

# Rain Drops

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*Mystikal's a homeless crossbreed who finds life hard because of his appearance. He steals to survive but is soon haunted by a shadowy figure.*

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# 1 - Shevvo

The rain poured down, beating onto the streets. Mystikal, a western/Eastern Dragon crossbreed stood huddled in the mouth of an alley way, leaning against the dirty wall of an old factory, his paws stuffed in his jacket pockets as water ran down his face and dripped from his nose and long whiskers. Cars, buses, wagons and lorries rumbled past, spraying anybody on the foot path that braved the weather or got caught up in the sudden down pour with grimey water.

This was a city of Dragons. Western on the western side of the river, Eastern on the Eastern side of the river and Jin 'Mystikal' Tsang caught in the middle, wandering from place to place, doing odd jobs for anybody who would talk to him for a scrap of food or a few pennies.

His father a Western, his mother an Eastern Dragon, he didn't belong and was looked down upon by the Westerns for his lush mane of purple fur, long, elegant whiskers and scaleless hide, and shunned by the Easterns for his hidden ears and wings.

He stayed in the shadows and sighed as he watched the Eastern community going about it's business, braving the rain and running from building to building with purpose. Mystikal's only purpose in life was to survive on the streets, homeless and hungry, swiping food from dumpsters or food delivery vehicles and sleeping wherever he could that was out of the way. Right now, he'd made a temporary home on the top floor of the old factory he was leaning against, having found some old builder's sheets behind the corner shop a couple of blocks down to use as covers for the cold nights as winter grew closer and closer as the days slipped by.

He wondered idly how many people had spotted him stood in the alley. Probably not many. If he wasn't being beaten down by others, he was invincible, non-existent to either side. Just a shade walking the streets, a shadow flickering as a small cloud skidded across the sun.

His stomach growled at the smell of freshly baked bread, the delicate scent being carried on the breeze from the bottom of the street. He pulled his hood up and obeyed his body's pleas for food, cautiously stepping out onto the street, looking from side to side, expecting at any moment that he was going to be cut down by someone. A constant paranoia that would always haunt him after being abandoned at a very young age and being brought up an old Eastern female who used to be a top thief, teaching him how to pick locks, how enter high security buildings without detection and how to fox the police if he were to be cornered.

When he was six, the old woman's house was broken into and he was forced to watch her be beaten to death with her own walking cane. He'd just barely managed to get out alive himself, and since then, he'd been labelled as a 'prize catch' to whom ever caught him, so he found himself looking over his shoulder almost constantly as he padded cat-like to his next destination.

Twenty one without a friend in the world. He thought bleakly. Maybe I should just end my life. No one would notice the loss.

He sighed at the thought and chuckled quietly as he stepped neatly around a puddle. He'd tried ending

his life many times before. Even when he'd been beaten to within an inch of his life, he'd always found himself struggling to survive.

All these scars and scrapes should be on the body of a brave warrior, not a cowardly thief. He thought bitterly, rubbing at a wound on his left fore arm that he'd recieved when he'd been caught out raiding a butcher's shop. The old Western had tried to cut his arm off, but Mystikal had managed to dodge the falling meat cleaver, and recieved a six inch wound instead.

The smell of fresh bread grew stronger as the rain grew weaker in it's efforts to drown the twin city. He stuffed his paws back into his pockets, keeping his hood up he quickly ducked into the alley a few buildings down from the large bakery. He quickly weaved between the scatter of dust bins, dumpsters, piles of card board and masses of dirty puddles and made his way towards the back of the bakery, where the door was always open.

Mystikal hid behind an overflowing dumpster and eyed the open service door. He couldn't see anyone, but he could hear them.

One man. About fifty years of age. Eastern, naturally, as the two races didn't stray into each other's territory, and he was alone. No one out front manning the counter or out back. It was just him. Shevvo, as his work mates called him. An old, grumpy Eastern Dragon with greying red fur and an alabaster hide. Polite to his customers, but a real bastard to anyone else.

"I'll be with you in a minute! Just pulling some fresh bread out of the oven!" Shevvo called out to the ringing counter bell.

Mystikal edged closer to the door as he heard the old Dragon's foot steps move closer to the front of the shop. He peered into the kitchen from his crouching position, and when he was sure it was clear, he darted in, as silent as a cat on the hunt, his claws not even tapping against the cold, hard surface of the tiled floor.

The bread was there, large, oval mounds of golden cooked dough, steam wavering above them still as they lay on the large baking tray. Mystikal edged closer and froze as he heard footsteps passing the doorway of the shop. Shevvo moving from one end of the counter to the other as his customer asked for a slice of cake to go. He retained his tense stance, wings pressed flat against his back, whickers slightly curled towards himself as he moved in a fluid motion towards the countertop that his prize was sat on.

Mystikal was about to reach up when he heard Shevvo come back into the kitchen, grumbling about picky customers. Mystikal was frozen to the spot, heart hammering in his ears, muscles so tense that he could've passed off for a statue if it weren't for his darting eyes. The old Dragon walked past the loaves of bread as Mystikal stayed crouched, stuck in position on the other side, praying that the baker wouldn't walk around the baking counter. He stayed put for a few more seconds then hazarded a glance over the top.

Shevvo stood with his back to him, cleaning one of the smaller ovens, cursing under his breath. Mystikal quickly plucked one of the loaves from the tray and winced, biting back a wimper as the still piping hot bread burned into his paw. He ducked down and started his slow and silent retreat, but froze again at the end of the baking counter, a scant few feet from the open doorway, when he heard Shevvo move. "THIEVING LITTLE BA-"

Mystikal didn't wait for the rest; he took off, sliding into the back alley and started running as fast as he

could, ignoring the To and concentrating on the From as more angry shouts echoed after him. He didn't look back. He never looked back when he was running, no matter how tempting it was. He just kept his eyes forward, head down and feet moving with his prize tucked firmly under his arm. He rounded his fifth corner and loped to a halt in the park, between a small, but thick cluster of trees.

He sat down in the centre of them, ignoring the wet mud beneath him and chuckled, admiring the golden brown loaf of bread. What a meal he'd have today. Fresh baked bread from one of the best bakeries on the Eastern side of the river. He chuckled again at the thought of Shevvo. This wasn't the first time he'd been robbed by Mystikal and lost. His break-ins came at random moments, whether there were people in the kitchen or not. The old Dragon just couldn't catch the outcast.

Mystikal pulled a clump of bread off and popped it into his mouth, savouring the wonderful taste, knowing he wouldn't be able to taste something this good for weeks to come. The last time he'd tasted food this good was three weeks ago, when the owner of a foreign restaurant made the mistake of forgetting to lock the back door, allowing the hungry thief to get in without being detected. He'd stuffed his old ruck sack full of packets of noodles, bread rolls and cheese, grabbing a bottle of fine wine on his way out. Opportunities like that didn't come very often, but when they did, he'd grab everything he could and slink off back into the darkness.

He leaned against the tree, digesting his meal of bread as he thought about what to do next. It was getting dark and he was getting tired. He sat thinking for a couple of minutes when someone shouted. The sound of branches being bent back and snapped filled the afternoon silence of the park. He turned around and looked up at three, well built Easterns; Dark blue, black and green, lips pulled back into an evil, toothy grin.

" 'old 'im down boys. This wun's fer Shevvo." The Blue said, cracking his knuckles.

The green and black stepped forward and pulled Mystikal from the ground and held him to the tree by his arms as the Blue loomed over him, a good two foot taller than his six - one. Mystikal tried wriggling free of the Dragon's grips, but they were too strong, their hold getting tighter with each move he made, making him wince. He closed his eyes and thought; Well, here we go again...

The air rushed from his lungs as the blue landed his fist firmly in Mystikal's gut, making him gasp loudly and tense up. The next blow was landed on his jaw, thankfully not hard enough to break it. He didn't bother crying for help, he knew it wouldn't come. It didn't matter if he was beaten to a bloodied mess in the middle of the market hill on market day, people either stopped to spectate or just ignored it. The blue's fist pulled back again, and hit him in the side of the head, making the world spin violently around.

He felt the tight grip on his arms loosen and disappear as the green and black let him go. A knee to the groin forced him over to the floor, huffing for air, but exhaling more than he inhaled. A kick cracked a rib and he cried out in agony. The blue continued to mercilessly beat him, breaking bones, winding and cutting with claws until the young crossbreed lay still, wheezing quietly on the wet ground between the trees. With each breath, his cut lips speckled with more crimson.

A low rumbling in the distance and the sky grew dark with storm clouds again, the soothing sound of rain taking up pace once more as it fell to earth in another bid to drown it. Mystikal peered out of eyes swollen with bruises, everything a blur as his wounds clouded his senses. He thought he heard a voice

in the rain, soft as silk, and as soothing as the rain fall hitting the soft leaves of the trees overhead. The voice got closer, asking the same questions; "Are you alright? Can you hear me?"

Before he could make out the figure in front of him, his sight wavered and darkness swallowed him, drowning out all feeling, sound and thought.

## 2 - A Roof Over Head

Something wet touched his forehead. It wasn't cold, it was warm and pleasant. He opened an eye to a slit and peered out. A slim, pale figure leaned over him, wiping his forehead with a damp cloth.

"Where am I...?" He mumbled hoarsely.

"You are in the guest room of a house in the Sing Gardens estate. You are in a bad way." Said that same, sweet voice, cooeing to him through the haze of sleep.

"How long have I been here?"

"A few days. I have cleaned you and dressed your wounds."

