

*Paul Stapleton*

## **The Fall of Punicea**

I pulled open the city gate with my white flag unfurled, billowing out above my head. Outside the walls the Volsci were lined up in ranks on the Campus Martius, maybe a thousand of them in battle gear. I prayed to Fish they would honor the sign of ceasefire. The minute they saw me, their choruses were quelled, and their drumming was tamped to a muffled beat.

“Vive Pax Tiberna!” I shouted.

The Volsci campfires crackled in the wind. Some of the soldiers laughed, “The Pax is dead.”

I ignored them. “I come as an ambassador to King Victorrex Gloriosus, sacker of cities, breaker of stone, brave son of Hedd.” I knew I would get him at the mention of his father.

Victorrex signaled, and three Volsci ran towards me. I drew in my breath and tried to remain as wooden as a statue. Still I trembled. When the soldiers reached me, one snatched my flag and the other two my arms, tugging me forward into the Volsci crowd. I figured I was a dead man, but I suppressed my fear and trusted in Fish. The soldiers tossed me before Victorrex, who stood stone-faced, his cheeks covered in war paint. We were close in manly age.

“Sextus the Learned,” he said. I must admit I was flattered by his recognition. My reputation had been growing in the region ever since my royally funded sabbatical to the library in Alexandria. I fancied myself a philosopher by trade. “Why does King Tarquin not come himself?”

“The King does not wish to offend you with his coarse speech.” I bowed obsequiously.

“Well spoken,” he said. “What is your message?”

“King Tarquin sees your tremendous army. At your martial chorus terror shakes the marrow of our bones. Proud you must be of your unmatched weapons of modernity.” I continued on like this with line after line of pure pulp. I knew he would eat it up. One thing I’ve learned is that people can’t resist flattery, especially imperialistic egomaniacs.

“You speak the truth,” Victorrex said. “But what is your mission? Is it that you sue for peace?”

“Certainly not. King Tarquin knows that to sue for peace from a man such as you, the image of Mars, is an insult.”

Victorrex hacked out a clam of sputum and expectorated on the ground between us. “Then why do you come?” he asked.

“King Tarquin knows the battle is over even before it has begun, but he also deems it unworthy of your honor not to put up a fight. Confident in your confidence in the confidence of your soldiers...” It was a mouthful, and I admit I was nervous, but the king could not hide his disdain, which spread across his face, clear as his war paint.

“Please, hurry up,” he said, “my soldiers are impatient to slaughter your troops and rape your women.”

“I fully understand,” I said. “To get straight to the point, King Tarquin would like to challenge three warriors from your army to fight three of ours, three on three, so to speak. Surely, you will not fear such a contest.”

A cry rose up from the Volsci, “Bring it on!” But Victorrex raised his hand and silence returned. “You challenge three of my soldiers?” he asked.

“Unless, of course, you are afraid, in which case, we can go ahead with the full-scale

battle.”

“Victorrex Gloriosus fears nothing,” the dupe said.

“King Tarquin knows this, but if you are, shall I say, uncomfortable with our request, we can go ahead...” It went on like this a half-dozen times before we finally negotiated the terms: three of our men, the Horatii, would fight to the death against three of their men, the Curiatii. If the Horatii won, the Volsci would return to their homes in the next town over, and if the Curiatii won, the Volsci would in short order raid, pillage, and sack Punicea. It was not exactly a bargain, but I knew a good deal when I heard one. We shook hands, and I strutted back to the city with my white flag blazing above my

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