

Chapter One

Two years ago ...

NESMA STOOD OPPOSITE A towering old oak tree, her eyes closed and her hands held up before her. In her mind's eyes, she imagined the tree splitting in half neatly down the middle due to her magical abilities. She had never actually succeeded in splitting a tree with her magic—and according to her best friend, Keo, it was a waste of time to even try to do that—but Nesma was convinced that she could do it. Her grandfather, who had been a Magician himself, had been able to do that and much more with his own magical powers, so Nesma saw no reason she couldn't do it, too.

Then Nesma felt the magic within her slowly but surely starting to rise. Her eyes snapping open, Nesma jerked her hands toward the old oak tree while yelling, “Split!”

A tiny, almost hairline crack appeared in the surface of the tree. In fact, it was so tiny that, if Nesma had not been looking for it, she would never have noticed it. She waved her hands, hoping to increase the size of the crack, but despite her best efforts, the crack did not widen.

Sighing, Nesma lowered her hands and glared at the tree. That did nothing, but it made her feel better anyway.

At least no one was around to see that, Nesma thought, glancing around the clearing, which was empty of any other people except for herself, although there were a couple of birds in the treetops above tweeting peacefully. *That was even worse than the last time I tried to split the tree.*

Sighing, Nesma turned around and walked over to a nearby tree stump where she had put her flask full of cold water. Grabbing her flask, Nesma sat down on the stump and took a swig of cold water, which felt nice on her parched throat. She was going to take a brief break before returning to her practice, although she was hardly looking forward to it, seeing as she was starting to think that this was all pointless.

As Nesma sat there, she found herself wishing that her grandfather was still alive. He had died a year ago at the age of 80. He had been an accomplished Magician in his youth, and even in his old age had been able to do things that Nesma had never seen any other Magician do before. If he was still alive, he might have been able to help Nesma master this skill.

But the fact was that he wasn't. And the new Magician in charge of her hometown of New Ora who had replaced her grandfather after his death, an unkind and arrogant old man named Skran, did not take on students and had no time for 'younglings,' as he had called her. And with Nesma's parents also dead, that meant that Nesma was more or less on her own when it came to learning magic.

Nesma pushed that thought out of her mind. She didn't like to dwell on those negative thoughts, because whenever she did, they always made her depressed. Her best friend, Keo, usually tried to cheer her up whenever that happened, but right now Keo was back at home with his mentor, that strange hermit named Master Tiram, practicing his sword training.

A twinge of jealousy went up Nesma's spine when she thought about that. Keo was lucky. Although he didn't have any magical powers of his own, he was a swordsman and the apprentice of a master

swordsman. That meant that, if he ever had trouble with learning any of his skills, he could just go to his master and ask him for help.

I can't do that, Nesma thought, putting her flask down. *I'm all on my own.*

“Oh, I wouldn't say that,” said a voice above her that Nesma did not recognize.

Just as Nesma looked up into the sky, a bright, brilliant white light suddenly shone. It was so bright that Nesma had to look away and cover her eyes to avoid getting blinded. Soon the light faded and then Nesma looked up again to see that someone was now above her.

Floating down from the gap in the tree branches above was a man Nesma had never seen before. He was the handsomest man Nesma had ever seen, with beautiful, flowing blond hair, skin as clear and white as snow, and muscles visible even underneath the robes he wore. His eyes were red, almost as red as blood, but it was an attractive red, almost exotic. When he landed on the ground a few feet away, he was a head taller than Nesma and carried a golden sword sheathed at his side. Beautiful feathery wings extended from his back, but folded up when he touched the ground.

Nesma immediately stood up from her stump, staring at the man. Her instincts told her to flee, but there was something about the way he looked at her that made Nesma stay where she was. She felt drawn to him, drawn to his strong and protective frame, but she didn't move over to him because she still didn't know who he was.

“Who are you?” said Nesma. Her voice, much to her embarrassment, was squeakier than it normally was, which she hoped that the handsome man would not notice.

The man smiled, revealing pure white teeth that were perfectly even and clean. “I am an angel, but you may refer to me by my real name, Love of Light, if you prefer.”

His voice was truly angelic, almost enough to make Nesma fall to her knees and do whatever he wanted, but she kept her senses about her. She knew better than to trust complete strangers like this, but she wondered if she could make an exception for a man as handsome and obviously gentlemanly as him.

