

He stopped speaking, mostly due to his inability to breathe. He was hyperventilating, his chest rising in quick gasps, and then there were arms around him pulling him against a wiry chest, a soft voice telling him to breathe and to count with him as the chest beneath his face inflated and deflated slowly, carefully, until Harry was doing the same.

He looked up into Snape's near-black eyes. "You are truly your mother's son," the man declared softly. Somewhere above him, on the other side of the table — when had Harry ended up on the floor? — Remus snorted out a surprised laugh. "I am glad you don't blame me, even when I still blame myself. You have every right to be angry," Snape told him, still keeping that same even tone of voice, like he was talking to a particularly spooked animal. "As for how I became a Death Eater, that is a very long and complicated story that starts with an awful man and ends with several different awful men, and it is not a story for tonight, though perhaps one day I may tell you. Needless to say I regret my choices, and I will do what I can to atone for them. But you are not me, Harry, and you are not Pettigrew. Yes, you have had awful people in your past, and awful things happen to you. And you have several awful things in your future, too. But you have the knowledge gained from watching the rest of us make mistakes. More importantly, you have more compassion in your heart than I have ever seen from anyone except your mother." Snape's lips curved in perhaps the first true smile Harry had ever seen from the man.

"Lily loved openly, and without hesitation. She did not love everyone — and if she hated you, you definitely knew about it — but if she loved you, she would do anything for you. If you threw that love aside, you would regret it. Merlin knows I did. Luckily, she deigned to give me a second chance, eventually."

The Slytherin's arms were still around Harry's back, surprisingly strong for a man so thin. Harry's heart still rabbited against his ribs. "You are like your mother in so many ways, and that is the reason you will never become like the Dark Lord. He was denied love through his childhood, and that made him bitter and angry and determined to see everyone else be denied love as well. You were denied love through your childhood, and it made you all the more determined to make sure no one else suffered the same way. You learned love and you gave it in spades. You made that choice. He made a different one. Having a piece of his soul within you does not change that."

Harry could do nothing but stare. Not only was that the most words he'd ever heard Snape say in one go, but it was the most honesty he'd ever heard from him, the most *humanity*. This was the Severus Snape that perhaps only Remus and Draco ever got to see these days. The Severus Snape that Harry's mother knew, before everything went so horribly wrong.

Snape seemed to realise he'd said quite enough, as his cheeks flushed faintly and he cleared his throat. "And if you think we're going to just let you sit around with a piece of the Dark Lord inside your head, you're even more daft than I thought you were."

"Oh, and he's back," Remus remarked, squatting down beside them with a grin. "That's it, Harry; Severus just used up all his emotions for the next year, no more for the rest of us." Snape glared at him, and Remus' grin widened. He kissed the man on the cheek. "You big softie," he teased. With one hand on each of their backs, Remus hauled them up to standing.