

Quicksilver

by Mercury

Hermione surmises that games are afoot during the Intergalactic Quidditch Cup, and they involve team Mercury. She soon realizes that being head of the Ethics committee means little to Mercury's owner or the other members of his team.

Stefdarlin - Meteoroid Beater

Chapter 1 of 7

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Standing at the very top of earth's enormous Quidditch stadium, Hermione relished the feel of the wind as it whipped through her hair. Below, thousands of witches and wizards from other worlds had gathered to support their planet's team in the biggest event of her lifetime. The pure euphoria cast off by their guests was contagious. She often found herself smiling and her heart beating rapidly as she took it all in. The banners, the celebration, the food, the pageantry reminded her of tourneys held in the middle ages she had only read about. And here, there were so many differences; it was boggling just taking it all in.

Beaming proudly, she glanced at the earth rotating languidly on her chest, the moon a quicksilver flash as it circled its mother on her enchanted badge, symbolizing her place among the few chosen for the Intergalactic Games Committee. As a member, it was her duty to ensure the safety, comfort, and conformity of the Intergalactic Quidditch Teams. Presently, teams Mercury and Venus were battling it out to determine who would move on, and she had to admit, it was exciting.

Off to her left, a subtle flash caught her eye, but before she could cast a spell to inspect it, the crowd was roaring around her. A sea of arms rose below her with fingers pointing, directing her attention to the players rocketing back and forth over the field and the large, golden flash zooming near the Venus Seeker. Peering at the hurtling blob of gold, Hermione realized it was a flock of Snidgets, and the Seeker for the Venus team was wavering in his flight, attempting to home in on the actual golden snitch and win the game.

Directly beneath her, Hermione noticed the Seeker for the Mercury team shoot off in the opposite direction. Following his flight path, she spotted the Snitch just ahead of him as he scooped it up into his hand, holding it aloft for the screaming fans and bravely standing atop his broom. Narrowing her eyes at the Seeker, she studied him. He looked vaguely familiar. At that moment, she found herself surrounded by the Snidgets as they breached the stadium wall, searching for freedom.

The wind kicked up again, carrying glitter, champagne mist, and bits of paper with it. A single sliver of parchment caught on her pin. Glancing down, she removed it and stared at it for a moment. Sucking in her breath, her heart seemed to stop in her chest. Though the ink was smudged, she could clearly see that it was part of a sales slip for Snidgets. That could only mean one thing: *Someone was attempting to sabotage the Intergalactic Quidditch Cup. And since team Mercury was the winner of this particular match, she would start her interrogation with them first.*

Shuffling down through the throngs of cheering supporters, Hermione strode determinedly to team Mercury's owners' box. The smell of stale Butterbeer and fish and chips permeated the aisles nearest to the food vendors as she passed, followed by the scent of blood and sweat wafting from the locker rooms. Climbing the stone stairs to the Mercury box, she took a deep breath and knocked on the door.

The door snapped open, lifting her tousled hair in the sudden breeze. Hermione looked up into familiar icy, blue eyes. "Well, well, Granger, I see you've moved up in the universe!" he exclaimed, rising up on his feet to look over her shoulder. "What? No Potty or Weaselbee? How disappointing."

Clenching her jaw, she stood straighter. "And I see you are still the same, Draco. Pity," she seethed. *Now I know why the Mercury Seeker seemed so familiar.* She smiled up at him maliciously.

"Ah, Miss Granger, I had heard you were on the main committee. Now, Draco, make room for our new guest," Lucius murmured from behind them, prompting Draco to move aside.

Stepping through the door, Hermione moved past him with confident strides into the most extravagant stadium box she could have imagined. The walls were adorned with fine silk; her fingers ached with longing to simply touch it. Plush, forest-green chairs lined the alcove, offering the best view of the action happening between the teams in play. On the opposite wall stood a buffet filled with succulent morsels. The smell of garlic, melted butter, seafood, mushrooms, and warm bread mingled, hanging heavily in the room like a blanket, causing her stomach to rumble.

Looking pointedly at her stomach, Lucius smirked, then spread his arms. "Please, sit. Eat. What is ours is yours."

"Thank you, Mr. Malfoy, but I have not come here to indulge in pleasantries. A very serious matter has come to my attention about the Intergalactic Quidditch Cup. I believe one of the teams is trying to sabotage the other teams in an effort to win."

"And naturally you showed up at my door."

"Honestly, I had no idea you were the owner of the Mercury team," she responded, raising her chin higher.

"Father?"

"Yes, yes, Draco. You mustn't keep my new daughter-in-law waiting. I will deal with Miss Granger. You run along."

Smirking momentarily at Hermione, Draco nodded at his father and rushed through the door, bounding down the stairs two at a time.

Spinning on her heel, Hermione faced Lucius, her face flushed with rage. "Deal with me?"

"Merely an expression, my dear girl." Lucius leered, and Hermione crossed her arms.

"Seeing as I am head of the Cup Ethics committee, I find that statement rather offensive, Mr. Malfoy. And I feel that some of my colleagues would find it offensive also, were you to refer to them that way as well."

"Tut, tut, Miss Granger, I was simply relieving Draco of his duties for the night so he could be with his new wife." Clandestinely, he moved behind her. Placing his hands on her shoulders, he leaned in to murmur in her ear, "Surely you can understand the rush a man feels after a hard-won victory."

Sucking in her breath, Hermione whirled around and backed away. "Hard-won?" she asked incredulously. Throwing her head back, she laughed at his attempt to look hurt. Sobering, she added, "You and I both know how you operate, Mr. Malfoy."

"You wound me, truly. May I ask what evidence you have to support your accusations?"

Pulling the scrap of paper from her pocket, she handed it to him. His eyes narrowed as he studied it and handed it back to her. "It looks like a sales slip for Snidgets, very rare birds indeed. Endangered if I recall and illegal to own, let alone buy. What does this have to do with me or team Mercury?"

"The rules state..."

"I don't remember your being overly tedious about rules, Miss Granger, but that aside, I do not recall ever having bought or owned a Snidget in my life."

"Might I point out that your team won tonight because a flock of Snidgets distracted the other team's Seeker?"

"That they did. It was a brilliant stroke of luck. And I was worried I would have to seek out investors. But our win tonight has them coming to me." He smiled.

Disbelieving, Hermione gasped, "Luck? Luck didn't have a thing to do with what happened out there tonight." She stabbed the air, pointing toward the Quidditch field, her voice climbing higher and higher.

Glancing above her shoulder, Lucius brushed past her. "As much as I would love to remain and discuss your theory further, I have a previous engagement with a potential investor. A Quidditch team with Mercury's popularity needs to take care of its members."

"Mr. Malfoy, I believe it would be in your best interest to stay and discuss this with me."

"Actually, someone *will* be discussing it with you, Miss Granger. You see, there are many facets to running an intergalactically popular Quidditch team, and I find it is best to balance roles. May I introduce my... silent partner... to assist you with your *allegations*?" Lucius purred, moving aside to reveal a man Hermione had not known was there.

Opening her eyes wide, Hermione's mouth dropped open, and she glanced over at Lucius, who smiled in a self-indulgent way. "B-But... how? Wha...?"

"My sentiments exactly, Miss Granger," he replied with a voice that tumbled through her veins like fine whiskey, blocking all thoughts and sounds out around her. She didn't even hear the door close when Lucius left the room.

BlueArtemis - Moon Chaser

Chapter 2 of 7

Hermione surmises that games are afoot during the Intergalactic Quidditch Cup, and they involve team Mercury. She soon realizes that being head of the Ethics committee means little to Mercury's owner or the other members of his team.



Once Hermione overcame the shock of hearing that dark chocolate over velvet voice that she'd feared had been lost to her dreams, she closed her mouth and stepped forward, holding out her hand to her erstwhile former professor.

