



18. THE DIMENSIONAL KEY

The arrival of spring on the campus of Alma Aleron was marked by a series of very gusty days. The warm winds first melted the remaining patches of snow and then dried the winter-yellow lawns so that by the week before Valentine's Day, groups of students could be seen practicing skim or tossing Clutches over the mall's yards and empty flowerbeds. After nearly a week of grey days, the sun finally broke through a tatter of stubborn clouds, bathing Administration Hall with beams of shifting golden light.

In the days after the revelation of the Erebus Castle tapestries, James, Ralph, and Zane had begun to plan the next step of their adventure, which was to somehow use the time-traveling nature of the school to go back to the date of Professor Magnussen's escape and follow him through the Timelock, out into Muggle Philadelphia. There, they would attempt to nick the dimensional key—the unicorn's silver horseshoe—from the villain professor before he could use it to vanish forever through the Nexus Curtain.

"If we're lucky," Zane whispered one morning in Clockwork Mechanics as Professor Cloverhoof assisted another student with her magical cuckoo clock, "we'll get the horseshoe *and* see where the Nexus Curtain is at the same time."

James lurched suddenly backward as his own wooden cuckoo bird sprang from the tiny doors of his half-finished clock. The bird extended on a complicated accordion of wooden struts, began to retract back, and then lurched to a squeaking halt, bobbing back and forth over James' shoulder.

“Not enough beeswax on the joints,” the bird chirped in irritation. “*And* your measurements are all over the place.”

“Shut it, bird,” James grumped, reaching to force it back into its compartment. To Zane, he whispered, “You mean if we just follow Magnussen without being seen, we can wait for him to lead us to the Nexus Curtain and then try to nick the unicorn’s shoe before he actually uses it?”

“Seems like it’d be cutting things a bit close,” Ralph admitted.

“Yeah,” his own cuckoo bird chirped from where it lay on the table next to him, surrounded by a variety of wooden cogs, tools, and brass gears. “And finesse doesn’t seem to be ya all’s strong suit.”

“Shut it, bird,” all three boys said in unison.

Just to be sure of their information, James had suggested that they take a quick trip up to the museum atop the Tower of Art to learn what they could about the unicorn’s horseshoe. During their Wednesday afternoon free period, they climbed the hundreds of stairs to the top of the Tower and spent some time wandering the museum’s halls, searching for any information about the apparently missing horseshoe. The curator was not at her desk, unfortunately, and a quick look around the museum’s halls revealed no mysteriously vacant display cases or empty frames where the horseshoe might originally have been displayed.

“It’s been gone too long,” Zane insisted, bored. “The portrait said they didn’t even really know the significance of the thing anyway, remember? As far as the curator knew, it was just some silver horseshoe from the Erebus family collection. Totally old and stuff, but still, just a horseshoe. Once it went missing, they probably just closed the display and put in a new bowl of golden scarabs. Let’s go back and see them again, now that I mention it. I still have some of those copper shavings in my pocket that they like to eat.”

“We need to be sure,” James said stubbornly. “Erebus himself said he’s pretty fuzzy on anything that’s happened since his death. I want to know for certain that the horseshoe really was here once and that it went missing around Magnussen’s time. Hold on...”

“What?” Ralph asked as James suddenly pulled him into a side corridor. “You see something?”

“These are just more portraits,” Zane said, rolling his eyes. “You going to corroborate one half-baked heap of paint with another?”

“If their stories agree, then yes,” James replied. “Besides, I’ve heard that one of these guys was known for never telling a lie.”

“A quote that has long outlived its context,” one of the portraits said with a sniff. “It was directed at Mrs. Washington, in fact, on the occasion of a missing slice of apple pie. And, I might add, it was meant to be rather sarcastic.”

“George Washington?” Ralph asked, peering at the large portrait on the corridor wall. “What’s he going to know about a magical unicorn horseshoe?”

“Nothing whatsoever with an attitude like that, young man,” Washington answered huffily. “I’ve been watching the three of you traipse around the museum. I can’t imagine why you haven’t already asked any of us portraits about whatever it is you are seeking, especially since the curator is absent. *Not* that said absence is at all unusual.”

“That’s for certain,” another portrait added. James glanced up and saw the painted visage of a rather round-faced man with tufts of iron grey hair poking from the sides of his head. ‘*John Adams*’, the name plate read. “Our Madam Curator spends about as much time at her post as a Virginia night watchman.”

“I take offense at comments like that,” another portrait commented from further down the hall.

“We *know*, Thomas,” Washington said with a roll of his eyes. “That’s why Adams keeps making them. He’s been trying to get your goat for centuries. I cannot understand why you keep making it so very easy for him.”

“Like shooting fish in a barrel,” Adams smirked.

“Some of us prefer more *sporting* contests,” said the portrait from further down the hall. James leaned to the side and read the name plate: ‘*Thomas Jefferson*’. “Us Virginians aim for loftier challenges than mere colloquial insults.”

