

# Idle Hands

by *sweetflag*

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Chapter 1 of 1

Something lurks in the dark corners of Diagon Alley; it takes advantage of complacency, greed, sloth and whispered desires.

He pulled pints and mopped up beer spills, avoiding eye contact. Someone knew. For weeks, he'd *prepared* his beers, only to pull perfect pints night after night. Someone was tampering with his watered down drink, removing the water. They were watching him. How else would they know when and which barrels to 'repair'? He served beer and kept his head down. His customers were very *sensitive* about their beer.

x

"Honey, the fire's too high. I'll only nag to clean the flue again," she snapped.

'Honey' grunted, staring at the blazing fire with glee. He hadn't cleaned it, which only added to his relief. Nothing had moved in the chimney since the fire. As he threw on another log, he grinned. Nothing would come down it again, and then he could forget those odd, unnerving mumblings he'd heard from the chimney.

x

"Admit it, thief!"

The two wizards were at wand-point over the garden hedge. The wives stood with arms folded and similar expressions: *men!*

"I never took your fountain!"

"Liar! I know you've been watching me, waiting!"

"Rot!"

"Is it? Thought you'd make some galleons, eh?"

"You've said for years you wanted it gone! And it's a worthless offence against sculpture."

When the curses started, the wives went inside and made tea.

x

Ron glared at the scroll, hoping that by sheer will he could change the assignment. It had to be a prank!

"They want us to investigate missing laundry?"

"Knickers!"

"My sentiments exactly," agreed Ron, slamming the scroll down.

"No," Harry replied tetchily. "Knickers are missing."

"You're kidding! Right?"

Harry shook his head. "Reports have been coming in from Diagon Alley for weeks: thefts, odd noises, feelings of being observed," he added, watching Ron's face morph from antipathy to interest. "People say there's a 'presence', and... well... it's getting nasty."

x

"The shame of it!"

Ron, Harry and the hassled husband all winced as the woman let out another pained, soggy wail.

"The worst," she said between sniffles, "is that the neighbours saw them."

"The criminals or the knickers?" Ron asked, utterly confused.

The husband closed his eyes and shoed them back out before another ear-splitting screech erupted.

"She's never put under-things on the line, and since we—" He broke eye contact. He'd never admit he'd asked her to spice her *things* up a bit. He couldn't look his neighbours in the face either—they must have overheard and had a bit of fun.

"So... they were pegged out?"

The husband paled. "Worse." He leaned in; Harry and Ron followed suit. "They'd been...." He flushed and coughed. "You know... *improved*."

x

From the shadows, they watched the denizens of Diagon Alley descend into squabbling, petty and vicious creatures. The more they did, the worse it became.

"Didn't want this," one muttered dejectedly, gripping his woollen status symbol.

Dozens of murmured, remorseful agreements flowed over him like a muted waterfall.

"Maybe we should have asked first?"

There was a moment of penitent reflection.

"Being a free elf is hard work."

x Xx

Prompt: An unseen presence unsettles the denizens of Diagon Alley.

Author's notes: many thanks to my beta for their input and advice.