

**FALLEN HEART**

BY BECK ROBERTSON

**SAMPLE CHAPTERS**

## Chapter One

I've never wanted to be immortal. For as long as I can remember all I ever dreamed about was being just like any other regular guy. Soon I'll have my chance to find out what *that's* like.

Through the portal Ganor my Guardian makes, I watch the mortal girl who'll soon be my charge with interest. He watches me as I observe her, a serious expression on his perfectly sculpted face.

"*You* will guard her. It's your job to protect her, to guide her. So do your duty and don't disappoint us." He wags his finger at me, the sleeve of his rich blue robe flapping.

I won't disappoint of course. I've been schooled not to disappoint my whole existence. As an Angelus I always knew this moment would arrive, the day when I fell from the Kingdom, assigned a charge to watch over until the Guardians see fit to recall me. Then I'll be chosen to serve one of two Arch Angelus, Thorus or the Lightbringer. Provided I don't fail.

My charge is Celeste Navarro and from the looks of things she could kind of do with my help.

*"Hey Navarro. Why you wearing that shit? Did you raid a thrift store?" A thin girl with a hard looking face, blonde bobbed hair and a reedy voice is addressing her. Celeste looks as if she's slightly scared of her. There are two other girls, standing around and both of them are smirking at the blonde's comments. I don't think they like Celeste much.*

*"They're just clothes," Celeste says, lowering her head and mumbling. Her cheeks are bright red, she's embarrassed, but also angry. I can tell she's angry by the way she balls her fists up by her sides. This isn't the first time I have observed her like this but it will probably be the last. Soon I'll be in her life, perhaps we'll even become friends.*

*"Clothes? More like rags. You're such a skank. Why are you even here?" The blonde girl snickers.*

*"The school has to help a charity case now and again." One of the thin girl's friend's chips in, a red head with a face as immaculately carved as if she were one of the Angelus.*

Those kind of looks don't interest me much though. When you've grown up around tall, perfect bodied beings that never age past 30 your whole damn life, you get tired of flawlessness pretty quick.

Someone like Celeste is *much* more interesting to me. Puerto Rican, dark haired and small, with a dusky caramel complexion and a smattering of freckles across her nose, she intrigues me. I love her eyebrow piercing and her battered DM's, her worn Levi's with the sewn on band patches.

She looks different from most of the other girls at Dunmow Academy but what I like about her most is she doesn't try to hide it. She stands up to them but boy she's punished for it. I've heard the names they call her slut, skank, loser, trash. She'd never let them see how much they affect her but I've seen how she bawls it all out when she's alone in her bedroom at night. I've seen the cuts she makes on her arms with the razorblade she keeps in her bathroom cabinet too. Humans can be so cruel to each other.

*"Get lost Sarah. I'm no charity case," Celeste says and I see she's gritting her teeth.*

*The thin girl takes a step closer. She pushes a strand of polished blonde hair back from her hawkish face, her eyes mean as she looks at Celeste.*

*"No? You're on a scholarship, what else would you call it? You should make more effort to be nice to us you know. We run this place."*

*"It's not me who's got the problem." Celeste turns away from them, kicking a piece of grit. The look on her face is defiant.*

*The blonde girl puts her hand on Celeste's shoulder.*

*"Listen skank, we know you're just a slut who puts out. We all know you've got no class. Danny told us you went with him last week and let him do you in his car." I can see the tears in Celeste's eyes though she fights them back.*

"So as you can see she's in need of some err, help," Ganor says, looking at me. His brown eyes are kindly when he speaks but his tone is formal.

"I'll do what I can." I have no idea what I'm supposed to do but I guess I'll figure that out when I get there.

"I've set up everything you need. A bank account, a car, your apartment is ready," Ganor says, nodding at me.

"What kind of car?"

He grins at that. "A Mustang. White of course. What else? You have to fit in with all the rich kids in the 10<sup>th</sup> Grade."

I grin back. Ganor's right, Dunmow Academy in Rochester, NY, is a place of privilege. Nearly all the kids there have trust funds and rich parents. *Except Celeste.*

"You'll need appropriate clothes. But I've arranged for all that as well. You'll find them in your apartment. They should fit you perfectly," he says.

I look down at the white initiate's cloth adorning the lower half of my body, fastened at my hip with a golden clasp. It's the only thing I've worn for many years now, after I took the oath of Duty when I was five years old.

"So what exactly *am* I supposed to do to help her?"

Ganor looks at me sighing, shaking his head.

“Don’t you remember anything you’ve been taught? It’s your job to protect her until the Guardians recall you. Solve her problems. You can start with those girls.” The Guardians are responsible for watching over the Angelus. Some of them are cool like Ganor, but some, like Morlath, scare the hell out of me.

“Yes sir,” I say. I feel oddly apprehensive about my time finally arriving even though my whole life I’ve waited for this moment. *The chance to live like them. The chance to live as a mortal.*

As an Angelus I’ve never known what it is to have parents. We don’t have family here, our job is to serve and protect. We have super human hearing, sight, and sense and each one of us has a special gift as well as a natural talent. Our gift’s not revealed to us until we complete our mission but we know our talent from birth. Mine is my Patha sense, the ability to sense people’s pain when I’m in close proximity to them. I can do it with humans and with some celestial beings too, except with Conceal’s and Arch Angels.

