



# THE LAST BANQUET OF TEMPORAL CONFECTIONS

TINA  
CONNOLLY



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**TINA CONNOLLY**

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Saffron takes her customary place at the little round table on the dais of the Traitor King. Duke Michal, Regent to the Throne is his official title, but the hand-drawn poster sheets, the words whispered in back alleys all nickname him the same. She smiles warmly at the assembled guests, standing poised and waiting by their chairs, ready for the confections and amuse-bouches that have been a mainstay of the high table for the last year.

Saffron has been Confection Taster all that time, her husband Danny Head Pastry Chef. Their warm smiles have been perfected as the Traitor King's power grows, inch by inch, as those who object to his grasp fail and fall, as the printers are vanished, as the daughters disappear from their homes. The little prince still sleeps in his nursery—but for how long? That is the question on everyone's mind in the last year. Not a question uttered, but a question that stays poised on the tongue, and does not fall.

The Traitor King takes his place. He looks sternly around the table, watching to see if anyone dares sit or talk or breathe before him. Then he breaks into a jovial smile, and everyone exhales, and there is careful laughter: the Duke is in a good mood tonight. There will be candies and conversations, alliances formed and favors exchanged, perhaps a juggler hung for dropping the pins, but who minds the jugglers?

Saffron minds. She minds very much.

*The first course!* bids the Duke, and around the table the white-coated servants set down the gilded plates, each bearing the first bite-sized course, showcasing Danny's skill. An identical plate is set next to Saffron, the Duke's own plate, this one bearing a pastry twice as large as the others, so the Duke shall not lose any of the delight of his food to caution.

The Duke barely flicks his eyes Saffron's direction. She knows what to do, and smiling, she cracks the thin toast in two with her fine silver fork, and takes her bite.

Saffron knows this moment instantly. The angled sun falls in clean lines on the bakery floor. *Daily Bread* is the name on the hand-carved sign of the shop, for it is an ordinary bakery still. A younger Danny stands at the counter, just turning with flour-dusted chin to notice her. She has come here so often with the rosemary crostini that she has what the lords and ladies do not: an instant of double-memory, of twinned lives, as she breathes, and lets herself go, and tumbles five years into the past.

Her sister Rosie pushes her forward, hisses, “Your turn,” in teasing tones, and Danny and Saffron’s eyes lock.

Saffron swallows. Two girls on a rare free afternoon, on a mission to see who can charm the most treats out of willing young shopkeepers and clerks. Rosie is the younger by a year but the older in daring. Her funny, loyal sister has transformed this morning into a different girl, all curls and honeyed tones, a girl on a mission. So far she has acquired: Item (1) length of green velvet ribbon, long enough to tie back her gold-brown hair. Item (1) scrap of lace, to finish the wrists of the gloves she is making for Saffron. Surely Saffron could manage a chocolate, a tartlet, a bun?

And yet here she is, with the sinking feeling that she *does not know how to flirt*.

The kind-eyed young man—for now she no longer knows his name, she has the faint feeling that she has forgotten, there is something teasing at the back of her mind—well, he leans on the scarred wood counter and asks again if he can help.

“A ... a rye bun, please,” she says at random.

“Just one then?” he says with amusement, and he reaches for it. The young man, so quiet on other occasions Saffron has come in, seems rather more self-possessed today, but who would not be at a girl stammering “bun”?

“Yes. No.” She can’t remember anything Rosie did to charm that ribbon off of the shopkeeper; all her wits have fled. “I mean, I may have forgotten my coins?”

“It’s a fine day when a beautiful girl comes into my grandfather’s bakery with no money, but only wants one poor little rye bun,” he says. “Hardly seems worthwhile to charge her.” She flushes; he understands the game and is teasing her.

Rosie elbows her; she should make her move. Say something pert in response; acquire the prize. Her coin is her flirtation, her smiles, she sees now

that she and Rosie are paying after all, in a different kind.

But instead, behind the baker she sees a small waif, silhouetted in the back door to the shop. Saffron nods at the baker, points over his shoulder. “Do you have company?”

He turns, drops his teasing manner. “Jacky,” he says affectionately, and scoops several buns and a long thin loaf off of a different shelf. The small creature holds open his bag hopefully, and the day-old bread is placed inside. Jacky pulls out a single copper cent and gravely hands it to the baker, who as gravely accepts it. “My best to your mother,” the baker says, as the waif scampers off.

The young man turns back to the counter, and the kindness in his eyes is replaced by a different kind of warmth for Saffron, one that is gentle and interested, and possibly could be the same kind of warmth as for that little boy someday if she lets it, if she begins as she means to go on.

