

Chapter 1: Saving the World before Bedtime

“WHAT IN THE FREAKING HELL is he doing? Come on, already. I’ve got shit to do.”

Declan Manning adjusted the magnification of the night scope and zeroed in on the asshole, er, um, *target* smoking a cigarette on the rooftop below them. Barely moving a muscle, he settled his body back into its waiting position and sighed long and hard. The urge to shoot the idiot in the head was threatening to make him blow off his famous surfer attitude. *Damn it.* He didn’t have time for this. He promised Rori he’d take her out tonight. But, of course, they were delayed—*again*. Sure they needed one of the demons alive, but it was really, really, *really* tempting to just blow the dumbass away and go dancing with his girl. They could always grab another demon. The friggin’ city was crawling with them.

His partner, Sean, snickered. Lying prone, his eyes scanning the scene, he hissed just under his breath, “Dude, relax. We can’t kill everyone yet. Killian needs us to question at least one of them.” Switching to telepathy, he needled him with typical Sean sarcasm; *Wedding jitters?*

You know you’re not funny, right?

Sean flashed a quick grin. *Whatever, man. You need to relax. Rori’s not going anywhere. She’s all in. The wedding will be perfect.*

Yeah, yeah, yeah—*rational* Dec knew that—hell, she’d been with him for two years already and hadn’t bailed yet. They were crazy happy together. Everything was completely perfect. That’s what was sending his spidey senses into overdrive now. There were only a couple more days before the wedding, and it was too quiet here in Demon Central. Surely something bad was coming. That was the story of his life. Nothing ever went as planned. So, yeah, he was feeling punchy about the whole thing. If he lost her now . . . Well, he didn’t know what he’d do. Chances were good that *someone* would die, though.

Seriously, chill out.

Dec swallowed another comment before it formed. The faint arc of the cigarette butt sailed over the edge of the roof below. The wind shifted to carry the guttural voices of the demons working security.

“Change of plans. Seth called. He wants us to move uptown.” The body attached to the nasally Bronx accent was shadowed against the water tower. As he spoke, he angled his frame further behind the thick metal structure.

Even with enhanced night vision, Dec couldn’t make out the facial features. Crap. *Don’t hide from me now.*

Narrowing his eyes, he adjusted the scope and peered through it again. Maybe with a little more juice? He pushed more energy into his retinas to max his ability. Not much better. Grinding his teeth, he muttered, “Come on, asshole. Show yourself.”

Sean asked from the corner of his mouth, “Well? Can you ID him or what?”

“He’s freakishly tall.”

“*And?*”

He chewed the inside of his cheek to strangle the chuckle that wanted to burst free. So predictable. His brother Primani was even less patient than he was. He was kinda surprised Sean hadn’t already jumped between the two demons with his blade flashing. “That’s it. He’s tall. I can’t see shit through the tank. At least we know that Seth’s part of this.”

“Sonofabitch. I knew Seth was up to something. I hate that demon. Why haven’t we killed him yet?” Sean remained perfectly motionless, but Dec felt every vibration as he got ready to bolt. His own body hummed with the force of his *saol* as it readied him for the fight. It was almost time.

The demon who’d been smoking, spit over the side and swung his eyes over the sidewalk below. With shoulders slumped, he jammed his hands into his sweatshirt pockets and whistled in alarm. “We move those bitches and the big boss will lose his mind. I heard him tell Seth they’re supposed to stay here. The buyer’s coming to pick them up later. You sure Seth knows what he’s doing?”

“Good question,” Dec muttered between closed lips.

Seth was a mid-level demon running Manhattan ops. He replaced the last asshole who’d replaced their favorite demon, Dagin, after his long overdue annihilation a few years back. Seth was *waaaaay* too junior to ignore his boss’ orders. “Maybe he has a death wish,” he added with a hopeful smile in his voice. “We could help him with that.”

Sean elbowed him in the side. “*Bitches?* Wasn’t this supposed to be about guns? When did they start moving *people?* Wait here. I’ll go recon.” With that, Sean dematerialized and left him lying on the roof with both hands on the sniper rifle.

“No worries. I’ll just lie here and bake.”

That wasn’t much of an exaggeration. It was hot. The roof wasn’t the coolest place in the city. Even nightfall hadn’t dissipated the heat that lingered in the concrete and metal under his belly. A trickle of sweat flowed along the curve of his face as the humidity cranked up for another thunderstorm. It smelled like rain, but Mother Nature was keeping the wet stuff to herself for now. Lifting his gaze to the sky, he sent her a mental thank you. The last thing he wanted was drenching rain all over his favorite rifle. *Come on, Sean, hurry the hell up.*

Waiting sucked. To entertain himself, Dec flexed and relaxed his muscles beginning with his calves and working his way up, all while keeping his eyes on the two demons. Should he cap the one standing near the edge? He mentally slapped himself. Not a good idea. He’d done this a thousand times since scopes were invented. He let his memory fill in the details as the guy lit another cigarette. The round would enter his brain at 2,700 feet per second. Bam! He’d topple straight over the edge without a sound—until his body collided with the car parked below—then the car alarm would go apeshit and their position would be blown.