He opened both eyes, the haze slowly clearing, and found himself looking up at a creamy coloured Eastern with a white mane, double horns and pale blue eyes. She was wearing a white silken dressing gown, blue flowers weaving about the delicate fabric, breaking up the paleness.

"I can't stay here..." He grumbled as he slowly pulled himself upright.

He looked down at what he was on. It seemed to be a pile of exotic cushions in the form of an oval shaped nest on the floor in the centre of the room, a light cover lay over him. He saw his clothes neatly piled on a low table in the corner of the light room.

"You haven't healed properly yet." She said, placing a tentative paw on his chest.

"I've had worse." He wheezed as his ribs ached.

"I'm sure you have. But I'd feel better knowing that you're healed properly when you go to leave."

Mystikal surrendered, feeling something in his back pop, and lowered himself back down onto the nest of cushions.

"I am Lyn." She said once she saw he was comfortable once more.

"Mystikal." He replied.

"I own this house, so you can stay as long as you wish. I am not racist like most outside. Infact, I find you quite intriguing." She said coily.

A faint smile worked it's way onto Mystikal's lips. "Thankyou." He said as she got up and headed for the door.

Lyn dipped her head. "I'll bring you some food." Then she disappeared through the doorway.

Three days passed and Mystikal was fully recovered. Lyn had been the perfect hostess towards him. She wasn't rude. She offered help and gave it to him. Put a roof over his head and gave him food and drink. He could feel his guilt rising up within him. He could never pay her back, and even if he could, he wouldn't know how. He sat on the rear porch, looking out into the lush garden. A stream with white lillies weaved between perfectly placed ornamental rocks and small islands of greenery, and a small, finely carved bridge arched over the water. A small pagoda sat at the end of the garden, tucked away between tree ferns and cherry blossoms. A tall, elegant wall surrounded the garden, closing it off from the rest of the outside world, adding peace to the tranquility. It was the perfect hide away; No risk of being seen or heard by the neighbours.

"I'll be leaving tomorrow." Mystikaly said without turning.

Lyn stood beside him, looking out into the garden too.

"You don't have to leave. It's been nice having company." She said.

"And it's been nice having somewhere comfortable to sleep, but there's no way I can repay you for what you've done." He said, turning his head to look at her.

"Yes there is; Don't leave. Stay."

Mystikal struggled to find words, but failed. Was she so lonely as to seek company from a lowly outcast, a thief, such as himself?

"I'll stay a few more days. Then I really must go before they find out I'm here. I don't want you to get hurt the way I've been hurt." He found himself saying, secretly cursing himself for agreeing to stay when he knew the danger of staying in the same place for longer than two days.

His bitterness towards himself quickly evaporated when he saw her smile. He'd grown fond of that sweet smile and the way her eyes glittered within the past few days, now realising why he'd said that he'd stay a while longer. She placed a paw on his as he leaned on the wooden railing and he gave her paw a gentle squeeze, pulling herself into a warm embrace, Lyn burying her face in his shoulder, inhaling his scent deeply.

"You must understand that I got to keep moving in order to survive." He whispered in her ear.

"No one should live like that." She replied, looking into his eyes, a tear of sorrow rolling down her face.

He gently wiped the tear away and wrapped his wings around her, not wanting to let her go. She looked so delicate even though he'd seen her practising the martial arts, her skill the finest he'd ever seen, but he found himself wanting to protect her from those that had broken him so many times, leaving him shattered in more ways than one. She looked up at him and kissed him, her whiskers entwining his as he reacted to her, his tongue carressing hers. The kiss was broken when she pulled back, face the same colour as her red blossom kimono.

"Forgive me. I shouldn't have done that." She stuttered, averting her gaze and pulling free of his grip.

"No need to apologise." He said.

But she scurried away, head dipped, back into the house, sliding the red wood and paper door closed behind her, leaving the grey crossbreed stood on the damp porch.

He dared to keep his word, so he stayed for two more days, sliding out of the side door and into the fading light, hood pulled up, padding down the path, eyes alert, ears straining. He'd left Lyn a note thanking her and apologising for leaving without a proper goodbye. He made it off the Sing Gardens estate and headed back to the park, in search for his pack that was lost when he was attacked by the three Easterns. The small clump of trees he'd taken refuge in stood proud before him, the dying sun illuminating them in a soft, rose pink glow. He approached them cautiously and started looking for his tattered pack, not really expecting to ever see it again, but there it lay, in a drying mud puddle between two trees.

He picked it up slowly, and examined it. Tears here and there, fraying seams and a damaged buckle to hold the flap down. The only thing different about it was the crusting mud splattered on it. Nothing was missing from it. There was very little he could lose. A small, black leather case sat at the bottom of the pack's grimey innards. His lock picking set which he'd been given, a birthday present from the only person who seemed to have cared for him. The remains of the loaf he'd stolen wrapped up in a greying piece of cotton, and old tooth brush, and a small blue pouch containing what little money he had in his

possession.

Mystikal slung the pack over his shoulder and headed off in the opposite direction, towards the river that split the city up into two, wondering if he could find a job in the hopes of raising enough money for a decent meal. Or a boat, he thought suddenly, surprising even himself. A small boat to sail further up river, to see what was up there, wondering if there were more people in the world like the kindly old woman who had taken him in when he was little or Lyn, who had given him a temporary roof over his head. The curiosity was too much. He would do it, or die trying.

He made his way to the third, connecting bridge, a large, metal structure, the suspension cables like giant spider webs stretching to the sky, small red, green, blue and white lights dotted about the complicated structure like Fire Flies, resting their wings, illuminating the night around them. He strode across the bridge, wings tucked firmly against himself, trying to keep to the shadows, hoping no one would notice him. The otherside of the river was in sight. The tall, modern building reared up like bleak, featureless monsters of concrete and glass, ready to devour any hapless wanderer who strayed too close. Ships and boats bobbed in the waters below, firmly docked for the night as the mariners slept, dreaming of full nets and calm seas.

He stepped off the bridge, the false bright lights of the concrete jungle piercing the darkness of his hood and stinging his eyes. He kept his head low and his pace fast and silent as he wove between the buildings, the layout of the twin city burned into his brain. So many years he'd been walking these streets and very little had changed. The people were the same, the buildings were the same, even the plant life and vehicles seemed to be the same. It annoyed him. Everything was so monotonous on the Western side. Boring, logical and sterile, unlike its sister, an ancient beauty, looking so delicate, yet it had withstood the test of time with ease.

He ducked down a back alley between two buildings and rounded a corner, finding it crammed with bins and dumpsters. Cardboard boxes and black bin bags were scattered about. Old rear doorways stood empty and dark, gaping like toothless mouths in the bleak face of a wall that separated the outside and the inside. The door had rusted shut, no one had used it for quite some time. Mystikal curled up in the doorway, using his pack as a makeshift pillow like he did so many times and let the city's natural rhythm lull him into an uneasy sleep.



### 3 - Dark Shadows

The sun rose, pouring golden light into the city streets, killing the fog that had wrapped its damp tendrils around the city. Mystikal opened an eye. The alley was dark still. He opened his other eye and found himself staring straight ahead at a tall, shadowy figure, its shape indistinct, like something out of the old ghost stories that described robed figures blacker than night itself lurking in dark corners. He sat bolt upright, an icy cold chill running down his spine. The figure wavered and started to fade like the fog. He rubbed a paw across his eyes and reajusted his vision. There was nothing there but the lightening fog, revealing the black bin bags and over full dumpsters and bins.

He sighed and relaxed a little. He stood up, swaying on his feet for a moment, tattered pack in paw as he mentally checked himself. A public toilet was just around the corner, his next destination, so he could clean himself up. Then he'd be off to scavenge, rob and pilfer, a task of survival, not guilt. Some days it would be easy. Others he would be lucky to get out alive. He had a grim feeling that it wouldn't be easy today. He was several days out of practise and his head hurt with an unexplainable headache. He padded out of the alley, his hood up once more, and made his way down to the public toilets.

He locked the disabled cubicle door behind him when he made sure no one was watching and filled the sink with warm water, pulling what remained of his tooth paste and tooth brush out of his pack. If I'm gonna die today, he thought miserably, I might as well die with a relatively clean body.

For some reason, that thought tickled him and he bit back a laugh, almost splitting his tooth brush into two. Every day he thought that, and as the years slid past, the thought seemed to get funnier.

A black shadow stood at the door in the corner of his eye made his head turn. No one there. His heart hammered and his head was still aching, but it was a dull ache in the back of his mind.

He wondered if the years of living alone on the streets was making him slowly lose his mind. He pulled the toothbrush out of his mouth and stared into the mirror above the sink. A few dark lines of stress under his eyes, dull, purple eyes, un-shining with the barest flicker of joy, ruffed purple mane, dull scales and whiskers loosely hanging. That same, joyless face he saw every day in window reflections, puddles and public bathroom mirrors. Nothing had changed about him. Nothing ever changes. Apart from the scars. The scars of a low life thief, not a proud, honourable warrior. He didn't feel ashamed. He felt no remorse or guilt or pity for those he stole off. He barely laughed any more; he had no reason to. Even now, when he'd survived something terrible, he couldn't laugh in the afterglow that came with every near death. Twenty one without a care in the world. He wanted to give up, but his body refused to die, no matter how badly beaten he was.

He scrubbed at his face with the cooling water, washing away the night's grime, ready for the sins of the day. He mulled over places of value. Places that held something that was worth more than a loaf of

bread. He heard the main bathroom door shut. Two people had walked in talking about the museum.

