



A GRAND EPIC POEM

THE BLESSED

KYLE DEREK MCDONALD

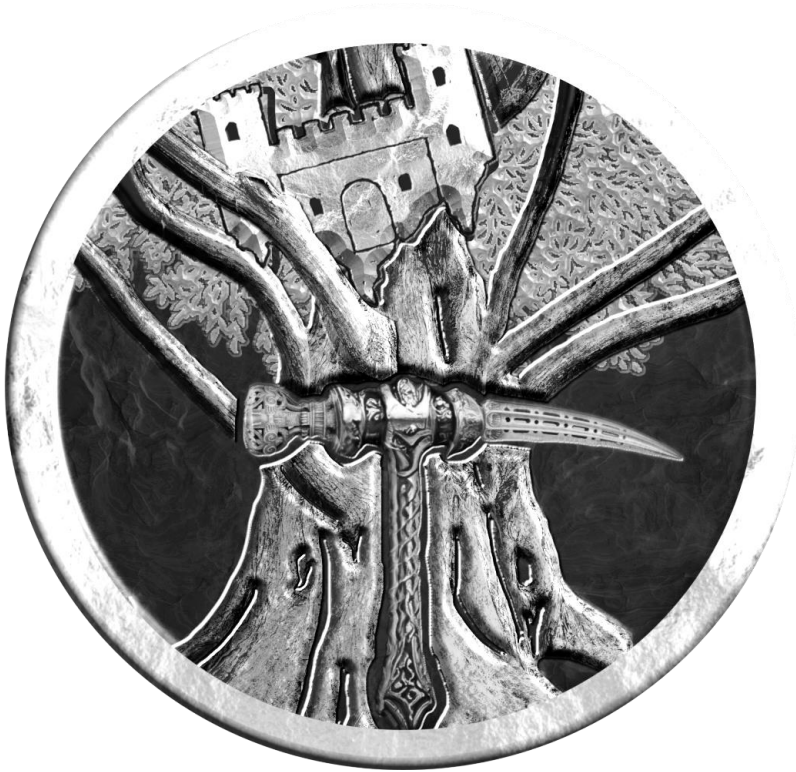
Kyle Derek McDonald

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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

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www.kylederek.com
www.theblessedepic.com

To my D&D Lads
(Alphabetical)

Brian, Corey, Darryl, Derek, James, Neil, and Troy too.

Here's to clapping heads and starting riots.

And, to my 16 year old self

You might not have always known all of what the hell was being
said, but you would have enjoyed figuring it out.

A Note From the Author

Hello! I'm Kyle and I'm the author of *The Blessed*. Thank you for joining me on this epic adventure which started in the video-game soaked and ancient-epic-addled brain of a 16 year old many years ago.

I'd like to talk just a little bit about language and formatting before we jump in.

I've composed this using some archaic language, and, to save my readership time, I've put the definitions of archaic and obscure words in the footer. I've also been sure to taper off these definitions throughout, since many of these words make repeat appearances. Please forgive me if any of this makes for a less aesthetic read.

Also, don't hesitate to go over to www.theblessedepic.com and join me in experiencing the book the way I think it's best to experience it: by listening to the full cast, fully scored and audio-designed audiobook! A banquet for the ears and a jumpstart for the mind!



Kyle Derek McDonald



Special thanks to Azgaar's Fantasy Map Generator

<https://azgaar.github.io/Fantasy-Map-Generator/>

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CANTO I

CANTO I: The Pilgrim Arrives

- I Roll thunder! Lightning strike! Empyrean¹ weep!
 Let Nature's fury ravage lands below,
And keep all frightened souls from docile sleep,
 That they may view the welkin's² angry show!
And there, beneath the grinding sky that roars that wails,
A daring pilgrim through the raging water sails!
- II Arrayed in sable cloak, the oars he plies,
 Neither recoiling from the wind nor rain:
He openly the surly surf defies,
 Being of warlike stock, inured³ to pain.
At length he runs ashore upon the sopping strand,
And drags, with ease, his vessel up the sodden sand.
- III He pulls a great-sword from his vessel's bed;
 Six-feet it stands and double stone⁴ it weighs:
The righteous man before it bows his head,
 And the corrupted man it gladly slays.
Scalpel, his sword, atop his bulky frame he slings,
Then leaves his hollow ship and up the beachhead springs.
- IV "Virilus Magnus!" sounded through the rain,
 A lonely voice pronouncing his dread name;
"Virilus Magnus!" came the voice again,
 Seeking that hulking man of martial fame
Whose warlike exploits had astounded hopeful ears,
And driven the most villainous to dreadful tears.
- V Mighty Virilus, in his stature huge,
 His title hears and slows his racing gait;
He scans the littoral⁵ for subterfuge⁶,
 Being ever chary⁷ of the foeman's hate.
Sure no trepan⁸ awaits to snare him on his way,
He fills his spanning lungs, which gives him breath to say:

¹ visible heavens

² sky's

³ habituated

⁴ 1 stone = 14 lbs, 6.4 kg

⁵ beach

⁶ trickery

⁷ cautious

⁸ trap, snare

CANTO I

VI

“’Tis he whose name thou call’st; who is’t that speaks?”

His voice, culled from the bosom of the earth,
Stirred ocean floors and rattled mountain peaks.

“Virilus,” the reply, “O man of worth,
I am the *Archon*¹, and ’tis I who summoned thee:
I am *Sagir*; thou need’st fear nought of treachery!”

VII

“Then,” said Virilus, “I am come for thee.”

“Yea, great Virilus; much have I t’expound;
What erst was lush, is now a flooded lea,
For *Xolis* as the Emperor is crowned!
His hordes, like flame, have raced across the palsied land;
Our Lords are too amazed to raise a fensive² hand;

VIII

“Our perils now attain their apogee!