“Do note, John,” Washington added carefully, “that I was a Virginian as well.”

“Yes, but you can give as well as you get, George,” Adams replied jovially. “*You* have a sense of humour, after all.”

“Wait a minute,” Ralph interrupted. “George Washington. You’re the guy that invented peanut butter, right?”

“Ahem,” another voice coughed lightly. “You’re thinking of George Washington *Carver*, young man. A common enough mistake, I suppose.”

“Oh,” Ralph said, his face reddening as he glanced aside at the portrait of a handsome man with dark skin and grey hair. “Er, sorry, Mr. Carver.”

“Not necessary,” the portrait smiled. “Although do spread the word, if you will pardon the pun: I invented over four hundred uses for the common peanut. Being chiefly remembered for the creation of a snack food tends to be a bit of a legacy killer.”

Ralph nodded. “I’ll, er, try to remember that, sir.”

“So then,” Adams said, leaning back in his painted chair, “what can we do for you fine gentlemen?”

Zane stepped forward. “All right,” he said, glancing around at the portraits. “We’re looking for information about something that might have been here in the museum a long time ago. Any of you guys remember a silver horseshoe?”

“Silver horseshoe,” Washington mused thoughtfully. “Rings a very faint bell, I daresay, although the idea seems a bit impractical on the surface of it.”

“You may wish to ask Miss Sacajawea,” Jefferson suggested. “She has a better view of the rest of the museum, being on the end near the entryway.”

James walked along the line of portraits until he came to a large painting of a tall Native American woman in a fringed, buff-colored tunic. Her long black hair fell over one shoulder, glinting in the light of a forest sunset.

“Um,” James began, “hi, Miss. Mr. Jefferson said you might know something about an old horseshoe that used to be here in the museum. Do you remember anything like that?”

The woman in the portrait didn’t move for several seconds. Finally, her eyelids fluttered slightly, as if she were rousing herself from a sort of sleep. She glanced at James solemnly and then nodded past him toward the corridor’s broad entrance. “The talisman of the Rider’s mount,” she said softly. “I remember it. Its voice once sang from the hall beyond you, from its resting place near the window.”

Zane frowned. “Er, I don’t think we’re talking about the same thing,” he said respectfully. “This was a *silver horseshoe*. You know. Not the sort of thing that sings, usually.”

“It was no usual relic,” the portrait said, and there was a tinge of sadness in her voice. “Its home was not of this world and the hoof from which it came belonged to no ordinary beast. Its voice was tiny, nearly faded to silence, but such was the enchantment of its origin that it still told its sad tale even after so many seasons had passed over it. I alone heard its song and marked its passing.”

In an awed voice, James asked, “Do you remember what happened to it, Miss?”

Sacajawea nodded slowly. “The man with the iron cane took it,” she said. “He enchanted the woman who was curator in that time, making her believe that he had been given special privileges. She helped him unlock the talisman’s case. When the man touched the talisman, its song, faint as it was, finally ceased. He took it with him and it has been gone ever since.”

“The man with the iron cane,” Zane whispered, nudging James. “Magnussen, you think?”

James nodded. “Who else could it be?”

“Ignatius Magnussen,” Jefferson’s voice echoed from the corridor. “I remember him—*and* his cane.”

James looked back. “You saw him here too?”

“He was not the sort of man one is likely to forget,” Jefferson answered soberly. “Had a face like something carved from granite and a tongue like a two-edged sword.”

“We observed him with his classes, on occasion,” Washington added. “Thomas is quite right. Professor Magnussen had a way with cruelty that was very nearly an art form. I knew men like him in my day, men whose words could both build the strongest confidences and cut the deepest wounds.”

“And his iron-tipped cane, I might add,” said the portrait of George Washington Carver, “was no normal cane. Its power was concealed, but no great secret. Where others seem to rely on magical wands, Professor Magnussen wielded his horrid cane, and it was revered with much dread.”

“I remember seeing that cane,” James said thoughtfully. “In the Disrecorder vision. It was leaning against the table, right next to him. Its handle looked sort of like a falcon or a gargoye or something.”

“Indeed, that was the man’s constant companion,” the portrait of Adams said, nodding. “Be glad, gentlemen, that his day is past and you do not have to sit beneath his cold eye.”

“Yeah,” Ralph said morosely as they made their way back along the corridor, heading for the exit. “Hooray for us.”



It was Valentine’s evening before the three boys were finally able to attempt the trip through time in pursuit of the infamous Professor Magnussen. Tracking down the date of the professor’s disappearance was the easiest part since, by all accounts, it coincided with the fire that destroyed his erstwhile home. Figuring out how to get the Warping Willow to take them to that exact date, however, proved to be a bit more of a challenge. In the end, Zane had called upon his fellow Zombies, including Warrington, to help write the appropriate rhyming verse that would, with any luck, send them back to the evening of October eighth, eighteen fifty-nine.

