

Kōrogi

∞ A Short Story ∞

ANDREW S. CIOFFI

Kōrogi

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Dedication

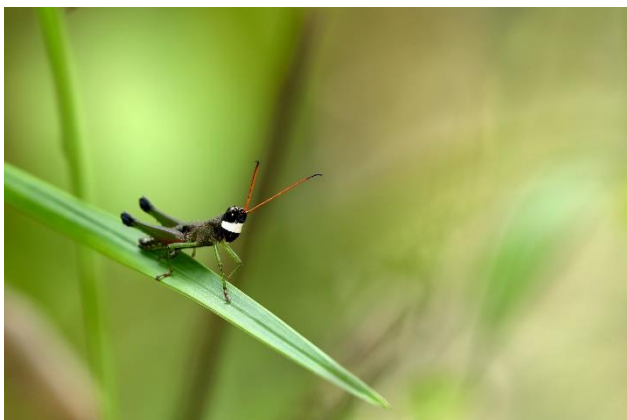
For my Alexander, Rosemary, and Thalia

Preface

Kōrogi is the first in a series of short stories and folk tales based on the work of Matsuo Bashō.

Read this as a story that would be told to the children of the Prefectures.

This story is inspired by the haiku *Ungraciously*



Morning dew from the sweet spring grass made her fingers tingle. She crouched low, stalking her prey, ready to pounce. She had to move quickly now; it was almost morning. 'There he is!' she thought, spotting one. 'The biggest one yet.' Her heart quickened; the hairs on the back of her neck prickled. 'Don't lose him!' she thought, afraid to speak even a whisper.

She was hunting crickets.

She licked her lips and wiped the sweat from her fingers. She tensed. And she pounced.

"Got him!" she said, exclaiming her victory. She held her hands up high, cupped around her precious trophy.

"Kohana-San! My brave and fearsome hunter!" said her father, singing her praises. "Bring him here. Let us see him together."

Kohana skipped, holding him high above her head. She liked the way he tickled and prickled her hands when he chirped.

"Father!" she said. "I caught him. He's beautiful!"

"Alright, Kohana-San. Are you ready? Remember how I showed you?"

She held up her hands, ready to blow like they were cold on a winter morning. It was an early autumn morning, and her hands were cool, but warming

them wasn't necessary. She had a whisper, not a breath, for her newest catch. She turned so she could tell him a secret.

"I remember, Father," she said. "He's ready now. He told me so."

"Oh, he did, did he? Did he say anything else?"

She leaned closer to her father, still cupping her cricket. "I can't tell you father. It's a secret."

The cage was ready. Small - too small for a bug so magnificent as the one she held; plain - too unlike the ones the children made from twigs and the tall grass. It was a cage that she helped her father make. It was her first cage, and it was her favorite.

Kohana's father was a master at his craft of making cricket cages. They took long walks together to find the tree that was straightest, strongest, and most beautiful. To this tree they would say a blessing, and her father taught Kohana to ask for permission from the noble tree spirit to take from his kin. They would cut carefully, quiet so they would not disturb the peace and silence of the forest. She was too small to help him drag their harvest, but she was always careful carrying his tools. They were very sharp.

He let her chop down the bamboo for the cage she carved, and she was very proud. She admired it as much as her newly captured companion. They looked suited for one another, but she knew he was destined for a finer cage. Still, she carried him as

carefully as her father's kataba saw, minding the corners, protecting fingers and her precious cargo.

It was full light when they arrived home. They were just in time to make a breakfast of miso soup, boiled rice, and egg cakes. It was a day to celebrate. This was a special catch; this was a cricket for the son of a lord.



Her father worked the whole day and through the night. He didn't ever show Kohana his progress because he loved the way her face lit up when she saw the new cage for the first time. The ring of his hammer meant that he was gilding, the sound of his song meant that he was happy.

She learned to love the smell of lacquer; it meant that he was nearly finished. If he took half as much care with the cage as she did with keeping her cricket, it would be worthy of the Emperor. At the very least it would elevate a lesser lord.

