

CHAPTER ONE

Erron Nas was feeling pretty good about himself right now.

He'd spent weeks preparing for this moment. He'd painstakingly tracked the twin orbits of the planet's moons over a full cycle, pinpointing his precise window of opportunity.

He'd stayed up late after work most nights, perfecting the necessary incantations, and spent every lunch break sourcing the required materials.

After days of research, he'd managed to track down and consult with the High Council of the Cult of Kalaechai. They'd been polite and encouraging, but he hadn't been able to shake the feeling they were laughing at him as he'd turned to leave their chambers. Especially the fat one on the far end.

Still, they wouldn't be laughing now.

He'd even bought himself a special purple robe. It wasn't strictly necessary, of course, but you couldn't leave the cult chambers without passing through the gift shop, and the moment he'd seen it, he knew he had to have it. Granted, from certain angles it made him look seventy pounds heavier and a full foot shorter, but he'd spent almost a week's wages on the fonking thing, so he'd worn it, anyway.

Yes, with all that preparation, Erron Nas had been a very busy man.

And then there were the murders, of course. None of it would have been possible without those.

He'd been reluctant at first. All that blood. All that screaming. He'd found it... troubling, although he'd told himself that this was only to be expected, and nothing to be ashamed of.

By the third or fourth slaying, he was starting to get into the swing of it. By the time he'd slit the final throat, he almost didn't want the wheezing and gargling to end.

Pulling his bruise-colored robe around himself, Erron weaved his way through the web of alleyways behind the warehouses. Without really intending to, he began to skip. He hadn't skipped in years. Had he ever skipped, in fact? He couldn't remember. Tonight, though – tonight was a night for skipping.

He'd done it. After all those weeks of preparing, months of planning, and years of dreaming, he'd actually done it. Tonight was a night he would remember forever. Tonight, if he were being completely honest, was the greatest night of his life.

Erron had just turned onto another alley when a corpse fell on him. It landed heavily on his back, feet first, and hurt quite a lot.

The corpse didn't look happy, and while very few of them do, this one was notable in that it looked decidedly *unhappy*. It was also notable in that it was moving.

A hand, the skin rough and dry, wrapped around Erron's throat. He let out part of a yelp as he was hoisted off his feet, the other part remaining stuck somewhere in his constricted windpipe. It was only ejected when Erron was slammed backwards against a wall, and all the air was forced from his lungs in one sudden gasp.

"Ack!" said Erron, although 'said' is a generous way to describe the actual sound that burst from his fish-like lips.

He had been aiming for something along the lines of, 'Ow! Stop! This really hurts,' but, given the circumstances, "Ack!" was the best he could do.

Not that his pleas for mercy would have done him any good, he suspected. The man currently hoisting him into the air, one-handed, did not look like the reasonable type. He looked like the dead type, more than anything. Smelled that way, too.

He wore a wide-brimmed hat, but had pushed it back on his head to give Erron a clear view of the horror-show that was his face. The guy's skin was criss-crossed by scar tissue and decay, making his face resemble a map of a particularly depressing city center. His eyes were narrow, the pupils a slate gray with a disconcerting hint of milky white around the edges. His nose was crooked, and his lips were just on the wrong side of blue to feasibly still be alive.

Surprisingly good teeth, though, Erron noticed, as he fumbled beneath his robe for...

Aha!

With a sudden jerk, Erron buried his ceremonial dagger in the middle of the man's chest, all the way up to the hilt. He twisted the blade, then summoned enough air to let out a tiny squeak of triumph.

Slowly – ever so slowly – Erron's attacker looked down. "Shizz," the guy said, in a voice like two breeze blocks rubbing together. "I just bought that shirt."

Erron suddenly found himself sailing sideways through the air. He was relieved to be able to breathe once more, but less relieved to crash head-first into a wooden crate.

Stunned, he staggered upright and lashed out with the knife again.

He looked at his hand.

