“And if you can’t see anything beautiful about yourself, get a better mirror, look a little closer, stare a little longer, because there’s something inside you that made you keep trying despite everyone who told you to quit.” – Shane Koyczan, “To This Day”

If someone told Percival Graves he’d spend his fortieth year as a fugitive on the run from MACUSA, in the company of an Obscurial, a smuggler, a Legilimens, and a No-Maj, he would’ve put them in an institution. But now, after a near-miraculous survival of captivity at Grindelwald’s hands, he’s become a wanted man because he can no longer in good conscience uphold the laws he’d once vowed to protect.

This is the story of a man on the run, haunted by more ghosts than he cares to count, on a journey that will span an entire continent. This is the story of how Percival Graves saved Credence Barebone from execution; how he fled New York in Newt Scamander’s suitcase; how he got something he never thought he needed: a family.

Complete.
Notes

This started off as a brief meditation on what kind of person you have to be in order to be replaced with no one noticing. Then, as they do, things got COMPLETELY OUT OF HAND. This is a very long story. Chapter length will be decently variable. For exceptionally short or long chapters I'll make a note at the beginning so nobody gets blindsided. Luckily for all of you, I've got a twice-weekly posting schedule: Wednesdays and Saturdays. You won't have to wait too long between chapters. :)

Dedicated to many, many people. Of course, my beta reader Pyxyl, who doesn’t like this pairing or participate in this fandom and still read this whole thing and gave me amazing feedback anyway. To eatingcroutons, who press-ganged me onto the ship with amazing art, writing, and meta. To gravesfrommacusa, who provided the moniker “The Evil Pineapple Man” and whose blog kept me inspired all month. To my friend K, who has had to listen to me rant and rave and ramble and instead of getting bored kept asking questions, giving me ideas, and supporting (enabling?) me anyway. And to everybody who follows me on Tumblr, whether they like this pairing or fandom or not, whose support and help has kept me moving forward and convinced me to finish this story. You guys are all amazing. <3
Chapter 1

They find Percival Graves locked in a cold, dark basement under a condemned building in Upper Manhattan. He doesn’t remember the address, later; he’d honestly prefer to forget that the building exists at all. President Picquery herself is there, when they break down the charms holding him in and carry him out into the sunlight. His injuries won’t heal. He can’t walk on his own, and the sun all but scalds his skin after more than five months buried underground. He’s all but forgotten how to speak. He was sure that that basement would be his tomb, and now suddenly he’s been granted a stay of execution.

He isn’t sure what to think about that.

It was the third of July when Grindelwald took him, and it’s the twelfth of December by the time he’s coherent enough to remember the importance of dates. When Graves asks—possibly scaring the nurse attending to him with the intensity of his questions—he finds that they defeated Grindelwald on the sixth of December. It really was just more than five months. Five months that he was missing, five months that Grindelwald took his place, five months of torture.

It feels like he was down there in the dark for a decade or more.

Tina Goldstein, far more confident now than Graves has ever seen her, is the one who tracked him down in the end. They were never particularly close, though he’d always noticed her competence and exceptional magical skill. In that period just before he was taken, they’d even developed some kind of banter, something that verged on a friendship. They are always superior and subordinate, though, and so he doesn’t expect it when she comes to visit him while he’s recuperating in a hospital. Half of MACUSA has been here, it seems, but she’s not here just to say that she’s been, and that’s something.

“I realized that it wasn’t right,” she says frankly, when they’re done exchanging condolences and thanks. “He wasn’t…you.”

“What’d he miss?” Graves asks.

Tina coughs and looks away, turning a little red with embarrassment. “You’ll laugh,” she says.

“Go on,” Graves says. He’s due for a laugh sometime in the next century; might as well be today.

“He wasn’t fussy enough,” Tina says, and then in a rush expands: “He stopped bothering to shelve books in alphabetical order.”

At that, Graves manages a smile. It’s creaky as hell and hurts the broken cheekbone he acquired the last time he tried to escape, which even Skele-Gro can’t fix entirely. But it’s a smile, at least. “At least somebody noticed,” he says.

Tina frowns. “I didn’t notice enough. The person who really worked it out was Newt. We should have caught on faster.”

“It was Grindelwald,” Graves says. He can’t shrug, not with the way that the scars on his shoulders still burn, but damn if he doesn’t try. “No one would have expected anything.”

“We should have caught it anyway. We’re Aurors,” Tina says. She presses her lips together. Her eyes are suspiciously wet. “We’re your Aurors.”
There’s a warm burn, so much more comforting than the aches and pains still shooting through every inch of his body, somewhere in the middle of Graves’ chest. “You got him in the end,” he says. “And that’s what matters, Tina.”

Tina sniffles and wipes her eyes discreetly. “I pulled out all the stops to find you,” she says. “They all thought you were dead. But…’t’s you. You wouldn’t be dead.”

Graves thinks about the endless dark and frigid air of that locked basement-turned-dungeon; the pain, the emptiness. He’d been damn close to giving up, more than once, and even now he’s pretty sure that he was only alive because of that tiny voice that demanded he keep fighting no matter what. It had grown quiet of late, but it had been all there was to hear, down in that place that should have been his tomb.

“Well, I’m alive,” Graves says. “Tell me they promoted you, at least.”

“They did,” Tina says, with a small proud smile.

She goes with a promise to look after things in the Department while he’s gone. “I’ve already been in your office looking things over,” she says. “I’m no Director, but I think I can keep the place running until you’re back to glower at us properly again.”

“Alphabetize the damn books in there!” Graves calls after her, as a near afterthought, and it’s oddly good to hear Tina laugh. He thinks that at the rate she’s going she deserves another promotion.

He suffers through three weeks of convalescence before the Healers announce that he’s ready to leave the hospital. He goes back to his house in Prospect Heights. It’s warded by magic so a No-Maj eye will slide right over it. To his neighbors, the house never enters their minds, even when he’s going up the steps. It’s a safe place, the place that Graves calls home.

The minute he walks through the door Graves knows that this isn’t his home anymore.

He stops in the front hall, staring at familiar walls grown suddenly strange. He can smell the Dark magic in the air. It’s nauseating. As the door bangs shut behind him Graves crashes to his knees, choking on it. It’s as if Grindelwald is standing before him again, and there’s nothing he can do. There’s no one to catch him. There never was. He feels like it’s an hour before he climbs painstakingly to his feet, ignoring the agony that threatens to split his ribs apart again, and sets about putting things to rights.

He opens every window in the house, despite the biting winter chill, and doesn’t bother to put on a coat. He turns on all the lights and casts lighting spells until not a single shadow dares to cast itself. Graves throws Scouring Charms with abandon, making the whole house smell of lye, cleaning even the surfaces that lack dust until they practically glow in the blazing light. Every stitch of fabric—every piece of clothing, every sheet and towel, everything that Grindelwald might have touched even once—he drops in a pile on the kitchen floor, and then sets them to wash in scalding-hot water, conjured up with what little energy he has left.

It’s past midnight when he finally collapses in a chair, shivering with cold and something else, something a little harder to define, worrying at his bones. No matter how hard he works, how much he tries to forget, there’s a searing pain that the Healers couldn’t cure. The time is out of joint.

Graves spends most of the night staring unseeing into the light and thinking how much easier it would have been if Grindelwald had just thrown a Killing Curse at his head and been done with it all. Vaguely, he wonders what his neighbors would think, seeing his house lit up like this at the
witching hour of the night. Not that he would care; they’re all No-Maj and he doesn’t associate with them. It wouldn’t be good for the Director of Magical Security to be so familiar with such neighbors. Right now, though, he desperately wishes that someone—anyone!—were close to him. He wishes he hadn’t spent his career being so unbearably professional, so cool, so proud. The only one who’d come to see him in the hospital because she wanted to see him was Tina, who came out of guilt more than anything else.

A single question runs round and round in his head, and no matter how he tries he can’t banish it.

Who, in the entire Wizarding community, cared enough about Percival Graves to notice when he was replaced by another man?

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The story filters back to him in bits and pieces. He’s on official leave, still, and though no one would stop him if he came back, Graves can’t quite muster up the energy to return to his office and do his job. He gets memos, notes to keep him up to date, a newspaper delivered to his door every day, and occasionally visits from Tina. She seems to have taken personal responsibility for all that’s happened to him, and Graves can’t quite make himself push her away.

When he asks about other security breaches—had they found any of Grindelwald’s other followers among the ranks of the Aurors? In the Senate?—Tina reassures him. “Abernathy did Priori Incantatem on everybody’s wands,” she says. “He said there were no Unforgivables in any of them. And everybody went through background checks when they first applied to make sure they don’t have a history. You did half of them yourself. Even if there are any of Grindelwald’s fanatics hiding in the Department, they’ll be laying low for now.”

It’s fragmented, this story. In one instance, Graves hears the hesitation when Tina talks about someone named “Kowalski”, and he puts together after a while that this is the No-Maj who helped them out. Tina dances around what happened with him, what he does, how they met, and eventually Graves guesses that there’s something happening there with Queenie. That one never comes around because Graves flatly refuses to have a Legilimens in his house but she sends dinner over with Tina regularly anyway. Graves doesn’t ask about the No-Maj, because it’s not his business. It might be, if he’s ever really the Director of Magical Security again, but for now…

The papers mention Obscurials and British magizoologists and an escaped Occamy, and it takes Graves half an hour to pry a straight answer out of Tina. He can’t help but shake his head, when she explains the whole misadventure. She gets choked up, talking about the boy who’d turned out to be the Obscurial—Credence Barebone, Tina calls him—before she tells him that the boy is dead, not a threat to anyone anymore.

Graves won’t lie to himself: as the Director of Magical Security, he’d try to catch an Obscurial, study it, perhaps even use its power as a weapon. Grindelwald, as much as he hates to admit it, had the right idea. A war is coming, one which Grindelwald will fight without mercy, and that kind of power could be useful in building MACUSA’s war machine. It would be powered by a forsaken child, but the more ruthless part of Graves understands that it would be a necessary and critical sacrifice. A tragic sacrifice, but one that MACUSA would make anyway. It’s an uncomfortable revelation that if that’s the kind of man he really is, Graves probably shouldn’t be surprised that no one noticed he was gone.

He can’t deny that he’s intrigued by the Obscurial. It’s almost a shame he wasn’t there to see it, to study its raw power. It would have been fascinating, when he was done making sure that it didn’t destroy New York. (And, he thinks as he scours the libraries for what little information there is, something dark and angry in him wants to know about this thing that Grindelwald would torture
Graves can find nothing. No one wants to talk about Obscurials, about how they’re created, so official sources are severely lacking. But, if Tina’s to be believed, he can access the next best thing. And so Graves writes to Newt Scamander, who’s off on the continent studying his animals. It’s a short letter, just an introduction, a request for any information that Scamander has, accompanied by an endorsement from Tina.

He’s almost surprised when a response arrives. The handwriting is a barely-legible scrawl, sentences friendly but short, with a nervous tremble to them. Yes, Scamander knows a lot about Obscurials, and if Tina’s vouching for Graves he’ll be glad to share what he knows. He starts cautiously, with basics that Graves already knows, but the man is thorough. He explains what they are, where they come from, their tremendous potential.

As they send their letters back and forth, Scamander opens up from mere facts and enters into the realm of speculation. He talks about theory, which largely flies right over Graves’ head since he’s never been one for the loftier applications of magic, and about his own experiences with an Obscurial. _It was a girl in Sudan_, Scamander writes. _She’d been hurt, tortured really, and her magic came to her defense even though she couldn’t consciously access it. It was awful. I tried to remove it, but I couldn’t save her. She’d been hurt too badly and for too long. She couldn’t take any more pain._

To someone who’d spent his life doing everything in his power to protect people, this is a sickening story. It should be to anyone—except Grindelwald, who’d probably enjoy it, the bastard—and it hits Graves especially hard. How the hell had something this terrible happened to someone in New York City, right under MACUSA’s watchful eye? How could someone be tortured into becoming an Obscurial right there, right in front of all the Aurors and wizards in the greatest city in the world, and be overlooked? Graves feels guilty. He didn’t even know about the existence of this boy who’d become an Obscurial. But he should have. He feels like he should have known.

This should be the end of things between Graves and Scamander, but their strange correspondence continues anyway. Graves never meets Scamander in person, even when he briefly comes to New York to visit Tina, but they get to know each other quite well through their increasingly lengthy letters. What began as a discussion of Obscurials turns quickly branches out into discussion of Thunderbirds—the beast that Scamander unleashed to save New York—and Scamander’s other creatures. Through offhand mentions, Graves learns that the other wizard is someone of great intelligence, though he’s incredibly shy. And Scamander—who is shockingly perceptive about people for a man said to be at home only in the company of animals—picks up quickly on the fact that Graves is, contrary to popular belief, not at all fine. It’s a strange sort of friendship, unfamiliar, but there’s something compelling about Scamander that keeps Graves interested despite himself.

When _Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them_ is published, Graves receives a signed copy in the mail. _Sorry I couldn’t deliver this in person_, Scamander has written in a letter tucked inside the book. _I’m already working on Volume II. China is very busy with migrating sanzuwu at this time of year. I’m working with Chinese magizoologists to study them. Beautiful birds, really. I truly am sorry, though. Next time I’m in New York, I’d very much like to meet you face to face, Percival._

Graves has to shut the book on the letter and take a walk to clear his head, after that. It’s been more than a decade since anyone called him by his first name. He’s been “Graves” and “Mr. Graves” and “Director” for so long now, the kind of person whose authority means that a first name sounds disrespectful no matter who’s saying it. And yet, there’s Scamander, calling him by his first name, just as if they’ve been friends for years. It’s so strange and unexpected, just like everything else these days, and Graves has as usual no idea what to do. His regimented life is in pieces, and this
latest blow seems to have shattered anything he has left.

He sends a letter back, when his head is clearer. Thank you for the book, he writes. It’s no trouble about you being missing—though I do expect a sketch of one of your “sanzuwu” and perhaps a story when you’re done with your studies in China. As usual, I look forward to hearing about your adventures. Perhaps you can tell me in person when you’re next in New York, Newt.
Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

SO. I’ve changed the posting schedule to thrice weekly, because if I did it twice a week it would take UNTIL THE END OF SEPTEMBER for all of this to be completed. None of us can handle something like that. We’re too impatient. Postings will now occur Monday, Wednesday, and Saturday. :D

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Graves returns to work about two and a half months after he left the hospital. At first, things seem fine, and then they aren’t fine all at once. He lasts exactly one month after his return as the Director of Magical Security before he walks into the President’s office and resigns on the spot.

She looks at him with compassion and something approaching pity. “You’ll be missed,” she says.

“Thank you,” Graves says. He slides his badge across the desk to her. It’s a fitting end to his career, he thinks. Handing in his badge to the President herself. Anything less, after all he’s done, would look terrible in the eyes of MACUSA.

He’d have been just as happy to leave everything on his desk and walk away without a word.

“If I may ask, now that I’m no longer your superior,” President Picquery says, “where will you go from here?”

“I believe it’s time for me to retire,” Graves says simply, without elaboration.

He has a disfiguration on the right side of his face from where his cheekbone was broken and everyone who speaks to him is very careful about looking away from it. He has permanent dark circles under his eyes from seemingly infinite sleepless nights. His hair has begun to go gray all over and he’s only just forty-one. His hand trembles uncontrollably when he has to perform anything but the simplest magic. He can’t go out and face Dark wizards without locking up and forgetting how to breathe.

It’s definitely time to retire.

The President rises to her feet and shakes his hand firmly. “We truly will miss you,” she says quietly. Repentantly. Will they miss him? They didn’t last time. She studies him for a moment, and then asks, “If there were anyone who might be half good enough to be your replacement, who would you endorse for the office of the Director?”

Graves considers for a moment. There’s Jeremiah Fontaine—young, decent enough wizard, a good Auror, with a family name to back him—but he doesn’t have any leadership qualities. Abernathy, one of the Senior Aurors, who has connections through the whole bureaucracy of MACUSA, but who no one in the Department of Magical Law Enforcement seems to like. And then…well, then there’s the witch who’s been carrying most of the weight of the Department for the last several months. “Porpentina Goldstein,” he says. “She’s a damn good Auror.”

President Picquery nods. “I’ll take that under consideration,” she says.
Tina shows up on his doorstep three days later.

Graves almost passes out when she flings her arms around him in a breathless hug. He catches her on instinct, returning the hug, and almost forgets to hear what she’s saying.

“Thank you, thank you, thank you!” she repeats over and over.

Awkwardly, he pats her shoulder. So Picquery did listen to his recommendation after all. “You’ve more than earned the position,” he says.

Tina steps back, grinning widely, so happy that she might just lift off the ground and soar away. “I can’t believe this is happening,” she says.

“It’s a tough job,” Graves warns. He smiles, though, infected by her enthusiasm. The places where she touched him are still warm. He doesn’t normally want physical comfort. So it’s strange that he badly wants to haul Tina into another hug. “But I believe you’ll do well.”

Another woman, a blonde, is standing on the sidewalk watching them. “I keep telling her that,” she calls, “but she just won’t listen!”

Graves furrows his brow and looks to Tina curiously. The other woman is familiar, but Graves can’t quite place her. It’s not surprising. His memory for faces was taken out and shot at some point in the last eight months and he doesn’t even remember when it happened.

“Oh,” she says, half embarrassed, “that’s my sister Queenie. The Legilimens.”

Queenie waves and gives him a brilliant smile.

“Ah,” Graves says. He tries to blank out his thoughts, but his Occlumency was also destroyed by repeated application of a particularly brutal brand of Legilimency. Something else that Grindelwald took from him, he supposes. Another part of himself left to die down there in the dark.

“Don’t worry,” Queenie says cheerfully, “I won’t tell anyone what you’re thinking.”

Graves has a sudden headache.

Tina is effusive in her thanks, and somehow she convinces Graves to let her take him to dinner as a real thank you. Queenie comes along, and true to her word she never speaks aloud of any of the thoughts she has to hear drifting through Graves’ head. Rather, she keeps up a light chatter, tactful and graceful and exactly the sort of thing he needs to hear, and he finds himself grateful to the beautiful Legilimens.

The restaurant is one which caters to an exclusively Wizarding clientele, so it’s no surprise that people turn with murmurs of surprise when the Goldstein sisters walk in and Queenie has Percival Graves on her arm. Tina marches in with her usual indomitability, head held high, glaring at anyone who dares to look at them askance. Graves understands the stares—surviving captivity in the hands of the most dangerous Dark wizard the world earns one a sort of grim notoriety—and he’s sure Queenie does too, because the arm linked through his tightens almost imperceptibly. Her dazzling smile takes on a sharp edge. People look away, feeling her laying their thoughts bare and listening in to their secrets. Graves thinks suddenly that the only reason Tina is Director of Magical Security and Queenie isn’t is because Tina’s ambitions must be greater than her sister’s.

They take a table in the corner. Graves can’t help but put his back to the wall, where he can see the door and has a vantage on the whole restaurant. It’s a habit bred by years of training, years of knowing that should trouble break out he has to be the first person to respond, but at this moment
the habit leaves a nasty taste in his mouth.

Queenie keeps the conversation going effortlessly. It’s the magical skill of a Legilimens combined with the verbal skills of a politician and the more he watches her the more Graves admires her. She could be the President, if she wanted, if that was her ambition, but instead she’s here at this table with them, wasting her talents on making him comfortable.

When Tina excuses herself for a moment, Queenie looks Graves straight in the face. It’s like being caught under a spotlight. He has no walls and nowhere to hide from her knowing gaze. “It’s not a waste,” she says softly. “You are not a waste.”

He doesn’t know how to reply to that, doesn’t even really know what to think, but whatever he’s thinking makes Queenie smile anyway.

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Things progress in this fashion for a week or two. His life still feels aimless, undirected, but he’s content with it for the moment. Without work, Graves has seemingly endless amounts of time on his hands. Supporting himself isn’t a problem—the job of the Director of Magical Security comes with a hefty stipend and fair amounts of hazard pay, and he’s never been one for a lavish lifestyle so he has savings in plenty, as well as the Graves legacy to which he is the sole inheritor. So money isn’t an issue. But finding things to do with himself is.

