



HOTEL SPECTRE

VIOLA GRACE

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Hotel Spectre

By

Viola Grace

Chapter One

Sophie took a deep breath and eyed all of the unusual creatures around her. It was going to be quite an evening, even if the conglomeration of races around her were a little too interesting. She didn't know what had possessed her to take the invitation that arrived in the mail seriously, but she had and now here she was, waiting with a bunch of half-humans.

Everyone quieted as an albino took the stage. The woman's skin almost glowed in the pale light of the ballroom, only the darker shadows of her eyes turning her from statue to living being.

"Ladies and gentlemen, we are gathered here today, at Hotel Spectre, to introduce you to your magical heritage. All of you here have a parent or ancestor who has a talent or is one of the magical races. The masks you have been

given are for your protection and to make you more comfortable with those around you." The white woman took a deep breath and continued, her red eyes sparkling with good humour.

"Despite appearances, I am not descended from magic in any form. I am here because my primary occupation is as midwife to paranormal-human interbreeds, like yourselves. My name is Raven Dexter, and if you look around you, these are your peers."

It was no coincidence that it was two days before Halloween. Some of the faces in the room were enough to scare children, despite the masks that had been forced on everyone. Sophie looked from left to right, straightened her mask and ran a hand down her yellow gown. She felt a bit like a princess at a troll ball.

Raven took a deep breath, "Welcome one and all, to the half-blood ball." Music began to play softly in the background. "Enjoy this mixer. A few basic classes on networking will be held late tomorrow so that you can get to know the other sides of your heritage. You will each be assigned a mentor from outside your family group, but with a similar talent to

help you get a grip on your own powers. Dance, party, and have fun, for tomorrow you join the magical community."

Sophie looked around her again, so it wasn't the fairy tale event that she had anticipated, at least there were other half-elves in the crowd. She even caught a glimpse of what seemed to be some of the ogre-born. She could only imagine what *that* date had been like.

Her own parents had had a typical collision of the fae kind. He was horny, she was drunk and willing. Based on the elegant features and pointy ears dotting the event, elves reproduced far more often than they gave themselves credit for.

A deep voice broke her focus. "May I have this dance?"

The creature asking the question closely resembled a gargoyle in color and anatomy.

Ah well, when in Rome... "Yes, yes you may." The music was subdued and elegant and she took to the dance floor with the gargoyle who turned out to be light on his feet. It was a good thing, too, her dress was a little long for her.

On their third pass, she asked him, "Are you one of the Halflings as well?"

"I am. Bat goblin and human. My name is Martin, and you are?"

"Sophie. Half-elf and human."

He swung her in a graceful arc and then separated from her as the music wound to a halt. "Pleased to meet you, Sophie. I hope to run into you again at this event, and wish you enjoyment of meeting others of your kind while you are here." He bowed formally and winked at her, then sought another partner in what seemed to be some sort of sprite goblin Halfling.

Sophie wasn't alone very long. Soon another male came calling, and then another after that. She had never danced so much in her life and the sheer array of species was dazzling. Dizzy with exhaustion, she moved to the snack table as her last partner moved to his next target.

Sophie took a seat on the first available chair she found and watched from the sidelines. She could almost see a pattern in the dancers' movements. A graceful mix of non-human and human looking beings who bore one thing in common, their lives had just taken a weird turn.

She had received an anonymous email three

months earlier asking her if she had ever felt that she didn't move in the same world as the people around her. Her mother, Henrietta, had never kept her origin a secret, and something in the tone of the letter had gotten her to click on the link.

A website catering to mixed bloods and those who carried an untraced magic had bloomed before her, and as the months went by Sophie, gleaned information on control, genetic sensitivities and a broad history of elves in general. The forum had given her contact information and she had started some communications with people who shared a version of her talent for animals.

The site had been started by someone called the Nexus, and it was designed to put people like Sophie in touch with people like the organizers of this event. Based on the turnout today, it was a success. The mentor idea was nice, meeting someone with similar talents would be a real help to her, especially if they shared any of the particulars of her bloodline.

She wanted to see if her mentor could help her with her whacked-out control. The last time she had tried to summon a squirrel, she had been overrun by a herd of the little furry

buggers and had been fending off their efforts to shove nuts in her mouth for a solid ten minutes before they lost interest.

It had not been one of her finer moments.

“Enjoying the party?” It was Raven. A misnomer if ever there was one. The albino sidled up next to her and smiled in greeting.

“Very much so. I had not even imagined so many races existed, let alone inbred with humans.” She tried to keep her fascination out of her voice, but Sophie knew she failed miserably.

Raven pulled up a chair. “I felt the same way when Calis came to bring me to my first supernatural delivery. I couldn’t stop staring. That was rather awkward, considering what I had to do, by the way.”

“I can imagine.” She nodded in amusement, imagining the situation. “It’s a good thing that babies come in their own time.”

“It is indeed. That one popped out and bit me. My first time with goblin kind.” Raven tilted her head and looked Sophie over. “I think you are a half-elf by the looks of you. Any idea who your father is?”

“None. My mother didn’t even get a name. Just a blue stripe on the pregnancy test a few

weeks later."

A small line formed on Raven's forehead. "Do you know what your talent is?"