The knife.

Where the fonk was the knife?

"Looking for this?" asked the walking corpse, gesturing to the knife's handle, which still protruded from where his heart should almost certainly have been. He gave the ornate hilt a flick with his index finger. "Nice craftsmanship. Although a little too fancy for my tastes."

He took a step closer to Erron, his long coat *swishing* around him. "Me, I'm a man of simpler pleasures," he said. The way he said it, cracking his knuckles on the word 'pleasures', caused Erron

some distress. Considering he had been pretty distressed to begin with, this made his breath start to come in short, weedy gulps, and a sudden deluge of sweat trickled the carefully arranged pattern of blood daubings on his forehead down into his eyes.

“G-get away from me,” Erron babbled, squirming beneath his robe.

The corpse stopped advancing. “Sure.”

Erron blinked in surprise. And also, to a lesser extent, because of the blood-sweat. “What?” he mumbled. “Seriously?”

The corpse nodded. “Seriously. Just tell me where the portal is, and I’ll be on my way.”

Erron swallowed. Oh, shizz. He knew.

“What portal?”

The hand was around his throat again in an instant, the smell of filth and rot and things long dead probing like fingers up Erron’s nostrils.

“Wrong answer,” the corpse growled. “See, I know you opened a portal to the Malwhere, Erron. You’re going to tell me where it is, and I’m going to shut it down. That’s Option A. I’ll be honest, I don’t know what Option B is, but I am *very* good at improvising.”

Erron’s eyes bulged in his head from the pressure around his windpipe. He found himself staring at the knife – his knife – sticking out of the man’s chest. There was no blood, he realized. Not a drop.

“Wh-who are y-you?” Erron managed to wheeze.

“Oh, that’s right. We weren’t formally introduced. The name’s Dan Deadman,” the corpse intoned. He leaned in closer until Erron could see nothing but that rotting skin and those creepy eyes. “And if you don’t start talking in the next five seconds, this mug of mine will be the last face you ever see.”

With that, Dan began to count backwards from five. Erron made it as far as ‘four’ before gesturing frantically to his throat and nodding in a way that suggested he was ready to spill his guts. Dan kept counting all the way down to ‘one’ before releasing his grip and letting Erron drop.

‘OK, OK,’ the smaller man grimaced, coughing and panting as he tried to remember how to breathe. “Give me a sec. I just...”

A scream split the night, echoing haphazardly around the warren of alleyways. Dan’s head snapped left, his eyes narrowing. “Know what? Doesn’t matter. I think I found it,” he said, then he turned to see Erron making a frantic dash for freedom, his robe hoisted up around his knees to stop him tripping over it.

“Ugh,” Dan grunted. He shoved a hand inside his coat and found the butt of his pistol. “I hate it when they run.”

Technically, the pistol was a fairly bog-standard blaster, albeit with a number of modifications that drastically increased its functionality. He had taken it from a Xandrie enforcer a few years back, and it had immediately become his go-to weapon of choice.

It had eight different types of round that Dan was aware of, ranging from old favorites like ‘stun’, ‘kill’, and ‘utterly annihilate’, to less traditional varieties, like the one he was about to call up.

“Mindy. Slowdown. Ten per cent.”

The handgun’s cylinder rotated, then illuminated in a series of blue lights as the round locked in the chamber.

Dan took aim and squeezed the trigger. There was a flash from the barrel, and a sound that was more *whoosh* than *bang*. Something streaked along the alleyway and struck the fleeing Erron squarely between the shoulder blades.

He didn’t die or explode. He wasn’t even stunned - at least, not in the traditional sense. Instead, his frantic sprint became a slow, lumbering gait, instantly dropping him from ‘high-speed run’ to ‘old man walking pace.’

His arms and legs still pumped as if he were running for his life – nothing had changed on that front – but the speed at which they were doing so was drastically reduced, to the extent that he now appeared to be moving in slow motion. Which, as it so happened, he was.

