

Sidewalk

Inspired by "Mond" by [HipHopium](#)



Lana's feet always hurt after a hard day's work, and the dusty heat of a late summer's wind making each breath a stifling swallow didn't help. Stretched out on the curb, her long legs covered by her skinny jeans, Lana leaned back on her hands and considered her options. She could go get payment now, she could go slake her thirst, or she could go home and get the bloodstains off of her hands and out of her blonde hair. She'd cleaned up some inside, but her fingernails always collected the gore...

Pushing said hair out of her blue eyes, she looked up and down Proof Street. Really, however, it was more of an alleyway, a place where shipments could trundle in, crap out their cargo, and belch their way back out. In fact, the curb on which she sat right now, trying to catch her breath and ignore the ache in her leopard-print-high-heels feet, faced the dock she had just left. That, more than anything else, made her think, maybe, regardless of what she ended up doing, she should get a move on. With a groan, she stood, scooping her genuine leather hand purse off the sidewalk as she went.

The day was hot and the smell of rotting milk. A dumpster at the far end leaked enthusiastically into a fetid puddle. Wrinkling her nose at the thought, Lana went the opposite direction, keeping to the relative shade that the sidewalk had from the sun. It was bright--much brighter than she was used to--and the heat was intense. She only wore a thin sweater on top, letting her bellybutton ring flash as she moved. It was vain of her, she knew, to want to show it off, but she liked her stomach and thought others might as well. Besides, it might help distract from the blood.

Unable to choose which way to go--straight if she wanted home, left if she wanted to collect, right if she wanted that drink first--when she reached the end of Proof Street, Lana stood a moment too long and lost her chance to choose.

"Lana Parker?" The voice came from the left--the way she needed to go to meet up with her employer--and was tinged with the kind of excited shock that Lana usually associated with a high school reunion (assuming that one was surprised to see old high school friends at the high school reunion). She flinched as she turned, and, to her surprise, she *was* surprised with the owner of the voice.

"Angelina Parr?"

"Yeah!" The former senior class president, drill club captain, and valedictorian stood in front of the drama-, never-once-was-asked-to-prom, went-through-all-of-high-school-a-virgin kid and began to laugh. "This is ridiculous! How the heck are you?"

Lana shook her head as if to clear it, then shot a look over her shoulder at the alleyway she had just finished working in. "Uh, yeah. I'm..." She swallowed and tried again. "I'm okay. I mean, my feet hurt."

Angelina glanced down. "I can see why. They're cute, but I bet they're murder."

Lana didn't respond to this.

"Well," said Angelina, not noticing Lana's silence, "do you want to, like, get a coffee or something?"

Not the kind of drink Lana had been considering, necessarily. In fact, if she thought about it, she just needed to go. She opened her mouth to say so and, "Yeah, that sounds great," popped out instead.

"Perfect! Oh, my gosh, I can't believe I just bumped into you! I haven't seen you since..."

"Graduation, yeah," said Lana, falling into step with her former classmate and erstwhile good friend (*best friend* would imply too much about their relationship). They crossed Green Avenue and then, like a tributary into a river, were suddenly surrounded by countless fellow denizens of Lanland City. The press of bodies--all of which sweated in the oppressive, humid heat, though some more visibly than others--made Lana more than a touch uncomfortable, but she managed to ignore the feeling of being out of place by focusing on the conversation.

"Gosh, that must have been, what, five years ago? Six?" And here she was, still using all of her squeaker language that her Presbyterian minister father had instilled in her. It was equal parts cute and weird, in Lana's opinion.

"Yeah, something like that."

"And you're not on Facebook or anything..." Angelina let the statement drift away, as if to allow Lana the chance to fill in the blank.

Lana shook her head. "I don't even have a phone."

Angelina gave her a blank stare. "How do you get around, then?"

"Oh...walking, you know."

"I mean...Heck, I would be *lost* without my Google Maps, you know?" Angelina laughed in that same, familiar way--tossing her head back and opening her mouth wide, letting her brown hair waterfall over her shoulders while her brown eyes fold

into crescents beneath her ruby cheeks--and held her leather briefcase tighter to her chest. It was only then that Lana noticed her friend was wearing a conservative pantsuit combo, gray and pinstriped, over a pink blouse. Hoop earrings and a golden necklace to match...she looked like Lana would have guessed the valedictorian would look six years after graduation. It seemed like quite the getup, especially in this kind of heat. Then again, it wasn't as though Lana were sporting dolphin shorts and a tank-top herself.