“An ... an angel?” said Nesma. She glanced up at the sky, where he had come down from. “I didn't know angels existed. I thought that they were just a myth.”

“Well, does this look mythical to you?” said Love of Light, patting his chest. He sounded mildly amused, which made Nesma like him even more. “But I understand. We angels rarely interact with humans. Often, we spend our time among the gods, carrying out their will and enjoying secrets and things that you humans can only dream of.”

Nesma realized that she had taken a step toward Love of Light without even thinking about it, but she did not step back. There was something irresistible about this angel, but she managed to resist it well enough so far, even though every part of her body wanted her to throw herself at his feet and let him do with her as he wished.

“Really?” said Nesma. Her voice sounded normal now, but now she was afraid he might notice how she would occasionally stare at his large biceps or chest. “Why have you come here? Why are you talking to me?”

“Because I have a ... problem that I need your help with,” said Love of Light. His face became worried, which just made him cuter to Nesma. “A terrible problem, one I would solve myself if I could, but alas, it is beyond my abilities and I must work through a human to do it.”

“Well, what is your ... problem?” said Nesma. She savored the word, pronouncing it similarly to how Love of Light did. “And how can I help?”

Love of Light smiled again, which made his face look as brilliant and handsome as the stars. “Tell me, Nesma, have you ever heard about the demons of old?”

“You mean the ones that are a myth,” said Nesma. “The ones that parents tell their kids about in order to scare them when they've being naughty or disobedient. My grandfather used to tell me about them.”

“What, exactly, do you know about these demons?” said Love of Light.

Nesma could tell that Love of Light was probing her now, but she didn't care because all she wanted to do was continue to stare at his handsome form and listen to his melodious voice. “The legends state that a thousand years ago, the demons ravaged humanity, killing and feasting upon our bodies. But then the Good King rose and, with the help of his magic sword, sealed the demons away deep beneath the earth. He then went on to found the Kingdom of Lamaira, which was to be ruled by his descendents.”

“But the Kingdom of Lamaira is no more,” said Love of Light. “Wasn't it twenty years ago that the last King, Riuno, died and the Kingdom fell into a civil war among three competing factions?”

Nesma nodded. “Yes. That's what happened. The Magicians control South Lamaira, the Restorationists control West Lamaira, and the Divinians control East Lamaira. North Lamaira is not controlled by anyone because the Dracones have made the Upper Mountains their territory and no one wants to anger them by trying to invade their territory.”

“You're a smart girl,” said Love of Light. “Very smart. Where did you get all this intelligence from?”

Nesma flushed in embarrassment at Love of Light's praise. “My grandfather, before he died a year ago, was the Magician of my hometown. He taught me everything I know.”

“He sounds like a wise man,” said Love of Light. Then he sighed. “But it seems to me that, like most humans, he was led astray by the legends—and lies—of his culture.”

“Lies?” said Nesma. She took another step forward, again without thinking about it. “Who lied to him? What are you talking about?”

“I am talking about the so-called demons, of course,” said Love of Light. He brushed back some of his long hair, a gesture that Nesma found irresistibly attractive. “Your human legends describe these demons as monsters of the highest order, smarter than beasts but less merciful than people. The demons were the monsters that hid in the shadows, the creatures that lurk underneath your bed or in your closet. The monsters you are supposed to watch out for if you are traveling alone at night.” Love of Light chuckled. “If only it were all true ...”

“What do you mean?” said Nesma. “What isn't true? The demons?”

“Oh, the demons exist, Nesma, but not quite in the way that your people have described them,” said Love of Light. He put his hands on his chest. “In fact, they weren't demons at all. Instead, the beings and creatures described in your legends are my fellow angels, sealed away by the so-called 'Good' King a thousand years ago and later demonized in myth and legend by that same King and his followers.”

Nesma gasped. “Really? No one told me that.”

“And why would they?” said Love of Light. “If you knew that the so-called 'demons' were in fact unjustly imprisoned angels, your people would have rebelled against the Good King's descendents ages

ago. Those in power have a vested interest in keeping you and the rest of the peoples of Lamaira ignorant about the true nature of the demons of legend.”

Although Love of Light offered no proof for his statements, Nesma found herself intrigued by them anyway. Maybe it was the way he spoke so scathingly of an obvious injustice committed against his people or maybe it was his handsome appearance, but Nesma felt herself believing him more and more.

So Nesma had to ask, “Can you tell me what you mean? What really happened all those years ago?”

