

Rooftop Lovers

by Adam Gauntlett

Te Geni smacked his enemy in the face with his buckler.

The Fly tipped backwards, spitting blood, dagger up, her right hand swinging like an open shutter in high winds. Te Geni let her stumble out to sword's point again, his sword's weighted tip up in her face.

"It was to first blood," he reminded her.

"Fuck you!" Her sword was steady now and pointed at him, the dagger in her left hand protecting her heart.

"This is a sanctioned bout," he said. "Will you bend or do I break you?"

She stepped in and to the right, her foible trying to twist his blade out of the way. Te Geni dipped his sword out of reach, beat, blocked with the buckler, twisted out and around. Now he was behind her, his sword whipping at her as he went.

"That's second blood."

She whirled to face him, only to be transfixed through the throat. Her mouth opened. There was no sound. Her dagger dropped.

She dropped, flopping and boneless on the sawdust. Blood rilled over the boards, dripping through, soaking them, spreading, and finally absorbed. Her eyes flickered. She tried to rise. Heels beat, and she was gone.

Te Geni stood victor.

"Know all present," he said wearily, "That this fight between myself and this woman, Bella of the Twenty Fold, was a sanctioned bout. Bella fought for Murgo, merchant of spices, while I for Egared, moneylender, whose shop may be found at Bledvere Cross. His rates are reasonable, his reputation sound. I challenge any here present to dispute this claim."

No-one did.

"Moreover," said te Geni, and this time his words were for the downcast Beetle sitting with his companions, "Next time you and your creditor have a dispute, don't go hiring a hot-head who thinks she need to make a reputation. Life's too bloody short as it is."

Te Geni found a drink waiting for him at the bar. There was always someone willing to keep in the good graces of a successful duelist. He drank it without bothering to find out who his benefactor was. It didn't matter. He drained it and paid for the next himself.

Te Geni leaned against the bar and looked out over the crowd.

Bucker's Place was a neutral house. It stood on the corner of three territories. The Twenty Fold, the Pure Hands and the Red Brothers all had their fiefs abutting the little maze of courtyards and alleys at the heart of which Bucker's Place sat. It was a smoky pit with tin pictures of sport fighters on the wall, from days long gone; a place where guzzlers could sit buttock to buttock with beggars, where the dippers gathered, and the leg-breakers, where a horde of stinking brats swarmed underfoot, eyes agog, looking their future selves in the face. Te Geni knew it very well. It was as much home to him as any other place had ever been, but he was no rooted man, he knew there were other places to go. There were some in Buckers who'd never been more than four streets away from the house they'd been born in. Te Geni wasn't one of those – and yet, he'd never travelled either, never seen anything other than Helleron's smokestacks.

A Fly wearing Twenty Fold's colors tied around his right arm slumped against the bar next to te Geni.

"Cousin."

Te Geni nodded. "It was a fair fight."

"When has that ever made a difference?"

Te Geni grimaced. "So what's the word?"

"Stay out of Twenty Fold for a while, is all. We know your reputation. You know ours. You may be a blade for hire, but we can't let insults pass . . . or be seen to let one of our people die unavenged."

"There was no insult."

"You won, didn't you?" The Twenty Fold man's grin showed no malice. "And we know Bella's been looking for something like this for a while. She wouldn't listen. A sorry tale, but it's over now. It'll stay over, so long as you don't come to our part of town. Call it a month or two, aye? That should be long enough for memories to fade. This isn't a blood insult, y'know, but it's enough to get people talking."

Te Geni nodded. Twenty Fold were butting heads with the Red Brothers over a few streets. No swords drawn yet. The fief chiefs were conferring behind closed doors. A civil dispute, but it could easily become savage, if of a sudden the Twenty Fold had to prove they weren't weak.

The Twenty Fold's man bought te Geni a drink. "No hard feelings," he said, and then he left the duelist alone at the bar.

Te Geni drained his last dram. He spent a few minutes watching some Dragon-Catch-Wind players, wondering if his purse was fat enough to stand a few rounds. He decided it wasn't.

A swart Ant entered through the East Door. Te Geni saw him, and grimaced. The Ant, Decendius, had been following him all over town. The Ant wanted a job done and figured the duelist was the best choice of muscle. Te Geni didn't agree; the Ant offered too much money, far too much money, for the job to be anything less than trouble, and te Geni didn't need trouble, that night or any other. Te Geni ducked out

through the kitchen, then through the Bawle Court exit, working his way through to Pure Hander streets.

He wasn't on the outs with the Pure Hands, but he wasn't on good terms either. He knew enough to keep his head down. He had no lodging in their fief, but he didn't let that trouble him. There was always somewhere to go.

Which, he knew, was his problem: always somewhere to go, never anywhere to stay. He'd had his eye on a place in Pawcock, but that was Twenty Fold territory, so it was closed off to him. Not that it was something permanent. Even if he'd taken it, he'd still have moved on a few months later. Bouncing from apartment to apartment, street to street, fief to fief, always keeping within the bounds and yet never ever standing still. Born in the shadow of Bledvere Cross, never gone further than Egger's Stack, that was his life in a nutshell.