The day leading up to the adventure went exceedingly slowly. James found it very difficult to pay attention in Georgia Burke’s Magizoology class even though they were studying live Velocipedes, which tended to require constant observation and very quick reflexes. Halfway through the class, James had gotten neatly bowled over by one of the huge hundred-legged insects. As a result, the creature had squirmed playfully around him in a vigorous hug and licked his face repeatedly with its long prehensile tongue.

“You’ll be all right,” Professor Burke called from outside the muddy pen. “They’re like big puppies, really. Just relax and she’ll get bored with you in a minute. There’s no point in trying to disengage yourself, trust me.”

James flopped back into the mud and squinted his eyes shut while the Velocipede huffed excitedly into his face, its tongue like a miniature, rubbery whip.

The afternoon's classes had no sooner ended than James had to rush across campus toward Pepperpock Down, munching a sandwich en route and dragging his Clutch gear along with him. The afternoon match was against Pixie House, and amazingly enough, Team Bigfoot was tied with the Pixies' scoring record. Frankly, James was too preoccupied with the evening's upcoming adventure to care much about the match, but the rest of Team Bigfoot had been wildly heartened by their recent victory over Team Vampire. As a result, they went into that afternoon's match with a grim determination that was, despite James' distraction, quite inspiring. It was no great surprise, therefore, when the Bigfoots prevailed narrowly throughout the match and ended the game with a very slim but breathlessly exciting win over the Pixies. The packed grandstands roared raucously when the final whistle blew, and James realized with some degree of amazement that Team Bigfoot had gone from forgettable losers to admirable underdogs. The entire school (with the obvious exception of whichever house they happened to be playing) suddenly seemed to be rooting for them, if only as a novelty.

Changing out of his Clutch gear and heading for Administration Hall for dinner, James met up with Zane and Ralph. It wasn't until they made their way toward the cafeteria that James remembered that it was the night of the Valentine's dance. Construction paper hearts and cupids flitted through the upper reaches of the halls, occasionally swooping down onto unsuspecting students and chasing them around, producing sudden explosions of giggles and happy screams.

"What's all that about?" James asked as a girl swept past, giggling and batting at the paper cupid that was circling her head.

"It's Valentine's Day," Zane shrugged. "Don't you have Valentine's Day at Hoggies?"

"Yeah," Ralph nodded. "I guess. But it's a lot less, er, screamy."

Zane rolled his eyes as he ducked into the cafeteria. "It's simple, really. If one of the cupids or hearts lands on you, you have to go and find a girl who's got one of the hearts or cupids stuck on *her*. You kiss and then the cupids and hearts let you go."

"Ah," Ralph said uncomfortably. "Maybe we should have just had dinner back at Apollo Mansion."

"Buck up, Ralph," James smiled, nudging the bigger boy. "If you play your cards right, you could winkle a kiss out of Jazmine."

Ralph boggled and his face reddened. "You think so? No. That's..." He stopped as the idea firmly began to take root in his mind. His eyes began to dart around the room, watching the flitting paper symbols.

"It's all about timing," Zane nodded, throwing an arm around Ralph's shoulders. "Keep your head down until one of them nabs Jazmine. Then up you pop. Obvious, but not *too* obvious, you know? Those cupids can smell opportunists, so you have to play it cool."

James stopped listening as he filled his tray. Half a minute later, the three boys found a seat at one of the long, crowded tables. The cafeteria thrummed with the noise of the post-Clutch, pre-dance crowd, creating an atmosphere of giddy excitement that very nearly vibrated in the walls.

“You all set for tonight?” Zane asked James as he munched a grilled cheese sandwich.

“I guess,” James shrugged. “I’ve been going over it all day in my head. The sooner we get it over with, the better.”

“I went out to see old Straidthwait in the cemetery again,” Zane said quietly. “Just to make sure we had everything all buttoned up. He said he saw Magnussen leave around eight o’clock on the night of the fire. If we get this right, we’ll arrive at the walled gate about half an hour before him. Then, we can just hide out and follow him when he shows up.”

“What about Flintlock?” James asked suddenly. “Won’t he recognize that we aren’t students in that time? What if he thinks we’re intruders or something?”

“Funny thing about rock trolls,” Zane smiled, tapping his nose. “They don’t occupy time the same way we do. Did you know that when they’re born, they actually age *backwards*? They get younger as time passes! It’s true. Rose looked it up for me at the Hogwarts library. She’s like our own private research department, you know?”

“What do you mean they age backwards?” James frowned. “You mean Flintlock’s younger now than he was when he first came to America hundreds of years ago?”

Zane shrugged and bobbed his head. “Hard to say. A lot of trolls try to *learn* to age forward in time like we do, especially if they live and work with humans. When in Rome, you know? The point is Flintlock’s grasp on time is pretty slippery. Even in eighteen fifty-nine, he’ll sort of remember us from the present day.”

“That’s totally bizarre,” Ralph said around a mouthful of Jell-O.

