

Counterspies

By Adam Gauntlet

“Four bunches a tik! Four bunches!”

“Fine sponges! Common for the common, three tik for the fine!”

“O ye of the faithful, hearken to my call! It was in the age of Hellephoron, when Ais was in the ascendant . . .”

“Say four and it’s a bargain.”

“Make way! Make way for the Lady Alia! Make way!”

“Call those fresh? I’ve seen livelier stuff in a coffin.”

Tak tak. Tak tak. Make way. *Tak tak tak.* Make way for the dangerous man. The sound echoed. *Tak tak tak.* Make way for te Geni the Duellist, it meant. Make way.

His long sword’s hilt, buckled to his waist, beat against the small shield at his belt. The fingers of his right hand were hooked into that belt, no more than an inch from the sword’s hilt. The elbow of his right arm, cocked outward, billowed his cloak, which action made him seem twice as large as he was. He had that condition, rare among Fly-kindens, known as Moon-touched; his skin was mottled, pale with dark patches. He had restless eyes. He could not keep still. He had, seemingly, no business and nowhere to go; yet he moved unceasingly up and down the market.

Tak tak tak.

Three Wasps moved in lock-step through the square. Two were in uniform; the third, obviously higher caste by his bearing, wore the tunic and leggings of a ranking guildsman, though whether he was entitled to the sapphire mark was another matter altogether; guildsmen tended to be Beetle-kin, certainly this close to Helleoron. Their arrival caused te Geni to pause, his gaze resting briefly on the trio, before resuming his pace.

He turned his head sideways, just enough so that he could glimpse the eastern corner of the market out of his eye. He saw with satisfaction the stout Beetle standing in wait. Above, on the rooftops, would be two more Fly-kindens; te Geni did not have to look for them, he knew they were there.

They had been watching Eodric, the Wasp in guildsman’s clothing, from the moment he’d left the Travelling House. He had not taken a step, eaten a bite, said a word, without them knowing. They knew what he was. He’d come hot-foot from Helleoron, sniffing after the bait that they had laid for him. The Beetle, Bophors, apprentice to Joten, was part of that trap.

Make your move, te Geni willed the Wasp. Go closer. Make contact!

The Wasps did indeed move towards Bophors. They marched at him like an army, and then they marched past him, and entered a shop at the eastern end of the market, leaving the apprentice bewildered and alone in the street.

Bophors looked helplessly at the Fly-kindens; te Geni, for his part, tried desperately to pretend he had no interest in the nervous Beetle. The duelist developed a sudden and immediate passion for the charms of a passing flower-girl.

Don’t look at me, you simpleton! Don’t give me away! Keep calm!

If the Wasp had noticed Bophors, he gave no sign. When te Geni risked another glance in his direction, Eodric was still busy in the shop. The duelist could just barely see him through the open shop window; he was haggling over something. Bophors was growing more nervous by the minute, and had so far forgot himself as to shift position, moving further into the market, closer

to te Geni, as though looking for support. That was the last thing te Geni needed; if the apprentice's cover was blown, fair enough and too bad, but if, through Bophors, te Geni was compromised! It was not to be thought of.

The Wasps emerged. Eodric was pocketing something. His two men were talking amongst themselves. They moved in lockstep back up the market, none of them sparing Bophors so much as a glance. Nor did they pay te Geni any heed. They were leaving.

The duelist swore, and made for the Western walk. The others would have the sense to keep on Eodric, he knew, and he wanted to be as far away from Bophors as possible. He had no idea what had gone wrong, but if the whole thing was blown, te Geni knew that the best place for him to be was far away from the market square.

He made his way down two streets, took Breakbone Alley at a run, and went to the inn with the sign of the Dancing Moth. Decendius, te Geni's partner, was waiting for him there.

Decendius had the swarthy face and dark hair of a Samesh, yet he wore the latest fashions of the Collegium, and bore himself like a decadent and lazy student of philosophy, not the warrior Ant that he ought to have been. His clothes had obviously been slept in, and he had not bothered to shave or bathe for some time. He was playing a desultory game of Dragon-Catch-Wind with three Fly-kindens, who were easily carving up the contents of his purse between them. The duelist paused, as if watching the play, and after a moment bent to Decendius' ear, perhaps to give him some gaming advice. The Ant's demeanor did not change. He played out the hand, lost, and got up from the table and left, going upstairs to a room. The duelist left by the back door. He worked his way by a side street to a spot under Decendius' room, then flew upward and landed on the windowsill.

"What happened?" Decendius demanded. "Did they see through him?"

"As far as I could tell, they didn't even know him," te Geni protested. "They didn't make the rendezvous, and left without so much as looking in his direction."

"So they knew what he was!"

"But how could they?" te Geni flung his arms wide. "If any of my people had been seen, Eodric would never have gone to the market. Yet he did!"

"He must have known Bophors was a plant," Decendius argued.

