

A Necessary Void

by Grahame Jones

She was still stood there, packing, when the door burst open. Two Wasp soldiers shouldered their way into the room, swords and sting-hands at the ready. Koyu's head snapped up. Oh well, here we go –

A figure moved through into the room, and there he was; Major Chankor, a damaged maniac, full of wrath. He filled the tiny taverna bedroom like a deranged draft-beetle loose in a grain store. He smiled, sourly, painfully. "Found you."

Koyu froze, or appeared to. She had only seconds, had to get this exactly right.

There was nothing more dangerous than an angry Wasp.

Chankor stared at her for a long moment. Black flames of madness danced in his eyes. Koyu's gaze was drawn to where the Wasp major's right arm ended in a puffy, blood-soaked bandage. One hand he couldn't sting from any more.

Provoke him. "Hello, Major, I must say I like the new look. Tell me, are you still 'utterly indifferent'?" She grinned, cheekily.

Chankor's eyes narrowed with hate. "Get it," He snapped at his subordinates. "Don't worry about damaging it."

The taverna bedroom was small, wood-planked and rather cramped, a situation Koyu was relying on as the two soldiers rounded the bed, faces blank. One at a time, no room otherwise. Good. "Don't take any chances. You've seen what it can do. Look out for those damned pipes." Chankor's voice was low, gravelly. Tired. His eyes flickered towards the pile of personal detritus on the bed.

The book still lay balanced on her boot. She moved her foot back slightly, judging the angle. Eyes towards the soldiers, face set in a careful expression of fear. Muscles tensed, ready to fly, to hide in the darkness. That old Roach instinct.

When the first soldier was almost within grabbing distance Koyu kicked upward, hard. The book was flicked into the soldier's face with an audible smack. He reeled backwards with a muffled cry, crashing into his partner and unbalancing both of them. The book bounced off the wall. There was tumbling and the sound of metal impacting on wood.

Koyu had less than seconds. No time to waste. Chankor, incandescent with fury, raised his right arm, evidently having forgotten there was no longer a hand on the end of it. Koyu span around to face the open window. Tensed thigh muscles. Leapt. Erupted with a shout into the cool night air.

Falling with no flight-plan or much sense of direction, Koyu landed badly, cracking her left shoulder and bouncing. She gave a little cry as she came to a stop in the dirt, then bit it back, put it down there in that hollow place where she locked away her fear, her worries for her family. *No time. Keep moving.*

Wearily she dragged herself to her feet. The night-time street was quiet, as it would be during curfew. A few Wasp functionaries and auxillians had stopped to gawp at the small female Roach-kindens who had just been launched from an upstairs window, but thankfully nobody dared intervene. Koyu began to move as she glimpsed one of the soldiers in the room behind her, reaching out a questing, punishing hand.

She ran, kicking up little brown clouds in the dusty ground, her left arm dangling uselessly by her side. An astonished Grasshopper-kindens stood rooted to the spot, and she roared at him, a furious, feral yell, causing the terrified man to leap eight

feet backwards just to get out of her way. She could feel it, in the prickling hairs on the back of her neck, the danger behind her; any second –

- and *now!*

Koyu threw herself to one side as a fizzing ball of lethal golden energy blasted past her, to explode in the dirt mere inches from where she had been. She rolled with the fall, using the momentum to swing herself up to her feet again. There was an alley beneath the shadowed awnings of the buildings on the other side of the street. She could make it. The Wasp soldier would take a few seconds to modify his aim, and as long as the other one wasn't on blasting detail as well – Oh, scrabble and *scratch!*

She ducked as a second Wasp-sting singed her scalp, the lethal spark smashing the shutters of a nearby window and bursting into angry flame in the room on the other side. And then there was the alley, not so much a thoroughfare as a tiny gap between two abandoned houses. A tight squeeze, but nothing arduous for a Roach-kinde. Darting to the safety of the shadows, she eased herself into the gap, vanishing into the body of the city like an angry salt tear in a bowl of wine. She'd done it.

She rested, finally, only a little way down the alley, betting that the Wasps would discontinue their pursuit of so hopeless a target and instead turn their attentions to the abandoned room. She couldn't afford to get too far away – she needed to see what happened.

Her nostrils were full of the stench of her own singed hair, and her left arm hung at an awkward, painful angle, bothering her. Evidently dislocated. Bracing it against the rough stone wall of the alley, she popped it back into position with a grimace of pain. There. No big deal. Her kinde were a sturdy breed.

She peered cautiously from the alley. A troop of industrious Beetle-kinde was busy dealing with the fire, passing buckets of water back and forth in a chain. The taverna opposite was silent, light and movement detectable in one room only.

Koyu watched, absently pulling a long wooden splinter - formerly part of the window frame - from her bruised arm and chewing on it thoughtfully. All gone now, she thought. Her spare clothing, her remstick, even that silly book. Just about everything she had in the world, except for the most important things. She wondered if they were all right. She wondered how she had ever come to get into this murderous, tangled-up mess.

* * *

It had been only three nights earlier, the evening of the Mustering, when Koyu had been clambering up the rise out in the wilderness of the Commonweal, the sack on her back bulging with looted treasures. A slightly-built Roach-kinde female of twenty-six summers, Koyu was, in her own estimation at least, one of the finest thieves in the Commonweal – lately one of the finest scavengers in the Commonweal, as there were precious few people to steal from any more.

The Wasp Empire's brutal war with the Dragonfly Commonweal was finally over after twelve long years, the entirety of Koyu's adult life, and yet peace bought with the brutal suppression of a country and its people – even a country Koyu had never considered herself truly part of – brought no comfort or release. She would sit up front of her family's caravan, hands loosely on the reins of Fantelbaum, their old draft-beetle, and watch the scarred, burning countryside slip slowly by. Burnt-out farms, abandoned villages, the low thrum of terror in the air. Stacked wooden cages crammed over-full with dead or dying prisoners. Smoke and gloom, the palpable taste

of despair. The Wasp Empire had won, and in that conquest the people of the Eastern Commonweal realised just how right they had been to resist it with everything they had.

But there were always compensations. Even an army as disciplined as that of the Wasp-kinde couldn't keep an eye on every square inch, and there were opportunities aplenty for an enterprising young Roach, a tan-skinned, white-haired ragamuffin of a race traditionally despised - or, more to her advantage, completely ignored - by those who thought of themselves as her betters.

Koyu struggled quietly up the rise, the sack slowing her down. She was late: It was near full-night, and the Mustering would be in full swing by now. The twice-yearly meeting of all the local Roach families, a time of discussion, news-swapping and setting of policy for the elders; a time of music and amorous dancing for the youngsters; A time of laughter and merry inebriation by everyone old enough to hold a bowl. It was Koyu's favourite time of year, and she was determined not to miss any of it. That afternoon, as the covered wagons of her people had begun to accumulate in the shady hollow of their agreed Mustering-place, Koyu had absented herself, leaving her two children casually in the care of her uncle, and scuttled off into the surrounding countryside to do some foraging. The ancestors had been smiling on her, too - a whole village, complete but utterly abandoned, had awaited her. Most of the food had decayed, but enough remained to make several return trips worthwhile, maybe even a mass sortie. In the meantime, she carried in her sack a dozen fairly fresh turnips, several volumes of whimsical romances (Her Uncle had acquired a taste for Ravustel's *Days of Lore* fantasies, and Koyu had been overjoyed to find a full set) and, best of all, a full flagon of softgrass wine. Hefting the bag, Koyu grinned to herself. She hoped there would be plenty of young men to choose from at this Mustering - she'd been too long on the road with her dusty uncle and those two squalling brats. Time for some serious fun.

She reached the crest of the rise, looked down at the caravans, puzzled at the silence. A couple of fires burning desultorily, casting vast, haunted shadows on the rocky sides of the hollow. Where was everyone? She looked to her left - gave a little squeak of terror -

- and was halfway back down the rise, hidden within a coppice of drab trees, before her brain had caught up with what instinct had already decided several seconds ago. What had she seen? Black and gold armour -

Wasp kinde!

Koyu hunkered down in the darkness, heart racing, hoping they had not heard her. That old Roach instinct, to run, to hide in shadows - *Stop it! Think!*

There was no good reason why Wasp soldiers would gatecrash a Roach Mustering, none at all. Her imagination went to the darkest places - drunken revelry, hey, let's have a little fun with the Roaches, then - Oh, no. Koyu tasted vomit at the back of her throat. Lucky, they'd been too lucky for too long, dodging the explosions as the country burned around them -

No, be quiet. No time. Move.

Koyu skirted around the other side of the hollow, lower but with better vegetation cover and hiding places. Using all her guile, she slipped into the Roach encampment under the very noses of the Wasp guards. Hunkering down by the wheels of a neighbouring family's wagon, she surveyed the situation. Six Wasp soldiers stood in a loose circle around the encampment's central fire, warming themselves and looking bored. Fully armed and armoured, but no method of transportation that she

could see. The caravans around her were silent, the occupants present but hiding. Not getting involved, thought Koyu with an inward sneer. What her kinden were best at. The only light emanated through the canvas covering of her uncle's caravan. She made out shadowed movement within, someone pacing up and down. That was very worrying. She had to get closer.

Keeping a weather eye on the soldiers, she made her way around the edge of the encampment. Fantelbaum the beetle huffed and gave a low chirrup as he recognised her.

"Hush." She said, placing a hand on the beast's giant head, picking lumps of dried moss from the joints between sections of his carapace. She had brought the sack with her – she'd thought of hiding it in the trees, but had no idea if she'd be able to return, and she certainly wasn't leaving it – and from it she offered the great beetle a turnip. He took it from her with surprisingly gentle mandibles, crunching softly. "Now. Be quiet, huh?" Leaving him, she crept alongside the caravan, on the side facing away from the soldiers. She heard the low murmuring of voices. What were they saying? Where were her children?