Even though I’m nervous because of my Severance, I’m excited that soon I’ll get my chance to live like *them*. I’d never let Ganor know of course, I’m not supposed to get excited about such things, it’s discouraged. I’m an angel, we’re supposed to be neutral. We’re the gatekeepers, the guardians.

Basically we’re supposed to avoid all the things that make human beings, truly human. We must be above feeling, as Ganor never tires of telling me.

“Donta will accompany you,” Ganor says and I nod again.

Donta is my Spiritus. He’ll be my link if I need to communicate with the Angelus when I’m on earth. A Spiritus can create a portal between worlds and Donta will enable me to link with Ganor while I’m in the earth realm. Here though Donta doesn’t ever do much except gurgle. He’s about a foot tall and kind of looks like an owl crossed with a fat, furry teddy bear. He gurgles now, as he nuzzles my feet making funny little cooing noises.

“Remember, *don’t* get too involved. Just guide her, it’s all you’re supposed to do,” Ganor says.

I remember the stories about Mano. I’ve often wondered whether they’re real or not.

According to gossip, after being assigned to guard a mortal girl, Mano fell in love and refused to return. Apparently the Arch Angels expelled him from Mythica, though why they wouldn’t just strike him dead doesn’t make any sense to me. Thorus and the Lightbringer are all powerful, they can do anything they want to. Anyway it’s impossible for an Angelus to become mortal. *As much as I might wish it otherwise.*

“Is there anything else you have questions about?” Ganor’s voice snaps me to attention. Donta emits a high pitched gobbling sound so I dig my foot into his side and he shuts up.

“No, I think that’s it.”

“Then you’re ready for your Severance.” I shudder. This is the only part of my Calling I have *not* been looking forward to. I know it won’t be pleasant.

“I guess so, “I say, shrugging and trying to put across an air of bravado I do not feel. Severances are never pleasant. At my friend Dima’s Severance, he screamed out loud. And Dima was tough, even tougher than me. I hope I don’t scream, especially not in front of Janna. That would be kind of embarrassing.

“This way,” Ganor says, closing the portal and beckoning me through the Gate that leads into the Circle of Ages. I know once I enter the Circle there will be no going back. But I’ll soon be where I’ve always dreamed of, where I do not belong but have wanted to be ever since I was a child.

I nod, and follow him as Donta scampers after me, bounding up excitably on to my shoulder. I don’t want to think about what’s coming next. *Searing the wings off an angel’s back is no easy task.*

At the moment a lustrous pair of gold coloured wings sprout from between my shoulder blades but once my Severance is performed they will be gone. I will be Fallen, banished until I complete my task on Earth and am recalled. I’ll savour living as a mortal while I can.

As I step through the Gate, I see them all gathered there. My childhood friends, most of the Angelus I grew up with all stand around the Circle, their flawless faces homogenously beautiful, lit by the evanescence surrounding its perimeter. I see Janna my best friend look up and smile encouragingly at me and I force myself to smile back despite my nerves. Donta starts to shriek, sensing my fear, his little furry paws digging into my shoulder, and I reach up to soothe him.

I take a step closer to the Circle. I’m freaking out now the moment is finally here. *Who will be performing my Severance?* I know it won’t be Ganor, he doesn’t have the power. I take another step closer and Janna and another of my friends, Michelo, step aside to allow me to enter.

As I step into the Circle I see him, his sallow skin illuminated by the golden light. My stomach drops. *Morlath.* Of all the Guardians he is my least favourite. Small with a sharp looking face and deep set, red rimmed eyes, Morlath, servant to the Lightbringer is *not* known for his kindly manner.

Now he will be the one to perform my Severance.

He grins, lips splitting to reveal yellowing teeth, as his thin fingers beckon me closer. Donta’s shrieks become higher and I clamp my hand tightly over his mouth. Luckily he takes the hint and shuts up.

“I see your time is come,” Morlath says, looking at me, then Donta. I feel Donta shrink back, his little legs trembling and I whisper to him that it’s okay.

“Yes Lord Morlath,” I say, I have to address him as Lord or he’ll bitch. He’s kind of narcissistic that way.

“Ah little Bailey, come of age and bid to do his duty.”

“Yes, Lord Morlath.” I say again, floundering. *What do I say to him?*

“You *will* do your duty won’t you? We’re all counting on you, you will not let us down?” He takes a step towards me and cups my face, his flesh damp as it touches mine, slimy almost. I shiver but my face reveals nothing. I am an angel; I am good at being neutral after all.

“I will do my duty.”

Morlath nods, releasing my face from his grip. He reaches into the folds of his dark coloured robes, withdrawing something. I already know what it is before he holds it up. The Larna, a necklace all Fallen are given at the time of our Severance. Each of us has to wear it for the duration of our entire time on the Earth Realm so we can receive Ambrul from the Gods. Without a Larna and Ambrul to sustain us, we would wither and evaporate into nothingness.