Saffron puts the coins on the counter for the rye bun. “Will you have coffee with me?” she says, clearly and calmly and forthrightly.

The flour-dusted young man takes her money and hands her the bun. Rosie snickers in the background, but the baker’s smiles are all for her. “Aye, and more.”

\* \* \*

Saffron returns to herself, the delight of the memory still sharp on her tongue. Her eyes clear, she smiles warmly at the crowd. “This has always been one of my favorite recipes of Danny’s,” she tells them, and her gilded plate is passed to the Duke. He does not look at her as he picks up the second bite of golden-crusted toast, redolent with rosemary and crystals of sea salt. Danny was an excellent baker long before he started experimenting with the rose-thyme plant that causes the memories, and this crostini is no exception.

Around the table the noble sycophants follow the Duke’s example, and Saffron watches in amusement at seeing the whole table go slack, their eyes staring off into nothing as they *remember*.

At the edges of the room the white-coated servants, the red-coated guards go on alert. Saffron knows, for he has told her, that the commander of the guard dislikes these little interludes. But the Duke will have his perks, and further—she is told—it amuses the Duke to watch the lords and ladies squirm. Not all the

confections Danny makes evoke pleasant memories, and during their time in the Duke's palace, he has been encouraged to experiment. An invitation to a Temporal Confections dinner is equally coveted and feared, but never declined.

Around the table the diners slowly shake off the residue of the memory, come back to themselves with foolish smiles on their faces. Good, she thinks. Danny is outdoing himself tonight. Is that a hint of things to come? They are kept apart, in the castle, and she wishes they had some way to communicate, other than through memory. A memory can be directed, a little, if the eater has practice. Saffron knows what she wants to see with the Rosemary Crostini, and she knows Danny knows she will see it. It was a gift to her this night, that first flush of meeting, that moment trapped in time like a fly in amber.

A salad course of watercress and arugula is served, and wineglasses filled with a dry white. The Duke's regular taster is given his salad, a fresh fork. She is a perpetually frightened-looking girl with honey-colored hair, but she is no milkmaid from the countryside. She is eighth in line to the throne, the granddaughter of kind Lord Searle, that same Lord Searle who would make a remarkably good regent—if he had not been accused of treachery by the Duke and disappeared into the maze of dungeons under the castle.

The girl retains many of her daytime privileges, but at dinner she sits at the Traitor King's side, yet another hostage for others' behavior. She tastes the requisite bite of the peppery greens, and then the plate is relayed to the Duke, and he picks up his own silver fork. Around the table the others join in, and Saffron and the girl fold their hands in their laps, and wait.

### Fennel Flatbread of Sunlit Days Gone By

The sun is sparkling on the snow on the day Danny gets his first temporal pastry to work.

It is a Seventhday, and the shop is closed. They have been married for a year now; Danny's grandfather has passed on, and the little bakery is all Danny's. A small inheritance has allowed him to experiment; a small inheritance and a smaller glass bottle of dried rose-thyme that Danny's grandfather gathered as a youth in the distant High Reaches. Despite its name, rose-thyme does not taste precisely like either; or, more correctly, it tastes like many more things than just those two flavors. It is a changeable plant; the method of preparation is key to bringing out a particular aromatic strain. More importantly, the method of



preparation is key to evoking certain visions. As a child, Danny's grandfather and his chums would chew on the flowers, which, when eaten plain, give brief flashes of déjà vu. He also told Danny that those who had once lived in the High Reaches had actual recipes that they swore could evoke glimpses of longer-ago memories, and indeed, at winter solstice every year, there was a certain currant cake made with the rose-thyme that would make everyone remember the previous solstice's currant cake, and back and back, cementing the continuity of a long line of years.

All that was long ago, and Danny's grandfather's people were mostly scattered and gone, driven forth by the last king's brother, whose dukedom was in the High Reaches, at the border of the country. He and his son, Michal, were reputed to be cold and cruel. Certainly they had destroyed Danny's ancestral home. But the current King was kind, if perhaps a bit soft, and he had not taken steps to control his distant cousin anymore than his father had controlled his younger brother.

All this runs through Saffron's head while she stands at the back of the shop, slowly kneading a mass of dough that will rise overnight for tomorrow's buns. Watching the sky slowly darken, the snow clouds massing once more. Why is she thinking of the old king? But perhaps it is because of the clock tower bells. They have been ringing all morning, and she has not heard them ring like that since she was a child. Their slow pealing is an eerie counterpoint to the silent snow, the warm, empty shop. A cheerful whistle floats out occasionally from the other room of the bakery, punctuated with the sharp smell of dried fennel being crushed with mortar and pestle. Danny is experimenting yet again.

