



## 6. UNDER THE WARPING WILLOW

As it turned out, the group was traveling the rest of the way to Alma Aleron via train. Franklyn led everyone underground through a Muggle subway entrance. Near the turnstiles, James saw Muggle New Yorkers mingling freely and apparently obliviously with witches and wizards in all manner of robes and costumes. A very tall black wizard wearing white robes walked regally with a Bengal tiger at his side, led by a length of gold chain. A small child in a stroller blinked at the tiger and pointed.

“Mom! Tiger!” the boy cried out, grinning with delight.

The mother, a harried-looking woman in a business suit, was talking on her cell phone. The boy called again, and she finally glanced down at him, patting him on the head. “That’s nice, honey,” she said. “Mommy loves your imagination. Tigers in the subway. You should draw that when we get home.”

James craned to watch as Franklyn led the troop through a special turnstile set into a tiled wall. “She doesn’t even see the tiger,” he said to Ralph, pointing. “It’s right there in front of her! It almost stepped on her foot!”

“The kid sees it, though,” Ralph commented.

“See what I mean?” Zane said, stepping through the turnstile. “The spell only really starts working when you’re about three years old. That’s why, when I was a kid, I always sort of knew there was something magical about this town, even though I didn’t really remember the details.”

James opened his mouth to ask another question, but at that moment he caught his first glimpse of the train that they were about to board. It rested between two elevated platforms in its own special terminal. The engine compartment was long and sleek, made from shining steel and glass, so streamlined that it appeared to be moving even as it stood still. Stylized letters along the side announced it as the *Lincoln Zephyr*. Double doors along the train’s cars shuttled open and James felt the throng of travelers surge toward them. In the lead, Franklyn and Merlin stepped into the brightly lit interior of the engine’s seating compartment.

“Sure beats taking a cab,” Zane announced. “The *Zephyr* line is the fastest way around the city. Even faster than a broom, especially at rush hour.”

James glanced aside as he approached the open doors. Petra, Izzy, and Lucy were entering a passenger car further down the train, following James’ mum and dad and his Aunt Audrey, who was herding Molly and Lily ahead of her. Finally, the noise of the terminal fell away as James passed through the car’s doors, finding himself in a richly upholstered and furnished interior. The walls and fixtures gleamed with brushed aluminum and there didn’t seem to be a single hard angle in sight.

“Cool,” Ralph said, finding a seat in the center of the lead car. “Looks like the entire train grew out of some kind of crazy dream.”

“It’s called Art Deco,” Zane pointed out. “These were designed by some wizard artist named Mucha a long time ago. I learned about him in Magi-American History. Even the Muggles knew about him, although they didn’t know he was a wizard, of course.”

The train filled quickly and James peered forward, toward the engineer’s post under the train’s sloping nose. A very thin goblin with a very large bald head stood before the broad windows, which looked out into darkness. A set of gleaming levers were embedded into the train’s control panel. The goblin engineer gripped them and then leaned toward a brass tube that extended from above.

“*Lincoln Zephyr*, five-twenty, now departing the terminal,” he announced, and his voice echoed along the length of the train. “Proud to be on time for the eight thousand, three hundred and twenty-first departure in a row. Thank you for patronizing the New Amsterdam Mass Transit Railway System.”

There was a loud click as the public address system shut off. The goblin engineer leaned forward and pressed both levers up at the same time. Immediately, the train began to glide forward, so smoothly that James could barely tell that they were moving at all except for the sight of the terminal outside the windows, which began to recede past, accelerating swiftly.

“So how is all of this done?” James finally asked, turning back to Zane and Ralph. “I mean, a whole magical city built right into a Muggle city. How’s it work?”

Zane shook his head and raised his hands, palms out. “Don’t ask me. I tried to get Stonewall to explain it to me one time and I finally had to ask him to stop because my brain was about to explode. Ask Chancellor Franklyn if you want an answer you can wrap your head around.”

“What’s that, boys?” Franklyn asked from across the aisle. “A question?”

James’ face reddened, but Zane prodded him, gesturing at the old rotund wizard across from them.

“We were just wondering, sir,” James said, raising his voice over the increasing drone of the train’s engines, “how is it that New York and New Amsterdam can exist in the same place, at the same time?”

Franklyn nodded appreciatively. “I’d be disappointed if you didn’t ask, Mr. Potter. The wizarding metropolis of New Amsterdam is, as you can imagine, quite old. It began as a mere alley, not unlike your Diagon Alley, hundreds of years ago, back when the Muggle city of New York was, itself, barely a port village on the Hudson River. As both cities grew, it became apparent that the various Disillusionment and Fidelius Charms put in place by the magical community within the city were simply too haphazard to manage such a large-scale secret. Eventually, the New Amsterdam Department of Magical Administration requested assistance from a foreign ally in the guise of a very unique and gifted witch. Agreeing, this foreign ally sent her, and she has resided with us ever since. This witch, you see, is content to perform one single spell, a very specialized bit of magic that requires nearly all of her prodigious attention—that of casting the most powerful and complete Disillusionment Charm in the entire world.”

Ralph let out a low whistle, impressed. “Wow. So she’s been here for a long time? How old is she, then?”

“Old,” Franklyn laughed, “although not quite as old as I.”

“So why does she need to stay here?” James asked. “Why couldn’t she just cast the spell and go back home, to wherever she came from?”

Franklyn took off his square spectacles and wiped them on his lapel. “It is complicated, I admit. Some spells need only be cast once, of course, and their effect is satisfied... others...”

“Others require constant support,” Merlin added from the seat next to Franklyn. “They dissipate over time. Some have lives of hundreds or thousands of years. Others, however, evaporate nearly instantly. I suspect that such might be the case with a spell as powerful and pervasive as the one which hides this wizard city from the Muggle city that lies beneath it.”

“Indeed, and well put,” Franklyn agreed. “Thus, our friendly witch remains with us, performing her solitary duty, even as she sleeps.”

“Sounds like a rum job if you ask me,” Ralph said, shaking his head. “I sure wouldn’t want to do it.”

“Where does she live?” James interjected, leaning forward. “Have you ever met her?”

“I have spoken to her many times,” Franklyn said carefully. “Although, alas, I myself have never heard her voice. Few have. Frankly, I am not sure she speaks English, and my foreign languages are rather woefully rusty these days.”

