

## **“The Hunter’s Prophecy”**

### **Written and Copyright by Anna Abner**

~~~This prequel takes place before the events of [Shopgirl’s Prophecy #1](#)~~~

*Ilvane’s Prophecy #616: Connor from Cleveland will release the Destroyer and trigger the apocalypse.*

Unable to sleep, Connor Beckett propped his arms under his head and clenched his eyes tight as he contemplated his prophecy. What a way to prove himself a fuck-up. The damning words affected him as deeply this morning as they had the first day he’d read them in the newspaper.

Connor from Cleveland.

The moment he’d seen the post, he’d known to his core, it was meant for him.

Connor from Cleveland.

He rolled onto his side in the nylon four-man tent and drew his knees toward his chest. What else was he to do about the prophecy except thwart it?

Roz Carrera shifted uncomfortably, and the entire structure quivered. “It’s so freaking hot,” she complained. “What time is it?”

“Almost five. I thought you’d be used to the heat. You’re from Miami, aren’t you?” He seemed to remember she’d talked about Miami. How she’d ended up at the University of Chicago, he still wasn’t sure, but he was damned glad she’d enrolled. He couldn’t have chosen a better partner, though he wouldn’t have guessed it until she’d outed herself at a frat party as a real-life spellspeaker.

“It’s humid in Florida,” she returned. “This is dry as hell.”

Las Vegas at any time of the year was bound to be both dry and hot, and there wasn’t much they could do about it. They’d spent most of their combined funds to purchase the tent, a couple of packs, and two flights out of O’Hare. The little money they had left was to keep them from starving to death and not for luxuries like hotel rooms with AC.

“Get some sleep,” Connor said. “We’ll search the casinos again today. You’ll be in the air conditioning, then.” They’d been searching for days for leads—eyewitnesses to vampire activity or a real, live infected. They’d run into a lot of rumors and cosplayers so far. No actual vampires. “Any new leads?”

“Not really.” With a huff, she spun and punched at the extra clothes serving as her pillow. Connor turned the opposite way, his back to her. Maybe another guy, a regular guy, a guy without a prophecy hanging over his head would have pulled Roz closer and enjoyed her long, lithe body.

But Connor wasn’t a regular guy, and he did have a prophecy hanging over his head. So, he settled in, closed his eyes, and tried to catch one more hour of sleep. Their partnership was all business, and he needed the witch on his side much more than he needed a hookup.

Besides, Connor preferred blondes.

“I can’t sleep,” she announced. “Do you mind? I need to change clothes.”

Connor roused, stretched, and stepped out of the flimsy structure into the sizzling desert air. Around him, people slept on, oblivious, in other tents, trailers, and RVs across the campsite sprawled in the shadow of the Le Sort Hotel. Squinting, Connor stared up at the shiny towers and endless rows of reflective glass blocking out the sky, imagining staying in a resort with so many luxuries at his fingertips.

“Must be nice,” he grumbled.

He’d grown up poor in Cleveland, the only child of a single mother. An engineering degree from the University of Chicago was supposed to change his trajectory, but then he’d gone and carpet-bombed his life by running off to Vegas with a strange witch.

There may still be hope for his fiscal future, though. His grandfather had died recently and left him an enormous trust fund, but then an aunt he’d never met had contested the will, and the money was still tied up in probate. Connor might never see a cent of it, which was fine with him. He had so many great memories growing up with his grandpa that were worth more than any fund. Somehow, he and Roz would make their plan of finding a real vampire work. Money, or no money.

He dismissed the view of the resort and grabbed his pack, rifling through it for a sketchbook and pencil. Perching on an upturned log, he balanced his book on his knee and picked up where he'd last left off—practicing eyes. Dark, comic, feminine, furious. He drew and drew, spitting out every variation he could think of, trying to improve his style with each stroke.

But even while drawing, thoughts of vampires were never far away.

It had been a long twenty years since vampires—or infecteds—roamed free in the Ukrainian mountains. Twenty years since Oleksander the Destroyer had been picked up by the U.S. Army after his failed attempt at invading Prague and been squirreled away somewhere in the Nevada desert along with most of his horde. It had been so long, and vampires had been so quiet since, that people had begun to forget. Connor believed, though, that the leftovers were still out there.