"What are you up to?" asked Lana, gesturing at the outfit. "You look like I'm making you late for a business meeting or something."

"Huh? Oh, no." Angelina looked surprised and a bit embarrassed by the question. "I'm, uh...an intern."

"Intern?"

Angelina nodded far too quickly to hide her feelings. "Acquisitions."

"What, like a book publishing company or something?"

"Yeah, kinda. They do...more like art selling."

Lana frowned. It didn't sound like Angelina wanted to talk about her career, but what else was there to catch up on? A ring-check let Lana know that, if Angelina had a husband, she wasn't advertising the fact she was off the market. So there wasn't relationships to talk about and--she was assuming here, but Angelina had always been the cautious type when it came to sex--probably no children either.

"Anyway, enough about me," said Angelina as she gestured at a coffee shop (called "Spill the Beans", which felt appropriate) and led the way inside. "What about you? What have you been doing lately? Anything interesting going on in your life?"

"Uh, not a lot, really," said Lana. "Just surviving, you know. Hanging in there."

The air conditioner didn't seem to work, so everyone sipping their lattes (or whatever caffeine delivery system they preferred) had them in gently sweating plastic cups and loaded with plenty of ice. Lana would rather something that rhymed with Black Spaniels, but she instead contended herself with an iced coffee. Angelina ordered the same for herself and popped open her wallet to pay--a nice gesture, especially since the last thing Lana wanted to do was open up her purse. The barista set about to prep the drinks; Lana gave an apologetic smile and excused herself to the bathroom.

Once inside and the door 'locked' with a small latch that would do nothing to slow down someone committed to getting in, Lana set about scrubbing her hands. The blood had dried completely, making it harder to get off than she had anticipated. Even the humidity in the air hadn't been enough to keep it from drying. She scrubbed, turning the hot water pink. There wasn't much in her hair--just a couple of splatters that had made it on her. Another couple of minutes of work and she was done.

Angelina was standing at the door, a smile tight on her face, an iced coffee in each hand, her briefcase tucked into her armpit. "Nice and clean?" She handed over one of the cups.

"Uh, yeah. Thanks."

Lana put it to her lips but, before she could drink any, Angelina said, "It's so hot in here. Let's go over to Standing Park. What do you say?"

"Um, sure." She followed after her old friend, frowning as she went. Why was this happening? It was almost as if Angelina was trying to...

"I have to confess something," said Angelina as they stepped out of Spill the Beans and merged with the foot traffic on Blue Avenue. "I have been thinking about you a lot lately."

"Oh?"

"Yeah! It's kinda weird that I should just bump into you like this, right?"

"Yeah."

"I mean, what are the odds?"

"I don't know," said Lana honestly, but something kept tickling the back of her neck, and it wasn't the bead of sweat that was wandering down her spine.

"Yeah, it was just like, I was at work, right? I was just doing the thing there and someone mentioned 'Parker'. At first I thought they meant me, so I was all, 'Yeah?' But then I remembered how often 'Parr' and 'Parker' were confused at school, so that was, like, a sign or whatever."

Lana, a head taller than Angelina, looked down at her. She was about to say something, but merely nodded instead. They headed across the intersection of Blue and Rall Avenue, moving briskly but with an air of authority, letting the drivers waiting for the light to change that, even if it did, the two of them weren't about to cross any faster. They arrived at Standing Park's entrance before that became an issue.

"So, yeah, that's kind of what I've been up to. But I've been doing all of the talking, right? I'm *parched*." She tipped her head back to laugh, then made a big deal of drinking two large swallows of the iced coffee.

Lana raised the cup to her lips, trying to pinpoint what, exactly, was setting her on edge. She'd only been a Messenger for a half year or so; she didn't have a lot when it came to experience, but older Messengers had always said that they only got to be old by trusting their instincts. If something felt awry, it meant that it was.

"Crazy hot weather we're having," said Angelina, looking around at the mostly-empty park as the first cold mouthful touched Lana's teeth.

