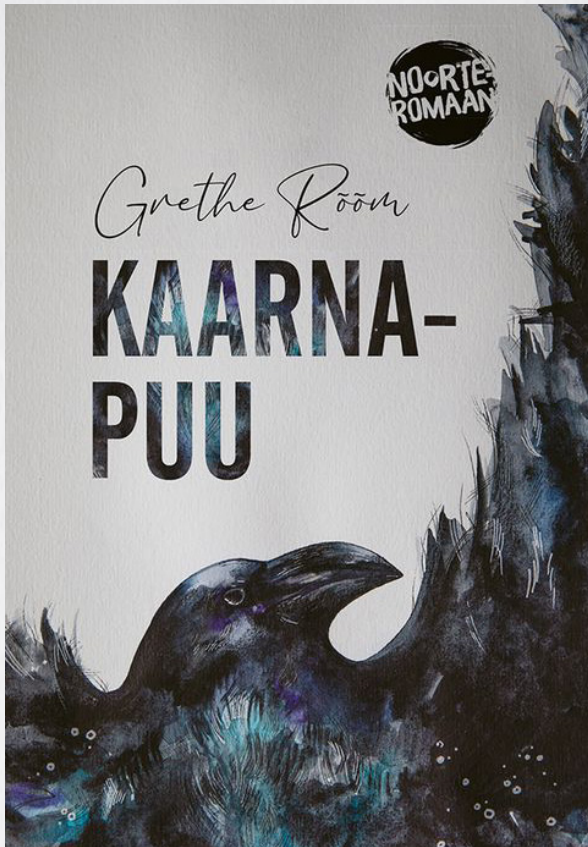


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The Raven Tree

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Guy has decided to spend winter break with his Great Aunt Iida in the little southern town of Rõuge. His mom is away at work all the time and never finds time for him, anyway. What's more, she has a new boyfriend who constantly pokes his nose into Guy's business – best to just get out of their way. And who knows, maybe he'll even have the chance to ask a thing or two about his dad: a topic his mom only ever dodges. When Guy arrives, strange events with no apparent realistic causes begin to unfold. As the locals stay staunchly tight-lipped about the oddities, the boy decides to investigate. Although his neighbor, a girl named Lee, has her own secrets and is standoffish at first (he is a stranger!), she ultimately softens and, along with the hockey team, lends a hand to solve the mystery.

The Raven Tree is the first part of a young adult fantasy trilogy inspired by South Estonian folklore.

Reading sample

[pp. 42–51]

5. Lee

Adults are a pain in the neck. The second they catch sight of you, they cram your day so cruelly full of chores whether you like it or not. And you usually don't, because the things they demand are real downers. Family matters. Hiding things. Staying busy all the time.

I shook my head.

I'd planned to skedaddle right after practice, but then we found a coin. It was too interesting to ignore. So, I agreed when Eke asked if he could use my computer to look it up. A computer would be much more convenient than a phone, and besides, it was a lot warmer inside. The boys invited the new kid to tag along, too. He'd been standing there looking like a lost puppy, all sad-eyed. The invitation made him so happy I wouldn't have been surprised to see him wag a tail.

Grandpa Leho's instruction to be there for the boy had been gnawing at me.

Here in this small town, we'd always kept our distance from outsiders. We stayed away so politely and respectfully that they couldn't even tell they weren't being told something or were missing out in general. But... outsiders had lived in and around Rõuge for years without anybody tipping them off about all the plentiful mushroom-picking sites, for example, or anything else important.

Because outsiders were outsiders.

And now, suddenly, Grandpa Leho's comment: he's important. Be there for him.

What on Earth is that supposed to mean?

I could feel the unanswered questions making me more and more irritated. The sensation tingled in my fingertips, moved up my arms, and drummed wildly by the time it reached my heart.

I took a deep breath. It was like somebody had plugged me into an electrical socket: my whole body was abuzz. I forced myself to calm my breathing. A very slow inhale, then exhale through the mouth. That always helped when anxiety attacked.

Though not today, unfortunately, because we'd barely been at my place for a minute before we bumped into Mom in the

corridor. Seeing her expression, I already knew that some kind of a request was coming.

I wish I could just disappear.

I felt like I was a millimeter away from exploding.

"Honey, would you please go and see Mirja? She's made mushroom soup today," Mom said in a tone that ruled out any arguing. She didn't ask whether I wanted to go in the first place or even had the energy for it after practice.

"Couldn't Dad..."

Mom cut me off with a sharp shake of her head.

"He's busy with his own things," she sourly remarked before marching off into the kitchen.

His own things. I bet!