"Apparently it's over a thousand years old and is worth a fortune!" Said an excited female voice.

"And it's on show today?" Replied another, equally as excited.

"And tomorrow, then it's gone." Replied the first voice.

The unisex bathrooms contained the most interesting tidbits of converse. Some handy, some not.

Mystikal had an inkling at what they were talking about and suddenly found himself in a strange mood. The kind of mood that cries out for adventure and excitement. After a moment of running water, the two women left and Mystikal cautiously stepped out the disabled cubicle, pack slung over his right shoulder.

A short hooded figure caught hold of his arm and he turned around, startled.

"Hallo Jin." A gruff voice said from the darkness of the hood.

Mystikal remained silent, shock swirling about his mind. Only two people knew who he was and one was long dead. How does this guy know me? He thought worriedly and pulled his arm out of the grip of the short western.

"How d'you know me?" He said from the darkness of his own hood.,

"I've been watching your movements..." He wheezed amusedly, a horrible wheeze that made the crossbreed uneasy. "And I have an inkling of what you're gonna do next, later on tonight. It's called The Midnight Stone."

Mystikal shook his head.

"No?" The man continued. "Shame. I can pay you a pretty penny for that."

Mystikal hesitated. His feelings and instincts were conflicting. "Oh come on. It's not as heavily guarded as you think. I can give you some extra supplies that'll get you past security with ease. You'll be in there and straight out before you know it."

"How can I trust you...?" Mystikal managed uneasily.

"I know people. I'm well trusted. If you want the job, come to the Melbourn building on north eighth. Turn up by three pm, or the job get's passed on." The small man shuffled off, leaving Mystikal frozen to the spot.

He didn't know what it was, but something felt familiar about the man. Did he know the old woman who'd brought him up? He might know Lyn, but he doubted that. She seemed too upright to be involved in

anything shady, but he knew all too well that looks could be deceiving. He stepped out onto the street. The clouds were low and thunderous again, a familiar sight for the past few weeks.

The streets were busy with people going about their business, always in a rush to be somewhere, never taking their time to just stop and look around. He was once again invisible. No one looked at him. They just passed him, ignoring him. Something in that felt comforting as the offer the strange man had made him swirled about in the back of his mind. The headache was still there, persistent, refusing to subside as he made his way down the street, eyes darting, looking for any signs of someone following him.

Three o'clock was nearing. He still hadn't made up his mind. He sat on the bench, watching the clock tower. The man hadn't said how much money he would get for stealing The Midnight Stone. But curiosity drove him to his feet and towards the Melbourn building on North Eighth. He'd never been to this building before. For some reason, he'd always found himself avoiding it, like it would bring up horrible, unwanted memories. He knew where it was, what it looked like, but for the life of him, he couldn't figure out what the faceless building's purpose was.

## 4 - Melbourn's Secrets

The rain poured, bouncing off the concrete and asphalt he was stood on. The building of Melbourn towered over him like a faceless glass and concrete monster, ready to devour anyone that dared enter through the revolving doors. He wondered about the strange man he met earlier and how he knew his name; his real name. No one had called him Jin for a long time and it worried him.

An icy cold shiver ran up and down his spine and he looked to the right. A misty black figure stood in the rain, the same figure that had been there when he woke up in the alley and the same figure that had been watching him from the door of the disabled toilet. He blinked and the figure wavered, disappearing into the pouring rain. He mentally shook himself and took a hesitant step through the door, his nails clicking on the cold marble floor as he walked towards the front desk.

The entrance hall was like an ice cavern, white marble stretching upwards and outwards, creating a cold feel. White and grey leather chairs sat in organised clusters in the corners and flat screen TVs hung on the walls displaying the news. A dark yellow female western looked up from a computer screen and eyed him up suspiciously. She was wearing a black skirt suit and had thin rimmed glasses on, her lips puckered in a look of distaste as she looked Mystikal over, his dripping, worn clothes hanging off his lithe body like old rags. Mystikal swallowed hard when she spoke.

"Can I help you?" She said in a voice colder than the room they were in.

"Someone told me to come here." He said hesitantly, kicking himself mentally for sounding so ridiculous.

"A short, scruffy looking male Dragon. Sounds as if he's smoked too much. I don't know what he looks like, he had his hood up..." He trailed off as she reached for a button.

"Don't look so frightened." She said, a slanted smile coming to her face. "That guard over there will escort you to the CEO's office." She gestured to a tall, well built black and red western as he strode towards them. The guard looked at Mystikal and raised an eyebrow. A moment's pause and he ushered Mystikal towards an elevator.

The doors closed effortlessly and the elevator moved up, towards its destination. The guard said nothing. He didn't even look at the crossbreed stood next to him. The bell pinged again and the doors slid back onto a large space filled with desks, each with a secretary at one, busying herself with filing, talking to clients on the phone or tapping away at her computer. Six in total. One set of black oak double doors stood defiant against the stale white of the building. The guard escorted him towards it and knocked on the door. None of the secretaries looked away from what they were doing, as if fearing the consequences of being caught out, doing something other than their job.

A muffled voice came from the other side of the door; a rough male voice. It didn't belong to the spiv who'd collared him in the public bathroom earlier. This one seemed tired and angry.

The door opened slowly. The room on the other side was dark; green glassed lamps lighting up the innards. The room was completely different to the rest of the building. It felt warm, but it wasn't inviting. He felt out place here, but whatever money was being offered, he needed it desperately. He didn't care how much he was offered, just so long as it was enough to live on for at least a day.

A dark grey Dragon looked over his shoulder. He was stood at one of the large windows, looking out

onto the city as it was being drowned by the relentless rain. He was wearing a pinstripe business suit, his wings tucked firmly against his back. He eyed Mystikal up, a flicker of interest sparking in his eyes.

"It's been a while boy." He said, turning back to window.

Mystikal flinched and turned his head as the doors closed behind him with a gentle click. Something about this wasn't right and he didn't know what it was.

"How can it when we've never met before." Mystikal found himself saying and shrank back towards the door, freedom, when the grey looked at him again from the corner of his eyes.

But it wasn't an accusing look. It was one of slight amusement.

"Haven't we?" He said lightly. "Anyway. That isn't why you're here. That subject can be discussed later. You're here for money. Assuming you pull off the job, that is." He sat down on one of the brown leather chairs that was set against the wood panelled wall and gestured for Mystikal to take up a seat with him.

He sat down on the edge of the small two seater sofa, his eyes scanning the room.

"What's your interest in The Midnight Stone?" Mystikal said bluntly.

"It's a family heirloom. Passed down from generation to generation. Or at least it was until it was stolen from us two hundred years ago. I've asked the owner politely to give it back on several occasions and he's refused. I've even offered him extortionate amounts of money for it, yet still, he refuses to hand it over."

"So you want me to steal it?"

The grey nodded and pulled the stopper out of a crystal bottle full of deep red liquid, pouring some out into a matching crystal tumbler. "Care for a drink Jin?" He said, offering an empty tumbler.

"How d'you know my name?" He said, ignoring the offer.

"Again, we can discuss that later." He replied coolly.

Mystikal sighed heavily, feeling frustrated.

"I run a powerful company, boy. If you succeed in retrieving The Midnight Stone, then I can offer you not only money, but protection and a roof over your head."

Mystikal gaped. Never in his life had someone made him such a generous offer.

"You have a few minutes more to think about it. After that, it's either yes or no."

Mystikal shook his head, trying to clear all the thoughts. "Fine. I'll do it." He found himself saying.

"Ah, excellent!" The grey smiled. "I'll have Jonas sort you out some equipment." He walked over to his desk and pushed a button. A few seconds later, a short western walked in.

"Yes Mr. T-" He was cut off by the grey's short glare. "Yessir. What can I do for you?"

Mystikal recognised the voice. It was the Dragon who'd collared him that morning.

"Take Jin here and give him some equipment. He's kindly accepted our proposal."

Jonas dipped his head and turned to face Mystikal. "C'mon guy. Let's get you some new toys." He grinned and walked out of the office.

They walked down a corridor at the left of the secretary room outside the office and entered a long, sterile room. Racks of weapons and gadgets and lockers lined the walls. Low benches sat squat down the center of the room in perfect line as strip lights hidden in the ceiling illuminated everything brightly.

"What do you guys do here exactly?" Mystikal asked.

"Oh you know... A bit of this, a bit of that. But only on the side. We're mainly an architect company, designing and building all kinds of things. That's what the public see. Only those with the right stuff, as I call it, know about this side of the company." Jonas replied smugly.

He walked over to a locker at the other end of the room and opened it. Inside was a black suit. "Got built in armour plating. Can't remember what they call the material, but it hides your body heat from any heat systems that may be about. Stay still, and you won't be noticed at all. You'll be practically invisible!"

Mystikal grunted. He'd been practically invisible all his life without the aid of a special suit. "Don't tell me I'm expected to wear this." He grumbled.

Jonas nodded.

"There's also a grappling hook, powder spray for beam trips, and in the finger tips of the gloves, are small glass cutters. There's also a decoder card, as most security systems run on cards. Uh, the goggles allow you to see things without any form of lighting. They also pick up certain sensors. I'm assuming you've got your own lock picking set, yeah?"

"Yeah. Take it everywhere with me."

"Oh good. Oh, one last thing; Leave the pack here. There's plenty of hidden pouches and pockets in the suit. I'll meet you outside." He said and left.