Yet, let us quit this most inclement plot,
And find a warmer lieu for colloquy.³

An inn there is nearby that well I wot:⁴
Follow and keep thy visage⁵ covered for a stound:⁶
Soon answers to thy crescive⁷ questions shall abound.”

IX

Sagir, his voice refined and gentle, leads;

Virilus follows, striding up the shore;

The gurgle, as the pitchy surf recedes,

Is bested only by the boreal roar.

A rugged heath great Magnus and his guide traversed,
Each in his own particular febrile thoughts immersed.

X

The pair approached an edifice of stone,

Whose mortared bricks the howling winds repelled;

A gentle amber from the windows shone,

The sight of which alone their shivers quelled.

Virilus, for his towering height, ducked through the door
And eased his ponderous mass upon the wooden floor;

¹ head of the Faculty of Sortilege (Mage’s council)

² defensive

³ conversation, dialogue

⁴ know

⁵ face

⁶ moment

⁷ growing, pregnant

CANTO I

XI

It crepitated¹ for th'enormous strain,
Nor could his cloak conceal his body's might;
From gaping those within could not refrain,
For never had they seen so huge a wight.²
Sagir threw off his cowl to show a handsome face:
One lacking the expected folds of Age's grace.

XII

Virilus, though, to doff his hood abstained,
And scrutinized the company instead:
The acrid smell of streaming barley reigned,
As sullen men imbibed, discoursed, and fed.
More bitter than the barley was the scent of fear:
Behind each sweating frown pale Dread was seen t'appear.

XIII

"Our lodgings are secured; there let us wend:³
In private conference more will I say."
The Hulk replied, "I have not eaten, friend."
"Forgive me! Yea, thy wants I shall allay."
The twain an escalier⁴ ascended to the room,
With but a candle's light their progress to illumine.

XIV

The chamber was diminutive yet fine,
Decked with two beds, a table, and a chair.
"Lord Magnus, come and sit thee down to dine."
"To dine? What victual is to be my fare?"
"Why these, Lord," said Sagir while casting forth his spell,
Conjuring up a meal Virilus' pangs to quell.

XV

Before them spread an appetizing feast,
Complete with spicèd wine and sugared cates.⁵
Now smiles Virilus, whose complaints had ceased,
And who a capon's breast incorporates.
The shrewd Sagir, divested of his dripping cloak,
Sat on a bed and to the great Virilus spoke:

¹ creaked

² person

³ go

⁴ staircase

⁵ delicacy, choice food

CANTO I

XVI

“Eat heartily; long hath thy journey been,
And for that, all my gratitude thou hast.”
“To aid, Sagir, my valour is most keen,
Now tell me: how hath Justice been harassed?”
Then did Virilus cast away his dampened veil
To show a countenance both beauteous and hale,¹

XVII

Features Divine in their proportion’s scheme:
His eyes were livid,² like the silver vault;³
His lips, a plushy, erubescant⁴ team:
His was a manful visage without fault.
Sagir admired the rugged beauty of his guest,
And then resumed the prelude to his parlous⁵ quest.

XVIII

“Be patient, listen, and I will be brief:
Xolis, a Warlock, hath enthralled the land;
With his rude horde he’s brought us all to grief,
For none can his abrupt advance withstand.
Five moons ago this sorcerer fomented war
By crossing into Northern lands with martial store!

XIX

“Without a word or warning he impinged,
And by deception trounced the Northern Kings,
Who to resign their garlands were constricted;⁶
His forces speed as though endowed with wings!
Of Kingdoms free from yoke, *Soraxos* is the last.”
“How is’t *unnoted* he such soldiery amassed?”

XX

“We do not know from whence his armies came.”
“And once the Northern realms this Xolis took,
Why did ye not repudiate his claim?”
Sagir responded with a bashful look.
“Ah,” Magnus sighed, “thou thought’st his press he would abate,
And that this conquest his desires would satiate.”

¹ vigorous

² blue-gray

³ sky

⁴ red, blushing

⁵ dangerous

⁶ constrained

CANTO I

XXI

“The North by fractious Lords hath oft been driven,
And we to interfere with them are loath
Lest Concord’s fragile tapestry be riven!

To keep the peace the Archon swears an oath.”

“Admirable, yet, by waiting, tears translate to tatters:
Thy concordat this Warlock in his tempest scatters.”

XXII

“Aye. To repair’t we’d have thee make assay:¹

Please, thrash this despot and reclaim our home!”

“Hast able Lords or armies in array

With which I can eject him from thy loam?”

“Alack...our martial dispositions I don’t know...”

Replied the solemn Mage, his brow depressed in woe.

XXIII

Virilus saw his grief: he was so young!

But five and twenty, with such duty loaded!

This watchful silence loosed the Wizard’s tongue

Who feared his lapses had his worth corroded:

“Though I know nought of fighting, armaments, or files,
I can profess to be a thing of wit and wiles...”

XXIV

“I’ve heard enough,” Virilus Magnus spoke,

As from his quivering chair he briskly rose;

Within the Mage this apprehension woke,

Seizing his slender frame from pate to toes:

“O Gods! I’ve failed,” thought he; “he will reject this feat!”

But Magnus vowed, “I’ll drive the Warlock to retreat.”

XXV

Sagir was comforted by this bold claim,

And then declared in manifest relief:

“Thou noble King, thou honourest thy fame,

And will, sans² doubt, soon reprimand this thief.

But come, I have more to divulge unto thine ears:

For there looms more within thy quest than what appears.”

XXVI

Virilus sits anew; Sagir explains:

“Th’Immortal Gods, our benefactors true,

Whom, in their care of us, take noble pains,

Have chosen from the mortal stock a few

In whom they have reposed endowments like their own:—

What I impart to thee of this is little known.

¹ attempt

² without

CANTO I

XXVII

“The Gods, thou wot’st,¹ hath each a double force:
Great *Fervidus* is lord of fire and might;
Aquin the mind and water doth endorse;
Ventus stirs up the winds and wisdom’s light;
Fair *Thona* is the queen of earth and beauty’s charms;
Salubria is friend to health and foe to harms.