There were other places he longed to fly to. His wings itched him, was what his mother used to say. Yet he'd never risen to the challenge. Always itching, never travelling. He sighed, unfurled his wings, and took to the skies. There was a beautiful view from three stories up, just beyond the tenement shingles yet below Egger's and the other great Stacks to the east. A Fly could almost see the sun, behind the sooty clouds.

A commotion to his left drew his attention.

Roof Dancers were gathering four tenements away. He'd seen them before, but never on Pure Hands territory. They belonged to a fief far to the west, beyond his streets. He knew them as an occasional sighting, a fleeting glimpse when travelling through Red Brother streets. Not Pure Hands; that was far too far out of their range. Yet here they were, four of them, more than he'd ever seen together in one place before.

He flew towards them. He didn't want to be seen to be spying, but he did want a closer look.

Their interest was fully engaged with something happening below them. He could see their fief marks, the bright jerkins and gleaming gold. Most of them, he knew, would be halves, quarters, even eighths. Not one of them would be pure-bloods; the Roof Dancers were for those without kin ties. Yet they all would have some Fly in them.

Te Geni watched and waited.

One of them stayed aloft, while the other three descended. Below, te Geni could see a Beetle, fat and undefended. By the way he staggered te Geni guessed the Beetle had just been supping. The Beetle tripped over his own feet, and then the Dancers caught him.

One was at his back, the halfblood's arm snaking round the Beetle's neck, one hand pressing at the back of the Beetle's head. Te Geni winced in sympathy; he knew the guzzler's choke. The Beetle would be feeling the pressure at his windpipe now, thrashing to get free. The Dancer's partners were on him. One held the Beetle's arms, and between that one and the guzzler the Beetle was lifted just off the ground,

his toes scraping the cobbles. The Beetle would be choking now, te Geni knew, his sight fading, unable to breathe.

The third Dancer was going through the Beetle's pockets, quickly but thoroughly. They were out of their territory. The Beetle might be alone, but at any moment someone might interrupt; they'd be seen, and the Pure Hands would know what they'd been up to.

Te Geni had no interest in interfering, but the fourth Dancer, the one who'd stayed aloft, had no way to know that. Te Geni realized he'd been seen. He back-flew, weaving heedlessly amongst the chimney pots as an arrow streaked in his direction. No archer, no matter how skilled, really had a chance of hitting a pureblood Fly, except by lucky chance. Yet luck favored everyone in turn, te Geni knew; it was time to be gone.

He dodged behind the chimneys and headed for ground. There were no more arrows. The Dancers would be on their way; he knew they wouldn't want to be caught on Pure Hands streets.

He touched earth. His wings folded back. He'd flown again, for the first time in weeks, he suddenly realized. It gave him a little sense of hope, to know that he could still do that, still touch the skies. True, he was in Pure Hands territory, but it wasn't as if he had no friends there. He had cousins in all the fiefs. He had only to seek them out.

He went looking for his family.

The Roof Dancers sought their prey.

She had not been in the Red Brother's ward. That much was clear to them after four weeks search, if nothing else was. Yet she wouldn't have gone far. If not Red Brothers, then Pure Hands, but they were limited, in that they couldn't afford to be seen there. They were just barely tolerated on Red Brothers' streets; anywhere else and their blood crime, plain for anyone to see, would get them knifed. Half-breeds were barely tolerated, a target for anyone to kick at. A half-blood, or quarter, or eighth, wearing the colors of a stranger's fief, would be a walking dead man.

Yet they could not let it be. They couldn't go back without her.

Now they'd been spotted.

"Kill him," said Pitri, the eighth with the ragged mouth.

"Don't be stupid," was Dimmock's reply, part Beetle and thus the fattest, "Didn't you see him move? And no fief marks either. He's a duelist, I bet."

"We can't be seen here!" Little Mara, always in a fuss over something; it was the Dragonfly in her.

Yet it was their boss who had the final say. It was his problem that put them there to begin with; Perro had to give the yea-or-nay.

Perro grunted. Te Geni was far below them; perhaps he knew the Dancers were following him, and perhaps he didn't. "No point. Whether he'll talk or whether he won't, you think the Beetle will keep his mouth shut? Nah. We go on. She'll be round here somewhere, I bet. Keep your eyes peeled."

The three of them fell into line behind their boss. It didn't matter whether he was right or wrong; he was boss, he had the say.

Dimmock cast a glance below them. He could see te Geni, could watch him duck into a tenement. Then the duelist was out of sight. Dimmock sighed. This was going to be hard; they couldn't walk around like te Geni, on Pure Hand streets. All she had to do was go to ground and keep hidden, and her pursuers would never find her.

Perro led them on.

"Cousin!" Te Geni gripped Dendil in a fierce hug.

