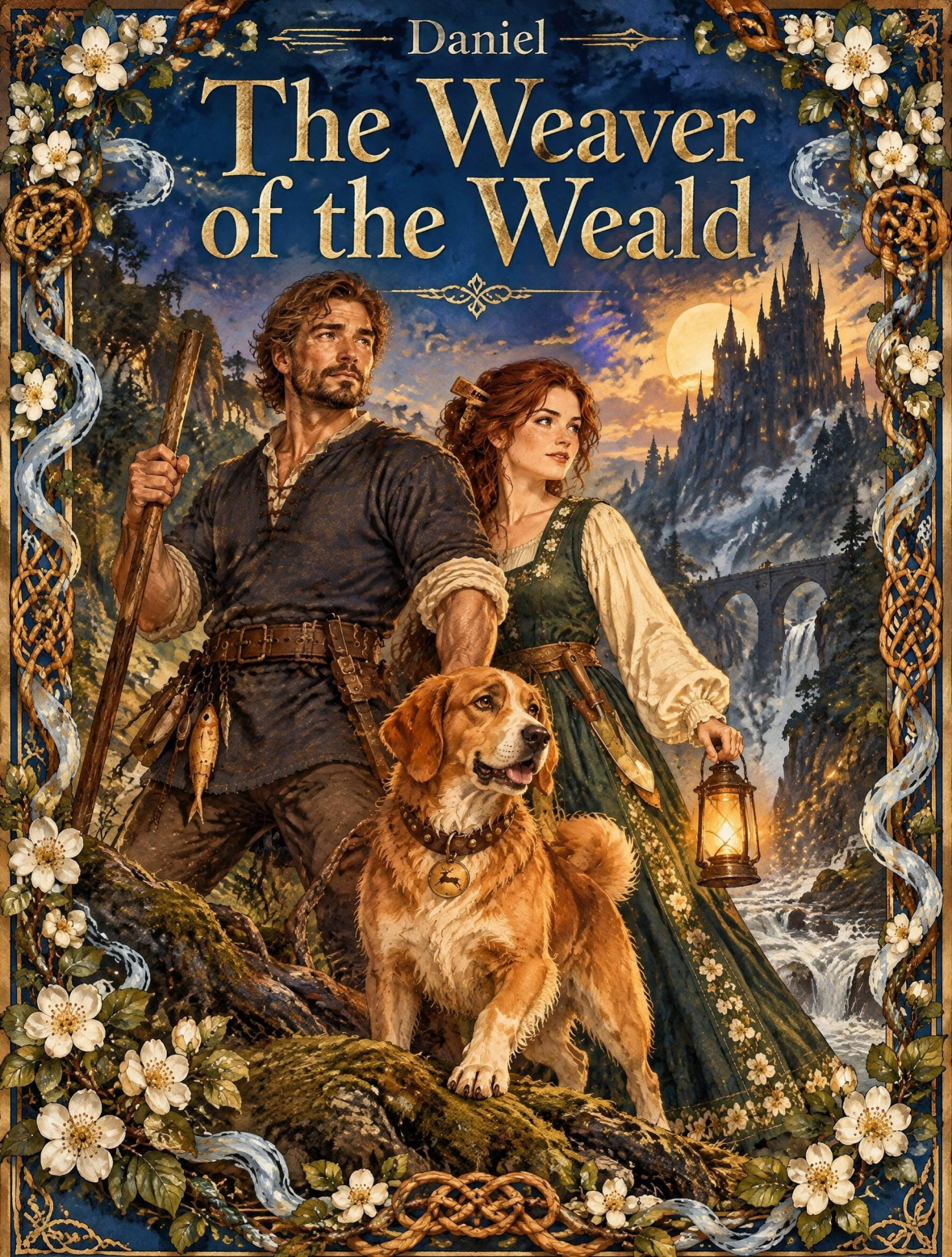
Daniel

The Weaver of the Weald



Midsummer at Oakhaven should have meant cider, song, and a decade of love. Instead, an austere sorcerer steals Claire away to silence her voice forever. Armed only with river timber, stubborn devotion, and his thunderous golden hound, Daniel enters the Grey Weald to prove no spell can outlast ten years of true devotion.

For Claire,

on our tenth anniversary:

I would cross any kingdom for you.

— Daniel

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CANTO I

The Midsummer Frost

Daniel

Ten summers back, my friends, remember,
I tuned my strings to make them one!
No fading spark or sluggish ember
Has cooled the bond so well begun.
Now Daniel fingered in his pocket
A walnut box he carved unseen;
He brought no silver-braided locket,
Just seasoned timber, smooth and clean.
He cleared his throat, his courage shaken,
And watched her by the sugar flare,
Where village weavers had partaken
In merry rounds with lovely Claire.

Then through the crowd a yellow thunder
Came bounding with an honest greed;
Rex knocked the trestle-benches under,
A hound who mocks the hunter's breed!
He leaped the boards in flying glory
To snatch the sausage garland neat,
While Barnaby, to crown the story,
Got splashed with liquor at his seat.
"By malt and barm!" the brewer shouted,
As pear-sweet cider filled his clogs;
The shameless thief had never doubted
The rights of uninvited dogs.

