

## Gary Corby – The Pasion Contract

I love Piraeus, with its crowded streets, its shops, its inns and its quays. I love its people, Hellene and barbarian. Merchants from all over the world come here to trade; one street of Piraeus has more excitement than all of Athens put together. The food from the inns is more likely to remind Egyptian and Phoenician sailors of home than any Hellene, and a man walking down the street is as likely to hear barbarian speech as civilized Greek. Most Hellenes don't understand them – they pretend no interest in the barbarians – but my years as a child, running amongst the men at the docks, caused me to learn their strange tongues.

This is why, when I am in Piraeus on business, I usually dress in one of the barbarian styles. As far as most Athenians are concerned, all barbarians look alike, and few foreigners will betray a thief at Piraeus, as long as the victim is an Athenian.

As soon as I saw them, I stepped into the street shrine next to me. Piraeus is dotted all about with shrines to the barbarian Gods. This one was dedicated to Isis, and I turned my back to the street, swept off my head-dress, bowed my head, and prattled loudly in the tongue of the Egyptians. It didn't matter what I said, for I was sure the men following me would not understand a word. This was a good thing, since I had no idea what might constitute a prayer to Isis.

The men came along, stopped behind me, looked around.

"Well?" one demanded angrily.

"I'm sure he came this way," the other said, scratching beneath his tunic.

"How do you know? You said you didn't get a good look at him."

"Yes, but I kept watch on his turban. He turned this way."

In the barbarian tongue I chanted, "Oh Isis, protect me from these fools. One looks like he has the mange, and the other, unless I miss my guess, certainly has lice. What use had they of their money, if they were so

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lax in holding it? The coins are better off with me, oh Isis. Save me, and a quarter shall be yours.”

The mangy one said, “We were two blocks behind him, and it was crowded. It might have been the next block along you saw him turn. Curse these streets that all look alike!”

“But I’m sure of it. Let’s continue this way!” And so saying they passed on.

I stayed for a few minutes, uttering personal comments about the breeding habits of my pursuers. My next move would be to find a quiet corner and quickly change back to Athenian dress.

Once I was sure they would not return, I turned to go.

“A moment, brother.” A short, dark man I had not noticed before addressed me in Egyptian.

“Yes?”

“Your pardon, but I was passing by, and I could not help but notice your highly original prayers. You were rather loud about them, and it’s unusual for a man of Phoenician dress who speaks the Egyptian tongue with the slight but detectable accent of a Greek to be here, or anywhere else for that matter.”

“The faith of Isis is a mystery cult, isn’t it?” I said warily. I recalled my knife was hidden deep within my robes.

“There is no need to reach for your knife,” my friend said.

I smiled. “Perhaps I have lice, too.”

“Then bid them be still for a moment. I notice you do not leave the quarter of coins you promised.”

“I’ll place them on a safer altar. I don’t trust this one, there are too many thieves about. If you want, I’ll swear by any God you care to name I’ll donate the money later.”

“A facility with oaths is not the most reassuring characteristic in a fellow believer and business partner,” he replied.

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“Business partner?” I asked.

“It so happens I shall be returning to Memphis with the high tide tomorrow. As a devotee of the Lady,” he grinned, “you will be aware there is a major, and very secure, temple there. For a small fee I shall transport your offering to this temple, and keep it safe from thieves.” He grinned again. I was beginning to take a distinct dislike to this fellow.

“What fee?”

“Half.” He said shortly.

“For keeping silent? That’s robbery!”

“Pot calling the kettle black. I’m sure your friends are not too far away, and in any case, it is obvious you are Athenian. Choose your path.”

I sighed. Taking out the two pouches, I carefully hefted both, so he could see they weighed the same. I handed one over. He nodded.

Once more I turned to go.

“Wait!” he called.

“What now?”

“You forgot the quarter for the Lady Isis.”

“You can’t be serious!” I exclaimed. But his eyes took on a dangerous light.

