

Hamsterdammed

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Introduction

“Hamsterdammed” is a clever story about writing from the perspective of an enterprising but controlling hamster named Ernest. Ernest scripts the life of a human Lucine, and Lucine’s life follows the rather dull rhythms of Ernest’s scripts until, one day, Hamsterdam’s Script Submitter fails. Ernest and Lucine both have to learn what it is like to write and live more spontaneously. Peyton Donovan wrote this story for WRS 101.

This wonderfully inventive piece has some important messages about the tension between invention and structure in writing.

Keywords: creativity, drafting, writer’s block, writing process



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² *Writing across the University of Alberta* (WAUA) publishes undergraduate student writing from writing studies courses and courses focused on writing studies practices and scholarship at the University of Alberta. You can find WAUA online at <https://writingacrossuofa.ca/>.

Ten little hamsters slowly glanced back towards the looming office that overlooked them, raised above on a platform. This platform served as an intentional reminder for the little hamsters, constantly providing them with a feeling of inferiority. The little hamsters liked it this way, being constantly reminded of who was the boss. At least they told Ernest that, for the little hamsters, who were just mere specks in the scriptwriting process, wouldn't say otherwise.

Ernest, the lead hamster, emerged from his space. Simultaneously, a loud sigh of relief flowed through the cubicles of Hamsterdam. As the head writer of Hamsterdam, Ernest wore a proud look on his face and held a several-page script in his paw.

“Well, my subordinates, I—I mean we—have done it again!”

A cheer erupted from the cubicles. Ernest smiled, for being the head writer was a very tedious task. He deserved the praise. He tightened his tie, straightened his jacket, and turned toward the Script Submitter. This device allowed his script to be real, applying his written instructions to the human's day. It beeped joyfully as it pulled the script in, and in an instant, the large screen at the front of Hamsterdam began to light up. The screen displayed a first-person view of the human's day to the hamsters. Murmurs and a thin hum of conversation began.

“Oh, Lucine! She's waking up.”

“That script came out just in time. I feel like Ernest has been cutting it close lately—”

“Hey! Shush! You know not to talk about him like that; he'll cut your wheel time!”

Ernest remained blissfully unaware of the words being spoken. He could hear them, but he chose not to listen, for he did not have time for opinions which were evidently inferior to his. Ernest was aware he had been cutting his script submissions close, but this did not faze him one bit. He had never once failed to submit a script on time, and he never would. His routine was perfected, and he had yet to prove himself otherwise.

You see, Ernest always wanted things in three ways: perfect, uncreative, and routine, which is why Lucine had such a simple life. In a way, he kept her on a little hamster wheel, running her through the same pattern every day, a perpetual cycle of mundane efficiency.

As she woke, Lucine already knew what she would wear: a plain sweater with sweatpants, the same as every day. She already knew what her breakfast would be: plain toast and butter, the same as every day. It brought Ernest great satisfaction to write the same script repeatedly, and he was so stubbornly driven to write something perfect that he would

refuse any aid from his colleagues. If a single hamster dared to mention the concept of change, creativity, or, worst of all, drafting, Ernest would snap, but that had yet to happen.

Some of the little hamsters began to march towards the large couch in front of the screen, grabbing popcorn and various snacks. Others went to rest, preparing for another long night of scriptwriting or, more likely, dealing with Ernest as he frustratingly handled all the work. Ernest plopped down in his office chair, observing the screen through the glass wall.

Lucine went to school, as per the script. She engaged socially with no one, only paying attention to her classes. She went straight home at the end of her day. She spoke minimally to her family at dinner, and when they asked her how her day went, she said the same thing as always: “It was fine,” followed by a quick “I am heading upstairs. Goodnight.”

As the screen slowly dimmed and Lucine fell asleep, Ernest shuffled back to his office, seemingly prepared to write another script. He doused his face in cold water, attempting to wake himself up, and stared into the mirror in front of him.

I will write, he thought to himself. I will write and I will maintain simplicity, for simplicity and routine and perfection are the only acceptable way to live.

Ernest sat down in his chair, pulled his typewriter towards him, and took a sip from his water bottle, which hung from the roof next to him. He stretched his paws wide, as he always did before starting a script, and moved about in his seat until he found himself comfortable. He double-checked the ink ribbon and after verifying it was full, checked it once more, just to be safe. His finger met the first key, and he began the script as he always did.