They had been searching nigh on a month now. Whoever ordered such a prize was patient. He was demanding of the very best. Most importantly, he was willing to pay. So much money Kohana had never seen before. All paid in full; all paid up front. It was well above her father's asking price, even for his finest. He entrusted his trusty keeper to catch and care for the most exquisite creature a lord could ever desire. For any other, a simpler bug would have been caught and gifted already, but not Kohana. This was, after all, serious business - catching crickets.

He opened the door that morning to his captivated cricket catcher. Her eyes were full of twinkling stars before she even saw him. She could hardly sit still.

“Oh! Father!” she said. “It is beautiful!”

It was, in fact, quite beautiful. It was woven and lashed to look like the Lord’s castle, with its tiers and upswept gables. The gilding he hammered lined around the edges. He hung it from his finger and admired his handiwork.

“Are you ready?” he said, calling for his helper to do the honor of introducing her cricket to his new home.

Kohana was not sad to see him go. In fact, she was proud that her hand would grace the likes of a Lord. She whispered ever so sweetly that he will bring honor to her father and that was very important.

Her father was always hard at work crafting cages and catching bugs. Some, he sold at the local market. Most of those were sold empty because the children like to catch their own crickets. He would save some of his finest works, though, for something special. And now that his masterpiece was made, the time had finally come.

“It’s time to tuck in, Kohana-San,” he said to his daughter after she wished her cricket happy dreams. “We need to rise early. Tomorrow we leave for Furoko. We have been invited to deliver this gift to the Daimyo personally.”

“Really, Father?!” said Kohana. “I have dreamed to visit Furoko!”

“They are sending and escort, too. After we have presented our gift, we will go to the market.”

Kohana was too excited for words. She was used to waking before dawn to hunt, but it was clear to her father that sleep would not come easy.

“And,” he said, “we will be able to sell our cages there. If only I knew someone who could help me fill them...”

“I will, father!” she said. “I will help you, and I will find the best crickets we’ve ever had!”

“That’s wonderful news, Kohana-San. I was worried that we would have to sell empty cages,” he said, with a wink and a smile. “Now, off to bed. I will wake you when they arrive.”



The cages were loaded onto the cart by the time she stepped out into the waning, silver moon. She didn’t know he made so many! He must have worked through the night so many times, she thought. But they were ready, and they were beautiful.

The horses were beautiful as well. Kohana had never seen so many. They were much bigger than the farm horses in their village, too. The white one was the

first one she saw. He stood out even in the dark. When the sun rose, it was the chestnut she loved most.

Kohana only heard stories of the Shōgun's mighty Senshin warriors. She heard of their great deeds in battle and their demon-faced armor and horned helmets. While she hoped to see them from afar, she was happy the men the Daimyo sent were in robes. Their swords stole her attention most. For the entire journey, she stared every moment she could, but tried not to be caught looking. She thought it might be very rude.

They lived only a few hours' walk from Furoko castle. They traveled by the Shōgun's road, which was well kept and swept through sprawling fields and in and out of forested passageways. She felt very important riding through the few small villages when people came out to bow.

Her father was advised that they would not be stopping, so he packed rice balls and bean cakes. Kohana was almost too excited to eat, for they were nearing the castle at every turn.

When the road turned wide and the trees arched up overhead, and men with their wares scurried to and fro, and distant music and the sounds of running hooves filled the air, Kohana knew they'd arrived. Ahead, the corner wound around and into view came the gate standing proud above the entryway to the Furoko marketplace. But the gate that stood between them made way to the castle of the Lord Daimyo.

His was a splendid gate, heavy atop its timbers and made of mahogany, and latticed over whitewashed walls trimmed in golden accents. What struck Kohana most was that the castle sat back far from the road, but there were fields in front. Fields of green, trampled to brown in spots by beating hooves. This Daimyo put his Senshin on display.

They were riding horsing and jumping gates, swinging swords, and clacking bokken. Archers lined up at the ready and loosed their arrows to the far end. Kohana wanted to stand with the children along the fence. She could watch them all day!

