

A Touch of Poison

by Jane Lindskold

The author of over forty short stories and several novels—including *Changer* and *Legends Walking-Jane* Lindskold lives in Albuquerque, New Mexico, with her husband, archaeologist Jim Moore. "A Touch of Poison" is set in the same world as her novel, *Through Wolf's Eyes*. She is currently at work on another novel.

WATCHING the plump, dark-haired young widow working up to her elbows in bread dough, a dusting of flour on her cute, slightly upturned nose, no one would have guessed that Adalia Baker had sworn to kill a man—a man who trusted her.

Standing in front of the solid wooden table, Adalia kneaded the dough with concentrated fury, remembering...

They'd slipped in through her bedroom window. She'd left it open, hoping for some relief from the humid summer night that plagued the city of First Harbor. Three figures—slim, wiry men dressed in rusty black clothing the color not of night but of shadows.

Adalia dozed lightly since her infant son, Jori, had only just started sleeping through the night. Light sleeper though Adalia was, she heard nothing until a voice whispered in her ear:

"Make no sound, or you will die."

At the same moment, - a hand gloved in finely tanned leather pressed firmly against her lips. When Adalia made no attempt to scream, the hand lifted, hovering a few inches away lest she suddenly change her mind.

"You are Adalia, under-chef in the kitchens of this estate?"

"Chief baker," she corrected hotly, indignant despite a dreamlike terror that numbed her limbs. That promotion had been hard won.

Her interrogator chuckled.

"Chief baker," he conceded. "Breads and rolls and pies and fine pastries, am I right?"

Adalia nodded. The man kneeling at her bedside must have had eyes like a cat's, for he acknowledged her reply.

"Very good," he murmured. "We have a job for you."

"Me?" she squeaked.

"That's right. We want you to kill a man. The reigning Supreme Affluent."

"My master?"

"That's right." The reply came as a hiss. "It should be so very easy. Your needs shall be met."

Another of the shadowy figures, the one who stood closest to the window, spoke for the first time.

"In fact, we would insist."

Adalia wondered why she wasn't more terrified. By now she was certain that she was awake and that her visitors were as real as the lumpy mattress on which she lay. She caught the tang of male sweat from the man nearest to her.

Those black outfits, complete with gloves, caps, and soft-soled boots, must be smotheringly hot.

"And what if I'm not interested?" she asked, surprised at her own pertness.

"You'll be interested," the first interrogator replied. "I promise."

That was when Adalia had started feeling afraid.

"Your master, the Supreme Affluent," the interrogator continued, "has made enemies, enemies who want him dead."

"He has been a good master to me," Adalia protested. "He gave shelter to me and to my son after my husband died in last autumn's fever. I have prospered in his service."

"That is precisely why we are interested in you. You are a trusted servant. He regularly eats the work of your hands without question. All you need to do is include another ingredient to your baking—a touch of poison."

Adalia bristled. She sat up in bed to glower down at the shadowy figure.

"I am not an assassin!"

"Of course not, lady," came the hissing laugh. "We are the assassins. You are merely the tool we turn to our use."

All their converse to this point had been in whispers, but Adalia's voice now rose to normal speaking tones.

"Find yourself another tool!"

At the sound of this mother's voice, her infant son began to fuss.

The third of the shadowy figures stooped and lifted baby Jori from his carved wood cradle. Something in the assassin's lithe grace and competent handling of the infant made Adalia start. Surely this one was *a* woman!

When the assassin spoke, Adalia's guess was confirmed.

"Tool," the assassin said in a throaty whisper, "we have you as firmly in hand as I now hold your son. He will be well as long as you do our bidding. If not, I fear my grip could..."

She bobbled the drowsy child.

"Slip."

"No!"

Adalia's scream strangled in her throat when the man kneeling beside her lightly touched a finger to her lips.

"Your son will be well cared for and returned to you as soon as your task is completed," he said. "We

will send you a message indicating a place where you can see him—from a distance—in order that you will be assured of his safety."

He dropped a small leather-wrapped packet on her counterpane.

"The powder in this packet will kill quickly. It has a fairly strong taste and an odor rather like bitter almonds. Use your imagination in administering it, for you will certainly have only one chance."

Adalia struggled to get past the black-clad figure and to her son, but the slim arm the man held out to intercept her was as strong as a steel bar. The woman holding Jori went out through the window first, followed a moment later by the second assassin. Then her interrogator moved to follow them.