He tries walking, for a few days, but he twitches at every car backfire and every shout or scream. In a city so full of such noises, Graves can barely make it down a street. He doesn’t want to go to the Wizarding parts of town, because people there have a tendency to stare. The city parks aren’t bad, exactly, but the problem remains that he has no one to walk with. Tina is increasingly busy as the duties of her position start to weigh on her, and Queenie has a job and—Graves suspects—a certain No-Maj sweetheart to see.

So he tries books next, and that’s better. It’s been so long since he’s read for pleasure that Graves feels a bit of a shock when he starts a book one morning, and the next time he looks up it’s three o’clock in the afternoon. He keeps reading. It’s just him and the ticking clock, a soothing reminder that he isn’t trapped in the disjointed time that he experiences in his nightmares. No matter the subject, it keeps him from thinking too hard about anything else. He keeps them meticulously shelved, alphabetically by title and by author within that, a small illusion of control.

Tina’s fondly exasperated when she visits for the first time after he re-shelves everything. “Well,” she says, looking around and rolling her eyes, “this is so fussy and ridiculous that at least I’m sure you’re not Grindelwald now.”

That comment startles Graves into laughter—and when did that happen, that he could laugh about that bastard wearing his face?—and for a split second Tina looks shocked before giggling a little herself. Any tension that remained between them from Tina’s guilt fades away. Something else eases into place. Things get a little bit better.

Of course it doesn’t last. There’s a bitter cold snap in early May, sudden and unexpected, and everyone’s pulling out the winter coats they thought were safe to put away. No one goes out unless they have to, which is why Graves is shocked when Tina arrives on his doorstep at ten o’clock at night.

“I can’t stay,” she says, stamping her feet in the front hall, trying to warm up. Her eyes dart about as if she’s looking for danger. “I just—I thought you deserved to know—I’m not supposed to—”
“Stop stuttering,” Graves says. Some of his old Director voice must have crept back in, because
Tina straightens up a little bit and looks him in the eye.

“The Obscurus is loose again,” she says.

Graves feels like he’s going to sink through the floor. “What?”

Tina’s hand shoots out and grabs his shoulder, steadying him. He must look like he’s about to pass
out. That would be an accurate assessment. “We didn’t defeat it, apparently,” she says. Her voice is
tight, upset. “Someone saw it and now half the city’s in a panic, every Auror is out, and I should be
looking too but I thought you should know. I can’t leave Abernathy and Fontaine in charge for
long, so—”

“Let me get my coat,” Graves says, “I have to go with—”

“The president ordered that you not get involved,” Tina says.

Graves stares. She’s serious. She’s not the sort to throw things like that around lightly. “Then what
does she expect me to do?”

“She expects for you to just sit and wait,” Tina says. “I know it’s not what you want, it’s not what I
want either, but…”

“No, I understand,” Graves says, forcing a semblance of rationality and calm into his voice. “It was
manipulated by a man wearing my face. If I found it, I could cause a catastrophe.”

Tina studies him for a moment, then nods. “Right,” she says.

Graves gives her a small push toward the door. “Go,” he says. “Your Aurors need you.”

He waits until the door has closed behind her, until he hears her feet going down the steps, until he
hears the snap of Tina Apparating away. Then Graves turns and takes down his coat. He buttons it
with fingers that only slightly shake, and wraps a scarf around his neck as a concession to the frigid
weather. It isn’t snowing, but the wind will scour him to the bone if he’s not careful.

The motivation for him to go outside is not entirely clear. Graves doesn’t examine it too closely,
because it’s a tangled mess that he doesn’t have time to unpick just now. There’s the idea of getting
some small revenge on Grindelwald by taking away the thing he wanted most. There’s a sense of
responsibility, that he should be the one leading the hunt, that he’s abandoned his Aurors. There’s a
slow-burning fury at his own impotence.

Under it all is a current of the words Newt had written him about Obscurials, about how they’re
formed, about their pitiful state and the tragedy of them. He remembers the quiver in Tina’s voice
when she talked about the boy who’d become an Obscurial. Graves is fully aware that he wasn’t
the only one tormented by Grindelwald. He wasn’t the only one broken in the mess of last year.
There was another victim. And Graves will be damned if he doesn’t try to find him.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter: the one we've all been waiting for...
He Apparates into Upper Manhattan, into the middle of an empty street in front of a horribly familiar building. He suspects that, if the Obscurial fled anywhere, it would have gone to ground here. It’s an instinct, but Graves hadn’t gotten to be Director of Magical Security by ignoring his instincts. He recalls that, once or twice, there had been another person here. They’d never come downstairs to the basement, but if this had been Grindelwald’s lair, then it made sense that he’d bring his Obscurial here. And if Graves has had to work to keep his feet from just bringing him back here, then he’d bet actual money that the Obscurial feels the same way.

For a moment, Graves stands on the street and stares up into the empty windows. He can smell the rot even from here, the poison of Dark magic eating into the very bricks of the building. No one else is about. The street lamps, in this part of town, are dark. The wind howls and even through his heavy coat and scarf, Graves feels the cold in his bones. His cheekbone aches.

It’s now or never. He goes up the steps with a firm, unhurried tread, remarkably calm, considering where he is. He still hesitates before he pushes open the unlocked door. The hinges scream, a warning to anyone in the building. He can taste the dust. It’s still more familiar than the taste of the air in his own house. Graves has to stop for a moment, leaning on the doorframe, before he can muster up the courage to keep going.

Many of the interior walls of the building are gone, only the most load-bearing left to hold up the crumbling ceiling. Graves takes a moment to get his bearings—there, set in the floor to the left, the door to the basement, and to the right is the door that leads into one of the few remaining rooms. And directly ahead is the rusting metal staircase that leads to the second floor.

He raises his wand and whispers, “Lumos,” and blue-white light spills out to illuminate the wide room. It’s just as empty as he recalls it being. But there are footprints in the dust, someone walking fast, headed directly for the stairs.

Graves follows. His footsteps send echoes flying, but he doesn’t bother with even attempting stealth. There’s only one other pair of footprints. His hunch was right. The Obscurial is here. The only flaw in the plan now is that he has no idea what he’ll do when he finds it.

The stairs creak ominously as Graves ascends to the second floor. He doesn’t know the original purpose of this building. The No-Majs built it and abandoned it, and he doesn’t care much about why. All he cares about is the Obscurial, which is somewhere on this story.

He’s almost surprised when he comes to the top of the steps and sees the person huddled in the middle of the floor. It’s a boy—no, a young man—and he’s a pile of angles and sharp edges, knees drawn up to his chest and arms wrapped around his legs. His clothes are almost entirely rags, holding together by threads and half-burst seams. He’s barefoot and lacks a jacket, and he’s shivering with cold. There’s a pendant hanging around his neck by a slender chain: a strange design of a line bisecting a circle inside a triangle. Graves puts it aside: he’s not here to worry about jewelry. The young man’s shadow, clear in the bright light from the wand, is far too big for
his body, nebulous and moving with a shuddering that looks almost like breathing. Graves ignores it. He knows very well what it is. But he’s not here for that shadow.

Graves stares at the young man and tries to remember the name Tina gave him, what feels like forever ago, when she first told him the story of the Obscurial. Finally, he says, with a confidence he certainly doesn’t feel, “Credence?”

He looks up, expression somewhere between eager and terrified. “You…you came back.”

“I…what?” Graves says, momentarily as surprised as Credence. And then Graves remembers. The last time that this young man saw Graves’ face, Grindelwald had been wearing it for a mask.

Credence stares at him. After a moment, he says, “You aren’t him.”

“No,” he says. “I’m not. I’m the real Percival Graves. How did you know?”

“No face,” Credence says quietly. But he’s not looking at the scar, the disfiguration which should be a dead giveaway. He’s looking intently at Graves’ eyes and Graves wonders what the young man sees there, what gave him the clue that he’s not confronting Grindelwald now.

They don’t have time for further pleasantries. Tina is a smart woman, and sooner or later she’ll think to come here. And if the Aurors come, they won’t be here for the young man. They’ll be here for his shadow. So Graves takes a few steps forward and offers a hand to Credence, who still hasn’t risen from his spot on the floor. “We need to go,” he says.

“Why?” Credence asks.

“They’re hunting you,” Graves says.

Credence’s eyes turn white and his shadow swells, rising behind him, casting its own shadows. He almost seems to flicker, darkness surging beneath his skin. “I want them to come,” he says.

“I doubt, if Tina Goldstein likes you as much as I think she does,” Graves says mildly, unable to muster up the energy to be afraid, “that you’re the kind of person who wants to destroy half the city with your Obscurus.”

That seems to give Credence pause. After a moment, the shadow falls back. He takes Graves’ hand and lets himself be pulled to his feet. Now Graves can see that the name “Barebone” is more than a surname, it’s a description. The young man is criminally malnourished. His posture is horrific, but even half stooped he’s nearly of a height with Graves. His hands are scarred and there are more scars visible on his arms where his sleeves have torn open.

That old part of Graves, the long-quiet part that wants to protect people, the part that drove him to become an Auror in the first place, wakes for the first time since he emerged from Grindelwald’s hold. It wants to hurt the people that hurt this young man. Graves would fully let it, should the opportunity arise. He doesn’t want to kill the Obscurial, no matter what Tina or Picquery might have assumed he would if he was allowed to go on this hunt with them. Looking at Credence—Graves knows the expression on his face intimately. He sees it every morning in the mirror.

“Where will you take me?” Credence asks. When he isn’t about to explode into an Obscurus, he’s remarkably passive, Graves thinks. It’s an odd thing for someone so powerful.

“My house,” Graves says. “No one will look for you there.”

Credence cocks his head. Tentative, he asks, “Aren’t you the Director of…of Magical Security?”
“I was,” Graves says, “but I’m not anymore.”

“Oh,” Credence says.

Graves has no idea what he’s doing. He’s planning on the fly. This wasn’t supposed to happen, any of it, but he won’t give Credence over to MACUSA. He thought it himself: an Obscurial is tremendously powerful. If MACUSA gets hold of Credence, he’ll be nothing more than a weapon. He’ll be tortured and burned to ashes by his own power.

“Hold onto me,” he instructs. It’s been a while since Graves performed Side-Along-Apparition, but he’s done it often enough that it’s second nature even after all this time.

Credence hesitantly steps closer, bracing himself against Graves’ side. He doesn’t say anything and he doesn’t look at Graves, but he clutches at Graves’ coat almost desperately. It’s odd behavior, but at this point there’s no time to question it. Instead, Graves simply Disapparates, heading straight back to his house.

They reappear with an earsplitting crack in the middle of the kitchen. Graves lets go of the young man as he lands, already moving around the room throwing out every warding spell he knows. Credence staggers a bit, but holds up well. He doesn’t say anything, but follows Graves’ movements from the corners of his eyes. It’s the work of a moment to have the kitchen warded well enough that a cursory examination won’t notice anything, especially given the sheer volume of existing protective spells that Graves has placed on the house over the years. Anyone short of Grindelwald, President Picquery, or a wizard of similar might would not even get through the door.

“May I ask a question, sir?” Credence asks, as Graves takes off his coat and scarf.

“Yes,” Graves says. His mind is going a mile a minute. He’s just kidnapped a wanted man, a known Obscurial with the power to bring down a city, and he wasn’t even supposed to know that the hunt was happening. This will take a hell of a lot of explaining. Unless…he can somehow manage to put himself in a position where he doesn’t have to explain anything at all.

The question drops heavily into the silence of the kitchen. “If you…if you aren’t him, then why did you come looking for me?”

Graves stops, his back to Credence. He really doesn’t want to answer that question. Finally, he has to speak. He has to come up with some kind of answer. “He took me,” Graves says slowly, still not looking at Credence. “He used my face to get into MACUSA. To get you to trust him. To get everyone to trust him. He—did things—to me. As I’m sure he did to you.”

There’s an even longer moment of silence. Finally, Credence whispers, “Yes.” There’s a pause, and then he asks, “How did you know to find me?”

“Tina told me about you.” There’s a sharp intake of breath from behind him, a sound of fear and shock, but Graves ignores it and goes on. “You aren’t as dangerous as they said you were. I’m not going to hurt you, but if you go back out there MACUSA definitely will.”

“You should have left me,” Credence says. “I’ve sinned so much, I’m tainted…”

“I’ve sinned,” Graves says. He thinks about the sins that the No-Majs go on and on about. At the moment, wrath is by far his favorite. Always has been, come to think of it. “Do you think I’m tainted?”

Credence doesn’t answer.
Graves looks over his shoulder. The young man is staring at the ground, almost completely unmoving, hands folded behind his back. “I wasn’t going to leave you to the Aurors,” he says. He can’t quite manage gentleness—the moment is too tense and he’s worrying too much about too many things to manage his tone—but he tries, at least, to avoid sharpness. “It wasn’t you who did wrong, any more than I did wrong when that bastard was running around with my face for a suit.”

“I destroyed half of New York,” Credence says to the floor.

Graves turns and leans against the wall. “Do you even know what you are, Credence?” he asks.

Credence shakes his head. “They keep calling me an Obscurial, but…”

“This is what you are,” Graves says. He’s parroting Newt’s words, but they’ll have to do until he can find some of his own. “You’re someone whose magical powers were repressed by violence. Because of the pain, you’ve acquired an Obscurus, a powerful magical parasite that can lash out and protect you when you’re helpless.”

“So—he wasn’t lying,” Credence says, half to himself. “I did have magic.”

“You do,” Graves says. “A hell of a lot of it, and stronger than any wizard I’ve ever seen, if the power of your Obscurus is anything to go by.”

Finally, Credence looks up. His expression is desperate. “He—he promised to teach me, but he lied all along,” he says, a little wildly. The lights flicker and the shadows rise. Magic crackles in the air.

“His name is Grindelwald,” Graves says flatly. “Use it. And he lied to every wizard in New York City. Did worse than that to me. You aren’t alone.”

The shadows recede, if only a bit. “What did he do to you?” Credence asks.

“Tortured me,” Graves says. He’s glad of the wall at his back, because it’s all that’s stopping him from keeling over. “Five months, in the basement of the building where I found you. Kept me alive so he could use me to brew Polyjuice Potion—that’s a potion that lets you take on someone else’s appearance.”

Credence looks him over. “He didn’t do a good job on the potion, then,” he says.

This is the second time that Credence has pointed out that Grindelwald’s disguise was terrible. It gives Graves half a mind to summon all his former Aurors and yell at them for an hour about how a young man he’d never met could do a better job identifying him than the whole lot of them. Of course, he can’t do that, but the thought is still satisfying. “How can you tell?” he asks, instead.

“You aren’t as…” Credence pauses, as if looking for a word. “…as hard, I guess.”

“You aren’t as…” Credence pauses, as if looking for a word. “…as hard, I guess.”

“That’s good to hear,” Graves mutters. He studies Credence again, this time with a bit less of a pejorative eye. The young man really is impressively tall, though Graves doesn’t change his earlier assessment of “criminal malnourishment” and terrible posture. He could be anywhere from eighteen to twenty-five, with that haircut, in those clothes. His eyes are odd—a bit too pale to be ordinary eyes. The scars on his hands and arms stand out prominently in the bright light of the kitchen. Despite all of that, though, there’s a certain openness about his face that gives Graves a real hope that Credence truly didn’t intend to cause all the destruction Tina and the papers described to him.

Credence shuffles uncomfortably under the scrutiny. “I should go,” he says.
“Where?” Graves asks. “It’s damn cold out there. Aurors are looking for you.”

“I can’t…” Credence says, looking back at the floor. “You shouldn’t let me stay here. I…I’m broken, Mr. Graves.”

Graves closes his eyes and pinches the bridge of his nose. There’s a familiar thought. It’s the same one that plagues him when he can’t cast a charm right, when his Occlumency fails him in front of Queenie, when he turns on half the lights in the house because shadows make him too jumpy. Broken. He hasn’t ever used it to describe himself before, but it fits. “So am I, Credence,” he says, letting the weary honesty come out despite himself. “So am I.”
Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

This is where the mess begins. It was at this point in the fic that I started to do some research, just to supplement things and protect the verisimilitude of the story. From here on forward, there will be footnotes appearing in some (read: most) chapters with details about the metric fuckton of research I did to make this fic good. Prepare yourself. This fic is about to turn into a HISTORY LESSON. Buckle up.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

By some miracle, Graves convinces Credence to stay. He has a spare room—exactly one, and it’s hosted only a few people in its time—which he hands over to Credence, along with clothes that are in significantly better shape than Credence’s current tattered things. The measurements aren’t right, but they can worry about that later.

After Credence has disappeared into the spare room, Graves paces the house for hours. He has no idea what he’s doing. Had he forgotten that one of his two points of contact with the outside world is a world-class Legilimens? Had he forgotten that the other was an Auror, and the Director of Magical Security, no less? How exactly is he supposed to hide an Obscurial—Credence—effectively for longer than five minutes?

Eventually, he manages to talk sense into himself. Tina will be busy for the next few days, perhaps even a week, accounting for the fallout of this incident. There will be false sightings for at least a fortnight, guaranteeing that she won’t have time to come look in on him. And keeping Queenie away will rely on luck, skill, and years of stubbornness when it comes to not answering doors. Graves has all three, so he should be fine.

Then…what to do with Credence, now that he’s here? Graves can’t deny the young man’s incredible power. It’s there in his shadow, half free of its shell of a host, and it won’t be contained for much longer. He has to help Credence control it, or risk causing even more destruction.

Broken. That’s what Credence had called himself. Like he’s a dropped teacup, or the spine of a book, or a door off its hinges. Like he’s an object, to be used and thrown away when it’s no longer useful. The word sits sour on Graves’ tongue. It won’t go away, because it’s a perfect expression of exactly how Graves feels. Broken. This is his fault, all of it, for letting Grindelwald get the better of him. For being too weak. For giving up. The least he can do is try to fix some of the damage.

He’ll start by fixing Credence Barebone.

In the morning, Graves goes about things methodically. He keeps his wand on his person, ready to throw up a shield at the slightest provocation. He dresses, not as if he’s going to work, but well enough that if he has to travel fast he won’t seem entirely out of place. Pants, shirt, waistcoat, no cravat, no jacket. By his usual standards, he might as well be wearing only underwear.

He makes coffee; not with magic, but by hand. This, along with alphabetizing his books, is one of the very few things that Graves ever does without magic. It’s comforting, somehow, that this was always his ritual, even before magic became a difficulty. Soon, the whole house smells of coffee, and it’s not long after that Graves hears a soft step in the hallway. Credence hesitates by the door.
Graves doesn’t look up from the coffee he’s pouring into cups.

“Come on in,” he says. “I’m not going to attack you.”

Credence comes into the kitchen, eyes darting around nervously, stopping just inside the doorway. He’s dressed, not in those rags from yesterday, but in the clothes Graves left by his door last night. Corey himself only knew what Graves could have done if Credence refused to wear them. That pendant is still there, hanging conspicuously, slightly unsettling. Again, Graves ignores it. It’s much less important than Credence.

The young man doesn’t speak, though, just looks around with wide eyes. Given what Graves has heard about his prior living conditions from Tina, he isn’t surprised. Credence has probably never seen a place like this. Graves—the most notorious confirmed bachelor in the whole New York wizarding community, possibly in the whole magical community of the East Coast—doesn’t do much decorating, but he keeps a clean house and knows basic domestic magic. The windows have curtains, the hardwood floors are polished, the furniture is in good repair. It’s about as far from the proud poverty of the Second Salem church as a house could possibly be.

“Sit down,” Graves says after a moment, when it’s clear that if he doesn’t Credence will stand in the doorway all day.

Credence sits. It’s a little frightening, now he comes to think of it, how quickly and easily Credence responds to commands. Was it Grindelwald who’d instilled that kind of obedience, or someone else entirely?

Graves doesn’t want to unpack all of that now. Instead, he sets a cup of coffee in front of the young man. “You’ve had coffee before?”

“Yes, sir,” Credence says.

“Then go ahead,” Graves says. “Drink. Then we need to talk.”

To Credence’s credit, once he has the coffee cup in his hands he doesn’t hesitate to drink it. The words “criminal malnourishment” go around Graves’ head again and he wonders how long it will take them to go away for good. The words also remind him that, even if he’s comfortable living off coffee and spite, Credence probably can’t. He flicks his wand to set the toaster going. It’s adapted from a No-Maj design to be useful to a wizard. Since it makes the fastest and easiest food, it’s also his favorite appliance.