Blinking a drop of stinging sweat out of his eye, he moistened his dry lips and tossed that fantasy aside. *Maybe later.*

Silent as air, Sean rematerialized behind the guy next to the tank, skewered him with his Primani blade and vanished again. Dec blinked and the demon was dust in the wind.

Score one for the good guys.

“Come on, man. Let’s bolt.” Back at his side again, Sean crouched to give him a hand up while wiping the bloody blade against the back of his leg.

After slinging the rifle over his shoulder, Dec asked, “What’d you find?”

“The friggin’ loft is full of women. At least a dozen. Maybe more.” Amped up and ready to kick some ass, Sean practically vibrated with the urge to charge in there.

“Want to call Killian?”

“The hell with that! We don’t need him. There are only four guards; three human and one demon. We got this!”

Dec adjusted the shoulder strap to keep the weapon from swinging around then drew his Sig from its holster. The faint echo of a scream spurred them to act. With a taut jerk of his head, he

aimed his body at the back door of the warehouse and vanished. As he rematerialized, he scanned the open space for targets. One, two . . . three.

Where's the demon?

Rolling his eyes upward to the second floor, Sean replied, *With the women.*

Of course he is. Guards first, yeah?

Sean lifted his chin in agreement. They'd done this a million times. They could clear a building with their eyes closed. Literally.

Hugging the shadowy space along the outside walls, they split up to take out the guards. The warehouse opened up from the narrow hallway they arrived in. With only a handful of scattered pallets breaking up the space, there weren't many places for cover. Too bad. He was in the mood for a gun fight. Things had been too quiet lately.

Two of the humans wore black cargo pants and black t-shirts with a white logo printed over the heart—*Expat Security*. Interesting. Not the usual hired thugs. Seth was moving up in the world. He had himself a real security team. One more reason to take them out.

Lifting his hand in the go-signal, he launched himself forward to reappear directly behind guard number one, locking him in a chokehold until he sank to his knees—not dead—just out cold. On the other side of the doorway, Sean did the same thing. After slapping zip cuffs on them, he and Sean moved to the stairs. Two down. Two to go.

With backs flat to the wall, they listened just outside the loft's entrance. It was eerily silent. No crying. No talking. There was nothing but the barest hint of breathing and thready pulses. Sean scowled in concentration. He was thinking what Dec was thinking: *drugged*.

"Hey, douche bags, don't wait in the hall. Come inside so I can kick your asses."

The demon had a death wish. No doubt. Dec flashed a quick grin before sauntering through the doorway with Sean on his left.

Sean drawled, "Big threat from a little demon. You really think you can take me?"

The idiot hell spawn had gotten the memo. New York demons all adopted the same façade. They thought it made them look cool. It made them look stupid, but hey, no one asked him. This poser had shaved his head, tatted both arms with dragon sleeves, jammed gauges through his earlobes, and topped everything off with baggy-ass jeans and a white wife-beater. He was a walking cliché. The only thing that Dec respected was the gleaming athame that he clenched in his meaty fist. He eyeballed it as he tightened his fingers around the grip of his weapon.

"Shoot him."

"Sure thing, boss."

Dec froze as a man stepped away from the wall with the barrel of a sawed-off shotgun pointed at his gut. The man smiled with more humor than called for. As he chuckled at Dec's reaction, his bloodshot eyes glimmered with a wee bit of crazy. Oh, yay. Another whack-job working with demons. Raising the weapon a hair higher, the crazy man ratcheted a round; the distinct sound sending a chill down Dec's back. Getting gut shot was painful. Sure, he could heal himself, but the process hurt like a bitch.

"Now hang on a sec. You don't want to shoot me." His tone was reasonable with an edge of threat that anyone who wasn't an idiot would catch. He held up his gun hand in mock surrender, sidling closer to the wall in the process. "That'll only piss me off, and you don't really want that, do you? Bad things happen when I'm pissed. Sure, I try to keep my temper under control, but I'm just like the next guy. Sometimes I just can't take it anymore and lose my shit."

