



## Severus and Stone

Memories have a way of getting fuzzy over time. They soften around the edges, like looking at faraway houses through the fog. You know what they are, in a general sort of way, but you can't describe them in detail. But some memories stay sharp, no matter the fog of time. Or that's how it is for me. Shouldn't speak for anyone else, I guess.

I remember my last night with Severus like it was yesterday.

Severus fell sick when we were both ten. Nothing new there. He'd always been sicklier than me. Even as a baby. Momma used to joke that I'd taken all the health in the womb and Severus had taken all the brains. We both bridled at that, and she'd laugh. Momma was like that. She had a queer sense of humor, and not much got past her, but she'd let you know it with a wink instead of a bark. Everyone always thought her stern, even wicked. The village folk were scared of her. I knew the rumors – heard them enough from the other kids in town. Used to bust noses about it until 'Ma told me she'd start giving my food to Severus at mealtimes if I didn't stop. But she isn't mean at all. Never has been. She's just clever, more than most people feel a woman has a right to be, and that makes them uneasy.

Bah. Getting sidetracked. My point is Severus was always the sickly one, so I didn't think much of it

when he fell sick again. Seemed like it was same as always, and he'd be back on his feet in a week or so.

It was a mean winter that year. Meaner than any I can recall, though I may be biased because of what happened. I remember the house would shake and rattle with the wind, as though giant hands had gotten hold of the roof. There were plenty of mornings where opening the front door was a struggle from all the snow that had piled up. A few times it was so bad I had to climb out the bedroom window and dig a path just so we could get it open. And through all of it, Severus was sick. I didn't worry too much until I noticed Mama's behavior changing. She normally seemed so confident, like she knew everything that was gonna happen. Even when I broke my arm and we had to set and bind it, or when Severus got hard candy stuck in his windpipe and could barely breathe, she didn't fret. Her concern was only for our comfort, nothing deeper. But this time was different. I could see it in her eyes. She was genuinely worried, and it scared me.

Five nights into his fevers, I stayed up with Severus while Momma ran to collect the doctor. I gave him water when he was thirsty, kept the rags on his forehead cool, maintained the fire. It was quiet in the house. Too quiet for me. I made some jokes, and Severus would smile at them, but in a polite sort of way. I don't think he really heard them. When Momma finally arrived with Mr. Winthrop, the doctor, it was late. Mr. Winthrop was always pretty nice to us. He wasn't afraid of momma the way other folks were. He was too smart to get wrapped up in rumors and superstition. Only he and Tom, the neighbor, treated her right.

Momma made me leave while the doctor checked on Severus. I protested, but she wouldn't hear it. So I pressed my ear up against the door. Hard as I strained, I couldn't pick out most of what they were saying, but what I heard didn't sound good. When Mr. Winthrop left and I went back in, momma was staring out the window. Just standing there, stock still, barely breathing. The firelight danced along her dress, playing tricks on my eye. I stood in the door a long time before she turned around. She smiled at me, and it was the saddest smile I've ever seen. Looking back, I think she knew what was coming. Momma always knew.

Over the next three nights, I stayed with Severus.

The first night he was lost in the fevers. He'd just fade in and out, and we didn't interact much beyond me giving him water, or trying to make him eat, which he didn't. I was afraid. I started crying a little at one point. I was grateful that Severus was asleep. I didn't want him to see it. I was supposed to be the tough one.

Thankfully the second night was better. Severus was awake a lot more, and was even talking some. He asked what had been going on while he slept, and I told him. I made up some stories to make it seem like we hadn't been just sitting around worrying about him. I think he knew they were bullshit, but he played along. He even joked a little bit. His voice was real weak, and his hands were shaky, but he seemed better than he had in a while.

On the third night, it was snowing outside. It'd been snowing all day, hard, like the weather had something to prove. It howled and beat its chest, only letting up to come back stronger. Severus was real bad at first. I could hear him working to breathe, and his eyes didn't focus well. When I'd cool his forehead, he just looked through me, like I wasn't even there. Gave me the shivers. I was glad when he finally fell asleep. He looked at peace all of the sudden, and his chest didn't sound like it was at war

anymore.

For a long time I just sat there, watching the candles flicker. Momma wasn't with us. All the nights of her sitting up in her chair and staring out the window had caught up to her and she finally went to her room and slept. While I was lost in thought, feet propped up on the edge of the bed, Severus sat up. It was real sudden. Like something had tugged on his night shirt and yanked him upright. "Severus?" I said, but he didn't look at me. He had his head cocked funny, like he was listening to something outside, something in the wind. I asked him what was wrong, but he just pulled his covers off. Then the damndest thing happened.

As he climbed out of bed and went to stand, his feet didn't touch the ground. He just hovered there, a good foot from the floor. I was stunned. Struck dumb, couldn't get a word out. My heart was beating fast, like it was trying to break through my ribs. And then he started to move. No motion from his body – he just floated forward as though pulled by some invisible string.