Suddenly, the train shot out of darkness and into the light of the lowering sun. James turned in his seat and squinted out the window.

“Wow,” he said, pressing his hands to the glass. “How fast are we going anyway?”

Zane leaned over James’ shoulder and shook his head. “Who knows? Fast. I don’t think the *Zephyr* even has a speedometer. No point, really.”

Outside, the great blocks and towers of the buildings rolled past the windows with shocking speed. Rivers of yellow taxis and silver buses clogged the Muggle streets while the air above was crowded with streams of witches and wizards on brooms as well as flying trolleys and buses and even the occasional sphinx and hippogriff. The wizarding metropolis of New Amsterdam seemed to occupy many of the second floors of Muggle New York City, with grand entryways that opened atop Muggle theater marquis and awnings. Magical signs and billboards flickered past, announcing all manner of wizard products, businesses, and entertainments, not all of it quite fit for young eyes.

“So does most of New Amsterdam sit up on top of the buildings of New York?” Ralph asked a little breathlessly.

“Yeah, most of it,” Zane said. “But there are wizard stores, offices, and secret entrances all over the place. Almost every building in New York has a wizard space in it on the thirteenth floor. Muggle elevators just skip right over it because they’re superstitious about the number thirteen. Convenient, eh?”

“What about that skyscraper over there?” James asked, pointing. “The huge one that looks like it’s made out of glass. Don’t tell me *that’s* a Muggle building!”

“*That,*” Zane said proudly, “is the center of the American wizarding world. It’s the headquarters of the Department of Magical Administration, the Worldwide Wizard’s Alliance, and the International Magical Bank. People just call it the Crystal Mountain.”

“Oh!” Ralph said, smacking his forehead. “I’ve heard of that! That’s excellent! But how do Muggles not see *that?*”

Zane shrugged. “Same way they don’t see the rest. To them, it’s just a three-story parking garage that’s always full. It’s the sort of thing they expect to see on nearly every corner anyway.”

James glanced back at him, unsure if his American friend was joking or not. Zane shrugged and smiled.

A loud click sounded throughout the train as the public address system turned on again. “Attention passengers,” the goblin engineer said in a businesslike voice. “Please secure all loose objects and find a handhold. Remember, the M.T.R.S. is not responsible for lost or damaged goods during Muggle railway interactions. Thank you.”

“What’s that mean?” James said, peering forward. The *Zephyr* was currently rocketing along an elevated section of track that curved around a bank of industrial buildings. “What are ‘Muggle railway interactions?’”

“Oh, this is the best part,” Zane said, climbing to his feet. “Come on with me. Grab onto the ceiling handles here along the middle aisle.”

“What?” Ralph said suspiciously, but standing nonetheless. “Why?”

“The *Zephyr* uses most of the same tracks as the Muggle subway,” Zane explained, adjusting his stance on the ribbed metal floor. “So, occasionally, the *Zephyr* and the Muggle trains have... er... interactions.”

“What sort of interactions?” James asked, frowning and peering ahead as the tracks flickered past, dim in the shadows of the buildings.

Zane thought about it for a moment. “Have you ever seen a square-dance?” he asked, glancing back at James and Ralph.

“Er,” Ralph said, perplexed, “no. How does a square dance?”

Zane shook his head and grinned. “It’s called a do-si-do. Never mind, Ralphinator. Just hang onto the handle. Keep your other hand in the air when we go over. It’s fun!”

“When we go—” James began, but the words choked in his throat as he saw another train come barreling around the track in front of them. He could tell by the blunt nose and spray-painted graffiti of the approaching engine that it was a Muggle subway train. Its headlight shone on the *Zephyr*’s windows. It zoomed toward them, occupying the exact same track.

“Geronimo!” Zane called out, shooting his free hand into the air.

James gasped, certain that they were all about to die, when the engineer of the *Zephyr* suddenly jerked the steering levers, forcing the left one all the way up, yanking the right one down. Instantly, the world turned sickeningly outside the windows of the *Zephyr*. Daylight and shadow switched places as the train spun into the air, following a new set of ghostly, curving tracks. James was immediately disoriented, but remembered not to let go of the ceiling handle. A moment later, there was a massive shudder as the engine landed again, pulling the rest of the passenger cars behind it.

“You really should’ve warned your friends, Mr. Walker,” Franklyn said with some reproach. “And it is unsafe to stand up during an interaction unless there is no other option.”

“But it’s more *fun* that way,” Zane proclaimed, unfazed.

“What just happened to us?” Ralph said, plopping back into his seat. “And why is it so dark outside all of a sudden?”

“You probably don’t want to know the answer to that question, Ralph,” Zane said sincerely. “Trust me.”

James moved to the window and peered out. Sure enough, the sunset sky seemed to be gone, replaced by a blur of blocky, shadowy shapes. Dots of lights flashed by, along with complicated metal struts and girders. He leaned forward and peered down. A moment later, his knees weakened as he saw nothing but empty space below the train. Dim blue space fell away to distant clouds, lit with the waning sun.

“We’re upside-down,” Zane announced soberly, clapping James on the shoulder. “We’re on the underside of the track now, letting the Muggles go by on top. Seems only fair, since they built the tracks in the first place.”

“That’s...,” James said faintly. He glanced ahead, past the *Zephyr*’s front windows, saw that they were, indeed, rocketing along on the underside of the elevated railway. Ghostly tracks glimmered ahead of the *Zephyr*, cast magically by the train itself. “That... is completely excellent!”

“Ralph,” Zane said, glancing up at the train’s ceiling. “You forgot to secure your stuff, dude.”

Ralph peered at Zane, his face pale. “What do you mean? How can you tell?”

“Because,” Zane replied, smiling and plopping into the seat next to his friend, “your cauldron cakes are stuck to the ceiling now. Sorry. The magical gravity only works on living things.”

James turned and looked up at the sticky buns plastered to the ceiling. He laughed.

Outside, a flash of bright purple light exploded with blinding force, rocking the train so hard that James collapsed onto Ralph. The train jerked violently, slewing back and forth under the elevated tracks and the interior lights flickered wildly. In the rear of the car, a window shattered, spraying glass and letting in a howl of rushing wind. Commuters screamed and covered their heads, jostling away from the blast.

“What’s happening?” James yelled, trying to scramble up. “Is this part of the ride?”