Her eyes widened and she held the liquid on top of her tongue, not letting it pass down her throat. *That's* what was so strange...Angelina wasn't sweating. Everyone else they had passed had been doing something to beat the heat--whether it was a bottle of water, a fan, or a broad-rimmed hat, it didn't matter--and no one was walking unscathed. It was just too damn hot, no matter how one looked at it. And Angelina was wearing the entire pantsuit, all the way from ankles on up, her sleeves down to her wrists. The woman should be baking...but she didn't have so much as a sparkle on her hairline.

"They say that it's only going to get hotter, you know? Tomorrow or something...are you okay?"

Lana gripped her purse more tightly. The iced coffee warmed in her mouth. What if she was wrong? She couldn't lash out at her high school friend...could she? When she remembered what was in the purse, however, she knew that it wasn't really a risk she could take. If she didn't act, it might be too late. Still, there *was* something she

could do...

Lana made as if to drink again from her cup, spitting the mouthful back in as she did so. "Sorry, I was just thinking...it *is* hot, isn't it? Do you want to take off your jacket?"

Angelina's hand tightened on the briefcase. "Oh, it's fine." That laugh. The head tip. It all felt correct, precise...exact. As if she hadn't changed at all in the six years since they'd last seen each other... "I'm okay. That iced coffee was so good, don't you think? You just...you can drink it up, too! It'll cool you right off."

"Oh, I just remembered. I'm allergic to coffee."

Angelina flashed a smile on her face that was equal parts confused and frustrated. She wiped it away with a concerned look. "Is that...new?"

"Since college, yeah."

"I'm sorry."

"Yeah."

"Does it have to do with your job?"

Lana stared for a long moment. Did...did she *know*? Swallowing, the taste of the coffee still on her tongue, Lana nodded. "Yeah, that's around the time..."

The air felt thick and heavy, almost as if it were pregnant with heat and expectation. They stood at the entrance of Standing Park, the leopard pattern of leaves shadowing their faces and the walk, completely isolated. The traffic rumbled not far away, and plenty of people, needing to get from Here to There were rushing past on the sidewalk. But it was as if they were in a painting and only she and Angelina were real.

"I don't mean to pry," said Angelina, the corners of her smile twitching and her eyes bulging, "but it's just...the heat..."

Angelina lurched forward, clutching at the thin fabric of Lana's shirt. Her right hand struck Lana's left, knocking the cup of coffee to the ground, where it burst in a light-brown arch with pockmarks of rapidly melting ice throughout.

"Heat..." groaned Angelina, her face distorting. Lana pushed Angelina away, then stared in mute horror as her former friend began to twitch and convulse, her fingers rippling as if they were underwater as they elongated. Claws split down the fingernails, unsheathing in bloody streaks. The business suit swelled, the seams popping and tearing as Angelina grew. With a moist pop, two wings birthed out of her shoulders, sharp spines with tenebrous fibers lacing between them. Angelina's face contorted even more as her teeth fell out, only to be replaced by massive fangs, her jaw cracking to unnatural size to accommodate the new acquisitions. Her tongue tore in two, each half lengthening and spinning about in the air, as if tasting it. Legs thrashed for a moment as they fused together, turning from normal-human into serpentine coils. Horns erupted from her forehead. The last thing to change was her eyes, which stared at Lana for a heart-stopping moment, transmitting a final look of despair, pain, and fear, only to disappear in a roil of flame that burst from her sockets.

Lana could hardly contain her revulsion. The transformation had happened, it seemed, over the course of hours, but she knew it was barely a few seconds. The Mouth of Moloch stood before her, breathing heavily through his fanged mouth. The final

shreds of human skin that remained on his muscular frame he plucked off with a taloned hand with the same level of casualness that Lana might have removed an offending thread from off a sweater.

"What did you claim in that warehouse?" he asked, the words duplicated in Angelina's timbre and a growling sound reminiscent of boulders tumbling over each other. He took a step toward her, his fingers arched and the claws dripping. "Tell me!"

Lana retreated, her eyes scooping in as much information as she could. The world around her had slowed even more, enough that it was as though no one moved at all. A droning dragonfly hovered in the air as if suspended by a line of fishing wire. The busy strides of the passing people froze, their postures ungainly without momentum to give them life.

"Tell me, please!"

Lana blinked away the sweat. *Please?* Since when did the Mouth of Moloch say *please* to a Messenger? To anyone, really.

"I--I can't..."

