

The Legend of Lemuria

*Thousands of years ago,
the continent of Lemuria
disappeared beneath the sea,
much in the manner of Atlantis.
However, unlike the Atlanteans,
Lemurians are not considered lost—
legend says they relocated their entire
technologically advanced society to a safe location deep
within the dormant volcano known as Mount Shasta,
in the Cascades range of northern California.*

*Much has been written about these tall and graceful
beings, of their great intelligence and beauty, their
advanced technology and supernatural abilities; but no
actual proof of their existence has ever been discovered.*

*That doesn't mean, of course, that they're not really there,
living in quiet splendor in their cities of gold,
deep within the mountain.*

*Remaining hidden, after all,
is just one of their many talents.*

Chapter One

Sunday night

He struggled out of the darkness, confused, disoriented . . . recalling fire and pain and the soothing voices of men he couldn't see. Voices promising everlasting life, a chance to move beyond hell, beyond all he'd ever known. He remembered his final, fateful decision to take a chance, to search for something else.

For life beyond the hell that was Abyss.

A search that brought him full circle, back to a world of pain—to this world, wherever it might be. He frowned and tried to focus. This body was unfamiliar, the skin unprotected by scales or bone. He'd never been so helpless, so vulnerable.

His chest burned. The demon's fireshot, while not immediately fatal, would have deadly consequences. Hot blood flowed sluggishly from wounds across his ribs and spread over the filthy stone floor beneath his naked hip. The burn on his chest felt as if it were filled with acid. Struggling for each breath, he raised his head and stared into the glaring yellow eyes of an impossible creature holding him at bay.

Four sharp spears affixed to a long pole were aimed directly at his chest. The thing had already stabbed him once, and the bleeding holes in his side hurt like the blazes. With a heartfelt groan, Dax tried to rise, but he had no strength left.

He fell back against the cold stones, and his world faded once more to black.

“You’re effing kidding me! I leave for one frickin’ weekend, and all hell breaks loose. You’re positive? Old Mrs. Abernathy really thinks it ate her cat?” Eddy Marks took another sip of her iced caffè mocha whip and stared at Ginny. “Lord, I hope my father hasn’t heard about it. He’ll blame it on the Lemurians.”

Ginny laughed so hard she almost snorted her latte. “Your dad’s not still hung up on that silly legend, is he? Like there’s really an advanced society of humanoids living inside Mount Shasta? I don’t think so.”

“Don’t try and tell Dad they don’t exist. He’s convinced he actually saw one of their golden castles in the moonlight. Of course, it was gone by morning.” Eddy frowned at Ginny and changed the subject. She was admittedly touchy about her dad’s gullible nature. “Mrs. Abernathy’s not serious, is she?”

“I dunno.” Ginny shook her head. “She was really upset. Enough that she called nine-one-one. I was on dispatch at Shasta Communications that shift and took the call. Shascom sent an officer out because she was hysterical, not because they actually believed Mr. Pollard’s ceramic garden gnome ate Twinkles.” Ginny ran her finger around the inside of her cup, chasing the last drops of her iced latte. “I heard there was an awful lot of blood on her back deck, along with tufts of suspiciously Twinkles-colored hair.”

“Probably a coyote or a fox.” Eddy finished the last of her drink and wished she’d had a shot of brandy to add to it. It

would have been the perfect finish to the first vacation she'd had in months—two glorious days hiking and camping on Mount Shasta with only her dog for company . . . and not a single killer garden gnome in sight. She grinned at Ginny. “Killer garden gnomes aren't usually a major threat around here.”

Ginny laughed. “Generally, no. Lemurians either, in spite of what your dad and half the tourists think, but for once, Eddy, don't be such a stick in the mud. Let your imagination go a little.”

“What? And start spouting off about Lemurians? I don't think so. Someone has to be the grown-up! So what else happened while I was out communing with nature?”

“Well . . . it might have been the full moon, but there was a report that the one remaining stone gargoyle launched itself off the northwest corner of the old library building, circled the downtown area, and flew away into the night. And . . .” Ginny paused dramatically, “. . . another that the bronze statue of General Humphreys and his horse trotted out of the park. I didn't check on the gargoyle, but I went down to see the statue. It's not there. Looks like it walked right off the pedestal. That thing weighs over two tons.” She set her empty cup down, folded her arms, and, with one dark eyebrow raised, stared at Eddy.

