

Reason for Living

by MuseAmusant

Hermione Weasley is given devastating news that shatters her world. Can she find a new reason for living?

Prologue

Chapter 1 of 5

Hermione Weasley is given devastating news that shatters her world. Can she find a new reason for living?

Disclaimer: It's not mine.

Hermione's slight form shivered uncontrollably, tears running down her pale cheeks as she lay alone in the sterile white room. She had always hated the cold and impersonal feel of St. Mungo's, from its bare, featureless walls to the spell-sanitized odorless air, but never more than in the year since she and Ron had gotten married and had begun trying to have a family.

At the soft whoosh of a door and the clearing of a throat, Hermione scrubbed fiercely at her wet cheeks and turned to meet the sympathetic hazel gaze of Healer Douglas Rubens.

"Mrs. Weasley, there's something we need to discuss. I understand your husband is out of the country, but would you like me to contact someone to be with you?"

"No, thank you," Hermione said softly. "Let's just get this over with."

The Healer cleared his throat awkwardly, then sat down in the chair next to her bed with a heavy sigh. "Very well. Mrs. Weasley, as you know, after taking into account your two previous miscarriages this year and your status as a veteran of the second Voldemort war, we decided to run the most comprehensive and thorough tests known to wizardkind and brought in a team of specialists to review the results. I'm afraid I have some bad news."

Hermione swallowed thickly at the undisguised pity in the seasoned Healer's eyes. "Just tell me," she whispered.

The man dropped his eyes for a moment and seemed to gather himself. "I'm afraid your miscarriages appear to result from an unusual substance in your blood that our best people have not yet been able to identify." He cleared his throat again before continuing.

"But whatever it is, it appears to reactivate each time you conceive. Not only is it causing you to miscarry but it is also causing serious cumulative damage to your reproductive organs for as long as each pregnancy lasts. It's a very good thing that you were here at St. Mungo's for your appointment today, Mrs. Weasley. If you hadn't been able to receive immediate medical care, it's very likely you wouldn't have survived."

The blood drained from Hermione's face as she realised what the man was struggling to tell her. "I can't become pregnant again, can I?"

Rubens met her eyes very seriously. "No, Mrs. Weasley, I'm afraid you can't. I am so sorry, but if you attempt to have a child again, you will most certainly die."

Two days later, Hermione was deemed fit enough to return home.

The trainee Healer on duty, a pretty blonde witch named Erin, told Hermione that Healer Rubens would be along in a few minutes to see her before she left.

She was sitting on the edge of her bed, staring fixedly at a watercolor painting of water nymphs cavorting in a fountain, when Rubens arrived.

The grey-haired Healer watched his patient worriedly for a few seconds, then called softly, "Mrs. Weasley?"

She slowly turned her head to face the Healer, and Rubens found himself fighting the urge to flinch as he met lovely deep-chocolate eyes filled with soul-crushing misery.

Normally a rather taciturn man, the Healer found himself pulling over a chair and reaching out to take the young woman's hands in his own.

"Mrs. Weasley, I know there's nothing I can say that will lessen the pain you're feeling right now. But I do want you to remember that some of the finest medical minds in the wizarding world will continue to work on your case. There is still hope, my dear."

Hermione smiled faintly. "Thank you, Healer Rubens, but perhaps my becoming a mother was not meant to be."

The Healer squeezed her hands. "Perhaps, but I've always believed that where there's a will, there's a way, as the Muggles say." He smiled gently. "Anyone can see that you would make a wonderful mother, my dear. But until we find a way to fix what is wrong with you, perhaps you might consider adopting? There were so many children orphaned at the end of the war..."

The young witch smiled again, ruefully. "As it happens, I have tried talking to my husband about the prospect of adoption, and he has made it clear that he's not interested. At least, not until after he has a few children of his own. Ron comes from a very large family, and I'm afraid he has his heart set on having a Quidditch team of his own, just like his mum and dad."

Rubens frowned slightly. "I'm very sorry to hear that. But there's something else I wanted to talk you about. Shortly after the war, St. Mungo's decided to take a page from the Muggles and began creating support groups for those in need. One of them happens to be a support group for grieving parents. I think it could be most beneficial for you and your husband to attend a meeting or two and talk to someone who has had an experience similar to yours."

Hermione gazed at the Healer thoughtfully for a moment. "I very much doubt if Ron would be interested," she replied quietly. "But I'll consider attending a meeting by myself, if that's alright?"

Rubens smiled gently at his young patient. "Of course it is. The witch who supervises the support group is named Jessamin Whitmore. I'll have her owl you the date and location of their next meeting."

After scheduling her follow-up appointment and taking her leave, Hermione quickly made her way to the nearest exit.

Unfortunately, this led her past the St. Mungo's maternity ward where she was taken aback to see an exhausted, yet radiant Pansy Parkinson Zabini cradling a tiny pink-swaddled bundle and cooing to her newborn as her husband, Blaise, looked on with indulgent eyes filled with love and pride.

