

ONE

The flesh of Adono Phrebus was a delightful shade of blue—often referred to as "sky blue," although that phrase was meaningless in the city of Betroit—and his wavy hair had a coppery tinge. His sharp, angular cheekbones were offset by an inviting rosebud mouth, and his eyes resembled sapphires (stolen sapphires, of course).

Petchy Maligula liked pretty men, but she had been forced to make some alterations to Adono's face—adding some purplish bruises and puffy skin, and splitting open those rosebud lips, causing cyanish blood to trickle down the cleft in his chin and stain his expensive peach-colored shirt. Since Cygnians had a high pain threshold, she knew Adono wouldn't break down and cry from a few love taps, but the damage to his looks and his wardrobe was definitely getting on his nerves.

Petchy was lucky; she never had to worry about her own looks. Because she didn't have any. If forced to describe herself, she would compare her blotchy skin to sandpaper, while her reddish-brown fuzzy-buzzy hair resembled rusted Brillo and her eyes were pea-soup green. Her facial features lacked Adono's finely chiseled look; "hacked" would be a better word—hacked out of gnarly wood by a bad carver with a dull knife.

And while Adono's body could be described as lithe, Petchy's was ...

Unlithe.

Very unlithe.

But she couldn't complain. This was the way the Goddess had made her. And in Petchy's line of work, size came in handy—especially when you needed to lean on a slimeball to loosen his lips.

"OK, Adono," she said. "I'll ask you one more time. Where the hell is Faladan Pala?"

She twisted the collar of his emerald-green suit and heard a satisfying ripping sound.

"Stop that!" Adono replied in his thick Cygnian accent.

"Sure. As soon as you tell me where Pala is."

"I already told you, I don't know anything about Faladan Pala."

"So why does the SIB want the dagger?"

"Who?"

"Come off it. Everyone's heard of the Sisters of Inner Beauty."

He smirked. "Sisters of INNER beauty? Heh. With a name like that they must be ugly as sin. I'm surprised you're not a member."

She whacked him again. For a second she thought she saw a tooth fly out of his mouth, but it was only a blob of phlegm. Too bad.

"That was cute," she said. "Nearly as cute as you. Oh wait, I forgot. You're not that cute right now, are you? I hope you don't have a hot date tonight, 'cause with that messed-up face you've got as much chance of scoring as the Betroit LionCubs."

"What would you know about hot dates, Maligula?"

She hauled off to hit him again, a real good wallop right on the chin, but thought better of it; she might knock him out cold and then he couldn't talk.

"Come on, Adono. Make it easy on yourself. Why did you come here? Who's the dagger for?"

"I dunno."

"Bull. You're not the kind to work blind. You know who Bardoko's buyer is."

"I didn't bring the dagger here. I found it on the floor when I arrived."

"Then why did you come here?"

"Just a social call. Garek's a friend." He glanced at the massive blob of goo on the floor behind him. "Uh ... he WAS a friend."

"Can the crap. You don't hang out with people unless there's money involved."

"Shows how much you know. I've got lots of friends. But you wouldn't know what that's like, would you?"

"If Bardoko was such a friend, why did you kill him?"

"I didn't. I'm not into violence. That's your line."

"Oh yeah? Then why did you try to stick me with the dagger?"

"You startled me. I thought you might be the killer returning to the scene of the crime. You should know better than to sneak up behind people. I was just trying to defend myself."

Petchy gave him a dirty look and let go of his collar, then turned around and walked a dozen steps to the other side of the living room, dodging the contents of a book shelf that were strewn across the floor.

Maybe "living room" wasn't quite the right word, for there was a dead body lying in the middle of it, or the remnants of one, melted by a beam gun into an ash-colored blob that

resembled a big wad of gum someone had tossed on the ground and stepped on. Only this wad of gum had a face at one end—smeary eyes and a crumpled nose and fused lips—and at the other end was part of a foot, still clad in a shoe; an Abidas, judging by the tread pattern.

The blob could have been anyone, but Petchy assumed it was Garek Bardoko, although the name on the mailbox downstairs identified the tenant of Apartment 613 as "Mr. Johnson."

She wasn't well acquainted with Bardoko, and had never been to his place before (he moved fairly frequently), but she knew he was a first-class fence and one of Adono's main contacts in Betroit.

Bardoko was a Deshian—a humanoid race with dimpled, slate-colored skin and tufts of orange hair protruding from odd places—and even though the beam gun had erased all those distinctive characteristics there were other clues pointing to the blob's identity. The TV set was on, the DVD player set to Repeat, showing a music video of a Desh group called Slof. Mercifully the sound was muted, but Petchy had heard The Slof before; their shrill squeaks and whistles were the kind of cacophony only Deshians would call music.

Another clue was the newspaper on the coffee table: The Strident, a rag put out by the Deshian Protective Front.

Then there was the pile of cat heads in the wastebasket. Deshians considered cat brains a delicacy. They'd cut the heads off and drill a hole in the top of the skull—with a special tool purchased from a Deshian food shop—then suck out the brains and toss the heads away. Petchy didn't remember what they did with the bodies. And didn't care to find out.