And her father let her. She would be safe in front of the Senshin; they were mighty warriors. And proud.

The truth was, as much as he hoped to see Kohana's face when the Lord received his gift, he wasn't keen on putting the pressures of a fussy Lord on her shoulders. He would, nevertheless, inform him of her contribution. This was a mighty cricket, and she had every reason to be proud. It was even one fit for the Shōgun.

Kohana wondered for a short while what she was missing. She wondered until she heard the drums.

Large-bellied drums drummed, and they announced the coming of the *real* warriors. Enough of a crowd had gathered by then that it was time for the real demonstration to begin.

Men on heavy horses came down the running way, making haste for the field. They were dressed out in

full armor. Their shoulder plates, robes, and face masks were of the blackest blacks, and their chest plates, and arm, hand, and shin guards were brown laced with gold. Kohana was drawn to their horned helmets. They were at once both stunning and terrible. To a man, everyone on the field stepped away to bow, and those gathered around followed.

They took the field with a purpose, calling their war cries and fanning out to charge in formation. Kohana couldn't look away. These were not men, but demons. Their horses kicked up dust and their swords rattled. Thunder stood little chance of being heard, and there were no men who could find their foe. One by one they drew their blades and held them high. They led their horses into a great and swirling circle around the field, ensnaring the other men, who stood and drew blades. They, too, called their war cries.

The riders slowed, closing in, before leaping down and facing the men head on. Their horses cleared the field and the drumming stopped.

But then a rolling rumble from the drum kicked up and the Senshin advanced. Hooting and hollers came from the crowd, and they heckled. Some began placing bets. Kohana couldn't take her eyes away. There was about to be a battle!

The first man stepped forward against one of the mighty warriors. They bowed to each other while the others stepped away.

There came an immediate cry. The men didn't size each other, and there weren't any flourishes of the blade. The armored demon warrior cried loud and charged. He made a sweeping move, crashing overhead like a great wave, like her father chopping wood for the hearth. She was so nervous to look; she didn't want to watch a man cut down; she was too young.

Kohana covered away her eyes quickly, tightening into a ball like her squeezing little fists. But she heard a better sound than skin and bone, and a more enjoyable disappointment from the crowd. She heard the clash. Sword against sword and steel against steel. It safe was to look again. The Senshin sword master made a big, sweeping blow which was deflected by the un-armored man, who returned with his own sweeping blow.

And the student stepped in and parried. He stepped again, pushing the Senshin back. He stepped and he stepped again, each time coming in closer and faster. He kicked the great warrior back and, with a flourish, unarmed him. His sword was so mighty that he fell to his knee after it, but the student was swift. With one hefty swing he swung, stopping his blade before Kohana could look away. He stopped a mere inch from the warrior's neck, and he drew his sword down, tracing a slash across his chest.

The warrior groaned out in pain, loud so the crowd could hear. At that moment, Kohana knew that it was a play. One more kick and the kneeling man toppled. He fell back, defeated. When his shoulders hit and kicked up dirt, his helmet rolled away.

Something about it was so striking to Kohana. Through cheers and jeers and joyous applause, she couldn't help craning to study the scene. The helmet had turned right way around and landed, sitting upright, glinting in the sun, some seven paces behind him. More followed, of course. So long as there were cheers, the play would go on. But there was something about that first fallen helmet...

Her father came halfway through, and he grabbed her up to share in his riches and relay his tale. He wished she could see the golden palace and the Lord Daimyo's suit of armor. He also felt justified in his decision.

"That is no place for a child," he said. "Let the castle in your dreams be the one you know."

Kohana wanted to see him so, the Lord of Furoko prefecture. Her's was a glorious gift, and she would share her father's blessing with all her heart. The look in his eyes made her want for that more, but she trusted him. She was too innocent to be so jealous. She was also a patient child and was settled to know that one day, she, too, would receive such praise. And still, she felt accomplished of her mighty deed.

"Are you ready," he said, "to see the market?"

"I can't wait, Father," she said, without as much excitement as he expected.

"Kohana-San?!" he said. "Are you not excited?"

