

The Other End of the Road

by Doomspark

Music hath charms.

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Chapter 1 of 1

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"In the end, these, as their Fates befall

Await the Grim Reaper. Death conquers all."

Severus cut the last word off sharply, rather than drawing it out. To his mind, it made for a better ending. An hour was enough for the night; his voice was still unused to singing. He swallowed experimentally. Yes, his throat was just a little sore. And his hands... he turned them over and studied the tips of his fingers carefully. Slightly reddened, but no blisters. Good.

He opened the hard black case that lay on the floor in front of him and carefully replaced his guitar. It was a D12-28 Martin, built in 1994 ten years old now, but guitars improve with age provided they are well cared for. He'd found it in a pawnshop, half buried behind other lesser guitars. The shop owner clearly had no idea what he had, for it was priced at a mere hundred pounds a fraction of its value. And now it was his.

All his life he had loved music, but only after Voldemort's death had he been free to pursue that love. As he learned to play, he found an inborn talent in himself for lyrics. It wasn't long before he was writing his own songs, and occasionally applying his wit and sarcasm to parodying snatches of overheard songs. How the other teachers would laugh if they knew! He took care that they would not find out.

And so things were for the first part of the year. As the term ended, Severus shook the dust of Hogwarts from his heels and removed himself to the small town near Cardiff where his family had once held lands and title. The title was still his by right, but the lands were long gone. Severus didn't care. He rented a room and set about forgetting all about teaching for the next several weeks.

With the ending of summer came the expected summons back to Hogwarts for a pre-term staff meeting. Severus sighed, packed his guitar, and returned to his dungeons where he discovered that his voice echoed weirdly through the corridors, at once magnified and muffled by the thick stone walls. He let his fingers wander over the strings in aimless chord sequences, then modulated into a walking bass line, losing himself in his music.

"I didn't know you played."

Severus clamped his right palm across the fingerboard silencing the Martin and turned to glare at whoever had interrupted him. He hadn't thought anyone would be in the dungeons. "Miss Granger, what brings you down here?"

"It's not 'Miss Granger' any more, Severus." She emphasized his first name slightly. "I'm taking over as Professor of Muggle Studies as you would know if you ever came to staff meetings."

"I attend all mandatory staff meetings, Professor Granger." He chose to stress her title. "But I see no reason to waste my valuable time at optional functions." He bent and replaced his guitar in its case and closed it with a series of decisive clicks.

She snorted, surprising him. "You miss out on lots of things that way such as the fact that Minerva has hired a new Transfiguration teacher as well."

He'd seen that coming. Running the school was a full-time job, and Minerva was looking forward to handing off her classes. "I don't suppose you would care to inform me as to the identity of this addition to the staff?"

She gave him an impish grin. "What's it worth to you?"

Now that was another surprise. She was jesting with him. He raised an elegant black eyebrow and looked at her speculatively. "Two knuts."

That surprised her, and she laughed out loud. "And everyone thinks you have no sense of humor. The new Transfiguration teacher is Emeric Switch." She held out one hand. "That'll be two knuts please."

He felt an unfamiliar expression stretch his face as he dropped the requisite coins into her palm. "I don't suppose you would pass on any other useful information?"

"You should smile more often, Severus. It's quite fetching."

"You're beginning to sound like Albus," he grumbled without malice. "I miss the old man."

"So do I." The old wizard had retired to southern England after Voldemort's final defeat six years back. "He doesn't visit as much as I thought he would."

"He wants Hogwarts to be able to go on without him," Severus said. "If he were continually here, Minerva would never have any real authority."

"I hadn't thought of it like that," she said thoughtfully. "I've been planning out my classes based on what I think he would approve of, not what Minerva expects."

"So what brought you down here? Surely you weren't looking for me?"

"I heard music, and wanted to find out where it came from. The acoustics here are marvelous. I didn't mean to interrupt." She tilted her head to one side. "I'd love to hear more."

"Hmm." One eyebrow lifted slightly. "What's it worth to you?"

She laughed delightedly as he bent to unlock the guitar case. "Two knuts!"

"And thus am damned to spend these coming years

With shouts of 'coward!' ringing in my ears."

