

The Pirates' Prisoner

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Gaius stood at the boat's stern, back straight and hands gripping the rough wood of the railing. His latest bout of sea-sickness was passing. The gathering wind pulled at his silk tunic and ruffled his dark, receding hair. He smoothed it back down across his forehead and stared intently at the tiny black sails following far behind the boat's wake. Was it his imagination, or had they grown larger in the minute he had been watching?

"What is it Gaius?"

He turned slightly to acknowledge the speaker - a young man of a similar age to him, and equally expensively dressed. A bright and un-notched sword dangled from his calfskin belt, more ornament than safeguard.

Gaius pointed. "What d'you make of that, Evander?"

The newcomer squinted to try and bring the distant smudge into focus.

"A ship?"

"Two, cousin. And they're gaining on us" Gaius replied. He looked down the boat's length, taking in the crates, sacks and jars crowding the deck of the small coastal trader. This boat wasn't built for speed, or comfort for that matter. *What have my family come to, Gaius thought, that we are reduced to bartering for floor space in a leaky, rat-filled bucket like this?*

"Do you see the splashes too?" he asked, nodding back towards the black sails.

"I don't think I can, no..." Evander admitted.

"Oars. Lots of oars. *Their* holds are full of rowers, not figs."

Evander shaded his eyes with his hand and tried to glimpse what Gaius saw so clearly.

"Perhaps they're ours, a naval patrol out of Miletus?" Gaius didn't seem to hear him.

"Go and fetch the captain of this tub" he ordered and Evander slipped away without a word.

He returned with the weather-beaten Greek who had agreed to take them to Rhodes.

"What is it?" the captain demanded, annoyed by this rich Roman boy who seemed to think of the ship as his own. Passengers were always more trouble than they were worth, he cursed, but the glint of their coin on the dock at Nicomedia had proved too tempting. Gaius answered without bothering to turn around. His words risked being lost in the wind and both men had to move in closer to hear him.

"Can this thing hoist any more sail?"

"Why?" the Greek started, temper already frayed by the six days he'd had Gaius on his boat.

"We'll be in Rhodes tomorrow morning without taking any unnecessary risks in this wind."

Gaius now met the man's eye and switched smoothly from his native Latin to perfect Greek, to make sure he wasn't misunderstood.

"There are two pirates closing in - " He paused for the man's sneer of disbelief to slide from his face as he looked out to sea over Gaius's shoulder. "- and from what I can judge of our relative speeds, we've got about two hours before they overhaul us."

The captain had no reply. Gaius startled him out of his shock by raising his voice. "So, again, Captain: can this thing hoist any more sail?"

Swallowing hard, the man nodded, turned and started barking orders at his small crew.

Moments later, three men were clambering up the mast to see to the sail and a minute after that, the canvas bulged in the breeze and the ship lurched forwards like a dog given another few feet of leash.

As morning moved towards mid-day, it became clear that they would not be able to outrun their pursuers. Even Evander could now clearly make out each strike of their oars.

"Can we head for the mainland?" he asked Gaius, the anxiety in his voice showing that he already knew the answer. The coast of Lydia was somewhere over the horizon to their left.

They had seen nothing but barren, treeless islets since they rounded the southern tip of Samos yesterday. Gaius smiled but shook his head.

"Afraid not, cousin. It's at least twelve hours' sail, and they'll be on us in less than one. No. We need a different strategy." He indicated to their right where a distant brown outcrop of rock was separated from a larger island by a few hundred yards of water. "That pair of islands are our best chance, we may be able to lose them between the two".

"How? I don't understand - " Evander began, but Gaius was already striding down the deck to confer with the Greek.

"How shallow's the draft of this thing, captain?"

"Shallow enough to get up-river. Why?"

"Forgive me, I'm not a sailor" Evander interjected shakily, having caught up. Gaius held his hand palm-down to demonstrate.

"An almost flat bottom. Means she doesn't sit too deep and doesn't get stuck on the riverbed. Makes her slow in choppy seas, and her passengers sick." Evander nodded his understanding. Gaius returned his attention to the Greek. "We can't outrun them, do you agree?" The captain grunted in assent. The two black sails were close enough now that it was possible to make out the figures of men on the deck and crawling up the mast. Gaius pushed on. "We're going to try something different and I will take control of the crew." The boat's owner almost objected to his passenger's high-handed assumption, but then was overwhelmed by the helplessness of his situation. He shrugged.

"Go ahead, looks like I'm going to lose my ship either way".

The boat tacked to the west, heading across the wind towards the twin islands, and lost speed as the sails sagged. Evander, watching their pursuers, reported that they had switched course to follow. The black sails, aided by the muscle power of their many

oarsmen, seemed to surge towards them. Gaius was arguing with the deeply tanned sailor manning the tiller.

"Doesn't sound that complex" he said, hands on hips. The man looked at the Roman skeptically and kept his sinewy arm locked around the boat's steering bar.

"You don't think? It took me the best part of year at sea to get used to it. Knowing how different seas feel on the rudder, when it just needs a nudge to get her back on course, when to jam your shoulder into it and when to let it go slack. Near enough broke my arm the first time". The man's injured professional pride was obvious. Gaius backed off, raising his palms in deference.