"I think it has to do with speaking to animals. That is the majority of the manifestation anyway." She shrugged and then raised her hand to cover a yawn. "Sorry. It was a long drive to get here."

"No problem. Have a nice rest and hopefully I will see you in the morning. The front desk has the instructions to finding your mentor tomorrow."

"Finding?"

"This is a large property and you will be working in your mentor's personal space while the instruction process is underway. The hotel staff will transfer your belongings in the morning." The midwife patted her knee and walked with her to the front desk, then said goodnight and drifted away.

"Your name, Miss?" The woman behind the counter appeared to have a tree for an ancestor.

"Sophie Jeffers."

"Just a moment, Miss Jeffers." Fingers flashed on computer keys and soon a swipe card was in a cardstock folder on the counter.

"Here is the instruction for locating your mentor in the morning. Please be there as close to dawn as possible."

"Dawn. Oh geez. Thank you." Taking the card with the key, she checked her room number and then remembered something. "Oh. Do you still have my bags? I checked them earlier."

"I will take them to your rooms, Miss Jeffers." A hulking troll appeared from around a corner, carrying her backpacks and duffle. As soon as they entered the elevator, he turned to her and gave her a smile that chilled her to her soul. "We are so glad that so many of you chose to come to the Hotel Spectre for this event." His hand reached past her and his claw jabbed her floor number.

It took her a few tries to clear her throat. "Thank you. Why are you glad?"

"The new Nexus has taken the stand that we need to support magic in all its forms. The offspring of pure bloods are one of those forms."

"Am I?" At his curious look, she explained, "A pure blood, I mean."

"Yes. It shines through you. Lovely to see, really. That much power translated through a

human born."

"Um, great. Mom will be so happy."

"She should be, you are a credit to her powers as a parent." His sincerity was palpable and when he left her at her hotel room, he refused a tip. "Your presence is enough for me." His bow was at odds with his lumbering appearance, but he took her thanks in stride as he returned to the elevator.

Sophie stared blankly at the spot where he had been standing and shook her head. It was the strangest feeling, like she had known him before she had arrived at this odd and magical hotel. That was impossible though. No trolls ran in her circles back home.

Sighing, she turned back and unpacked her clothing, stopping for a moment at her reflection in the mirror. The mask that she had been issued was a beautiful gold, as was the gown that she was wearing. It didn't look like her mousy brown hair and gold and brown eyes at all. Her body was highlighted, another thing that she wasn't used to, and the shoes were too comfortable for words. She truly had entered another world when she stepped into Hotel Spectre.

Chapter Two

The directions she had been given were easy to follow. *From the main elevator, go through the amber archway that would appear, and continue to the cottage in the garden and knock on the door. Easy enough.*

Standing in the lightly stained glow of the dawn, she raised her hand to knock and almost fell forward when the door swung open before she made contact. “You are Sophie?”

She quickly regrouped her balance and nodded. “Yes. And you are my mentor?”

“Raffinialus Delnarian of the Solar Clan.” He was wearing a hooded robe that obscured his features, but his voice had the same resonance as the troll bellboy. It relaxed her in the same way. “You may call me Raffin. Or

Mentor Raffin if you prefer.” He came out and closed the cottage door behind him.

Sophie backed up out of reflex, and then fell into step with him as he progressed into the garden with a smooth stride.

“You are here to learn the differing aspects of your talent and how to use it.”

Good. She was in the right place. He gestured for her to take a seat on one of the stone benches. “Can you tell me what my talent is?”

“In good time. I need to assess you first, and that is best done in silence. Give me your hand.”

Sophie blinked, but settled her fingers against his palm. Raffin’s hands were elegant, the fingers long and strong as they closed around hers. Keeping her mouth shut did not come naturally, but when she felt him tickling his way into her mind, she lost all ability to speak.

His mind caressed hers delicately, investigating and peering into all aspects of her conscious thought. He moved past her outer thoughts and soon found the centre of her talent. His surprised laugh startled them both and in that instant, he was out of her

mind and his hood was flipped back so he could look at her closely. "You're a Ganconer. But there hasn't been a female on record, so no wonder you couldn't control your talent. There would be no instinct to guide you."

His removal of his hood exposed his gold hair, straight nose, piercing blue eyes and a mouth so lush that she completely lost her train of thought. "A what?"

"Ganconer. Love Talker. They are known for their seductive powers and for their ability to make human women pine away after they have lain with them. In modern terms, the kings of the one night stand."

"Great, no wonder the animals went nuts when I tried to speak to them." Disgruntled, she sat and waited why while he chuckled.

"They probably were confused and tried to court you by their species methods."

A dawning horror came over her as she went over every attempt in her mind. He was right. The squirrels and their nuts, cats with dead birds, and she had no idea why the horse had brought her that apple, but it had freaked her out a little. "Oh my god. I had no idea."

Raffin was still chuckling. "Obviously. With no one to teach you to aim your talent, or even

what your talent was for that matter, you are lucky to have come out unscathed."

Sophie thought about it for a moment and had to agree. If that horse had been in the mood for mating and not courting, she would have been in real trouble. Good thing he was gelded.

"Do you wish to sign on for some training?" Raffin's voice snapped her out of her thoughts.

"Um. Yes?" A second or so later. "Wait. Why do I need training? Can't I just *not* use my talent?"

