The Language of Birds

In one city there lived a merchant with his wife, and a son was born to them wise beyond his years; they named him Vasily.

Once, as the three of them were dining, a nightingale hung in a cage above the table and sang so plaintively that the merchant could not bear it and said:

"If only there were someone who could guess for me what the nightingale is singing and what fate it foretells — I think I would give him half my estate while I live, and bequeath much wealth after my death."

And the boy — he was six years old at the time — looked his father and mother in the eyes and said:

"I know what the nightingale is singing, but I am afraid to say it."

"Speak without concealment!" his father and mother pressed him.

And Vasya, with tears, spoke:

"The nightingale foretells that a time will come when you will serve me: father will pour the water, and mother the towel to wipe face and hands."

These words grieved the merchant and his wife deeply, and they decided to get rid of their child; they built a small boat, laid the sleeping boy in it on a dark night, and set it adrift on the open sea.

At that very time the prophetic nightingale flew out of the cage, flew into the boat, and perched on the boy's shoulder.

So the boat floats on the sea, and toward it a ship comes flying with all sails set. The shipmaster saw the boy, felt pity for him, took him aboard, asked him about everything, and promised to keep and love him as his own son.

The next day the boy says to his new father:

"The nightingale sings that a storm will rise, break the masts, tear the sails; we must turn to the anchorage."

But the shipmaster did not listen.

And indeed a storm rose, broke the masts, tore the sails.

There was nothing to do, the past cannot be recalled; they set up new masts, repaired the sails, and sailed on. And Vasya says again:

"The nightingale sings that twelve ships are coming toward us, all pirate ships, they will take us captive!"

This time the shipmaster listened, turned toward an island, and saw those twelve ships, all pirate ships, pass by. The shipmaster waited as long as needed and sailed on.

Not long after, the ship docked at the city of Khvalynsk; and at the king of those parts, for several years now a raven, a raveness, and their raven chick have been flying and cawing before the palace windows, giving no peace day or night to anyone.

Whatever they did, by no tricks could they drive them from the windows. And the king ordered a proclamation nailed at all crossroads and landings: if anyone can drive the raven and raveness from the palace windows, the king will give him half his kingdom as reward and the younger princess in marriage; but whoever undertakes such a task and fails shall have his head cut off.

Many were the suitors who wished to become kin to the king, but all laid their heads under the axe.

Vasya heard of this and began begging the shipmaster:

"Allow me to go to the king — to drive away the raven and the raveness."

No matter how the shipmaster tried to persuade him, he could not hold him back.

"Well, go," he says, "but if anything bad happens, blame yourself!"

Vasya came to the palace, spoke to the king, and ordered that very window opened near which the ravens were flying.

He listened to the birds' cries and says to the king:

"Your Majesty, you yourself see that three are flying here: the raven, his wife the raveness, and their son the raven chick; the raven and raveness are arguing to whom the son belongs — to the father or the mother — and ask you to judge between them. Your Majesty! Say, to whom does the son belong?"

The king says:

"To the father."

No sooner had the king said this word than the raven with the chick flew to the right, and the raveness to the left.

After that the king took the boy to himself, and he lived with him in great favor and honor; he grew up and became a fine fellow, married the princess, and received half the kingdom as her dowry.

It occurred to him one day to travel to various places, to foreign lands, to see people and show himself; he made ready and set out to wander.

In one city he stopped to spend the night; he slept over, rose in the morning, and orders that water be brought for him to wash.

The host brought him water, and the hostess handed him a towel; the prince talked with them and learned that they were his father and mother, wept for joy and fell at their parental feet; and afterward he took them with him to the city of Khvalynsk, and they all lived together happily and prospered.