

the still-smoking wreckage. “We couldn’t help him. It all happened so fast... they were in and out in less than ten minutes.”

She choked on a sob, and Arthur put his arm around her soothingly. “It’s not your fault,” he soothed. “If it was that quick, there likely wasn’t much you could do anyway.”

As the Weasley patriarch comforted the pub owner, Kingsley took a few steps closer to the Hog’s Head. It was a seedy hellhole to be sure, but there had been a certain charm to it. It was a good place to get a drink without judgement.

Aberforth Dumbledore had been a good man. He didn’t deserve to go out like this.

“Why would they do this?” Kingsley didn’t realise he’d been followed, but Tonks and Remus were barely a step behind him. “What good does it do them? Unless Ab pissed off the wrong person...” Tonks shook his head, scowling. “Why go for just the Hog’s Head, of all the buildings in the village? Hell, why not burn down the whole village?”

“It’s a message,” Remus said, his nose wrinkled slightly as the acrid smell of smoke was blown their way by the wind. Had to be much worse to wolf senses. “He’s still after Albus. He’s trying to make him mad, draw him out.”

It made perfect sense, but it still made Kingsley grimace. He had almost forgotten about that loose end, about Albus out there somewhere with his own grand plans. Was he coming, for the battle? Did he have some idea of swooping in to claim glory at the last minute?

Was he even still alive?

At his side, Tonks wrapped his arms around himself. Kingsley put a hand on his shoulder, wishing he could do more, offer a better kind of comfort. “I had my first ever alcoholic drink there,” Tonks said quietly. “Fourth year, morphed myself into looking like one of the seventh years. Ab knew it was me — I had the nose all wrong, and I couldn’t get my voice to change for the life of me — but he served me anyway.” There was a flicker of a smile on his face. Kingsley squeezed his shoulder.

Back at the castle, he could hug him properly. Mourn for a man tainted by his brother’s legacy. Find some quiet corner to decompress in together, and then step out into the world and pretend they were just colleagues, sleep in separate rooms barely feet from each other like they were students all over again. Worse — even the students were sharing rooms, sharing beds!

After the war, Kingsley would change that. He couldn’t live like this anymore, couldn’t keep pretending. Life was too short.

But they had to win, first.

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Hogwarts had always been a home away from home for Sirius, but right now it felt like a prison. Another cage — bigger than the last, but no less chafing.