

Neutered

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This sordid story begins in a seedy garret room in a house on the unfashionable end of Delusion Alley. Around the room's only table sat five Death Eaters and their Dark Lord. An sixth Death Eater was at the window keeping watch.

Lucius kept a careful eye on his Dark Lord and imagined that he could pin point exactly where the whole thing had gone wrong. It had been the debacle at the Department of Mysteries that had changed everything.

After failing to possess the Potter boy, the Dark Lord had decided to try possessing the Longbottom whelp instead.

It had not gone well. The boy had collapsed to the floor in the veil room and rolled around in agony while Lucius watched from where he lay on the floor having been bound by Albus Dumbledore. Then as suddenly as the possession had begun, it was over. Neville Longbottom had somehow expelled the greatest Dark Lord of all time from his mind.

It was only later, after the entire summer, Lucius had finally managed to convince the Fudge administration that he and the others captured in the Department of Mysteries were, of course, all victims of the Imperius yet again, that he discovered how much both the Dark Lord and Longbottom had changed.

Draco's reports from Hogwarts, interspersed with threats against the Potter boy, were tales of how the Longbottom heir had changed. Having met the boy at social events prior to the Department of Mysteries, Lucius had found the stories hard to believe, but then he considered the Dark Lord.

"All clear?" Voldemort asked.

"All clear My Lord," Pettigrew confirmed from his place at the window.

Voldemort carefully unrolled a large map of Diagon Alley and its surrounding area. "Right ... this is the plan then. At 10:45 Bella, Lucius and I will head round to Midas' Fine Jewelry over in Commercial Alley. We will arrive outside the shop at 10:50 a of m. I shall then enter the shop at 10:51, where you, Lucius, disguised as a customer, will meet me and hand me twenty-eight galleons, fourteen sickles and nine knuts. At 10:52, we shall approach the counter and each of us will purchase a watch of this model," he handed around photographs of the item, "This little

treasure will cost twenty-eight galleons, fourteen sickles and nine knuts. Lucius and I shall then give the watches to you, Bella. You'll go straight to Norman's Apothecary in Chemic Alley, where you'll meet Devon MacKay, the forger. After MacKay finishes forging Potter's three identical love note to the victims, you will hand off the watches and the notes to Peter at 11:28. Peter, you will take the watches and notes, and go to the main post office in Government Alley, where you will post them as gifts to Miss Hermione Granger, Miss Daphne Greengrass, and Miss Hannah Abbot, all care of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. You lads will be back here by 11:42 and then we will all rendezvous in the back room at the Cow and Sickle, at 12:15 for tea and biscuits. All right, any questions?

"Forgive me, My Lord," Lucius ventured hesitantly, "I don't really understand just what we are achieving with this... caper."

A puzzled look appeared on Voldemort's face "What do you mean?"

"Well," Lucius paused, carefully considering his words, "we're paying for the watches."

"Yes," Voldemort agreed patiently.

"Well," Lucius again paused while he tried to understand his Dark Lord, "why are we paying for the watches?"

Voldemort looked at his chief financier as if the man might be losing his mind. "Lucius, they wouldn't give them to us if we didn't pay for them, would they... eh?"

"My Lord..." Lucius started, wondering if he was taking his life in his hands, but soldiered on. "Respectfully, my Lord, I'm finding it harder and harder to understand what you are doing any more."

"And why is that Lucius, my slippery friend?" Voldemort purred.

Lucius swallowed hard. "Well, we never even plot against the Potter boy anymore."

Ignoring the murmurs of agreement coming from his Death Eaters, Voldemort showed his confusion. "What do you mean?"

"Well, our last major operation, the bank job last week," Lucius pointed out.

"What went wrong with that?"

"Nothing went wrong, my Lord, but the results of a month of meticulous planning ended with you having me put on my full Death Eater Regalia to go to the Gringotts teller and withdraw 25 galleons from my vault and using the cash to buy everyone lunch. That's what's wrong. We're supposed to be taking over the world..."

"I'm not sure I see the problem, Lucius," Voldemort said, "What are you trying to say?"

"If the watches are truly necessary for your plans," Lucius asked hopefully, "Couldn't we just steal them, my Lord?"