As pain stabbed her raw heart anew, Hermione's eyes flooded with tears, and she rushed towards the lobby as quickly as she could, darting out the door and nearly bowling over a very startled Severus Snape.

The wildly sobbing witch never noticed her former professor, who watched, dumbfounded, as the former Gryffindor know-it-all immediately Disapparated, leaving a single chestnut lock to flutter to the ground in her wake.

A/N: Thanks to ladyinthecloak for her assistance with wayward comma wrangling. :)

PS: I don't currently have a beta, but am looking. If you're interested, feel free to drop me a line. At any rate, I expect to add a new update to the queue once a week, barring RL complications. This is my first solo multi-chapter story, and sincere constructive criticism is welcomed and appreciated.

One

Chapter 2 of 5

Hermione Weasley is given devastating news that shatters her world. Can she find a new reason for living?

Disclaimer: Jo owns it all.

Severus was making his way to St. Mungo's subterranean medical research complex, bemusedly contemplating his new status as godfather to Blaise and Pansy's newborn daughter, Phoebe, when an elderly wizard with a silver mane and beard nearly as long as Albus Dumbledore's popped out of a doorway, promptly seized a startled Severus' hand, and began pumping it with vigor and enthusiasm.

"So glad you've decided to join us, young man! Excellent, excellent," enthused the wizard, green eyes twinkling in an altogether too-familiar manner, and Severus found himself having to quickly suppress a shudder of profound revulsion.

It had taken him a quite a long time to fully understand and accept that his once-beloved mentor had used his kindly, twinkling demeanor to efficiently manipulate him and his fellow Order members every bit as ruthlessly as the late, loathsome, serpent-snogging git known as Tom Riddle used terror to control his Death Eaters. Both lived by the adage 'the end justifies the means,' and while Severus himself had once felt the same way, he found he could no longer honestly say that was the case anymore.

Firmly dragging himself from the dark mental path he had determined to never walk again, Severus nodded a greeting to the aged wizard who, somewhat embarrassed, belatedly introduced himself as Theodosius Rankin, head Healer and administrator of WRAITH, the new War-Related Ailments and Injuries Treatment Hospital, which was now connected to St. Mungo's by a rather impressive dragon-tempered glass walkway.

Severus had received his invitation to the gala event to celebrate the upcoming grand opening of said facility only two days previously, and he had promptly tossed it on top of the teetering pile of other such invitations he had received and ignored.

After pouring himself a cup of good English tea and nabbing a pair of decadent dark chocolate-almond scones from the extensive array of pastries laid out on the table, Severus seated himself in the chair nearest the door, the better to observe his fellow invitees as they arrived.

Unobtrusively scanning the room, Severus spied several persons of note from various fields: seated to his right and sporting a crown of short blonde curls and ubiquitous

lime-green robes was Dorothea Wainwright, head Healer of St. Mungo's maternity ward; the portly grey-clad little wizard inspecting the walnut sticky buns was Stuart Creighton, prolific author and expert on magical blood disorders; wearing finely-tailored black robes and having an animated discussion near the coffee urn were Gideon Rookwood and Cassius Thorntree, the heads of the Ministry's Department of Health and Potions Research, respectively; nodding a greeting and taking a seat to his left was Healer Douglas Rubens, one of the few people Severus considered a friend. The former Ravenclaw Head Boy had tried his best to befriend a first-year Severus and tried valiantly to protect him from the worst of the young Marauders' depredations.

They had only just exchanged pleasantries when a deep-voiced throat was cleared, drawing the attention of all to the head of the table, and the wizard standing there.

Severus' eyes widened as he recognized the snowy hair and dark blue gaze of Gaston Morel, world-renowned Healer, philanthropist, and creator of the Morel Foundation, a non-profit medical research firm that had produced many of the most impressive advancements in the field of medical Potions research for the last several decades.

As a teen, Severus had often dreamed of working at the Morel facility in Aix-en-Provence, imagining himself as a rising star among Potions researchers and becoming a much sought-after expert in the field he loved.

At least, until Lucius Malfoy took advantage of his deep depression in the wake of Lily Evans becoming Lily Evans Potter, carefully coaxing his devastated young friend into making the stupidest and costliest error of his young life.

Just then, Rubens nudged Severus' elbow and passed him a stack of folders that had been making their way around the table. Accepting one and passing the others on, Severus took a moment to leaf through his. It contained the medical charts of nearly two dozen young women of varying backgrounds with two things in common: Each witch had suffered at least three miscarriages in less than a year, more than half dying in the process. And each witch was found to have the same peculiar, unidentifiable substance in her blood.

Severus, deeply disturbed, tapped at his chin thoughtfully, his mind conjuring a vivid image of a highly distraught Hermione Weasley, sobbing hysterically as she fled St. Mungo's barely two hours ago. Somehow, he instinctively knew that one of those charts surely belonged to his little know-it-all, the former Miss Granger.

