

such as is common to man

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such as is common to man

by [imochan](#)

Summary

Arriving in London, Credence finds a familiar face.

Notes

See the end of the work for [notes](#)

*God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able;
but will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it.*
- I Corinthians 10:13

He is sick the whole way across the wide, black ocean. He is told that this is quite expected, for the homebound and the inexperienced, because of the swells and dips and the ceaseless rocking from side to side. But Credence knows that it is not the crossing that is the cause, it is the thing inside him fighting out its last weak spurts of rage. It is the dying wail of an animal drawn too far afield from its burrow. It is his own tide receding. His vomit is dark like pitch, and he shivers in his small bunk for days and days and days, and when the massive ship docks finally at the port they call Manchester, he emerges on coltish legs to squint into the bright ash-white grey of the sky, and he feels a little like he has shed something of his own skin.

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Mr Scamander takes him to a shop in an alleyway in the middle of the bustling shuttle of the city of London. It looks a little like the New York he knows and yet feels older, stranger, deeper. The vowels in people's mouths are a little crooked and there are odd rituals of tea and speaking at great length about the weather that he does not entirely understand the purpose of.

At the shop Mr Scamander introduces him to an old man who is in charge of the making and the printing and the binding of books.

"This is Credence," says Mr Scamander. "He's very good with a press, and a quick learner."

Mr Lyonhart, the shop owner, regards them carefully from underneath massive white eyebrows that reminds Credence of the way snow used to gather puffy and clean on the sill of the high arched window by the staircase of their church.

"You know," says Mr Scamander. "We've got quite the project on our hands. I imagine you're going to need all the help that you can get."

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"It was good of you," says Credence, one day soon after, carefully feeding Pickett dried woodlice with the tips of his fingers. "To. Help me."

Mr Scamander looks at him across the table, just for a moment, as if he is startled to hear Credence say it, before his mouth quirks and he bends his head again to his work.

"Couldn't have left you there," he says, a little muffled, a little rushed. "One leg in a trap, like that."

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Mr Lyonhart sets him up in the vacant apartment on the third floor of 18a Diagon Alley, above the printing shop. He has a little money docked from his wages for the rent. It is small and a little dusty but the sheer novelty of ownership has him reeling for weeks. When he is not at work he finds it difficult not to spend hours wandering around the two little rooms just to pick things up in his hands and marvel at the simple power of his own agency. At a second-hand store he buys an alarm clock that sings in nineteen languages and also can mimic any birdsong one chooses. He gives it a place of honor on his bedside table, next to his book of remedial spellwork, which he has yet to open.

Mr Lyonhart and Mr Scamander both, they urge him to go and get fitted for his wand. He makes his excuses.

He still has nightmares. He dreams about being pulled apart at the seams like a fragile length of cloth. He dreams about being dissolved into nothingness and wakes with bile in his throat and cold sweat coating his skin. There was a certain and singular kind of pain to it, in being seared into pieces, in being reduced to absence and having for a moment that looked like the end of it all, the peace of death, only to rematerialize shaking and naked and crying and heartsick, in an alley in lower Manhattan. He cannot seem to shake it; it follows him like a weak shadow and slithers into his head in quiet spots, in sleep. He will reach out from the covers and set the alarm clock to ringing, just to have something to drown out the aching emptiness inside his own head.

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A month and a half after his arrival in London, a great black and ruffle-feathered bird alights on the windowsill of his apartment and pecks its beak on the glass until Credence rises from his bed and lets it in. It hops onto the bedside table and lifts one claw, where there is a roll of thin and brittle-looking paper tied off with the black piece of string.

Credence picks it up, gingerly, and the bird makes a soft *hoo-hoo* noise, before it retreats again to the windowsill and ducks its head to clean its feathers.

Credence, says the note. Dear boy. I do hope this helps.

Below, there is an address, scrawled in the same neat and spiky hand.

Credence traces the letters with his fingers, and feels something black and wild inside his heart quake and rear its head.

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“Do you have a map?” he asks Mr Scamander, two days later, while they are reviewing proofs. “A map of London?”

Mr Scamander looks at him with his delicate brow drawn together. He always looks at Credence as though everything about him is some sort of vaguely unstable surprise.

“I’d like to—” Credence glances across the room, where Mr Lyonhart is bustling about, wrangling the movable type blocks into the proper position with several gruff flourishes of his wand. A “G” and an “R” escape direction, and float mischievously toward the ceiling. “I’d like to explore, a little.”

“I can show you how to use the Floo network,” says Mr Scamander.