“Yeah,” Zane agreed. “But the upshot is that even if he does eventually realize we aren’t supposed to be around in that time, we’ll probably already be long gone, chasing after old Iggy Magnussen.”

James drew a breath to respond when something fluttered wildly in his ear, startling him. “What is it!?” he cried, batting at the side of his head. “Get it off!”

“Calm down,” Zane laughed. “It’s a red cupid. You’ve been marked, James. Better go find somebody to kiss.”

James stopped flailing. The paper cupid flung a red and pink paper chain around his neck and held on tight.

“What?” James exclaimed, trying to peer down at the figure on his shoulder. “No way. I don’t have a girlfriend or anything.”

“That’s the point,” Zane insisted, pushing him up from the table. “This is how you *get* a girlfriend.”

James’ face reddened. “But I don’t need any help in that area!”

Ralph shrugged and grinned. “Cupid disagrees.”

“What happens if I just rip it off me?”

Zane shook his head warningly. “You can’t break the spell that way, mate. They may be paper, but they’re *stubborn*. In five minutes, he’ll start pulling your hair out one strand at a time. After that, things will get ugly.”

James shook his head in irritation and embarrassment, allowing Zane to push him up from his seat. Glancing around the room, he saw several girls with pink hearts and cupids clinging variously to their hair, collars, and necks. He immediately looked away from them, refusing to make eye contact.

“Ohh,” Zane encouraged. “Julie Margoliss has a pink heart! She’s a senior! *She* could teach you a thing or two about kissing. Go for it!”

“No!” James hissed. He angled out from between the tables, keeping his eyes lowered. He tugged at the cupid, but it only renewed its grip on the paper chain around his neck. “We’ll see how you like a little hot water splashed on your chain, you little imp,” he warned, stalking toward the bathroom head down. “Just try to hang onto me when you’re soggy as a—”

He stopped suddenly as he ran into someone else, nearly knocking them both to the ground.

“James!” a girl’s voice said, surprised, and James groaned inwardly.

“Er, hi Lu,” he said, the blush on his face deepening from pink to brick red. “Sorry. Didn’t see you.”

“Me neither,” she admitted, glancing away and tugging at her shoulder. A red heart was stuck there, apparently by some sort of magical magnetism. “I was just on my way to, er...”

James saw the look of miserable embarrassment on his cousin’s face, saw her eyes as she refused to look at him.

“Hey Lu,” he said quietly, and she finally looked up at him. He took a quick breath and went on. “Sorry about the other day. I was a total berk. I should have just asked you straight up for what I needed. Can you forgive me?”

She studied his eyes for a moment and then slumped slightly. “I forgave you that very night,” she admitted shyly. “I can’t stay mad at you, no matter how hard I want to. And I really *did* want to.”

James glanced around the room to make sure no one was watching and then leaned close to the shorter girl. “I *wasn’t* trying to trick you when I asked you to go to the Halloween Dance with me, Lu,” he said earnestly. “I asked you because I knew I’d have fun with you, and I *did*. You had fun too, right? I didn’t mean for it to be... er... confusing.”

Lucy shook her head and dropped her eyes. “Don’t say any more, James. I’m already mortified. Just let me sneak off to the girls’ bathroom and see if I can soak this stupid heart off of me.”

James smiled sheepishly. “I was going to do the same thing,” he admitted. “I mean, not in the girls’ bathroom, though, of course. I was going to... um...” He paused, looking down at her as

a completely unexpected idea occurred to him. It was probably stupid, but suddenly that didn't seem to matter very much.

"Er," he began, and she glanced up at him. Her eyes were huge and very dark, cautiously inquisitive. "Er," he said again, and swallowed. "I mean, I know we're cousins and all, but we're not really *blood* or anything, like. We could maybe just..."

But suddenly Lucy was pulled away, caught up in a mass of students who pushed past, screaming and laughing.

"You lost your chance with *this* little Vampire, Potter," Gobbins grinned, taking Lucy by the shoulder. "You snooze, you lose!"

With a quick messy *smack*, he kissed Lucy on the corner of her mouth. Immediately, the paper heart flitted up from her shoulder and darted out over the cafeteria. Lucy touched the corner of her mouth, simultaneously peeved and amused.

"Happy Valentine's Day, Lucy!" Gobbins called with a grin as he backed away. Lucy blushed and smiled, a little flustered.

James sighed deeply, his face heating. "Yeah," he agreed somberly. "Happy Valentine's Day."

Before Lucy could reply, he ducked into the boys' bathroom, tugging at the cupid that still clung to his neck.



"I *told* you you couldn't just rip it off," Zane whispered some hours later as the three boys stole through the darkness toward the Warping Willow.

"Don't remind me!" James rasped. "Let's just forget the whole thing ever happened, all right?"

“It’s a good thing for you that Mother Newt saw you in the hall and knew how to summon a paper heart for herself,” Zane said, shaking his head. “Otherwise, you’d probably be spear bald by now. So, was she a good kisser, then?”

James fumed silently.