“A big bronze statue like that would bring in a pretty penny at the recyclers. Somebody probably hauled it off with a truck, but it's a great visual, isn't it?” Eddy leaned back in her chair. “I can just see that big horse with the general, sword held high and covered in pigeon poop, trotting along Front Street. Maybe a little detour through the cemetery.”

“Is it worth a story by ace reporter Edwina Marks?”

Eddy glared at her. “Do not call me Edwina.” She ran her finger through the condensation on the scarred wooden table top before looking up at Ginny and grinning. “Maybe a column about weird rumors and how they get started. I'll

cite you as Ground Zero, but I doubt it's cutting edge enough for the front page of the *Record*."

Ginny grabbed her purse and pulled out a lipstick. "Yeah, like that rag's going to cover real news."

"Hey, we do our best, and we stay away from the tabloid stuff—you know, the garbage you like to read?" Laughing, Eddy stood up. "Well, I'm always complaining that nothing exciting ever happens around here. I guess flying gargoyles, runaway statues, and killer garden gnomes are better than nothing." She tossed some change on the table for a tip and waved at the girl working behind the counter. "Gotta go, Gin. I need to get home. Have to let Bumper out."

"Bumper? Who's that? Don't tell me you brought home another homeless mutt from the shelter."

"And if I did?"

Ginny waved the lipstick at her like a pointer. "Eddy, the last time you had to give up a fostered pup, you bawled for a week. Why do you do this to yourself?"

She'd be lucky if she only bawled for a week when it was time for Bumper to leave. They'd bonded almost immediately, but she really didn't want a dog. Not for keeps. "They were gonna put her down if no one took her," she mumbled.

Ginny shook her head. "Don't say I didn't warn you. One of these days you're going to take in a stray that'll really break your heart."

Eddy heard Bumper when she was still half a block from home. She'd only left the dog inside the house while she went to town for coffee, but it appeared the walls weren't thick enough to mute her deep-throated growling and barking.

Thank goodness it wasn't nine yet. Any later and she'd probably have one of the neighbors filing a complaint. Eddy picked up her pace and ran the last hundred yards home,

digging for her house keys as she raced up the front walk. “Bumper, you idiot. I only left you for an hour. I hope you haven’t been going on like this the whole time I’ve been gone.”

She got the key in the lock and swung the front door open. Bumper didn’t even pause to greet her. Instead, she practically knocked Eddy on her butt as she raced out the front door, skidded through the open gate to the side yard, and disappeared around the back of the house.

“Shit. Stupid dog.” Eddy threw her keys in her bag, slung her purse over her shoulder, and took off after the dog. It was almost completely dark away from the street light, and Eddy stumbled on one of the uneven paving stones by the gate. Bumper’s deep bark turned absolutely frantic, accompanied by the added racket from her clawing and scratching at the wooden door to Eddy’s potting shed.

“If you’ve got a skunk cornered in there, you stupid dog, I swear I’m taking you back to the shelter.”

Bumper stopped barking, now that she knew she had Eddy’s attention. She whined and sniffed at the door, still scratching at the rough wood. Eddy fumbled in her bag for her keychain and the miniature flashlight hanging from the ring. The beam was next to worthless, but better than nothing.

She scooted Bumper out of the way with her leg and unlatched the door just enough to peer in through a crack. Bumper whapped her nose against Eddy’s leg. Shoving frantically with her broad head, she tried to force her way inside.

“Get back.” Eddy glared at the dog. Bumper flattened her ears against her curly head and immediately backed off, looking as pathetic as she had last week at the shelter when Eddy’d realized she couldn’t leave a blond pit bull crossed with a standard poodle to the whims of fate.

She aimed her tiny flashlight through the narrow opening. Blinked. Told herself she was really glad she’d been

drinking coffee and not that brandy she'd wanted tonight, because otherwise she wouldn't believe what she saw.

Maybe Mrs. Abernathy wasn't nuts after all. Eddy grabbed a shovel leaning against the outside wall of the shed and threw the door open wide.

