

For The Empire

Story by Yvette Keller

“No. No. Yes. No. Yes.” Peter was tired of cookies. His once favorite smell of warm, crisped dough was beginning to nauseate him. Not so long ago, he was a real pastry chef. He made meringue. Marzipan. Rolled out the thinnest and flakiest crusts for tartlets.

“Yes. Yes. Yes. Yes. This entire batch.”

“The Empress thanks you, Peter. The royal guest is pleased,” said Head Chef Ivan. “Your nose for the correctly crisped cookie will bring great fortune. Keep up the excellent work. Do not let your attention flag for a moment. A less than perfectly crisp cookie might shame and threaten the empire.”

If that is true, Peter thought, the empire is a fragile thing. Perhaps cookies are not what we should be worrying about.



Two hundred cookies later, Peter’s eyes were as heavily glazed as a doughnut. He was asleep on his feet until the ricochet of a staff, rapping the worn flagstone of the kitchen floor, resounded in the open space between the ovens. Empress Pavlova, Queen of the East, Ruler of the North Isles, and Conqueror of the Left Half of the World, strode, for the first time, into the place



Artwork by Diane Liguori

that had made her imposing figure all that it was.

“Where,” her voice commanded, “is the pastry chef?”

“Here, Empress,” Peter said, falling to one knee. She approached, and he smelled the heavy powder on her wig, the tangy citrus scent of the perfume she favored.

“Stand, and receive our thanks.” Peter did as he was told, keeping his focus on the hem of her gown. It was embroidered in lacy swirls like frosting on a marriage cake. Her fan touched his chin, the feathers soft, but the ivory spines cold. His face was lifted until he looked into dark eyes the color of simmered raisin sauce.

“King Christian says he has never experienced such perfection. In the form of a cookie.” A chorus of courtiers laughed. “A clear sign of discernment and culinary prowess, to his way of thinking. He has therefore asked for our hand in marriage. A great defeat for our enemies. You have our thanks.” With that, she turned to go, stopping briefly to nod as the chancellor handed a purse to the head chef.

When they were gone, Chef Ivan brought the bag to Peter. With a resigned sigh, Peter dumped a pile of diamonds into his left hand. The jewels sparkled like rock candy.

Disgruntled, Peter said, “Chef Ivan, we are peasants. We cannot eat diamonds.”

“Never fear,” Ivan replied, clapping Peter so hard on the back that a few diamonds skittered away below the slab of a wooden table. You have made all our fortunes, Peter.”

“How, Chef Ivan?”

Ivan winked. “Have you ever seen King Christian smile?”

“No, Chef Ivan.”

“I have. His Majesty loves all sugary treats so much, that the singular expression, ‘sweet tooth’ is accurate. We just became indispensable. Congratulations, my boy. Your talent has saved the Empire. We must celebrate! Here, have a cookie.”