October 16, 2023. Lucine – Day 7,060.

I feel like Ernest has been cutting it close lately...

The little hamster’s words echoed through his head. He shoed them away, taking a sip of his water to try and drown all thoughts of self-doubt.

He attempted to type the basic details of her day: what she would wear, what she would eat. He stumbled over words, forgetting to add in certain details, which typically seemed to flow so easily. His brain came up blank when thinking of the next word to write, and his internal monologue, which usually guided him through his thoughts, went mute. Refusing to draft his writing and aiming for a perfect script first try resulted in many crumpled balls of paper on the floor, all scripts that were not deemed perfect enough. He slouched in frustration, yanking on his whiskers in desperation. Not a single idea popped into his head.

“Why, why is my routine failing me now? Why is it not good enough!?”

Ernest’s head sunk into his desk with a loud thud. A knock came on the door.

“Ernest, everything alright?” a muffled voice asked, one of the hamsters checking in on him. There was no doubt the entirety of Hamsterdam could hear his frustrated groans. His office was made of glass, after all.

“Ernest, do you need help with the script?” another voice asked.

Oh, just lovely! Lovely! They all know what’s going on.

Ernest rose from his desk, his back stiff with stress. He glanced towards the clock. Midnight. He had six hours until Lucine would wake. Six hours to produce a script. Panic filled his body. His stomach twisted into knots they had never been twisted in before. He took a deep breath, shuffled towards the door, and opened it, forcing a calm look onto his face and wiping the endless drops of sweat off his forehead with his tie.

Not only were there two little hamsters, as he had expected, but the entirety of Hamsterdam’s staff stood outside his door, all with wide eyes and a look of worry painted on their faces.

“Oh,” he muttered, “Hello, my subordinates.” He looked towards his shoes in embarrassment, for his staff were never supposed to see him like this. He was perfect, after all, and how could he expect so much of his staff if he could not live up to his own expectations?

“Do you need some help, Ernest?” a voice chimed in from the back of the crowd.

“Yeah, Ernest, we are hired to help you after all. Let us help!” another pleaded.

Ernest shook his head. “I do not need help. Return to your cubicles and continue whatever previous work you were doing.” He shooed them with his paw. “Go on. Tsk. Leave me be. I will be fine. Just a bit tired, that’s all.”

He was lying through his teeth. He needed help. He knew it; they knew it. He would never admit such a vulnerable thing, however.

Most of the little hamsters made their way back to their desks, but one stuck behind.

“Why not try something new, Ernest? You might enjoy being creative for once.” The hamster glanced back towards his coworkers to provide backup on his statement, but they had already fled the scene, fearful of the assault Ernest would throw upon them. He sighed,

“Also, why not attempt drafting your scripts? We can always help revise them. After all, it isn’t like you to not give us *any* work.”

The little hamster began to turn around when Ernest appeared in front of him.

“What did you just say?”

“Well, sir, you do write the same script every time. Hard to make something perfect if you’ve done it thousands of times already.”

A vein began to bulge in Ernest’s forehead. His cheeks grew red in anger. “How *dare* you say such a thing! You have no right. None.” He turned towards the cubicles, attempting to make his point clear to all who attempted to change his ways. “This script concerns me, and me alone. All those who interfere will be writing lines until they collapse. Do I make myself clear?”

A hum of agreement came from the cubicles. Ernest flipped back towards the single little hamster, who was now sweating and quivering. Gone was his confidence to speak up, and what came in its place was unwavering fear. He attempted to make his way back to his cubicle but was cut off by his boss once more.

“Pathetic, what was your name?”

“Lewy.”

“Ah well, Lewy, here is a token of advice from a prolific writer,” Ernest aggressively adjusted his tie, attempting to intimidate the already-shaking hamster. “Learn to keep your mouth shut, and don’t give advice where it isn’t warranted.”

Lewy glanced at Ernest, a crushed look in his eyes. He headed towards his cubicle, carrying an overbearing weight of humiliation on his shoulders.

Ernest made his way to his office, slamming the door behind him. He plopped back down into his chair, pulled the typewriter towards him, and attempted to write again. Lewy’s words replayed in his mind.

You do write the same script every time.

Was that true? Did he constantly repeat himself? Even if he did, was there such an issue with it? He had seemed to perfect his formula when it came to scriptwriting.