The garden gnome that should have been stationed in the rose garden out in front held a pitchfork in its stubby little hands like a weapon, ready to stab what appeared to be a person lying in the shadows. When the door creaked open, the gnome turned its head, glared at Eddy through yellow eyes, bared unbelievably sharp teeth, and screamed at her like an avenging banshee.

Bumper's claws scrabbled against the stone pathway. Eddy swung the shovel. The crunch of metal connecting with ceramic seemed unnaturally loud. The scream stopped as the garden gnome shattered into a thousand pieces. The pitchfork clattered to the ground, and a dark, evil-smelling mist gathered in the air above the pile of dust. It swirled a moment and then suddenly whooshed over Eddy's shoulder and out the open door.

A tiny blue light pulsed and flickered, followed the mist as far as the doorway, and then returned to hover over the figure in the shadows. Bumper paused long enough to sniff the remnants of the garden gnome and growl, before turning her attention to whatever lay on the stone floor. Eddy stared at the shovel in her hands and took one deep breath after another. This was not happening. She *had not seen* a garden gnome in attack mode.

One with glowing yellow eyes and razor-sharp teeth.

Impossible.

Heart pounding, arms and legs shaking, she slowly pivoted in place and focused on whoever it was that Bumper seemed so pleased to see.

The mutt whined, but her curly tail was wagging a mil-

lion miles a minute. She'd been right about the gnome. Eddy figured she'd have to trust the dog's instincts about whoever or whatever had found such dubious sanctuary in her potting shed.

Eddy squinted and tried to focus on the flickering light that flitted in the air over Bumper's head, but it was jerking around so quickly she couldn't tell what it was. She still had her key ring clutched in her fingers. She wasn't quite ready to put the shovel down, but she managed to shine the narrow beam of light toward the lump on the floor.

Green light reflected back from Bumper's eyes. Eddy swung wider with the flashlight. She saw a muscular arm, a thick shoulder, and the broad expanse of a masculine chest. Blood trickled from four perfectly spaced pitchfork-sized holes across the man's ribs and pooled beneath his body. There appeared to be a deep wound on his chest, though it wasn't bleeding.

In fact, it looked almost as if it had been cauterized. A burn? Eddy swept the light his full length. Her eyes grew wider with each inch of skin she exposed. He was marked with a colorful tattoo that ran from his thigh, across his groin to his chest, but other than the art, he was naked. Very naked, all the way from his long, narrow feet, up those perfectly formed, hairy legs to . . . Eddy quickly jerked the light back toward his head.

When she reached his face, the narrow beam glinted off dark eyes looking directly into hers. Beautiful, soul-searching dark brown eyes shrouded in thick, black lashes. He was gorgeous. Even with a smear of dirt across one cheek and several days' growth of dark beard, he looked as if he should be on the cover of *People* as the sexiest man alive.

Breathing hard, her body still shaking from the adrenaline coursing through her system, Eddy dragged herself back to the situation at hand. Whatever it was. He hadn't said a

word. She'd thought he was unconscious. He wasn't. He was injured . . . not necessarily helpless. She squatted down beside him, and, reassured by Bumper's acceptance and the fact the man didn't look strong enough to sit up, much less harm her, Eddy set the shovel aside.

She touched his shoulder and grimaced at the deep wound on his chest, the bloody stab wounds in his side. Made a point not to look below his waist. "What happened? Are you okay? Well, obviously not with all those injuries." Rattled, she took a deep breath. "Who are you?"

He blinked and turned his head. She quickly tilted the light away from his eyes. "I'm sorry. I . . ."

He shook his head. His voice was deep and sort of raspy. "No. It's all right." He glanced up at the flickering light dancing overhead, frowned, and then nodded.

She could tell he was in pain, but he took a deep breath and turned his focus back to Eddy.

"I am Dax. Thank you."

"I'm Eddy. Eddy Marks." Why she'd felt compelled to give her full name made no sense. None of this did. She couldn't place his accent, and he wasn't from around here. She would have recognized any of the locals. She started to rise. "I'll call nine-one-one. You're injured."

His arm snaked out, and he grabbed her forearm, trapping her with surprising strength. "No. No one. Don't call anyone."

