

Those Left to Carry On

by luvcharlie

Death is hardest for those who are left behind. This is set immediately following Fred Weasley's funeral.

Oneshot

Chapter 1 of 1

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Those Left to Carry On

"Change is the constant, the signal for rebirth, the egg of the phoenix." --Christina Baldwin

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Hermione:

It had been mere days since Voldemort had been defeated. So many were lost, and Hermione knew their lives would never revert to the way they had once been. The only constant she could count on was that time would move forward, propelling them along with it, even when they most wanted to dig in their heels.

As she sat at the kitchen table of the Burrow following Fred's funeral, Hermione felt lost and out of place...an intruder upon this family's grief. She looked for Ron in each face that crossed the threshold, always disappointed when each red head that entered belonged to one of his brothers.

When she could stand the tears no longer, she walked down to the pond to sit and look out over the water. The sun was shining brightly; too brightly it seemed to lay to rest a young man from whom so much life had been stolen away. She was lost in reverie when a hand touched her shoulder. She covered it with her own, only to be disappointed when it was too small to belong to Ron.

She looked up into the face of her friend. Harry must have felt even more out of place inside with the grieving family than she. After all, he was a young man whom the Weasleys loved as their own, but he knew he could never replace the child they had buried earlier that day.

"So what are you doing out here, Hermione?"

"I suspect the same as you."

"I doubt it. I've never hated being the 'Boy Who Lived' more. I keep thinking it should have been me they buried today, not Fred."

Hermione took his hand and squeezed it, knowing it offered little comfort. "Nobody wishes it had been you, Harry."

"I know."

"Where is Ginny?" Hermione asked, laying her head on his shoulder. She couldn't help thinking shoulders that had borne so much should really be larger.

"Ginny's telling her mum and dad that she's coming with me to Grimmauld Place tonight. Kreacher's been there and cleaned up some, and she wants to give them some time alone, you know, without all of us going in and out of the house. Why don't you and Ron come along?"

"I'll see. He hasn't talked to me much since...well, you know, today."

"I know. I don't think he's talked much to anyone. Go and find him." Harry patted her on the back before standing and walking away to find Ginny.

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The night Voldemort had been defeated, she had allowed Ron to lead her up to his old four-poster bed in the Gryffindor boys' dormitory where she had given her body to him. It had been awkward and painful and over much too quickly, leaving her with the belief that sex was seriously overrated. However, the way he had cuddled her to him afterwards, placing kisses on her face, down her neck and over her shoulders had been divine. She had never felt closer to anyone than when he held her in his arms and whispered words of love into her ear.

Unfortunately, since that one night alone in Gryffindor Tower, there had not been an opportunity for anything more than a few stolen kisses and the feel of his hand in hers under the table at the Burrow. So much had happened in that short span of time. It seemed a lifetime since that night and she missed his touch, newfound though it was.

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Hermione tapped lightly on the door to the attic bedroom. She received no answer and opened it to find the man she loved curled up on his childhood bed facing the wall. It was odd to see him curled there as he was and difficult to believe that when she first knew him he had actually fit in that small bed. She cast an enlarging spell, and the bed grew in both length and width. He had cast his dress robes aside, clad now in only a white undershirt and pair of worn jeans.

He attempted to wipe his face as she put her wand away and crawled in behind him. "Do you mind if I join you?" she asked, entangling her legs with his and stroking the hair that curled at the nape of his neck, twirling it around her finger.

Ron didn't verbally respond to her question, only rolled her beneath him and put his head on her chest. As much as he had grown from that child of eleven she had encountered on the train to Hogwarts so many years ago, she had never seen him look more childlike or vulnerable. His hands on her waist bunched her shirt up, and she felt his first tears begin to soak her top. She whispered words of comfort as one hand snaked under his shirt to rub consoling circles on his back.

She heard footsteps on the stairs and looked up to see Bill standing outside the door. He had come to check on Ron and gave her a grateful half-smile before mouthing a silent 'thank you' and closing the door to offer them a modicum of privacy in the always busy house.

Hearing the door close, Ron attempted to wipe his face and sit up. "Hermione, I'm sorry. I... Merlin, you must think I'm--"

She grasped his face between her hands, forcing him to look at her, "Brave. I think you're brave and strong and smart..."

"Okay, now I know you're delirious. You just called me smart."

"Hush, Ronald, I'm not done," she said as he laid his face beside her on the pillow and pulled her tightly against him. She placed small kisses on his lips as she brushed the hair back from his forehead. "I think you are smart and sweet and caring and handsome." She kissed him again more firmly. "And I love you, Ron Weasley." She had only said those words to him once before, but she meant them with all of her being. They had wasted too much time, and Fred's death served as an all too tangible reminder that time was much too precious to waste.

His hand curled around her neck, and he pulled her to him covering her mouth with his. "I love you too," he whispered.

"Ron, Harry and Ginny are going to stay at Grimmauld Place tonight and give your parents some privacy, and they've invited us to come along. I told them I'd see what you thought."

"I think I probably won't be very good company, Hermione."