"I'll bow to your greater experience. You steer. But you'll need to do exactly what I say, as soon as I say it, is that clear?" The sailor nodded. "Good man. Now keep her pointed straight at that pillar of rock."

Their loss of speed had cost them most of their lead and the pirates were now only a couple of hundred yards off the boat's stern. The beat of the drum keeping the rowers in time could be clearly heard, aggressively leaping across the gap as a grim fore-shadow of what was to follow. The pirates' ships were only a little larger than the trader, but of a very different design. A score of long oars ran down each side, dipping in and out of the water with a deadening rhythm. The ships hardly rolled despite the swell from the crosswind, their deep rounded hulls providing the stability at sea that the trading boat lacked. Their prows tapered into a pointed ram just above water level, for skewering prey like a hunter's spear. The menacing effect was finished off with an unblinking eye, painted above the ram on each side.

A man stood, one foot up on the prow of the leading ship, his dark complexion and darker hair echoing the nature of his business.

"Cilicians" sneered the tillerman.

"You've had trouble with them before?" Gaius asked. The man nodded again. Evander pressed him for a more helpful answer.

"And?"

"And this coast is riddled with 'em" was all he got back.

"What do they want with us? We're only carrying food, nothing of real value."

"There's only one thing they're after and it's not the latest news from Rome" the sailor replied gnomically. Evander looked at Gaius, appealing for an interpretation of this sailor's riddles.

Not for the first time, Gaius wished he'd left his cousin back in Rome. He understood so little of the world! He sighed to himself and tried to explain.

"You know those slaves your family owns?" he began.

"Yes?" Evander replied, unsure what point Gaius was making.

"The ones your father relies on to farm his land and scrub his dishes? The ones that brought you up and carried your mother around the city?"

"Yes."

"...The ones that your father would visit at night..."

"I said yes!" the younger man snapped, losing his cool. The beat of the rowers' drums sounded ever louder from behind them. Gaius smiled, having drawn a rise out of his companion.

"Well, this is where they all come from" he finished, spreading his hands wide to indicate the sea. Evander looked blank, so Gaius continued. "The slave market in Ostia has to get its stock from somewhere, right? We haven't had a nice foreign war in a few years, so most slaves wind up in Rome after being captured somewhere in the East by... well, I suppose you could call them sea-faring entrepreneurs."

"Entrepreneurs? You mean these pirates? Are you crazy?"

“Not at all. It’s good business. Haven’t you wondered why the Republic hasn’t bothered to simply drown these annoying cockroaches?” Evander didn’t reply, he just blinked in disbelief. Gaius carried on his explanation. “Because our supply of slaves depends on them, and there’s a lot of money wrapped up in that.”

Evander was too scared to appreciate the economics lesson he was being given and was maddened by his cousin’s calmness. He pointed to the ships bearing down on them, eyes blazing with fear.

“I don’t care Gaius! I don’t care! What are we going to do?!”

His older cousin pursed his lips thoughtfully and glanced back at the black sails, now only fifty yards off. The brown rock of the first island loomed in front of them. It was to be now or never.

“Ready, sailor?” he asked the tillerman, who repeated his earlier nod. “Steer just to the right of the rock and listen for my command”. The first of the pirate’s arrows thudded into the deck at the men’s feet, hammering home the desperate straits they were in. “Slow us down a little, captain,” he instructed the Greek. “We need them to catch us at just the right time”. The man bustled off to order the sail to be mis-adjusted slightly to the wind, and the boat slowed further.

The last few seconds of the chase terrified Evander beyond any sense of shame. He crouched in the protection of the stern’s wooden side, screwed his eyes shut and prayed to every god whose name he could remember. The thundering of the drums and the creak of the oars were joined by the intimidating whooping and jeering of the men on board the black-sailed ships as they sensed the kill approaching. The vessel with the man at the prow still led and closed in on the trader, each oar strike gaining another couple of feet, the

metal-tipped ram glistening murderously in the salt-spray and sunlight. Gaius kept his head low, wary of the archers' arrows, constantly checking how close they were to being rammed.

The boat glided past the rock column, a stack of granite that had resisted the sea's relentless pounding for thousands of years. The man on the pirate's prow yelled something over his shoulder and the ship lunged towards the trader, bronze ram inching closer to their bow with every oar-stroke.

"Now tillerman, hard about, down wind!" The sailor obeyed, yanking the tiller towards him with all his strength. The sudden change of the rudder's angle jerked the boat left in a sharp turn and they pivoted round the stone column, keel grating on the tapering rock under the water.

"The sail, Captain!" Gaius shouted down the boat. The Greek nodded and his men set the sail square and full. The wind, now directly behind them, filled the canvas and the boat was slung through the straights like a shot from a sling.

The pirate, its own tillerman caught unawares by their sudden twist, careened harmlessly past and away on a tangent, the man on the prow screaming orders back at his crew. Gaius allowed himself a small smile before ducking his head back to check on the second pirate. That ship, a length behind its leader, had time to react and follow the trading boat's course. The same winds propelled it forwards and its rowers meant they would be on them in seconds. Gaius smiled again. He was relying on its captain not having time to think, and on him wanting the chance to steal the prize from the man in the first ship.

