Nepenthe

by Deathofme

The alternate ending to "Pomegranate Seeds." What happens if Hermione doesn't eat the pomegranate? What happens when she dies and then returns to the Elysian Fields? How much has she forgotten?

Nepenthe

Chapter 1 of 1

Lethe: literally meaning "forgetfulness," one of the five rivers of Hades

Nepenthe: literally meaning "the one that chases away sorrow," a drug for forgetfulness

"*A land of deepest shade,*

Unpierced by human thought

The dreary regions of the dead,

Where all things are forgot."

-Idumea, traditional folk ballad

PROLOGUE

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He looked at her though hooded eyes and with a blood-red mouth.

"Eat this pomegranate with me."

Hermione reached for his face, willing her fingers not to tremble. She stroked his cool skin, autumn-kissed, and placed one of her own at the corner of his eye.

"Try as I might, I'll never forget you."

Severus bowed his head, resting his brow against the hollow of her neck. As he spoke, his mouth brushed against her throat in a lost variation of cuneiform.

"I will wait for you."

Hermione closed her eyes and whispered, "*Lumos.*"

Her wand tip flared into a bright beacon, inviting for her only eternal night.

In one world, Severus watched as she melted away from him like a swirling mass of gray smoke.

In another, Hermione Granger inhaled sharply, twitching. Ginny rushed over to her side, eyes wide.

"Hermione?"

She then saw her friend open her eyes for the first time in seven days. There were tears shining in them, and they soon closed tight as if they couldn't bear to see.

"Hermione? Oh, Hermione, I thought you were gone forever. What happened? Did you find him?"

Hermione lay on the ground, her body still halfway through the veil. Her soul, however, had firmly been reclaimed by the living. Her voice came out as barely a whisper.

"I wish I were dead."

NEPENTHE

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One day, Hermione Granger closed her eyes and died.

Some would have said of her that it was still a young age to depart the world from. That it was still too soon. But no one leaves before their time, so it was with a sense of expectation that the shades in the Elysian Fields welcomed her.

Remus Lupin took her face in his hands and smiled gently. "My, is that gray hair I see, Hermione? You look older than me now."

She smiled back, a hand reaching up into her bushy mane. "I *am* older, Remus."

"How did it happen? What of Harry? Ginny? You said they were married what of their children?"

Sirius had bounded up to her, hugging her fiercely. His eyes sparkled with excitement and hunger. The sense of welcome upon recognizing him faded from her face as she pondered his questions.

"Harry and Ginny? Really? I never would have guessed ... "

The gathering of shades surrounding her suddenly parted, creating a free path off into the distance. Hermione looked up to see Severus Snape, standing from afar and regarding her with a desperate look on his face.

"Hermione ... "

He walked over to her, his black eyes sparkling, misty robes rippling over the gray Elysian grass. There was a longing on his face, which held too much depth to sit comfortably in the Underworld. When he finally reached her, after what seemed a sweet eternity, he had to stay his hand from reaching for her face.

"I waited. I remembered."

Hermione looked up at him, politely curious. "Did you, Professor?"

He took a step back, surprise registering across his face. He then lowered his eyes, a darker material swirling within him and condensing into a tight, black knot. He willed himself to speak kindly.

"I did ... Miss Granger." He disappeared into the crowd of shades with a swirl of his gray robes.

Hermione barely noticed him leave as she was greeted by another person she had once known. There was only one occasion for enthusiasm of the dead, and it was when another joined their number.

The sky of the Elysian Fields grew imperceptibly darker.

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When Severus found Hermione on her own, finally, it was to see her sitting serenely on a tree stump. Seeing her on her own, he found an inch of courage to approach her again.

She noticed him walking over and smiled. "Hello, Professor."

She looked older. Time had brought a maturity and sense of the world to her face before preserving her as she was.

"I had just noticed something about this place, Professor."

As Severus bent to sit, he found another stump had materialized beneath him. "What would that be, Miss Granger?"

"There aren't any books here."

A smile danced its way across his mouth before it was captured and twisted into a grimace. Severus lifted a trembling hand and pressed his fingertips gently to her face. He could see her curious eyes staring at him through the latticework of his fingers.

"Professor?"

"Won't you call me Severus?"

She cocked her head to the side, nose wrinkling with amusement. "All right. It will take getting used to."

He withdrew his hand and left her to once more sit alone on her stump. Staring out into the fields of gray, contemplating and reveling in her newfound forgetfulness as all newly dead did.

Severus wandered over to where the Malfoys were. Lucius cracked open one eye when he sensed someone approaching, and relaxed again when he ascertained it was only Severus. Severus bent down to the gray river to offer them his customary drink, when Narcissa suddenly sat up.

"Lucius."