“Hope you like potato chips for breakfast,” Roz said, climbing out of the tent with her laptop in one hand and a crumpled bag of chips in the other. “It’s all we have left.”

“Go ahead.” He’d rather skip breakfast.

In the lavender glow of dawn, she dropped crisscross onto a patch of synthetic grass and opened her laptop. She munched a couple of chips, clicking the touchpad.

“More emails?” he guessed. She’d been sending messages to organizations with known interests in the paranormal. If anyone ever answered, she had a whole wish list of vehicles, weapons, and tech she hoped to acquire for their mission to locate Oleksander’s desert prison.

The only problem with super-secret, underground military installations was they were really hard to find.

“No, but do you remember the missing persons cases I told you about?” she asked. “I cross-referenced the ones from last year looking for patterns that might indicate supernatural events.”

Even though he’d gone to the same university as her, Connor only understood about half of that. What he comprehended very well was, he needed to locate a vampire to lead him to Oleksander. Whatever it took.

“Find anything?”

While Roz chewed and scrolled, he put away his sketchbook and started tearing down their campsite for the day. The tent stayed to hold their spot, but he loaded everything portable into one giant pack. The last thing he did was strap a hunting knife in its sheath to his hip. Just in case.

"I don't know, yet. It's gonna take some time." Her voice trailed off as she leaned into her screen.

Connor swung their pack over one shoulder, keeping his wallet and a bottle of water out for their walk. "I'll go check in with Remy."

Roz grunted a goodbye.

Connor found Remy and his common law wife Precious sprawled on an outdoor sofa in front of a piecemeal singlewide trailer at the center of camp. Over time, Remy had added a front porch, a roofed garden, and a wraparound wooden deck to protect from the blistering heat, and the structure looked more like an arts and crafts project than a home.

"Can I leave this with you?" Connor greeted, indicating his pack.

"Hey, man." The grizzled slice of human-shaped beef jerky peeled himself off the sofa. "You bet. Where you off to today?"

Connor propped the heavy pack against the trailer wall. "Casino crawling," he said. "What about you?"

Remy grinned. "I am the king of all I survey, dude." He swept his arm out to indicate his campground kingdom.

"Some king," Precious snorted.

A U.S. Army decal in the trailer's window caught Connor's eye. Giving Remy a second look, Connor considered whether the man could have served in the Vegas area around the time Oleksander and his infected horde disappeared into secret prisons.

"Remy, what do you know about vampires?"

The older man cleared his throat. "Well, just about everything there is to know," he replied. "Back in my army days, I was ordered to guard their quarters."

"You've seen them? You know where they are?"

Remy put one finger to his lips and winked.

“You think you’re going to hunt vampires?” Precious eyed Connor up and down, all six feet of him, a huff of a laugh escaping. “Good luck.”

“What she said,” Remy replied.

The couple’s out-of-tune laughter followed Connor all the way back to Roz and his campsite.

“Ready?” Roz stuffed the laptop and chips into a knapsack and stomped off toward the road fronting the camp.

It was only a meandering half a mile to The Strip, not far enough to warrant hitchhiking. So, they walked in silence through eerily quiet and empty streets. The only other people up and on the sidewalks before six a.m. were fitness nuts and gamblers who hadn’t gone to bed yet.

Roz bowed her head over her phone. “Whoa. Four days ago,” she said without looking up, “a waitress named Tara Reeves was attacked in the wee hours and drained of blood. She survived. I can’t believe I didn’t see this earlier.”

“Any details?” This could be the break they were waiting for. This Tara person could point them toward the vampire who hurt her.

“Not in the press,” she said, scrolling and clicking at warp speeds. “But social media is a different story.” Roz nearly stepped into a light post, but Connor steered her around it. Still too invested to look up, she added, “Here it is. She works at the Lucky Hand.” Finally, peeling her gaze from her phone, Roz quickened her pace. “Let’s go.”