"if so, why go at all? Or why not make the meeting, then try to turn Bophors' treachery to his advantage? You know these people; they strike. Dancing isn't in their nature; they're as blunt as a Scorpion in their dealings. Yet either this Eodric has Spider in his veins or he plain did not know Bophors for who and what he was."

Decendius despaired. "Well, all I can see is, we've put a lot of effort into an operation that's just gone South. What do we do now?"

"We wait," te Geni counseled. "The plan is still sound. We know what the Wasp will want –"

"Joten's schematics."

"Exactly. And we can keep tabs on Eodric all the time he's here. He might be cleverer than he looks, but if he's come after our bait he can't be a Dancing Master, now can he? All we need –"

He was interrupted by the arrival of another Fly-kindens, one of the two that had been on watch at the market. The new arrival did not stand on ceremony; he flew in as though fire was licking at his heels.

Decendius grabbed him. "You're not supposed to come here!"

"News!" the Fly gasped. "Bophors is dead!"

Decendius dropped him. "How did it happen?"

"None of us saw it," the spy told him. "We were just handing off the surveillance to the next team when the hue and cry went up. I went back to see what was going on. There was no mistaking him; he was lying in a back alley, his face black and tongue twisted out of his mouth. There was a crowd round him. Someone said he was dead. Someone else called for the market Guard. I got close enough to get a good look at him. There was a mark round his neck, like he'd been guzzled proper. The Guard was on his way, so I winged it."

"He—" te Geni paused. "He might not be dead. All this fellow saw was the tail end of it. Or it might be a coincidence . . ."

Decendius shot a sour look at his partner. "Do you really think that's likely?"

There was no answer to that. Decendius paced the room.

"Bophors was found out," he said almost to himself, but loud enough for the others to hear, "So the Wasp killed him. Plain enough. Is the Wasp still here, or is he leaving town?"

The new arrival piped up. "When we last saw him, he was going back to the Travelling House. He wasn't in any hurry to get there."

"Make sure he isn't leaving town, and report back to te Geni as soon as you know."

The Fly-kinde left. Decendius faced te Geni.

"The plan is still sound," Decendius said, "If Eodric doesn't leave, it's because he's still interested in the bait. That means Joten's workshop will be his next target. We need to be careful; he obviously has an agent we don't know about. Someone had to kill Bophors, and it couldn't have been Eodric or his bodyguard. Keep watch on him. I want to know his every move."

The duelist bowed. "As you will." He flew out of the room.

Eodric was tired and out of patience. It had been a long journey and, as far as he could see, it had been for nothing. Yet he couldn't simply leave, not without instructions. The thought of staying in a small, decadent little outpost, so close to the fleshpots of Helleron and yet too far away to enjoy them, was intolerable. He snapped at his guardsmen, was irritable through lunch, and stalked back to his room.

His chattel Alia waited for him there.

"My Lord is displeased," she crooned as she unbuckled his belt. "Will he allow me to soothe him?"

He grunted. She was pretty enough. Some of his peers would have called him lucky; she'd been sold well, came with a good dowry, had an excellent bloodline and a pleasant face. A sane man could ask for little better than that. Yet, he told himself with a sigh, he was not sane at all.

For had he not come to prefer other things? Helleron had been so different; a revelation and a revolution, a riot of the senses for one such as him, who had only known the Empire and the battlefield. He'd had no idea people could live like that, behave like that; before he'd seen it for himself, he'd been half convinced that what people told him of the world outside the Empire had to be a delusion. It was impossible that things, people, ideas like that could exist in the real world. Yet Helleron had been all too real . . . and now here he was in some border town, far away from what he wanted, waiting for orders that seemed as though they would never come.

"My boots." He proffered a foot. Alia eased the leather off of him.

"Did your business not go well, husband?" She asked this while at the same time polishing off a stain that marred the boot leather. "You seem displeased."

He sighed. "It's nothing important."

He knew she couldn't talk to him, not like those other women could. Flies, Beetles, Bees – he'd once seen a Mantis female and been struck dumb with lust, yet what he craved most of all was to be able to talk to a woman who could converse. Not soothe, not ease, not sympathize, but talk; a blessed exchange of ideas was what he needed. Talking to other Wasp males was dangerous; status was everything, a misplaced word could be fatal. Talking to Wasp females was even worse. There was no status at stake; instead, just an echoing silence, like screaming into a void. Sometimes he wondered whether he was all alone, and all the other Wasps were just empty ghosts. It was an idea he'd had after a particularly stimulating (intoxicating and befuddling) night in a Fly den in Helleron. The next morning, his mind near drowned, he'd been greeted by another Wasp kinden, and went to return the greeting, only to find that there was nothing there at all. A mask and puppet strings, but nothing behind the eyes. He'd been careful to stay far away from intoxicants after that experience, but it had left him with too much to think about.

Alia massaged his neck. "Allow me, husband. I know what you like."