He stood up straight and, cupping his hands to his mouth, shouted at them in Greek:

"Call yourselves pirates? You should have stuck to stealing goats from the next hick village, you stupid, ignorant farm boys!" He crouched down again quickly as arrows thumped into the

wood. *They might not have caught every word*, he reasoned, *but they understood my meaning all right*. The second pirate continued straight at them, blood up and keen for the kill. So keen that its captain took no care to skirt the rock column, following tight on the trader's tail. The rowers on the near side shouted in alarm and quickly drew in their oars to prevent them being snapped off. But nothing could be done about the ship's rounded hull, sitting a man's height deeper in the water than the flat-bottomed trader. The wood of the keel struck the underwater slope of the granite column so hard that the ship seemed to bounce upwards, throwing a man from its mast and into the sea. With a terrifying grinding crunch, the pirate's ship came to an abrupt stop, stuck fast on the underwater rock. It teetered momentarily and looked like it might topple and capsize, but then settled at a bizarre angle, like a beetle on its back, helpless and out of its element.

Gaius hauled Evander up from where he was cowering and pointed at the impotent pirate ship. The Greek and his crew were jumping up and down, cheering with raw joy.

"Look cousin, look! I told you I had a plan! It worked even better than I had hoped!" Evander stood nervously and risked a glance towards the vanquished enemy. He wiped his sweating palms on his tunic and gripped Gaius's shoulder in trembling gratitude.

"Thank the gods you kept your head. We might just make it to Rhodes after all!"

And that was when the forgotten ram of the first pirate slammed into the other side of the trader, having swept round in a tight arc with practised precision and borne down on them with the fury of the humiliated. The impact knocked every man off his feet and brought the chase to the end that had been inevitable from the start.

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The setting sun blinded Gaius and turned the men moving in front of him into not much more than black, threatening silhouettes. He leaned back, his rope-bound hands digging into the sand of the beach for any advantage he might find there. Nothing but shells and pebbles. The Mediterranean Sea lapped rhythmically between the three vessels hauled up onto the gently sloping shore. Either side of him sat his fellow prisoners, similarly bound and cowed. It was clear that the lead men from the ships were arguing about something and Gaius had a good idea what. He turned his head left and right to gather as much information as he could about their surroundings. It was an island, he was certain of that. Only a league or two south-west of where they had been captured. The journey had taken two hours, at any rate, after the pirates had finally succeeded in refloating their rock-grounded ship. He was glad it hadn't sunk: they'd be dead if it had, without a doubt. Now the pirate's leader was arguing with his second about exactly the same thing, the man's wounded pride demanding a blood price.

"You! Get up!" The command came in rough Greek, from the dark-skinned pirate leader.

Gaius stood awkwardly, his bound arms little help.

"Captain" he said levelly, acknowledging the man's status.

"Tell my friend Priam here why I shouldn't let him empty your guts onto the sand for what you did to his ship back there" he said, jerking his thumb out to sea. Gaius swallowed a laugh that the under-pirate was named after the mythical King of Troy. It was just as well, as the man's anger was burning bright already. He was a short man with a thick-set chest and a head shaved so that it gleamed.

"And you killed a man of mine too! A bloody good lookout!" Priam raged, forehead to forehead. The stench of months without washing almost caused Gaius to gag.

"I am truly sorry for that... er, Priam. We only want to make it safely to Rhodes, where I am to continue my education in rhetoric".

This was a misjudgment and the swift headbutt that followed knocked Gaius onto his back so that his eyes swam with lights and his ears sang.

"Bloody students!" the man swore. "I told you this lot was worthless, Darius!" He waved his finger in his boss's face and paced angrily in front of the prisoners. "At least let me get some fun out of this over-privileged brat before I kill him" he demanded. Darius was defeated.

"Go on then, if you have to" he sighed. Smiling, Priam took a step towards the still prone Gaius, hand on the hilt of a wicked-looking curved knife. But another voice intervened before he could follow through with his evil intent.

"No!" It was Evander, on his feet and having found his courage somewhere between the battle and the beach. He wavered with fear but persisted.

"Don't be foolish, friends - don't you know who this is?"

Priam first looked at Darius in confusion and then turned his attention and his knife towards Evander.

"Don't care. He owes me blood". He moved on Gaius again. Evander's nerve held, though his voice was shrill with urgency.

"It's expensive blood, that's all I'm saying." It was Darius's turn to intervene now, placing a restraining hand on his man's chest.

"How expensive, boy?" the pirate asked. Evander gulped down a breath, looking between the two faces, switching from murder to avarice.

"His family is one of Rome's greatest. This is Gaius Caesar" he said as grandly as he could manage. It was clear that this meant nothing to the Cilicians. "Of the Julii!" Evander added incredulously. *Had these people been living under a rock for the past five centuries?* Darius recognised the disbelief in Evander's expression.

"It might surprise you boy, but all we know about Rome is that it steals and taxes, then steals and taxes some more... But if he's worth something, that's good news." He thought for a

minute, looking at the damaged ships behind him. "If you can get us twenty talents of silver for him, I'll let him live".

Evander's heart sank. That was a fortune of silver, enough to buy a small navy. There was no way he'd be able to raise twenty talents, even if he could get to Miletus or some other nearby city. But he had no choice.