Zane shook his head, his eyes wide. “No! That was magic! Somebody attacked us!”

Another bolt of purple light slammed against the side of the train, rocking it over onto its right wheels. A curtain of sparks flew past the windows as the roof screeched against the elevated track’s steel supports.

“Hold on!” the engineer shouted. James turned to look and saw him jerk the steering levers again. The train lurched to the right, slamming back down onto the ghostly tracks and spinning up into the dying sunlight. The Muggle subway train was past now, fortunately, allowing the *Zephyr* to thump back down onto the main tracks with a rocking crash. It continued to hurtle forward, careening between buildings and over bridges.

“Who is attacking us?” Merlin asked Benjamin Franklyn, climbing to his feet in the swaying train.

“I—I don’t know!” Franklyn stammered, struggling to stay upright in his seat. “I can’t see anything!”

James looked up as the big man moved behind the row of seats, pushing through the frightened passengers toward the side of the train that had been battered. James followed Merlin's gimlet gaze. There were three figures flying alongside the train, black against the blurring cityscape. Another purple flash shot from one of the figures, shattering more windows and forcing the train to vibrate on its tracks.

"Mr. Engineer," Merlin commanded loudly, producing his staff. "Now would be a good time for us to take evasive action."

The goblin engineer glanced back at Merlin over his shoulder, his eyes bulging. "What d'ya expect me to do? We're on a train, if ya haven't noticed!"

"A *magical* train," Merlin corrected quickly. "One that can apparently make its own tracks. I'd suggest that you do so, sir. I'll do what I can with our pursuers."

"There're more on this side!" Franklyn cried out, pointing. He fumbled for his own wand as two more blasts erupted, one on each side. The train leapt off the tracks and then crashed down again, screeching horribly. Passengers scrambled over one another, crying out in fear.

"Here goes nothin'!" the engineer called, gripping the steering controls. A moment later, the train leapt off the tracks again, following its own set of ghostly rails. The rails curved sideways and down, leading the train completely off the railway bed.

Merlin used his staff to fire at the dark shapes outside as they angled to follow the train. His bolt struck one of the figures, which jerked and spun away, falling from its broom. The other two figures arced closer, shadowing the train as it hurled through the air.

"I can't hold her up like this!" the engineer yelled, struggling with the levers. "She's too heavy to go unsupported!"

"Then put her down!" Merlin commanded, still firing.

A blast of purple light engulfed the right side of the train, forcing it into a barrel roll just as it began to descend. James gripped his seat as hard as he could while the world rolled over ahead of them. The train righted itself just as it struck the pavement of the busy street below, squeezing between lines of dense traffic.

"We're going to crash!" Ralph yelled. "At the intersection!"

James looked ahead and saw what Ralph meant. A line of buses and cabs was lumbering slowly through the intersection, crossing directly in front of the train.

"Wands!" James shouted, producing his own and pointing it wildly toward the front of the train. "Zane and I will take the cabs! Ralph, you get the bus!"

Ralph's eyes widened, but he didn't argue. The three boys stabbed their wands forward and called the incantation—"Wingardium Leviosa!"—at exactly the same moment. James felt adrenaline surge up his arm, powering the magic, and the first of the cabs lofted immediately into the air, turning sideways. He dropped it a moment later, letting it fall halfway onto a blue police car as he

aimed at another cab. Together, he and Zane succeeded in levitating the cabs out of the way. Ralph grunted and his arm trembled as the bus finally shoved forward, its rear end rising and sliding sideways. A moment later, the *Zephyr* rammed through the space, barely missing the disheveled traffic. The three boys fell back into their seats amidst the screams of their fellow passengers.

More bolts of magic fired between the train and the flying figures, and James sensed that his dad and the others were waging their own battle from further back in the train.

“We can’t keep this up!” the engineer shouted, gripping the controls and veering the train through the Muggle traffic. “It’s not what we’re made for! And we’re breaking nearly every code of railway conduct in the book!”

James scrambled in his seat, prepared to use his own wand to fight the flying dark figures, when a hand fell onto his shoulder, gently, but with surprising strength.

“Have a seat, James,” a female voice said. “Don’t you worry.”

James craned to look. Behind him, standing calmly amidst the terrified passengers, was the unusual woman he had first met in the halls of Atlantis, the one who had told him he was so like his grandfather, James the First. She smiled down at him.

“Merlinus is doing his best,” she said, almost whispering, “but this isn’t really his element, you know.”

She winked at him, and then stepped lightly over to the window on the opposite side of the train. She raised her hand, wandless, and pointed at one of the dark figures that flew alongside the train. There was a faint, bluish flash and the figure seemed to freeze in the air, so suddenly and completely that its cloak ceased flapping. It dropped to the street like a stone, crashing against the windscreen of a taxi. The other figures fell quickly thereafter, dropping the moment the woman pointed at them, her face mild, almost amused.

“Did you see that?” Zane demanded, gripping James’ arm. “Is she with you?”

“I’ve never seen her before in my life!” Ralph called back. “But I’m glad she’s on *our* side!”

James looked aside at Merlin, but the big wizard hadn’t noticed. He was busy aiming for the last pursuer on his side of the train. His face was shiny with sweat, pinched in exertion. Whoever the woman was, she certainly appeared to be correct: the city definitely wasn’t Merlin’s element.

The last cloaked figure swooped upwards over the train and disappeared from view. A moment later, it appeared again, directly in front of the train as it hurtled forward.

“Go home, Harry Potter!” the figure yelled back, its face hidden behind a metallic mask, its voice magically amplified so that it resonated throughout the entire train. “Consider this a warning! Take your people and go home! Go home while the W.U.L.F. is willing to *let* you go!”

Merlin raised his staff to strike once more, but the figure spun on its broom and zoomed away, merging with the throng of broom-borne travelers high over the city’s streets.

“Hold onto your hats, ladies and gentlemen!” the goblin engineer cried suddenly. “We’ve got the eastbound overpass dead ahead and we’re *going* for it, ready or not!”



James leaned back into his seat as the engineer hauled backwards on both of his steering levers. The train leapt up from the street, following its ghostly rails once more into the air. It turned as it flew, angling toward another set of elevated tracks as they loomed ahead. The train seemed to falter, pulled down by its own weight and its failing inertia. James was quite certain that they were going to ram directly into the side of the overpass, even saw the shadow of the train fall onto the support girders. At the last possible moment, however, the train seemed to loft upwards. The engine jiggled and snaked through the air, dragging its passenger cars behind it, and finally crashed down onto the tracks.