Inside the cavernous casino, Connor and Roz roamed the floor, checking nametags. A cute little barmaid passed them named LeeAnn.

“Is Tara Reeves working today?” Roz shouted after her.

“Tara’s working the poker machines, love,” the woman said in an adorable British accent that landed pleasantly in Connor’s ears. “Northeast corner.”

From there, it wasn’t hard to find the right waitress.

“Tara Reeves?” Connor questioned.

A tall and svelte woman with overdone brown hair startled at the sound of her name, her tray of half empty tumblers rattling. “Sorry, honey,” she said, avoiding eye contact, “I’m extra busy today. Gotta cover for my friend who didn’t show up.”

Connor elbowed Roz and gave her a nod, indicating she should take this one. Roz had bite to her, but he sensed Tara might talk to a female more easily than him. It had only been four days since the attack, and she still sported bruises under a layer of make-up.

The unlucky woman wouldn't change into a monster, though. He and Roz had done their homework. Vampirism was spread through infected bodily fluids entering a person's blood stream through a cut. It was usually intentional, not accidental. Tara had been a meal to her attacker, nothing more.

Roz hurried to catch up to the fleeing barmaid. "I know you're busy. This job probably sucks, am I right? Can I just ask you a couple of questions? We heard you told the police you were attacked by a vampire. We'd really like to know the details."

Tara stopped fast, and ice cubes clinked. "You want to know about vampires? Are you two a couple of idiots, or something?"

Roz made an incomprehensible sound before Tara rolled right over her.

"Yeah, I got bit, but the cops don't give a shit. They talked to him, he had some BS alibi, and they let him go. They weren't that excited about a serial *biter*, you get me?"

"You can identify who attacked you?" Roz clarified with more than a little zeal shining in her eyes.

"You really are idiots," Tara scoffed. "Go see him, then. He calls himself Adrian, and he hangs out at the blackjack tables across the street. Real great guy. Have fun." With a disgusted snort, she was off again, weaving into the crowd.

Connor sent Roz a nervous look. *Could it be that easy?*

"They're really in the city," he breathed. "It's not just rumors."

Roz nodded. "This is why we're here, right? Let's go find him."

A vampire playing blackjack didn't fit Connor's preconceived notions of mindless, rabid predators feasting on fountains of blood, but it didn't sound too dangerous. They'd be in a crowd, after all, and captured on probably a hundred different recording devices.

With a nod, Connor turned and led the way outside into the suffocating heat. Buffeted by the growing crowds, they crossed the street on the pedestrian bridge

and strolled into the casino. A Scandinavian-themed mega-resort, there were probably dozens of blackjack tables studding the main casino floor, not to mention private games on other floors for celebrities and high rollers. It might have been a needle in a haystack sort of issue, except the casino floor was nearly empty and Connor knew the infected in the room almost the moment he entered it.

Adrian, who'd attacked Tara the barmaid in the early morning hours and almost drained her to the point of death, hunched over one of the only game tables operating before noon. He was by far the best-looking man in sight—glossy auburn hair, a bit of scruff across a well-defined jaw, and a suit that hung tailor-made on his athletic body.

But he didn't look so tough. He may be handsome, but handsome didn't threaten Connor. He'd been training for this daily from the moment he stepped off the plane. He could take him.

After readjusting the sheathed knife on his hip, Connor made a beeline for the infected at the blackjack table, only slowing down when he marched to within striking distance. At Connor's approach, the vampire glanced up.

"Room for one more player?"

Adrian didn't even let the dealer answer. With inhuman strength and speed, the vampire slammed the woman on the stool next to him into Roz's arms, toppling them both to the thick carpeting. Connor turned his attention away for a split second just as Adrian struck at him. Teeth, meant for Connor's carotid artery, sank into his shoulder instead. Cloth and flesh tore. Sinew and tendons crushed.

All Connor wanted to do was talk to the infected. A couple questions about the army, Oleksander, and how to kill the warlord. He hadn't expected Adrian to attack without hesitation.

Vampires were a lot faster and stronger than he'd anticipated.