"Please, don't!" Adalia wailed softly after his retreating form.

"And I should take care not to draw attention to yourself, Widow Baker," was all the man said in parting, "or you will be in no condition to reclaim your son."

In Waterland, of which the city of First Harbor is the capital, no one man or woman reigns. There is no king or queen—not by any of the aliases such rulers are known. What reigns in Waterland is wealth.

Every second spring, Assessors are appointed from among the most deserving of those unfortunates serving their sentences in debtor's prison. The theory behind this is that these men and women cannot possibly qualify as among the Opulent and by the time they have completed their six-month term as Assessors, they should have accumulated enough in bribes to clear their debts and set themselves up in honest business.

Over the past ten years, five sets of Assessors had ranked Adalia's master, Greene Reid, among the ten wealthiest citizens of Waterland. Twice in that time he had been named the wealthiest of all—the Supreme Affluent. Popular gossip said that Reid had missed a third appointment only because one of his ships had been mysteriously lost at sea.

Among the Supreme Affluent's privileges is the right to assign market booths—an equally assured way to make fast friends and bitter enemies.

Clearly those enemies had—upon hearing the rumors that this year Reid would again be declared the wealthiest of all—decided to act in a way far more permanent than the piracy of vessels to make certain that Greene Reid would never be Supreme Affluent again.

Wiping tears from her eyes, Adalia struggled for composure. The little packet of powder rested untouched on top of her bedclothes, lightly dimpling the coarsely woven material with its weight. Its presence, even more than her son's absence, testified that this was no nightmare.

The young widow rose from the bed, dropping the covers over the incriminating packet as if by doing so she could erase the incident. Automatically, Adalia splashed water on her face and combed her hair before getting dressed.

Fortunately, no one thought it at all odd if a baker was up and about before the dawn. Fresh bread for the breakfast tables—especially in summer when the dough could not be trusted to rest well overnight—made such early rising nearly law.

Adalia was belting her apron over her light cotton smock when the true horror of her situation occurred to her.

Even if she did arrange to kill Supreme Affluent Reid—and already she had worked out a dozen ways to

introduce the poison into his food—what guarantee did she have that the assassins would return her child? What guarantee did she have that they would not—a dozen recipes for deception sprang to mind unbidden—let someone know that she had introduced the poison into her master's food?

She stood trembling, staring out the window to where false dawn was tinting the skies precisely the color of the assassins' clothing. Then with a decisive toss of her head, she made her decision. It was not a matter of right or wrong; it was a question of survival for herself and her boy.

Leaving her room *in* the servant's wing of Reid's sprawling mansion, Adalia trotted down the stairs. She wondered just how well-supplied the larder was with almonds.

The almond tart was a magnificent thing, folded over into a fat half-moon of butter-brushed pastry, beaded with a narrow ribbon of sugar glaze rather than sloppily coated as had been the custom of the previous baker.

Supreme Affluent Reid wondered in passing, even as he turned his attention to the ham and eggs with which he began his meal, why Widow Baker had apparently used almonds to flavor the creamy cheese filling rather than a seasonal fruit as had been her custom to this point. He then dismissed the thought as unworthy of such an artist. She must have had her reasons.

He returned his attention to the account books he had brought to the table with him as was his custom at breakfast. There, in complete privacy but for the servant who stood motionless in an alcove to one side, Reid reviewed accounts and from them laid his plan of battle.

Greene Reid was considered young to hold the power he did—barely into his fiftieth year. Nor had he arisen from great fortune as many of his rivals had done.

Reid's mother had managed a handful of particularly fleet raiding vessels and had done well among the isles to the south. His father had owned marshy, wet land in the southeast of Waterland and many slaves. Reid Senior had combined these resources to grow the tart, round marshberries that were prized by sailors for staving off scurvy and by healers as a key ingredient in many of their preparations.

When Reid's father and mother had united fortunes, those marshlands had also become a haven for Waterland privateers—any ship, any owner, though the price was high—and a base for profitable smuggling into the southern kingdom of Hawk Haven.

Young Reid had inherited his mother's portion when he was thirty and she was lost at sea. Father's portion still remained under the old man's administration, but the older man had sold out to his son—through a middleman—fifteen years before.

Their economic rivals had taken enormous pleasure in Greene Reid's "losing" his inheritance to another sharp operator. How father and son had laughed when two years later Greene had publicly purchased the holdings from the middleman, having carefully allowed for enough time to pass that no one could classify these profitable lands at the lower rate reserved for inheritance.