She turned her attention to the books strewn all over the floor: Deshian novels, romances mostly, and a few mysteries, all hardbacks. But Bardoko hadn't been a big reader; most of the books were hollow inside, hiding places for forbidden goodies stored in baggies, most of which were now scattered around the room. Petchy took a quick inventory, impressed by the variety of stash: there were powders (both magical and narcotic), vials of dark-blue and metallic-red liquids, assorted feathers, pendants, rings, bracelets, small jade carvings of elephants and hippos and gryphons, and a huge green-winged beetle encased in amber.

Yet the most interesting object wasn't in the jumble on the floor, but sticking out of the wall on the far side of the room—a two-thousand-year-old dagger that Adono had tried to shove into Petchy's guts. He'd missed her and impaled the wall instead, after which she'd waltzed him around the room at the end of her fist.

She pulled the dagger free and turned around, not really surprised to see Adono making a break for the front door. Her free hand darted into the front of her purple blouse, reaching for the holster nestled between her massive breasts. She pulled out her Texus Instruments TIRG-189 beam pistol and snapped off a pulse. A ball of reddish orange light, about the size of a quarter, struck Adono in the arm and he yelped with pain as the searing heat dug into his flesh. A thin wisp of smoke spiraled out of the hole in his jacket, followed by a few drops of blood.

Adono gaped at her as she shoved the gun back into her cleavage.

"What's the matter?" she said. "You never seen a chick pull a gun out of her boobs before?"

He moved his mouth but no words came out.

She crossed the room and stood next to him, examining the dagger closely for the first time, pretending Adono wasn't even there.

It was a fine piece, and looked distinctly out of place in a crummy apartment in downtown Detroit. Made by the ancient Aztralects, it had an onyx handle and a steel blade, slightly curved and ending in a forked tip. Encrusted in the handle were six gems, bloodstones and garnets and a couple of silvery green ones that Petchy couldn't identify. The gems weren't flush with the surface, and would've dug painfully into the palms of the Aztralec priests as they grasped the handles tightly during their sacrificial rites—but Petchy doubted the holy men ever got much sympathy from the young men laying before them on the altars, awaiting their grisly fate.

The dagger had been swiped from the Museo d'Aztralica in Mezico City by night raiders, who knocked the outdated security robots out of commission with exploding bolas before breaking the glass display case and making off with their prize. That was two days ago. Petchy hadn't paid much attention at the time—it was just another mildly interesting item on the news and she was far more concerned with the mysterious disappearance of Faladan Pala, who had vanished from an archaeological dig near Inkstain, Mechigan, almost a week prior. But then rumors began swirling through the streets of Detroit that the SIB had swiped Pala so they could cut his heart out, Aztralec style, and offer it up to the serpentess goddess, Quatakexel, for old times' sake.

When Petchy learned that Adono Phrebus, the notorious Cygnian "antiquities dealer," was back in town, she figured there might be a connection between him and the museum theft and Pala's disappearance, so she decided to check it out.

It hadn't taken her long to find Adono; he always stayed at the Helton Hotel in Starling Heights whenever he was in town. A really smart crook would have booked himself into some fleabag dive and laid low, but Adono liked the Helton, one of the swankier places in the region; he couldn't resist those fluffy towels and the little bars of scented Estay Lauver soap they put in the bathrooms.

When Adono left the hotel that afternoon in a rented midnight-blue Luxus, Petchy had tailed him. Not surprisingly, he'd gone to The Puz, the bad part of Betroit. Adono had parked on 13th Street, then walked back a block, entering a crappy apartment building on 14th Avenue. Petchy had slipped into the lobby a few seconds later, in time to see the arrow above the elevator stopping on the sixth floor. She hoofed it up six flights of stairs, then walked slowly down the hall, using her Awareness to try and sense Adono's presence. She paused at the door of Apartment 613, and a moment later heard something heavy hit the floor inside. She worked her "hairpin" magi-mech lock pick in the door and barged in.

Adono Phrebus was in the process of ransacking the place and didn't hear her approaching till she was nearly on top of him. Then he tried to give her the dagger—blade first...

And now it was time to return the compliment. She put the tip of the blade up to his throat, nestling the fork against his Adam's apple.

"Talk to me, Adono," she said. "Or you'll never talk again."

He gulped, the cold steel tickling his larynx. His face turned pale, almost white.

Petchy said, "You brought this dagger here, didn't you?"

"Alright, alright," Adono said. "Yes I did."

"And that blob of gunk on the floor is definitely Garek Bardoko?"

"I assume so. But I can't say for sure. One blob looks pretty much like another to me."

He looked her up and down as he said the word blob, but she ignored the jibe.

"Who stole the dagger from the museum?" she said.

"Beats me."

"Did Bardoko arrange the theft?"

"Search me."

"Who's the buyer?"

"I haven't the foggiest."

"Bull. You always keep yourself in the loop."