"Fine. Twenty talents. That should be... no problem."

Gaius rose weakly to his feet again, swaying with the effort.

"No, Evander, I won't let you do it" he said.

"Gaius, seriously! They'll - " Evander protested, but Gaius spoke over him, his anger rising.

"I said no!" Everyone paused, unsure what the next move was.

"You want to barter for your life, is that it, student?" Priam mocked. Gaius looked at him, feeling total disdain but his face showing nothing.

"I do. Twenty talents of silver is a joke!" The two pirates looked at each other, unsure. Darius took the initiative.

"It's twenty or your head. You choose." Gaius just laughed in response.

"Twenty talents for my life? That's an insult to my family's name. *Twenty* talents!" He scoffed, shaking his head, astonished at the ridiculousness of the suggestion. Darius prodded Gaius with his slender forefinger.

"Just what are you saying, Roman?" he asked, brows furrowed. Gaius looked back at him and drew himself up to his full height.

"He shall fetch you *fifty* talents of silver in exchange for my safety, and not one fewer. I refuse to be ransomed for twenty. You shall simply have to kill me. That's my final word". He sat back down and crossed his arms, the matter decided.

The pirates stared open mouthed, feeling that they'd just lost an argument but not sure what about.

"Now untie me. We'll have to be friends if I'm to wait here while Evander collects the silver"
Gaius ordered. Darius obeyed without hesitation.

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It took almost the whole of the next day to patch the trading boat's side well enough to make the journey to the mainland. The ram had splintered half-way across the boat's width, leaving a hole big and square enough for a man to fit through. Luckily yesterday's sea had been calm and the hole above the waterline, otherwise they would have quickly sunk. Sawing and hammering was followed with tar-boiling and spreading. Meanwhile, the crew were forced to unload the boat's cargo of food and pottery onto the beach while the eighty men of the pirate ships looked on and threw the occasional insult, shove or chilling threat as a man passed.

"I'm keen to get going, Gaius. The sooner we set out, the sooner I can return" Evander said, noting that the July sun was already on its way to meet the horizon.

"So's the Greek" his cousin replied, nodding at the captain who had spent the day in an unconvincing pretence of concern for Gaius's safety. In reality, he couldn't believe his luck, a lost cargo a tiny price to pay for his freedom and his ship. The man was practically dancing his way down the beach. The pair of Romans were sat in the shade of a tree at the edge of the beach, sheltering from the heat.

"Any ideas about where I can get my hands on fifty talents of silver?" Evander half-joked. Gaius was unconcerned.

"Just get to Miletus and tell the Governor what's happened. If he's difficult in any way, remind him how good a friend I am of King Nicomedes. And remember the plan. We don't need the silver for long. Even if you have to pay for a loan, it won't cost us more than two or three, so don't be afraid to spend a little." Evander nodded nervously. He didn't like Gaius's

plan one bit. He was about to go over it again, in the hope of talking him into some safer alternative, but Gaius shushed him to silence - Darius was walking up the beach towards them.

"Looks like you're almost ready to leave" he said, indicating to where the Greek was inspecting the hardening tar on the boat's side. "How long to fetch the silver and get back here?" The question was directed at Evander but Gaius answered for him.

"Two days there, a day at most to gather the money, two days back. Let's say a week at the outside, to allow for poor weather." The pirate nodded to himself but said nothing in return. He stood above the two reclining Romans, unsure what to say next. Gaius continued the conversation after a few seconds' pause. "I was just telling Evander here that when he returns, he should make sure he brings a hold full of wine. Your men have enough to eat now to last a month, but very little to quench their thirst." Darius grunted in thanks and turned to Evander.

"None of that Gaulish stuff though. We like ours strong."

Evander quickly agreed. "Of course Darius. There's bound to be stock from Hispania, perhaps even Germania - "

"Nothing from Germania!" the pirate replied aggressively. "It's like drinking piss-water."

"Hispania it is" Evander said, holding up his hands, glad they could agree on something.

Darius stood in awkward silence, uncomfortable with the shift in the balance of power. He was used to being able to treat his prisoners as exactly that - prisoners. This felt very different.

"Is there something else, Captain?" Gaius asked politely. The Cilician looked back over his shoulder.

"Priam says I shouldn't trust you. Says you'll trick us if we let this one here go."

"He's a wise man" Gaius said. "But I don't see what we could do to trick you."

"Bring back soldiers, take our hostage and our lives."

"Priam is judging us by what he would do. I've given you my word of honour that you will be paid in full." Darius's face did not look convinced, so Gaius continued. "When Evander comes back with the money, we'll sail one way, you'll sail another... Look, Darius, if it makes you happier, we promise just the one ship - and just enough soldiers to make sure you don't rob us without following through on your half of the deal."

"One ship?" the man asked skeptically.

"One ship, that's all." Gaius's voice was calm. The pirate captain finally nodded, reassured. He spoke aggressively to Evander again, to make his position clear.

"If we see more than one sail, that's it, your friend dies. Got it?"

"I understand" Evander replied. "One ship is all".

Satisfied, Darius walked back to his men who were picking through the cargo crates and examining their new haul.

"Don't let him see more than one sail, Evander" Gaius commanded. His cousin did not need reminding.

