

An Inconceivable Weekend

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Chapter 1 of 1

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Disclaimer: In case you don't know yet, the world of Harry Potter is the property of JKR.

Yule 2008 Challenge response to prompt No. 5: Snow Day: A blizzard comes to Hogwarts for those staying at the castle for Christmas. What goes on?

Of course Hermione had heard the occasional rumours about the existence of the Inconceivables; everyone in the wizarding world would hear the word whispered once in a while. But only the likes of Luna Lovegood actually believed it as fact. Just as Hermione's parents had never bought into the conspiracy theories that the Muggle world was owned by secret societies, Hermione was above believing such twaddle.

She'd snorted inelegantly when Ginny had whispered with a conspiratorial grin, "Snape is said to have joined the Inconceivables..." They had just learned of Snape's unexpected survival, conveniently *after* he'd been cleared of any charges and *posthumously* awarded an Order of Merlin, First Class.

"Right, Gin. As if he ever *was* anything but inconceivable."

Ginny had shrugged. "Don't believe it then," she'd said and abruptly changed the subject to something mundane.

Some years later, Hermione was irritated about having to eat her words. She wished she hadn't let the owl in that had delivered the letter. "Couldn't they at least have given more notice?" she muttered, annoyed that she'd have to cancel her dinner plans for that weekend.

She could simply ignore the contents of the letter, but realised that wasn't an entirely feasible option. She read the letter again.

Dear Ms Granger,

You know of the Department of Mysteries, you know of the existence of Unspeakables, and you'll likely be surprised to learn that the occasionally voiced rumours about the existence of Inconceivables are based on fact.

The Inconceivables do not care about bloodlines; what we focus on is mostly intelligence and intellect amongst members as well as good connections to the Muggle world.

You are invited to join the Inconceivables in the next induction seminar to be held from December 20 to 21, 2008, at Hogwarts School of Witches and Wizards, Hogsmeade, Scotland.

Should you decline the invitation or speak to anyone about this letter, please be prepared to have the memory of this occurrence Obliviated without prior notice.

I look forward to seeing you in December.

Yours,

Rueben Lavine

Hermione sighed and resigned herself to attending the seminar instead of a potentially romantic dinner with the latest addition to the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, an attractive wizard from Monte Carlo, who was not only good-looking but appeared to sport a rather cultured background, which, to Hermione's delight, made for intelligent conversation.

She groaned inwardly. If Padma found out she cancelled the dinner, she'd go for Gustav in an instant *Never mind. One day I'll find the perfect match. That is if I ever manage to be in the right place at the right time...* Somehow, she doubted it.

It had been nearly four years since she and Ron had finally called it a day. Having witnessed Ron's nearly obscene happiness with Parvati Patil, Hermione was able to admit a distinct lack of compatibility with her former boyfriend. Parvati always admired his Quidditch skills, never told him off for overdoing the Quidditch talk, and humoured his every whim happily. Ron in turn was content to accompany her on forays into Muggle commercialism where she drew inspiration for her next line of fashionable clothing designs that sold equally well in both the wizarding and Muggle worlds.

Hermione wasn't fool enough to miss Ron. He made a wonderful friend, but on the same level as Harry...neither material for a relationship. She did miss having a relationship, though, and all that came with it. That she simply wasn't cut out for casual affairs did not take her long to realise. When she'd met Gustav, she'd been rather indifferent, but after a few lunch hours spent coincidentally together, she had come to appreciate the intelligent conversation and sharp wit he'd offered and consequentially taken a closer look at the Mediterranean wizard. She'd liked what she'd seen and found his French accent positively sexy. But now she'd have to cancel her chance at happiness for fear of being Obliviated. *Great. How lucky am I...*

Hermione shivered when she arrived in Hogsmeade. The Highlands were considerably colder than London, and she was nervous with anticipation. Pulling her cloak tighter around her frame, the witch wasted no time and briskly walked towards Hogwarts, wondering yet again whether someone had played a cruel joke on her with the mysterious letter. *I'll find out soon enough*, she thought as she opened the door to the castle and entered. The Entrance Hall was deserted, and Hermione suspected it might have been a joke after all. She hesitatingly headed for the Great Hall.

"Ah. I see another unsuspecting victim has arrived," a silky voice startled her as she entered. A voice she'd never forget, for it had delivered hurtful, biting insults throughout her school years and never offered the slightest appreciation.