When Credence sets his empty coffee cup carefully down on the table, making hardly a sound at all, Graves clears his throat. “So.”

“What do you want to know, sir?” Credence asks the table.

“Oh, for…look at me when you’re speaking, would you?”

Credence looks up with an effort. “What do you want to know, sir?” he asks again, voice even quieter than before.

“I want to know just how much he told you about our world,” Graves says. “What do you know?”

“I know that there are wizards and witches,” Credence says slowly. “That you have your own government. You live in secrecy, but you don’t want to, because you’re more powerful than people without magic.”
Grindelwald had tried to indoctrinate Credence, then. Had tried to teach him that secrecy was something to be ashamed of and discarded by any means necessary. Had wanted to use this innocent, unhappy young man as a weapon, instead of actually doing something to help him. Graves almost has to swallow his tongue to stop himself from shouting.

His thoughts must show on his face because Credence quails and stops. “Did I say something wrong, sir? I’m sorry…” His hands twitch and he hunches in on himself again. It’s like he expects Graves to strike him.

“No,” Graves says shortly. “He lied to you about why things are this way. We can talk about the International Statute of Secrecy later.”

“The…what?”

Never mind. Apparently they’re having the foreign affairs talk now. Fantastic; the one area of politics in which Graves is actually terrible. But he does know a great deal about the ISS. It was, at one time, his job to enforce it. “The International Statute of Secrecy was signed in 1689,” he says. “It was passed by the International Confederation of Wizards to protect wizards from No-Majs who would hunt and kill us. People were hesitant at first, but its usefulness was proven in Salem. That was the year it truly came into force. After that, people like me were given a bit more power to do what’s necessary to keep wizards safe from…”

“…people like me,” Credence says.

Graves shrugs. “More like your mother,” he says. “Second Salem would have been trouble for us if they’d ever proven that magic was real. And Grindelwald wants to tear down the ISS. He wants us to reveal ourselves and go to war on the No-Majs, which would be devastating for both sides. He was using you as a step in his plan.”

Credence nods. “He told me about…MACUSA? You’ve mentioned it too.”

“The Magical Congress of the United States of America,” Graves says. He leans back in his chair and folds his arms. “It’s their task to uphold the Statute of Secrecy in America. A bit different from the No-Maj government—I don’t know how they get anything done with two legislatures—but we still vote for our Senate. They make laws. And the Aurors exist to enforce that law and protect the magical community from threats like Grindelwald.”

“Oh,” Credence says. “And you were part of that?”

“Yes,” Graves says. “I was an Auror. Now…well, I don’t think I’m really going to be spending time with them any time soon.”

“You broke the law by finding me, didn’t you? The International Statute of Secrecy, I mean.”

Well. That’s a bit finer of a point than Graves has been using, but it’s true. “Yes.”

“I shouldn’t be here,” Credence says. “I’m putting you in danger.”

Graves barks out a humorless laugh. Credence startles, eyes wide. “I haven’t been out of danger since I became an Auror. I don’t think this is the trouble that’s going to kill me.”

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They enter into an uneasy truce. Credence clearly has no idea what to do, and neither, honestly, does Graves. He doesn’t know why he’s describing this as a “truce”, but the word seems to fit.
Neither man is inclined to empty words or small talk. Credence moves around the house quietly, seemingly unable to decide what to do with his hands. Graves can empathize: he felt like that, the first weeks he was home again. He tries to give the young man space to navigate, to discern who he is without Grindelwald’s influence over him.

Though he’s not used to eating much at home—he has the money to eat where he wants, and there were options available to him when he worked at the Woolworth Building every day—Graves does his level best to actually feed Credence. He tries. He fails often, but Credence never seems to mind the failures. He discloses that he was never allowed much before, which confirms the idea of “criminal malnourishment”. It takes some mild coaxing before Credence figures out that he’s actually allowed to eat as much as he needs to, or wants to, and soon after that he starts to look a little less like he’s one meal away from starvation. It’s odd, for Graves to be actually trying to produce decent meals on a regular basis, but he finds that he likes it. It’s one more thing that makes this feel like some kind of new normal.

Graves studies up on some magic that will allow him to fix clothes. It’s bothersome, the way that Credence’s borrowed clothes hang off him as if he’s a coatrack. Graves knows how to mend things—how many times has that coat of his been nearly destroyed in a duel?—but he’s not nearly that good at tailoring. Fleetingly, he wishes he could ask Queenie for help, since she’s so good at this kind of magic, but that’s just not going to work for now.

He’s a competent wizard. No one would dispute that (well, Grindelwald would, but no sane man would pay attention to his opinions). He’ll be able to fix the clothing situation. But Graves’ real power has always been in combat magic. He’s heard people compare him to a force of nature and he supposes that’s true. His wand is and always has been less of an enhancement to his power than it is a focus for the raw energy he brings to magic. Curses, hexes, and jinxes are always his best work. Of course, he knows the finer kinds of spellwork—for example, charms of protection are the inverse of a curse and thus fairly easy for him—but he finds that performing them is always more difficult without a wand.

Fortunately, he’s good at wandless magic. And the plan taking shape in his head, inspired by some of Newt’s earlier letters about the possibility of taming an Obscurus by helping its Obscurial harness their magic properly, will require all of that skill and knowledge. Graves is going to teach Credence magic. Since there’s no way to get the young man a wand, it will have to be wandless magic. If he can help Credence tame the Obscurus, then maybe he’ll be able to make a case for Credence’s integration into society. He has to try something, at least.

But first, he needs to help Credence resolve the issue of clothing.

Credence has been in the house six days when Graves finally thinks he has things well enough in hand that he’ll be able to pull off some basic tailoring. He calls Credence into the kitchen and tells him to bring the few articles of clothing he has. “Since I can’t get you out of the house to find you proper clothes,” Graves says, already trying to get a read on Credence’s exact measurements, “we’re going to do this the wizarding way.”

“The…wizarding way?” Credence asks, sidling along the wall to drop the neatly folded clothes on the table in front of Graves. How he folds those so crisply without magic, Graves will never know.

“Magic,” he says, and holds up his wand.

This would be hard enough if Graves was trying to do this with anyone. It’s even worse when that person is Credence Barebone, who won’t stand up straight long enough for Graves to see his actual height. He doesn’t walk away—Graves isn’t sure if the young man actually has the spine in him to do something like that—but he’s clearly unhappy.
“Why are you wasting your time on me, sir?” Credence finally asks.

Graves looks up from the book in front of him, a slim thing he hadn’t had to use since he’d first moved into an apartment alone more than two decades ago. It’s got details on how to quickly Transfigure clothing into a more tailored shape, which might be traditionally witch’s magic but is absolutely necessary for a man living on his own. “This is not a waste,” he says. “And you are not a waste. If you want a chance to enter Wizarding society, then—”

Credence shakes his head. “It’s no use trying to make me fit in,” he says with a straightforward, dogmatic finality. “I’m not meant to be anything special. You’d be better off killing me, Mr. Graves.”

Someday, Graves will actually understand the things Credence says. Today is not that day. “I’m not going to kill you,” he says. “Besides the fact that I went to a lot of trouble to find you and keep you safe, I don’t just kill innocent men.”

“I thought…that’s what everyone always told me,” Credence says, looking a little lost. “If you can’t be what you’re supposed to be, then you’re a burden. You’re better off dead.”

For Merlin’s sake, he’s serious. Graves sets down his wand and stands up from the table. “Who exactly,” he asks, “told you that?”

“My mother,” Credence says, hesitates, and adds, “and so did…he.”

If he ever gets his hands on Grindelwald, the man will wish he was dead long before Graves gets done with him. It’s one thing to hear about the kinds of things that he says in his pamphlets and speeches and a whole other thing to hear them come out of the mouth of a young man like Credence. And do No-Majs think the same way? What kind of nightmarish world do they think they live in?

“Do not ever think that,” Graves says.

“But—” Credence starts.

Graves cuts him off. “If you deserve to die, then so do I,” he snaps.

Credence jerks, surprised, and looks up at Graves. “You’re not like me,” he says.

“I am.” Graves steps forward, closer than he’s stood to Credence since they Apparated out of the building where he’d been hiding. “I resigned my position because I couldn’t cast a charm or think straight under pressure. I’ve barely left this house in weeks because I can’t look anyone in the eye. I’m useless. In your words, I’m broken and a burden. If you deserve to die, then—”

“Stop it!” Credence shouts.

So he can speak louder than a whisper. “Do you get it?” Graves asks, keeping his voice level.

Credence doesn’t answer. But he doesn’t leave, either, and as Graves turns back to the mundane work of trying to figure out how to Transfigure clothes without destroying them, he thinks he sees a thoughtful expression on Credence’s face. Progress. Slow, small steps, but progress all the same.

Chapter End Notes
On the subject of toasters. (Yes, this is the first piece of research I did. Don’t make fun of me.) The links are to two sites which detail the many kinds of toasters used in the 1920s and the history of toasters in general. For those who don’t have time to follow the link, here’s the gist: manual toasters were in use throughout the 20s, with the slice toaster making its debut in 1921 by a patent from the Waters-Genter Company. The pop-up toaster (an early version of those we use today) appeared for the first time in 1926. Interestingly, pre-sliced bread didn’t appear until 1928, a year after this fic begins. For the sake of the fic, I made the assumption that magic could compensate for the Muggle world’s drawbacks. This is one of the rare times this happens, so enjoy it.
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

Monday update!!! Shoutout to all of you who've been commenting on every chapter.
Y'all make my day, you know that? <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

After a while, Graves asks how old Credence is. It’s hard to tell: he’s still too thin, carries himself too stooped, acts too shy and too worldly at the same time for Graves to get a good read on him. In the five months since his “death”, the young man’s hair has grown out of that horrifying bowl cut Graves had seen in the few photos of Credence that exist from before the disaster—all from news clippings and reports from Tina. That makes him look older, because he’s no longer sporting some deranged version of a child’s haircut, but still.

“I think I’m twenty-four, sir,” Credence says. “I don’t know. I’m sorry. Ma was never…birthdays weren’t important, so I don’t know exactly.”

Well, it’s right on the outside edge of Graves’ initial estimate, but it’ll do. He feels a little bit better about this whole mess—Credence isn’t actually a child, he’s someone who’s definitely capable of taking care of himself—but at the same time he feels even angrier. A man of Credence’s age should be independent, rushing into things head-on, cocky and carefree and sure of himself. Credence is none of those things.

But what he lacks in youthful zeal, he makes up for in other areas. The young man could only have made it as long as he had in Second Salem by having more survival skills than most men twice his age. The longer Graves is around him the more he recognizes the keen intelligence hidden under Credence’s shy, frightened demeanor. He’s sharp and perceptive. Without Graves ever saying anything directly, Credence pieces together a picture of Wizarding society that, when they talk about it at last, is remarkably accurate. In the arena of magical theory, it’s the same way. He’s more intelligent than half the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, that’s for sure.

And he’s unusually kind, too. It doesn’t take long of being in the house for Credence to start making coffee in the morning before Graves is even awake. When Graves tries to tell him that it’s not necessary, that he doesn’t have to do things for him if he wants to stay, Credence manages to look him mostly in the eye and say that he wants to. He must have noticed how much Graves hates the dark, because Credence starts to leave lights on in empty rooms when evening falls, just around the time that Graves starts to feel claustrophobic.

He seems to also have noticed the fact that Graves still struggles to use magic for even simple task. Summoneing Charms, spells to light the stove, or any of the other myriad sundry spells a wizard uses to run a house—they’re often beyond him, foiled by a shaky hand or a burst of anxiety at the wrong moment. And Credence, without ever saying a word about it, compensates. When a Summoneing Charm fails, he silently brings the desired object to Graves. He starts carrying a box of matches in his pocket. It’s No-Maj help, but it’s help that no one else has given him. Though he can’t quite enunciate his feelings on the matter, Graves hopes Credence picks up on it anyway.

And all of this feeds fuel to the slow-burning rage building up in Graves. Credence’s constant apologies, the way he freezes in fear when there’s a sudden motion or sound, his silence—those are
the kinds of things that people pick up after years of abuse. It wasn’t Grindelwald who’d tried to break Credence. It was Mary Lou Barebone. The more he learns about that woman who ran Second Salem, the more he hates her. She was a menace to more than wizards; she was a menace to her own children. Graves has arrested people for the kinds of things that he’s getting the inkling she did to them. And though Credence never, ever says that the woman was in the wrong—he defends her at every turn, repeating over and over that she did everything she could to save him and his soul—it’s obvious that she hurt him much more deeply than he’ll admit out loud. Credence deserved—deserves!—so much more than everything the world gave him.

Eventually, the tension eases a little. Credence stops trying to get Graves to throw him out or kill him. Graves, for his part, tries to do a little more to get Credence to come out of his shell. It’s a difficult thing, when Credence panics and apologizes for almost everything he does. It’s obviously difficult for Credence, too, trying to absorb the shock of being thrust from one world into another so abruptly. They have to be patient with each other, and somehow both of them manage it.

He catches Credence staring sometimes, eyes fixed on Graves’ hands or arms or face. He doesn’t say anything about it. He can’t fault Credence for it; after all, he does look exactly like Grindelwald. It would be hard for anyone not to stare.

And besides, it’s not like Graves isn’t surreptitiously staring too. When Credence isn’t paying attention, Graves is doing his best to catalogue all of the young man’s scars and badly healed injuries. A rolled sleeve here, a slipped collar there; all of it shows that Credence has more scars than most adult Aurors Graves knows. Graves wants to see the extent of the damage. He needs to know just how physically damaged Credence is, how much of his Obscurus was created by bodily harm instead of psychological damage. If Newt’s to be believed, physical violence is worse by far than emotional violence, because it produces an immediate need for protection to which the Obscurus responds. Obviously, Credence has endured far too much of both. But if Graves is going to truly assess the kind of danger that the young man presents, he has to figure that part out.

Tina sends a note one day, apologizing for being missing. There’s a crisis in Bucharest and I’ve had to go and Queenie’s so busy, neither of us will be around for a while. I’ll come as soon as I’m back in the states, and Queenie’s promised to look in on you when she can. It might be some time, though, she writes. So she won’t come looking for a good fortnight or more. This is good. Graves has time. Perhaps more importantly, Credence has time.

It’s no trouble at all, Graves replies. I have plenty to keep myself busy. I don’t rely on your visits for amusement, Tina. Good luck in Bucharest.

You miss me and you know it, Tina fires back, and he can see her rolling her eyes as she writes it. He doesn’t reply, because she’s right. He does miss her.

“You’re safe for a while,” Graves tells Credence after he gets the letter. “Something happened in Bucharest to put people in a state. They won’t be thinking about you for a while yet.”

“Are you sure?” Credence asks. He looks terrified, and Graves suddenly realizes that’s why it took him so long to realize that Credence wasn’t a teener anymore. When Credence is afraid, he shrinks in on himself, making himself less of a target. His eyes get wide and he looks barely eighteen. It’s a pitiful sight.

Graves cautiously puts a hand on Credence’s shoulder. It’s a clumsy comfort, but it’s all he’s got to offer. “I wouldn’t say that if I weren’t sure,” he says. “I promise, I won’t lie to you. About anything.”

Credence, for the first time since Graves met him, smiles.
That evening, Graves decides to spend some time in his library. He remembers having a few books dealing with issues of repressed magic. He’d given them a cursory look when he was first researching Obscurials, but now he wants to revisit them. Graves isn’t sure what had been done in those cases, as the wizards in question were all adults, but there has to be something there that can transfer to Credence.

It’s late enough that Graves is fairly sure Credence is asleep, so he won’t be disturbed in his reading. He goes down to the library, thinking of mundane things, which is a luxury to be able to do lately. But he’s knocked out of those thoughts by the sight of Credence standing by one of the shelves, staring at the spines of the books.

“Credence?”

The young man jumps and turns quickly. “Sorry, Mr. Graves, I shouldn’t be—”

Graves holds up his hands to forestall the flood of apologies. “I was just surprised,” he says. “You haven’t shown much interest in the library so far.”

“There’s a lot more here than I thought there’d be,” Credence says, looking around wonderingly at the books.

“Wizards can’t just pull everything out of a hat,” Graves says. He goes to where he recalls the books on repressed magic being located and starts looking. That’s the advantage of the alphabetized library. When Graves locates the book he wants, he turns around. Credence is still in the room, though his hands are behind his back, as if he’s afraid to touch anything. He sighs. “You can read anything in here, assuming that you can—”

Credence fires him a withering look. “I can read, sir,” he says.

Graves raises his eyebrows.

There’s a personality, finally. “Good,” he says simply. He sits down in one of the chairs and opens the book.

A moment later, Credence sits down across from him, hesitant and quiet as always. Graves glances up. The young man has one of Graves’ old history textbooks from his days at Ilvermorny, kept out of nostalgia alone, open to the first page. What a choice.

“That’s a dry one,” Graves notes.

“The only book my mother would let me read was the Bible, sir,” Credence says. He smiles down at the book on his lap. “You don’t know what a dry book is until you’ve had to read the genealogies for the eighth time in a row.”

Satisfied, and happy that Credence turns out to have a sense of humor, Graves looks back down on his own book. He pulls a notebook and pen out of the pocket of his jacket. He has a lot to think about tonight, and notes will only help. He can’t help, though, periodically looking up from the book to watch Credence. The young man looks at ease. It’s a rare thing to see, Credence with his head not bowed. He traces abstract patterns on the arm of the chair as he reads, enthralled by the book that had bored Graves silly in school. It’s a good sight, one that actually warms Graves’ heart a bit. He must be doing something right, if Credence feels this comfortable.

It’s after midnight when Graves finally feels that maybe he’s exhausted himself enough that sleep will be easy and dreamless. The second that he stands, Credence snaps his books shut and leaps to his feet. Graves sighs, but doesn’t say anything. He can try to help Credence get over his fears
later. It’s late and he’s tired.

“May I take this with me, sir?” Credence asks, looking down at the textbook in his hands.

“Of course,” Graves says. He leaves his own book on the small table, by the notebook, because he’ll probably return to this tomorrow morning. “You can read anything you like, Credence. Please…just put them back in alphabetical order.”

Credence nods. “I will,” he says, clutching the textbook to his chest.

Graves smiles. “Good night, Credence,” he says, and goes up to bed.

Chapter End Notes

OKAY SO THIS IS FUN. Did you know that “teenager” was not attested as a word until 1922? So I asked myself: would Percival Graves, as I have characterized him (a forty-year-old workaholic with virtually no social contact outside his office and no access to our modern social media) have picked up a five-year-old slang term? I answered this question with an emphatic NO, and since (give the age *I* have headcanoned Graves to be) dear Percival would have been born in 1886, he gets the next best slang term. The word “teener” was used from 1894 on, and since he would have been just hitting his teen years around the time this word spiked in popularity, it’s the one I feel he would be most likely to use.

Call people teeners, let’s bring this back!
The nightmares have receded of late, and Graves almost starts to think that they might not come back. But then, one night when he turns in early, he’s proven wrong when he wakes up at two in the morning with a strangled scream.

Graves snatches up his wand and without a word—he can’t speak, can’t get the words out of his mouth—casts a Lumos spell that fills the room with gentle blue-white light. He sits up in bed, forcing the grim memories out of his head, trying to remember how to breathe.

It was the Imperius Curse this time, the time that Grindelwald had placed him under the curse and forced Graves to break his own ribs. Grindelwald’s control of the Imperius Curse was so refined that his victim remained aware of what was happening, even as they were forced to obey his will. So Graves had screamed from the pain and begged Grindelwald to stop, even as his own hands methodically moved on to snap the next one. He’d screamed until he couldn’t scream anymore, until the rib that punctured his lung drove the breath from his body. And then Grindelwald had healed him and left, laughing, while Graves tried not to choke on his own blood down there in the dark.

He can’t remember, now, if it had been for a purpose or for Grindelwald’s dark pleasure, but it doesn’t matter. He’s safe, Graves reminds himself. He’s not there. He’s not in that basement. His wand is in his hand. The wards on the house are in place. He’s safe.

He can taste blood in his mouth.

