CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Wrath

For a few glorious seconds, the three of them simply stood there under the Cloak and grinned at the empty sky. Then a small, cold question crept into all their minds at once.

What now?

Without a word, they crept a little way back down the slope, until they could see over Hagrid's fence. Down in the garden, things were going from bad to worse. Macnair had stopped shouting about the Executioners' Union. He was stamping up and down the pumpkin patch with his axe, kicking at pumpkins, getting redder by the second. Fudge was trotting after him, flapping his hands, without the smallest effect.

'Walden, please,' he kept bleating. 'Walden, think of the *Prophet*...' The old Committee member had sat down on an upturned bucket and was fanning himself with his hat.

Harry saw Macnair throw down the axe. He was rolling up his sleeves, squaring up to Hagrid with both fists raised, as though he really meant to hit him.

Without thinking, Harry started forward. A hand closed on his arm and held him back.

Ron put his mouth to Harry's ear. 'Look, Dumbledore's there. And if that berk is enough of an idiot to pick a fight with Hagrid of all people he deserves Hagrid plastering the walls with bits of him.'

His grip was surprisingly strong. Harry could feel how much Ron meant it, and he knew that his best mate was only looking out for him. He stopped pulling.

'There's nothing we can do,' Hermione whispered. She had hold of Harry's other arm, quite as tightly as Ron. 'Honestly, there isn't. Let Hagrid and Dumbledore sort it out. If anybody finds us down here now, after all this, we'll be the ones in trouble.'

They turned to go. Behind them, Macnair's voice rose to a screech.

'You planned this, you great half-breed lump! I know what your mother was! Giant filth, the lot of you, you ought to be locked up with the rest of, - aaaah'

He never finished. Hagrid simply reached out, took hold of the front of his robes and threw him. Macnair sailed several feet through the air, waving his arms like a windmill, and landed flat on his back in the pumpkins with a noise like a sack of potatoes being dropped off a cart.

Half-breed. Harry thought of the word Malfoy had used about Hagrid in the spring, *Half-Giant*, which he had tucked away to look at later. He was beginning to think he knew what it meant.

'Now, Hagrid,' said Dumbledore mildly, laying a hand on Hagrid's enormous arm. Even from where they stood, Harry was

almost sure that he was trying not to laugh. ‘I think Mr Macnair has quite understood your point. There is no need to make it a second time.’

‘Dumbledore!’ Fudge was almost hysterical. ‘Dumbledore, he has *assaulted* an employee of the Ministry! In front of the Minister! Oh dear, oh dear, oh dear... Walden, are you hurt? Is anything broken? Somebody get him up...’

‘ASSAULT!’ Macnair was howling from the pumpkin patch, struggling to sit up. ‘That was assault! You all saw it! I want him arrested! I want him in Azkaban!’

Harry took one last look back at Fudge, who was wringing his hands and hopping from foot to foot like a man who needed the lavatory. He couldn’t understand it. Somebody, somewhere, had decided that this was the best person in all of wizarding Britain to run the country, and a great many other people had agreed with them. That was wrong. That needed to change.

‘Come on,’ Ron muttered. His teeth were chattering.

They started back up the slope towards the castle, slowly, so as to keep their feet hidden under the hem of the Cloak.

‘Who was it?’ Hermione whispered, as they went. ‘On Buckbeak. Who on earth could it have been?’

‘Dunno,’ said Ron. ‘Whoever it was, I’d like to shake their hand. Did you see Macnair’s face?’

‘It looked like a dementor,’ said Harry. ‘Didn’t it? That cloak.’

‘Dementors don’t rescue hippogriffs, Harry.’ Hermione was quiet for a few steps. Then she said, in a careful, rather tight voice, ‘Malfoy wasn’t at dinner.’

Harry nearly laughed out loud. ‘Malfoy? Hermione, it was her dad who wanted Buckbeak dead. She’d never go against him. Not in front of the Minister.’

‘Yes,’ said Hermione. ‘Yes, I expect you’re right.’

She didn’t sound convinced. Harry couldn’t see her face under the Cloak, but he felt her arm go as stiff as a broom handle against his. She didn’t say another word all the way up the slope.

The light was going quickly. By the time Hagrid’s cabin was well behind them, the dusk had gathered round them as thick as a spell.

‘Scabbers, keep still,’ Ron hissed, clamping a hand to his chest.

The rat was wriggling madly inside his pocket. Ron halted, trying to push him deeper down.

‘What’s the matter with you, you stupid rat? Stay still-OUCH! He bit me!’

‘Ron, be quiet!’ Hermione whispered urgently. ‘Fudge’ll be out here in a minute-’

‘He won’t-stay-put-’

Scabbers was terrified. He was squirming and thrashing for all he was worth, scrabbling to get out of Ron’s grip.

‘What’s the matter with him?’

Harry had just seen what it was. Something was creeping towards them through the long grass, belly low to the ground, with two wide yellow eyes glowing eerily in the gloom. It was Crookshanks. Perhaps he could see them. Perhaps he was simply following the frantic squeaking. Harry couldn’t tell.

‘Crookshanks!’ Hermione moaned. ‘No, go away, Crookshanks! Go away!’

The cat kept coming.

‘Scabbers, NO!’

