

# Chapter 1

## Amsterdam, 1889

Elizabeth gripped her skirt in her small hands, fearing the hem might snag beneath her shoes as she ran across the Torenluis bridge after her friend. Bernard caught hold of the post at the far end so that he swung round, and then set off again full pelt along the banks of the canal. Elizabeth laughed as she chased after him, her footsteps clattering on the cobblestones.

“You’ll not catch me,” he called over his shoulder.

This made her more determined, but he was too fast for her and raced away. She shouted for him to wait, but he kept going, into the shadowed darkness of the path ahead. A cold wind rose up to chill her, slicing down between the houses and the trees that lined the canal, and her pace slowed to a dejected walk. She noticed that black clouds had gathered in the sky, and the reflections in the water shivered.

Her temper flared. “Bernard,” she called again, “come back.”

A tall oak tree shifted in the wind, scratched gnarled fingers at the darkening sky and released a spray of leaves. Elizabeth watched them tumble down onto the still surface of the Singel. Sometimes the canal was an enchanting place, but the gloom now, as night began to fall, felt cold and full of menace. She stepped back from the water and looked up and down the bank in search of Bernard. Nervously, she bit a fingernail. They had played too long, and she knew she would be in trouble with her parents if she delayed any longer, but she couldn’t leave without him.

At last she caught sight of him again. He stood facing one of the canal houses, as if studying its façade. There was no one else around.

“What are you doing?” she asked as she approached.

“There’s something in there,” he said.

The house looked abandoned; there were no lights showing in the windows. “What do you mean? Let’s go.”

He shook his head. “There’s something familiar, something I recognise.”

“What are you talking about? It’s just an empty house. Let’s go.”

He stepped forward and pushed at the front door.

It swung open.

Up on the first floor, the sole occupant was sitting in a leather armchair. He had hardly eaten these last few weeks, trying to weaken himself. His skin had loosened on his face; the emaciation robbed him of his previous handsomeness.

Though the fire was dying, it still cast a flickering crimson light. He had lit the fire and drawn the curtains hours earlier, when he’d had more strength. It was difficult, to sit in the chair quietly, enduring the craving, doing nothing.

A glass of red wine stood on an occasional table at his side. Slowly he began to reach for it, but his hand trembled with even that small effort. He abandoned the attempt and sank back into the chair, settling for the hint of the wine’s bouquet carried on the air.

He began to hear it, and smiled: the distant but huge thrumming sound, the rise and fall of wings, stirring the dark void and coming closer.

Then he detected something else, a fragrance. He found that he was standing, without having made any conscious decision to move. There was power and animation in his limbs again.

“No,” he whispered. “Please, no.”

He knew he must regain control quickly or all would be lost. He ran to the kitchen and, among the scraps of vegetables remaining, he found a clove of garlic. Angrily, he smashed the clove against the chopping board and then held the fragments to his nostrils, inhaling their pungent aroma.

He could hear them, in the front hall downstairs. How had they got in? The boy wanted to explore; the girl said no, she wanted to go home, she was afraid. Nevertheless she followed after him.

He remembered leaving the door unlocked now. His inner

demon had lost none of its cunning. He lifted his head, closed his eyes and smiled, with the taste of something divine upon his tongue. He went out towards the stairs. There was no hope of controlling himself now.

He moved without a sound, following the children, unseen in the shadows. The girl had no warning; he moved past her, scratched a sharp fingernail across the back of her neck and then disappeared back into the shadows. She stiffened, frozen where she stood.

He said, "You should not have come here."

Elizabeth heard the rasping voice and saw Bernard jump. He turned to flee, but something lean and powerful stepped out of the shadows to block his path. Bernard stumbled and fell to the floor. The dark figure circled around him until she could see its sunken face. She attempted to cry out, but no sound escaped her. The man fixed all his attention on Bernard. She was powerless to do anything but listen.

"I came here to die," the voice said. "In this house that was mine long ago and means so much to me. So many years I have carried this burden. Just a little while longer and I would have known peace at last."

A light began to glimmer at the man's stomach. The walls of the house hummed and then fell silent, hummed and fell silent again. The pattern repeated itself, growing louder and louder. Then there was a flutter of black in the centre of the light as a raven began to emerge and emitted a deafening caw.

She wanted Bernard to flee, but he still cowered, transfixed by the grotesque sight. The raven cawed again and again as it struggled to break free from the whorl of black energy now swirling at the man's stomach. With another surge of its wings the raven's body emerged, but it held something in its claws — something still trapped. One more thrust of its wings and it pulled free. The raven let go, and the thing it carried thudded to the floor. It had the shape of a human body, but charred as if it had been dragged from a fire. The air sizzled around it.

The stench of it filled Elizabeth's nostrils. She could only whimper helplessly as the man looked down at the carcass, something like disgust showing on his face. Then he looked again towards Bernard.

“It took ten years to suck all the life out of that one. You will be the replacement.”

Bernard did not make a sound. The man clutched at him and pulled him close, and Elizabeth saw her friend vanish into the pulsing vortex of shadow, which then turned brilliant silver.