“I’d like to walk,” says Credence. The note stuffed in his back pocket is an incriminating brand. He despises it, how easy it is to fall backwards into lying, again. “I like walking.”

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He takes the map that Mr Scamander gives him upstairs to his apartment and unfolds it on the floor with the note beside it. He sits in front of it with his knees crossed and with a quill borrowed from the printing shop he carefully circles the place where Mr Scamander explained was where they were, where Diagon Alley lay hidden behind brick walls and a curtain of magic. He spends twenty minutes with his finger following the grids of the winding city, fold-by-fold, street-by-street, until he finds the string of letters he is looking for: H-a-n-b-u-r-y-S-t-r-e-e-t, and N^o 28. He circles it.

Between the two he draws an unsteady line—although he is trying to keep his wrist still and his work legible. He sticks to the larger roads so perhaps it will be harder for him to get lost; the thick black line travels to the right along the curve of the wide river and then up in a gently sloping diagonal, skirting below where there is a large church marked on the map as “St. Paul’s.” (There is also a St. Paul’s in New York, he knows, between Vesey and Fulton. He can see in his head the little grey-schist triangle cap of it and its pale imposing steeple, and the figure of Paul in his robe and with his long sword peering down at the street with his blind-looking oakwood eyes, and also he remember that when they would pass the steps of it sometimes the way Ma would spit at the Episcopalists and their apostolic treachery.)

He sets the quill down and reaches under the collar of his shirt, slowly drawing the chain out and fumbling with the clasp. He is careful when he lays the necklace down on the edge of the map not to touch the heavy metal symbol pendant with his bare fingers. He thinks he will need to wrap it in a handkerchief, when he goes.

He goes to bed with the candles still flickering. He dreams his body is a coil of black smoke, streaming through the streets of London like a ghost made of shining darkness.

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He does not have a pocketwatch, so in the end he is not sure how long he walks. Judging by the position of the sun from the time he was dismissed by Mr Lyonhart at the end of the afternoon to the moment that he turns onto Hanbury Street he reckons it has been at least an hour’s time, if not more than that by half. The necklace is heavy in his pocket, wrapped in the single white handkerchief that he had had with him the day he boarded the large ship across the ocean, now a little stained with printer’s ink and yellowed at the edges. He is sweating, under his jacket and his high collar, and the hairs on the back of his neck are starting to prick, as if something in his body has begun to enact the animalistic urge of running before he’s even glimpsed the thing he should be afraid of.

Spitalfields is what the map called it, this dingy collection of brick rowhouses slumped up against the cavern of a railyard. The streets are dirty and the shops are grey-curtained, most unoccupied, and there are packs of smudged-faced children perched the kerbs and running the alleys in bare feet. The men are ruddy and aged and overworked, the women gathered in doorways cluck in accents more foreign to him than the ones he has become more accustomed to, and they rub their rough chapped hands in their stained aprons over and over and over again, like some kind of ritual of prayer Credence does not recognize. An old man bent nearly in half stumbles down the street towards him hauling a cart laden with rattling and dented pans; as he passes, Credence hears him mumbling to himself. A nun in a habit with white folds like the tail of a swallow hurries around a corner and disappears into the maw of a building adorned with a wooden cross.

The squalor of it reminds him of the cobbled heaps of apartments on Orchard Street, of the markets on Canal and tucked into the curving labyrinth below Houston, where his flyers were always met with outright indifference, where no one ever seemed to care for the threat of outward and encroaching evil in the world for they seemed to have little for which they felt the will to cherish and protect against it.

Nº 28 is in the middle of the block, three stories high with a dingy stone stoop and its beige brick stained grey with soot and the fumes of traincoal. Peering upwards, he can only see that all the windows look dark and grimy, and that the chimneys look cold. He tugs at the brim of his hat, hesitating on the edge of the stoop. He is not entirely sure that were he to try the door and find it unlocked that he would have within himself the courage to venture in alone. He does not like the uncheery look of it, or being faced with the reality now that he has set off on this foolish journey alone and unprotected and that this could very well be simply another trap for him to bumble into, another set of painful tasks for which he is unprepared.

“Can I help you?”

Credence turns on his heel where he is; at the sound of the voice his heart is suddenly pounding in his chest, pulse leaping up into his throat.

He looks a little different. Unshaven and not so well-dressed. Black trousers, grey waistcoat, a dark navy jacket clearly tailored for someone else. The dark circles under his eyes are deeper and look borne of lack of sleep rather than bone structure. His hair is not so close-shorn on the sides of his skull, and it softens the edges of his face, a little—it looks less fashionable and perhaps more like the natural dusting of white that older men often begin to sport along their temples. He is carrying a brown paper bag in one hand, fist clutched at the neck of it.