Dendil was a pureblood Fly, but not of the Families, and so lacked the honorific. He wore the colors of the Pure Hands, but only because he was born on their streets; he needed to belong to a fief to survive. He lacked te Geni's height – te Geni was remarkably tall, for a Fly – but he was a strong man, a trait inherited from his father who had worked the Stacks.

"So," Dendil grinned, "Got bored, did you? Moping around, as usual, nothing to do, no better place to be? So now you seek out your cousin, eh?"

"You know me too well," te Geni grinned.

"I heard about Buckers," Dendil told him. "Don't look so surprised. Do you think I don't care what happens to my kin?"

"You probably didn't hear all there was to hear," te Geni said, and he told Dendil about the Twenty Fold ban.

Dendil shrugged. "It's the price you pay. Now, I think you could use something to eat, eh? Marta! Marta, have you food?"

Dendil's wife stuck her head around the door. They shared two rooms with another family, and all told there were twelve together. The rooms were cramped and stank of old sweat.

"There's some bread here, a little cheese," she said, and she smiled at te Geni. "You're welcome to it."

He accepted; it would have been disrespectful not to. He remembered his purse, probably fatter than Dendil's, and decided that he'd later slip out to the shop on the corner for some other supplies.

As he chewed he noticed that Marta had company of her own. The delicate young Fly girl with Marta was a stranger to te Geni, which he thought odd; he'd known Dendil since they were children together,

and he thought he knew all Dendil's friends. The young girl noticed te Geni staring, which drew Marta's attention; she closed the doorway's curtain.

Dendil took te Geni by the arm. "Why don't we go for a walk, eh?"

Dendil led te Geni down the stairs and out, the two of them walking aimlessly along the street.

"You've got troubles, cousin?" te Geni asked.

"Me? No. My wife . . ."

"I'm sorry if I intruded . . ."

"No, no, you mustn't misunderstand. Ah, you couldn't know."

Te Geni laughed. "All right, I couldn't know."

Dendil smiled. "Well, it's this way. My wife has a cousin; Jandi is her name. She and her brother live in Red Brothers fief. This brother, he likes to gamble, but he loses. And he loses. And he keeps on losing, and all the while this pig of a Beetle, he keeps lending money, until the debt, it's more than the brother can pay. More than he can pay with money, at any rate."

Te Geni was outraged. "You mean he'd pay with his sister's honor? He'd disgrace her?"

"No! No, he wouldn't pollute her like that! But he didn't have too many other choices. Now the two of them were in Red Brothers, and you know how they feel about Pure Hands. It was always in their minds that, if it came to it, they'd cross over, come here to hide. They thought the Beetle wouldn't be able to follow them here, and they might have been right. But the Beetle heard about it, and he caught the brother before the two of them could run. Only she escaped. Now she hides with us. So you see, you're welcome in my home, cousin, but I must ask that you tell not a word of this to anyone."

Te Geni stiffened.

"Not that I would insult you by thinking you would! But Marta, and Jandi, they're so frightened. I had to take you aside, to warn you. You understand?"

"Who," said te Geni in a low, angry voice, "Is this Beetle? I would have words with him."

"Ah . . ." Dendil's eyes flickered. "Phibo, is his name."

It wasn't one that was familiar to te Geni. "What is his work? Is he a Red Brother?"

"Um . . . no, I don't believe he is. He's a moneylender, I think. I don't know much about him."

Te Geni's smile hardened. "Very well, cousin."

Dendil clapped him on the back. "I knew I could count on you."

Te Geni shrugged. "Today is a day for unusual things. First, Buckers – though I should have seen that coming. Then the Roof Dancers, and now your fugitive! I wonder what stars are above me today, that I should have all this on my head!"

Dendil's face twitched. "Roof Dancers? What is this, cousin? You didn't mention them."

"Eh, it was nothing important. I haven't seen them here before, that's all."

"Here? They were in Pure Hands?"

"Of course." Te Geni told the story. "But I gave them the slip, I think. They won't prosper, if they keep guzzling folk on Pure Hands streets. Someone will find them and skin them alive."

"Yes," Dendil tried to smile, "Of course."

They passed the rest of the walk in silence.

Perro and his band had found Buckers.

They'd known of it, but never seen it. They had no neutral houses near their fief. It took a lot of talking before Mara would go near it. She was convinced it was some kind of trap, that the minute they walked in the door they'd be caught and taken to the cellars, there to be tortured to death.

Perro was still boss, and he had the lead. Where he ordered, she went – trembling all the way.

They drew a few stares, but nothing they weren't used to. They stuck together like glue, which probably saved them a challenge. There were one or two there who might have gone against them tooth and blade, if it came to it, but not quite enough to take on all four Flies.

They leaned against the bar. Perro did the talking, while the others kept watch. They knew they were the center of attention. They weren't about to get jumped.

"These things," Perro bargained, "Will be worth a few coin. What will you give me for them?"