It was too late. The rat had squeezed out between Ron’s fingers, dropped to the grass and shot away into the dark. Crookshanks went after him in a single bound. Before Harry or Hermione could do

anything to stop him, Ron had flung off the Cloak and was pelting away across the lawn.

‘Ron!’ Hermione wailed.

Hermione threw Harry one horrified look. They ran after him. There was no running properly under the Cloak, so Harry dragged it off. It flapped and billowed from his fist as they raced along. Somewhere ahead of them they could hear Ron’s feet pounding over the grass, along with his yells at Crookshanks.

‘Get away from him-get away-Scabbers, come here-’

There was a heavy thump.

‘Gotcha! Get off, you stinking cat-’

Harry and Hermione nearly tripped over him. They skidded to a halt just in time. Ron was lying full length on the grass. Scabbers was safely back in his pocket, and Ron had both hands clamped tight over the struggling bulge.

‘Ron, come on, back under the cloak-’ Hermione panted. ‘Dumbledore, the Minister, they’ll be coming back out in a minute-’

They never got the chance. Before the Cloak was over them, before they had even got their breath back, they heard something else. It was a soft, heavy thudding, like great paws on turf, and it was coming closer very fast.

Harry whirled about. Bounding out of the darkness towards them, as swift as its own shadow, was a gigantic black dog with pale, gleaming eyes.

Harry let the Cloak fall and grabbed for his wand. He was too slow. The dog left the ground in one tremendous leap, and its front paws slammed into Harry’s chest. He went over backwards in a tangle of fur and limbs. He felt its hot breath on his face, and saw teeth an inch long-

The dog had jumped too far, though. Its own weight carried it clean over him, and it rolled away into the grass. Harry struggled up, winded and dizzy, sure that some of his ribs had cracked. He could hear it snarling as it scrabbled round to come at him again.

Ron had got up. When the dog sprang again, he shoved Harry out of the way. The great jaws closed on Ron's outflung arm instead.

Harry threw himself at the dog and grabbed two fistfuls of its matted coat. It made no difference. The dog was dragging Ron off across the grass as easily as if he were made of rags-

Then something came out of nowhere and struck Harry across the face so hard that it lifted him off his feet.

'Bloody... ugh,' Harry cried out in pain.

He heard Hermione shriek and go down too.

Harry fumbled for his wand, blinking warm blood out of his eyes.

'*Lumos!*' he whispered.

The light at the tip of his wand fell on the trunk of an enormous tree. Chasing Scabbers, they had run right under the Whomping Willow. Its branches were thrashing as though a gale were blowing through them, lashing to and fro to keep them away. The dog was at the bottom of the trunk. It was dragging Ron backwards into a wide gap between the roots. Ron was fighting like a wildcat, yelling, swearing, kicking out with both feet, but his head and shoulders were already disappearing into the hole.

'Ron!' Harry shouted, and dived forward to follow him. A heavy branch came scything through the air at his head, and he had to throw himself back again.

Soon there was nothing left in sight but one of Ron's legs. He had hooked it round a root, trying to stop the dog dragging him any

further underground. There was a sickening crack, as loud as a gunshot, and the leg went limp. The next moment his foot had gone.

'Harry, we've got to go for help.' Hermione gasped. Blood was running down her arm from her shoulder, where the Willow had slashed her.

'No! That thing's big enough to eat him; we haven't got time-'

'Harry - we're never going to get through without help-'

A branch came swishing down at them again, its twigs bunched like a fist.

'If that dog can get in, we can,' Harry panted. He darted this way and that, hunting for a way through the lashing branches. Every time he got within a few feet of the roots, the tree lunged at him and drove him back again.

'Oh, help, help,' Hermione whispered frantically, dancing helplessly on the spot, 'please...'

Crookshanks shot forward. He wove in between the flailing branches as smoothly as a snake. Reaching up, he pressed his front paws against a knot on the trunk.

The tree froze, as suddenly as if it had been turned to stone. Not a single leaf moved.

'Crookshanks!' Hermione whispered uncertainly. She had seized Harry's arm again, so hard that it hurt. 'How did he know…?'

'For some bloody reason, that mangy thing is friends with that dog, the one who just snatched OUR mate,' said Harry irritably.

It wasn't fair on Hermione, he knew. He couldn't help it. He had no room in his head for being fair. All he knew was that Ron was down that hole with a broken leg and a dog the size of a bear. Harry wasn't going to let him be hurt any more than he had been already, whatever it took. He felt it rise in him, the same hard, bright courage that had carried him down to Quirrell and the Mirror, then into the

Chamber after the Basilisk. Alongside it, just as strong, was a hot, weary sort of rage. Why was it always him? Why did somebody always have to be trying to kill him, or his friends, before the year was out?

'I've seen them together. Come on-and keep your wand out.'

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They reached the trunk in a few seconds. Crookshanks got there first, though. With a twitch of his bushy tail he slid into the gap between the roots and was gone. Harry went in after him head first. He slid down a steep bank of earth on his front and landed in a tunnel so low that he couldn't stand upright, with soil in his mouth. A little way ahead, Crookshanks was waiting, his eyes shining in the wandlight. A moment later Hermione came slithering down the bank beside him.

'Where's Ron?' she whispered. She sounded terrified.

'This way,' said Harry. He set off after Crookshanks, bent nearly double under the low roof.

'Where does this tunnel come out?' Hermione panted behind him.

