

Hermione came hurrying into the room looking flustered just as Harry was putting on his trainers; Hedwig was swaying on her shoulder, and she was carrying a squirming Crookshanks in her arms.

“Mum and Dad just sent Hedwig back” — the owl fluttered obligingly over and perched on top of her cage — “are you ready yet?”

“Nearly — Ginny all right?” Harry asked, shoving on his glasses.

“Mrs. Weasley’s patched her up,” said Hermione. “But now Mad-Eye’s complaining that we can’t leave unless Sturgis Podmore’s here, otherwise the guard will be one short.”

“Guard?” said Harry. “We have to go to King’s Cross with a guard?”

“*You* have to go to King’s Cross with a guard,” Hermione corrected him.

“Why?” said Harry irritably. “I thought Voldemort was supposed to be lying low, or are you telling me he’s going to jump out from behind a dustbin to try and do me in?”

“I don’t know, it’s just what Mad-Eye says,” said Hermione distractedly, looking at her watch. “But if we don’t leave soon we’re definitely going to miss the train. . . .”

“WILL YOU LOT GET DOWN HERE NOW, PLEASE!” Mrs. Weasley bellowed and Hermione jumped as though scalded and hurried out of the room. Harry seized Hedwig, stuffed her unceremoniously into her cage, and set off downstairs after Hermione, dragging his trunk.

Mrs. Black’s portrait was howling with rage but nobody was bothering to close the curtains over her; all the noise in the hall was bound to rouse her again anyway.

“Harry, you’re to come with me and Tonks,” shouted Mrs. Weasley over the repeated screeches of *‘MUDBLOODS! SCUM! CREATURES OF DIRT!’* “Leave your trunk and your owl, Alastor’s going to deal with the luggage. . . . Oh, for heaven’s sake, Sirius, Dumbledore said no!”

A bearlike black dog had appeared at Harry’s side as Harry clam-