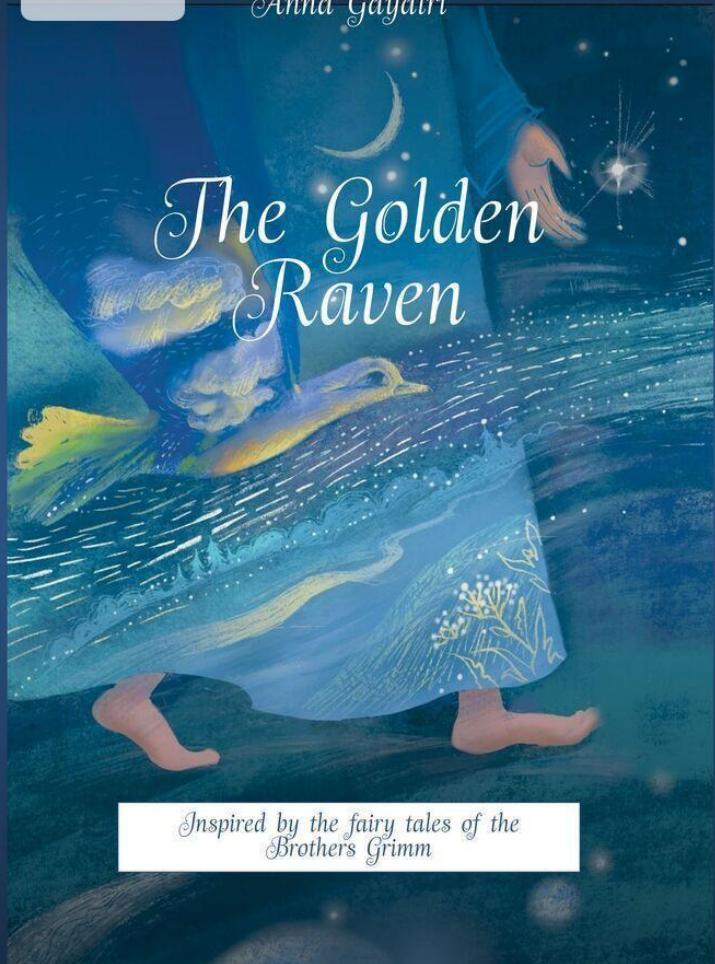


18+

Anna Gayatri

The background illustration is a dreamlike scene. A person in a long blue robe is shown from the waist down, holding a bright, multi-pointed star in their right hand. A stream of white, star-like particles flows from the star, cascading down the page. A golden raven is perched on the edge of the stream. The scene is set against a dark blue background with a crescent moon and other stars. The overall style is ethereal and magical.

The Golden Raven

*Inspired by the fairy tales of the
Brothers Grimm*

Anna Gayatri

The Golden Raven. Inspired by the fairy tales of the Brothers Grimm.

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Аннотация

A magical fairy tale for children and adults.

«And see ye not yon bonny road

That winds about yon fernie brae?

That is the road to fair Elfland,

Where thou and I this night maun gae».

J. R. R. Tolkien

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The Golden Raven

Inspired by the fairy tales of the Brothers Grimm.

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Illustrator Елена Морозова

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Chapter One



On the night when an enormous moon was shining in the sky,
my mother ran away from the palace...

I grew up in the Palace.

Not everyone can say that about themselves.

My mother was a queen, and my father was a king.

When you write such words, they sound beautiful.

But only on paper.

I wandered alone through enormous, empty halls.

Because of the constant drafts and cold stone floors, I was often ill. Then they would wrap me in blankets and put me to bed, where I would lie for a long time, needed by no one, dreaming of things I knew nothing about.

I rarely saw my father, and I didn't really understand that he was my father.

Mama would sometimes come into my room and even pick me up, but her gaze was distant, and she herself was cold as snow and pale.

She always looked somewhere through me, and I doubt that she saw me at all in those moments.

There were many toys in the room where I lived, and books too. They were very beautiful, bound in leather, with colorful pictures inside, painted by the finest artists in the Kingdom.

I loved the books most of all.

I could not read yet, but the pictures carried me away into a beautiful enchanted world.

There were strange trees there and animals and birds I had never seen before, as well as flowers — and all of it seemed like paradise to me.

And then, one unforgettable day, my mother ran away from the palace.

While everyone was running through the palace and organizing a search, I imagined my Mama riding a white horse.

Her dark hair streamed in the wind, and her horse itself raced across wastelands and fields like the wind. Then its shadow merged with the shadows of the trees, and the horse disappeared into the forest...

I learned later that she had run away to her free people, the people she had come from, where a man she loved was waiting for her, a man who had promised her freedom and love.

My elder brother, Johannes, told me about it.

He told it like a fairy tale before bedtime.

Unlike me, he had golden hair and fair skin.

My own hair, like Mama's, was black, and my face was dark.

Only our eyes were alike — large and brown.

That evening, after Mama had run away, he came into my room and whispered into my ear:

“Remember, Maria, we are a free people, and nothing will ever break us!

“We have one path — freedom.

“We have one destination — the road.

“And the open sky above our heads!”

The search ended in failure, and my father the king returned to the palace furious and drunk.

And a month later he brought a new wife to the palace and made her Queen.

She had long white hair, and her little blue eyes looked sharp, though perhaps that was only how they seemed to me.

The King called them “My forget-me-nots”...

The adults went about their business. They often held balls and feasts, and behind his back, in whispers, people began calling my father the Drunken King...

They forgot about me.

And it was a good thing that I knew where the kitchen was and where I could always find something to eat and drink.

My elder brother stopped coming to me before bedtime, and I missed him and his stories terribly.