“Behold the emissary of the ancients. In tacitus complicitae exulta,” he says, holding the Larna aloft. All around me my friends chant, repeating his words.

“In tacitus complicitae exulta.” *May the food of the gods sustain you.*

He reaches toward me and I extend my head forward, enabling him to place it around my neck.

“The Gods have granted you their divine sustenance,” he says, fastening it. I look down at the peculiarly shaped pendant suspended from the thong made of Snaka now encircling my neck. The pendant looks like a sun with curling snakes instead of rays emanating from its sides. The Larna glitters a strange grey green in the golden light permanently enshrouding the Kingdom and it appears to be almost translucent.

Morlath takes me by the shoulder and I brace myself, for I know exactly what is coming next. His fingernails grip my flesh as he leans in to my ear, his breath hot upon my neck.

“Let it be done. In Sutris Decidus Domiticus.” *May the Law remain unbroken.*

All around me I hear my friends repeating his words. *In Sutris Decidus Domiticus.*

There’s an eerie red glow in the middle of the Circle and I find I can’t help but look at it. As I stare it seems to pull me closer even though I know my feet are still glued to the spot. Donta starts to wail again but though I try and reach up to comfort him, my arm is too weak to lift.

I feel my chest tighten as the red glow grows, the light increasing in size and intensity until it begins to burn my eyes.

Out of the corner of my eye I see Morlath raise his hand and panicked I try and ready myself. The voices around me rise in pitch, climbing higher and higher feverishly, and blending with Donta's shrieks. I start to feel as though I'm spinning, like my body's floating above the ground.

I wrench my gaze from the fire and look straight in to Morlath's eyes. His face is a smirk as he lowers his finger to my chest and I find I'm struggling to breath. His eyes appear much darker than usual, bloody and terrible, and for a moment they make me tremble.

"Arise Fallen One. Let the Gods bear you witness," he says, his voice a low hiss as he releases his grip on me. I feel a searing pain in my back and hear Donta's high pitched cry pierce the air before everything around me goes black and I tumble into nothingness.

## Chapter 2

I wake up and stare straight at an unfamiliar brass ceiling fan that whirs around repetitively above my head. The ceiling fan is attached to an equally unfamiliar white stucco ceiling and immediately I feel a jolt of panic surge through me. *Where the hell am I?* I rub my eyes groggily and take a look around me.

I'm lying on a large, comfortable King sized bed and I am naked. I start forward and my fingertips run to my back, fingering something that feels like a thick scab. So it happened. I wasn't dreaming. My Severance was performed and now I'm here to live among mortals.

I hear the scampering of tiny feet and feel a soft paw on my leg as Donta scrambles on to me excitedly. His eyes are wide, constantly looking about as he takes everything in and I grin at him.

"This is all new to you too huh buddy?" I pet him between his furry ears. He enjoys it when I scratch him there. He rubs himself against my hand purring back contentedly at me.

I get to my feet. I'm oddly unsteady when I walk and I feel something soft beneath my bare soles. When I look down I see I'm walking on a thick, luxurious looking white carpet.

I pad over to the mirrored closet and stare at my reflection. Donta gurgles by my side as I look at myself. My body's in good shape by mortal standards, great shape even. I look over my well defined thighs, the taut musculature of my body, my broad shoulders and strong jaw. I know a lot of girls here will probably find me attractive, maybe some guys will too.

But I'm not here because of them. I don't care what they think of me. I'm here because of Celeste. I turn around, peering at the flesh of my back, where earlier my wings had sprouted. Now there are just two thick scabs, the only memento of my former life.

I don't know exactly why Fallen are doomed to carry these marks. It would be so easy to arrange it otherwise, but perhaps it's supposed to be a reminder to us of what we really are. *A reminder I'm not mortal however much I want to be.*

I open the closet, scanning the scores of clothes suspended neatly from hangers within. Ganor has been as good as his word.

I pluck out an expensive looking shirt, holding it up against me. It will probably look good on me but it's not the kind of thing I want to wear. I leaf through the wardrobe, and see there are several different styles of clothes, from smart to more casual.

I pick out something fairly low key, a white t-shirt and pair of plain blue jeans plus a black leather jacket. I can tell they're expensive by the cut of them, but they're casual enough for me. I pluck a pair of crisp white boxer shorts from the closet shelf and put them on, then pull on the t-shirt, jeans and jacket.

When I glance back at my reflection in the mirror I realise I'm not wearing any shoes. I look down at the floor of the closet and see rows of brand new footwear, an array of styles, high



end leather brogues, casual deck shoes, sneakers. I spy a pair of black leather biker boots and slip them on.

Donta coos at me appreciatively and I look at my reflection and grin. The new clothes do suit me. *But what now?*

I turn back to the bed looking for a clue and see a cell phone and a bunch of keys on the glass topped table by the bed.

The phone makes a weird beeping sound as I turn it on and a message flashes up on screen.

*“Your car’s parked outside. Get in and the GPS will take you to where you need to go. I’ve left a wallet on the table stuffed with cash and there’s a credit card in there too. You can charge what you like to it. The PIN number’s 0110. You need to get to the main reception of Dunmow Academy by 9AM to enrol. Don’t be late.”*

The message isn’t signed but I recognize Ganor’s authoritarian manner in it all the same. He’s watching me now I know. He watches every single one of us.