"I am afraid that it doesn't work that way. In fact, I am surprised that a woman with your obvious charms has not already had to beat away suitors." His gaze was admiring, flicking up and down her body with surprising attention to detail.

"My mother raised me to wait for a man who wanted the whole package, not just my body, so I don't get out much." She shrugged.

"Your mother seems to have a will of iron. She managed to survive being abandoned by your father, and then raised a daughter to adulthood with a strong sense of self." Admiration coated his tone. "She did a wonderful job."

Flustered, Sophie looked down at her hands. "Thank you."

"It is the truth."

His hand raised her chin up so she looked into his eyes for a long moment before he gave her a delighted grin.

"You don't find me attractive at all, do you?"

Chapter Three

Flustered, she jerked out of his grip and looked away. “Yes. I mean. You are very attractive.” Rubbing her hands up and down her arms gave her something to do.

“But you are not besotted with me.” He leaned back on the bench.

She was up and out of the reach of his long arms in a moment. “Um. No. I don’t get besotted with anyone. It feels safer that way.”

“Ah, but how can you live, or love, if you don’t take risks?”

“I can live quietly.”

His scowl could have peeled paint. “But that is simply existing, not living at all. Your short human life needs to be lived to the fullest.”

Hearing it put like that was a little shocking.
“You couldn’t have sugar coated it?”

He was surprised. “What?”

“My short lifespan.”

“There are ways of increasing it, but you would have to embrace your inner talent and let the magic run through you on a regular basis.”

She rolled her eyes at that. “How am I to manage that?”

His blue eyes turned black as he leaned toward her. “Kiss me.”

Kiss him. Yes, that seem the right thing to do. His hair was so silky, his mouth perfect, his skin cool as she cupped his jaw. Raffin tasted like Spring, all energy and light. Sophie sighed happily as their mouths met, touched and sparked power off each other. She made a soft sound of loss as he pulled back and her eyes opened wide to see his satisfied grin.

“That will work.”

“Wait, what was that?” She was on her feet and backing away from him. Her body had been beyond her control for those few seconds, or minutes, whatever it was. She had wanted nothing more than to kiss him until the sunset dipped through the sky. “Is that the

effect of a Love Talker?"

"It is." Raffin crossed his arms over his chest and crossed his ankles. The perfect epitome of lazy male. "As your mentor, I am giving you an assignment. I want you to make me kiss you."

"Are you nuts?"

"Our talent is sensual in nature, it is easiest to manifest in that manner. Come on. Just another kiss. It means nothing and you probably won't be able to get the command to stick."

He didn't think she could do it. That much was obvious. Her jaw set and she took a long look at her so called mentor. Reaching into her mind to find the source of her talent, she tried to pull it forward. Glaring at him she gave him the same command he had given her, "Kiss me."

"No." His grin was expansive and he shook his head until his gold locks spilled over his shoulders and exposed his pointy ears. "You are not connecting with your magic."

"How am I supposed to connect with it, I don't know what it is!" Frustrated, she closed her eyes and hugged her midriff in agitation.

"Think about what you are trying to

accomplish. You are trying to entice me into kissing you. That cannot be done with the words alone. You need to feel it."

Chanting to herself that she couldn't believe she was doing it, she moved toward the bench and straddled her mentor, much to his surprise. She leaned forward, inhaled the light scent of his hair and the stronger scent of wild male underneath and then closed her eyes while she touched her talent. Opening her eyes, she saw him in a whole new way, his body was humming with energy and with a little effort, it could be hers. "Kiss me," came out of her throat in a whisper of sound, but it had a definite result.

Raffin's hands threaded themselves into her hair and held her still for the ravaging kiss that her request had brought. Through the kiss, she tasted his body, his mind, and his magic, drawing power through him and into herself.

She had to break the kiss, because Raffin's mouth was seducing her as certainly as if he had bespelled her and not the other way around. Pushing back on his shoulders, she levered away from him and he reluctantly let her go.

"That was more like it." His chest was heaving with exertion and he had merely been sitting there while she used her magic on him.

"So, you are a Ganconer as well?"

"Yes. We guessed at your talent based on the posts online, but until you got here, it could not be confirmed. Would you like some breakfast?" He seemed to be back to normal, but there was a tent in the front of his robes that had not been there until the first kiss.

"I would love some breakfast. And some more explanation as to how many of us there are in the world."

"I can do that. But you will have to get off me to assist in my obtaining the food."

Embarrassed, she clambered off him and stood waiting until he got to his feet. He led the way back to the small cottage and inside was a selection of breads and pastries to make her mouth water.

"The Hotel agreed to supply breakfasts for all of the mentors and students, they did a fantastic job."

Raffin's voice overrode the hungry rumble of her stomach and for that, she was thankful. At the elf's nod of agreement, she dove into the pastries with a relish that would have

made a carb-sensitive woman shudder.

“You were really hungry.”

Blushing, she brushed at her mouth to remove any crumbs. “Yes. I didn’t have much to eat at the ball last night and was too excited to sleep.”

“Well, it’s a good thing that the hotel sent enough for five. I think you have done yourself proud today.” He picked up a danish and tore into it with enthusiasm. “And I have to say, human food is much better than I remember it.”

“It is an evolving art form, much as anything else.” Something in his sentence struck her. “You don’t live out where you are exposed to regular humans?”