He sighed. "Go ahead."

Another night of silence and sympathy for him, he knew. He wondered how many more of them he could take.

"All hot! All hot!"

"Spiced ginger-nuts! Nuts nuts nuts! If *one'll* warm you, *what'll* a pound do? *Wha-at-ll* a pound do?"

"O ye of the faithful, hearken to my call! It was in the age of Mellephorum, when Taki was in the ascendant . . ."

It had been two days since Bophors had been murdered in the market square.

The Fly duelist had learnt little about the killing. Whoever had done it had to be bold as brass, he knew; snaffling someone right in the market, where anyone might have seen, argued for an assassin of almost suicidal courage. Yet it also indicated that the plan was blown. Surely the Wasp spy Eodric would never attempt to recover Joten's schematics, now that he knew – and he had to know, else Bophor's death made no sense – that a trap had been laid for him?

Still, Eodric had not left town. Te Geni's informants had told him that the wasp had paid for a further week's lodgings, and showed no sign of being about to make a moonlight flit. The Fly duelist had his people watching Eodric night and day; so far, without result.

Te Geni's people were watching Eodric's rooms from a rooftop across the street. One nudged his companion.

"There's the wife, look," he said, pointing at a slight figure wrapped in a sapphire dress. The dress was shot through with silver thread, in the style of fashionable Empire women, while the green headscarf she wore was similarly decorated with golden thread. The Lady Alia was being carried through the streets on a litter borne by two swart Roaches. A third marched in front of the litter, parting the crowd with his staff so that the litter could pass.

"Off to market, I see."

His companion grunted. "Should we be following her?"

"Nah," the other watcher replied dismissively, "She's just the wife. She doesn't matter."

"I dunno; it could be important."

"You don't know much about these Wasp types, do you? Listen, as far as Eodric's concerned, she's less than nothing. He wouldn't trust her with anything important. It'd go against the very heart of him."

“You sure? He seems to spend a lot of money on her.”

“I spent a lot of money on my new boots; I don’t expect them to think, or go walking about on their own. Besides, if we watch her, we aren’t watching him, are we? So keep a sharp eye out.”

Decendius had to spend his time reassuring the Beetle artisan Joten that nothing more serious would happen.

Joten Skywright was near despair. He hadn’t liked the scheme to begin with. Luring a Wasp spy into a trap with the schematics of his new flyer body design as bait held no appeal for him. Yet he had been persuaded, because the pay was extremely generous. Now his apprentice Bophors had been killed, and he had to spend all his energy watching everyone who came near his workshop for fear that one of them might be the killer in disguise.

Only his work kept him happy. When nothing else would do to keep him quiet, Decendius would allow Joten to prattle on about his new design, in the hope that this would take the Beetle’s mind off of what was going on.

“You see here,” Joten said, as he unfurled a few design scrolls, “This is the standard body type for most fliers. Robust, stable, long lasting. And that is the problem. You see?”

“I’m not entirely sure,” Decendius said to soothe him. “Perhaps you could explain.”

“It’s obvious! Look here.” More scrolls were unrolled. “Stable means steady, reliable, yes, but it also means sluggish, unwieldy. Stable is good for passenger craft, good for observation craft, but if you’re a military man, you don’t *want* stable. You want something that will *fly*, really fly. It’s the ability to maneuver, to roll, loop, spin, faster and tighter than your enemy; that’s absolutely critical, if you’re to win in the sky. You’ve seen Wasps, yes? You know how they fight?”

Decendius grimaced. *Better than you, I’ll wager*, he thought. “But of course.”

“Well, the kind of craft I’d like to design will make every Man his own Wasp, I’ll guarantee it. See here – the wing design, d’you see?”

The drawing was of an aircraft with two wings, one mounted above the body of the aircraft.

“I’ve seen this before,” Decendius said.

“Of course you have! That’s a design that recently came out of the workshops at Helleron. D’you see, they’re using similar principles to my schematic, but I’ve got a trick worth one or two of that, O yes! I’ve been bribing their test pilots. To a man, they say the same thing: not nearly as maneuverable as they’d like, and very difficult to handle. They call it the Spider; you know why? Because they don’t *trust* it! Now, *my* design uses the same principle – two wings – but *I* don’t make the mistake of using wood for my framework – wood! They must be *peasants* in Helleron – nor do I use that kind of airfoil, dear *me* no. Peasants, sir! Now, my new alloy . . .”

Which, Decendius knew, did not work; that was the rub. If it had, Joten would have a world-beater on his hands. Instead what he had was an aircraft that, while much more maneuverable than the standard flier design, had a disturbing habit of falling apart at high speeds. Not that it was to Decendius’ advantage to let this be known. He and his people had spent months talking up Joten’s design, letting slip a few details here, a tasty rumor there. Every Man his own Wasp; a catchphrase designed to drive the Empire into a fury.