There’s a knock at the door and Graves flinches violently, aiming his wand at the door.

“Mr. Graves?” Credence says softly, muffled by the door. “Are you all right?”

Graves’ heart is hammering at his ribs, a phantom pain burning him, healed bruises sending shocks of pain through his skin. “I’m fine.” Graves has to force the words out of his mouth. He can hear the lie in his voice, and he’s sure Credence can too.

There’s a pause, then Credence asks, “May I come in?”

Graves doesn’t answer. He doesn’t trust himself to speak.

Apparently Credence takes that as permission, because the door opens slowly and Credence steps into the room. The hallway is dark, and against the blackness Credence looks like a ghost in the light of Graves’ wand. He stands by the door, looking with surprising steadiness across the room at
Graves. “You had a nightmare.”

“Yes,” Graves says. He runs his free hand through his hair. Giles Corey’s broken bones, his whole chest hurts. It seems that his ribs remember being shattered after all.

“Was it—him?” Credence asks, hesitant, as if he’s not sure that he’s overstepping his place.

Graves nods. His wand hand is shaking and the shadows around the room flicker and dance. He can’t even concentrate enough to hold together a simple lighting spell. “I won’t tell you the details,” he says. His voice is raspy and his throat burns. He’s too tired, too thrown by the nightmare, to be cautious with what he’s saying. “I’m sorry. This shouldn’t happen.”

Credence cautiously comes into the room, walking towards Graves’ bed. “It’s all right,” he says. “I think you have shell shock.”

“What?” Graves has never heard the term before.

“Shell shock. It’s what the… the No-Majs say that soldiers have, when they come back from a war. I was sixteen when the Great War ended. I did charity work in the hospitals. I’ve seen men who have shell shock before.” That’s the most Graves has ever heard Credence say at once, and he isn’t done talking yet. He looks up and sees Credence looking down at him, remarkably awake despite the lateness of the hour. “They look like you. And they scream like you.”

Graves has to look away. “I shouldn’t be like this,” he says, resting his head on his free hand, almost wishing he’d never woken up at all. “It’s not right for a wizard like me to be like this. To be this weak. I told you. I’m as broken as you. I should be stronger than this.”

Credence’s hand settles on Graves’ shoulder. The touch is gentle and reassuring and despite himself Graves leans into it. Credence sounds much older than his twenty-four years when he speaks. “You survived,” he says. “That’s strength enough, Mr. Graves.”

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They’re running out of time.

Graves understands, and he thinks that Credence does too, that the longer they stay in stasis here the more risk they run of a discovery. Graves has to leave the house, has to be seen outside, because he’s not quite a full hermit yet. This means leaving Credence alone, a situation which neither man particularly enjoys.

If there’s anyone else in the world who would be sympathetic to Credence’s cause, it is Newt Scamander. So Graves sends a letter to Newt. I have found something I think will be of great interest to you, he writes. I would appreciate it greatly if you would come to New York. The matter is rather urgent. Please hurry.

Newt replies soon enough: Tina has also written me that there’s something I should see. I wonder if you’re both talking about the same thing? It’s no matter. I have to travel by Muggle transport, so it’s a bit slower than I’d like, but I’ll be in New York soon enough. I look forward to meeting you, Percival.

It makes Graves incredibly uneasy that Tina apparently also wants Newt to see something. Does she suspect that Credence is here? She’s on her way back from Bucharest, which means that—very soon—he’s going to have to risk exposing himself and Credence to the Goldsteins. Tina won’t take no for an answer, if Graves tries to keep her away. Something has to give, and honestly he’d rather it be this than half of MACUSA breaking down the door.
With all of this in mind, Graves decides it’s time for him to start working with Credence on wandless magic. Now that Credence is more comfortable, they can work on stability and control. He clears one of the rooms he almost never uses—a study he thought he’d use when he first purchased this house, until he realized that he was almost going to live in his office at MACUSA headquarters—in preparation. Graves bolts the shutters closed, to prevent anyone from seeing what’s going on inside this room. He also places wards on the room, to contain any minor backlash or spillover from mistakes in spellwork. Graves wants a space free of anything that Credence can break, a space where there’s nothing to focus on except for the magic. Any child with magic can cause trouble when untrained. If Credence loses control, the devastation will be much worse.

Graves calls Credence upstairs once the room is empty and he thinks he’s ready. He’s never taught anyone to use magic before, and it’s been untold years since he was at Ilvermorny. At this point, he’ll count it an unqualified success if they just avoid blowing up the house.

Credence steps into the room with great caution. “What’s this for, Mr. Graves?” he asks, looking around the empty walls.

“It’s time for you to learn magic,” Graves says, shutting the door behind them. He turns, rolling up his sleeves, and stops when he sees Credence.

“You mean that?” Credence breathes. His eyes are alight, clear and bright, and not from the eerie glow of the Obscurus. His whole demeanor is different. Graves is stunned: this is not the terrified young man he brought into this house two weeks ago. He’s someone completely different, someone wonderful, and Graves is very glad he decided not to throw Credence on the mercy of MACUSA.

“Yes, I mean it,” Graves says. He finishes rolling up his sleeves. “Now. Take off your jacket. This is going to be difficult work and you can’t be hampered in any way.”

Credence stands in the middle of the room, anxious to please and more than excited. Graves looks him over. He’s standing up straight for once, completely unafraid. And in the light from the window, his shadow isn’t moving at all. That’s a good sign.

“The most important thing about magic is control,” Graves says, remembering the first thing his parents had ever told him about magic. “Your emotions give you power—your spells can be fueled by rage or love or joy or even pain—but in the end, you must turn to control if you’re going to perform magic.”

Credence nods. “And I’ll have to be even more controlled than usual,” he says. “Because my Obscurus is released by fear.”

Good: that perceptiveness Graves had noticed before is coming in handy now. “Yes,” Graves says. He comes to stand directly in front of Credence. “Control comes in many forms. We direct our spells with wands and words because those give us a concrete way to focus. You only have one of those options available to you. My wand may not work for you, and I don’t know how long it will be before we can find you one that will.”

Only belatedly does Graves realize that he’s framing all of this as “we” and not “you.” He brushes off the mistake, though. If he’s to act as a teacher, then it is in some ways his task to take this journey beside Credence.

“If you use words and wands,” Credence says, “then why do you sometimes only flick your wand to make things happen? Do you even have to use words to do magic?”
“You don’t have to use words or wands at all, if you’re controlled enough.” Graves looks around the room. Yes, it’s entirely empty, if Credence turns out not to have any control at all. “After a lifetime of using magic, many wizards and witches learn how to use simple, common spells without needing an incantation. But most are never able to give up their wands. And that’s your test, Credence. You may never have a wand. You will not have the crutch to get you started. If you want to harness your magic, then you will have to be more focused and controlled than any wizard I’ve ever met.”

Before Credence can ask another question, Graves silently holds out his hand. A fire dances above his palm, shifting slowly through all the colors of the rainbow. It’s hot, but not impossibly so. Even though Credence has seen Graves perform a good deal of magic since being in the house, he still freezes in place, staring at the fire. It’s a satisfying reaction. Graves thought a good deal about which spell to choose when he was planning how this would go, and the idea of casting a warm, multicolored fire as a counterpoint to the cold, inky darkness of the Obscurus was a pleasant one.

Graves lets Credence marvel for a moment before speaking. “Flaming Colors Charm,” he says. At the words, Credence looks at Graves, fixing his gaze on Graves’ face with the same intense concentration he’d given to the fire. Graves goes on. “It’s a pretty spell, but one which is almost useless except as a party trick. But it’s a simple combustion reaction that requires minimal focus and emotional effort, which is exactly what you need.”

Credence nods. “Can I try?” he asks, suddenly shy.

“First, you need to breathe.” Graves closes his hand and the fire goes out, the spell dismissed. He moves to stand behind Credence, where he won’t distract the young man. “For now—until you’re more in control—when you cast a spell, you must be calm.”

“All right,” Credence says. His voice is unsteady.

“Center yourself with breathing,” Graves says. “Find a rhythm that works for you. Relax. This isn’t as difficult as you think it is.”

There’s another slow nod, and then Credence falls silent. For a moment, Graves watches as his shoulders rise and fall, and then that labored breathing disappears as the young man calms.

“Very good,” Graves says quietly. “Now, you need intent. When you hold out your hand to summon the fire, you have to want it. The incantation won’t work if you don’t put the whole force of your will behind it.” These things are second nature to him, and to any wizard or witch born and raised in the magical community, but to Credence they are entirely new.

“I do want it,” Credence murmurs, almost to himself. He extends his arm, holding it steady in front of him. For someone who spends half his time in mortal terror, Credence has remarkable self-control. Graves supposes that surviving the attentions of a Dark wizard and Mary Lou Barebone requires that.

Graves takes a step closer, so that he can see over Credence’s shoulder. “Repeat after me,” he says. “Chromato Pyrorum.”

There’s a pause, and then Credence says in a faint voice, “Chromato Pyrorum.”

Nothing happens.

“Try again,” Graves says.

Credence repeats the words, and still nothing happens. This time, his voice is a bit steadier, but still
not quite strong enough.

“Don’t be afraid,” Graves says. “You know the words. You have the power. All you need is will.”

He thinks, for a moment, that Credence won’t do it. And then the young man straightens up, raises his head, and says loudly, “Chromato Pyrorum!”

A brilliant fire erupts over Credence’s outstretched hand. It’s not the small, controlled flame that Graves conjured, but a beautiful blaze. The shadows fall away and everything is illuminated. Credence staggers with the sudden shock, trying to step back from the fire, but Graves catches him, planting his hands on the young man’s shoulders to keep him in place.

For a second, Credence freezes up. Graves, hands still on the young man’s shoulders, can feel the muscles tense with something that might be panic. “Are you with me?” he asks.

“I’m still here,” Credence answers after a moment, looking back at Graves.

His expression of wonder is enough to remind Graves that this magic he uses so cavalierly in his everyday life is not common, not something that every person can experience. And for a moment, he’s glad that he got to witness this, the first time that Credence controlled his own power. He tightens his hands on Credence’s shoulders, silent approval and encouragement, and Credence’s smile widens.

Apparently Credence was paying attention when Graves ended the spell, because despite the size of the fire he banishes it simply by closing his hand. He turns around, looking Graves dead in the eye as he never has before. “Thank you,” he says. “Thank you for this. Thank you for everything.”

Chapter End Notes

OH HEY A MAGIC SYSTEM. So…this is where I went off the rails in regard to Rowling’s magical system. To me, the system in Harry Potter has always been a bit of a mess. Limits of magic, where magic comes from, why some wizards are more powerful than others—these things were never addressed to my satisfaction. So I took the two systems I’m most familiar with, ran them through a blender with Rowling’s system, and used what came out. These systems are the Vancian-inspired system of Dungeons and Dragons 3rd and 5th Editions and the system from Jim Butcher’s Dresden Files.

The essentials are as follows. (Not all of it is important right now, but I’d like to explain it for reference down the line.) Graves gives a pretty good explanation of the role of will and emotion in casting spells, which is basically lifted straight from the Dresden Files as a bolster to some of the concepts that Rowling touched on in later books. As for D&D…there are 8 schools of magic. Abjuration is protective magic (think Shield Charm); Conjuration is…well, conjuration; Divination is anything involving observation; Enchantments mess with the victim’s head (Imperius Curse or Obliviate); Evocation BLOWS SHIT UP (Fireball. Just…Fireball.); Illusion is exactly what it says on the tin; Necromancy fucks around with life and death (highly limited in the Rowling-verse); and Transmutation is essentially Transfiguration. You can see that there’s a lot of ways to place certain spells from the Rowling-verse into these schools.

Here’s where it gets tricky: in 3rd Edition D&D, there was the concept of “prohibited
schools”, where a wizard specializes heavily in one school of magic and is literally unable to use two others. While all wizards in this ’verse can cast any spell they want, I’ve taken the idea of strengths and weaknesses to heart here. Graves is basically an Evocation wizard, as you’ll see later. The other characters also fall into this pattern: Newt is Transfiguration-heavy, and so is Queenie (based on what we see of them in the film). Tina is largely Abjuration-based. Credence is…special. As you’ll see round about Chapter 33.

So yeah. Magical theory, am I right?
Chapter 7

Because there was a minor crisis at the end of last chapter (everyone got blindsided by the whole “there’s 33+ chapters in this thing”), allow me to clarify. THIS IS A VERY LONG STORY. That “Slow Burn” tag up there? That’s not even remotely a joke. This story was born as “The Accidental Epic” and so it remains. (I legitimately don’t even use the title when I’m talking about it…) So prepare yourselves.

Due to *drama*, footnotes have been moved to the beginning of this chapter.

I ESCAPED UNION SUIT HELL BY THE SKIN OF MY TEETH. By the late 1920s, according to Vintage Dancer, Americans had largely shifted to preferring separate undershirts and shorts. Here’s their write-up on the subject. No union suits in this fic! :D

Graves works Credence hard for the next few days. What’s refreshing is that Credence is more willing to work than half the Aurors Graves has ever trained. He won’t stop reading and barely takes enough time off from practicing to eat or sleep. In short order, Credence has mastered the Flaming Colors Charm, able to change its size from a spark on the tip of his finger to an explosive bonfire that requires both hands to support. Now Graves isn’t concerned that Credence will burn the damn house down. Credence also gets the hang of the Lumos/Nox duo quickly. He virtually teaches himself the Levitating Charm, which Graves bans from the library after Credence gets slightly too excited and flings every book in the room off the shelves. The Summoning Charm comes easily, and soon enough Credence is shyly but eagerly offering to summon things whenever they need them. Graves lets him, almost ridiculously happy that Credence is gaining such confidence.

Every day, the shadow that haunts Credence seems to get smaller and smaller. The deliberate use of magic appears to be weakening the Obscurus, giving Credence’s magic a better outlet than raw destruction. Graves begins to hope that he can make a case for Credence, that when Tina finds out she’ll see that he’s no longer out of control, now that he’s able to practice his magic. He still isn’t happy—or particularly optimistic—but Tina’s a reasonable woman.

He gets the chance to test this theory just over a week after Credence casts his first successful spell. Tina sends a note over—I’m back in the US and Queenie wants to know if she can bring you dinner—to which Graves replies with a simple yes.

“Credence,” he says that morning when they’re both standing in the kitchen with coffee, “Tina Goldstein and her sister are coming tonight.”

“Really?” Credence just about drops his cup. “Miss Tina wants to see me?”

Graves has no idea how well this will go over, but he hasn’t accidentally caused Credence to unleash the Obscurus yet. “She doesn’t know you’re here,” he says.

Credence processes that. “So she’ll find out tonight,” he says.
“Yes,” Graves says.

He’s waiting for the shadows to explode, but they don’t. Credence takes a thoughtful sip of coffee and nods. “All right,” he says. “I’m going to go keep practicing, sir.”

“I’ll join you in a bit,” Graves says. He watches Credence go with something that feels oddly like pride. He’ll be fine. They’ll both be fine.

Tina and Queenie appear at the door at six o’clock sharp. Graves leaves Credence waiting in the kitchen while he answers the door. The young man is twitchy and nervous and it’s affecting Graves. He tries to calm himself before opening the door, but he’s fairly sure Queenie will read his thoughts immediately. His Occlumency is still not up to scratch.

“Director Goldstein,” he says with a smile when he opens the door. “How was Bucharest?”

Tina shakes her head. “Like it always is,” she says, with a world-weary air that he knows is affected, as she steps past him into the house. She’s never been to Bucharest before. The last time there was a crisis in that part of the world that had required the direct attention of MACUSA, Tina hadn’t even joined the ranks of the Aurors.

He steps aside to let the two women in. Queenie gives him a searching look as she passes, and he knows she’s looking straight into his head. She nods, almost imperceptibly, and leans in to press a gentle kiss to his cheek. He blinks, startled. “It will be fine, honey,” Queenie says, and glides into the house.

Graves stands still for a moment, still able to smell the witch’s perfume, completely confounded by that whole moment. Then he shakes off his thoughts and follows the two witches.

Tina is the first one into the kitchen. Graves can just see as she gets to the doorway and freezes in place, as if someone had just cast a Body-Bind Curse on her.

“Hello, Miss Tina,” Graves hears Credence say.

“Credence?” Tina whispers. Her hands come up to cover her mouth. “You…you’re alive?”

Credence sounds tentative. “Yes, ma’am,” he says.

Tina bursts into motion. Graves looks around the doorframe to see her dart across the kitchen and practically tackle Credence in a hug. The young man practically crumples. He buries his face in Tina’s shoulder and she strokes his hair, as if trying to reassure herself that he’s real.

“I know they’ve met before, but I didn’t know they were close,” Graves says, looking at Queenie as he steps into the kitchen. He moves to stand beside her, so they won’t disturb Tina and Credence.

Queenie’s already at the stove, flourishing her wand in elegant gestures to prepare what looks like it will end up being fried chicken. “She don’t talk about it much,” Queenie explains quietly. “Wouldn’t be good for the Director to admit she liked the Obscurial. While Grindelwald was the Director, Tina went to investigate the Second Salemers. She found that bitch beating Credence bloody and tried to protect him. But…”

“That broke the Statute of Secrecy.” Graves nods. Admittedly, had Tina attacked a No-Maj while he was in office, no matter how valid her reason, he’d have disciplined her too. “And Grindelwald used it as an excuse to get her demoted, get her out of the Auror office.”
“Exactly,” Queenie says. Her lips are a thin, angry line. She doesn’t look at Graves. “She tried to save that poor boy’s life and even you think she should have gotten kicked down to Wand Permits for doing the good thing. It ain’t right.”

“It’s not right, but it’s the law,” Graves says. But then he thinks of Credence, and—

Queenie stops what she’s doing and turns to look at him. “If you’re going to say things like that,” she says, “then you’d better hurry up and turn Credence in. It’s not right, but it’s the law, ain’t it?”

This is why picking fights with a Legilimens is a bad idea. Graves folds his arms and doesn’t argue, even though part of him wants to. She’s right: he is breaking the law. Just by keeping Credence here, he’s going against the direct orders of MACUSA. They could put him on trial. Execute him, if they wanted, and they probably would.

“You can’t tell me that you think she was wrong to try to save him,” Queenie says, turning back to her cooking. Biscuits are mixing themselves. “He needs someone to look out for him. Why else have you been protecting him for so long?”

Graves does not have a good answer for that either. He leans against the counter, watching Tina pull Credence into a seat next to her at the table, asking him questions at a rate of about ten a second. She’s still holding Credence’s hand, and he doesn’t seem inclined to pull away. He answers her questions quietly, but there’s an obvious air of reverence about him. If what Queenie says is true, then Tina was the first person to ever show the power of magic to Credence.

“She worried about him so much,” Queenie says softly, answering a question Graves doesn’t say out loud. “Grindelwald used that to get to him, and then when he betrayed Credence…that was when the Obscurus got out. And then it looked like he was dead. She blamed herself for what happened…”

“He’s lucky he isn’t dead,” Graves mutters, folding his arms. “I’ve seen his Obscurus. That thing should have killed him.”

Queenie, finished with what she’s working on for the moment, looks at him, brows furrowed with concern and perhaps a little fear. “You saw it? When?”

“The night I found him,” Graves says. “He was barely human. If he’d attacked me, I wouldn’t have stood a chance. I don’t know how he survived this long.”

“By being a very strong young man,” Tina says from the table.

Queenie whirls in a cloud of chiffon and perfume, a smile appearing on her face as suddenly as a light coming on. “Exactly right,” she says, and flicks her wand to send all the dishes floating to the table.

“Don’t get used to this,” Graves warns Credence as he sits down. “You’ve seen the extent of my skill in culinary magic.”

“Have you got him living on toast, Graves? That’s all I’ve ever seen you eat when Queenie isn’t foisting food on you,” Tina asks, rolling her eyes.

“Not just toast!” Credence protests quietly. He’s smiling, and glances slyly at Graves before continuing, “There’s coffee sometimes too.” Was that a joke? Did Credence Barebone, who can barely look anyone in the eye half the time, just make a joke?

Queenie laughs. “Eat,” she says, waving a hand at Credence. “You’re still nothing but skin and
bones, honey. Some real food will do you a world of good.”