Connor's arms finally came back online, and he pummeled the vampire's ribs, first his right and then his left, hard punishing blows that didn't seem to faze Adrian one bit.

A pair of beefy security guards arrived and startled the vampire who tossed Connor to the ground like a discarded toy. He leapt on top of the blackjack table and

fled through the crowds at top speeds. One of the security guards halfheartedly ran after, while the other radioed for paramedics as he knelt beside Connor.

“Buddy, how you doing?”

*Not too well.* “Roz?” Connor called out instead. “You okay?”

“I’m here,” came Roz’s brusque yet annoyed voice in the crowd right before she smacked the guard’s bicep. “He’s fine. Worry about the jerk that did this to him.”

Roz grabbed Connor by the shirt and shook him, not an easy task considering he outweighed her by over fifty pounds. In a lower voice, she said, “Get the fuck up before they call the cops.”

It was difficult to explain to the police why Connor was on a mission to find vampires. They didn’t always subscribe to the Oracle’s prophecies. Best to stay off their radar, so Connor rose on shaky legs and waved off any help from the rent-a-cop.

“I’m good,” he assured. “He was too drunk to do any damage.”

*Wishful thinking.* The blood may not be visible through Connor’s dark clothing, but he could feel it oozing down his chest and arms, just enough to piss him off.

Stumbling out of the casino and onto the sidewalk, Roz directed Connor into the next public building and a family restroom.

“What are you doing?” he demanded as she locked the door.

“You’re bleeding.” She spread her arms at her sides and said, “Blessed is my power. I call upon thee.” A magical windstorm whipped into being, swirling around her legs and hips. It started at her feet, ruffling her clothes as it spiraled up her body and played with her long black tresses. When she raised her eyes, they shone with power. “*Heal,*” she whispered.

As she spoke her spell, repeating words of healing and comfort, Connor watched her. Rozlyn Carrera was a remarkable sight. She seemed to sparkle from her feet all the way up to the crown of glossy hair on her head as magic oozed out of her pores.

He stared, mesmerized, as a tickle began in his shoulder. He rolled the wounded arm and sensed the bite was closing up. “It’s working. You’re doing it.”

A few minutes later, her power exhausted, she ceased casting. Connor’s shoulder wasn’t good as new, but it was markedly better.



"Thanks," he said, holding the door for her as they made their way back onto Las Vegas Boulevard. "I don't want to lose him, Roz. He's the first vampire we've even gotten close to."

"He's had a taste of blood," she said. "But he's not full. I have a hunch he'll stick around here until he finds a victim he can drain." She sent him a look full of nervous energy. "We need backup."

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Roz stomped onto the camp manager's front porch amid Precious' half-hearted protests and settled her hands on her hips. "Remy, do you know anything about vampires, or not?"

"Who do you think locked them up?" Remy inhaled, puffing up his chest. "I was a wet-behind-the-ears private back then, but the army had me pouring cement and bolting steel doors together so the infecteds couldn't escape."

"At least one of them got away. He's on The Strip right now."

"What?" Remy coughed, his chest deflating. "Are you sure?"

"We're sure." She laid a hand on Connor's shoulder and drew away a blood-red palm. "You in?"

"You want to kill him?" Remy wagged his eyebrows at Precious. "I know places you could dump a body."

"No." Connor huffed an uneasy laugh, not sure if the older man was kidding. "No killing. I just want to ask him some questions, but he's a little hesitant to talk. I need your help convincing him."

"I'm guessing he's not too friendly." Remy locked his front door and jangled his keys at Connor. "You need stitches or something first?"

"Nah." Connor ignored the pain throbbing through his chest and blinked away a dizzy feeling. "This is more important."

"Fine." Remy pointed ahead. "Let's go."

"I'm coming, too." Precious peeled herself off the outdoor sofa. "I'll get the guns."

Remy rolled his eyes as Precious hobbled inside the trailer on plastic wedges. When she reemerged, she carried two large handguns. With much pomp and circumstance, she handed a .357 to Remy and a .44 magnum to Connor.

Not sure where to hold it, Connor tucked it into the waistband of his jeans, concealing it under his shirt. He really hoped he didn't have to use it.