He blushed. He actually blushed. “My clan has kept itself separate for the last few hundred years, as the Industrial Revolution got underway. Before that, most human food was rubbish.”

“Everything boiled?”

“Exactly. But this. This is very nice indeed. What other tidbits do you think I should sample?”

She directed him to the donuts, explained bagels and the art of a finely toasted English

muffin. They sat across from each other in a companionable conversation, she teaching and he learning.

It was a bit of a switch from what she had originally imagined the day would bring, she thought to herself as she tore into a raisin stuffed scone, but enjoyable nonetheless.

She finally got up enough courage to ask the question that had been running through her mind since their second kiss. "So, how do I keep up a steady supply of outlets for my, uh, talent?"

He gave her a brilliant smile. "You take me home with you, of course."

Chapter Four

The sheer boldness of his answer shocked her. She was terribly afraid that her mouth was hanging open in a very unladylike manner. "What?"

"You will need far more training than I can offer here in the few days that you are at the hotel." Raffin looked positively enthusiastic. "I have always wanted to live in a small human town. What is your home like?"

"Look, as intriguing as the thought of you moving in is, I don't move that fast." She swallowed a large chunk of the muffin she had been chewing. "And you might stand out a little."

His expression moved on to mournful with a touch of hope. "Ah. A prolonged courtship it shall be then. Pity."

Throwing her hands up in frustration, she left the door to the cottage and stomped back toward the amber gate, only to find that it had gone missing. "Where is the gate, Raffin?"

"It will reappear in the afternoon. Once you are due to be at the meeting on networking. Until then, you are stuck with me. May I at least explain your talent?" He was right behind her, so close she could feel the heat coming off him in waves.

"Fine. Explain. But not over muffins. Here in the garden." Sophie stomped into the garden and pointed to the bench so that her mentor could sit. She took a seat on a meditation rock far enough away to keep her wits about her, but close enough to hear him whisper.

"You are no fun."

"I know. People have told me that I can suck the fun out of a room just by walking in. Now, were you going to tell me about what my talent actually does besides make me kissable?" It sounded defensive because it was. Distance between them was her only hope. It was that or diving into his lap and trying to make a home there. Something about his smell, his taste and that damned twinkle in

his eyes made her judgement fly out the window.

"You are quite kissable on your own, without the magic. But, for others, if you wish them to do anything, simply make eye contact and think of seducing them while you ask for what you want. Any male and some females will be helpless to do as you ask."

"But why? How does it work?"

"When the magic flows through your voice, they see you as the most attractive woman of their imagining. Obeying you is their compulsion."

He was looking at her as if he wanted her to use her talent on him right that moment, and she tried to turn the conversation. "Can I do anything else with it?"

"Once you master your tone and inflection, you can use your talent as a form of camouflage if you wish." He smiled at her and, as he continued to speak, his form wavered. "It is really quite a mastery of the magic to change the appearance without using the emotions of the other party, but it is a fun exercise." A troll was now sitting where Raffin used to be. A troll of familiar dimensions.

"You! You were the bellboy." Shock ran

through her as she went over every second of their conversation. She sighed when she realized that nothing she had said was going to bite her in the ass.

"I was. As I said, it is a useful skill. One you may learn if you wish, but it will take time, effort and hours of study with a devoted tutor." The toothy grin of the troll was almost too much for her.

"Can you go back to being an annoying elf? A happy troll is a little hard for me to take." She sighed with relief as he shifted back. It wasn't so much a shift as the bubble of the troll image collapsed back onto him and then colour matched him back to his normal form. "Thank you."

"No problem. Now, did you want to practice channelling your talent again? I am a willing victim."

His waggling eyebrows made her giggle, what could it hurt to try it again?

Sophie's lips were swollen and her body screamed in frustration when the amber gate finally appeared. She pushed away from Raffin and took a few steps toward the exit before he caught her.

“Oh no you don’t. If you go back looking like this, they will think I had my way with you.” He grimaced and looked down at the tent in his robes. “And I think it is obvious that I haven’t.”

If she didn’t feel exhausted and tense, she would have laughed. As it was, she could only stare at him as he dragged her into the cottage and sat her in front of a small table.

“Hold still. I am going to fix your hair and give you a compress for your mouth.” He quickly got some ice chips from a hotel bucket that she didn’t remember seeing, and wrapped them in a napkin that she pressed to her swollen lips. While the cold soothed her, he started to comb out the tangles that his fingers had elf-locked into her hair.

As the throbbing of her mouth eased, the throbbing elsewhere heated up. His long and graceful fingers danced across her scalp and she was both relaxed and incredibly turned on at the same time. When she realized she was thinking of excuses to stay, she abruptly stood and jumped away from his ministrations.

“I am sure that it’s fine now. Really. Positive.” Considering that she had spent a good portion of the day in his lap, her urge to

run was almost comical.

"If you are sure, I will see you tomorrow." He didn't make it a question, but an order and she knew it for what it was.

"Yes. I will see you tomorrow." *While I am wearing a full suit of armour.*

Before he could stop her, she scampered down the path and through the archway.

Signs pointed to a luncheon, so she quickly got in line at the buffet and filled her plate. Sophie breathed a sigh of relief as she took a seat at an empty table. It gave her time to eat, and think.

