

The kettle whistled, cutting off Hagrid's self-flagellation.

"It's not your fault, Hagrid!" Harry insisted while the huge man poured. "There was so much I couldn't tell you. And you've known Dumbledore for a long time, after all. He did a lot of good things for you. I... I didn't want to ruin your view of him, not if I didn't have to." He had known it would come eventually, but he wanted to soften the blow as much as he could.

"Aye, he did, but that don't mean much when he's out there trying to kill you!" Hagrid protested. "All that about you havin' evil in you is absolute codswallop, anyone who knows you can see that!" Hagrid passed Harry his teacup, and sat down opposite him, shoulders slumping. "I shoulda come talk to yer as soon as you got back to school, but — well, everythin' with Grawp, and then Aragog..."

"Is he still not well?" Harry asked, and Hagrid gave a great big sniff.

"He died, actually. Jus' last week. Buried him out by the forest," he said shakily, wiping at his watery eyes.

Though Harry felt nothing but mild satisfaction at the knowledge that the huge man-eating spider was dead, his heart clenched for his friend's grief. "Oh, Hagrid, I'm so sorry. You should've sent a note, I would've come. You shouldn't have been alone."

Hagrid smiled weakly. "Means a lot, Harry, but it's alright. Was only a small thing, really. Just for me own peace o' mind. Acromantula eat their dead, and... well." He made a face. "I — I thought about it. Writin' you. Didn't know if you'd wanna talk to me, is all. Worried you might think I was still Dumbledore's man."

"I never thought that," Harry insisted — which was a tiny lie, but Hagrid didn't need to know about the doubt in Harry's chest. "I figured you were mad at me for not telling you the truth."

The half-giant chuckled, shaking his head. "Right pair, aren't we?" he mused, reaching out to pat Harry's back with one of his massive hands. "I told you, Harry — I'm on your side. That's what friends are for."

Harry grinned up at him. "I'm glad, Hagrid. Really."

The first adult to ever give a damn about him still cared. That was more than he'd hoped for.

He stayed long enough to finish his tea at a leisurely pace, catching Hagrid up on the things he might have missed in the time they weren't really talking. As the hour grew later, the sky turning burnt orange, Harry decided to head back up to the castle.

And that was when things went a bit pear-shaped.

He didn't quite wander about with his head in the clouds anymore, not after the first time — so he was vigilant when he heard muffled footsteps tracking him. He veered off course, heading closer towards the greenhouses. He knew where Neville planned to spend his evening, could feel the other heir's solid presence through the wards. Hogwarts was so much stronger now, with a headmistress who cared about it thriving.