Remy stashed his handgun as well. "What kind of information you all looking for?"

As a group, they meandered toward the lights and noise of The Strip.

"I have to find Oleksander the Destroyer," Connor said.

Remy stuttered a step. "You must be kidding." When Connor didn't answer, he added, "Twenty years ago, the army was so scared of that monster they had him drugged and chained until he was as helpless as a little baby. What are you gonna do with him?"

"Do you know where he is?" Connor pressed. "You said you were there."

"Well... I was around, that's for sure, but the army moved them a lot and I didn't, uh..."

Connor grit his teeth. So, Remy was more storyteller than legitimate asset. It didn't change what Connor had to do.

"Anyone else want a shot of tequila first?" Precious asked, veering toward a casino bar. "Liquid courage?"

Remy pulled her away from a grinning bartender. "Later."

Ignoring the couple, Roz touched Connor's arm, snapping his attention back onto her. "You good?"

He nodded jerkily. "The walking helps." He attempted a smile. "What's the plan?"

"Well, he'd be an idiot to go back to the same casino," Roz said, dropping her hand. "The security staff knows his face, and now he won't be able to walk through the front door without being recognized. But he seems to like the casinos," she added. "I think he'll strike again in the same area."

"We have to find him," Connor said. "This is the best lead we've had since we got here." While Remy was distracted taking care of Precious, Connor leaned in toward Roz. "I have to kill Oleksander," he whispered, staring directly into her anxious brown eyes. "I can't be the guy who lets him out and starts the damned apocalypse. *I can't.*"

“Okay. We’ll talk to Adrian.” Roz started walking again. “But there are thousands of people on the street in constant movement, thousands more on casino floors, not to mention the people in hotel rooms, restaurants, malls, theme parks... I’m estimating a less than one percent chance of finding him before he feeds and disappears.”

“You’re not helping,” Connor grouched as they hit the street in front of the last place they’d seen Adrian.

“This is it?” asked Remy. “This is where he took a chunk outta you?”

Roz ignored the retired soldier and searched the crowds. “If I were him, I’d have left here in a hurry. And there are so many other places I could visit. So many options.”

Yeah, no kidding.

Roz continued, “But if I was hungry, I might go across the street and start over.” She nodded her head in the direction of the palatial resort on the other side of Las Vegas Boulevard. “More blackjack. More victims. And a security system that won’t recognize him. Let’s check it out.” She glanced at Connor with a concerned expression. “What do we have to lose? Right?”

*No choice*, he thought glumly as he followed her across the pedestrian bridge and into the marble-lined entrance hall.

Precious stumbled in her preposterous shoes. “Can we get a drink now?”

“Soon,” Remy assured, steadying her. “Very soon.”

Adrian lounged at a low-limit blackjack table near the hotel elevators. He wore the same immaculately tailored suit, completely unruffled from their earlier fracas, betting on a new hand. The vampire appeared unperturbed, but Connor could still feel the blood on his skin, dry and scaly.

“You have his habits figured out,” Connor applauded. “But stay back and cover me with magic in case he gets mean again.”

Connor rolled his aching shoulders, and the vampire caught his eye. The bastard smiled a warm slow smile and wiggled his fingers at Connor before turning back to his game.

“Son of a bitch,” Connor swore. Adrian was going to make this difficult, he could tell. Connor didn’t want to fight him. He only wanted to ask him a few questions.

“Is that him?” Precious asked.

“That’s him,” Connor agreed, not taking his eyes off the vampire.

Adrian folded his hand, swept his chips into a pocket of his suit, tipped the dealer, and sauntered casually toward the hotel elevators.

“You and I,” Remy hissed at Connor, “grab him and hold him still. If he tries anything, I’ll shoot him. That seems like a good plan to me.”

Connor nodded as he and Remy followed in Adrian’s wake. Once the vampire looked back, giving Connor a flirty glance before heading past the elevators into a suite of meeting rooms. Connor started to run. The vampire popped open a locked door and slipped into one of the closed meeting spaces.