She wanted Raffin, and he wanted her. He wasn't human, but really, neither was she. It was a sort of a good match. But how much of her lust was caused by his talent, and how much of his by hers?

* * * *

Raffin paced restlessly. He wanted to be with Sophie, but instead, was trapped speaking to his great great grandmother. She had aged very well for a human. "Nexus. I want to leave and open a bakery."

Terranor looked at her grandson and

cocked one eyebrow. "Really? What do you know of bakeries?"

"I know I like the food that comes out of them a great deal and think that my talent might be used effectively in the public relations portion of the business."

She reached out a hand to him. "Does this have anything to do with the Love Talker you are mentoring? Are you sure that you want to go for real reasons and not just a temporary lust?"

"When I met her, something inside me shifted." He held out his free hand. "Not what you think. I felt completeness just hovering out of my grasp the instant that I saw her last night. And she first saw me as the troll, and still there was a connection between us."

"It was like that for your grandfather and myself. The second that he saw me, he says he knew I was his." She smiled softly in remembrance.

"When does Strykr return?"

"For Halloween. He likes to dress up and run amongst humans with me in tow." She shook her head. "Last year he was a werewolf and I was a sheep. That was a fun night." A dark gleam came to her eyes.

Raffin smiled at the passion that had lasted for centuries. It was a family tradition he wanted to carry on.

Chapter Five

Raven Dexter was once again running the show, but this time they were in a lecture hall and waiting for her when she started speaking. “Welcome to your Beginning to Networking class. We are here to discuss the variety of ways that you can, as new parts of our magical community, keep in touch with others that you have met, and your mentors.”

Raven smiled and straightened her jacket. “As some of you may realize, not all of your mentors have access to email, so we are here to discuss alternatives.”

An array of devices were exposed when Raven whipped away the cloth on the table. “Ta-da! The exact form of communication will be up to your mentor, but these are common items that are used for that purpose. A scrying

bowl, filled with pure water, it enables you to speak and be heard. As does this hand mirror. You charge the objects with your power and they activate, like a light switch. Some of these are tuning forks for audio conversations, and some involve inserting your hand into a conductive gel.” She held up each of the items as she described it. “Each of these items can be operated on a network for larger gatherings, and the mirrors usefulness depends on size.”

Interested murmurs were running through the crowd.

“You can try them all out after this meeting. Sadly, I cannot use magic and therefore can’t demonstrate them for you.” Raven hauled out a large pile of papers. “Take one, pass them back. Only your magic will allow the numbers to be seen. If you lose this document, it will turn into an ad for a local pizza place.” In her hands, it was exactly that, a piece of paper with a large pizza on it.

Despite her recent meal, Sophie was suddenly hungry. She took one of the contact sheets and passed it back.

“Now, as you become more confident with your talents, you may have spills in the normal world. The emergency numbers listed

on the page will send you assistance, but it may not be exactly what you are expecting. Keep your head up and your mind alert. You came here as confused and unsure Halflings, you are leaving as damned dangerous halfbreeds."

As a group, they blinked in surprise.

She chuckled richly at their shock. "I know that that surprised you, but you may want to get used to it. There are several pure breeds out there that consider your joining the magical community a travesty. You need to be ready for those people and to develop a bit of a thick skin."

"No problem over here." Martin the grey goblin halfbreed from the night before flexed his rubbery skin and the room erupted in laughter. His wings flared lightly at the sound and that tipped off more laughter.

"Okay. Thanks, Martin. We will now open the floor to general discussion." Raven sat and let a few of the others speak while she answered a violent shudder from her pager. "That's me. I am afraid that I will have to cut our little lecture short, I need to bring something with a lot of arms into the world."

An elf that hadn't introduced himself

appeared in the doorway and nodded to Raven.

"That's my ride. I will hopefully see you all tomorrow." The elf had a large bag over one shoulder and was carrying a case in his other hand. He was also apparently her Sherpa. With a brisk wave and a sharp nod, Raven Dexter left the building.

Not wanting to spend any more time than necessary in the company of the mixed and cheerful creatures, Sophie made a quick exit. After the morning she had engaged in, she needed some alone time.

The swimming pool at the hotel was calling her.

There was nothing like floating on one's back, staring up at the starscape above to put one's life in perspective. Not even the occasional brush of the merfolk playing beneath the surface could wreck her tranquility.

She was at peace with herself for the first time in a very long time. Sophie finally knew what she was. A Love Talker, and there was no one she would rather talk to than Raffin. It was more than hormones, he felt right and like

he worked out, neither of which hurt his case.

She had once again successfully drifted back to the shallow end and took it as a sign to end her float. Her snug blue suit hugged her curves faithfully as she climbed the stairs out of the pool. There were a few admiring glances, but none were the gazes that she wanted running over her figure. Those blue eyes were sadly absent.

Wearing a complimentary robe and some flip-flops, Sophie made her way toward the elevator, but almost tripped before she reached it. A tiny pumpkin coloured creature had jumped in front of her feet and it took some fancy manoeuvring to dodge it. "Whoa."

Leaning against the wall between the elevators, she looked down at the tiny speed bump. He was an orange gremlin of some kind, a stem coming out of his head gave her the reason for her pumpkin association. "Hello, little fella. Did I scare you?"