“I am a devout man!”

So I took half the coins from my pouch, and dropped them on the offering table.

“For that you can tell me one thing.”

“Ask it.”

“Is there somewhere around here I can quietly change?”

He nodded. “Around the back there is an alcove, where the priests store their things.”

“Sounds like a good place to get mugged.”

He shrugged. “You asked for quiet. But you are my friend and

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business partner. I shall stand guard for you at this entrance. There will be no fee for the service.”

I decided I could trust him that far. He had enough of my money that it would not be worth his while to do otherwise. I slipped behind the curtain, and became an Athenian once more. Then I set off down the busy streets.

Piraeus is a port town, serving Athens as dockyard, naval headquarters, trading centre and warehouse district. At this hour of day, the start of evening, the port town is in a lull. The day’s merchants are shutting up shop, if they have one, or wrapping their wares in a cloth and carrying them back to wherever they come from; the inns are not yet full of drunken sailors; the ladies of the night – the pornoi – have not yet started to walk with their special sandals. It is forbidden for the women to speak with a man in public. So the pornoi wear sandals with FOLLOW ME carved backwards into the soles. Their customers get the message.

“Ho there, Ariston!” A huge man with red hair, a short beard and bulging muscles approached me. It was Bathocles, wearing a clean white tunic and his usual joyous grin.

“Ho there, Bathocles. What are you doing, all dressed up?” I asked him.

“Got a date with a girl.”

“You’ve dressed up to impress a *pornê*?” I asked, incredulous.

“She’s not! Nistra’s just a good girl down on her luck. She says her father died last year, and her mother couldn’t afford to keep her and her three brothers, so she left home to look after herself. She works for the fisher folk. She mends and washes their clothes by day, so she can only see me in the evening.”

Bathocles is strong, very strong. He’s what the Gods had in mind when they gave men muscles. A good man in a fight, is Bathocles, and he’ll never let down a friend. But no one will ever accuse him of intelligence. I

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sighed.

“I suppose she needs some money to tide her over until one of these fishermen pays a debt he owes her.”

“Ten drachmae. How did you know that?” he asked, amazed. Then suspiciously, “You haven’t been seeing her too, have you?”

“No, but I know a couple of women like her. Forget it. I couldn’t afford your Nistra anyway, I’ve just lost a purseful of coins.”

“Oh?”

I told him about my adventure.

“You need a drink,” he decided. “Come along.”

“I thought you had a date?”

“Not till later. Besides, a woman stays pretty for twenty years. Wine goes sour in a couple. Better see to the wine first then.”

That’s the other nice thing about Bathocles. He’s got his priorities right.

The best inns in Piraeus are between the Corn Exchange and the commercial docks, close enough for the sailors to stagger back to their ships. We headed there, stopping along the way to buy some salty fish cakes from an old woman who hadn’t packed her stall yet.

It’s always my custom, whenever I can, to sit with my back to the wall and my face to the entrance. In some of the shadier inns this can be difficult, as in recent years a large number of men have had cause to acquire the same habit. Sometimes I have walked through the door of an inn to find the entire population squashed into the same corner, all facing me like a panel of jurors, talking to each other out of the corners of their mouths.

The patrons of the Drowning Persian were either more honest or more confident. In any case, I had settled myself quite comfortably into a suitable nook, with Bathocles across from me.

We were into our second jar when Bathocles said, “Let’s see your takings.”

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I was curious myself; I hadn't had a chance to count the few coins left to me. So, glancing about to make sure no one was paying me attention, I upended the thin leather pouch onto the bench between us.

Out rolled enough coins to mollify me, and a scrap of papyrus. It lay face up with words on it, a discoloured, frayed scrap, torn from some larger piece. The printing was so fresh it was smudged. Bathocles picked it up and tried to read it.

"You're holding it upside down," I told him.

He blushed and handed it to me. "What's it say?"