“I hear she was quite a looker back in the day,” Ralph mused.

Zane considered this. “*Waaay* back in the day, maybe.”

“*Would you both shut up about it?*” James exclaimed in a loud hiss. “We’re nearly there. You got the note?”

“Right here,” Zane acknowledged, producing a folded scrap of parchment from his pocket. “Here’s hoping it works.”

Silently, the boys crept underneath the low-hanging limbs of the Warping Willow. All around, the campus was dark and quiet, overhung by a huge moon and a sprinkle of glittering stars.

“I think you’re supposed to read it first,” Ralph said, nudging Zane. “And then you drop it in the knothole in the trunk.”

“I know, I know,” Zane mumbled. “All right, here goes.”

The blonde boy unfolded the note and peered at it by the dim light of the moon. He took a deep breath and read aloud: “Warping Willow, take we three... to a date that’s nifty-fine... in the nineteenth century... eighth October, fifty-nine.”

Rolling his eyes, Zane crumpled the note and dropped it into the hole in the Willow’s trunk.

“Nifty-fine?” Ralph repeated quizzically.

“Hey, *you* try to find a rhyme for fifty-nine,” Zane replied tersely. “See what *you* come up with.”

“Do you think it’ll work?” James asked, looking around.

As if in answer, the Tree’s limbs began to sway and whisper all around. Very slowly, the stars beyond the Tree’s canopy began to move like painted dots on a monstrous black dome.

“We’re going *somewhere*, at least,” Zane said. “Let’s hope we got everything right and don’t end up in the Stone Age or something.”

“You’re joking, right?” Ralph asked nervously. Neither Zane nor James replied.

Accompanied by the shushing movement of the Willow’s limbs, time began to unravel all around. Night crept backwards into day only to be followed swiftly by night once again. The sun and moon chased each other faster and faster through the sky, becoming streaks as the days grew into a flickering blur. Winter came and went again and then the leaves sprang up onto the trees all around, changing from autumn orange to vibrant summer green. Seasons melted together as years sped into decades, spiraling steadily backwards. Finally, the whip-like branches of the Warping Willow began to relax. The whicker of the leaves settled to a whisper as the sun resolved into an

individual orb again, dropping past the horizon, descending into a single chilly night. The moon crept up into the sky, a thin sickle shape now, and stopped.

“Well,” Zane said, his voice unconsciously hushed, “we’re here. I hope.”

“How do we know what year it is?” James asked as they skulked out from beneath the Tree into the weedy walled yard that formed the entrance to Muggle Philadelphia. “Do we just wait and hope for the best?”

Ralph nodded. “I don’t think we have much of a choice. Are you sure about the incantation that takes us back to the school?”

“That one’s easy,” Zane whispered. “I’ve heard it about a thousand times and it never really changes, so long as you know the timeframe that the Aleron is occupying on any given day. Warrington worked it out with me, so that’s no problem.”

“Shh!” James rasped suddenly, pushing Ralph and Zane backwards behind him. He nodded toward the gate and whispered, “Look!”

Both boys looked and saw the hunkered shape of Flintlock. He was in his resting form, looking like nothing more than a pile of great mossy boulders near the closed gate. As they watched, a clatter of hooves on cobbles could be heard beyond the gate. A shadow passed by on the street outside followed by a rattle of wheels.

“Well,” Ralph whispered, “horses and carriages. That’s a good sign, I guess.”

James nodded. Together, the three boys hunkered down into the weeds near the yard’s furthest corner.

As they waited, the sounds of the Muggle city filled the small yard, echoing off the stone walls. James heard indistinct voices and laughter as well as the more distant bellows of working men, probably down by the river. Clangs and whistles marked the passage of ships on the dark waterway. The crisp breeze carried the scent of smoke, horse manure, and rotting fish. After a few minutes, a bell began to toll the hour, ringing clearly in the darkness. Eight chimes pealed out, diminishing slowly into the silence.

“Any moment now,” Zane whispered, watching the Warping Willow carefully.

“I hope he comes quick-like,” Ralph replied quietly. “My bum’s going to sleep.”

Several more minutes crept by, each one seeming as long as an hour. James began to worry that they had missed their target date somehow. He opened his mouth to say so when the Tree began to rustle faintly in front of them.

“This is it,” Zane rasped, his eyes bulging with anticipation. “Keep low so he doesn’t see us!”

James hunkered down in the weeds, hoping the darkness and the overgrowth would be enough to hide them. Shortly, the motion of the Tree increased, hiding the space beneath it. James held his breath, watching. With a shudder and a sort of sigh, the limbs relaxed, and a figure stepped purposely out from beneath the Willow.

There was no question of who the figure was. Even in the darkness, the fringe of short gray hair and the chiseled features of Ignatius Magnussen were clearly visible. Further dispelling any doubt, the man thumped the ground with his cane and James saw moonlight glinting off the hooked iron face of its handle.