Someone bangs on the back door, and she opens it to a snowdrift. Little Jacky, older now. He comes in, stamps his feet.

"The King is dead," he says, "Did you know?"

Of course, she thinks, *the bells*, and behind him the flurries have started again, the spangles of sun replaced by fat dots of white.

"Ma says they'll make old Searle the regent. He's a soft touch, that's for sure. Gives out coppers to kids anytime you see him in the street. Hey, maybe he'll give out silvers if he's got a whole treasury."

Saffron shakes her head. She saw the King speak, not two months ago. He was grieving for his wife's death in childbirth, and the city grieved along with him. But ... "He was so healthy."

"Bloody flux," Jacky says with certainty. "Got my cousin last month." He

holds out his palm. “I got *five* coppers for you this time. Been working for my uncle. What can I get with that?”

She ruffles his snow-dusted hair and hands over a hearty round loaf that didn’t sell, and several currant buns, only a little burnt.

He shouts his thanks and hurries off, running through the falling snow. His bit of red scarf flaps behind him; he shrinks smaller and smaller in the vanishing white. The king is dead, the poor little prince an infant. There will be change. Change is hard to weather. Change makes everyone skint, and keep their coins in their pockets.

But the people will still need bread, she thinks, as she watches the diagonal drifts. And there has been peace for so long. How can there not still be peace? Power will transfer, the reins will change hands, but she and Danny will have their bakery, their dough, their bread. They will focus on the rising of the yeast and the pounding of the dough and if they have to cut out currants for a time, well, plain buns sell nearly as well.

The clock tower bells ring all day and all night for the end of the king, the ending of the old era. She stands for some time, looking at the falling snow, until behind her Danny shouts, I have it, I have it, Saffron, I have it.

She turns to see the exult on his face, and he scoops her up and swings her around. He has been parcelling out the last few sprigs of rose-thyme for months, trying recipe after recipe, running right through the last of the dried leaves.

Now he hands her a round circle of flatbread on a plate. It looks like any of Danny’s homey flatbreads, but smaller. A few bites only, and one bite is missing.

She knows already that there is something special about this moment. It is the sort of memory you recall for years after. A moment when the world changed around you. A moment etched with both beauty and loss, a moment that you leave behind as you move away from it, a moment you can never reach again.

Except, with what Danny has now made, perhaps you can.

Saffron takes the first bite ever of a temporal confections creation and falls back further still.

The world shifts around her. She is seven, and her mother is still living. The sun drifts golden onto a dew-spattered morning, and she shakes a magnolia tree onto Rosie, watching her sister laugh as the droplets spray—

\* \* \*

“Another masterpiece,” says Saffron, and the same white-gloved servant passes her plate to the Duke. She shivers, deep inside, for she is not lying. Danny has been working on that linked memory trick for years. She has seen the Fennel Flatbread creation memory before, but she has never seen that magnolia tree memory within it. Usually the scene ends the moment Danny hands her the flatbread and she takes a bite.

Around the table eager hands reach for the plates, barely able to wait for the Duke. A Fennel Flatbread of Sunlit Days Gone By sounds delightful; not like any of the Duke’s nastier tricks. They all could use a moment of nostalgia, of respite from their grown-up cares. They eat, and Saffron watches them, still wondering how Danny triggered the second memory. Perhaps it was in the mashed fava bean dip served alongside, perhaps it is something in the flatbread itself. He has been working on reductions, on methods of increasing the intensity of the herbs. But of course, he has not been able to share anything with her since coming to the palace. And truly, it is better if she does not know. She has never been very good at dissembling, though she has been practicing in this last year. Ready for the skill for the moment she needs it.

The words rise as the memories dissolve; the voices filled with emotion, with wonder.

—I was climbing a tree; it was cut down long ago

—I saw my mum, I haven’t seen her in years

—My boy was young again; he ran to me

The Duke scoffs. Whatever he has seen, it has made little impression. “Puerile fantasies,” he says, and swivels to eye Saffron. “I hope the next course will be more suitable to an ... advanced palate.”

“Danny’s skill at arranging a balance of flavor and memory is unsurpassed,” Saffron says evenly. If she wished to gently push the Duke she would remind him of previous banquets; the one that ended with the nobles in tears; the one that ended with them overcome with patriotism, swearing oaths to the Traitor King. But she does not want to disturb the fragile balance. Danny is building to something, she is more and more certain. Which means that she is to taste, and be ready. Timing is critical in baking, and here so tonight.

