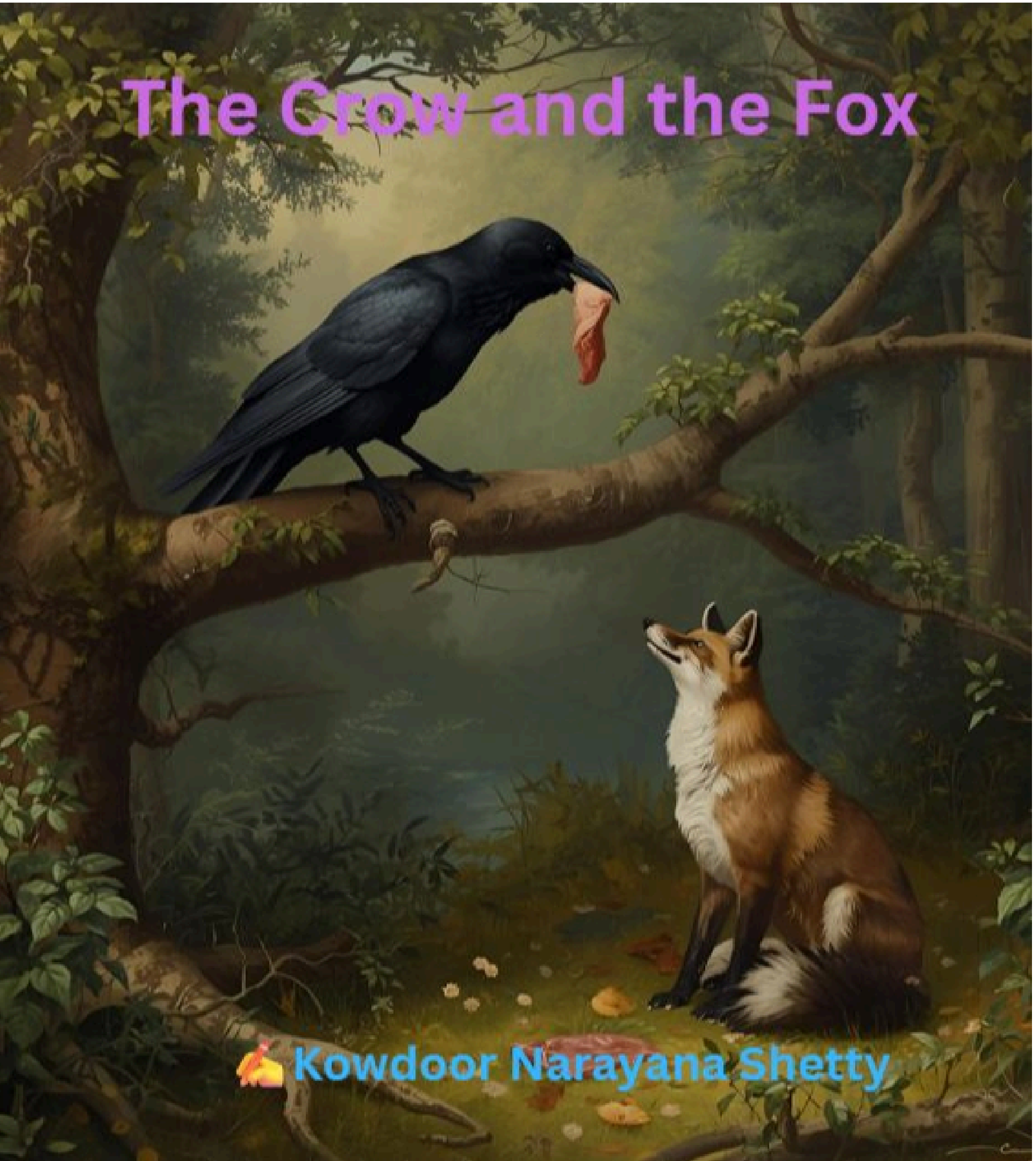


Once upon a time, there lived a crow. While crows usually gather in flocks, this crow lived by itself, separated from others, likely because it was excluded or forced out.

A popular tale about monkeys suggests that if one tries to leap between branches but fails to catch onto a leaf, it gets chased away by the rest of the group. When children come across a lonely monkey, they repeat this tale and claim it is a monkey “without a caste.” Why should anyone believe such stories?

Yet this crow, too, seemed like an outcast much like how people say of Sankraya Achari that he belongs to no caste.

One day, the crow found a piece of meat. Delighted, it picked it up in its beak and perched comfortably on a large banyan tree to enjoy its meal. A fox happened to see this and thought, “By hook or by crook, I must trick that crow and snatch the meat.” So, the fox approached the tree and called out:

“Oh my, King Crow! Today is a truly special day. Your eyes shine so brightly, and your face looks remarkably beautiful. Such a sight is rare, like a flower blooming on a fig tree! When have we ever seen such splendor?”

Hearing these unexpected compliments, the crow blinked in surprise. The fox talked so fluently that the crow looked around in confusion, wondering who else the fox could be addressing. But seeing no one, it continued listening. The fox went on, breathless:

How fortunate that you came today! Your presence is like rain blessing this forest in the height of summer. The entire forest is rejoicing because of you."

The crow, now completely captivated, heard nothing but the fox's sweet words. It listened intently, giving the fox its full attention. The fox continued its flattery:

"Ah, what beauty you have! A bird's strength lies in its wings—and looks like how your feathers gleam! As the saying goes, 'Nothing is blacker than a crow, and nothing is thinner than water.'

Your plumage is as deep and glossy as polished ebony. And surely, your voice must be as magnificent as your appearance. Aren't you the very one who teaches the cuckoo how to sing? All the animals and birds of this forest wait eagerly, heads lifted and mouths open, longing to hear your voice. They wish to dance, enchanted by your melody!" Then the fox asked gently, "Will you grace us with a song?"

Hearing praise, she had never imagined about herself, the crow was overwhelmed with joy. She at once opened her beak to sing: "Kaaaaw! Kaaaaw!" But the very moment she began, the meat slipped from her beak and dropped straight into the fox's opened mouth. The fox chewed the meat contentedly and, looking up at the crow, gave a sly smile.

Only then did the crow realize she had been tricked. She had lost just a piece of meat, but she had gained a priceless lesson: Never be swayed by flattery. Or don't let compliments go to your head.

Trust others if you must but never trust this cunning fox. And so, she spread this wisdom across the forest.