They talk long into the night. Tina has infinite questions about how they’re controlling the Obscurus. She wants to see Credence practice magic, and he gladly shows her what he knows (after Graves clears the room of breakable objects). Queenie actually compliments Graves on the quality of his magical work with Credence’s clothes. He’s absurdly pleased by that.

He corners Tina while Queenie is walking Credence through a charm to wash dishes in the kitchen. Graves goes straight to the point. “Are you going to turn him in?” he asks.

Tina smiles. “No,” she says. “This is exactly what I wanted.”

“What you wanted?”

“I came to you the night we were hunting for him because I knew you wouldn’t be able to stand back and watch someone else do your job. And I was right,” Tina says smugly. “You went out and found Credence and brought him back and taught him how to control his magic. That’s what I wanted.”

For the second time tonight, Graves is confounded by one of the Goldstein sisters. “How did you know I wouldn’t just kill him on the spot?”

Tina looks at him steadily. “Because it’s you, Graves. You are not that kind of man.”

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Tina tells Graves that she can’t guarantee their safety much longer. The President wants the hunt for the Obscurial to continue. It’s a fairly good chance that they’ll eventually zero in on Graves, if only because he was the last person with whom Grindelwald was in close contact. And Tina, even though she’s the Director, can’t forestall an investigation forever. “But Newt’s on his way,” Tina says. “His ship sailed from London yesterday afternoon. He’ll be in New York in eight days.”

“Good,” Graves says. “What can he do for us?”

“Other than help Credence,” Tina says, “he can help us get you two out of New York. Newt’s a master of Undetectable Extension Charms. His suitcase is big enough to hold a whole zoo of magical creatures. I want him to smuggle you and Credence out of New York. In the suitcase.”

Queenie looks nervous when she hears that, but doesn’t say anything. Graves has a sudden suspicion that there will be at least one kink in the plan, and it might very well be a No-Maj with the last name “Kowalski”. But that’s for Tina to worry about. Graves’ only concern is making sure that Credence is safe. He agrees to the plan, and so does Credence.

Tina promises to contact Graves the moment Newt is in New York. Until then, she and Queenie will stay away, to help forestall any suspicions that might already be brewing. With their departure, the house is suddenly much quieter. It’s almost strange, not hearing Queenie’s light banter in the kitchen or Tina asking questions or even Credence talking.

As has become a habit, Graves goes to the library. He has a half-formed thought of selecting the books he’ll take with him, but those thoughts are banished when he sees Credence sitting in a chair with a book. Something Queenie said very early on in the evening about Credence stuck with him. Now’s the perfect time to ask about it, while Credence is calm and in a relatively good mood.

“Do you have a moment, Credence?” Graves asks.
Credence sets down his book. “Yes, sir,” he says. They really need to have a talk about the word “sir” and why it needs to never be applied to Graves again, but that can wait.

Graves leans against a bookshelf. “Queenie…she told me about how you met Tina,” he says.

And just like that, the smile’s gone. “Oh,” Credence says.

“I need you to be honest with me,” Graves says. He feels strangely like he’s conducting an interrogation. It is, in a way, but he doesn’t want to force the truth out of Credence. He doesn’t want to lose whatever ground they’d gained over the course of this evening, over these last weeks. “She said that your mother beat you. How badly?”

Credence doesn’t answer. He looks away, shoulders slumping in that old, familiar, frightened way. It’s an answer, and not one Graves likes to see.

“From what I know of the Obscurus,” Graves says, maintaining a steady voice that won’t upset Credence more than he already has, “they’re made more powerful in proportion to the pain endured by the young wizard who creates it. Yours is…very strong.”

“It…she did it to help me,” Credence says quietly to the far wall.

“If it hurt you, then it would have helped your Obscurus grow,” Graves says. If this is the answer to why Credence is so powerful, so afraid, so self-controlled…then he is going to find out how to resurrect people just so that he can kill Mary Lou Barebone all over again. “How bad was it?

Credence gets to his feet. “I don’t want to talk about it,” he says. Graves opens his mouth to cut in, but Credence goes on. “Please…just let me show you, instead.”

Graves nods. “All right.”

Slowly, with a distinctly fatalistic expression on his face, Credence takes off his jacket. He removes his shirt, too, and pulls off his undershirt. That pendant he wears, usually tucked under his shirt, flashes in the dim light, glinting like an eye. Then Credence turns around, and anything Graves would have said dies in his throat.

Credence’s back is a mass of scars. There’s the strange white curse scar that goes like lightning from the nape of his neck down his spine, inflicted when the Aurors tried to kill him in the subway. But the other scars are worse. There is not an inch of him, from shoulders to waist, where badly healed welts aren’t in evidence. They’re all old, but that’s somehow more horrifying than it would be if they were new. That’s years of beatings.

After a minute, Graves manages to ask, “Is that…your mother’s handiwork?”

“Yes, sir,” Credence says.

That’s the same kind of damage Graves had sustained in those months when Grindelwald was holding him prisoner. No amount of healing could take away all his scars. If they’d have gotten to Credence sooner, he could have been spared some of this. If the laws weren’t so damn strict then Tina could have pulled him out of that living hell.

“You think this is what made my Obscurus so powerful?” Credence asks after another long pause.

“I do,” Graves says. His shoulders press against the bookshelf uncomfortably, but he doesn’t dare to move. There’s palpable tension in the air. The shadows at Credence’s feet are twisting with agitation. “It’s fed by your magic—you’re a powerful wizard—but only pain that intense would
make your Obscurus so destructive.”

Credence shifts a little, so he can see Graves better. His arms are still at his sides. “She was trying to help me,” he says softly. “She didn’t mean to do this.”

This is not the moment to argue that point. Another day, Graves will convince Queenie and Tina to talk to Credence about that. For now, he has another concern. “Did Grindelwald do any of that?”

“No,” Credence says. He shakes his head. “He never hurt me. Never. Not until he betrayed me.”

That’s incredibly strange to hear, given who Grindelwald is. “What did he do, then? How did he…”

“I’d rather not say,” Credence says. Almost as if he’s not thinking about it, one of his hands drifts up to rest on the back of his neck.

Graves folds his arms. That’s not a comforting gesture. There have been rumors about Grindelwald for a long time, fairly unsubstantiated, and not ones that Graves paid attention to. His preferences in bed aren’t related to the fact that he’s a mass murderer. Well, most of his preferences aren’t related to that, but the satisfaction Grindelwald got from torturing Graves probably is. “He…ah…”

Credence nods. “Yes, sir. I…shouldn’t have listened…”

“Don’t,” Graves says, cutting off the imminent self-flagellation. “If all you were used to was pain, I’m not surprised. He was using you in the easiest way he could. If he could have gotten something out of you by hurting you, he would have done it.”

“He did, once,” Credence says. “Hit me because I wouldn’t tell him where my sister was. I thought he was there to help me. I thought…he was…” Credence stops. He closes his eyes tightly, biting his lip hard. His shoulders shake with silent, suppressed crying.

It’s uncomfortable to witness. Graves has seen people break down before. It’s a normal thing, in his line of work. But it wasn’t his job to comfort them, it was his job to detain or destroy whatever upset them. And now here he is, with no one to ask for help. He feels responsible for this—he was the one that asked the question to begin with.

He considers what to do. He’s never paid much attention to what people do, to comfort someone. The only good examples lately have been Tina and Queenie. Both of them seem to lean to the physical side of things: Queenie’s kiss, Tina’s hug. It’s been a decade or more since someone who wasn’t a Goldstein—or Credence, on that one memorable occasion with the nightmare—did more than clap him on the shoulder or shake his hand. He doesn’t have anything more than that to go off.

“Credence,” Graves says.

The young man takes a shuddering breath and opens his eyes, looking at Graves with an absolutely haunted expression. Graves holds out his arms slightly, offering. Credence stares at him for a moment, unbelieving. Graves waits. Next thing he knows, he’s between the bookshelf and Credence. The young man is shaking, clutching convulsively at Graves with a drowning man’s desperation, smoke whispering angrily from his skin. Cautious, Graves actually puts his arms around Credence. He’s still too thin, and without a shirt and jacket Graves can feel all the scars on the young man’s back.

The clock ticks. Graves isn’t sure how long they’re standing there. His hip, pressed against the bookshelf, goes numb. Credence never moves once, but gradually he stops shaking and his
breathing evens out. The Obscurus—because that’s what they are, these shadows, the manifestations of the parasite eating Credence from the inside—doesn’t disappear. But it settles. Credence’s head, on Graves’ shoulder, is heavy. Oddly, though, Graves isn’t uncomfortable. This…it isn’t confusing. It’s safe.

There are a lot of problems here. Things that need to be addressed, things that Graves should probably convince Tina and Queenie to deal with because they’re both more qualified to do this. He and Credence are both dangerously damaged. He can easily think of a thousand bad things about this whole mess. Right now, though, Credence isn’t afraid, and neither is Graves. That’s a rare enough thing that, for now, he’s willing to stand here until Credence walks away.
Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaand this is where the action part of the story comes in.
Truetomorrow, here be explosions. :) I hope you all enjoy Graves being Extra™ as much as I do.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Things go straight to hell barely two days later.

Graves has been on edge ever since Credence came into the house. It’s worse than usual, now that Tina’s informed him that the hunt for Credence is about to begin again. He has a satchel from a long time ago with a minor Undetectable Extension Charm on it, and packs it so that he and Credence can leave at a moment’s notice. He’s not sure when he became like this, fully prepared to abandon everything in New York for the sake of a young man with enough power to destroy a city, but Graves accepts it philosophically. What else was he doing with his life, anyway? At least now he has a purpose again.

Newt is halfway across the Atlantic, according to a No-Maj telegram that Tina forwards one night to Graves with no other note attached. He’s upstairs, reading it over, when he hears Credence from the bottom of the stairs. “Mr. Graves,” he says, “there are Aurors outside.”

Graves comes down the stairs two at a time, wand already out. He doesn’t spare Credence a look as he throws on his coat. It’s early June, but if they have to go there is no way in hell he’s leaving that coat behind. “Get ready to leave,” he says tersely. They weren’t ready for this. Newt isn’t in New York. Tina must not have been able to stall any longer. “And stay inside.”

Credence catches Graves by the sleeve. “There are three of them,” he says, “let me at least—”

“You haven’t learned how to duel,” Graves says flatly. “If you let go of your Obscurus, then you could do more damage than that. People could die.”

“You could die,” Credence argues.

Graves half-smiles. “It took Grindelwald himself to bring me down,” he says. “Three Aurors shouldn’t give me any trouble.” And he gently pulls away from Credence and steps out the door.

It’s plain that the three Aurors are looking for trouble. They’re standing in the street, a safe distance away from Graves’ wards. All of them have their wands out and look wary. He knows all of them: Jared Firestone, Calla Carter, and Ergot Smith. He trained all three of them. He knows their strengths and weaknesses intimately. Firestone is the best duelist, though he’s impulsive and has a limited range of spells. Carter isn’t a great duelist, but she thinks faster than most Aurors. Smith’s wide range of knowledge is what makes him dangerous, though he’s slower and less aggressive than his companions.

And Graves? He’s a better duelist than Firestone, thinks faster than Carter, and knows one hell of a lot more than Smith.
By the looks on their faces, they know exactly who they’re confronting.

“Good evening,” Graves says, descending the stairs slowly, wand fully exposed. “I didn’t expect a delegation this late in the day.”

“Mr. Graves, you’re wanted for questioning regarding the location of the Obscurial,” Carter says, in a carefully-practiced and impressively calm voice.

Graves stops on the bottom step. “I’m wanted?”

Firestone scowls. “We tracked the Obscurial to the building where you were held,” he says. “It makes sense that you’d have come to take it. Use it like Grindelwald did.”

“You really think that I would do anything like that bastard did?” Graves demands. "I'm starting to understand why no one noticed anything wrong!"

“Jared's just on edge,” Smith soothes. “We all are. This is a difficult situation. We just need whatever information you have, Mr. Graves.” The way he holds his wand belies his words. Smith is ready to fight. Inconveniently for him, Graves is, too.

It’s strange, because Graves would expect his hands to be shaking right now. Instead, he’s in the state of utter calm that usually precedes a duel. His mind is absolutely clear, thoughts racing ahead, seeing every avenue of attack at the same time. He’s calm and steady, like he hasn’t been since he got out of Grindelwald’s hold.

“I’m afraid I won’t be accompanying you,” Graves says calmly.

Firestone’s scowl becomes more pronounced. “If you don’t come willingly, we are authorized to use force!” he warns.

That’s an invitation to fight. Before any of the three of them can react, Graves turns on Smith and shouts, “Stupefy!” The spell hits Smith in the chest and the Auror goes down hard. It won’t keep him that way for long, but the shock of Graves’ sudden attack throws the other two off balance.

As Smith falls, Graves is already turning. Firestone always opens with a fire spell and it’s simple enough to snap “Protego!” in his general direction. A wave of heat rushes over the preemptively cast Shielding Charm, but Graves doesn’t take time to be satisfied that he was right.

Carter is trying to get behind him, to force him to fight on two fronts, and he flicks his wand in her direction as she bolts around. “Locomotor Mortis!” Graves commands, and Carter shrieks as she goes down, legs locked together.

Firestone charges in, wand leading the way with some offensive spell, even as Graves is already hurling a countercharm. Their spells meet and burn each other away.

Graves sidesteps Firestone’s rush. All three Aurors are close together now, and he’s feeling reckless. “Confringo!” he thunders, and a blast of white-hot fire erupts from his wand. Firestone dives out of the way, tackling the Stupefied Smith as he goes, and Carter is just slightly too far away to be hit. But they’re disoriented, and that’s exactly where Graves needs them to be.

“Go back to the President and tell her I’m not coming in,” Graves says coldly.

Carter climbs to her feet. “You are coming in with us,” she says through gritted teeth. She swings her wand through the air like she’s wielding a sword and a blast of blue light hurtles toward Graves.
He ducks under the blast and, while she’s still blinded by the spell’s brightness, casts his own spell. “Silencio!” he snaps, and Carter glares at him with a silent expression of rage. She’s not good at wordless magic, he knows that. Effectively, Carter is out of the fight.

But he’d turned his back on Firestone for too long. Graves hears him yell out: “Expelliarmus!” His wand goes flying, clattering away on the steps of the house. Graves whirls, only to see Firestone advancing with his wand held high.

“How’s it going?” Firestone growls. “You don’t have a wand.”

Graves throws out a hand. It’s been a long time since he’s needed wandless magic of this magnitude. The incantation will help. “Everte Statum!”

Firestone goes flying backwards, right into a lamppost. He valiantly tries to get up, but then crumples to the ground. He’s no longer a concern.

“Orbis!” Smith rasps out, from where he’s been left lying on the ground. What in Corey’s name is that spell? Graves doesn’t know it. He realizes just a moment later that he’s sinking into the street. That’s what it does, then. He’s already up to his knees. He hears Smith cast the countercharm for the Silencing Spell at Carter and swears internally. Now she’ll be back in the fight. Wonderful.

“How’s it going?” Firestone says. He’s clutching his ribs and Graves has absolutely no sympathy. He sees Carter come up beside Firestone, glaring at Graves with unconcealed rage.

“Not,” Graves says. He plants his hands on the ground and summons all his will. This is a spell that none of them will be able to charm away. “Bombarda Maxima!”

The street explodes.

Graves is hurled free of the ground. He smashes against the steps and feels bone crack and the edge of the stairs slice deep into his arm. His ears are ringing. But there’s no time to worry about that: he rolls and snatch at his wand. “Credence!” he shouts, spitting blood as he speaks.

The door crashes open and Graves hears Credence running down the steps. He doesn’t look, turning his attention to the crater that once was the street. He sees Firestone, bloody on the ground, not moving at all. Smith is unmoving fifteen feet away, knocked out or worse. And Carter—she’s on her knees, staring at him with murder in her eyes, and Graves hears her speak the incantation of an Unforgiveable Curse. Green light erupts from her wand.

In that moment, time seems to slow down. This is it, what he’s wanted for months. To just let it end. He’s fought enough. The curse is flying and—

—he doesn’t even try to block it.

But Credence does.

“Protego!” he screams, throwing his hands out over Graves.

A wave of silver energy rolls out from Credence, tearing the Killing Curse out of the air. It slams into Carter and she goes down hard, tumbling into the crater. The façade of a house across the street shatters.

There’s a moment of silence where the only sound is Graves’ breathing.

“You shouldn’t have been able to stop that,” he says, panting, as he climbs to his feet. “You can’t block an Unforgiveable Curse with a Shield Charm.”
“I don’t know how I did,” Credence whispers, staring at his hands like they belong to a stranger.

Graves stares at Credence, almost afraid of the young man in front of him. “I never taught you that,” he says. He feels like he’s slowing down, the rush of battle fading.

“I heard you say the incantation,” Credence says. “And…it seemed right…”

Graves grips Credence’s shoulder. “You saved me,” he says.

Credence smiles a little. “That seemed right, too,” he says.

And then Graves hears the crack of more people Apparating into the street. Half a dozen Aurors, maybe more. People are shouting, orders and incantations alike. There’s no time to explain. He yanks Credence up against him and, before any of the spells can hit their target, Graves Disapparates.

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He and Credence crash-land in the middle of the Goldsteins’ apartment. Instead of landing upright, Graves hits the floor shoulders-first. Credence yelps as his leg hits a sofa. Queenie lets out a little shriek and leaps to her feet at the kitchen table, eyes wide with shock.

“They came for him,” Graves says, staggering upright. He doesn’t let go of Credence and the young man seems willing enough to follow. “Is Tina—”

“At the Woolworth Building,” Queenie says, running to the window to close the curtains, casting silencing charms over the whole room as she goes. “I didn’t think they would move this fast!”

“No one did,” Graves says grimly. “They’ll come here next. You and Tina are the only people I see regularly, they’ll think we’ve gone to ground with you.”

Credence is still leaning on Graves, though it feels strangely like Graves might really be leaning on Credence instead. “Do you have a fire escape?” Credence asks Queenie, looking at the other window.

“Yes, why?” Queenie asks, then her eyes widen and she bolts to the other window, throwing up the sash. “Credence! You’re a genius!”

Graves is confused for a moment, as Credence pulls him toward the open window. “Why do we care about the fire escape?” he asks.

“They’re wizards, they won’t think to look where a No-Maj might!” Queenie explains rapidly. She helps Credence over the sill and then assists Graves. “With a good Disillusionment Charm, you’ll be able to hide. And if they try to find you with any kind of magic, they’ll be confounded by the other people who live in the building.”

Credence is already climbing up the fire escape to the next story. Graves follows suit, the pain in his arm growing as the adrenaline rush fades.

Queenie pokes her head out the window. “Stay up there until I tell you it’s safe to come down again,” she says. “And if they realize you’re out there, just Apparate away. I’ll be fine.” And with that, she slams the window shut and pulls the curtains.

The fire escape is narrow, cold, and dark, several stories above the streetlights. Graves drops a Disillusionment Charm over himself and Credence, leaving it so they can just see each other but
not be seen by an onlooker. They’re shoulder to shoulder, no space at all between them on the slender metal platform. At least it’s slightly warmer this way.

Graves leans against the wall and takes stock of his injuries. He definitely cracked a rib when he hit the steps, and that gash in his arm hurts badly. He’s also bleeding rather severely, and as the adrenaline fades he’s starting to really feel the pain.

“You’re bleeding on me,” Credence remarks quietly.

“Sorry,” Graves mutters.

Credence looks down at his arm. “Is there any way to fix that?” he asks. “Grindelwald... he used to fix my hands. Can you...”

“Those were small cuts,” Graves says, wincing as he touches the injury, trying to determine the extent of the damage. He feels drained, exhausted more than he usually would after a duel. It’s been a while. Maybe he shouldn’t be surprised. “You’d use Episkey for that. This is a damn deep cut... I’ll need another spell to fix it, and I’m not sure I can cast it right now.”

“I could try,” Credence says.

In the dim light, Graves looks at Credence. The young man is absolutely serious. After that Shield Charm he cast, Graves is fairly certain that Credence is more powerful than Graves ever was. “The incantation is Vulnera Sanentur,” he says. “Hands over the injury. You'll need to cast it three times. Stop the bleeding, clean the injury, and then actually fix it.”