He had noticed it too and sat up alert. They both looked somewhere off into the gray distance, tense. Severus then felt it a moment after.

Someone new had entered the Elysian Fields.

Narcissa tugged at Lucius' sleeve, when they finally saw a figure in the distance. It looked panicked; it was running towards them and yelling something.

"... ath ... fath ... er ... "

Lucius stood, rising once more to his full, impressive height as the figure finally made it to the clearing. It promptly tripped and fell flat on its face, its small frame wracked with sobs.

Narcissa, already making soothing noises, knelt by the figure's side and lifted its face to reveal a young boy with regal features and soft, golden hair. She inspected him tenderly and then said, "You're not Draco."

Lucius helped the boy to his feet, concern etched on his face. He wiped the startled tears from the boy's eyes. "I know you ... you're a Malfoy."

"Sc-Scorpius."

"Why do you come here so upset? Why are you here before your father?"

The boy looked wildly about, still in the grips of some horror, but whatever was plaguing him was slipping away like a dream upon the waking.

"Father ... the bridge ... he slipped too ... falling ... falling ...*father*..."

Narcissa, her arms around him, shushed him and stroked his hair. "It's all right, child. It's over now. It's all over."

The boy clung to her robes, the frightening nightmare slowly dissipating. Lucius encircled a protective arm around him as well, regarding the boy with a fierce look in his eyes.

Severus quietly withdrew, albeit with his spirits slightly lifted. The Malfoy clan was slowly reuniting.

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"Where does this river go?"

Sirius shrugged. "It cuts through this entire place. I don't think it begins or ends."

Hermione walked along its bank, beckoning for Sirius to follow. She had maintained a certain curiosity about the Underworld, still settling into her new home.

"What's happening up there? How's Harry? Who's still around?"

Hermione looked up, puzzled. "I don't know. Same as always I suppose."

Sirius shoved his hands into his pockets and kicked a pebble ruefully. "You used to know everything."

Hermione shrugged. "I just liked to read ... oh, look!"

The river had wound its way to a clearing where it formed a pool. Its gray waters were still and impenetrable. One could not see the bottom through its depths.

Hermione knelt by its bank and cupped her hands into the water. She drank, and it tasted cool and crisp.

Sirius sat down beside her, skimming his fingers across the pool's surface. "You didn't drink before either. No matter how much I pressed you."

Hermione wiped a stray droplet from her lips. "Before?"

"You were here before once. You were much warmer then."

The water from the pool coating her mouth gray, Hermione tried to remember but could not.

"I forget."

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Severus looked up to realize he was standing in front of a set of heavy wooden doors. Pressing his hand against them, they swung open to reveal a garden. Cherries and apples, fallen from their branches, littered the ground and were crushed underfoot. He wandered within its stonewall perimeters in a daze.

He lowered himself onto the cool grass, his back against a cherry tree. Its bark was stained a dark burgundy here and there from the bruises of its fallen children.

He heard the sound of footsteps and looked up to see Moody walk into the garden. The old man sat down beside him.

"Alastor."

The old man raised an eyebrow in query.

"She *was* important, wasn't she? There must have been a reason I held onto her memory for so long. Sometimes I feel it slip away again. Sometimes, it's hard to not let it go. Maybe, it's something that doesn't belong to me. Maybe ... this is why it struggles so hard to escape me."

Moody considered this, picking up a bruised, fallen cherry. "Nothing ever really belongs to anyone down here. Maybe you should do what's easiest."

A slight frown furrowed between Severus' eyes. He battled with a recalcitrant memory. "I remember being taught that what is easiest is not always best."

Alastor popped the cherry in his mouth, working its way around his teeth. He finally spat out the stone, its juices darkening his lips.

"How does it taste?"

Moody shrugged. "Of nothing. It tastes of nothing."

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The next time Severus found Hermione, she was playing chess with Albus. She had already outmaneuvered him and would corner him into a checkmate within four moves.

She looked up and cheerily called out. "Good day, Professor."

She moved her knight, eliminating Albus' queen, then added as an afterthought. "I mean, Severus."

Severus stood behind her, curling his fingers into her hair. The tip of his fingers brushed against the nape of her neck, and he felt her tremble. Still surveying the chessboard, Hermione remarked, "You're being rather familiar."

Severus had closed his eyes, a shudder running through him. He couldn't raise his voice above a silken whisper. "Forgive me, Hermione. I find there's just something that draws me to you."

She gave him a curious little smile, not fully understanding him, but secretly pleased at the attention. One finalizing move of her rook and she looked up at Albus. "Checkmate."

Albus grumbled, looking fiercely at the pieces, and with a weary sigh finally conceded defeat. He knocked over his king, folding his hands under his chin. "Would you care for a game, Severus?"

"Actually," Severus looked to Hermione. "I was wondering if you would accompany me on a walk?"

