

A SHOT OF COURAGE

by Amos Kwok

Heroes were important. They were symbols of courage, symbols of worship. All the boys wanted to be heroes and they tried to prove themselves. Wrestling with the largest hog in the village, swimming in the river during winter, clinging to a tree as it was felled, leaping from the cliff into the lake... They tried it all.

I wanted to be a hero too. The longing for adoration and worship made me follow the others as they risked their lives. But I was never worthy. Greater acts always overshadowed my feats. How I longed for courage. But it never came. Instead, fear was my constant companion: fear, not of failing, but of pain. And of death.

"Let's go boar hunting," suggested John. The others murmured their agreement. I remained silent, thinking of the consequences. Boar hunting meant stalking through the woods. The King's woods.

"Won't we be poaching?" My tone was nonchalant but laughter greeted my comment.

"Billy's afraid," they chanted.

"Am not." I glared at them, shaking a fist at them. The others merely laughed again. Shamefaced, I followed the company as they wandered into the woods. A few of them carried long slim spears while the others had slings or bows. I touched my leather belt, feeling the twelve arrows tucked there. Shooting was the only thing I was good at and I could hit a target at a hundred paces. But targets were of motionless straw; I had yet to hit any live game. Hitting straw didn't make me a hero. It didn't matter that it had taken me hours of whittling ash to form the slim missiles. It didn't matter it took just as long to bind the goose fletchings to the end. I had even fitted the barbed arrowheads with my own hands. But making arrows wasn't heroic.

We entered the forest. My eyes wandered ceaselessly all about, more alert for soldiers than game. By midday, the tension of being caught exhausted me and I began to watch as the sun threaded lines of gold through the green cloth of leaves. The birds called out in shrills and twits; the cicadas chirped a discordant song; and even the trees rustled their branches in greeting. The strong scent of oak and pine

saturated the air, enveloping us. For a while, I forgot about trespassing as the forest filled my senses.

Close to dusk, the company had swelled with heroes. Squirrels, hares and even a fawn had become badges of courage. The heroes in an endless stream of words, were reliving their tales of glory while the others were spread out, thrashing in the brush, hoping to drive out game. I glanced at my belt, at the twelve arrows tucked there and sighed. Suddenly there was a scream from some distance ahead. I looked up and saw John burst out from some brush that he had been exploring. Waving his arms, he ran towards me.

"Help! Big one!" My eyes travelled past him and I saw his big one. A boar, twice his size was charging him. Its tusks were the length of his arms and they gleamed in the setting sun. I watched in horror as the boar chased him. Without warning, John fell with a cry and before he could even sit up, the boar drove its tusks into his back. I could feel the bile rising in my throat as the boar gored John again, turning its tusks crimson.

"Get away from him!" I ran forward, waving my arms. But I stopped short when the boar glanced up. My eyes widened as I realized I was the closest to it now. Carefully, I inched a foot back, then another.

"Billy. Come back. It'll kill you too!" The boys' shouting only made the boar keep its cold black eyes on me. It snorted once, then charged.

"Billy! Run!" The others were already a safe distance away. I bolted but tripped and tumbled. There was a snap of ash arrows. Fear flooded me like a cold blast as I scrambled to my feet. I started to run but my mind screamed stop. I did and turned to watch the boar a hundred paces away.

"Billy!" I ignored their shouts. I was scared: no longer of pain but of being a coward for ever.

"I'm not craven." The words spilled out again and again like a chant as I felt along my belt. I pulled an arrow free but was shaking so badly it took an eternity to nock it. I pulled hard but my fingers slipped, sending the arrow to the ground. Fighting back rising panic, I pulled out a second arrow and nocked it. The boar came into my sight. Whoop! I heard the familiar whirring of a flying missile. I held my breath as the arrow flew but it struck the ground where the boar had already run past. It thundered on and I reached for another arrow.

Whoop! The arrow was away, homing in with a life of its own. It struck the great beast on a shoulder and sent it tumbling with a snort of pain. It struggled on the ground and then scabbled to its feet. My jaw dropped. I could see blood ooze around the wound but the beast shook its great bulk and began its charge once more. Slower now, but still formidable.

"Run, Billy!" My mind was shouting at me. Hero, hero, hero. The word echoed in my head, keeping my feet rooted. I glanced down at my belt. There was a single arrow left. Oh please... I removed it and tried to lick the goose fletching but my mouth was like sackcloth in the sun. Hurriedly, I nocked the arrow once more and pulled. The beast filled almost all my vision now. Eye to eye, we stared at each other. I trained the arrowhead on it.

Whoop! My anger flew at the monster. I could feel the bowstring lash the leather bracer on my forearm as it whipped the missile forward. The arrow struck and the monster buckled. Even as I watched, the monster started to sway, left to right and back again. Then I noticed the trees were swaying too. Left to right and back again. The boys had emerged from hiding and were gathering around me. They were also swaying. Left to right and back again.

"Billy, you hit it in the eye." There was awe in their voices. I tried to focus on where my arrow was but by then, the ground was swaying beneath me. My badge tottered and started to collapse. I didn't know which one of us hit the ground first.

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