He played for her, and her alone, for most of the term. She never laughed at his songs, although she sometimes offered suggestions for changes to the lyrics. Usually he would have to agree with her, and he wasn't sure if that annoyed or amused him.

It came to him, slowly, that he cared for her beyond the normal concern he felt for the other staff. He struggled with it, afraid to acknowledge it, afraid to verbalize it, and finally doing the only thing he could to deal with the feelings: he poured his heart and soul into his first and only love song.

It was an intensely private song, and though he completed it soon enough, he could not bring himself to play it for her. He found the words flickering through his thoughts as he taught his classes, and he found the tune in his head from dawn to dusk.

The last night of the term she seemed a little distant, almost like she wasn't really listening. They were up in her sitting room.

"Hermione, what's the matter?" At some point, he'd started using her first name. The students were all on their way home, and the summer stretched before them.

She turned to look at him squarely. "Severus, your songs are beautiful. Almost too beautiful. But they're all dark, all unhappy. Have you ever thought about writing something ... cheerful?"

He twitched slightly. "Well..."

"You must have some happy memories for inspiration."

"Only from this past term, I think." He gathered his courage with both hands. "Would you care to hear something I haven't played for you before?"

"Certainly." She sat back on his couch expectantly.

He began the introduction, his hands shaking slightly.

"I have wrapped my soul in shadow

So I would not have to feel.

Through the years I've built my armor:

Heart of stone and hands of steel."

She had lost the air of indifference, he noted with some part of his mind.

"Hands of steel are strong in battle,

Hearts of stone can feel no pain,

But hands of steel are never gentle,

And hearts of stone are much the same.

Now I wonder since I met you,

What is shadow, what is real.

Will you dare to walk through shadow,

Break the stone and melt the steel?"

His fingers came to rest as the final chords faded. He looked down at his hands, waiting for her reaction.

"Oh, now that is much better! I was beginning to think you were never going to leave your past behind you."

"Hermione I wrote that for you."

She stopped and stared. "Me?" He could see her mind racing through the implications. "You're not serious."

He knelt to recase his guitar so he wouldn't have to look at her. "You keep telling me how wonderful my songs are, but I can't find the words to say what I want to." His voice roughened. "I'm not a knight in shining armor, Hermione. I'm no good with feelings. I'd like us to be more than friends."

"Oh, Severus. I had no idea you felt that way."

He shrugged almost helplessly. "What do you feel... for me?"

She wouldn't meet his eyes. "It's not that simple, Severus. You're a powerful wizard and a talented musician. You're fabulously wealthy yes, I've seen your Gringott's vault and you've got a brilliant mind. God, you don't know how much I've enjoyed our evenings here! But it wouldn't work. It wouldn't work for me."

"I don't understand." He moved to sit beside her.

Hermione stiffened as he put an arm around her. The arm was withdrawn immediately. "I know you mean well, and maybe it would work during the summer. The minute the rest of the staff came back, the whispering would start about me being a gold-digger chasing you for your money. They'd call you a would-be pedophile, or worse. I'm sorry, Severus. It wouldn't work out." She rose. "I think you'd better go now. You'll get over it."

He sat alone in his rooms for a long time that evening. The candles guttered out one by one and the darkness gathered around him. He could seduce her, and it would last for a night or two. But soon or late it would wear off, and she would hate him for it.

It was two weeks before he picked up his guitar again. He would never 'get over it', but his music made it bearable. Barely.

"You say you don't want to walk beside me,

You don't want to touch my face.

You won't share your thoughts and feelings,

And you shrink from my embrace.

Then you tell me you must be alone now,

And so I take my leave of you this night.

What good would it do to try to change things?

What good would it do me to fight?

To rescue one's lover is an honor,

To hold one unwilling is a curse.

To never have loved is a sorrow,

To love and not be loved is even worse.

Still I will come riding to your rescue

Whether you love me or no,

Whenever, wherever you may need me.

I love you enough to let you go.

So go your way. I will not stop you,

For you were never mine to hold.

I will be here for you if you need me

At the other end of the road."

NOTE: All lyrics in this story copyright G. Avalon