Decendius had known that the Empire would send spies. He was counting on it. The Wasp network had, so far, proven unbreakable. Nobody knew how it was run, what its targets

were, how it communicated with its agents, whether it used only Wasps or perhaps also Beetles and Flies, who, Decendius understood, could become citizens of the Empire, albeit of low rank. Presumably then Beetles and Flies could also be trusted enough to become spies – but Decendius could not be sure. Too little was known about the Wasp network for anything to be certain.

A captured spy, or even a cipher, would go a long way to dispelling this uncertainty.

If Eodric was their man, all well and good; Decendius could take him at any time. If, on the other hand, there was more to the situation than met the eye . . .

“Perhaps you could explain that to me again, Master Joten? I’m afraid I don’t have your keen eye for detail.”

The hot stink of fresh spilt blood filled te Geni’s nostrils.

His rapier was out, by instinct, as his left hand swept his buckler up into position, midline of of body, held just in front of him. The door ahead of him was half open. He stepped cautiously forward. He could see very little; the door wasn’t open far enough.

He took one quick step forward and rammed the door open with a swift kick. It swung back and slammed against the wall. Te Geni surged inward, ducking his head as he moved through the door, first sweeping his blade to the right, then to the left.

Nothing moved. He was alone in the room.

Blood had sprayed high, up the walls and even to the ceiling. One of his people lay flat on his back, a last surprised look etched permanently on his face. If te Geni was any judge, he’d been the first to go down. One sweeping blow to the neck; that was what had caused the splatter, and he’d fallen where he’d been struck, his life gushing out of him in one long stream.

The second of the team lay in a tangle under the windowsill. He’d been able to get a dagger out, but there was no blood on the blade. There was a bruise on his forehead and blood at his chest; te Geni shifted the body, and saw the markings of several dagger blows, at least three. Probably the agent had been dazed by the blow on the head, and then his attacker had finished him off.

It was just like Bophors. Someone quick, bold and savage had gone through two trained men in a matter of seconds, not caring whether he’d be seen either before or after the deed had been done. Moreover judging by the arterial spray the killer would have been drenched in gore, yet somehow had gotten away without detection.

Something metallic shifted under te Geni’s boot. It had been lying under the body of the one killed by the window, and had rolled out when te Geni moved the corpse. Te Geni picked it up.

He wasn’t sure what it was. It looked cheaply made. It was a bronze rod, eight sided, and had moving parts. He inspected it more closely. Each side had a panel, and five panels ran the length of the rod. The panels each had a symbol carved into them. Te Geni fiddled with the rod, and found that if he shifted the symbol at the top of the rod, the symbol two panels beneath it moved as well.

It was all beyond him. He was no artificer. He knew someone who was.

He made one last quick sweep of the room, then went through the pockets of his agents, making sure that no incriminating documents or other identifying papers remained. When he was satisfied, he left by the window, and made his way from rooftop to rooftop to Joten’s workshop.

He quickly told Decendius, who was still pacifying Joten, what had happened.

“Shitfire,” the Ant breathed. “What does that leave us with?”

“Not enough assets to complete the mission,” te Geni told him. “I can hire people, but the kind of gutter trash I’d find here wouldn’t stand a chance against whoever’s doing this.”

“If we give up now, it was all for nothing! We can’t afford to go back empty handed. Was there nothing to show who’d done it?”

The duelist showed his paymaster the bronze rod he’d found. “I’ve a feeling I’ve seen something like it before,” he said, “But I can’t place it.”

“You have,” Joten told him. He’d leant over Decendius’ shoulder to get a better look at the item. Anything intricate caught his eye; he’d evaluated it in an instant, worked out what it was for, and dismissed it as an item that had no use for him. “Most markets sell something like it. It’s a kind of almanac.”

“You what?”

Joten impatiently twisted the rod. “See? I shift this, then this, and I get that, that, and that. D’you follow? Farmers use it all the time.”

“Perhaps, master artisan, you could go into a little more detail,” Decendius said to him.

Joten sighed. “It’s really very simple. Farmers want to know what the weather’s going to be like, what crops can be planted at what times, and so on and on. A more complicated version of something like this is much more accurate, but is correspondingly larger, and has to be updated often to keep it accurate. If, however, you don’t care too much about that, but can live with a rough approximation, then you set this,” he twisted the top panel, “So it’s showing the correct area you’re in, then this, to indicate time of year, and the device then indicates here, what crops can be planted or harvested, and here, what the most likely weather conditions are, and here, what other conditions – wet rot, say – might be a factor. All of this, given a time of year and a location.”

Decendius frowned. “Those symbols then, they represent what exactly?”