Hermione was sitting on the living room sofa, having bathed and dressed in her softest flannel pajamas, fuzzy bathrobe, and slippers, sipping disconsolately at a mug of tepid green tea when Ron finally arrived through the Floo, scattering debris everywhere as he dusted the confetti from his hair and the soot from his Chudley Cannons uniform.

"Hey, 'Mione, we swept the Vultures! Four games straight out of seven, we completely kicked their Bulgarian arses, we did!"

"That's wonderful, dear," Hermione said quietly.

At that, Ron turned around and took in the sight of at their less-than-tidy living room and his wife's wan, disheveled appearance. He paled as realization struck him with the force of a Bludger hit between the eyes. Ron's Firewhiskey-infused gaiety evaporated in an instant and was immediately replaced by a simmering rage.

Ron knew, he just knew, it must have happened again.

"You lost our baby, didn't you? Again!" Ron's voice was all hard edges and barely-suppressed fury.

Hermione looked up in shock, her face going from pale to bone-white, while Ron's steadily darkened to an unhealthy shade in the magenta range.

"Ron, please, I wanted our baby every bit as much as you do! I can't help the fact that..."

"Yeah, you could if you really wanted to," Ron shouted, turning shrill as he exploded in rage.

"I thought we agreed that when we decided to have kids, you would stop working! But noooooo, you just had to keep working and proving that you're so much smarter than everyone else, too smart to settle down to be a proper wife and mum like a normal witch! You want so bad to be a Potions master just like that old bat you idolize, you probably brewed something to make sure you wouldn't have to worry about having our babies, didn't you?"

Stunned speechless and staring at her husband's twisted, reddened face and ugly clenched fists for a few frozen beats, Hermione suddenly turned around and headed to their bedroom.

Moments later, she returned with the paper bearing Healer Ruben's diagnosis and placed it on the table in front of her husband.

Ron eyed the paper with distaste, and spat, "What's this supposed to be?"

"It's from St. Mungo's," Hermione responded quietly and silently waited as he scanned the document, his full lips thinned and tight with anger.

"So Lavender was right," Ron growled. "You little baby-killing bitch!"

"Lavender? What did she... Ron, NO!" Hermione screamed as Ron snatched up a vase filled with wildflowers and threw it at her head, water, multicolored petals, and shards of crystal flying everywhere as the vase smashed against the wall, mere inches from her head. "Ron, listen to me, please," she cried.

"I'm done listening to your lies, Hermione," Ron yelled furiously. "You hear me? We are DONE!"

Hermione knelt in the broken bits of crystal, her body shaking violently with the force of her sobs, her blood mingling with the water pooled on the floor as Ron reached for the Floo powder.

Turning around, Ron coldly surveyed his sobbing wife for a few moments. "I'm going to let Mum know she doesn't have to worry about knitting anything for us anymore, thanks to you. I don't know when I'll be back. Don't be here when I return."

At that, he flung a handful of Floo powder, stepped into the hearth, and out of her life.

It was several minutes before Hermione found the strength to drag herself to her feet, still stunned by Ron's cruel accusations. She still couldn't believe that her husband, her lover, her best friend since she they were firsties at Hogwarts had turned on her so completely, had actually believed her capable of deliberately causing herself to miscarry their unborn children.

Hermione had no doubt now that Lavender had set her sights on stealing her husband, and Hermione knew from past experience that Lavender had no scruples whatsoever when it came to getting what she wanted. Hermione had had serious misgivings, right from the moment Ron had told her that the Cannons were taking a page from Muggle footballers and had hired cheer-leaders to liven up their games, with Lavender Brown as the new Chudley Cheerleaders' captain. Ron had been amused by what he interpreted as Hermione's jealousy and had insisted that he was absolutely devoted to her and their family.

Of course, that was back when Hermione was three months into her first pregnancy, and blissfully unaware that her first miscarriage was only days away.

Hermione had known from the very beginning that Ron wanted a family at least as large as the one he had grown up in. Hermione, personally, would have preferred perhaps two or three, but she loved Ron so much that she had wanted to make his dream of a large family come true, just as new bride Ginny planned to do for her familial-love starved Harry.

Praying fervently to whatever gods might exist that her friends would be blessed with children and the kind of happiness that seemed to come to her like glimpses of a

radiant sun, only for the clouds to come rolling in, darker and more forbidding than ever before.

Slowly moving over to her desk, Hermione scrawled out a quick note to Luna before coaxing a terrified Pigwidgeon from the rafters and sending him on his way.

Then she dragged herself off to her room to pack her bags, hoping that Pig would return quickly with Luna's reply.

Two

Chapter 3 of 5

Hermione Weasley is given devastating news that shatters her world. Can she find a new reason for living?

Disclaimer: It all belongs to Jo.

Ron stalked into the Burrow, slamming the door behind him, sat down at the heavy, scarred oak kitchen table, and dropped his head in his hands.