“Awake, my friend,” Magnussen announced in his unmistakable British accent, speaking to Flintlock. “I have one final duty to perform this evening and then you will know me no more.”

Slowly, Flintlock stirred, his movements like a miniature landslide in reverse. “Professor,” the troll said, spying the man before him, “I’m afraid I cannot allow you to pass. I have orders directly from Chancellor Franklyn himself.”

Magnussen lowered his head and stepped forward in a friendly fashion. “I am quite certain that you do, my friend,” he said. “But look here...”

With that, Magnussen raised his cane, holding the iron head aloft, nearly at the troll’s eye-level. A green flash lit the troll’s face, sparkling in his diamond chip eyes, and Flintlock stopped moving.

“Open the gate,” Magnussen ordered, and all the friendliness had dropped out of his voice. “Or I will unmake you and return you to the guts of the earth, a million pebbles without memory of the shape they once comprised.”

Jerkily, almost as if he were being operated by a careless puppet-master, Flintlock reached for the gate. He wrenched it open in one swift motion, ripping the vines that had grown up through the bars.

“Thank you, my friend,” Magnussen said easily, lowering his cane. With a sweep of his cloak, he strode through the entrance and disappeared into the dark street beyond.

“That was an Imperius Curse,” Zane breathed worriedly. “He *Imperioed* Flintlock!”

“Come on!” James whispered, scrambling to his feet.

“But what about Flintlock?” Ralph asked. “What if he tries to stop us?”

Zane approached the great stony troll carefully and then patted him on the knee. “I don’t think he’s going to notice anything for awhile,” he said with a shudder.

James looked up at the troll as he passed. Flintlock’s eyes stared straight ahead, glinting dully in the moonlight. More than anything, he looked like a machine that had been temporarily switched off.

“Come on,” Zane nodded soberly. “Mags went to the right. We have to hurry up or we’ll lose sight of him.”

With a renewed sense of urgency, the three boys darted through the open doorway out into the streets of nineteenth century Muggle Philadelphia.



To James' eye, Muggle Philadelphia didn't look immediately very different despite the change of nearly two centuries.

The streets were narrower and cobbled rather than paved and the footpaths were made of uneven slabs of stone, leaning somewhat drunkenly toward the brick-lined gutters. What streetlamps there were flickered with gas flames instead of the bright incandescence of the modern lights. The houses that lined the streets, however, seemed nearly unchanged, apart from the lack of any televisions flashing behind the windows. Occasionally, a black carriage or hansom cab would trundle past in the tow of large horses, their eyes hidden behind black blinders, their harnesses creaking and jingling.

"This would be a lot easier if there were more people on the street," Ralph whispered as they trailed Magnussen. "If he turns around, he'll see us straight away."

"Just walk casual," Zane muttered, "and try to keep in the shadows."

Magnussen strode briskly, his cape billowing behind him like bat wings in the chilly breeze. The three boys had to occasionally trot to keep him in sight as he zigzagged through the narrow residential streets. Obviously, Magnussen knew exactly where he was going and was sparing no time in getting there. Shortly, the boys trailed the big man into a neighborhood of much larger houses, most surrounded by low stone walls and wrought-iron gates. The gas lampposts were more prominent here and the windows of the houses glowed brightly, making it harder for the three boys to stay hidden in shadows. Magnussen never once looked back, however, even as he turned sharply and descended into a narrow alley.

"We're heading down toward the river," Zane whispered as they ducked into the alley. "Wrong-side-of-the-tracks-city."

"What's that mean?" Ralph asked. "I didn't see any tracks."

"It means keep a sharp eye out, Ralphinator," Zane said grimly. "This area is seedy enough in our own day. I don't expect it's any better in this timeframe. Watch your back."

Fortunately, it was much easier for the boys to follow Magnussen here since the streets were very narrow and crowded with carts, uneven stacks of crates and barrels, and parked carriages. Figures moved in the dim recesses of doorways or skulked along the cobbled road, their feet splashing in the puddles that trickled downhill toward the river beyond. James realized that they had gotten close enough to Magnussen to hear his boot heels knocking hollowly on the cobbles.

“How far’s he going to go?” Zane whispered, darting behind a row of empty carts. “We’re nearly to the waterfront. Those’re the wharves up ahead. After that, there’s nothing but river.”

Suddenly, Magnussen stopped and turned around. James ducked behind the nearest cart, his heart leaping up into his throat. Both Ralph and Zane hunkered down next to him. After a long, tense moment, the three dared to peek out from beneath the cart, their chins virtually touching the wet street.

Magnussen was fingering his cane as he peered around the cramped intersection, his eyes narrowed. Finally, apparently satisfied, he turned and stalked into an even narrower alley.

“That looks like a dead end,” James whispered. “Doesn’t it?”

Zane nodded. “Come on, we can get closer if we hide behind that pile of broken crates.”

As quietly as possible, the three boys crept along the edge of the street into the shadow of the jagged pile. Bits of broken wood crunched underfoot as the three gathered against the corner of a brick warehouse.