"Professor Snape, it is a pleasure to see you alive and well, even under these circumstances," declared Hermione.

"I am no longer your professor, Miss Granger, or is it Mrs. Weasley now? In any case, that honorific is no longer mine to claim. Mister Snape will do just fine," replied Severus Snape with a smirk.

"It is most definitely Miss Granger. I don't speak to the Weasleys any more. Ronald and I had our differences. He is currently married to Pansy Parkinson under rather questionable circumstances..." Hermione trailed off.

Snape looked at her with amusement. "Well, then you are well rid of that gaggle of ginger menaces, Miss Granger. As you managed to rid yourself of the youngest with such celerity, I feel it bodes well for our association."

"Now, then, sir, as pleased as I am to find you alive and well, this will mean nothing to my investigation. I am quite sure someone on team Mercury procured those Snidgets in order to facilitate their win..." Hermione was getting wound up when all of a sudden Severus interrupted her.

"Now, now, Miss Granger, surely you are not intimating that the Malfoys or I had something to do with this? Lucius and Draco have done everything aboveboard since the end of the war in order to maintain their freedom and build their name and reputation back up. I would certainly not jeopardize my life by playing with it so cheaply. Apparently someone is trying to besmirch our name and character, do you not see?" If he was hiding the truth, he did it very well, Hermione thought.

While he'd been speaking, Severus had been moving closer to Hermione. By the time he had finished his final question, he was almost, but not quite, in her personal space. The low vibrations of his voice practically mesmerized her. Hermione shook her head. The man was dangerous. Not pretty dangerous like Lucius Malfoy, where the beauty of the man and his surroundings were as tempting as the sharpness of his mind, but darker, with sharper edges. His nose was still too large, although it seems he had managed to fix the bump in it, his eyes were dark and fathomless, and he was tall and thin. Strangely, but it looked good together. The scar at his neck was not even particularly noticeable.

"Are you done looking me over, Miss Granger?" Snape asked, a thread of humor underlying his deep voice.

"Oh! I'm sorry, Profess I mean, Mister Snape! I was just so happy to see that you were well. But in any case, can I count on you to stop any more questionable events happening with team Mercury?" asked Hermione.

"Since I do not believe this first action originated with anyone attached to team Mercury, I would be glad to be of assistance," responded Snape.

"Wonderful! I am glad to be working with you," she replied.

Hermione realized the conversation was over and turned to leave. She was quietly pleased to find that Severus was alive and willing to work with her. There had been very few things recently to make her personally happy, so finding one was wonderful. Like catching a Snitch.

She returned to her office in good spirits and started to mentally go through the list of people who might want to cause the Intergalactic Quidditch Cup irreparable harm. She then began to cross-index that list with the inventory of people who might want to cause the Malfoys harm. Part way through, she realized this was going to require actual writing and possibly some Arithmantic calculations. She began to get everything ready for some serious research when she heard a commotion in her fireplace. She looked over and there was Ron, calling frantically through the flames.

"Mione, Mione, please. Come on, give me some tickets to the matches. At least two of them, and good seats, love, come on," he cajoled.

"Ronald Weasley, I have no idea what makes you think that I am going to give you anything. Now get out of my Floo before I hex you!" Hermione was in a good mood, or she would have hexed first.

"Harry won't give me any. He still hasn't quite forgiven me for slipping him and Ginny that love potion. You won't give me any because I wanted to have sex while I was still young. The Parkinsons have enough tickets for everyone but me. What the hell do I have to do to get tickets? Give me yours, you don't like Quidditch anyway!" Ron's conversational skills had not improved with age. Actually, very little of Ron had improved with age.

Hermione pointed her wand at the Floo and muttered under her breath. Ron saw the hex and ducked out as quickly as he could. Hermione returned to her calculations.

The next morning, she was not as sanguine. The starting Seeker for team Neptune was incapacitated. It appeared *someone* had decided to gift all of the Intergalactic teams with kneazles. But not any kneazles. These were special blue-spotted ones. And the only known breeder of blue-spotted kneazles was Lucius Malfoy. It was a well-known fact, at least to anyone who had done their research, that Neptunians were quite allergic to felines of any kind. This was most likely not an accident.

Hermione stormed toward the offices of team Mercury. Her hair was crackling and her eyes were sparkling. She blew through the wards as though they weren't there and demanded to speak to Severus Snape. His secretary took one look at the furious witch and sent her right in.

Hermione was taken aback at the sight meeting her eyes. There was Severus, a small kitten in a basket on his desk, and a rather large, beautiful, haughty-looking kneazle sitting on his shoulder.

"Good morning, Hermione. Would you like a kitten? It appears that Darius Sauterbaum is rather allergic. Unfortunate, don't you think?" asked Severus.

"Unfortunate? He's the starring Seeker! He's the best Seeker in decades! He is known all over the galaxies! He has all the talent and is better-looking than Krum! He was one of the biggest draws to this tournament! Unfortunate?" Hermione's voice had turned louder and shriller with every exclamation point. "You are not only not being helpful but I am quite sure that team Mercury knew exactly what they were doing when they presented everyone with these kittens! Bah. Why would I ever think dealing with you would be any different than any other man? I give up, Mister Snape. I am letting you know right now that team Mercury is going to be under intense scrutiny by my team of investigators. If we find any little thing tying team Mercury to either of the incidents that have made their matches a bit easier, they will be disqualified from the Cup and will be disbarred from International competition." Hermione turned on her heel and stomped out of the office, only to turn back, grab the basket with the kitten and leave once again, leaving a rather amused Snape in her wake.

Two hours later the following diktat was made from the office of the Intergalactic Quidditch Cup committee: *Any team found to be interfering with the natural course of events during the Intergalactic Quidditch Cup will be disqualified and banned from further competition.*

"I told you that would be a bit much, Severus. She went back to calling you Mister Snape," Lucius spoke from the chair in the corner of the room.

"It will be fine, Lucius. Hermione Granger needs a cause to keep her happy. Did you see the way her eyes sparkled? And if you notice, that diktat had to have been written by a Gryffindor. It doesn't say "any team interfering". It says "any team *found* to be interfering". She gave us a loophole to take advantage of. Anyway, no one will ever tie us to any of these little events. What kind of fun would we be having without giving this competition a bit of a Slytherin twist?" asked Severus.

"Too true, my friend. Too true."

A/N: This week's words: celerity, diktat, cynosure, kitten, wand, Knightbus, password.

A/N2: Thank you very much to ladyinthecloak for the beta!

Reviews are appreciated and you can vote for your favourite chapter here: <http://www.livejournal.com/poll/?id=1486306> The poll closes on Sunday.

sunny33 - Asteroid Beater

Chapter 3 of 7

Hermione surmises that games are afoot during the Intergalactic Quidditch Cup, and they involve team Mercury. She soon realizes that being head of the Ethics committee means little to Mercury's owner or the other members of his team.



As his business partner refilled their glasses with a fine Chateau Margaux, Severus sidled closer to the fireplace. A blur of movement later and he had captured the brightly coloured beetle lurking amidst the fleur-de-lys pattern on the wallpaper above the mantel.

"What have we here?" he asked as he examined the struggling insect.

"Stop tormenting the creature and try this wine, Severus," Lucius demanded, holding aloft the glass glowing incarnadine in the stream of sunlight from the window. He turned and glanced at his friend. "What is your fascination with the slimy and sticky creatures of this world? I suppose you want to collect it for your laboratory."

"I believe this may be a somewhat pathetic specimen of a Lesser-Spotted Falsidicus Veneficus. They are useful in some potions, but the effort required to extract the useful components is hardly worth it," Severus explained as he prodded the now desperate beetle's underbelly. "One has to carefully peel the carapace from the specimen, then drop the remains into strong acid to deactivate the potentially poisonous residue. Of course, I could simply squash the thing."