"Lucius, you lack vision," Voldemort laughed. "The plan is in progress, and it's too late to change it now. I've spent weeks organizing this job. Bella rented a room across the road from the jeweler's shop and recorded the people going in and out every day. Peter spent three weeks looking at watch catalogues...until he knew the price of each one backwards, and now I'm not going to risk the whole raid just for the sake of breaking the law."

"But..." Lucius searched for the words, "How does any of this hurt Potter? Wouldn't it make more sense to just kidnap the boy? Draco could easily plant a portkey among his possessions."

"No!" Voldemort spat, his patience clearly at an end. "I've explained this before. Potter is now dating young Miss Susan Bones, by sending gifts and love notes to three other witches, we will spoil his relationship most deliciously," the Dark Lord was overcome with maniacal laughter for several minutes. "And once those three witches compare their gifts, they will 'discover' that he bought them all the same thing, and wrote them all the same mash note. Oh, how Potter will suffer!"

"My Lord!" Peter hissed from the window. "I see her! She's here!"

Voldemort rushed to the window, and parted the curtains so that he might see. "Bloody Hell!" He whimpered as he spotted the woman wearing a hat with a vulture mounted upon it. "You're right."

The Dark Lord swallowed noisily as he fought against his panic. "Change of plans," he whispered. "We're going with Plan Epsilon Gamma Gamma-3"

"Plan Epsilon Gamma Gamma-3?" Bella asked nervously.

"Don't any of you pay attention when I explain the situational alert plans?" Voldemort asked plaintively. "All right, listen up. Plan Epsilon Gamma Gamma-3, we've no time to lose. Bella, shave off all your hair, get a passport in the name of Susie Q. LaBromowitz, meet me at this address in Rio de Janeiro Tuesday night," He handed the confused woman a slip of paper. "Peter, go to East Africa, have Muggle plastic surgery to resemble Lucius and meet me in Somerset, you know the place. You've got 152 hours. Alecto and Amycus, you two go to Canada and work your way south to Nicaragua as door-to-door encyclopedia salespersons. I need you in Tipitapa by July. Lucius, sorry old friend, you'll need stay here as the front man. Give us fifteen minutes then blow the building up. All right, make it fast."

"My Lord," Lucius pleaded, "I own this building."

"Good man," Voldemort nodded. "That way no one important will be hurt by the loss of the building. All right everyone, good luck!"

Lucius stood silent for several moments after his lord and fellow Death Eaters fled the room, before shaking his head and heading to the locker where his detonator was hidden. To hide his

tracks, he had purchased the explosives needed to erase this building from some shady types with contacts in the Muggle world.

Lucius had decided to use Muggle explosives to keep the suspicion from ever being focused on him. The stuff came in block and was evidently called Cee Four. He found himself wondering if Dumbledore needed another spy in the Dark Lord's camp. Something to speak to Severus about.

Because the explosive was of Muggle manufacture and therefore of low standard, he had purchased quite a bit more than he would of a properly magical explosive. He picked up the detonator and armed it as he had been shown. The red light came on just as he had been promised. It had taken his contacts nearly two days to load and arm the two tons of the Muggle stuff.

As Lucius actuated the detonator, he wondered if it would be enough.

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Tonks ducked under the tape around the scene of the disaster, idly wondering if the DMLE had borrowed the idea of the yellow tape to demark crime scenes from the Muggles or if it had been the other way around.

Whatever had happened had left a crater only slightly smaller than the circumference of the building's foundations, but that appeared to be an illusion. The upper stories of the building were utterly gone. The reports she had read before being sent to the site had hypothesized that the building's wards had focused the explosion upward rather than outward. The only thing that had protected the surrounding buildings and people had been those wards.

Amazing.

"Tonks!" she heard Kingsley call. "Over here."

Spotting her supervisor, she picked her way through the rubble.

"Good thing you're here, Tonks," Kingsley said as he nodded to one of the yellow robed forensics wizards. "Tell her."

The wizard hesitated for a moment, and then bent over, reaching for the tarp at his feet. "At first we thought that the building was empty when whatever happened, happened," he explained. "Then, we found this."

He pulled the tarp away to show a snake-headed onyx cane, a chalk-white left hand still gripping it despite the hand terminating in a jagged stump. The ring finger of the hand bore the heavy Head of House ring of House Malfoy. "Lucius Malfoy," Tonks breathed.