Mystikal sighed and looked at the suit a moment before pulling his clothes off, replacing them with it. It fit snugly around his body and felt strange against his hide. Once he was sure he had everything intact, he pulled his own clothes on over it, concealing it. He walked out of the room and met Jonas who was stood in the secretary room, trying to chat up one of the girls.

"Have I got a time limit, or not?" He asked, fidgeting, desperately trying to get used to the new material. Jonas shook his head and grinned. "So long as you get the stone and get back here without being noticed, you're fine. Now ske-daddle. I'll let the boss know you've gone."

Mystikal turned and walked into the waiting elevator and made his way down to the main lobby. He walked out of the elevator and headed towards the doors. The sky was darker, it was almost night and the rain had subsided to a cold drizzle. The museum was three blocks away to the east and would be closing by the time he got there. He knew there were other ways in. A fire door around the back could be easily jimmed open with the right tools, so he set off, hood up, tattered pack over his shoulder, ignoring the headache and the shadow following him.

## 5 - The Midnight Stone

He studied the old fire door, picking bits of climbing ivy off the area where the latch would be. It was well hidden and neglected; no one would see him entering. With his regular clothes tucked away in his tattered pack, which itself was hidden beneath the bushes that secluded the old fire door, he pulled out a long, thin piece of metal, perfect for slipping into one way doors and prying them open. A squeek, a click and a pull as the piece of metal hooked onto the decaying wood of the door and it slowly opened, protesting at the movement.

A blackness thick like ink lingered on the other side. Mystikal swore quietly and pulled the goggles down over his eyes. They did what Jonas had said they would do; illuminated the darkness. Nothing was there, lurking in the shadows of the old concrete hallway. He crept in slowly, the icy, prickling feeling of someone watching him from behind creeping over his body, tormenting his senses. He hazarded a look behind him, seeing nothing. He lifted his goggles and outlined in the darkness, was an even blacker figure, the same one that he had seen so many times. Like everytime, it vanished when he blinked. Pulling his goggles back down, he stepped further into the darkness, peeking around the corner at the end, into a vast square room full of glass cabinets.

A ring of floor lights illuminated a square cabinet in the center, within it sat a dark purple gem, finely cut, on a silken cushion. He pulled out a small pray can and crept along the floor, the mist aiently erupting from it's spout laying across thin red beams stretched across the floor like a spider's web. He carefully stepped over them, tail raised, unwilling to disturb the beams, alert like a guard dog. He stopped a few inches away from the glass cabinet, barely breathing incase he set some unseen alarm off, and gently pressed his finger tips against the glass, cutting a hole in it, large enough for his paw.

The circle of glass fell out and he caught it in his other paw, proceeding to slide the other into the case, his fingers gently wrapping around the Stone. Alarms blared and foot steps echoed down the corridor. shoot! He thought and pulled his paw free. Pressure pad!

He swore bitterly and ran, tripping the beam alarms, not caring about their distressed screams. Shots echoed to him as he neared the old fire door and something hit him in the back, his vision blurring as searing pain shot through him, making him stumble. He regained his balance and carried on running, snatching his pack, disappearing into the streets of the city, hot stickywet crimson running down his back between the armour plating as he moved.

Don't stop. He thought wearily. "Never stop!" He growled out loud as he felt himself growing tired, quicker than usual. He'd outran the shouts and the alarms, the city night drowning out their anger and distress as he ignored his body's protests, the Midnight Stone tucked firmly into his paw, digging into his palm, drawing blood that splattered to the pavement below as he moved. The faceless Melbourn building came into view, it's shining toothless mouth gaping in a blank white expressionless face. Nearly there. Just keep running. He thought anxiously. He remembered his right foot touching the cold marble of the main reception and the dark shadow staring down at him, expectant.

"Lay still. Yer've been shot in th' back." Said a familiar voice.

"Ah h'ain't bin 'rested 'gen 'av ah...?" He mumbled, his voice floating up from the pillows like a drunken man's burble.

"Nope. Never sin a man run so friggen quick in muh life." The voice now accompanied a name. Jonas, the scruffy western that reminded Mystikal so much of a spiv. He was a spiv.

"Th' Stone." He burbled again, his wings shaking slightly as he took a deep, gurgling breath.

"It's safe, Jin. Now hold still, I'm going to remove the bullet now." That was what he recognised as the CEO's voice, the man who had hired him in the first place, that calm, steady voice of a man who's spent years honing the perfect business tone.

Something cold touched the wound and he flinched, wings going rigid, claws wrapping tightly around the cushions he had his face buried in as the cold object was pushed deep into the wound, a smothered clicking sound as metal gripped metal.

The slim tongue was removed, a small bullet in it's rigid grip. Mystikal relaxed. He'd been shot at so many times, but only a few had hit him. He'd get used to the red hot pain, he once thought, but that thought occurred over six years ago. He looked up through pain misted eyes, seeing the dark shadow looming over him again, waiting patiently as it always did, seemingly watching him, studying him.

"You'll live." Said the CEO.

"Whut 'appens now...?" Mystikal burbled, reaverting his attention to the business suited grey western.

"You successfully retrieved the Stone, so you get your payment and also our protection. Assuming you want our protection?" He said.

Mystikal hesitated. He'd heard about people like this, come across many people like this.

"Think ahm bet'roff sellin' muh soul t' th' Devil..." He burbled quietly.

The CEO chuckled and crouched next to him, looking him dead in the eye.

"I don't deal like the other companies. You want to leave, that's fine. I won't send anyone after you to tear you apart. I like things clean. Once you leave, that's it. It'll be like you were never in our protection." He said evenly.

Mystikal thought, his eyes glazing, feeling heavy.

"Yu'll get muh serv'ces so long's yuh tell me 'ow yuh know muh name..." He managed quietly, sinking back into the shrouded, smothering darkness.

"I don't think you're quite ready for that whole truth just yet." The CEO said and walked away from the passed out crossbreed that lay face down on the leather sofa in his office.



## 6 - Bitter Realisation

Mystikal came to, still lay on the leather sofa in the CEO's office, the blinds on the large windows curled up at the top, hiding like scared animals, letting the merciless sunlight in, burning his eyes. His body ached, questions left unanswered, the hole in his back patched up tightly. The office was quiet. No one was in there. No sign of the CEO, no sign of the Spiv, Jonas; just the harsh light streaming through the windows, peeking between the opposite buildings, infiltrating whatever it could. The rain had finally stopped, the only good thing to come out of the past couple of days. He sat up groggily, pain in his head and his back, his wings laying loose, head hung low and long spine hunched, scrubbing slowly at his eyes, shooing the disgustingly cheerful sunlight away. The heavy dark door opened and the CEO stepped in, the pinstripe jacket hung over his left arm, a cup of coffee held in his right paw. He looked at Mystikal, a pitiful sight to say the least; all ruffled mane, dull, tired purple eyes, sagging posture, a far cry from the tall, slender energetic crossbreed that had come into his office yesterday morn.

"I brought you a drink. Should help clear your head." The old grey said and sat the steaming polystyrene cup down on the low glass top coffee table.

Mystikal said nothing, just stared at the cup, head supported in one paw as he leaned on his knees, perched on the edge of the sofa.

"You wanted me to answer some questions." The CEO said bluntly, taking up a seat in the chair diagonal to his right, back against the sun, ignoring it.

Mystikal was now staring at a point just beyond the stale cup, that same, looming shadow lingering near the door like thick smoke from a pyre of old tyres, watching, studying, examing.

"How do you know my name? My real name." He said eventually, trying to ignore the shade.

The CEO paused, as if thinking, but the crossbreed knew he was just stalling, he'd seen that same, vacant look full of thought so many times.

"I have eyes all over the twin city. Your escapades, whilst sometimes painful, are quite impressive sometimes. You've gotten away with quite alot. Unfortunately, those two things, your name and way of living, is the only thing we know of." The CEO said eventually in an even business-like voice.

Mystikal looked him hard in the eye, those hard, uncaring eyes as bright as polished silver, and wrinkled his brow.

"You've been spying on me?" He said. "How many people have you got watching me?" He demanded, standing up, feeling more violated than he ever has in his life, more violated than being raped, more violated than being beaten.

"Several." The CEO replied evenly, a flicker of amusement behind his eyes.

"I'll take my payment thanks." He growled angrily. The CEO stood up, even in height, matching his six foot.

"Two hundred dollars for the trouble of getting the Stone back for me. Anything else?" He chided, striding over to his desk, picking a key out of his pocket and inserting it into a drawer.

"Yeah: Call off your spies." He growled, an unkown anger rising inside him, screaming to be let out.

The CEO nodded. No fuss, no chatter, just a nod yes and he pulled out a light blue slip and closed the drawer again, locking it. Pen glided across paper and the CEO walked over to the crossbreed and handed him the cheque.

"Pay it into that little account of yours and use it wisely." He said, voice as smooth as ice. "Anything else you would like to know, Mr. Tsang?" The voice now edged lightly with irony.

Mystikal shook his head and stuffed the slip into his front trouser pocket, slinging his tattered pack over his shoulder and stalked out of the room, leaving the CEO behind in his lush, dark office.

Stood outside the bank on the seventh avenue, the grey carved stone reaching upward like a stubby finger pointing to the greying sky, looking at the scrawl on the cheque, squinting to make out the signature.