XXXVIII

“Though five Immortals rule above with care,
There is a sixth by turpitude consumed:
Mad *Lyssor*, who is lief² his bane to share,
And whom with hate and malice oft hath fumed.
On Holy *Ichora*³ he mounted an attack,
Whilst riding on a vicious dragon’s scaly back!”

XXIX

“That story is well known,” Virilus said;
“He stormed the palace with a dragon horde –
The fiercest, *Fanthar*, by his own hand bred –
In hopes to crown himself the overlord.”
“Indeed, but he and all his drakish crew were felled:
The Drakes were slain, then *Lyssor*, into chains compelled;

XXX

“He was Imprisoned in the depths of *Dis*,⁴
There to reside until the end of time.
But, shaken by the breach of armistice,
The Gods deliberated on this crime,
And mused on how such future treason to prevent;
Aquin and *Ventus* pondered up a muniment:⁵

XXXI

“T’imbue selected souls with powers Divine,
Whose duty is to safeguard Heav’n’s estates.
These are the *Blessèd*, Tumult’s anodyne.⁶
Decease alone the blessing abrogates,
Whereon, the gift upon another is conferred,
Thus future allies for th’Immortals are assured.”

¹ know

² eager

³ floating castle of the Gods

⁴ the underworld

⁵ defence, barricade

⁶ medication that relieves

CANTO I

XXXII

“Who now with Godly graces are bestowed?”
“Huge Fervidus to *Cratus* gave dense thew;¹
In *my* mind comprehension Aquin sowed;
Geros sagacity from *Ventus* drew;
Great Thona blessed the comely *Thalia* with her wares;
And with the mild *Iréna* kind *Salubria* shares.

XXXIII

“And yet ‘tis said that Lyssor, though exiled,
A mortal with his savagery hath tainted:
Stugnetos by that God hath been defiled,
Though witless we how he was darkly sainted.
But worse, two of the Blest from righteousness have turned,
And by this woeful action have the heavens spurned!”

XXXIV

“What urged the Blest their senses to deport?”
“Methinks it is an inculcation spell;
Such hexes are most onerous to thwart,
And can induce the wise to welcome Hell.
‘Tis for this reason also that I’ve summoned thee:
Should he seize *me*, it would be a catastrophe,

XXXV

“For with my powers – I repine² to think! –
There would be scant he could not subjugate!”
“Bright Aquin’s brow! Where *thou* in fear would’st shrink,
Then how shall *I* his summons obviate?
By *Xolis*’ sorcery shall I not be enchanted,
And have my sovereign wits with sycophants supplanted?”

XXXVI

“I cannot answer that, yet *Geros* may;
From *Xolis*’ hex the ancient Sage is free.
Seek him and reck³ what wisdom he shall say,
For he abounds in perspicacity.”
“Tell me: where shall I find this said astucious⁴ seer
Whose remedies to wrack are welcome to mine ear?”

¹ muscle, strength

² fret

³ heed

⁴ astute, cunning

CANTO I

XXXVII

“I would I knew,” Sagir said in complaint;
“Nor friend nor foe can find the Augur’s stead,
For in his wisdom, (or fear of distraint,)¹
He’s all mewed up and nowhere will he tread.”
“Another dubious task dost thou allot to me:
I must have help, sir, if I am succour² thee.”

XXXVIII

“The Gods will guide thee unto his abode!
Trust in their will! Strike north tomorrow morning;
Travel with haste and keep thee nigh the road:
Untrodden paths with murderers are swarming.”
“It shall be done; yet, could I beg of thee a steed?
With such a boon I could traverse with greater speed.”

XXXIX

“There *is* a courser I can recommend:
Celeria she’s cleped;³ proud is her frame!
All other destriers doth she transcend,
And, though she’s from the *Wild Lands*,⁴ she is tame:
Her I bequeath to thee: may her unrivaled speed
Avail thee in delivering Xolis’ bitter meed!

XL

“But come now great one, take upon thee rest;
For me, I cannot tarry, but must go.”
“I understand; thou must heed Duty’s hest:⁵
Whoever scorns to drowse defeats his foe;
But tell me whither dost thou go this roaring eve?”
“The Faculty of Sortilege⁶ demands my leave;

XLI

“The Temple’s Counsellors must hear my cares,
And Evil seldom takes a holiday.
I’ll find thee; be beseeching in thy prayers.
Go north; forgive me, for I cannot stay!”
“Farewell, Sagir; may honour be thy sovereign guide!”
This mandate buoyed the Archon as he stepped outside.

¹ distress

² rescue, aid

³ named

⁴ a land of beasts and wonders to the East

⁵ command, order

⁶ sorcery

CANTO I

XLII

The Knight was now alone, but lacked no cheer,
As bread and viands¹ blanketed the table,
And aromatic wine in casks sat near.
He ate, then slept as long as he was able,
As haggard Dreams, like lightning, blazed throughout his mind:
Some pleasant, others strange, but most of them maligned.

XLIII

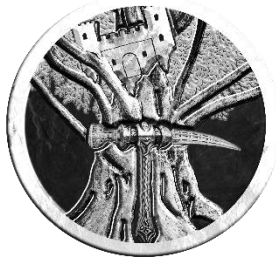
Being a General of gruesome war,
He was no stranger to imposing sights:
How many times had he been doused in gore?
How oft had he beheld abysmal frights?
How many adversaries pledged he unto Hell?
How many enemies by his great prowess fell?

XLIV

Of what his swevens² told, he could scarce say,
Save that he circled a familiar tree,
Whose umber bark appeared suffused with tray,³
With girlish tresses for its canopy.
What signified this trunk unto the Cavalier?⁴
There was beneath its foliage buried someone dear.