She pressed her ear to the canvas. Someone sounded angry. And was that her name? They were talking about *her*?

She stepped backwards in alarm – straight into the arms of a Wasp-kindens soldier. He held her arms in a fierce grip. She looked up into his hard, satisfied face.

"Got you."

* * *

The interior of the caravan was stuffy and overheated by the excess of bodies. Koyu was thrust through the interior flap, quickly taking in the tableau before her with a lurch of silent horror.

The front half of the cart, sectioned off from the sleeping areas at the rear, contained her family's crated up belongings and items for trade. A large, important-looking Wasp-kindens sat on one of the crates, flanked by two soldiers. On a third crate, illuminated by the flickering light of three unstable lanterns, was her uncle Shimovar, hands tied in front of him, one side of his lined, nut-brown face purple with fresh bruising. On the small table between them stood two bowls of wine, the one on her Uncle's side mostly empty, the other barely touched.

The soldier who had caught her held her arms behind her tightly, thrusting her forward into the cramped space. The General or whatever-he-was looked up in irritated surprise. "Ah," he said mildly, "I assume this is the young lady we have been seeking."

"I'd bet good gold Imperials on, it," snarled the other, "Creeping around outside like a baggage-train weevil. Look at her." The leading soldier did so, carefully and seriously, up and down like she was a slightly disappointing investment. Koyu held her head high, submitting almost proudly to his gaze. She knew that she was a fine specimen of Roach womanhood; small and slim, her creamy-white hair falling in a sleek bell to the length of her chin. Smooth, tanned skin, a sharp-featured face only missing true beauty by the merest whisker, and most of all those huge olive eyes, twinkling and ripe with mischief. Oh, let him look. She'd kill herself before she let any of them touch her.

"Yes," said the leader eventually, "She matches the description quite well."

"The fairest flower in all the Roach nation, according to those scum in the other wagons." Said the man who held her, voice full of sneering contempt.

“I could find better in the cheapest brothel in Capitas,” chuckled the Wasp-kind to the general’s left. “Better tits on a goat.” The general’s head snapped up. “Leave,” He said. “Leave now.”

“But all I said-”

“I will not repeat myself, soldier. You are on latrine duty for the next tenday. Now get out before I have you whipped.” With poor grace, the soldier exited the wagon. The lead Wasp sighed, his broad face sunk in an expression of frustrated anger. “I will not have such language in my presence.” He snapped, “And you-” here he looked at Koyu’s captor – “Lieutenant Chankor, would do well to remember that.”

“Of course, sir”, said the other quietly.

“And we are not here to be unpleasant,” he continued. “Let her go.”

Koyu’s arms were released. She rubbed the circulation back into them sullenly.

“Please,” said the General, “Take a seat. We only wish to talk.” Koyu seriously doubted that, but could find no compelling reason to disobey, so she sat down on a square-topped trunk next to her uncle. She looked up into his old, worried eyes. “Are you all right?” She whispered. “Your face...”

“It’s not important,” Murred her uncle. “Oh Koyu, I’m so sorry...”

“Enough!” Snapped the thin Wasp identified as Lieutenant Chankor. “Speak only when spoken to!”

“Lieutenant,” said his superior in a mildly warning tone. The other fell silent.

The larger Wasp stared at her for a long moment. Then, “I am Captain Dralik,” he said, “Of the Imperial Ninth Army. Chankor here is my adjutant.” He leaned forward to add emphasis to his next words. “Roach-kind Koyu of the family Rusidae, we need your help.”

* * *

“Bayan Lumai!” Koyu squeaked in astonishment. “But how am *I* supposed to help? He’s ancient history.”

The general – no, the *captain*, she corrected – took a deep draught of wine. Now that he had his quarry he seemed to have relaxed. Replacing the bowl on the little table, he continued, “Not so, my dear. Very *recent* history. We believe that he has in his possession an... artefact... of great importance to the Wasp Empire. Our spies have confirmed that he has returned to Shan Sharoli. You were there some years ago, I believe?”

Koyu nodded, and Dralik continued, “The rest of the Imperial Ninth under General Gragau have the city surrounded. Nobody can get in or out. But we still can’t seem to *find* him.” Here the Captain reached for the gourd and poured himself more wine, taking a deep, satisfied swig. “Not bad,” He said. “I wonder where you stole it from. Now, time is of the essence in this mission, and so I have been charged with the task of securing your assistance – you, who know Bayan, perhaps better than anyone.”

“Nobody really *knows* him,” She said, her head reeling. Lumai, after all this time. “And who told you where to find me?” Roach Musterings were kept a careful secret, advertised by certain signs and symbols on walls, trees and rocks, known only to others of her kinden. Dralik waved the question away. “You know him,” he repeated, “And you know the ways of the Dragonfly-kind. Perhaps he has learned some Roach tricks as well. We require you to accompany us to Shan Sharoli, and find him for us.”

Koyu shook her head. This was unbelievable. Five years gone, and still getting her into trouble. What a silly, flighty young girl she had been, full of rebellion and boredom at her family's endless travelling. Parents dead, nothing to hold her, she had said goodbye to her uncle at the gates of Shan Sharoli some seven years previously, intending to make a life for herself in the town. There she'd met Bayan Lumai, former Dragonfly prince, or so he'd claimed, and they'd had fun for nearly two years, thieving and drinking and making love – until the day she'd awoken in their grimy squat to find that he'd gone, without a single word, leaving her with the remains of their haul, of which he had taken the best part, and a bellyful of twins, of which he'd taken nothing but his pleasure in generating them.

Oh, Lumai. Scrabble and *Scratch!*

“You will accompany us to the city and locate Bayan for us,” Captain Dralik continued, “After which you will be released to return...” He looked disdainfully around him, “home. Your family will be held here as collateral to ensure your cooperation.” He drained his bowl of wine, “For which I apologise, but, as I'm sure you understand, we cannot assume your loyalty.” He got to his feet. “We will leave you now, to get some rest and prepare yourself. But please don't try any mischief. I am not an unkind man, but this is too important a matter for such things as mercy to be a factor.” He scratched at his chin, and left without another word, the other Wasps following after.

Some time later Koyu stood in the centre of the encampment, kicking earth over the remains of the fire. It seemed that no-one else would do it. Some Mustering. She turned with a sigh – straight into Lieutenant Chankor, who took her casually by the throat, lifting her bodily into the air. “Let me get one thing quite clear.” He said, “I don't care about that old fool Dralik, and I am utterly indifferent to you or your family's suffering. Cross me, and I'll have them carved into beetle-chum.” With a twist of his shoulder he flung her to the ground. “Bear that in mind,” He said, and stalked arrogantly away, leaving Koyu choking, weeping, in the cool dry mud.

* * *

The night passed slowly and sleeplessly, Koyu falling into a light doze only an hour or two before dawn. At first light she poked her head out of the rear wagon flap to find a scene of satisfying desertion; the other covered wagons had vanished in the night, simply melted into the trees like the Moth-ghosts of Lore. Wasp soldiers stood in huddles, muttering to each other, looking around them in disbelief. Oh, somebody was going to catch it good for this. Koyu smiled despite herself; there were no people like the Roaches for the sudden disappearing act. What others might see as cowardice, they saw as pragmatism, plain and simple; the Wasp empire might be short a few dozen fresh slaves today. Her people would remain free, even if Koyu and her family would be lost.

This last thought quite putting a dampener on her mood, she dressed quickly, in tough leather trousers and boots, and a rough linen shirt belted at the waist.

There was movement outside, and harsh voices – one of the Wasps talking to, or at, her uncle. She didn't have much time. Taking a travelling bag from where it hung on a nail hammered into one of the wagon's supporting ribs, she pushed into it some spare clothes, a couple of books, her melodicum pipes and various other sundries. She looked at the pipes again, a Roach instrument made from a curved line

of pipe reeds of descending length. There was one more thing she needed. It would be a risk, but her whole life was a risk from now on.

Slinging the pack across her shoulders, she emerged from the wagon, past the Wasp sentry stationed outside, into a day as silent as morning, beneath a sky the colour of old sorrows. She couldn't see Chankor anywhere, for which she was thankful.

Turning to the sentry, she asked; "How long? Until we leave?" The Wasp looked at her briefly, his mouth twisted with loathing, and looked away without saying a word. "Fine," said Koyu. "If anyone asks, I'm just going to relieve myself. I'll be a few minutes. I'm not running off."

Without waiting for an answer, or absence of the same, she stalked off into the bushes. On her way down here last night she had seen something of great interest, and it would be well worth finding again. Plus, of course, she really did need to pee.

It took her a few minutes to find them – a nest of red centipede young, already approaching a foot long each, writhing around inside the bole of a dead tree. Using the trailing edge of her shirt Koyu carefully took hold of one and lifted it out. It struggled in her hand, poisonous mandibles clacking as it tried to attack her face.

"Koyu? Where are you? We're waiting... and so are your family." Chankor's voice echoed through the foliage, the implicit threat unmistakable.

"Just a minute!" She shouted back. She was going to have to work quickly.

They were all waiting when she came out of the trees. The Wasp soldiers, all eight of them lined up in a square formation in two rows of four. Chankor at the front, facing them; a little further back, Dralik in full armour, with her uncle and her two children in reluctant attendance.

"Hello Fryek! Hello Froku!" She said with false bonhomie. The two halfbreed children looked at their mother in annoyance. "*I'm* Fryek!" Said one, "*He's* Froku."

"Are you? Oh."

Shimovar stepped forward and hugged his niece under the impatient gaze of the Wasp captain. "Come back to me. Remember Tantamon. Remember what I told you." Was all he said, but when he stepped back with a slight smile on his face, Koyu realised he'd slipped something into the waistband of her trousers; something long and wooden, perfectly hidden under her shirt. A blowpipe?