"A. Tsang..." He murmured to himself, his stomach knotting painfully, knees threatening to buckle under his suddenly felt weight, something he rarely ever noticed, gravity desperately wanting to take control and pull him down, down into unconsciousness, instead leaning against the luke warm masonry of the near ancient bank, staring at the signature. He had no idea what had happened to his parents. He didn't even know them. But now, looking at this signature, he had a gut feeling that he'd just met his father and didn't even realise it until three hours after leaving his office in a mood that could only be equalled by the bad weather that had been drowning the twin city for weeks and weeks.

"No. Coincidence." He murmured defiantly, ignoring the drizzle. But how many Tsangs are there in existence? He thought, that horrible cold knot forming in the pit of his stomach again. He looked around, not knowing how many of these people were spies for this A. Tsang, his paranoia growing. He walked into the bank, carpet smelling, sterile space, always so sterile in this part of the twin city, always so boring to look at. He waited in line, ignoring the strange, curious and disgusted looks he was getting off the customers and staff, praying for the whole situation to be over with, begging the earth to crack open its invincible stone toothed maw and swallow him, let him fall into the jagged, hot oblivion below. Anything would be better than standing in this line, fending off nervous members of staff always cautiously approaching him and asking the same, tedious questions like a broken record or a parrot; "Can I help you sir?" and each time he'd politely decline, secretly growing more and more impatient.

Stood at the window now, at long last, minutes like years of waiting in line just to deposit one small piece of paper, the attendant looking less than pleased to see him, but faking it anyway, hoping he wouldn't notice that she was secretly urging him to go away and fighting the instinct to call for security. She looked at the cheque and raised an eyebrow. He didn't know if it was the amount of money a scruffbag like him had in his possession, suspicious of a robbery or the name of a powerful western CEO scrawled at the bottom in a perfectly practiced hand. The cheque whirred through the machine and he was off again, heading for the door, trying not to run, now feeling more than uncomfortable, the outside world so full of exhaust fumes and fading light into drizzle, beckoning him back into it's more forgiving bosom, the cold, harsh place he called home.

Around the corner was the spiv, Jonas, wearing a navy blue hoody and stone wash jeans, paws stuffed in the hoodie's pocket, cigarette hanging from his maw, light wisps of grey smoke swirling in the breeze and the drizzle, reaching for the sky like the grey tendrils of a ghost.

"'erd from th' boss that yer've gone an' dun a runner. Din' believe 'im mind you, so thought might as well come 'an see for me self, thinkin' that a smart lad such as yerself dun go an' turn down a sweet deal like th' boss were offerin', y'know? Cushty job it is. Bin' in th' business fer years naah." The spiv said, cigarette hangin from his bottom lip.

"I don't care how cushty it is." Mystikal grunted and side stepped around the short western, continuing his walk, searching for some place to stay the night, not wanting to eat, feeling too sick to eat after what

had happened.

"This 'bout whut th' boss said t'you afor you upped an' left 'im in th' lurch?" The spiv called after him and scuttled along up beside him, trying to keep up with the crossbreed's long, determined strides.

"Not so much as what he said, but what he didn't."

"Whut 'e dint say?" The spiv asked, puzzled, his mind working through muddled thoughts, trying to pick out valid reasons. "Summink 'e did? Wrote even...?" He hazarded.

Mystikal looked over his shoulder. "Wrote." He snarled.

"Wrote.. Oh.. Th' cheque ah'm assuming? Problum wee'it?"

"Yeah. His frackin' signature!" Mystikal snapped and his pace sped up a little, his body trying to match the speed of his mind, leaving the little Dragon scuttling and wheezing along behind.

A small patch of grass with a bench on lay to the right, the rain soaking it, giving it a miserable, lifeless appearance.

"Wayte up Legs!" The spiv panted and almost collided with Mystikal when he stopped abruptly. "Whut 'bout 'is sig?" He asked, puzzlement and concern colliding on his greasy ageing features.

"Why didn't you tell me his goddamned name? And why the frack did he shut you up when you went to address him last night?" He hissed, leaning forward slightly to try and make proper eye contact with the five foot man huffing and wheezing on the pavement in front of him, threatening to double over and collapse to the puddled floor.

"'onestly? Ah ain't got th' foggiest." He huffed, dropping his cigarette to the ground, a small, hissing sound like a pissed off snake as it drowned in the small puddle below.

Mystikal righted himself, his throat tight with anger, rain water now dripping and sliding from his muzzle tip and long whiskers because he neglected to put his own hoody on, but the rain being the least of his concerns.

"If he's playing some kind of sick little game with me, I ain't gonna rise to the bait, so you can tell him to frack off and leave me the hell alone! He's already done me more then enough damage to last me a frackin' lifetime." He hissed bitterly and turned, continuing his walk, leaving the wheezing western behind, his pack tugged tightly against his back, for once uncaring as to whether anyone saw him for what he really was or not.

## 7 - I'm Done

He sat huddled in a steel and safety glass bench hut on the sea front, watching the grey, unsettled water sucking hungrily at the beach, his legs curled up, arms and wings and tail tightly wrapped around himself, and his tattered pack in the middle as if to be protected. The rain contended for dominance of noise, coming on par with the greedy, merciless sea that lay sprawled ahead of him, just a mere sixty feet away from him, beckoning him, urging and persuading him to come closer, to discover the secrets it's held close to its heart, the skeletons of days gone by, lying on the gritty, slimey bed for many many years; years older than his great grandfather's great grandfather. The rough, churning sea looked inviting, promising an eternity of peace, escape away from the colliding thoughts, questions and less than pleasant memories in exchange for a few moments of unbearable pain.

Hot tears stung his eyes, tears he thought went extinct many years ago, rolling down his grubby cheeks and into his curled up lap where his tattered pack lay, nestled in what little warmth he could muster, smoke curling from his wet nostrils as he worked his fire lung, trying to keep himself warm. The shadow stood, watching him again from the steel white safety rails a few feet ahead of him, not blocking the view of the churning water, silently watching him, waiting patiently for his next move. He uncurled himself, not taking his eyes off the figure, refusing to blink no matter how badly the salty tears and cold wind stung his eyes, fearing the apperition would vanish again, like it had done so many times in the past few days. So certain that he wanted to die, that his subconscious wouldn't interfere this time with his wish, that the shade came clearer through the driving rain. He dropped his pack, what little belongings he owned stashed away in there, onto the damp ground of the shelter, not wet, but not dry either, as if it couldn't make up its mind what it wanted to be.

He walked towards the rail, the figure watching him as he watched back, the dark fog still refusing to take on a firmer more distinguishable shape. He placed both paws on the top rail, the cold water and steel biting into his paws, the wind rattling his wing bones together. Keeping what he thought to be eye contact with the dark shape he said "You've been waiting for this a long time, haven't you?" The voice so devoid of feeling his spine turned to ice. He didn't care though; soon his entire body would feel like that and his spirit, his soul free of the daily worries of food and shelter. The shadow only watched as he climbed the railing and dropped down to the muddy sand and slick rocks below, the fifteen foot drop easy, using his wings as a parachute. He didn't know why he did it, since he was going to end his life anyway.

The short walk towards the roaring sea seemed to take years.

Already waist deep in the biting cold water now, the churning of the sea trying to suck his life away already as he fought the waves, slowly moving forward, losing his footing and having to swim, relieved as the undertow finally took charge, allowing the crossbreed to relax, to be swept away, never to be found. All the memories being washed away with him, bitter salty water hitting his lungs like knives, his body trying desperately to save itself, unable to override his determined mind. The grey sky was swallowed by murky green water, filling his vision with dirty green and brown silt, blue and white lights in his eyes, his head about to explode, then just as he thinks it is, darkness swallows the roaring, tumbling sea around him, blissful peace at last, a wonderful, weightless feeling. Then voices. No. A voice. So familiar, yet distant, out of reach, telling him No, it's not time, go back or he'll get you, drag you into a

starless oblivion.

Mistress? He said, wondered. Who'll get me? Tell me and I shall avoid him. A child's voice, a voice he hadn't used since he was six.

Don't avoid him. Don't run. Don't get caught. You'll know when it's your turn. And when it is my mystical one, I will be there to guide you like I should have done all these years.

Bright lights shining through his eye lids, sterile, starched cotton against his back and across his front, voices murmuring above him then receding footsteps, a door closing shut then the light went out. Merciful gloom, only a dim glow. He opened his left eye a crack, a slit of purple centered by a pupil as black as night. A black and red western above him, watching, curiously. The other eye opened to a crack, adjusting to the dim light. It was the security guard who had escorted him to the CEO's office who had later turned out to be Mystikal's father, who had refused to tell him who he really was, using him as a tool for his own devices.

A disheartening groan rippled up inside his slender neck, getting caught in his dry sealed mouth.

"Dun tell me. I'm alive." He grumbled dryly.

The security guard nodded and placed a paw on Mystikal's chest as he tried to sit up.

"Sit still. You've done yourself enough damage already." He said gruffly.

Mystikal slumped back down. "Where're my clothes?" He asked numbly, his brain finally realising that it's vessel was naked in a strange, alien place.

"In the incinerator where they should've gone a long time ago. But don't fret. I got you some new ones."

Mystikal wrinkled his nose, making a face, somewhere between disgust and disappointment. "Why am I here?" He asked, feeling puzzled and angered at the same time.

"A fisherman brought you into the local hospital. Luckily I was there getting some stitches done, so I brought you back to Melbourn. And yes, your pack is safe. Jonas went to look for it." He placed a reassuring paw on the young crossbreed's shoulder. "Why did you try killing yourself?" The question was more out of personal worry than business, taking the young crossbreed by surprise.