"Now, now, Severus. Just toss it out of the window. I'll place an Insect-Repelling Charm on the doors and windows, and we shall not be bothered again."

"If I must," Severus grumbled as he flung the beetle unceremoniously outside.

Pausing briefly in the outer office, Draco flung off his gloves in disgust. How could he prove himself as a brilliant Seeker if his opponents were always incapacitated? Team Neptune's replacement Seeker had been a poor substitute for the challenge he had anticipated from Sauterbaum. About to enter the inner sanctum, his hand stayed as he heard his father speak.

"Now, Severus. Are you planning to tell what that was all about, or do I need to ply you with more of the contents of my wine cellar?"

"That beetle, my dear friend, was more of a pest than you realise. The inimitable Rita Skeeter in Animagus form and assiduously spying as is her wont."

"But for whom? You know none of the major newspapers and magazines will employ her since that fiasco involving Celestine Warbeck and Lockhart. She lost all credibility with the drivel she wrote then."

"I suspect her employer is not a member of the press, but someone who stands to gain from knowledge of our business."

"The same someone who is trying to set us up as cheats in this competition?"

"The very same. Hence my comments regarding Granger. Speaking of which, I must commend you on your immediate understanding of my ploy."

"But what were you trying to achieve, Severus? If this person is attempting to undermine our credibility, how does acting the guilty party aid our cause?"

"Confusion, Lucius. Let them think we are happy with their manipulations, and they will become careless. Sooner or later, they will leave us a clue to their identity. And besides, Granger will be unable to resist the challenge of uncovering our guilt, although there are other things I'd rather she uncovered."

"Hear, hear. A toast to the delectable Miss Granger."

"Miss Granger!"

Draco's dismay at the threat to his parent's reputation was overcome by astonishment at the lascivious direction in which the conversation had turned. Hermione Granger an object of desire? For his *father*? For *Snape*? For both *together*? What would his mother say?

"Don't just stand there, son. Come in and celebrate your victory!"

His father's voice pierced his bubble of indecision as he wavered on the brink of leaving without announcing his presence. Assuming the expected cocky expression, Draco joined his team managers in a new toast to team Mercury and the vagaries of Madam Fortune.

"Those bloody Slytherins! If they think they can get away with this, they'll be sadly mistaken!" Hermione ranted as she scooped up the pile of letters of complaint and accusation smothering her desk. Pointing her wand at the window, she blocked entry to any further owls and likewise warded the fireplace. Team Mercury's managers were about to discover how unwise it was to upset a certain Gryffindor witch.

The match that afternoon had been a pure farce. Team Jupiter, always known for their relentless self-aggrandisement, had surpassed themselves in a display reminiscent of the worst moments of Caligula's reign. Whilst inured to such behaviour by virtue of association with Quidditch players in general, Hermione was aware Beaters trying to score goals with the Bludgers and Chasers flying into the stadium grandstand to sign autographs during the game was simply not normal. The fine aerobatic display Ichbaine Figjam put on for his adoring fans was hardly uncharacteristic, but ignoring the Snitch flying around his head was suspicious to say the least.

Attempts to interview the players after the match, easily won by none other than team Mercury, revealed only a pre-game gift of chocolates, the last of which, and only evidence, having been eaten by the now disgraced blue-spotted kneazle kitten lurking under her desk.

Grasping the incriminating scroll in her hand, she left her office and Apparated to the stadium to find her quarry.

"Miss Granger. What a pleasure it is to see you again so soon. Do come in," Lucius purred, a gleam of something as yet undetermined in his eyes.

"The pleasure will be all mine, bringing you two to justice." She tossed the scroll onto the large desk behind which Severus Snape sat. "Ego Inflatus. Heard of it, Snape?"

"If you have that scroll, you know damned well I invented it, *Granger*. What of it?"

"The members of team Jupiter were clearly dosed with Ego Inflatus this afternoon, causing them to lose the match. I have read the instructions for the brewing of that potion. Only the most skilled Potions masters can manage the complexity of the process. Someone such as you, Snape."

Severus's smile was disconcerting. "While I appreciate the compliment, Granger, there are several other Potions masters who could brew the potion."

"Yes. In Asia and South America. And the potion does not travel well. Forgive me for assuming the obvious. Now, do I have your permission to search these offices, or shall I report this to the Ministry? I believe that potion is restricted to medicinal use only." Hands on hips, Hermione glared at the two apparently unconcerned wizards.

"Feel free, Miss Granger. We have nothing to hide." Lucius waved his hand around the office, inviting her scrutiny as he and Severus left the room.

Twenty minutes later a dishevelled witch emerged, bearing only a small vial containing a bright blue liquid.

"Performance Enhancer, Mr Malfoy?"

Severus snorted as his friend's arrogant smirk faded.

"Er... that was not supposed to be in there. But it's not illegal. Even we Malfoys are subject to stress occasionally, and since the divorce..."

"I'm not interested in your sexual difficulties, Malfoy, just your obvious difficulty with telling the truth. This is not over. Expect to hear from me again soon." She turned on her heel, hair and robes flying, and left the two men to contemplate their team's precarious future in the Intergalactic Quidditch League.

Lucius moved somewhat awkwardly over to the desk where Hermione had deposited the vial of potion. With a flick, he disposed of the vial and its contents.

"Well, I won't be needing *that* any longer," he declared.

Severus cast his eyes over his friend's lean form and smirked. "I'm pleased it's not just me she has that effect on."

"You too?"

Severus nodded his rueful agreement.

Hermione stepped outside and briefly leaned against the wall as she gathered her scattered thoughts. Unsure which of the two men had unsettled her so, she sighed and looked up to find an oddly contemplative Draco Malfoy before her.

"Er... Granger," he began. "May I have a moment of your time?"

A Malfoy behaving diffidently was almost as disturbing as the mention of Lucius and sex in the same sentence had been a few minutes earlier. Nothing good could ever come of it.

"Yes, Draco. How can I help you? I don't suppose you have a sudden urge to confess all and save me a load of paperwork, do you?"

"You don't understand. My father... he's being framed. Someone is deliberately causing trouble and making it look like we are responsible. You may not realise, Granger, but we have worked damned hard to get our Quidditch team recognised in the Intergalactic League and have been winning matches over the last twelve months on merit alone. Father and Severus have us practising endlessly and have hired the best coaches to get us to where we are." His usually perfect coiffure bore evidence of his distress as he ran his hands through his hair once again.

"You know what it was like after Voldemort fell. No-one wanted to associate with us. The only reason I play for the Mercurians is because no-one here would even allow me to try out for a team. Why would we undermine all our efforts to regain respectability by cheating now?"

"Forgive me if I'm sceptical, Draco, but your family has rarely seemed to need justification for their behaviour in the past," Hermione replied. "Do you have any evidence you are being set up? Why has your father not insisted upon an enquiry? I know Sev... er Snape suggested malfeasance on someone else's part after the first match, but surely if they were innocent, they would be more proactive about finding the culprit?"

"I know. It looks bad, but I happened to overhear a conversation between father and Severus two days ago. I think they are trying to flush out the person behind this themselves. From what I heard, they believed you would be more likely to pursue the case if you thought *they* were the guilty parties."

Hermione studied the young wizard's face for a few moments as he described the circumstances in which he obtained his information. For the first time since she had met him so many years previously at Hogwarts, he appeared genuinely sincere.

"But what if *you* are being played, Draco? How do you know they weren't fully aware you were outside the door and staged that conversation deliberately, knowing you would come to me with your concerns, thus casting doubt over my investigation?" For one moment she felt ashamed as she saw the fleeting hurt in his eyes before he stiffened his back and forced a laugh.

"Granger, that's so convoluted it makes my brain hurt. Even we Slytherins are not that devious. Besides, encouraging you to continue to work on this case wouldn't help them if they were behind the incidents."