Surprised, Hermione looked at the remains of her victory and then to his offered hand. Smoothing the front of her robes, she stood up and placed her arm around his.

As they walked through the Elysian Fields, where the horizon never changed no matter how far one walked, Hermione noticed Severus was in the grips of some great emotion. When he looked at her it was with a mix of sadness and betrayal.

"Professor, what's affecting you so? You aren't anything like I remember."

"And how is it you remember me?"

"From my school days." Her eyes glazed over as she chased some slippery glimpse of her living days. "You were very gloomy, very dark. Always under some great burden."

Severus couldn't help but smirk at that. "I am still under a burden."

"Oh, look. It's the pool." Hermione pulled herself away from his side to walk over to a still, gray pool. She knelt down by its bank, running her hands through the cool water.

Severus sat down beside her, reaching for her hand again. An impulse he found too difficult to disobey.

"Hermione, do you remember ever being here before?"

Hermione allowed some gray droplets to fall onto her tongue. "Yes. I first found this pool while walking with Sirius."

"No, I mean ... you once came here before your time. To the Elysian Fields."

Hermione looked shocked. "But how is that possible?"

"Do you remember why you came?"

Hermione shook her head, inching away from him. The intensity of his gaze was scaring her. It was too much like the living.

"You were looking for something. For someone."

He gathered both of her hands into his. "You were looking for me." His face fell then, the dark matter swirling within him. "And then you left."

Hermione tugged her hands away from his, growing frightened. A tinge of anger began to seep into her eyes, hardening her mouth as well. "You're lying. I don't remember any of this."

Severus' voice grew hard and cold as ice. Why was she willfully doing this to him? "You *do*. Look deep, *deep down*. No one truly forgets."

Hermione rose to her feet, drawing her voluminous robes around her. "No, I don't know what you're talking about."

Severus leapt to his feet, grabbing her by the shoulders and pushing her backwards into the solid trunk of a tree. His face was pressed so close to hers that their noses almost touched.

"Surely ... surely there is a reason you are here of all places, and not in the Fields of Asphodel? Surely, in your passing, something called you here."

Her eyes shone brilliantly, her mouth parting. Was it a flash of realization? Recognition? Something pulling within him, an invisible thread tugged at Severus until he felt his mouth settling into the curve of her lips. Sweet pressure, supple give ... he sighed into her, feeling as if he'd found his way home.

Two hands firmly pressed against his chest, breaking the kiss. Severus stumbled backwards.

There was a wild look on Hermione's face. Desperate and hard.

"I forget. I forget everything. I forget *you*."

And the Elysian Fields seemed to pull themselves away from him, as Severus found each step he took merely pushed him further and further away from her furious gaze.

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"What is that pool, Alastor?"

"It is Lethe. It is where the dead river's waters collect. These waters bring forgetting to the drinker."

Severus' face darkened. Hermione walked there frequently with Sirius and drank from the pool of Lethe. When she forgot she was angry with him, she would cheerfully call out, "Good day, Professor" and sometimes invite him to play a game of chess.

Once Aberforth Dumbledore had entered the Elysian Fields, Albus had retired from his chess set. If the entire Dumbledore family wasn't congregated in their private tent, then the two brothers could be seen smoking pipes. The chess games were only resumed now and again by Remus or Hermione.

Wounded from her absolute rejection, Severus had maintained his distance, only watching her from afar. He seemed to turn a darker gray each time he watched her go by.

The only major event that alerted him to the fact that time had passed was when Draco Malfoy finally reached the Elysian Fields.

He looked old, much older than when Severus remembered him. There were lines around Draco's eyes, drawn by Sorrow's sharp quill. It made him look tired, weary. He had entered the Elysian Fields with a look of confusion on his face, as if he did not know why he was there.

No shade approached him. He had paid heed to no one. Instead, his feet seemed to draw him to a certain spot of their own volition.

Finally, Draco came to a spot where there was a large, flat rock, bathed in a soft, golden light. Narcissa was reclining, her hand entwined with Lucius', both with their eyes closed. Like pale statues in the sun. A smaller form lay nestled against Narcissa's side, Lucius' hand resting in its tousled hair.

Draco sank slowly to his knees, his arms at his sides, knuckles skimming the tops of cool, dry grass.

As if waking to some clarion call, Scorpius opened his eyes to see his father and wriggled away from his grandparents to tumble into Draco's arms.

Narcissa kissed the top of Draco's head while he was still kneeling. When he rose to his full height, Lucius quirked a pale eyebrow and smirked.

"Still taller than you."

"What about Mum?" Scorpius still clung to Draco's midriff, half his face buried in the gray, mist-like robes.

"She's coming soon. Very soon."