Dan strode quickly past Erron and blocked his path. Erron’s eyes widened – slowly – then he began to speak as Dan hoisted him onto his shoulder.

“Hooooooooowwww thhhhhhheeeeeee fffffffff...?”

“No idea,” said Dan, interrupting. “Don’t know how it works, just know it does.”

He about-turned and set off with Erron in the direction the scream had come from. This was one of a dozen down-market warehouse districts in this sector of the city, and one of the very few he wasn’t painfully familiar with. The fact he knew the others quite so intimately probably said more about him than he’d have liked.

There were maybe thirty different industrial buildings in the immediate vicinity, ranging from huge, smoke-spewing factories to the row of compact individual units Dan now carried Erron past. Most of the units were in darkness, locked up for the night, but light seeped around the edges of the shuttered windows of one. Four shoes stood neatly outside the unit’s door – a pair of large men’s boots, and a much smaller pair of child-sized sneakers with smiling faces scribbled onto the scuffed material.

Dan stopped. “In here?” he asked, but then the screaming came again from somewhere along an alley on the left, and Dan quickly headed that way. A scream was rarely good news. The other sound, which he was only just starting to hear, was worse news. It was a wet sound. A wet, slimy sound.

And big.

Wet, slimy and very, very big.

“Erron, you’re a fonking shizznod. I want you to know that,” Dan muttered.

Erron didn’t reply. Or rather, he started to reply, but by the time he’d reached the second syllable, Dan had thrown him through a window.

While Erron himself was on a go-slow, the rest of the world wasn’t. The window exploded as his rigid torso smashed through it, showering the inside of the warehouse reception area in shards of flying glass. The big wet slimy noise immediately became louder.

Ducking outside the broken window, Dan listened carefully to the sound, then swore a number of times, very quietly. From somewhere inside the building, there came a slow, belated, “Ow.”

Dan inhaled deeply through his nose. He didn’t need to – he’d long-since left behind the need to breathe, in general – but it was a habit he’d never thought to break.

“Mindy. Explosive rounds,” he said, standing up. The weapon’s cylinder spun and locked as Dan vaulted in through the window. He caught Erron by the hair before he had even started to get to his knees, then dragged him across the foyer floor, cutting a trench through the carpet of glass.

There was a door leading through to the main warehouse area. Heavy. Probably locked. Dan considered throwing Erron through it, but he’d barely make a dent.

He threw him, anyway. Sure enough, Erron bounced off it and slid back along the glass-strewn floor, only stopping when Dan put a foot on his back.

Mindy kicked in Dan’s hand, and the door disintegrated. The reception was suddenly filled with smoke and fire and a fresh round of screaming. Grabbing Erron again, Dan strode on through the now much-bigger doorway and wasted a few seconds taking in the details on the other side.

The portal – a shimmering hole in the warehouse floor - was huge. Stupidly huge. So huge, in fact, it was clearly the work of an amateur, and an overly-enthusiastic amateur at that.

He gave Erron a well-deserved kick.

Dan had hoped to stop the portal opening, but that ship had sailed. A frankly obscene number of tentacles whipped around the glowing red edges, scrabbling to get a foothold in this dimension. He didn’t recognize the tentacles. Not that he had expected to be on a first-name basis with any of them, but he had extensive experience of being struck, thrown and strangled by the fonking things, and was usually able to identify what sort of creature lurked at the other end.

These, though – a jumble of fat, shiny green ones and thin, whip-like yellow things – were new to him. Part of him almost wanted the owner to come all the way through so he could see who the tentacles belonged to.

But only part of him. And a small part, at that.

A woman – young, dark-haired, her face a mix of purples and pinks – stood pressed against one of the walls, her eyes fixed on the assortment of appendages squirming blindly on the floor in front of her. The screamer, Dan presumed, and a high-pitched shriek from the woman confirmed it.