Eddy looked down at the broad hand, the powerful fingers wrapped entirely around her arm, just below her elbow. She should have been terrified. Should have been screaming in fear, but something in those eyes, in the expression on his face . . .

Immediately, he loosened his grasp. "I'm sorry. Please forgive me, but no one must know I'm here. If you can't help me, please let me leave. I have so little time. . . ." He tried

to prop himself up on one arm, but his body trembled with the effort.

Eddy rubbed her arm. It tingled where he'd touched her. "What's going on? How'd you get here? Where are your clothes?"

The flickering light came closer, hovered just in front of his chest, pulsed with a brilliant blue glow that spread out in a pale arc until it touched him, appeared to soak into his flesh, and then dimmed. Before Eddy could figure out what she was seeing, Dax took a deep breath. He seemed to gather strength—from the blue light?

He shoved himself upright, glanced at the light, and nodded. "Thank you, Willow."

Then he stood up, as if his injuries didn't affect him at all. Obviously, neither did the fact he wasn't wearing a stitch of clothes. Towering over Eddy, he held out his hand to help her to her feet. "I will go now. I'm sorry to have . . ."

Eddy swallowed. She looked up at him as he fumbled for words, realized she was almost eye level with his . . . *oh crap!* She jerked her head to one side and stared at his hand for a moment. Shifted her eyes and blinked at the blue light, now hovering in the air not six inches from her face. What in the hell was going on?

Slowly, she looked back at Dax, placed her hand in his, and, with a slight tug from him, rose to her feet. The light followed her. "What is that thing?" Tilting her head, she focused on the bit of fluff glowing in the air between them, and let out a whoosh of breath.

"Holy Moses." It was a woman. A tiny, flickering fairy-like woman with gossamer wings and long blond hair. "It's frickin' Tinkerbelle!" Eddy turned and stared at Dax. "That's impossible."

He shrugged. "So are garden gnomes armed with pitchforks. At least in your world. So am I, for that matter."

Eddy snapped her gaze away from the flickering fairy and stared at Dax. “What do you mean, you’re impossible? Why? Who are you? What are you?”

Again, he shrugged. “I’m a mercenary, now. A hired soldier, if you will. However, before the Edenites found me, before they gave me this body, I was a demon. Cast out of Abyss, but a demon nonetheless.”

He knew she was bursting with questions, but she’d taken him inside her home, given him a pair of soft gray pants with a drawstring at the waist, and brewed some sort of hot, dark liquid that smelled much better than it tasted. She’d handed him a cup; then as she left the room, she’d told him to sit.

He sat, despite the sense of urgency and the pain. The snake tattoo seemed to ripple against his skin, crawling across his thigh, over his groin and belly to the spot where the head rested above his human heart. He felt the heat from the demon’s fireshot beside the serpent’s head burning deeper with each breath he took. Exhaustion warred with the need to move, to begin the hunt. In spite of Willow’s gift of healing energy, he felt as if he could sleep for at least a month. Instead, he waited for the woman, for Eddy Marks. He sipped from the steaming cup while she opened and closed drawers in an adjoining room and mumbled unintelligible words to herself.

The four-legged creature stayed with him. Eddy called it “damned dog,” but she’d also said its name was Bumper and it was female. The animal appeared to be intelligent, though Dax hadn’t figured out how to communicate with her yet. She was certainly odd-looking with her bullet-shaped head, powerful jaws, and curly blond coat.

“Sorry to take so long. I had to hunt for the first aid kit.”

The woman carried a box filled with rolls of bandages

and jars and tubes of what must be medicine. He wished his mind were clearer, but he was still growing used to this body, to the way the brain worked. It was so unlike his own. This mind had memories of things like bandages and dogs and the names for the various pieces of furniture he saw, but too much in his head felt foggy. Too much was still trapped in the thinking process of demonkind, of kill or be killed. Eat or be eaten.

The only thing that was absolutely clear was the mission, and he was woefully behind on that.

Of course, he hadn't expected to encounter a demon-powered gargoyle armed with fire just seconds after his arrival through the portal. Nor had he expected the power of the demons already here. Eddy had no idea she had truly saved more than his life.

So much more was at stake. So many lives.

