

Intent & Vigor - Chapter 1

“You’re short,” the barmaid stated, her voice piercing the din of the busy tavern.

I silently counted the copper pieces I’d placed on the bar counter. *How many drinks had I had again?*

I flashed her my most charming grin. “Surely, there's a discount for your favorite Vespran?”

My attempt at humor fizzled under her deepening scowl as I began to feel the weight of the Auroran patrons' stares settling on me.

“I’ll cover the rest next time,” I said loudly enough for the rest of the tavern to hear before turning to leave. My departure was a bit too swift for my unsteady feet, and I stumbled against a barstool, catching it just in time to prevent a fall.

"There won't be a next time," she called after me.

Another tavern off the list. At this rate, I'd soon be relegated to the dim corners of the Vespran slums, sharing drinks with the dull spirits of my own kin. As the tavern door swung shut behind me, the barmaid’s contempt followed me into the chilled night air. “Damned Ghoul,” she spat out—a sharp barb meant to wound. Her words lingered, mixing with the alley’s shadows as I stepped into the street. The posted torchlight here cast a golden glow on the cobbled paths, bathing the avenues in a honeyed light that was a sweet contrast to the bitter gloom of the Vespran slums.

Deciding to make one final mark on this gilded quarter before heading home, I slipped into an adjacent alleyway. After all, it only seemed fitting that if I came to the rich part of town to drink, the fine wine should make its exit here too—far too good for the slums.

Just as I squared up against the cobblestone wall, a voice interrupted. “Hey, Ghoul!”

“Darkness below,” I muttered, hastily retying my breeches.

Plastering on a smile, I turned to see three young men at the alley's entrance. The dim moonlight highlighted their Auroran features: light-brown skin a shade paler than mine and eyes distinctly rounder.

“Think you can come here and leech off our booze?” the middle one sneered.

I raised my hands in a placating gesture, my smile widening. “Now, now, my friends, let's not be hasty. I was just a little short tonight, but I'll settle my tab next time. Honest.”

They exchanged glances, unimpressed. The middle one stepped closer, his eyes narrowing. “We don't appreciate Vespran thieves around here.”

“Thief? I prefer to think myself an advance collector of hospitality.” I said, trying to maintain a cheerful tone. “Now if you'll excuse me, I'll be collecting some now and be on my way.”

I tried to sidestep them, but they blocked my path. I paused, my best attempt at a disarming smile still on my face. “How about we get to know each other,” I said, extending a hand. “I'm Rakhas.”

They eyed my outstretched hand as if it were a coiled snake.

“Right,” I muttered, retracting it. An awkward tension enveloped us, punctuated only by a chilling breeze that slinked its way through the alley. I cupped my hands and blew into them for warmth.

“Hey, Ghoul magic!” one of them yelled, pointing at my raised hands.

“What? No, that's not how it—” A sucker punch to the temple cut short my protest. Reeling, I barely caught my footing when a second blow slammed into my gut, doubling me over in pain. A knee followed, connecting with my jaw and sending me crumpling to the ground.

I instinctively shielded myself, bracing for the next strike. But before another blow could land, a sudden voice boomed behind my attackers.

“What is the meaning of this!”

Peeking from behind raised arms, I saw a dark-cloaked figure stepping from the mouth of the alleyway, the shadows seeming to bend around him as he held up a lit torch.

The Aurorans turned, shielding their eyes against the torchlight. “Piss off,” the lead one snarled, taking a step towards him. “Another Vespran, huh? Seems like you Ghouls never learn to stay in your own gutters.”

The Auroran lunged, swinging at the cloaked figure. The newcomer deftly dodged, causing the attacker to stumble and trip past him.

“Fucking Ghoul magic,” one of the others hissed. He and my other assailant stepped away from me and towards the newcomer. I crawled backward, distancing myself from the impending brawl.

The second Auroran rushed the figure, swinging wildly. The figure evaded again, the man's fist barely grazing his hood. Another swing, another miss. The third attacker joined in, his strike whizzing past the cloaked figure, missing by mere inches. The flurry of near hits looked almost choreographed as the figure weaved seamlessly between their blows.

The first Auroran got back on his feet and charged. The cloaked figure sidestepped, hooking out a foot and tripping the man into his companions, sending all three crashing to the ground.

The cloaked figure coolly circled the heap of men, positioning himself between them and me. His torchlight cast a warm glow on the alley walls, his shadow falling over me.

The three Aurorans slowly reclaimed their footing, shooting piercing glares at the newcomer. “Fucking Ghouls,” the lead one spat, before the trio turned and left the alleyway.

The sounds of their footsteps echoed in the distance as the cloaked figure turned to face me. He stood a little over six feet tall with a medium muscular build. The torch in his hand illuminated his face, highlighting short black hair and a serious jawline molded by years of scowling. At twenty-four, he was only three years my senior, though you'd think the age gap greater if you compared us.

