

Specter of War
An Unnoticed Tale of the Cricket
by Scott Brandon
The Cricket created by Jef Holbrook

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I hear a lot of people complaining about the snow this time of year. Even people who've lived here all their lives and really should know it's coming. But I don't mind it so much. It's like spring cleaning for the city except, you know, in the winter. That first big snow collects all the grime from the rest of the year. After all that filthy, gray stuff gets washed down the storm drains, everything seems cleaner. Plus, in the mornings you're left with a nice layer of what I like to call Postcard Snow on the windowsills and rooftops. If you took a photograph before anyone walked through it, it would look great on a postcard.

Maybe all that seems a little poetic but walking the city streets this time of year, like I am now, I feel...hopeful? Optimistic? Maybe it's just the "Christmas spirit." I'm not sure.

A newspaper catches my eye in the early morning sun and I stop to look at the headline. It's screaming about the war in big, bold letters that are blaringly dark against the snow around the paper rack. I shake my head. This year...well, this year I don't think there's as much hope and optimism in the air. It's quieter than usual. The kids are usually running around, yelling in excitement or playing a game. The only folks shouting right now seem to be the newspaper hawkers.

People are uncertain about what's coming next. Some are frightened. Some have already lost family. Some are going to.

And why shouldn't they be scared? Who can blame them, after the last war? It was supposed to be the "War to End All Wars." I guess even heads of state can be hopeful too.

"You all right, Mr. Cricket?"

I shake my head again. I realize I've been staring at the newspaper too long. Looking up from the side of the newsstand, I see the slim face and brown eyes of Sam. He's the young guy who owns the stand nearest my office on China Street – wife, one or two kids. Not sure. I wouldn't say we're "friends" yet, but I see him every day. He's always sociable...even to the guy in the long coat and cricket suit.

"Yeah," I say, finally finding the voice the war memories stole for a moment. "Just a long night, Sam."

I don't think Sam's his real name, but he says it's what everybody calls him. I'm sure he means "everybody who can't pronounce my real name." Like most of the people here he's—you guessed it—Chinese. Well, Chinese but American. Both.

He grins as he's setting out another bundle of papers, his heavy coat not hindering him in the least. "You have lots of those don't you, Mr. Cricket?"

"Trying to stay busy." I smile somewhat mirthlessly. "The life of a private eye."

He barks a laugh. "How's business?" he asks.

"Dry. Yours?"

"Good, good." He slams a palm down on the papers with a thump. He doesn't wear gloves, despite the cold air. His hand is covered in uneven smears of newsprint ink. Some of it's made its way to his forehead, below the edge of his wool cap. Probably from his pushing his hair back from his eyes. "People can't get enough news about the war," he continues.

“Right.” I pick up a paper from the stack and fish around in my pocket for a nickel. It takes a lot longer than it really should, not because I’m clumsy, but because the nickel doesn’t have any company in there.

“I guess you’re glad we’re finally taking it to the Japanese, huh?” I say, trying to sound light. “They’ve been fighting with China for a couple of years now.”

Sam shrugs. “My parents have been a lot more upset about that than I am. I’m second-generation American. None of us remember the ‘homeland’ my grandparents talked about. I’m sure we have distant relatives over there, but it seems as far away to me as to...well, it probably does to you, Mr. Cricket.” He adds a laugh. “I’ll be glad to see the Japanese leave China, though. But I am sorry it has come to war for us.” He shakes the paper in his hand slightly for emphasis before handing it to me. “But it is good for selling papers.”