"Possibly. But I will still reserve judgement. Rest assured, Draco, I will not rest until those behind this are exposed and suitably punished. Preferably painfully and slowly. You had better hope your father *is* innocent, because if he isn't, he'll need more than a Performance Enhancing potion."

"A Performance Enhancing potion? As if my father would ever need that!"

Draco shook his head in wonder at the very suggestion of a Malfoy being less than virile as he walked away from a reluctantly smiling Hermione Granger.

A/N: Thanks to ladyinthecloak for checking this.

Falsidicus Venificus = lying witch.

Keywords used: incarnadine, laboratory, assiduous(ly), mother, inure(d), Hogwarts. I couldn't find a spot for sartorial.

Please don't forget to review. Team Mercury gains points for every review given. We are also awarded points for every vote cast, which you can do on the LJ community [potterplace](#).

Amita - Comet Chaser

Chapter 4 of 7

Hermione surmises that games are afoot during the Intergalactic Quidditch Cup, and they involve team Mercury. She soon realizes that being head of the Ethics committee means little to Mercury's owner or the other members of his team.



The delegation had gathered in a room close to the Ministry of Magic.

"Is the first diversion in place?"

"Yes, it's in place."

"I'm certain something's happening."

"Nonsense. It's all quiet on the Quidditch front," said Ron. "Team Mercury isn't even playing this week."

"I know. It's an exhibition game the Earth All Stars versus the Solar All Stars with the proceeds going to charity."

"So, what's the problem?" asked Harry.

"Everyone thinks it's a fun event for a good cause. Everyone's guard is down, the perfect opportunity for those Mercurians."

"We're on to them, Hermione, and those simple-minded prats are focused on winning the tournament," said Harry.

"Even villains take a day off," said Ron. "You're disappointed because you don't have an excuse to confront two handsome wizards. I bet they've been flattering you."

She turned to Percy for support, but he was deep into filling out administrative request forms and writing memoranda. No one was constantly vigilant anymore. She left Ron and Harry to their argument about the best Keeper and Percy to his paperwork.

The lack of response from her comrades had left her frustrated. Keeping the Mercurians in line and the confrontations with Severus she meant Mr. Snape along with her ambiguous feelings about Mr. Snape had left her exhausted. Being civil to Ron, who had suddenly appeared on the committee, had taxed her to the limit. She would take the rest of the day off.

Her thoughts drifted toward an austere wizard. Being dedicated to one's profession was praiseworthy, but there was such a thing as overdoing it. Didn't he ever do a jigsaw puzzle or play Sudoku or spend time on anything just for fun. How was she to relate to him in a relaxed manner? Would life with him be a series of intense work-days?

Lost in thought, she drifted to the noise and merriment of the Home Team Center. A pair at the edge of the crowd had a table set up under a banner that read "Support Your Home Team," and they were offering a chance to bet on the Earth All Stars at odds of one-to-one. She considered that strange since the Solar All Stars were the big favorites, but people were demonstrating their faith and support by buying tickets.

Oh, why not? she thought and bought a one-Galleon ticket.

She admired the sport paraphernalia and was tempted to buy a banner, but she had to remain outwardly neutral. As she was hesitating, there was a disturbance at the table taking bets. The two manning the table were refusing to sell any more tickets and telling people to come back later. Before she left, they were taking bets again.

The next day she wandered over to the alien sector where another betting table was selling tickets at two-to-one in favor of the Solar All Stars. Hermione remembered the different odds for the tickets sold to Earth Team supporters and smiled. Emotion ruled the day. The two taking the bets were constantly consulting a communication device, and once, they announced they couldn't sell any more tickets until certain funds had been cleared. An hour later, they were back in business.

The rational part of her that favored the better odds warred with the loyal part of her that had bought the Earth Team ticket. Suddenly, the parties and pep rallies weren't fun, and she headed home.

Her dreams that night consisted of the kitten chasing two Galleons alternating with one Galleon chasing the kitten while Crookshanks cried out, "Beware the odds of Mercury." As she scrambled the breakfast eggs, it struck her. It couldn't be true. It had to be true. It wasn't the Mercurians this time. She only knew one wizard capable of this. No, not even he would do such a thing. This was terrible. Wow, this was brilliant.

"That tosser is out to make some quick silver at everyone's expense," she told her pets. "Wait 'til I explain this Arithmancy scheme to Ron and Harry." She reconsidered. "Well, maybe it's better if I act alone."

She faced Crookshanks and the kitten. "You know this is strictly business and Ron's accusations are false, don't you? Of course, you do."

The delegation reviewed their plans.

"We have probed deeply into the nature of Brit wizard society. It needs a hero."

"Their famous saga sings of a young person with hairy feet who retrieves the wand ExElder from the crux of the Lady of the Knight, undertakes a perilous trip with his dining-mates to locate the source of power and nearly dies while expelling a circular table of ring-eaters to their doom."

"Touching."

"It must be full of Earth-symbolism; I don't understand it."

"Be that as it may, the 'masterminds' didn't believe we could act without their guidance, but we were able, by a careful and clever analysis, to identify the key individual. Now, we'll show them what we can do."

"It's time for the second part of our plan to isolate the essential Earth-person from the people who could offer protection."

Ron wandered through the alien stalls and displays as he had been doing for weeks. It was pleasant to be distracted, and he was beginning to make some sense out of the wild images that beat on him from all directions. There was usually a gaiety here although after the last game, the ladies in one booth were silently crying. He wondered if their hopes of moving to Earth had been dashed. And they were such kind and lovely ladies. He wouldn't mind comforting them or even keeping them. He imagined basking in their gratitude. But gratitude never lasted for long. Besides, maybe all the females from that planet were very intelligent. He shuddered.

Tonight, there was something new. He had heard about it before he had left the Ministry building. In the Terran sector, they were offering an opportunity to bet on the next game, but if he had heard correctly, the odds in the Terran sector were one-to-one on a team with little chance of winning. Here, the odds were a more realistic two-to-one. He weighed the possibilities of coming out ahead, suppressed a guilty twinge, and bought a ticket for the Solar All Stars. His salary wasn't that great, and he had a lot of catching up to do in the wealth department.

He caught a familiar aroma. The aliens celebrated the variety and abundance of Earth cuisine even though, in their hands, it came out different. He had been enjoying the difference, but tonight the scent was very earthlike. He followed his nose to a stand that advertised fish and chips. No, it didn't advertise fish and chips. It offered fish and chips, but it advertised CosmicSauce. He elbowed his way through a crowd of enthusiastic Terrans and placed an order. The chef flourished a newspaper wrap of the Brit basic and, with a bigger flourish, lightly sprinkled the condiment over it. Ron took a bite. He couldn't help it; he lived the cliché of a smile spreading from ear to ear. He had to have that sauce. He joined a long line of people waiting to buy it by the case.

"Did you plant the final diversion?"

"Of course."

After Ron had left the Ministry building, the magazine, *Witches of Venus*, lay between Harry and Percy like a moral challenge.

"Too bad Ron's so restless these days. He could assess this publication better than either of us."

The other wizard reluctantly picked up the publication. "We'll have to check if there's a wee bit too little of a costume in any of the photos, and we'll have to examine every page for nefarious material. They don't think like us, you know. I'm certain they're the decent sort, but they're decent by their standards."

There was a rustle of pages being turned. "Hmm. A stellar spread. This is going to require some attention."

"This is going to work. This is going to work. The sun will rise on us."

"Stay calm. Don't number your egg-layers until they've broken out of the shell."

She burst into his office. "I know what you're doing, you ... you pilchard."

Severus crammed his copy of *Witches of Venus* into the top drawer of his desk. "Do you really," he said.

"Yes, and you've got to stop it," she said.

He didn't want to stop. In honor of the interplanetary competition, the magazine had an astrological theme for its photography. The Taurus model resembled the eighteen-year-old Molly Prewett. *Arthur, you lucky twit*. As soon as he could tear his eyes away from Molly, er, the Venusian model, the Gemini twins, resembling the twenty-year-old Andromeda Black, awaited his divided attention.

