



sleeper

E.G. ROWLEY

Part I: The Journey to The Sea

The Ballad of Cap'Tian

Cold and black brisk East winds blew,
Through Far'Verm Pass to Western lands,
To walls of Draer dark shadows drew,
Delivered into evil's hands.

Draer King's army gave valiant defense,
Against the shadow's growing might,
As dusk Sun's light made red intense,
Draer King lay martyred that very night.

Unmatched they marched with force of arms,
Southward evil's dark armies spread,
Cross rivers and forests and trampled farms,
With misery, hopelessness, death and dread.

When from the heart of the Western lands,
Like a brilliant star that comes to Earth,
A shining hero stalwart stands,
Raises sword and shows his worth.

Cap'Tian, pure of heart and mind of stone,
With sword and shield and spear-tipped lance,
The hero stands — one man alone,
Drives back the horde's conquering advance.

Back to the East fleas evil's retreat,
With one final card yet to play,

A feast and trap did lay in defeat,
For Cap'Tian's fate ends would betray.

By victory drink was Cap'Tian betrayed,
To sleep but not to die or rise,
On windward slopes the evil stayed,
To perhaps return and claim their prize.

Foretold the hero of this song bides,
Until Draer Princess softly weeps,
When returning horde of evil rides,
Yet deep in El'Thune Cap'Tian sleeps.

Stripes of orange light shot through a small window, illuminating the plank floor of Rowan'Gaff's bedroom. Fine, ever-present dust rose from the floorboards, and refracted the morning light throughout the small room. The boy sat on the edge of his bed catching his breath from the previous night's shocking dream.

In it, the stocky five-foot-three lad wore heavy black armor and drug behind him a long-sword gouging a shallow trough in the blood-stained ground. He marched with slow, hammering steps lifting each weighty boot in lurching agony. Around him, taller dark figures lumbered ever forward — great plumes of steam bursting from their helmets accompanied by grunts and growls. Fear gripped the boy and the feeling of being out of place and time spread through his consciousness like a wildfire through dry underbrush.

The company halted in lock-step and Rowan'Gaff nearly plowed into the hulking soldier to his front. Through gaps in the front lines, Rowan'Gaff shielded his eyes from a glowing figure holding back the advancing horde. Snarls emanated from figures looming over him and whispers of, "Cap'Tian," and "The hero," floated forward from within the cohort.

Cap'Tian, the boy questioned, whispering in his dreaming mind. He shuffled to get a better look at his fabled ancestor. Since birth, Rowan'Gaff listened to stories of his heroic fore-bearer, the man that single-handedly drove off an over-powering, invading army. In his dream, the boy could not make out the glowing figure's features, only squint at the dazzling light which hovered in front of the company.

The ranks in front of Rowan'Gaff shouted a blood-curdling roar and broke into a sprint toward the glowing light. Rowan'Gaff lurched forward, pushed by the onslaught of immense, armor-clad fighters. He tried to slow his advance, working his heavy feet backward only to find himself at the vanguard of the assault.

Before him stood an enormous luminescent man, his face obscured by the brilliant orange and yellow light bursting from him. Rowan'Gaff stepped back to look at the figure as the hero's crushing shield plowed into the boy dropping him to the muddy ground.

“No!” Rowan’Gaff cried, not only in his dream but also unknowingly from his bed as the hero advanced on him and plunged the silvery tip of his lance deep into Rowan’Gaff’s chest.

Awake, his body shook at the memory of Cap’Tian’s voracious thrust and touched the spot on his nightshirt where moments earlier in his dream, a spearhead punctured his heart.

The spot itched and he softly scratched at it. The irritation did not subside. From it, emerged a feeling that Rowan’Gaff no longer belonged in this place. His room looked unfamiliar — his belongings foreign. He stood and crept into the main room of his family’s small farmhouse.

His father, Fere’Man Vodr, sat at their small, common room table, finishing a bowl of boiled oats. “I heard you yell,” he commented through a spoonful of dripping meal. “Are you well?” Not that his father gave him much concern, the question came as more of an inquisition regarding Rowan’Gaff’s fitness for the day’s work, than fatherly care.

“I’m fine.”

Fere’Man nodded and jabbed another ladle of oats into his bearded mouth. “Then dress yourself and eat with haste. The wagon for Son’Us needs attention.” He motioned to a squat brown bucket on a preparation table next to their cooking hearth.

Rowan’Gaff returned to his room, removed his nightshirt, and dressed for the day’s work. The itch in his chest grew to a burning desire to leave this place immediately. The drawing force also instilled within him a feeling of destiny — a sense of longing for greatness. Between the visions of black-clad creatures, Rowan’Gaff saw himself as the shining hero. He heard songs of his deeds ringing from some distant inevitability. He mustered his strength and pushed the secret desire to leave deep within himself before warming his own bowl of oats. The young man quickly finished his breakfast and joined his father at their wagon. While he hefted burlap sacks of grain onto the dray, his mind filled with the glowing form of Cap’Tian.

“Father? You used to tell me tales of Cap’Tian, the hero. Are we really descended from him?”

Fere’Man pushed a grain satchel into position and rested an elbow on the stack. He nodded, “Aye, he is your fore-bearer on your Mother’s side.” He waved for the boy to toss him another load.

Rowan’Gaff hoisted a bushel from his shoulder to the cart’s rail. “Was he really the great hero the legends make him out to be?”