A quick glance at the clock on the cell tells me it’s 8:40 AM. I better get going. I walk over to the window and peer down at the street below. Sure enough there it is, parked right outside my condo; a bright white, gleaming Ford Mustang.

I must admit it’s exciting to know I’ll soon be behind the wheel of it. I grab the black leather wallet off the table. A quick rifle through tells me there must be at least thirty \$50 bills and ten \$20 ones in there.

I pull the credit card out, running my fingers across the embossed lettering. Bailey Manders. *So that’s my last name huh?*

“Come on Donta,” I say and he hops on my shoulder. A Spiritus can’t be seen by the human eye so it’s not like I’m going to get weird looks from anyone. Even though there’s no way they can be seen they still feel uncomfortable when mortals get too close so one of their traits is doing a disappearing act when that happens.

I leave the apartment and enter the elevator. When I emerge at street level, I give a polite nod to the valet sitting behind the desk in the buildings foyer and head toward where the Mustang’s parked. As I hit the street I close my eyes momentarily, inhaling the scent of the air.

My nose picks up a cacophony of smells, not all of them pleasant. Hotdogs, traffic fumes, perfume, and garbage, all of them mingle together, creating a heady aroma. I walk up to the Mustang and hit the keys, unlocking it and sliding inside.

The interior smells of the soft, new cream coloured leather that covers the seats, and the scent of it mixes with all the other new odours in my nostrils. I grip the steering wheel with one hand, the other going to the clutch, and rev the engine as Donta starts in surprise.

“Welcome Bailey. I’m Jenny and I’ll be your guide. Auto steering will be enabled for the next few days while you orientate yourself. Destination Dunmow Academy, Rochester, NY.” A slightly robotic female voice addresses me as the engine starts up.

Ganor really did think of everything. I’m slightly disappointed my driving skills won’t be tested just yet though. As the vehicle moves down the street I keep my hand on the wheel anyway, just in case. Here it’s not like Mythica where pretty much everything is always the same and has been for millennia. On earth, all kinds of random stuff can happen.

I arrive at the school with five minutes to spare before registration officially closes, or so the clock in the entrance as I arrive tells me. Donta looks up at me with big eyes as I hesitate outside.

“Ok buddy, I’m heading in now so I’m guessing you’re gonna want to vanish. I’ll catch you later,” I say and he gurgles at me before disappearing. I approach the flustered looking school receptionist, whose precarious stack of blonde hair is as haphazard as the tall tower of paperwork threatening to topple off her desk.

As I walk up, she looks up at me, momentarily covering the mouthpiece of the phone she’s holding.

“Can I help you?”

“I’m here for enrolment.”

“Name?”

“Bailey Manders.”

She hits some keys on her computer, frowning.

“Hrrm, oh yes, there you are.” She looks at me with a smile, pointing behind me.

“Through there?” I gesture to where she’s pointing.

“Yep intake’s right through that door. When you get in, take a seat and someone will call your name. I’ll give them a buzz to let them know you’re here,” she says, returning to her phone call.

“Thanks,” I say, heading for the door. I enter a sparse looking room with a line of wooden chairs running along one side of it. Two other kids are waiting, a mousey looking girl with who looks at the floor as I enter, and a broad shouldered ginger haired guy who gives me the once over once, then quickly averts his eyes.

I sit there a while twiddling my thumbs but no one calls for me. I peer at the embossed gold letters on the big stack of brochures on the table in front of me - “*Dunmow Academy – where true talent thrives.*” I grab one of the brochures, flicking through the glossy pages. The kids pictured inside all look like they come from money, with their expensive haircuts and designer clothes. They are all smiling too, a lot, maybe because they’re so rich.

I am about to put the brochure back when I hear someone calling my name.

“Bailey Manders?” A grey haired woman with glasses and a brusque manner is speaking.

I hold up my hand.

“Yep.”

“You’re late. Come this way please.”

At intake, the grey haired woman, whose name is Cynthia and who doesn’t turn out to be as brusque as her initial tone suggested, tells me I’ll be joining history of art with Mr Matthias first period.

She gives me a map of the college and leads me out of intake down a long corridor with many doors on either side of it. Her heels click on the polished wooden floor as we walk and I notice she smells like sour dough.

“It’s the classroom second to the end. If you have any questions just pop in to intake or ask one of your tutors.”

“Thank you, will do,” I say, nodding my head.

As I push open the door, and step inside, I feel about thirty pairs of eyes assess me. Most of the guys look away again fairly quickly but a lot of the girls stare at me far longer than necessary and some of them whisper things to their friends. I’m not being arrogant but I know they’re probably talking about me. There are some good looking guys in the room but none of them are as attractive as I am.

I spy Celeste sitting on her own at the back as Mr Matthias comes up to greet me, a broad smile on his fleshy, red cheeked face. He wears thick black glasses and a full beard and his badly fitting blue t-shirt says “Hug Dealer” in white lettering. His black hair sticks up in random clumps and looks as if it’s been greased with pomade. I think he’s what would be called a hipster. I wonder if all art teachers dress like this.