His fingers hit the keys again, this time in a more aggressive manner. More crumpled papers ended up scattered around the office. His whiskers were being yanked out in pawfuls now. His tie was tossed on the floor, feeling less like a clothing item and more like a noose.

The clock ticked on—one a.m., two a.m. There were more papers on the floor, but still no script. Three a.m., four a.m. Fewer whiskers on his face, still no script. A writer’s block had engulfed him whole, leaving him to fall into an endless pit of self-doubt and despair. His mind felt foggy. He desperately needed sleep but persisted in vain. He would finish a script. No, not would; he *had* to finish a script.

What will happen to poor Lucine if she falls off her wheel?

Six a.m.

An alarm rang through Hamsterdam. The Script Submitter had yet to engulf any of Ernest’s work. A blank page rested in front of Ernest. The ink ribbon was still full. Ernest drowned in crumpled papers. He had failed. He felt nauseous. He had never failed to submit a script on time.

Little hamsters sprinted around in panic as red lights flashed across their faces. Some ran towards their wheels in the back, and others fainted. Ernest rose from his chair groggily, observing the chaos in front of him. He couldn’t bear to present himself to his subordinates, a wave of shame crushing him, pulling him violently into a stream of panic. No matter how hard he attempted to withstand its violent current that thrashed his mind around in all directions at once, he still sunk.

The screen began to light.

Lucine was waking up.

Ernest stared into the screen.

She woke up stiff and sore, which was quite unusual. She typically felt so rested.

I must have slept poorly, she thought, unaware of the situation deep inside her mind. She groggily made her way towards her closet and for the first time in years, had absolutely no idea what to wear. She dug through her closet, desperate to find something to her taste.

“Gosh, there are too many pairs of sweatpants in here. What is wrong with me?” she scoffed to herself. She reached the far back corner of her closet, which held a bin labelled ‘You don’t like this stuff.’

Huh, I don’t remember ever hating these.

She pulled out a pair of jeans and a white T-shirt. Ernest visibly cringed.

“Lucine! No! Not the jeans! They inhibit your ability to focus; they’re so uncomfortable!” He slouched into his chair, knowing Lucine could hear nothing he said.

With her outfit on, she made her way downstairs.

Hmm... what to eat?

She opened her pantry door and made her way inside. Her eyes lit up seeing the box of Fruit Loops, and she eagerly grabbed it, pouring herself a bowl.

Once again, Ernest cringed. He stood up and began tidying the floor, tossing most of the failed scripts into the trash. There was still time to salvage Lucine’s day. So long as he submitted a script at any point during the day, he could put her back on track, forcing her back onto his wheel of perfection. He threw himself into his desk chair, which croaked under the stress of his movements. He seized the typewriter between his paws and pulled it towards himself violently. He didn’t even bother checking the ink ribbon as per usual. His fingers met the keys with loud thuds.

Lucine made her way to her classes in a more exuberant manner than usual. She spoke to those whom she wouldn’t typically have, those whom Ernest wouldn’t have allowed her to speak to. They were friendly yet seemed off-put by her, one might say... *different* attitude.

Upon entering the library at lunch, Lucine immediately turned towards the stairway. She apparently loved this library, or so her calendar (which she had written under Ernest’s guidance) told her. Ascending several flights of stairs, she entered the fourth floor. It was dead silent. The floor was deserted, save for a few students scattered throughout the overwhelming bookshelves and tables. One could hear a pin drop, a mouse tiptoeing, and the breath of a fly. One could also definitely hear Lucine’s less-quiet-than-usual footsteps as she crept towards an empty table hidden in the back corner of the floor. Encased by books and pure silence, she pulled her notes out of her bag and began to study.

Ernest smiled towards the screen. “Oh, Lucine! You still heed my orders despite a lack of direct communication.” He dropped his head towards the script, which had appeared to make some progress yet was, as per Ernest’s standards, a complete and utter disaster.

Oh well, this will do... I am glad to see that calendar come in handy.

He continued writing, his state so crazed he had thrown caution to the wind. Desperation to control others and to keep Lucine on her wheel coursed through his veins. He didn't feel as if he enjoyed or was even remotely proud of what he was writing; however, he was consumed whole by his need for routine.