A different voice snickered but was quickly forgotten, as suddenly, she found her mind facing an intruder. Hermione saw herself reading the letter, her reaction from incredulous to annoyed over having to cancel a date to the suspicion that the letter was someone's idea of a joke. More scenes, each one a situation in which she was thinking of the letter or its contents, flashed past her until, finally, Snape ended the spell.

With an air of boredom, he turned to his collaborator. "Finally someone kosher. No Obliviating this one, partner."

Hermione stared at the two men with wide eyes.

"Lost your voice, Miss Granger?"

If Hermione hadn't known better, she would have thought Lucius Malfoy's voice filled with concern. "What is going on here?" Hermione demanded. "Do you greet everyone this way?"

"Naturally," Snape said with a hint of a sneer. "Most fail to keep silent about the invitation, which makes for instant disqualification."

Malfoy sighed. "Makes you wonder about the selection process, does it not? It isn't as if we don't make it clear what happens if they talk."

In the short silence that followed, the front door creaked, announcing the arrival of another candidate.

"Miss Granger, do proceed to the staff lounge; I'm sure you remember where it is. Hopefully, you will be joined by the next eligible candidate sooner rather than later," Snape drawled.

Hermione needed no second invitation to leave behind this most bizarre scene. She sat down on the sofa in the staff lounge and waited to see who else might turn up, looking around with interest. The room was spacious and mostly taken up with comfortable chairs, a sofa, and coffee tables. One wall was entirely covered with crammed bookshelves while other walls displayed paintings of landscapes. Portraits were completely absent.

Hermione's eyes stopped at a coffee table, on which a Pensieve stood. The temptation to peek was great, but she resisted *What if it's another test those two have devised...* she mused, regarding the Pensieve curiously.

An hour later, Hermione was thoroughly tired of simply waiting and got up to inspect the bookshelves.

Various editions of *Hogwarts, a History* brought fond memories of her schooldays to the fore. Then a canary-yellow and black cover caught her attention *Genetics for Dummies. What on earth is a Muggle book on genetics doing in the Hogwarts staff lounge?*

The door opened and a couple walked in. Hermione recognised Narcissa Malfoy, but the man was unknown to her. Narcissa squinted before she schooled her face to display her trademark arrogance.

"Miss Granger," Narcissa said, her voice friendlier than her expression, "I'm not surprised you passed the test. Severus expected as much." She looked around the empty room. "And obviously, you're the first one. Been waiting long?"

Hermione shrugged. "A good hour."

"Oh, where are my manners? Miss Granger, meet Rueben Lavine. Rueben, this is Hermione Granger, one of our candidates."

Hermione remembered his name from the letter.

Lavine shook hands with her and smiled. "Lovely to finally meet you, Miss Granger. I've heard much about you."

Hermione looked at him questioningly, and Lavine hurried to add, "Only good things, never fret. The new measures you introduced into the department of Magical Law Enforcement are encouraging indeed, making life much easier for everyone."

Before Hermione could reply, bemused that he knew about internal affairs of the MLE, the door opened again, and her eyes widened. "Padma! *Maybe Gustav will be up to reschedule that dinner after all...*

Her friend and colleague was as surprised. "Hermione!" They embraced each other, and then Padma turned to Narcissa. "Mrs Malfoy." Her tone was coldly polite, and

Hermione wondered why Padma seemed to dislike Narcissa. The Malfoys had divorced shortly after Voldemort's fall. Neither had remarried, the society pages of the *Prophet* had been empty of gossip about either, and they occasionally were seen together at Ministry functions. As far as Hermione knew, the Malfoys had become citizens of good standing in every conceivable way.

Narcissa paid no attention to Padma's coldness. "Miss Patil, how nice to see you passed the test, too. Meet Rueben Lavine."

Lavine shook hands with Padma, and her response to him was slightly warmer. Eventually, everyone sat down again.

"What is a Muggle book on genetics doing at Hogwarts? It's not a likely book to have been confiscated from a student," Hermione said to nobody in particular.

Lavine laughed heartily. "I can see why you were invited." Turning more serious, he asked, looking from Hermione to Padma, "What do you know about the Inconceivables?"

Both witches shrugged. "Next to nothing," Hermione offered.

"We know that they exist," Padma added. "Which is rather... inconceivable."

"Well, that's a start," Lavine said, looking almost boyish with his grin.

The adoring look Narcissa cast him did not escape Hermione. "Are you going to enlighten us then, Mr Lavine?"

The wizard pointed to the Pensieve on the table. "This Pensieve contains two-hundred-year-old memories. Watch them, and you'll get a good idea of what we're about." His gesture invited Hermione and Padma to enter the Pensieve.