“What, this? This is a constellation symbol. Some of the lesser races used to believe that the stars represented mythical heroes – Ais, for example, who the Roaches call She Who Brought Water – but we know better, and we use symbols like this to indicate time of year. If you’re near Tark, for example, then if Ais is in the ascendant it must be early spring, with all the wet weather that implies, and that means you shouldn’t have to plant your seeds too deeply but you do need to put your grain crops in the ground as quick as you can. Honestly, that’s simple enough, isn’t it?”

It might have been simple enough for Decendius, just possibly, but it was more than too much for te Geni, whose jaw hung slackly open. Recovering himself, he shut it with a snap.

“But what in mercy’s name were they doing with it? It’s not as if my men needed to know whether it was likely to rain today!”

Joten shrugged. “How should I know? In any event, that’s what it is, and what it does. More than that, I couldn’t tell you.”

Eodric was in a rare bate. None of his people dared go near him. His two subordinates kept a respectful distance, never coming close enough to be a target of his wrath, never so far away as to be beyond call. The Lady Alia hung her head and said nothing. Her Roach servants, chatters all, had been banished from their rooms.

“*What can they be thinking?*”

Eodric had not been recalled. He had sent messages to his superiors in Helleron. The situation had been clearly explained. There was no logic in staying, no profit to be had, nor any strategic gain for the Empire. Yet he had not been recalled. In fact, when his last message lacked

sufficient subtlety and grace, (for Eodric was becoming impatient with protocol), he was abruptly reminded that his social position depended upon his rank, which could be reduced at any time if his superiors saw fit.

That was why he paced and screamed. He was bored, crushingly bored with the squabbles and petty arguments of a small, staid little trading town. He had seen all that there was to see (and it wasn't much), bought all he needed to buy (precious little), and, to cap it all, had endured an unsatisfactory visit to the township's only house of pleasure. The whole trip from start to finish had been a disaster.

Yet they would not recall him!

"My husband is upset," the Lady Alia crooned. "Perhaps some mulled wine . . ."

"Bugger the bloody wine! Just leave me be!"

Oh for a Fly maid, Eodric yearned! Oh for something exotic, something with a little *bite* to it! Why, he asked himself, had he been so foolish as to purchase such an unsatisfactory wife! The only reason for marriage was children, male children, and there had been none. Nor even a wretched female, who, though a burden to him during childhood, could at least be bartered for something better when she came to marriageable age. Yet this doll in her pretty dress, with her soft-spoken mannerisms and her so-very-wearing passivity, this *thing* had not even seen fit to give him that.

Intolerable, it was all so very intolerable. He spent the afternoon making life difficult for everyone near him. Only by evening did he wear himself out. When time came for his evening posset, prepared by his Lady, he was almost reconciled to the tedium.

Perhaps, he told himself, by morning they will have reconsidered, and I might leave.

"The Diabolical Practices of the Heathen Moth Peoples, upon their Victims, when in a state of Mesmerism! Read, and be informed! Five tiks, sir, thank you sir!"

"Half-a-tik, half-a-pint! Half for a half!"

"O ye of the faithful, hearken to my call! It was in the age of Mellimor, when Ais was in the ascendant . . ."

"Sod off, you old fraud!"

"Jellies! Jellies! All the colors of the rainbow! Jellies!"

Decendius, in a fit of despair, had resorted to searching the market. It was the only place he could think of where the Geni's people could have picked up the mechanical almanac that had been found with their bodies. He didn't know why they'd bothered with it, but he hoped that questioning the stall keeper who'd sold it to them might give him some answers.

Now he was in the middle of a brawl. He didn't know how it had happened. An elderly looking Roach, his long hair carefully tied back in a style that Decendius associated with mystics, had to hide his head. A few other Roaches, all of them much younger, were throwing stones at him, while Decendius, not having noticed what was going on, was caught up in it. Standing between the boys and their target as he was, the danger of being struck was high.

"Watch out!" The Ant raised his arm, part in protest, part to ward off another missile. "I'll call the market guard!"

"Yaaah! Nuts to 'em! And the same to you!" The one who'd spoke bent to pry a loose cobble out of the road, and flung it at the mystic, who was struck on the leg. Howling in pain, he screamed curses at the younger ones, who replied with jeers and cries of "Fraud! Fraud! Get back under your rock, you pigger, lousy bent-talker! Fraud!"

Decendius took the opportunity to duck out of the way. He'd seen the market guard hovering on the edge of the crowd, uncertain whether to intervene or not. The squabbles of a few lesser breeds weren't really the problem of the guard, but when a badly aimed missile shattered a pot belonging to one of the merchants, the guard took immediate action.

Decendius watched the fight from the safety of a stall. To keep the stall's owner happy, he bought one of the jellies and a dollop of sweet ice. He ate while the guard, warden sticks flailing, dealt out lumps to the squalling Roaches.

"Beats me why they do it," Decendius said, more out of politeness than to have a conversation. The stall owner, himself a Roach, nodded.

"Well, he was wrong, you see," the stall owner said.

Decendius was puzzled. "Who?"

"The old man was wrong. That's not the way the story goes."