I read this:

*For the death of Pasion. More instructions to follow.*

I dropped the scrap and looked at Bathocles in astonishment. "The men I stole the pouch from were paid to kill this Pasion."

"Sounds like." He emptied his jar. "Want another?"

"We have to do something about this," I insisted.

Bathocles crinkled his forehead, then asked, "Why?"

"Why?" Surely it was obvious! "Because...because..." My tongue stumbled. "I don't know, Bathocles! But I'm a thief, not a murderer. Somehow this seems wrong."

"Ariston, men get killed around here every day. What do you care about this one?"

"We know about this one before it's going to happen!"

"So?"

Inspiration struck. "There might be money in it for us," I suggested.

"How?"

"If we warn this Pasion someone wants to kill him, he'll probably reward us. Don't tell me you don't need the money. How are you going to keep your

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Nistra?”

My logic was irresistible. “Okay,” he said. “So what do we do now?”

Find Pasion, but how to do that in a major city? There must be thousands of men in Piraeus, and if this fellow was in Athens, tens of thousands.

A man walked in, short and dark. “Uh oh,” I said.

“Trouble?” Bathocles asked, in much the same way a small child says, “Honeycomb?”

“Not yet. But my ‘business partner’ of the afternoon just walked in.”

“And here I am with my good tunic,” Bathocles said dolefully. Then he brightened. “Oh well, Nistra can mend it!”

The Egyptian looked round, chose a nearby bench, and sat with his back to the wall and facing the entrance. Poor man, how was he to know his problems were going to be coming from *behind*?

“I have an idea. Come along.”

“Hey!” Bathocles called out, but quickly stood and came with me as I sauntered over to the Egyptian.

I sat down beside him. He recognized me at once and jumped up, startled. Bathocles stood behind, clapped his hands on the man’s shoulders, like an old friend, and forced him back onto the bench.

“You should be more careful,” I admonished. “There are thieves about!”

He offered a wan smile. His hand crept towards his tunic.

“Oh, there’s no need to reach for your dagger,” I told him. “We’re all friends here.” Bathocles squeezed hard to show how friendly he was. The Egyptian winced but managed to say, “How happy I am to see you again!”

“Oh?”

“Yes. I realised, after we parted, that I had inadvertently overcharged you for my services. I was looking for you, to return your money.”

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I smiled. “You may keep the coins. I can always steal more. I’m looking for something else.”

He squirmed under the pressure Bathocles was exerting. Bathocles has the strength to snap a man’s collar bone, or his neck.

“Was there anything else in your pouch? Any papyrus?”

“Yes!”

Aha! I’d guessed right. When it had said, more instructions to follow, they had kept them in the other pouch.

“I want the papyrus.” I glanced up at Bathocles and nodded. He released his pressure, and the Egyptian sagged and rubbed his neck and shoulders.

“What’s your name?” I asked him.

“They call me Odji. Odji the Grifter.”

I laughed. “In your language that means ‘villainous’!”

“It’s a name,” he grumbled.

I held out my hand. He grudgingly reached beneath his tunic, his hand fumbled, and he withdrew another scrap of papyrus, this one larger but obviously torn from the same sheet. He put it in my hand.

*In the afternoon of the noumenia of Poseidon. Afterwards, the boat will be waiting to take you straight away.*

I thought for a moment, counting back the days. The first day of the month of Poseidon.... that was tomorrow! I put the scrap in my pouch.

“Odji, you saw those men chasing me this afternoon?”

“Aye.”

“Good, then you can help us tomorrow. I might need you to spot them.”

“Why should I do that, Greek?”

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Bathocles gently rested his hands back on Odji's shoulders.

He said quickly, "It would be a pleasure to help my friend!"

I grinned. "We know when the killers will strike. We know how they plan to get away."

Bathocles was worried. "But how do we find this Pasion?"