His attention was shifting to an overdressed overachiever. Duty unto everlasting dullness. Didn't she ever relax and have fun?

"Look," she was saying, "it's an exercise in Arithmancy."

Perhaps if we subtracted some clothes, he thought.

She waved her wand, creating symbols in the air. "Suppose we have k bets on Team A at one-to-one and n bets on Team B at two-to-one."

What are the odds she's wearing knickers? he wondered.

She continued waving her wand. "If Team A wins, you collect k minus n Galleons; if Team B wins, you collect $2n$ minus k Galleons."

I have a wand. If I wave it, can I collect you minus your inhibitions?

"Both are positive if k is between n and $2n$," she announced. "You make a profit with either outcome."

I'd be positive if I were between something. And I'd profit from the outcome.

"That's why you have to stop selling tickets every once in a while: to preserve those proportions," she said.

Ah, yes, let's preserve your lovely proportions. His eyes took in the harmony of her spheres. *Everything is number.*

She looked at him admiringly. "That's brilliant unethical, but brilliant."

"Are you suggesting we set up a gambling scam?" he asked. *Keep looking at me like that.*

"What," she said. "Aren't you doing this?"

She recovered her train of thought. "You hid something when I walked in. I bet it's the gambling tabulation."

"No," he said, pulling out another magazine. "It's a crossword puzzle. What's a Regency romance novel word for wallflower?"

"Antidote," she said, "to love."

"What's an eight-letter word for diligent?"

"Sedulous."

What's a nine-letter word for cheap souvenir?"

"Tchotchke," she said.

She gave him a critical look. "You were acting pretty suspicious for a crossword puzzle."

"You have me jumpy from your accusations," he said. "Care to make amends by helping me finish this one?" He held up *The Big Book of Crossword Puzzles*. "And do another?"

She pulled up a chair.

"We're almost there. Once we remove the key person, Brit society will collapse. We win."

"One small step for a Terran, a giant leap for us."

The wizard who had not committed to examining the Venus publication locked his papers in his desk, threw on his cloak, and stepped into the night. And into those waiting for him.

They pounced.

They delivered their ultimatum to the Brits.

Surrender. We have Percy at our mercy.

Keywords used: antidote, sedulous, and tchotchke.

Reviews give us points. As do votes cast, which you can do [here](#).

Hechicera - Gravity Keeper

Chapter 5 of 7

Hermione surmises that games are afoot during the Intergalactic Quidditch Cup, and they involve team Mercury. She soon realizes that being head of the Ethics committee means little to Mercury's owner or the other members of his team.



A/N: My apologies to C S Lewis for so shamelessly ripping off a scene from The Magician's Nephew. And yes, I know that a narthex is part of a church, but it's always sounded like an exotic animal to me. The ansible is the invention of Ursula LeGuin, and we all know where tribbles came from.

All the clues are from the Sunday, Nov 15, 2009 New York Times crossword.

Thanks to exartemarte for Britpicking!

keywords used: treacle fudge, foofaraw, storeroom

The hostage was not doing at all well, and its captors were baffled. They had, after all, watered it generously and sprinkled it with a variety of the nourishment pellets recommended in *Caring for Your Pet Human*.

"I can't understand it," said the gamekeeper, curling a tentacle round a pellet labelled "Diced Tomatoes" and tossing it down into the enclosure. "Look...not only does it not leap for the nourishment, it actually flinches away from it." He flung the pamphlet away in disgust. "This clearly is not worth the narthex skin it's printed on."

The cultural attaché started to speak, but decided, on reflection, to keep his speech orifice shut: this was clearly not the time to inform his colleague of the Earthlings' disappointing lack of response to yesterday's ultimatum from the Committee to Undermine the Nations of Terra.

It was almost as though they did not want it back.

Furious, Hermione dropped a stack of the previous day's newspapers onto the table.

"Really, Snape? Really? Percy *Weasley*?!"

"I assure you, I have no idea what you're wittering on about."

She snatched up a copy of the *Sydney Sorcerer*. "And this organization has Lucius Malfoy written all over it! We're the complete laughingstock of the English-speaking wizarding world!"

Snape took the paper from her and regarded the headline with a smirk. "British Ministry Official Trapped by C.U.N.T.," he read. "You must admit, it is rather amusing."

"I admit nothing of the sort," she said. *Must not imagine Percy Weasley stuck in a giant...*

Snape was leafing through the pile of newspapers. "Is there by any chance a *New York Necromancer* among this collection?"

"Yes. I believe it's the one with 'Who is C.U.N.T Holding British Undersecretary?' in 72-point type. Why?"

He pulled a newspaper from the middle of the pile. "Their Sunday edition has the best crosswords anywhere."

"Is that all you care about? Your bloody crosswords?"

He folded the paper to reveal the puzzle, then said mildly, "You seemed to enjoy doing them with me, if I recall correctly."

"Well... yes, I suppose I did."

"*Source of black diamonds*, eight letters."

"Coal yard," she said without thinking. And then, in an unconvincing voice, "I really should get back to the Ministry offices to see if there's any news about Percy. *Trapped in the giant...*

"What's a five-letter word for *Ply with liquor*?"

"Erm... besot." She had moved over to sit beside him on the sofa.

He shifted slightly so that his leg was in contact with hers. "Care to make it interesting?" he asked.

The gamekeeper's daughter had taken an interest in the hostage, and it actually appeared to be faring a little better. She had named it "Wankers," as that seemed to be the sound it made most vigorously and often, and had experimented with different foodstuffs until she found two that it was willing to consume. The first was the embryonic form of certain flightless birds, available in the same shops in which he had bought the variety of rejected food pellets. Through trial and error...she really was a patient child, and good with animals, and the gamekeeper held a secret hope that she would grow up to follow in his podprints, career-wise...she had discovered that Wankers consumed the embryos with much more enthusiasm if they were first heated to the point of coagulation.

The other food was a brownish paste labeled "Treacle Fudge" that had been wrapped in a clear skin of some sort. It so resembled the waste produced periodically by the hostage that the gamekeeper had been led to speculate that humans practiced some sort of recycling of their digestive byproducts, but his daughter's attempt to test this theory had been disappointing.

At the moment she was leading the hostage around by a cord tied around its midsection. "Papa," she said, "I want to give Wankers a bath."

"Why, precious?"

"Papa, can't you smell him? He's really quite revolting. Plus I think it's time for him to molt."

"Do humans molt?"

"Oh, yes, Papa, some of them more than once a day. They peel off their outer skin, and a new one grows overnight." She waved her antennae at him coyly...she knew he could never resist it when she did the larva-antennae.

"Oh, all right, I suppose. There's some scouring solution in the storeroom. Just make sure you don't leave a mess on the floor." He turned to his assistant. "No word from the Terrans yet?"

"Not a squeak. We've sent them another letter, with a bit of its cephalic fibers as proof that we do indeed have it captive, but that hasn't produced a response either."

"Budding salt-pit!"

"Sir, language! But yes, indeed."

Fucking hell.

This was not going at all the way she had planned. After those first two clues, she had missed five in a row (Laurel and Hardy flick [1949], "What's going on" singer, Some wraps, Show grps., and Some Juilliard students) whereas Snape had instantly produced even the most arcane words (trefoil) and Muggle culture references ('Rachel' of Mean Girls). As a result, he was still as fully clothed as he had been when she walked in while she was missing both socks, both shoes, and her hair scrunchy.

"Let me see," he said, scrutinizing the puzzle with a wicked look, "how about...*'Mad Men'* extra, five letters?"

What the bloody hell was Mad Men?

"Ends with an o," he added helpfully.

"Bugger," she said.