Claire

Now Claire stepped to the orchard flooring;
She tossed her chin with radiant pride,
And paid no heed to cider pouring
Or dogs that begged on either side.
A smirk of mischief, quick and daring,
Curved on her lips to tease the throng;
She caught her husband's quiet staring
And raised the sweet Midsummer song.
Then Daniel stepped with awkward passion,
His walnut box outstretched to view,
Prepared in stubborn, honest fashion
To prove his ancient promise true.

Lord Malakor

A soundless wind blew sharp and chilling;

The torches died without a spark;
A sudden frost, intense and killing,
Consumed the orchard in the dark.
The pear-tree blooms, so sweet and slender,
Were turned to needle-spikes of frost;
Then down through fog of ghastly splendor
A shadow came whose path we crossed!
Upon a raft of mute swan feather
Lord Malakor descended low;
He came to quench our summer weather
Beneath an icy sheet of snow.

He raised an ash-bespeckled finger;
Her song was severed mid-refrain!
No dying cadence dared to linger,
Congealed to frost upon the plain.
Her song in violet crystals hovered,
Suspended, shining in the air,
Before the velvet mantle covered
The frightened face of lovely Claire.
Within his cloak of silent trailing,
He wrapped her in a frozen sweep;
She had no breath for futile wailing,
Enfolded for the distant deep.

Young Daniel seized an iron poker
And lunged to strike the shadow down;
No thief of breath, no phantom-broker,
Would steal the jewel of our town!
A shockwave burst with sudden power
And hurled him headlong in the dirt;
He saw the frozen heavens lower,
And lay there breathless, bruised, and hurt.
Beneath his ribs the box was shattered,
Crushed in the mud beneath his weight,
While Claire was dragged, as hoarfrost scattered,
Into the clouds to meet her fate.

Rex

Up from the frost-scorched dirt and litter,

Poor Daniel dragged his aching bones;
He coughed out ash both grey and bitter,
And spat his blood among the stones.
With frantic whines and urgent licking,
Rex cleared the crimson from his face,
While Daniel felt his pulses ticking
To spur him from that frozen place.

Fat Barnaby was slapping roundly
His knees in terror and despair;
"By malt and barm! He struck us soundly!
The ancient curses ride the air!
The Keep of Silence wakes to harrow!
To tavern, Daniel! Bolt the oak!
Barricade every nook and narrow
Until the morning clears the smoke!"
The brewer babbled, pale and shaking,
Of deadly spells and ancient law,
While every fatty limb was quaking
Before the horror that he saw.

Captain Vane

"Right then," he muttered, never bending,
Nor heeding what the brewer spoke;
For marriage was no playhouse ending
To vanish when a demon woke.
He stomped straight past the frightened talker,
Down to his workshop on the dock;
No shadow-lord or ghastly walker
Could make his stubborn purpose rock.
He gripped his river-walnut tackle,
With braided copper line in coils,
And seasoned ash-wood oars to shackle
The surging water to his toils.

Rex came to plant his heavy muzzle

Upon his master's river-boot;
No demon's frost could ever puzzle
A loyal heart so resolute.
A sudden "BOOF!" like muffled thunder
Broke from his broad and furry throat;
It cracked the rim of ice asunder
And shook the hoarfrost from the boat.

Barnaby Finch

Ashamed to see the hound so steady,
While he had whimpered in the cold,
Old Barnaby grew prompt and ready,
And found his heart again was bold.
He rolled a cask of cider, glowing
With summer warmth and potent yield,

And brought a yellowed parchment showing
The sunken marshes of Grey Weald.
"Take these!" he cried, his terror mended,
"And drink a draught when courage dies!"
The fellow's trembling panic ended
Beneath the hound's reproving eyes.

Now Daniel shoved the timber vessel
Into the chill and gurgling track,
Prepared with frost and fiend to wrestle,
To bring his stolen darling back.
"Ten years," he swore, his grip grown tighter,
"We held our vow through flood and stone;
No fear shall make my purpose lighter
Until I bring her to our own!"

He saw the downstream current shudder,
Where creeping black reeds choked the shore;
The rime-ice bit against his rudder,
More swift than winter frost of yore.
The river current turned to blackness,
As midnight frost ran sharp and cold;
No winter freeze of sluggish slackness,
Against the flow the rime-line rolled.
It raced past branch and frozen willow,

A creeping venom, unrevealed,
That surged beneath the darkling billow
Toward the grim, forbidden Weald!

CANTO II

Across the Whispering Fens

Above the marsh's sunken traces
The barge of shadows sliced the night;
High over grim, forgotten places

It drifted on its soundless flight.
Upon a velvet bench, unbending,
Sat Claire, as fearless as a queen;
Her pear-tree blossoms, white, extending
Across her kirtle's vivid green.
She smoothed her hem with cool defiance,
And met the sorcerer's cold eye;
Refusing any tame compliance,
She held her chin against the sky.

Lord Malakor, in down and feather,
Addressed her in a silken tone:
"Why mourn a world of stormy weather,
Where mortals only weep and groan?
Your song, a treasure pure and tender,
Shall quench the quarrels of the earth;
In everlasting, soundless splendor,
To banish all discordant mirth.
No petty bickering shall wound you,
No husband clatter on the floor;
A sacred quiet shall surround you,
And peace will reign forevermore."