Credence turns awkwardly to press his hands against the gash. Graves hisses with pain, but stays still. There’s a pause, as Credence focuses, and then he says, with intense concentration, “Vulnera Sanentur.” The flow of blood slows, and as Credence repeats the spell twice more with that same intensity, Graves feels the relief of the injury being healed.

“Thanks,” he says, when he’s sure that his arm is back to normal. “Should have been more careful where I was throwing explosions.”

"It was impressive," Credence says softly. He hasn't taken his hands from Graves' arm, as if he's afraid if he lets go the bleeding might start up again. "It's healed, but it feels like there's going to be a scar..."

Spectacular. Another scar. That's all he is anymore, a collection of scars that won't heal. “We'd need more supplies to prevent that,” Graves explains, forcing away the unwanted thoughts. "What you cast—that's a triage spell—meant to help people in a hurry. Much worse than that and you’re dealing with complicated healing magic that I can't perform.”

“I think I could do it,” Credence says thoughtfully.

Graves looks sideways at him. Even in the gloom of the fire escape, Credence’s eyes almost look like they’re glowing white. “I don’t doubt it,” he says.

From below, there’s the sudden sound of Queenie’s tinkling laugh. In the quiet, it’s clearly audible, even through the closed window. The sound of muffled voices—words impossible to make out—drifts out into the night. The Aurors are here, then.

The window creaks as Queenie opens it. “—mind if I get some air?” she asks brightly.

“Of course not, Miss Goldstein,” a woman says.
The curtains flutter. Queenie doesn’t look out, but her pink nightgown is clearly visible even from this awkward vantage point. “Why didn’t you bring Tina?” she asks. “If this is an investigation—”

“Director Goldstein is in a meeting with the President,” another person says.

“Well, you should tell her when she gets out that I’ve been waiting up for her for hours,” Queenie says crossly. “She promised no more late nights. And now you show up here looking for people when I ain’t seen nobody all night, least of all Tina!”

“We need to search the apartment anyway,” the woman says apologetically.

Queenie huffs. “Get on with it. If Tina ain’t coming home tonight, I’d like to get some sleep.”

There’s footsteps and quiet spells. Graves distinctly hears someone mutter “Homenum Revelio,” but apparently nothing happens.

“Too many No-Majs in the building,” a man says. “And they aren’t in this apartment, anyway.”

“We’re sorry to have bothered you, Miss Goldstein,” someone says.

Queenie moves away from the window. There’s a bit more conversation, and then the sound of the door shutting. A moment later, Queenie looks out the window and up at them. “They’re gone,” she says. “Come back inside.”

Chapter End Notes

An explanation for Credence's block-a-Killing-Curse-with-a-Shield-Charm stunt will be found, just like all such explanations, in Chapter 33 IN CHAPTER 27. To those who are reading this now: I rechapted this monster like six times and Things Moved Around. It's Chapter 27 now and forever.
Chapter Notes

A Soft™ chapter of fluff after the chaos of last chapter. Nothing loud or upsetting here, just people being nice to each other. This is good, because I have a FUCKING STRESSFUL DAY AHEAD OF ME AND I NEED HAPPY THINGS. Enjoy your fluff, people. :)

Also, keep an eye out in the next couple of weeks. Apparently I’ve started writing a college AU (same pairings as this fic), which will admittedly be MUCH shorter than this damn story, but will hopefully be just as much fun. There are Shenanigans, Seraphina Picquery as everyone’s favorite RA, Newt keeping illegal insects in the dorms, and a guest appearance by somebody who hasn’t even been on screen in the movie franchise yet. So yeah. That’s a thing.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Lucky this ain’t the first time I’ve had to hide wanted men,” Queenie says as she moves around the apartment, turning out lights so no one watching will see extra shadows through the windows. “And you two ain’t half as much trouble as Newt and Jacob.”

“Exactly how much chaos did Scamander cause?” Graves asks, from where he and Credence are sitting on the floor, out of sight of any windows. He’d perused the case files once or twice, but admittedly not in great depth, and he’d never really asked Newt about it. Most of his information came straight from Tina. “Tina mentioned an Erumpet, but—”

Queenie smiles. “There was an Occamy too,” she says, “and a Demiguise and a Niffler and that sweet little Bowtruckle and…oh, so many creatures. Just you wait until you see the inside of that suitcase of his. It’s marvelous.”

The last bit of Graves which is pretending to care about the law thinks that “marvelous” may not be the exact word for the suitcase. If there’s one thing that makes Graves think that there’s a silver lining to being held by Grindelwald, it’s that he wasn’t the one to have to deal with the disaster that Newt had caused. There’s a sort of twisted pleasure in realizing that Grindelwald, by taking Graves’ place, had to deal with it—as well as the mountains of plebeian paperwork that any Director did. How that must have rankled.

“I’m sorry that you two are going to have to hide here,” Queenie says with a sigh, once all the lights are out and the curtains drawn. She hands each of them a blanket. The Goldsteins don’t have an extra cot, and Graves and Credence both insisted that they’d be fine with the floor when Queenie tried to tell them to sleep in the girls’ beds. “I heard them thinking about how the apartment will be under surveillance.”

“We’ll be fine. This is not my first time doing this,” Graves says, thinking of a particular incident in Sweden involving giants and a very angry troll. He can’t remember now how the barn they’d been holed up in burned down, but he was fairly sure that someone else had started it. It was probably McGuiness. He’d still been working on subtlety at that point. There had been firewhiskey involved, courtesy of one of the British Aurors who’d come along; as a result, the memories are hazy.
Queenie giggles a little as she hears the memory. “I’m sure you and Credence will be fine. No burning down the apartment, all right?”

And just like that, she’s gone into the bedroom, leaving the two men alone in the dark.

It’s very nearly silent, and the quiet allows Graves to think back on the evening. He’d blown up the street, and Credence had almost knocked down a house. That was…not good. Though, given how No-Maj authorities usually took things, they’d attribute it to a “gas leak” or some such nonsense and that would be the end of it, no memory modification required. The duel hadn’t been Graves’ best work. It was still good to know that in a crisis he was capable of fighting back.

A question raised by the fight that he only now has a chance to really think about is what, exactly, an Auror was doing throwing around Unforgiveable Curses. The Killing Curse was impossible not to identify, and she’d definitely thrown it at him. Had they been authorized by MACUSA to use Unforgivables to apprehend Credence? That was the only way that an Auror could legally consider doing such a thing. Do they think he and Credence are really so dangerous?

Well…he had blown up half a street. Perhaps they’re justified.

And another thing. What he’d said to Credence on the steps, just before they’d Disapparated, is entirely true. A Shield Charm should not have stopped the Killing Curse. But Credence’s spell had done exactly that. The level of power it would take to do something like that is incredible. Impossible. Graves doesn’t know enough magical theory to even begin to speculate on what happened.

He’s knocked from his contemplations by Credence. “Why did you fight them, sir?” the young man asks quietly. “You just…you didn’t even wait for them to finish talking.”

“They were looking for you,” Graves replies. “They knew you were inside. They expected me to surrender. It’s easier to start a duel when no one expects you to do it.”

Credence is silent for a moment. “I just wonder why you didn’t hand me over,” he says.

Somehow, Graves still doesn’t have a good answer for that. He’d attacked Aurors—people who he’d worked with, not so long ago—and broken the Statute of Secrecy, all to protect Credence. It isn’t in his character. None of this is. Then again, if he’d have been asked two years ago if he’d ever consider resigning, living with someone, teaching someone magic, he’d have laughed in the questioner’s face. It wasn’t in his old character, but he’d changed a great deal in the last year.

For the first time in his life, Graves is questioning whether the law is always right. The law had condemned Credence to life of misery. It would have used him as a weapon. Graves has seen firsthand how it splits apart families: magical children taken from their No-Maj parents, lovers separated because one was a wizard and the other wasn’t. That never bothered him before, but now…

“It would have been wrong to hand you over to MACUSA,” Graves says. It feels like an admission, a confession. “What you are is more important to them than who you are.”

“No, even if I’ve learned some magic, I’m still an Obscurial,” Credence says. “I’m still dangerous, I still should be locked up to keep people safe.”

Graves looks at the young man, even though he can’t make out anything more than a silhouette in the dark. “I’m dangerous,” he says. “You saw what I did to the street. I might have killed Firestone and Smith. Should I be locked up to keep people safe?”
“No! You’re a good man, sir.”

“Being dangerous doesn’t make you evil,” Graves says. “I’ve been around you for more than a month. You’re more concerned about doing the right thing than half the people in the Department. And you do it, no matter the cost to yourself.”

Credence is silent. It’s not an angry silence, but a thoughtful one.

Finally, Graves breaks the quiet. “You’re better than you think you are, Credence.”

The young man doesn’t answer. A moment later, Graves starts in surprise when Credence’s head comes to rest on his shoulder. He did not see that coming, but it’s not unpleasant. Indeed, the weight is almost soothing. It’s good to feel that there’s someone next to him, that he’s not alone. He doesn’t move. Let Credence sleep. It’s been a hell of a day.

He’s half asleep himself, thinking drowsily of where they go from here, when he hears Credence whisper, “You’re better than you think you are, too.”

***

Graves wakes up the next morning with a sore neck and back and a heavy weight against his right side. He looks around blearily for a moment before remembering that he spent the night on the Goldsteins’ floor. Light filters through the curtains, and a shaft of it is right on his face. Graves turns his head to get the light out of his eyes and is confronted with Credence, still asleep, lying half across him, one bony elbow pressed into Graves’ side.

This is the most unexpected thing he’s ever woken up to, and he’s woken up to some strange things in his life.

“Morning, Mr. Graves,” Queenie says softly from the kitchen. She’s at the stove, working on breakfast. She smiles at him warmly. “You two make quite the picture.”

“An unintentional one,” Graves says, just as quiet. He doesn’t move, though. Giles Corey knows that neither he nor Credence get nearly enough sleep. For the moment, this isn’t an issue, except for how stiff his back will be later. “Did Tina ever come back?”

“At three in the morning,” Queenie says. “Fell asleep in her clothes. Has to go back today to clean up the mess you left behind last night.”

“She knows we’re here?”

“Saw you two when she came in.” Queenie floats a plate of bacon to the table. “She didn’t say anything but she’s so angry. They went over her head to get authorization to go for you.”

“They would,” Graves says. He glances down at Credence, who’s at the most relaxed Graves has ever seen him. “He’s an asset MACUSA can’t afford to lose. Even if he’s young.”

Queenie shakes her head. “He’s not that young,” she says. “Not judging by his thoughts. Just a quiet kind of man. I can hear what he’s thinking. So smart, but scared to say anything. Spends all his time afraid. He’s seen a lot more of the world than most men his age.”

He wants to argue, but given what he knows about Credence and the fact that Queenie can read minds and therefore knows far more about Credence than anyone else, it would be moot. So instead Graves glances around for a clock.
“Eight in the morning,” Queenie says promptly. “You slept soundly.”

“First time in months,” Graves mutters, almost in disbelief. How he managed to sleep that well on a floor with a blanket and a pile of elbows next to him is beyond him. It doesn’t matter, though. “Are we safe to get up?”

Queenie nods. “I’ve left all the curtains closed for now,” she says. She sits down at the kitchen table. “Tomorrow we’ll work out something else, since I have to get back to work. Come have breakfast.”

For a moment, Graves is confounded by how he’s supposed to get up when Credence is still sound asleep on his shoulder. To hell with it: he’s got to get up at some point, and there’s no avoiding it. Carefully, he slides away from Credence, one hand supporting his head and the other his shoulder, letting him sink to the floor with as little disturbance as possible. Credence doesn’t move, except to curl in on himself slightly more. Graves hesitates, then pulls the blanket better over the young man’s shoulders. He lets his hand linger for a moment, not entirely sure why he does it.

When Graves stands up and turns around, Queenie is watching him with a soft smile. “What?” he asks, puzzled by the expression.

“Nothing, Mr. Graves,” she says. Queenie points her wand and the chair across from her slides smoothly out. “Come and sit down.”

Chapter End Notes

This is a watershed moment, because someone has caught a case of Feelings. Even if he’s an oblivious idiot and doesn’t know it…

Also, since there’s no history footnotes, it’s story time!!! Pyxyl reminded me that I forgot to tell you all about The Kaiju Incident; Or, Why I Don’t Write Action-Adventure Stories. See, a while back, I started working on a Supernatural/Pacific Rim crossover. This was reasonably the first major action/adventure piece I was going to write (although it’s never been published, for reasons that will shortly be obvious. I was super excited, because the narrative centered on Sam and Castiel copiloting a Jaeger together. (Dean helped build her.) Their first battle was a MASTERPIECE, or so I thought. I passed it off to Pyxyl for a beta read, and that’s when I learned that she has a mouth like a SAILOR, because she swore at it nonstop for fifteen minutes. My verbs weren’t active enough, my descriptions were too wordy, and—worst of all—I wrote a chunk of the fight that relied on a 150-foot-tall Kaiju “appearing out of nowhere”. The editing was…painful. And that’s how I learned that I can’t write physical fight scenes.

Luckily, her advice made me better (for those of you who’ve read Task Force Winchester or similar, you are aware that I HAVE improved significantly), and also luckily in a magical duel I can safely say “fuck physics” and just blow things up. :D
Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

Another short and sweet chapter. The next one is longer, I swear! BUT THERE IS EXTRA CONTENT TODAY! For those of you interested in such things, I have made public a selection of my writing playlist for this fic. You can find it here on 8tracks. Don’t make too much fun of me for all the pop songs, capiche? :)

The days between their arrival in the Goldsteins’ apartment and Newt’s arrival are agonizing. They can’t make too much noise, in case anyone’s listening, and they can’t be seen. During the day, Graves and Credence are confined to the bedroom, where it’s most plausible for the curtains to be permanently shut. In the evenings, they can move to the living room, though cautiously, stopping their shadows from being seen on the curtains. Then they can talk with Queenie and Tina about plans, useless or not, for how to get out of New York.

Tina is convinced that they’ll be able to get out in Newt’s suitcase. Graves thinks this is the stupidest plan anyone has ever come up with, but he’ll admit that there’s not a better one to be had at the moment. Credence seems optimistic about it, telling them what little he knows about No-Maj trains and places outside New York. Queenie is unusually silent during these discussions.

Credence, too, is quiet. Perhaps even quieter than he was before they came here. It’s almost depressing, how used to being trapped in his own thoughts he is. But whatever he’s thinking, it at least doesn’t seem to be miserable. Frequently, now, he smiles. That’s good to see.

They’re in the afternoon of the third day. Newt is supposed to arrive tomorrow. As usual, they’re in the bedroom, curtains and door closed. Graves is reading—one of the books he thought to throw into that satchel, a No-Maj novel he’s read twice before—and Credence is laying on one of the beds, tracing the patterns of the wallpaper with the tip of a finger. It’s their new normal. What isn’t normal is the sudden bang of the front door being flung open and slammed shut. Footsteps go rapidly across the floor.

Graves is on his feet in a moment, wand out and pointing at the door. He expects it to blast open any second, but it doesn’t. Instead, a moment later, he hears muffled sobbing from outside.

“Is that Queenie?” Credence asks, standing.

Graves listens. Yes, it can’t be anyone but Queenie. “I think so,” he says warily.

Credence goes to the door. Without hesitation, he opens it. “Queenie, what’s happened?”

Queenie is at the kitchen table with her head in her hands. She looks up, and Graves is alarmed to see that her eyes are red and there are tear tracks on her face. “Nothing,” she says, words catching. “It’s—it ain’t anything, you should stay out of sight—”

The curtains are closed in the living room. Graves makes the executive decision to come out into the open. “Did something happen to Tina?”

“No, no.” Queenie waves a hand weakly, wiping uselessly at her eyes. “It’s not her, it’s me.”
Credence hesitantly hovers by her shoulder. He gives Graves a confused look and for just a moment they’re on exactly the same page. Neither has any idea what to do. “Please, tell us what happened,” Credence says.

Queenie sniffs. “It’s so stupid,” she says.

“I promise it isn’t,” Credence says earnestly.

She hesitates for a long moment, then plunges in. “You know about the No-Maj who helped us,” Queenie says, “Jacob Kowalski. He was so good and so kind and wonderful and I…fell in love with him a little, maybe. But then he got Obliviated like the rest of the city, see, and I couldn’t talk to him because the law says that’s not allowed.”

“Aren’t you the one advising law-breaking?” Graves asks.

Queenie takes a shuddering breath. “I wouldn’t have, a month ago,” she says. “But…I started going to his bakery. He’s amazing. I couldn’t stay away. He’s so kind, you should see him. And when he sees me I think he remembers, just a little. I never spoke much to him, there’s no law against going to a bakery, but I just wanted to see his face. And he started to save things for me. When I said I liked cinnamon rolls there was always one he held back to make sure I could have it even though they always sold out by noon.”

Her lip trembles. “I knew he was getting sweet on me but I couldn’t stop going back, because I was just as sweet on him. And then today when I went he asked me if I’d like to go to dinner with him sometime, to see…and I had to turn him down, I could hear that he wanted it so badly and didn’t know why and I can’t see him right now or maybe ever because if I take up with a No-Maj I’ll be putting all of us in even more danger…” And she starts to cry again.

Credence, standing behind her, bends down and puts his arms around her shoulders. It’s the most awkward hug Graves has ever seen, but Queenie leans back into him all the same. They’re like that for a moment, Queenie shuddering with sobs and Credence making ineffectual soothing sounds.

Graves thinks furiously. How many laws are they already breaking? How much trouble are they already in? How much more can they possibly get into? How many times has the Statute of Secrecy been broken? What’s one more offense, at this point?

“Queenie,” he says slowly, “I can remove the memory modification charm on him.”

“What? But that’s impossible—” Queenie starts.

“I’ve had to interrogate someone under the effects of a memory modification plenty of times. We don’t talk about how it works much, because if we did we’d have people de-Obliviating No-Majs left and right,” Graves says. “It’s a delicate job, but I’ve done it before. I can do it again.”

Queenie stares at him, tears still rolling down her cheeks. “Do you—do you mean that?”

Graves nods. “Get him here and I’ll do it,” he says.

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Tina almost tries to slap him when he raises the subject that evening.

“Are you stupid?” she demands. “No, don’t answer that. You are stupid. I can’t believe that you would do something so irresponsible, so reckless—”
“Like hiding an Obscurial from Aurors and blowing up half a street?” Graves inquires dryly. “I think I already crossed the line into recklessness, Tina.”

“Tina, please,” Queenie says. “If he just remembered me, we could be together, I know we could.”

Tina huffs. “And how exactly are we supposed to hide you two from MACUSA?”

“The same way you’re hiding me and Mr. Graves,” Credence chimes in. “We’ll go in Mr. Scamander’s suitcase, all four of us. If he’s got creatures as big as an automobile in there, then he has to have room for two more people.”

“You’re all three in on this, aren’t you?” Tina drags a hand down her face. “And what if Kowalski doesn’t want to go?”

“If he doesn’t, I’ll wipe his memory again,” Graves says. He avoids looking at Queenie. “We’ll leave him here to live his life.”

He sees the moment that Tina accepts this is happening whether she wants it to or not. “At least let’s wait until Newt gets here tomorrow,” she says, crossly flicking her wand to set the iron going on a particularly nice blouse. “We don’t even know if he’ll be all right with smuggling fugitives in his suitcase or not yet.”

“You know he’ll do it,” Queenie says. “He’ll love the chance to see more of America, study more creatures. And I don’t think he’ll mind having friendly company while he does.”

“Merlin’s beard, you’re all completely cracked,” Tina mutters. She sends the blouse sailing onto a hanger, where it waits perfectly pressed for tomorrow when she goes to retrieve Newt. It’s mildly entertaining, how earnestly Tina wants to see the magizoologist. She’s dressing up more than she does to meet with the President. Queenie stifles a giggle, and Graves glances at her. She definitely heard that, and she smiles at him in confirmation.

“This was your plan to begin with,” Credence points out with a sly grin. “If we’re cracked, then so are you, Tina.”

Tina flings her hands into the air. “Fine. You be idiots and I’ll just watch your backs since not a single one of you has any idea what self-preservation means.”