"I'm not sure I follow you. He was telling a story?"

The Roach shot a pitying glance at the Ant. "Of course, you being one of the Unclean, you wouldn't understand. It's not for your kind to know these things."

That put Decendius on his mettle. "You mean I'm Apt, and he isn't. Right?"

The stall holder nodded. "Those of us who believe that Aptitude is simply a passing whim, that it will not last and that the old ways will be restored; those are the people who call themselves Faithful, faithful to the magic our forefathers used. So goes the cry: O ye of the faithful, hearken to my call! Which is as much as to say: hear me, for I will remind you of what you were, and what you will be again! That is what the youths meant, when they said he was a fraud. He was wrong."

"But I still don't understand. How was he wrong?"

The Roach was incredulous. "But sir! How could he not be wrong? It's as plain as the nose on your face, if you'll forgive me. I can't understand how you shouldn't see it straight away."

"It isn't very clear to me. He was telling a story, but he was telling it wrong? How, wrong?"

"But sir! It's so obvious! Did you not hear? He said it was in the age of Mellimor, when Ais was in the ascendant! How can you not see how wrong that is?"

Decendius was more puzzled than ever. "Ais is a constellation, I know . . ."

"Pah! Ais is She Who Brought Water, as you would know, if you were not – but I must not speak of these things. In any case, that is why he was wrong. Surely it is plain to you now?"

The Roach could tell by Decendius' puzzled expression that all was not clear. He sighed. Slowly, as if to a child, he said, "Ais *cannot* be in the ascendant, not if it is the age of Mellimor. There are only three phases in the year when Ais is ascendant, and Mellimor is not one of them. To make such an error, why, it is like spitting on the Faithful. For all his age, I think the old fellow must have been a rare trickster, a bent old falsifier, one who'd never eat straight or breed true! Feh! Age of Mellimor! Mad old man!"

It was as if he'd been struck on the head. Dazed, Decendius thanked the stall holder and left. He searched in his robe for the little bronze device. He twisted and turned the dials. It was true; there was no way he could twist the panels so that Mellimor coincided with Ais.

Decendius had an idea, hovering at the back of his mind, shouting for attention. He couldn't quite fathom it; yet if there was a way to make Mellimor coincide with Ais, then logic said the other three panels would change their meaning. To what, he didn't know; obviously the device he held wasn't the one he needed. Yet if it could be done!

“You would be changing the message,” he breathed.

The point of the almanac was to communicate information. The point of a cipher was to communicate information in such a way that it could not be understood, except by the intended recipient. The best kind of cipher, Decendius knew, was one which would never be recognized for what it was. A code like that could go undetected, never analyzed, thus never broken.

“A code like that . . . could be shouted out for everyone to hear, right in the heart of the market . . . and only the person who’s supposed to hear it would understand . . . because only they would know what he *really* meant, that Mellimor and Ais were triggers, indicators that the real story was to follow! It’s the Wasp code! I know how they do it! I KNOW HOW THEY DO IT!”

His sudden yell struck the nearby traders dumb. Decendius smiled weakly, then fled the market, clutching the bronze tube to his chest.

“I know how they do it! I know how they do it!”

Decendius would have been less enchanted if he could have seen a small gold device, which at that moment was being delicately manipulated so that the phase was Mellimor and the star in ascendant was Ais.

Its owner knew that Mellimor meant ‘to be acted on immediately’, and Ais referred to the intended recipient. Fully translated, the message read:

‘You must act on this immediately. We are not certain of the provenance, but it is worth the risk. Eliminate the opposition and retrieve the document; return to us as soon as this is done.’

It was late at night. Joten had sent his remaining helpers home. Now that he was without an apprentice, he lived alone above his workshop. He paid the market guard a few extra tix each week, to encourage them to patrol nearby more often. Ordinarily he might have been more cautious, perhaps employed extra watchmen, but Decendius had persuaded him against it.

“They must think you’re vulnerable. Do you see? If we keep defending against who knows what, we’ll never get anywhere; but if we offer them an opening – if say, you were to leave a window unlatched, and it was known that you were alone in the shop – then they’re most likely to try their luck. When they do, we’ll be waiting.”

Te Geni would have been happier with this plan if he had more men. His best were dead; the second surveillance team had been sent back to Helleron with strict instructions to pass on their information about the Wasp cipher. The few gutter trash he might have been able to hire were no good for subtle work. As a reserve, he’d paid four bravos and given them strict instructions to wait nearby, in a grog shop, and to come immediately if they heard te Geni shout. He didn’t hold out much hope that this would do, but four doubtful swords that might turn up were better than nothing at all. He had faith in his own ability, but Decendius was an officer, not a brawler, and Joten even less of one.

Everything depended on the Wasp agent doing exactly what they wanted him to do.