'I don't know... It's marked on the Marauder's Map but Fred and George said no one's ever got into it... It goes off the edge of the map, but it looked like it was heading for Hogsmeade...'

They hurried along as fast as the passage would let them. Ahead, Crookshanks's tail kept bobbing into the wandlight, then out again. The roof was so low that Harry's back ached within a minute. Roots hung down from it like grey string and brushed his face as he went. The air was stale, smelling of wet earth. Underneath the earth smell was a rank, animal stink, like a kennel that hadn't been cleaned.

Every so often the wandlight caught a dark smear on the floor. The first time, Harry thought it was mud. The second time he bent closer, and saw that it was red.

'That's Ron's,' Hermione whispered. 'That's Ron's blood.'

Harry didn't answer. He started to run, crouching, banging his head on the roof, not caring.

Hermione kept up with him. She had a fistful of the back of his robes and wouldn't let go of it, however hard the going got, so that whenever Harry stumbled she stumbled too. He could hear her breathing behind him, quick and ragged. Now and then she muttered something under her breath. At first he thought she was crying. Then the passage narrowed, bringing her mouth close to his ear, and he heard the words.

'If he's hurt him... if he's *touched* you... I'll kill him. I don't care what he is. I'll kill him myself.'

Harry had never heard her sound like that. It was a flat, quiet, perfectly steady voice, quite unlike Hermione's, and for a moment it frightened him more than the dog had.

'Let me go in front,' she said suddenly.

'What?'

'Let me go first. If it's waiting for us round the next corner, it'll get me, not you.' Her fingers tightened in his robes. 'I don't mind. I'd rather. Please, Harry.'

'Don't be stupid,' said Harry. 'Whatever it is, it's probably after me. Everything always is.'

'That,' said Hermione, in the same flat, frightening voice, 'is exactly why.'

Harry didn't let her past. After that, though, he could feel her at his back all the way, treading almost on his heels, as if she meant to

stand between him and anything that came at him from behind as well.

The passage seemed to go on forever. Harry thought it must be longer even than the one to Honeydukes. He couldn't stop thinking about Ron, down here somewhere in the dark with that huge dog. His breath was coming in sharp, painful gasps. A stitch was stabbing him under the ribs.

Then, at last, the tunnel began to climb. A little further on it took a sharp turn, and Crookshanks had vanished. In his place was a faint patch of light, shining through a small hole.

Harry and Hermione stopped to catch their breath. Then they crept forward, with their wands held up to see what lay on the other side.

It was a room, and a terrible one. The wallpaper was hanging off the walls in long, mouldy strips. The floor was blotched with stains. Every stick of furniture had been smashed to pieces, as if somebody had taken an axe to the lot. All the windows had been boarded over.

Harry looked at Hermione. She was white to the lips, and she had moved so close to him that her shoulder was pressed against his. After a moment she nodded. When he climbed out of the hole into the room, she came too, without once letting go of him.

The room was empty. A door on their right stood open on to a dark hallway.

Hermione's grip tightened on his arm. Her eyes were darting round the boarded-up windows.

'Harry,' she whispered, 'I think we're in the Shrieking Shack.'

Harry looked round.

'Lovely. I'm sure the stories of the murderer and the ghosts are a load of bollocks,' Harry said, as sarcastically as he could, so that Hermione wouldn't hear how frightened he was.

He was remembering Ron leaning on the fence outside this very house. *I reckon not many people would want to sort out a mad old wizard with a cleaver*, Ron had said. Just then he noticed a wooden chair close by. Something had torn great bites out of it. One of its legs had been wrenched off altogether.

'Ghosts didn't do that,' he said slowly.

He held his wand higher. The light slid across the wall behind the chair, and Harry's skin crawled. Five long grooves had been ripped through the plaster there, right down to the bare brick, as if something had dragged its claws across it. They started a good foot above Harry's head. There were more further along, on the door frame, the skirting boards and the boards over the windows. They weren't new. Dust lay thick in the bottom of every one.

'No dog did that, either,' said Harry, more quietly still.

'No,' said Hermione. She was staring at the marks with an odd, fixed look on her face, like somebody doing a sum and not liking the answer. 'No, I don't suppose it did.'

Then, overhead, a floorboard creaked. Somebody, or something, was moving about upstairs.

They both looked up at the ceiling. Hermione was gripping Harry's arm so tightly that he could no longer feel his fingers. He gave her a questioning look. She nodded once more and let go of him.

Moving as softly as they could, they tiptoed into the hallway and up the rickety stairs. Everything was thick with dust, except for one broad, shining track down the middle of the stairs, where something had been dragged up them.

They came out on to a dark landing.

'*Nox*,' they breathed together. Their wandlight died.

Only one of the doors stood open. When they were nearly there, they heard sounds from the other side: a low groan, then a deep, contented purring. They looked at each other one last time, and nodded.

Harry held his wand out in front of him and kicked the door wide open.

Moonlight leaked in thin stripes between the boards over the window. A magnificent four-poster bed stood in the middle of the room, hung with dusty curtains. Crookshanks was sprawled across it, purring happily at them.

'We're putting ourselves in mortal danger and that bloody cat is putting his feet up,' Harry murmured, anxious and irritable at once.

Ron was on the floor beside the bed. He was clutching his leg, which was bent at a horrible angle. The sleeve of his robes hung in bloody tatters where the dog had bitten him.