Another course is served; a delicate shellfish bisque, but the nobles barely notice what they eat, lost in recounting, reliving, those long-ago moments, made

real again for an instant. If the Duke were more observant, he would notice how even the sweetest memory has an edge, for it is something that is lost and will not come again. But perhaps Danny is lulling him, downplaying his skill with the more complicated memories; the ones that linger like the mold on cheese, the yeast in the sourdough, the bitter in the wine.

The bisque is finished—Saffron sometimes feels guilty that the main cooks no longer receive the attention they ought—and the servers return with the next pastry course.

Ah, thinks Saffron, who recognizes it immediately. Here we go into the darker turn.

She could almost be angry at Danny, but she knows whatever he plans tonight has a purpose. The Duke will feast on her tears, but so be it.

The silver fork cuts through the pastry and she takes a bite.

### Rose-Pepper Shortbread of Sweetness Lost

She and Danny have been married for three years now. The bakery has picked up, now that they are offering a few *unusual* items right alongside the daily bread. There is still no baby, but they are happy with their bakery and their work, and they do not mind—too much. Danny bakes and she assists, Danny invents and she assists. But she does not mind that either, for she has found her own calling at the front of the shop, and it is matching people with the right pastry.

There is an art to knowing what people need. Oh, they would all take the flatbread if they could, but do they *need* it?

At first they do not advertise that there is anything special about some of the pastries in their shop. Danny is still working out the strengths and flavors. The first few pastries and confections come with barely a hint, a flash. A memory easily dismissed as natural. The sort of thing that keeps people returning to a bakery where they feel so content, so rejuvenated. So understood. With the increased income, Saffron arranges the shop and sews new curtains and freshens the paint. She hires Rosie to work alongside them, and that gives Danny more time to develop the recipes, strengthen the flavors. Rosie is a natural third point to their triangle; her open, gregarious warmth is a fire they kindle themselves by. She helps them turn the bakery from a shop to a *café* ; she encourages customers not to just buy their regular bread and go, but to sit and linger, try that extra morsel of unusual pastry and feel at peace.



This morning, Rosie is laughing with a regular about something that happened last night. Rosie has changed the last two years; her curls are the same, but she has swapped her ribbons and laces for steel-toed boots and the cry of *Resistance*.

Saffron understands that the new Regent Michal, at first so sympathetic, so distraught about the sudden treachery of Lord Searle, has slowly been closing his velvet glove around the city. She understands that there have been rumors of people taken. Rumors of Bad Things. But she only has one sister, and rumors are not here and now, they are not the shop and bread and cheese and chairs.

She pulls Rosie behind the counter, by the trays of day-old regular bread, and says as much.

Rosie's chin sets. It is not the first time they've had this conversation. "I have to do *something*," she tells Saffron. She drops her voice. "You know the little print shop, down the street?"

The printer. An outspoken, angry man. Yes.

"You know they *took* him, Saffy. Tortured him. Just for printing the truth about what's been happening to the girls. The disappearances—"

"Who says, though?" says Saffron, who can't believe in things happening to people she knows.

Rosie gives her a look. "His body was all covered up at the hanging. So you wouldn't see what had been done to him. I saw—"

"You *went* there?"

"I can't stay here, safe in a *bakery*," says Rosie, voice rising. "I have to *try*."

"We are doing good work here," Saffron says, helplessly.

Rosie shakes her head. "This is not the only good work there is to be done. Can't you see that?"

They are close to understanding each other, but then Saffron lets slip: "Can't someone *else* do that work?" and that makes Rosie shake her head, and stomp away, off to heft some flour bags around, take out her frustration.

Yes, Rosie has changed. Or no, not changed, perhaps, but grown up. Matured into something that was there all along.

She can't just stay in her bakery, Rosie says. But why not? Why can't there be room for someone who takes care of people, one person at a time? Who feeds them bread for their bodies and confections for their souls and does good work on a single, individual level? Saffron is heavy with resentment, she is prickly with the wish to prove Rosie wrong.

That is when the enforcer comes in.

He wears the emblem of the palace; the R of the Regency, the eagle of the Duke. He saunters up and says politely, “We have reports of miscreants disturbing the peace last night.”

“Everything is just fine here,” Saffron says.

“And your employees?” he says. “Where were they?”

“We have but one,” she says, “and she is a law-abiding citizen.” Her heart is thumping inside and he can surely see her pallor. *What did Rosie do?* For that is her first thought, that Rosie and her group of troublemaker friends must have done *something*. This man would not be here for *nothing*. Around the store she sees the customers who have finished their pastries quietly slipping away, their peace at an end.

The enforcer’s eyes follow her gaze; he looks languidly around the room like a bored cat. “This is a sort of opium den, is it?” he says, gesturing at a man’s slack face.