A few minutes later, a mug of steaming, hot tea was set down in front of him, and Ron looked up to find his father taking a seat directly across from him.

Arthur calmly sipped from his own mug and waited. It didn't take long.

Running his hands through his disheveled red hair, Ron blurted out, "Hermione lost our baby, Dad. And I think, *know*, she's doing it on purpose! You know how she is, all wrapped up in her work, and never any time for family. I thought once we started trying to have children, that she would settle down and be like Mum, like Fleur, like Ginny, like a **NORMAL** witch!"

Arthur, too shocked to speak, simply watched as his youngest son jumped to his feet and strode over to the kitchen counter. Touching his wand to the cabinet above the sink, Ron retrieved a half-empty bottle of Old Ogdens and added a healthy measure to his mug.

"Son," Arthur began slowly, "did you say anything like that to Hermione? Actually accuse her of deliberately miscarrying your children?"

Ron stared at his father. "Of course I did, Dad! Lavender told me that there are dozens of potions that Hermione could have taken that would have made her miscarry, and Hermione has access to everything that she would need to make them! And you know how smart Hermione is, always has to prove it to everyone, so she probably thought she could get away with it!"

Ron slammed the heavy table with his fist, causing his mug of tea to tip over and come crashing to the floor. "Merlin, she even showed me a paper from her Healer that said there was something in her blood that caused her to miscarry... That's almost as good as admitting it!"

"What in Circe's name is going on down here," cried Molly as she trotted down the stairs as fast as she could, a basket piled high with laundry perched on her hip. "Arthur?"

"Hermione miscarried again," Arthur said, his voice turning hollow and unsteady. "And our son saw fit to accuse her of causing herself to do so."

Molly paled. "Ronald... why? How could you do such a thing!"

"What do you mean how could I do such a thing, Mum?" Ron spat. "Hermione's the one who cares more about becoming a Potions mistress than she does about being a mum!"

"Ronald, that's just not true!" Molly stared at her son as if she had never really seen him before. "Do you have any idea how often Hermione has cried on my shoulder because she was terrified of losing another child, of losing you?"

"And you bought it?"

Seeing the look on his wife's face, Arthur hastily got to his feet and pushed Molly into his chair, pulling over another for himself.

Molly closed her eyes, fighting back tears as she imagined the unbearable pain her young daughter-in-law must be going through at that moment. Pain that her own child, her dear Ronald, had deliberately, cruelly caused.

"Listen to me, Ronald," said Arthur in a flat tone that the younger man had never heard his father use before. "Hermione did not, in any way, shape, or form, deliberately cause herself to miscarry. I don't care what Lavender Brown told you. Hermione would never, ever do such a thing, and you had damn well better start thinking with your head for once, instead of your bollocks."

Ron gaped at his visibly angry father, who had never spoken so harshly to him in his life. Then he sneered, "Mione's got you wrapped around her little finger, hasn't she? Look out, Mum, your precious Hermione seems to have a thing for older men. Maybe she's decided Dad would be a better fu--"

SLAP!!!

For several tense seconds, Ron stared up at his mother as he lay sprawled on the Burrow's hardwood floor with his mother's handprint glowing a vivid red across his astonished face.

"Ron, what in Merlin's name has gotten into you?" Molly burst into tears and buried her face in her husband's robes.

"I'm afraid a certain Miss Brown has, by the sound of things," Arthur said sadly. He rubbed soothing circles on his sobbing wife's back as he watched his son slowly get to his feet, scrubbing fiercely at his rapidly bruising cheek.

"Son, I think it would be best if you left and didn't come back for awhile."

"Don't worry," Ron snarled, "I'm going. I'm clearly not welcome here."

"The way you're acting right now, you have most definitely worn out your welcome," Arthur agreed. "By the way, Ronald, I think it would be best if you left Hermione alone as well."

"She had better not be there when I get back," Ron said darkly. "I warned her."

"Don't you dare lay one finger or point a wand anywhere near that witch!" Molly cried. "Ronald, don't you dare!"

Arthur's eyes darkened with anger as he stared at the stranger who stood in his kitchen in place of the boy he had raised. "Ron, I'm warning you. If anything, and I mean anything, happens to that witch, I will personally order the Aurors to escort you to Azkaban."

"My own family is turning against me now," roared an infuriated Ron. "All because of my baby-murdering bitch of a wife!"

"Listen to me," yelled Arthur, "Hermione did not kill those babies!"

Suddenly, the Weasley Floo flared green, and the worried face of Healer Dorothea Wainwright appeared in the flames.

"I'm sorry to interrupt, Mr. and Mrs. Weasley, but you need to come to St. Mungo's."

"Oh no, is it Hermione?" asked Mrs. Weasley worriedly.

"No," said Healer Wainwright, "I'm afraid it's your daughter, Ginevra."

