

THE EMPIREID

ILVARIO



VAGABOND

BOOK I

THE SLEEP OF THE GODS

For love and the destiny of man I sing,
of those compelled by Fate, to fulfill the goddess's journey
and lift an Atlas weight. In the house of Priam, forward bring
those beleaguered sons of Troy, who fled across the Aegean Sea,
harried by the unfathomable hatred of Queen Juno,
and the accursed sorrow of Greek led tragedy;
set adrift on Neptune seas, a floating human cargo
suffering beyond all measure to Lavinian shores,
surmounting brutal wars and many foes
to found a home once more,
have at hand one final test,
greater than all that have come before,
before claiming their well earned rest.
O Muse, and to Apollo, Sun-god who sees beyond all,
whose beloved lineage this telling does attest
to follow, through peril and great toils, I pray for the merit to recall
how the empire finally ended, and the gods themselves did fall.

Was it by some grand design maybe?
Or that frivolous Chance did lend a hand?
For in here lies the story, set forth by dark and mighty Hades,
of how the lovely Venus, made her final stand.
It began long ago, before the counting of Time and swelling tide,
an old grudge, born from the careful, cunning plan,
forged between the brothers three, committing patricide.
For the stars they do remember, and the lesser third could not forget,
let alone forgive, the untold longing and crafty slight that cast aside
he, the unfortunate, to his eternal banishment
into the realm of everlasting night, to go
where all souls go, to burn with regret.
Patience, the Virtue, enjoyed by none who know
greater than the immortal gods themselves,
was a constant and stall-worthy friend to Pluto,
the Lord of the Underworld, from the heavens expelled,
who forever in darkness dwelled.

BOOK II

THE FALL OF ROME

Let no joyful voice be heard,
sing no merry song,
for Rome of ancient glory be dead,
the gods have come and gone.
A new purpose now fills the hearts of man,
a dreadful bitter one,
a crusade against the ancient plan,
they lie prostrate before the son.
Baptized in blood, through sword and
shield and every manner of pain, a rage has come,
unlike any other seen, from papal palace they wield
their reign, ushering in the darkest age, an unholy kingdom,
for this they fight, to this is what they kneel,
in the name of their deity an unholy war they wage.
It is in these times of cursed plight, when all that's good does reel,
in which our story shall unfold, released from memory's cage
for in the darkest hour of night, there's the turning of the page.

With one's back up against the wall, behold
that like a star up in the sky, shining clear and bright,
courage shall return to the hearts of man, to once again unfold
and in their time of greatest need, show to them the light,
when one amongst the rest, shall
stand against the grain and fight,
heeding to the pressing call.
Civil wars divided once all powerful Rome,
every corner rising, gathering at the wall,
to rebel against their formerly united home,
In the north the barricades fell, abandoning Britain for Arles,
the Franks invaded Belgium, taking it for their own,
while barbarians swept across Gaul.
In the east, the Visigoths, they rose, a terrible and mighty clan,
pillaging and raiding outlying posts, before them much did fall,
opening the doors for Attila to take away Milan.
And so, like this, is how it all began.

BOOK IV

RAID OF THE BARBARY CORSAIRS

Arriving in Naples, a first to his eyes,
Horacio stared out in wonder at this Renaissance seat.
In every direction, a spring of vitality energized
the teeming populace, as they haggled to compete
for the latest wears, arriving on merchant vessels,
from Pisa and Genoa and far away Crete.
The markets they bustled, while, under the shadow of the castle,
the port busily unloaded more goods.
No stranger to turmoil, the Kingdom of Naples,
was the center of shifts in regional power and it be understood
that in time all that comes will too one day be gone.
For the moment, from there where he stood,
Horacio could see flying, the colors of the Order of the Dragon.
From the House of Trastamara, surrounded by gothic architecture,
sat Alfonso the first, ruler of Naples and King of Aragon.
These were the times of upheaval, discovery and adventure,
a perfect place, Horacio thought, to commence his new venture.