“Is everyone all right?” Franklyn called faintly, struggling to get up from the floor of the aisle, where he had apparently fallen.

“We’re fine, more or less,” Zane answered, looking from James to Ralph.

James nodded, and then remembered the woman in the black robe. He glanced around the darkened train as it continued on, rather more slowly, but smoothly once again. She was nowhere to be seen among the frightened passengers. Movement in the very back of the car caught James’ eyes, however: a flicker of black fabric and a slowly closing door. It had to be the mysterious woman, but could she really be using the bathroom at a time like this? James moved into the aisle, watching the door as it swung shut.

“Take your seat, Mr. Potter,” Merlin said faintly. James looked up and saw the Headmaster clinging grimly to the seats in front of him, still standing, but just barely. His face was solemn, sheened with sweat.

“Are you all right, sir?” James asked, peering closely at the huge man.

“As fine as anyone else, under the circumstances,” Merlin replied. “Do sit back down, James.”

“In a minute,” James said, backing away toward the rear of the car. “I, uh, have to use the loo.”

Merlin nodded, not really listening.

When James got to the bathroom door, he found it unlocked, still cracked open. Wind whistled and roared through the broken windows, rocking the door on its hinges. Inside was only darkness.

“Ma’am?” James called, leaning toward the door. “Everything okay in there?”

There was no answer but for a low, steady hiss. Steeling himself, James reached for the bathroom door. He pulled it slowly open.

There was no one inside the tiny room, but the sink was running. James peered closer. For some reason, both the hot and cold handles had been cranked all the way on. He stared at them and the empty room. Where had the woman gone? And who was she anyway?

Darkened and damaged, the *Zephyr* rolled onward through the city.



It had become readily apparent that the *Zephyr* wasn't going to continue the rest of the journey in its current state.

After a few minutes of discussion, Professor Franklyn and Headmaster Merlin had repaired some of the broken windows but were unable to fix most of them since the broken glass that had comprised them had been scattered along a rather surprising length of Lexington Avenue. The engineer himself was adamant that regardless of the operating condition of the *Zephyr's* engine, any 'non-standard Muggle interaction event' required the stoppage of the train at the nearest terminal or safe place and the alerting of the appropriate authorities. In this case, unfortunately, the 'appropriate authorities' included the New Amsterdam Wizarding Police and representatives from a mysterious agency known as the Magical Integration Bureau.

Shortly, the train had screeched to a halt on a side track next to an abandoned factory. The Hudson River sparkled nearby in the rising moonlight and traffic could be heard thrumming somewhere nearby, but for now, the *Zephyr* rested inconspicuously hidden among banks of brick walls and blind windows. Twin smokestacks jutted up into the indigo sky with nothing but pigeons at their tops. At their base, incongruously, perched a brightly lit wizarding establishment with a candy red pagoda roof and two golden dragon statues flanking the round door. The sign that jutted up from the roof proclaimed the establishment to be 'Chang's Magic Luck Hunan Palace'. A fleet of Chinese wizards in white coats and red pillbox caps came and went from the establishment, carrying large grease-stained paper sacks in special baskets attached to the tips of their brooms.

James watched from where he sat on the end of the *Zephyr* in the shadow of the factory and its perching wizard restaurant. Ralph sat next to James on his right while Lucy sat on his left, watching the Chinese delivery wizards with a mixture of curiosity and disdain.

"It's not true Chinese food, you know," she commented. "Not if you've had the real thing."

“So you keep saying,” James said, rolling his eyes.

“An egg roll is an egg roll,” Ralph proclaimed, rubbing his stomach. “I wonder when our order will get here. I’m starved.”

“Shh!” James hissed, leaning. “I’m trying to listen in on this.”

Zane stood some distance away on the side of the railway bed next to Professor Franklyn and the rest of the adults.

“I’m sorry, Professor,” one of the wizarding policemen, a thin man named Trumble, was saying, consulting his little notepad. “You mentioned that these men came out of nowhere. They weren’t provoked in any way?”

“I assure you,” Franklyn answered, puffing out his chest, “we are not in the habit of provoking warfare whilst aboard moving trains. We have women and students aboard the train, as you know, not to mention any number of anonymous fellow travelers. These men attacked us in a coordinated fashion, and with no provocation whatsoever.”

“That’s not entirely true,” Harry Potter said.

“What do you mean?” the larger and older policeman, Dunst, said, his face suspicious.

“The leader announced his affiliation with the W.U.L.F.” Harry answered. “I expect it was Edgar Tarrantus himself, by the mask he was wearing. *He* certainly seemed to feel provoked. He threatened me and my people by name, telling us if we didn’t leave the United States there would be trouble.”

“I’d say there’s been trouble already,” Neville said, narrowing his eyes. “They weren’t out to give warnings tonight. They meant to derail the train, at the very least. Warnings were what they resorted to only when we fought back and showed them a little what-for.”

“Ah, that,” Trumble said apologetically, sticking his pencil behind his ear. “It was the fighting back that was the problem tonight, when you get right down to it.”

“Surely you didn’t expect us to stand by and do nothing?” Denniston Dolohov said, raising his voice. James knew that, in fact, Dolohov himself had not fired a single magical shot, being a Squib, but James was impressed with the man’s spirit nonetheless. “They were trying to kill us all!”

“That’s hardly conclusive,” Dunst replied, obviously unconvinced. “Probably just a bunch of local punks out looking for trouble. It was your overreaction that’s caused this mess.”

“Overreaction!” Franklyn sputtered. “I’ll have your badge number! The impertinence!”

James noticed that throughout the conversation, Merlin stood some distance away, his face lowered in shadow, his arms folded.

The goblin engineer perked up then, apparently deciding that now was the time to distance himself from what had happened. “I didn’t want to do it, officers,” he said. “They *told* me to. It was all that big guy’s idea.”

“You didn’t *have* to do it, you know,” Zane said, cocking his head at the goblin. “As I recall it, we all did what we had to do to avoid being turned into highway hash, *you* included. Merlin made a request and you agreed to it.”