"That's why we called for you," Kingsley said. "You're the closest family on the force."

"You have my sympathies for your loss," the forensic wizard said.

Tonks nodded solemnly.

Shack later congratulated her for not laughing out loud.

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Harry stumbled into the Great Hall and painfully made his way to the Gryffindor table. Cautiously lowering himself into his seat, he groped for the coffee.

A long pull, and he waited for the life giving caffeine to make its way into his bloodstream. Someone should have warned him, he thought, while wincing as Filch's cat stomped by the table. Someone should have warned him about dating a Hufflepuff, or at very least warned him about the Hufflepuff House Parties.

It turned out that Professor Sprout grew more than just plants needed for classes and potions ingredients in her greenhouses. The whole common room smelled like Dudley's room that time last summer when Vernon and Petunia left for a week in Majorca.

Harry had stuck with the firewhisky, but still had managed something of a contact high when Susan dropped into his lap and started an exploration of his tonsils.

Then, all throughout the Hufflepuff common room, clothes started coming off.

Hufflepuffs, it seemed, shared *everything* .

Harry's sexual experience had gone from pathetic inexperience to full-blown orgy in one easy lesson. The Man-Who-Was-Molested sighed as the caffeine finally started taking the edge off his pain. He never noticed that he was suddenly surrounded until someone spoke.

"You look like hell, Potter."

Harry cracked open one eye and looked to his left. "Am I at the wrong table, Daphne?" he asked, "or did you come to see me?"

"You're at the right table Harry," Hermione said to his right, "and you're a pathetic sight."

"Quit being so mean to Harry," Susan said from across the table. "If I'd known he was such a lightweight, I'd have kept him on Butterbeer."

"Will you three please just let me die in peace?" Harry whimpered as he lowered his pounding head to the table, relishing the cold of the bare wood far more than he ever imagined possible.

"Be nice to Harry," Hannah giggled from next to Susan. "He just went to his first Hufflepuff House Party last night."

"Ohh," both Daphne and Hermione said in sudden understanding, something that disturbed Harry more than just a little bit. Had everyone in the castle except him known about 'Puff Parties?

"What we wanted to know, Harry," Susan said as she pressed a crystal vial into his hand. "Is if you have annoyed the Weasley twins recently. That's a hangover potion by the way."

Harry immediately removed the stopper and tipped the vial's contents into his mouth. Blessed relief immediately followed the horrid taste.

"The twins?" he asked. "No. Not that I know of anyway."

"This was not the Twin's work," Hermione pointed out. "Far too unimaginative and nowhere near as painful as their pranks."

"What?" Harry asked intelligently.

"Someone thought it would be amusing to send Hermione, Hannah, and I a gift of a cheap watch and a poorly spelled love note with your signature," Daphne explained.

"Cheap watch?" Hannah exclaimed. "This thing cost 30 galleons if it was a knut."

"You're actually wearing it?" Susan teased.

"Of course I'm wearing it. Professor Sprout checked it for curses and its fine. Much nicer than my old watch too."

"Your 30 galleon estimate is a bit high," Daphne sniffed. "No more than twenty four or so. Costume jewelry."

"Yeah, well, the grammar in the love note is atrocious as well," Hermione noted examining her copy again, "better than yours Harry, but I suspect that this is the work of a non-English speaker."

"Hey!" Harry protested.

"Who has been marking up your essays for five years now?"

"You have," Harry sighed.

"Thank you," Hermione nodded. "The owl that delivered mine had bands from La Paz,"

"So did mine," Daphne agreed, while Hannah nodded in agreement.

"La Paz?" Harry asked.

"Bolivia, Harry," Hermione explained. "La Paz is in Bolivia."

"Okay," He said hesitantly.

"Honestly, Harry!" Hermione huffed. "Bolivia is a country in South America. Someone is trying to prank you, through us from Bolivia."

"But for that to work, Susan would have to find out and be jealous."

"Susan knows," his girlfriend pointed out, "and knows that it's there is no way in hell you would ever try something like this silly plot."

"Thanks, Susie," Harry grinned.