“Mr Graves?” says Credence, when he finds his voice. “Mr Percival Graves?”

“Yeah, sure,” says Graves. “Who the fuck are you?”

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I'm Credence, he'd said. My name is Credence Barebone.

Never heard of you, said Graves, but he had let them both in, allowed Credence to trail behind him up the creaking and unsteady stairwell to a cramped and mostly-empty set of rooms on the second floor. Credence notices first that there is only a single mattress on the floor and several haphazard and teetering piles of newspapers stacked up against the far wall, and then the small adjoining kitchen with a single table where Graves sets down the paper bag, and then the cracks running up the faded wallpapering, and then the way the whole building shudders unhappily whenever a train pulls out from the rail yard behind the alley.

When the clattering and the shaking fades, Graves turns, and stares at him sharply from across the room.

“You American?”

“Yes,” says Credence. “New York.”

“Huh,” says Graves. “Me too.”

“I know,” says Credence. “I know, I—”

Graves’ eyes narrow, suddenly; a glint of something that looks like anger sparking behind them, and he’s across the room in three long strides, his big hand shoving Credence back against the wall by his chest, sliding up to press hard against the span of his throat.

“Are you with him?”

“I don’t—” says Credence.

The pressure on his throat tightens. He chokes.

“Are you *with him*,” Graves snarls.

“I—I’m not.” He forces himself to move, to shove a shaking hand into his pocket and draw out the handkerchief with the tangled chain and the heavy pendant. He squirms under Graves’ grip, lifting his arm between their bodies to show him where it hangs from the fabric clutched in his fist. “I was, but. I mean, I didn’t know. He gave me this. He wanted—”

“Are you the child,” Graves hisses, his gaze flickering back and forth between the spinning symbol and Credence’s face.

“No,” says Credence. It feels like heartbreak to say it. “It wasn’t *me*. I mean, it was, but I wasn’t what he wanted. He didn’t know.”

Graves exhales sharply, through his nose. Credence feels his rough fingers flex against his throat; he imagines if Graves had a weapon—a wand, a revolver—that he’d be holding it to Credence’s temple. Between them, the symbol swings, slowly, like an unbalanced pendulum.

“Don’t touch it,” says Credence. “Please. I only brought it in case—”

“It wasn’t you,” says Graves. His posture falters: his gaze drops, his shoulders slump.

“No, it was. It wasn't—” he says, thickly. “What he thought.”

Graves is silent, eyes fixed somewhere to the left of Credence's shoulder. When he finally steps back and lets his palm slip from Credence's skin, he looks defeated, as if he has suffered some unkind loss by being denied the chance to strangle the life from Credence's body with his bare hands.

“And I'm not a child,” says Credence, more boldly. He touches his own throat, tentatively. The skin feels hot, and clammy with sweat.

“Yeah, yeah,” says Graves. His face is twisted with something more foreign to Credence, now. It looks a little like rage, a little like grief, mostly lost. He crosses back to the kitchen and pulls a dark-glass bottle from the paper bag, uncaps it, and takes a long drink. The label says *Ogden's Best*.

“All right,” says Graves, wiping at his mouth with the back of his hand. “You—sit. Tell me what happened.”

Credence tells him.

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“Are you really a wizard,” asks Credence. The sun is setting now. The color of it paints the drab walls of the kitchen and casts long shadows into the room, like reaching fingers, like hungry vines of the approaching dark. They have settled into the two chairs on opposite sides on the table, the necklace curled like a sleeping snake in its nest of stained white handkerchief on the surface between them.

“Yeah,” says Graves. His mouth twists. “Sure. Used to be.”

“Used to be,” says Credence.

“Not sure, anymore,” says Graves. He takes a long swallow from the bottle, which is almost halfway gone, now.

“Was that you,” asks Credence. “The person—who he pretended to be. Was that who you were?”

“Sure,” says Graves. “That's why he wanted me, wasn't it?”

“I don't know,” says Credence. “I don't understand why he wanted any of it.”

Graves is silent, for a long moment. He's turning the bottle between his big hands, gently, his heavy brows drawn like there's something on the label he's trying to decipher, some kind of hidden message writ there that Credence can't hope to understand.

“He wants,” says Graves, finally. “Power. That's the heart of it.”

“Power,” says Credence, trying the weight of it on for size against his own tongue. “What. What kind of power?”

Graves shrugs, lifting his gaze now, studying Credence across the rickety table. “The kind that gets you what you want. Easily.”