Greene Reid had risen to the ranks of the Opulent with that purchase and had never left them—not even when pirates had taken one of his best vessels, not even when foot maggots killed most of his swamp slaves, not even when he himself had been laid low with a hacking cough and had been unable to give his complete attention to managing his properties for the turning of four full moons.

Careful attention to detail, relentless labor, and a canny sense for what would turn a profit were only part of the reason for his success. The other reason—and one that many of his competitors in this slave-holding nation could not understand—was building intricate ties of loyalty and alliance between

himself and his vassals—free and slave alike.

Slaves were, in many ways, easier to manage, for they could always be offered credit toward their eventual freedom—or that of their children—as a reward for faithful service. Unlike many slave owners, Greene Reid never reneged on such agreements, never created reasons to remove credit from a slave's account or arbitrarily punished a slave financially.

An erring slave was offered a choice between physical and financial penalty—and an astonishing number chose the lash rather than losing a chance to buy freedom.

Free servants were more difficult to reward, though financial bonuses worked with them as well. Even better, however, were those little kindnesses that a rich master could grant so easily—and with so little cost to himself.

Such had been the case with Adalia Baker. When her husband—one of his sailing masters—had contracted a late autumn fever, Reid's obligation to Adalia ended with the payment of her husband's death bonus. However, he had taken the trouble to offer her work on his estate, had arranged for her infant son to be cared for in the nursery with the other children who lived in his household, and so had earned her best efforts.

Adalia had accepted her promotion to chief baker with decorous gratitude that didn't conceal a slightly malicious sense of triumph. She had been too well-mannered to say directly that the chief cook had been conniving against her—wanting the position for a grandniece—but Reid had listened to his steward's report of the situation.

Cook had been warned and Adalia promoted. Reid considered the sumptuous baked delicacies that graced his tables reward enough for this coup of household management, but he was to learn that morning that his devotion to justice had also earned him his life.

The Supreme Affluent of Waterland had broken off a corner of pastry dripping with deliciously almond-scented filling and was raising it to his lips when a trembling female voice ordered:

"Stop."

Reid did so automatically. Looking up from his account books, he saw Adalia Baker standing in the corner where a lesser servant usually was stationed lest the master desire more tea or juice or perhaps someone summoned into his presence.

That Adalia Baker, dressed in servant's livery, stood there was as surprising as the word she had spoken. That now she opened a closet to one side of her and led from it a very old, blind hound dog was hardly more astonishing.

That Reid had not noticed the exchange of one servant for another was not unusual. He had hardly glanced at the alcove except to note that it was occupied as it should be. After that his meal and his account books had held his complete attention.

For long enough that the cheese filling began to drip from the chunk of pastry he held in his hand, Reid stared at this intruder. Absently, he started to mop up the filling and again Adalia Baker interrupted him with a monosyllabic command.

"Don't."

Her voice had lost its quavering note, and she took a step forward as if to stop him bodily if she must.

"Why," he asked, skipping non-essentials for the moment, "should I not?"

"It is poisoned," she replied bluntly. "I know, for I put the poison into the filling myself."

Too amazed now to do anything but shake his head and set down the offending piece of pastry, Supreme Affluent Reid listened as Adalia Baker went on.

"I don't ask you to believe me," she said. "That's why I brought this old dog. Yesterday, the kennel keeper asked the still-room attendant for something with which to put the beast out of its misery. I got the dog out this morning before the kennel keeper was awake."

"And the dogs did not bark?"

"They know me," she explained. "I've been experimenting with making biscuits for them seasoned heavily with blood and substituting bone meal for some of the flour. The kennel keeper thinks that such will give the bitches extra milk when their puppies come."

Reid, who never really thought about his dogs except when arranging to sell the excellent pups each summer,, nodded.

"So the dogs didn't bark," he said. "And this one will eat poisoned pastry from your hand?"

"Or yours," Widow Baker replied. "He's so blind now he snaps at whatever comes near his nose but so toothless he couldn't harm a flea."

"Then I shall administer the pastry," Reid said, glad to have action to cover his astonishment.

He took the pastry carefully in his fingers and held it out to the dog. The offering was swallowed eagerly and in a few moments the dog shuddered, began to have difficulty breathing, and collapsed.

