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February, Present Day, Denver

Chapter 2

During the next three weeks, knowing the Lightfolk wanted her to go on another "time-sensitive mission" for them niggled like a sliver deep in Jenni's skin. A splinter she could sometimes ignore, but sometimes would jar and send pain shooting through her.

She didn't want anything to disrupt her steady life, didn't want to recall her past or actively use her magic. She did fine living in the mortal world.

Missions for the Lightfolk were deadly.

Jenni stayed inside, hermit-like, avoiding any world beyond her computer, until she yearned for fresh air. So one bitter cold morning when the snow had melted and the sun was high and yellow in the crystal sky, Jenni left the house. She walked briskly from the Mystic Circle cul-de-sac toward the local business district a few blocks away, circling around the green space dotted with skeletal aspens and lush evergreens in the middle of the cul-de-sac.

It was good to hear the slap of her leather boot soles on the clean sidewalks, to see shafts of golden sunlight bounce off window glass. The trees and grass were shades of brown, but the sky was blue and gold with sunshine and white with frost crystal clouds and she inhaled deeply of the cold, fresh air.

She was out of her house, away from the brownies' earthy energy. They had made her life so much easier, she'd let them stay. Life might just be okay.

She'd left Mystic Circle and was a block away from the neighborhood businesses when she heard the sharp crack of a branch breaking. Her shoulders tensed. That sound echoed from the past...when her ex-lover wanted her to know he'd arrived. Stopping in her tracks, she turned back and looked. Aric Paramon stepped out of a huge evergreen tree.

The sight of him jolted her down to her bones. She hadn't seen him since the evening of the ambush, the failed mission. She'd left after her brother Rothly had thrown salt and silver at her, disowning her.

Aric was as gorgeous as ever. He was a tall man, like the California redwoods he lived in, about six feet four inches to her five feet eleven. His skin was ruddy-copper. The sun accented the faintest tint of green in his long black hair. The deep green of his eyes would be ascribed to contact lenses by humans. Wide shoulders tapered to a muscular torso. His mother was a dryad and his father an elf.

He wore a raw silk shirt the same color as his eyes, brown slacks and a long dark brown leather trench coat.

Jenni gulped, and her heart thumped heavily in her chest. She should have anticipated Aric would arrive that way, he was half Treefolk and could travel the world through any tree.

"I knew they would send you," she said, and the heat of her emotions dried her throat, "the kings and queens of the elements, the Eight, to convince me to go on that mission. I don't want to see you. Go away."

Aric rolled his shoulders, the gleam of pleasure she'd thought she'd seen in his eyes vanished. His face went impassive, then he said, "I've wanted to talk to you for a long time." His

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voice lowered, "I hoped you would be done mourning."

He didn't add that it had been fifteen years. Aric was nearly immortal and she – half human and quarter djinn and quarter elf – was very long lived.

Fifteen years was like three years to a mortal. "Oh? How long do you think a person grieves for the loss of two brothers and two sisters and parents?" She wanted the words to be sarcastic, but they also were laden with sorrow. She stiffened her spine and lengthened her stride. Aric wouldn't accompany her to a busy human area.

He kept up with her, glanced down. "I wouldn't know how long your grief lasts," he said. "But I have had losses too." He looked away. "I am sad when I think of my lost friends. Your father, your brothers."

She didn't care. Sometimes she had moments when wild grief tore at her from the inside.

"You didn't say goodbye," Aric said.

The sentence was a blow that stopped her breath. She struggled for air. She understood, then, that though Aric might grieve as she did, he felt none of her guilt for making love instead of being with her family for their mission.

That was a wide gulf between them that she couldn't cross, didn't even want to think about. Didn't want to think about that time at all, only could speak one sentence of her own to reply. "I thought Rothly throwing salt and silver at us, showing we were dead to him was enough." Again her voice rasped from her throat.

She turned away, ready to hurry the four blocks back to her house, her home, her sanctuary. A place untouched by any magic save her own and the brownies'.

His wide, warm fingers curled around her wrist, touching her skin and she experienced an unwelcome shock of attraction. While she was dealing with that, he said, "You could be a Lightfolk Princess, that's what the Eight are offering you as payment for this mission."

She snorted. "Unlikely."