

"The Lost First Chapter of *Shopgirl's Prophecy*"

Written and Copyright by Anna Abner

~~~This story takes place after "Hunter's Prophecy" and before *Shopgirl's Prophecy #1*~~~

"Get down," Roz hissed, yanking on Connor's black jacket. A spotlight swept over their heads, and he tasted dry earth as he flattened onto the sand.

"That was too close," Roz complained.

They skittered like cockroaches across the ground, avoiding a parked Humvee, and staying out of the guards' eye line. The things they couldn't avoid at the secret army facility in The-Middle-of-Nowhere, Nevada were surveillance cameras on every wall and post. Hence, the need for speed and an electromagnetic pulse device the size of a suitcase strapped to Connor's back. If they were caught breaking into Oleksander the Destroyer's cell, they'd never see daylight again. Sort of the way Oleksander had been in the dark of an army prison for the past twenty years.

Connor Beckett hadn't known twelve months ago – an engineering student at the University of Chicago – that the Seer Ilvane would write down his name and forever link him with the end of the human race.

*Connor from Cleveland will release the Destroyer and bring about the apocalypse.*

There wasn't any way to fix the prophecy and save the world except to kill the vampire lord.

"Push the button," Connor said, nodding at the EMP. Thank the fates for Anton and Natasha, their very generous benefactors from New Zealand and their high-tech toys.

"Pushing the button." Roz activated the device, and every electric light on the base, hopefully the cameras and security doors too, blinked off. "Now," she ordered. "Move."

Nimble on the balls of his feet, Connor ran for building 2A, which he knew from poring over satellite photos of the installation, was where the army kept the vampires. He hunched over the card reader beside the prison's heavy-duty outer door, sweat rolling down the back of his neck. "Please," he breathed. A single second delay while they stood like a couple of sore thumbs at the gateway to a vampire's cell on a secret military base could ruin everything.

He hoped for the best and yanked. The immense door swung open on soundless hinges.

"I was only fifty percent sure the EMP was going to work," Roz admitted as she followed him inside and sealed the door.

There wasn't supposed to be a guard on duty at two-thirty in the morning. Except there was.

"What the hell?" complained the unlucky soldier.

Engineering classes hadn't prepared Connor for this situation. He'd psyched himself up for killing the Destroyer, not innocent bystanders. The soldier glaring at him carried a gun on his hip, and he probably knew how to use it better than Connor could operate the high-tech gear his New Zealand backers had sent.

"Both of you get on the floor. Now." The soldier pulled his weapon, but he didn't call for back up. Connor needed it to stay that way.

"Whoa," Connor exclaimed, his mind coming back online. He stepped in front of Roz as she followed his lead and held up both hands. "I just want to see the vampires. Don't shoot me. Jesus!" He cracked a goofy smile.

"Yeah," Roz parroted. "This idiot promised me we wouldn't get in trouble."

"Stay where you are." The soldier wasn't buying it. "I'm calling my sergeant."

Plan C. Or was it D? "Sleep spell?" Connor whispered to Roz out of the corner of his mouth.

"Blessed is my power. I call upon thee." Roz produced a tiny windstorm that pushed and pulled at her dark clothes. "Sleep, sleep, sleep..."

The guard blinked at Connor in bewilderment before his knees buckled and he crashed to the floor, fast asleep.

“Oh, crap.” Roz said, picking up the soldier’s fallen handgun. “I was only about twenty percent sure I could do that.”

“That’s twice as confident as I was,” Connor admitted, relieved he didn’t have to hurt anyone human. With no magic or supernatural abilities of his own, having a witch as a friend had its perks.

Her windstorm died down. “We gotta hurry. My spell won’t last more than a few minutes.”

Satisfied the guard was out cold, Connor turned his full attention on the pair of cell doors at the far side of the room. Each one had a monitor above it, and under each monitor was a name plaque. The first read: Maksim Volk, vampire lieutenant. The second read: Oleksander the Destroyer, vampire warlord. But someone had scratched out warlord and written *douchebag* in permanent marker.

“Grenade,” Connor said, holding out one hand. His voice didn’t even waiver, which was weird considering the cold terror inching up from his belly.

A cold, egg-shaped bomb landed in his palm. Connor opened the sliding hatch in the cell meant for exchanging food and correspondence and peered inside. Volk lay on a cot with his back to the door wearing an unadorned orange jumpsuit. Connor pulled the pin from the grenade and tossed it into the cell. He watched through the slit as the grenade went off, so loud Connor jumped back from the door. Through the smoke, Volk was suddenly under the cot instead of on it.

“Volk’s down,” Connor announced. He gestured shakily for the second grenade.

Roz passed it to him, and Connor opened Oleksander’s mail slot. He’d fantasized about killing the Destroyer so many times he wanted to savor it, to take his time and be certain the vampire was dead. But Oleksander wasn’t visible through the small opening.