Her soft voice was laced with steel when it burst into his meandering thoughts. "First things first," she said. "And don't lie to me. I'm trusting you for some weird reason, when I know damned well I should call the authorities. So tell me, who are you, really? Who did this to you? How'd you get this burn?"

Blinking, he raised his head. She knelt in front of him. Her short dark hair was tousled, and her chocolaty brown eyes stared at him with concern and some other emotion he couldn't quite identify. Thank goodness there was no sign of fear. He didn't want her to fear him, though she'd be better off if she did.

He shook his head. He still couldn't believe that blasted demon had gotten the drop on him. "I really am demonkind. From Abyss. The wound on my chest? It was the gargoyle. He surprised me. I wasn't expecting him, especially armed with fire."

She blinked and gave him a long, narrow-eyed stare.

“Hookay. If you say so.” She took a damp cloth and wiped around the burn on his chest. The cool water felt good.

Her soft hands felt even better. Her touch seemed to spark what could only be genetic, instinctive memories to this body he inhabited. He felt as if his mind were clearing. Maybe this world would finally start to make sense.

She tilted her head and studied the burned and bloody wound. “That’s the second reference to a gargoyle I’ve heard tonight,” she said, looking at his chest, not his face. “They’re not generally part of the typical conversation around here.”

Shocked, he grabbed her wrist. She jerked her head around and stared at his fingers. He let go. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to startle you. Have you seen it? The gargoyle? Do you know where it is?”

She stared at him a moment, and then sprayed something on the wound that took away the pain. She covered it with a soft, flesh-colored bandage before she answered him. “No,” she said, shaking her head, concentrating on the bandage. “Not recently.”

Her short dark hair floated against the sharp line of her jaw. He fought a surprisingly powerful need to touch the shimmering strands. He’d never once run his fingers through a woman’s hair. Of course, he couldn’t remember having fingers. He’d never had any form beyond his demon self of mist and scales, sharp claws, and sharper fangs.

She flattened all four corners of the bandage and looked up at him. He wished he were better at reading human expressions. Hers was a mystery to him.

“Last time I saw it,” she said, “it was perched on the corner of the library building where it belonged, but I heard it flew away. It’s made of stone and most definitely not alive, which means it shouldn’t be flying anywhere. What’s going on? And what are you, really? You can’t be serious about . . .” She glanced away, shook her head again, and then touched

the left side of his chest, just above the first puncture wound. “Turn around so I can take care of these cuts over your ribs.”

He turned and stared at the fireplace across the room. After a moment he focused on a beautiful carved stone owl, sitting on the brick hearth. The owl’s eyes seemed to watch him, but he sensed no life in the creature. It was better to concentrate on the bird than the woman.

Her gentle touch was almost worse than the pain from the injuries. It reminded him of things he wanted, things he’d never have.

He was, after all, still a demon. A fallen demon, but nonetheless, not even close to human. Not at all the man he appeared to be. This form was his for one short week.

His avatar.

Seven days he’d been given. Seven days to save the town of Evergreen and all its inhabitants. If he failed, if demonkind succeeded in this, their first major foray into Earth’s dimension, other towns could fall. Other worlds. All of Earth, all of Eden.

Seven days.

Impossible . . . and he’d already wasted one of them.

He would have laughed if he didn’t feel like turning around and heading back to Abyss—except Abyss was closed to him. With only the most preposterous of luck, he might end up in Eden, though he doubted that would happen, no matter how he did on his mission. The promises had been vague, after all.

So why, he wondered, had he agreed to this stupid plan?

“I asked you, what’s going on? I’m assuming you know how my cheesy little Walmart garden gnome suddenly grew teeth and turned killer. Try the truth this time. With details that make sense.”

He jerked his head around and stared at her, understanding more of his new reality as each moment passed, as the

memories and life of this body's prior owner integrated with his demon soul.

Eddy sat back on her heels, and her dark eyes flashed with as much frustrated anger as curiosity.

He glanced down at his side. There were clean, white bandages over each of the wounds from the demon's weapon. The big burn on his chest was cleaned and covered. The entire length of his tattoo pulsed with evil energy, but if he ignored that, he really did feel better.

Stronger.