The dog died swiftly enough that Greene Reid realized that in a similar circumstance assistance—even from the servant within the room—would have arrived too late.

He covered his horrified reaction to this revelation of how close he had come to death by becoming quite severe.

"Tell me, Widow Baker, what purpose did you have in first trying to poison me and then warning me against your own handiwork?"

"Well, late last night..."

In a short speech, obviously rehearsed in advance, Widow Baker told Reid about her visitors of the night before, about how her son had been kidnapped.

"And then I realized that they had no real need to return Jori to me and every reason to reveal my part in your death."

Her pretty, rounded face was ill-suited for the expression that shaped it, but Reid had seen its like on the trading floors and in the halls where the Opulent met to decide the business of the nation.

"I told them then to find another tool! It is my great-est desire that before the sun sets tonight they will regret what they have tried to do to me. And," she added hastily, "to you, too, Master Reid."

Privately shaken as he was to learn how his home had been infiltrated, nonetheless, Reid admired her pluck.

"You have given me my life," he said. Then, because it is always good business to settle a debt as quickly as possible, he asked, "What do you wish in return?"

"I want my son given back to me alive," she replied fiercely, "and I want a chance to show those who thought me a tool taken easily to hand that I am a knife who will turn in their hands and cut them to the heart."

Greene Reid was not a parent himself—business having delayed his pursuing a matrimonial contract— but he supposed that the fire that lit the pretty young baker's blue eyes was maternal in origin.

"And how shall I aid you?" he asked, impressed despite himself.

"Feign your death," Adalia said promptly, "but not from this morning's pastry. It would be impossible for me to hide my part convincingly and the assassins must be convinced that I have done exactly as bidden. As it is, I must hope that the servant I bribed to let me take her place does not talk."

"Then you wish to 'poison' me at another meal?" he prompted, intrigued despite himself.

"Yes, this evening. I understand from Cook that you will not be at home for the midday meal."

"True, though I admit that I will be nervous about eating anything anywhere after what you have told me."

"I believe you are in no greater danger than usual."

Adalia replied thoughtfully, "less so if the assassins believe that I am planning to do my part. The powder they gave me had a distinct odor of bitter almonds and would not be easy to administer randomly."

"Thus the almond pastry!" Reid exclaimed. "I wondered why you had chosen something so out of season, but not enough to pause rather than enjoy your fine cooking."

Adalia smiled at his compliment.

"If you wish to take care over what you eat during the day—just in case your enemies have other agents," she stated, "stay away from heavily spiced foods, especially stews or chowders. Claim a desire for freshly caught fish, lightly grilled."

"With new potatoes simply boiled," he added, getting into the spirit, "and perhaps a peach for dessert. Yes, I can do that. And you?"

"I shall await the promised opportunity to see my son and assure myself of his safety. Perhaps I can gain some idea of who has bought the assassins' services."

She frowned thoughtfully. "If you can spare me someone you trust, it would be wisest if I were shadowed to that meeting—for I assume there will be a meeting since they told me I should be shown Jori and assured of his safety."

"That could be arranged," Reid replied.

"A shadow could see who comes to speak with me and follow that person or persons to their lair, thus granting us some clue to their identity."

"You have thought of everything."

"I didn't sleep much last night," she replied, and Reid could see the dark circles under her blue eyes, "and I have had much time to think."

"Many women—or men—would have panicked and fallen to weeping."

"Jori," came the emotionless reply that was somehow deeply charged with feeling, "is all I have to love now that my husband is dead. I cannot save him by losing my head."

"I see."

The Supreme Affluent nodded, already shifting through the ranks of his enemies, trying to decide who might be behind this murderous attempt.

"I shall do my part," he said, "and so discharge my debt to you, Widow Baker."

She smiled a touch wanly and turned as if to go.

"Then all that is left is that I prepare something appropriate for tonight's dessert."

Supreme Affluent Reid considered those details that would concern him, tapping his finger against his lower lip.

"If I am to carry off my performance," he said, stopping her in mid-retreat, "I will need to take a few people into my confidence—my physician, I think—and my steward, perhaps someone to shadow you. Are you certain you can manage this 'poisoning' for tonight? I had planned on guests and they must not eat what I do."

"Individual pies," Adalia Baker replied promptly, "each with sculpted crusts tailored to compliment the intended diner so that no one is served the wrong pie."

"You seem to have thought of everything," Greene Reid said once more.