Hermione sat ensconced in a squashy, purple-and-blue floral armchair near the fire, still shaking uncontrollably, when Luna returned bearing a tray of tea and little cinnamon cakes. Luna poured her friend a cuppa and carefully placed it in her trembling hands, then seated herself on the ottoman at Hermione's feet.

"You've left him, then?" Luna gazed up at her friend, her pale blue eyes solemn.

Hermione set her cup on the table beside her. "It's not like Ron gave me much choice," she admitted quietly as tears filled her eyes again.

"Don't cry, Hermione, please don't cry," said Luna, taking the brunette's trembling hands in hers. "Ron never deserved you, you know?"

"Do you know he thinks I killed my own babies?" Hermione sobbed into her already soaked handkerchief. "I can't believe he could think I could do that, Luna? Does he even know me at all?"

"I would say not," Luna replied firmly. "Anyone with the brains God gave a Grindylow would know you couldn't hurt a fly, my love."

Snorting a soft laugh, Hermione reached over and gave her friend a hug. "Thanks, Luna, I think I really needed to hear that."

"Anytime," Luna smiled. "Anyway, you're staying with me now, and I've added new wards to the house and grounds just in case that wanker should turn up looking for you. You're safe here, Hermione, and you can stay as long as you want. Ever since Daddy passed on last fall, I've been pretty lonely," the blonde admitted. "It will be so nice to have company for a change."

Hermione closed her eyes in shame. She realized that she had been so wrapped up in her own pain and worries about her marriage that she had virtually forgotten about her friend in the wake of Xenophilius Lovegood's death.

The late Quibbler editor-in-chief had been quite outspoken against the newly-elected Minister, Marcus Nottingham, and his plan to sharply reduce or commute the sentences of certain "less violent" Death Eaters and Death Eater sympathizers in exchange for substantial monetary donations to the Ministry's fund to rebuild homes and businesses left damaged or destroyed in the wake of war.

Apparently, some rogue Death Eaters took exception to Xenophilius' passionate stance against the Ministry's plan and had sent the newsman an owl, claiming to be a Ministry employee with proof that the new Minister had Death Eater ties.

A horrified, devastated Luna had found her father's barely-recognizable body on their doorstep the very next morning.

"Luna, I am so, so sorry," Hermione began. "I can't believe..."

"Hush, love," Luna smiled. "This past year has hardly been kind to either of us. But we have each other now, and that's what counts, right?"

Hermione smiled and gave her friend a fierce hug. "We sure do. And thank God for that."

Three

Chapter 4 of 5

Hermione Weasley is given devastating news that shatters her world. Can she find a new reason for living?

Arthur and Molly hurried through the Floo at St. Mungo's to find a terrified-looking Harry waiting for them, pacing and running his hands through his thoroughly-disheveled black mop.

"Harry?" Arthur's voice shook at the wild look in his son-in-law's eyes. "What's happened? Where's Ginny?"

"We, er... Ginny and I," Harry's voice broke and he scrubbed his hands over glassy, reddened eyes. Those eyes narrowed when he spied Rita Skeeter entering the reception area and promptly making a beeline in their general direction. "Come on, let's go somewhere where we can talk privately, alright?"

Harry quickly lead Arthur and Molly down a winding series of corridors and ushered them through to a private waiting room connected to St. Mungo's recently-opened High Security Critical Care Ward. Rita had clearly attempted to follow, but--judging by her indignant shrieks of fury--she had been accosted by the burly wizards who provided Auror-level protection to the medically fragile patients who were considered to be particularly high security risks due to their celebrity status and/or notoriety.

Ginevra Molly Potter, new bride of the Boy-Who-Conquered, most certainly qualified.

Arthur lead his wife to a large, squashy ivory-and-green striped armchair and seated himself in the one next to her. Molly, trembling, looked up at Harry. "Harry, please,"

she pleaded, "tell us what's wrong with our daughter."

Harry sat, dropping his head in his hands for moment, before resolutely meeting her anxious gaze. "We didn't want to tell anyone," Harry whispered. "After what happened to Hermione last time, we didn't want anyone to know until Ginny was a little further along."

Molly gasped, tightening her grip on her husband's hand.

This time it was Arthur who broke the silence. "Ginny is pregnant?"

The door to the waiting room slid open to reveal a haggard-looking Healer Rubens. "Was pregnant. I'm sorry, Mr. Potter, Mr. and Mrs. Weasley, but she lost the baby."

"Ginny," Harry choked, "is she..."

"Your wife is a real fighter, Mr. Potter," Healer Rubens hastened to reassure the frantic young husband. "She will need several doses of Blood-Replenishing Potion and careful monitoring, but she will survive this."

"Oh, thank Merlin," Harry and Arthur sighed as one as Molly burst into tears. All were deeply relieved that their Ginny was still with them but heartbroken over the loss of yet another unborn Weasley. "When can we see her?"