He offered up the Beetle's few possessions, a collection of scraps and gold-gilt things that they'd managed to snatch. The bartender at Buckers was used to this sort of trade. He took a professional glance at them. He shrugged, and offered a price that was a tenth, perhaps, of their worth.

"You can do better than that," Perro told him.

"Could, but won't," was the reply. "You try making a bargain with anyone else. See how far you get. This is a neutral house, chum. You might not get a knife in the back in here – but out there? Go on, try. I like a good laugh."

The bartender idly fingered a stolen watch and chain. "Besides, I know the slob who owns this. Want me to tell him where I found it?"

Perro had few options. They were low on money. They couldn't get back to their own fief, not easily. The attack on the Beetle had been a desperate risk, and it had worked, but only if they could sell what they had stolen.

"Done," he said, frowning. The bartender swept his takings into a box behind the bar, and counted out a few small coins in payment.

Perro's ragged companions were getting nervous. Several Twenty Fold had come into Buckers since their arrival. They were spreading out, standing watch over the doors, the windows. Each of them was armed.

"This is a neutral house?" Perro asked the barman.

"You're safe in here," he was told. "Outside's a different thing."

"Have you seen a girl, about her height," he pointed at Mara, "But more delicate in the face and body, with gold-brown hair? She'd be young, very young. She wouldn't be wearing fief marks."

"Can't say as I know her," the barman said. He had other things to do, and he wanted to be getting on with them.

"What about a man," Dimmock interrupted, "A Fly, moon-touched, who wears his sword in a left-hand draw?"

Perro could have throttled him. The bartender considered the question. "Well," he drawled, "I'm not saying I do and I'm not saying I don't . . ."

"You don't." This came from one of the Twenty Fold, who stood at the bar. "Half a measure, Tam."

The bartender served him his half measure and then went up to the other end of the bar, where glasses needed polishing.

The Twenty Fold man stared mockingly at the four Roof Dancers.

"Well now," he said. "What has te Geni done to you, I wonder?"

"Nothing," Perro replied.

"Well," said the Twenty Fold, and he glanced at a dried patch of blood on the floor. "He's done something to us. I don't see why we should be holding you . . . things . . . back, now is that right, lads?"

The Twenty Fold (by now there were a dozen in Buckers) laughed.

"We've got no interest in this te Geni, whoever he is."

"Don't you lie to me, you fatherless fuck." The Twenty Fold leaned close in, face to face with Perro. "I heard your boy asking. And you wanted a girl, delicate like, with brown hanks? Is that it?"

Perro kept himself totally still. "Is she with him, then?"

The Twenty Fold didn't say anything, for two heart-beats. Then he smiled. "She is."

"Then where is he?"

"Well, as to that, I couldn't say for certain. But I could guess. Pure Hands was where I saw him going, and he's got blood kin there, a boy named Dendil, lives with his girl not far from the stacks. You'll know the street by the drink-house sign; got a silver dragonfly hanging out front. No, don't you offer me money, chum. Think of this as a present."

The Twenty Fold stood aside, with an exaggerated bow. "Now, milord, why don't you piss off about your business? 'Cos I know you won't want to keep your dear girl waiting."

That got a laugh from all the Twenty Fold, which only grew louder as the four Roof Dancers hurriedly exited Buckers. "Get on your way, maggots! Don't think of coming back here, neither!"

The bartender, having polished as much as he could, wandered back. "So who's the girl, then?"

"How should I know, Tam? Nor care. Let 'em go piddling after te Geni if they like. He'll probably carve 'em all up into slivers, but they might cause him a few problems before that happens. Another half measure, if you would!"

Te Geni had been ducking the Ant for days.

Even so, Decendius was persistent. His scholar's habit made him easy to spot, but the frequency of his visits was beginning to wear te Geni down. When he saw Decendius loitering outside the Silver Dragonfly, obviously waiting for te Geni to exit, the duelist sighed and decided to bow to the inevitable.

"Come in and have a drink," he said, "But this can't take long. I've to meet my cousin soon."

"You're a hard man to find," the Ant said, as he sat down. "Was I a suspicious soul, I'd think you were trying to dodge me."

Te Geni grimaced.

Decendius smiled. He had the dark hair of a Shamesh and wore Collegium fashions. Clearly he was out of place in the Pure Hand stews, but he either didn't mind the risk or was a very good bluffer. For a man who didn't seem to be a fighter, he had no bodyguard, which given where he was, was a gamble indeed.

"My rates are high," te Geni said bluntly, in the hope of frightening the Ant off.

"I can pay whatever you ask, and more besides."

Te Geni gloomily considered that. Decendius probably could; he had the look of a man of means.

"I don't want trouble with Red Brothers," he said, "Or Pure Hands. Twenty Fold, I can live with, if it's someone on their end you want killed. Anything more than that, and you're out of my league."

“Nothing like that. If this goes the way I want it to, nobody will die, and you’ll get very rich, very quickly.”

Te Geni shook his head. “I like a quiet life, chum. I don’t think we’ll get on.”