Harry and Hermione rushed over to him.

'Ron, are you OK?'

'Where's the dog?'

'N-not a dog,' Ron moaned through clenched teeth. 'Harry, it's a trap!'

'Yeah, I had a feeling mate, but-'

Harry had been about to ask which of the people queuing up to kill him had arranged this one. Ron cut across him.

'He's the dog... he's an Animagus...'

Ron was staring past Harry's shoulder. Harry turned.

The man who had been standing in the shadows behind the door pushed it shut with a snap.

His hair was a filthy, matted mass that hung to his elbows. His face was grey and waxy, the skin pulled so tight that it looked like a skull. If it hadn't been for the eyes glittering out of their deep, dark

sockets, Harry might have taken him for a corpse. His lips were drawn back from yellow teeth in a grin.

It was Sirius Black.

'*Expelliarmus!*' he croaked. He had Ron's wand in his hand.

Harry's wand and Hermione's flew out of their hands, high into the air. Black caught them both. He came a step nearer, with his gaze fastened on Harry.

For a moment Harry couldn't move at all.

Then the rage came, like a wave breaking over his head. This was the man Harry's parents had trusted, the man who had sold them both to Voldemort and stood laughing in the street afterwards. His wand was gone. Without it he was helpless...

Except that he wasn't. He still had his hands.

'I thought you'd come and help - gah!'

Black never finished. Harry hit him in the middle at a dead run, with his head down and every ounce of his weight behind it. The two of them went crashing to the floor.

'YOU BETRAYED THEM!'

Harry didn't know he was screaming. He was on top of Black, on the grimy floorboards among the dust and broken glass, punching, clawing at whatever he could reach.

'THEY TRUSTED YOU! THEY TRUSTED YOU, AND YOU SOLD THEM TO HIM!'

Everything was coming out of him at once. It came from the other Harry. The hurt, angry one, who dreamed of torturing muggles for hurting him. Ten years of the cupboard under the stairs were in it: the spiders in the dark, the bolt on the outside, Aunt Petunia's frying pan swinging at his head. So were the bars on his bedroom window, Uncle Vernon's purple face, and Dudley's fists in the playground. So were all the birthdays nobody remembered, and all the nights he had

lain awake wondering what his parents' voices had sounded like. Then there was the voice he had heard in the end, at last, with a dementor's breath on his face. *Not Harry. Not Harry. Please.*

'EVERYTHING WAS BECAUSE OF YOU! EVERYTHING! I HAD NOTHING! I HAD NOBODY! I HAD A CUPBOARD!'

His knuckles split on a cheekbone. His nails raked down Black's face. He grabbed a handful of the matted hair and tried to bang Black's head against the floor. All the time, he was screaming. He couldn't stop. He didn't want to stop.

'YOU SHOULD HAVE DIED! IT SHOULD HAVE BEEN YOU! IT SHOULD HAVE BEEN YOU INSTEAD OF THEM!'

Black was horribly quick. Wretched as he was, he moved like a cat. Harry's fists kept landing on elbows and forearms, or on bare floorboards, or on nothing at all. The face kept twisting out of the way. Now and again a blow got through, though. When one did, Black made no move to stop it. He simply took it, with his eyes screwed shut. His cracked lips were moving. Through the roaring in his own ears, Harry thought he caught a few words, muttered over and over, very fast, like a lesson learnt by heart.

'...my fault... my fault... my fault...'

It made Harry hit him harder.

It was a long time before it occurred to him that in all that while, Black had never once hit him back.

At last Black got a hand flat against Harry's chest. He heaved, and Harry went flying backwards across the floor. He landed on his back in the dust, winded, with his knuckles bleeding and his chest heaving. He started to scramble up.

Black didn't get up. He lay where he was, propped on one elbow, with blood running from his nose and a scratch down his face. Then, quite suddenly, he began to laugh.

It was a horrible laugh. It was high and cracked. It went on for a long time, the laugh of a man who had been alone with nobody but himself to talk to for years. It was so unexpected that Harry stopped dead, halfway to his feet, staring at him.

'Rescuing your mate, that's what James would do. He'd have done that...' Black's voice trailed away into more of those mad giggles. 'He'd have done that for me. But that rage... that was... that was Lily.'

He was smiling up at Harry, shaking his head, almost as though he were pleased. Harry was far too angry to notice that the mad, glittering eyes were wet. All he knew was that this man, this filthy, murdering, cackling thing on the floor, had just said his father's name and his mother's, then laughed.

He was mocking them. He was lying there on his back, mocking them.

The rage came back so hard that the room seemed to turn red. Before he knew what he was doing, Harry lunged forward-

Hands caught him from either side and dragged him back.

'No, Harry!' Hermione whispered, terrified.

Ron didn't say anything to Harry at all. He was hanging on to Harry's arm with one hand and to the bedpost with the other, swaying, grey in the face. His eyes were on Black, and Harry could tell that he was thinking of the night in the dormitory.

'You're a brave man considering I chinned you. I saw you fall flat on your arse, mate. You looked like you'd just been told off by your mum before you ran off.'

Something passed over Black's face at the word *mum*, too fast for Harry to read. For one moment he looked stung. Then he came up off the floor in one quick, savage movement and lunged towards them.