“Blessed is my power I call upon thee.” With those words, Roz brought a small invisible windstorm indoors.

Betting an awful lot on Roz’s magic, Connor ducked through the door a step ahead of Remy. The dim space was in varying stages of transformation—the floor was stripped to the bare concrete, a small stage had already been framed in, and a multitude of electric and hand tools lay strewn about the room.

Connor didn’t have a chance to locate the vampire before a fist with the power of a battering ram behind it hit him on the side of the head, and he went down. Adrian tossed Remy in the opposite direction, the man’s weapon skittering across the floor and under the stage.

Connor’s vision dimmed. On his knees, he reached for a handgun that wasn’t there. Damn it. Why hadn’t he kept tabs on his gun?

*Poof* went any and all magic in the room. Roz didn’t perform well under pressure.

“Hold on a goddamned second,” Connor roared. “We’re not here to hurt you.”

Adrian chuckled. “You think you’re the wolf? No, sweetheart, you’re the bunny.”

“Roz, run,” Connor hissed. But when he caught sight of her, she was frantically calling her power.

Connor fumbled for the blade on his hip, missed, grabbed it again and slid it across the floor in Roz's direction in a lame attempt to protect her.

She didn't pick it up. The infected did.

Connor watched, numb, as Adrian threw it overhand at Roz. She put her hands up to deflect and *thwack* the blade pinned her palm to the wall beside her head.

Precious stumbled into the room, brandishing a pocket-sized pistol. "Where's the bloodsucker?"

Adrian's arm snaked out, his hand closing around the woman's throat. As Connor watched, paralyzed, the infected slung her pistol away and crammed his hand into her mouth. With a solid punch and a little wiggling, he reached into her chest cavity via her esophagus.

Vomit spewed uncontrollably as Connor scrambled to his hands and knees. He retched hard enough to cry.

"Roz?" Connor gasped. Good God, where was she? He tried to tell her again to run—just get out—but he couldn't force the words past his lips as Precious flopped onto the concrete, blood splattering everything within a six-foot diameter.

Remy, finally gaining his feet, rushed the vampire, but Adrian used his momentum to spin him face first into the wall.

With a sickening flourish, Adrian bowed over Precious and tore organs from her throat as she spasmed beneath him—lungs, liver, Connor couldn't differentiate. Whatever the vampire found, he took big, hungry bites from.

Groaning, Connor struggled upright even as his head spun. A concussion was the least of his concerns right then.

"Roz," he tried again. "Go."

Remy, coming to, made a move for the vampire and got in a nice tackle before the infected noticed him, but it was no use. Adrian tore a two-by-four the size of a Louisville slugger from the half-constructed stage and captured Remy, holding the board to his throat. With a bloody sneer, Adrian growled low in his chest.

*He'd made a terrible mistake.* Roz was going to die. Remy was going to die. Connor was going to lose everything.

He was an even bigger fool than his prophecy forewarned.

Bracing himself, he saw with perfect clarity all the things he'd done wrong today. Everything from letting himself be led away to bringing Precious along. There had been a lot of errors, and the learning curve was steep when it came to vampire hunting, but he wasn't finished, yet.

*No.* He could do this. He and Roz could figure this out.

His weapons long gone, Connor picked up a discarded screwdriver and staggered forward.

"Roz, answer me," he called into the dim room, not daring to take his eyes off the vampire again.

"I'm fine," Roz whimpered. "Don't worry about me. Just kill him."

Gladly.

"I'm so happy you returned." Adrian chuckled as Remy turned horrific shades of plum. "Thank you. Really. I tried to make it easy for you to find me, and here you are." He jostled Remy, whose body appeared to be seizing. "And you brought more snacks. Today could not have gone any better."

Adrian leered as Connor slid through Precious' blood, his weapon up. The moment Connor stepped within striking distance, Adrian kicked out, knocking him flat without ever letting up on Remy's throat.

The only mistake the vampire made was letting Connor fall within striking distance. Connor stabbed the screwdriver into the infected's thigh with as much strength as he had left. The tool scraped bone and hit with a wet little punch all the way to the handle.