XLV

Implanted on the day she was interred,
The sapling had since towards the vault extended;
Would she be so robust had she endured?
In such reflections was the Hulk suspended,
And, while his siegèd mind strove to be unencumbered,
The stormy night passed as he feverishly slumbered.



¹ meat

² dreams

³ sorrow

⁴ A knight (in this case, an epithet for Virilus)

CANTO II

CANTO II: An Alliance

I

With eagerness the dewy Dawn arises,
And, as a soldier with an iron heart,
Virilus to remain in bed misprises,
And in his raiment decks his every part;
He takes a pastry cake to break his evening's fast:
And stows the rest for an eventual repast.

II

When from the fusty¹ tavern he debouched,²
An ancient ostler brought *Celeria* forth:
She was as hardy as the Wizard vouched;
Up leaps Virilus: straight they gallop north;
The charger did not bawl nor bend beneath her master,
But traced the cobbled road and bolted ever faster.

III

The louring clouds from heaven's brow now cleared,
Solacious³ beams embraced the lands below.
The steed shone argent, by this light endeared,
And hurtled like a missile from a bow.
Through day and night the twain pressed hard the chalky road,
Hoping to hap upon the Soothsayer's abode.

IV

Scanty a soul spied they upon the lane,
For frosty Terror stalked the countryside,
And by contagion of his horrid reign
The people's bravery was pacified.
Mute menace and relentless solitude pervade
As champion and mount traverse the quiet glade.

V

While passing through a bosk, the road to shy,
He heard a raging clamour cleave the air:
"A mortal struggle doth this din imply..."
Now forward does the Knight exhort his mare!
Deeper into the wood Virilus pressed this pace,
Celeria advancing like it was the chase.

¹ mouldy, dank

² emerged

³ solace giving

CANTO II

VI

Eftsoons¹ they came upon the tintamarre²
Where they beheld a man by foes beset;
Several monsters sought his path to bar,
 Th'Aberrant or th'Accurst their epithet;
These oddities were man and beast conjoined in one:
None could say how it was their race had been begun.

VII

While some were mantled with repugnant feathers,
 Others bore tusks, or horns, and heath-like flesh,
While others still to Living-Death were debtors
 As their corroded limbs could not refresh:
To pain these wretches were entirely immune,
Which only made them more laborious to expugn.³

VIII

Four of these baleful beasts besieged a knight
 Who nimbly evitated⁴ all their blows;
Yet, he could not their vehemence requite,
 Having no time their onslaught to oppose,
Since all his sinew and dexterity he plied
Quietus⁵ from their flashing armaments to chide.

IX

Nor horse, nor shield possessed this lonesome soul;
 He toiled on foot with hauberk and a blade,
Whose resonance served as his mouth's parole,
 And whose hard edge his mordant bite displayed.
Here he rebuffs a thrust, and here, a slash defies,
There, parries an assault, and thwarts now a surprise.

X

Advantage will not bend to either side:
 Th'Accurséd prosecute their suit to kill,
While the lone warrior maintains his stride,
 And keeps his tender heart alive by skill.
Had not Virilus happed upon this bloody spot,
Who knows how long these adversaries would have fought!

¹ soon, shortly

² clamour

³ vanquish

⁴ evaded

⁵ death

CANTO II

XI

Celeria's thundering hoofs reach now their ears,
And from the moil the monsters disengage,
While the afflicted man suspends his fears,
Unwitting whether to rejoice or rage.
Virilus, monarch of the warrior's code, declaimed:
"Which single mortal by four beasts shall *not* be tamed?"

XII

"What great dispute hath caused this unjust brawl?
What hath he done to warrant such a fate?"
His sonorous pronouncement awed them all:
Th' Accurst but gazed; *he* sought t' elucidate:
"O adventitious¹ traveller, behold a King,
Who knows no bounds of grief or suffering!"

XIII

"Defy with me these felons and their liege!
My Kingdom, sir, is no more proud or free,
She, seized by their deception, not by siege!
Theirs is the portrait of iniquity!
I have endured my trials by the force of arms,
And now I find destruction by these monster's harms!"

XIV

Detecting truth in what was intimated,
The warlike Magnus crushed his brow and growled,
Wherewith the forest's trunks reverberated;
To fight his dauntless destrier he roweled!
The four Accurst addressed them to his fervent charge,
And looked upon his brawny bosom as their targe.²

XV

Agog to crush these beasts *without* his glaive,³
Virilus vaults, alighting on a foe,
Whose spine collapses in a buckling wave;
Both Cavalier and monster earthward go.
Magnus leapt up; the beast would never rise up more.
Now were there three opponents, when there erst⁴ were four.

¹ arriving by chance

² target

³ technically a hafted blade in a polearm, but in the realm of poetry, a sword

⁴ formerly

CANTO II

XVI

Indifferent to their colleague's brutal end,
The other Curséd leap to join the fray,
Swinging their swords, Virilus' flesh to rend,
While crying out like hunting hounds at prey!
The towering champion, with his arms' expansive length,
Rebuffed the swooping strokes of his opponents' strength;

XVII

With bellicose jocundity he frisked,
As if he were a youth at idle play;
Though battle with but naked hands he risked,
He leapt and gambolled¹ freely round the fray,
As though he danced a heavy hour to beguile:
Hardly as though he struggled in a martial trial!

XVIII

Anon his mirth diminishes, then wanes,
As is the wont of any Pleasure's rule;
Finding the sport unworthy of his pains,
He hastened to conclude the tedious duel:
He quickly stooped and plucked a boulder from the earth,
Which scorned his brawny arms' embraces for its girth.

XIX

Aloft he hoists it with impressive ease;
Astonishment compels th'Accurst to halt
As Terror's icy grasp assails their knees,
Stilling them for the imminent assault!
Now plunges that behemoth stone with raucous power,
Repaying vital Nature her initial dower!