He’d never murdered anyone before.

Connor's skin prickled. Was the vampire in there skulking in a corner? Or had the army moved him in the six hours since Roz had sweet-talked a drunken, off-duty soldier for info at a Vegas strip club?

The poor sot had admitted nobody guarded the vampires anymore because after twenty years of incarceration, torture, and experimentation both were as docile as a pair of kittens. If the army was stupid enough to believe that, fine. Connor assumed Olek and Volk were every inch the cold-blooded psychopaths they'd been before their bloody capture.

Visible or not, Connor tossed the grenade at Olek and waited. There was a gong as the bomb was thrown back, and it exploded against the door, warping it outward and filling the entire room with white smoke.

The door remained closed, but it was badly disfigured.

There was a moment, staring wide-eyed at the twisted metal, that Connor considered backing out. Nothing catastrophic had happened, yet. No one was hurt. So what if a few cameras were sizzled? He could pull his friend out of there and go home.

But he didn't leave. This was Connor's best chance to kill the Destroyer and negate his prophecy. He must kill Oleksander.

Connor plucked the third and final grenade from Roz's vest and rolled it through the wasted door of Olek's cell. Almost immediately, the grenade skidded right back out again.

Connor launched himself at Roz, and the grenade went off before they hit the ground, blowing them horizontally against a wall.

"Oh, shit," he said, a ringing in his ears and blood in his mouth.

He wasn't ready to die for a stupid prophecy. To be honest, he hadn't totally believed the Destroyer would even be in this cell let alone that he had a chance in hell of slaying the vampire.

Connor was a failure. He was unprepared. He should have stayed home.

He rolled, taking weight off a gnarly wound on his left hip and shook Roz's arm. "Are you okay?"

No answer.

A very aggressive alarm sounded. So much for the EMP. The base had come back to life. Soon, there'd be soldiers everywhere, and Connor didn't have a good reason for blowing up their super-secret vampire prison or a desire to spend time in a matching cell.

Through the haze, a large orange shape appeared carrying a body over one shoulder.

Oleksander the Destroyer.

Looking as spry and psychotic as ever in a prison jumpsuit.

Unable to tear his gaze from the Destroyer's nearly black eyes and heavily Slavic features, Connor shielded Roz and prepared to be consumed.

"Thank you," Olek said and then carried a bloody and unconscious Maksim Volk out of the building.

Chills skittered up and down Connor's battered and bloody limbs. The Destroyer was much more terrifying in person than he'd been in photographs. He was a monster, a devourer of children. And he seemed to think Connor had just done him a favor.

"Roz," Connor groaned, the world tilting dizzily. "We have to get out of here." Olek might realize his mistake and double back to kill them both.

"Connor?" Roz sat up, wincing as she scrutinized the warped cell door through a haze of white smoke. "He's free?"

"Can you run?" he asked rather than admit the truth.

"If I have to."

They hobbled, Connor gritting his teeth every time his burned leg touched the earth, toward the back fence as scream after tortured scream reached them. Olek was finally free and obviously enjoying himself.

"Halt," a commanding voice ordered. More soldiers.

"Smoke bomb?" Conner questioned Roz. They had debated whether it was necessary, but he couldn't remember if she'd packed it.

She pulled a canister from her waistband, tossed the pin, and threw the explosive over her shoulder. Immediately, they were engulfed in a thick, red cloud. Shots were fired, but nothing found a human target.

Like half-dead rabbits escaping the hunt, they slid through a hole in the chain link, and limped across an expanse of sand dotted with sagebrush.

“Get in, and start the engine,” Connor ordered, ripping a camouflage tarp off his baby, a 1973 Ford F-350 pickup. In red. “They might have helicopters.”

The truck roared to life, and he leaped through the passenger door, hanging on for dear life as Roz raced over desert roads toward the lights of the Las Vegas skyline.

No choppers took flight. No Humvees chased them. No further shots were fired. It was like the base had been swallowed up. Olek was making up for lost time and wiping the secret military installation off the map with nothing but his hands and a pair of fangs.

“What happened?” she demanded.

Connor grimaced at the black smudges on her face, the ash in her hair, and the blood splattered across her top.

The worst thing possible. “I fulfilled my prophecy.”

#

Maksim Volk’s prison cell faded from sight as he was dragged away by his army-issued prison garb.

Someone had thrown a grenade at him. Even now, his eyes burned and his entire left side felt gooey.

“I miss people trying to kill me with wooden stakes,” he grumbled, squinting to see who or what had a grip on him.

Oleksander the Destroyer.

“Fabulous.” Maks swatted at Olek’s iron-like fist, but only managed to bring his right arm halfway up. Yep, something was definitely wrong with his limbs. Fricking grenades.