“Well,” the engineer said, scratching at his bald head, “he’s Merlin, ain’t he? Fellow like that is a hard one to say no to. Even if I didn’t know at the time that’s who he was.”

Another voice spoke and James saw that it belonged to one of the two men from the Magical Integration Bureau. “According to a cursory survey of the scene of the incident, at least seventy-nine non-magical persons witnessed this train being piloted along Lexington Avenue,” the man said in a rough, gravelly voice, consulting a clipboard. He had rugged features beneath a pair of dark sunglasses and a very staid black suit and tie. “At least thirty of those non-magical persons witnessed said train flying, either off the 21<sup>st</sup> Street southbound overpass or back up onto its northbound counterpart, some three blocks away. Initial damage estimates are in the hundreds of thousands, including a New York City police cruiser which somehow managed to end up beneath a Liberty Taxi.” The man lowered his clipboard and glanced around at those present. “I can’t be one hundred percent certain,” he said in a different tone of voice, “but I think this might be the biggest violation of magical integration laws in at least a decade. Wouldn’t you agree, Espinosa?” The last question he directed to his counterpart, a younger man with black hair and a pencil goatee.

“I think you’re probably right, Price,” the thinner man agreed. “At least a decade.”

“I’m sure our people are already on the scene, setting things to rights,” Franklyn soothed. “We have response teams for just such events, as you know. By morning, no one will remember anything other than that they had a somewhat exciting time during their previous evening’s commute. The real question is who these men were and if we need to take their threats seriously.”

“I take every threat seriously,” Harry announced gravely. Next to him, Neville nodded.

“Does that mean you will be going back home?” Franklyn asked suddenly, peering up at the two men.

“Not at all,” Harry replied immediately. “But it does mean we must be exceedingly cautious. I, for one, do not believe that those who attacked us were merely street toughs. They claimed to be members of the W.U.L.F., and were quite possibly attended by that organization’s global leader. As one of my former teachers used to say, this will require constant vigilance. Fortunately, we are prepared for just such a thing.”

A flicker of shadow appeared overhead followed by the flap of wings. James looked up from where he sat and saw a pigeon circle downwards, landing easily on Trumble’s outstretched arm. Dunst quickly removed a rolled note from a tube on the pigeon’s leg.

“I like owls better,” Lucy commented next to James. “Pigeons are filthy birds.”

James shrugged. He didn’t have an opinion on that particular subject.

“All right,” Dunst announced, reading the note and apparently disliking its contents. “Everything checks out with headquarters downtown. Mr. Potter here, along with his entourage, are indeed here at the request of the D.M.A. My apologies, gentlemen, Professor. Another train has

been dispatched to take you and your people the rest of the way to your destination. The remaining passengers will complete their journey via the *Zephyr*, assuming you believe it rail-worthy, Mr. Engineer.” He handed the note back to Trumble, who peered down at it.

“Well, I should hope that settles it, then,” Franklyn announced huffily.

“I wouldn’t be too hasty,” the gruff man in the black suit said. “There will be paperwork, I’m afraid. I hate paperwork. It makes me cranky. Mr. Potter, I’d expect a call from the Magical Integration Bureau, if I was you. In fact, I suspect we will take a very close interest in you during the extent of your visit. I hope you’ll be willing to cooperate with us.”

Harry studied the rough-faced man for a moment, narrowing his eyes. Then, charmingly, he smiled. “It’ll be our pleasure, sir. But do let me inquire: what is the basis of your interest in me and my people?”

“You’re English, aren’t you?” the gruff man, Price, asked, smiling tightly. “You might be interested to know that the tape the F.B.I. received explaining the terms of the release of our kidnapped senator, Charles Filmore, was recorded by someone with a British accent. One can only assume that you are here, officially, to investigate Senator Filmore’s ongoing abduction, not to mention the matter of our relocated skyscraper. The newspeople and the general public may buy the story about little green men from the Andromeda galaxy, but we in the Magical Integration Bureau, well... we tend to be a suspicious bunch.”

Harry nodded. “As would I, let me assure you. I welcome your assistance and collaboration. For now, though, might I ask, just out of curiosity, what the purported terms of Senator Filmore’s release are?”

“That’s confidential, of course,” Price answered apologetically. “Fortunately, the F.B.I. believes the tape is a prank. I myself know very little about it except that the prevailing view around the Bureau is that we do not negotiate with terrorists—alien, British, or otherwise.”

Harry seemed to accept this. “I look forward to hearing from your office, then, Mr. Price. Now if you will excuse us, it is getting rather late and we still have some distance to go if I am not mistaken.”

Price bowed slightly and spread his arms. “*Mi casa es su casa*,” he replied. “Enjoy your travels. And welcome to America.”

“Hey chief,” Trumble said, frowning at the little note in his hands, “it says here we’re supposed to escort Mr. Potter and his group for the rest of the trip. You didn’t read the whole thing.”

“Is that so?” Dunst said with deliberate emphasis. “Well, silly me.”

In the distance, the huff and screech of an approaching train grew. Shortly, a headlight appeared around the bend of the tracks, slowing as it approached.

James sighed and looked up. High overhead, one of the Chinese delivery wizards took off from the wooden platform that surrounded the brightly lit restaurant. He circled economically around the extinct smokestacks, dipped down into the shadow of the factory, and swooped toward

the *Zephyr*. A moment later, he hovered in front of James, Ralph, and Lucy, consulting a handwritten bill.

“You order three Happy Emperor Family Combo?” he said, glancing up at the three of them. “You owe me sixty-six seventy-five.”

“Here you go,” Harry said, handing the man a small handful of gold coins. Zane took the paper bag from the basket on the end of the delivery wizard’s broom and peered into it.

“Cool!” he said. “Magic fortune cookies!”

“Where’s my egg roll?” Ralph asked, leaning forward and sniffing at the open bag. Lights flickered within it and James was mildly amused to see lit sparklers inside the bag, stuck into the tops of a variety of white cartons and boxes.

“What this kinda money?” the delivery wizard said, peering suspiciously at the Galleons in his hand. “This not real money. You trick me?”

“It’s real,” Franklyn said wearily. “European Galleons are still legal tender in this country, even though you see fewer and fewer of them these days.”

The Chinese wizard regarded Franklyn doubtfully. A moment later, he pocketed the Galleons. “Fine fine. But no change. Don’t know exchange rate.”