Credence shakes his head. “I think he likes a challenge.”

Graves snorts. “Sure,” he says. “Sure, like you were a *challenge*.”

Credence feels his face heat, feels that dark coil inside his heart tighten and quiver. “He was wrong, though,” he says. “About me.”

“Sure,” says Graves, some of the bitterness bleeding from his face. “Yeah. I guess you're right.”

“What happened to you?” asks Credence.

“He knows what people want,” Graves shrugs. “I liked what he said.”

Credence nods. He knows something about that, too. “What did he say?”

“That we were unduly suffering, that continually hiding in the shadows of our own painful history would never do us any favors—that. That things had to change.” Graves is frowning at the table, where the symbol glares up at them. “I agreed with him. Still do.”

“Did you trust him,” asks Credence.

“I'm an Auror, kid,” Graves' mouth twitches. “I don't trust anyone.”

“But,” says Credence.

“But,” says Graves. They understand each other, Credence thinks. They have been similarly tugged around on strings of their own making.

“I said I would help him, too,” he says, encouraged. “I didn't know, but. I wanted him to—”

Graves takes a drink. “Shit,” he says, grimacing: maybe against the taste, maybe against the words. “Sure, you don't have to tell me. I gave him my *face*.”

“Your face,” says Credence, feeling something hollow and ugly plummet in his gut. He had been entertaining a hope of familiarity, he realizes, against all evidence otherwise.

“Polyjuice,” Graves says, like it is a slur somehow. Like he is now offended by it, ashamed. Credence still does not know what this means, really, only that he has heard Mr Scamander say it, that it has been proven, that Miss Goldstein had written just so in one of her letters. “Just some hair off my head, and some memories from here—” he taps his own temple with the mouth of the bottle, “—for authenticity.”

Credence gapes. “He—he can do that?”

“Sure. Small favor, huh,” says Graves, chasing the sarcasm with more Ogden's.

“Why are you living like this,” asks Credence. “They've caught him, I heard. You could go back now.”

Graves shrugs, tightly. “He got what he wanted, double-crossed me. Held against my own will half-alive in a vegetable cellar while he worked MACUSA with my face, looking for that weapon, the child. Woke up here two weeks ago, covered in rutabaga leaves. Trying to put the pieces back together, with all these missing parts. Then you show up, telling me he failed.”

Credence reaches across the table and takes the bottle from Graves’ hand; their fingers touch and he feels the shock of it like a little tremor in his ribs, the thing inside him stirring at the surreal familiarity of the touch, of the rough knuckles, the short nails, the warmth radiating. It craves something Credence has not admitted to, not in weeks and weeks now, the way it was so deeply soothed by the simple generosity of touch, of healing. He wonders if this Graves can do that too, the thing that the other one did, with his hands, where he could wash the burn of old cuts away with a brush of his fingers and leave only tingling, searing heat where the nascent scars had been. He wonders if this Graves would cup his face too with those big hands and whisper in his ear and if it would feel differently, to receive that kind of softness, to feel that soaring tremble in his heart, if he knew that this Graves needed nothing from him and still reached out to touch his skin.

“Do you believe me,” asks Credence. He tries not to choke on the harsh medicinal burn of the liquor. Wipes his mouth like Graves had done.

“Sure,” says Graves, watching him intently across the table, his dark, dark eyes like shining wet ink in the failing light. “Probably.”

The room shakes gently, and a train whistle shrieks, from the yard.

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“How do I know,” says Credence, before he leaves. The necklace and the handkerchief are back in his pocket. “How do I know it’s you, and. And not him?”

“You don’t,” says Graves. He looks tired; his eyes are glassy. “How’s that for truth.”

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The next day it rains and rains and rains. Credence wakes early and stares out his little window of his apartment at the sheets of water pouring from the clouds and the heavy dark-grey sky and pulls the blankets up around his shoulders and imagines for a moment that he has the warmth of someone else’s hands touching at his shoulders, his neck, his face. He puts his fingers against his throat where Graves had had his palm there in anger and presses his face between his knees to try and slow his breathing.

He is sent on errands, out into the rain. He delivers packages for Mr Lyonhart up and down the Diagon street alleyways, and he is sent out into the non-Magical London also, clutching an umbrella. He lingers in one shop, in a bookstore, dripping water on the floor and staring fretfully at a display of small and finely bound black-leather volumes, with gold lettering

stamped into the covers and along the spines. He has no money that would be good here. And in the end he emerges with a thick square weight tucked under his jacket and a heavy guilt clutching at his ribs.