She tossed her chin, her humor waking,
And gave a smirk of sharp disdain:

"Why, darling, honestly! You're making
A foolish virtue out of pain!
Ten years of wedlock, haughty master,
Without a squabble, loud and clear,
Is no escape from grim disaster,
It is a corpse upon a bier!
A marriage stripped of honest shouting
Is just a graveyard in disguise;
The slamming doors, the healthy doubting,
Keep living mortals warm and wise!"

He smoothed his cuffs, as though offended
By mortal madness, loud and base;
His gaze into the clouds ascended,
Above the squalor of our race.
Behind her skirts, her fingers shifted;

She slipped the silver trowel free;
She hummed a garden tune, and lifted
Her chin in daring mockery.
"A pear tree's bed," she lectured grandly,
"Needs rotted straw and seasoned weed!"
While smiling innocently, blandly,
She pried the stone to serve her need.
Her silver blade dug in, unheeded,
Behind the timber of the bench;
The black obsidian glyph he needed
She loosened with a sudden wrench!

The vessel pitched! A tremor shivered
Across the spars and silent sail;
The phantom craft convulsed and quivered,
And tumbled headlong through the gale!
Three hundred feet through shadows dropping,
It plunged into the sulfur-drift;
Without a helm, without a stopping,
The vessel took a sickening shift.
Lord Malakor was hurled and battered
Against the rail of frosted ash;
His cold composure cracked and shattered
Beneath the sudden, jarring crash!

Yet swift he rose, with anger freezing,
To seize the plunging rudder-beam;
Around her wrists, abruptly squeezing,
Twin bands of vapor hissed with steam.
Like biting rime the vapors locked her;
The chill bit deep into the bone,
Yet neither fall nor phantom shocked her,
Nor did she yield a single groan.
"At midnight strikes the solstice turning,"
He whispered in a deadly swell;
"Your voice shall yield its mortal burning
Forever to the Silent Bell!"

Below, where willow-boughs were weeping
Across the river's sluggish track,
The honest boatman, never sleeping,
Bent low his broad and knotted back.
The river ran like blackened tallow,
Resisting every stroke he gave;
Through muddy deep and choking shallow
The ash-wood oars churned up the wave.
His knuckles bled, all raw and aching,
His hazel eyes were narrowed tight;

He rowed through silver vapors breaking
Upon the venom of the night.

Then from the reeds a music drifted,
A sweet, bewitching, mournful cry;
Across the fen the phantom shifted
To counterfeit a lover's sigh.
"Oh, Daniel, drop your oars, I shiver!
Beneath the keelson I am bound!
Dive down into the weeping river,
Before your wedded love is drowned!"

He froze; his stubborn heart was leaping
Within his ribs with sudden dread;
He heard her sorrow, softly weeping,
And leaned above the riverbed.
The oars hung dripping, uncommitted;
He peered into the swirling black;
His craftsman’s reason was outwitted,
Drawn toward the deep and deadly track.

Then Rex leaned out, his nostrils flaring
Above the swirling, sullen foam;
No lavender, no scent of caring,
No trace of her who kept their home!

He sneezed with absolute revulsion
Against the reed-bed's rotten smell;
And, outraged by the vile convulsion,
He let his canine fury swell.
A "BOOF!" like crack of thunder started
From deep within his furry throat;
The hollow, lying fog departed
In terror from the little boat!

Like brittle glass, the mist was broken;
The siren vapors flew away,
Dissolving what the reeds had spoken
In jagged reefs of deadly grey.
An inch before the timber vessel,
Sharp limestone teeth stuck through the tide;
No mortal strength with them could wrestle
Had Daniel plunged into their side!

Young Daniel laughed, his courage steady,
Though cold sweat pearled along his brow;
He patted Rex, alert and ready,
Who wagged his tail upon the prow.
"Good lad," he muttered, reaching blindly
Into the sack beside his seat;
He spoke both gratefully and kindly,

And tossed a slab of bacon meat.
The hound engulfed the savory ration
With one contented, greedy snap,
While Daniel rowed in stubborn fashion
Beyond the water-spirit's trap.

He turned his gaze; the fog was lifting,
Yet joy was strangled in a breath:
Before the boat, through vapors drifting,
A barrier arose like death.
Across the river, black and chilling,
A spiked portcullis barred the way;
The Iron Weir, its gates fulfilling
The grim enchantments of decay.
High iron pikes and rusted cages
Locked tight the black and swollen fen;
The weir that stood for silent ages
Denied the river-path to men!

CANTO III

Locks of the Iron Weir

Into the cavern, deep and vaulted,
Where sluggish, silent waters creep,
The phantom vessel softly halted

Beneath the stones of Silence Keep.
No water splashed, no timber grated;
A velvet moss of sickly green
Devoured each footstep as it waited
Across that subterranean scene.

With silken tread and haughty bearing,
The sorcerer led Claire along;
While she, with daring vision staring,
Maintained her courage, proud and strong.
She passed dead stone: old poets standing
With lyres all broken in their hold,
And singers on the granite landing
Whose open mouths were choked with cold!
A leaden rime had choked each singer,
To freeze the measures they had spun;
No breath of music dared to linger
Beneath that cold and soundless sun.