“Call it a tip,” Harry smiled, accepting a paper bag of crab rangoon from Zane.

The Chinese wizard nodded, doffed his red pillbox cap, turned, and swooped away. In the darkness beyond the *Zephyr*, the wizarding policemen, Dunst and Trumble, stepped off the tracks, approaching their black and yellow police brooms. Further away, the agents from the Magical Integration Bureau climbed down the embankment toward a nondescript black car. Ralph’s father took the delivery sack from Zane and climbed into the train to distribute it around. Harry and the rest of the adults stepped aside into the weeds that bordered the outside of the tracks as the second train chugged to a stop next to the *Zephyr*.

Ralph munched his egg roll thoughtfully. “If I’m not mistaken,” he said, watching the men in the dark suits as they started their car, “those two are Muggles.”

“You nailed it, Ralphinator,” Zane said, sighing. “The Bureau is part of the Muggle F.B.I., only super top-secret. The president doesn’t even find out about them unless he absolutely has to. They’re a little creepy and intense, but it’s all part of the deal.”

“What deal is that?” James asked.

Zane leaned against the end of the *Zephyr* and waved one of the sparklers from the delivery sack. “The government here was a lot more involved with the wizarding world, way back in the day. The Muggle leaders who knew about the magical community were suspicious of them, even though a lot of the witches and wizards were their friends and helpers. Franklyn can explain it better if you want him to, but basically, they built protections into the original laws that governed the coexistence of the magical and Muggle worlds. Those guys in the suits... they’re one of those protections.”

Lucy frowned at the black car as it drove serenely away, its lights off in the darkness. “Do they have... what’s it called... *jurisdiction* over us?”

Zane shrugged slowly and shook his head, as if he wasn’t really sure.

“All I know,” Ralph commented, climbing to his feet, “is that we were lucky to have that witch in our compartment. The one that pegged all those guys on the brooms. Talk about your wandless magic.”

Zane screwed up his face thoughtfully. “Was she part of your group?”

“I met her once before,” James admitted. “In the hallway back at the Aquapolis. She’s... curious.”

Lucy raised an eyebrow. “What do you mean ‘curious?’”

James shrugged. “She knew things about me, that’s all. She said it was because we Potters are famous.”

“I suspect there’s more to it than that,” Lucy said, still looking closely at James. “Otherwise, you wouldn’t call her curious.”

Ralph raised his eyebrows. “Well, there was the bit where she performed some dead serious magic without any wand in her hand,” he proclaimed. “I mean, first Petra, and now some unknown lady. I’m starting to feel like I’m missing out on a trend.”

“Probably you just couldn’t see her wand,” Lucy said dismissively. “It was dark in there, and there was a lot going on.”

“I saw her raise her left hand and point,” Zane replied. “There was no wand there, I promise you.”

“Yes,” Lucy nodded, her face merely inquiring, “but did you see her right hand?”

Zane thought about it, but before he could answer, James spoke up again. “What about when we were about to crash into the overpass? I was sure the train wasn’t going to make the jump, but then up we went, like we suddenly sprouted wings. Maybe it was that witch again! Maybe she levitated the train!”

Lucy shook her head. “You can’t levitate yourself, James, or anything you happen to be riding in. It’d be like trying to pick yourself up by your own feet. It’s one of the laws of magical dynamics.”

“Well, *somebody* gave us a boost back there,” Ralph said. “I felt it happen.”

Lucy opened her mouth to respond, and then stopped. Her eyes narrowed thoughtfully.

“Wait a minute,” Zane said, pointing at Lucy and looking at James. “She’s this year’s Rose, right? She’s the smart one!”

“What, Lucy?” James asked, bumping her.

Lucy shook herself. “Well, like I said, it’s impossible, but still...”

Ralph threw up his hands in exasperation. “So tell already!”

“I think it might have been Petra,” Lucy said, looking at the three boys.

James felt a shiver coil at the base of his spine. “Why do you say that, Lu?”

Lucy’s face was tense as she thought about it. “I was in the same car as Petra. Back in the middle of it all, even when those dark flyers were blasting the engine with their wands, Petra stayed unusually calm. Uncle Harry and Professor Longbottom were firing back at them and there was no end of confusion, what with everyone screaming and the train crashing along the street, but Petra just sat there, holding Izzy’s hand. The two of them were just looking out the window, watching everything happen. And then, when the train leapt up, aiming for the tracks, I saw it...”

“Let me guess,” James said quietly. “Petra closed her eyes. Like she was concentrating on something.”

Lucy looked at James. “No,” she replied meaningfully. “They both did. Izzy and Petra both. And that’s when it happened. That’s when we lifted up onto the tracks. That’s when we didn’t crash.”

There was a long awkward moment of silence as everyone considered this. Finally, James heard the approach of footsteps from the railway bed in front of them.

“James, and the rest of you,” Neville called up from the side of the tracks. “The other train is finally ready for us. Go and alert Professor Remora and the others in our group, will you? Tell them we’re boarding a different train for the remainder of the trip. With any luck, this journey may still end tonight.”

James nodded. Along with Lucy and Ralph, he climbed to his feet and threaded back through the rear doorway, into the dark train.



The second train wasn’t as nice as the *Zephyr*, but it was quiet and moved with similar speed. James found himself in a sparsely populated passenger compartment with most of the rest of his traveling companions. The rocking of the train, and the darkness outside the windows once the city



was behind them, lulled him into a mild doze. Finally, an hour or so later, James was awakened by the screech of brakes as the train began to slow. He looked around blearily as his fellow passengers began to stir and collect their things.

“Finally here,” Ralph muttered, cupping his hands to the window as a railway station lumbered slowly past. “Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.”

“At least the journey’s done,” Albus commented grumpily.

Near the head of the passenger compartment, James saw Professor Remora sleeping awkwardly, leaning across two seats with her mouth hanging open. One of her students nudged her experimentally.

“I thought vampires loved the night,” Lucy mused idly.

“Who, you mean Remora?” Zane said, glancing at Lucy. “Yeah, that’s a real puzzler, ain’t it?”

Ralph yawned and asked Zane, “How far is the school from here?”

“Just a few blocks away. It’s almost right downtown, but you have to know where to look.”