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The July dawn streamed over the beach and woke Gaius from an untroubled sleep. He shook the sand from his tunic and went looking for Darius. He found the pirate captain sleeping at the edge of the huge celebratory fire his crew had built from emptied crates. The cargo of fruit was strewn across the beach, evidence of the chaotic cavorting of the crew late into the night. Gaius cleared his throat. Receiving no response he coughed again, more loudly. The captain cracked one eye and squinted blearily up at the young Roman.

"What is it?"

"I thought I had better ask your permission before I went anywhere. As your prisoner." Gaius explained.

"Knock yourself out, rich boy" Darius grumbled and shut his eye, the conversation over.

Gaius thanked him politely and started to walk back up the beach. "Just stay away from the cliff" Darius added, eyes still shut.

He headed into the trees that fringed the shore, following a path of sorts leading uphill. A few minutes later he arrived at the freshwater spring which explained the pirates' choice of harbour. A further hundred yards brought him clear of the trees, the high point of what he could now see was indeed an island. Gaius stood with his hands on his hips, heart beating hard from the climb, enjoying the cooling wind sweeping the hilltop. He understood why Darius didn't care where he wandered - the island was tiny, perhaps a mile across and half as long. It would prove a better prison guard than any man could. To the north, the direction Evander had sailed the evening before, he could see nothing but the shimmering sea. Southwards his eyes could just discern a distant landmass - Kos, possibly, he thought. The pirates' ships lay to the west, stranded on the beach like whales surrounded by black flies and to the east the land rose, lost in greenery and sky. That must be the cliff I've been forbidden, Gaius thought, before resolutely deciding to see it for himself.

By the time he returned to the beach camp there were signs of activity among Darius's men. The fire had been re-lit and Priam was angrily picking through the discarded figs, apples and olives for something resembling a decent breakfast. Gaius ignored the sneered threats that followed him as he moved through the camp carrying a loose bundle close to his chest. He found what he needed buried in a mound of metal tools and household goods - an iron pan with a long wooden handle. The pirates didn't give him a second glance until, drawn by the smell of frying, men started to gather around the Roman to see what he was doing. Four

eggs sizzled in Gaius's pan as he held it over the campfire's flames and hummed happily to himself in concentration.

"Where'd you get those?" Darius asked, drawn by the scent and wondering what the knot of his men were so interested in. Gaius looked up briefly before returning his attention to the eggs, which he manipulated with a wooden spoon to ensure they weren't burning or sticking. "The cliff you warned me about - it's home to a colony of seabirds. There are eggs there for any man who'll risk a bit of a climb."

Darius scratched his beard and stared at the spitting pan.

"I told you to stay away from the cliff" he said finally, for want of anything else to respond with.

"And I heard you say it, Darius. But I'm the curious sort. If someone tells me I can't do something, it only makes me want to do it more." Gaius lifted the edge of an egg with the spoon and leaned closer to make a judgement. "Done, I think! Fetch a couple of plates will you?"

"What?" Darius was unsure how to react. Was his prisoner ordering him around? His men looked at him to see what he would do. Gaius interrupted the pause with another curt instruction.

"Plates, Darius. Get a couple. You're not going to eat yours out of the pan now are you?"

The implication that one of the plates was for him was enough to tip the balance and Darius found himself returning thirty seconds later with two heavy iron plates and half a loaf of bread he'd been keeping in his pack.

The two men sat on the sand and ate their breakfast together without need for conversation, for which Darius was grateful. A few of the men had headed up the hill towards the cliff to see if they could find their own eggs to fry. Priam sat a few yards away with his back to them, gnawing aggressively on an unripened fig. When they were done Gaius stood up, thanked

his dining partner for his company and strode off down the beach to see what was to be seen.

The first few days passed without incident. Gaius kept largely to himself and the pirates watched with concealed curiosity as he wandered into camp each meal time carrying things he'd foraged and hunted to supplement the fruit and vegetable cargo from the trading ship. Spear-caught fish. Two gulls with snapped necks. A collection of small mammals no-one could identify, from a trap Gaius had constructed near the spring. Darius always got to share this silent meal and began to feel the need to extend the hand of friendship as his half of the bargain. At the midday meal on the fourth day, having contributed nothing yet eaten well, he tried to start a conversation.

"What were you going to Rhodes to learn about? You mentioned when we... met that..." He trailed off, thinking of Priam's headbutt and the circumstances of their meeting. But Gaius did not seem perturbed by the awkwardness of Darius's question. He put down his plate and answered enthusiastically.

"Rhetoric. The art of eloquent discourse." Darius said nothing so Gaius rephrased. "How to make an argument with words that will convince your audience and befuddle your opponent. When I return to Rome I intend to prosecute my enemies through the courts. I may have to defend my friends too." Darius nodded dumbly. He had no concept of court cases, lawyers or the tricks of language. He'd never been to a settlement larger than the fishing villages he had grown up in and now occasionally raided for supplies. Gaius noted his companion's uncomfortableness.

"Think of it as how to get people to do things they didn't know they wanted to do."

"Sounds useful" said the pirate. "I usually break someone else's fingers, that gets the others to do things pretty quickly".