"We're getting her cleaned up and moving her to a private room," Rubens informed them. "Give us about fifteen minutes and I'll take you to see her myself. But while we're waiting, there's something I would like to ask of you, if I may?"

Harry looked confused but nodded his consent while Arthur wore an expression that seemed to indicate that he had an inkling of what the Healer was referring to.

Healer Rubens addressed Arthur first. "Mr. Weasley, as a Ministry official, I imagine you might have some idea what this is about. But Mr. Potter, Mrs. Weasley, let me fill the two of you in as well. Over the last several months, there has been a sharp, unexpected increase in the rate of miscarriages in young witches. Particularly since the end of the final Voldemort war."

Molly's eyes widened in shock. "Like our Hermione?"

Rubens nodded sadly. "Hermione is all-too-typical of the cases we're seeing. All witches in their late teens to early twenties, all have a particular substance in their blood that has proven impossible to identify, all miscarry repeatedly until they are forced to avoid becoming pregnant again. The unusual thing here is that, up until recently, all of the witches affected have been Muggle-borns and half-bloods. Ginevra is only the third pureblood witch we've seen who seems to be similarly affected. The thing is, the substance has never been found in the blood of pureblood witches... but it is found in that of their babies."

Harry swallowed hard, dropping his head in his hands. "You... you want to test our..." He couldn't finish.

"I'm afraid so, Mr. Potter."

At the sound of a new, very familiar voice, Harry's head shot up.

"Snape?" Harry rasped.

Severus gazed at the former bane of his existence for a long moment. "My condolences, Potter, Arthur, Molly. I would not wish what you've suffered on anyone."

Rubens hastened to explain. "Professor Snape recently became a member of the team investigating this epidemic of miscarriages. He's specifically working on identifying the substance in question and hopefully finding a cure."

Snape nodded briefly at his new colleague. "I believe I may have found something with regard to the pureblood miscarriages." He turned to face Harry and the Weasleys. "Though none of the witches had the substance in her blood, we noted that each of the would-be fathers were not purebloods themselves. At our request, each father agreed to a series of tests. In every case, the substance turned up in their sperm."

Turning to Rubens, he added, "Curiously, the substance has never been found to be involved any miscarriage in which both parents were purebloods. However, I think it would be beneficial for all pregnant witches and their partners to be tested as soon as pregnancy is confirmed. Perhaps if we can intervene earlier..."

Rubens nodded swiftly. "Thanks for the update, Severus. I'll make the order at once."

At Severus' raised eyebrow, Rubens clarified. "Healer Wainwright just requested an immediate leave-of-absence to deal with a family emergency, so I'll be in charge until she returns. By the way, Harry," Rubens added, turning to the younger man, "Professor Snape's request means we'll want to run tests on you as well. But for now, let me take you to see Ginevra. She needs just as much love and support as you can offer right now."

Lavender had just emerged from the bath, wrapped snugly in her favorite namesake-colored cashmere bathrobe and slippers when a sharp crack of Apparition heralded her married lover's arrival.

Hastening towards the kitchen, Lavender immediately began preparing tea in the blends they each preferred, along with a hearty platter of sandwiches and homemade biscuits when Ron slid up behind her and planted a kiss just below her left ear.

Shuddering in pleasure, Lavender turned around to kiss him properly but drew back, horrified, at the sight of the livid, purple handprint decorating his right cheek, shrieking, "Did *she* do this to you?"

Ron snorted, rubbing his sore, bruised cheek. "Hardly. I got into an argument with my parents. This is courtesy of *mymum*, who is siding with my bitch of a wife. Soon to be ex-wife, if I have anything to say about it. Lav, she lost our baby again. You were right all along, she's been doing it on purpose, I know it!"

Lavender's eyes shone with unconcealed delight at that piece of news. "I'm sure it's for the best," she purred. "I always knew that uptight, swotty, little bookworm was all wrong for you. She's too high and mighty, thinks she's too good to be a proper wife and mum."

"I know that now." Ron grunted, slumping into the nearest chair as Lavender fetched a teapot painted with bright orange poppies and poured, adding a healthy dollop of Firewhiskey and three sugars to the mug before placing it in front of him.

"But I couldn't make mum and dad see reason. They're too infatuated with their wonderful, perfect, saintly daughter-in-law. Oh no, their precious Hermione would never do such a thing. Bollocks, I say!"

Ron took a long drink of his tea as Lavender favored him with a sly look from under long, blonde lashes. "But you still want children, don't you, Won-Won?"

Grimacing only slightly at the nickname he used to loathe, Ron finished his cup and poured another. "Yeah, but I don't think that's going to happen anytime soon."

"Sooner than you think," Lavender burred excitedly.

"What do you mean?"

"Oh, Ronald," Lavender walked around the table and sat in Ron's lap, wrapping her arms around his neck. "I'm pregnant! We're going to have a baby!"

Four

Chapter 5 of 5

Hermione Weasley is given devastating news that shatters her world. Can she find a new reason for living?