"You're the only company I want."

"Hard to say no when you put it like that," he said, pulling her back in and kissing her hard.

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Ron:

They exited the fireplace at number twelve, Grimmauld Place, hand-in-hand, just as Harry and Ginny were sitting down to dinner. Kreacher had the kitchen smelling of delicious beef stew and treacle tart, and Ron's mouth began to salivate instantly.

"Room for two more?" he asked.

"Absolutely," said Harry, getting up to grab two more plates from the cupboard.

"How about three more?" asked George, stepping from the fireplace behind them. "I mean, if you don't mind. I really don't want to go back to the flat over the store tonight, and I don't think I can stand listening to Mum cry the rest of the evening. Do you mind if I stay here tonight, Harry?"

"You never have to ask. You're always welcome here."

"Thanks, mate."

They ate in relative silence. They had all lost so much to this War, but none had lost as much as George. George had lost his other half, and Ron found it painful to see him without Fred at his side.

After a second helping of treacle tart, the button on Ron's trousers was protesting and his eyelids were growing heavy. He only half-heard what was going on around him, but was sure Hermione asked Harry where they were all sleeping. George volunteered to take the sofa in the front sitting room and followed Kreacher to the linen closet for a blanket and a pillow.

Ron heard Harry say that he would take Sirius' old room, purposely tuning Ginny out when she agreed that would be fine with her *There are some things it is simply best not to acknowledge*. Hermione took his hand moments later and pulled him toward Regulus Black's old room with the large four-poster bed covered in a soft green duvet. Kreacher had everything freshly laundered and the room was free from dust. Ron had to admit the room probably looked as nice as when it was last occupied by its previous owner.

He startled in surprise when Hermione's arms circled his waist from behind and she pressed her face into his back.

"I didn't think I would ever get you all to myself."

Ron smiled at this new comfort between them. "You have me now," he said.

"Give me a couple of minutes," she whispered picking up her overnight bag and heading for the loo connected to the large bedroom.

Ron quickly changed into a pair of pyjama bottoms himself and lit all of the candles in the room, before turning down the lush duvet and climbing atop the soft sheets. He didn't recall closing his eyes, but the next thing he knew something was popping him rather painfully in the forehead.

"Pathetic," said the all too familiar voice of his brother, who was supposed to be sleeping downstairs on the sofa.

"George, get out."

"You finally get the girl you've wanted for as long as I can remember in the next room getting herself ready to come in here and shag you senseless, and you fall asleep. If I wasn't already dead, I'd kill myself at how pathetic you are, little brother."

"George, that's not funny. Get out."

"You always were a bit slow, Ronnie. I don't know how much time I have before I have to go back, so let's just get this out of the way. Follow me, okay?"

Ron followed his brother into the living room where George lay sleeping on the sofa.

"George, how're you sleeping there and standing here all at once?"

Fred laughed, "Cause I'm not George, you moron. I'm Fred. Honestly, I don't know how Hermione puts up with you sometimes. Now listen, before I have to go."

"But, I mean..."

"Shut your trap and listen to me, Ron."

Ron closed his mouth.

"Better. Now, as I was saying, I don't know how long I have here. I need to ask you to do something for me. Georgie is going to have a hard time. He's never been on his own before. It's always been the two of us. I need you to promise me you'll look out for him."

"Why me?"

"There's nobody else. Percy's too full of himself. Bill's married. Charlie's going to head back to Romania soon. So, there's just you. We worked hard to make that store what it is, me and George, and I don't want him throwing it all away grieving. I can't come back, no matter how much I wish I could, so I'm asking you to do this for me. Help him along until he's ready to do it himself. Will you?"

This was really his brother standing in front of him, the brother he had buried earlier that day, the brother George would so want to see. "Wake him up, Fred. Let him see you. He needs to see you."

"That's not the way it works. Only you can see me, Ronnie. I came to give the message to you."

"But why? George needs to know you're okay where you're at."

"It will only hurt him more when I have to go away again, just like it will hurt you. I'm sorry I had to hurt you again, Ron, but it was the only way. Promise me you'll take care of him while I can't."

Ron had never seen Fred look so desperate. "Okay, I will. I'll look out for him."

Fred smiled a contented looking smile. "Thank you. He's not nearly as tough as he looks," Fred said, brushing back a lock of hair that had fallen over George's forehead. He stood up and clapped his hands together. "Okay, now just one more thing."

"You're demanding for a dead bloke, you know that?"

"I don't think you'll find this to be too much of a burden, little brother," Fred said with an impish smile. "There's a girl up there getting ready to come join you in bed. Make sure she knows how much you love her. We're not always promised a tomorrow, you know."

And with that, he was gone.

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"Ron! Ron, wake up." Hermione's concerned face was leaning over him, and his cheeks were wet with his own tears.

"What's going on?" he said. His brain felt like it was in a fog.

"You were saying Fred's name in your sleep."

"I was asleep? Are you sure? How long have I been asleep?" The questions poured from his lips in a confused jumble.