“You must be Bailey,” he says, extending a hand. I see his palms are as rosy and pudgy looking as his face.

“Yep, that’s me.”

“Welcome to art history. You can sit anywhere you like,” he says, gesturing around the room. I see some of the girls straightening up in their seats, as I look around. Some of them shoot sly smiles at me, others play with their hair, coyly.

I walk down between the rows of desks, ignoring all the come ons, trying to make it look as if I’m casually deciding where to sit. I already know exactly where I am headed of course.

Celeste is probably the only girl in the room who hasn’t noticed my existence yet. She sits doodling in a sketch pad, a scowl wreathing her face.

As I approach her desk she doesn't even look up. I hear whispered snatches of conversation behind me.

"What's he doing?"

"He's a bona fide hottie."

"Is he sitting with that skank?"

I slide into the empty seat next to Celeste. Finally she turns to look at me, appraising me with a suspicious glance.

"Hi," she says, turning back to her sketch pad. I hear titters from some of the students.

"Hi I'm Bailey, I'm new here," I say. *Great, I sound like such a dork.*

She turns to look at me and I see her eyes are lovely, large and green and clear. My Patha's telling me absolutely nothing which is weird because I know she has problems. Maybe it's because she's my charge. I'll have to ask Ganor later.

"Welcome to hell," she says, shrugging. *Okay this is so not a good start.*

"Sorry do you mind if I sit here?"

"It's up to you. I could care less. But it's probably not a good idea if you wanna make friends here."

"Oh why?" I already know the answer but I guess I have to play along.

"Because everyone round here thinks I'm a loser and a slut."

"You seem pretty normal to me." *Now I sound really, really dorky. Smooth, real smooth.*

"Normal? Nah," she says, shaking her head and staring at the doodle she's working out on the yellow legal pad in front of her. I peer over her shoulder to take a closer look.

"Is that Mr Matthias?"

"Sssh," she says, grinning, and holding her finger to her lips. I can't help but stare at her mouth as she makes the gesture. She's really quite attractive, in a quirky sort of way. Even though I've been observing her for a while now it's still a jolt to see her in the flesh like this.

I peer at the drawing again. It really does look like Matthias, the hipster beard, the round, slightly pudgy face, the too tight t-shirt that gives the top half of his body a sausage like effect.

Just then the man himself wheels a large projector out of the cupboard next to the whiteboard.

"Right well, now you're all settled down, I'd like to show you a important film about Andy Warhol and his Factory," he says, dimming the lights.

After the important film which managed to make Andy Warhol seem really dull we have a lecture on the significance of Pop Art, then the bell rings for end of class.

I hang around, wondering what to do next, then remember Cynthia handed me a schedule earlier. I rummage in my pocket and pull it out, squinting at it as I try to decipher where I'm supposed to be.

"What are you doing skank?"

I look up and see Sarah, the blonde thin hawk faced girl I've observed before, addressing Celeste.

"Nothing," Celeste says, pretending to be busy stuffing things in her book bag.

"Do you know him?" Sarah thinks she's speaking quietly but she's about as subtle as a foghorn on a ship. Anyway even if she was whispering, I could still hear her, I can hear nearly everything. The ability to hear things cats would struggle to pick up on is a perk of being Angelus.

"Nope." Celeste shakes her head.

"Well dunno why anyone would sit with a skank like you."

"Get lost, Sarah."

"Don't talk to her like that bitch. We run this place," The redhead with the far-too-perfect-looking-face joins in.

"She started on me, I was minding my own business," Celeste says.

"Everything alright?" I straighten up and come and stand beside her. She needs my support; it's what I'm here for after all.

"Yeah, it's cool."

"Aww is the new boy fighting your battles for you. I wouldn't bother, she's a loser skank."

"Really? Damn she's pretty cute for a skank," I cut in, winking at Celeste. Sarah looks as if her jaw's going to crash to the floor and the red head looks around like some drone robot in need of programming, unsure of how to react.

"Yeah us skanks come in all shapes and sizes I guess," Celeste says, playing along, a big, wide grin spreading over her face. It's funny but when I was watching her through the portal I never really noticed how cute the freckles on her nose made her look.

"Come on Rachael, there's no helping *some* people," Sarah says, glaring at me and turning to the redhead. Her voice sounds extra whiny, like she's all nose. I can tell just from standing next to her that her parents ignore her, that Mummy's an alcoholic and Daddy's never home. Maybe that's why she's such a bitch.

“Helping? Don’t you think all that loser stuff’s a bit Mean Girls. You can’t sit with us and all that,” I say, quoting the film. I’ve seen quite a few films as part of my training and Sarah’s gang definitely remind me of the plastics.

Sarah and Rachael just stare at me with blank faces. Mean Girls isn’t a thing for them obviously. I hear Celeste trying to stifle a giggle behind me.

“You’re a weirdo.” Sarah screws up her nose at me.

“Yep, guess I must be a loser skank too,” I say, grinning.