Ron let go of the bedpost and threw himself in the way. It took everything he had. Harry thought Black was coming for Harry, and so did Ron, but Black's hand was reaching lower, towards the front of Ron's robes. Black's eyes were fixed there too.

'I'll knock your head off before you try to kill Harry!' said Ron fiercely. Even standing upright was costing him the last of his colour, and he swayed as he spoke.

Something flickered in the depths of Black's shadowed eyes. He stopped.

'Lie down,' he said quietly to Ron. 'You'll damage that leg even more.'

'Did you hear me?' said Ron weakly. He had to hang on to Harry to stay on his feet, and it was plainly agony. 'I won't let you, he's my best mate!'

'There'll be only one murder here tonight,' said Black. His grin grew wider.

Harry could hardly believe his ears.

'Oh the mass murderer is showing some restraint. Thank God for that.'

Black laughed again. He seemed to find what Harry had said genuinely funny, but there was something more than that, too, as if a joke of his own had just occurred to him, one that nobody else in the room could share. His hand crept up to the neck of his ragged robes. There was something hanging there, on a dirty bit of string. Harry couldn't see properly what it was. It looked small and crude, made of wood.

Black closed his fingers round it.

'Yes... thank God. We should all thank God he brought us here together. Finally...'

He trailed off again, into a fresh fit of those mad giggles, clutching the little wooden thing as though it were the most precious object in the world. All the while, though, his eyes were moving. They went over Harry, then over Ron, up and down, searching, the way a dog searches a hedge.

Harry didn't wonder what he was looking for. Neither did Ron. Out of the corner of his eye, though, Harry saw Hermione's face change. She was following Black's gaze, and a small, puzzled frown had appeared between her eyebrows.

Harry wasn't interested in Hermione's frown. Black was giggling about God, as though a murder were a prayer answered, and it was the last straw.

'So you've thought up an arbitrary number of brutal murders you want to commit tonight. Not that you cared last time, did you? Didn't mind slaughtering all those Muggles to get at Pettigrew... What's the matter, gone soft in Azkaban?'

'Harry!' Hermione whimpered. 'Be quiet!'

'HE TOOK EVERYTHING FROM ME!' Harry roared.

With a huge effort, he tore himself out of their grip and flung himself forward.

Magic had gone clean out of his head. So had the fact that he was thirteen, small and skinny for his age, against a grown man far taller than he was. Nothing mattered except hurting Black, as much and as badly as possible. He didn't care what happened to himself.

Perhaps Black hadn't expected him to try anything so stupid twice. At any rate, he was too slow to bring the wands up. Harry seized his bony wrist with one hand and wrenched the wand tips away. His other fist cracked into the side of Black's head. The pair of them crashed backwards into the wall and slid down it together.

Somewhere behind him Hermione was screaming, and Ron was shouting. The wands in Black's fist went off with a blinding flash. A jet of sparks shot past Harry's face so close that he felt the heat of it on his cheek. The thin arm under his fingers was twisting like an eel, but Harry hung on, punching with his free hand at every bit of Black he could reach.

Then Black's other hand found his throat.

The long fingers closed. Harry couldn't breathe. He clawed at the wrist, but it was like clawing at an iron bar. Black's face was very close to his now, so close that Harry could see the tiny broken veins in the whites of his eyes.

'I'm sorry, Harry. But I've waited too long.'

Behind the wildness in those sunken eyes was something that shocked Harry far more than madness: a terrible steadiness, a hard, driving, single-minded purpose that had lasted through twelve years in the dark, and would not let go of its object for anybody. For a second he couldn't think where he had seen it before. Then, with a lurch of his stomach, he realised that it was very like the look in his own eyes.

Then, all at once, Black's face changed.

It softened. Something had dawned on him, it seemed, something he hadn't thought of until that moment. His fingers loosened on Harry's throat. Then they let go altogether.

Hermione didn't see that. All she had seen was Black's hand round Harry's neck. She came at Black like something out of a nightmare and swung her foot into his stomach with all her strength. He folded up with a grunt of pain.

'Don't you dare touch him! *You* aren't allowed!' Hermione screamed.

After that, everything went mad. Ron had flung himself on Black's wand arm. Something clattered on the boards. Harry squirmed free of the scrum, just in time to see his own wand skittering away across the floor. He flung himself after it.

Behind him, Hermione had gone for Black with her bare hands. She was clawing at his face, at his eyes, at his throat, sobbing and spitting with fury, quite beside herself. She was more savage than Harry had been. Harry, scrabbling for his wand, caught one glimpse of her face and hardly knew it.

'Argh! Ruddy cat!'

Crookshanks had joined in. Both sets of his front claws were buried in Harry's arm. Harry flung him away, but Crookshanks went streaking straight for Harry's wand-

'NO YOU DON'T!' roared Harry.

He lashed out with his foot. Crookshanks sprang out of the way, spitting. Harry grabbed his wand and spun round.

'Get out of the way!' he yelled at the other two.

Neither of them argued. Hermione scrambled clear, panting, with blood trickling from her lip. She grabbed her own wand off the floor, then Ron's. Ron hauled himself across to the bed and collapsed on it, gasping, clutching his broken leg with both hands. His face had gone from white to faintly green.

Black lay slumped against the wall, his thin chest heaving. He watched Harry come slowly towards him, wand aimed at his heart.

'Going to kill me, Harry?' he whispered.