Franklyn shouldered his leather attaché and patted his pockets, apparently looking for his glasses. “I’ll arrange for our trunks and bags to be delivered to our various quarters via porter. Tonight, you shall all stay in the Alma Aleron guest house. Tomorrow, I will show you all to your residences for the duration of your stay.”

Harry stood up, carrying Lily as she slept, her head on his shoulder. Ginny followed, and the group began to shuffle toward the car’s doors. It was an unusually quiet group as they filed out onto the deserted platform. A cool mist hung in the air around the huge terminal nearby. In the distance, a clock tower began to toll the hour. James counted the chimes and discovered that it was ten o’clock. Slowly, led by Chancellor Franklyn and Professor Georgia Burke, the group made its way off the platform and into the huge brightly lit terminal. Tall windows framed the space on either side, showing inky black sky.

“This is the 30<sup>th</sup> Street Station,” Zane announced, too tired to be particularly enthusiastic. “They were going to rename it Benjamin Franklin Station a decade or so ago, but there was some political mish-mash and it never happened. Do yourself a favor and *never* bring it up with the Chancellor.”

As the group made its way through the bank of doors at the far end of the marble floor, they were met by a sweeping view of the city where it huddled on the other side of a broad river. Without stopping, Franklyn led the travelers across the street and onto a wide bridge. Cars and a few buses moved back and forth on the bridge as the travelers made their way along a footpath on the right side.

“It isn’t far,” Franklyn proclaimed over the noise of the traffic. “No Disapparating this close to the station, unfortunately. Not that we could anyway, with so many underage witches and wizards with us.”

Ginny pulled her hair into a ponytail as she walked next to her husband. "I don't mind stretching my legs a bit, actually."

"Not the most beautiful city I've ever seen," Albus remarked. "But the river is a delightful shade of orange."

"That's just the streetlamps," Lucy sighed.

"Enjoy the view while you can," Zane instructed. "Once we get on campus, it might be months before you ever see it again."

Albus frowned. "Is it a school or a prison?"

"Yes," Zane quipped. "But the point is, there's no reason you ever really need to leave. The Aleron's got everything you need, and quite a few things you don't. I've been there a whole year already and I still haven't seen the whole campus."

Shortly, the group left the traffic bridge behind and descended into a warren of densely populated city blocks. Small businesses and gas stations eventually gave way to crowded residential areas. The houses and apartments pressed together like patrons at a bar, shouldering for room in front of the narrow streets. Cars and trucks lined the pavement, glimmering softly in the glow of the streetlights. Trees ranged along the streets as well, huge and old, their roots pushing the footpath into unruly hills and valleys. Finally, the group crossed a narrow intersection and approached a stone wall, just high enough that no one could see over it. Bits of broken glass were embedded into the mortar along the top.

"Here we are, then," Zane said, nodding approvingly.

Albus was unimpressed. "This is it, is it? I see what you mean about the size of it. You could get lost bending down to tie your shoe."

James looked back and forth along the cracked footpath. The stone wall was no longer than a Hogwarts corridor, with leaning brick pedestals at either end. Embedded in the center of each of the brick pedestals, worn almost to illegibility, was a stone block with a stylized symbol engraved onto it. The symbol appeared to be a shield with two letter 'A's on it, perched upon by an eagle with spread wings. A wrought-iron gate stood in the middle of the wall, facing the street, but the gate was so choked with vines and weeds that the view beyond was completely hidden. Franklyn approached the gate and pulled some of the vines aside, peering in.

"It is I, Flintlock," he said quietly. "Chancellor Franklyn. Our visitors have arrived."

James, Albus, and Lucy crowded through the travelers, eager for a glimpse beyond the overgrown gate.

"It's just a yard," Albus complained. "Where's this big giant campus you were talking about?"

"It's not there yet," Franklyn answered.

"The Timelock!" Ralph said suddenly, remembering. "My dad told me about it last year! Excellent!"

“In time, Mr. Deedle,” Franklyn smiled. “So to speak.”

James pushed the vines aside and craned to look over Albus’ shoulder. Sure enough, the space inside the wall was simply an old yard, choked with weeds and bits of trash. Only two objects seemed to occupy the space. One was a rather fat and overgrown willow tree. The other was a very large jagged boulder.

“He’s asleep, Chancellor,” Professor Burke sighed, turning away. “Shall I toss a rock at him?”

“You know how irritable he gets when we do such things,” Franklyn replied impatiently. “Nobody likes having their own genetic material chucked at them. Let me try once more.” Raising his voice a bit, Franklyn cried out again, “Flintlock! It is I, your Chancellor! Do wake up! Our guests are waiting!”

From the yard came a grating snort followed by a low grinding noise. James glanced around, looking for the source of the sound, and was surprised to see the boulder moving slightly. Apparently, it wasn’t one boulder, but many smaller rocks piled together, for they began to move independently, not falling apart, exactly, but shifting position, forming a shape that looked strangely, teasingly alive.

“Cool!” Albus cried out suddenly, forgetting the quiet street around him. “It’s a rock troll! I’ve always wanted to see a rock troll!”

The stony shape stood up and began to lumber toward the gate, moving ponderously but heavily, its footsteps shaking the ground faintly.

“Meet Flintlock,” Franklyn said, gesturing with one hand. “Our security chief. He’s been a part of Alma Aleron ever since... well since before my time. Isn’t that right, Flintlock?”

The troll fished a large key from the depths of his rocky crevices and socked it into an iron padlock. In a deep grating voice, the troll said, “I came over with the Mayflower, sir. I remember it like it was yesterday.”

Professor Burke smiled wearily. “Of course, in rock troll years, it probably *was* yesterday.”

As the gates swung open, squeaking noisily, Albus peered up at the stony creature. “But you must weigh a thousand tons!” he exclaimed. “How would any boat carry you?”

“It didn’t carry me,” Flintlock replied slowly. He leaned forward, and in what passed as a whisper, he added, “I followed it.”

The others passed by Albus as he stared up at the troll, wide-eyed, considering.

“To the Tree,” Zane pointed. “This is the best part. Come on!”

Franklyn stopped, allowing everyone else to pass by in front of him. “Yes, yes, as Mr. Walker says, everyone under the Tree. I am sure we are all quite ready for this journey to be over.”

James, Ralph, and Lucy joined Petra, Izzy, and the rest in the moonshade of the Tree’s drooping branches. James no longer felt tired. Instead, he was filled with a certain giddy

excitement, fuelled partly by the misty night air, and partly by the mystery of whatever was about to happen.