“I say we will. What if I were to tell you that the job wasn’t in Helleron at all? That would change things, wouldn’t it?”

Te Geni was startled. “Where, then?”

“A small township, not far from here. It’s to the east, on the outskirts of the forest; a place on the road that leads to the Wasps and far away.”

“Never heard of it.”

“I didn’t think you would have. It’s just a trader’s haven.”

Te Geni shifted in his seat. “So what would you have me do there?”

Decendius glanced around the drinking-house, afraid he’d be overheard. “This is private business. I don’t think we should be talking about it here.”

“Here, or not at all. Make your case.”

Decendius sighed. “I was told you’d be difficult. What do you know about the Empire?”

“The Wasps? Not much. None of my business.”

Te Geni had heard the gossip. The Wasps were coming. The Wasps were massacring the Ants. The Wasps were being massacred by the Ants. The Ants had invaded Wasp lands. The Wasps were ten feet tall and breathed fire. The Wasps were four feet tall and pathetically afraid of mice. Politics bored him. He enjoyed travelers tales and always wanted to hear of foreign lands, but as for what foreigners did amongst themselves, he could care less.

“You’ve not seen them at work, as I have. You’d change your tune then. I’m telling you, there’ll come a day when they’re here, right here at your gates.”

“Never happen.” Te Geni was sure of that. Yet at the same time he was caught. There was something in the Ant’s steady, fanatic stare, something in the way he spoke and held himself. Te Geni noticed scars for the first time, around the Ant’s wrist and hand. He saw the Ant’s calloused palms, not the soft scholar’s grip that might have been expected. Whatever else might be said, Decendius believed, and his belief carried weight.

“You mark my words. The day will come when all of this,” he waved his arm, taking in the whole panorama, drinking-house and streets and stacks and all of it, “Is gone. What they won’t burn, they’ll take. The ones they don’t enslave, they’ll kill. They will come here. This place won’t be able to withstand them. And when that day comes, where will you be?”

“Far away from here,” te Geni said, with a conviction he didn’t feel.

Decendius shook his head. “I’m putting a group together. I want you to be part of it. There’s a job I want done. It’s simple, and shouldn’t take more than a score of days, but I need people like you – clever, capable people – as sword hands. Just in case things turn bad.”

“Oh yes?”

Decendius shrugged. “It might happen. If it doesn’t, and I don’t think it will, you stand to come out of this a moderately wealthy man. Certainly more than you could hope to earn in half a dozen duels, and with less risk.”

“No deal.” Te Geni stood up to leave.

Decendius grabbed his arm. “If it’s the money, I can get more.”

“It’s the job,” te Geni shook himself free. “I don’t want it.”

“What? You’re a mercenary, aren’t you? What difference does it make whether you fight here or in some border town?”

Te Geni snarled, “All the difference to me, chum. Look, you don’t seem to get this, so let me make it plain. I don’t do politics. I’ve spent all my life keeping well clear of every sneaking bastard who thinks I ought to be in with his little band of idiots. I don’t wear fief marks; you know what that makes me? Everyone’s target and nobody’s friend. Why? Because that’s how I like it. If I die, it’ll be in a fight I choose.

“Now,” he told the chastened Ant, “If you’ll excuse me, my lord, I’ve business of my own to attend to.”

Decendius watched him leave.

There were other duelists, Decendius knew; other fighters. That wasn’t the problem. He didn’t need another sword hand. He needed a thinker, someone who could be trusted to act on their own and lead others. There were precious few like that, in Helleron or anywhere else. Te Geni had come highly recommended.

Decendius wondered if there was something else he could offer, to change the duelist’s mind.

That night there was a dance.

Half the house was on the street. All the folk gathered outside, as the weather was warm, and drank, laughed, played music, and danced. It was the bright summer music that they played, the cheerful notes floating up into the night, and the young swayed with the sounds, while the old smiled and remembered other days. For many of them it had been a payday; the stack workers had collected that evening, returned home, scrubbed their faces and hands, put on their best and brightest, and went out to

celebrate. Their wives and children with them, they'd gathered in the streets, cracked open a few barrels (te Geni had not been backward, and had supplied a cask), and settled in to enjoy the long summer evening.

Te Geni smiled. He saw the girl, Jandi, who had been so eager to dance, she'd grabbed the first hand proffered, and was swinging the youth into the throng. He, poor man, was footless and helpless, but he tried to keep up with her. It was a sight to see, and te Geni chuckled as he watched her bustle him through the dance, and then off to the barrels for a drink.

Te Geni knew the signs. She was looking for a husband. She was young, pretty enough, but had no family, so any chances she had she'd have to make for herself. It had not escaped him that her young beau was one of the stack workers, dressed in slightly better, more expensive, finery than his fellows. He had thought he'd recognized the calculating gleam in Jandi's eye. Te Geni hoped the young man was quicker on the uptake than he appeared to be, else there'd be a wedding before the week was out.

Her expression changed. She ducked away from the barrels, leaving her beau behind as she hid in the crowd.