Harry stopped right over him and stood looking down, with the wand still aimed at his chest. A purple bruise was swelling up round Black's left eye. His nose was bleeding again.

'Everything that happened to me...' hissed Harry.

His voice shook. He was thinking of cupboards and frying pans, of stale bread, cold tea, misery, ten years of being nobody at all. Then his wand hand went perfectly steady.

'It was you! It was all your fault!' he screamed, blind with rage.

Black looked up at him from the floor.

'I don't deny it,' he said very quietly.

Then he said something Harry had never expected to hear.

'I'm sorry, Harry. For everything.'

There was no madness in his voice now. It was gentle. He sounded sorry, as if he had any right to be sorry, as if *sorry* came anywhere near what he had done to Harry's family.

'But if you knew the whole story,' Black finished.

'The whole story?' Harry repeated. The blood was pounding in his ears. 'You sold them to Voldemort. That's all I need to know.'

'You've got to listen to me,' said Black. He sounded urgent now. 'You'll regret it if you don't... You don't understand...'

'I tried pretending to be a mug once this year. No more. I understand everything!' His voice cracked. 'You never heard her, did you? My mum... trying to stop Voldemort killing me... and you did that... you did it...'

Somewhere deep down, underneath all the rage, something else was beginning to creep in. It was a long, cold, aching misery, and it was a great deal worse than being angry. Harry held on to the anger with both hands, because if he let go of it he thought he might simply fall down.

Then, before either of them could speak again, a ginger streak shot past Harry. Crookshanks leapt on to Black's chest and curled up there, right over his heart.

Black blinked down at him.

'Get off,' he murmured, trying to push the cat away.

Crookshanks dug his claws into the ragged robes and stayed exactly where he was. He turned his flat, ugly face round and gazed at Harry out of huge yellow eyes.

Beside Harry, Hermione gave a dry, choking sob.

Harry's fingers tightened on the wand as he looked down at them both. He was furious with the cat now, as well. What did it matter if Crookshanks had to die too? He was on Black's side... If he wanted to die defending Black, that was his own lookout... If Black wanted to save him, it only proved that Black thought more of a cat than he ever had of Harry's mother and father...

Harry raised the wand.

This was the moment to avenge them both. Black was going to die. He had to die, here, now. There would never be a better chance...

The seconds stretched out, longer and longer.

A thin blade of moonlight had found its way between two of the boards over the window. It fell across Black's upturned face and across the cat, leaving Harry standing in the dark.

In the moonlight, in the dust by Black's collar, lay the little wooden thing on its string. It had fallen out of his robes in the fight. Harry could see now that it was nothing but two splinters of bed frame, bound crosswise with a bit of thread. It lay beside Crookshanks's paw, very small and plain.

From the bed came Ron's ragged breathing. Harry thought, for no reason at all, of Ron in the corridor on the day Buckbeak lost his case, letting the quarrel over Scabbers go when he had been sure he was in the right. He thought of Malfoy at the bottom of the castle steps, with blood on her sleeve. He thought of the Quidditch pitch, where he had looked down at her and found that he wasn't angry any more. A quiet voice spoke up at the back of his mind, a mild, tired,

kindly voice he knew very well. *I've always understood that the idea was to lose count.*

He shoved it all away. He didn't want it. Not now. Not tonight. Not for *him*.

And still he stood there, frozen, with his wand raised. Black stared up at him. Crookshanks lay across Black's chest. Ron's breathing rasped on and on from the bed. Hermione had gone completely silent.

Then came a new sound.

Somewhere below them, muffled by the floorboards, were footsteps. Somebody was moving about downstairs.

'WE'RE UP HERE!' Hermione screamed suddenly, stumbling to the door. 'WE'RE UP HERE-SIRIUS BLACK-QUICK!'

Black jerked so violently that Crookshanks nearly fell off. Harry's hand clenched round his wand.

Do it now! said a voice inside his head. *Do it now, before they come!*

But the feet were already pounding up the stairs, and still Harry hadn't done it.

*

Red sparks exploded round the door as it flew open. Harry spun round. Professor Lupin was hurtling into the room with his wand raised, his face drained of blood.

His nostrils flared wide as he came through the door, and his head jerked towards Ron, like a hound catching a scent. Then his eyes flicked over Ron, lying on the bed, then over Hermione, white and rigid by the door, then to Harry, standing with his wand trained on Black. Last of all they came to Black, lying in a bloody heap at Harry's feet.

‘*Expelliarmus!*’ Lupin shouted.

Harry’s wand leapt out of his hand once again, and so did the two that Hermione was holding. Lupin caught all three neatly. Then he came further into the room, his eyes on Black. Crookshanks still lay across Black’s chest like a guard.

Harry stood there with his empty hand still raised, feeling suddenly hollow. He had failed. When it came to it, he hadn’t had the nerve. Now Black would go back to the dementors, and that would be that.

And yet, underneath the emptiness, he felt a flicker of something very like relief. For once, after three years of Defence teachers who had tried to kill him or run away, one who actually knew what he was doing had turned up in time to save Harry’s life. He had always known Lupin was on his side.

Then Lupin spoke. His voice was strained.

‘Where is he, Sirius?’

Harry’s eyes flew to Lupin’s face. He didn’t understand. Who did Lupin mean? He looked back at Black. Black’s face showed nothing at all.