“I’m glad you asked,” said Love of Light. He smiled again, which almost melted her in its brilliance. “A thousand years ago, humans, angels, and Dracones lived together in peace and harmony. We angels ruled humanity and the Dracones, though not because we were conquerors, but because our deep insight and wisdom, combined with our long-term thinking skills, made us obvious leaders. We angels were leaders, you humans were our servants, and the Dracones were our allies.”

“You mean ... like a caste?” said Nesma. “You angels were in the ruling caste?”

“Yes, but please do not misunderstand,” said Love of Light, clasping his hands together like he was praying to a god. “We were never cruel or unfair rulers. We always treated all peoples, regardless of their species, with utmost fairness and justice. We would never even think to abuse our authority. Not once. We were like you Magicians, who rule over your fellow humans justly and fairly with your magical powers.”

Love of Light spoke so sincerely that Nesma had no choice but to believe him. In fact, he was so sincere that Nesma felt ashamed and guilty for daring to question him. She was determined not to do that again.

“But, like the Rebels who are fighting against the authority of your Magical Council, not all humans were happy with our rule,” said Love of Light. “Chief among them was the one you know as the Good King, but who we angels know as the Vile Rebel. He considered our rule oppressive and unfair to humans and said that humans ought to rule themselves.”

“What did he do after that?” said Nesma. “Did a lot of people believe him?”

Love of Light looked down at the ground sadly. “Unfortunately, yes. You humans have always had this desire to rebel against your superiors. Humility has never been a human virtue, so the Vile Rebel's words struck a chord in his fellow humans and more and more people started to support him. Even the Dracones began to listen to him, mostly because they were jealous of us and saw an opportunity in which to take down a potential rival to their own dominance.”

“What happened after that?” said Nesma.

“The Vile Rebel led a successful coup against my people,” said Love of Light. His hands balled into fists. “He successfully defeated my people and banished us deep beneath the earth, behind a seal that his descendents maintained as long as they sat on the Throne. Then he established the Kingdom of Lamaira so that he and his descendents could rule over the people forevermore.”

“That's horrible,” said Nesma. “Absolutely awful. And your people are still banished behind that seal?”

“They are,” said Love of Light, nodding. “But it is worse than that. When the Vile Rebel rose to the Throne, he crafted the false legends portraying us as demons, because he wanted to ensure that no one ever tried to free us. He christened himself the Good King and his descendents continued to spread and

support these legends, until eventually everyone, even the Good King's own descendents, forgot the truth.”

“Oh my god,” said Nesma. “I can hardly believe it.”

“Every word I said is truth,” said Love of Light. “But if you choose not to believe me—”

“No, no, I believe you,” said Nesma. She rubbed her forehead. “But it is still horrible. I know that humans can be awful toward other species, but sealing away an entire people for eternity and making up legends to make them look like monsters? That has to be one of the worst things I've ever heard.”

“Yes, it is indeed quite horrible,” said Love of Light. “And for centuries, my people remained banished, including myself.”

“Then how did you get out here?” said Nesma, gesturing at the clearing in which they stood. “If the seal is keeping your people locked away, then how could you be here?”

Love of Light suddenly brightened, a smile appearing on his lips. “That's the good news. You know, of course, how King Riuno died without leaving an heir to succeed him, right?”

“Yes, of course,” said Nesma. “What about that?”

“Well, the collapse of your Kingdom was actually a good thing,” said Love of Light. “As a result, it left no one to rule the Kingdom. Without a descendent of the Good King on the Throne, that means that the seal has been steadily weakening for twenty years, which is how I was able to slip through and escape to the surface.”

“Amazing,” said Nesma. “Does that mean that you angels are going to rise again?”

“I believe so,” said Love of Light, nodding. Then his expression darkened again. “But we can't celebrate just yet. Our freedom is not guaranteed, despite what has happened, and even if we are free, that does not mean we will be able to restore the world to its original peaceful and harmonious state.”

“Why not?” said Nesma, tilting her head to the side. “What's stopping you from doing that?”

“Your leaders, naturally enough,” said Love of Light. “They will never give up their positions as rulers of your people. Power corrupts humans and corrupt humans never give up their power easily, even if they did not earn it.”

“I see,” said Nesma. “Yes, the Magical Council is very arrogant. They think they're better than everyone and I can't imagine they would be happy to learn that you angels are returning again, even if your return would be a good thing for humanity as a whole.”