"I am, Father. I am very excited."

"Kohana-San. Something upsets you. I know," he said. "If I imagine myself in your place, it would upset me as well, not seeing the castle. You will someday, I promise." He pinched her cheek to reassure her. "If truth be told, I wish we traded places. He's not a nice man. But his warriors are something, aren't they?! I saw them a little on my way to you now. What do you think?"

"Yes, Father," she said, not unafraid to show she was scared by them. "They are wonderful. I would very much like to see the market now."

And to the market they went without so much as another glance back to the Daimyo's Senshin. Until they reached the road, she could hear that they were still making their pretend battle. The quiet of the tree cover was a welcome one.

Kohana was reserved on their walk away from the castle. She listened to her father softly saying the names of the birds and she liked the sound of gravel crunching under her feet. Every so often a rickety wagon rolled slowly by, and rickshaws sped all around. Everyone shared pleasantries and wished one another 'happy morning' or 'prosperous day.' What caught Kohana's eye was the children up ahead with their painted paper pinwheels and cups of sweet ice. Oh, how they spun, and oh, how they glistened. The market must be drawing near!

And then she saw it - the high arching gate, wooden, lacquered, showing both its many generations and its meticulous upkeep. She liked this gate. It had a feeling, like some things often do. It felt like it was warm and welcoming. It felt festive, even. Somehow it felt like it was just the gate for her, unlike that pretentious thing on the Daimyo's road.

So far as she knew, this gate would carry her to another world, one filled with riches and dreams, and bustle and splendor. The grass was brighter, and the sun was shining. Drumming and chatter whirled around, and the wafting smells of coal fire and roasting pork blended with the scent of pine. It was a festival air that made her forget the Daimyo and forget his men. She even forgot that there was a job at hand. She couldn't focus on catching crickets; she had a market to attend.



Kohana's eyes couldn't catch up with the wonder. There were painted ladies in vibrant kimono. She never saw such beautiful flowers as the ones studding their hair. Men zipped by and children scurried. Chickens had free rein, but the goats were tethered. She saw small sparrow kites dart through the sky, and a long and flowing Dragon kite gave chase. They passed trinket makers and men selling jewels. A master folded paper cranes to a crowd of children that followed his lead. One man carved bamboo into flutes as his wife potted the shoots for selling. Someone sat clipping beards next to a man sharpening scissors. She saw white puppies and golden fish, trained falcons, and dancing snakes.

There were fire eaters and spear smiths and wood carvers, and there were women stitching patterns with threads as fine as hair.

People weren't just buying and selling wares. More stories were traded than coins. Some wares were cheap, while others were extravagant, but to see and be seen was its own commodity. Most people seemed to be there to be a part of things. It seemed like all the people from all the prefectures were there to Kohana. Many looked to fit in while others dressed in exotic garb from far flung corners of the world.

Her father hoisted her to his shoulders and patted her knees. Even from this vantage, Furoko market spread beyond the horizon.

They had to dance around the crooked alleys and crowded lanes, past tables and stalls, food merchants and fish mongers, and men selling all manner of blades. They finally reached their destination, which was a small stand tucked in the corner, under shady, sculpted pine trees, against a fence bordering the grounds.

To Kohana's surprise, the cages were delivered already and there was no sign of the men who brought them to the palace. She was amazed they were safe, but "no one steals at Furoko market," said her father. She believed him only after she counted the cages.

It took no time to set up and for her father to start calling potential customers. What he lacked in

showmanship and gusto he made up for ten times over with sincerity. He was utterly sure of his cages, and he need only to show them to sell.

“Kohana,” he said, after only a short while into their trade “would you like to explore? Perhaps you can buy some food. You’ll need a full belly to hunt...”

She was bored of selling cages anyways. But, oh, to explore the market... She never thought he would ask!

“Really, father?!” she said, not trying one bit to hide her excitement.

“Here, take this,” he said.

Truth be told, they hadn’t sold many cages so far. He handed her the only two iron coins they earned. That used to make her feel poor, but she knew he was saving what the Lord Daimyo paid him for his masterpiece, and that it was safely tucked away at home.