I could feel the bile rising to my throat. I knew there was no point asking again.

Because everything had already been said.

Already decided.

They were constantly demanding something of me.

Some kind of effort.

I always had to reach a bar that somebody set crazy high forever ago. Always had to manage everything they asked of me.

Nobody ever asked what I wanted! They just made up their minds themselves. I can learn this because I'm talented! I can practice that because that's the way it's always been! I go and I do and I am—always just the way that they've decided!

And if anybody ever does ask what I want, then I don't even know what to say anymore. Because somebody else has always answered for me.

They make all the decisions that concern me and nobody else!

I pressed my lips together into a tight line and glared at the wall.

No, I'm not going to cry! Crap. Like I really needed to go and start bawling in front of the new kid!

"Lee! Take Anna with you, too!" Mom called from the kitchen over the sound of clanging pots.

"Yeah! Anna come, too!" my little sister squealed.

It was that Anna-sized millimeter that'd so far kept me from exploding. I took a sharp breath, my face as frozen as ice, spun around, and stepped outside without a word, slamming the door shut behind me. But the stupid door betrayed me and swung back open, allowing me to hear Mom clearly.

"Anna, get dressed! I'm sure she'll wait for you outside! She's not mad at you, darling, trust me! And you must be the new boy, hm? Go along with the girls, they'll show you around town a little. The rest of you, go straight outside and give Leho a hand! Eerik delivered a load of firewood last week, Leho sawed the logs to the right length, and it's been nice and cold for chopping. You all go help stack firewood until dinner's ready!"

The boys clomped out of the corridor, not one of them looking as if he intended to argue. My mom's stiff, stern expression had a note of determination that made protesting impossible.

Anna pulled on her snowsuit and boots, ignoring the fact that their toes pointed in opposite directions.

"You can come wid me!" she announced, beaming at Guy as if she'd just picked him to be her best friend.

Anna and I are as different as night and day. She can chatter on and on nonstop. I ran out of words a while ago. Sometimes, it feels like words and I just aren't friends. They're constantly whirling around inside my head but when it comes time to talk, they up and disappear.

Anna's like the sun.

I'm like dirt.

Or mud.

I lifted my eyes just as the new guy was giving me a curious look. It appeared he hadn't understood a word of Anna's endless babble. What was I supposed to say?

"She's still learning how to pronounce th. Just makes a d sound right now. And she's saying she wants pancakes, too, because Mirja makes the world's best," I translated, then sucked in a deep breath. I hadn't spoken so many words in a long time.

"How old are you?" Guy asked Anna.

"Three," I answered for her.

Anna jerked her hand back from Guy's and stopped, stomping her foot.

"I'm not dree! You're a liar! I'm dree and a half!" she blurted, tears streaming down her cheeks.

Crap, I messed it all up again.

The thought pounded in my head like a hammer.

I always manage to ruin everything.

I wrapped my arms around my tiny sister, lifted her into the air, and twirled.

"I'm sorry—of course you're three and a half! That's way more than just three, isn't it," I said with a smile.

A cautious mile.

I hadn't smiled in so long that I wasn't sure I even remembered how to do it.

The new guy watched us attentively. I took Anna's hand, and we continued walking down the freshly-shoveled street. I don't know what came over me, but I looked back at him.

If he could stare, then so could I.

I didn't want to admit to myself that I liked what I saw.

He was tall. At least a head taller than me. If not more. And he had a calm look in his eyes. Everything about him seemed calm.

Huh!

And he was handsome.

Not the kind of handsome guy who stands in front of the mirror all the time, preening and trying to show everybody how handsome he is with every move. Not that, but a calm kind of handsome.

I've obviously lost my mind.

Here I am staring at a boy I barely know and thinking he's handsome!

Crap!

And he's staring back at me!

Taking in the intent look in his eyes, like he was trying to figure something out, my throat turned dry and my stomach churned. As if my guts had suddenly gotten too tight. Or like I was about to get diarrhea. It was a weird mix of tickling and fear and excitement. Something I'd never felt before in that situation.

The guys on our hockey team call me the Ice Queen. In secret. Nobody dares to say it to my face because of all the crap our family's had to go through. But they use the nickname behind my back. The Ice Queen. Because I've never reacted to their incessant attempts to hit on me. They're all great guys, but I just can't. They're like brothers to me.

Oh, and that idiot Kris! He's a prime example of how if you say something loudly and repeatedly, people start to believe it. Lots of kids thought I had a boyfriend.

Not too long ago, Kris somehow convinced himself that we were going out. It was super annoying because he's doggedly persistent. As if I had no say in the matter.