"I have a plan. Trust me. That reward is as good as ours."

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I sat in the cool shade beside the inn, trying to recover. My head was pounding, pounding, pounding with the curse of bad red wine. Bathocles and I had stayed up late celebrating our future reward. He had gone on to his Nistra. I had slept under the table, that being about the distance I was fit to travel by then.

Today was the day Pasion was due to die.

It would be easy to catch the killers after the fact. All we had to do was wait at the docks and nab them as soon as we saw them. But no, we mustn't do that! No one was going to pay us for allowing a murder to happen. If we were to get anything out of this, then we had to stop the killers, and we had to do it so it was obvious to Pasion that we had saved him. If only we knew who the damned man was. I may have been a trifle overconfident in my assurances to Bathocles. We didn't know a thing about him.

But wait...Pasion must be an important man, or no one would pay so much to have him gone. And he must be seen regularly at Piraeus, or no one could be confident of catching him here. There must be others who knew him, who could tell me where to find him. So, who knew all the important men? No one who'd be willing to talk to a dockside down-and-out, that's for sure, I thought glumly. I hadn't always been this way. I wondered what my father was doing. I hadn't thought of him for years, the bastard. He'd beaten

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me as a child until I'd run away from home, survived on what I could take from around the docks. I might have been a citizen by now, not just one of the freeborn scum hoping to make enough to survive. Only someone as low as me would tell me a thing.

Only someone as low as me... I grinned. How obvious!

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"Sure, I know Pasion," said the messenger boy, off-hand. I'd been waylaying every boy I found, asking the same question over and over. Slave boys criss-cross Athens and Piraeus every day, taking messages from their masters to other important men. There's nothing lower than a slave boy – except, of course, a slave girl – but the ones that did errands got to meet everyone who was anyone.

Thank the Gods, I'd done it! I dropped drachmae into his hand. "Take me to this citizen."

The boy chuckled. "Oh, Pasion isn't a citizen. He's a slave."

I'd gone horribly wrong. Who in their right mind would pay to kill a slave? It had to be the wrong Pasion. Nevertheless I allowed the boy to lead me. I had nothing else to try.

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He sat behind an oddly-shaped table, in the thick of the action in the agora of Piraeus. Beside him, at his feet, lay bags of coins. Large bags. He was flanked by two bodyguards. Pasion was a banker.

Bemused, I watched Pasion run knotted string along the sides of irregular shapes on his table, which itself had sides of different lengths. His practised fingers moved swiftly, fingertips marking lengths of string at the

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knots. It took me a moment to realise he was calculating money. He came to some conclusion, nodded, and counted coins to the man standing before him. The client departed, and Pasion made marks in a scroll. I asked another man standing nearby, who told me I'd come to the Antisthenes and Arcestratus Savings and Loan Company.

"But you won't see either of them," the man told me. "They're both old. Pasion's been their slave for years. Smart bugger. He runs the whole show these days. Got an account with them myself."

A line of men stood before his desk, waiting to do business with him. These were impatient businessmen. Some tried to jump the queue, they were abused and thrown out. Others with suspicious, darting eyes held bags close to their chests.

With so much wary attention about, it was hard to see how anyone could get close enough to hurt the banker, not without being caught immediately. At any rate, he had those bodyguards, and they looked alert enough.

One of the guards scratched his left armpit, beneath his leather jerkin. The movement seemed familiar, and I froze in horror. I studied the bodyguards closely. They were the ones I'd stolen from, the killers! Dear Gods, Pasion was going to be killed by his own men. How simple could that be!

Had they spotted me? No. Both of them had looked past me without recognition. They'd seen nothing of me yesterday except my back, and that dressed as a barbarian.

I stepped into line. There was no other way to get to Pasion.

"I need to talk to you, right now, privately" I said to Pasion when it was my turn. It had been a nervous wait; I didn't want to see him murdered before I got to the head of the queue. He stood no chance in a fight; he was middle-aged, hair thinning, running to fat already. I suppose sitting at a desk all day

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is bad for you.