“Merely a bakery,” Saffron says.

“Please produce your license,” he says, more politely yet, and she understands how to do this part, this part is rote. She gets it from the back room, a few steps away through that curtain. Her eyes sweep the room for Danny—surely Danny will know what to do—but he is out on a buying errand, and she sees only her sister, crouched and silent, hiding behind a barrel of flour.

Numbly she returns, shows the man the card that should make him leave.

He barely looks at it, lets it fall to the counter. “Please produce your sister,” he says, and this is the point she cannot forgive herself for, even as it happens.

*I must not tell him where she is*, she thinks. But she is too used to being law-abiding, and she has never tried to become good at deception. Her mouth hangs open for too long, her eyes flick to the wrong side. “I have not seen her today,” she stammers at last, and the enforcer just laughs at her.

He pushes past to the back, and he pulls her sister out. Rosie reams him with a pan, and then he casually punches her in the stomach, so hard she doubles over, and he drags her out, even as Saffron runs after them, armed with nothing. He throws her into a carriage—pushes Saffron down into the muck of the street—and then they are gone, and Saffron is weeping.

The scene jumps forward—another linked memory. Danny finding her in the streets, near the castle. Saffron ran after the carriage until she couldn’t run anymore, then she plodded after it till she reached its entrance to the gates, and

when they would not let her in, she sunk down and stayed there. She doesn't deserve to leave the muck, because she failed to save Rosie.

Another jump forward, because the hanging does not happen until an entire week later. The body is fully clothed, down to long sleeves and long gloves that Rosie was not wearing when she left. Saffron is left to imagine everything the cloth is hiding. Drawn iron wire fences the hanging square; it cuts red lines into Saffron's palms. Around her the scent of lilacs blooms thick and sweet. It is spring.

\* \* \*

Saffron comes back to herself in the banquet room, and her eyes are wet. She sits up straighter, calmly blots her eyes with her napkin. "The Rose-Pepper Shortbread of Sweetness Lost will show you someone you miss," she says to the table. "All such sweet memories are tinged with sorrow."

She nods to the servitor to take her plate to the Duke, smiles warmly at the table to put them at ease. "You will find notes of citrus and almond in the tasting," she says. "We find it is one of the most popular pastries among the elderly."

"I certainly hope you are not insinuating anything," says the Duke, and then he laughs, and then they all do.

They take their bites and Saffron breathes out, concentrating on what Danny has done. Three jumps this time. Usually she sees just the bakery, or just the carriage, or just the hanging. Yet somehow he has strung memories together, finding a way to let the whole terrible story unfold.

If she had seen a fourth memory, it might well have been the aftermath. For it is a day not long after that when Danny starts experimenting on what he will call the bitter pastries. Not bitter in flavor, necessarily. Certainly deeper in flavor, more profound notes in the tasting. Memories that are both sweet and sour. Memories with a purpose.

The first one has a rose flavor, in honor of her sister.

Rosie is not the only person Saffron has lost in her life—her parents have both passed away—but she only ever sees Rosie when she eats the shortbread. She suspects that its creation is too inextricably bound up with her sister for her to ever see another. For awhile, there were many Seventhdays that she dedicated to nothing but the rose-pepper shortbread and her grief.

Many months later, when she is capable of feeling anything more than numb, Saffron takes her place again at the front of the shop. She understands then that this recipe is what she was lacking to give the customers. Not all customers can be helped with a fennel-bright flatbread, a happy moment. There are many who need a more profound searching into their past.

Around her now the nobles return from their journey, their faces a dizzying array of sadness, happiness, regret. It is a complex pastry.

The next food course is served—some sort of little trussed-up birds, but Saffron barely notices. She is elsewhere, considering what Danny has shown her, considering what next is to come.

She is not surprised when the silver bell rings and out comes the fourth of Danny's creations tonight, another bitter pastry. It is not one that Danny has yet showcased at the castle. Only now does it make its appearance, and her heart quickens, her lips pucker, her mouth salivates for the taste.

### Lemon Tart of Profound Regret

It is an ordinary day in the bakery, and Saffron looks around at her regulars with satisfaction. Everything they have worked for, coming to fruition. She is closer to contentment, closer to peace than she has been in over a year. The loss of her sister will never leave her, but it is a dull ache these days that only sometimes turns sharp, breaks her down in the middle of the bakery, hand on a bag of flour. The bakery has found a new normal, and there are customers to help.

The regulars, and she knows them by their orders.