When her back is turned, Queenie mouths a silent thank you to Graves and Credence.

At the rate he’s going, Graves will end up in hell faster than anyone from Second Salem would have ever expected. At least it seems he’ll be in good company.
Newt Scamander arrives at six o’clock sharp the next day. Queenie has cast charms on the curtains to keep any shadows but hers, Tina’s, and Newt’s from showing, when it gets dark enough that they have to turn on the lights. Graves can’t deny that he’s looking forward to meeting Newt in person at last—seeing him as more than words on a page. Tina knocks on the apartment door, a pattern to let them know it’s her. She comes in, flushed and smiling, and behind her there’s a tall, thin man in a blue coat with ruffled red-brown hair, carrying a battered suitcase, also smiling, looking around at them all with friendly inquisitiveness.

Queenie shuts the door behind them and then turns to embrace the man, who can only be Newt Scamander. “It’s so good to see you, honey!” she says.

Awkwardly, Newt returns the embrace. “You too,” he says in a quiet, British-accented voice.

Tina comes to stand by Graves. “Newt, this is Percival Graves,” she says, and then amends: “The real one, I mean.”

Newt glances up. He doesn’t quite meet Graves’ eyes, and he stands like he’s confronting a skittish animal, but holds out his hand. “It’s good to finally see you, Percival,” he says.


“I think I do,” Newt says. He smiles. “They’re fascinating birds, really, I wish I’d been able to keep a specimen but that wasn’t possible…”

“You two have been writing each other for how long?” Queenie looks between the two of them in surprise. “And how come I didn’t know?”

Graves shrugs. “My Occlumency is recovering. Slowly. Underlying thoughts aren’t quite as strong anymore, I think.”

Tina stares at them like they’ve both grown a second head. “I knew you wrote to him once,” she says, “but I had no idea you were going to keep writing to each other! What possessed you, Graves?”

“He never goes out of the house,” Queenie says. It looks like Graves won’t have to explain this, then; she’ll just read his mind. Convenient. He’s still not entirely up to scratch with blocking people out of his conscious thoughts. “How else was he supposed to have any human contact?”

Actually, that’s not convenient at all. It’s embarrassing. “We should probably get to business,” Graves says stiffly.

Newt looks over Graves’ shoulder at Credence, who’s standing well back, looking more nervous
than he has for a long while. Newt sets down his suitcase and steps around the other wizards. He moves slowly and carefully, making no sudden movements. “Hello,” he says, offering a hand to Credence, “you’re Credence, aren’t you?”

Tentatively, Credence takes Newt’s hand. “Yes, sir,” he says.

“I’m not a sir,” Newt says. “Just Newt is fine with me.”

“Newt,” Credence says, studying the magizoologist.

“We met before, in the subway,” Newt says, “but I don’t think you were in any state to recall it.”

Credence shakes his head. “I’m sorry,” he murmurs. “I wasn’t—I wasn’t all there.”

For the first time since coming into the apartment, Newt makes eye contact with someone. “Then I’m glad to meet you again,” Newt says. And Credence smiles.

There’s a long moment of silence, then Queenie claps her hands. “I should get to dinner,” she says. “How long has it been since you’ve had a real good meal, Newt?”

“A long time,” Newt says. He looks sideways at her with a faint smile. “Probably since I was last in New York, actually.”

Queenie rolls her eyes and tosses her hair. “Flatterer,” she accuses, but there’s definitely an extra spring in her step as she goes into the kitchen.

Tina drags Newt to the sofa. “Graves, get over here, we need to talk,” she says.

“Should I—” Credence asks, glancing at Tina and Newt.

“I don’t think you need to worry about this,” Graves says. “Tina’s the one with the plan. We all just have to stand back and listen.”

“Hurry up,” Tina says, and Graves thinks that being Director agrees with her. All that will and ambition finally have an outlet. Unfortunately, it has the side effect of making her even more impatient than she’d ever been before.

Credence, looking relieved, drifts away into the kitchen. Queenie immediately starts up a one-sided conversation with his thoughts. Graves sits down across from Tina and Newt. Tina is holding Newt’s hand like she expects a comment, but there are more important things than personal matters at the moment. “Have you explained the plan?” Graves asks without preamble.

“She did,” Newt says. “I’m to put all of you in my suitcase and get you out of New York.”

“It’s a risky plan,” Graves says. “If you get caught—”

Newt shrugs, a quick motion that’s almost birdlike in its speed and delicacy. “I’ll be in no more trouble than I was the last time.”

“When can you go?” Tina asks. “They’re really starting to ask questions, and I don’t know how much longer I can keep the President from forcing my hand.”

“Have you come up with any excuse to prolong the investigation?” Graves asks. She’s the Director of Magical Security, for Giles Corey’s sake—she has options.

Tina shrugs, visibly frustrated. “They’re buying all of the excuses so far,” she says. “But they came
here looking for you, which means that someone suspects that I’m protecting you. It had to be someone close to me, which means it’s Abernathy or Fontaine. I doubt either of them has the competence to get around me like that, though… I just don’t know. Everything’s so strange.”

Newt glances into the kitchen, where Credence is helping Queenie by chopping carrots. “He doesn’t seem so dangerous,” he says, changing the subject. “Not now, anyway.”

“He’s worked hard,” Graves says, and he can’t keep the pride out of his voice. “He’s learning to control his magic. Your advice was invaluable.”

“I’m glad,” Newt says. “He didn’t deserve any of that. I only wish we’d have been able to help him sooner, before…” He trails off. There’s a hundred things left unsaid: before Mary Lou Barebone got to him, before he learned to hate himself, before he became an Obscurial, before Tina tried to help him and failed, before Grindelwald came, before any of this happened.

“He’s no danger to anyone right now,” Graves says. Unspoken, he knows they hear the addition: But he could be if things go wrong.

Tina purses her lips. “That’s how I’d like to defend Credence, if it comes to that,” she says. “The mandate of the Director of Magical Security is—”

“—to define and gauge the severity of threats to the magical community of America,” Graves fills in. “If you say it isn’t a problem, the only one who can overrule that is the President.”

“Right,” Tina says. “And if I can prove that Credence is no threat as he is right now, then we’re home free. I don’t think that will fly, though. President Picquery is under pressure from the Senate to find and contain the Obscurial, and I doubt that they’ll hear me.”

“By contain, they mean kill,” Newt mutters darkly.

Graves leans back. He glances at the battered suitcase sitting by the side of the sofa. That’s got to be one hell of an Undetectable Extension Charm. It’s an extremely small suitcase. “So our best option is still to run.”

“No one will suspect me. Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them is apparently a bestseller, or so the publishers tell me.” Newt sounds surprised at his own success. “If I say I’m out looking for creatures to put in the second edition, people will believe me.”

“How long before someone realizes that we left with Newt?” Graves asks Tina.

Tina shrugs. “With any luck, they won’t realize you left with him at all,” she says. “I’ll make a public statement after Queenie disappears that she was the one that helped you get out. It’ll be a scandal for a bit, that the Director’s sister helped wanted fugitives escape, but if I mention that MACUSA let you get replaced by Grindelwald often enough, they’ll shut up.”

“I’m glad that my disgrace will help you cover our tracks.”

“Oh, you—”

From the kitchen, Queenie says, “Before you two get in a fight, there’s dinner.”

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By the time they make it to the kitchen, Queenie has already set the table. It’s a bit crowded, with five chairs. Graves finds himself between Queenie and Credence. Given that it’s them, he doesn’t
mind bumping elbows. Besides, Tina and Newt are so close together that they take up barely more space than would be necessary for one person alone. It would be funny if it weren’t honestly touching.

Queenie has many questions for Newt about his recent travels, and as Newt speaks more he gets more and more excited and expansive. He tells them about the Sanzuwu, the red three-legged crows who shine with gold light when they fly, and how he’d seen them nesting among the red mulberry trees at the Valley of the Sun. He describes the cities he’d visited, the wizards he’d met, the adventures he’d had. The slightly harrowing story of a sea serpent he’d encountered while sailing across the Pacific with his friend, some ship captain, has everyone enraptured.

Tina keeps getting closer and closer to him throughout dinner, staring at Newt with what can only be described as adoration. At a moment when they’re all about to break more laws than Graves really thought existed, it’s good to see that some people aren’t afraid. It’s fine, because he has enough worry for all of them. Considering that he used to spend his time worrying about all of wizarding America, this shouldn’t seem so difficult. Yet he has more of a personal stake in this than he ever had about being an Auror, and that’s on the edge of being frightening.

When he thinks that, Queenie takes his hand under the table. It’s still a foreign feeling, this casual affection, but he’s starting to think he could grow used to it. Not take it for granted—never that—but it doesn’t shock him anymore.

“Good,” Queenie murmurs, looking at him with a fond smile. Under cover of Newt expounding loudly on the problems with dragon-keeping in Poland, she says quietly, “I’m starting to think that no one’s shown you enough love in your whole life.”

“I don’t exactly invite it,” Graves says. He really doesn’t. He’d had a few relationships at Ilvermorny, of course, but after there had only been one, and even that one had eventually fallen apart.

Queenie, for some inexplicable reason, glances past him at Credence. Graves looks at the young man—he’s very intently looking at Newt, apparently listening with rapt attention. “That’s not as true as you think it is,” Queenie says.

He has no idea what she’s on about, and she doesn’t explain herself. Instead, she jumps to her feet to retrieve a tart she’d apparently made earlier, and asks Credence to pass out plates. It’s odd, but no more odd than any other conversation he’s had with her.

In the end, he puts it out of his mind. There’s a lot more to worry about here than what Queenie was seeing in his mind. Graves finds that his old instincts are returning, his thoughts two steps ahead of his actions, planning and counter-planning, working out all the ways that this could go horribly, terribly wrong. His wand feels heavier in his hand, as if it’s aware that he’s one wrong move away from casting a curse. Graves knows the others notice, but no one comments. Credence is a little wary of him, which is strangely painful. Is this how Grindelwald had looked, wearing his face? A hair-trigger temper, constantly ready for a fight?

There’s no time for a moral crisis, though. The plan is to bring Jacob Kowalski to the apartment tomorrow evening. Graves will de-Obliviate him as best he can, and if all goes well, four people will be packed into Newt’s suitcase and off they’ll go by No-Maj train into the middle of the continent. If it doesn’t go well, the plan doesn’t change much: it will be two people going, instead of four.

“If it goes wrong,” Queenie says softly when they ask her, “I don’t think I’ll have much of a mind to come along.” She stares fixedly at the dishes in the sink. Everyone pretends not to see the tears
threatening in her eyes.

Newt seems embarrassed, when he finds out that Credence and Graves have been sleeping on the floor, but takes the sofa anyway at their insistence. “I’m taller than both of you,” he observes, “and younger than Percival, so by all rights one of you should be up here.”

“I’m not that old,” Graves objects. Everyone ignores him.

“Besides, we have to stay out of sight,” Credence says reasonably. “No one can see us here, but if the curtains open and one of us is sleeping on the sofa…”

“Fine,” Newt says, stretching out on the sofa. His little Bowtruckle climbs out of his waistcoat pocket to explore the cushions. “I still feel bad.”

It’s a little strange, that night, having Newt in the room with them. None of the three men are particularly given to small talk, which is nice, but it’s a change from the dynamic that had already evolved on previous nights. Having Newt there changes small, subtle things—Credence sits a little further away than usual, and doesn’t fall asleep with his head on Graves’ shoulder. It’s odd, but Graves misses that small contact. Graves is awake longer than either Newt or Credence, listening to the other two men breathe, unable to dispel the concerns about tomorrow and all the days beyond. He sleeps restlessly, if at all, and dreams of dark things.

Chapter End Notes

A snippet about Sanzuwu: A blog about crows has a nice write-up on the myth. There were once ten crows, which perched on a red mulberry tree at the Valley of the Sun. They gave off light, and one of them traveled around the world each day (the arc of the sun across the sky). One day, all ten of the crows came out at once, which nearly destroyed the world in a fire, but Houyi the celestial archer slew all but one of the crows. Obviously, I’ve adapted this slightly, but I tried to be respectful of the original myth in the adaptation.
Chapter Notes

This is actually kind of a “missing footnote” to last chapter. Essentially, I kind of wish there were an established AO3 tag for “skin hunger/touch hunger”. It’s a condition where a person is not getting enough human contact and starts to suffer psychologically for it. People who suffer the condition can start presenting symptoms of depression, and people who already suffer from depression can get worse. As far as I’ve written in this fic, Percival definitely does suffer from this condition—and so does Credence. Queenie’s not wrong: they’re more than a little messed up by this. Thorough application of hugs and so on, however, can go a long way toward making things better.

The unfortunate reality is that our whole culture (assuming you live in the English-speaking Western world, particularly America) is increasingly touch-starved and many, many people unwittingly suffer from this condition. As our culture disconnects physically, more and more of us simply aren’t getting what we need in terms of human contact. And it’s not just internet and social media: other well-connected countries (like France, for instance) don’t suffer in the same way, because casual, platonic physical contact is much more normalized than it is in America. So if you haven’t had a hug today, go and get one, all right? :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

There are steps outside the apartment and Queenie’s bright, anxious laugh, accompanied by a man’s voice. Newt, who’s in the middle of the room, readies his wand—he’s a little less likely than Graves to accidentally blast Kowalski into oblivion when he casts the Stunning Spell. Graves is busy trying to remember how in the hell de-Obliviacion works, since it’s been more than a year since he’s had to do it. It’s complicated, and if one thing goes wrong he could accidentally erase all of Kowalski’s memory.

He’s jarred from his thoughts by the door suddenly opening and Queenie ushering the No-Maj into the apartment. “—here we are!” she exclaims.

“Hey, who’s—” Kowalski starts, but Newt’s wand is already pointing at his chest.

“Stupefy,” Newt says calmly, and the No-Maj goes over without another word.

Queenie helps haul him into the apartment. “Please just make this work,” she whispers to Graves as they prop him up in a chair in the kitchen.

“I’ll do my best,” Graves promises. He rolls up his sleeves.

Newt gives the No-Maj a critical look. “We need to stop meeting like this,” he says.

“Wait, how did you meet the first time, Newt?” Credence asks.

“I accidentally cast a Summoning Charm on him and Apparated him into a bank vault while I was trying to catch a runaway Niffler,” Newt explains. “And then—”
Graves glares at them. “I need quiet.”

Queenie takes Credence and Newt by the arms. “Let’s…get out of the way, shall we?” she says, casting a worried look at Kowalski. She pulls the other two men into the next room and shuts the door firmly behind them.

Alone with the No-Maj, Graves studies him critically. He has a round, heavy, pleasant face, with a thick mustache. This close, the cinnamon and other spices that are ingrained in his suit from long days at the bakery are easy to smell. There are multitudes of smile lines around his eyes. Yes: this is exactly the kind of person Queenie would fall for, if he’s actually as good a man as he seems to be.

He touches the tip of his wand to the man’s temple and begins the slow, careful process of repairing the man’s memory. This is the kind of magic that Graves isn’t nearly as good at. It requires intense focus, which he has in plenty, but it also requires a fine touch that doesn’t come easily to him. Still, thinking about Queenie, about her tears and absent smile, it’s easy to find the will to keep going.

Two hours later, Graves steps back, exhausted. He’s sure he’s performed the procedure correctly, and now all that’s left is to awaken Kowalski. He goes to the door and opens it. “It’s done,” he says.

Queenie pushes past him into the kitchen. “When will he wake up?”

“I’ll cast the countercharm now,” Graves says, coming to crouch in front of Kowalski. “I thought you’d want to be here when he woke up.”

“Yes,” Queenie says, standing where she can see Kowalski’s face, looking pinched and upset.

Credence and Newt stand in the doorway, twin looks of concern on their faces. Graves points his wand at the No-Maj and says, “Rennervate.”

A moment later, Kowalski’s eyes open. He stares at Queenie, utterly confounded. “Queenie? Did you—I can remember everything—”

“Oh, Jacob,” Queenie whispers, and starts forward.

But then Kowalski’s gaze fixes on Graves, still right in front of him, and the man instantly looks furious. Before anyone can react, he launches out of the chair and punches Graves in the face. Graves hits the floor hard, wand skittering away from him. For a second, he’s just stunned—he didn’t see that coming. Dizzy, he tries to sit up, and realizes that he’s seeing stars.

Newt and Queenie have hold of Kowalski, preventing him from going after Graves again. “What the hell is he doing here!?” Kowalski demands. “Did you just let Grindelwald in through the front door!?”

“Jacob, honey, that ain’t Grindelwald!” Queenie says.

“That’s the man he replaced!” Newt says.

Kowalski stops struggling. “…explain,” he says, still glaring warily at Graves.

Newt and Queenie start trying to fill him in at the same time. Graves is a little too busy to focus on that: he’s pretty sure his nose is bleeding, and that damn cracked cheekbone is throbbing.
“Here, sit up,” Credence says, and the next thing Graves knows Credence is helping him into an upright position, kneeling beside him, thin hands on Grave’s shoulders. “How bad did he hit you?”

Graves touches his face and winces. There’s blood dripping down onto his collar. “Not the worst I’ve ever had,” he says. By his standards, this is positively pleasant.

“Let me fix it,” Credence says. Graves doesn’t even have time to protest before Credence gently touches the broken skin. “Episkey.”

The pain vanishes. Credence’s hand doesn’t. His fingertips are still on Graves’ cheek. He’s studying Graves with an intensity that he usually only gives to spells. Graves has no idea what’s happening here, but he doesn’t move. He can’t make himself look away. At this close distance, it’s impossible not to notice that Credence has incredible eyes, beautiful even in the low light of the kitchen.

Finally, Credence leans back. His intent focus doesn’t waver, but he does take his hand away from Graves’ face. It’s still strange, but no longer unbearably so. Since Credence doesn’t seem inclined to say anything, Graves takes the initiative. “You don’t forget anything, do you,” Graves says, tearing his eyes away from Credence’s. “I told you that spell when we were on the damn fire escape a week ago.”

“I never forget the things you say,” Credence says.

That’s a slightly unsettling comment, but there’s no time to focus on it. Whatever conversation Newt and Queenie and Kowalski have been having seems to have ended, because Newt is offering a hand to help Graves up. He takes it, as well as the handkerchief Queenie offers to wipe off the blood.

Kowalski offers a hand, a bit shamefaced. “Sorry, Graves,” he says. “What an introduction, right?”

Graves shakes the man’s hand, then goes back to trying to get the blood off his face and shirt with the handkerchief. He doesn’t know if he can manage a Tergeo at the moment, feeling shaky from the exertion required to mend Kowalski’s memory. “I don’t blame you. If I saw Grindelwald in front of me, I’d punch him, too.”

Apparently, that weak joke is enough to shock everyone into laughter, and Graves manages to crack a smile. It might be dark humor, but it’s better than nothing. And seeing the way that Queenie is clinging to Kowalski’s arm, and the way he’s looking at her, Graves thinks that this was worth the pain.

***

Finally, when Tina comes home that evening and all the chaos of explanations is over, they get to see the inside of Newt’s suitcase. Tina is on edge, but she pulls up a smile somehow, and insists that she’s fine. So Newt himself leads the way, stepping down into the extradimensional space with the assurance of someone who’s done it hundreds of times. Kowalski follows, obviously ecstatic to be back. Queenie’s down the ladder next. It’s only with great hesitation that Credence steps into the suitcase, as if he’s expecting to fall or vanish or go nowhere at all.

“Don’t worry, I’ll catch you,” Newt assures from inside the suitcase as Credence descends.

Graves shakes his head—they’re already good friends, and it’s confounding when he’d half expected Newt to treat Credence as a curiosity rather than a person—and follows Credence down. “Close the case as you come down,” Tina says.
He’s surprised, despite all of the stories that everyone had told, when he steps off the ladder into a small room. It’s crowded, with six people packed inside on the narrow alley between cabinets and shelves and a long countertop. The whole place is full of paraphernalia for the care and keeping of magical creatures. There are notes and sketches pinned to the walls with Permanent Sticking Charms, detailing every inch and aspect of so many creatures, magical or not, that it’s almost impossible to believe. It’s a master’s workspace, just as Graves’ office was his, and as he takes in the sight he gains a new respect for Newt. This isn’t his job. This is his life.