Aiding Chance and the Fates, Horacio decided
to canvass the merchant ships at port,
in hopes that by actively pursuing the gods' design,
he might find work and passage of some sort
to his destination, and therefore speed up his prospects
to find the Isle of Aethalia. Yet, for all his effort
naught was to be found, except to collect
a handful of scorn and abuse.
None it would seem had any need to select
a youth with no seafaring knowledge to use.
With his spirits, and the sun riding low,
discerning neither the right nor wrong way to choose,
he consoled himself, trusting that the prophecy before long would show,
and with it the direction in which his fortunes lie.
Feeling the weight of his days travelling the road,
he found a quiet spot near the port to rest for the night,
and letting his eyes close, he drifted to sleep there with a sigh.

BOOK V

IN THE SERVICE OF REIS-EL-KHAN

Seven years be a long time to wait,
but longer still pushing an oar,
with no hope of escape.
If this truly be the path the gods had in store,
if somehow it be all part of the plan,
then he had no choice but to follow, for
it was controlled by destiny's hand.
The first year was the hardest,
he worked back breaking hours, more than
ever before. His service was not just a test,
constantly under a watchful eye,
being driven greater than all of the rest,
fearing that one mistake might cost him his life,
there was no option other than to give it his all.
Yet, in his heart, through all of the strife,
he never once forgot his pledge to the goddess's call,
regardless of what may come, in that duty, never would he fall.

The Crescent Moon,
was a ship like no other, more than a galley,
a galleass, it was known, the Turks they called it a *mahon*.
Ahead of its time, the fastest ship on the sea,
it was said to be of Reis-el-Khan's own design,
with multiple desks and masts numbering three,
it had thirty-two oars, sixteen to a side
and fifty guns, twenty-three port and starboard each,
with two fore and aft, the only on the water to cover its behind,
no other had such a deadly, terrible reach.
It made port in Algiers, Rabat and Tripoli,
and all along the Barbary Coast, in each,
selling what they stole for a handsome fee,
with ten percent of the share going to the sultan,
as homage, the standard duty for all ships of the fleet.
Hunting for treasure, Christian slaves and all that they can,
it was run by a crew of bloodthirsty pirates to the very last man.

BOOK VI

THE BATTLE OF ALGIERS

Up the winding hillside they climbed,
Reis navigating the twisting alleyways
all by memory. The bell of adhan then chimed,
as they came through a passageway
to a large public square.
Suddenly their momentum gave way
to a mass of supplication, where
hundreds of bodies turned towards the east,
all falling into line. "Mid-morning prayer,"
Suleiman whispered in Horacio's ear, as Reis and he
joined in the ceremony of touching their foreheads to the ground,
reciting the ritual of prayers, four times each.
Horacio had of course already seen this around
the ship and was familiar with the daily homage,
this however was quite different from anything he'd previously found,
an entire city stopping in mid-stride, people of all ranks and ages,
together lowering their heads to the sun, here in the heights of Algiers.

It began by standing touching hands to the ears
with the words "*Allahu Akbar*," God is Great,
on their lips for themselves alone to hear.
Hands on chest they continued the rakat,
quoting scriptures from the Quran.
Bowing, then three times did they iterate,
"Glory to my Lord, the Most Magnificent" and
standing again, "Allah listens and responds to
the one who praises him." Then, "*rabbanā wa-laka al-hamd*,"
"O our Lord! And all praise is for You."
Now lying prostrate with head and palms upon the ground,
"Glory to my Lord, the Most High Most Praiseworthy" three times they do,
from whence they sit before again lying down for another round.
When complete they sit once more, recite a prayer, then stand and repeat.
For the final raka'ah, while sitting on the ground,
to the right, then the left, a blessing do they offer from their seat,
"May Allah grant you peace and security, and upon you may His Mercy be."