He cringed against the wall, but stilled as she tried to use her talent on him. "Come on. Come closer. I won't hurt you."

It was her first non-seductive attempt and she was thrilled when he climbed onto her extended palm. He was tiny. Less than eight

inches from toes to head. He had a chubby little belly and a teeny little vest. Even his belly button was cute.

“Aren’t you just the sweetest thing? You had better run along now. I am sure that someone is missing you.” When Sophie tried to put him down, he clung to her wrist tightly. “Okay. You can stay. Want to see my room?”

He smiled and nodded enthusiastically, so she carried him up to her room and let him run amok on her bed while she took a shower and got dressed. By the time she returned, he had a pen and paper in his clutches and was doodling.

“What are you doing? Were you born or made?” She looked at his intricate drawing and made a low whistle.

He looked up at her and mimicked the noise.

“That is amazing. I am going to call you Littles. Is that alright?”

He frowned, but nodded.

She guessed that he wanted something more grand. “Littles the Mighty?”

That was more like it. He grinned and took up the pen. N-X-S. Oh, so he was a Nexus creature. She had heard about them online.

Created and animated to live tiny and original lives, they had free will and excellent senses of humour.

“Do you want to help me order room service?” He seemed up for it and so she let him jump on the remote while she ordered a burger and fries for delivery to her room.

Together they spent an entertaining evening and she fell asleep while watching a B movie.

He was gone when she woke and there was a tension in the air as if the Hotel was holding its breath.

Chapter Six

She skipped the dawn arrival since no one had insisted on it the day before. It seemed a waste of perfectly good sleep. The path to Raffin's cottage was bordered by a riot of flowers this morning. Something was brighter here and Sophie was almost petrified to find out what. Again, she raised her hand to knock and again he jerked the door out of her hands.

This time his first words were, "Come in here. You have to try this!"

Surprised, she let herself be dragged over the threshold into a world that smelled of cinnamon and vanilla. Every flat surface was covered with pastries, éclairs, cinnamon buns and things she had only seen in calorie-filled dreams.

Her mouth hung open in surprise and he

didn't waste the opportunity. Sidling up to her, he cradled her hips with one arm and drew her against him. He lowered his head and raised one arm to slip a tiny éclair into her mouth and when she bit down on the creamy sweetness, she moaned. It was perfect. Chocolate, vanilla, cream, a hint of coconut and the flaky buttery burst of pastry. It was heaven.

Her knees went weak and it was lucky that he was holding her because she could only manage one word. "More."

Raffin grinned happily and gave her a kiss that shared a hint of cinnamon and the flavour that was uniquely his. It was a breakfast appetizer that she would crave in her dreams. He sat her on a kitchen stool and fed her one item at a time.

When they got around to thirdsies, she waved him off. "What brought this on?"

"I enjoyed our breakfast yesterday so much that I asked the Hotel chef if I could borrow some cookbooks. He didn't have any, so I asked the staff. Bry, from the front desk, was most helpful." He looked a little sheepish. "I have been up cooking most of the night."

"Really, I would never have guessed. I

watched a movie and now I feel like a slacker." She giggled as he leaned forward to lick a spot of icing off her face.

"I was testing a theory. I want to open a pastry shop in the human world and wanted to make sure that I enjoy making pastries."

That made her blink. "You want to open a shop and you didn't know if you liked to bake?"

"I was optimistic."

He came in for a kiss with neither of them using their talents. Sophie could still feel the power of the magic between them, but it was far more personal than anything that had happened the day before. He was making a point. If this was how he made a point, she wanted to stay for the whole lecture. She could spend hours this way.

As the gate reappeared she groaned. Their heavy petting had left her frustrated and dazed, but she had managed to discuss communication with him and he was one of the few who would be accessible by phone and email. He swore to keep in touch with her as soon as the event was over, and he sealed his promise with another mind-numbing kiss.

She was dazed and stumbling when she left the archway and re-entered the Hotel, and if she hadn't been so distracted, she might have noticed the elves rushing her from either side. "What the hell?"

"Quiet, halfbreed. You will know soon enough what is happening to you." The blonde on her left almost crushed her arm in his grip as he hauled her to the ballroom.

A quick glance at the front desk gave Sophie a sinking feeling. The concierge was tied hand and foot, and the troll bellboy that was genuinely on duty was on the floor, tied, with black blood seeping from his head wound.

"We have no quarrel with them, but we couldn't allow the staff to interfere."

She didn't need to ask *interfere with what*, because as they threw her to the floor in the ballroom, she was not alone. Every attendee of the HalfBlood Ball was there, in various states of awareness. Some had been badly beaten.

"That was the last of them." The elves who had dragged her in nodded towards her as they spoke to a large group of creatures.

"Excellent. The sooner this is over with, the faster our society will repair itself." It was a

yellow and blistered goblin who hissed that comment.

An elf turned to the huddled halfbloods on the floor and finally addressed them. "For those who are too stupid to figure it out, we are taking this opportunity to destroy those who would weaken the Pure bloodlines that have been created over centuries. With you destroyed, this concept of halfbloods in the community will be surrendered."

"Are you sure of that?" She couldn't stop herself. She opened her mouth and her outrage came out. "None of us would be here if you pure-bloods could keep it in your pants. There will be generations after ours that will appear if you don't change your habits, or neuter the adults who don't want to breed."