Te Geni lost sight of her, but at the same moment he saw what she had seen.

The four Roof Dancers that te Geni had encountered before were there at the dance. Te Geni was shocked; there weren't many Pure Hands there, but there were some. The halfbreeds were taking a huge risk. He couldn't understand what they could possibly be after.

Their leader spotted te Geni, and the group made their way through the crowd towards him.

Perro frowned. He saw the duelist, standing on his own not far from the musicians. He looked a capable fighter; this would have to be quick.

Perro didn't quite believe that the duelist knew anything about their quarry. Yet he couldn't afford to miss the chance.

Mara would be his shadow. Dimmock and Pitri would fight as one. It was their style, to fight in pairs. Dimmock and Pitri were fanning out to Perro's left. Dimmock was clever with a sword and Pitri was very fond of knives. Mara, Perro's partner, was the weakest of the group, which was why Perro led her. Perro was the strongest fighter; he could protect Mara if need be. Perro favored staves, and Mara had her ax.

"We want to talk, te Geni," Perro said. "This doesn't have to be a fight."

"You think so, my lord?" te Geni's hand was on his sword hilt.

Perro's staff was held out in front, defensive, covering his lower body against a sudden sweep.

"We mean no harm to anyone here," he said, loudly, for the benefit of the crowd. "We just want the girl. That's all."

Te Geni saw Dendil and his woman, Marta, off in the crowd. Dendil, no fighter, had his knife in his hand. It was Marta that caught te Geni's eye; she glared murderously at the Roof Dancer leader.

"Kill the bastards!" she screamed.

"Perro, I see her!" A stunted Roof Dancer with a ragged mouth was pointing into the crowd with his knife. "Over there!"

Someone swung at someone else; that was how it started, but afterward te Geni wouldn't be able to say who attacked first or with what. The crowd erupted, a swirling mob that beat and flailed, some attacking the Roof Dancers, others trying to get free without being trampled to death.

The Roof Dancers were much better fighters than te Geni would have credited. They fought back to back, each protecting their partner, and while none of them were duelists each knew their task and performed it well. Even the weakest of them was handy enough with her ax, and he saw they fought on the defensive, not attacking unless attacked. Even so, five of the crowd were on the cobbles groaning before te Geni had time to blink. Only one of the Roof Dancers, a fat one with Beetle blood, was harmed, and that but a scratch.

Te Geni moved in, his sword at high guard. He didn't have his buckler, but he didn't need it. A free hand was better, against a stave. The Roof Dancer leader was clever; his low guard switched to a darting attack, which te Geni leapt over, his wings giving him height as he slashed out, hoping for a face cut. As the Roof Dancer moved his head, te Geni's free hand went low, grabbing the stave, holding it, as he moved in close. That was the staves' weakness; a close in fight went the swordsman's way, six times in eight.

Te Geni barely snatched his hand away in time, as the Roof Dancer female's ax swept in, protecting her leader. Yet she was foolish; now the two of them were tangled in the fight, too close together, and the leader was open. Te Geni lunged, caught him where leg met body, felt his sword sink down to the bone.

Now it was four on one, and it was te Geni's turn to retreat as the Roof Dancers advanced on him in a body. He put his back to the wall, fearful of being overwhelmed, but as he stepped back the four of them took flight. They kept their leader up, and rose to the rooftops.

The fliers in the crowd yelled a good fight, threatened to follow, but none of them had the heart for it. They buzzed, made noises, but did nothing that might put them in harm's way. Te Geni wiped his blade clean and sheathed his sword. Four on one was not his fight.

He heard Marta wailing.

Dendil was down. His strong body had been hacked across the chest, and a deep wound at his collar was gushing dark blood.

Te Geni knelt beside him. Marta's eyes begged him. "The apocathery is four streets away," he told her. "Lie still, cousin."

Te Geni staunched the wound as best he could. Dendil had lost too much blood. His face was bone white, his eyes sunken. He gripped te Geni's hand fiercely. The grip weakened. The rattle shook his throat. His last breath came.

Marta screamed.

High up on the rooftops, Perro groaned, his face twisted in agony.

The blow had gone deep. His leg was starting to numb. They'd tied it up as best they could, but none of them knew anything of surgery. Perro thought he might live; he'd had worse cuts, but the threat of infection . . . He knew all this and they didn't. He was boss. He didn't say a word about it.

"Dimmock, you're second," he said. "If you have to leave me, then you leave me, understood?"

Dimmock's face was a mask. "Yes."

"Now," Perro said, turning to Pitri. "That was a pretty mess. Are you sure you saw her?"

"Sure as I'm alive," Pitri said. "No mistake, and she knew me, too. She ran off. I saw who she hid behind, tried to get to her, but the bugger came at me like a madman. I had to cut him twice before he fell. By then she was gone. I think she went into the tenement."

"Te Geni's probably hiding her," Dimmock said, "Maybe he has a bolt-hole here, got her snug away. He wasn't expecting us, though. He'd have kept her hid if he knew we were coming."