He moved past me like that, still listening to the thing I couldn't hear. He had an intent look on his face as he opened the door and floated through the frame. Without questioning it, I got up to follow. I always protected him. Momma always said it was our job to keep each other safe, and me being two minutes older, twice so. We moved through the family room to the front door, his night clothes all orange and red in the firelight, our shadows dancing along the walls, his feet still a foot from the ground. He opened the front door with surprising ease and hovered outside. I started to follow, then ran back inside. It was vicious cold out, so I grabbed Momma's knit blanket off the chair near the fireplace. When I got back out the door, Severus was already halfway across the yard, moving toward the trees. A chill shot through me at the sight of him that had nothing to do with the cold.

Once I caught up to Severus, we moved at an even pace. The trees we walked among seemed taller and more grand than they did during the day. While wondering about that, I noticed the snow had stopped. The world had gone completely still. With the moonlight pushing through the branches up above, everything was the color of ghosts. And quiet. The loudest sound was my own breathing. I didn't say anything as we continued along. I knew better. The moment felt fragile. Like if I spoke, it'd all shatter and the consequences would be hefty. But I remember looking back and seeing only one set of footprints. Mine. That, of all things, confirmed to me that this wasn't just some trick.

In time, we approached a clearing. I spent a lot of afternoons in these woods and I'd say that I knew them as well as anyone, but I'd never seen this place before. I don't know how I could have missed it. The clearing was maybe 30 feet across, perfectly round and completely undisturbed. In the center, tall and proud, stood a single tree. Its naked branches were spread wide like the remains of bird wings. I stayed at the edge of that clearing. It didn't feel right for me to enter. Some part of me knew I didn't belong. But Severus didn't slow. He hovered across that space and right on up to that tree. And as he got close, he lifted up into the branches and leaned his body against them. Like the fingers of some great hand, they folded around him. I felt afraid suddenly. I thought the branches were hurting him, or worse, taking him away. I almost stepped into the clearing then.

Severus must have known what I was gonna do, because he looked up at me suddenly. His eyes were clear, sharp, blue as a robin's egg. None of the fever haze was in them, and he said, "Don't you fear for me. I am where I'm supposed to be."

I nodded. And then the world went white.

It felt like I just blinked a few times, but suddenly I was awake and everything looked different. I was back on the front lawn, wrapped in that knit blanket I'd snatched from the chair, just sitting in the snow. It was morning. I must have been sitting there for a while, because I was shivering and my skin was pale. When I stood, it was hard to walk. In part because my legs were numb, but also because I knew Severus was gone. Momma says it's because twins share a connection other folks don't. I guess that's true, because when I woke up that day, there was a hole in me. Some piece I'd never gone without was suddenly missing.

As I stumbled back into the house, I heard Momma crying in the bedroom. It took me a moment to realize what the sound was. I'd never heard her cry before. When I entered the room, she didn't turn at first. I saw that she'd combed Severus's hair. She doesn't remember doing it, but I do. It struck me as strange. "You okay, Mom?" I asked. She turned and hugged me, and we sat like that for a long time. We didn't talk. There wasn't any point.

As for what came after, I'll keep it short. Not a lot to say. The following day was bleak. We buried Severus in the backyard, and it was hard work. The ground was half frozen, and I had blisters on my hands before we were done. The neighbor, Tom, came and helped. He didn't say anything, just brought a shovel over and started digging. Always was a quiet man. We did a small service that evening as the sun was going down, just the three of us. It wasn't snowing anymore and the sky was prettier than it had a right to be. All orange and pink and purple. Tom was silent until after it was all done with. "I'm so sorry," he said to Momma, then he walked home. We went inside, and Momma went in her room and closed the door without eating.

I sat near the fire and ate some cold soup that'd been made for Severus. That's when my next surprise came. Severus had only been in the ground about an hour when I heard him speak, somewhere in my head.

"Hello, Stone," he said, and the bastard was laughing.

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**Lyrics:**

all the trees stood like skeletons  
silhouettes of spilled ink  
and the snows fell in sheets and got wrapped around our feet  
we built the fire evermore with winter beating at the door

brother's eyes were getting heavier  
his bony hands cold and white  
and I could hear his ragged breathing like the wind along a knife  
there beside him through the night, in the hum of candlelight  
I no longer felt the time

brother woke just after midnight  
and he didn't make a sound  
and as he climbed from out of bed with severed rings around his head  
his feet didn't touch the ground

I could feel it then  
a tiny miracle  
so I followed him  
into the woods  
crossed beneath the trees  
but only I left my prints in tow  
he was afloat  
found a lonely tree  
and tied himself within its limbs  
and he said to me these words:  
“Don't you fear for me,  
I am where I'm supposed to be.”

and when I woke he was gone  
and I was wrapped in blankets on the lawn  
the sky was blue and my skin matched the hue  
and I could hear mother crying in your room

from here on out I wear this face for both of us