"Spur of the moment." He mumbled and closed his eyes again, the vile taste of sea water lingering in his mouth, refusing to go away. "I need a drink."

"I'll go fetch you some water."

Footsteps on carpet receding to the other side of the room, water pouring into plastic and the carpeted footsteps were making their way back again, stopping beside him, the stale scent of fresh water hanging in the air above him. The tap of plastic on wood and a paw to help him sit up, the other rearranging the pillows at his back before the plastic cup was offered. Eye half open, head hurting and body aching, Mystikal took the beaker, a massive black Dragon's paw to help steady his own, slender grey paws as he raised the half full cup to his lips, the water pouring down his gullet like hot ice, stinging and relieving both at once.

"The boss isn't too happy with that stunt." The guard said.

"I bet he ain't as pissed off as I am though. Hell, can guarantee it." He grumbled and refused anymore water.

"I don't know what happened, so I won't pry. I'm just here to make sure you don't do anything like that again." The guard said.

Mystikal thought a moment, trying to get his mind back in it's proper order, the organised chaos that he knew so well and could cope with. "I'm surprised you ain't tried killing me yourself. Everybugger else wants to."

"I find you interesting." The guard replied then stopped, suddenly feeling awkward.

"In what way?" Mystikal didn't look at him, could feel the sense of awkwardness, knew how the guard felt, so decided not to make the situation any worse.

"I've never come across a hybrid before." He said and that got Mystikal looking at him.

Runt, freak, demon, loser, crossbreed but never hybrid. The guard, eight foot of stocky western muscle, looked meek. Mystikal had nothing to say, couldn't find a reply for the western sat next to him, remembering the cold, hard and dismissive look he gave him when he was sent to escort the crossbreed to see the CEO, that familiar look he had grown accustomed to melting away so quickly, it startled him.

"The CEO will be by after his meeting to see you." He said, regaining his composure. "It's just started so you'll be able to rest a while longer. I'll be stood outside the door which is the only exit from this room." His voice now cold and rigid, like that first look.

He stood up and walked towards the door, a few carpet smothered foot steps, the door clicking open then closed again, sealing the outside world off from him and sealing him off from the outside world. A window at the far end of the room, the late evening rain pouring down the thick pane of glass like a waterfall, the small bunch of yellow flowers in a cheerful vase sat atop the low table beneath the miserably familiar view doing little to cheer things up, making it worse in fact.

## 8 - Unforgiven

Tall, dark grey scales, pinstripe suit, double horns polished and sharp, wings tucked firmly to his back, standing beside Mystikal's bed, looking down at the young crossbreed who had the heavily starched white cotton sheets pulled around him, hiding the shame of his scar coated body. An expressionless expression on his face, the sort that would make demons think twice.

"You get paid a large sum of money, possibly the largest you will ever see, and you go and try and kill yourself." The CEO said evenly, no flicker of amusement, irony or business this time round, just hollow, hollow like a dark cavern, hungry for victims to fall in and get lost in the never ending darkness.

Mystikal sat quiet, still in his cocooned crosslegged position on the bed, staring out of the window, the rain relentless in it's soaking onslaught.

A lecture from dad. He thought miserably. A lecture from a so-called father who has never been there for me, has been spying on me for my whole life, doing nothing to help me, watching me be tortured by racists and other bastards with small minds. He hissed, his mental voice bitter with hatred, the hatred that he had hoped was lost at sea, never to return to him, but here it was. The small voice inside himself once more, screaming and clawing, wanting to spread this mans blood across the sterile Melbourn building, chiding that the place needs some colour, some life added to it.

"I honestly didn't think you cared." He grunted quietly, wondering if the CEO caught the near whisper as he sat atop his high horse.

"You'd be surprised at what I care about." The CEO said.

"Mmm. Business ties, yourself and your money. And guess what? I ain't a business tie." Mystikal kept the itchy starched fabric wrapped around himself, his knees threatening to give way as he stood, snarling at the offered paw. Too late to help. Twenty one years too late to help. He growled to himself. The outstretched paw was quickly revoked as the crossbreed shuffled towards the clothes the guard had pointed out. New jeans, new underwear, new shirt and new coat, same old tattered pack, containing the remnants of himself, all that was left of the life tired Dragon.

"What're you gonna do now?" The CEO asked, more out of curiosity than anything else, possibly for his own benefit though; always the same with these people, always thinking about themselves, not a flying frack about those around them, the sick, the dying and the homeless.

The artificial brightness of the bathroom light scorched his eyes, forcing him to squint hard to try and see what he was doing, shuffling foward, clothes draped over his left arm, with his pack in the same paw, his right arm aiding him through the light, guiding and feeling his way along, pushing the door shut with a soft bump and click shut with his tail.

"That's none of your damned business." His voice growled softly through the bathroom door, tired of the twin city, tired of his life here and it's people, the shadow following him and watching him like one of the CEO's spies.

"And if I make it my business-"

"Then your life will go straight to hell, just like mine. There's nothing like the feeling of being left behind by those you thought loved you." He growled, more tears tightening his throat, cursing himself for letting his emotions run rampant, swallowing them hard like bitter pills.

Running water to block out the CEO's words then the ruffling of new, clean fabric and he was back out, coat on, tattered pack over his right shoulder, hood up. The CEO stood watching him, the bleak expression had melted into something unreadable. Mystikal, fed up and hungry pushed past the CEO, ignoring him, sidling past the guard outside and made his way unsteadily towards the elevator, not looking back, not caring about those behind him, just caring about finding shelter and food for the night, a secluded place away from Melbourn and its deceiving secrets, wanting to be left alone once more out on the streets, with the rain, the wind and the hunger, wandering from place to place, never stopping for more than a short night, a life he'd grown used to.

Pouring rain smacking against the dirty concrete and tarmac, bouncing off car roofs with a soothing short and hard wet metallic clang. His feet squelching along the puddle ridden pavement, rain water cold between his toes, long, maned tail dragging occasionally along the floor, the tuft of purple fur on its tip becoming wet and matted as he walked, hunched over in his new coat, hood up, determined to get away from this place as fast as possible, refusing to look back, determined to find a place where he won't be ignored, looked down upon or cursed. The anger finally subsiding now, simmering down to a cold knot in his gut, distantly wondering about what the CEO was going to do, already knowing the answer without having to ask or look back, knowing that the CEO would just go about his daily business as if nothing had ever happened, as if he hadn't ruined anybody's life completely and utterly.

No sign of the spiv, Jonas, either, the shadow gone for now, but those words of a familiar voice still echoing in his head. He'll get you. He wondered to himself. Who was he? Mystikal didn't know, but had a horrible inkling, slivers of fear sliding up and down his spine like shards of ice, forcing his wings to fold in tighter against the miserable weather as he walked, eyes sliding from side to side, scanning for an out of the way nook to hide in for the night. His stomach churned, begging for food, tightening and gurgling, giving him more grief than he needed. A fast food restaurant lay ahead, preparing to close its doors to all customers as the sky grew darker above the low lying rain clouds. He'd caught a glimpse of a massive clock in the main lobby on his way out the monstrous Melbourn building, it had been nine forty-five when he'd left. The days waste food would be going in a bin out back, behind the fat-filled restaurant, a health and safety rule to put good food to waste, a mainly needless rule.

He vanished around a corner near the squat building, its garish colours standing out in the rain and gloom even without the burning neon sign lit up. Hiding behind an old dumpster, he watched silently as two workers heaved a box of pre-cooked food into an overflowing dumpster near the rear door, food that had been cooked ready to serve during the lunch hour rush, but hadn't quite made it onto the rotten brown plastic trays due to the rain forcing people to stay in and eat at their desks, in staff rooms and stock rooms, unwilling to get drenched just to satisfy their hunger pains. The rear door creaked and clicked shut, the sound of metal on metal quietly bouncing down the alleyway to him, signalling the locking of the door. The lights went out, the small, long windows above him going dark, allowing him to sneak to the discarded box, pulling some left overs out he scurried away, deeper into the alleyway, away from the eyes of the daring public, and into an old doorway, where two more of the twin city's homeless lay, snoring and mumbling in their restless sleep.

He sat on the wet, ruddy step, chewing on a mouthful of left overs, his mind wandering back to the Melbourn building and its CEO. Mystikal could never forgive someone like him, not ever. Even if my life depended on it. He snarled in his mind, swallowing hard, his stomach contracting tightly around the stale food. He wondered what had happened to his mother, if she was more caring, but he had only the



faintest desire to find out, a large part of him refusing to go back to the concrete and glass monster that was Melbourn, not wanting to smell its sterility, feel its coldness or see any of the faces it held within ever again. He wiped his paws on his trousers and placed his tattered pack into his lap, pulling his knees up to his chest and wrapping his tail and wings around himself, trying to ignore the thoughts in his head and the shadow against the opposite wall that was watching him once more, waiting for him.

## 9 - Connecting Bridges

Drizzle filled the morning air, joining the murk and pollution, corrupting the senses of everyone who ventured out into the dim light. A toe prodded him in the side, a gruff voice telling him to wake up, swearing at him to wake up. Mystikal grumbled something, feeling iller than ever, not the day old food, but something different, the feeling of wanting to throw up but knowing you can't lingering in his stomach as he opened one blood-shot eye, swivelling upwards towards a hunched over figure in a rain coat. "What you want Spiv?" He grumbled, ignoring the snoring tramp he was sharing the ancient doorway with.

"Boss wanna see yeh. Now. 'e ain't impressed wi' you fer some reason." Jonas said, stuffing his paws in his pockets.