"A cheerful house!" she muttered lightly,
And hummed three bars of garden song;
Then, stumbling on the pavers slightly,
She feigned a foot had fallen wrong.
Down to the damp flagged pavement bending,
She scraped the drain with covert art;

Her silver trowel, sharp, extending,
Cut deep into the stone apart.

A ringing groove! The steel, rebounding,
Sent shivers through the basalt rock;
A hum arose, the vaults confounding,
That answered to the sudden shock!
She listened as the echo, flying,
Went humming up the belfry sky:
A tuning fork, the stone belying,
Whose core could amplify a cry!

The master sprang in haste to catch her;
He seized her wrist with biting frost!
"No mortal impudence shall match her,"
He hissed, "and all your tricks are lost!"
He tore the mantle from her shoulder,
To leave her linen thin and bare;
His slate-grey face grew grim and colder
Beneath his bone-white, swept-back hair.

Then soundless wraiths came forth to lead her
Up spiral stairs of soundless stone;
No friend was near to help or speed her,
Where chilling gusts of void were blown.

Within a cage of iron bars now,
Beneath the Bell of Stillness bound,
She looked upon the frozen stars now,
Above the dark, unyielding ground.

Beside the weir, where currents muttered,
Young Daniel moored his boat of oak;
No fearful syllable he uttered,
Though through the fog the hoarfrost broke.

Up to the slimy platform striding,
He hailed the warden of the grate:
"Crank up the bars! No more abiding!
My wedded Claire cannot await!"

The grizzled warden, coughing, spitting
Into the foam that churned beneath,
Growled: "All your lover's vows are fitting
For nothing but a graveyard wreath!
Go home, young fool! Your blind devotion
Feeds only wraiths within the Weald;
Mind well the current—in this ocean
No stubborn heart has ever healed!"

Then boiled the grate! From iron cages,
Black shadow-leeches, thick as tar,
Sprang upward in demonic rages,
Like venom from a severed scar!
They coiled round Vane’s oiled boots, demanding
Their victim for the hungry sluice;
They dragged him from the timber landing,
Where mortal courage proved no use!

"Rex, hold him!" cried the boatman, reaching
For tackle in his river pack;

While Vane, amid the foam and screeching,
Was hauled toward the chasm black.
Full fifty paces, stout and supple,
Of braided copper line flew wide;
With weighted lead to bind and couple,
He cast across the boiling tide!
The copper lassoed tight the lever
That worked the sluice-gate forty feet;
He snubbed it round his rowlocks clever,
And made the winch's hold complete!

Rex charged the slick and sodden planking,
And seized Vane's collar in his teeth;
While all the rusted chains were clanking,
He hauled him from the foam beneath!
A shadow-leech reared high to grapple,
A bloated worm of ink and dread;
Rex pinned it flat, while juice of apple
Was drenched upon the monster's head!
Young Daniel doused the cider, pouring
The tart, fermented cellar-brew;
Their caustic slime, with hisses roaring,
Dissolved before that golden dew!

Shamed to his soul, the warden, staring

Upon the hound and steadfast man,
Felt in his heart an ancient daring
Before the sorcerer began.
He reached into his coat, producing
An old tobacco tin of lead;
A key of bronze, the gates unloosing,
He tossed to Daniel's hand, and said:
"Once past this lock, the silence, stealing,
Will eat your memories, cold and black;
If you forget her face and feeling,
You never, never bring her back!"

CANTO IV

The Claws of Stillness

Suspended high in soundless spaces,
Where gloom had hung its heavy pall,
She watched the cold and barren places

Along the fortress belfry wall.
From adamantine chains, unbending,
A sheer obsidian giant swung,
The Bell of Stillness, dark, descending,
Without a clapper, mouth, or tongue.

And yet a chill began to shiver
Within the chambers of her mind;
The quiet crawled, an icy river,
To leave no tender thought behind.
She sought his voice, her courage falling,
The dry, warm chuckle of her spouse;
She strained to hear his spirit calling
As in the sunlight of their house.
Yet from her grasp the tone went fleeing,
A shadow swallowed up the sound;
A terror struck her inmost being
Above that dead, forbidden ground!

"No, never!" cried her soul, defying
The theft of all she held most dear;
With stubborn pride, the void denying,
She gripped her silver trowel near.
She struck the bar: a sudden clatter
Awoke the belfry from its sleep!

No hollow shade that sound could scatter,
No sorcery could bid it weep!
And then she hummed that rowdy measure
I sang them on their wedding day,
When Daniel pledged his simple treasure
And kissed her every tear away!

The coarse, unruly cadence quivered,
And struck the cage's iron frame;
The stone above convulsed and shivered
Before that loud, rebellious flame!
The great obsidian bell was shaken;
A tremor ran along its crest,
As though a sleeping fiend should waken
With mortal fury in its breast!
A hairline crack began to glisten;
A spark of lavender arose;
The stones leaned in, as if to listen,
Where bright dust trickled on their foes.

Then through the arch Lord Malakor glided,
His slate-grey forehead lined with spite;
"Audacious fool!" he softly chided,
"You dare corrupt my sacred night?"
He raised his ash-encrusted fingers,

He smoothed his cuffs with bitter haste:
"No mortal dissonance here lingers
To lay my quiet realm to waste!"
Across the platform, arms extending,
He loosed the siphon's hungry chill,
Before the solstice hour descending,
To bend her spirit to his will!