"Where's Oleksander?" Connor demanded. "Where's the Destroyer?"

The vampire swatted Connor in the back of the head, but for a moment, his grip slackened on Remy and the man twisted free, sputtering and puking all over the cold concrete floor. Connor pulled out the tool and lodged it again in the vampire's thigh. Higher up. This time when he pulled it out, a hot gush of blood spurted. He'd hit an artery.

"Where is he?"

"You little shit," the vampire spat. "Stay the fuck down." He hammered his head.

Connor didn't so much hit the floor as floated there, half conscious, his vision wobbly and corrupt.

Remy had gathered his strength and swung at the back of the vampire's skull with the board. Over and over. Fast, brutal blows. Blows meant to not only incapacitate but to kill. Three or four of those and the vampire lay motionless beside Connor, his crushed face a mess of blood and gore.

"No," Connor cried. A dead vampire couldn't lead them to the army's secret prison and Oleksander. A dead vampire was of no use.

"Does he have any money?" Remy demanded, ignoring Connor and ransacking the vampire's pockets. He must have found something because he arched his back and howled like a wolf into the open space. "Wooie, motherfucker. What a rush!" Then he turned on Connor. "What about you, dipshit?" He pulled and patted, thrusting his hands into Connor's pockets, discovering his last four hundred dollars. Money meant to feed him and Roz for the month. Money that would keep them alive and off the streets.

Then he pilfered Connor's class ring, his watch, and his shoes.

"Thanks," Remy guffawed. "I always liked your shoes."

When he went after Roz, Connor pushed himself to his elbows. The whole room tilted so far to the left he was sure he'd slide right off, and his stomach whined in protest.

"Leave her alone," Connor slurred.

Remy slammed the end of the board into Roz's gut, doubling her over. She cried out, and the sound twanged through Connor.

There was an awful moment when all he heard were the sounds of cloth rustling and Roz's quick, pained breathing.

"I'll kill you," Connor said, on his knees now.

"Who are you going to kill?" Remy swung the bat across Connor's back.

He fell to his side, his body a mass of pain. "I'll kill you for hurting her."

"My girl's gone." Remy brought the board down hard on Connor's lower leg. The angle was all wrong, the trajectory too. His bone snapped. "But you don't have anything to say about that, do you?"

Connor curled upon the floor as the lights flickered and the only sound that reached him was the two-by-four bouncing against concrete as Remy dropped it and fled.

Someone called his name. Connor peeled open his eyes.

“Get the fuck up!” Roz smacked him with bloodied hands. “We have to get out of here.”

“Roz?” Everything hurt.

“Get up!” she hissed, yanking at his shirt.

He slid his hands underneath him, found the .44 magnum wedged under his ribs, grabbed it, and with Roz’s help, he climbed to his one good leg. They lurched further into the darkened room.

“I wrecked the cameras outside,” Roz panted, pulling him toward an emergency exit door. “But we gotta hurry. We can’t be here for long.”

Connor’s thoughts cleared enough to remember the vampire. Precious. The blood. The organs. He glanced back. There was no body on the ground.

“Where’s Adrian?”

“Gone.” They stumbled through the door into a dark loading area. “He took Precious’ corpse and ran.” She elbowed him in the ribs. “Just keep your head down, and don’t pass out on me.”

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Connor knew where he was before he even opened his eyes. Hospitals had their own unique vibe. And he knew he’d been there for a while, because his body didn’t hurt the way he expected it to. His leg was surprisingly numb. His head, too. And he lay in a soft, comfortable bed that smelled of detergent instead of stale sweat and sleeping bags.

He finally opened his eyes to find Roz hovering at his bedside.

“It’s okay,” she assured. “By some miracle, you’re alive.”

He made a pathetic noise to mean, *What happened?*

Somehow, she understood. “I didn’t tell the cops anything, so don’t worry about that. If you’re asked, we were jumped at a house party. But,” she sighed, “Remy ran, Precious is dead, the vampire ghosted, and we’re on our own.” She added, “I haven’t



gone back to the camp, but I'm guessing whatever gear we left behind is Remy's now, too."