She shakes her head turning away from us huffily. *Thank god, I don’t think I could bear hearing her awful, whiny voice a moment longer.*

“Oh my god I’m dying. That was so funny, did you see the look on her face? No one’s ever cut her dead like that, it was awesome, you’re a freaking God,” Celeste says, cracking up. *A God eh? Close.*

“So does that mean you’ll agree to go get lunch with the one person that can defeat the wicked witch then?”

She screws her nose up at me, considering.

“Yeah, why not. I know an awesome place that does meat subs near the college. That’s if you eat meat?”

“Yeah, I guess,” I say, shrugging. In Mythica we only eat Ambrul; it’s given to us twice a day. Ambrul tastes sweet and thick or at least I think that’s how humans would describe it, but I can’t compare it to any other food because I’ve never eaten anything else. I’m pretty curious to see what meat tastes like though.

“You guess? How can you not know?” She gives me an odd look.

“I mean, I guess that’s cool,” I say, recovering swiftly. It won’t do to arouse suspicion, especially not so quickly. Not that anyone would *ever* guess the real reason I’m here.

“Great, meet you outside school at lunch then,” she says, giving me that big beautiful smile of hers. I feel a peculiar sensation in my stomach like I ate a moth and it somehow managed to survive and is just hanging out, flapping its wings inside me or something.

“Right at you then, I mean great see you then,” I say, stumbling over my words. I shake my head, cursing myself for sounding like such a world class dick as I make my way to second period.

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At lunch I weave through the crowds of students milling around and stand outside the entrance waiting for Celeste. She’s a few minutes late but I spot her immediately when she

arrives, her thick hair framing her smooth brown skin like a fuzzy dark cloud. She stands out among the student body here but definitely not in a bad way.

She doesn't dress like most of the other kids here either, her torn jeans covered in 90's rock band patches and her beat up dark green velvet blazer highlighting the intense color of her eyes.

I grin at her as she approaches and she smiles wryly at me. The look on her face gives me a weird kind of pleasure, it feels as if we're both in something cool together no one else knows about.

"Hey," is all she says in greeting.

"Hey you," I reply, grinning, "so, you're gonna show me how to eat meat round here huh?"

"Hungry?"

"You betcha." I'm not, I've never been hungry in my life, but she probably wants me to say I am so I just go with it. Angels don't get hungry for food, we can eat it when we're Fallen but we don't need to.

Ambrul feeds our minds rather than our bodies and our Guardians make it available to every member of the Angelus, twice a day. It's kind of our life force; without it we would cease to exist. While I'm on earth the Larna around my neck will give me all the Ambrul I need. I automatically reach up to my pendant and rub the shiny, polished surface.

"Come on then, I'll show you where to get the meanest freaking sub ever," Celeste says, turning to go. I grin and nod, following her cue to leave as I fall into step with her.

The place where I can get the meanest freaking sub ever is located three blocks from the college, in a slightly less well-heeled part of town. As we approach the meat sub place, an old guy trying to flog us yesterday's copies of The New York Post comes up to us and Celeste stops and gives him a buck, waving away his offer of a newspaper. The place is located in between a Laundromat and a kiosk and I see the windows of the joint are covered in a grimy patina.

I look up at the lettering spelling out the name of the place on the filthy sign hanging over the entrance way.

*Stacks Subs.* "Come on let's go in, I'm fricking starving," Celeste says, tugging at my sleeve and pulling me inside.

As we enter I see several Formica tables surrounded by orange plastic benches that are nailed to the floor. Some of the tables have occupants and some of the occupants look as though they might have been sleeping rough.

We take a seat at an adjoining table to an old guy with a long, straggly beard, who sits there absent-mindedly picking at a Styrofoam cup, wearing a bobbly stained brown jumper. I look at the three lumpy, stuffed tattered carrier bags by his feet, wondering what's inside them.

"Here's the menu," Celeste says, handing me a laminated sheet of cream colored plastic. I stare at the 50's style burgundy lettering, trying to decipher it. Nothing on it really makes much sense to me. *What the hell is a Statehouse Steamer? Or a Meatball Brisket?*

"What you going for?" I look up at Celeste, stalling.

"Definitely the Chilli Pepper Salami Ranch," she says, grinning, "but if you want something a little less, spicy I reckon for your first visit here you should try the Meat Mountain."

"The Meat Mountain?" I eye her sceptically. I've seen the size of earth mountains through the portal before and I'm not sure I'm up to consuming a whole one for my first earthly snack.

"Mmhmm and get me a diet coke," she says, nodding her head at me. I shrug my shoulders.

"Okay then," I say. She nods, fumbling in the pocket of her jacket and handing me a crumpled \$20 bill.

"What's this?"

"It's on me."

"No it's fine. I've got cash, I say, reaching inside my jacket for the leather wallet I picked up at the apartment. I open it, flashing the wads of pristine \$20 and \$50 dollar bills. The old guy sitting at the table next to us perks up, looking at the notes with interest.

"Jeez you really shouldn't carry that much cash with you around here," she says.

"Nah I can handle myself," I say, swaggering slightly as I put the wallet back.

"Oh yeah? Confident huh?"