“Rakhas, are you okay?” Mordai asked, leaning down and offering me a hand. Tendrils of inky black vapor trailed from his mouth as he spoke, curling and twisting through the air before dissipating into the night.

“Never better, dear brother,” I said cheerily, standing up on my own. “Though I do wish you would stop chasing off my friends.”

Mordai regarded me with a flat look. “They didn’t look like friends to me.”

“Well, maybe if you actually *had* any friends, you’d recognize them as such,” I retorted. “Believe it or not, people don’t find it interesting when brooding is your only hobby.”

He gave me a brooding look.

“We should get home, Rakhas. It’s not a good idea to be in this part of town after dark.”

“Fine, I wouldn’t want to be seen with you here anyway. Do you own anything that isn’t black?”

He didn’t respond as he turned to leave the alley. The tendrils of dark vapor once curling from his mouth had stopped, signaling the end of his Vigor. As he walked ahead, I caught a glimpse of two sheathed sickles strapped to his waist, concealed within the dark folds of his cloak. Although he hadn’t drawn them during the encounter, a splotch of fresh blood stained the fabric around one of the blades.

I trailed behind Mordai as he navigated us out of the alley and onto the evening streets of Roselake. Despite its modest size, the city was one of stark contrasts. We walked through the southern district, the side of town belonging to the Auroran majority. Torches, strategically placed along the main thoroughfares, illuminated splendid stone structures spaced with elegance. However, as we continued north, the warm glow abruptly faded to dimly lit narrow streets that wound their ways through tightly packed hovels. It was like crossing an invisible threshold, one that even the posted torchlight dared not pass. The streets constricted, winding unpredictably as the stench of sewage and garbage crept its way into the air. This was the part of town where my people resided. Even if we had the funds to live elsewhere, this was the best a family of Vesprans could hope for in a city like Roselake.

I trudged behind Mordai as he led us through the city streets, rubbing my sore jaw when I was sure he wasn't looking. Mordai had warned me countless times about my ventures into the Auroran part of town. I almost wished he'd gloat, to throw out an "I told you so," if only to crack the stoic demeanor he wore like a suit of armor. He would never come down this way if not to fetch me, happy to stay in our dreary stretch of dirt and poverty. He was a man content with his lot in life, though I imagined that was easier when life had been so generous to you.

We arrived at our modest home, a small wooden structure nestled among a chaotic mesh of similar buildings. The exterior was weathered and patched, with rough-hewn planks that had seen better days and a roof that sagged in spots. The place was cramped but clean, a reflection of our mother's efforts to make the most of what we had. The front door opened directly into the living room, where a large wooden shrine stood on the far side. The shrine, intricately carved and painted, depicted a setting sun enveloped by dark branching tendrils. This was the symbol of the Dusksong, the patron deity of the Vespran people. Despite its beauty, the shrine seemed out of place in the small room, dominating the already tight space and making it feel even more crowded. Its presence was expected though, given Mordai's position as one of the Dusksong's Favored. The rest of the house was similarly compact, with a small kitchen attached to the living room and a hallway leading to the bedrooms.

I pushed past Mordai, making my way to my room. Like the rest of the house, my room wasn't much to look at, with a single bed and a small nightstand that doubled as my writing bench. My creativity found its canvas on the walls, where pinned sheets of parchment carried charcoal sketches—mostly depicting bars on Auroran side of town. Each tavern depicted in those drawings featured me at the center, laughing and reveling with the Auroran patrons.

Amid these scenes were drawings of my family. My mother, a slender Vespran woman with a weathered face, smiled gently from various portraits. Beside her were images of Mordai, shrouded in the dark cloak that marked his status within our faith. There were also older sketches of my father, his strong features still vivid despite the papers' age. It was easy to see that Mordai inherited much of his physical appearance from our father, while I seemed to take after our mother.

Settling at my makeshift desk, I pulled out a fresh sheet of parchment and began to sketch the scene from the tavern tonight. My charcoal moved swiftly, capturing my scattered black hair falling loosely around my face as I engaged in conversation with the barmaid. I exaggerated the finery of the tavern, giving it an air of sophistication that a Vespran could scarcely dream of in the slums. In the drawing, the barmaid and I were locked in amiable chatter, her face lit up with laughter at my witty remarks. It was a scene that elevated my presence, painting me as a charming figure at ease in a world above my station. It was a romanticized version of the night—the way I would tell it to others.

I pinned the finished drawing to the wall, stepping back to admire the latest addition to my collection. The embellished tavern scene joined the array of sketches, each piece implying a reality slightly more grand than the truth. I rubbed my face as I gazed at my work, wincing as my fingers brushed over a fresh bruise from the night's escapades.

With a sigh, I turned away from the wall and lay down on my bed. The drawings loomed over me as I drifted into sleep, silent witnesses to dreams both sleeping and waking.