A draft of venom pierced the grating,
And snatched the music from her breast;
Unto the chasm, grimly waiting,
Her singing yielded to the test.
A strand of lavender, upcurling,
Was drawn into the bell's cold maw;
Her voice, in dying spirals swirling,
Sank down beneath that frozen law.
Her throat was left a rasping ember,
A hollow whisper, dry and spent;
Yet still that crack could stone remember—
The stubborn mark her music rent!

Across the Dead Mere, dark and hollow,
The little skiff went gliding on;
No ripple urged the wake to follow,
Where every breath of life was gone.
The water lay, a sheet unbending,
As smooth and black as polished glass;
A heavy gloom, from skies descending,
Refused to let an echo pass.
He dipped the oars; no splash succeeded,
No drip was heard upon the stroke;

The soundless air, by none impeded,
Devoured the sturdy wood of oak.

Then Daniel slowed; his stroke grew weary,
His calloused fingers lost their hold;
His hazel eyes turned blank and bleary,
Beneath a numbness damp and cold.
Why was he here, upon this river,
With bleeding palms and aching head,
While biting vapors seemed to shiver
Above a soundless waterbed?

What task had brought him out to settle
A midnight grudge where shadows close?
He touched his ring of simple metal,
Yet no beloved image rose!
He turned toward the creature sitting
Upon the prow with golden hair;
His scattered senses, faintly flitting,
Could find no name or kinship there.
A beast—no more; a stranger peering
From out the dark with amber eyes;
And Daniel yielded, slowly nearing
The void that eats our mortal ties.

The faithful hound gave voice in grieving;
He gave an urgent, muffled whine;
He saw his master's spirit leaving,
Drawn down beneath the dark design.
Rex nuzzled at the deadened fingers,
Then rooted deep within the vest,
Where yet a secret parcel lingers
Against his master’s quiet breast.
His jaws retrieved the keepsake battered;
He dropped it in the craftsman's palms:
The walnut box, though cracked and shattered,
Brought forth the sweetest of all alms!

He stared: his calloused thumbs, awaking,
Traced out the notched and stubborn wood;
Three months in secret, shaping, making,
Through winter nights he carved and stood!
He felt each leaf, the rough engraving,
The pear-tree bough he planned with pride;
That token, from oblivion saving,
Cast all the creeping mist aside!

And like a sudden clap of thunder,
The curtain of the gloom was torn!
He felt his spirit break asunder

The shroud of silence he had worn!
Her vibrant laugh, her eyes of ember,
Her mocking lips, her fearless grace!
"Oh, Claire!" he gasped, "I do remember!
The Weald shall never drown your face!"

He seized the ash-wood oars, commanding
His skiff toward the water-gate;
No more in idle stupor standing,
He sped to wrestle with their fate.
When from the belfry, skyward leaping,
A beam of lavender broke high!
Her voice, in pale mist upward sweeping,
Was drawn into the bell's cold sky!
A breath of bitter frost succeeded:
The water-gate was frozen shut!
By razor-ice, all unimpeded,
The river’s every path was cut!

CANTO V

The Mirage of the Hearth

High perched above that frosted border,
The lord of quiet led his guest;
A gallery of barren order,

Where winter froze the mountain crest.
He filled a cup, remote and hollow,
With vintage drawn from phantom streams:
No tang, no scent, no draft to swallow,
Save numbness stripped of mortal dreams.
It touched her lip like melting vapor,
Bereft of fruit, or spice, or sun;
A draft as dim as dying taper
Before the evening watch is done.

"Drink deep," he urged, his grey brow bending,
"Forget the fever and the strain!
Unto this tranquil height ascending,
Put off the mortal yoke of pain.
I too was once a youth, mistaking
Blind passion for a sacred light;
With furious cries our rafters shaking,
My brothers battled in the night!

"A torch was flung; the roaring cinder
Consumed my house, my flesh and bone!
Our joy was dry as autumn tinder,
And left me weeping here alone.
Since then I vowed: no angry clamor
Shall scorch this weary province more;

Beneath my cool, untroubled glamour,
I give the peace they pleaded for."

Her throat was dry, her music broken,
Yet Claire threw back her auburn head;
I knew that spark! The gallant token
Of vows she once so proudly said:
"You fool! Our home was never fashioned
To languish in an icy tomb;
True love is clumsy, hot, impassioned—
It will not seek your soundless gloom!
We quarrel, yes; we shout and blunder,
Yet rise to mend what went astray;
Though foolish words may tear asunder,
Forgiveness sweeps the storm away!"

He stiffened at her proud refusal,
With slate-pale lips and tightened brow;
Refusing further mild perusal,
He turned to seal his bitter vow.
Yet as he turned, her sharp glance darted
Beyond his velvet mantle grey:
Between the arches, shadow-parted,
The master winch and cables lay!

The counterweight of iron, gliding
To loose the striker from above,
Hung poised in frosty shadows hiding,
To crush the music of their love!
Before her reaching hands could shake it,
He thrust her back behind the grill;
"No mortal peasant's hand shall break it,"
He murmured, pitiless and still.
He tripped the catch; the bronze wheel started,
The giant clapper sank in flight—
With two short hours before imparted
The final blow of solstice night!