"Always," I say, "so I'm gonna to go get this okay?" I turn to head to the counter where a twenty something guy with thin blonde hair that's already receding stands. The place has a funny smell, the odour of stale grease and warm baked bread mixed with some kind of lemon scented floor cleaner.

"Okay rich boy," she calls after me.

He looks up as I approach and smiles in an exhausted kind of way that looks like he's tired of smiling but has to do it anyway. I read the name tag on his shirt, Gideon, and I sense something behind that smile as I get nearer, worry maybe, and something else, some kind of sadness, like maybe someone close to him died.

"Hey what can I getcha?" The way he speaks it sounds as if all the words in the sentence sort of run together.



“One Chilli Pepper Ranch. Six inch. And a Meat Mountain. Oh and a diet coke. Wait make that two diet cokes.” I figure I might as well order a drink since Celeste has.

“You want a foot long?” I have absolutely no idea what he’s talking about but I feel put on the spot so I just nod my head and grin.

“Hungry huh?”

“Uh yeah, I guess.”

“Well you’ve come to the right place then dude,” he says, reaching under the counter and placing two long baguettes on the counter top.

I watch as he prepares the food then puts it on a brown plastic tray, presenting it to me with a stupid grin like he’s all pleased with himself.

“That’ll be \$12 man.”

“Here,” I say, thrusting a \$20 bill at him. He presses some buttons on the register and shoves the note I hand him inside and I pick up the tray, turning to make my way back to where Celeste sits waiting.

“Hey wait, your change,” he says, but I just wave at him to keep it. The look of surprise on his face is funny it’s obvious he doesn’t usually get tipped by most of the clientele.

“Mmm gimme,” Celeste says, grabbing the smaller sub and biting into it as I set the tray down.

I glance warily at the huge piece of filled bread that I gather I will have to eat.

“Good?”

“So good,” she says, nodding through mouthfuls of Chilli Ranch. I unwrap my sub and pick it up, taking a huge bite. I chew and attempt to swallow the large lump of meat filled bread but as I do I start coughing, violently. *Great, super dork.*

“Hey you okay? Celeste looks at me funny.

“Ye, yeah, I can’t,” I say, spluttering and trying to force it down my throat. The meat sub is the weirdest experience I’ve ever had, it’s nothing like Ambrul. It’s spicy and lumpy and weird and scratchy all at the same time. Celeste offers me her open soda can and gestures for me to take a swig.

“Bitten off more than ya can chew eh? That’ll help it go down.”

“Thanks,” I say, grabbing the can and taking a sip. Another weird sensation hits the back of my throat. It feels as if thousands of tiny bubbles invaded my mouth but the taste of the soda is sweeter than the meat sub and it does help dissolve the large lump in my throat.

“You okay?” She looks at me concerned.

“Yeah, good now,” I say, finally forcing the sub down. *Way to go. Great first impression. I’m supposed to be her Guardian Angel and I almost choke to death on our first outing.*

“So why is Sarah such a bitch?” I say, taking another swig of soda.

She sighs, shrugging. “Dunno. She doesn’t like me, she’s kind of a snob. It’s okay I’m used to most of the school thinking I’m trailer trash.”

“Hey,” I say, reaching out across the table to put a hand on her arm, “she’s just jealous.”

“Yeah well there’s not much to be jealous of really so I doubt that.”

“You’re great,” I say, “you know you shouldn’t put yourself down like that.”

“Why not? Nearly everyone else does,” she says, shrugging again and taking another bite of her sub.

“What do you care anyway?” She narrows her eyes at me, they look slanty and cat like and for a moment I feel a funny sensation in my groin.

“I’m just looking out for you. You seem nice, so I figured, I’d just tell you what I thought about the situation,” I say, shrugging and holding my palms out.

“Yeah and I’m sure you’re not trying to get in my pants like all the others looking for a cheap date,” she says. I’m shocked by the bitterness in her tone, she sounds so jaded, cynical even.

“Hey you’re not a cheap date,” I say. “You’re worth more than that.”

“Then you’re the only one who thinks so. Most of them just go with me then tell the whole school.”

I look at her not understanding. This doesn’t make any sense to me. Why does she do it, why does she let them use her like that?

“Why do it,” I say, shaking my head “why go with them at all if they’re just going to treat you like that. I just don’t get it.”

“Yeah well, you wouldn’t get it.” She clams up and I see her pull that face I’ve watched her pull when I’ve been observing her through the portal, the one she always makes when she’s trying not to cry.

“Try me then.” I squeeze her arm, “hey try me.”

She looks at me her green eyes welling up.

“You ever been so lonely that any company seems like it’s a good idea. Anyone at all who’s down for throwing you a word here or there, tell you you’re beautiful, you’re the only one they want even if it’s just for an hour? You ever felt like that?”

I shake my head slowly.

“No,” I say, “I’ve never felt that way.”

“Then maybe you shouldn’t judge me. Cos from where I’m sitting it looks like you’re lucky enough to fit right in rich boy,” she says, her eyes challenging me.