XX

The earth resounded 'neath the callous weight;
The fruitless outcries of the slain were quelled
By that magnific² boulder's ruthless freight;
The clash was done, the peril was dispelled.
The grateful Rescued could not his surprise suppress,
But marveled at the might that buttressed his success:

XXI

“Good sir, who hath these heinous foes allayed,
Ne'er have I seen such ease and grace i'the field;
Tell me the name of he who hath assayed,
And saved this Chief reft of his mount and shield.”
To this request made in a humble, awe-struck tone,
Virilus made reply: “iwis,³ to thee I'm known,

¹ frolicked

² huge, magnificent

³ certainly

CANTO II

XXII

“And, seeing in thee more of friend than foe,
I will divulge my purpose and my name:
I’ve come to succour ye from tyrant’s woe;
Virilus Magnus I.” “I wot¹ thy fame!
Art Lord of *Thunderwold*?” the Chieftain asked.
“Verily;² with that Empire’s weal I have been tasked.”

XXIII

“The *Imperator* on these dolent³ shores?”
Resumed the King, “what mysteries abound!
Where are thy forces? Where thy war-like stores?
Where are the means fell Xolis to confound?”
“Right here,” said Virilus as he displayed his hand;
“This is the weapon that will liberate thy land.

XXIV

“Grant me the honour I have granted thee:
What is thy title? Rulest thou a fief?”
“O Imperator, I’ll speak honestly:
I’m *Sigurd Stål*, of *Thuria* the Chief.
Though Chief no more: to daubery⁴ my Kingdom’s lost:
Consigning trust to Xolis wrought this fortune crossed.

XXV

“I sought some succour from his puissant hand,
Beseeching of him warriors to lend
That I might trounce a neighbour’s brutal band,
Who, coveting my crown, craved to contend;
With Xolis’ dearly purchased regiments I won,
Securing Thuria’s future for my future son.

XXVI

“And yet – O Ventus!⁵ Woe upon thy silence! –
The very levy sent to arm my claim
Disarmed me in a single eve of violence,
When all my men – carousing round the flame,
Falling to sated sleep soused in ebriety⁶ –
Were hastenèd to death in their satiety!

¹ know

² truly

³ sorrowful

⁴ trickery

⁵ God of winds and wisdom

⁶ drunkenness

CANTO II

XXVII

“Without recourse to weapons or defence,
They were served up like livestock for the Gods,—
But *this* damned sacrifice lacked pious sense,
And rather burgeoned with the pride of frauds!
In celebration I was, haply, more austere:
Ambling about the walls accounted for my cheer.

XXVIII

“But once th’attack began, I could do naught
But race and ring the alarum bell in vain:
The doughtiest¹ of us staggeringly fought,
Our wits befuddled by the purple stain!
Alack, unto a man we fell, and so I fled,
Abandoning my hold whilst rushing forth in dread...”

XXIX

A livid² shame, so hot it pales his lips,
Prevents his elegiac³ speech to course;
His hand with umbrage round his handle grips,
As he resists hot rivers of remorse.
With manful effort he composure reasserts,
And silence to sedate oration then converts:

XXX

“I fled, raised forces, and besieged the foe!
Around the keep we formed a ring of steel:
Hunger or stour would gift them to the crow!
Each day my heralds bellowed our appeal,
Each day my vassals rushed to prosecute their oath,
To serve their liege, their land, and their inviolate troth.⁴

XXXI

“And yet, despite our valiant assault...
What can the might of mortal men alone
Do to constrain the powers of th’occult?
One cleped⁵ Stugnetos—Xolis’ wicked drone—
Deployed some kind of sorcery our ranks to scourge:
O worthy sir! Naught can our heinous deeds deterge!⁶

¹ most formidable, bravest

² white-hot (sometimes blue-gray)

³ tearful

⁴ fidelity, truth

⁵ named

⁶ wash away

CANTO II

XXXII

“For, friend on friend turned in malevolence
Striking his neighbour down in rabid ire;
Gone, comity;¹ farewell, benevolence...
There were too few remaining to retire:
I ordered that the clarion announce retreat,
But, lo! The Warlock’s triumph o’er us was complete.

XXXIII

“Again I fled, and traveled south for aid,
When, on this road, th’ Accurst upon me fell;
They scared my steed, who pitched me as he brayed,
Leaving me to resist those banes from Hell;
On foot, like to a soldier of demeaned degree,
Deserted, I was prey unto the enemy.

XXXIV

“Had’st thou not haply come upon this lane...”
“Say no more on’t, O Chief, ill served by fate!
The Gods, to bring me hither, must be fain,²
And of this noble meeting approbate.
How well, O Thuria, dost thou this country know?”
“Enough to aid thee bring our enemies to woe;

XXXV

“Unto thine inquisition give but speech,
And I shall do my utmost to appease.”
Virilus answered, “rede,³ friend, I beseech:
Geros I seek, a reverend Sage who sees;
The Godly will, to us opaque and recondite,
Is to the Seer neither turbid nor dissite.”⁴

XXXVI

“Forgive me, but the name I do not know;
However, there resides an Elder nigh
Whose wisdom a solution may bestow.”
“This likes me well, unto him let us hie;⁵
‘Twould please me best if we may reach him ere the night
Extends her atramentous⁶ mantle o’er our sight.”

¹ courtesy

² eager

³ counsel

⁴ remote

⁵ hurry

⁶ inky black

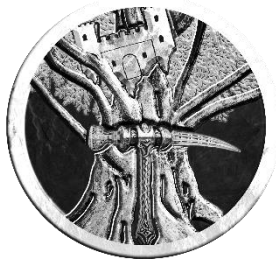
CANTO II

XXXVII

“Assist me with recovering my steed,
And to the Prescient I’ll bring thee straight.”
“Thou’lt find no contradiction here: agreed!
But let us hasten: it grows ever late.”
To find the Chieftain’s startled destrier they strode,
Keeping a wary eye upon the quiet road.