"I tried," Adalia admitted. "At first the presence of your guests caused me some concern, then I realized that they would actually prove useful, for there would be outsiders in the house and thus many more suspects. Moreover, with the pies neatly initialed, it should seem quite possible that someone else could add something to the one meant for you."

"Very nice," Reid replied. "Go about your duties, Widow Baker."

She took the broken pastry from in front of him and messed it under other fragments of his meal.

"The dog?" she asked, looking at the old hound's stiffening corpse.

"The steward will deal with that," Reid said. He gave her a kindly smile. "Now go to your duties and trust that I shall attend to mine."

"I shall," she said, and then so softly that Reid suspected he was not meant to hear. "I must."

After leaving the Supreme Affluent's presence, Adalia went to the bake house and tossed the poisoned pastry into the fire, leaving the vents open wide lest the burning poison make the air noxious.

While the pastry burned, Adalia allowed herself several jam rolls and a stout cup of tea to steady her nerves. Although she had kept her composure before the master, she had not been at all confident he would believe her rather outlandish tale.

For the first time since she had seen Jori vanish over the windowsill, she permitted herself to hope, and so in a happier frame of mind she occupied herself with preparations for later in the day.

Cook's dislike for her meant that Adalia had fewer assistants than she should—a thing she usually resented. Today, she was grateful.

Shortly before the noon hour, the half-wit who mended the fires brought Adalia a piece of folded paper. Accepting it and rewarding the messenger with a bit of hot bread, Adalia unfolded it, thanking her guardian stars that her parents had insisted she learn her letters.

"Two finger widths below noon," the note read, "be in front of the bandstand near Pier Seven. Listen for someone whistling 'My Love is a Sailor Boy.' Draw no attention to yourself. Come alone."

The missive was unsigned. Though Adalia turned the paper over and over, hoping for some indication of the sender's identity, she found nothing. In the end, she refolded the note and tucked it into her bodice. Then she continued her preparations for this evening's dinner party.

No one thought it at all odd when she closed the bake house at the hottest part of the day. Already the loaves and rolls, fragrant as some yeasty perfume, were arrayed in baskets beneath fine linen covers.

Cook's resentment of Adalia was limited to wanting the chief baker's post for her great-niece, not to questioning the young woman's timing—not, at least, since Adalia's promotion earlier in the year. Thus there was no one who would question when Adalia hung her apron on a hook, washed the flour from her face and hands, and strolled out into town.

Adalia tried to walk as if she was deep within some private musing, not as if she was—as was the truth—fighting a nearly overwhelming urge to run down to the harbor as quickly as possible.

She found it easier to act absentminded than she had imagined, for usually she *was* deep in some private musing. Rising before dawn left her tired just when everyone else was feeling chipper. Little Jori's demands—loving as they were—taxed her further. Finally, still growing accustomed to the idea that this time Big Jori would not return from the sea, she had no heart for the flirtations byplay that most men seemed to feel that the presence of a pretty young woman demanded.

I wonder if, Adalia thought, amused as much as angry, that's why the assassins settled on me among all those who cook and bake in Master Reid's house. Not only could they steal away my son as hostage against my betraying them, but they may have thought me little brighter than Half-wit Stoker.

Variations on that idea kept Adalia occupied until her carefully measured tread brought her to the bandstand near Pier Seven. Glancing up at the sun, she saw that it measured right at two fingers below noon. Even as she was endeavoring to think of some way to look as if she had business there, she heard a tin whistle merrily piping the opening notes of "My Love is a Sailor Boy."

When she looked out over the water in the direction of the music, Adalia immediately caught sight of Jori. He was in the stern of a small rowboat, sitting in the lap of a slender young woman who was holding him so he could splash at the spray with his chubby hands. Both of them were laughing.

The boat was being strongly rowed by a broad-shouldered man about the right age to be the woman's husband. A covered basket sat in the bow of the row-boat and bounced slightly when the rower took them across the wake of a passing sailboat.

There was another spate of piping song and Adalia realized that it was coming from that very sailboat just as the boat vanished behind an even larger vessel.

She was about to run down Pier Seven and see if she could do something—hail the rowboat, get the

name on the sailboat, scream to Jori, she wasn't sure what—when a terribly familiar voice, speaking hardly louder than it had the night before, spoke from behind her.

"Remember, you are not to attract attention to yourself. It would be so easy for little Jori to tumble from that woman's arms. You may not think such a kind-looking woman could do that, but she's being well-paid for her services."