"Not long. I heard you when I came out of the loo."

He sat up and kissed her, tasting his own tears as they mingled with the kiss. He licked at her lips and forced his tongue inside her mouth.

"I want you, Hermione. I want to make love to you tonight."

She pushed his bare shoulders back against the soft pillows on the bed and climbed into his lap. Her palms wiped away the remainder of his tears and kissed every inch of his face, finding his lips at last, and slipping her tongue between them in an earth-moving kiss.

He rolled her beneath him and made love to her with an urgency that he had never felt before. As he came, he whispered how he loved her in her ear and felt her tighten around him, as her nails dug into his shoulders. He had never felt anything so wonderful.

"That was bloody brilliant," he said upon regaining the capacity for speech.

"Yes, it was."

"Did you...I mean, I felt you...Oh, bloody hell, I'm just gonna say it. Did you come, Hermione?"

He smirked at the telling blush that spread across her cheeks when she nodded her head.

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He was still stroking her hair long after she had fallen asleep with her head on his chest. He wasn't sure when he drifted asleep, but he felt the painful knocking on his forehead once more. "Will you stop it?"

There was a whispered, "Meet me in the kitchen," which reached his ear.

Ron pushed Hermione back against the pillows and pulled the blanket up around her, as she said a sleepy, "Ron?"

"It's okay, love. I'm just going to the kitchen for a glass of water. You want anything?"

A breathy sigh escaped her lips, which Ron thought he would never tire of hearing, before saying, "Just hurry back. It's cold in here without you."

"Okay, I will." He picked up her wand and started a fire in the fireplace, then grabbed his shorts and pulled them on before heading down to the kitchen.

Fred was leaned against the counter when he entered the room.

"I thought you couldn't stay long?"

"I told you I didn't know how long I could stay. Not sorry I got to stay long enough to watch you and Granger shagging though. Eager little thing, wasn't she?"

"What? You watched us?"

"Nah, I watched her. I did my best not to look at you at all. I'm dead, not blind, and the sight of you starkers is not one I care to carry with me into the afterlife."

"You prat. How dare you?"

"Come on, can you blame me? It was my last glimpse of a naked female before I have to go, and the only other alternative in the house happened to be my little sister. I'm a ghost, not a perv."

"That's debatable," Ron growled. Fred sniggered, only making Ron more frustrated.

"What do you want? Did you drag me out of bed just to tell me you watched me shag my girlfriend? Because I could be up there right now snuggled underneath the covers with her instead of down here freezing my arse off and listening to you. When did this fucking house become so damn drafty? It's May for Merlin's sake."

"I really just wanted to say goodbye and thanks, Ronnie."

The next thing Ron knew, he was standing back in the room he and Hermione were sharing before the warm crackling fire. He wasn't sure how he had gotten there, but he smiled when Hermione sat up in the bed and motioned him over. He looked around first, but his brother had gone.

She yawned sleepily, and he smiled at the way her hair framed her face in a wild array of curls.

"You started a fire. How'd you know I was cold?"

"You told me. Don't you remember?"

She shook her head to indicate that she did not and started to rise from the bed.

Ron gave a quick look around the room before saying, "Don't get up."

She looked around the room too, obviously wondering what had caused him to behave so strangely. "Ron, what's..."

"It's just you look so beautiful sitting there in the firelight. I don't want you to move."

"Oh, Ron," she smiled. "That's the sweetest thing I've ever heard you say."

It was a nice recovery if he did say so himself. He was certain he heard laughter trailing down the hallway as he climbed into the bed and pulled Hermione tightly against him.

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A year later, to the day, the store was prospering under Ron and George's ownership, and all of them were still living at Grimmauld Place. George had simply been unable to return to the flat he had shared with his twin, and rather than sleeping on the sofa, he had moved more permanently into one of the bedrooms.

Ron decided that Fred had been right. There was no guarantee of a tomorrow, and he and Hermione had continued to reside in Regulus Black's old bedroom since that night one year ago. He never wanted to spend another night away from her. In fact, there was a ring in the pocket of his recently discarded trousers which he planned to give her at the Weasley family dinner on Sunday when he asked her to marry him. He had no doubt she would say yes.

He sat watching the fire crackle in the fireplace as his girlfriend dozed in bed beside him. He didn't recall falling asleep, but the familiar knocking on his forehead of a year ago brought him quickly awake.

"You know, there are better ways to wake a bloke," Ron said, giving a frustrated sigh as the face of his brother swam before his blurry eyes.

"I can only stay a second," Fred whispered. "I just came to say thanks for keeping your promise."

Ron pulled the blanket more closely around Hermione causing Fred to laugh, and then he was gone.

"Goodbye, brother," Ron whispered into the dark room.

"What'd you say, Ron?" asked Hermione tightening her arm around his waist.

"Just wondered if you were cold, love," he responded.

"Come here and warm me up."

"Yes, ma'am," he replied, rolling her to her back, as she pulled his mouth down to hers.

"Out of the ashes of our hopelessness, comes the fire of our hope." Anne Wilson Shaef