XXXVIII

Ere long, the wayward courser they discovered,
Stamping and neighing near a lonesome brook;
Thuria’s titian war horse thus recovered,
The journey to the Sage they undertook
As solemn Evening her mysterious pall extended,
And weary Day retired, unto his bed intended.



CANTO III: Sagir's Burden

I

Sagir, departing from the thoughtful Knight,
 Applies his hood and through the tavern races;
 He stays nor for his thirst or appetite,
 But susurrates¹ arcana 'midst his rapid paces;
 Ill did this rambling suit his clean and comely figure,
 But no one present dared oppugn² this Wizard's rigor.

II

Once more in the inclement heath he strides,
 Where screeching winds and chilling rain abounds;
 A traveled cloak alone respite provides,
 Which scarce the welkin's³ truculence confounds.
 A pebble from his pouch he seizes and projects,
 Whereat his esoteric whispers 'gan to show effects:

III

From this small stone, now couching on the earth,
 Emerges an expanding purple door,
 A standing whirlpool to another berth!
 He entered it, abandoning the shore.
 One foot upon the heath, the other far away,
 He stands athwart the land, like Gods at play.

IV

Whither was he transported with such haste
 By such abstruse and marvelous design?
 How many leagues – so quickly! – were displaced,
 Which to a pilgrim's legs would prove malign?
 Vast swathes with pastures, dales, bosks, fens, and lakes supplied
 He obviates, emerging on the mountainside.

V

High and immense, these ranges, serpentine,
 Divided Men from those of wilder make,
 Those whom the Gods desired to confine,
 Fearful of what would come in meeting's wake.
 Atop this frosty range an august temple sat:
 Hewn from the very rockface was this habitat.

¹ whispers

² criticize

³ sky's

VI

Within this hallowed hall debouched Sagir,
 Whereat the pulsing portal closed behind;
 Within, the walls were grand, albeit austere,
 With Aquin's statue centrally enshrined:
 Aloft extends his dexter¹ hand with scroll adorned:
 Knowledge shall not be subjugated or suborned!²

VII

"Knowing," intoned Sagir, "shall always rise;
 Ignorance is defeated by the light!"
 He spoke these gentle words to eulogize
 The patron godhead of the erudite
 Ere he departed from the chamber towards his quarters.
 The halls were silent, reft of their familiar boarders.

VIII

"Where have the *Ephors*³ gone?" inquired the Mage;
 "Are they at study? Or in council caught?"
 This was a temple from another age
 Wherein the gifted were in magic taught.
 The Faculty of Sortilege kept stringent watch:
 They kept Men's Kingdoms from debacle and debauch.⁴

IX

Sagir his private chambers soon achieves,
 Where he at once casts off his weathered cloak,
 And then his feet of sodden boots relieves,
 Being weary of the bluster and the soak;
 Delighted to be sheltered from the raging skies,
 An azure⁵ cassock to his body he applies:

X

This reverend garment was the *Master's Mode*.
 With gold embroidered and with ermine trimmed,
 Upon the chosen *Archon* it's bestowed,
 Signaling an intelligence undimmed.
 The Ephors answer to the Archon; he, to God,
 For, only an immortal can bestow this laud.⁶

¹ right

² bribed

³ lesser members of the Faculty

⁴ moral failing

⁵ blue

⁶ praise, honour

XI

Yet, like a heavy iron pendant chain
 This weighty honour dangled at his throat,
 And rather than rejoice in Aquin's reign,
 A luctual¹ drooping did his soul denote:
 Reclining lucubrations² and obscure research
 Pleasèd best his heart, not guiding Aquin's foremost church;

XII

Combine this with the gnashing press of war,
 Commanding armies, and opposing foes,
 And there is nothing he could more abhor,
 Nothing more sure to shatter his repose.
 But yet, this youth, with care and mansuetude³ replete,⁴
 Accepted his devoir⁵ and swallowed his defeat.

XIII

And more: he was obedient to the law,
 And grateful for his deep sagacity.
 He now suspired from a weary maw,
 Aghast and sad at the rapacity,
 For sweeping Xolis ravaged his beloved lands.
 His gaze descended, falling on his trembling hands:

XIV

These, formerly intrepid, smooth, and sure,
 Now shook like slender branches in a storm.
 "Great Gods above: afford to me recure:
 Dispel these craven tremens,⁶ false to form!
 In one so graced with gifts, such terror is a slight;
 Help me to stand as Archon for the coming night!"

XV

"Fear not," replies a miniscule vox,⁷
 Which, scarcely audible, still startles him:
 "Salubria's heart!" he sputters as he balks.
 The little voice, then gleekful⁸ to the brim,
 Jubilates soundly for her pert and sudden prank,
 Ignoring both his dignity and premiere rank.

¹ grievous

² candle-light studies

³ mildness

⁴ filled

⁵ duty

⁶ shakes

⁷ voice

⁸ full of pranks and jokes

XVI

“*Fré!*” he cried, “thou nigh slewest me with fright!”
 “Whilst *I* with *laughter* thou art like to slay!”
 This jocund apparition was a Sprite
 No larger than a finger, clepèd *Fré*.
 Lissom and gracile, dancing on her fluttering wings
 She bobs aloft, while with her tiny voice she sings.

XVII

Her tiny frame emits a gentle glow:
 Vermillion¹ in a passion she displays;
 Argent² when calm; when grieving, indigo;
 But more, she Nature’s humour can appraise,
 Reading within the loam what outwardly is hidden:
 A sacred knowledge that to others is forbidden.

XVIII

She asks: “did’st meet Virilus by the bay?”
 “In sooth, I did, the Deities be praised!”
 “Is he as handsome as the rumours say?”
 “And if he were – how should’st this fact be peised³
 Since he is towering, and thou a teeny mite?”
 “Fie!⁴ Mites abide in filthy dust; I am a Sprite!”

XIX

Her colour waxes⁵ carmine as she shouts;
 She flutters round the chamber in a rage,
 Her curses reinforced by harmless clouts
 Upon the passive shoulders of the Mage.
 Now laughter raises up the Archon’s drooping breast,
 From duty’s dole⁶ affording him a welcome rest.