"I'm afraid not," he said. "So, what will it be, Miss Granger? The trousers or the jumper?"

"Neither," she said, reaching underneath her jumper to unfasten her bra and pull it out.

"How *do* you girls do that?" he said. "I've never understood it. And, my, what an insubstantial little thing this is. I wonder you bother to wear it at all."

He rubbed the lace slowly between thumb and fingers, and the look he gave her made her suddenly aware of the roughness of the wool against her hardening nipples.

She picked up the newspaper. "*Three trios*, five letters."

"Nonet," he said without hesitation.

"Fuck."

"He's the same color all over now."

"Yes, Papa, and he smells ever so much better."

He peered more closely at the hostage. "I thought humans didn't have tentacles."

"It's only a vestigial one, I think. I tried to teach him to pick up sticks with it, but it didn't work."

The cultural attaché oozed into the room, looking apprehensive.

"Any news?" asked the gamekeeper.

"I'm afraid so. The British Ministry have refused to enter into any negotiations whatsoever."

"They won't even talk to us?"

"It would appear not."

"Then what the salt are we going to do with him?"

There was a strangled shriek from Wankers as the gamekeeper's daughter began waving him about in the air. "Papa, Papa, can I keep him? Please please please?"

He tried to look stern. "Remember what happened last time? Besides, your mother would never stand for it."

"Oh, please, Papa, I promise, I'll be so responsible this time...I'll clean his litterbox and everything."

"Well..." he began, and she threw three of her free tentacles around him. "As long as it's all right with your mother. And stop flinging him about like that...you'll break his notochord, and they always die if you do that."

She was down to her jumper and knickers, having lost her trousers to *Texas State Athlete*, six letters. Snape had answered "Fahd, of course," to *Late Saudi king*, four letters, and was taking his time picking out her next clue, running his finger down the page with maddening deliberation.

"I think this will do," he said finally, a slow smile spreading across his features. *'Indiana/Michigan natives*, six letters."

"Bloody hell! Are all the clues in this sodding puzzle about America?"

"It's not the *Nottingham Necromancer*, Granger."

There was a long pause.

"Would you like some help with that jumper?"

"I told Mummy you said it was all right," said the gamekeeper's daughter happily. She had wrapped Wankers in a tribble-fur blanket...remembering at the very last minute to uncover his breathing orifices...and was pushing him about the room in a packing-crate pram. "I can't wait to get back home with him...all the girls in my class are going to be soooo jealous!"

The cultural attaché poked an antenna through the doorway. "Your wife's on the ansible, sir...she says it's urgent."

Well, this was... different. Who would have thought Snape... ohh now that was nice. Little soft kisses, trailing down her neck and across her collarbone. His gentle hand, lifting her naked breast to his lips, while with the other hand he hooked a finger into the elastic of her knickers and began slowly to draw them downward.

She smacked at his hand. "You haven't... earned... the knickers yet," she said unsteadily.

His voice was muffled against her chest. "The current state of my cock, four letters." He had not stopped pulling her knickers down.

There was a soft whoosh.

"Oh, dear, I seem to be interrupting something. My profound apologies."

"Merlin's balls, Lucius, have I not asked you repeatedly *not* to Floo into my rooms uninvited?"

Hermione had snatched up an issue of *The Philadelphia FooFaraw* and was clasping it in front of her. Malfoy tilted his head to read the headline ("C.U.N.T Claims Responsibility for Percy Weasley's Disappearance") and then clucked his tongue disapprovingly.

"Was ever a newspaper so appropriately named?" he drawled. "That rag is all color pictures and talking type, and no substance whatsoever. I can't believe you spent good money on it."

He was looking frankly at the parts of Hermione that the paper was not large enough to cover.

"Mr Malfoy, do you *mind*?"

"Oh, not a bit, I assure you. Severus, I just dropped by to give you a bit of news and to ask if I might have yesterday's *Necromancer* back, if you're done with the crossword. Some of us actually read the articles, you know."

Hermione stared at Snape. "You already *had* that paper? You'd already *done* that crossword? You cheating bastard!"

Unruffled, he turned to Malfoy. "You said you had a bit of news, Lucius?"

"News, yes. They've found Percy Weasley. Turned up at Marble Arch, as naked as the day he was born."

"Just wandering about?" asked Snape.

"No, curled up in fetal position on top of the arch."

"Is he all right?" asked Hermione.

"A bit the worse for wear, but nothing a bottle of Firewhisky and a week in bed won't cure."

"Excellent," said Snape. "And now, I believe you were just leaving."

A/N: We all thrive on reviews. If you like what you've read, please consider voting for [us here](#).

karelia - Black Hole Chaser

Chapter 6 of 7

Hermione surmises that games are afoot during the Intergalactic Quidditch Cup, and they involve team Mercury. She soon realizes that being head of the Ethics committee means little to Mercury's owner or the other members of his team.



Lucius pouted to himself as he stepped out of his fireplace. *Why does she prefer him? What does she see in him? My hair looks better, my clothing is more elegant, I have more style, yet Granger chooses Severus...* he thought, disgruntled, as he poured himself a snifter of Cognac and sat down on the sofa.

The stream of his musings brought his attention to the subject of Percy Weasley. *What a prat!* he thought, sipping the golden liquid. *And who was the idiot who thought we'd want him back...? That C.U.N.T. committee... what a name... could...no, should...have kept him... I wonder who is behind it...* Lucius stared into the fireplace, and his mind wandered back to the scene he'd just left. *I want her, too...*

Putting the snifter down on the coffee table, he stood abruptly. *I'll wait for her in front of her home. Perhaps she'll see reason!* His mind made up and his person filled with sudden hope and anticipation, Lucius picked up and reduced a bottle of Veuve Cliquot to fit in his pocket, walked to the front door, picked up his cloak, and exited the manor ready to Apparate the moment he would leave the wards behind.

He paled as he saw the number on her flat. *Really, now is not the time for my triskaidekaphobia to flare up!* Irritated, Lucius took his wand and cloaked the number, then found a bench underneath a lone tree. It was easier to sit down and wait for her, he decided. After all, the wait might be long. Too long probably...

Lucius was busy brooding over the events of the day when some movement in the corner of his eye caught his attention. There! He frowned when the tall man disappeared through a closed window of Granger's flat. *Damn Saturnians! I wish they couldn't ignore solid material like they do. I bet they go snooping around everywhere with that ability!*

What to do, what to do... It was tempting to Apparate to his office and inform Granger of her flat being investigated by a Saturnian, but before Lucius considered that Severus had likely closed the Floo connection, the tall man reappeared, holding a kitten in his arm, and climbed back to the top of the stone steps.

Lucius rose briskly, crossed the deserted street in swift strides, taking his wand out, and stopped the Saturnian at the bottom of the stone steps. "Oh, no, you don't," he hissed. "Theft is a punishable crime in every country on this planet, and if you think you can get away with that just because of your alien status, you're wrong."

The Saturnian's eyes widened, and he took a step backwards.

"Meow." The kitten looked at Lucius, trying to free itself from the grip of the man.

The blond wizard grabbed it with one hand, the other still holding the Saturnian at wand point. "One step and I'll bind you." His voice was threateningly low.

"Meow." The kitten snuggled into Lucius's elbow, and he managed to bend his hand enough to scratch its head. The kitten started to purr. Lucius thought it was a rather pretty kitten, even if it hadn't sprung from his top litter. He moved to a more comfortable position, his hand still scratching the furry creature, his wand still pointed at the Saturnian, and waited for Granger to turn up.

"You know..." Snape said slowly, "this place is decidedly too uncomfortable for what we have in mind... And besides, I'd hate to be disturbed again." His hands were trailing lightly around her breasts.

Hermione suppressed the shiver of delight and asked, "And *what* do we have in mind?" She studied his hands as they explored her skin inch by inch. His fingers were long and slim and very white and looked positively elegant as they descended further.