He sensed Willow's presence and finally spotted her sitting in amongst a collection of glass figurines on a small bookcase. Could demons enter glass? He wasn't sure, but at least Willow would warn him in time. He caught the woman's unwavering stare with his own. She waited more patiently than he deserved for his answer. "I always tell the truth," he said. "The problem is, will you believe me?"

She nodded and stood up. "I'll try." She stalked out of the room. He heard water running. A moment later she returned, grabbed his cup and her own, and left again. This time, when she handed him the warm mug of coffee, he knew what to expect.

He savored the aroma while she settled herself on the end of the couch, as far from him as she could get while still having room to sit.

She was close enough for him to pick up the perfume from the soap she'd used to wash her hands, the warm essence of her skin, the scent that was all hers.

He shrugged off the unusual sensations her nearness gave him. Then he took a sip of his coffee, replacing Eddy's scent with the rich aroma of the drink. He couldn't seem to do anything about his powerful awareness of her. Of this body's reaction to her presence, her scent, to every move she made.

He could try to ignore her, but he didn't want to. No, not at all. It probably wouldn't work anyway.

She curled her bare feet under herself and leaned against the back of the couch, facing him. He turned and sat much the same way, facing her.

Bumper looked from one of them to the other, barked once, and jumped up on the couch, filling the gap between them. She turned around a couple of times and lay down with a loud, contented sigh. Her fuzzy butt rested on Dax's bare foot; her chin was on the woman's ankle.

"Bumper likes you." She stroked the silly-looking beast's head with her long, slim fingers. "If she didn't approve, you wouldn't be sitting here."

Dax smiled, vaguely aware that it was an entirely new facial expression for him. Of course, everything he did now, everything he felt and said, was new. "Then I guess I'm very glad Bumper approves. Thank you for battling the demon, for taking care of my injuries. You saved my life."

She stared at him for a long, steady moment, as if digesting his statement. There was still no fear in her.

She would be safer if she were afraid.

"You're welcome," she said. "Now please explain. Tell me about the garden gnome. What was it, really?"

He arranged his fingers in a steeple in front of his face and rested his chin on the forefingers. Had the one who first owned this body found comfort in such a position? No matter. It was his body now, for however long he could keep it alive, and resting his chin this way pleased him. "The small statue was inhabited by a demon from the world of Abyss. They've broken through into Earth's dimension, but the only form they have here is spirit—that dark, stinking mist you saw after you shattered the creature was the demon's essence. They need an avatar, something made of the earth . . .

ceramic, stone, metal. Nothing alive. The avatar gives form and shape; the demon provides the life.”

She nodded her head, slowly, as if digesting his words. “If I hadn’t seen it . . . Good Lord . . . I still can’t believe I saw what I saw out there.” She glanced around the room. “Where’s that little fairy? The one you called Willow?”

“She’s actually a will-o’-the-wisp, not a fairy. She’s a protector of sorts. She gathers energy out of the air and shares it with me. Helps me understand this unfamiliar world, this body. Right now, she’s sitting on your bookcase. I think she likes being surrounded by all the little figurines on the top shelf.” He looked over his shoulder at Willow. Her light pulsed bright blue for a second. Then, once again, she disappeared among the tiny glass statuettes.

Eddy shook her head. She laughed, but it sounded forced, like she was strangling. Mostly, her voice was low, sort of soft and mellow. It fit her.

“I’m generally pretty pragmatic, unlike my father, who believes every wild story he hears. I can tell it’s going to be really hard for me to deal with all this. Just point to Willow as a reminder that the impossible is sometimes possible. . . . You know, when I look at you like I think you’re lying.”

“I promise to do that.” He smiled over the edge of his cup and took a sip of the dark brew. She’d said it would perk him up, whatever that meant. He did feel more alert. He hoped it wasn’t because danger was lurking nearby. He still didn’t understand all this body’s instincts.

“You said you were a demon, but you look perfectly human. What exactly do you mean?”

“Exactly that. I’m a demon from the world of Abyss. It exists in a dimension apart from yours, but I was sent here by people from another world, one called Eden that’s in yet another dimension. The two worlds never touch, never interact.

