

A Place to Bury Strangers

by kizzy7

For months, Hermione has searched for him.

one-shot

Chapter 1 of 1

For months, Hermione has searched for him.

A/N This was written for the lovely lulabelle72 on the livejournal community hpcon_envy. She brilliantly prompted me with the phrase, 'a place to bury strangers.' Thanks to lulabelle for the prompt, and thanks as always to the admins at TPP.

She is utterly and completely exhausted...the dark, bruise-like circles under her eyes and her weary, slumped shoulders tell a physical tale of today and the week prior to today and the three months previous.

But here she is at last, the final stop before she finds him, before she can return home.

It is nighttime when she reaches the cabin high on the hilltop, for she is afraid to Apparate here lest someone unfriendly see her. She knocks on the door; the wood is soft with rot beneath her knuckles.

The door swings open of its own accord. She enters with trepidation pinching her nerves tight, but the small, single room inside is apparently empty. A feeble fire in the far corner offers little light and heat. Hermione shivers, pulling her cloak firmly over her shoulders.

The wooden planks she walks upon are ancient with creaks and crevasses. She wonders if she will fall through into whatever lies beneath, thus ending her travels.

As she treads silently into the room, a high-backed, ornate rocking chair reveals itself, and it is rocking, rocking, though it is empty.

Irrational horror...for she is certainly a witch, and she has certainly faced worse...engulfs her, smothering her lungs and mouth and senses until she stumbles backwards, falling to the floor with an inelegant thud.

"Hold on, girlie," comes a voice, an ancient voice that cracks with each word. "Don't be leaving yet."

In the empty chair materialises a witch, an old witch, probably the oldest person Hermione has ever seen. Her skin is folds upon folds of wrinkles, dry, papery cracks are deeply embedded in her yellowish lips, and her eyes are dull and faded, rimmed with a bleary red.

She is crocheting something, her large, curled fingers steadily working a plain, Muggle hook. Hermione stares at her nails...they are at least five inches, constantly snagging the yarn with their curved length.

"I would offer you a chair, but I'm afraid this is the only one I have," croaks the voice.

Hermione shrugs and pulls herself up, brushing the dust and the grime off her robes. "Oh, no matter. Are you... are you Mary Shaw?"

The old woman pauses her crocheting, pauses her rocking, and in the sudden silence, Hermione can only hear the flames popping in the fireplace and the rustle of the leaves outside.

"Who are you, young girlie, to be asking me such a thing?"

Hermione creases her brow, physically biting her tongue to prevent a tirade born of exhaustion and fear flood from her mouth. "Sorry, ma'am. My name is Hermione Granger, and I was told that you would have answers."

Mary smiles, revealing a mouth pink, gummy, and devoid of all teeth. "Aye, perhaps I have. I have many answers, though it has been long since anyone called me by that name. Though I wonder... what answer can a girl as young as yourself be seeking so desperately?"

"I am looking," and Hermione rummages through her magically expanded, beaded bag until she grasps the necessary bit of parchment, "for this."

She proffers the scrap of yellowed paper, and when Mary reaches for it, their fingers graze.

A place to bury strangers, it reads in faded ink, torn from the pages of perhaps a manuscript, perhaps a diary. The man who gave it to her didn't know, or wouldn't tell her.

Mary peers at it for several timeless seconds until with a cry she drops it onto her floor. "Where did you get this?"

Hermione shakes her head...there is no time for explanations, no time, for she is so close she can almost feel his arms wrapped sure and strong around her shoulders.

"Never mind that, Mrs. Shaw. Can you tell me?!" Hysteria edges her voice.

The old woman leans back into her chair, nodding once towards the scrap of parchment, and it ignites on the ground. Hermione sobs, screams...because it is her only chance of finding him, of seeing him, kissing him...and she throws herself on the ground, clawing at the flames until her fingers are singed black and she holds crumbling ash in her hand.

"Why?" she asks. "Why? *Why did you do this to me?!!*"

Mary eyes her warily. Hermione can easily read her thoughts...after all, it's what Harry thinks. What Ron thinks. That she is crazy with grief, driven to insanity by impossible hopes and mad, mad dreams.