Apple Turnover of Happier Times, aka, the bent old woman in the moth-eaten furs. Saffron saves the curtained alcove for her, and for the fifteen minutes it takes to eat that pastry, she's lost in a haze of *remembering*. Children, thinks Danny, but Saffron thinks grandchildren. Either way she lost them during the brief, bloody uprising last spring, they agree on that.

Lavender Macaron of Long-Ago Flirtations, aka the angular man who still owns two silk scarves, despite the ever-increasing privations, despite the shabbiness of his old suit. He rotates the scarves day by day; green-stripe, violet dots. He takes tea with his macaron, and his lips curl in pleasure while he *remembers*. Obviously it's a lover, but Danny is sure the lover disappeared in some dramatic way; attacking the palace, or daring to print anti-propaganda sheets. To have something worth *remembering*, you have to live first, says

Danny, and then he looks sadly at his flour-dusted arms, knowing that he only runs a bakery.

Lemon Tart of Profound Regret, that's the sad one. She's young, too young to have so much Profound Regret in her life. But she comes every day at ten, testing her sorrow. Profound Regret shows you the biggest mistake you made, the one you brood over, and there are two kinds of people who buy it. The ones that make Saffron's heart gladden are the ones who buy it infrequently. They descend into the despair of knowing what they did, just as fresh as the day it happened.

Then they go off and change, because of what they saw.

Saffron knows, because they come back to tell her. Not right at first. But they come back, several months later, and buy the tart again. And this time they see something else. Something less terrible. That's how they know they've moved on.

Those are the ones Danny says the whole shop is worth it for. He'd do it all again. Some days it seems like you're doing so little, but when he helps one of those people, his whole life is justified. On days that are really tough—the stories told about the Duke are worse than usual, the taxes are due, the Profound Regrets are too deep—Danny eats one of his Honey Chocolates of Well-Deserved Pride. He says it always shows him those moments, the ones when he helped people.

Their current Lemon Tart comes day after day. She's not moving on. Danny thinks Saffron should intentionally mix up her order, give her a Honey Chocolate or an Apple Turnover and see if that helps her mindset change. Saffron is considering the merits of this when *he* comes in.

He's supposed to be incognito but Saffron knows him instantly. She's seen enough Resistance flyers to know how the Duke disguises himself when he wants to move around the city. His red hair is slicked back under a hooded cloak.

She tries not to start, but her body betrays her. She flushes, angry and scared all at once, and she knows he sees it.

"I have a mind to try one of your Honey Chocolates," he says smoothly.

Her fingers are shaking as she reaches for it. This man of all men does not deserve to relive his best moments. She has thought for so long of *Resistance*. She could reach for the Mint Chocolate of Deep Despair, at least. After he tastes it, he will know that mint is not honey, and he will punish her somehow—



execute her? Torture her, like her sister? But first he will suffer. Oh, he will suffer.

But it would not just be Saffron who suffers. It would be Danny. It would be the part-time employees. It would be the customers, for she is not naive enough to think that he would not seek his wrath on all who saw his humiliation. He must squash any hint of rebellion.

*Or you are afraid*, says a smaller voice still.

Saffron reaches for the chocolates and his eyes are heavy on hers; it seems he knows her thoughts. She knows why he comes unannounced. So she cannot slip him poison, not unless she has planned for this moment and made an entire tray of poisoned chocolates, and she has not.

“I am most delighted to sample what I have *asked for*,” he says, and there is a world of meaning in that tongue.

Her eyes close—her fingers close on the wrapper around the chocolate, bring it up. She puts it on the plate with nerveless fingers.

It is the Honey Chocolate.

Her voice shakes as she tells him the price. Her moment has come, her moment has gone.

The Duke takes the chocolate, sits down at a table in the corner. A young man leans casually against the wall, fiddling with his belt knife. He doesn’t fool Saffron. The Duke goes off into a haze of *remembering* and for eight heartstopping minutes she cleans the counter and tends to the customers as the Duke looks off in the distance and the young man watches the two of them, his eyes flicking back and forth, watching to see if the bakery worker has lied to the Duke.

She regrets her choice already. She does not need a Lemon Tart to know that.

She regrets it even more when, two nights later, the Duke’s guards take Danny out of their bed in the middle of the night.

She is left to make her own way to the castle and offer herself up as sacrifice. A willing check on any rebellious tendencies my Danny might have. To sell herself to the Traitor King.

A common food-taster.