“Who are you? Are you a client?” He looked me up and down, no doubt noticing my soiled, wrinkled chiton, the grime on my face from sleeping in the dirt, and the bruise where the innkeeper had delicately kicked me awake in the morning.

Somewhere close by, someone was cooking squid in strong garlic. I could smell it. My stomach lurched again. I’d been fighting it all morning.

I leant forward and whispered. “Pasion, for your own good, I have to speak to you now, and it has to be away from your bodyguards. They’re plotting against you!”

Pasion flinched, I knew he could smell the stale wine on my breath. He looked up at me coldly. He didn’t have to tell me I was a contemptible fool; I already knew what he was thinking.

“Trust me,” I pleaded.

“Trust is not a major element of banking. And I’m certainly not going to trust a dirty beggar like you over the men paid to keep me safe. For all I know you could be a thief. I have sufficient bodyguards to protect me, and more importantly, the client money. Good day to you.” He looked around me. “Next!” The man behind jostled me to the side.

I departed, angry with myself for handling the interview so badly. Pasion was going to die at any moment, and it was all his fault. He should have trusted me.

I glanced at the guards, one of them looked back at me suspiciously. I’d whispered low enough that my words hadn’t been audible. But he’d certainly heard Pasion’s reply. I was sure he knew something was up. He had to be nervous. I guessed Pasion had only moments to live.

I walked quickly out of sight, feeling the eyes of the guard on me. Bathocles was round the corner. I’d sent him earlier in the morning to find Odji, who’d failed to arrive. Now he easily held Odji with a single fist around

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his forearm.

Odji spluttered, “My friend—”

“Shut up and listen,” I interrupted. “Here’s what we have to do...”

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Odji walked to the table, looking more confident than I knew he felt. He dropped two leather bags in front of Pasion, who looked up startled. “What are these?”

Odji waved at our men. “These two lost them yesterday. I’m returning them. Why don’t you look at what’s inside?”

I have to give them credit for quick thinking. Mangy whipped out his dagger and whirled towards Pasion.

I shouted, “Look out!”

Pasion turned in time to see Mangy’s dagger descend upon him. Pasion grabbed at it, the point hovering over his heart.

I dived on Mangy, and we both fell, knocking Pasion, who in turn knocked over the table and bags. Coins flew everywhere.

Bathocles, who’d been standing a few paces behind the one with lice, stepped forward, took him in a wrestler’s hold, and *squeezed*.

Odji dived onto the ground, sweeping up coins in his arms and stuffing them into his tunic. He wasn’t the only one, men dived on the money from all directions. When the field became too crowded, Odji used the hem of his tunic to carry his takings and ran, jangling into the distance.

I didn’t have time to watch him. Mangy had his dagger a hair’s breadth from my throat. I was holding it back by main force, both my hands on his wrist, but he was stronger, any moment that blade was going to slip into my throat. I hoped it wouldn’t hurt.

Mangy suddenly spasmed, his eyes rolled up, his muscles went loose,

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and he collapsed. Bathocles stood behind him, shaking his hand.

“That hurt,” he complained.

Pasion, sprawled along the dirt, took in this scene with total astonishment. But his mind was quick, and he said, “Well, whoever you are, it seems you were right. I owe you my life, and I think, a reward.”

The two of them lived long enough to confirm what I’d guessed. An unhappy client who’d lost against the bank in court had paid them to exact revenge. They went to the execution ground.

I still have to spend a lot of time around Piraeus these days. My reward, you see, wasn’t money. It was a job. Bathocles too. He stands at Pasion’s back. I’m an investigator. Marine insurance, mostly. Fraud. It seems dishonest men are forever trying to cheat honest bankers. Imagine that! So Pasion pays me to spot the crooks. You can’t be too careful with all those thieves about.