The hamsters occasionally glanced at Ernest through the windows, making note of his deranged state. Rumours began to spread.

"I think he has lost it," one hamster groaned.

"Well, yes, I don't disagree," another chimed in joyfully. "But he is working hard, and he even appears to have ended that slump of his!"

"At what cost? You really think whatever he's writing in there is of quality?"

The few gossiping hamsters turned towards the screen, ignoring the anxious nausea that filled their stomachs. Their human appeared to be doing fine, quite better than usual, without Ernest's stranglehold of a script suffocating her lively nature.

"It's a shame Ernest can't see things for how they are." Lewy sighed from his cubicle and allowed himself to doze into a nap.

This is stupid. It's too quiet. It's making me uncomfortable.

Lucine haphazardly tossed her notes in her bag, threw her bag over her shoulder, and marched toward the stairs. She had to get off the fourth floor immediately.

"Why, why did I write that I liked this place?!" Her scream echoed throughout the gloomy stairwell. Lucine put her back to the wall and slid downwards, collapsing into a puddle of confusion. Her fists clenched against her forehead.

What is wrong with me? Someone could see you any second. Get a grip, Lu.

She abruptly stood up, collecting her backpack off the floor. Her hands began fanning her face to prevent an offence of tears from streaming down her cheeks. It was too hard not to cry. She felt amnesic, being completely unable to justify her past actions, behaviours, and motives for an extensive amount of time. She began to yell again, tears finally freeing themselves and pouring down her face, and she marched towards the innocent garbage can in the corner.

"I don't like quiet!" She kicked the garbage can. "I don't like sweatpants!" She kicked it once more. "I don't like anything about me, whoever *that* even is!" She kicked it one last

time, harder than her previous attempts. It spun, hit the wall to the right, and collapsed onto the ground, spewing trash as the lid broke off.

“Shoot.”

She crouched to the floor, feeling slightly disgusted by the feeling of trash on her hands. The stairwell wasn't clean to begin with, but this was just gross.

Consequences of my actions, she thought.

Something sticky touched her hand. Gum. Ew.

As she fought the urge to puke, footsteps began from the top of the stairwell. She heard the conversation between two people, a male and a female. Suddenly, the gum wasn't so gross, and Lucine began panickily throwing heaps of garbage back into the bin. The voices sounded familiar, but Lucine could not think of a name to associate with their booming voices.

“Preston, we're late!” the female voice yelled.

The male scoffed. “Cilla. We're going to the Olive Garden, not something *legitimately* fancy. We can afford to be a few minutes late.”

Cilla and Preston. Lucine's lab partners. The remaining garbage quickly was tossed into the bin, the broken lid tucked against the wall, and the garbage can pushed back into its spot. Lucine wiped her tears with her sleeve.

“Lucine?” Preston looked surprised to see Lucine not sporting her typical sweatsuit and *trying* to socialize. Lucine turned to see her lab partners in front of her. She smiled, attempting to hide her puffy eyes and flushed cheeks.

“Hi, you guys.” *Oh, how I hope they can't see through me right now.*

Cilla was slightly taken aback as well. She shot Preston a confused look. Her perplexion did not kill her kind nature, however, and she and Preston nodded at each other.

“Lu, Preston and I are meeting some people in our lab at the Olive Garden. Would you like to join us?”

Lucine appeared to think for a second. “Sure, why not?”

Preston and Cilla's jaws smacked the floor, their mouths agape in shock. “You mean, you're *not* saying no to us immediately, and you don't have three hours of homework to get through?” Cilla tapped Preston on the back, prompting him to answer.

“Yeah, Lucine, that’s not like *you* at all,” Preston added.

Lucine thought to herself for a second. *Homework? Immediately saying no? What kind of person am I?* “Well, I have just been really busy lately...”

Ernest felt so consumed by the atrocious script in front of him that he failed to look up at the screen once. The other hamsters began observing him closely rather than casually, fearful he would send himself into a cardiac arrest of sorts if he continued to be so unhinged. He appeared crazed. His tie was loosened and thrown over his shoulder. His eyes were bloodshot from a lack of sleep. His fur was a disaster, being pulled in all directions and even matted in some spots. He was far from his usual neat and prim self.

