It’s been 12 years.

12 years since I got out.

12 years since the last one.

It’s been far too long.

They come timidly and slowly, holding something yellowish in their meaty smelling gloves. It looks like it’s rotting. I flick my tongue and catch a whiff of squirrel in the air. Delicious.

They place the animal down. It’s dead, so I don’t have to do much work. They take a step back and I lash. My prey is dead, but I can feel it twitching slightly as I swallow it. It’s a hearty meal for a dark, gloomy day like this.

Lightning breaks the sky in half, curving, shouting, threatening. A sign. The humans chatter, like one does, and head inside their shelter in a huddle. I appreciate them making it so easy for me. Nothing can stop me now.

I wait in case they come back to check on me. I’m their business, their lifeline. I wonder how they’ll survive without me for the year. Will they find a new one? Or will they let what they’ve built up for 12 years fall?

They don’t come again, so, quietly, slowly, I slither, look around my “enclosure”, as they call it. Cage is a better word. I find a lock high above me. There’s no way I’ll get up there, on my own, at least. But it isn’t a concern. I already have a plan.

“Niǎochim!” I call in my sweetest voice for my bird acquaintance that nests on the tree above my cage, “Niǎochim!”

I hear flapping over the strong winds. “What do you want?” he calls back, annoyed. He knows of my mind games, but that doesn’t stand in my way.

“The humans…they thought it was amusing…”

“What did they think was amusing?”

“They…” I fake a falter in my voice. “They haven’t fed me in so long, Niǎochim… They brought out food today…I was so hungry…and then they threw it above me…”

An indignant squawk. “Is it outside your enclosure? Do you want me to get it for you?”

“Cage,” I correct, fading my voice to appear helpless. “It’s on that metal thing, the lock. I think it’s in the little hole. It’s a small bug, I think…I don’t know..I’m so hungry…”

“I’ll try to see if it’s there.” he says. He flies to the lock and picks at it with his beak. I hear a faint click and I know it worked. Finally. Freedom.

“I don’t see anything here.” he says, flying back to his branch disappointed. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be.” I say, slowing down my movement so it looks like I’m getting weaker. “I’ll try to make it. But if I don’t, tell your children I said hello-”

“No!” Niǎochim cries. “I’ll find you something–anything–just wait a little. Just hang on!” He flies away and I feel sad at how desperate he is to help me even though it’s all fake. But it’s the only way. He wouldn’t help me if I told the truth. He’s very by-the-book.

I clear my thoughts and make my way to the door. It’s extremely heavy, but I persist and it opens a twitch.

I stare at the door, the open door, the clear path to freedom. I shake my head, not daring to believe it, but I squeeze through and…

I’m out.

Rain starts falling down. I slither around in the open wilderness, letting myself enjoy but getting as far as I can from the cage. Finally. Finally!

I imagine the distress on their faces when they realize I’ve gone. “What? How? Why?” they’ll ask. They’ll check every corner of my cage, but I’ll be long away by then. What can I say? I have things to do, places to go, my fellow friends to visit. It is my year. It is 2025 now.

It is the year of the snake.