Gaius laughed appreciatively. "It's certainly one way! But coercion creates its own crop of troubles over time, you've got to have other ways of persuading people as well."

He nodded towards the empty amphorae littering the camp. "For instance, why do you make your men fetch water from the spring all the way up there, when an afternoon's work would divert its path to run to the edge of the camp?"

Darius snorted at the idea. "Because they're lazy swine who think no further ahead than their next meal. Most of them need the whip just to pull an oar. I couldn't make them do the work it would need."

Gaius smiled and considered the men, sat around in various small groups. Gambling, arguing, loafing.

"Men are the same everywhere, Darius. They want - no they *crave* structure and a leader to follow... they just need help understanding that this is truly what they desire."

"I tell them what to do, don't worry," Darius complained, "and from time to time I find a reason to kick the arse of the one of them, but sooner or later, they're back to this -" He waved dismissively at the nearest scuffling pair of pirates.

"And if I told you I could make them repair Priam's ship and divert the spring by the end of the day, and that they'd enjoy doing it, how would you react?"

"I'd say that the sun had baked your brains".

"May I address them?" Gaius asked.

Darius chuckled. "Be my guest, Gaius of the Julii."

Gaius bowed fractionally. "Thank you Darius, I'll do my best."

He stood up and walked purposefully into the middle of the camp, mounted an upturned crate, spread his arms wide and announced: "Men - your attention please!" Those nearest looked round in surprise but the majority took no notice. Gaius doubled his volume. "Men - I

need your help to settle a bet I've made with your chief here" he boomed, swivelling one arm dramatically towards Darius, who stood watching his efforts with obvious amusement. At the mention of a bet, a few men gathered to hear what the crazy Roman had to say, for want of any better entertainment. Once ten or so were assembled, Gaius continued.

"I was explaining to Darius here, who is clearly the wisest among you as you consent to be led by him," - this drew a laugh from the men - "that the crew of his ship, the Scylla isn't it?" Darius folded his deeply-tanned arms and nodded in confirmation. "That the Scylla's crew were a hard working, skillful team of warriors, capable of great acts of courage." A few of the men from the Scylla swore loudly in agreement. Gaius looked around them sagely, as more pirates started to drift in to hear what was going on.

"And yet -" Gaius paused, holding up one finger and pivoting the tone to uncertainty. "And yet," he slowly repeated, underlining the doubt, "it seems to me at least - and I know well how poor a judge of these matters I am - that it is in fact the crew of the Charybdis that is the greater in every respect." At this revelation, he turned and pointed at Priam's ship for emphasis. The men from the Charybdis clapped their slandered companions from the Scylla on their backs and roared mocking jeers. Gaius held out his hands for quiet. The crowd of men was now forty strong, those at the back asking others what was happening. Gaius noted the shaven head of Priam stood at the edge, scowling menacingly at the sound of his name.

"From what I saw from the deck of my boat, it was Priam's men who were the swiftest rowers. It was their well-aimed arrows that I needed to duck. It was the Charybdis which came within a foot of catching us before luck took a hand and gifted the victory to the crew of the Scylla." The men were in uproar now, the one half laughing and jostling, the other

cursing and gesticulating angrily. Gaius took a moment to judge their mood before speaking again. "Darius's argument is not without merit though," he continued, "he makes a valiant case defending your honour, men of the Scylla. And Darius is a man of honour, so I do not doubt his sincerity. He believes - he knows - he is *certain* that his crew is the superior." The arguing around him continued and Gaius had to wait for over a minute before he could carry on. Almost every man from both ships was now listening.

"So, what I am I to think? My eyes have told me of the Charybdis's quality, and the honourable Darius has told me of the Scylla's." He looked around the faces of the men surrounding his crate, arms spread in an appeal for ideas.

"A fight?" one man offered, uncertainly. Gaius seized on the suggestion.

"A contest would help decide the matter - but fighting would only be a test of strength, and we need also to decide on the swiftest, the cleverest, the best crew in every respect..."

"Games!" another voice shouted. "We could race and wrestle, settle things like Greeks!"

Others around the man hollered their support and Gaius harnessed it.

"That's it! I'm sure that could settle the question. Each crew shall have five champions to run, five to wrestle, five to shoot and then, as a final test of your teamwork, a task for the whole crew - with whichever is ahead on points choosing between..." He looked to Priam and recruited him into his action. "Priam, the Charybdis's hull took a battering from that rock and needs repairing, I think? How long would the work take?" The man shrugged his muscled shoulders sullenly, only speaking up when some of his men made to answer for him.

"A day, at least."

"Good, thank you noble Priam. And honourable Darius, a task of equal difficulty for the other crew will be needed. Do you know of one?"

The pirate captain, whose appreciation of Gaius had risen ten-fold in the last five minutes smiled in understanding. "I can think of only one, Roman - re-routing the spring from up there on the hill so that it reaches our camp."

Gaius stroked his stubbled cheek thoughtfully with the fingers of one hand before replying. "Yes, I think that would be a good counterpart. The crew which finishes it's labour of Heracles first will double their points tally - and Darius and I will have settled our bet!" The men were already enthusiastically arguing about who were their strongest wrestlers and which archers to pick.