Back at the printing shop Mr Scamander says he has received a letter—an owl—from New York, from Miss Goldstein, and would Credence like to read it, would Credence like also to write a note to send along with Mr Scamander's reply.

Credence says that he would.

Miss Goldstein, he writes, carefully and slow with the awkward weight of the quill. Thank you for your letter, I hope you do not mind that Mr Scamander showed to me what you had written to him.

He wants to say: I am sorry for all the hurt I caused and I wish I could set things right like none of this had ever been.

He wants to say: I am scared all the time. I am scared all the time and not in the way that I used to be because it is not that I am scared of anyone else I think it is that I am scared of myself only myself now and I do not know what to do.

He wants to say: Today I stole a King James Bible from a bookstore in the city because I did not have any money and I opened one to look at the printing because I thought it was very smart and the page I turned to was the one that we never read, back in New York, but it was the one that went—His left hand should be under my head / and his right hand should embrace me—and it was the one that went—Awake, O North Wind / and come, thou south / blow upon my garden / that the spices thereof may flow out / Let my beloved come into his garden / and eat his pleasant fruits—and it was the one that went—I will rise now, and go about the city / in the streets, and in the broad ways / I will seek him whom my soul loveth / I sought him, but I found him not. And so I stole it.

He wants to say: I am keeping secrets again. Am I allowed to have this one. Mr Graves is here, that is my secret. What if this goes poorly. What I am supposed to do please help please help I just want this thing so badly to be mine.

Instead, he writes: Thank you also for the kindness you have shown me, I am very grateful. I am well. I like London very much, and Mr Scamander has been generous. I am working hard to learn a lot of things. I hope you are well, I hope that when we can see each other again that you will be proud of me.

*Sincerely,
Credence*

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“Could you teach me,” he asks. He has returned again to Spitalfields and to Hanbury Street the following evening, rain drying on the dirty pavement, bearing a small bag full of four flaky sweet rolls from the bakery next to 18a Diagon, with no real understanding as to why he has done so.

“Teach you what,” says Graves, still in the doorway to the apartment, one arm braced along the jamb.

“Magic,” says Credence. “Could you teach me how to—”

“I don’t have a wand,” says Graves.

“I don’t either,” says Credence. “But. Maybe, you could teach me anyway. And—and then, when I’ve saved enough money, we could go together.”

“Together,” says Graves.

“Yes,” says Credence. The bag crinkles under his palms. He can feel it getting damp with sweat, where he is gripping it. “For. For our wands.”

“I’m not a teacher,” says Graves, frowning, when he lets Credence inside.

“I wouldn’t know the difference,” says Credence, and offers him a sweet roll.

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Start simple, Graves had said, once convinced. *Something easy, all right?*

They’re sat on their knees on the floor of the small room with the newspapers and the mattress. Graves has placed his single flute-shaped gaslamp between them, turning the key of it so that the flame of it sinks low, sputtering sadly blue-green and orange at the crown of the mantle.

“The spell’s *lumos*,” says Graves. “For light.”

Credence swallows; nods.

“Say it,” says Graves.

“*Lumos*,” he says, obediently. And then: “Nothing happened.”

“Without a wand,” says Graves. “You’re going to have to concentrate. Imagine—imagine the light from the lamp, growing. Flooding the room. Like the sun, all right?”

“Like the sun,” echoes Credence. “All right.”

“When you close your eyes,” says Graves. “Picture the lamp, just like it is here, see? The word of the spell, that’s not the thing. It’s intention, Credence.”

Credence wets his lips; mouth suddenly dry and his tongue thick against his teeth. There’s a tickle of something flaring inside his chest, but he can’t seem to separate it out from the thudding pulse of his heart, from the anxious prickle of his own skin.

“Yes,” he says. “All right.”

“Go on,” says Graves.

He closes his eyes, tries to breathe slowly through his nose, tries to focus on the feeling that Graves has described. He tries to picture in his mind the soft and fragile curve of the lampglass, the little licking flicker of its flame, tries to image the way the butter-yellow metal of it would be slightly warm under his fingers if he were to reach out and turn the key. Tries to imagine the sudden wash of heat and light, the radiation of a bright glow outward, swallowing up all the darkness and the shadows and the black pitch in the corners of the room and out in the streets and coiled between the bonespears of his ribs—

“*Lumos*,” he says.

Several things happen all at once, then: something searing stabs upward in his chest at the same time that his eyes shoot open again at the pain of it, at the same time that the gaslamp explodes, shattering glass and spurts of flame outward, slicking the floor between them and licking at their knees, at the same time that Credence hears in his head a wild rush of static air and growling, at the same time that he is knocked backwards as if he has been struck with a heavy fist directly in the vulnerable soft plate of his sternum.