That worried Perro. Te Geni didn't strike him as a fool. Yet te Geni had seen the Roof Dancers, knew they were on the prod, could probably guess why, yet if this was to be believed he let her out anyway. Perro cursed his luck; if he'd known, they could have kept hid up at roof level, only coming down to snatch her off the street.

"What do we do?" This from Mara. "Even if we take her now, how do we get back with her, now that Perro's down?"

"You don't worry about that," Perro ordered, "It's me, and Dimmock's second. We worry about that. You do as you're told."

That silenced her.

"We stick with the plan," he said, "And the plan is, get her back, no matter what. We know where she's hiding now, and we know who with. We watch. Either she or he will slip up sometime. Then we take her and run."

“Where the hell have you been?” Marta raged. “It’s been four days!”

Te Geni had entered by the window. It was pitch dark outside, a blustery rainswept day that threatened to unleash thunder and lightning but in the end only grumbled high up in the clouds.

“We buried Dendil yesterday,” she told him, “Had the wake here, then the tashers took him off. You could at least have been here for that!”

“Probably,” te Geni replied. He was wet through. There was a fire going; he warmed himself by it, but didn’t take off his cloak. It hung, damp and oozing, close around him.

“Tell me,” he asked her, “Who is Phibo?”

Marta’s rage was still simmering. “I don’t know.”

“That’s what I thought. Nobody knows.”

She stared at him.

“Nobody knows any Beetle by that name, still less a moneylender, in Red Hands fief. Which is a peculiar thing, because I remember Dendil telling me that the only reason your pretty little cousin with the light brown hair was here, was on account of a Beetle by that name, a Red Hands man.”

He smiled at her. “Not only that, but they’ve never heard of Jandi either. Or her brother, if there was one. Gossip like that would have spread, you know.”

He stepped towards her, hand on the hilt of his sword.

“So who is she?”

Marta backed away. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“I don’t ask twice. My cousin is dead. My blood. You ought to know what that means.”

He caught a glimpse of brown tresses; Jandi was hiding behind the door frame.

“It means I’ll fight the one who killed him. But then you’ve been counting on that, haven’t you? Now Dendil’s gone, I’m the only one who can keep Jandi safe. And to you, that’s very important.”

His hand gripped his sword hilt. “But I don’t know why.”

“You wouldn’t.”

“I do not *like* these games, Marta. I fight for pay, *not* politics or fief games or any other *stupid* little causes you might have got yourself caught up in.”

“Please!”

“That is not an answer.”

“Don’t hurt her!”

Te Geni stepped back. “I wondered when you would show your face, Jandi.”

She looked him in the eye. “I thought you’d gone for good.”

“I almost did. But then, Dendil . . . You know what it means, when blood dies. I can’t leave it like this, not now. Then I find he’s lied to me, and he did it because of her,” he pointed at Marta, “And she did it because of you. Why are you so important?”

“She’s my sister!” Marta blurted out.

Te Geni knew it was a lie. She was too quick to say it, too eager to be believed. Yet Jandi took it and used it. The look on her face said it all. Now Jandi would insist the lie was true. He could threaten Marta, perhaps hurt her, but that wouldn’t change the lie.

Besides, Marta was Dendil’s woman. If he hurt her, it would be the same as hurting him.

“So.” He decided to play with the lie. Perhaps it would lead somewhere useful. “Your sister has enemies, and they live in a western fief.”

“Yes,” Jandi replied.

“Powerful enemies? Possibly . . . but then a powerful man wouldn’t need to hire four killers who stand out in a crowd, would he? No, a powerful man wouldn’t use Roof Dancers. Nor would he send them so far out of their fief. He’d hire someone closer to home.”

He watched Jandi’s face intently. She was clever; she let little slip. Yet there had been something, when he mentioned the Roof Dancers by name.

“Yet Perro has come all this way . . .”

That was a hit; he knew as soon as he said it. Her face twisted. Fear, panic, and something else; something just out of reach, that shouldn’t have been there at all. He put it away in the back of his mind to chew over later.

“You . . . know him?”

“I? No. But the Red Brothers, they know him. They told me he’d been on their fief, and who he was looking for. But they didn’t know why. To come this far, for you . . . that takes dedication, I think. This is a personal grudge.”

She stared at him, defiant. “And what if it is?”

He sighed. “I’m in this now, up to my neck. I just need to know this: if I deal with these four, if I get rid of them, will there be more? Am I going to spend the next year watching my back, waiting for one of Perro’s friends to take a shot at me?”

“No.”

That was true, which surprised te Geni; or at least, she hadn't lied. Whether her not lying was the same thing as truth was a matter too knotty for him to want to untangle.

“Then that is what I will do. But, Marta? After this thing, we do not know each other. You were Dendil's woman; you're nothing to me. Understood?”

He turned to leave the same way he'd entered. Jandi reached out for him. He stopped, and glared at her.