Joten couldn’t sleep. He wasn’t in his bed; they’d put a bolster in it, to look like him. Joten was in his apprentice’s room instead. It was too cold, too small, too warm, too drafty, too quiet – it was too something, or too nothing, but whichever it was, he couldn’t sleep.

He got out of bed. He didn’t dare light a candle, so he couldn’t read. He paced the room, wincing whenever a floorboard squeaked, trying to exhaust himself without giving away where

he was. In the morning he'd be able to get back to work. Soon, perhaps in a few days, everything would be normal again and he could finish his prototype. Schematics were dancing in his mind like fever dreams. He thought he understood them, but just when his jumbled mind put together the pieces in what seemed like the correct order, they all floated away from him. There had to be a way to get the alloy to work properly. There had to be a refinement of wing design, to get a little extra maneuverability without risking structural failure. There had to be *something* he could do.

This, he knew, was what Bophors had been good at. Joten Skywright was an ideas man, a big picture genius. He knew how to create a concept. He was not nearly as good at developing one, at spotting flaws, or refining design. If he worked in Helleron he might have had a team of people under him, assisting his grand plan; but then, if he worked in Helleron, he would never have had his own workshop. He didn't have the funding or the organizational capability. Here, he was a large fish in a small pond. There, he would have been eaten, his fishy bones picked clean, his ideas making other Beetles rich, his fame – his deserved fame – eclipsed by lesser men.

Yet now it seemed even his small pond was too large and dangerous for him. He'd agreed to Decendius' plan because he needed the money. Joten was no Wasp-hater; he'd sell to anyone. Yet now, he knew, he'd be on a list somewhere in the Empire's records: enemy of the Wasp People.

"I just want to fly," he groaned.

Even as he said it, he had an idea. A brilliant, stupendous, colossal idea! It was to do with the alloy, which so far had been unsatisfactory under test conditions. One of the visions that had been floating behind his eyes had, on the moment, crystallized. He could see it, understand it, knew how it would work – and yet there he was in the dark, with nothing to write with.

He ignored the advice that Decendius had given him. The idea was too perfect, too sublime to gutter and die in the dark. He left Bophors' room and went to the workshop. Surely, he reasoned, a lit candle could alert no one? It would only take a few moments to make the necessary notes. He could develop them tomorrow morning.

Once inside the workshop, he began searching for a candle. He kept his supplies in such a muddle that it took him a few moments to find what he was after. Then, with light and something to write with, he spread his latest schematic out on a drawing board. It was as he had thought; the alloy was nearly perfect. Some very minor modifications would be needed, and perhaps a change in the cooling process as well, to make the finished product less brittle. He began sketching out his ideas on the design. In moments he was lost, his head in the clouds, his pen scratching away busily.

He rested his hand, which was beginning to cramp. He glanced over his notes. They seemed legible enough; he could develop them further in the morning. He reached for the candle.

A long dagger slammed down through his wrist and pinned his arm to the table.

He opened his mouth wide, but shock kept him from screaming. It was as if his voice had vanished; a breathless squeal was all he could manage. He felt an arm snake around his neck.

His last thought was, *It would have worked . . .*

Decendius heard something.

He had been squatting in the dark for what seemed like eternity. Unlike te Geni the Ant had not developed the art of waiting patiently. He had run through every possible scenario in his

head a hundred times. He knew that the ambush was flawed, but with the limited resources he had available he could think of no better option. Besides, he told himself, the Wasps had to make at least one mistake. They were only mortals, after all.

The noise he had heard came from Joten's workshop. Te Geni ought to be close by; Decendius had instructed him to watch the workshop, while Decendius had kept an eye on Joten's bedchamber. Any spy was more likely to be interested in the schematics than in their designer, but assassination was also a possibility. It might have been that te Geni'd caught someone in the act of stealing the plans.

Or it might not.

Decendius hesitated, but only for a moment. He knew he'd heard something. He had to see what it was.

Joten Skywright's workshop was a maze of clutter. Tools and worktables, magnified a thousand times in size by dancing shadows, barred Decendius' way. There was a light, over by the main drawing tables. It was a dancing candle flame.

Decendius cautiously made his way to it.

He could see something on the floor. It was large, crumpled; he could smell blood.

"Joten?"

Something light flew around his neck, settled, tightened.

His throat was on fire; he couldn't breathe. His fingers tried to fight their way under the wire, but could gain no purchase.

He caught a glimpse of his attacker, reflected in one of Joten's huge mirrors.

". . . no . . ."

"Madam."

Decendius fell to the floor.

The duelist te Geni stepped into the room. He held a torch, which he threw in front of him, its guttering light just enough to illuminate Lady Alia's slim form.

Te Geni's sword was out of its scabbard. Alia's left hand snaked up to her green scarf, wrapping it around her hand and forearm. Te Geni's buckler came up, held just in front of him, midline of his body. The Lady Alia's right hand now held a long dagger, high guard, its point angled down at te Geni's face.