“Precisely,” said Love of Light. “But there is yet another problem facing us: The possibility of King Riuno's son returning and reclaiming the Throne and reuniting the Kingdom, which would strengthen the seal again and ensure we could never escape.”

“Are you talking about the legends of the *shelmai*?” said Nesma. “I thought they were just myths.”

“They might be, but my own research has shown that the so-called Rightful Heir is very real,” said Love of Light with a shudder. “I don't know where he is or when he will return, but he must be stopped. Otherwise, my people will never be free, which is an injustice that is greater than any other I can think of.”

“What are you going to do about it?” said Nesma.

Love of Light stepped toward Nesma. Before she realized what was happening, Love of Light had taken one of her hands into both of his and was now looking deeply into Nesma's eyes. His red eyes

were striking and impossible to ignore, and once again Nesma had the strong desire to do whatever he asked her to do, no matter how crazy it might have been.

“What are *we* going to do about it, you mean,” said Love of Light. His hands felt cold around hers. “I need your help, Nesma. By myself, I cannot ensure that the seal decays enough for my people to break themselves free before the Rightful Heir returns and attempts to reunite the Kingdom. I need an intermediary, a human who can do what I cannot. Will you be that intermediary for me, Nesma?”

Nesma almost immediately said yes, but she hesitated. “What will you give me in exchange for my help?”

“Power,” said Love of Light simply. “I saw how you were struggling with splitting that tree. As an angel, my power exceeds that of any human Magician. I can give you power and teach you spells that will make you the most powerful Magician of them all.”

“Really?” said Nesma. She so desperately wanted to believe him, wanted to throw herself into his arms, but again the tiny resistance in her mind prevented her from accepting his offer. “Can you prove your power to me?”

For a moment, Nesma thought she caught a glimpse of anger in Love of Light's red eyes. It looked almost murderous, which made Nesma worry that Love of Light was going to hurt her.

But then the anger vanished, replaced by a kind look, and he said, “Certainly. Observe.”

Love of Light let go of her hand and turned around to face that same tree that Nesma had had no luck in splitting. He raised his hand and snapped his fingers.

A second later, the tree turned into dust. It was an abrupt transition. One moment, it was a very solid-looking tree; in the next, it was a cloud of dust in the shape of that same tree. The dust then fell into a thick pile on the ground where the tree had stood a mere instant before.

Lowering his hand, Love of Light looked back at Nesma. Nesma hadn't realized it, but her jaw had fallen open, although she quickly recovered and looked at Love of Light with renewed respect.

“Is that the proof you desire?” said Love of Light. “Or should I show you more magical secrets to convince you about the truth of my power?”

Nesma shook her head. “No, no, I believe you.”

“Then, in exchange for the magical secrets that I know, will you help me prevent the Rightful Heir from reuniting the Kingdom and reclaiming the Throne of his ancestor?” said Love of Light.

For the briefest of seconds, Nesma hesitated. She thought she saw something in Love of Light's eyes—a look of triumph—that made her rethink what she was about to say. A part of her told her to run, to leave this strange man, and never look back.

But Nesma ignored that part of her. She just nodded and said, “Yes. I will help you. I will do whatever you ask of me. Because no one deserves to be locked away for no reason.”

Love of Light smiled once more. “Wonderful. Absolutely wonderful. I knew I was correct in showing myself to you and appealing to your inner sense of justice.”

Love of Light's praise washed over Nesma like the waves of the ocean, but she said, “So what will we do now? What's the first step?”

“The first step is showing you the seal,” said Love of Light. “You need to go to the seal to speak with the leader of my people, who we call the Angelic King. If you are going to help us, then you must

know who our leader is. And he, of course, will be interested in speaking with you about our great plan to ensure our freedom.”

“Yes, yes, please show me the way,” said Nesma.

Love of Light held out one of his hands. “Then take my hand and follow me.”

Nesma took Love of Light's hand without hesitation. His hand was much bigger than hers and his grip was tight and firm. She let him lead her deeper and deeper into the forest, her earlier frustrations at not being able to split the tree gradually being replaced by excitement at helping Love of Light.

Yet for all that, there was still a tiny voice of resistance in the back of her head, telling her that she was making a mistake. But Nesma ignored it, because her instincts told her to trust this angel, that she was doing the right thing, regardless of her own doubts. She knew that there was nothing more important in this world than helping those who could not help themselves.

Nothing at all.