The horror on the faces of the elves made her smile an instant before the goblin's fist hit her face. The group of thirty pure bloods nodded in satisfaction as she was flung to one side. It seemed that they were not in favour of self-control or safe sex.

As the world swam around her, she wondered if there were any magical type of pox that they could contract. And where the hell was Raffin?

Chapter Seven

Sophie huddled with the rest of the half-bloods against one wall. All of the mentors on their side had been bound and gagged against spell casting. The rest were scowling and deep in conversation.

A hissing and chittering near her feet got her attention and she looked down to see Littles near her feet. When he waved paper at her, she took it slowly and opened it. It said, *Be Patient, Don't do anything stupid. We are coming.*

The handwriting was Raffin's.

She muttered under her breath about men and cryptic instructions, then settled down to wait. She only hoped she had the time for the patience.

A fight of sorts had rung out amongst the

Pures. They were fighting about whether to kill all of the Halflings or to do them in one at a time. How festive.

Martin's mentor had been one of those who wanted to destroy their pupils. He snarled and strode toward the hapless halfbreed. In a moment that would live in Sophie's mind forever, she watched him tear Martin's wings off. His scream echoed through the ballroom and many turned their eyes from his broken frame, but Sophie met his agonized gaze and gave him what strength she could.

"Be calm. The pain fades and your mind is no longer here." She could feel the magic running through her, and when Martin's face took on that faraway look, she felt a sad sort of success. He would still bleed to death, but he wouldn't feel the horror of it. It was all she could do.

If only the elves hadn't been watching her so closely, she might have gotten away with it. The one who dragged her up by the arm, looked at her very closely. "Ganconer. Damn. They told me you were an animal talker."

"I thought I was," she said it through gritted teeth as he dragged her into the circle of Pure elves that was gathered.

"Oh no. You are far more. And I think we may choose to investigate this a little further before we kill you." He seemed remarkably cheerful at the prospect and threw her to the floor in the centre of their circle. "Look, brothers. A Ganconer in our midst. And a pretty one as well."

"Really? A female. Someone bred a female Love Talker? It has never happened. Just proof that there are abominations in our midst."

Another elf with white blond hair chuckled and sneered down at her.

"This abomination has some great legs. I do believe I need to investigate further." The sneering elf was coming closer, and her sundress was up around her knees.

She did the only thing she could, met his eyes and spoke, "You have no interest in me, no interest in any woman. You wish to ensure my freedom by blazing a path through your companions."

It worked until his companions caught on after the first one had been dispatched by a bright ball of magic to the chest. Three more fell before they stopped her unwitting protector by running their swords through him. The last figured out what had happened

and was on his way to kill her when running feet came through the door attached to the greatest motley crew that the hotel had ever seen.

Gnomes, gargoyles, goblins, elves, trolls, dryads, all came through the doors to defend the Halflings from the Pures. They fired weapons and subdued the aggressors in a flurry of confusing moments.

When the melee stopped Sophie stood on shaking legs and looked around for the rescuer she wanted to thank personally. "Raffin!" Picking her way over dead and dying bodies was disconcerting, but she only had eyes for the elf at the end of the hallway. As the debris cleared, she started to run, her only focus to have her arms around him again.

A voice screamed, "Sophie! Get down!"

Foolishly, she stopped to look behind her, facing the energy blast head on. A body ploughed into her and took the blast.

She was dazed on the floor when she recognized her saviour. "Raffin!" *Oh gods no.* There was a five inch hole in the centre of his chest and his blood was running freely from it. "Oh, Raffin, why not let me die? I am mortal. It's coming anyway."

He whispered to her, “My choice, my love, your life.” His bright blue eyes dimmed as she held his hand and when his grip grew limp, she held tighter and wailed her loss to the skies. Hands tugged at his body, but she clutched at him.

“Let him go, Sophie. They need to care for him.” The dryad from the front counter was surprisingly friendly, now that she had been freed from the metal shackles that had bound her.

Care for him. For the funeral. He was dead and it was all her fault.

Even the sight of Littles poking the yellow goblin with a pen couldn’t rouse her.

She left Hotel Spectre bereft of hope, drained of life and abandoned by love. It was a long drive home.

Chapter Eight

Sophie went through the motions after the attack at Hotel Spectre. Her mother was concerned that it was her talent, but after a while, Henrietta's face took on a look of understanding. She knew lost love when she saw it.

Weeks passed with the endless round of sleep, eat, job, eat, job, home, eat, sleep. At least her appetite was still there, but when a pastry shop opened in her neighbourhood, grief hit home hard.

Raffin was gone. She had seen him breathe his last. His love of pastries would forever taint the sight of the marquis going up, *Enchanted Tastes*.

After a month of wallowing, her mother decided that her time was up.

"Eat this." Her Mom shoved a box at her.

After swallowing tears at the graceful lettering on the lid, she opened it with shaking hands. Eclairs taunted her with their chocolate coated goodness.

"Eat one."

"Why?"

"Because you love them and you should never lose all the things you love." It was a mother's wisdom, and so with trembling hands, Sophie lifted one of the tiny confections and popped it in her mouth. The instant that she broke through the pastry shell to the creamy vanilla scented filling, she moaned. Then her eyes widened. She knew that pastry. Swallowing quickly, she looked at the box and then over to her mother. "I have to go."