"If you don't, he'll keep me. He'll keep me forever. Please, just give it to me. It's the Demon's Snare, isn't it? You can tell me--we were friends."

Lana tried hard not to panic. Her mouth felt dried of all moisture while her forehead poured with sweat. "What was in that drink?" This was, when she reflected on it, perhaps the worst of all questions she could have asked.

"Etorphine hydrochloride. It would have knocked you out, I would have taken what I need, and we'd be done. You wouldn't have even known."

"Except that *I* need this to keep my job."

"Your job is to kill scions!" Angelina's voice broke through, her pleading as familiar as the time when she asked Lana to come to a One Direction concert with her, which was something that Lana most definitely didn't want to do. Though it was the same familiar tone, the gravity of the situation was quite a bit different.

"I'm sorry..."

"I made a mistake. Please, don't let it get worse!"

Lana paused, staring at the Mouth of Moloch, the gore from his transformation still glistening across his immense, muscled chest. Shreds of the ruined business suit clung to the tawny hair of his back. Flames curled out of the side of his eyes. The wings rose, casting a shade over Lana's head, almost like Angelina was making an apologetic gesture and trying to shield her from the sun. Lana glanced up, not at all surprised to see tendrils of smoke rising off the thin wings.

"Ah," she said. "You took on Angelina's form so that you could come out in the sunlight."

"No...well, yes. Not took her form, but *my* form. It's me...Angelina."

That confession clicked it all into place. Angelina had made a bargain. She was a scion now, but likely one of very low importance. The Guild of Messengers would probably appreciate knowing this. More than that, Lana guessed that the Mouth of Moloch was in some trouble of his own. Otherwise, why would he allow Angelina this opportunity to break free? Mysteries, certainly, but ultimately there was only one

question she really wanted to know: "Why'd you sell your soul, Angelina? What was worth..." and she gestured at the monster in front of her "...all of this?"

"It was stupid, I admit it."

"Tell me."

"I..." Seeing the Mouth of Moloch squirm with almost-adolescent discomfort should have been humorous; the situation, however, kept Lana's sense of humor tamped down. "It was for a guy."

Lana sighed.

"I know. It was stupid, I know. I thought it would be worth it..." The Mouth of Moloch shook his head. "Look, I want out of the bargain. They say they'll allow a new host if I can simply return the Demon's Snare to Dagon. Please. I'm begging you." The flames in her eyes snuffed out, and the evocative brown eyes that Lana had forgotten she'd known--six years was a long time, after all--returned, imploring. "Please."

Lana took a deep breath. Angelina was trusting demons to keep their word. She sensed a trap. But, at the same time, could she live with herself if she didn't do *something* for her friend? Six years may be a long time, but that didn't change the fact that Angelina had been part of what got Lana through high school. There were some things that friends had to do to help each other, even when one had made stupid mistakes.

"Okay," Lana said at last, looking into Angelina's eyes. "But you have to do something for me."

"Anything."

"I need you to hit me."

"What?"

"Hard. With claws, I think, though not too deep. I mean, I don't want to risk bleeding out."

"I don't understand."

"If I return to the Guild empty handed, what do you think they're going to do to *me*?"

"But..."

Lana put a hand on the Mouth of Moloch's muscle-bulged arm. "Girl, I'm telling you right now, I'd rather be punched by a demon than go back to the Guild."

The Mouth of Moloch nodded his head. "I'll do my best," Angelina said.

"Okay." Lana took a deep breath. "Oh, and one other thing."

The Mouth of Moloch hesitated, one clawed hand held up and waiting. "Yes?"

"You'd better return it fast. You don't want to be chased by Messengers. Trust me."

The Mouth of Moloch nodded. "I understand." His eyes enflamed once again. "I'm sorry about this."

"So am I," said Lana. The force of the blow knocked her through the air, searing pain lightning through her arm where the claws had raked her skin. She landed hard, her head cracking on the hot, unyielding pavement. Stars burst behind her eyelids. She felt a hand pull the purse free, heard someone rummage through it, then drop the bag

next to Lana's still-reeling and now-bleeding head. As people cried out--a woman, bleeding and sprawled on the sidewalk, after all, was not a normal sort of thing, even in Lanland City--and rushed to help her, Lana caught a glimpse of a slight figure, dressed in a pantsuit, holding a briefcase under one arm.

Lana wished her well.