Adalia shuddered, revolted and infuriated but held by those words as she could not have been by chains. She didn't know what power the assassins had over that seemingly contented pair, but she didn't doubt for a moment that their power was real enough to make a woman drop a helpless infant into the waves.

"Good girl," the whisper continued like a lewd caress. "Now when the word is cried from throat to throat that our Supreme Affluent has gone to his final accounting, then you must come here to this very spot. You'll find little Jori safe and sound and strong."

Adalia wanted to scream, "What kind of an idiot do you think I am?" but she swallowed hard and the sound that came from her lips was closer to a sob.

Let them think me an idiot, she prayed, hoping that the stars were listening and guiding her fate as her mother had promised her they would.

"Do you understand?" came the whisper.

Adalia nodded and murmured, "Yes, sir."

She waited, but all she heard was a tapping sound as of hard-soled shoes hurrying away. When she turned to look behind her, her interrogator had melted into the crowd.

"Lovely day to look at the boats, isn't it, ma'am?" said a man passing by. Whatever expression he saw on Adalia's face didn't encourage further familiarities, for he fell silent and turned away.

Adalia searched the waters for the rowboat, hoping to intercept it when it came to shore, but lost sight of it among the larger vessels in the crowded harbor. By the time she had given up, she had regained her composure if not her spirits. Disheartened and near despair, she returned to Reid's estate and her baking.

More than the heat of the ovens colored her cheeks rosy as she cut pastry and shaped it *into* intricate curls and patterns. A terrible thought had come to tempt her.

Maybe the assassins will give Jori back if I do as they say. Maybe they'll play fair. After all, who is to gain from my arrest? I might even say something incriminating without meaning to. I could describe them or...

Maybe I should play along with their original plan, poison the master's pie. He's promised to eat it. I'll never have a better chance—never have another chance—and if our game tonight goes awry, then Jori's gone to the sharks and me as well.

Master's promised to eat the pie...

Those words became a refrain as she rolled and cut and shaped, but when the time came, the filling that went into the master's pie was as untainted as all the others: cherry and toasted almond, smelling like a dream of summer.

Each of the dozen pies Adalia crafted was decorated with garlands of pastry leaves and garnished with translucent almond slices arranged cunningly into little flowers. As a final touch, each pie had a guest's

name written in pastry cutouts along the sides, a prodigy of both time and skill that would brag without words that Supreme Affluent Reid had wealth to spare for such fripperies.

By dinner time the pies were baked and set ready on trays covered with loosely woven cloth against the flies.

Adalia carried them in from the bake house herself, placing them where afterward—if there was an afterward—it could be conjectured that any of many hands could have altered the filling. In reality, though, she kept a sharp eye on the pies, even while she was slicing bread or arranging rolls or helping with some other culinary matter. It would not do to have her care turned against her.

She was seeing a spy in every corner, a sneak in every shadow by the time dinner had ended and dessert was called for. Footmen in splendid livery came to fetch the trays with the little pies and Adalia watched them go, silently beseeching the distant stars for luck.

In a few moments there should be a hue and cry. If there was not, then Master Reid had reneged on their bargain—or perhaps he had merely forgotten.

Adalia stood, poised like a bird-dog awaiting the summoning whistle. Her heart was pounding, her hands wringing the edge of her apron. She had forgotten to look unconcerned and didn't even notice the strange looks a few of the scullions gave her as they labored by, weighted down with dirty crockery for the wash tubs.

Then there came a shrill scream, probably from one of the female guests. This was followed by an inarticulate bellow, then a thud as if one of the heavy wooden chairs in the banquet hall had toppled backwards.

"Poisoned!" came a slightly theatrical shout from a voice that Adalia recognized as that of the master's physician.

The estate steward rushed in, his expression worried.

"The master has fallen ill," he cried to the kitchen staff in general. "You and you and you .."

His last wild gesticulation indicated Adalia.

"I need you to carry messages."

Two energetic pot-boys fled with verbal messages for the apothecary and the physician's assistant. Beneath the cover of the anxious chatter that had arisen when the steward made his initial announcement, the steward muttered to Adalia,

"And you go to your appointed rendezvous. The master fears that if you do not leave now, someone will think to delay you."

Then more loudly he said, "And you to Opulence Vellum. Tell her to come immediately."