*Author's Note: Many thanks to the incomparable **Luvsev** for agreeing to beta for me. Any further mistakes are purely the fault of this very tired author. This chapter is a bit late, but I'm hoping most of you find it to be worth the wait. :)*

Hermione hugged Harry tightly, rubbing his back as he buried his face in her neck, his eyes squeezed tightly shut against the flood of tears.

After several minutes he seemed to gather himself and pull back.

"Thanks, 'Mione. I guess I really needed that," Harry admitted, somewhat abashed. Furtively rubbing at his wet cheeks, he added, "By the way, I... heard about you and Ron. I'm so sorry, love. I don't know what's gotten into the sodding prat."

"It's not your fault, Harry. And it's not like I didn't know Ron could be incredibly thoughtless and had a bit of a vindictive streak. I just never expected..."

Hermione took a deep, calming breath and firmed her jaw. "But that's not important right now. What's important is helping Ginny get through this."

For a long moment, the two of them gazed sadly through the small window into Ginny's room where Molly and Arthur sat on the bed slowly rocking their grieving daughter.

Turning back to his best female friend, Harry asked, "Hermione, how are you coping with all this? This is such a nightmare for Ginny and me, but this is still our first time. I can't even begin to imagine what you must have gone through for all these months."

Hermione took a deep breath before answering. "It... hasn't been easy. Especially with Ron away most of the time and then..." She shook her head as if to clear it. "But Arthur and Molly have been wonderfully supportive. Harry... did you ever hear that Bill almost had an older brother?"

Harry frowned slightly. "No. Anyway, Ginny never mentioned anything like that."

"I'm not sure Ginny ever knew," Hermione admitted. "It was after I miscarried the first time that Molly and I had a really long talk. It seems she found out she was pregnant a few weeks before she and Arthur were married. When the Prewetts found out, they were livid. They weren't exactly thrilled about their daughter choosing to marry an enthusiastic Muggle-lover like Arthur in the first place and there were several bitter arguments about that alone. Anyway, it wasn't long before tongues started wagging in the Prewetts' pureblood circles about why their daughter 'had' to get married. Then one day while Arthur was at work, Molly's parents came to pay a visit. When he came home, he found Molly collapsed on her own kitchen floor."

The pair were silent for a long moment, each wrapped up in their own thoughts.

"Hermione," Harry began tentatively, "I doubt Ron knows that about his mum. Maybe..."

"Trust me," Hermione sighed. "It wouldn't have made any difference."

Harry's eyes were sad as set his chin in his hands and studied his lovely friend. "I just don't understand what went so wrong between you two. You and Ron were so happy when you first got married. Do you know that seeing that is what gave me the courage to propose to Ginny?"

"We were happy... for a while." Hermione stared at her hands for a moment before meeting Harry's troubled eyes again. "I think things started to turn back when Ron made first string Keeper for the Cannons and started spending a lot of time away from home. You already know that Ron always felt overshadowed by his successful older brothers, even by you. Well, when Ron really started to get a lot of attention from the media, it wasn't long before loads of little Quidditch groupies were running after him everywhere we went. And then came the Chudley Cheerleaders and Lavender Brown."

Harry snorted. "I can't believe Ron was stupid enough to actually get mixed up with her again. Remember how he kept alternately trying to hide from her and break up with her back in sixth year?"

Hermione smiled mirthlessly. "Oh, I remember. Thing is, Lavender apparently never quite got over him. Or gave up on getting him back, for that matter. A couple months after she was hired, I was cleaning out our bedroom closet and found a stack of letters she had written to Ron under a pile of old Quidditch magazines. They were quite... detailed. Not to mention graphic."

"Did you ask Ron about them?"

"Of course I did. Ron insisted that he wanted nothing to do with her outside of the Cannons and swore that he told her in no uncertain terms to back off. Shortly after that was when I had the first miscarriage. But Ron was wonderfully supportive. We were so close at the time and it wasn't long before we were ready to try again. But no sooner did I get pregnant than the owners decided to send the team on the Asian tour," she sighed.

"When Ron came home after the tour, he was... different, oddly distant and his moods would change like the weather. I never could find out what happened and Ron kept insisting that nothing was wrong. But then he started going on about 'Lavender this, Lavender that' every time we would argue. We had had the occasional fight before just like every other married couple, but things had never turned nasty between us until then. I thought Ron had matured since we left Hogwarts, but it was like sixth year all over again, Harry, only worse. It started with the occasional snide comment about me allegedly running around with Professor Snape and other older wizards, even with his own father, for God's sake! But the worst was when he started accusing me of not wanting to be a wife and mum. Oh, Harry, Ron actually told me he thought I had... that I had killed..."

Hermione's voice broke, and she buried her face in her hands.

Harry reached out and pulled his friend close, hugging her fiercely. "That complete and utter bastard," he hissed, visibly furious. "Gods, Hermione, I am so sorry! If I'd known that Ron had dared to say anything like that to you, I'd have kicked his sorry arse like a Muggle."