\* \* \*

Saffron blinks back tears. She has not seen Danny in so long. The Duke does not

trust them together. He has taken Saffron's measure—correctly assessed her as ineffectual, not a threat. She is plain, ordinary, and the Duke is not so foolish as to spend the coin of her in the wrong place. She is much more valuable alive and whole and as a check on Danny. So the Duke left her free rein of the upstairs servants' quarters—as long as she does not enter the second kitchen. The second kitchen was turned over to Danny; his tools and herbs brought from the bakery, and he is confined to it. The only way they can communicate is through the confections themselves. There is always at least one confection during a meal that he knows will call up a sweet memory of the two of them—something she can feast upon for a week, and *remember*.

But this banquet has been leading her step by step forward, as if in a story. Both she and Danny know the purpose of the Lemon Tart too well. She has been reminded of how she failed to act, which must mean that he is prompting her that she will need to act. But in what way?

Perhaps it is poison, she thinks. Perhaps he is telling her that this is the only way to strike against the Duke. A slow-acting poison; something she will recognize, but must pretend to be fine.

But she can't imagine Danny choosing that method, even if she ordered him to. And at this point, she *would* order him to. She stiffens her spine, watches the nobles eating their own lemon tarts. She has spent a year practicing dissembling. Her courage and her warm smiles will not fail her now. She is ready for whatever comes.

Or perhaps there is something else he is reminding her of. Those small jumps that the pastries have been taking. The Lemon Tart memory skipping ahead, to Danny's disappearance, to her own application at the castle. Those are not part of the original memory. They are *linked* somehow, just as she saw with the crostini, with the shortbread. Not enough that anyone would notice, because no one understands the subtleties of how the pastries work, not like she and Danny. Were those extra memories there to warn her of something specific?

But maybe that is not it, either. Sometimes she thinks she is going mad. Danny is long gone, and these pastries are normal pastries done by a normal pastry chef, their memories some collective dream that she convinces the nobles to believe in, once a week.

The cheese plate comes and goes while she feels more and more adrift, lost in her own memories, wishful thinking, and nonsense. These banquets will go on for eternity, and she will eat lemon tarts of regret forever, and nothing will

change.

For now the after-dinner liqueurs are being passed around, the meal is over, and there has been no dramatic change tonight. She is disappointed; she wants the Duke gone so badly that she almost feels she will run at him herself, with the silver fork. See what damage she can do before they kill her. Danny was always the patient one, the one performing the endless tweaking of recipes in search of the correct formula, the one able to wait until the exact moment. Cooking is all about timing.

Ah, but wait. There is one more plate. Her heart quickens—

But she can tell at a glance it is a chocolate, a dark chocolate-shelled truffle with an amber-colored drop at the top.

The Honey Chocolate of Well-Deserved Pride.

It makes her sick to think of the Duke eating this confection. Who knows what sort of disgusting thing the Duke will find pride in tonight?

She knows, for Danny has served this chocolate to the Duke before, that there is no outside morality imposed upon the choice of memory. Saffron always, invariably, sees one of the times she helped somebody. Danny sees those as well, or he sees moments of creation, breakthroughs of hard work and study.

The Duke saw a moment he cleverly destroyed a family. He told the table about it, in salivating detail, and the quiet bliss the nobles had found in the chocolates evaporated. Why would Danny grant him such?

The extra-large chocolate is set down before Saffron and she cuts it in two with her silver fork. It is in the last second before she takes her bite that she notices the color of the honey drop on top is a little deeper than usual. Molasses, perhaps, and it is her single clue that this is something different than what she is expecting.

### Bitter Chocolate of Agony Observed

She falls, tumbling, faster and faster. It is a moment she has never seen before. She is five, and Rosie is four, and Rosie has been stung by a hornet. In real life she barely remembers this, but she is here now, and Rosie is wailing. She holds up her arm to show Saffron, and Saffron sees the welt. And then—she *feels* the welt. In seeing the pain of her sister, it triggers her own sense of pain, and her arm stings and swells with it. Rosie runs off to find their mother, and Saffron falls—

She is eleven, and her best friend has taken a header off of the chicken coop. Busted her nose but good. Saffron sees it, and her own face *swells* in response, painful, aching, broken. She helps her friend home, and at every step she feels the pain of the broken nose. Until the friend is turned over to her mother, and Saffron runs home, the pain dissolving, the memory released—

She is in the bakery, and the enforcer punches Rosie, and Saffron staggers back with the pain of it as they drag Rosie away—

She is at the hanging, and the body falls—

It is last year, and Danny has sliced right through the pad of his thumb with a bread knife. Skin wounds bleed like billy-o, and Saffron carefully stitches it up for him, feeling the pounding of the blood in her own thumb, feeling the piercing tugging of the thread pulling through. Through the roar of the pain she hears Danny musing: I wonder if I could do something with pain.

Why would you want to? says past Saffron.