"Not solving crossword puzzles, that's for certain," he rumbled into her ear, and this time it was his voice that made her shiver.

Judging by the way things have been going, I'm in for a good time, Hermione thought, not even realising that for the first time, she put pleasure before duty. "We could go to my place. It's small but cosy."

"Certainly one of your better ideas," Snape said, again into her ear, his voice equally low. He smirked at the sight of goose bumps on her skin. "Ah, like it?"

Could his voice lower further? Hermione wondered. "I do like it, yes." Her eyes meeting his, she added, "So? My place?" *Damn. I'm sounding far too keen.*

Snape lazily reached for his wand, and instantly, both were fully dressed. "Take your cloak. It's cold out. I assume your flat is warded?"

"Yes. We'll have to Apparate to the front of the steps," Hermione said as she pulled her cloak around her, anticipating the nightly cold. Taking his proffered arm, they Apparated together to the front of Hermione's flat, startling Lucius.

"Meow?" The kitten looked at its familiar and purred.

"Lucius. What are you doing here?" Snape asked, frowning.

"I... Well..." Lucius pointed at the Saturnian who was now in a full Body-bind, glaring fiercely at his captor. "I had a hunch these C.U.N.T. aliens were up to something, so I Apparated here. And found this... abomination breaking into Miss Granger's flat to kidnap her familiar. You know how they can walk through glass and brick. I thought I'd wait for her and let her decide what to do with the kidnapper."

Hermione stretched her hand out to the kitten, but it didn't move. Hermione scowled. "What did you do with my kitten?"

"I've been holding your kitten to ensure its safety, *Hermione*," Lucius said, offering a thin smile. "I breed blue-spotted kneazles. How can you even consider I'd mean it any harm?" His expression was one of hurt.

She looked away, embarrassed she'd forgotten where the kitten had come from. "Sorry."

"No worries. Now, I think we all deserve a drink, don't you?" Lucius replied, offering his still frowning business partner a smug grin.

Hermione rolled her eyes and started to take the wards down. Then she turned to Lucius. "How come this Saturnian was able to get in despite my wards?"

"Ah, Miss Granger, it takes a special kind of spell to ward off their kind. They thrive on disregarding rules of magic. It's a mental thing, I think." Lucius continued to look smug.

"Isn't the question," Snape started, "to decide what to do with this... excuse of a human?"

Hermione snorted. "Does he qualify as human, being from a different planet?"

"Well... humanoid then." He sneered at Lucius and added, "Can we go inside, please? Hermione, you can Floo-call the Ministry and have him removed. Your front steps most certainly look much more pleasing without him there." Snape wrinkled his nose.

Hermione beckoned the two men inside and closed the door, paying no further attention to the bound Saturnian. The moment she entered the living room, the fireplace flared green.

"Oh, please, it's evening, and I've already worked my eight hours today." She began to walk leisurely across the room, but hurried when Kingsley's head appeared. Looking around, Hermione noticed gratefully that the two men had the sense to be out of Kingsley's sight.

"Kingsley, what's up? I've just got back home," she said, bending to avoid looking down at the Minister.

"I'm really sorry to disturb you, Hermione," Kingsley started, looking genuinely sorry. "But I have this Saturnian beauty here in my office. She won't leave, she refuses to speak English, and every few minutes, she says what sounds like, 'Wankers.' I'm out of ideas what to do. Knowing you, you must have researched how to communicate with aliens before you took up your current position. You are my last hope, Hermione."

Sorry for himself, then. Hermione sighed; the prospect of dealing with a female ET from Saturn had*not* been on her agenda for the evening. "Fine. I'll be over shortly," she said resignedly.

"Thank you! I really appreciate it!" Kingsley disappeared from the fireplace, and Severus and Lucius approached her keenly.

"We want to meet her, too. We've never met a beautiful alien from Saturn." Lucius eyed her expectantly.

"Fine." Hermione wasn't in the mood to argue; all she wanted was to continue what she and Severus had started earlier*Perhaps he'll fall for the Saturnian and I'll have him out of my face...*

"By the way, Hermione, a generous application of Doxycide on the cladding prevents the Saturnians from entering," Lucius offered.

The Saturnian in the Minister's office really was beautiful, Hermione observed as she cast a sequence of complicated spells to establish some form of telepathic communication with the alien.

Why do you keep saying Wankers, and what are you doing here?

The handsome human the C.U.N.T. boneheads kidnapped... I want to see him again. Her pout, combined with pleading eyes, was endearing.

Hermione turned to Kingsley. "She likes Percy apparently," she said. "I have no idea where he is."

"Oh. He's in St Mungo's to recover from his ordeal." Kingsley pointed at the two wizards who were unabashedly staring at the Saturnian. "Since you can communicate with her, would you mind taking her to Weasley? I'll notify St Mungo's. And sorry for interrupting your evening, Hermione. Take the day off tomorrow!"

"That's a deal." Hermione grinned and turned to the Saturnian beauty. *We'll take you to him.*

Together they exited the Ministry and Side-along Apparated to the front of St. Mungo's.

"Wankers!" the Saturnian beauty exclaimed when they entered Percy's room and ran towards him with outstretched arms.

"Oh, thank you," the Healer whispered. "It's the first time I've seen him smile!"

Severus turned to Hermione. "Job done? Can we go back to our previously planned activities now?"

"Splendid idea," Lucius said and followed Hermione and Severus out of the door, the Saturnian beauty forgotten.

A/N: Grateful thanks to Sunny33 and amita for inspiration. Equally grateful thanks to sempra for the beta.

As always, reviews are greatly appreciated, and if you like what you've read, you can vote for [it on the Petulant Poetess LJ community](#).

Keywords:

1. Triskaidekaphobia - fear or a phobia concerning the number 13
2. Malapropism - an act or habit of misusing words ridiculously, esp. by the confusion of words that are similar in sound.
3. Maggoty Haggis -
4. Doxycide -
5. Glumbumble Parts
6. The Serpentine
7. Stream

Hermione surmises that games are afoot during the Intergalactic Quidditch Cup, and they involve team Mercury. She soon realizes that being head of the Ethics committee means little to Mercury's owner or the other members of his team.



The IQC tournament had everyone at the Ministry working overtime, so Hermione wasn't terribly surprised to find the bound Saturnian still waiting outside her flat, shimmering beneath a Disillusionment Charm. No doubt some trainee Aurors would be along soon to collect him.

It was just as well. Questions had been piling into her mind from the moment she'd communicated with the Saturnian beauty in Kingsley's office.

She approached her erstwhile burglar and ignored the impatient sigh that came from one of the men following her...Lucius, most likely. Waiting would do him good. He and his not-so-silent partner seemed far too eager to gain access to her flat, anyway. A heightened sense of anticipation could only benefit her later.

She stopped before the Saturnian and began the same sequence of spells that had just recently allowed her to experience telepathy.

"Surely this can wait?" said Severus.

"I must know why he tried to steal my kitten," she said. "He may have had something to do with Percy's abduction, as well."

"Perhaps all Saturnians are just thieves," said Lucius.

The Saturnian raised one bushy eyebrow and spoke in perfect English. "Such statements only highlight the ignorance of Terrans."

Hermione lowered her wand. She'd dealt with enough planetary delegates lately to recognize the VIPs: not only were they capable of human speech, their diction put that of her compatriots to shame. She sent a warning look at Lucius before she spoke. "I am certain my friend did not intend to traduce your planet or its occupants."

His gaze flicked to Lucius, and for a moment his eyes glowed red. Then, despite the full Body-Bind, he seemed to draw himself up taller. "My affiliation with Saturn is inconsequential. Far more important is my role as leader of the most noble organization in the galaxy."

"Let me guess," said Hermione. "The Committee to Undermine the Nations of Terra."

He turned his haughty expression to her. "Our name commands respect throughout the universe. You cannot fathom the power of the C.U.N.T."