"The most I've done to annoy him is try and drown myself. Anyway, I couldn't give a flying frack about what he wants. He never gave a frack about me, why should I give a frack about him?" He curled up tighter and shuffled to face the other way, trying to ignore the spiv and the lingering shadow by the old dumpsters.

"You're very 'ard t' come by, Jin, so Imma bring you in kickin' an' screamin' if I ave' to, got it? An' I like you, so I don't wanna do that." He said. "Yer pissed off 'nuff as is already." He mumbled at the end. "Yeah well, you can tell your boss, that if he wants to see me, he can come out here and find me." He stood up, slinging his tattered pack over his right shoulder and pushed past the spiv, making for the end of the alley, the clicking of nails splashing through ruddy water puddles and across uneven paving to keep up with the crossbreed. The streets were busier than usual, the past few weeks the rain had been keeping pretty much everyone secluded from the outside world. Hood up, wings tucked in tightly, with the spiv and shadow in tow, he walked across the street, no care for whether he got hit by a car or lorry or not, ignoring the few dirty looks and lavishing the ignorance of the others; invincible in plain sight. How he liked it, what he was used to.

"I don't think th' boss'd appreciate commin' out t' look fer yeh, y'know." He wheezed.

Mystikal shrugged. He didn't care. He didn't know what the CEO wanted, nor did he care.

"He's had his chance to talk to me. He's had fracking years to talk to me."

The spiv, Jonas, nearly tripped over his own feet and tail, trying to keep up with Mystikal as he crossed a junction on a red light.

"Well, yeah, but, y'see, 'e's a complicated man our boss is. There's no tellin' what he's gonna do next."

"Look, this conversation, if it can be called one, is getting neither of us anywhere. So, tell him that if he wants to see me so badly, he can come and find me. He obviously knows where I am, so it should be a sinch." Mystikal said suddenly, looking over his shoulder at the short western following him behind.

The spiv's face paled and he swallowed hard. No one had refused the CEO before, unless they were his enemy, and the young crossbreed, the CEO's own blood and flesh was making him an enemy, seemingly determined to cross blades with him.

"Oh shoot, boy. He's gonna have both our hides now."

"It's me he has a problem with, not you."

"You ain't got a damn clue what yer gettin' yerself int', lad!"

The spiv ran off back towards Melbourn after a moment's terrified hesitation, obviously not wanting to go

back empty handed, the bearer of bad news. Mysterious things had happened to those who brought the CEO bad news. People had gone missing, limbs had come off and entire families had been wiped off the face of the planet.

The first joining bridge; one of the three suspended above the wide river, the only two ways for haulage to gain access to either side, always one or the other crossing into enemy territory for the sake of business, money, all of which Mystikal had no care for. He'd lost near enough everything except for his tattered worn pack and his ragged sharp mind. The rain insisted on continueing it's downpour, drowning the twin city in salty droplets of water from the sky. The boats moored up tightly on the river, clinging to the wooden and metal moorings as if their life depend upon it, patiently waiting for the monotonous weather to give up, to give the sun a chance at life, quietly creaking and clumping patiently as rain tried to sink them. Over the many hundreds of years, the twin city had become an island, cut off from the rest of the world by the ocean, the only links to the mainland; the bridges, the water and the sky.

He looked north, a dark horizon peeking through between the mounstrous sky scrapers of the western's part of the city. Trees, mountains, lakes, valleys and plains all stretched out, villages, towns and cities of their own waiting for someone brave enough to leave the downtrodden twin that was quickly being cut off from it's roots. There was no doubt about it. He hated this city and near enough everything in it. He wanted out and if Death didn't permit that, then he'd find another way, back to the secondary plan of getting a boat, either hiring or stealing. He was good at stealing, lived all his live on the prowl for something decent to steal, from bread to jewels plucked from a woman's wrist on the street for a bit of cash from the pawn shop. Looking behind himself, head craned, eyes fixed over his shoulder, the shadow stood, patiently waiting, the hardening drizzle falling through it, the now familiar feeling of hollow eyes fixed on his own, boaring into his soul, searching for clues.

He took up a seat on a drenched bench on the river front, ignoring the sound of the various vehicles passing by on the bridge a mere thirty foot to his right, eyes fixed on the shade.

"Why are you following me?" He asked, aware that he may be only talking to himself.

The shade stood, watching.

"Can you even hear or understand what I'm saying?"

It continued to watch. Mystikal worked his mouth around a jumble of silent words, wondering what to say, wondering if he should say anything else.

"Jin." Came a voice he recognised all too well.

He didn't take his eyes off the shadow. Just watched it.

"Jin?" The CEO said again, impatience lining his tone.

He looked back towards the road. He hadn't heard the black four by four pull up to the roadside. The rear tinted window was rolled down, the CEO sat in the back of the leather interior, watching the crossbreed.

"What do you want old man?" Mystikal growled.

"You." He replied simply, a smile tilting the corners of his lips slightly, not a pleasant smile, not welcoming, not friendly in anyway.

"I don't want to work for you, I've already said, now piss off and leave me alone."

He got out of the back of the car, an umbrella spread out above his head and walked through the puddles towards Mystikal on the bench.

"Who were you talking to just a minute ago?" The CEO asked curiously.

Mystikal stayed silent, defiant, refusing to answer his question.

"Fine then. About the other day; I should have told you before you left."

"You should have told me years before instead of leaving me behind." Mystikal growled angrily.

"I didn't leave you behind. I put you into care, for your own good. Your mother's family didn't approve of me and threw a shootfit when they found out she was pregnant with you. As soon as she had you, you went to an orphanage."

"For my own good? Is this what you call for my own good?" He shouted, standing up, gesturing at his surroundings, tossing his pack off his shoulder and holding it up in front of the CEO before letting it drop to the ground where it landed with a wet slap in a puddle.

"I had no idea you were going to end up like this, otherwi-"

"Otherwise you'd have done something sooner? You've had twenty one years of spying on me! Isn't that enough? Were you enjoying the show?"

The CEO bowed his head, closing his eyes briefly and looked up into the crossbreed's eyes, seeing the hate and anger there, ready to be released.

"It's hard to explain, son."

"Don't ever call me that." Mystikal growled, taking a step forward.

The driver in the car looked at them, eyes now fixed on Mystikal, warily watching and studying him, cautious of the homeless crossbreed's next move.

"You may have had a hand in creating me, but that's all. You were never my father in any other way, got it? As far as I'm concerned, the only family I ever had is the old eastern that took me in." A bitter snarl now, his words dripping with hatred, whiskers curling slightly with each breath he took, fighting the urge to beat the man in front of him death.

"Now tell me what you want so I can get on with my life or frack off and disappear again."

"I want you to come and work for me. Your skills are valuable to the side business."

"Didn't I make it clear that I didn't want to work for you?" He said in a low growl. "I never want to work for you. For all I care, you can drop dead right now, I'll happily dump your body in the river with the rest that are there."

The CEO frowned. "I'll have to take that as a threat." He said.

"Take it however the hell you want. One day, you'll be dead, and I'll be there to dance on your grave." Mystikal snarled and turned away, scooping his pack up into his paw and slinging it back over his right shoulder.

"I shan't blame your mother for your current situation. She wanted to keep you. She fought for you tooth and claw and it ended up killing her."

Mystikal ignored him and carried on walking away from the CEO, away from his shiny, expensive car and towards the bright lights of the bridge, towards the small, hidden set of stone steps that led down to the moorings.

"You've made a powerful enemy today Jin. I have ways of getting to people even beyond the grave."

That sent a chill up and down his spine, but he didn't stop, he didn't hesitate, he just continued walking.

An old western of green and blue scales knotted a rope, securing his small vessel to the wooden moorings as the wave on the river slapped hungrily at the banks, drinking in the rain.

"'scuse me!" Mystikal called. The western looked up.

"Can I 'elp?" He replied raggedly.

"D'you know of anyone who'd take me across to the mainland?"

The old sailor thought a moment, looking Mystikal up and down.

"You're a strange specimen." He cooed, eyeing up the wings, purple mane and long whiskers of the crossbreed. "Hmm... I've seen some strange things in my life, but never summon like you."

Mystikal sighed.

"I'll take yeh across t'the mainland if yeh want. But it'll cost yeh."

"How much?"

"Hundred an' fitty. No less."

To his surprise, Mystikal nodded. "I can get you the money by tomorrow noon. Is that ok?"

"That's fine by me laddie. Jus' don't be late, otherwise I'm shoving off without yeh."

## 10 - Fire And Blood

The next day, the sun finally peeked through the low grey clouds, a brief, welcome moment of warmth instead of the cold wet. Stood in que once again at the bank, the carpet smell in his nose, the staff taking worried looks at him once more, as if he might rob the place, leaving everyone for dead. He hated it here, but he'd had to come to get the money he needed. He'd draw all of it out, a total of two hundred and fifty dollars. The attendant staring at him, eyes wide, shock as if he'd just pulled a gun on her. "If you draw that much out, the account will be empty and will shut down within twenty four hours." She said.

"I know." He said simply, ignoring the looks he was getting, ignoring the shadow that persisted in following him around.

The money was shoved to him through the metallic gap underneath the bullet proof plexiglass and he took it, putting it into his old wallet and walked out of the building, leaving behind the staff and their carpet smell.

He wasn't surprised when the rain started up again.