Complete yet separate, they are entirely dependent on the balance that holds them apart as much as it connects them.”

“So what does that make Earth?”

He stared at his cup of coffee a moment, picturing the three worlds as he imagined them. “Earth is the fulcrum,” he said, raising his eyes to study her reaction. “Eden on the one side is a world of light filled with people who are inherently good. Abyss, on the other, is a world of darkness, a land of fire and ice populated by creatures who personify evil. Earth is in the center, holding them apart, keeping them in perpetual balance. . . . Or, at least, that’s the way it’s supposed to work. The way it’s always worked in the past.”

Her brows knotted over her dark eyes, and she looked confused, but at least she was still listening. Dax ran his fingers through Bumper’s curly coat. The dog was a hard-muscled, frilly contradiction—she had a powerful body with strong jaws, yet she was covered in a curly blond coat that made her look utterly ridiculous. Dax couldn’t imagine anyone creating an animal like Bumper on purpose, yet somehow the combination worked.

Sort of like Earth. “Your world is mostly populated by a mixture of different kinds of humans—some who will always try to do the right thing, as well as those who are set on doing something evil. The best of you and the worst of you are balanced by the vast majority who are sort of like this dog of yours, a blend of both good and bad, beautiful and ugly.” He laughed. “Smart and stupid. Somehow, it all works, and, on the whole, humans get along and live their lives.”

She snorted. He grinned at her. “Well, most of the time, anyway.”

Shaking her head, she set her cup down. “I beg to differ with you—people don’t get along that well. There are wars

going on all over the world, people are starving and dying, we have to worry about terrorists blowing things up, and . . .”

“I know. That’s why I’m here. Evil has grown too powerful on your world. It’s giving demonkind a foothold. Balance has reached a tipping point. It’s slipping over to the side of darkness. The people of Eden recognized the danger, but they’re incapable of fighting. Their nature doesn’t allow it. They can, however, hire fallen demons to fight their battles.”

She ignored his reference to himself and instead asked the one question Dax didn’t want to answer.

“What happens if the balance slips too far?”

He didn’t want to think about that. Couldn’t allow himself to consider failure. Bumper raised her head, stared beyond Dax, and growled. Dax looked down at the dog, but he spoke to Eddy. “Then the demons of Abyss take over. If Evergreen falls to the demons, they gain a powerful foothold in your world. If this town falls, others may follow. The fear is that all of Earth will fall to darkness and demons will rule. There’s a risk that eventually, even Eden will be overrun.”

“Dax? I think you need to turn around.”

He snapped his head up at the quaver in her voice and caught Eddy’s terrified gaze. He spun around on the couch, and his feet hit the floor just as the stone owl by the fireplace stretched its gray wings and clicked its sharp beak, as if testing to make sure things worked.

Willow shot up from the bookcase so fast she left a trail of blue sparkles in the air behind her. Dax leapt to his feet, pulled in the energy Willow sent him, and pointed both hands at the owl, with his fingertips spread wide.

Fire burst from his fingers in long, twin spikes of pure power. He caught the owl as it prepared to take flight, trapped the creature in a blazing sphere of heat and light, and blew it right through the wire screen and into the fireplace.

Eddy screamed. The creature screamed louder, sounding

eerily like the garden gnome Eddy had flattened. The cry cut off the moment the flaming owl hit the back of the firebox and shattered. A dark wisp, stinking of sulfur, coalesced in front of the broken pieces, but before it could race up the flue to freedom, Dax called on Willow's power once again.

This time a blast of icy air caught the amorphous mass of darkness, freezing it before it could make its escape. It hovered a moment, quivering in midair, then fell to the hearth and shattered into a thousand tiny pieces of black ice.

Dax hit the ice with a burst of flame. The pieces sizzled and disappeared in puffs of steam.

He took a deep breath and turned away from the mess. Eddy sat on the end of the couch, with Bumper caught in her shaking arms. Both of them gaped, wide-eyed, at the fireplace. Before Dax could assure Eddy that everything was all right, at least for now, she raised her head and stared at him.

"Okay." Her voice cracked, and she took a deep breath. "I take back what I said. You won't need to point to Willow for proof. I promise to believe anything you tell me. Explain, please, what the hell just happened."