"Thanks, Harry." Hermione sniffled, wiping her eyes. "Just the thought means more than you'll ever know. But Ron and I are over now, and I think that's for the best. Come on, enough about me, alright? I'm staying at Luna's; I'll be perfectly fine there."

Frowning slightly, Harry asked, "Hermione, Ron never actually... hurt you, did he? Physically, I mean?"

Hermione chewed her lip nervously, not sure how to answer. "Not exactly," she hedged.

"What exactly..." Harry began, but he trailed off, staring as a furiously swearing janitor pelted down the hall in hot pursuit of a determined-looking Ministry owl that was quickly winging its way in their direction. Seconds later, the owl swooped into a dive just long enough to drop a thick roll of parchment directly onto Hermione's head before zooming back towards the hospital lobby.

Hermione cautiously undid the parchment, then read quietly for several moments.

"Hermione?"

She glanced up, wearing an undefinable expression. "Well, it seems like Ron's in quite a hurry to make things official."

Harry gave his friend a confused look. "What do you mean?"

Sighing, Hermione passed him the paper. "It's a summons to the Ministry for tomorrow morning. Ron's filed for divorce."

Not especially hungry but knowing they had to eat, Molly sliced a fresh loaf of bread as the familiar, comforting aroma of simmering onion soup filled the Burrow's kitchen. Arthur sat at the heavy oak table in silence until Molly set their bowls of soup, bread and butter on the table.

They had only just begun their meal when they were startled by a loud crack of Apparition right outside their door. Molly flinched and Arthur leapt to his feet to peer out the window. Relieved to see it was only their eldest son Bill, Arthur quickly strode to the door to let him in.

A weary-looking Bill gave his father a brief hug as Molly got up to ladle another bowl.

"Bill, dear, you're so thin!" Molly cried, grateful for an excuse to do what she did best. "Come here, sit down, we're having onion soup, your favorite."

"Thanks, Mum," Bill said gratefully. "Fleur's been too sick to cook, so I've been mostly living on pub fare. The sight or smell of anything other than weak tea and soda crackers sends Fleur running straight for the loo."

"Oh, the poor thing," Molly fussed. "I believe I still have some of the anti-nausea potion Hermione brewed for me in the bedroom, just let me..."

"It's okay, Mum, I'll get it before I leave." Hearing the odd tone in their eldest son's voice, the couple turned to face him.

Arthur set down his spoon abruptly. "Bill, you don't believe any of that nonsense Ronald's been spouting, do you? Because..."

"No, no, Dad, of course not!" Bill hastened to reassure his father. "And I'd love some of our Hermione's potion. Merlin knows Fleur will be so grateful for anything that will help her eat a decent meal again. But I didn't just come by for some of Mum's wonderful home-cooking."

"What's wrong, son?" Arthur asked, placing his arms on a worried Molly's shoulders.

"Well, it's about Ronnie," Bill hedged.

Molly's eyes flashed ominously. "What's Ronald done now?" she demanded.

Bill sighed. "Well, you already know that he kicked Hermione out of their house. But it seems Ronnie's ready to move on in a big way. One of my old Gryffindor housemates is now working for the *Daily Prophet*; you remember Davey Wood, don't you?"

At his parents' nods, Bill continued. "Davey asked me to meet him at the Leaky Cauldron, said he had something that he needed to tell me before it hit the papers tomorrow. Well, his girlfriend Francine works as the fashion editor at *Witch Weekly*, and she told him Rita Skeeter, even fresh out of Azkaban, somehow wangled herself a job there as their new gossip columnist. Seems she got the position by bringing them a juicy celebrity scoop complete with an interview and loads of pictures."

"Well, whatever Ronald's done," Arthur commented wryly, "I'm sure Rita was more than happy to take full advantage."

"Yeah, I'll say," Bill agreed with a scowl of disgust. "Especially since Rita not only personally profits, but she gets to twist the knife in Hermione as well."

"Oh no," Molly moaned. "As if that poor child hasn't been through enough already!"

"Rita really hates Hermione, Mum." Bill sighed. "But especially since Hermione caught her eavesdropping on the Wizengamot's deliberations during the Death Eater trials. That little escapade earned Rita six months in Azkaban, so now she's really out for Hermione's blood. Anyway, Davey thought we should know what she has in store for Hermione. According to Francine, Rita has a source in the Ministry who not only notified her the minute Ronnie started divorce proceedings against Hermione but got her a copy of the paperwork he filed. As soon as she got a whiff of that nasty business, Rita immediately contacted Ron and Lavender and snagged herself what she's calling the juiciest interview of her career."

Arthur stood up abruptly, pushing his soup aside. "As if Ron's baseless accusations aren't bad enough, with Rita there to fan the flames, Merlin knows what will happen. We've got to warn Hermione and get her official Auror protection. Tonight."