"If we're all ready?" Snapped Dralik. Turning to his subordinate he shouted, "Lieutenant Chankor! Prepare to fall out!" and then looked at Koyu again. "Now listen," he said. "There's no need to worry. If you do this thing for us, you'll be back with your family in a few days. The Wasp Empire rewards good service."

Koyu was already familiar with the rewards that the Wasp empire meted out to so-called "lesser" Kinden – she'd seen the lines of filthy, dispirited slaves, cowering under the whips and taunts of the Slave Corps in their full-face helmets; seen entire villages put to the torch, the inhabitants taken like so much booty. The Wasps had no allies; instead they had chattels, sometimes favoured chattels called auxillians, but chattels nonetheless. And that would be her fate, unless she did something about it.

Of course, on these thoughts, she kept her own counsel behind a brief, trusting smile.

Minutes later, after giving each of her children a diffident kiss, they were marching off, Koyu struggling to keep up. Off to Shan Sharoli, a place she'd never wanted to see again.

After a few minutes' walking they came to a clearing, in which Koyu was relieved to see were tethered horses. The two Wasps attending them were ordered back to the encampment, to assist the other two stationed there in keeping her family

prisoners. Then they mounted up and set off. Koyu, a good rider, was just happy they weren't marching the entire way, and settled into the saddle of her gentle brown mare with a grateful sigh.

* * *

The convoy moved out of the woodlands and into the open country of the Commonweal. It would be a two-day ride to the town, located nearly thirty miles North-West of the great Dragonfly city of Falme Dae. Koyu was determined to turn this time to good account. She thought she might start with Dralik, who seemed an uncommonly civilised Wasp to say the least, and after a couple of hours' ride she spurred her beast along until she drew level with the Captain.

"Captain," She nodded to him, casually using a Wasp military honorific that meant absolutely nothing to her.

"Miss Koyu." If he was annoyed by her moving place in the formation, he gave no hint. Neither did he say anything else, facing forward as though all he could see was the dirt road stretching ahead of them.

This may well have been to save his own sensibilities, as they were passing a scene of typically Wasp-kindens atrocity. Six stout wooden poles stood in a formation of X-shapes in the grass to the side of the road. To each X was tied a corpse, several weeks dead, by the look and the smell. Blackened flesh hung in strips from the skulls, the eye sockets picked clean by birds and flies. Cadaverous ribcages could be glimpsed through shredded garments and, disgusted as she was, Koyu couldn't turn away.

"I must confess," She said with a sneer in her tone she couldn't help, "I do love what you've done with the place." Dralik gave a sigh, but said nothing. Not a useful avenue for conversation, she understood. Instead, she asked something she was genuinely curious about. "So, what is this thing you're looking for? This thing Lumai's stolen?" Her voice dropped to a whisper. "Is it magic?"

Dralik laughed then, shaking his head at inapt Roach-kindens ignorance. "There's no such thing as magic. And if I told you what it was, you might be tempted to take it for yourself."

"Not with my family back there," She snapped – otherwise, of course, he'd have been absolutely right. "Look, it's in your interests to tell me. I mean, what if I saw it and didn't recognise it?"

Dralik turned to look at her for the first time. He was a handsome man, Koyu decided, perhaps fifteen years older than her, but with surprisingly merry blue eyes and a broad forehead that lent him distinction. "Very well," He said, "What you do with the information is entirely on your own head. We are searching for the Eye of Shon Fhor." He stopped there, as if Koyu should know by the name what in the land-and-sky he was talking about. Obviously he didn't realise he was dealing with an uneducated Roach who had learned to read off the side of packaging crates, she thought sourly.

"Which is?"

"Oh." He shifted in his saddle. "It's a sort of amber-coloured jewel, some ancient relic of the Dragonfly ruling families. It's wanted by the Imperial household, which means that, come what may, we get it."

"Why do they want it?"

Dralik shrugged, which Koyu understood to mean, “Didn’t ask, don’t care.” She changed the subject. “S’cuse me for saying it, but you don’t seem to me like a typical Wasp soldier.”

He smiled again, bitterly. “It would seem not. Perhaps why I’ve been allocated this wonderful assignment.” He indicated behind him at his subordinate. “Chankor is though, the very model.” His voice dropped to a whisper which Koyu had to strain to hear. “He was seconded to the regiment half a tenday ago. I’m sure he’s-” He shook his head. There was an unvoiced word there that Koyu was missing. “Don’t cross him, Koyu. That’s the best advice I can give you.”

She nodded. It was advice she intended to take to heart.

The horses and their riders plodded on. As evening fell the Wasps stopped to set up an overnight camp in a clearing to the side of the road. A fire was lit as the day failed. Koyu dismounted and walked in circles, stretching her fatigued muscles. The stick or whatever it was her Uncle had given her was digging into her thigh, and she’d had no opportunity to examine it. She went to sit by the fire, and was handed a field-ration of bread and dried beetle-meat, rather tasteless but considerably more welcome than the raw turnip she’d had for breakfast. A flagon of weak beer was passed around, from which she took her grateful fill. Then she had an idea and reached for her pack.

Soon the air was filled with the tender harmonies of her melodicum pipes. She played a simple reel she knew by heart, a typical longing-for-lost-love thing, and the notes reached out to the tough Wasp soldiers surrounding her on both sides. *Cry, you bastards*, she thought. They did not, but at least they listened with appreciation – apart from Chankor, who sat there polishing his sword, shooting glares of pure malice across the fire at her. *Oh dear*, she thought. *I’m really not going to win with that one, am I?*

The recitation finished, and Dralik got to his feet. “Thank you, Miss Koyu, that was... rather wonderful.” Was that a tear in his eye? Oh, say it was! “Now, I suggest we all get some sleep. Much to do tomorrow.”

Later, hidden under the blanket that had been allocated to her, she examined her uncle’s gift – a stout wooden stick with a sheathed blade at one end. A remstick. He’d given her a remstick, or at least most of one. There should have been a length of chain hanging from the end opposite the blade, but it had been removed for obvious reasons of effective concealment. It was still a lot better than nothing. *Thank you, Uncle*, she thought, and at last allowed herself to drift off into uncomplicated sleep.

* * *

Late the next morning the gates of Shan Sharoli loomed up before them, and as they passed through Koyu felt a sudden rush of recognition at the place she’d spent two years of her life – followed by a lurch of horrified disgust at what had happened to it of late.

The twelve-year war had touched different places in the Commonweal in different ways, and Koyu admitted to herself that her old stomping ground had not done as badly as she might have feared. Shan Sharoli was a smallish town of indifferent military value and not much in the way of defence resources – obviously it had surrendered fairly quickly once the Imperial front line had penetrated this far West. Perhaps this cooperative attitude had forestalled the worst of Wasp degradations, for this was still a somewhat functioning city. But still, as the convoy passed through the streets, the signs were there to see. Rubble and matchwood in the streets, unwashed bloodstains. Burned-out houses and shattered civic monuments –

and wasp sentries on every corner. The inhabitants still allowed to go about their business had a hunched, defeated air, and there was a palpable sense of misery at odds with everything she remembered about a once-thriving market town. As ever, the mighty Wasp Empire left charred kindling in its wake. Buildings, towns, people. Koyu shivered, her own potential fate very much in mind.

She was to be billeted at the local Wasp garrison post, once the rather grand house of some minor Dragonfly princeling, now a rubble-strewn chamber of echoes. In what was once the grand main hall lay several massed ranks of army camp-beds, and everywhere off-duty Wasp soldiers bustled, relaxed, or drank and gambled with dice. A tiny part of Koyu's mind wished that she'd brought her own, somewhat more *reliable* dice set with her. There might have been some money to be made here.

Dralik moved off to report to General Gragau. She was shown to one of the beds in the huge hall – or rather, shoved roughly down onto it. “This is yours,” said a soldier. “Half an hour's rest. Then we move out. The sooner you do your job, the sooner we can be rid of you.”

Half an hour. No time at all. There were Wasps on all sides. No freedom, no time for any plotting – for a plot there had to be. She had only just noticed a circular metal door at the far end of the hall – set in a rectangle of paler wall where it had obviously been hidden by a painting or tapestry – and begun to wonder at the possibilities, when she was distracted by a voice urgently calling her name.

“Koyu! Koyu! Koyuda Rusidae! Over here!” She turned around only to be nearly knocked off her feet by the small body that cannoned into hers, in what seemed to be an attempt at a hug. “Oh, Koyu. Thank goodness you're here!”

Koyu pried the diminutive Fly-kindin off her. Oh, this was marvellous. Not half an hour, and already the old ghosts were coming back.

And *hugging* her. “Affri. Get *off* me will you? And stop using my full name!”

“A while, a long while! Five years!” The Fly danced upwards into the air, Art-wings a blur, performing an aerial pirouette of merriment. “This is excellent! How good to see you! All that is fractured will be made whole again by the gentle adhesive of your presence!”

“Affri, calm down.” Oh, scrab and scrat. During her years with Lumai in this town, Affri the Fly-kindin had been equal parts ally and irritant. Superb at breaking into jewellerys and museums, and a card-sharp like no other in the Commonweal, the little man had also harboured an enormous crush on Koyu which it seemed the intervening years had not diminished. He was also about as trustworthy as... as...well, as *she* was. The insight was not a welcome one.

They spent the remainder of their time catching up. “So, how's old Brovu?” She asked.

“Dead!”

“Magdali the Snitch?”

“Dead!”

“Um... Raum Cha, the Grasshopper?”

“Sting-shot trying to leap over the city wall with a bag full of dice-winnings.”

“Dead?”

“Yes!”

“And...Lumai?” She asked, with a sudden suspicion as to the reason for the Fly-kindin's presence here.