‘You... you believe me, Remus?’ Black said. He was staring up at Lupin, desperately, with the mad light back in his eyes.

Lupin’s voice was firm, with a growl underneath it.

‘If I didn’t and came here not believing you. The whole school would soon know that I didn’t. You of all people know that, Sirius. Where is *he*?’

He growled the last word. It came from somewhere far deeper than his throat, from the middle of his chest, the way it had over a smoking goblet in October, and in Snape’s office over the map. Harry felt it in his own ribs.

For a few seconds Black didn't move. Then, very slowly, he lifted one hand from the floor and pointed at Ron.

Harry glanced round at Ron, who looked completely bewildered.

Lupin muttered something under his breath. 'So... that was the smell. I should've known.'

Lupin stood thinking. Harry could see that he didn't like whatever he was thinking, not one bit. In fact, he seemed to be growing angry, and not in any way Harry had seen before. The air in the room felt suddenly thick and close, as it does before a thunderstorm. The hair was rising on the back of Harry's neck. Lupin's nostrils were flared wide. His shoulders had come up and forward, the way they had once before in a Defence lesson, as if his shabby robes had shrunk across the back. Somewhere under the cloth there was a faint creak, like a seam under strain.

'But then why hasn't he shown himself before now? Unless-'

Lupin's eyes suddenly widened. He was staring past Black now, at something that only he could see.

'-unless he was the one... unless you switched... without telling me?'

Black didn't take his eyes off Lupin's face. Very slowly, he nodded.

'Professor,' Harry interrupted loudly, 'what's going on-?'

The question went unfinished. What he saw next drove every word out of his head.

Lupin was lowering his wand. He was gazing fixedly at Black. He crossed to Black, grasped his hand and hauled him up off the floor, so that Crookshanks tumbled to the boards. Then he put his arms round Black and held him, the way a man holds a brother he has given up for dead.

Harry felt as though the floor had dropped away from under him.

It hurt worse than the dog had, worse than Black's fingers on his throat. This was *Lupin*. He had sat with Harry in an empty classroom on all those winter evenings, teaching him to fight the dementors, giving him chocolate when he failed. He had known Harry's father, and told him about his mother. Harry had trusted him. He had trusted him more than almost any grown-up he had ever known.

Now that man was standing in the Shrieking Shack, with his arms round the person who had murdered Harry's parents.

'I DON'T BELIEVE IT!' Hermione screamed.

Lupin released Black and swung round to face her. She had pulled herself up off the floor. She was pointing at Lupin with a shaking finger, her eyes wild.

'You-you-'

'Hermione-'

'-you and him!'

'Hermione, calm down-'

'I didn't tell anyone!' Hermione shrieked. 'I've been covering up for you-'

'Hermione, listen to me, please!' Lupin shouted. 'I can explain-'

Harry was shaking with new fury, and with something underneath it that hurt far worse.

'You were the best teacher I've ever had. I... started believing in myself because of you! I trusted you,' he yelled at Lupin, his voice cracking wildly, 'and all the time you've just been another teacher trying to kill me!'

The words came out full of hurt, and so bitter that Harry could taste them.

'You're wrong,' said Lupin. 'I've wanted to help you Harry. That's why I took up the job despite my... problems. But I haven't been Sirius's friend, I am now, though. Let me explain...'

‘NO!’ Hermione screamed. ‘Harry, don’t trust him, he’s been helping Black get into the castle, he wants you dead too... he’s a Garou!’

There was a ringing silence. Everybody was looking at Lupin now. He seemed remarkably calm, though rather pale.

‘Not at all up to your usual standard, Hermione,’ he said. ‘Only one out of three, I’m afraid. I have not been helping Sirius get into the castle and I certainly don’t want Harry dead.’

He took a handkerchief out of his pocket and wiped his forehead with it. His face was shining with sweat, though the room wasn’t warm. Harry saw that his hand wasn’t quite steady. The knuckles looked thicker than they ought to. There was something odd about the nails, too, which seemed darker and longer than Harry remembered.

‘But I won’t deny that I’m Garou,’ Lupin said quietly.

Ron tried bravely to sit up, but sank back with a whimper. Lupin took a step towards him, frowning with concern.

‘Get me some silver, Hermione! I’ll sort him out!’ shouted Ron. Even with his leg in pieces, he hadn’t lost his nerve.

Lupin stopped dead. He sighed, very patiently.

‘Ron. I know you mean well but if I was ever in a position to fight you or any other wizard you’d soon realise the mistake you’d made. Not that you’d live long enough to appreciate that. Be lucky I’m here. Others like me would be less forgiving.’

He said it quite mildly, but nobody in the room doubted for a moment that he meant every word.

Then, with a visible effort, he turned to Hermione.

‘How long have you known?’

‘Ages,’ Hermione whispered. ‘Since I did Professor Snape’s essay...’

‘He’ll be delighted,’ said Lupin coolly. ‘He assigned that essay hoping someone would realise what my struggles meant. The signs were always there. I’m painfully aware of that.’

‘Garou normally wouldn’t stand the sight of all the dark magic at Hogwarts,’ Hermione said firmly. ‘But I could see how you struggled. The symptoms were all there. You were suppressing your war form.’

‘You’re the cleverest witch of your age I’ve ever met, Hermione.’