“Tell him . . .” She hesitated, “Tell him this is for the best. Make him understand. I want to stay here, to marry here.”

She gripped his sword hand tightly. She had a birthmark on her right hand, he noticed, just between thumb and forefinger.

“Tell him I will never go back!”

He disengaged from her. “I will tell him all this, my lady.”

“He's coming,” Dimmock told the others.

They hid amongst the smokestacks, up high where few dared fly. The stacks belched black smoke all day and all night. It was an easy place to get lost in.

Te Geni flew a careful circuit, making sure he saw all four of them. Perro, lying on his back, his leg suppurating by now; he needed a physician. Dimmock, sword at the ready. The other two unarmed, but wary.

Te Geni settled, his sword in its scabbard for now.

“You got my word, then,” he said.

“Speak your piece,” Dimmock replied. He was tired, on edge. He wanted so badly to be gone, back in his own fief, where things made sense.

Te Geni looked at Perro. The Roof Dancer leader was very badly ill. The wound needed treatment, but would he leave? Te Geni knew it would be hard to make him go.

“She will not go back with you.”

The little one, the woman, stepped up to te Geni. “That doesn't matter! If he says, she goes!”

“Mara . . .”

“No, Dimmock! You know we can’t leave without her! He –”

Perro coughed. “What did she say?”

Te Geni looked him in the face. “She said she would stay here. Marry here. She said she’d never go back with you.”

“Marry.” It was a blow to him.

“Friend,” te Geni knelt beside him. “Is this truly what you want? You’ve come far, and suffered much. Yet at the end of it all, what is there? If she will not go, you forcing her will not change her. The minute you let down your guard, she’d run again.

“She can pass here, can’t she?”

Roof Dancers; they were all half breeds, the blood crime written on their faces for anyone to see. Yet it was not always so easy to tell. Some of them, they favored their Fly blood. Some few could pass as a pure.

So long as she was always on her guard, never letting slip anything about her Roof Dancer past, she could live life as she pleased, with no guilt showing.

Te Geni heard the movement, pivoted, throwing himself awkwardly to one side. The ax blow was badly done, yet even so it came very close. Te Geni fell to the ground. Mara stood over him.

“You bastard,” she hissed, and she readied for another strike.

“Mara!”

She hesitated.

“I’m in charge,” Perro coughed. “Dimmock is second. You obey.”

“But –”

“*You obey.*”

The ax dropped.

Te Geni got to his feet. Mara would not look at him. Dimmock was impassive. Ragged Pitri was, if anything, relieved, and far too bad a bluffer not to let it show.

“Friend,” Perro said, “Would you give her this?”

He held out a ring. It was made of battered, cheap gold, bought for a few coins at a tender’s stall, no doubt. “It ought to be hers, by rights.”

Te Geni took it. “I bid you farewell, friend. Safe travels.”

Te Geni flew, and didn't look back.

Later, in Dendil's rooms, he gave the ring to Jandi. He half expected her to throw it away, or tell him to keep it. She surprised him. She put it in a pocket of her dress.

She asked no questions, and was glad when he left.

Soon after, te Geni took Decendius' commission. He needed to leave Helleron, to clear his head. It was some time before he returned.

When he did, his Ant companion gravely injured and in need of a place to hide, the city had by then been taken. Auxilian Drephos was in command. The city's rats were being burned out of their holes, one fief at a time. However the great Colonel did not personally attend every execution, nor did he care overmuch how the example was made, so long as it was done.

Some, and the commander in charge of the Bledvere Cross effort was one such, were creative.

It was this Wasp's view that punishments alone were insufficiently instructive. To drive home his point, he nailed his enemies to the wall. However rather than put their heads on high, as by now te Geni had seen some others do, this one had a fancy for a different kind of grotesquery.

In every street, at every door, garlands of hands sprouted, each severed at the wrist and nailed neatly through the palm.

As te Geni walked, he remembered.

Decendius, pale and earnest. *They will come here. This place won't be able to withstand them. And when that day comes, where will you be?*

There were no fief marks on this street. It was unlike anything he remembered; it was as if his home were not his home any more. *This isn't a blood insult, y'know, but it's enough to get people talking.*

Was this where they'd held the dance? He could hear the music in his head. *My wife has a cousin; Jandi is her name. She and her brother live in Red Brothers fief. . .*

She's my sister! A cry of grief, long forgotten.

One small hand among many, a birthmark – or perhaps just a mark – between thumb and forefinger.

Tell him this is for the best. Make him understand. I want to stay here, to marry here.

I don't wear fief marks; he remembered telling Decendius, you know what that makes me? Everyone's target and nobody's friend. Why? Because that's how I like it.

If I die, it'll be in a fight I choose.

Te Geni sighed. His feet ached. Decendius lay, hidden and injured, in a safehouse, but there were very few places in Helleron that could be considered safe. Soon they would have to move on.

He walked down the street, looking neither left nor right, and by that means contrived not to see any hands at all.