A twinkle came to her eyes. "I know."

Sophie didn't even grab a jacket, just ran through the snow-coated streets, slipping and sliding as she went. When she reached the pastry shop, she froze. What if she was wrong? A strange coincidence that would break her heart all over again.

The door opened and a back lit form held it open for her, "Are you coming in, or do I have to come out there and get you?" He solved the

question by stepping forward, scooping her up with one arm and hauling her into the warmth of the shop.

"I thought you were..." Tears rained down her face, unblocked and unhidden. His arms held her tight against him as she bawled out her grief, shock and frustration. When she pulled back and sniffled, he handed her a napkin.

"I won't say I was fine, but I healed. I simply couldn't do it on the human plane. I had to stay at the Hotel until I was better."

"Better? There was a giant hole in your chest. You shouldn't have been able to get better." She snivelled again, and he caught her, again. He rocked her against him and finally she calmed.

"Better now?"

"You are alive. Everything is better now." She hiccupped a laugh. "You opened your shop."

"Do you like it?" The pride of the new shopkeeper was in his voice.

"I love the éclairs. And the name is very fitting." Being in his arms again was intoxicating, and the smell of sugar made her want to find some whipped cream and places

to lick it off him.

"I chose it for you. You are the most enchanting taste I have experienced. And I want to experience it again." It was all the warning she got before she was perched on the counter with his mouth getting reacquainted with hers. It started as a polite kiss, soft and sweet, but quickly moved into dark and sensual until she was moaning in his mouth. When he leaned back to meet her gaze with his own, he smiled that quirky smile that she loved.

"And the courtship?"

"As short as we can make it. Court faster." Pulling his head down to meet hers, she stifled his laughter with her mouth, enjoying the taste of cinnamon and beloved Raffin. "And where are you hiding those éclairs?"

Epilogue

Afterglow was an amazing thing, especially if your lover was feeding you treats and he was back from the dead. Not necessarily in that order. "What happened to the others? The Pures?"

"They were wiped and are being retrained to be of service to the humans at the hotel. They are now Hotel Spectre staff. Folding towels will be good for most of them."

"And did Martin survive?"

"He did. He was healed, but his wings were not salvageable. So he was reshaped to take on a more human form and is in orientation as we speak." Raffin had her curled against him, rubbing his chin against her forehead as he spoke.

A dash of orange flashed in the corner of

her eye. "Littles?"

"He would not let me leave without him. He stowed away in my luggage. Apparently you have more than one devoted follower." He kissed her head and beckoned for the little gremlin.

It was rather disconcerting for her to be naked in the front room of the bakery, and even more so to have the little orange beastie curl up against her palm and reach up for a kiss. A soft kiss on his tiny cheek made him smile and wriggle, so she put him down to let him romp around the room while she cuddled against the elf she loved. "How did my mother know?"

"I told her. It took me over a week to catch her alone, and explaining that I was your dead mentor and life mate was a bit awkward, but I managed." He sighed heavily.

She rode his exhalation with a certain amount of amusement. "How does your family feel about you being here with me?" That question popped into her mind when she remembered the elves who joined the Pures.

"My grandmother is deliriously happy. Everyone else will take the hint from her. And no member of my family will gainsay her."

“A tough old broad, huh?”

His smile told her there was much more to it. “Something like that. She possesses a power that makes the rest of us look like carnival magicians.”

“Impressive.” Curled against him with Littles the Mighty standing in her line of vision with a pen and paper again, she knew the feeling of contentment that she had chased all her life. She smiled and started to drop tiny kisses in a trail down his chest.

“What are you up to?”

Between kisses, she whispered in a throaty voice that surprised her, “Trying to find out how far your *Enchanted Tastes* go.”

His rich chuckle rolled along her nerves and woke the magic inside her, together they rocked, rolled and shared a burst of energy that would have shocked Littles if he hadn’t been completely absorbed by his masterpiece.

An elf, a human with pointy ears and a pumpkin gremlin proudly on her shoulder. The perfect start to a magical family.

Author's Note

I have hoped that you have enjoyed Hotel Spectre. And with any luck you have dipped into Gnomes of Suburbia and Gargoyles in the Round, so the whole Hotel concept made sense to you. If not, go get them right now. ☺

Pixies in the Park will complete the Nexus arc (yippee) and leave me with more room for spin offs.

Thanks for coming to play in my universe.

Viola Grace

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About the Author

Viola Grace was born in Manitoba, Canada where she still resides today. She really likes it there.

She has no pets and can barely keep sea monkeys alive for a reasonable amount of time. Her line of day job tends to be analytical which leaves her mind hopping to weave stories. No co-worker is safe from her character analysis.

In keeping with busy hands are happy hands, her hobbies have included cross-stitch, needlepoint, quilting, costuming, cake decorating, baking, cooking, metal work, beading, sculpting, painting, doll making, henna tattoos, chain mail, and a few others that have been forgotten. It is quite often that these hobbies make their way into her tales.

Viola's fetishes include boots and corsetry, and her greatest weakness is her uncontrollable blush.

Her writing actively pursues the Happily Ever After that so rarely occurs in nature. It is an admirable thing and something that we should all strive for. To find one that we truly like, as well as love.

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