Adalia fled. The idea she might be detained had not worried her before, but now that it had been raised, she fled as swiftly as if an arresting hand was already lowering toward her shoulder.

Once through the side gate used by servants, Adalia fled down the cobbled streets, unmindful of the stares she attracted from those still abroad enjoying the relative coolness of the summer evening.

She was clattering over one of the narrow footbridges that spanned the city's numerous canals when a

man blocked her way. In the light from the setting sun, Adalia recognized him as the fellow who had spoken to her about boat watching near Pier Seven earlier that day.

She attempted to dodge around him, but he forestalled her with a hand upon her sleeve.

"Greene Reid assigned me to aid you," he said quickly. "I was to tell you that I buried the dog who ate the pastry."

Adalia drew up sharply and inspected the man.

He was neither young nor old. The hair he wore drawn back into a tight sailor's braid—as did nearly all the working men in First Harbor—was of an indiscriminate shade between blond and brown. His features were so ordinary as to be familiar, not because she recalled meeting him elsewhere but because he reminded her of so many other men she had known.

"I don't recall seeing you about the estate," she said, but even she could hear the hesitancy in her voice. She could have sat at a long table in the servant's hall with this man a dozen times and forgotten him immediately after.

He laughed, more a explosion of air than an actual chuckle.

"What good would I be if you did?" he said cryptically.

Then his expression turned grave.

"Tell me, Widow Baker, are you as brave as you are clever?"

She blinked at him, surprised.

The man took her arm and started escorting her across the bridge, moving quickly but not so quickly as to attract attention.

"Your son," the man continued, "is not at Pier Seven, nor is he likely to be there. I, however, know where he is. With your help, we can retrieve him."

"For Jori," Adalia answered, "I can be brave. How?"

"Shadows," he said. "As you suggested to the master, you were shadowed when you went to the bandstand. The man who met with you—a nasty fellow I've crossed with before—was followed when he left, so was the rowboat carrying little Jori."

"It didn't come to shore," Adalia protested. "I watched for it."

"No, it didn't. It went back of a trading ship belonging to that same nasty fellow. Out of sight of har-borside traffic, the passengers were taken aboard."

"And Jori is there still?"

"Still," the man agreed. "And we must take him from there before he is slipped over the side as they will surely do when they get word you have done your part. Right now we are ahead of that news, but it will travel swiftly."

"Then," Adalia said, "so should we."

The man grinned at her and, seizing her hand, led her on a wild tour of alleys and byways. If Adalia had

not lived in First Harbor all her life, she would have rapidly lost any sense of where she was. As it was, she was confident enough that they were closing on the harbor that when her guide hopped onto a cargo barge tied in one of the canals, she followed without question.

"We'll take this down to the harbor," said he. The bargemen must have been briefed in advance for they were poling even as he spoke. "It may not be quite as fast as running, but it will attract less notice and give you a chance to change clothes."

Adalia glanced down at the apron-covered cotton-print dress and open-toed sandals she wore about the kitchens and nodded.

"Not the best for a boarding action," she agreed.

"In here, then," her guide said, directing her into a boxy cabin at the center of the barge. "You'll find what you need."

Adalia recognized as her own the stout shoes that were the final element in her new costume and knew with a slight shiver that her mysterious guide had been in her rooms. Between the assassins and this more friendly invasion, those rooms were becoming quite a public place.

The duck trousers and red-and-white-striped sailor's shirt were not hers, though they fit well-enough. There was a ribbon with which to tie back her hair and a woven belt from which hung a stout knife and a small wallet.

Adalia was buckling the shoes when she felt the water beneath the deck change character, become a bit rougher, and knew that they had left the canal for the open harbor. There was a change in motion that told her they had linked to a tow vessel. They would not stand out she knew, for many barges would still be being towed back and forth as merchants took advantage of the long summer evenings to load and unload.

"You make a convincing sailor lass," was the man's greeting when she emerged. He had not needed so many alterations to his attire, but he, too, had replaced the loose workman's smock he had worn ashore with a striped shirt. In addition to knife and wallet, his belt bore a sheathed cutlass as well.

"We transfer," he said, "to another boat soon, a swifter vessel than this. We're to be a party of sea dogs taking advantage of our leave. One of the men here has a brother on board our target, and we're paying a call."

"Fine," Adalia said. "And then?"

"Follow me," he said. "We'll board, and then you'll claim the child while I..."