"Oh, I have an inkling." Her cough hid the snickers of Severus and Lucius. "Why did you kidnap Percy Weasley?"

"A miscalculation," he replied. "We believed you would negotiate for the return of your most celebrated and venerated hero."

No cough could hide the men's mirth now. "A miscalculation of galactic proportions," agreed Severus.

"So you returned Percy and stole my kitten instead?" she asked. Something in the way he glared at her before turning murderous red eyes to the men made the wheels in her head spin. "Wait a minute...you were going to blame the theft on them, weren't you?"

His agreement took the form of a sneer.

"Then *you* were the one who sabotaged Team Mercury's opponents!" she said.

The red eyes cooled to violet. His chin lifted, as if he were proud to be accused of such crimes.

"You released the flock of Snidgets during the match against Venus." She jabbed her finger at him. "And you sent Kneazles to the Neptunians knowing full well I'd suspect Lucius. You must have known I'd suspect Severus, as well, when you used his Ego Inflatus potion in Team Jupiter's chocolates."

"Er..." interrupted Lucius. "Actually, that last bit was my doing."

"What?" said Hermione and Severus in unison.

He had the grace to look mildly repentant. "I wanted to ensure our delightful visits continued."

Hermione rolled her eyes and turned back to the Saturnian. "You were responsible for the Snidgets and Kneazles, though, weren't you?" When he remained silent, she shrugged and said, "Right. I'll just fetch my probity probe, and we'll see how long you can lie about..."

"I have no wish to deny your accusations," he said.

"Good." She frowned. "Then explain why you tried to frame Team Mercury."

"After careful research, the Hermionegranger subject was identified as a strident proponent of justice, as well as an individual with ample cause to dislike Team Mercury. You were the ideal candidate to dismantle their business."

"Okay." Although logical, it still didn't answer her question. "But for what purpose?"

"For our ultimate purpose!" he said. "The collapse of Terran society. We have studied your history extensively. The smallest disagreements often result in the destruction of even the most stable populations. It takes very little to ignite a Terran conflict. And you are never more efficient at annihilation than when the fighting is localized." He smiled. "I believe your term is civil war. We, on the alternate hand, refer to it as bonus time."

"That's disgusting," she said.

"That is the nature of Terrans," he spat back. "It is only a matter of time before you eliminate yourselves entirely. Everyone knows this."

Severus stepped forward. "Then why not leave us to our own devices and let nature run its course?"

"We no longer have the luxury of time. You reside upon the richest, most bountiful planet in the galaxy, yet you do nothing but abuse it. We cannot risk its further destruction. You no longer deserve Earth."

To some extent, she knew he was right. The alternative he'd proposed, however, could hardly be considered a panacea. "Look, I'll be the first to admit we've buggered the planet thus far, but we're working to change all that. There are environmental sanctions and..."

"Too little, too late!" His eyes flashed red then orange, twin pools of roiling lava. "You have lost the right to steward this planet. Upon your extinction, others will gladly take your place. The Saturnians are eager for a view of the sun unimpeded by rings. Venusians long for a lighter atmosphere. And Martians have always been envious of anything blue."

She shook her head. "I cannot believe this."

"I am not surprised. Terrans refuse to acknowledge the truth, even when it is irrefutable. You prefer to worship myths and spin fairy tales."

"Not all Terrans," she said.

He seemed unconvinced. "Even when you admit a problem exists, you waste your time pointing your digits, blaming your neighbors for its cause. Terrans know nothing of solutions."

She tried to recall the first words he'd spoken to them. "Such statements only highlight your ignorance," she said. "And that of your C.U.N.T."

His lips peeled back from his teeth. "Mark my words, Hermionegranger. You grow weaker with each passing Earth year."

"I'll take it under advisement." She turned to Lucius and Severus. "I suppose we'd best print more of those 'United We Stand, Divided We Fall' bumper stickers."

The Saturnian shouted at her retreating back, his voice rising so high it rattled the windows. "You shall not survive the next decade!" A trail of spittle ran down his chin. "Your so-called advancements and technology only create more distance. Soon Terrans will not even remember how to vocalize speech to one another!"

A pop heralded the arrival of two harried-looking young Aurors. "Sorry we're late," said one over the continued ranting of the Saturnian.

"Be extra cautious with him," Hermione warned. "In addition to burgling my flat, he is responsible for the abduction of Percy Weasley ... and a somewhat convoluted plot to eliminate the population of Earth."

The Aurors straightened. "Yes, ma'am!" They secured their prisoner with additional bindings and Disapparated from sight.

The silence was a relief. Hermione sighed. "In some way, I suppose it's comforting to know zealotry exists throughout the galaxy. I would hate to think we'd invented it."

Severus's lips quirked. "You need a drink." He gestured to the front door of her building.

"Or perhaps a massage," offered Lucius.

"Perhaps both," she said and led them into her flat. She poured generous amounts of Firewhiskey into three tumblers, then perched on the arm of her sofa.

Severus scowled at Lucius.

Lucius licked his lips.

"Now, then," she began, "despite your relatively advantageous positions at present, you are both in quite a bit of trouble."

Both men spoke at once. "Trouble?" They cast surreptitious glances at one another.

She could almost hear their minds whirring. Speculating. Plotting.

Her glass clinked onto the table, the first sound to break the silence. She strolled to Severus first. "You, sir, will have to be punished severely for cheating on that crossword puzzle." Her fingers slowly opened the many buttons of his shirt but stopped at the band of his trousers.

He grunted. His hands skimmed her hips, pulled her closer.

Lucius approached them, obviously not willing to be excluded. She whirled and pinned him against the wall. "And you, my dear man, are in a most precarious position for having tampered with that match against Team Jupiter." For the sake of fairness, she began to unfasten his shirt, as well.

Severus cleared his throat. "I believe Lucius has other matters that demand his immediate attention."

Lucius appeared to disagree. His fingers slid beneath her jumper, teased the sides of her breasts. "Weren't you listening to the Saturnian?" he asked Severus. "All that tripe he spouted about the strength of unity?"

"I recall his mentioning weakness," he replied.

Lucius winked at Hermione. "Trust Severus to focus on the negative," he said.

"Not at all," Severus replied quickly. "I was merely trying to spare you the embarrassment of having arrived without your Performance Enhancer potion."

Lucius merely smiled and dipped his head to Hermione's ear. "Pay him no attention, my dear. The boy was never taught to share. Rather tragic, really." The tip of his tongue traced the curve of her ear.

She shuddered. Her body shifted forward, pressed against a rock-hard erection. There would be no need for performance enhancers tonight.

Desire coiled deep inside her, a tightly wound spring that trembled for release. She pulled away before it sprang of its own accord. Her legs were made from rubber, but they carried her to the bedroom. She stood just inside the doorway and gazed back at the men.

"Since you own a Quidditch team together, you must be fond of sports," she said. "How does a bit of friendly competition sound?"

"Sounds quite promising to me," said Lucius. He took several slow steps toward her, then raised a questioning brow at Severus. "The first man to pleasure the witch wins?"

Severus frowned but stepped forward. "Too easy. A test of endurance would be a far better method to showcase carnal prowess."

"You underestimate the appeal of finesse and style."

"And you lack the patience for proper stamina."

"Afraid to pit your skills against mine?"

"Afraid you cannot keep ... up?"

Hermione chuckled. Their gazes swung back to her, their argument abandoned the instant she tossed aside her jumper. By the time her skirt pooled around her feet, neither man seemed capable of speech.

Clad only in bra and knickers, she crawled, cat-like, onto her bed and smiled. "Let the games begin," she said.

And so they did.

Many thanks to Karelia for the beta pass!

Reviews are always appreciated...never more so than now, as this is the final chapter and your last chance to give us some points love!

Words used: tripe, traduce, probity probe.

Word count: 1795