Mindy let out three short *bleeps* and Erron came to life in Dan's grip. "Argh! My arm! You fonking maniac, I think you broke my arm!"

Dan hoisted Erron to his feet and half-dragged, half-carried him towards the portal. Despite the whole 'tossed through a window' situation, the time dilation meant he hadn't been cut by the glass. Hurt, yes. Definitely hurt. But not cut.

"Shut up," Dan hissed. "How many people did you kill to get the blood you needed for this?"

"W-what? None!" said Erron.

Dan cracked the butt of his gun on the side of Erron's head, not too hard, but hard enough.

"How many?"

"Three!" Erron yelped.

Dan hit him again. "*How many?*"

"S-six! That's all. I swear."

This time, Dan didn't hit him. He didn't need to. He just brought him in close so his face was all the squirming little runt could see. "How. Many?"

"I... I can't remember," Erron whispered. There was a touch of hysteria to his voice. "I don't know."

Dan sighed. "Yeah. Figured as much."

He marched towards the glowing edges of the portal, and towards the tentacles slapping around on the floor beside it.

"You fonking people, always messing with things you don't understand," he muttered.

Across by the far wall, the woman looked up, as if spotting Dan for the first time.

"H-help!" she cried. "Help me!"

"Gimme a second, sweetheart," Dan told her. He returned to his muttering. "Opening holes to fonk-knows-where. And for what?"

He went silent for a moment, then shook Erron violently. "That was a genuine question. Why did you do it?"

Erron's mouth flapped up and down. "B-because it's cool. You know? D-demons."

Dan grunted and gestured to the thrashing mass of rubbery limbs before them. "And yet you didn't stick around to admire your handiwork up close. You people never do. You don't have the guts to see it through. Also," he added, "they're not demons."

"Help!" the woman screamed again.

Dan tutted. "Seriously, lady, I'm going to be right there. OK? Quit busting my balls here. Relax."

He turned Erron so he was able to see the full horror of whatever he was in the process of unleashing. "Not so cool up close, is it?"

Erron's mouth flapped some more. His eyes grew wider. His voice, when he spoke, was a whisper of awe. "It's the most amazing thing I've ever seen. It's... It's beautiful."

Dan shrugged. "Oh well. I tried." He held his gun up, ready.

Erron let out a high-pitched hiss of a giggle. "A blaster? You think you can stop it with a blaster?"

"Hmm? Oh, no," said Dan, absent-mindedly. "The gun isn't for that thing."

With a grunt of effort, he tossed Erron into the thrashing mass of tentacles. One of the thinner tendrils snapped out, snagging the flailing figure around one leg. Erron swung, then hung there, upside-down, his robe falling upwards to reveal his skinny legs and ill-fitting underwear.

"N-no! Stop! What are you d-doing?" he cried.

"Blood opened this thing. Blood's what's going to close it," Dan said, then he raised Mindy and squeezed her trigger until she bucked and roared in his hand.

Erron exploded, in much the same way as the door had, only with substantially more in the way of splash back. A gallon or two of blood, bile and knobby bits fell into the hole, and Dan took a couple of hasty steps backwards to avoid the mist-like crimson spray that wafted his way.

The owner of the tentacles shrieked, the sound ejecting upwards out of the portal and rebounding off the high warehouse ceiling. There was a sound like garden shears snapping shut, and the hole became just a red circle smeared onto the concrete floor. All the tentacles that had been on this side of the portal hit the ground in a series of damp *splats*, oily black liquid oozing from the glowing ends of each severed stump.

"Huh, what do you know?" said Dan, sliding Mindy back into her under-arm holster. "That actually worked."

He turned towards the young woman. "Now, then," he began, then he stopped when he saw she was lying on the floor, either knocked-out or fainted. Possibly dead, although that was less likely.

Dan exhaled through his nose. Habit again, more than anything. "Well," he said. He clicked his tongue against his teeth. "Isn't that just great?"