“Stay close, now,” he said.

“I will, Father.” She was eager to explore.

Nearby were the smaller wares, mainly trinkets and beads - buckets of them - and saké bottles, bells, lock boxes, and socks. She was to stay within sight of her father, but the food was a little further. She saw no harm in seeing the kite makers table as long as she was within earshot.

There were so many of them! And pinwheels and propeller toys. A small boy spun his father's lathe while he carved kokeshi dolls. Another man strung stones to the sides of small drums and his wife danced to their song. The kendama master across the way was too young, she thought, to put on such a magnificent show! And it was a deft hand that painted the eyes of the daruma dolls.

But what had her fancy most were the other bugs. There were other cage-makers, whose work was nowhere near as fine. They weren't just selling cages, neither. They had painted beetles and beautiful, furry spiders. Some had netted cages and kept green dragonflies. The pill bugs made her giggle and the mantises made her pray. There were curly little caterpillars sold with twirly little sticks. One little girl had fuzzy, buzzing bumble bees tethered by the leg. She saw moths as beautiful as butterflies, some as big as her hand.

Every one of those sellers made for better salesmen than her father. She wondered why his table stood alone... She knew she should be hunting.

Kohana brought back skewered chicken, pork dumplings, sweet beans, and grass jelly. The cuttlefishes, glazed rabbit, and smoked mackerel cost more than her coins.

She didn't feel sorry for herself for not having the food she wanted, for they always made do. She couldn't feel sorry for his cages, for they were the most beautiful. It wasn't that they weren't selling well, either. She felt sorry that her father wasn't the

center of attention; that he didn't shout the loudest or sing when he sold. She was sad that it wasn't a celebration for him, but a necessity. She wondered about the payment the Lord bestowed.

When they finished with lunch, she had a spark of inspiration. She could always rely on a full belly for that. She was going to catch bugs. But her father would never believe that, for cricket hunting was for the wee hours, on the cusp of dawn. She would have to do something she hated. She would have to lie.

"Father," she said. "May I explore? I would love to watch the kites!"

The patrons weren't so much customers as they were browsers and minglers. He would handle the business alone and he didn't want to bore her.

"That will be alright, Kohana-San. As long as you stay close so that I can call you if I need you."

"May I take this?" she said. It was one of the smaller cages, less ornate than the rest, from the back of the cart.

"I'll tell you what," he said, suspecting she was up to something. "Take this one. If anyone asks, tell them I have finer ones for sale."

It was bigger than the one she wanted, and it was finer, too, than any of the others she saw for sale. She skipped away, thanking her father, hoping he would be distracted by a customer.

Kohana retraced her steps, heading back towards the food vendors. They were not her target, though. She wanted to see the bugs. She wanted to remind herself of her favorite ones. She also had questions. They weren't very far.

Oh, but they were wonderful! This time she took a closer look, and they were better than she remembered. She particularly liked the fuzzy ones. But it was that one she liked. The green one. She knew it had to be him.

"Excuse me," she said, polite with her meek little voice. She was asking the bug monger's daughter. She was like Kohana in almost every way, except she must have been an extraordinary hunter. "What is this one called?"

She knew very much he was a mantis. She liked that bug. Only, she didn't want to sound suspicious. She knew if she asked where she could find one the girl would say "Right here!" Her father was a pushy salesman.

"Did you catch him?" she asked.

The little girl was so proud to claim him as her own.

"You must be very lucky," said Kohana. "I bet they are difficult to find. I only catch crickets."

"Crickets are easy," said the girl. "I've caught hundreds of them."

So had Kohana. She was excited to tell her friend just how many she collected. She wouldn't divulge her most secret techniques, though, or of the one she caught for the Daimyo, but she needed to know more.

"I hunt for them," she said. "And my father makes these cages. He has many that are more beautiful than this one." She held up her prized possession.

"My father makes these cages you see, but they are not for sale."

Kohana could see that they were not as fine as her father's, but they were quite respectable, in their own sort of way.