The two witches edged towards the table, close to the Pensieve. The liquid, silvery mass inside began to swirl gently, and Hermione made out the figure of Lucius Malfoy. *No, it can't be him*, she realised, remembering Lavine's words. As she was pulled into the first memory, entirely unnoticed, the setting caught her attention: a Muggle would have termed it the prototype lab of a mad scientist, only the equipment was not entirely Muggle. The microscope might have originated from the Muggle world, but so long ago, there would have been no light illuminating the glass. The crystal ball on the other end of the long table that housed the microscope looked like a Muggle one typically sold in New Age shops. *Malfoys and crystal balls somehow don't go together...* Hermione barely managed to suppress a snort at the thought and idly watched Padma's fascination with the orb.

"This isn't a crystal ball," Padma whispered. "I've heard they exist, but I've never seen one before."

"What do you mean?" Hermione asked, frowning.

A door opened, stopping Padma from answering, and another Malfoy appeared, this one a few years older than the carbon copy of the current Malfoy patriarch near the microscope. "Rudolph, any progress?" the older one asked.

"Indeed, Cipher." Rudolph looked gleeful. "I finally succeeded in looking at the relevant year through the looking glass." He pointed to the crystal ball before his expression changed to one of high concern. "If the world continues the way it is set to at present, the 2012 rapture will be a negative one. But," his face lit up again, "I believe I am close to a possible solution."

Cipher looked incredulous. "How are you going to do that?"

"Ah, never underestimate the genius of a Malfoy!"

"Explain yourself!" Cipher demanded.

Rudolph grinned, grabbing a parchment and a quill. "Do you remember my research into DNA and how some human DNA shows only two strands whereas three or more strands are present in some people?"

Cipher nodded. "And that has exactly *what* to do with saving the future?"

Rudolph let out a long-suffering, exaggerated sigh. "And I thought you were the one with higher education... Anyway..." He frowned suddenly. "Why the hell do we care, Cipher? It's not as if we'll be alive in a hundred or two-hundred years! Why. Do. We. Care?" He shook his head as if in disbelief.

Cipher sighed. "Because we do. Keep in mind our name. We obviously have something to make good. And don't remind me how much easier a service-to-self orientation is! Now, get on with it."

"All right. Muggles typically have two strands of DNA. Those with more than two are psychics or at least have some sort of psychic power. Wizards and witches on the other hand have a minimum of three strands, and many have more." He rapidly drew first a sketch of the two-stranded DNA Hermione was vaguely familiar with, then turned the parchment and started drawing multiple strands of DNA. "This is how it looks. Now, I told you this knowledge won't be public for another hundred and fifty years. The knowledge that the DNA can be tweaked with some simple magic might not ever come out in the open. But we know it. Well, I do." He challengingly looked at his older brother.

"Yes, yes. Smartarse." Cipher glared at him. Then he pointed at the crystal ball. "And what else has the looking glass told you?"

Rudolph smirked, which made him look all the more like Lucius Malfoy. "Ah, you caught me here. Well... if I focus on the year 1980 and ignore the knowledge of being able to tweak DNA, things look seriously bleak. There'll be another dark wizard earlier that same century, but someone appears to take care of that problem without interference. However, the year 1980..." He shook his head sadly before continuing. "Essentially, if we allow this timeline to continue, the wizarding world will be in shambles, Muggle-borns, as rare as they are, will all be killed off because they pose a threat to this one dark wizard, who happens to be a half-blood, and darkness will reign for the next three-thousand or so years until the next rapture." He sighed deeply. "We'll be stuck in this third density with all its limitations, and eventually, we'll merely resemble Muggles with a psychic talent if that." Then his face lit up. "On the other hand, *if* we utilise the knowledge of tweaking DNA from two-stranded to multiple-stranded, we'll have a wealth of Muggle-born wizards and witches, many no longer aware of their Muggle heritage, and this dark wizard will be defeated. He'll cause a bit of an uproar, but our world will recover in no time, and we as a race will be able to move out of this density into higher ones without a problem." Now his face displayed a look of triumph.

Cipher nodded thoughtfully. "Yes. Yes, it makes sense. You're suggesting to actively change the DNA of unborn Muggles, yes?"

Rudolph beamed. "Why, how ever did you guess?"

Cipher snorted. "Maybe I know you? No, seriously, that idea does have merit. Now, any idea as to the practicalities?"

"Oh, indeed." Rudolph grabbed another parchment to write some Arithmantic calculations as the scene faded.

Hermione and Padma looked at each other, astounded, but before either found words, they were sucked into another scene, this one an elegantly furnished, large drawing room. Rudolph was pacing in front of the large fireplace, and Cipher was sitting on the leather sofa facing it.

