

The Thief's Prison

The day is beautiful.

One of my hands pets a sleeping sheep as my other paints.

A lamb prances about in the sun as my magic guides me through sketching his spry form.

He stops just long enough for me to paint one more picture.

I tuck my last artwork into my shoe. This one, the Wolf won't steal.

As the sun disappears below the horizon, I set off on my way to my captor's house.

The door creaks open. The Wolf's house is beautiful, even when I know everything in it is stolen.

The carefully woven carpet lining the floor was my parents'.

The Wolf stole everything from us, including me, taking it all to some sort of magic prison.

Months later, he uses my magic just to get more art.

I empty my arms of five paintings, placing them in front of him.

He hands me some food in return, not bothering to speak. He never does.

But we still have an agreement - I use my magic to make art. Once I have none left, I will be useless, and he will eat me.

After nine months, my magic is nearly gone.

And escaping is impossible.

I've tried.

The day after I spent all night trying to find a way out of the woods enclosing the Wolf's property was undoubtedly my worst. Wherever I went and every turn I tried, I wound up back where I'd started.

Then on the next day, I was too tired to paint anything.

The only way I stopped the Wolf from eating me was my promise to produce double the amount of art for the next month.

He might as well have killed me on the spot.

All my magic will be gone within days.

But the only thing my mind can think of as I reach my blanket tent is sleep.

I wake to a merciless headache, my skull pounding relentlessly.

I shiver as I wrap my wool blanket tighter around myself.

It's midnight. Moonlight shines off winter's first snowfall.

My headache becomes unbearable.

Then, out of nowhere, it vanishes.

Nothing else moves as a small voice appears in the back of my head, a familiar one.

It's been so long.

The silence continues. I ask my friend, "Why are you here?"

On my fifth day, the voice appeared in my head. He was the only thing that talked inside of the Wolf's domain. We became friends quickly.

After a week, he came to me as a Crow.

Saying goodbye, it left abruptly, trying to escape the Wolf.

Now, seeing him here, I know he has failed. We're both captors here, though the Crow never shared his story.

I take him into my tent.

"I'm so sorry," I say.

It was impossible. But now, it can be done. I need your help if we can escape at all.

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I listen carefully to the Crow's plan. In five minutes, I am standing in front of the Wolf's house, a golden master key in my hand. The Crow's thievery skills are astounding. The house is silent as the door swings open, the Wolf off somewhere far away. Moonlight shines through the windows.

The Crow's words echo through my mind as I go, once more, through the plan he laid out in my mind.

The Wolf keeps his most prized possession, a key, in that drawer.

I cannot open the glass case; the lid is too heavy.

You, however, can.

There is a keyhole in the well. Put the key in, twist it, and you and I will be free. It's so much easier when there are two of us.

My hands shake slightly as I step into the house.

From behind me, I hear something rustle.

I see something metal glint out of the corner of my eye.

Then I duck, just in time.

A silver blade whistles above my head.

A beautiful sword sits suspended in the air, the master plan's glaring flaw.

Security.

Cold steel nicks my arm, a drop of blood falling to the floor.

It swings again.

Too late, I dodge. It cuts deeply into my leg, pain twisting upwards.

It swings and sticks into the door. I grab it, throwing it out into the moonlit snow.

The hilt tilts at the last second, throwing me against a glass drawer.

Something golden falls onto the floor. I reach out, my fingers closing around the key.

I stumble out into the snow, closing the door, walking, leg bleeding, to the well.

There is water inside. I'd always thought it was dry.

It's for the best.

Cold black water, the same shade as the Crow's feathers, overflows, splashing my hand.

It has almost a spirit to it, prying my cold, red fingers apart, thickening and eagerly grabbing at the key.

I realize what I've done.

Desperately, I throw the key as far as I can, across the snow.

The thick blackness surges after it, mixing with the pure snow, dissolving away.

More follows through the white snow, each time getting closer to the key.

The sludge pouring out of the well begins to thin.

Knowing it will never reach the key, it turns towards me.

I choke out a strangled cry as the Crow's spirit coils up my legs and face, sinking into my lungs.

In utter silence, the thing reaches out to me.

I'm sorry.

"How COULD YOU – "

Hush.

Sleep now.

It's time to let me take over.

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The Crow pours into me more deeply than its inky water.

This can't be how it ends.

I feel myself stand again.

My new human form walks easily across the enchanted snow that so hindered me.

I find the key. Twisting it through the keyhole in the well, I am suddenly overcome with joy, no longer contained.

Like thunder, my unbound power splits the sky, creating a way out of my prison. My wings spread, bringing a new midnight to this weak world.

With help, it will be strong again.