The meth head looking human with the shotgun stopped a few paces in front of him and steadied the weapon with another crazy grin. Okay, maybe he *did* want to shoot him. Dec swung

his eyes around the room, taking in the prone bodies of about a dozen young women. From the way they were sprawled, they all seemed to be unconscious. He could hear the faint pattering of a dozen heartbeats so he was pretty sure they weren't dead. The angels only knew how close they were to it, though. Time to get this show on the road. He and Sean locked gazes.

Erupting with a burst of speed, Sean lunged at the demon at the same time Dec snatched the barrel of the shotgun out of the human's hands. Using it like a club, he slammed the thing into the side of the man's skull with enough force to send him crashing against the wall before sliding to the concrete floor. His bloodshot eyes fluttered once before he went completely limp. Dec turned away before the blood got a chance to flow. Sean and the demon were squared off, sizing each other up before diving in. Dec shrugged dismissively. Sean was on his own. He didn't need help with one asshole.

While Sean dealt with the demon, Dec quickly cleared the small bathroom and the two partitioned offices. The place was empty. Good. Time to bring in the cops. He dialed 911 to report the location and condition of the women. As he waited on hold, the reek of burnt earth assaulted his nose, and he gave Sean a mental high five. The demon was toast. Another point for the good guys. One last thing before they go . . .

Sean's voice wasn't even slightly breathless when he asked, "Did you kill him?"

Glancing up from the unconscious thug's body, he shook his head, replying, "Nope. I'm just zipping him up for the cops. Someone needs to be here when New York's finest shows up." The crazy bastard would have a lot of explaining to do if he woke up from Dec's little love tap. Served him right.

Right on cue, the faint sounds of sirens warbled in the night air.

On the other side of town, Rori Austin tucked a cotton throw beneath her toes and settled into the comfy new leather couch. Loki was curled against her hip snoring softly. Still lanky with doggy adolescence, the Dalmatian pup was clumsy and adorable whenever he was mobile. Right now? He was sacked out like a throw pillow. Deep in his dreams, he breathed slow and easy, the sound lulling her into a puddle of relaxation too. After a gentle pat on his butt, she turned back to her tablet to read a new eBook, *Puck Me*, with a heavy sigh.

Dec was late. Very late. She'd given up on getting dinner at Dean's and ate a bowl of cereal instead. It was 9 o'clock. The new hamburger joint would be packed by now, and they'd have to wait two hours to get a seat. Dinner was out but dancing was still doable. *If* her man made it back before she fell asleep and lost interest in putting on a different outfit. *If* he made it back in one piece and didn't need to heal. That could take all night, depending on the wounds.

Her helpful imagination conjured up several horrifying images of him bleeding to death before he could save himself. Come on, brain. Knock it off! That's not going to happen. Dec and Sean were good at what they did. They'd survived thousands of years without any help from her. She wasn't going to be one of those nagging, clinging, annoying women who did everything she could to change her man to fit into her comfort zone. Dec was perfect exactly as he was. He was Primani. He was immortal. And thanks to her father's maker, Uriel, she was immortal, too. They had all of eternity for dinner and dancing. She wasn't going to get her panties in a knot if he was late once in a while. They had important things to do, and she wasn't about to get in the way. Turning off her worries, she tapped the tablet for the next page and groaned.

"Oh, yay. Another sex scene." Derek, the hockey player hero, was her newest book boyfriend. The author managed to get her all hot and bothered at least five times during each

book in the series. These scenes were hot, hot, and more hot. If she kept reading, they'd have to forget dancing and give the mattress a workout instead. She checked the time again. It was now 9:15. Damn it. Where was he?

With perfect timing, Dec and Sean rematerialized in the foyer, bringing with them the gross smell of demon wafting from their clothes. Rori glanced up from her tablet, her lips tilting into a relieved smile. "There you are. I was just about to go to bed." She tapped the tablet closed, and added, "But not to sleep."

Sean chuckled knowingly before saying, "Don't mind me. I'm heading home. I need a serious shower."

Wrinkling her nose, Rori agreed, "Yeah, you stink. Dec, what on earth are you doing with a sniper rifle?"

Dec was halfway down the hallway to the spare bedroom when he called over his shoulder, "Practice, darlin'. I like to keep my skills up. Tonight was supposed to be a simple stakeout so I thought it'd be a good chance to work with the rifle again." His voice tapered off as he turned into the spare room.

She asked Sean, "I take it things didn't turn out like you thought? Are you guys okay?" He didn't seem to be hurt, and Dec had been moving with his usual leopard-like grace. Still, it didn't hurt to ask. They were stoic when it came to pain.

Sean rubbed at his nose with the back of his hand before sneezing a couple of times. "We're good. I'm out of here, though. I need to get this ash off of me. Wedding plans all set?"

"Yep. Everything's perfect."