"We need to start now, Rudolph. It takes at least four generations before a Muggle-born is forgotten and the offspring is considered pureblood. If people wait until their late youths before they start procreating, we're easily talking a hundred and fifty years. Also, take into consideration that we absolutely must share our plan with those who are

trustworthy, and in order for our activity to continue after we leave this plane, we need to set up a secret group so that there'll always be sufficient numbers of wizards and witches who can find Muggles worthy of magical progeny!" Cipher abruptly stood up and stopped Rudolph in his tracks. "And stop pacing! It is irritating!"

Rudolph stood still and let out a deep breath. "You are right. It's just... this task seems overwhelming right now. We know one...one!...Muggle couple expecting, and they aren't exactly... well, if you gave them a Knut for their thoughts, you'd get change. That child, if it takes after its parents, will *not* contribute any brain power. Probably will turn out more a Squib than a witch." He gloomily studied the floor.

"One is better than none. And until we have a small but efficient network of wizards and witches, we'll have to make do with what is available. George Black is an idiot, as is his wife, but his father was quite the clever businessman. So there is hope for his offspring." Then Cipher took a deep breath. "I've been thinking about who else might join us, so I've made a list of those I would trust to work with us. It is short, but we have to start somewhere." Cipher handed a parchment to his younger brother, who quickly read through the few names and then nodded.

Hermione blinked as the scene faded out of existence. *The Malfoys, not only supporting the idea of Muggle-borns but actively working in its favour?*

"The Malfoys?" her friend mouthed and shook her head in disbelief.

Hermione shrugged. "Apparently."

Both witches suddenly found themselves back in the Hogwarts staff room. Lucius Malfoy and Snape had joined them in the meantime, and there was no sign of any other candidates. The conversation died when the two witches returned from the Pensieve.

Hermione looked from Lucius to Snape and back to Lucius. "How? Why? Your ancestors, and presumably yourself, have done exactly the opposite of what your name stood for during Voldemort's reign..." She had no more words.

"Thankfully, the Dark Lord never found out the Inconceivables made me their bitch to keep Mudbloods going strong," Lucius stated dryly. Then he turned to Snape. "Severus, why don't you tell Miss Granger how *she* became a witch?" He looked as gleeful as Rudolph in the first scene of the Pensieve.

Snape looked uncomfortable. He cleared his throat and started, "Right. I... tweaked your DNA. You already had three strands. I just added a couple to make sure you'd turn out a witch." He looked away.

Hermione gasped. "You?"

"Me."

"How?"

"Oh, that was easy enough. I received word from your then-neighbours via Minerva, and all I had to do was follow your mother to Safeway's when she went on one of her salami binges. For a vegetarian, she could consume a considerable amount of meat when she was pregnant!"

Hermione wrinkled her nose. "Ew. Mum told me about her salami cravings. I still don't like salami."

"Well, that's a good thing because we're not having any for dinner."

"Talking of dinner, we have a whole lot to get through before that!" Lucius interrupted. He took out a parchment and handed it to Narcissa. "Two candidates to Obliviate. Find them quickly, will you?"

Narcissa glanced at the parchment and displayed a smile that made Hermione shudder with unease. "I see. Wood is missing. As is Potter."

"Harry?" Hermione asked. "I can't imagine him not turning up for such an occasion! There must have been some emergency that prevented him from getting here."

"Never fear, Miss Granger. We'll find out soon enough," Rueben said jovially and turned to Malfoy and Snape to say good-bye while taking Narcissa's hand in his own.

When they'd left, Lucius sighed. "Why did she have to fall *for him* of all people?"

Snape shrugged. "I thought you liked him."

"I like him all right. But it irks me that Cissy prefers his cunnilingus skills over mine."

Padma paled. Hermione was thankful that her snort was drowned out by Snape's response.

"Are you having a competition about skills in bed, Lucius?" He shook his head pensively. "And here I was, thinking it's all about love." He sneered.

"Yes, of course it is about love. We made the best out of our situation, and as soon as Draco was of age and the war was over, we parted amicably. She loves Rueben, and I have no problem with that. But does she have to rub in his skills?" Lucius looked irritated.

Snape tapped his foot impatiently. "Are we here to discuss your ex-wife's love life, or are we here to train these two witches to become adept Inconceivables?"