BOOK XII

THE UNDERWORLD

Meanwhile,
in the underworld,
Lord Pluto was living in style.
Never before had so much tribute been unfurled
before his feet. If maybe not on every lip,
he was never far from mind. As the world's populace curled
into religion, he became that much more important, the biting end of the whip
that set people into motion. From his domain, he controlled the strings,
pulling the world from left to right, according to whim, as he saw fit,
the lives of men on earth his playthings.
From up above there was nothing, only silence,
leaving up to man's interpretation the meaning of things.
Fallible, they shaped theology to suit their own structures of violence,
leaving Pluto, by whisper or direct involvement, to mold the world to his image.
Reaping from their fields of battle the spoils of blood and rising pestilence,
his kingdom continued to expand to cover the earth in a sorrowful age,
one in where wars unending roiled with rage.

From his palace,
dark and magnificent,
overlooking the Elysian Fields of grace,
Pluto contemplated in a manner quite reticent.
"You've changed," Proserpine, his beloved wife, spoke in a soft voice.
"How so?" he turned from his tower pane, looking at her, feeling reminiscent,
her beauty unfading in all the long years, since that fateful choice
on the day he abducted her, stealing her away from the fields,
bringing her to the realm of the underworld, where by bargain did rejoice
at their union, having been struck by Cupid's arrow, even death might yield
to love. "You seem withdrawn, more somber than usual of late."
she confided in him. "Your humor, grim as it may be, no longer do you wield."
"It's nothing, just a passing phase," he deflected, sensing the bait.
"I've got a lot on my mind," he passed it off to responsibilities.
"Are you sure there's nothing else?" she implied, but would not grate
on him by saying aloud what she thought, and all the possibilities,
that he might feel somehow remorse for all his morbid activities.

BOOK XIII

A RETURN TO CARTHAGE

On Fortune's wings they flew,
over the open sea, with the wind at their stern
and spirits running high, The Crescent Moon and her crew
skirted the Christian sphere of influence. Setting a course north-western,
they trimmed sail to make the most of the prevailing air current.
"Steady on," Horacio felt the wind stream through his hair, as he turn
to look upon the horizon. If they kept their pace going at the present
rate they'd make the Tyrrhenian by nightfall, and hopefully pass undetected
up the Italian coastline. "Captain," Suleiman, on an aside, asked for a moment.
"Is it true, you search out the doorway to the afterworld? That selected
for a mission have you been, by the gods you worship, no less?"
There was a deeper question lingering unspoken, yet still detected
in the air. Horacio regarded his friend and first mate, sure of the duress
that must weigh with some of the crew on the course chosen for the ship.
"Got no choice but te trust thens guardin' yer back," Khan would often stress.
"In the end though they're all a bunch of cutthroats who'd throw yer te the fish,
so regardless the yarn ye care to weave, remember te press the point of profit."

"Yes,"

Horacio looked him in the eye.
In seven years of service pressed,
he had never felt more at home amongst family.
"All I can speak of for my life is of that which I've seen,
of that which I've done, everything else is speculation. This journey
over leagues and many miles has led me to where I am, somewhere between
where I was and where I must be and to that end I am drawn, not so simple,
nor as deep, as belief, for it goes far beyond that to something so clean
it could be described as fact." He put a hand to the sword sheathed as official,
"This sword is real. The things I've done with it are real, and when at night
I see those I've killed, at the point of this sword, I know too that this riddle
I'm chasing is real, for if not this sword wouldn't be here, and by that same bite
neither would I. The sword is real, and therefore too must be the quest."
Suleiman thought hard on the words he'd heard, for what he knew as right
was that he believed in people, in the consistencies of character to test
the qualities of the man, this for him is where the answers rest.