“Okay look, I get it,” I say, “I do but you need to understand something. I may look like I have everything, like I’ve got it all together but I get what it’s like to feel alone. I get what it’s like to want something so bad you’ll do anything, even pretend for a while. I do,” I say, still holding her arm.

She just looks at me and nods her head.

“Then you’ll get it.”

“It doesn’t mean you should let them take advan— I start to say but she silences me, shaking her head.

“Let’s not get too heavy, I don’t do heavy well,” she says, rolling her eyes.

“Okay, okay,” I say, holding my hands up in a gesture of surrender, “we won’t do heavy.”

“It’s cool. I just get kind of depressed sometimes, I don’t really need to be reminded of that place I have go to sometimes. But speaking of places, I freaking love this place,” she says, still chewing.

I look at her in puzzlement, I can’t figure out why exactly, of all the places I’ve observed, this is one of the grimiest.

“Yeah, it seems pretty cool,” I say, nodding and hoping I sound convincing and not like the total dick I feel.

“Been coming here forever, I love people watching and the subs rock.”

“People watching?”

“Yeah, it’s interesting. More than Greece Ridge where most of the others go to grab lunch. Everyone looks the same round there. All expensive blonde highlights and Abercrombie jumpers. Same with the school cafeteria really.”

I look at the guy in the bobbly jumper with the carrier bags at his feet. I suppose he is quite interesting to look at but I’m still not convinced about this joint.

“So what do you want to do when you leave school?” I look at her.

“I wanna try and get my own studio and make art all day but I don’t think I’ll be able to afford it. So I’ll probably have to wind up showing rich people round galleries while I try and make it.”

“Make it?”

“You know, *establish myself*.” A stray crumb of bread escapes from the corner of her mouth and instinctively I go to brush it off. I’m surprised how smooth her skin feels beneath my fingertips.

“Uh sorry you just had something there, you know,” I say, gesturing like an idiot as I retract my hand. It’s odd but I feel like I was doing something I shouldn’t be.

“Thanks,” she says, smiling at me. Her eyes look even larger as she looks into mine and I can see there’s tiny golden flecks in her irises that I didn’t notice before. I’m still not able to sense anything from her with my Patha but there’s a sadness in them I can tell.

“So you’re gonna be a big famous artist huh?”

“Hardly.” She wrinkles her nose.

“You have to show me some of your work,”

“Ughh no way you won’t talk to me,” She makes a face, knocking back the last of her soda and crushing the can.

“Promise I will. Go on.”

“Maybe. But you’ll regret asking,” she says, polishing off the last of her sub. I look at my plate, most of the foot long still remains. There is no way I’m finishing that thing but I better try at least. Reaching for it, I take another bite. I chew, it tastes much better this time, not so weird. *Maybe I can get used to this food thing.*

“You like it?”

I nod, my mouth full of sub. I actually think I do, the taste is hard to describe but it’s not bad at all. I look at her and smile, I feel good, like I’m a regular guy doing regular things, just hanging out. I always dreamed about experiencing this. Now I’m doing it and it’s actually everything I expected.

“See I told you they made the best subs here. The owner’s secret recipe,” she says, smiling back at me. *That smile. God.*

“Who’s the owner?”

“There he is,” she says, pointing behind me. I twist round in my seat. A stooped looking old guy wearing a stained white apron, with wisps of grey hair and a thick moustache is shuffling towards us.

“Hiya M.” Celeste smiles at him, waving.

The old guy smiles back at her and shuffles up, collecting her empty tray. As he does he fixes me with a suspicious glare.

“You? Finished as well?”

“Yeah sure you can take it,” I say, pushing the tray at him.

“Weren’t you still eating,” Celeste says, frowning at me.

“I’m good.” The old guy curses under his breath as he swipes my tray.

“Uh thanks,” I say to him. He nods perfunctorily to me and I don’t know why but I can tell he doesn’t seem to like me very much.

“Bailey’s a friend of mine M. He’s just started school today,” Celeste says, trying to smooth things over. The old guy turns to me, looking me up and down with a hard stare. His eyebrows are thick and knotted, and half hang down into his eyes. I notice his eyes are a piercing grey as he looks right into mine.

“Stay on the right side of the laws,” he says with a growl, before taking the tray and walking off.

“Don’t mind him,” Celeste says to me, “he’s grumpy sometimes. And he’s kinda protective of me is all.”

“Hey it’s cool,” I say but I feel a bit confused. *Stay on the right side of the laws?* What laws?

“Well we better get back to class but thanks for the subs,” Celeste says, looking at me and smiling.

“Yep, guess so. I had fun, thanks for showing me where to get a meat sub in this town,” I say, “but you know you’re gonna have to let me return the favour and take you some place though.”

“Maybe,” she says, with a grin, “if Sarah doesn’t get her claws into you.”

“Yeah right like in no universe am I gonna let that happen,” I say, making a gagging motion and we both crease up at the thought as we exit the sub bar.

I don’t think about the old guy’s words til I get home but later as I’m about to go to sleep his peculiar warning drifts into my mind. “*Stay on the right side of the laws?*” He was probably just an old guy being weird I know but there was something about the way he looked at me that made me think there was something more to what he said.

*Why would he say that to me?*

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