Affri shuffled awkwardly, lifting off from the floor a little. “Lumai... well, nobody knows... that's why... Why I was... um – asked for my assistance.”

“I see,” Said Koyu coldly. “You told them where they could find me, didn’t you? You told them about the Musterings.”

“They were going to torture me!” The little man’s eyes pleaded for forgiveness. “I had to, Koyu. If it had been you, would you have done any different?” It was a question she could not answer. Not truthfully.

And then Chankor was there. “You, Roach-kinde. Come. Now!”

It seemed that reunion time was over.

* * *

So, to the city streets, with a contingent of Wasp soldiers – Dralik, Chankor, and two others – that left her feeling frustrated and trapped. Yes, she could locate Bayan Lumai if he was here – but with these galumphing escorts? And really, once they had found this Eye thing, wouldn’t they just kill him? And probably her? Whatever he’d done to her, her former lover didn’t deserve that. And *she* certainly didn’t. It was time to get devious.

There was one place she might try, one contact from whom she might gain assistance – if he was still there, if this city still functioned as a city; if he would condescend to help her, and if, unlike the rest of her former gang, he wasn’t stretched out on an X someplace or shot full of Art-fire. She would see. She had no other choice. And, given her present company, neither did he.

“Well. There’s a face I never thought I’d see again. Or *want* to see again.”

“Oh, come on, Happiday. You love me really.”

“After what you did? I could have been killed by that rubbish you sold me. The best thing you ever did was leave.”

Koyu sighed. She had known that this would not be easy.

Happiday Founder was an independent Beetle artificer and alchemist who, during her previous time in Shan Sharoli, had owned a stall in the town’s bustling market district. They had met in a taverna one night as she and Lumai were carousing their way through a celebration of their latest successful scam. He had joined them in their heroic drinking sessions, spinning yarns about the amazing things he’d seen in his younger days as he travelled up and down the country.

His stall was a Moth-hermit’s cave of strange treasures, all designed, built or mixed by the master artificer himself. For his major customers, the Inapt of the Commonweal, there were eldritch solutions and “magical” arcana – love potions, death-curses sealed in wooden puzzle-boxes, lucky amulets and sense-mists; for his few Apt-inclined customers, such as Ants and the occasional fellow Beetle, he liked to keep his hand in with mechanical contrivances; special lenses for seeing things far away in the distance; a clockwork brush for the cleansing of the teeth; retractable spring-knives, pocket projectiles and suchlike. And then there were his marvellous alchemical solutions, the point at which Apt and Inapt met; purgatives for distemper of the bowels, explosive powders for the breaking of rocks or the settling of personal vendettas; a special mushroom solution that, when ingested, let the Wingless customer know the sensations, if not the actuality, of flight for a few hours. A cornucopia of unnatural delights.

She had considered him a friend, which is why she still regretted going along with Lumai’s drunkenly-conceived plan to rip him off. She still wondered why she had never objected. Lumai could be too persuasive sometimes. Either that, or Koyu herself too weak.

The Market district was a pale shadow of itself now. Most of the gaudy stalls had closed, either disappeared altogether, or smashed apart, or burned. Any stallholder not serving some useful purpose to the Wasps would have been carted off to the Slave Pens months ago. But Happiday Founder still ran his little stall, albeit with much reduced stock, as the new Wasp masters would never allow him to sell weapons to potential insurgents. But here he was, hanging on, still making a living as best he could; the wily old rogue.

“Please don’t say that,” She told him, surprised at the tremor in her voice. “Not now. I missed you, you know.”

Happiday was a little taken aback. “Strange way you have of showing affection.”

She looked up into his broad, lined face. He’d aged, far more than he should have done in five years. There was a kind of quiet despair in his single remaining eye. An eyepatch covered the empty socket of his other, the former contents having been lost in a taverna brawl several years before Koyu had met him. She doubted he had ever been a handsome man, but she knew the loss still troubled him.

“I’m sorry for what we did to you,” She said, meaning it for once. This adventure seemed determined to raise up all her own mistakes and rub them in her face. “I’d like a chance to make amends, but now is not the time. I need to find Lumai. Have you seen him? Or know where he might be?”

Happiday ran a hand through his greying hair. “You’re a strange one, Koyuada. You change quicker than mercury when you raise its core temperature. And I wonder – are you asking for yourself, or because of *them*?” He nodded toward the Wasp-soldiers, who stood in rigid formation some distance behind her, making no effort at all to appear nonthreatening. Captain Chankor, in particular, looked with death at them across the street.

“You’re an intelligent man,” Koyu sighed. “You know the answer.” She looked at the arrangement of tiny machines and powder-filled bottles arrayed at the front of the stall. Picked one at random, a large smooth metal ovoid with a big bronze key at the base. “What does this do?”

“Clockwork onion peeler.”

“Sold many?”

“None at all.” Happiday shook his head in annoyance at a world full of people content to peel their own onions.

“And this?” She picked a tiny rhomboid bottle filled with blue grains.

“Condensed crystals of Salfire moss, the most powerful laxative in the known world. It works on contact, so I wouldn’t get any on your hands.”

She quickly put the little vial and the onion-peeler back. “Nice.”

Happiday leaned across the counter, spoke in a low, angry voice. “If I don’t tell you what you want to know, your friends over there will get it out of me with hot iron, won’t they?”

Koyu bowed her head in shame. “Yes.” She whispered.

The Beetle nodded. “Tough times, for all of us. Try the Monument Garden. Look for Roach-sign. I can’t read it, but I suppose that’s the point. There might be a clue there.”

She took his rough old hand, squeezed it. “Thank you. And I will find a way to repay you, I promise.”

He smiled then. “Just survive, Koyu.” He pulled away from her and moved toward the curtain at the rear of the stall. “You’re even more beautiful than you were,” He muttered, facing away from her. “And you have a heart. You keep it

hidden, but it's there. I always thought you could do better than that moth-dung boyfriend of yours." He disappeared through the curtain, leaving Koyu, open-mouthed and blushing furiously, in his wake.

* * *

The Monument Garden was the town's oldest district, encircled by a high, crumbling stone wall, set with arched paths leading out to the five peripheral districts. The Monument itself – a great statue of some long-forgotten Dragonfly Monarch – was no longer in evidence, its former presence marked now only by a stepped marble plinth and a pair of giant, truncated feet. There would have been plays performed here once; festivals and celebrations. A lonely place now, the only sound the wind, gusting eddies of brown dust around an echoing desolation.

The four Wasp-kindens tramped into the Garden with an effortless display of total indifference. Dralik turned to Koyu with a puzzled frown. "Are you sure?"

"This is where he said."

Chankor gave her a sneer. "Or she's leading us around the city on a wild ant-hunt."

"No, no, I'm not." She looked around her. "I need to examine the walls. Alone. Will you give me a few minutes?"

Dralik nodded, and Chankor said, "Captain, you should not-"

He was cut off. "Let her go. She knows the consequences of failure. And Lieutenant, I would appreciate it if you did not question my decisions again, or it may go badly for you - no matter who your friends might be." He was obviously fed up with his insubordinate subordinate, and taking ever less care to hide it.

Koyu walked away, content to leave them to their squalid little internal struggles.

Roaches left messages for each other, in code. That is how they communicated within the long boundaries of the Commonweal. She had taught it to Lumai years before, and if he truly was within Shan Sharoli, he would use it; he had to have allies, and the need to speak to them secretly.

Koyu searched carefully amongst the rubbish scrawled on the great wall, all the time feeling Wasp eyes burning into her back like a brand. Most of it was the usual chaff – declarations of love, crude statements of existence, sexual insults – the majority Fly-kindens, for amongst the folk of the Commonweal and Empire both it was they who most held a passion for scribbling on other people's walls. But among them were more subtle marks, curved scratches and dots, written as much to be concealed as to be seen. Roach-sign.

And one message led her to another, and then another, and then she had it – Lumai's symbol, a simple L with a smaller capital B with an extended tail, like half a dragonfly. A message, below. A request for a certain someone to meet at a certain place – and a name that raised an angry question –

- "*Who by the Ancestors is Siropi?*" It came out more peevish than she had expected.

Bayan Lumai stared at her, jaw hanging loose, eyes wild as though he had seen a ghost, and it had just flashed its privates at him. "Koyu?" He stood there, arms full of sundry junk, looking as though he'd just been found by a bee with his face in a honeycomb.

"Koyu. Hello again, *lover*." She felt as sharp, as cruel, as a blade.

Lumai started to back out of the room. In a flash Koyu had bounced across the bed and slammed the door, trapping him. She looked up fiercely into his blandly handsome face. “We need to talk,” She said, “Now.”

* * *

Once she had ascertained Lumai’s probable location, it had been a simple matter to lose her Wasp escorts in the winding back streets of the town. A wild ant-hunt, indeed. She was determined that Lumai was not to suffer through her treachery, as she was suffering through Affri’s. After the soldiers had become hopelessly lost in the narrow back alleys, with Koyu moving just a little too fast ahead for them to keep up, she had made her way to the Shrouded Wing, a taverna of dark repute which even now performed a service for its shady clients, right under the noses of the new overlords. A three-storey shack of crumbling brick and plaster, it had been a simple matter to bribe the fat Woodlouse landlord with a shiny gewgaw from her pack, and then use her Ancestor Art to scale the walls, hiding outside Lumai’s window until he had ventured inside. Then, a confrontation she had been waiting five years for.

“Sit.” She motioned at the narrow bed with the bladed end of her remstick, which she had retrieved from her leather breeches as soon as the Wasp-kindens were no longer a problem. Lumai complied, cautiously, still looking at her as though a spirit from the Days of Lore had suddenly appeared and told him his boots were unlaced.