XX

“No more, O *Fré*, thou apogee of light,
 Thou sweet companion to my weary soul!
 The sun commands less shine than thee, O Sprite!”
 “Rather than mite, I’d suffer being a *troll!*”
 “But *Fré*, a mite is little; trolls are big and tall—”
 “I am *diminutive*,” cried she, “I am not small!”

¹ red

² silver

³ weighed

⁴ an expletive

⁵ grows stronger

⁶ sorrow

XXI

“I’ll hold my peace! To business now look we:
 I must apprise the Ephors of my news,
 But yet, since my return, none do I see.
 Where keep they? On the grounds, or in their mews?”
 “Within the *Aquinapagus*¹ on thee they wait.”
 “They do? Then I must venture to address them straight.”

XXII

Unto the *Aquinapagus* they went,
 Where, as asserted, all the Ephors waited;
 Sitting about a table’s round extent,
 They whispered as they heatedly debated,
 Their sibilance along the chamber’s frescoes sprawling
 Like slithering serpents through the jungle’s grasses crawling.

XXIII

All present stood as *Aquinus*² approached.
 “Be seated, friends, I pray ye,” quoth the Mage,
 “And tell me how far Xolis hath encroached;
 Omit no detail of his fresher rage,
 Which, all consuming, spreadeth like a conflagration,
 Growing by easy breaths through nation after nation.”

XXIV

“First, Archon,” croaked a wizened³ woman, “speak:
 Did’st treat with him, or, loll in niaiserie?”⁴
 “With Magnus, aye! That paragon of wreck,⁵
 Who hath no equal in his bravery,
 Who tops the heroes of the ancient tales – agrees!
 And even now, makes forays ‘gainst our enemies!”

XXV

In *his* mind, this resounded like the bell
 That calls the starving to the rich repast
 That all their heinous torments will dispel,
 But his companions’ visages held fast.
 “That is my news...” he stuttered; “hope Virilus carries.
 But, what have ye to tell? What of our adversaries?”

¹ council chambers for the faculty

² Sagir

³ withered

⁴ silliness

⁵ destruction

XXVI

The Council's Ephors numbered twelve in all,
 And yet, in presence they were lacking two;
 Already some had fallen in this brawl:
 One at th'incipience of Xolis' coup;
 The other somewhere riding on the parlous¹ road:
 Her whereabouts unknown, her bones in mystery strowed.²

XXVII

When vulpine³ Aquinus his questions posed,
 The Ephors could not help but note this dearth;
 Their confreres, they were sure, in mud were closed:
 Too well they knew their adversary's worth.
 Clenthé – the eldest – for the Council made reply:
 “Our foes, your Grace, all our manoeuvres stultify;⁴

XXVIII

“They shame our celebrated wits with ease;
 Shall I elucidate on our defeats,
 And catalogue our mounting miseries?”
 Abashed, the Archon's confidence retreats;
 Those shameful tremors to his digits then returned,
 And to be anywhere but there he deeply yearned.

XXIX

Of him as Archon, Clenthé disapproved:
 “This rotten child! He's green, and he's too young,”
 Thought she; “and ought to be at once removed,
 And I set in his stead i'the topmost rung!”
 Clenthé's ambitions weren't so simple to dismiss:
 Her age and craft spoke louder than her avarice;

XXX

Yet, 'twas not she the brilliant God had graced:
 It was not she who could absorb a book
 Having but *once* its stylèd leaves embraced
 While spending but a *moment* in a nook;
 It was not she who magnified, sans effort's cries,
 The power of her craft so as to shake the skies!

¹ perilous

² strewn

³ cunning (as in fox-like)

⁴ render ridiculous

XXXI

Her boiling envy she attempts to hide,
 And gelid reticence performe assumes;
 Like anyone who is corrupt inside,
 She masks her venomous and sordid rheums:¹
 Those clearer consciences – who castigate ambition –
 Detect such poison, and enjoin² a swift demission.

XXXII

Yet, this covered heat hid ill in ice:
 Sagir discerned the embers hotly smolder,
 And aptly guessed at her concealed device.
 Because of this, with her he waxed still colder,
 Since only Folly trust lends to Prevarication,
 And this, in turn, she took as insult to her station.

XXXIII

And yet, with her assessment he *agreed*:
 He *is* too young, too fresh for stately matters;
 With war, by books acquainted, not by deed.
 The very *thought* of strife his courage scatters,
 And issuing commands his very soul offends:
 To play the part of fearless Archon he *pretends*.

XXXIV

“Archon?” inquired Clenthé, “dost thou hear?”
 Roused from his rumination, he awakes:
 “Yes, Clenthé, pour thy tidings in mine ear,
 And though this churning brew behiteth³ aches,
 ‘Twill prove medicinal: for wellness to improve,
 The malady must be discovered to remove.”

XXXV

“So. Brief I’ll be. The circumstance is bleak.
 North of Soraxos, no domains remain,
 But all to Xolis’ rule are rendered meek;
 The Kingdoms south, whilst loud with their disdain,
 Are being presently reduced to smoking ash,
 And soon will fall to servitude beneath the lash.

XXXVI

“Because Soraxos’ Queen would stay her doom,
 She proffers Xolis passage through her lands –
 And more – affords them nourishment and room,
 Keeping them strengthened for hot strife’s demands.”
 “Our allies then...?” asked he. Then Clenthé, “none remain:
 Some are imprisoned; others turned; but most are slain.”

XXXVII

¹ illnesses

² command

³ promises

Kyle Derek McDonald CANTO III

A fearful frisson down his spine progressed:
 “And of the Blessèd hast thou tidings learned?”
“Nothing propitious there can we attest:
 Cratus to Xolis’ banner hath since turned,
 Whilst Geros and Iréna, both, have disappeared.
 That they to Xolis’ have succumbed ‘tis mickle¹ feared.