Beside the crag the skiff was grounded,
Where razor-ice had locked the moat;
By jagged cliffs of stone surrounded,
He tied the painter of his boat.
He coiled his tackle, sternly bracing
His shoulder for the sheer ascent;
With braided cord the basalt facing
He measured where the rampart bent.

When lo! the frozen dark went fading,

The black stone blushed with amber light;
No more the winter winds invading,
No more the grim and bitter night!
Behold! his very cottage timber,
The seasoned oak of floor and beam,
The hearth-fire dancing, gold and limber,
Within the parlor of a dream!
And there she sat, his sweetheart smiling,
Beside the stove upon her chair;
With steaming bread, his soul beguiling,
Warm blossoms braided in her hair!

"Lay down your pack," she murmured, sighing,
"Rest now, my love; your work is o'er;
Why bleed upon a mountain dying,
When home awaits beside the door?"
His weary marrow, bruised and aching,
Besought his soul to drop the twine;
Why climb the heights, with sinews breaking,
When here was peace, and bread, and wine?

He dropped a strap, his eyelids blurring,
And stepped toward that gentle seat—
When Rex came bounding, nose up-stirring,
Beside the trencher piled with meat!

A roasted joint of pork was steaming,
All crisp and glazed with honey-crust;
The hound approached the platter gleaming,
And gave a deep, suspicious thrust.
He sniffed: no lard, no fat, no bacon!
No garlic scent to tempt his jaw!
Our wedding beast was not mistaken
In matters of the tooth and maw!

Disgusted by this phantom cheating,
He clamped his fangs on Daniel's boot,
And with a "BOOF!" the rafters beating,
He yanked his master by the foot!
Like brittle glass, the parlor shattered!
The hearth dissolved in needles cold;
The phantom feast in pieces scattered,
As black stone reasserted hold!

Two strides had plunged him down the border,
Full eighty feet of sheer despair,
Where pointed spikes, in cruel order,
Stood waiting for him in the snare!
He cleared his throat, his balance gaining;
"Good dog," he wheezed, and stroked the ear;
No time was left for spent complaining,

No room for weariness or fear.

He cast his line: the copper biting,
Took hold upon the upper wall;
He hauled his weight, the darkness fighting,
Beyond the reach of slip or fall.
He vaulted in! But wild and pealing,
A sudden clang of metal spoke—
Discordant chimes, along the ceiling,
Through all the frozen courtyard broke!

CANTO VI

The Midnight Belfry

Ah, friends, you know how Daniel labors:
No mountain wall could bid him stay;
While lesser men call out to neighbors,

He carves his own unyielding way!
His heart was set, his purpose burning;
He felt her peril in the stone;
Without a pause or backward turning,
He sought the love he called his own!

With canvas stout and rope-twine binding,
He hoisted Rex upon his back;
Along the buttress, steeply winding,
He scaled the black and icy stack.
From tackle box his fingers taking
Each sharp bone spike to wedge the cleft,
He climbed, with every sinew aching,
Until no foothold path was left!

Down plunged the Silent Wraiths, descending
Like tattered owls across the cloud;
Their frost-barbed claws the darkness rending,
They sought to weave a mortal shroud.
They ripped his wool with icy slashing,
And gashed his shoulder through his sleeve;
A sudden, crimson torrent splashing
Across the stone he would not leave!

Yet held the braided copper tether,
Spun by his hand through patient days;
It would not snap in frost-bound weather,
Nor yield before the phantom haze.
A wraith sprang near, with talons glaring;
His river boot drove hard and true!
Down fell the fiend, through blackness faring,
Lost where the chasm's vapors blew.

He hauled his weight, the platform gaining,
And loosed the hound upon the floor;
With scant five minutes yet remaining,
He thrust Vane's key into the door.
The heavy bronze went turning slowly,
Then bit on frost with cruel crack—
It snapped clean off! A ruin wholly,

The deadbolt jammed within the track!

Our wedding beast would brook no waiting;
He bunched his thighs and hurled his chest!
Against the hinges, old and grating,
He flung his weight with savage zest!
The rusted iron groaned and parted,
The shattered lock flew open wide;
Together, bruised and headlong darted,
The hound and craftsman rolled inside!

Within her iron prison swaying,
Claire saw him stumble from the dark;
Her vibrant soul, no fear betraying,
Flashed out to meet his hazel spark!
Her stolen chords were dry and failing,
She could not raise her wedding cry;
A hoarse, rough gasp, the foe assailing,
Warned: "Look above! The moon is high!"

Turned Malakor, his mantle drifting,

With slate-pale brow and chilling sneer;
His ash-black staff of power lifting,
He spoke so low they scarce could hear:
"You are too late, rough craftsman, plying
Your futile tools against the night;
The universe, on hush relying,
Demands an end to sound and sight."

Then Daniel hurled his copper cable
To catch the master winch's teeth,
With mortal craft, alert and able,
To save the prize that swung beneath!
The sorcerer flicked his ash-stained knuckle:
A wave of hoarfrost hissed and passed;
It locked each boot and leather buckle,
And froze him to the flagstones fast!