"I bet you could sell many," she said, "with all of these beautiful creatures. How do you catch them?"

The girl told her all about it, beaming. Kohana knew that crickets loved the dawn. It was fun to learn that the caterpillars loved the long grass blades. The spiders they found were in the trees. She found beetles in the garden, and the ladybugs liked to fly around wherever they pleased. But the mantises liked stiff shrubs when they weren't stealing pollen from the bees. She imagined them in sunlight, unlike the dusty cart path from the Daimyo's castle. She would have to go outside the fence behind her father's cart.



There she found her shrubberies. They were set back from the gate but formed a sort of barricade behind the trees outside the fence. She searched for what may have been hours, but she didn't care. She enjoyed the hunt. She searched, at least, until her father called.

He was relieved she stayed in earshot, though he needn't know it was unintentional. She came to him empty-handed save for his cage. Alas, there weren't any mantises to be found. This, he did not need to know.

"Father," said Kohana, "you sold some cages!"

He had, in fact, moved a few more than she expected. It was enough so that she thought a hug was in order.

"Thank you, Kohana," he said, surprised by her. "We did quite well today after all. We can camp here tonight, and tomorrow I think we'll sell the rest. Will you hunt with me in the morning?"

She was quick to nod and happy to perform her duty.

"Come, let us buy food."



The lanterns and torches lit the grounds gently. If the marketplace bustled under the sun, it came alive at night. People did not stop needing for things or to be seen because it was dark. It was quite the opposite,

actually. Kohana hoped to see the dancing and drummers, but her father insisted they stay nearby. Lucky for them the other sellers stayed as well.

It was wonderful to listen to their tales and hear their soft songs. One man played a melody on a bamboo pipe-flute he carved. It hung between somber and sweet and made Kohana long to see her mother. Watching her father enjoy his company made her not miss the other festivities.

Sleep found her before her father, and she dreamed of nothing else but catching bugs. It was a good night.



For a hunter used to hunting crickets before dawn, she was awake after her usual time, even if it was only with the sunrise. Her father was up and rearranging his wares. The cages were already filled.

They breakfasted on cold rice and slivered onion and made plans for the day. Kohana was happy to know she could explore more, and content to keep her father unknowing of the mission at hand, but she felt sorry for missing the hunt.

She could hear crickets in the brush.



Hunting mantises didn't have to be so different, thought Kohana. She needed to first be still. She needed to listen. She wondered what sound a mantis

made. Her eyes needed to be keen, her feet silent. She had to think and to outsmart her prey. She put the sun between them. At her back she'd cast a shadow; head on, she couldn't see.

She couldn't remember the exact shade of him and didn't know if he changed colors. For sure, he wouldn't stand out against the bushes. She knew she needed to watch for movement. Was he fast? Did he startle?

No! He was there. Just then! It wasn't a flicker, but a steady, proud stride. And he rubbed his head, alternating sides. She needed to know if he was brave. Would he run? Could he fly?

The first thing was to put down the cage; this was a job for two hands. She leaned low and stretched out so it would be closer when she needed it. She collected herself, crawling to the cage, so she, too, could get closer. She stopped. He was still there. Had he noticed her? Was he afraid?

He was beautiful! Plump and green like a soybean. That's what she would call him. She could see the orange around his eyes.

Kohana knew if she was fast, she would never trick him. He was not some ordinary cricket. She knew if she hunted, he may defend. She dropped the stiffness in her shoulders and tilted her head just a little. Slowly, with a sure hand she advanced. He held steady. She wasn't sure if he was watching. He looked so calm. He was quiet.

She swallowed hard and brought her towards him, trying not to shake or flinch him away. In his orange eyes she saw that he was curious, like she was curious. She knew she needn't snatch him fast; she knew he would let her take him.

What a rush it was to touch him. His prickly arms prickled her fingers. She knew, though, to take away her hand. He was not some trinket to be taken. She would not collect him; she would welcome him. She gave him her knuckles and he scurried up. He was curious of her. Her hand tickled where he walked. The mantis did not startle when she lifted him away from his branch. She lifted him up close to her face, and with her other hand she touched his head softly. The hunter in her knew she had won, but the child in her knew she had a friend. The daughter in her knew she'd make her father proud.