I snorted as I remembered the time he insisted to walk me home after hockey practice and then tried to kiss me. It was like two slimy snails writhing over my lips.

Gross!

I shook my head and tore my eyes away from Guy's. It felt like he wanted to ask me something, because he still didn't look away.

Clearing my throat, I was ready to snap at him that his stupid neck would freeze up if he didn't quit staring, but not a single word would cross my lips. As usual.

"Are we there yet?" Anna asked for the hundredth time, skipping next to me. She puckered her lips and announced that her legs were tired.

"Piggy-back, please?"

I inhaled sharply.

If you make fun of her now, dude, then you can go straight back to where you came from! Kris had the hugest grin whenever Anna said anything to him. He can go to hell! Nobody teases or mocks my little sister!

But Guy looked down at Anna seriously.

"Would you like to climb on my back?" he asked, hunching down. Anna wrapped her arms around his neck and chattered giddily the whole rest of the hundred meters to Mirja's red-roofed café.

Even I got a happy feeling about the size of a pinhead.

He hadn't laughed at my sister.

"Hey, Mirja! What's on today's menu? Pancakes? Roast beef? Normal parents?" I called out when we stepped inside.

Mirja is the only person with whom I can have a normal conversation. With whom I never feel like I run out of words. She doesn't judge or criticize. She simply lets me be. Mirja is my aunt. Almost 15 years younger than my mom and nearly identical. A blond fairy. Which means that we don't look alike. I got my greenish eyes and dark wavy hair from Dad.

I don't want to think about him.

And they say that girls who look like their dad are lucky!

Mirja pushed open the swinging kitchen door, walked into the restaurant area, and gave me a hug.

Sometimes, I feel like she's the only person in the world who understands me.

"Anything. You've just got to know how to ask," she said, smirking and pulling my hat down over my eyes.

"I'll tell Mom you're bullying me," I joked, and gestured for Guy to take the pot out of the bag.

Instead, he stuck his hand out and introduced himself.

"Hi! I'm Guy. Anna said you make the world's best pancakes."

Mirja smiled, shook his hand, and took the bag.

"Nice! Yeah, I heard you came to join our little community," she said. Seeing the look of surprise on Guy's face, she added, "Rõuge is small enough that word travels quickly." Then Mirja disappeared into the kitchen, muffling her voice a little.

"You haven't seen Sander today, have you? Eerik called and said he came down with a cold, no doubt from falling into the water yesterday, but he hasn't been able to get ahold of Sander's mom on the phone. If you see Sander, then tell him his mom should call Eerik, okay?"

Guy's gaze drifted curiously around the café. There was a long row of tables lined by tall-backed chairs and a glass-doored fireplace in the corner, a couple of logs burning inside. On a table under the window was a large ceramic soup pot and salad bowls on either side. Several men in construction gear were devouring lunch under the watchful eyes of century-old photographs on the walls.

Guy attentively took everything in, as if trying to commit it to memory. Absent-mindedly, he unzipped his coat and took hold of a necklace around his neck.

Anna, who had been hanging on a stool by the counter, noticed and asked: "What's that?"

Guy lifted her up onto the counter.

"It's a secret," he said after a brief pause. "I can only show it to someone who's three-and-a-half years old and promises to walk home from the café on their own two feet. And that they won't tell another soul what they saw. Can you do that?"

Anna nodded solemnly.

Guy had his back turned towards me, so I didn't see what he showed my sister.

But Anna laughed.

“Cool! I want one like that when I get grown up!”

This guy’s pretty good, I found myself thinking.

Guy nodded thoughtfully. He stood up, took off his hat, and tousled his already-messy hair before sliding his hand down over his face. Anna asked if he forgot to wash his face that morning and that’s why he was rubbing it, which made him laugh. The tiniest dimple appeared in his left cheek. Anna laughed along with him.

I felt myself blush when he turned his eyes to me and caught me looking back.

What is going on with me?!

Luckily, the kitchen door squeaked, and Mirja saved me from the awkward moment with a pot of soup and a box of pancakes.

“Go home and enjoy. Your mom and I’ll settle things later. Just help me get them into the bag,” she said in almost a single breath, just like only she can do.

I nodded.

“So, when are you going to officially adopt our family?”

Giggling, she walked us to the door.

“Don’t you forget to tell Sander to tell his mom to call Eerik if you see him! And come around to give me a hand tomorrow if you can!”

Anna skipped the whole way home by Guy’s side. All by herself. Without whining once about being tired. The smell of pancakes wafted from the bag Guy was carrying and for the first time in ages, I felt hungry.