Koyu crossed to the window and secured the shutters against any sudden escape, for Dragonfly-kindens were the best flyers in the world. She turned to look at him, this silver-tongued rogue who had once been the centre of her girlish world. He had put on weight since she had known him – an impressive paunch bulged over the top of his breeches, and his face had filled out. He was still attractive, but he had acquired an extra fatty chin, and his blue eyes were now red-rimmed and dissolute. Whatever had happened to him, it had not been to his advantage.

She advanced into the room, blade at the ready. “Where is it?”

Lumai’s face was a picture of unconvincing innocence. “Where is what?”

“The Eye of Shon Fhor. The reason the Wasps are so interested in you.”

“Ah, that.” He gestured with arms full of stuff. “If I may?” She nodded, and he spread the lot out on the bed. Fine clothing, a bee-fur stole, a red velvet hat shaped like a pear, and several glittering necklaces – each of which had a centrepiece with a jewel.

“Which one?”

“This one.” He picked up a chunky gold necklet with a large, glimmering diamond at the centre. “The dream of princes.” He held it out to her.

Koyu snorted in derision. “I’m an idiot, he thinks.” Suddenly angry, she jabbed the remstick blade in his face, and he lurched backwards. “Now the real one. That one, there.” She used the blade to scoop it up; an impressive golden necklace with a centrepiece of finely-wrought filigree, and at the centre, a round amber jewel that seemed to glow with some mysterious inner fire. “The Eye.” Flicking the remstick upwards, the Eye of Shon Fhor slid down its length, until it reached Koyu’s hand. She examined it, briefly. Pretty. In value, worth her family’s life. “Right, we’re done. Nice to see you again.”

Lumai leaned forward, his hands raised, beseechingly. “Koyu, please, don’t take that. It’s our way out, our only chance for a new life-“

“Who? You and Siropi?” She wound the silver chain around her palm. “Was it her who stole it? I can’t imagine it was you, with your want of brains.”

“Siropi’s in the Underground here. There was a big heist, they lifted it out from under the Wasps’ noses, to smuggle it into the Lowlands or somewhere. But me and Siropi had fallen in love-“

“You mean, she was obsessed with you, and you took advantage.”

“If that’s how you insist on putting it.”

“I do. So she stole it and gave it to you.”

“Just for safekeeping. We were going to leave tonight. We were going to the Lowlands to get married. Start again, as honest folk.”

You don’t even know what those are, she thought, and yet a stab of pain went through her. This Siropi was worth marrying, and she wasn’t?

“You don’t seem to realise the danger you’re in,” She said coldly. “The Wasps sent me to find you. Oh, they want to do such unpleasant things to you. And towards that end, they’re holding my family as hostages. To ensure my cooperation. My *family*, Lumai. Can you have any idea? My uncle, my old uncle, you remember? And...my boys. My children.”

His head flicked upwards. “Children?”

“My twin boys. Mine... and yours. For all you care.”

Something changed in his face then, something she had not seen for a long time, since the early days of their partnership. “My children? Boys? I... I had no idea.”

“Then something is lacking in your education. When you pleasure yourself with a woman night after night, children can often be the result – didn’t you know?”

“Um... well, yes, but I thought – “

“You left me!” Suddenly she was shouting. “You left me all alone in that dump without the slightest explanation! I was nothing to you, just so much moth-dung to be left on the excrement heap! I... I *hate you!*” She backed away, the tears behind her eyes finding release upon her cheeks. “You son of a slug.” She said quietly.

“What... what are their names?” All the fight seemed to have gone out of him, all the guile.

“Froku and Fryek.”

“Roach-kinde names.” He said, shaking his head.

“What do you expect? Two halfbreeds, no place in the world save with us.” She shook her head at him, disgusted. “You know what? You’re pathetic. And I was pathetic for trusting you. For ever loving you. This is your only warning, Lumai. I have to tell the Wasps where you are, very shortly. Ensure you are gone when they arrive. As for this,” She tucked the Eye of Shon Fhor inside her shirt. “This is security for my family’s lives. And now, we are *done*.” She swung her legs out of the window and dropped, away into the streets, leaving her former lover bow-headed and bereft on the bed behind her.

* * *

She ran through the narrow leaning alleyways, the fear growing inside her. She knew she was taking a big risk, losing the Wasps like that. Even now, some messenger might be making his way by orthopter to her uncle’s encampment with orders to –

No. *Shut it down, lose it*. No time for wallowing. *Remember Tantamon*.

Her uncle's parting words came back to her, and she smiled wryly at the memory. *Remember Tantamon*. He'd meant to give her strength – and who knows, maybe he had.

Tantamon had been Koyu's pet beetle when she was a child – a midnight black creature the size of a lamb, and as gentle. Named after a Mantis warrior of days gone, He'd followed her everywhere, or she'd followed him, listening to him chirrup and huff as she'd fed him apple cores and bits of carrot, made up crude straw dollies to ride around on his back as though he was venturing into battle. After her parents had died and she'd been reluctantly taken in by her distant uncle Shimovar, for a long time she had felt that Tantamon had been her closest friend. Until the day he had been neatly bisected by the wheels of her uncle's wagon, the crack of his fine black carapace echoing from the surrounding stones.

Twelve-year-old Koyu had been inconsolable, almost mad with grief. After her parents, this was too much; would everything she loved just die? Would she be alone forever?

Her uncle had taken her in his arms, for the first time showing something of the affection that would come to be normal as they had grown closer. "Koyu, oh my poor girl," He murmured, "Listen now. This is a terrible thing, but one you must master. We live a hard life out here, we Roach-kindens, despised by all, with no friends to aid us nor allies to give us succour. Which is why we must be hard, be strong as stone, simply to survive.

"You grieve for Tantamon, my girl, as I grieved for your parents when you were too young to remember them. But that grief cannot master us, for our kindens would be lost if we were to give into it. Listen, little Roach-girl, let me tell you a secret." He held the child close to him, and murmured in her ear. "Each of us has a hollow space at the centre. A hole, a necessary void into which we pour our griefs and our fears. We hide them there, and we take them out when there is leisure to do so, but otherwise we keep them hidden, keep them locked away inside that inner emptiness," And here his voice took on a violent, insistent hiss – "*For that is how we survive.*"

Taking him at his word, Koyu had found that empty hollow place, and poured her feelings of grief into it, returning clear-eyed and calm. She had even partaken of the meal when Shimovar, never one to waste good meat, had taken up the two halves of poor Tantamon and roasted him up for dinner.

It was getting late in the day as she made her way back to the barracks. The grey overcast had broken up into strips of glowing pink as the Westering sun lit them from behind. Koyu allowed herself to feel a little optimistic. She had the Eye of Shon Fhor now, this jewel the Wasp Empire wanted so much. She had some leverage at last. Her plan was a simple one – take the Wasps back to the Shrouded Wing tomorrow, giving Lumai plenty of time to clear out – and then "find" the Eye somewhere. The Wasps should have no reason to continue their manhunt. As for her own situation – well, she still had to do a little work on that.

* * *

Chankor actually laughed. "I cannot believe you are asking me that," He said. "Roach, you have some nerve." The converted mansion house was quieter now, most of the soldiers either on manoeuvres or enjoying their off-duty time elsewhere. Lieutenant Chankor's voice echoed in the vast, gloomy space.

“Well, I was only explaining that I didn’t mean to lose you this morning, honestly, it’s just that I may have accidentally been... a bit too quick for you.” She risked a cheeky smile.

Chankor’s fist caught her under the jaw with no warning at all, sending her flying backwards with a loud crack. She stared at him, wide-eyed and fearful, one hand to her throbbing face. He stood over her, no amusement in his expression now. “You stupid whore,” He growled, “Don’t even think to try your whore’s tricks on me. You’re out to betray us, I know it, and when I find out how, they’ll be able to hear your screams from here to the Spiderlands.” He turned on his heel and left without another word. Koyu sighed ruefully, wondering if her jaw would bruise. She climbed to her feet, the Eye of Shon Fhor a guilty weight between her breasts. That had actually gone a little better than she had expected. At least he hadn’t decided to search her.

She went to her bunk and lay back. The Wasp-kindens, with their almost total lack of night vision, weren’t great ones for blundering about at night, so there was nothing to do now but keep her head down and wait until morning.

Across the hall she saw Affri the Fly bouncing about, waving his arms, trying to catch her attention. Get lost, she thought, pointedly excavating her nostril and wiping the produce on the side of the mattress. When this had no effect, she turned on her side away from him. Really, this crush of his was getting tiresome. The idea of her bedding a Fly-kindens was a ludicrous one, for logistical reasons if nothing else.

With that amusing thought, her eyes closed and she slipped into sleep.

She was awoken several hours later by something striking her on the forehead. Something tiny and light. Her eyes flicked open, instantly awake. What?

Another something bounced off her scalp, and she caught it on the rebound; a tiny pebble, probably from the gravel drive outside. Somebody wanted her attention. She raised her head; it was pitch black in the hall, as cold and quiet as a Moth-kindens birthday party. Near the huge round door at the far end the soft glow of a fire illuminated a small group of soldiers, rolling dice and talking quietly. The remainder of the hundred or so beds were occupied by sleeping Wasp-kindens. Of Affri there was no sign.

Catching a movement from the front end she turned her head, her vision adjusting instantly to the changes in the light. A shadowed figure stood there, waving and beckoning. Lumai. Lumai had somehow broken into the heavily guarded Wasp empire barracks. Oh, scrabble and *scratch!*

The Wasp refectory must at one point have been an elegant drawing-room of some kind; now, all the elegance had been stripped out and replaced with rows of trestle tables. At the far end was a bar comprised of five barrels with a bare wooden plank laid across the top. All was dark; utterly silent.