Olek hauled him without any gentleness whatsoever across an asphalt parking lot and then roughly over a concrete curb. Maks' legs, currently numb and useless, had been blown up a bit, it seemed.

Lovely. With a twist and a grunt, Maks freed himself and landed flat on his back.

He sat up to inventory his injuries. His right arm was burned down to bare bone, his left leg was ground beef and cloth, but nothing seemed missing that couldn't heal. His seventeen-year-old body would regenerate exactly as it had been, leaving the forty-something forever looking like a rangy youth.

But the best news he'd received in twenty years of incarceration? He was a free man.

No matter what happened next, he would never return to a cell and be anyone's guinea pig.

Maks crawled on his hands and knees, headed for rocky hills in the distance, and something fragrant tickled his nose. Faint, like a memory. Closing his eyes, he inhaled deeper.

Not a memory. *Real.*

Maks climbed to his feet despite the pain and stumbled west toward the scent, straining to place it.

"These mortals annoy me," Olek grumbled as soldiers continued to fire their weapons.

Maks couldn't care less because he'd finally recognized the scent. Vampires. Lots of rotting vampires under tons of earth. He increased his scuffling and lumbered toward a bare stretch of sand between the outer security fence and the base infirmary. The closer he got, the stronger the smell became.

He ignored the rapport of gunfire and the familiar sounds of Olek feeding messily on human victims to drop to his knees and tear into the earth as the shooting ceased altogether. His right arm was useless, so he excavated with his left, scooping and clawing until his fingers were bloody and his nails cracked to the quick.

"Explain yourself," Olek demanded, appearing behind him.

"Can't you smell them?" Maks cried.

More specifically, his little bird. He could smell his sweet Katya, and he'd dig until both arms fell off to free her.

"Who?"

"Our people." His fingers unearthed a trouser leg, and he dug faster.

At last, Olek knelt to help. He wasn't half blown up and was made stronger from the soldiers he'd gorged on. He was much quicker displacing mounds of dirt.

A body appeared, rapidly followed by another and another. When the army had finished with Olek's horde, they'd tossed the dried out, skeletal vampires into a mass grave under the base.

His mates. His fellow warriors. At last, he knew they weren't being kept in a separate facility. They weren't being tormented and experimented on the way he'd been. No, they'd been used up and thrown out like so much refuse.

Katya among them.

His little bird had been stolen from him so long ago, and yet he pictured her exactly as she'd been two decades earlier, before their capture. Young and beautiful, shy yet passionate. She had set his blood on fire.

Olek uncovered half a dozen more bodies, emaciated corpses, but further down, the bodies emerged in pieces. Hands. Feet. Heads.

"No, please." Maks dug directly at the spot Katya's scent was strongest. She couldn't be dead. She couldn't be.

She was.

Maks lifted a familiar torso, now rotted to pieces, and beside that, a skull with a tuft of strawberry blonde hair still attached.

"No."

The sky collapsed around him, drenching him in shadow. Not possible. She couldn't be gone. Not the woman who imbued his soul with life, who gave his wretched existence meaning.

“Sergei, Ilya, and Ivan are beyond saving,” Olek said, picking and choosing bodies from the grave. “But my three best fighters are still strong.”

Lies. Maks didn’t have to look to know Olek’s three brothers Sergei, Ilya, and Ivan were whole and in stasis thanks to their immortality, but Olek had never enjoyed his brothers’ company, not when the four siblings were constantly struggling for control over the vampire horde. But Olek’s three favorite lackeys – Freddie, Dawn, and Lara? They were a different story.

He smelled fresh blood as Olek fed his three acolytes from nearby soldiers’ throats.

Maks didn’t care. His little bird had been cut into pieces. He would never care about anything again.

“How?” He cradled Katya’s head. “We are not animals. We are not experiments.”

Not that the U.S. Army hadn’t tried. For twenty years they’d been cutting imprisoned vampires open, testing their blood, pushing the limits of their healing abilities. Volk and Olek had been their preferred test subjects, though, and Volk had endured an eternity of pain and agony.

He would repay every second.

“I swear to you,” Olek said as his three warriors rose up around him, “we will make the human race suffer for what they have done. We will burn their world to the ground.”

Olek started to walk away, but Volk didn’t follow. He curled around Katya’s remains and was content to die from the grief splitting him in two.

“We go.” Olek grabbed Maks’ collar and pulled.

Maks scrambled to keep a hold of Katya’s skull, but he was only able to snatch her necklace off her neck, pulling strands of red hair with it before his master tossed him, Freddie, Dawn, and Lara into a Humvee with an unconscious soldier.

If he must live a little longer, then he’d get his revenge.

While they drove out of the base and into the mountains, Maks sank his teeth into the dying soldier's throat, Katya's locket clenched in his hand.

**The End**

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

Find it and more on Anna's [Beasts of Vegas series](#) page!