BOOK XIV

DIDO'S CURSE

Around his neck
the stone of red returned to black.
For the moment, it seemed that danger had been put in check.
Quickly the brothers, retracing their path to the harbor, made their way back
to their ship, The Crescent Moon, where the crew was busily making repairs.
“Captain,” Isa for the pair spoke, “we must sail with all haste.” Fearing attack,
they pulled Horacio aside, relaying the encounter that caused them such cares.
Telling the story about the gypsy girl and her gifts, they then recounted
the following of Jamel, and what then befell tracing him to secret lairs.
“Entering from the rear of the building, I observed them undetected,”
Isa began his report. “I saw that traitor talking low with three Spaniards,
one a ranking officer, the other two his adjutants,” from what he counted.
“And so the Spanish know we’re here?” Horacio considered those cards.
“That’s unfortunate for sure, though I doubt they’d dare to make a strike
in such a fortified harbor?” “Nay sir, there’s more,” Isa’s voice broke to shards.
“They seemed little interested until he mentioned your heritage, then like a pike
they became rigid with attention, taking a stance serious and businesslike.

“A Trojan?”
asked their leader, a great significance he placed on those words.
‘We must deal with this at once,’ he told the others. And that’s when it began.”
Isa, unlike himself, visibly blanched and weakened, with wavering vocal chords.
A shudder passed through him as he tried to regain his composure.
“Isa, are you alright?” Horacio now equally concerned leaned forward.
“Yes sir,” Isa righted himself. “It’s just that’s when it happened. What for sure
though I cannot say. Jamel demanded compensation, and overly it was given.
The officer nodded to his companions, who before my very eyes changed color.
They turned from flesh and blood to a ghostly grey, to something not living.
At that moment, the stone around my neck took on a glow of deep scarlet,
and Jamel, as if the life had been sucked right out of him, his soul driven,
turned white, aged in an instant and fell there dead, most unnaturally forfeit.
For my part, overcome and frozen with fear, I was unable to even twitch.
Had they noticed my presence I too would have been slain, an easy target.
Then, just before departing, I heard them confirm the words of the old witch.
‘The queen shall have her revenge this night,’ their leader did pitch.”

BOOK XVII

LUCK OF THE GODS

Through the rolling mist,
breaking a path over foam clad cresting waves they burst,
silently menacing, stalking the future, as the ever looming apocalypse,
came the towering forecastle and mighty pale arc of Hannibal's Thirst.
Sailing from Carthage upon the darkest hour, she longed for the taste of blood,
the scent of her prey guiding the helmsman's hand, as the heavens cursed.
At the prow stood her master, the God of War, who with a boot heeled thud
upon the deck, set his eye to the horizon. "That way," he inhaled deeply,
savoring the tang of haste and sweat that mixed with the flood
of sea salt on the air. "They're out there, just ahead of us, obliquely,
I can feel them." The helmsman adjusted course to come in line
with the direction Mars had set. When caught, the price would be steeply
paid, for once embarked upon, war could not so easily confine
itself, but instead would spread to every corner with carnage and destruction.
None were safe who crossed into this realm. "Bring me more wine!"
Mars called to his steward, his hunger swelling with a gnawing seduction,
as his sword hand itched to fulfill its own primary function.

"Ah, look at those streaks of scarlet,"
he eyed the first light of day as a good omen,
while pulling back a long swig from his goblet.
"Hunting season is upon us," he gave a broad smile. "Rouse the men.
Let them know there's knife work to be done today," he sent off his servant.
"That'll raise their spirits, eh?" he turned to his seconds, who shared an amen.
"It will indeed," Timor made his own declaration, equally fervent.
"All will tremor before us," Formido likewise echoed. "They shall perish,"
he spoke, as the three readied for battle, with eyes to the skyline, observant
to the direction in which fled their quarry. These were the moments to cherish,
with all the day's possibilities before them, contemplating their pending wrath.
"There! There she is!" Mars bellowed, pointing, standing tall and squarish,
as a speck several leagues away dented the horizon's lineal path.
"Prepare ye demons!" Formido hissed at the crew, eyes locked on their target,
as the finger puppets of the damned riled, anticipating the coming bloodbath.
"Shall we play with our food before we dine?" Mars, standing upon the parapet
considered the mouse, and in a feisty mood, he decided to affix his helmet