Half-way through the afternoon, the witches and wizards were on a first-name basis after both Hermione and Padma had addressed Snape one too many times as *Professor*. The witches now knew the entire history of why there had been a steady occurrence on Muggle-born witches and wizards over the last two hundred years. The Malfoys had been knee-deep in the activity of the Inconceivables from the start, and their former display of hatred to Muggles and Muggle-borns was as far from the truth as it could possibly be. Snape's ancestors on his mother's side had also been involved for over a hundred years. Hermione thought that explained the unlikely friendship between the wealthy Malfoys and Snape with his working-class background, although she could not help wondering how Lucius and his family had managed to keep up appearances as arrogant purebloods bordering on evil while Voldemort was around.

Just as the group was breaking up in anticipation of dinner, the door opened once more. Minerva McGonagall beamed at her former students as she entered. "How lovely to see you!" Then she frowned and turned to Severus. "Was Mr Potter not invited? I thought his name was on the list."

Severus smirked. "Narcissa and Rueben have gone to check on him and Wood. If he was held up for any reason, Draco will bring him here. If he simply forgot or, worse, decided not to bother, then he should be Obliviated by now."

The door opened again. "No chance, Snape. I really was held up. At work!" Harry Potter walked in, followed closely by Draco Malfoy.

Draco addressed his father. "I vouch for him. Remember those threatening Howlers I've been receiving? Potter is working on the case and followed a lead this morning." He turned to casually greet the others, and the group headed to the Great Hall for dinner.

The food was very different from the typical Hogwarts fare, but the house-elves had outdone themselves equally, offering sophisticated choices of oysters, asparagus in balsamic vinaigrette, lamb's lettuce, and pasta with truffles. The wine served to accompany the meal came from the cellars of Malfoy Manor, as Lucius proudly announced.

The talk was more mundane than the intense session of education about Inconceivables in the afternoon once Draco had assured Lucius and Severus that he'd brought Harry up-to-date on the hours he'd missed.

Hermione watched amusedly as Padma hung on every word uttered from Lucius's lips. *Padma and Lucius? Who would've thought...? And I was all worried about her going for Gustav...* The thought brought a smile to her face.

"What's amusing, Hermione?" Snape enquired mildly. His eyes darted to Lucius, who was sitting next to him, and from there to Padma opposite his friend. "Indeed. Why am I not surprised..." he muttered.

Hermione's eyes widened. "You're not?"

He shook his head and said quietly, "He's had enough of blondes I expect. And he deserves some happiness for once, having spent the better part of twenty years in an arranged marriage for the benefit of genetics."

Hermione shrugged. "Don't we all deserve happiness..."

Snape quirked his eyebrow. "Indeed." Then he turned his attention to the food on his plate, and Hermione followed suit, her mind wandering to the new-found knowledge she'd gained during the afternoon. The idea that the Malfoys of all people were responsible for the existence of Muggle-borns took some getting used to.

Once everyone had their fill of nutrients, conversation picked up again, with Padma still hanging onto Lucius's every word, Harry and Draco conversing in a civilised manner, and Professor McGonagall bemoaning the ignorance of genetics amongst pureblood families when it came to arranging the marriages of their offspring.

"Of course, Minerva," Lucius said. "Why do you think there are so many Squibs? Few purebloods are willing to study genetics before deciding with whom to procreate. And even fewer are willing to arrange the marriage of their offspring based on genetics. Muggle values have taken over here: A rich family will arrange a marriage with another rich family in order to combine wealth. It is more important these days than sound genetics." He sighed. "That's one of the reasons we've taken to recruiting Inconceivables four times a year instead of annually, and you know yourself how little success we have, even choosing only the crème of wizards and witches. Ego prevails these days, and we really need to make a great effort to find worthy Muggles to turn into magical folk if we're to stop the trend begun by the Dark Lord of not recognising the worth of Muggle-borns. Otherwise, they will, in a few generations, become the same kind of purebloods who are currently diluting our lines."

"I could never imagine being forced by my parents to marry someone I might not even like," Hermione said bluntly. Being told whom to spend her life with was rather inconceivable.

Severus smirked. "Of course not. But your Muggle parents are not exactly the norm, are they? They not only allowed you but encouraged you to question everything, including their own statements they saw as truth or fact."

Hermione slowly nodded. "Yes. I suppose that's rare for Muggles as well."

"Indeed," Lucius said. "And that is perfectly understandable." He shrugged. "Had it been up to me or Narcissa, we would never have married. But at least we knew what the deal was, and once Draco was of age, we were able to part agreeably while still being fond of each other. And I can't say I regret it." He cast an affectionate look at Draco, who looked divinely indifferent as he nodded at his father.

