

Chapter One: The Black Hands

WATER RUSHED AROUND A SMALL BLACK HAired CHILD. SHADOWS FROM THE murky depths stretch towards him, thousands of hands grasping at once. The clinging hands sent numbness throughout the child's body as his breath ran out and river water filled his lungs. Shadows wrapped around him completely, making him blind in the icy rapids.

Orrin awoke with a start, chest heaving as he tried to calm himself down. He scrambled for the candle and box of matches he kept on his nightstand, unwilling to remain in the dark any longer. His panic ebbed away as soft candlelight illuminated his surroundings. Orrin looked to the bed across the room to see his mother still asleep. He guessed it was close to sunrise and decided against falling back asleep and risking another nightmare.

Walking into the kitchen, Orrin caught a glimpse of his dimly lit reflection in the mirror. His eyes wandered along the midnight black markings that sprawled across the right side of his pale face. His sharp face and sunken dark eyes gave him a haunting look, as if he were an old portrait who's eyes always followed its viewer. The dark markings continued from his jaw down to his neck and collarbone.

A sudden knocking startled Orrin out of his contemplative trance. *Must be another meeting*, he thought to himself. Sure enough, he was met with the scowl of Avin Hassei at the door.

The old man gave Orrin a dour look and asked, "What keeps you awake at this hour boy?"

"Nightmares." Orrin stated flatly, too tired to indulge the old man's riddles and ridicule.

"Ah. I take it the nightmares are to blame for the dark circles under your eyes." Avin Sneered.

"I'll go wake my mother." Orrin replied.

As if summoned by the mere mention of her, Orrin's mother drifted into the kitchen adjusting her glasses.

"Avin Hassei, exactly as early as I foresaw." She beamed.

"Your mastery over divination continues to impress me, Helvig." Replied Avin

“I knew you would say that!” Helvig quipped. “Orrin, why don’t you quickly make yourself some breakfast and wait in the bedroom? The others will arrive soon.”

Reluctantly, Orrin cut himself a slice of bread and sulked back to the bedroom. He was never allowed to attend the meetings, even after he had become an adult. He listened as Helvig’s and Avin’s voices floated down the hall.

“He really should be allowed to take the induction ritual, he’s grown older and-” Helvig began.

Avin cut off Helvig saying, “I would expect you to understand this by now. He absolutely cannot be allowed to become an osteon. He may show promise, but he is still a *vinati*.”

Orrin loathed the way Avin spat the word. *Vinati*. He knew he couldn’t be one, he had never shown any signs of the supernatural abilities associated with *vinati*. But for all of the efforts of him and his mother, Avin refused to believe that Orrin was anything other than a *vinati*. Orrin felt neutral about becoming an osteon, if what he’d heard was true he would be required to remove one of his own bones to complete the induction ritual. But not being allowed the option due to seemingly unnecessary reasons upset Orrin deeply.

He tried to distract himself by sketching the precarious assortment of knick knacks threatening to topple off of his mother’s nightstand. While it helped at first, Orrin gave up when the noises of the meeting outside the room became distractingly loud. He listened in on the rest of the meeting. Talks of those who had been captured by the witch hunters, ancient prayers recited, and praise for those with mastery over their craft. The same as last week. And the week before that. It seemed that the same three topics of conversation were all that the osteons cared about. Seeing the darkness outside begin to retreat, Orrin started getting ready for his daily routine.

After the rest of the osteons left, Orrin said goodbye to Helvig and departed to the sand shark ranch where he worked. With the sun peaking out from behind the Firetip Mountains, the desert air was sweltering. Sweat beaded on Orrin’s forehead as he trekked into town to reach the farm. Approaching the edge of town, Orrin pulled a hood over his head. It was necessary for him to keep his face somewhat hidden despite the intense heat. The attention that his markings often attracted was never good. Finally reaching his destination, Orrin greeted the vodine man waiting at the gates.

“Orrin! Looks like you slept well!” The man remarked.

“Ha, very funny Lokgour.” Orrin said sarcastically. “Anything new or should I begin my usual routine?”

