

Intent & Vigor - Chapter 1

I drunkenly sauntered down the alleyway, intent to relieve myself of my evening beverages. If I was going to come to the Auroran side of town to drink, it only seemed fitting that the fine wine should make its exit here too—far too good for the slums.

As I squared up against the cobblestone wall, a voice sounded out behind me. “Hey, Demon boy!”

“Shit,” I muttered, hastily retying my breeches.

Taking a moment to plaster on a smile, I turned to see three young men in their early twenties framed by the alleyway’s entrance. The dim moonlight highlighted their Auroran features: light-brown skin a shade paler than mine and eyes distinctly rounder.

“My dad said Vesprans burn if you splash holy water on them,” the middle one sneered. “Wanna go to the Dawnbringer’s temple and test that out?”

“A generous offer, my friend, but only a myth I’m afraid,” I replied, trying to maintain a cheerful tone. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I really must be on my way.”

I tried to sidestep them, but they stood their ground, obstructing my way. I paused and looked them over, 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 snaked its way through the alley. I cupped my hands and blew into them for warmth.

“Demon magic!” one of the boys yelled, pointing at my raised hands.

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

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

“What is the meaning of this!”

Peeking from behind my arms, I saw a dark-cloaked figure stepping forward from the mouth of the alleyway, the shadows bending around him as he held up a lit torch.

The Auroran boys turned, shielding their eyes against the torchlight. “Piss off,” the lead boy snarled, taking a step towards him. “Another Vespran huh? We ought to teach you demon boys to stay on your side of town.”

The boy lunged forward, taking a swing at the cloaked figure. The newcomer deftly dodged the blow, the boy stumbling ahead and tripping as his momentum carried him past the cloaked man.

“Fucking demon magic,” one of the other boys 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 boy rushed toward the figure, swinging wildly with a right hook. Again, the newcomer nimbly dodged the blow, the boy’s fist skimming his hood but making no contact.

The second boy swung again while the third attacker threw a jab. The cloaked figure weaved seamlessly between their assaults, the strikes coming close but never quite landing. The flurry of near misses almost looked choreographed as the two boys fruitlessly tried again to strike the newcomer.

Behind them, the first boy returned to his feet and charged the cloaked figure. Without so much as a glance, the man sidestepped the charging boy and hooked out a foot. The boy tripped, barreling into his companions and sending the trio to the ground.

The cloaked figure coolly circled the sprawled heap of boys, positioning himself between them and me. His torch cast a warm sheen on the alleyway walls, throwing his shadow over my prone form.

The three boys slowly reclaimed their footing, shooting piercing glares at the newcomer. “Fucking demons,” the lead one spat, before the trio turned and exited 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 a serious jawline molded by years of scowling. At twenty-one, he was three years my senior, although you would guess the age gap greater if you compared the two of us.

“Rakhas, are you hurt?” 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. “I do wish you would stop chasing off my friends though.”

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

“Well, maybe if you actually *had* any friends, you might 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 were currently in 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 slums. 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 would gloat, to throw out an “I told you so,” if only to crack the stoic armor he wore so effortlessly. He would never come down this way if not to fetch me, happy to stay in our dreary part of town. He was a man content with his lot in life, although I imagined this was easier when life had been so generous to you.

We arrived at our modest family home and went inside. The place was cramped but clean, a testament to 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, featured a majestic depiction of 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 cramped area and making it feel even more crowded. However, its presence was expected, given Mordai’s position as one of the Dusksong’s Favored. The rest of the house was relatively small, with a cramped 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 doubling as a writing bench. My creativity found its canvas on the walls, where loose sheets of parchment carried charcoal sketches—mostly depicting the Auroran side of town. My mother, a slender Vespran woman with a weathered face, smiled down at me from my various depictions of her that hung on the walls. Among the drawings were also a few images of Mordai, wrapped in the dark cloak that marked his position within our faith. A number of old sketches of

my father also hung on the walls. Though the images had aged, his strong features still resonated in my memory. It was easy to see that Mordai inherited much of his physical appearance from our father, while I seemed to take after our mother.

I reached into my nightstand and pulled out a small hand mirror. Holding back my dark curled hair with my free hand, I examined my face in the reflective surface. A few red marks threatened to turn to bruises, but there were no other obvious souvenirs from my nocturnal antics. With a sigh, I set down the mirror and laid in bed, gazing at my depictions of my family and life on the other side of town as I drifted off to sleep.