“Ha! Ha! I did it!” Ernest yanked the script from his typewriter joyfully. He quickly rose from his chair, which creaked joyfully being freed from his heavy presence. He yanked open the door to his office, skipping into the common area. The lights in Hamsterdam were beginning to dim. Noise from Lucine’s Olive Garden dinner played through the speakers.

The script entailed Lucine going straight home, studying for several hours, burning every pair of jeans she owned, and being in bed early. There were spelling errors throughout the script. Its structure was undefined and messy. It was quite terrible. Yet Ernest persisted, feeling no more adoration for writing and only viewing it as a chore to control others.

Conversation flowed around the dinner table. There were endless laughs and continuous jokes... and Lucine, for once in a very long time, felt relaxed. She picked up another breadstick from the center of the table and quietly observed the ongoing deliberation between Marshall and Emily, who were apparently in Lucine’s lab. She had clearly failed to ever make note of them.

“How can you *think* that? Jane Austen is not overrated!” Emily scoffed.

“Listen, all I’m saying is that she’s okay. I mean, have you even read *Pride and Prejudice*? Insufferable characters all around! I couldn’t stand any of it.”

Emily’s face began to grow red. The rest of the group started to chuckle, fearing the onslaught her response would bring. She set down her fork and locked eyes with Marshall.

“But you see, you’re not appreciating the bigger picture. Their insufferable nature stems from a place of satire! Perhaps you should re-read it, and this time not on such a surface level.”

The only response Marshall mustered was tossing his unfinished breadstick her way and laughing.

Lucine looked around her, glancing at Emily's joking anger, at the group attempting to ease the argument between the two, and began pondering about a time in her life when she felt so at peace. She would have never gone out like this usually, but she couldn't think of anything better to do with her time.

Why do I constantly reject new things? Why don't I go out like this more?

Ernest watched the gathering through the screen, haphazardly scrambling around Hamsterdam with his script in hand. The other hamsters were asleep, but his crazed state did not seem to wake them. Each time he wandered in front of the screen, he became slowly captivated by the gathering and had to force himself to stay committed to the task at hand. He did not have the time to consider his desires for socialization and entertainment; he *had* to put Lucine back on track.

If I just submit this script, things will return to how they once were. Routine.

He smiled at the thought of Lucine falling back into her hamster wheel, but this idea did not bring him the satisfaction it once did. As laughter from the restaurant filled Hamsterdam, and Lucine appeared happier than usual, his internal thoughts of control became dim, and he felt a different way.

Perhaps the problem, why I failed to submit a script, was because of MY intense devotion to routine and perfection...

"Lucine, you're being awfully quiet. What's wrong?"

Cilla's question pulled Lucine out of her thoughts.

"Oh, nothing. Just adjusting to being out and about, that's all." Lucine smiled through her reply, hoping the group would accept her words and return to their previous discussion.

Preston chimed in,

"Yeah, about that. Lu, why don't you come out with us more? You're always welcome, you know."

Ernest observed the scene and felt something he hadn't felt before.

Was I too harsh?

He turned towards the cubicles where the little hamsters rested.

Why did I always refuse their help?

He slowly made his way through the rows, glancing at each little hamster's face. They all napped at their desks, some cozily wrapped up in blankets, others with their fluffy foreheads on their desks. The lights above Ernest were off, and the only light in Hamsterdam was gleaming from the screen.

Lucine had gone mute. Preston's face turned red.

"I'm sorry, Lu, I didn't mean to—"

"No, you didn't do anything," She sighed. "I don't know why I don't come around more. I wish I knew," she shrugged. "I'm having a good time. It's so strange..."

Emily laughed, "Do you have someone controlling you six out of seven weekdays or something?"

"Ha, no. I just feel more like myself today. It's weird."

Ernest felt a wave of sadness wash over him.

More like myself.

Her words played on a loop through his mind. Ernest had stripped away all aspects of Lucine, everything that had made her, well, her.

Why did it take me so long to realize my faults?

The script became crumpled in his paw as it became a fist in frustration. In an instant, the script was shredded to bits and left in pieces on the floor. These were remnants of his controlling reign of terror imposed upon the hamsters, Lucine, and himself. He traipsed his way towards a certain hamster's cubicle.

"Lewy?" Ernest put his paw on the hamster's shoulder. "I need your help."

Lewy groggily awoke and looked up with tired, annoyed eyes at Ernest.

“I was asleep.”

“Yes, but I need *your* help.”