“*Aqua eructo!*” snaps Graves, waving the palm of his hand at the oily smears of fire. They sputter, dissolving into angry curls of black, slimy smoke: stubborn and foul-smelling. “Fuck—*eructo!*”

“Sorry, sorry—” Credence has fallen over onto his backside, he’s gasping. His palms hurt as if he has placed them flat down on the surface of a hissing cast-iron skillet. His heart is pounding and his chest *aches*. The thing inside him has its claws out. “Oh, no—oh, I didn’t mean to—”

Without the lamp the light in the room is plunged suddenly ashy-blue and dim. Credence can still see the outline of Graves’ heaving shoulders, the smudge of soot on the palm of one outstretched hand, across his forehead.

“I’m sorry,” he says. “I’m a freak, I know, I shouldn’t—”

“No,” says Graves, sharply. At Credence’s flinch, he amends: “No, that’s not. It’s fine, it’s. Here—just.”

He extends a hand. Credence, still terrified, can’t fathom what it is that he wants, until Graves shuffles forward on his knees, minute shards of glass tinkling under the *hshh-hssh* of the threadbare fabric of his trousers on the floorboards.

“Sit up,” says Graves. “It’s fine.”

“I’m dangerous,” says Credence. He shakes his head even as he takes Graves’ hand, allows himself to be pulled up to his knees again. “No—I shouldn’t.”

“You’re powerful,” says Graves. The serious line of his mouth quirks, for a moment. He pulls his own hand away, and Credence feels a little pang of loss. “Inexperienced. People think they’re the same thing—they’re not.”

Credence stares at the floor, at the sooty smudges radiating around them like a halo. “I can’t,” he says.

“You can,” says Graves.

“No,” says Credence.

“Yes,” says Graves, with a surety of feeling that sounds to Credence like an order. “Again, this time—” he puts both hands in front of himself, cupped together in front of the buttons of his waistcoat. “—just like this, see?”

Credence frowns, but mimics him, his fingers shaking.

“Not so much light, this time,” says Graves. “Think of—you ever seen a lightning bug?”

“Yes,” breathes Credence. Modesty had got a mason jar and they had punched holes in the lid with a pair of rusty scissors and they had caught dozens. They had been late to return because of the soft and endless swarms of them, and Credence had been whipped for it, but he did not mind so much, that time. It had not felt so much like a sin to be breathless at the beauty of something that God had made. “By the river, sometimes. In the summer.”

“Good,” says Graves. “Like that. In your hand.”

He closes his eyes.

“No,” says Graves. “Look at me.”

He blinks, confused; the cup of his hands falters.

“It’ll help,” says Graves. He points at his own face, at the space between his eyebrows. “Just at me, right here.”

“Just a lightning bug,” says Credence, exhaling, feeling foolish and hot in the face with shame and excitement and his veins still thrumming with the residuals of the explosion. “Just a small one.”

“It’s all right,” says Graves. “It won’t hurt you.”

His eyes sting; he can’t tell if it’s the film of tears or the ache of effort of holding Graves’ gaze with his own.

“I won’t let it,” says Graves.

(It feels to Credence like a caress.)

“*Lumos*,” he whispers.

It erupts very gently, out of thin air, in the space between them just above his upturned palms. The hurt he had felt before in his chest is just a little sting, a sharp gasp, a thin needle straight into his heart. The room is bathed in soft and blue-white light, glowing, from the orb that

Credence has made with only a word fallen from his lips. There is suddenly so much warmth inside him that he feels as though his whole meagre body is a hearth, a furnace, absorbing all the coldness in the world.

“Good,” says Graves, very quietly. He is still watching Credence’s face, and not the gently glowing ball of light floating between them. “Credence?”

“Yes,” gasps Credence, because he feels as though there is light inside him where his voice should be. “Oh.”

“Do you feel it?”

“Yes,” he says. “Mr Graves—”

“Shh,” says Graves. “It’s all right, Credence—this is. You’re, you’re doing so well.”

The light pulses sharply: Credence’s own fluttering heartbeat is betrayed in the way it swells and caves, like the little tide inside him.

“It’s,” he swallows. “It’s beautiful.”

“How did you know I was here,” asks Graves. His face illuminated by the little orb of light is softened: his hard jaw and his sharp cheekbones and the tight, flinty quality of his dark eyes all blurred out at the edges. “Credence.”