“I have no reason to doubt the songs.”

“I’d like to be a hero,” the boy said.

His father laughed. “If you manage to get your chores done today, you’ll be a hero, bar none.”

Rowan’Gaff frowned at the jibe, the longing in his chest felt as though his heart would beat its way through his ribs. He needed to go — now. *Where do I need to go*, he asked himself and heaved the final bag to the cart.

Fere’Man maneuvered the grain into position, securing the load with several runs of

fraying twine. "I'll return tonight from Son'Us. I expect your tasks completed."

"Yes, father," the boy answered. Behind his composed response, Rowan'Gaff knew the instant his father crested the low hill to the South and lost view of the farm, his journey would begin.

The beating in his chest and desire to depart clouded his thoughts, removing any notion of responsibility to his father or their small Longshore farm. Rowan'Gaff moved to the house and withdrew a strapped-satchel from his father's worn storage chest. On the table, he filled it with dry and salted supplies, a semi-clean shirt from his room, and a small skin of water.

Minutes later, Rowan'Gaff stood outside their cottage door watching the cart lazily draw up the southern hill's slope. Without looking back, his father crested the incline and vanished from sight. The boy looked left, then right. *Which way*, he silently questioned? He closed his eyes, bringing the vision of Cap'Tian to the forefront of his mind. When the memory of the gleaming hero focused, Rowan'Gaff winced from a sudden, sharp chest pain. For an instant, in his mind's eye, a bright lance erupted from below his chin. Rowan'Gaff opened his eyes to the brilliance of the blazing morning sun. *East*, he concluded.



The pack's weight made Rowan'Gaff's back sore and his limited knowledge of the lands outside of those between the River Mor'Ah and the Great sea slowed his progress East. He trudged along the rolling grasslands of Longshore directly East, keeping the sun in front of him for the first half of the day and at his back as afternoon progressed. He hoped to reach Narrow Bridge by nightfall, but the unfamiliar terrain and unknown distances forced him to set camp in the open by sunset the first night.

In his haste to begin his journey, Rowan failed to pack a flint and steel or a proper bed roll. His camp consisted of a mound of dried grass which he plucked from the side of a wind-blown rise and a small morsel of scraped salt-pork.

Mercifully, the weather remained dry and the heat of the day dissipated slowly, allowing the young man to fall asleep in relative comfort under his makeshift blanket. Rowan'Gaff drifted off when his tired muscles finally relaxed and thoughts of his father's anger evaporated.

When his eyes closed Rowan'Gaff's mind drew him back to the corpse-strewn battlefield. Again he stood opposite the glowing hero surrounded by grunting heathens awaiting the opening of the melee. *Why am I here? Why am I not standing beside my kin?*

Knowing the outcome of this scenario, Rowan'Gaff pushed forward to join his heroic ancestor and fight off the black horde, like the hero he should be. The ranks in front of him opened and he found himself face to face with the vibrant visage of Cap'Tian.

"Cap'Tian, I am Rowan'Gaff, your decsend..." The hero's shield slammed the boy to

the ground. Cap'Tian stepped over him and raised his glimmering lance for the eventual deathblow.

Before the glimmering head of the spear penetrated Rowan'Gaff's chest, his dream wavered abruptly and he found himself laying in a meadow listening to the sounds of birdsong. He unfurled defensive arms from his face and stared in a bright blue sky.

No longer wearing the heavy black armor, Rowan'Gaff sat up in the tall, green grass. In the distance a snow-capped mountain range extended as far as he could see and an ocean of yellow and purple flowers stretched toward a towering wood line. Behind him a brook babbled and a gentle breeze brushed the flowers from side to side like rhythmic dancers.

Rowan'Gaff stood, turned in a circle, and looked into the mid-day sky. His chest pounded as he surveyed the prairie, not unlike the grasslands of Longshore. Tall, straight trees encircled the meadow and Rowan'Gaff felt an intense desire to remain in this peaceful place. "Hello?" his dream-self called only to have his call vanish in the wind.

Rowan'Gaff turned again and several feet away, opposite the stream, stood an old man. The man did not startle Rowan as the boy felt the stranger's sudden presence before he saw him. The man leaned on a worn staff which ended in a gnarled root, several inches above his head. His gray cloak scrubbed the ground around his boots and tracks of countless travels worked up from its worn edges.

The man looked directly at Rowan'Gaff with intense eyes and a caring, yet forceful expression. Rowan took a step forward. "Is this where I'm supposed to be? Please..."

Rowan'Gaff's foot slipped in a slight depression and he tumbled to the ground, landing on his side. He rolled to his back and stared up into the glowing image of Cap'Tian. The hero's lance slammed into his chest, smashing through his armor and driving the air from his lungs.

The boy shot awake, clutched at his chest and gasped for breath. He thrashed at the remaining grass-covering and stood, pacing away from his sleeping area. He convulsed and bent forward, resting his hands on his knees.

Dawn's light crested the distant mountains igniting a burning in his chest toward them. That is where he needed to be, he knew it now more than ever. *I must find the old man's meadow*, he told himself. He straightened and allowed the eastern light to flow up him from boot to scalp. Its heat felt cleansing and he shrugged off the night's chill before rummaging through his pack for breakfast.

The hunk of stale bread did little to fill his hollow belly and less to diminish the aching in his chest to find the old man who stood next to the bubbling stream.