"As the Charybdis is a man short due to no fault of Priam's, I will join this crew for the games - if we all agree that this is fair?" said Gaius. There was a generally positive murmur from the crowd. "And I hope you will accept me into your crew, Priam?" The under-pirate only had to glance around him for a split second to know how he must answer.

"An honour, Roman" he replied in a strangled voice.

* * * * *

And so the inaugural Pirate Games were held that afternoon on the beach, in the full glare of the Summer sun. Men ran, fought and shot together, and by the time night fell, the Charybdis was sea-worthy again and clear spring water flowed straight down to the camp, its freshly-laid channel lined with overlapping flat stones. More had been accomplished in one afternoon than either Darius or Priam, grudgingly, had thought possible, the crews working towards a shared aim with a single mind and untiring effort. The two ships' captains had even managed to contrive a tied finish, with both crews' honour intact. Gaius had pitched in with the rest of them, organising, encouraging and helping Priam's crew to engineer the spring's channel without the water seeping away into to the earth on its way down the hill.

Darius was still shocked at what he'd witnessed as Gaius cooked their supper. "I've always liked this bay as a base, but now we've got water right here too... and all through the power of your words, nothing more!"

Gaius pushed the sizzling fish around his pan, and gave a modest answer. "It's about finding the right lever for your audience, that's all. You must ask yourself: what makes them afraid? What makes them angry? For your men, it was clear to me from the start that the two crews were rivals. That was their lever, and I just leant on it to move them."

Darius laughed. "You make it sound easy. There are men there who'd murder their best friend over a game of dice - you had them following orders like little boys."

"Yes, because I'd given them a good enough reason to want to follow orders."

"You're not what I'd assumed you to be, Gaius" said Darius, his dark features hard to read.

"Your high-handedness is all an act, isn't it?"

Gaius did not respond.

"We might have been friends in other circumstances." Darius glumly concluded.

"Friends?! I shall have you all hung - bunch of good-for-nothing cutthroats the lot of you!" the Roman replied with fake outrage.

Darius laughed loudly at his act. "And I'd believe you too, if I didn't know how dry your sense of humour is!" He punched Gaius's arm with the friendly aggression of brothers.

"I cannot deny it," Gaius sighed with a twinkling eye, "I *do* have a dry sense of humour", before adding in a mock-serious tone "We can't have pirates swanning around the Republic's ocean, not even ones we like."

A few yards to their left, a short-tempered fight flared between two men and turned nastier than any of the previous squabbles Gaius had observed. It was the end of a tiring, sunburned day and the men, both from Priam's crew, rolled in the sand scrabbling for an advantage. The upper hand was traded back and forth until one managed to slash the

other's arm with a short-bladed knife, slicing through tendons down to the bone. Before things could go any further, Priam's thick arms pulled the men apart. The wound spurted blood ceaselessly on to the sand as their captain made up his mind what to do. He cursed the knifeman and pushed him away with a string of foul words and examined the wounded arm briefly. Conclusion reached, in one deft movement he lowered the man to the ground, drew his own curved knife and slipped it in a smooth circuit around his throat. A further torrent of blood, a thrash of the legs, and the man lay still. Priam wiped his blade and then his hands on the man's tunic, stood up and sauntered back through camp.

"Can't afford to keep any useless mouths round 'ere" he said casually as he passed Gaius.

* * * * *

Morning brought news, the lookout galloping down from the island's highpoint to breathlessly report. "A sail, captain!"

"Just one?"

"One's all I can see. There's no other ship this side of the horizon."

Darius considered this for a few seconds. "Get back up there and keep your eyes open" and then, in afterthought shouted after him, "and take another man too so you can cover all directions!"

"Evander will hold my word, have no fear Darius" Gaius reassured the pirate leader. "He will bring only one ship to the exchange. We Romans always do what we say we will. It's a point of honour for us".

An hour passed before Evander's ship slid around the headland and into the bay. This one was no trader, but a military galley crewed by soldiers. It lay fifty yards off shore for several tense minutes before a small boat was lowered and began to make its way to the beach.

Evander sat in the prow looking as nervous and out of place in his fine clothes as when he

had left. When the boat was close enough, he jumped into the surf and ran to embrace his cousin.

"Thank Zeus and all the gods that you are unharmed Gaius!" he said loudly.

In the clinch, Gaius whispered his response: "All goes to plan, cousin?"

"Everything will go well now" Evander said at a normal volume, his meaning clear to Gaius.

He turned to Darius and Priam who were eyeing the armed legionaries pulling the boat out of the water. The soldiers lined up behind Evander, swords drawn.

"Thank you for keeping your half of the bargain" he started. Darius grunted in assent and Evander continued. "We have kept ours too - these men are here only for our protection."

Darius wasn't interested in discussing the Roman's honesty. "Where's the money - in the boat?" He nodded at the small vessel the soldiers guarded.

"No, but now that I know Gaius is safe, I will have it brought to you."

"And the wine?" Priam interjected aggressively, pushing his squat body into Evander's space. "You promised barrels from Spain, that was the deal, rich boy."

Evander started to react to the pirate's insolence, but Gaius raised a calming finger. "Priam, please, I would hope that you now know us too well to think we would renege on what we have promised. The wine and the money are yours, in return for protecting me from harm."