“He told me,” says Credence. “I think he told me where to find you. I think he—”

The light between them pulses again, stronger now, matched to the little surge of feeling Credence feels inside his ribs. Graves reaches out, as if perhaps he might be afraid that it is a sign that Credence will accidentally blow out all the lights in London, that he might blow out the windows and the doors and leave them both smoldering. One big hand cups the back of Credence’s fingers, his thumb nestling into Credence’s palm. The light surges again; Credence swallows.

“I think he’s still playing with us,” he says.

“Fuck him,” says Graves. He says it gruffly and all in a rush, like he is surprised by it, like perhaps he might in fact understand how hard it is to believe what he’s just said.

“I miss it,” he says, before he can stop it. His face feels wet; there is too much *feeling* inside of him, and all of it connected to this sweet and beautiful flickering of power cupped between their hands, and the thing inside of him seems to be feeding it, engorging itself at the same time—but *oh*, it feels so different now, to imagine that he might have also inside himself and simultaneously the strange and miraculous ability to transform that raw and ravenous emptiness into something resembling God’s own creation. “I miss *him*, he was—”

“Credence,” says Graves.

He sobs, a little. The ball of light hovering above their palms pales, swells, in an empathetic shudder.

“Credence,” says Graves, again. “Did he touch you?”

“Yes,” says Credence.

“Did you like it?”

“Yes,” says Credence.

“Do you want me to—” Graves swallows. His eyes are dark and shining in his skull. “Touch you.”

“Yes,” Credence gasps. The light pulses bright, blinding, and white. “Oh, *please*.”

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It is different.

This Graves is rougher with him, goes farther. This Graves cups his face with both hands and pushes him back against the mattress and licks into his mouth like he is hungry, like he is desperate, like perhaps Credence is giving *him* something and not the other way around. This Graves settles heavily over his hips and makes a low noise in the back of his throat when he tips Credence’s head back by his hair, and opens the top buttons of his shirt with a sharp series of tugs, and tastes at the sweat gathered on the sharp line of Credence’s collarbone. This Graves, when he takes something, seems to derive something perhaps like pleasure from it, and not that strange and cold favor of condescension, and so Credence is confused for moment, thinking: *oh, do I miss that?* This Graves, when he pulls at the belt at Credence’s waistband, has a tremor in his fingers.

“Shit,” says Graves, when he has opened Credence’s shirt to the navel and has tugged off his trousers and his underwear and thrown them both halfway across the room, when he has Credence pinned back against the mattress with a look like reverence, like half-stunned worship. “Look at you.”

Credence is sure in that moment with the hot shame of exposure and the still-foreign tightness of excitement in his gut, between his legs—he is sure that if he had not let go of the little ball of light when Graves kissed him that now it would be as bright as the center of the sun. He presses both his hands to his face and Graves leans down over him, lifts the heel of one of his palms, so he can brush his lips against the corner of Credence’s mouth.

“Credence,” he says.

“It’s okay,” says Credence. He is not sure why he is whispering. There is no one else here but them, he thinks. “I’m—all right.”

By the time Graves arranges him into his lap, pressing his chest up against Credence’s back and holding Credence’s knees spread over his thighs with one big, hot palm, Credence feels as though his whole body is one enormous patch of raw skin: exposed and hot and stinging like a whiplash. The rough fabric of Graves’ trousers against his naked thighs is like a burn, the rub of his own opened shirt on his arms and his chest is over-sensitive, constricting. The

searing shadow of his own erection against his stomach is at the center of it all, all his discomfort and pain and thrill and thinly persistent embarrassment and his soaring, squirming pleasure. He cannot even bring himself to look at it, not even when Graves wraps his roughened fingers around it and works him up and down, up and down, faster and faster, with a spit-slick hand, not even then. He twists and tries to push his face into dark shadow of Graves' throat, but Graves has his chin hooked over Credence's shoulder, watching his hand work where Credence can't bear to look.

This Graves does not soothe him. This Graves does not try to quiet him, does not refuse him the helpless, choking noises he can't seem to help; he pushes him through it, relentless. When he feels the wave of pleasure breaking like a crest, when he comes, the thing inside him twitches, like it is being caressed in the fog of its sleep, fireflies blooming in the dusk around its stupored, formless body.

Graves pushes him to the mattress and shoves the hem of his shirt up his back, all the way up under his arms. Credence, still shaking, hears the rustle of clothing and the clink of buttons being undone, and then the hitched pause in Graves' breathing—Credence imagines he must have just seen them, the thick and pale-pink lines he knows are still there, will probably always be there, hatch-patterning his skin.

"Who did this to you," says Graves, a palm wet with Credence's own emission sliding almost tentatively over the backs of his thighs, slicking into the space between them.