Through open vaults the full moon riding
Stood centered at the midnight peak;
The giant striker downward gliding,
Smote on the rim with fury bleak!
No clang rang out, no brazen ringing,
No thunder rolled across the air—
A soundless shock, in horror springing,
Exploded through the chamber there!

A pressure vast, the senses crushing,
Tore every breath from human lung;
No tempest roared, no torrent rushing,
Yet fractured stones were wildly flung!
The ancient arches cracked asunder,
Dissolved in hail of biting grit;
Without a voice, without a thunder,
The very vault of heaven split!

Hurled hard, against a pillar crashing,
Poor Daniel felt his rib-bones break;
Beneath a hail of granite smashing,
He could not stir for Claire's dear sake!
Across the dais our hound was driven,
Flung out beneath the crumbling crust;
No sign of life his frame had given—
Rex lay all breathless in the dust!

Ten feet her cage plunged down, suspended
Upon a single fraying cord;
Her hopeless hands in vain extended
Toward her fallen, bleeding lord!
While high above the darkness glooming,
The clapper drew its backward stroke;
A second strike in horror looming,

Before a single whisper spoke!

CANTO VII

A Mortal Chorus

Suspended high, the prison tilted,
Above the black and yawning floor;
Though every iron bar was silted

With choking dust of winter hoar,
She saw him fight the rubble, bleeding—
Her Daniel, pinned beneath the weight!
His hazel eyes, her terror reading,
Looked up to mock the threat of fate:
Ten faithful years of stubborn daring
Burned bright within his steadfast gaze,
A husband's fierce devotion flaring
To light the dark, despairing maze.

No helpless tear her eye was weeping;
From ochre sash around her waist
She wrenched the garden trowel, sweeping
Across the bars with sudden haste!
The silver metal, shrill and screeching,
She scraped against the iron grill;
No gentle mercy there beseeching,
It jarred the chamber, fierce and shrill!
Along the groove she scored, unfurling,
A harsh, deep shudder shook the floor;
The shattered rime around him swirling,
The frost broke off and bound no more!

She hurled the trowel, bravely crying:
"Catch, Daniel! Anchor fast the swing!

The clapper bind, the foe defying,
Ere silence smites the lower ring!"
From underneath the granite heaving,
A sneeze resounded, loud and dry;
Rex burst abroad, his prison leaving,
To snatch the fallen steel on high!
In mid-air caught, the flying treasure
He carried through the dust and sand,
And gave it up with wagging pleasure
Directly into Daniel's hand!

Then Malakor, his venom showing,
Whirled round to strike the daring wife;
A storm of razor hoarfrost blowing
Leaped forth to steal her blossomed life!
It ripped the emerald skirt she cherished,
And tore the pear-tree garlands through;
Yet ere her steadfast courage perished,
Her husband rolled in plainest view!
He sprang aloft, his torment spurning,
The copper coil within his hold,
His hazel eyes with courage burning
Against the deadly mist of cold!

Full fifty yards of copper flinging,
He whipped the line into the gloom;
Straight through the clapper's eyelet winging,
It seized the instrument of doom!
Down round the granite pillar winding
The braided cord of river craft,
He made an everlasting binding
About the stout foundation shaft!
A double-clove he tied, so clever
No strain could cause the line to slip;

A riverman’s true knot that never
Would loosen from its stubborn grip!

In haughty fright the tyrant, screaming,
Launched out his void-fire through the hall;
Yet Daniel stood, his purpose gleaming,
Unyielding to the rotten thrall:
"Right then!" he cried, the sorc'rer daring:
"Give me five minutes and some cord!"
His eyes above with Claire’s were sharing
The blow that would unseat her lord!
High in her cage, all fear forsaking,
She sang their orchard drinking cheer;
With raspy throat, raw spirit waking
A melody both loud and clear!

Rex planted firm his paws, out-facing
The conduit of the basalt floor;
His head thrown back, the darkness chasing,
He woke a realm-unnerving roar!
The loudest "BOOOOOF!" of all creation
Burst from his golden, rugged throat,
A catastrophic conflagration
Of honest, deaf'ning, canine note!

The rowdy song, the thunder blending,
With copper line pulled taut as wire,
Smote on the micro-fracture, sending
A wave of harsh, harmonic fire!
The monstrous Bell, in pieces blowing,
Exploded into sparkling snow;
A million harmless crystals glowing,
Like glassy flakes that drift below!

The backlash tore his mantle, rending
The velvet cloak of shadow-night;
His phantom forms, no more defending,
Dissolved before the dawn of light!
Lord Malakor, in terror flying,
Fled like a powerless grey shade;
Her cage upon the dais lying,
He caught his brave and darling maid!

The proud obsidian keep, descending,
Now crumbled into harmless dust,
Its tower of false grief up-ending
In heaps of silence and distrust;
While Midsummer's first sunrise, breaking
With golden rays across the height,
Pierced through the fleeing mists, awaking

The joyful land in living light!

CANTO VIII

Return to Oakhaven

The summer dawn, in amber glowing,
Poured down the river molten gold;
A gentle, warming current flowing

Dispersed the shadows, grey and cold.
Wild petals from the orchard drifting
Upon the amber ripple spread;
A light and lively vapor lifting,
The skiff flew down its winding bed.