"I don't mean to be a spoilsport, but you have quite a curriculum to cover tomorrow," Minerva said. "I suggest I'll show you to your rooms and we'll call it a night."

Nobody protested, and Minerva took the group to a seldom-used corridor on the second floor where numerous guestrooms were located.

Hermione woke up early. *Winter Solstice!* She hurried out of bed into the shower and then quickly dressed for outside to watch the sunrise. As she approached the front doors, another's steps sounded across the floor, and she looked around curiously.

"I see I'm not the only one out early to appreciate nature this morning," Severus said, nodding curtly.

"I've always found watching the sun rise on the Winter Solstice makes for a particularly peaceful experience," Hermione said. "And with snow. I've missed that."

It was still nearly dark as the two made their way through the snow around the castle and up a hill, the top of which would offer an all-around view of the hills and valleys. The stars were slowly losing their brightness, giving way to the light of the approaching day, and when the couple reached the peak, there was only deep blue sky above and the snow-covered plain surrounded by the stark silhouettes of trees around them.

Hermione took a deep breath as she looked around, taking in the harsh beauty of the snow-covered landscape and the appearance of dark clouds in the north. Then her eyes focused on the east where in the far distance in a valley the light had become brighter. She stared in fascination at the first appearance of the red fireball, a mere glimpse of the sun.

Focusing on a point just below, knowing her eyes would hurt otherwise, she watched as the glimpse slowly grew and rose upward until, finally, a bright-red ball of fire ascended above the hills, which had previously obscured its view, in full splendour.

Hermione stood mesmerised, awestruck at the wonder and beauty nature had once again put forth, and startled when Severus spoke. She'd forgotten his presence.

"Isn't it amazing what nature is capable of?" he asked quietly.

She turned towards him. His face held an odd expression, and Hermione was surprised to find it devoid of harshness. "Yes," she said softly, "it is."

He pointed northwards. "Another skill of nature. If it comes our way, we'll have a lot more snow very soon."

Hermione's eyes followed his hand. "Those clouds seem to move fast," she said. "A few minutes ago they were in the far distance, and now they look quite... menacing." She shivered as the wind suddenly picked up.

"Let's head back inside," Severus suggested and turned slowly to lead the way.

As they wandered through the snow along the castle, two figures became visible on the path from Hogsmeade. When they drew nearer, Hermione recognised Lucius and Padma.

"Ah. Lucius must have taken Miss Patil on a field trip," Severus said, quirked his brow.

"That was wonderful!" Padma exclaimed as she and Lucius reached the front doors where Severus and Hermione stood waiting.

"So glad you enjoyed it." Lucius looked at his watch. "We have about twenty minutes until breakfast, just enough time to get rid of all the excess clothing." He shivered slightly. "Blimey, it *is* cold." Opening the door and heading inside, he added, "If the Muggles are correct, we'll have a snowstorm this afternoon."

Each went to their room to take off their outdoor clothes. Hermione had just folded her scarf when a knock at the door interrupted her. She opened it and Padma floated in, looking radiant. Hermione grinned. "Do tell, Padma! I had no idea you had your eyes on him!"

For a moment, her friend looked sheepish. "Well, it's not something I like to admit, you know? I never had any doubt that he is a good person underneath all that pureblood arrogance, but I never thought I'd have a chance. Until yesterday, I never even saw him more than three or four times a year, and half the time Narcissa was with him." She took a deep breath and smiled. "I had the most wonderful Solstice sunrise." Then she looked dreamily at Hermione. "We Apparated to Stonehenge, and it was so, so beautiful. And he was there with me, and... Oh, Merlin, Hermione, I think I'm in love!"

Hermione smiled. "Yes, I believe that! I'm so happy for you!" She figured she should feel relieved that Padma wasn't interested in Gustav in the least, but that relief never came. Hermione shrugged it off. Sharing Padma's happiness was easier than pondering her own potential love-life for now. "Did you have snow there?"

"No, it was a clear sky and a beautiful sunrise. Although it was freezing cold, but," her face looked flushed, "Lucius kept me warm... Oh, and he cast that DNA spell on a Muggle!"

"Really?" exclaimed Hermione. "How so?"

Padma grinned. "Well, he figured that Muggles who appreciate the Solstice enough to make their way to Stonehenge early in the morning may be worthy of magical offspring. We followed one couple who were expecting and listened to their conversation, and then Lucius cast a spell. It was quite amazing. The woman's stomach turned all blue for a moment. Not that *she* noticed. Anyhow, that's what happens once the DNA is adjusted, Lucius said."