Koyu held a finger to her lips as she led Lumai inside: *shhh!* He closed the door with care; the tiny click seemed to reverberate through the shadows.

“What are you doing here?” She asked, her voice an angry whisper. She had brought her backpack with her, unwilling to lose sight of it even for a second in this place, and she gripped it now as though it might absorb some of the anger rising up inside her. “I had a plan. You’re going to ruin everything. If one of those Wasps out there wakes up-”

“I had to see you,” He whispered in return, a fierce look in his eyes.

“You’re not getting it back, you greedy dungball. Don’t you understand, I’m trying to save your life.”

He waved that away as though it were of no consequence. "I don't care about the Eye," He said. "I need to know about them. I need to know about my sons."

This surprised her. "Really?"

"Yes." He advanced closer into the room, hands held beseechingly in front of him. "Tell me about them, Koyu. What are they like?"

"Well..." She thought hard. She had to admit that she didn't know the twins as well as she might. She had never considered herself particularly maternal, and had mostly seen her progeny as a style-cramping annoyance better offloaded onto her uncle. Now though, thinking about them, an uncomfortable pang of longing went through her body. A desire to hold them again that was almost a need. "Fryek is... the older, by six minutes," She said. "But it's Froku who's the leader. Lumai, you'd be proud of him, running around, lying, cheating, getting involved in little schemes. Fryek's just sort of... daydreamy." She remembered the day they'd been born, when she'd held the newborn baby for the first time; Eyes still closed, he had never cried, his chubby little arms reaching out, trying to touch her face. Her sons. Her handsome boys. She was wracked by an unexpected sob. "They're in danger, Lumai, the Wasps are going to kill them if I don't... oh..." She wiped the tears away; more crowded close behind them.

And then she was in his arms again. Like old times, like solid, dependable comfort. "Shhh," He said, holding her body to his. "Shhh..." then one hand beneath her chin lifted her face to his, and he kissed her.

And it was as if the previous five years had been a nasty hallucination. They were there again, back in the good times, loving and drinking and laughing and thinking that nothing in the world could tame them. She pushed herself into him, murmuring as his hand cupped a tiny breast, slowly unbuttoning her shirt to clasp the golden chain concealed there -

A warning bell sounded in her mind, and with a jolt of angry panic she smacked his hand away. "You're not getting it," She growled, shaking her head. "Such a good conman. I should have remembered." *Idiot!* She was such an idiot.

His face changed then; suddenly it was furious and feral. "That jewel is my future," he snapped, advancing towards her. "One way or another, I'm getting it back." His hand, so sensuous only moments ago, now held a stubby, short-bladed knife. "You've no idea what my life has been like. Living on the streets, eating scraps from garbage heaps, like an animal. While you, sweetie, have been living the life of a Moth-emperor with your *brats*."

She backed away, fumbling for the remstick. "Your *children!*" She said, aware that she was not whispering now. Didn't care; too angry.

"Kids I've never seen, and don't want to. Who knows what kind of trash have been enjoying themselves with your skinny body over the years? Or if those whelps even *exist!*" He was preparing to lunge, she saw it in his stance; she held her remstick up before her. She had the advantage of reach, but Roach-kinde had never been fighters; Bayan Lumai was an expert.

The problem was taken out of her hands when the room was suddenly flooded with light. They both looked at the door, which had been flung open to allow three Wasps to enter; two soldiers, both holding powerful cave-lanterns, and Lieutenant Chankor.

"Got you." He said, for the second time in their brief acquaintance.

Koyu froze, completely at a loss. It was over. It was done. They'd kill her, they'd kill her family, all because of this selfish fool. She should have told the Wasps

where he was as soon as she'd found out. So much for compassion. That's what you got for acting against your nature, ignoring the urge to run, hide, survive.

Lumai turned to face the intruders. "Lieutenant Chankor," He said mockingly. "Still crawling along in Dralik's wake like a dung-beetle after favours?"

Chankor didn't so much as blink at the insult. "The Eye of Shon Fhor," he stated flatly. "You will give it to me now."

"Sorry," Lumai shrugged. "I traded it for a rope ladder and a bag of fried honey-cakes. Didn't realise it was so important."

Chankor smiled then, an expression that sent warning sparks up Koyu's spine. "Oh, we are going to have such fun with you."

"I don't think so." He turned to Koyu then, eyes full of remorse, and something else; resignation. "I'm sorry for what I said. Sorry for everything. I wish I'd been... I wish..." He shook his head tiredly. "Oh, balls to it." Then he was flying at Chankor, literally flying, launching himself into the air and screaming with fury, knife-hand outstretched –

Chankor casually raised his hand and released his sting. The energy blasted Lumai from the air, his right shoulder and most of his head gone, his Art-wings shrivelled to wisps of burning paper. His carcass slammed into one of the tables, rolled off onto the floor. Silent forever now. Dead.

The hand trained itself on Koyu, who stood, wide eyed and utterly terrified. Chankor stepped forward. "Drop the weapon," He said, "Or you'll get the same." The remstick fell from her numbed hands. "Good Roach." The two soldiers took hold of her none too gently, forcing her unprotesting body out of the door. "Still some fun to be had," smiled Chankor as she passed him.

* * *

Captain Dralik was still awake; perhaps Wasp officers never sleep, thought Koyu dully as she was pushed to her knees before him. She had been hauled bodily up several flights of stairs to what had once perhaps been a bedchamber, but now served as Dralik's office. The Wasp captain sat behind a large ornate desk made of some dark, expensive wood. The two guards took up stations behind him. Chankor closed the door and came to stand to the side. With murmurs and whispers and the occasional hate-filled glance, he brought his superior up to date.

Dralik frowned, but not at Koyu. "Let me make sure I have this correct," he said, "Tonight we had the chance to capture the only person in the city who knew for certain where the Eye is located. And you killed him."

Chankor looked a little taken aback. "I had no choice, Captain," He snapped. "He was about to kill me."

Dralik turned to look at him. His voice was cold and hard. "You, Lieutenant? A trained soldier, with your sword, and your sting, and a hundred hardy warriors to back you up? You didn't perhaps see the opportunity for a little revenge on the man who has evaded you for so long?"

"No sir. It was life or death."

Dralik nodded. "A pity, then, than death was not yours. We might still have had a chance. Your life must be very important if it takes precedence over the needs of the Empire." Chankor looked as though he had been slapped in the face. "Of course the Empire is more important than my life, Sir, but remember, we still have this one. She lied to us. I'm certain that she knows the whereabouts of the Eye, just as that filth Bayan did."

“We’ll see.” He turned his gaze on Koyu. His eyes looked sorrowful. “I hope I wasn’t wrong about you, young Roach.”

Koyu shrugged, uncomfortable. “May I stand up, sir?” Dralik nodded his assent, and she stood. Her ears picked up the sound of movement from behind her; someone was listening at the door.

“Careful, sir, she had some kind of weapon on her-”

“You will be *quiet!*” There was pure iron in his voice, and Koyu now saw how this gentle man might have risen to the rank of Captain. “You have caused enough damage for one night. Be grateful you will only face demotion for tonight’s fiasco. Any other Captain would have you executed.” She saw Chankor’s hands bunch up into fists. But he remained silent.

Dralik leaned forward. “Do you know where the Eye is, Miss Koyu?”

Koyu shook her head, turning her Terrified and Innocent act up to maximum. “No, sir. Lumai must have learned I was in the city and thought he could pay a visit. I have no idea where the Eye is.”

Dralik nodded tiredly. “And thanks to the *former* Lieutenant here, nor does anyone. Very well. We shall continue the standard search of the city tomorrow. It is all we can do now.” He ran a hand through his hair. “I’m sorry we involved you in this, my dear,” He said. “You are, of course, free to go. I shall have one of my men return you to your family by orthopter. You have my-” His words were cut off, forever, by Lieutenant Chankor drawing his sword across Dralik’s throat. The Captain’s eyes bulged as he acquired a second, red mouth; blood ran from it in torrents. He raised one hand to it, as though amazed that his body could have generated such a curious thing; then he pitched forward on the desk, head slapping on the wood, a lake of red spreading across pages of reports.

The two Wasp soldiers drew their swords; Chankor smiled that sadistic smile of his. He produced a leather wallet with a carved wooden sigil inside it. “I am *Major* Chankor,” He said, “Of the Rekef Outland. From now on, I am in command.” The soldiers, though not happy, returned their weapons to their scabbards.

Chankor wiped his sword down with a rag. Turning to Koyu, he said, “And now, slave, for you.”

Koyu backed up against the door. “I’ll kill myself before you take me,” She said. “Depend on it.”

Chankor nodded. “A pity, then, about your poor family.” And she froze again. What was she to do? What?

Put it in the void, she thought. Put it all in the void. And *think*. The Wasps had not taken her pack from her, and she started rummaging through it.

The two soldiers closed in on her, swords again drawn. Playing for time, she asked, “What’s so important about his jewel, anyway?” Dralik hadn’t known, but perhaps she’d have better luck with a Rekef, whatever they were.

“The Eye of Shon Fhor,” Said Chankor, “Prize of the Commonweal Crown Jewels. In Wasp hands, the perfect symbol of our conquest. I work for General Reiner of the Rekef. It’s the Emperor’s birthday in but a few days. What better gift from a loyal servant than the Eye? What better way to secure favour? And I shall have it.”

“Yeah?” She rummaged some more. “Well you didn’t reckon on...” The soldiers stopped in puzzlement as Koyu produced... her melodicum pipes. “These!” She held them up before her as though they were nailbows.

Chankor grinned in triumph. “Yes, why not charm us with a pretty tune?”

“Well, if you insist.” She put her lips to the pipes and blew with all her strength. Blew a fast-moving spray of poison centipede forcipules right into the faces of the soldiers.