“Well, one of the sharks broke through the fence on the western side of the ranch. I need you and Rolof to fix it and find the shark that ran away.”

Gloom overtook Orrin’s face. He could not stand working with Rolof.

“Hey scribble face!” A voice shouted from a nearby barn.

A giant of a man ran over to where Orrin and Lokgour stood. He towered over both of them, putting a thick muscled arm around Orrin. *He must be half giant or something, there is no*

way he's just a normal human, Orrin thought to himself while trying to escape Rolof's grasp. His attempts were futile.

"Let's go fix this fence!" Rolof exclaimed.

"Fine, just let go of me first." Orrin grumbled.

Mending the fence was tedious work. Orrin and Rolof took turns digging trenches for giant slabs of sandstone while the other poured water into the sand near the fence to keep more sand sharks from escaping. After just half an hour, the two were drenched in sweat and covered in sand. Orrin knelt on the sand, gently petting one of the smaller sharks with a bucket in his other hand. Suddenly he heard a splash from behind him. He turned to see that Rolof had leapt into the basin of water they were using to contain the sharks.

"That feels sooo much better." remarked Rolof, enjoying the respite from the heat.

"Get out of the water, Rolof. We need to finish this fence." Scolded Orrin

"Oh come on, we can take a tiny break. We've literally been working on this all day."

Orrin narrowed his eyes at Rolof and walked behind him. He quickly grabbed both of his arms and attempted to pull him out of the basin. This did not work at all. Rolof retaliated by yanking Orrin towards him, pulling him into the water.

The second the water hit him, panic gripped Orrin powerfully. He was no longer a man in a basin of water in the desert, but instead a small child surrounded by an ice cold river. He tried to scream as he felt something grabbing for him. He felt a force pulling at him from the shadows around him, and he instinctively tugged back. His face broke the surface of the water. He was back in the desert, but felt an icy chill beneath his skin. Rolof was out of the basin and staring at Orrin with a mixed look of bewilderment and horror. For a moment Orrin was confused, until he realized that Rolof was actually staring at the massive matte black figure pulling Orrin out of the basin. It receded almost as soon as he glimpsed it.

"You..." Rolof began shakily. "That was a wraith."

Orrin was too shocked to say anything.

"You're a witch." Rolof stammered.

Before he could say anything else, Orrin tore off through the desert towards his home.

Orrin still felt the frost in his bones as he barrelled into the house.

"Orrin! You're home early." Remarkd Helvig.

"I think I accidentally summoned a wraith." Orrin shuddered.

"What?!"

"I fell into a basin of water and it pulled me out then disappeared."

"What? How long have you been able to summon wraiths?!"

"I don't-"

A firm knock interrupted Orrin. Helvig made a face like she had been expecting this. Orrin ran into the bedroom while Helvig cautiously opened the door. Four men stood outside blocking any way out. Three of them wore maroon tunics with the king's seal embroidered on

them, one of them wearing a captain's hat. The other man wore an old black tunic that was ripped in several places. The large tattoo on the man's forehead contrasted his pale skin.

"We are here to arrest Orrin Azor for the crime of witchcraft. Cooperate and no one will get hurt." The captain stated.

"You must have the wrong house," chimed Helvig, a bright smile plastered across her face. "There is no one named Orrin in this house."

Helvig's left hand twisted behind her back and swirls of dim green light began to form around her wrist and slither down to the floor and towards the witch hunters. Before it could reach them, the tattooed man stepped forward and reached a hand out towards the green light. A purple beam erupted from a hand missing its index finger and disintegrated Helvig's spell.

"She's a witch, kill her!" Shouted one of the men.

A sword came towards Helvig's head and she ducked under it at the last second. Her hands shot up and a flash of green energy shot at the man who swung on her. He screamed as a line of flesh from his temple to his nose began sizzling and burning. The captain raised a hand that bore a tattoo matching the one on the forehead of the pale man. The prisoner's hand jerked out and purple energy raced towards Helvig. Unable to react in time, Helvig was hit by the spell and shot backwards against the kitchen wall.

[figure out the rest of this chapter later]

Chapter Two: Ritual