Feeling a little stronger, Connor sat up. "Your hand?" he managed.

She raised her neatly bandaged right hand. "Stitches and some physical therapy. No permanent damage."

He squeezed his eyes closed, so many conflicting thoughts and memories chasing each other inside his head. Their first real encounter with a vampire had been a complete disaster. A woman was dead. Connor was broken. Maybe he was asking too much of Roz.

How could he expect her to stay in such an awful situation, hunting creatures that could maim her with the flick of a wrist? The prophecy was his to bear, not hers.

"You don't have to stay," he told her.

She swatted his bicep. "Shut the hell up."

She was so brave, smart, and driven, but he feared he was an anchor around her neck. "You should go home."

"No." She scowled at him as if he'd hurt her. Again. "Don't you remember when you sold me on this little catastrophe back in Chicago? You said—hunt vampires, kill them, find Oleksander, kill him, and do it with my magic backing you up. And I didn't take you that seriously, I'll be honest, but then I saw you ready to die to cancel out your prophecy and it hit me how important this is to you."

"It's not your fight."

"I'm not abandoning you. I don't care about your honor or any of that other crap." When he didn't respond, she asked, "When you said you believed in my magic, was that bullshit?"

It wasn't bullshit. He'd seen her call magic. She was spectacular when she controlled her power.

"I believe in you," he amended. "But I can't watch you be stabbed and beaten anymore."

"Agreed. We need a better plan and better weapons."

He sighed. She wasn't getting it. "Roz," he began.

“No. Shut up. Listen to me for a second. After seeing you lying like a broken, bloody corpse on a dirty Las Vegas sidewalk, I realized how much help you really need. And I decided, then and there, I’m here for the long haul. I promised to support you with every ounce of magic I have, and you promised we’d do some good in this world. Ridding humanity of the vampire infection is damned good work.” She crossed her arms tightly. “I was there in that room with you, don’t forget. I saw Adrian eat Precious alive. I smelled the blood. That *creature* is too dangerous to live. We need to stop him and everyone else like him. For good.”

Connor shook his head. Observing her pain and being unable to help had nearly split him in two. He couldn’t do it again.

But Roz spoke first, “Don’t ever tell me to go home again. I don’t have anything to go back to.”

He caught her nervous gaze and read her determination, fearing if he cut her loose, she’d only hunt vampires on her own. He couldn’t risk her getting herself killed.

“Me, either,” he admitted softly. “This is it for me. I don’t have a plan B.”

“Then we make a promise. We don’t leave until the job is done.” She stuck out her uninjured hand. “Deal?”

Finally, he took her small but strong fingers in his and shook on it. He tensed to say more when her phone chirped. She frowned at the screen. “It’s an international number. New Zealand, I think. That’s weird. Do you care if I answer it?” she asked, already reaching for the green button and then the speakerphone. “This is Roz.”

“Roz Carrera?” the female voice queried. “The vampire huntress? Is it really you?”

“In the flesh.” She shrugged helplessly at Connor. “Who’s this?”

“Oh, my God,” the woman said, a bit of a Kiwi accent emerging. “Anton,” she shouted over the phone, “it’s her. Get in here.” Then, “Roz, this is Natasha. I got your email last night.”

“I’m sorry,” Roz said, leaning back in her chair, “what is this about?”

“Oh, right.” The lady laughed. “Sorry. My brother and I want to fund your hunt for Oleksander the Destroyer, and we have a lot of ideas to discuss.”

Connor's eyes widened in cautious excitement.

"That's amazing," Roz said. "I have a lot of ideas of my own. First, though, if you're serious about funding us, we need a place to stay and some very specific gear—*today*."

"Absolutely," the lady said. "Do you know where the Le Sort Hotel is? Daddy went to university with the CFO. I'll get you a suite for as long as you want it. As for gear, we'll ship you anything you need. But first, Roz, you gotta tell me—what are vampires *really* like?"

Connor's story continues in [Shopgirl's Prophecy \(Beasts of Vegas #1\)](#).

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