The screaming began almost instantly. Red centipedes concealed a potent poison.. The soldiers staggered back, huge boils on their faces already swelling to purple-black as a claw of venom reached out for their hearts.

Koyu dropped to her thighs and scuttled towards the door, but Chankor wasn't going to let her escape that easily, vaulting across the desk to confront her, hand outstretched to sting. She dodged him, generations of finely honed instinct lending her lightning speed. Reaching up, she grabbed the flailing arm of a stricken soldier and, acting purely on instinct, forced it downwards with all her strength. Chankor let out a scream as the sword in the other Wasp's hand sliced through his arm, sending the Major's hand and four inches of wrist tumbling to the floor in a welter of dark blood and crackling residual energy.

Koyu spun away. In desperation she grabbed for the handle of the door – a door that was already open. “Affri!”

The little fly-kindens stood in the corridor outside, backing up hurriedly as Koyu hurtled through it. “Koyuda! You live! Oh-”

“Hold that shut!” Affri held the door closed, listening to the screaming from within, as Koyu snapped the leg off a chair and thrust it under the handle. “Now, run!”

They dashed through rooms of desecrated opulence. Affri pointed out the stairway. “No,” Said Koyu, “Not down there, it's crawling with Wasps. We'd be lucky to make it halfway to the front door. Let's try in here.” She barged her way through an unlocked door into a small dark room. She caught the impression of a small bed, scattered building blocks, a wooden rocking-grasshopper in the corner – a child's bedroom.

Affri closed the door behind them. “Now what? Koyuda, they're going to kill us!”

“Yes, yes. Hang on a moment.” She crossed to the window, where the almost-full moon shone through the cracked glass with a light like watered milk. “And stop calling me Koyuda. I hate all that flowers-and-sunshine crap.” She looked through the window. “We're to the side of the house here, fewer guards. Good. Now, how do these work...” After a moment's hesitation she flicked a tiny lever and pushed the window frame upwards. “Hah! Who says we're not Apt!” She turned to the Fly. “Right, you. Out.”

“But what about you!” It was becoming obvious that he was planning on being difficult. Koyu thought quickly, then opened her arms wide. “Oh, Affri,” She said softly. “So loyal. Come here, my loyal friend.”

Thinking that there might be a little love-play in the offing, the little Fly-kindens hurried to embrace her. “Oh, Koyu, you've no idea how-” No chance to say any more, as Koyu locked her arms behind his back, twisted around on her heel, and shoved him bodily through the window.

“Never mind about me!”

Affri disappeared for a few seconds, and then reappeared in the air outside the window, Art-wings buzzing furiously. “Koyu! Traitorous defenestrator! All I want is you safe! I stayed in this horrible place just for you!”

“I’ll be all right. I’ll meet you round the front of...” A horrible thought occurred to her, sounding a death knell in the pit of her mind. So much still to do. This night’s treachery was just beginning. “Affri- where do the Wasps keep those flying machines of theirs?”

The Fly buzzed querulously. “The orthopters? I... I think there’s an ornamental garden, behind the house. All walled off. Why?”

Koyu climbed into the window frame, looking down at the clipped lawn three storeys below. “Just go, will you? I’ll meet you there.” She looked up at the doubt in his face. “Scrab and Scrat, will you just *go!*” She snapped this last in a voice that brooked no argument. Affri buzzed away into the dark. Koyu examined the walls. Good, rough stone, plenty of handholds. Pulling off her boots, she dropped them to the lawn below, recoiling slightly at the smell of her own feet. Then she levered herself through the window frame, using her own Art to secure herself against the outside of the wall; slowly, stealthily, began her clambering descent to the ground.

* * *

She waited, flat against the wall of the orthopter park, gazing curiously at the flying vehicles – seven complex agglomerations of clockwork and pale wood which she didn’t understand and didn’t want to.

The orthopter park was a large square walled enclosure to the rear of the barracks, what had once been an orchard, perhaps, or an ornamental garden, and was now little more than a field of churned mud. Koyu steeled herself for what she knew she had to do.

She thought back to what had occurred in Dralik’s office. Scrab and Scrat, that had been close. And what was she, all of a sudden? The runner, the hider, the little thief with the quick legs, she’d not only injured, possibly blinded or killed, two soldiers, but she’d gone and chopped Chankor’s hand off!

She shuddered to think of it. The desperate are crueller than the strong, her uncle always said. Never had truer words been spoken, and she tried to comfort herself with them as she confronted what she knew she had to do next.

She tensed as a figure hurried from the rear of the main house. A soldier, of course, acting on instructions from the freshly un-armed Major Chankor. The first thing, the very first thing the bastard would do, even as Mercy’s Daughters bound his oozing stump; send a messenger with orders to execute her family. So, much darker work to be done this night, and hatred to spare to get it done. The soldier was heading towards the nearest orthopter. Koyu glanced up into the night sky, hoping for a glimpse of Affri, but he was too good at hiding. She hoped he was as good at watching. She moved out to intercept the Wasp soldier. As he reached the orthopter something dropped out of the sky, fast as a flung brick. The unfortunate man gave a muffled cry as Affri slipped the garrotte around his neck, wings buzzing as he yanked backwards. The soldier dropped to his knees, ineffectually grasping at the wire cutting into his throat. As Koyu reached him he was already turning puce.

Affri was in obvious difficulty, his tiny frame not having the strength in it to finish his murderous work. “Koyu!” he said, his voice a harsh whisper. “Quickly, do it!” Mouth dry, she unsheathed her remstick. Some part of her had always known that this day would come. She stood before the man, his eyes bulging in pain and terror. The stench of urine filled then air as his bladder gave out. Koyu searched herself for pity and found none; only an empty, sucking blackness. She raised the stick, blade-

end out. “This is a remstick,” She said quietly, not caring if he heard her. “Yes, my people have their own weapons. Do you know why it’s called that?”

“Koyu...” Said Affri nervously.

“It’s short for Reminder: We are *not* harmless.” She snarled, and plunged the blade into the soldier’s heart. “Stick,” She added.

* * *

“Won’t they send another one? Koyu? Koyu, won’t they notice that the orthopter’s still there, and just send another one?” Affri prodded the Roach-girl in the shoulder, eliciting no response from where she slouched, glass-eyed, against the rough alley wall. “Koyu!”

“Keep you voice down, will you?” She snapped. “We have to hope that they’ll be too busy to check. That’s all we have, is hope.” She held the remstick between her knees, twirling it absently from side to side. She’d done it now. She was a killer. She wondered if there was a new look in her eyes, a Mantis-look, a warning to others like the splatters of blood that soaked her clothes. She felt as though some creature had crawled into her belly, some nasty, wriggling thing that she couldn’t get rid of. She tried to put the feeling in that hollow space at her centre, but it seemed that the hollow space was full tonight, as the feeling stayed where it was.

Affri, sensing an opportunity, leaned in close and stroked her face with his tiny Fly hand. Koyu jerked away angrily. “No, Affri, no way. Hands to sides, please.”

He jumped backwards, taking to the air slightly with an expression of angry hurt. “What must I do?” He said quietly. “What must I do to please you? I could have escaped from that place at any time. I stayed because I knew you were coming, I knew you’d need help.”

“You told them where to find me in the first place.” *And helped make me a murderess*, she didn’t say.

“I helped you escape. I helped you with that soldier. All I ask is a little affection.”

She snorted, angry now. “Am I supposed to believe you did any of that out of altruism? A little affection is the least of what you want.”

“You know how I feel about you-”

“And you should know what I feel about you, Affri, I’ve dropped enough hints. Absolutely nothing, is what, not now, not ever. So give it up.”

Silence in the night. She watched him out of the corner of her eye, watched the yearning in his eyes sharpen into something angry and spiteful. “All right then,” He said. “Is there anything else you need, most respected Roach madam, before this worthless vassal may consider himself done?”

She pretended she hadn’t noticed his tone of voice. “There is one thing, yes. The last thing.” From her pack she produced the Eye of Shon Fhor. The amber jewel glittered slightly in the moonlight.

Affri gasped. “Is that it? Can I hold it?”

“Yes it is, and absolutely not.” She gripped the medallion in her palm and yanked away the neck chain. “Here,” She said. “You can hold this bit.” The thread spooled up in his palm. “That is pure gold. I want you to go to the Taverna of the Shrouded Wing – you know it? – and secure for me an upstairs room for the rest of the night. After that, do as you please. Tomorrow, I am getting out of here. I suggest you do the same.”

Later, she wandered down a particular street, checking doors. There was no lighting here, in what was and remained the poorer part of town, and she had to rely on the thin moonlight and her own night-vision to locate what she was looking for.

Presently she found the door and knocked at it sharply. When there was no answer, she knocked again, and kept knocking. Shuffling footsteps told her that she had caught his attention, moments before the door swung sharply open and Happiday Founder stood, angry and squinting at the shadows with his single eye.

“Koyu,” He sighed, “It’s four hours after curfew. Do you know what time it is? That you might bring the Wasp soldiery down upon me at any moment? Do you even care?”

She barged past him into the tiny house. Maybe it was the bloody, unsheathed blade, or the strange new look in her eyes, but he offered no resistance. “Let’s talk weapons,” She said. “Let’s talk about what you’ve been hiding.”

Happiday’s house was small and mean. Evidently the onion-peeler business was not doing so well. The main room was a dank place of crumbling plaster, lit from the ceiling by a strange glowing orb of obvious Beetle manufacture. A large, rickety wooden table occupied the centre of the room, the surface spilling over with stock from his market stall. Koyu looked over heaps of incomprehensible metallic components, bits of browning apple rind, and something that looked like an oversized brass clog with a star-shaped comb affixed to the heel. Then her eye alighted on a small, open wooden crate in which sat twelve alabaster eggs in numerous different colours. “Aha,” she said. “I’ll have a yellow, please. In fact, I believe I’ll have two.”