Severus rarely saw the Malfoys after Draco returned, and his wife soon after. They never returned to their rock. They rarely ever made appearances with the other shades, and when they did they were never apart. Standing tall, haughty, and proud in their bitter majesty. They were happier in some private eternity, reunited.

Severus found himself staying more and more at the garden. Whether it was within its enclosure or resting against its cool stonewalls. Sometimes Moody joined him, and they sat in silence. Most times Severus was left in solitude.

"It's not natural," Moody said to him. "To keep tormenting yourself into remembering. What we all relinquish ourselves to when we die is inevitability."

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Hermione walked by herself to the pool of Lethe, not quite remembering what was so vital about the place, but that she enjoyed the taste of its waters. It felt cool and cleansing down in the realm of the dead, where nothing bore taste.

When she arrived, it was to see Severus waiting by its bank.

"Good day, Professor."

"Hello, Hermione."

He walked over to her, stopping her in her tracks. Smiling pleasantly, he indicated a spot of grass a few feet away from the pool.

"Will you sit with me?"

"I was actually going to have a drink."

"Sit with me. Please."

Thirsting, but seeing no reason to refuse him, Hermione sat. He seated himself beside her, his robes settling about him in a gray sigh.

"It has been cruel of me, to pressure you to remember. And you must know it comes not from a place in which I wish to harm you."

Hermione fidgeted. Something was stirring within her.

"There's just one thing ... one thing I don't know, which I would like to ask."

Something was niggling in the back of Hermione's mind. A blade of grass tickling her skull. A song whose melody she could only half-remember.

"What was your life like when you returned? Were you happy? Did you find contentment? Was it easy or hard for you to wait?"

Something shone in Hermione's eyes before a dark shutter passed over them. She made to rise, suddenly made of ice. "I have to go now, Professor."

His hands snaked around her waist, the other settling around her neck. His voice was a sibilant hiss. "Was it *easy* for you to wait? Were you eager for your death, or did you run away from it screaming 'I want to live, I want to live'?"

His eyes glittered with a dangerous light. His voice dripped with the acid of wounded pride and a betrayed heart. The cruel mockery to his question forced Hermione to lock gazes with him, determined not to show him defeat.

"Did you so wish to escape me?"

Hermione snarled, grabbing the neck of his robes. "I *suffered.*"

Such was her fury and anguish, that Severus almost imagined the hot, angry gush of air from her noise warm his face. His words, ringing in her mind, had hurt her somewhere deep past forgetting.

Severus buried his fingers into her hair, and pulled her mouth to his. If his heart could still beat it would have broken every rib in his chest. They sank to the cool, gray grass, the tips tickling the side of their faces. Severus drank from her greedily, starved, of all of her anguish, her pain and the darker humours that meant she had missed him.

When they finally broke apart, she gasped as if for air in their gray imitation of life.

She touched his face. "The path was too long trying to find my way back. I remember ..." She gazed off into the sky, struggling to bring back the recollection. "... questions ... white walls. Nurses. No one believed a thing I said. I said nothing. Where is my wand? Beds ... doctors ... Ginny Ginny, where are you?"

Severus held her close to him. Dry sobs wracked her body as the memories ripped through her. She babbled them, senseless, into the crook of his shoulder.

"... white, everything was white ... day in, day out ... good for me ... they left me ... for my own good ... "

She finally stopped with a shuddering sigh, her hand curled against his chest. He cradled her head tenderly towards him, sorry for all she had to go through.

"There is too much pain, too much suffering when I try to remember you. I don't have it in me, Severus."

He brushed her hand against his lips.

"I've come from too far away ... I can't keep remembering you, only to spend an eternity forgetting you again. I enjoy the nothing too much."

He felt his throat constrict, burying himself deeper against her. "I waited. I remembered."

"I lived. And died. And I want to remain dead."

Hermione cradled his face with her hands, pressing a cold kiss to his lips of her own volition. She then sat up, fingers brushing against his face. When she stood, she tugged his hand and made him stand too. She walked them over to the pool of Lethe. She dipped her cupped hands into the water and held them up to him.

"Drink this with me, and forget me."

Severus shook, trembled with feeling unfit for the dead, and collapsed back to the ground. Hermione drank the gray water, cool and clean. She walked away into the inevitable horizon, and Severus lay by the riverbank, his lips an inch away from oblivion.

EPILOGUE

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There are two shades in the Elysian Fields. One is never far from the other; there is a sense of inertia that keeps them wandering around the same centering point.

The tall man with the haunted eyes could now and again steal a kiss from the woman. Once or twice she leaned into his touch, but it became harder and harder for her to remember that he preferred being addressed as "Severus" rather than "Professor."

The only regular communion they share is when they walk together to the pool of Lethe, drink from its still waters, and forget.

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END