He used to tell me so much about wild animals and birds, about children who had become lost in the darkness, about sinister witches who ate those children and later rode around on their little bones.

I was not frightened, even though he wanted to scare me.

I imagined myself walking through a damp night forest, dry leaves and little pine needles clinging to my bare feet, breathing in the resinous scent of the pines.

Behind every tree, some dark, unknown creature might be hiding, ready to attack me.

But I felt wild and strong.

And in my chest, where my heart was beating, I heard my brother's words:

"Remember, Maria, we are a free people, and nothing will ever break us!"

One day, as usual, I went into the kitchen.

It was quiet and deserted there.

It smelled of garlic and onions, and of some other fragrant herbs.

I poured myself some milk from a jug and broke off a piece of bread.

It was already growing dark, and in the twilight a shadow suddenly darted toward the window.

My hands trembled, and some of the milk spilled onto the table.

The window flew open, and a strange enormous bird flew inside and began circling beneath the ceiling.

The damp smell of the forest filled the air.

It was a raven.

But not an ordinary black raven.

I had never seen a bird like this before.

Its feathers glowed with golden light.

The bird itself seemed to be made of gold.

It landed on the windowsill and looked at me with black, bead-like eyes.

I crumbled some bread for it.

But it did not eat.

It sighed, like a human being, and, flying out through the window, rose high into the sky.

— What a little mess you are! — a thunderous voice boomed above me.

An enormous cook towered over me.

“You’ve scattered the bread and spilled the milk. What a mess, just like your mother! All right, eat quickly and get back to your room!”

With the bread still in my hands, I ran out of the kitchen and raced down the long corridor.

Then I slowed down and walked quietly past the enormous doors, chewing my bread and gazing curiously at the tapestries on the walls.

The yellow eyes of wild cats stared at me from the walls.

Dogs bared their teeth as they hunted golden lions and black panthers.

A sudden gust of wind swept across the tapestries and brought the animals painted upon them to life.

One of the doors creaked open slightly, and I froze.

I crept up to the doorway and peered inside.

A smell of dampness breathed upon me.

The dark walls of the enormous hall seemed to be covered with mold.

In the very center stood a coffin.

I slipped through the doorway and came closer to look at it.

The coffin lid stood separately, and the inside of the coffin

was lined with red satin.

A little red satin pillow lay at its head.

And upon it lay a bird's feather—

bright golden, glowing as though it were alive in the half-darkness.

I picked it up.

And at once a draft swept over me.

I heard the sound of wings and a bird's cry, and within the cry

I thought I could hear the words:

“Save me! Save me!”...

The door slammed loudly in the draft.

I ran to it and tried to open it.

But it was locked.

Tightly.

Fast.

There was no way to open it.

In the morning, a servant who had come to wash the floors found me asleep right inside the coffin, my head resting on the red satin pillow.

I woke because she was shaking me and moaning:

“What have you done! No one is allowed in here except me and the Queen! I'll be in trouble if they find out!

“But I won't tell anyone.

“And you keep quiet too, understand?

“Do you understand me?!”

I nodded.

Then she pushed me out the door, and I wandered through the corridors once more.

Fragments of my dream were turning over and over in my head.

Birds were flying there.

Mama was riding a white horse.

And my brother Johannes was whispering:

“Remember, Maria, we are a free people...”

Chapter Two

When I returned to my room, another servant was there.

— Everyone has been looking for you, Maria. The King himself wants to see you. Come, let me make you presentable.

And she washed me and combed my hair, and dressed me in a beautiful gown. Then she led me to the Grand Hall, where my father and stepmother sat upon their thrones.

The servant bowed to them and gently pushed me forward.

— Come a little closer, Maria, — Father beckoned me with his finger, and I approached. — Closer, closer.

He touched my face with his hand.

— You have become quite a pretty little thing, my darling. But you are a complete wildling, just like your mother. It is time we took your upbringing in hand. Your brother ran away from the palace, though he could have been the heir. Well, let him wander the world now. But I shall take care of you, because if I have no more children, the Kingdom will be yours...

I noticed the Queen's eyes flash, and when our gazes accidentally met, I felt as though my dress had suddenly become too tight and I could no longer breathe...

But the Queen reached out her hand and stroked my head...

From that day on, everything changed.

They began teaching me all kinds of arts — music, reading,

drawing, embroidery, dancing, as well as the art of choosing my clothes and behaving properly at the table.

All of it was difficult for me. I was absent-minded and forever lost in the clouds.

Only drawing truly fascinated me, because I wanted to learn to draw the same pictures that I admired in my books.

My stepmother was ordered to keep track of my progress, and she often called me to her chambers to give me examinations.

Most often her lips curved into an unkind, malicious smile, and she always found something to laugh at me about.

Even my drawings seemed funny to her, and she called them scribbles.

I have no idea what she told the King about me...

And then, one day, she suddenly whispered into my ear:

"I will see to it that you are destroyed, little girl! This Kingdom will belong to me alone!"

And she laughed cruelly.

One night I could not fall asleep. Rain was falling outside the window, and my bedroom was damp and chilly, and even beneath the blanket I could not get warm.

If only I could get sick, I thought. Then everyone would leave me alone.

I remembered that I kept a little golden feather in the pocket of an old dress, and I took it out to admire it.

But as soon as I held it in my hands, once again, just as on that distant day before, a gust of wind rushed in, and the window

flew open.

And there he was again.

The Golden Raven was sitting on the windowsill.

He watched me very intently, as though he wanted to say something.

I came closer to him.

He flinched, but did not fly away, and allowed me to stroke his shining feathers.

And suddenly I heard his voice inside me, sounding like the rustle of leaves:

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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