Happiday stood behind her. She sensed his shadow on her back. “Of course you will,” He said with quiet anger. “All you ever do is take.”

She turned to face him. She might have felt guilty, but tonight she wasn’t in the mood. She remembered her former lover, coming apart in a burst of Wasp fire. The blade of her remstick, dripping with blood. “At the moment,” She said, “I don’t care what you think of me. I have a chance to end something tonight, something that threatens the people I love.” She gripped the handle of her remstick. “And you are not going to stop me.”

Happiday said nothing, merely giving voice to a contemptuous grunt, gesturing expansively at the loaded table. *Help yourself.*

Keeping one eye on the angry Beetle, she took two amber eggs from their nest of soft cotton. Wrapping them carefully in the material from the box, she secured them in her pack. She walked past Happiday to the door, turning to face him again as she opened it. “I will pay you back for this,” She said. “That is a promise. I’ve been a very poor friend to you, my dear Beetle.”

“You’re a Roach-kind. It’s what you do.” Was all he said.

“If you see me again... it will be better.” He glared at her with monocular wrath, his silence telling eloquently of where she could shove it. No advantage in remaining, Koyu disappeared once again into the darkness.

* * *

She made her way back to the alley, keeping high to the walls and shadows to avoid the heavy Wasp and auxillian patrols that, darkness or not, had been sent out to hunt her. She had never felt so exposed or in more danger, and at any moment expected to feel the acid sunburst of a Wasp sting turning her flesh to charcoal.

In any event, she made it back to the alley, to find Affri buzzing up and down its length like an orthopter with no pilot. He greeted Koyu with little more than a hurt, affronted look. Everyone seemed to be doing that at the moment.

“Well?” She said, suddenly tired of men and their attachment to stupid.

“Room booked. Top floor.” He scuffed the dirt with his foot, refusing to meet her eye. Usually Koyu might have enquired about the remainder of a length of high-purity gold chain, less than an inch or so of which would have been sufficient to secure a room in a fleapit like the Shrouded Wing for half a tenday. But frankly he was welcome to think she’d forgotten about it; the theft would make her feel a little less guilty if what she suspected about him turned out to be wrong.

“Your part in this is done,” She whispered to him. “Get to the walls, get out of the city. They know your face now.”

The Fly-kinde puffed himself up to his full three-and-a-half feet and said, “I’ve lived here for nearly a decade without you to advise me, Roach. I will do whatever I feel suits me best. You know, now that the scales of misdirected lust have fallen from my eyes, I find you quite objectionable. Arrogant. And far too tall.”

She sighed. “Yeah, all right, Affri. Do what you like. But for your own sake, don’t be anywhere around here.” She walked away down the alley, checking the coast was clear at the cross-street and darting across, heading as quickly as able towards the Inn of the Shrouded Wing. *I will do whatever I feel suits me best*, he’d said. A big part of her hoped that she was wrong about him, but the silent majority was depending on her to be right.

She closed the door behind her. This room was on the same floor, and only three doors along, from where she had confronted Bayan Lumai, only hours ago but already feeling like tendays. She could feel the bare floorboards creaking under her feet as she crossed the tiny space, unloading the contents of her pack on the coverlet of the bed and checking her view of the street from the window. Then she set to work. She knew she might have hours yet, or as little as minutes, and she couldn’t afford to make a single mistake.

Affri. What would he do? She’d known him before, of course, and had been amused by his funny little crush. But it had never been a comedy matter to him. She recalled the expression on his face when she’d rejected him – like a child whose favourite toy had been snatched away. Oh, Affri could be charming and helpful and funny when he wanted to be – but cross him and he could be a spiteful bastard.

So, he might take her advice after all, and head for the city walls. Or he could just as easily run to the Wasp barracks and tell them exactly where she was. Koyu smiled grimly. *My Goodness*, she thought. *I had him book the room for me, and everything...*

She swapped her bloody shirt for a darker-coloured spare and looked at her possessions on the bed. Clothing, a couple of cheap paperbacks, half of a rather spongy-looking turnip, two small yellow eggs and, nesting in its sunfire gold medallion, the Eye of Shon Fhor. The Emperor’s birthday present. Reaching for it, Koyu set to work.

Ten minutes later she was almost ready. Nothing more to do now. Either Affri would betray her or she was in for one really boring night. She picked up her bloody shirt and stuffed it back into her pack.

She was still stood there, packing, when the door burst open. Two Wasp soldiers shouldered their way into the room, swords and sting-hands at the ready. Koyu’s head snapped up. Oh well, here we go –

A figure moved through into the room, and there he was; Major Chankor. Her own personal nemesis. A damaged maniac. Full of wrath.

Koyu tensed her muscles and prepared to do something desperate.

* * *

From the alleyway, she watched. The chain of locals still passed buckets back and forth, but the fire inside the little house was as good as out already. Across the street, the Shrouded Wing lay in darkened silence, the light from her former room the only indicator of life. Koyu edged forward a little. This was taking too long. What if they'd discovered her scheme? Even now, they were charging down the stairs to –

No. Keep calm. Look. Shadows across the window. Movement. She tried to put herself in their position, imagining the layout of the room, the Wasp soldiers within it. They'd turned away from the window – Chankor too impatient – thinking they'd surprised her. "Search the room!" He'd shout, or something similar. Start with the most obvious place – the bed, scattered with all her things. One of the soldiers – maybe the good Major himself with his remaining hand – reaches over to flip aside a bloody shirt, and there, beneath it.... The Eye. It's there, right in front of him. Even the treacherous Roach murderess is reduced in priority now.

Look, Koyu! See the way those shadows move. He's reaching for it, right now. Too tired and in pain, to drunk on laudanum perhaps, to notice that the amber jewel isn't quite as lustrous as the legends would tell, isn't, on closer inspection, a jewel at all, but a small yellow alabaster egg, procured from a Beetle artificer of some repute, known for his skill with metal and chemicals, including spring-loaded knives, and, and wrist-operated finger-bowls, and –

- explosive powders.

Still, who had time these days for a close examination of every little thing?

Koyu threw herself back into the alley as the top storey of the Inn of the Shrouded Wing loudly combusted in a magnificent flower of orange-yellow flame.

The water-chain dropped their buckets and scattered. Ant-auxillians turned telepathically as one and marched smartly away. Grasshopper-kindens leapt for safety as a cavalcade of fire-blackened bits blasted the dust in a lethal rain. Koyu sheltered in her alley and waited for the violence to subside.

When it was over, she emerged. The top floor of the Inn was gone, blackened planking reaching upwards like a long row of rotten drunkard's teeth. Debris graced the ground before her; shards of half-melted glass, pieces of furniture. Bits of armour, here and there, the smell of roasting meat in the air. She walked through it all, through the smoke and the screams, as if dazed at the terror she had initiated. But it wasn't that. The necessary void swallowed it all. She walked there because she had to be sure.

And eventually she was, when her foot tapped against something and she looked down to find that it was Rekef Major Chankor's fire-blackened head.

* * *

Some days later, she stood amidst the trees on a forested slope, listening and looking at the campfires burning orange in the night blue of the valley below.

Getting out of Shan Sharoli had not been easy, especially since Koyu had elected to complicate matters with a raid on the treasure-store at the Wasp barracks.

That huge round door in the dormitory. She had known it must hold something juicy. All it had taken was a false fire alarm to clear the building, and the second of Happiday's eggs spit-glued to the hinge. Two large sackfuls of looted gold later, a quick visit to a tiny house in the poor sector, and it was only a matter of getting her stolen orthopter into the air long enough to clear the city wall. That part had not gone so well, and she still had a nasty burn on her upper arm from when the vehicle had burst into flames on landing. Still, the wound would be gone in a few days. A hardy breed, the Roaches.

And damned good thieves.

It had looked bad until she had managed to secure a lift from a passing honey-merchant in his wagon. She had made friends with his skittish dray-weevil, and with the man himself, leaving him a surprise of a diamond as big as a plum.

It was almost over now, this strange journey from the person she was to the person she was becoming; she had paid off the only debt she felt worth the honouring. A certain Beetle-kind artificer, thanks to the contents of a rather large sack she had left on his work table, would now be able to afford rather grander accommodations than he was used to. The other sack she had taken with her, burying it carefully at a special place unmarked by Roach-sign, or any other. Her family would never have to thieve or smuggle to survive again. From now on, it would purely be for fun.

So, just one more thing to do to secure that future. Time to end it.

Crouching silently at the foot of a nearby fogberry tree, she scanned the base for signs of movement. There they were. Reaching out, she took a couple of Red Centipedes, holding them carefully by the body segments just behind their venomous forcipules. Working with expert speed, she snapped the creature's heads off, carefully extracting the deadly pincers with a twist of her fingers. She had six now; that should be enough.

Rising, she made for the edge of the treeline and looked out. All was peaceful; her family's wagon still sat in the same place it had a half-tenday ago, old Fantelbaum the draft-beetle snuffling quietly at the dusty earth. Low light seeped through the canvas of the wagon, and two of the Wasp sentries warmed their hands by the central fire, while the others stayed desultorily on guard. Looking in the wrong direction.

Koyu moved forward, one shadow slipping invisibly inside another. The darkness hid her fierce grin; six darts, four guards. Two spare for later. It occurred to her that she had come so far in the last few days from the standards of her quiet, self-effacing people, that she could hardly be thought of as Roach-kind any more. She wondered what she was instead, as she loaded her melodicum pipes and darted forward to give the Wasps the news of her return. Roach-Kinden Koyuda of the family Rusidae; thief, traveller, impatient gypsy brat; Niece, friend, beloved daughter, adored mother; Mercenary, grinning assassin, fatal rumour in the night.

Life would never be boring again.

THE END