"Ma," says Credence.

"Your mother," says Graves.

"She's dead," says Credence. "I killed her."

Graves presses his mouth to the top of Credence's spine. "Good," he says.

"Is it?" says Credence, twisting his body into the wool blanket when he feels something thick and warm nudge between the space of his thighs, the graze of Graves' knuckles guiding himself into place there; he squeezes his legs against the first few probing thrusts.

"Yes," says Graves, and with conviction.

His mouth—wet and with the scrape of teeth—is an anchor at the very arching top of Credence's nerves. The rest of it is still cruder than he expected: the simulation of fornication somehow still more filthy than the actual thing, in the way that he can hear every slippery squelch and rasp of skin and grunt of Graves' breathing, in the way that even though he has just had his mind blanked-clean when he spilled over the firm grip of Graves' hand he still feels his own body responding to the desire of it, a flickering curl of heat in his belly. He is aware that he is arching up against it, that he is fisting the blankets with desperate kneading fingers, that he wants to turn his face against the mattress and have Graves lick against the side of his mouth, that he *wants* and he *wants* and he *wants*.

"What did he tell you," Graves says to him, hoarse and gruff in the back of his throat, voice catching. "That he would save you? That he loved you?"

“No,” gasps Credence. “No—never. It was. That I was special. He said I was a miracle.”

“Fuck,” says Graves, and then Credence feels the hot, wet splash against his thighs, over the thick weave of the scarring on his backside. “Yeah. Yeah you are.”

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Graves cleans him up with a rough flannel from the kitchen and then tugs the wool blankets up around Credence’s body while he sits on the edge of the mattress and sorts through one of the piles of newspapers.

“What are those for?” asks Credence, eventually, rubbing at his eyes. He’s drowsy, but vaguely energized.

Graves glances back at him, over his shoulder. “I’m an Auror, like I said. A cop. I’m looking for clues.”

“What clues.”

“Use your brain,” says Graves, but his mouth twitches in the movement that Credence is realizing is meant to be the way that he smiles. “What else?”

“He’s in jail,” says Credence.

“He doesn’t work alone,” says Graves, shuffling papers. “Who does. Besides, he still got to you, locked up or not, didn’t he.”

“Are you trying to,” says Credence. “To go after him?”

“Sure,” says Graves. “Just gathering intel, for now. And maybe one day soon—”

“Can I help?”

Graves blinks, and then leans over to slide a pile of yellowed newsprint up and over the pillows.

“Sure,” he says, and he presses his mouth to the side of Credence’s temple. “Knock yourself out.”

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What did he tell you, asks Credence. He whispers it against the rough skin of Graves’ throat. It is the middle of the night and the last train has just pulled out from the yard.

That I was righteous, says Graves. He says it into the soft muss of Credence’s hair against the thin pillow. *That I was a righteous man.*

Was he wrong, asks Credence. He means: *Was he really lying to both of us.*

Graves does not reply. In the soft and quiet dark Credence finds that he is glad of it: he is not sure what answer he would rather hear.

Between their bodies he opens his fist, cupping the air. He concentrates, skin still buzzing and alight with an unfamiliar quality of buoyancy, like a kind of swelling of gentle waves, a calmer tide inside his skin now. He thinks there may be yet a tenuous balance to find, some place where he will not have to deny, or rage, or desperately want, or weep, or burn it all to the dead earth for lack of understanding why he has been given something he never asked for. He does not know what this looks like, what form this sort of thing would take, what kinds of things in the world that it enjoys and what points of virtue it will value: whether it delights in sweet rolls or black coffee or *Ogden's Best* whiskey or being kissed on the mouth or walking in rainstorms or reading silently by candlelight or sweeping wild through the sky like a oil-fire in the clouds. He does not know yet what the world will expect of it, only that he thinks he knows now what it feels like to draw with his own hand a line of black ink upon a map with intention.

And when he whispers *lumos*, the light flickers, but it blooms.

End Notes

There is now a truly beautiful illustration of the Lumos scene by Ok-oko [here on tumblr!](#)
Please go and leave Koko some love for this incredible piece of art! ♡ ♡ ♡

Also! The stunningly talented Reiburger illustrated the last scene, [seen in the second drawing here](#). And the wonderful Juls [has done a beautiful comic](#) as well. Thank you guys all so much for this incredible work, I'm so touched. ♡

thank you to [chloe](#), [betty](#), [lucy](#), [becks](#), [holly](#) and lani, for their intelligence, encouragement, and tangible filthy delight at this new and compelling canon.

i'm on tumblr @ [imochan](#)!

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!