The difference between Kohana and that other girl was that this bug was not captured into her cage. He was not there to be collected. His was now a noble house and she placed him gently, making him safe. She wanted to run and skip back to her father. Somehow, however, he was calming. She walked back slowly, careful not to jostle his cage as often as she stopped to admire him.

She didn't sneak away and around; she walked straight back to her father's cart, hopped the fence, and hurried right over. Her father hadn't any customers because he hadn't any cages left to sell.

This was a good day.

“Father!” she said. “I found him, look!” Kohana held her cage out proud.

“And he is a wonderful pet,” said her father. “But I don’t know if you can keep him.”

He took some of her wind. He kept packing his things, preparing to leave.

“Could you help me?”

“I don’t want to keep him, father.”

“That is good,” he said. “Please roll your blanket. You can brush the dust when we get home.”

“But father, I don’t want to keep him.”

“Then let him go. I would like to be home so we can begin in the morning. The blanket, Kohana, please.” His was folded and rolled and tied around with a length of cord. He clearly had the time to brush his before she returned. “Besides, he would eat too many crickets. We need them. I’d like to come back next month before it gets too cold.”

“I want to sell him. We can make bigger cages. We can earn more. Look at him,” she said. “He is beautiful!”

Her father didn’t react. He simply walked closer so he could hold the cage.

“Isn't he the most beautiful color green?” she said.
“And look, his eyes are orange. I think he likes me.
His name is Soybean.”

“Kohana, the blanket.”

Kohana was an obedient child. She told him all about the girl she saw and the beautiful bugs her father sold while she rolled her blanket. She was also an honest child. She told him how she slipped away - out of earshot - to hunt him.

By the time she looked up, her father had already let him go and packed away the cage.

“Give me your blanket. We must be going,” he said. He wasn't angry. It seemed like he truly was happy he sold so well, and eager to begin work on next month's earnings.

“Father! How could you do this?” Kohana cried. She was not a loud child. “Where is he?” she said, hurrying to the fence.

“He is where he belongs. Now, please, we should be going.”



Kohana was silent for much of the ride, only speaking when she needed to take a break. She barely ate when they stopped to nourish. She also barely cried. Her father respected her privacy, but she knew to expect a talking to when they returned

home. He would not raise his voice in front of their escort.



It was night on their arrival and Kohana didn't need to ask that he not wait until morning to explain. He paid the men iron coins from his purse and asked that Kohana follow him. There was a snap of cold in the air. He wrapped her heavy robe around her shoulders and walked her to the field. He carried a lantern to light the way.

Kohana wanted to ask. She, at the very least, wanted to speak first. She was angry but wanted him to hear sadness in her voice. But he held a finger to his lips, holding her to silence.

"Listen," he whispered. "What do you hear?"

To a girl who hunts them, it was quite clear. It was crickets.

"Do you hear it," he said, softly? "It is a sound we know well. It is one that most people disregard after a short while. It's not a threatening noise. Some say it's soothing. It's a sign that everything is otherwise quiet. I like to think it is a sound that lets us hear the silence."

Kohana thought there was meaning somewhere in his words. She was so angry that he let her mantis go, but he had her attention now.

“Let me tell you a story,” he said, speaking loud enough to silence the crickets. Or did he simply draw her attention from them? “It’s a poem, actually. A haiku. It was written by a great master. A wandering poet. It was something my father’s father used to recite, and he said *his* father’s father used to recite it, too. It says

*“Ungraciously, under
a great soldier’s empty helmet,
a cricket sings “*

They sat together, savoring the story. In silence. Though Kohana missed a part of his meaning, she heard the word crickets and at least four fathers that came before her own. Crickets clearly meant a great deal more to him than something that could simply fill a cage.

“What do you think this means, Kohana?”

“That it was wrong to catch a mantis?”

He laughed a quiet laugh. “I suppose,” he said. “That is not what I meant, though. You should know, Kohana, that I am very proud of you. It takes patience to catch a mantis, and a keen eye. You are very cunning. The haiku. Any thoughts?”