"Because you don't have that kind of imagination," she continued. "Also Hannah and Daphne are dating Neville."

"Someone say my name?" Neville asked as he slid onto the bench between Harry and Daphne.

"Just someone trying to prank Harry," Daphne explained as she leaned in to kiss him.

"Evidently, I'm far too clueless and unimaginative to try to date four witches," Harry complained. "Not that I really want to, but it would be nice if my girlfriend was at least a little bit jealous."

"I'll be jealous next time, Harry," Susan laughed, patting his hand.

"That sounds like the sort of half thought out and over planned nonsense I might have come up with before last year," Neville nodded. "I think it's probably Tom, still obsessing over you, but he's trapped by my old insecurities and lack of confidence."

The assembled students looked to the Longbottom heir in confusion.

"Do you mind explaining that, Neville?" Hermione asked.

"Well, I'm sure you all noticed how much I changed after we went to the Ministry," Neville reached across the table to take Hannah's hand while encircling Daphne's waist with his other arm. "It confused me at first. Everything started coming easier. Suddenly I believed in myself and my own worth," a small grin played upon his lips. "I even found I was no longer frightened by my Gran."

"I don't understand," Daphne said. "What happened that night anyway?"

"We were stupid," Harry murmured, "Voldemort was trying to get a prophecy from the Department of Mysteries, and he tried to trick me into getting it for him by sending me images of my Godfather being tortured over the mental link we share. Hermione, Ron, Ginny, Luna and Mr. Wonderful here came along; because they knew I was being stupid and wanted to protect me from myself."

"That's now quite how it happened," Hermione disagreed.

"No, it wasn't," Neville agreed. "We ended up fighting a full dozen Death Eaters, the elites, but even then, we held our own, until help arrived."

"Held our own, as in didn't die," Hermione interjected. "They were hampered by not wanting to

kill Harry until Voldemort had the prophecy in hand. The rest of us were expendable. Ron was savaged by those congnitovores, Ginny ended up with a broken leg, Neville's nose was broken, Luna was cursed, and I was..." she unconsciously ran her hand along her chest, tracing the path of her scar, "I was hurt badly."

"Dumbledore and a group of fighters showed up to help us, and he fought Voldemort to a draw in the Veil Room of the Department of Mysteries," Neville continued. "It was indescribable, when Voldemort realized he couldn't win, he disappeared and tried to possess Harry, but it didn't work, so he tried it on me,"

"I've apologized for that at least a dozen times," Harry pointed out.

"And I've told you at least as many times that you had nothing to apologize for," Neville laughed. "You didn't point Voldemort at me, he did that. When he tried to possess me, something went wrong, rather than his taking control, our minds merged for several seconds. I was terrified, but Voldemort, he was panicked. He withdrew as quickly as he could, and when he did so, I was changed..." Neville hesitated for a moment, "and I think he was as well."

"What do you mean?" Hermione asked.

"I think he disengaged the possession incorrectly, and he left some of his personality in me," again the smile played upon his lips, "and I believe he took some of mine."

"So Voldemort is?" Susan asked.

"Terrified of my Gran, indecisive, and more than a little unsure of himself. I tried to make up for it by putting loads of planning into everything I did, I tried to cover every single thing that could possibly go wrong. I ended up not achieving very much," he explained. "This watch thing stinks of, well, me at my worst."

The six friends sat in silence for several seconds until Hannah broke it. "Neville," she asked. "If all that is true are you... evil?"

"I don't think so," Neville said with a shake of his head. "I mean, everyone is the hero of his own story, but I don't think I'm going to hurt anyone. I'm just enjoying life."

"Good," Hannah pronounced.

"But *could* you be evil?" Daphne cooed, pressing herself into him. "Just a little, for me?"

"I'm not killing Draco for you, Daphne," Neville said, "Unless he touches you, then, they'll never find his body."

"Tempting," Daphne admitted, "but I'm not letting him touch me, no matter what you offer, and you're a beast for even suggesting it."

"All right, as nauseatingly cute as that exchange was," Hermione sighed, "are you saying that

Voldemort is neutered?"

"Basically, yeah," Neville agreed.

"I haven't had as much of a tingle from my scar since that night," Harry admitted. "It turns out Neville is the one with the power the Dark Lord knew not."