

The Song of Shadows

by Paul D. Deane

This poetry is part of a cycle of alliterative epics that I wrote "in character" as the Avarin poet Rhunedhel, a resident of Imladris during the Third Age, while I was playing on Elendor MUSH, an online roleplaying game, in the 1990s and the first decade or so of the 2000s.

When I wrote these poems, I was working my way toward an original alliterative stanza form only loosely patterned on traditional alliterative verse. The form I ended up with is what I call the "Daeron Stanza", characterized by 4-stress accentual (mostly iambic tetrameter) lines alliterating in the pattern AA/BB, with a final rhyming couplet. It demonstrates the possibilities of alliterative forms not based on the traditional Old English and Middle English metrics.

This poem describes imagined events in the far East of Middle Earth that led to the Witch King of Angmar becoming the proud owner of "armor unbreakable by man". Other poems in this cycle include The Song of Marwen and Fithurin, The Song of Woe, The Song of Returning, and The Redemption of Daeron. This poem was originally published on the Imladris Poetry Page.

I

Dim in dusk, dark fields and forests lay
Open, exposed to lengthening light.
Golden beams glinted on heads and helms
Silently slipping from forest fastness
Into open twilight
-- reaching the road --
-- on the verge of night. --

They were awaited: one in sable silk
Bowed gravely in greeting, held out his hand,
Wishing welcome to His Lordship's lands.
The riders reined in, their heavy helms
Revealing elvish eyes:
-- Avari, unyielding --
-- Wary, yet wise. --

Hunched on the heights, a castle crowned the crag:
In fading light it loomed stark and strong.
The cobblestones clattered; flaming torches flared
Shielding corners in shadows that dipped and danced.
They entered the hall:
-- bright gold, crystal --
-- a trophy-lined wall. --

The master of his men sat in state,
Tall as a tower, gaunt, with gleaming hair.
Briefly they bowed, then stood silent, still,
Like statues of stone in a tyrant's tomb.
The tall lord smiled,
-- as a hunter might --
-- to something free and wild. --

'Welcome,' he said, 'And where is the smith,
Whose unbreakable armor is famed near and far?'
One stirred and stepped forward; softly spoke:
'The smith stands before you, for Cordil has come,
And would learn from your lips what price you would pay.'
And his face was cold
-- his voice polite --
-- and utterly controlled. --

'Have you skill sufficient,' said that master of men,
'Armor to make unbreakable by man?
No price may be paid for the perfect piece,
But gifts I may give, exchange priceless for perfect.'
Thus the grim lord
-- offered for armor --
-- a choice from his hoard. --

'If the metal is mithril,' the Avar answered,
'My skill could shape it strong and sure.
But armor unbreakable? Only Powers could prove it,
Or battering of battle, though the smith should strive
Armor to make unbreakable by man.
But what, great lord,'
-- 'might you have to offer --
-- from the depths of your hoard?' --

Deep they descended to a hidden hall
Locked with locks, secured with seals.
The narrow gate gaped, they walked within
Dazzled by dance of flickering flames
On diamond and mithril
-- serried arms and armor --
-- jewels and precious metal. --

Their bright brands glanced on a gleaming coronet
Which flashed in the flame like a subterranean star:
And its rose-red ruby like a captive king
Lay enfolded in flowers of molded mithril.

The Avar held his breath
-- at treasure long-lost --
-- in ancient years of death. --

He looked at the lord matching eye to eye
And slowly smiled as if to challenge with charm.
'If the mail I make can break the blows
Of your strongest soldier, O Master of Men,
Would you call this coronet an equal exchange?'
And so they agreed
-- one lustful for power, --
-- the other, from need. --

II

The high-roofed hall given to guests
Echoed with anger and whiplash of words.
Her face aflame -- her eyes ablaze --
Fèhaglin the Fair his wedded wife
Spoke for them all
-- as they huddled close-clustered --
-- in that alien hall. --