Suddenly, Kohana couldn’t take her mind away from the Daimyo’s Senshin. He was a great warrior. And yet his helmet rolled. It laid empty on the field of battle. Empty after he was cut down. This was, of course, for show. But what she saw was more grim.

She imagined a field as far as the eye could see, littered with helmets, painted by blood from fallen men.

“He doesn’t care,” she said. “He doesn’t care that the warrior has died.”

“Very good,” said her father. “Why doesn’t he care?”

“He is a cricket.”

“Yes,” said her father, laughing. “I suppose that’s true. My grandfather asked me what the lesson was when I said the same thing. He never did tell me, though. What do *you* think the lesson is? What does it mean?”

“That *we* should care?”

“That’s very good,” he said. “Have I told you that you are a clever girl? I like to think that is what it means, too. Hmm,” he said, puffing his chest. “The great warrior. A lifetime of training... What a waste. The cricket doesn’t care. I mean, of course! He is just a cricket. Why should he care about the battles of men? All he knows is to sing. And listen...”

Kohana could hear them again. Like the great warrior, she was gutted before. Upset at her father, mad about her mantis. Ungraciously, they were chirping.

But she wasn’t offended... She didn’t think them ungracious. If anything, they were soothing. Perhaps

there was another meaning... Perhaps they thought they were singing to save the soldiers some grief...

"Do you want to know what lesson I find there?"

Kohana kept her eyes forward and she nodded. She was eager to hear something that would put her at ease about the mantis.

"Actually, there are two, depending upon how you choose to feel about the crickets," he said. "On the one hand, they are simply crickets that don't know of such things. We find it ungracious because we *do* know, because they are *our* battles. In this way, let the lesson be a reminder to live a life of respect. Let the lesson be to live a gracious life.

"But you know crickets better than most, Kohana. You are the cleverest cricket hunter I have ever seen. And trust me, I have known many! Let's pretend they *do* know of the battles of men. At first, maybe they are ungracious to sing. But maybe, just maybe - if they *truly* know - the lesson is that even in hardest times, which we are sure to face, we must keep our spirits. We must sing.

"Either way, they remind me to be brave."

Kohana saw it in an instant.

"I'm sorry..."

He held his hand up and didn't let her finish.

“Kohana, when we lost your mother, you were very young. I knew there wasn’t any way you would understand. I wanted to scream that night. I wanted to break everything down; I wanted to hurt to take the pain away,” he said, trailing off.

She thought that maybe he was holding back tears.

“You were sleeping. I would not wake you, not that way. I ran out of the house. I remember it was so cold. I made it to about where we are sitting now before I collapsed. I fell to my knees, and I cried. I cried for hours that night. I cried until the dawn. I never felt this pain. I cried until I couldn’t cry anymore.”

She had never seen her father cry.

He put his hand on Kohana’s knee and squeezed. They did not meet eyes.

“When I wept, I could hear them. I stopped and I listened, and I remembered my grandfather’s haiku. I was so mad at them. *How could they sing?* I thought. Every chirp made me angry. But the more I listened, the more I knew I would not survive the silence alone. Did I find them ungracious? More than I can tell you. But maybe they were just...I don’t know...unintentional. They are only crickets...”

“I never knew if this was why my father sold crickets in cages. But I knew then that I would carry on in his tradition. In her name. They are crickets. They are ungracious at times, but they are always full of joy, if you know how to listen. Every one we sell reminds

me to be strong. I hope that they bring this kind of joy to at least one person. That is all I could ever hope.”

This time, to Kohana, they didn't sit in silence. They sat in the company of crickets. They were ungracious of her father's story, but they were singing in joy. Perhaps *they* were ungracious to wish the crickets any different. Kohana wished her father's story brought her joy, but she would settle for understanding.

Secretly, she wanted to see another mantis, to feel what she felt when she caught him, but she knew she would let him go.

Kohana knew, in that moment, that she would continue selling crickets. In her father's tradition.