“He followed the *Mayflower* here!” Albus rasped, stabbing a thumb over his shoulder at Flintlock. “He just walked right along the bottom of the ocean, watching the ship way up on the surface! Isn’t that the coolest thing you’ve ever heard in your life?”

“Isn’t he coming with us?” Ralph asked, peering aside as the troll stumped back toward the gate, padlock in hand.

“No!” Albus answered, grinning. “He stays here all the time! ALL... the TIME! He says that sometimes Muggle teenagers climb over the walls, glass shards or not, looking for places to get into mischief. He bops ’em to sleep and tosses them in a nearby alley with an empty bottle or two, makes them think they just fell over drunk!”

“Let’s see,” Franklyn said, crowding under the Tree. “I daresay, what with our visitors, Professor Remora, and her returning students, we are exceeding the legal occupancy limit of the *Warping Willow*.”

“Please, Chancellor,” Remora sighed. “Even for creatures such as myself, it has been a very long night. Let us get it over with.”

Franklyn nodded and produced a complicated brass instrument from the depths of his robes. James recognized it from his previous experience with the Chancellor. It consisted of various-sized lenses held in hinged loops. He twisted two of the lenses into alignment, raised the instrument, and peered through it at the moon.

“Ah yes,” he said, and then muttered to himself, apparently doing calculations in his head. Finally, he nodded and pocketed the brass instrument. A moment later, he raised his wand and touched it gently to the gnarled trunk of the Tree. In a singsong voice, he said, “*Warping Willow*, take us hither, days and years or all or none. Wend your way, we travel thither, home to Alma Aleron.”

Next to James, Ralph shifted nervously. “I know about *Whomping Willows*,” he whispered, “but what’s a *Warping Willow* do?”

Zane whispered back, “Have you ever seen a square-dance?”

“No!” Ralph rasped. “We’ve been through this already.”

Zane bobbed his head back and forth. “Think about what the *Zephyr* did with up and down,” he said quietly. “And now think of the *Zephyr* as the *Warping Willow*, and up and down as now and then.”

“It’s technomancy again, right?” Ralph moaned as the Tree began to move around them, shifting mysteriously, stirring wind in its long branches. “I *hate* technomancy.”

A cool breeze whistled around the Tree’s twisted trunk, threading through James’ hair and making the branches sway and hiss. A dull crackle emanated from the depths of the Willow, sounding like pine knots in a fireplace.

In front of James, Izzy gasped. “Look!” she cried, pointing. “The sun’s coming up!”

Zane peered at the pinkish glow as it expanded on the horizon. “I may be mistaken,” he said, “but I think that’s the sun going down. Er, in reverse.”

The pink glow spread and brightened, turning orange, and then, sure enough, the sun peeked over the stone wall of the overgrown yard. The yellow orb climbed into the sky with eerie speed, casting hard shadows inside the yard, and then swiftly shortening them. Warm air blew through the Tree and James squinted, finding himself in a sudden hot noontime. The sun began to move faster, sliding back down the sky on the other side of the Warping Willow, which sighed and shushed all around, its branches swaying like curtains.

“What’s happening?” Lily asked with a note of fear in her voice.

Ginny pulled the girl up into her arms. “It’s all right, Lil,” she soothed. “We’re still traveling, I think. Only now, we’re traveling in time.”

Night spread across the sky again, filled with glimmering stars. Now, the moon waltzed overhead, its bony crescent chasing the clouds. Moments later, the sun followed once again, moving so fast that it seemed to be rolling across the sky like a marble. The wind in the Tree increased, shushing the whip-like branches, and James felt movement beneath his feet. He glanced down and saw the Warping Willow’s roots twisting through the earth, spreading and shifting like tentacles.

The sky dimmed to night and lightened again to noon, beginning to cycle with dizzying speed. The sun and moon chased each other across the sky, and then blurred into streaks, and then vanished into seamless, silvery arcs of spinning time. The arcs curved across the sky, and seasons began to drift past the outside of the Tree. The grass grew brown, and then gray and listless. Suddenly, snow covered it, sparkling white and piling high, forming drifts against the interior walls of the yard. The snow vanished away again, and now autumn leaves carpeted the ground. Almost immediately, the leaves evaporated, leaving the grass green and lush, peppered with white butterflies. James turned on the spot, transfixed, watching the yard all around as it cycled past seasons and into years, faster and faster, blending into a flickering tableaux of decades, even centuries. And through it all, Flintlock hunkered unmoving, looking like nothing more than a craggy boulder, through flashing eons of sunshine and snow.

Finally, the cycle began to slow, until the seasons became distinct again, and then the streaks of the sun and moon, and finally the alternating lights and darks of days. The Tree sighed and whispered, settling, until the sun lowered for the last time and the sky grew dark, flooded with stars. The moon was a high, full orb now, frosty in the darkness. It slowed, climbing, climbing, and finally crawled to a stop. The Warping Willow relaxed and went still.

In the sudden silence, Neville Longbottom exhaled a pent breath. “So...,” he asked slowly, “when are we?”

Chancellor Franklyn glanced at him, and then at the watch that hung from a chain around his prodigious waist. “It’s eleven twenty-one,” he answered. “September fourth. Er, seventeen fifty. Give or take a few seconds. It’s hard to be especially accurate about such things.”

“Oh my,” Petra said from behind James. He turned to glance back at her, saw the expression of rapt wonder on her face, and then turned around again, following her gaze.

Beyond the curtains of the Warping Willow’s branches, the yard had grown. The gate was still visible nearby, but the wall it was set in was much wider; so wide, in fact, that James couldn’t see either end. In every other direction, moonlight sifted down onto manicured lawns, sprawling colonial brick buildings, statuary, fountains, and flagstone footpaths. Flickering lampposts dotted the campus, their lights dim and entrancing under the full moon.

“Well,” Percy said, and even he sounded awestruck, “it looks like we’ve finally made it to Alma Aleron.”

*Therefore ends chapter six. What did you think?*

Tomorrow’s chapter will be released at noon, CST, via [www.jamespotterseries.com](http://www.jamespotterseries.com). In the meantime, come on over to the [Grotto Keep forum](#) to discuss what’s happened thus far.