“It *is* a dead end,” Ralph whispered, peering cautiously around the corner. “There’s a little stairway at the end, though, and a door. Looks like a cheap little flat or something.”

Zane craned his head around the corner as well, squinting in the darkness. “Any sign of old Mags?”

“No,” Ralph shook his head. “He must have gone inside. You think maybe it’s *his* flat? Like, he rented it special just to have a place outside of school?”

James nodded. “He needed a place to hide the horseshoe, where nobody magical would sense its power. While it was up in the museum, it was probably lost in the background noise of all the other magical relics up there. Once he took it out, though, he’d need to keep it hidden. This is probably the perfect place.”

“So,” Ralph whispered, turning back around and leaning against the grimy bricks, “how are we going to get the horseshoe from him?”

Zane rubbed his hands together against the cold. “Right. What’s the plan, James?”

“Me?” James rasped. “I thought *you* were in charge of that detail?”

“I got the verse to get us through the Warping Willow!” Zane frowned defensively.

Ralph glanced worriedly from Zane to James. “And, er, *I’m* the one what found old zombie Professor Straidthwait! Without him, we wouldn’t have gotten anywhere at all!”

“Hold on,” James said, poking a finger into the air. “We got this far and *none* of us has any plan for how to actually *get* the unicorn’s horseshoe from Magnussen?”

“Well,” Zane shrugged, “we could just send Ralph out there with his Godzilla wand. I’d put your wand up against that evil cane of his any day, Ralphinator.”

“No way I’m dueling a bloke like that,” Ralph replied, shaking his head vigorously. “Not after the way all those portraits talked about him. Let’s not forget that the man’s a bloody murderer!”

James nodded soberly. "That's true. We have to be dead careful."

"Or just plain dead," Zane gulped.

"Don't get spooked yet," James said reasonably. "We still need to follow him to the Nexus Curtain. We can figure something out along the way."

"Yeah," Zane nodded. "Figuring stuff out along the way, that's always worked out great for us in the past."

"Shh!" Ralph hissed, peering back around the corner. "Here he comes!"

A door thumped shut in the darkness and was followed by the tromp of boots on squeaky stairs. James peeked around the corner, followed by Zane. Together, the three boys watched the shadowy form of Professor Magnussen as he stalked along the alley, his feet splashing in the puddles and his cane glinting in the darkness.

"Hey," a man's voice called out suddenly. James startled, as did Zane and Ralph. Magnussen stopped in his tracks, wary as a jackal. After a few tense seconds, the voice spoke again, timidly, but with stubborn resolution.

"She knew you'd come back," it said, and there was a hint of a disbelieving laugh in it. "I told her she was crazy. You'd never come back here, not after what happened. But here you are, bold as brass, big as life."

Magnussen hadn't moved. His voice came out of the darkness silkily. "You have me at a disadvantage, friend," he said. "Come into the light so I can see you."

"What, so you can do to me what you did to her?" the voice scoffed nervously. In spite of its words, however, a figure moved into the mouth of the alley. He was a young man, barely twenty years old, very thin and wearing a bowler's hat. Braces were slung over his shoulders, holding up a pair of ill-fitting flannel pants. He was less than fifteen feet away from James, Zane, and Ralph where they hid in the shadow of the broken crates.

"Have we met, good sir?" Magnussen asked calmly, taking a step forward.

"Oh yes, we've met," the man spat. "Although I doubt you'd remember it. Fredericka even talked to you about me. She was worried that you might get the wrong ideas about her, a big fancy man like you from up in the Heights coming down here to engage the services of a common seamstress. I heard all about how you stared at her when she delivered your mended coats and capes, how you looked like you were measuring her up with your eyes, like she was just a piece of meat and you were a butcher. She told you she had a fiancé just so you knew where you stood with her. To me, she said not to worry, that she could handle herself and she needed the money you were payin' her. But turns out she was right about you, wasn't she? Poor little Fredericka who never would've hurt a fly. You *were* a butcher after all. You killed her, *mangled* her, and left her in the street for us to find. And now here you are, come right back to the very scene, just as bold as you please."

"This is a misunderstanding, my good man," Magnussen said soothingly, still stepping forward. To James, he looked like a cat slowly creeping up on its prey. Silently, James drew his wand from his pocket. Next to him, he sensed Ralph and Zane doing the same.

“Helen said you’d come back,” the man said, and then he laughed a little hysterically. At his side, he held a length of iron, a crowbar. “Helen is Fredericka’s little sister, you know. She has a sense about these things. I didn’t believe her, at least not completely. But you know what? I believed her enough to keep a watch on this here alley. When I saw you come here tonight, saw you stand right here on this spot, looking around like you owned the place, I barely believed my own eyes. But Helen was right. You came back.”

The man began to stride forward then, raising the crowbar. He looked like he barely knew what he meant to do with it.

Magnussen didn’t move. “Now look here, my good man,” he said with a smile in his voice.