"Not if I risk a sale. Garek refused to say who the client was. It was all very hush-hush."

"Why did you kill him?"

"What makes you think I did it?"

"Call it a hunch."

"Oh, a hunch. And what inspired that brilliant flash of insight, those rocks in your jacket?"—he cast a derisive glance at the gems sewn into her red dragonleather vest—"or the rocks in your head?"

"They're gems, not rocks," she said. "And it's a vest, not a jacket. They help me focus my Awareness. But I don't need any sixth sense to know you're a lying rat." She touched her nose. "This tells me."

"My, how droll. So if I did kill Bardoko, where's my gun? The only one I see in this room is the one you're, uh, packing."

"You could've thrown yours away or hid it somewhere." She nodded at the jumble of objects scattered all over the floor. "Maybe you mixed it in with the mess. You've had just enough time for that."

"And what would my motive be? I don't go around killing my business associates. Especially when they haven't paid me yet. That's what I was looking for when you attacked me. My money."

Petchy didn't really believe Adono was the killer; she just wanted to rattle him a little by tossing out the accusation. Sure, he'd tried to stab her with the dagger, and he was giving off bad vibes, but her instincts told her someone else had waxed the Deshire. And even if Adono had done the deed, there was no way to prove it, since beam guns left no powder on hands and it was easy enough to wipe prints off the handles.

Time to change the subject. At least for awhile.

"Was he paying you in cash?" she said.

"Of course not. A bank chip."

Petchy glanced at the debris. "You thought he'd keep a bank chip hidden in a book?"

Adono shrugged. "No, but I figured there might be something of value in his stash that would compensate me for my time and trouble. I sure as hell can't rifle through his pockets looking for the chip, now can I?"

"Good point. Was the chip straight-up cash or PayBuddy?"

"I wasn't his fegging banker."

"How much money did he promise you?"

"A grand."

"The dagger's worth five."

"You're an expert on Aztralec artifacts, are you?"

"No, but that's what they said in the news stories about the museum heist."

"That's no concern of mine. Like I said, I'm just a go-between. The money has to be split, so naturally my share is less."

"Unless you cut someone else out of the loop," Petchy said, jerking a thumb at Bardoko's body.

"Oh please. What good would that do, since I don't know who the buyer is? Besides, Garek was more than just a business associate, he was a friend."

"Your loyalty is touching. And I can tell you're all broken up by the loss of your, uh, dear friend."

Adono's face turned to stone. "Cygrians don't show their sadnesses in public. It isn't our way. But that's no concern of yours. Now I strongly suggest you release me. You have no authority to hold me here against my will."

She let out a sigh. "OK, Adono. Get out of here."

She backed away a couple of steps and gestured toward the half-open door.

"What about the dagger?" he said.

She hefted it in her hand. "I'm keeping this."

"What? That belongs to me!"

"I thought you were going to sell it to Bardoko."

Adono rolled his eyes. "I don't think he'll be closing any more deals any time soon. I need to find another buyer."

"No dice."

"Come on, Maligula, have a little compassion."

She stared at him incredulously. "Compassion? In Betroit?"

"Please," he said softly.

"Forget it. The dagger belongs to the Museo d'Aztralica, and that's where it's going."

"Why not let me try and find out who Garek's client is? I could sell to him direct and we could split the profits."

"Come off it. The SIB are the buyers and you damn well know it, and once they have this thing they'll use it on Faladan Pala."

"You don't actually believe that street-rumor crap, do you? Why would they bother kidnapping a TV star and stealing an expensive dagger to make sacrifices to a half-forgotten goddess no one's worshipped in over two thousand years?"

"Because they're nutso bitches, that's why."

"Heh. You'd know a lot more about that than I would."

"Are you bucking for zero teeth, Phrebus?"

His eyes hardened. His slim little chin thrust out defiantly. "I'm sick of your oafish threats, Maligula. You shan't intimidate me any longer."

"Shan't? Did you just use the word shan't?"

"It's not my fault if my vocabulary is more refined than yours."

"Yeah, I've noticed that about you. Your words get fancier whenever you start running out of lies."

"Think what you like. I'm sick of your tuff-grrl shtick. I insist you let me go and return my dagger at once, or I'll seek legal recourse."

She shook her head. "The dagger stays with me—but you can leave. Go seek your legal recourse. I shan't object."

She slipped the dagger into a pouch hanging from the belt of her mauve slacks and gestured at the door once more.

He started to say something . . . Didn't.

"Good bye," she said. "Don't worry about holding the door open for me. I'll see myself out."

He studied her face. One of his eyes twitched nervously. "Just like that, you're letting me go?" he said suspiciously.

"You said it yourself. I have no right to hold you. I'm not a cop. Besides, your lies are starting to annoy me. Scram."

He hesitated, licking his lips. Suddenly he dashed out the door. She closed it and locked it, then stood there listening till his pounding footsteps faded into silence.

She turned around and walked toward the gum-wad corpse on the floor.

"OK, Bardoko," she said grimly, "give me a minute to tidy up and then we'll have a little chat."