“Ye,s but, you see, Ernest, you are not overly kind,” Lewy removed Ernest’s paw from his shoulder. “And therefore, I do not want to help you. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I need sleep.”

“Lewy. Come on. I’m trying to become a changed Hamster.” Ernest pleaded with desperation. Lewy, who had set his head back on his desk to sleep once more, refused to even meet his boss’ eyes.

“Liar.”

“How do I write a script full of creativity? How, Lewy?” Ernest sunk to the floor and glanced upward. Lewy had lifted his head, clearly trying to see legitimacy in Ernest’s words. “How do I find passion in my writing again?”

Lewy, for once in his life, pitied the head hamster.

“Well, you try something new.”

“I don’t know *how* to do that. I don’t know how to try anything new.”

Lewy groaned. “Oh, stop with the self-loathing Ernest. It’s annoying.” He stood from his chair and pulled Ernest to his back paws. “Now, where is that mean hamster who embarrassed me in front of my colleagues?”

Ernest looked away in shame. “He is gone.”

Lewy nodded. “He was quite the unfriendly fellow, I will say.”

The two hamsters glanced at the screen. Lucine was giggling like a toddler. Ernest had never heard her laugh, had never *allowed* her to laugh. It was a strange yet welcome noise to his ears. Lewy made note of Ernest’s solemn attitude.

“Maybe you shouldn’t control her so closely?” Lewy shrugged, “She seems pretty happy without your paws gripping her life.”

Ernest sighed.

“I know. I don’t want to even write scripts anymore.”

Lewy thought to himself for a minute.

“Perhaps you should take a break? The rest of Hamsterdam can always fill in. I think you need the rest,” Lewy smiled and started walking toward Ernest’s office. “And when you return from your break, I can show you a revised writing process, full of drafting—”

Ernest attempted to hide his visible cringe.

“And peer review—”

There was no possible way he could hide it now.

“And revision. You’ll never get it right on the first time, Ernest. No matter how talented you are.”

A phrase fell out of Ernest’s mouth, one he had never said before.

“You are right. I apologize, Lewy.”

Lewy shrugged, opening the door to Ernest’s office. He glanced at the erratic state it was in and started picking up crumples of paper off the floor.

“I know you are, and I think an apology is owed to all of Hamsterdam’s staff, including yourself.”

“Merry Christmas!”

Lucine grinned, unwrapping her gift in excitement.

“Oh! The Jane Austen Collection. Thank you, Emily.” She set down her present beside her and tucked it under the tree for safekeeping. Marshall began chuckling.

“Having to convert others now, are we?”

An argument ensued. Preston, Cilla and Lucine looked at each other in unison, nodded, and stood up. The comforting smell of cookies wafted through the air, guiding them towards the kitchen. It was a few days before Christmas, and their annual friend’s gift exchange was taking place at Cilla’s home. Over the past couple of months, Lucine had become quite close with her newfound friends and felt extremely welcomed by them into their circle. She felt an unfamiliar sense of comfort as she looked at the kindness that surrounded her. She smiled to herself and took a bite of a gingersnap.

Ernest watched the gathering displayed on the screen. He, too, smiled, typing the final few words into the first draft of a script. He pulled the papers from his typewriter, excitedly stood up, and made his way toward Lewy's desk.

Hamsterdam was a much more cheerful place. The hamsters were busy consistently, with Ernest giving them a multitude of tasks, such as revising and providing feedback on his scripts, particularly in the creativity aspect, ensuring he was giving Lucine enough room to breathe. It was a refreshing feeling for Ernest to no longer have writing feel like such a chore that had to be completed but rather an enjoyable pastime full of passion.

"Hello, Ernest," Lewy smiled, reaching out for the script in Ernest's hand. "Another one to revise?"

"Yes, I am quite proud of this one. Only a first draft, though, so I am excited for your suggestions to make it even better." He grinned.

"I appreciate your openness to feedback Ernest, and I am sure the rest of Hamsterdam does as well." Lewy's eyes began to scan the paper. "A party? You're finally letting her—"

Ernest nodded. "Of course, she has to go a bit wild once, at least," He began to turn. "I trust the script is safe in your paws?"

"You know it." Lewy immediately got to work. Ernest nodded in approval and strolled to his office, which was no longer raised on a harsh platform but now sat on the ground, the same level as everyone else.

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