Priam backed down and growled "Let's see 'em then."

Gaius nodded at Evander, who turned to face the ship anchored in the bay and raised both of his arms above his head. Within seconds another small boat was lowered from the warship's side. A string of large wooden barrels toppled from the galley and bobbed in its wake, roped together and tied to its stern. Six soldiers rowed it ashore.

It took four legionaries to lift the chest from the beached boat and, stumbling under its burden, dump it with a thud in the sand at Darius's feet. The pirate captain ran a hand

through his long black hair and let out a low whistle at the thought of what it contained. Priam quickly knelt and prised open the chest's iron-bound lid and stared open-mouthed at what he saw within.

"I doubt they can count to fifty," Gaius said in Latin, "but it's all there, I hope?"

Evander nodded, distracted by the gathering excitement of the pirate crews, still waiting further up the beach as ordered but creeping ever nearer. Twelve soldiers now protected their escape, enough to prevent them being rushed, for a short while.

"Who did you have to borrow from? Not that old crook Marcellus, I hope?"

"The Governor" Evander replied distantly, eyes elsewhere. "It cost you two talents for the week, ten if it takes a fortnight".

"An expected expense. And the wine - strong Spanish stuff, as requested?"

"Uh-huh... We should leave now, Gaius."

"No rush, cousin" he said calmly. "I want to say goodbye first." Gaius turned to the ragged crowd of armed Cilicians edging slowly closer to them, their mood uncertain. "Men -" he began in the simple Greek he'd adopted when speaking with them. "I have enjoyed your company this past week and have learned, in yesterday's Pirate Games, that you are all capable of achieving great things. For that reason, if any man among you wants to leave with me, I will see to it that you are given honest work in the armies of the Republic."

Priam spat and drew his knife, furious. "You filthy, lying Roman - leave my men alone. No one wants to join your gang of robbers."

But Darius interrupted him. "No, Priam, it's fine." He raised his voice to address the crews. "I won't stand in anyone's way - you will lose your share of this of course -" he kicked the chest which chinked loudly "- and that will mean more for the rest of us, but leave with the Roman if you don't want to stay here."

An uneasy silence settled over the beach, with only the sound of the lapping waves to disturb it. Nobody moved. Priam broke the deadlock by grabbing the rope tying the wine barrels together and calling on those nearby to help him haul it in. Soon one had been smashed open and men were clamouring for space to fill their cups.

“Now we can go” said Gaius as the first fist was thrown between the men surging around the barrels.

The Romans began to carefully back towards the two row boats. “Good luck, Gaius of the Julii” Darius called, raising an arm. The Roman tilted his chin in acknowledgement and climbed into one of the boats. As the soldiers pushed them afloat, two men at the fringes of the revelling crowd on the beach made a late dash for the surf, taking up Gaius’s offer. They grabbed at the boats’ sides, seizing the chance of escaping from their hard and desperate lives. A few of their former colleagues threw insults and threats after them, but then quickly returned to celebrating their unbelievable good fortune.

“Wise decision” said Gaius as he helped pull one of the former pirates into his boat.

* * * * *

Gaius was glad of the dawn breeze after the last few days of sweltering on the sand. He stood at the ship’s prow, his keen eyes scanning the brightening vista for what he expected to find. The sun was only just rising behind his galley, slowly revealing the shape of five more warships fanning out in echelon. The only noise was the muffled creak of the four rows of oars as the legionaries powered the ship forwards. He hoped that the day and a half it had taken to rendezvous with the navy hadn’t sunk his hopes of recovering the silver. The fact that, if the pirates were gone, he would be permanently ruined did not seem to be causing Gaius the appropriate amount of anxiety, Evander thought.

"See anything?" the young Roman asked. Gaius responded with a smile.

"A bright future" he said enigmatically.

Minutes later, Evander was able to make sense of his cousin's cryptic reply. The bay opened up before them, sunlight visibly creeping across the sandy shore on which the pirates' ships were still fatally beached. The remains of the huge campfire smoked gently in the light breeze and men lay motionless, curled around emptied barrels and dreaming about new-found riches. Gaius took a moment to drink in the peaceful scene as the ship's commander approached and coughed politely.

"How would you like to proceed, sir?"

"No change to the plan, Decius" Gaius said coldly. "Disarm, subdue, separate enough sale-able ones to cover my expenses... And crucify the rest - their captains first."

The officer moved away to signal the squadron. Evander studied his cousin's face for a second and made a silent vow to never give him reason for even a flicker of doubt about his unquestioning, unswerving and undying loyalty.

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Gaius Julius Caesar would go on to become of the most successful, and disruptive, men in the late Roman Republic. He would conquer Gaul, invade Britain, be appointed Dictator for life and proclaimed a god before coming to a fitting end. The story of his encounter with the pirates in his youth is recorded by the ancient historian [Plutarch](#). If you are interested in finding out more about Gaius, a great place to start is Caesar's own telling of the [Conquest of Gaul](#). Older readers will enjoy Adrian Goldsworthy's ['Caesar'](#).

This story is extracted from the forthcoming collection 'Six Nasty, Brutish and Short Stories from Ancient Rome' by Ed McWatt. Find out more at www.edmcwatt.com