They stood facing each other, no more than two sword lengths apart.

"You will forgive me," te Geni said. "I had been told that, of the Wasp kinden, the females were considered no account."

He thought he had the advantage. His sword's reach was more of a threat than her dagger's point, while his buckler could protect him against her blows. Yet this was the same Wasp who had killed three people, that he knew about, and killed them quickly, without hesitation or mercy. He wanted to make no mistakes. His left hand, oddly especially for a Fly, was stronger than his right. He led with his right leg, easing it forward, finding purchase; his left leg tensed, preparing for the lunge.

"This one regrets causing difficulty."

How peculiarly they talk, te Geni thought to himself. The dagger, he noted, had no real cross guard to speak of, no protection for her fingers. Her index finger had slid down the hilt, which would give her greater control when point came to point. Either she didn't care how much damage her hand took, or she was supremely confident in her ability to kill him and escape unharmed.

"Your husband knows you're here?"

Perhaps the lunge was unwise. Perhaps a short flight – but no, not in a poorly lit enclosed space. That was asking for a concussion. Te Geni was beginning to consider a pass then thrust; he'd pretend a lunge, then execute the killing move when she responded.

“Him?” There was naked scorn in her voice. “He is of no consequence.”

“You are his property, are you not?”

She was beginning to tense, he saw; perhaps she would make a mistake. The cloth wrapped around her left arm would be flung forward, he knew; she'd try to blind him, then attack.

“He is insufficiently important. He could never own me. I am the property of the Empire!
I –“

He moved. A low lunge, intended to cut across her leg, crippling her. Her cloak-covered hand had gone as if to push it out and away. Yet as he had planned the lunge was a fake; te Geni passed back and to her side, intending to thrust through her body.

She was not there.

She was fast, so very fast. The cloak-covered hand grabbed his sword's point as he thrust it forward, directing his tip and foible between her legs, then closing with him. He twisted his head to one side, avoiding the killing blow, but her dagger still scored deep across his shoulder and chest. He cried out in pain. The Fly stepped quickly back, but she moved forward with him, keeping so close that his sword's length was useless, while his buckler could just barely be brought in to defend him against another dagger blow.

She stumbled. Joten Skywright's fallen body was the cause of it. There was just enough time for te Geni to put distance between himself and her.

Te Geni whipped his sword around and above his head. It was a tactic born of desperation. His rapier was thicker at the tip; it gave extra weight, and thus momentum, to cutting blows.

He was rewarded with a hit. Not a solid blow, but a bloody scratch, bisecting her eyebrow.

She recoiled, hissing. There was a sudden crackle, and a crash as if of lightning. The bench next to te Geni exploded, as dazzling energy sprang from her left hand's finger tips. Te Geni was struck by hundreds of splinters, and retreated, shaking his head to clear it. His left leg was bloody and moved slowly. He wasn't reacting quickly enough. The light was all gone now; she was out there, in the dark, and he was crippled prey.

It took him several minutes before he realized that he was alone in the room. The Lady Alia had made good her escape.

Eodric awoke. His head felt thick, as though he'd been drinking. The last thing he could remember was his wife's bland, sympathetic face. She'd fed him some kind of calming draught.

What was in it? he asked himself.

There was no sign of her ubiquitous servants. He bellowed, but there was no response.

He couldn't make his legs obey him, so he sat up in bed and worked at them with his fingers, trying to get some blood pumping into them. His wife entered at that moment. There was something wrong with her face, but he had no patience for that.

“Where have you been?” he snapped. “I wanted you here when I woke up.”

“Husband,” she replied. “You will need to get dressed now. My servants will aid you. You must hurry; we will be leaving here tonight.”

His eyes went wide. Every word she spoke was like a message from another dimension. It simply was not possible! She was not submissive! She had issued an order! *She expected him to obey it!*

“I’ll whip the skin from your bones!” he yelled.

“You will do no such thing.”

He stopped yelling, his mouth half-open.

“Your father is deeply indebted, and the loans are beyond his ability to repay. Your younger brother has been fraternizing with enemies of the Empire. Your sister has been extremely indiscreet, but as of yet her husband has not been made aware of this. I have in my possession documentation which proves beyond question that you yourself have been fattening your purse by misuse of funds given you to carry out the Empire’s work.

“You will do as I tell you, husband. The alternative is unthinkable.”

Te Geni pulled Decendius’s body from the workshop. He hoped the bravos he had hired would get to the workshop quickly; someone stronger than him was needed to carry Decendius. Whatever else happened, it was imperative that there be no sign left that they had ever been there.

He had no idea whether Alia had taken anything from Joten’s workshop or not, but in any case there was no point taking risks. He’d put all of Skywright’s plans in the furnace. The last of them were crumbling to ash.

His wound ached. His leg was nearly numb. It was a long way to Helleron.

“Next time, madam,” he promised the rising sun. “Next time.”