'Make that murderer's armor? His promise to pay
Is as constant as cobwebs and as safe as a storm!
And what can he offer but ill-gotten gains,
The pillage and plunder of countless coasts?'
Then from her lips a wild cry burst
-- 'Such utter folly --
-- 'This has been from the first!' --

'That man has Mirloth!' -- So Cordil cried --
'That my father forged and my mother wore!
That price will I pay, and risk what I must
To ransom their relic from this house of dust!'
Fèhaglin sighed: 'And also strive,
-- gaining the treasure, --
-- 'to reach home alive.' --

Enshrouded in shadows that dipped and danced
They softly spoke in their Silvan speech
Of cares, contingencies, methods, means,
Secrets, circumstances, purposes, plans:
Lest fear at night
-- should catch them aground --
-- lacking wings for flight. --

VIII

The trumpet's tantara announced an arrival
Whom the grim lord greeted to his kingly court.
And courtiers crowded to meet the man
Sent to speak for the Fiery Land.
Among the rest
-- the Quendi came --
-- to greet their host's guest. --

He saw them and smiled, benignly bowed,
Wishing them well with velvet voice.
Annatar, he noted, his lord and liege,
Was friend to their folk since the Elder Age.
His thin lips smiled
-- as a cat's might that stalked --
-- A bird in the wild. --

Their talk soon turned by delicate degrees
To the mail to be made for the land's own lord.
That grim lord laughed and with braggart's boast
Said that they should be finest friends
Since both in their worth
-- worked to make him --
-- the strongest on earth. --

Their words wound on to meaningless matters
And soon they stopped when others arrived.
His evil eyes, though, caught Cordil's face
And scanned and studied each feature and fault
As if there he read
-- with gruesome pleasure --
-- ancient tales of dread. --

The seasons spun with ponderous pace
From Summer to Spring, and the fiery forge
Roared red-hot in a hollow hall
Where metal's might was shaped by skill,
Where anvil sang
-- where bellows hissed --
-- and heavy hammers rang. --

And Fèhaglin, furtive, with soft-paced steps
Lurked where the lord was wont to walk,
In sunlight strolling, head to head,
Closely consulting Annatar's ambassador.

And her Elven ears
-- heard what they said --
-- as she listened near. --

'If our friendship is firm, we stand established,
strong and sure. My lord would ally
his crown to your cause, securing your strength
Should rivals arise. As sign and seal
Will he give you a ring
-- potent with power.' --
-- 'And one more thing --'

The ambassador added, with whispering words:
'My lord by your leave, a matter to mark:
Lord Sauron has stated, and so it is certain:
That elf once escaped my Potentate's prisons;
'His features remind him
-- Of unfinished business --
-- He would put behind him.' --

The grim lord grinned, his sharp teeth shining.
'I need him now, nor would it be wise
To give a guest into hostile hands.
Yet robbers are rife; when he leaves my lands
Would any think it strange
-- Were he caught by ambush --
-- Covertly arranged?' --

IV

Argent the armor shone in the sun;
The grim lord grinned at its dazzling display.
A strong man stood with mighty mace;
Let fly such force the mace head burst.
The blows fell thick;
-- it still shone silver --
-- without scratch or nick. --

'Such magnificent mail,' said that master of men,
'Is well worth winning; the price I pay
A pittance so paltry it beggars the brain.
Come! The crown is yours; then let us make mirth
With as splendid a feast
-- as ever was served --
-- in West or in East.' --

High that hall, and wide-spread its walls
Yet filled overflowing: all manner of men
Were gathered together with bounty before them,
Washing the wine down from flowing flagons.
Above all the rest
-- the Quendi sat --
-- their grim host's guest. --

Cordil cracked jokes, laughing loud,
But his stare often strayed to the distant doors.
Fèhaglin fidgeted, her hasty hands
Flickering, fluttering with hummingbird's hovering.
Nearby, gleaming bright
-- Mirloth lay, glistening --
-- with roseate light --

At length it was late; the brands burning low
Spat and sputtered with flickering flames.
Some now slept, but many more
Muttered, murmured, drunk and dazed.
Then, her voice strong
-- Féaglin offered --
-- to sing them a song. --