XXXVIII

“In license Thalia spends her wanton days
 Utterly careless of our parlous plight:
The only *abstinence* the stale² displays
 Is in her base abstention from the fight!
Stugnetos massacres and operates at will,
And doth the Empire’s adversaries blithely kill.

XXXIX

“That leaves but thee, O Archon, in our sphere;
 And whilst Virilus in our cause proceeds,
Two of the Blest to Xolis’ fiat adhere,
 While merely *one* – ‘tis thee – their march impedes.
Moreover, those who counter us are friends of war,
And revel freely in the contest and the gore,

XL

“Whereas, with thee... from speech ‘tis best t’abstain;
 In short, O Aquinus, we have no friends,
Nor men, nor *Heroes* for this dire campaign.”
 Her imputation at once scathes and shends,³
Burning and chiseling away his dignity,
Leaving naught but a husk scarred by malignity.

XLI

Indignant, Fré her hue to red converts,
 And flutters wildly round the Archon’s head;
Gently, her course behind him he diverts,
 Lest she her fists in Clenthé’s eyes embed.
“Reverèd Ephors,” said Sagir, “our woes are great,
But tell me, please, that ye would not capitulate!

¹ mickle

² prostitute

³ shames

XLII

“For in thy words I hear sepulchral groans,
 As though our cause were destined for the tomb!
 Remains there yet no vigor in our bones
 For oblutation¹ ‘gainst this creeping doom?
 We’ll find some friends and heroes if we be in want,
 Our hopes we cannot let our Blessèd rivals haunt!

XLIII

“Courage and wisdom must supply our need,
 For, are we not accomplished and sagacious?
 Who dares our gnostic powers, combined, impede?
 These detriments are paltry and fugacious;²
 Connive with me: make known thy direst predilection:
 Only by daring fate can we prevent dejection!”

XLIV

A speech of fire burned on his lips once more,
 But turned to smoke ere it their hearts ignited.
 Looks of despondent shame their faces bore,
 Fearing to catch his eye, their honour blighted.
 “Why such sad physiognomies?” enquired Sagir.
 No answer came, though Fré was overwrought with fear:

XLV

She urged him in her little voice to “fly!”
 Sagir, bewildered, turned unto the Sprite,
 Whereat old Clenthé finally gave reply:
 “We’ll stand with Warlord Xolis in the fight:
 It’s been decided, *Archon*. Now, remove that gown:
 Thy tenure here is done; here endeth thy renown.”

XLVI

Torpid with incredulity he gapes:
 How smooth was this betrayal, how complete!
 His grief-struck essence from his head escapes,
 And sees himself astonished and effete;³
 He watches then as he removes the Master’s Mode,
 Relinquishing without a fight that sacred load.

¹ resistance

² short-lived

³ lacking vigor

XLVII

Eyes more cupidinous¹ for that blue dress
 Than those of haggard Clenthé, there were none:
 Her fingers throbbed that treasure to possess,
 Though he, in shedding it had scarcely done;
 Now Clenthé wrenched it from his hands and put the garb on:
 Now *she* commanded all the wizards as the Archon!

XLVIII

To wake the wilted wizard from his tene,²
 That they might hurtle through the open door,
 Fré tugged and tugged upon his gabardine—
 The garment ‘neath the cassock that he wore.
 No sooner had the crone the azure robe applied,
 Than, with a cachinnation, wickedly she cried:

XLIX

“Thus right prevails! And as my first decree—
 As the presiding Archon of this order,—
 For treason unto death I sentence thee!”
 Aquinus vainly struggled to exhort her:
 “Treachery! How?” “Abetting Magnus ‘gainst our Lord!”
 Her hand dipped in the pouch where she her *Tinctures*³ stored:

L

An igneous pebble she straight exfiltrates,
 Then mouths a spell which makes the pebble spark:
 Within her palm it flares and radiates!
 Without delay she casts it at her mark,
 Whereon it blooms into a raging ball of fire:
 The Aquinapagus would prove to be his pyre!

LI

Though erstwhile⁴ stunned, his Genius grasps the crop
 And goads the Coursers of his Wits to charge,
 Rather than ambling at an aimless clop:
 Sagir deflects the bullet from its targe,
 And then dispels it ere it can destroy the hall;
 “Strike home!” roars Fré in ire, “for their pernicious gall!”

¹ greedy

² grief

³ spell components

⁴ earlier, before

LII

Indeed, they were deserving of reproof –
 Apostate¹ from the Council and the light –
 But from attack the Wizard stood aloof:
 The thought of injury made him contrite.
 “Then fly at least!” implored the Sylph; “let’s leave this place!”
 He took this exhortation and they fled apace.

LIII

The chasing Faculty began to close,
 Preparing their most devastating spells;
 Mere yards ahead of their pursuant foes,
 The friends no refuge found, for all the cells, –
 The Ephors’ private rooms – their every door was locked:
 The former Archon’s chamber only was not blocked!

LIV

Thither they raced and shut the door behind:
 Munified² by enchantment were its planks;
 To neuter spells the portals were designed:
 A boon for which Sagir gave many thanks!
 Though, only for a time could it such rage repugn:³
 To concentrated furor it was not immune.

LV

Clenthé’s cabal assailed the door with spite;
 Within, Sagir laid hands on all he could,
 Stocking his means for their impending flight.
 The Ephors’ onslaught finally rent the wood:
 The splinters skittered through the cell where they beheld
 A purple portal closing, by Sagir dispelled!

LVI

He and the Sprite a portal had traversed!
 “They have escaped!” the Moded crone declared,
 Her eyes on fire, her lips in anger pursed;
 “But yet...he is inveterately⁴ scared:
 His fear will see him slain, or captured and subdued.
 Subservience to Xolis he cannot elude.”



¹ having defected

² “enwalled,” protected

³ resist

⁴ chronically (in a dissipated way)