You wouldn't think a Lemon Tart of Regret would be useful, and yet.... says Danny. There might be something there.

Saffron laughs. Only you would slice open your thumb and wonder how to turn it into a new pastry. Go for it. But leave me out of this one.

Do you know how much I love you? says Danny.

And she is falling away from that memory, falling back to the table, even as her last words echo: I love you too. More than anything....

\* \* \*

The entire table is looking at her. She has been gone a few minutes longer than usual. Hopefully not so long as to give the game away. Her face, she feels now, is still wincing from the pain of the sliced thumb. She consciously relaxes her jaw, loosens her face, breathes.

She is supposed to entice the Duke to eat this chocolate. And how exactly is she going to do that, with everything she just saw plainly visible on her face to the whole table?

She waves at the servitor to take the other half of her chocolate to the Duke. She does not yet trust herself to speak.

The Duke looks at the half-eaten chocolate, then back at her. "For a moment I thought your husband had decided he was willing to poison you," he says. "But now I see he is merely willing to torture you."

That gives Saffron the thread to walk down. “His skill with confections is the most important thing to him,” she says, and she keeps her head high, not minding that her lip trembles. The Duke understands this. He will see himself in Danny.

“So explain to me why I, and my table, should go ahead and try this particular confection,” he says. “After seeing its most ... interesting results.”

She looks evenly into his face. There is only one answer that will work with the Duke, and this is truth.

At least, part of the truth.

“You will see pain,” she said. “Not your own pain, but another’s. A moment of exquisite pain that someone else is suffering.”

The Duke’s face relaxes, just barely, and he laughs. “No wonder you were so conflicted. My little weaklings.” He gestures around to the table. “Go on, then. Eat.”

Her heart sinks, watching as one by one the reluctant guests pick up their chocolates, their faces frightened or stoic by turns. If the Duke does not eat his bite quickly, then this is for nothing. The nobles will spill to him everything they *felt*, and there will be no more chance to do this again, and she and Danny will be strung up for daring to oppose the Traitor King.

The memories for some of them will be long this time. She cannot help that. One lucky woman, younger than the rest, is shaking off the trance already. “I saw my brother break his arm,” she says, shuddering, and her hand unconsciously goes to her own arm.

Saffron breathes, willing the woman not to say any more. This is confirmation to the Duke that what she said is true. You see someone else’s pain. The chocolate is not poison. His face relaxes a tiny bit more, he is weakening. He wants to try it.

“You can aim for the right memory if you give it a nudge,” Saffron says, and this is true in general of their work, if irrelevant in the case of this particular chocolate where you will see *everything*. “Wouldn’t you like to see ... what you did to my sister?” Her eyes meet his and she is breathing fast, she can’t help it, and he is feasting on every moment of her pain. If this works....

The Duke’s eyes never leave hers as he raises the chocolate and places it on his tongue.

\* \* \*

The linked memories keep the Duke under for three entire weeks, writhing in a *remembering* coma, first on his chair, then moved to his bed, then moved to the dungeon. For three weeks is enough time for someone to find the food-taster's grandfather, and let him out, and for the whole chain of command to be rearranged. The Duke is declared incapacitated and relieved of his regency, and kind Lord Searle takes over in his place.

When the Duke finally does wake, the pain and malnutrition have left him wasted away to nothing. His eyes fall on a glass cake stand placed beside his filthy, flea-infested mattress, on the stones of the dungeon floor. Inside is a single chocolate, identical to the one he was served at his final dinner.

If he were stronger, one might call his laugh the laugh of someone who finally sees a worthy adversary at last.

The chocolate, of course, was made by a baker, a simple baker who refused the honor of being Regent Searle's head pastry chef, and asked only to return home to his two loves: his work and his wife.

The chocolate was placed there by Saffron, who stayed to watch the Duke writhe for twenty minutes before she slipped silently away, knowing full well that that pain will account on her soul; that she will revisit this spot if she ever eats that particular chocolate herself again.

The Duke is never leaving this dungeon. And the only real question is, how does he wish to go?

Trembling hands knock the glass dome to the dungeon floor. It shatters, an echo that remains in the Duke's ears long after the shards have come to rest.

The Duke takes his last bite of food ever on this earth, and *remembers*, as he falls.

## About the Author



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**TINA CONNOLLY** lives with her family in Portland, Oregon, in a house that came with a dragon in the basement and blackberry vines in the attic. She is the author of the Ironskin series (*Ironskin*, *Copperhead*, *Silverblind*) and her stories have appeared all over, including in *Strange Horizons*, *Lightspeed*, and *Beneath Ceaseless Skies*. You can sign up for email updates [here](#).





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