Across their feet the hound lay sprawling,
A golden lump of velvet ears;
No longer terrified of falling,
He left behind his river fears.
His heavy chin on leather resting,
Upon his master's river-boot,
With twitching paws the floorboards testing,
In snoring peace from head to foot.

Three times he rasped to break the quiet,
And stared upon his calloused hand;
Though rescued from the shadow's riot,
A darker doubt he could not stand.
He scanned each knuckle, bruised and grated,
With river-silt and splinter-grit:
"A spirit such as yours was fated
Where lords in golden houses sit.
I bring you to a life so muddy,
With shavings curled across the floor;

No gentle hall or velvet study,
Just common timber at the door."

Claire rolled her eyes in fond vexation,
And laughed away his solemn dread;
With razor wit and adoration,
She stroked his hair and shook her head.
She took his battered hand, so tender,
And pressed it firmly to her cheek:
"Must I rebuke this brave defender,
Or teach the craftsman how to speak?
I'd burn their marble domes completely,
Their sterile courts of polished stone,
To smell your cedar shavings sweetly,
And share your muddy bench alone!"

From out his coat, all frayed and splattered,
He drew the little walnut box;
Although its carved design was battered
And cracked against the chasm's rocks,
He offered it with shy confusion:
"Forgive a rough and clumsy part;
It has no golden, vain illusion,
Yet took three months of all my heart."
She raised the lid with fingers shaking;

Inside, upon the velvet laid,
A braided ring of his own making
Lay with a seed from their own glade.

She slipped the ring upon her knuckle,
With weeping eyes of grateful light;
No jewel from a baron's buckle
Had ever shone so pure and bright!
Her arms around his neck went sweeping,
To press him in a fierce embrace;
With kisses warm and joyful weeping,
She claimed her craftsman's bearded face!
Beneath them, crushed against the flooring,
Rex woke to find his ribs compressed;
He stopped his quiet, rhythmic snoring
And grumbled, thoroughly distressed,
With rumbling chuffs and snorts reporting
That food was late and home was near!

Around the bend the river guided
The little craft with easy glide;
The morning clouds had all divided,
And Oakhaven arose in pride.

Now mark, my friends, the timber landing
Where weeping neighbors filled the quay!
In mournful vigil they were standing,
Beside the sad and silent spray;
For Barnaby, his spirit broken,
Had thought them lost in shadow-night,
With dirges sung and prayers spoken,
Beneath the sorrow-clouded light.
Bump went the keel! The pilings shuddered!
Down dropped the brewer's earthen pot!

Right through the reeds the vessel ruddered
Into the sunny landing-spot!
He slapped his knees in wild confusion,
And let an ear-shriek split the air:
"By barley-mash! Is this delusion,
Or Daniel and my lady Claire?!"

Along the bank, with armor ringing,
Came Captain Vane with crooked grin;
No more the phantom terrors clinging
About his battle-hardened chin.
He paused to spit into the water,
And gave salute to hail the craft:
"Mind well the current! Death and slaughter
Have fled before your stubborn raft!
The iron locks swing wide, unbarring
The river-road to mortal men;
Safe passage for all honest faring,
Nor shall the gates be closed again!"

Ashore leaped Rex, no manners keeping,
A furry bolt of golden speed!
Right through the crowded tables leaping,
He took no warning, gave no heed!
He bowled three cider barrels rolling,

And spilled the jugs across the floor,
Then bounded, playfully patrolling,
Before the butcher's pantry door!
The cheering cooks, their laughter waking,
Brought forth a great, colossal tray;
A hill of sausages for taking,
To feast the hound who won the day!

Then Claire stepped out amidst the bower,
Where sunlight laced the grass with gold;
A woman of triumphant power,
Magnificent and proud and bold!
Around her neck, on copper gleaming,
The battered walnut box was strung;
With mischievous delight out-beaming,
She rasped her chords and loosed her tongue!
She led the folk in joyous singing,
The loudest tune the orchard knew;
Through every pear-tree branch 'twas ringing,
Beneath the broad, midsummer blue!

Beside the bench her husband, resting,
Watched Claire with deep and quiet pride;
With Barnaby in friendship jesting,
He raised his brimming cup and sighed—

Pure unthinned cider, richly golden,
Poured out to toast his daring wife;
To ten long faithful years beholden,
The anchor of his happy life.
While at his boots, in sausage-slumber,
Rex snored away the afternoon,
Untroubled by the dancing number
Or any rowdy village tune.
She caught his eye across the clearing,
And tilted up her head with pride,
Her mischievous bright laughter nearing,
To bid the craftsman to her side!

Now hear my song, you brides and lovers,
Who fear what drifting time may do:
No magic spell or silence covers
A heart that beats forever true!
Ten years are not a fragile feather,
Nor idle dream of fairy art,
But stubborn craft that binds together
Two rivers in a single heart!
He rose to meet her, laughing, ready
To join the shout the orchard spoke;
And so they rowed together, steady,

As stubborn as the rooted oak,
As noisy as the rushing river,
As they had done through all the past;
With hands that clasp and never shiver,
Two faithful lovers, home at last!

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Daniel ☆

The Weaver of the Weald

Author: **Daniel**

Written especially for Claire on our tenth anniversary

October 2026