Silence struck, and in that instant
Cordil called from his flute a soothing song
That softly sounded through the eery air
Like a spirit singing of light and life
Undying
-- over mortal lands --
-- which it blew past crying. --

Fèhaglin followed with a song like the sea
Soothing yet surging as wild as the waves,
Echoing endlessly, rhythmically rocking,
Roaring, resounding, repeating, returning,
Foaming floods whose constant dashings,
-- wash all away --
-- with lullabye crashings. --

Heavy heads hung, dull eyes drooped,
Then one by one each dim face fell.
And last like a leaf the tall lord's gaze
Dropped faint and frail to face the floor.
Some snoring mutters
-- then all was still --

-- as the last torch sputtered. --

They stood with stealth, gently lifted the jewel,
And softly slipped from the hushing hall.
In silent slumber a kingdom slept
Unwarned of absence. They fled for freedom
Leading in quiet line
-- those of their folk --
-- who had helped with the wine. --

V

A stair fell steep from the castle crag,
Its base abutting a quiet cove
Whose quay held craft both strong and swift.
Straight down the stair the Quendi came
Then checked in fear.
-- Annatar's ambassador softly smiled, --
-- 'What brings such nightbirds here?' --

The castle-crowned crag lay quiet, cold
With neither light nor lamp. But a mass of men
Twoscore in sum were placed to bar their path.
'The lord would not like to hear of your haste,
To borrow wings and fly.
-- Why, what a reaction! --
-- You'd simply die!' --

The ambassador eyed them with sinister smile.
'But need he know?' he suavely suggested.
'We can mend the matter to our own advantage.
Consider, Cordil! My Potentate will pay you
What you truly deserve:
-- Not trifles like he --
-- Whom you would no more serve. --

But savage and sudden Cordil cried out
A wild cry of war last heard long ago
When Fithurin's fighters, defiant, despairing,
Sallied in strength from besieged Amon-Gil
And charged to their doom:
-- seeking others' escape --
-- and they, the tomb. --

The elves above from the steps of the stairs

Drew aim in the dark with Elvish eyes
And let fly a flock of feathered fangs.
And Cordil came forth, defiant, determined
And slashed his sword
-- with leaping lunge –
-- at that Mordain lord. --

But he stepped aside, and with mighty mace
Swiftly swung to cripple or kill.
Eluding, evading, they danced a dance
As light as lovers, as deadly as death.
But with lightning speed
-- the sword did the kissing, --
-- And Cordil the deed. --

That servant of Sauron slid from his sword
Lifeless and limp to the sand by the shore.
Then Féaglin found him, her spear stained with blood:
The elves were alone but for Death and the the dead.
So they swiftly embarked
-- the ambassador's boat –
-- and were lost in the dark. --

VI

In a far-off forest, in a hidden hall
Fèhaglin faced him with unwilling eyes.
In his hands Cordil held the coronet,
His head tilting forward, his gaze to the ground,
His grey eyes glimmering
-- with sudden sheen, --
-- with silver shimmering. --

'I will not wear it. It is bought with blood.'
Her words then wavered; by will they went on:
'Five of our folk died to deliver it;
And how many men shall pay your price,
And fall at his hand
-- Because you have made –
-- Armor unbreakable by man?' –

'There is more to be mended,' he softly sighed.
'For dark years are dawning when Sauron will seek
A world bowed to his will, and our forest fastness
Lies exposed in the East, no haven from hunters.
Unless we would do as he bid,

-- We must enter a haven –
-- Forever hid. –

'I have had dark dreams,' she suddenly said,
'But in shadows there shone a vision unveiled,
A city encircled by mighty mountains
Whose white walls stood secret but strong
In a high but lonely place.
-- Could we build such a city –
-- It would shelter our race!' –

Her head held high, she held out her hand;
His hand met hers; they stood face to face.
'Let us dream this dream, and dare to defy
The Servant of Shadows!' - so he softly said.
Their eyes were wild
-- like eagles untamed –
-- And they suddenly smiled. --