"I did that because no one...*no one*, girl...should ever read that again. For once they enter the circle of stones, the living cannot leave. It is a place where strangers are buried, and the dead bury the dead."

"No!" Hermione cries. "That is just an old wives' tale, told to frighten misbehaving children."

In sympathy, Mary reaches out a claw-like hand and pats Hermione on the head. "No, my child. It is magic ancient and forgotten, yes, but very, very much alive."

"I d-don't care. I have to meet him there. He is waiting for me, every night. I can feel it."

"Ah, a man, then," Mary says wisely. "I see now that you will find another, more desperate way if I do not help you."

"I will do anything," Hermione whispers, meaning the words with every breath she draws. For he wasn't supposed to die. He wasn't supposed to leave her.

Mary shakes her head, a sad frown upon her face before she answers. "Then go into the forest, the forest behind the hill. Stay north until you come to the tallest of trees. Veer right, and you will reach the circle of stones. But beware, Hermione Granger, once you cross the stones, you cannot come back."

Hermione is up and gone from the cabin before the old witch finishes speaking, and her final warning never reaches Hermione's ears.

The dead bury the dead.

The forest is unnaturally quiet in this deep, forgotten part of the woods. Every footstep results in a near-deafening snap of twigs in the absolute silence, but Hermione is beyond fear now. She is so close, so close, and he beckons her, she knows, with his pale fingers.

She quickens her pace, thinking of how his hair sometimes falls across his face, obscuring his features from scrutiny, or how his thin lips feel against her own, and resolutely not about why he chose to be buried there...the place to bury strangers, where the dead bury the dead.

An hour's brisk walk, and she is standing uncertainly before the circle of stones. They glow eerily in the moonlight, as if... as if they are alive and watching her, waiting for her decision.

Enclosed within the circle of stones lies the burying ground, and Hermione can hear the dim hum of old magic vibrating in the air around her. The ground is flat, smooth with black dirt, and somewhere in there is Severus.

That thought compels her forward with one, shaky step. She is over the stones and running on the hard-packed dirt, screaming his name into the stillness, and crying. She does not notice that the hum of magic in the air has changed subtly, and now buzzes with a wicked *anticipation*.

He appears out of nothing, a few steps from her. She closes the distance, throwing her arms around his chest, hugging him and sobbing with relief and happiness.

Severus is wearing the long, black robes she remembers so clearly from her childhood...the robes he died in. She remains ignorant that the wounds on his neck are gaping and bloody, as if still fresh, and he smells of the deep, deep earth.

"Hermione," he rasps. "You should not have come here." His voice has changed...it is gravelly and distant, as if he were speaking to her from underground.

"Severus," she replies, "you should not have left me."

He clutches her wrists, prying her arms away from him. "You should have remained with the living, Hermione."

"But... but I love you," she says, realising with horror slick in her stomach that his eyes are flat and dead.

She fingers a single, bloody button on his chest. "I need to know... why you came here. I love you, Severus. I would have buried you, taken care of you... Why did you come here?"

"I thought you would understand, Hermione," he says in his odd, muffled voice. "I was tired of Hogwarts and the life I lived there. In my death, I wanted to be alone. Finally, blessedly alone."

"Even... even from me?" she asks pitifully.

"I had hoped that in your death you would join me. But I see now that I won't have to wait... any longer..."

Uncertainly, Hermione steps back, but he captures her face in his hands, kissing her until she shivers with cold and lust.

"You shouldn't have come here, Hermione," he repeats one last time.

And now his fingers are tight and cold around her neck.

Mary Shaw sits in her chair, rocking and knitting, waiting for the delivery owl to arrive with *The Daily Prophet*. With a screech, the tawny bird drops the paper on her lap, strutting across the floor until Mary tosses him a sickle and a piece of bread.

She unfolds the paper across her yarn, and her eyes widen as she reads the headline.

War Hero Hermione Granger Missing.

The girl in the picture doesn't *really* look like the girl who visited her three weeks ago. She is lighter, fuller, happier in the black-and-white photo. Her eyes do not burn with desperation and sorrow.

Mary throws the *Prophet* into the flames of the fire. She crosses herself as the pages crackle and burn black smoke.

She is old, but she does not yet concern herself with those who are dead.
