

Third's the Charm

by duniazade

Written for shiv5468, on her prompt:

"Snape and Hermione argue over who should have the last chocolate éclair - who wins?"

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Chapter 1 of 1

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It is an universally acknowledged truth that good *pâte à choux* cannot be produced by magic.

Hogwarts' elves may pride themselves on treacle tarts or trifle, but their attempts at éclairs have always been pathetic. Even Malfoy elves never achieved satisfactory results. Many of famous Dobby's self-punishment stints originated in failed experimentation in this field.

Miss Hermione Granger had, indeed, done extensive research in the matter and even consulted the molecular gastronomy specialist, Hervé This, but the conclusion was always the same: magic is, in essence, a shortcut, and *pâte à choux* was definitely rebellious to shortcuts. It wanted to take its time, or rather its full due of a human's mortal time, and be stirred, kneaded, petted and heated to full satisfaction.

There are, of course, some good Muggle cake shops and tea rooms; but as most wizards have no full understanding of Muggle fashion, their attempts to patronize such invariably ended in teams of Obliviators swarming like flies. It was extremely expensive for the Wizarding Treasury, and the Ministry decided that any wizard who attracted unwanted attention by succumbing to gluttony was to be heavily fined.

Therefore, when Arabella's opened after the Second Voldemort War, it was immediately crammed with clients. Arabella was a Squib and had specialized in handmade *pâte à choux* pastry, guaranteed without the slightest spark of magic.

Arabella had inherited from Dumbledore a small shop-cum-flat in a disreputable part of Muggle London. It had served as a safe house for the Order during the war, and it had in the back a warded Apparition Room. Which meant that wizards could safely Apparate into the tea room (for such was the new purpose of the shop), but only with Arabella's previously given agreement. She had wisely decided to run her business as a club. You had to pay a hefty subscription just for the right to Apparate to Arabella's, and it was rumoured that some who hadn't scrupulously paid up had splinched themselves while trying to cheat.

Arabella, on the other hand, had scrupulously respected Dumbledore's routine of paying regularly all due Muggle taxes. The door and narrow windows of the shop still opened on a garish Muggle street crammed with cheap fast-foods of an exotic but undetermined nature and a variety of extremely hot entertainments. They were simply overlaid, by courtesy of Kingsley Shacklebolt, with a notice-me-not charm which ensured the Muggles just wouldn't be interested.

Rocky Stanpike was a tall, gangly youth, with a bloom of pimples on his cheekbones that would have done proud any maiden. He was a good boy, and that's why he kept shuffling his feet and blushing under the severe gaze of Simone Salieri.

"I swear, Boss, I did it twice. I did every business in the street, number by number, just as you said."

"You can't have. I have the taxpayer rolls, and it doesn't check. Number 16 pays regularly good money to the Queen, but you didn't bring protection money from them."

Rocky screwed his brow. He tried hard to remember the shop window between the 14 and the 18, but all he could see was a vague blur of pink.

"You bring the cash this evening, Rocky, or else. Nobody fucks with Simone Salieri."

Rocky hung his head and left, closing quietly the door. His friend Ernie Brambles, who had been waiting outside, leapt to his feet.

"You look dreadful, Rocky."

"The Boss said this evening, or else."

"Let's fetch the AK, pal, and then relax a bit at the Elephant and Bottle, and I'll do the lookout for you."

Arabella's was bustling as usual and humming with the murmur of subdued and fashionable conversation.

The best table in the room was undisputedly the round one in the right corner, which was reserved for the most honoured patrons. As every afternoon of the week, Lucius Malfoy sat regally in a mahogany armchair, his blond hair fanned against the dark green velvet. At his left, Miss Granger curled on the sofa. At his right, Severus Snape could see both the door to the Apparition Room and the disused door to the Muggle street. Some habits never die.

As every afternoon of the week, a double-tiered plate of éclairs sat between Miss Granger and Mr. Snape. Mr. Malfoy had always preferred croquebouches, which he was assured were a more aristocratic fare.

Now you must understand that Arabella's specialities were truly wonderful. Her éclairs were small and delicate, about the length of Miss Granger's fingers and about the girth of Mr. Snape's. They came in a variety of flavours, and when you had ventured beyond the enticing, sweet, tangy promise of the upper side icing and took your first bite, the marvelous crust offered, like a sleazy virgin, only the barest resistance before letting you dive into the unctuous, perfumed, complacent cream. It was the moment when Miss Granger's eyes would always close, and when they opened again, they had a slightly lost expression. Snape loved that look on her face, though he wouldn't have confessed it under the direst torture.

But he also loved his éclairs.

And there was only one of them left on the plate.

A chocolate éclair.

The "Elephant and Bottle" hadn't usurped its name. When Rocky and Ernie emerged in late afternoon, their minds had broadened and their senses had sharpened to the finer vibrations of the universe, especially in the range of pink.

Which is how they managed to dimly perceive the front of number 16, between the dingy Chinese take-away at the 14 and the Texas Fried Chicken at the 18.

"Do your thing, Rocky boy" said Ernie.

Rocky squinted his eyes. "I can't see the doorknob."

Meanwhile, inside the tea room, the level of the conversations had somewhat dropped. There was an undefinable tension in the atmosphere. Those who were closer to the round table had noticed the glittering eyes of their former Potions professor and his rigid shoulders, and sensed that he was poised to fight.

And then, Miss Granger did the unthinkable.

She brought her chocolate-coated finger to her mouth and slowly, deliberately, began to lick it.

There had been many whispers about Snape and Granger (and, some added, Malfoy). But never, never had they departed in public from the strictest propriety.

This was a provocation of the first magnitude.

A deathly silence fell over the room. The air was thick with unreleased hexes.

At that precise moment, Rocky Stanpike kicked down the door, brandished his AK47 and yelled: "Nobody moves!"

In a single fluid, powerful movement, like a black snake, the dark wizard uncoiled and struck. One wand twirl, and the hapless thug was trussed like a chicken and covered in feathers; a second, and he was forcefully expelled; a third, and he hung from his own AK, firmly planted in the wall above the Texas Fried shop, the most vocal sign to have ever graced that godforsaken business.

His friend Ernie must have perceived something familiar in the panic-stricken cacklings, for he cleared off as quickly as possible.

Snape sat, with a sigh of relief.

The roomful of people breathed.

Miss Granger seemed petrified with her finger still in her mouth. A most becoming glimmer of admiration was slowly dawning in her eyes.

But the chocolate éclair was gone.

Snape turned his stony gaze upon Malfoy.

Lucius shrugged: "I thought I'd give it a try."