Padma continued her excited chatter all the way to the Great Hall where the others had already arrived for breakfast. She sat down next to Lucius, and Hermione amusedly watched him buttering toast for Padma. Severus smirked from across the table.

Suddenly, the enchanted ceiling darkened, and the howling of the wind outside drowned out the sound of chatter. "Impressive," Lucius said. "The Muggles *were* right. This does look like a storm." He looked up to the ceiling.

"Damn," Severus muttered. "Looks like we won't be able to do any field work today."

"No, I think we might have to postpone that plan," Minerva agreed, frowning at the ceiling. It had started to snow, and the howling grew louder with each gust of wind.

"Oh, well, we can practise the spell nevertheless. Is everyone ready?" Severus asked.

The group moved back to the staff room. Lucius and Severus took turns demonstrating the DNA spell on a dummy spelled to react like a human.

It didn't look or sound like a difficult spell. However, mastering it took the witches and Harry longer than anyone had anticipated upon seeing it.

"Never forget to check for the blue light once you cast the spell," Severus reminded Hermione, watching her practise.

Hermione stopped momentarily. "What happens if there is no blue light?"

"Then the spell didn't take, and you have to repeat it. You will know by the blue light appearing that you were successful."

Hermione nodded and continued practising with renewed determination until she finally succeeded.

Harry was the last to master the spell, and his peers teased him mercilessly as the group made its way to the Great Hall for lunch.

All candles were lit in the hall now. The ceiling was grey and heavy with snow, and loud howling drifted into the hall. "I'm going to check outside," Severus announced and headed out into the corridor.

He returned minutes later, flakes of snow attached to his robes, frowning. "I don't think we'll make it out of Hogwarts today. It's a blizzard raging out there."

"The Floo network is entirely out as well, according to the house-elves," Minerva said.

"Oh, no," Harry said. "What am I going to do? I still have a lot to finish before the office closes for the holidays."

"Aw, poor Potty," Draco mocked, eliciting laughter from everyone.

"The work won't run away, Potter," Lucius said in a friendly tone. He turned to Padma. "You don't mind staying, do you?"

Padma smiled at him. "Not one bit."

Her reward was his arm around her shoulder, pulling her closer to him.

Watching her friend with her new-found love, Hermione pondered being stuck at Hogwarts. Her leave had been booked since summer, starting the following day, and she was simply looking forward to relaxing until she'd join her parents for Christmas Day. It made no difference whether she did so at home alone or in the company of people she liked. *I like Snape and Malfoy? What has the world come to...?* If she was honest with herself...and she'd never been one for denial...it was the simple truth.

What had started out with a bizarre letter, followed by a very strange encounter involving Legilimency, concluded in a very enjoyable weekend of learning and good-natured banter with agreeable company. *And Padma finding love... And a beautiful sunrise...*The soft expression Severus had displayed back on the hill just after the sun had come up wove its way to the forefront of her mind. An inaudible sigh escaped her.

"So wistful, Hermione," Severus's low voice brought her back to the present.

She turned to him and shrugged. "It's been a... strange weekend."

He chuckled. "Strange? I suppose. For someone who didn't know about the existence of Inconceivables until recently, it has to be strange."

Once again, she was unable to decipher the expression of his face.

"Are you missing out on important things by being stuck here?" he asked conversationally.

Hermione shook her head. "No. I'm on holiday now until the New Year, and my only plans are some last-minute shopping." She shrugged. "Nothing important."

Except for the howling of the wind, silence reigned for a while, as everyone concentrated on their food.

After lunch, Hermione decided to pay a visit to her once-favourite place: the library. *Might as well learn some more about genetics if I can find a book on it...*

Perusing the bookshelves, including those of the Restricted Section, yielded no results. Hermione frowned, then took the latest edition of *Hogwarts, A History* and sat down at one of the tables. It would have to do for now.

"Not *Hogwarts, A History!*" Severus's mocking voice ripped her out of her marvelling at the continuously, correctly recorded more recent events in the book.

Hermione looked up and shrugged. "I tried to find something on genetics, from a wizarding point of view, but there's nothing."

"How did I guess..." Severus smirked. "One of the benefits of being an Inconceivable is access to our own library. And where better to keep a secret library where nobody would expect it?"

Hermione's eyes widened. "Here?"

"Indeed. Follow me." Severus led the way through the Restricted Section to a shelf-covered wall and drew his wand. A hardly noticeable wand movement and a silently cast spell later, a door appeared and opened by itself. Severus motioned for her to enter, and Hermione was unable to stifle a gasp as she saw what was in front of her.