‘I’m not,’ Hermione whispered. ‘If I’d been a bit cleverer, I’d have told everyone what you are!’

She had moved while she was talking, without seeming to know it, so that she was standing squarely between Harry and the rest of the room. Her wand was gone, but her hands were clenched. She was glaring at Black, not Lupin. Her bleeding lip was drawn back from her teeth.

‘But they already know,’ said Lupin. ‘At least, the staff do.’

‘Dumbledore hired you when he knew you were a werewolf?’ Ron gasped. ‘I knew he was bloody mad,’ he added bitterly.

It wasn’t hard to guess what Ron was thinking. He was thinking of every year so far: of a three-headed dog behind a door, of a basilisk in the pipes, of Dumbledore called away to London one year and thrown out by the governors the next, never there when it counted. But Dumbledore was wise. Harry knew that. He must have had his reasons. All the same, here Lupin was, standing next to Black, betraying Harry to his face.

‘Some of the staff thought so,’ said Lupin. ‘He had to work very hard to convince certain teachers that I’m trustworthy-’

‘AND HE WAS WRONG!’ Harry yelled, angry and hurt at once. ‘YOU’VE BEEN HELPING HIM ALL THE TIME!’

He was pointing at Black. Black had crossed abruptly to the bed. He sank down on it with his face buried in one trembling hand. Crookshanks jumped up next to him, stepped on to his lap and began to purr. Ron edged away from the pair of them, dragging his leg. Behind his hand, Black's lips were moving without a sound. Harry supposed he was talking to himself. Mad people did.

'I have not been helping Sirius,' said Lupin. 'If you'll give me a chance, I'll explain. Look-'

He sorted out the three wands and threw them back, one to each of them. Harry caught his in a daze.

'There,' said Lupin, tucking his own wand into his belt. 'You're armed, we're not. Now will you listen?'

Harry's head was spinning. Was this some sort of trick?

'If you haven't been helping him,' he said, glaring at Black, 'how did you know he was here?'

'The map,' said Lupin. 'The Marauder's Map. I was in my office examining it-'

'You know how to work it?' Harry said suspiciously.

'Of course I know how to work it,' said Lupin, with an impatient flap of his hand. 'I helped write it. I'm Moony; that was my friends' nickname for me at school.'

'You wrote-?'

'The important thing is, I was watching it carefully this evening, because I had an idea that you, Ron, and Hermione might try and sneak out of the castle to visit Hagrid before his hippogriff was executed. And I was right, wasn't I?'

He had begun pacing up and down, watching them as he went. Little puffs of dust rose round his feet. Something was plainly irritating him, gnawing at him from inside. From time to time a low sound came out of him, very nearly a growl, and he kept dabbing at

his forehead with the handkerchief. The floorboards groaned under him as he walked, far more loudly than they had any right to under a man so thin.

'You might have been wearing your father's old cloak, Harry-'

'How d'you know about the cloak?'

'The number of times I saw James disappearing under it...' said Lupin, with another impatient gesture. 'The point is, even if you're wearing an Invisibility Cloak, you still show up on the Marauder's Map. I watched you cross the grounds and enter Hagrid's hut. Twenty minutes later, you left Hagrid, and set off back towards the castle. But you were now accompanied by somebody else.'

'What?' said Harry. 'No, we weren't!'

'I couldn't believe my eyes,' said Lupin, still pacing, paying no attention to the interruption. 'I thought the map must be malfunctioning. How could he be with you?'

'No one was with us!' said Harry.

'And then I saw another dot, moving fast towards you, labelled *Sirius Black*... I saw him collide with you; I watched as he pulled two of you into the Whomping Willow-'

'One of us!' Ron said angrily.

'No, Ron,' said Lupin. 'Two of you.'

He had stopped pacing. His eyes travelled slowly over Ron.

'Do you think I could have a look at the rat?' he said evenly.

'What?' said Ron. 'What's Scabbers got to do with it?'

'Everything,' said Lupin. 'Could I see him, please?'

Ron hesitated. Then he reached into his robes. Out came Scabbers, struggling frantically. Ron had to catch hold of his long, hairless tail to keep him from escaping. On Black's knee, Crookshanks rose to his feet with a soft, low hiss.

Lupin moved nearer. He was staring at the rat, with every sign of holding his breath.

Then he let it out, and Harry saw his face change.

His upper lip had drawn back. For one instant, in the thin moonlight, Harry saw his teeth, and they looked longer than any man's teeth should. When Lupin's eyes caught the moonlight, they flashed back at it, flat and yellow, the way a cat's eyes do in a car's headlamps. His hands had curled into fists at his sides. Something in his left shoulder gave a sharp crack, like a knuckle, only far louder, and there was a soft sound of tearing cloth.

'God, he *reeks* of it. Worse than Severus,' Lupin growled.

He seemed to be holding himself back from something by sheer force of will. Every muscle in his face was rigid with the effort. He kept his hands rigidly at his sides, as though he didn't trust them anywhere near the rat.

'What?' said Ron again, clutching Scabbers to his chest. He looked frightened now. 'What's my rat got to do with anything?'

'That's not a rat,' croaked Sirius Black suddenly.

'What d'you mean-of course he's a rat-'

'No, he's not,' said Lupin quietly. 'He's a wizard.'

'An Animagus,' said Black, 'by the name of Peter Pettigrew.'