He didn't finish then, for a man called out from the fore portion of the barge.

"Sailboat's here, Clam!"

Her guide, now aptly identified as "Clam" for he had certainly proved as close-mouthed as one, tapped her on the arm.

"Ready?"

Adalia nodded. Although she was pleased that Clam expected her to be able to handle herself, she almost wished he would offer her more advice. After all, her husband had been a sailor and she herself had been around boats all her life, but she had never been part of a boarding party and had no idea what

they expected of her.

Play along, she coached herself, and find Jori. That's your job. Leave the rest to Clam and his fellows.

With the brother—one Strop—in the lead, they swarmed up the side of the trading vessel, leaving one sailor aboard the sailboat.

The trading vessel was not large when compared to many in the harbor, but it seemed large enough as Adalia found toeholds in the swinging rope ladder.

Only schooling her muscles into reflexes learned when visiting Big Jori aboard carried her along.

After the sailboat's pitching, the deck of the trading vessel seemed as steady as the docks ashore. Adalia cast glances here and there, noting the location of the hatches and the best ways to get to the fore and aft cabins. As of yet she had no idea where Jori was being kept and more than once the mewling cries of the seagulls made her start, for to her eager ears they sounded much like the wails of a child.

"Signal from ashore!" came a call from the crow's nest.

Immediately, one man—Adalia thought he was the same who had manned the rowboat's oars when she had caught her glimpse of Jori—separated himself from the convivial knot of visiting sailors and trotted purposefully for the aft cabin.

Adalia didn't need Clam's slight nudge to mark the cabin out, and when the door shut behind the man, she was already easing herself in that direction. The door opened again and the man emerged, followed by a slender woman dressed in sailor's togs.

Both were looking intently toward where regular flashes of light—probably from a handheld mirror—were coming from Lighthouse Hall, an artificial high point created to guard the harbor.

The cipher was not one with which Adalia was familiar. There were dozens in use, for the plutocrats of Waterland were well aware that knowledge could be transformed into wealth.

However, though the flashes were nothing but winks of light, watching the anxious expression on the woman's face shift to one of grim determination told Adalia more than she wanted to know.

She had edged within reach of the stairs that led to the raised deck around the rear cabin and now in one rush she was up the stairs and into the cabin. Jori, so heavy-lidded that she suspected that he might have been given a tot of liquor in his milk, woke a bit when his mother lifted him, then snuggled against her breast and fell promptly back to sleep.

Out on the deck there were shouts and the sound of metal striking metal. Clam and his men were at work.

Adalia found a fabric sling meant for carrying the baby near to the cradle. Despite a shudder of revulsion at wrapping herself in something belonging to one of the assassins, she used it to secure Jori to her. She was fastening the final knot when the cabin door was flung open. The woman stood blocking the doorway, a cutlass rimmed with a thin bead of scarlet in her hand.

In this pose, graceful and confident, Adalia knew her as she had not before for the woman who had stolen Jori from her room.

"Reid Greene is dead," the assassin announced, "and by your hand, but it seems you did not trust us,

Widow Baker."

Adalia smiled grimly. "Master Reid lives, and *you* were unwise to trust me. As you would turn me into a tool for your hand, so I turned Master Reid into one for mine."

The woman reeled back a step, then recovered.

"You are bluffing."

"Wait and see," Adalia replied calmly.

But the woman did not. Wheeling to flee, she found

Clam standing behind her, the point of his cutlass pressing lightly against her belly.

"Tansy Tea," Clam said, "daughter of Opulence Tea. I hold you for questioning on the matter of an assassination attempt against my master, Supreme Affluent Reid Greene. Your associates here on shipboard are subdued. Doubtless you can buy your life by finking on those who are ashore, or would you prefer a valiant death?"

Adalia felt cruelly disappointed when Tansy Tea dropped her blade and put her hands behind her back in a posture of surrender.

For a brief moment, the baker considered shoving the assassin onto the tip of Clam's blade. Then she shook her head regretfully.

Poison when Jori's life was at stake she might have managed, but not such a violent act with Jori mumbling sleepily at her breast. Still, she couldn't help but feel that she was owed a more personal revenge.

Clam must have read something of Adalia's thoughts from her expression, for as he shoved the prisoner ahead of him, he called back:

"Come along, Widow Baker. Master Reid is planning a bit of a get-together to discuss this ugly situation, and I believe he is counting on you to bake some almond tarts for his guests."