Suddenly, the thin man flew up from the pavement, flailing wildly in the air and dropping the crowbar. It clattered loudly to the cobbles, spinning away into a puddle. A moment later, the man himself crashed into a stack of barrels at the rear of the alley. The barrels toppled and tumbled over each other, burying the man.

“So much ugliness,” Magnussen sighed to himself, turning toward the rear of the alley. “When will these people ever learn...”

A barrel clattered sideways as the skinny man scrambled to his feet again, his face pale but determined in the dimness. “I don’t know *who* or *what* you are, you demon,” he breathed, “but you aren’t leaving this alley. For Fredericka...”

“You know,” Magnussen said magnanimously, “the young lady *did* speak of you, now that you mention it. Your name is William, isn’t it? Yes. She screamed your name, in fact, near the end of her life. I wouldn’t have thought that she’d been capable of something so strenuous at that point, but that just goes to show the difference between theory and reality. It was highly instructive, in fact. I’ll tell you what. As thanks, I will grant you your greatest wish. I will send you to join your dear departed Fredericka. Perhaps you will scream *her* name as well.”

The skinny man barely seemed to hear Magnussen. He lurched to his feet, limping pathetically, and began to lope toward the older man, his bare hands held before him, hooked into claws. In the darkness, Magnussen raised his cane, smiling malevolently.

“No!” James cried out, leaping out into the alley and brandishing his wand. His voice, however, was drowned out by a loud, echoing *crack*, nearly deafening in the confined space of the alley.

Too late! James thought hectically, still aiming his wand wildly at Magnussen’s back. *He’s killed him!* The skinny man, William, did not fall, however. James blinked into the darkness of the alley, waiting for Magnussen’s evil spell to take effect. Instead, Magnussen lowered his cane and then dropped it. It clattered to the alley. A moment later, Magnussen himself fell to his knees.

“How...” he asked, looking up at William. Slowly, almost ponderously, Magnussen fell forward, flat on his face in the center of the alley, dead.

“For Fredericka,” a girl’s voice said faintly. James looked to the side. A young woman, barely older than James himself, stood nearby. She stared at Magnussen’s dead body, her face a mask of pale resignation. In her outstretched hand, smoking lazily, was a small pistol.

“For Fredericka,” she repeated faintly, “from her fiancé, William. And from me, her sister, Helen.”



The girl, Helen, had seen the three boys, but didn’t seem particularly interested in them. Zane, being wise enough to opt for the truth when it was most appropriate, simply told her that the dead man in the alley had stolen something from their school, thus he and his friends had followed him in the hopes of getting it back.

William, still limping, had been surprised to see Helen and her pistol, but only a little. Kneeling over the body of Magnussen, he had retrieved the man’s evil magical cane. With a swift, decisive movement, he broke the cane over his knee. The long end he tossed into the gutter, but the handle he peered at in his hand, studying the glint of moonlight on the leering metal face. He shuddered.

“Your stolen goods might not be the sort of thing that would fit in a velvet bag, would they?” he asked dourly, looking down at the body.

James nodded. “Could be,” he answered, stepping gingerly forward. As he approached Magnussen’s prone figure, he saw a drawstring sack lying next to the corpse, still hooked over the left wrist. Feeling a wave of revulsion, James tugged the loop of string from around the dead man’s wrist. The hand thumped back to the street with a faint smack.

“You three...,” William said faintly, looking at the boys. “You’re like *him*, ain’t you?”

James swallowed thickly and shook his head, but Ralph, surprisingly, was the one to speak up. “We’re sorry for what happened to Fredericka,” he said solemnly. “This man may have been a part of our world... but we aren’t like him.”

William stared at Ralph, his eyes wide and shining in the darkness. Slowly, he nodded. Helen moved next to him and put an arm around his shoulders, still staring down at Magnussen’s body, as if mesmerized by it. Her face was very pale and James had a suspicion that the girl had been sick only moments earlier, probably behind the same broken crates where he, Zane, and Ralph had hidden.

“I don’t know what’s in that velvet bag,” William said, shuddering, “and I’m sure I don’t want to. This is over. You go your way. And me and Helen, we’ll try to go ours. Fair enough?”

James nodded. He could feel the cold weight of the horseshoe through the velvet of the sack. Slowly, he backed away from the body of Magnussen. Zane and Ralph followed and a moment later, all three boys turned and ran out of the alley. They ran almost the entire way back to the Alma Aleron gate, where Flintlock was only just beginning to come out of the trance Magnussen had cast over him. The rock troll remembered them in that hazy reverse-time way that Zane had predicted and allowed them to approach the Warping Willow. Zane recited the incantation that would return them to the school and the Tree began to shiver all around them. The moon and stars started to roll forward again, taking them back to the school and their own time.

Throughout the journey home, James held the velvet bag, fingering the distinctive shape inside it. Neither he, Zane, nor Ralph said a word.

They didn’t have to.

Thus finishes chapter eighteen. What did you think?

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