God's always pissing on me. He grumbled in his mind, wondering what he did to deserve this, the almost constant run of bad luck that tainted every decision he made. He flicked his tongue inside his mouth, tasting blood. His own blood. The shadow was watching him again, studying as it always does. Can't have cut my mouth. He thought idly, trying to locate where the blood was coming from. No. There's no way I could have cut my mouth... He thought, spitting out a bloodied glob of spittle, watching it land in a puddle, the red slowly spreading out. The ill feeling was still in his stomach, had been since he walked out of Melbourn, slowly getting worse, now accompanied by a bleeding mouth.

You've made a powerful enemy today Jin. I have ways of getting to people even beyond the grave. Those words stuck in his mind. He wondered if it was true, if the CEO could get to him, harm him, without even having to touch him. Magic was rare, but it wasn't impossible. Then it struck him; the shadow could be somehow related to the goings on in Melbourn, one of the CEO's spies or assassins, possibly both. Mystikal growled and strode off toward Melbourn, breaking the promise he made to himself, swearing to never go back there again. But in his mind, he saw very little choice, he had a feeling the CEO was behind this, and he was going to stop him, even if he ended up getting killed in the process.

I go down, I'm dragging you down with me, bastard. He hissed in his mind, ignoring the pain in his stomach and the blood in his mouth, forgetting the man down at the river docks, striding towards Melbourn, the faceless building that stood tall against the skyline, nestled within the other sky scrapers. He was at the door before he knew it, the glass rotating door, the cold hard street on the outside, the cold hard lobby on the inside. The dark yellow western female was sat at her desk, the main reception desk, the tall, stocky black and red western security guard stood off to one corner, both watching him carefully as he made for the elevator, the guard coming after him as he pressed the button.

"I thought you'd left never to return." The guard grunted, then stopped the following sentence abruptly when he noticed the line of stickywet crimson oozing from the corner of the crossbreed's mouth. "What the frack happened to you?" He said instead.

Mystikal just looked at him, stepping into the richly lined elevator. "What does the CEO know about black magic?" He gurgled, as if his lungs and throat were filling with blood.

The guard stepped into the elevator next to him. "He knows allsorts. He has used black magic a few times, but he only uses that on those he really doesn't like." He trailed off, noticing that Mystikal was looking dead ahead, staring at the doors, his paws balling into fists repeatedly, knuckles going white then red dripping from his claw tips as he flexed his paws before fisting them again, digging into his palms.

"If you're planning on doing what I think you're here to do, I wouldn't even try it. You'd be dead before you even reach him."

"Shame. That means I'll just have to tear him apart from beyond the grave."

The guard shrank back at the look on Mystikal's face. There was just a frown and the faintest of snarls twisting his lips, his once lively purple eyes holding nothing but hollow malice.

The elevator pinged and the door opened, sliding back to reveal the reception area of the upper floor. Feeling more ill than before now, just within a few seconds he was ready to collapse here and die, on the floor of the elevator, only determination to end the life of the twin city's most powerful CEO kept him going strong as his stomach burned and twisted, the taste of acidic bile tainting the hot metallic taste of blood on the back of his tongue. The heavy twin doors at the end of the white room were pushed open by the guard, curious to see what was going to happen.

The CEO stood at his window once again, the exact same spot where Mystikal had first seen him, the pinstripe suit still perfect on his slender frame and wings tucked tightly against his back.

"I was wondering when you'd get here. Hell, I'm surprised you made it here." The CEO turned around to face Mystikal, the guard closing the doors behind them, leaving them alone.

"What've you done t' me?" Mystikal snarled, a bloody gurgle entering his hard tone.

"Nothing." The CEO said innocently. "I was just practicing some of my spells." He shrugged.

Mystikal narrowed his eyes and stepped forward, furthering his position in the dark office. The CEO didn't budge, his eyes studying the crossbreed in front of him, looking for any signs of weapons, smiling when he found none, sure that he didn't have any.

"What spells?" Mystikal demanded, bloodied spittle flying from his lips.

The CEO reached into the air in front of him, one eye closed, squeezing his hand shut and twisting. Mystikal gasped and fell to the floor, blood trickling from his nose now too, running down his whiskers and dripping onto the maroon carpet.

"Just some self preservation spells, something no CEO should go without."

Mystikal snarled and clawed at the carpet through the seering pain, trying to get to his feet. The CEO turned his back on him again, looking out of the window once more.

"It's a shame you know. Melbourn's going to be spreading further towards the southern part of the city and you could have been an important part of the project. Alas, you had to go and piss me off. I mean really. Storming out of the boss' office, trying to drown yourself then blame it on me?" He tsked.

Mystikal's mouth worked soundlessly. "I know you've had that shadow following you everywhere, that's why I wanted you."

"You know about it?" He wheezed, scrabbling to his feet. "What the frack is it?"

"It's your Death." The CEO said darkly. "But it can be controlled with a certain spell, one that I have and I also know how to cast it. Only problem is, I don't have your cooperation, so I'm afraid, I'm going to have to torture you into submission, kinda like I did with my secretary in the main lobby and my security guard who's waiting for you outside."

His insides were on fire now, doubling him over, leaning on his bent knees as he swayed on his feet, gasping for air, blood dripping from his mouth like the rain poured down outside. He was in pain, but he kept his eyes focused, his mind set on what he wanted to do, what so many other people wanted to do. He stepped forward, the CEO didn't look back; either he could see him in the reflection in the window or he was too cocky for his own good. Mystikal agreed on the latter, hoped that was the case, wanting to get at least one blow in before he was crushed. He lept forward, across the desk, wings flared, the only things about him that didn't hurt blindingly, and smashed into the back of the CEO. The window vibrated in protest but didn't shatter and they staggered back, struggling, falling onto the desk, breaking it as they landed heavily. A fist connected with Mystikal's jaw, but he managed to remove a lump of flesh with a swipe of a claw, leaving a large gash in the side of the CEO's face, the soft tissue of his lips being shredded as Mystikal went at him again, claws extended, razor sharp and bloody like his mouth. The CEO roared in agony and anger but no one came into the office to help him, leaving him at the mercy of his enraged son as he was flipped over, blood dripping into his face, mixing with his own as a flame ignited at the back of the crossbreed's throat, the last thing the CEO saw.

The floor around the CEO's charred head smouldered, the scent of burning nylon, cotton and paper and wood infiltrating the crossbreed's bloodied nostrils. The pain inside him stopped as the CEO's life disappeared with the flames, the only pain now was in his jaw and his mouth. It'd been many years since he'd breathed fire and the protective lining of his throat and mouth had become useless and tainted by the blood that had been coming from his mouth. The door opened a crack and a large black reptilian head lined with red horns peeked into the room, before the rest of the body followed, wary of what had just happened. Mystikal tried to stand up, but his knees buckled beneath him and he collapsed into the remains of the desk and the CEO as darkness swallowed him.

He opened his eyes again, a different room, a different building. The smell homely and welcoming and the black Dragon's head appeared above him once more, worry etched into its hard features.

"You're awake then." The guard said. "Didn't think you were gonna make it, but once again, you surprised me." That was said with a relieved smile.

"Now where am I?" Mystikal grumbled sleepily.

"At my house, away from the madness of Melbourn."

"The CEO...?"

"Like you left him: Dead." He replied as if it didn't matter. "You have no idea how many of the rival companies want to shake your paw for getting rid of him. You did us all a favour. Seriously."

Mystikal blinked, barely able to recall what had happened. The shadow was gone, no longer there to watch or to study. Just the guard, in civilian clothes. He pulled himself upright, his stomach gurgled hungrily and his mouth like a soot bowl, but a weight off his shoulders.

"How long have I been here?" He asked curiously, looking around at the lush surroundings, the house having an eastern feel to it.

"About a week. It's Friday and you passed out Monday."

"Uh, bathroom?"

"First door on the left." He said pointing towards the door and watched the crossbreed move unsteadily towards the door. "You're welcome to stay here for as long as you like." The guard, Leo, called after him.

When he came back into the room, he looked out of the window, the sky the bluest he'd seen in weeks,



the rain drying up, mud puddles going hard and cracking under the sun, the earth finally warming up and drying out after being drowned for so long under the rain.

"What's gonna happen now?" Mystikal asked.

Leo shrugged. "There was no second in command. Andre didn't like the idea of anyone being ready to step into his shoes, so to speak. Near enough everyone has agreed on putting the business up for auction. Let the other big CEOs argue over who gets to run Melbourn now he's gone. Anyone don't like it, there's nothing from stopping them upping and leaving to find another job."

"What about me?"

"Company protection. The authority doesn't know who killed him, and with the pay off the other companies gave 'em to stay off their backs while this mess gets sorted out, they ain't bothered. An evil man has had his dose of karma, case closed, good night ladies and gentlemen."

Mystikal looked at him.

"You really think someone's gonna bump you off for ridding the world of a menace? Pfft. You got balls kid. Bigger balls than I have, I give ya that. But like I said before you scurried off to empty yourself, you're free to hang around here as long as you want. Could do with a bit of company even if it is lurking about in the background."

This time Mystikal smiled, the strange feeling of being wanted something new to him. Maybe this was the moment he could turn his life around, earn some extra cash and eat on a regular basis.

He looked around the room. Still no sign of the shadow that followed him everywhere. His shoulders sagged as he relaxed, the feeling being completely alien to him.

He shook his head slowly.

"Thanks. But I dunno. I dunno what I wanna do next. I was supposed to be heading out to the main land before I ended up here."

"Think about it. For as long as you want." Leo said and headed out of the room, closing the door behind him as Mystikal sank onto the bed, staring out of the window at the blue skies beyond.