The room was barely larger than her parents' living room. It was devoid of corners, entirely circular, and lined with bookshelves from floor to ceiling on every wall space. Just off the centre was a fireplace, accessible from two sides. To one side of it were two wooden chairs and a wooden table, on which lay parchment, quills, and ink bottles. On the other side of the fireplace was a sofa, opposite it two comfortable chairs, and a coffee table in-between.

Hermione wasted no time and headed to the first shelf, which housed an impressive collection of esoteric writings from wizards and Muggles alike. She'd read some of them, such as *The Law of One* series and *Bringers of the Dawn*, but others were entirely unknown to her. *The Montauk Project* was neither a title nor a subject she'd ever heard of by the look of the blurb on the back of the book. *Muggle time travel?* Hermione shook her head. *Sounds like fiction.* Skimming through titles, she stopped momentarily when she reached the shelf on genetics.

The choice of titles overwhelmed her. *Genetics 101*, *DNA Blueprint for a New Era*, *From Genes to Genomes*, and on and on the rows continued. The more titles Hermione skimmed the less she knew which one to pick.

Eventually, she turned around to seek Severus's help and was startled to look straight at him. He was holding up a book. "You might want to start with this one."

Discovering DNA by Rudolph Malfoy. Hermione took the book from him, muttered words of thanks, and sat down on the sofa to read.

Eventually, Hermione looked up and saw Snape studying her. "He knew all this two-hundred years ago?"

"There is much that's been known for centuries in the wizarding world." Severus's expression was indifferent.

"What, exactly, is the goal of the Inconceivables? It's not just turning Muggles into witches, is it?"

Severus looked at her, his face once more unascertainable. "Nowadays, not exactly. Although that plays a major part." He seemed to squirm before continuing. "Our goal is to tip the balance towards what's generally known as service-to-others. The majority of the world unfortunately functions on a service-to-self orientation. Witches and wizards typically know that difference better than Muggles do. But, yes, the Inconceivables have been choosing people who prefer service to others rather than themselves."

Hermione nodded. "Makes sense."

The silence that followed was awkward.

"Hermione?"

"Yes?"

"You... you are a rather amazing witch."

"I... I..." Hermione was lost for words.

"What more do you want me to say?" he asked, now an edge to his voice. "That you're beautiful? Admirable? That I love conversing with you? That you're actually silent when the need arises, and I appreciate that very much? Not enough?" He turned away from her.

Hermione laughed, her heart suddenly felt with joy. "Severus! Come back!"

She grabbed him by the arm that was nearest and pulled him to her. "Nobody has ever told me that." She squirmed. "But I like to hear that very much!"

"Really?"

"Oh, Severus, why don't you try me?" She looked at him expectantly.

Lucius and Padma had spent most of the remaining day in his room, but eventually, long after midnight, both were hungry enough to take a break in the exploration of each other and resultant pleasure in favour of food.

They wandered to the kitchen and were enthusiastically greeted by house-elves, who motioned for them to take seats at a large table where Harry and Draco were already busy filling their stomachs.

Draco smirked at his father. "Good time?"

"Indeed," Lucius said and smirked back at his son.

"Have you seen Severus?" Draco asked. "I went looking for him earlier, but he wasn't in his room at dinner time."

"I imagine he'll be in the library," Lucius said as he took plates with sandwiches from a house-elf. Turning to Padma, he added, "Maybe we should look for him, just to be sure. He's probably forgotten time, as he is wont to do."

Padma had no objections, and after finishing dinner, the couple headed for the library. "I might as well show you now where our library is. Every Inconceivable has access to it at any time, and you never need to worry about being seen, as it is perfectly warded to keep out others."

They entered the library, and Lucius headed straight for the private library, closely followed by Padma. The door was already open, and Lucius nodded to himself. "I bet he's in there."

As he reached the door, Lucius stopped in his tracks. Then he turned to Padma, smiled, and whispered, "It looks like we're not the only ones to have found each other."

Padma tiptoed into the room and smiled widely at the sight in front of her. Severus was half-sitting, half-lying on the sofa, his feet resting on the table, his arm draped around Hermione, who lay on the sofa, her head resting on his legs. Both were sound asleep. "Gustav will have to look elsewhere for love," Padma whispered and turned to follow Lucius back to the room.

~fin~

A/N: Grateful thanks to HogwartsClassof91 for letting me whinge and whine about the characters, to kittylefish for beta-reading and constructive advice, and to sunny33 for coming up with the name of Inconceivables as well as correcting my appalling sentence structure and poor wording.

Happy Holidays!