Tears streamed down Elizabeth’s face, but she still could not move. She looked again at the charred body lying on the floor, black smoke curling from the husk. Was this the fate that would befall Bernard, too?

The raven had landed on a high shelf and gone silent. The blue-purple iridescence of its feathers glistened in the light.

The light began to dim, and Elizabeth could see the man’s face again. He said to the raven, “Will you not go back this time?”

It sounded as though the man despised the bird. The raven’s black eyes watched him a moment, cold and dispassionate, and then it flapped its wings and took to the air. It opened wide its large beak and cawed a final time, and Elizabeth thought its cracked voice spoke of pain beyond measure.

The raven flew around behind her, then swooped forward to disappear into the light. The glare dimmed and the vortex vanished.

The man came towards her. “I should kill you too,” he said. “Better that than make you live with what you’ve seen here.”

She stared up into his ancient face and saw something more, something she could not understand. Was he growing younger? And what was that in his expression? Something puzzled him.

“You’re powerful,” he said. “Or you could be.”

The man stepped back from her, and she saw a glowing fragment of coal appear in his hand. He raised his fist and threw the coal at Elizabeth. It burned as it burrowed its way into her chest. She closed her eyes tightly and gritted her teeth against the pain. After a moment the agony subsided, and when she opened her eyes she saw that the man had vanished. The charred body was gone, too.

She remained rooted to the spot, alone in the darkness. Nothing remained as evidence of what she’d seen. Except, on the floor she saw a single feather that had fallen from the wing of the raven.

When at last she found she could move again, Elizabeth gathered up the feather, ran from the house and fled home to her

parents. It was late and they demanded to know where she had been, but she when she tried to tell them she found she could not. The words dried in her throat as if she were still paralysed.

There were suspicions when it was discovered that Bernard, the son of Doctor Raaf, had vanished that night. The two children had often played together. Clearly something had terrified Elizabeth, and Bernard had gone missing, but when questioned she could never answer. She could speak of other things, but not that night.

Huginn Raaf was desolate when he came to see her, asking the same questions others had. She had rarely seen him before; he'd been home only a few times when she'd gone to see Bernard. Tall and lean, he had black hair, and his eyes were black too, though they sparkled with intelligence. He was a teacher of history, at the Universiteit van Amsterdam. Elizabeth had heard he travelled for long periods, so it was mostly Bernard's mother, Johanna, who took care of their home.

Huginn and Elizabeth sat together in the candlelight. Her parents were also in the room, but did not speak while Huginn was there. The loss of his only son hung over him, dark and heavy as a storm cloud. Yet he treated Elizabeth with kindness. He did not scold her as others had, but tried to encourage her. He looked at her with quiet intensity, his head tilted slightly to one side. Her young heart ached for him.

"I want you to call me Huginn," he said. "Only Huginn. Truly I have only one name."

"I will only call you Huginn," she promised, though she thought it strange. It had been almost a century since the French emperor Napoleon had obliged the Dutch to take surnames, against their own custom, and she had not thought Huginn was a Dutch man in any case.

She could not answer about where she and Bernard had gone that night. At last Huginn asked her, "Do you think it is possible Bernard might still be alive?"

She thought about everything she'd seen and heard while frozen by the demon's spell. With a great effort of will, she managed to nod her head. Then she took from her pocket the raven's feather, which she had not yet shown to anyone, and held it out to him.

The pupils of his eyes flashed wide in astonishment. He took it from her and studied it, then nodded and looked back at her with even greater intensity.

He took her hands in his and said, “You saw this raven? I’ve been looking for a raven.”

Ten years passed, years in which Elizabeth lived with the certain knowledge that there were monsters in the world and they would consume you if you did not adequately protect yourself. To that end, she learned all she could of the magical nature of the world.

At the end of that decade, Elizabeth sat facing to the north in a secluded wood. She took a white cloth from her rune bag and spread it out before her. With her eyes closed, she picked three rune stones from the bag, cast them onto the cloth and studied them: to the left, the past; to the right, the present; in the centre, closest to her, the future.

The past. Huginn’s suffering grew greater in the time following Bernard’s disappearance. The search continued for long months and years, but no trace of him was ever found. Johanna, sick with grief, succumbed to madness. Huginn took her away from Amsterdam, but kept in touch with Elizabeth through letters and occasionally a visit. Elizabeth had eventually been able to write down an account of what had happened that night and share it with Huginn, but she still could never speak of it, even to him. He encouraged Elizabeth in her studies and often sent books to aid her — volumes on mythology, mysticism and science.

The present. She had grown up and grown stronger. She continued to study as often as she could. She learned the rune casting and other magic, but kept this knowledge hidden even from those closest to her. She felt she had some degree of power now, but would it be enough?

The future. The runes told her little. A veil lay across the face of the future like the mist that rolled in from the canals. Sometimes she thought she saw fires burning beyond the white haze. She was afraid that all her preparations would count for nothing at all if the monster ever came again.

Sometimes she wondered whether the burning fire-coal still lay within her chest, and if so, what dark purpose it served.

# THE FLIGHT OF THE RAVENS

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