“Come on,” Newt says, already pulling a slightly reluctant Tina by the hand out of the room and through a door. They disappear from sight, followed by the rest; Graves still behind Credence. The young man is unsure, glancing around with curiosity and something that isn’t quite fear. He moves carefully, afraid to touch in a way that he hasn’t been since Graves first Apparated them back into his house. The moment he goes through the door, though, he stops short and just stares. Graves, accustomed as he is to wonders of magic, does the same.

It’s a whole arena, larger than a house, going up into the air and spreading for hundreds of feet around. There’s a desert, a snowfield, a forest, a pond, places Graves doesn’t have the experience to identify—all with their own plants and possibly even climates. And in every one, there are creatures. He recognizes the Bowtruckles, the beautiful Fwooper (that must have had a Silencing Charm cast on it, if Newt’s book is to be believed), and the huge and incredible Graphorns. There are many other creatures, too, for which Graves doesn’t even have a name.

Newt is already sitting on the ground, picking up a small creature that Graves recognizes as a Niffler. “Now, you don’t go stealing anything from them,” he says, scratching its back gently as he glances around at the other people. Kowalski has been sidetracked by a large nest of sorts, and is cooing over whatever is inside. Tina has drifted off to the side, looking troubled and upset.

And then Queenie comes up the steps and offers her hands to both Graves and Credence. “You should come see them all,” she says. “The mooncalves are my favorite.”

“I should talk to Tina,” Graves says, shaking himself out of the sudden stupor. She’s got her arms folded, worrying at her lip with her teeth. Something must have happened, not serious enough to cause a crisis, but not anything good, either.

“All right,” Queenie says, and takes Credence by the hand. He follows Queenie down the steps, casting an inscrutable backwards glance at Graves. Sometimes Graves wishes he were a Legilimens like Queenie, because for all that he’s been living with Credence for weeks he still feels like he barely knows the young man at all.

Graves picks his way around a pair of very large beetles to stand by Tina. “Unless something happened that’s a real crisis, don’t worry. I’m starting to think that this plan might just work.”

Tina just looks at him for a moment, then says, with a wavering crack in her voice, “What on earth are we going to do, Graves?”

Kowalski stands up. “Tina?” he asks, a concerned hand on her elbow.

“You’re abandoning your bakery, my sister’s going to be a wanted criminal, Credence will never be safe, Newt could be arrested, we could all lose everything,” Tina lists, voice going louder and louder as she speaks. Graves tries not to feel stung that his name is missing from her litany. He fails.

Newt appears at her side. “Tina, don’t—don’t worry—” He holds out his hands, like she’s one of
his creatures, trying to calm her down.

She only rounds on him. “Don’t worry!? Everyone I love could die and you say don’t worry!?”

“Tina!” Queenie snaps, and at the foreign sound of Queenie losing her temper everyone just stops. In that moment Queenie is truly angry, eyes narrow, the wand in her hand looking like a threat despite not being raised.

“I’m not wrong!” Tina shouts. “This isn’t going to work! There has to be another way!”

Queenie folds her arms, utterly immovable. “There ain’t another way and you know it,” she says. “We’re going, Tina. We can’t stop now.”

Some of the beasts are moving restlessly, watching the fight and clearly aware enough to understand that violence is just a breath away. Credence pulls away from Queenie’s side, moving to stand anxiously next to Graves. Kowalski backs away, looking confused and slightly scared. Smart man. Newt doesn’t, though, standing by and watching them like they’re a pair of angry hippogriffs.

“I shouldn’t even let you leave the city,” Tina says, cold and hard suddenly. “You’re all only here because I haven’t turned you in like I should.”

“If you turn us in—”

“—you’ll be alive.”

Queenie points at Credence. “He won’t!”

It has to be the heat of the moment, all of the fear spilling over into anger, because Tina doesn’t even look at Credence as she says, “I’d rather have you alive than anyone else here.”

And just like that, Queenie’s wand is out and pointed at her sister.

The tension that’s been in the air for the last few days breaks, the ground he thought was solid shifts, and all of Graves’ self-control shatters. On instinct, he pushes Credence behind him and draws his wand, ready to cast a Shield Charm or even a curse. If Tina turns on them, he knows he can still defeat her in a duel. In a split second he’s aware of how fast they can get up that ladder, into the apartment, where they can Apparate to and be safe while they work out their next move—

Credence’s hand closes on his shoulder. “We’re fine,” he says softly, though his voice is shaking and his hand is cold as ice even through Graves’ shirt. “We’re safe. Just…put the wand down. Please.”

“Not until we know for sure,” Graves says. That tremor in Credence’s voice is worrying. It means he’s wavering, near to losing control of himself. That’s bad. That’s catastrophic.

Tina and Queenie are still shouting, Kowalski has prudently removed himself up the steps to the doorway of the workshop, and Newt—

Newt steps right in between the two women.

“What are you doing?” Tina snaps.

He holds out his hands as if pushing them apart. “You need to calm down,” he says quietly. Queenie rounds on him. “Calm down? When she threatened to turn us in to—”
“We have a bigger problem,” Newt says, with a forced lack of urgency. “Calm down. Percival, you need to turn around.”

Graves does, and then he understands. “Catastrophic” was, in fact, the correct word.

Credence is not entirely there anymore.

His edges have gone blurry and black, as if his shadow is crawling out of his skin. His hair drifts like it’s in a breeze, though there’s no wind to be felt. One hand is still outstretched, where it had been on Graves’ shoulder, and the other is in a fist at his side, trembling with the effort of control. His eyes are glowing a terrible empty white. And behind him, around him, in him, is the swirling, roiling, angry darkness of the Obscurus.

“Oh, no,” Queenie whispers.

“I tried,” Credence says, voice shaking. “I can’t…I can’t hold it.”

The wise thing to do is to step back. Let Tina or Newt handle this. But Graves is not a wise man, and his sense of self-preservation isn’t good for much anymore. So he steps forward instead. “Stop trying,” he says. “You can’t hide from it.”

Credence stares at him, and there’s the sense that the Obscurus is watching him, too. “What do I do?” the young man asks. The Obscurus murmurs with barely-contained rage.

Graves reaches out and holds Credence’s outstretched hand steady, turning it palm-up. “You can control this without suppressing it,” he says. “You know how to do this. You’ve done it before.”

“I…”

“You need to breathe,” Graves says. “Just take a breath, Credence.”

He takes one shivering breath, then another. A moment passes, and Graves sees him relax just a tiny bit. “What now?” Credence asks.

“You know the incantation,” Graves says, half smiling. “Remember, you have to want it.”

For one second, then another, Credence stands silent. Then he whispers, “Chromato Pyrorum.”

A tiny, weak spark, shifting through every color of the rainbow, flares to life over his hand.

“Good,” Graves says. He’s carefully not looking at the Obscurus, but out of his periphery he thinks he sees it shrinking. “Make it stronger.”

Credence’s hand is still trembling, held steady only by the fact that Graves is supporting it. Slowly, so slowly, the fire grows from a spark to a candle flame, then to a small blaze. The Obscurus continues to shrink. Graves is aware of Newt coming to stand at his shoulder, keeping a watchful eye on them. He doesn’t look away from Credence.

When the Obscurus is no more than a shifting shadow on the ground, Graves knows they’re done. He says, “Now snuff it out.”

Credence closes his fist. The fire dies, and his shadow is no more than a simple shadow again. For a moment, he stands still, and then—like a puppet whose strings were cut—Credence topplies, legs simply giving out. Graves catches him and Newt helps him get Credence safely to the ground.

As Newt checks Credence’s pulse, making sure he’s still alive, Graves stands and looks at the
other three. “We’re leaving New York,” he says, in a tone that brooks no argument.

And none of them argue.

Chapter End Notes

Sooooooo due to rechaptering concerns, that chapter 33 explanation has moved back to chapter 30...it'll come a week earlier than expected :)

One other thing. I would just like to say that if you have feedback that isn’t strictly positive, I am also so down for hearing that. This monster of a fic was a labor of love, and I’ve gone over and over and over it to make sure it’s just right. I’ve been so critical —I’d love to hear from more people about what you genuinely think or if you see things you think are mistakes/wrong/god-awful interpretation. Obviously, I’m not a fan of true flames/nonconstructive hate, but I’m here for people doing what message_from_Anarres did on Chapter 2 when they pointed out that I FUCKED UP THE ALPHABETIZING OF THE BOOKS, IT SHOULD BE THE OTHER WAY AROUND.

In my never-to-be-humble opinion, fandom is a give-and-take between creators and consumers in a way that no other kind of media can be. I put out fic, you all get to tell me what you think of it, and then I can put out more fic that takes what you’ve said into consideration. The only way I can get better as a writer is to receive feedback so I can understand what you all think I’ve done wrong, and possibly what I could do to fix it, if you have suggestions for me. So…yeah. Concrit, everybody. :)
Newt is truly a master of Undetectable Extension Charms. He takes two of the small cupboards in his workshop and enchants them so that each opens into a small room, rather than on shelves. “It’s a bit tricky, stacking extended spaces like this,” he says. “I’m sure they’ll hold, though. You can’t sleep out with the creatures, that would be…dangerous.”

Graves considers the Nundu which prowls the artificial jungle at the far reach of the suitcase. It’s the only creature in here that actually makes him nervous. “I think you’re right,” he says.

“And, if anyone else comes into the suitcase, they’ll never realize that you’re all in here,” Tina says, looking around at the workshop, which gives no sign of the two new rooms hidden in the cabinets.

One space is for Queenie and Kowalski and the other is for Credence and Graves. Queenie brushes off any unspoken questions with a smile at her No-Maj beau, and it’s entirely clear why she never asked for a room of her own. “I’ll be sleeping on the train and in whatever hotels we’re in on the way, or in the bed I’ve got already,” Newt explains, when Graves asks about his part in the arrangements.

They have one last dinner in the apartment, all together. No one talks about what happened earlier in the day, though Tina’s eyes are red-rimmed and she can’t quite look Queenie or Credence in the eye. Queenie seems unbothered—probably because she can hear what they’re all thinking. Credence sticks rather close to Graves, who is perfectly fine with that. Earlier today—that was a disaster. He’s still half a second from Apparating across the city with Credence if someone so much as raises their voice.

When they ask Kowalski, one last time, if he’s all right with abandoning everything, he shrugs. “I’d rather know about all this and be with Queenie than be successful and always feeling like I’m missing a part of myself,” he says philosophically. “Gotta make sacrifices sometimes.”

After dinner, Queenie retreats to the bedroom to pack. She’ll say her goodbyes to Tina in the morning. Everyone else except Newt will be spending the night in the suitcase.

“You take care of my sister,” Tina says fiercely, shaking Kowalski’s hand.

“The way things are going right now,” he says wryly, stepping into the suitcase, “I think she’ll be taking care of me.”

When the No-Maj is gone, Tina approaches Credence hesitantly. “I’m sorry about what I said, earlier,” she says. “I didn’t think, and I should have…”

“It’s all right,” Credence says quietly. He’s gazing somewhere away from Tina, hands twisting in
the hem of his jacket. “I’d worry about Queenie more than me, too.”

Tina has an expression like she’s been struck. “Oh, no, I…”

Credence looks at her with an obvious effort and a small, sad smile. “I always worried about my little sister more than anybody else,” he says. “I don’t blame you.”

“Credence, I’m going to worry about you the whole time we’re apart,” Tina says. She hesitantly, gently pulls one of his hands free of his jacket, holding it in both of hers. “Please stay safe.”

“I will,” Credence says. “You too. Don’t…don’t do anything dangerous.” And then he’s gone into the suitcase like he was never there at all.

Graves looks Tina over. She’s biting her lip again, that nervous habit that she’s had since her early days as an Auror. “Please look after them,” she says. “You…you’re the best wizard going. Credence trusts you, Queenie adores you, I’m pretty sure Jacob respects you. They’ll listen to you.”

“I’ll protect them,” Graves promises. Though they aren’t exactly casting the Fidelius Charm, he’ll treat this with the same gravity. “I’ll keep them safe.”

“I wish you didn’t have to go,” Tina says.

“Keep sending letters to Newt,” Graves says. “That way you’ll know where we are. Credence is right in thinking you should come join us.”

Tina nods. “All right,” she says. She looks lost and afraid, nothing like the Director of Magical Security or the woman who’d faced down Grindelwald.

Well, it had helped Credence, and it generally seems to help him. Awkwardly, unused to doing this at all, Graves gathers Tina into his arms. She seems surprised for a moment, but lets it go. If she sniffles a little, well, only he and Newt are there to see it.

“Get going, Graves,” Tina says when she steps back.

“Don’t get into too much trouble, Tina,” he says with a small smile. And he climbs into the suitcase and closes it behind him.

***

The departure happens without fanfare. Inside the suitcase, they can’t feel any of the motion happening outside, so their only gauge for what’s happening is knowledge of the plan. All they know is that, mere minutes after Queenie climbed down the ladder into the suitcase, Newt should have left the apartment and headed by No-Maj transport to Grand Central Station. If no one stopped him, he would purchase a ticket on the next train heading out of New York City, no matter where it’s going. From there, it should be an effortless, easy ride West.

Without talking about it, all four of them end up sitting under the ladder. Queenie holds Kowalski’s hand and rests her head on his shoulder. Credence, withdrawn and visibly upset, sits with his back to a wall and his knees drawn up to his chest. Graves has his wand lying across his lap, within easy reach. They don’t speak much, each lost in their own thoughts.

It’s nerve-wracking. Until the case opens, they have no way to know what’s happening. Newt could have been arrested. The case could have been impounded. The luggage, as Kowalski points out from experience, could have been switched. They just don’t know.
For hours, they wait in near-total silence. Occasionally, Queenie murmurs a reply to one of Kowalski’s unspoken thoughts. Graves pretends not to hear. He’s busy anyway, laying out plans for as many possible bad outcomes as could occur. If there’s trouble, he’ll prioritize Credence and Kowalski. Credence could defend himself, but that would be dangerous. The No-Maj would be helpless against a curse or a jinx. Queenie is an unknown quantity—how competent a duelist is she?—but she, at least, can Apparate. The fact that Queenie doesn’t try to reassure him or knock him out of his melancholy thoughts tells Graves that she’s really afraid.

Finally, there’s a tapping on the suitcase. Everyone jumps, looking up.

Then the lid creaks open, and Newt looks down at them with a smile. “We’re on the train and well out of New York,” he says cheerfully. “No one following, far as I can tell. Come on up.”

Credence practically bolts up the ladder. There’s an awkward moment when Graves and Kowalski both try to let Queenie go first, and then she pushes them both forward with a roll of her eyes. “One of you is trying to be respectful and the other one is thinking about looking up my skirt,” she says, eyeing them with amusement. “And the one trying to be respectful ain’t named Jacob.”

Graves laughs as Kowalski turns bright red and stammers. He climbs up the ladder and emerges into a cramped train compartment. It’s not large, but the doors lock and there’s a curtain over the door’s window, so no one will know that Newt’s hosting four other people in a compartment meant for two.

Just as a safeguard, Graves taps his wand to the door handle. “Colloportus,” he mutters, and hears the lock click shut. By the time someone gets it open, they can all be back in the suitcase.

“I’m never going to get used to this,” Kowalski says, head and shoulders emerging from the suitcase. “I don’t care how many times I do it.”

When he’s out, the No-Maj turns to offer Queenie a hand as she ascends. She takes it, stepping gracefully out of the suitcase. “It’s nice to see the sun again,” she remarks, looking out the window on the landscape churning past.

The Niffler is on her heels, but Newt swoops in and sweeps it off the ground before it can scurry away. “No,” he says sternly, poking its nose with one gentle finger.

Graves is unaccustomed to the motion of the train, the floor constantly swaying from side to side, but he adapts quickly enough. Credence is leaning on the wall beside the window, one arm braced over his head so that he can look out. Steadying himself with the regular rhythm of the train, Graves navigates around Queenie and Kowalski, who are talking about inconsequential things and staring at each other like they’re in the process of falling in love again. He tries not to knock into Newt, who’s busy with his Bowtruckle and the Niffler. At last he gets to the window, standing beside Credence.

“I have never,” Credence says without looking away from the view flashing by outside, “been on a train before. Ever.”

Graves mirrors Credence’s pose, one arm—the opposite of the young man’s—braced above the window. He’s seen quick-moving views before, but never on the ground level. There’s something pleasant about this, much simpler and easier than seeing the ground from a broomstick. “Neither have I,” he says, watching hills roll past. “A new experience for both of us.”

Credence glances at him. “You haven’t ever been on a train?”
“I’m much more used to magical travel,” Graves says. He puts his free hand in his pocket, unworried for this brief moment about the need to draw a wand. “Even when we’re going long distances, wizards don’t generally use No-Maj travel.”

“Finally,” Credence says under his breath, barely audible over the sound of the train. Graves casts him a quizzical look and Credence flushes slightly. “You weren’t supposed to hear that.”

Graves squints at the younger man. “Explain,” he says.

Credence smiles a little. “I finally found something you haven’t done,” he says. “I was starting to think you’d seen everything.”

“Not by a long shot,” Graves says. He shrugs ruefully. “For example, until I met you, I hadn’t had good friends in a long time.”

“Friends?” Credence looks absolutely confounded. “You mean—me? Your friend?”

Graves shrugs. “I don’t think I’d have done any of this for someone I hated,” he says.

There’s a moment where they’re just studying each other. And, honestly, Graves likes what he sees. With his overlong hair pulled back and tied out of the way with some ribbon that Queenie gave him, it’s evident that the young man’s hollow face has filled out significantly. There’s color in Credence’s pale skin. He’s less “bony” and more “slim” now. He looks healthy. Graves hadn’t been paying attention to this small transformation: there were more imminent things to worry about, like the emergence of the Obscurus or hostile wizards bursting in the door. He thinks that Credence looks a little less like a half-starved and injured boy, a little more like a happy and collected man.

“I’m fairly sure no one has ever called me their friend before,” Credence admits at last.

“If it makes you feel any better,” Graves says, thinking about his career, “I haven’t really called anyone my friend for about a decade.”

Credence smiles, a little shy, perfectly happy, and it might just be the best thing Graves has ever seen. “I’m glad I’m yours, then,” Credence says, and something about that turn of phrase makes Graves feel warm all over. He doesn’t say anything about it, though, just returns Credence’s smile. And nothing more needs to be said.

Chapter End Notes

I want to say that this is the point when I realized that this fic wasn’t going to be a short investment of time and energy. I still, however, was under the impression that this might break 50,000 words, if it ran particularly long. Obviously, I was incorrect…

This also marks the shift from the first to the second arc of the story. The first arc is everything you’ve already read: meetings, story setup, the planting of a mountain of seeds that will grow throughout the rest of the story…and this is the second arc. We now enter the world of road trips. WIZARDING ROAD TRIPS. IN NEWT SCAMANDER’S SUITCASE.

And on to research footnotes! I have SO many questions about Undetectable Extension
Charms. Here’s what happens in D&D if you stack extradimensional spaces (put a bag of holding, Heward’s handy haversack, portable hole, or some other item inside another extradimensional item): the action “instantly destroys both items and opens a gate to the Astral Plane. The gate originates where the one item was placed inside the other. Any creature within 10 feet of the gate is sucked through it to a random location on the Astral Plane. The gate then closes.” IT MAKES A BLACK HOLE. So…in canon, can you stack Undetectable Extension Charms??? Will THEY produce a black hole???
Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

SO! We’re starting a betting pool! It’s obvious to anyone that Graves and Credence are having Feelings at each other. However, it’s anyone’s guess (except mine and Pyxyl’s really) as to who will figure it out first and which one of them will make the first move. We already have one bet recorded:

1—Credence realizes first/Graves is the first to make a move

Add your guesses down in the comments! Suggested combinations: Graves realizes first and makes the first move, Credence sees it first and makes the first move, Graves figures it out first and Credence makes the first move…add anything else you want, though if you think your guess falls into another category please word it accordingly for ease of accounting. I’ll just keep a running tally in the chapter notes until The Inevitable Reveal. :3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The journey is about fifteen hours from New York to Chicago, which was apparently the next nearest destination Newt could think of when he was at the train station. “I’m sorry to drag you all along to find a creature,” he says apologetically, “but I’ve heard that there might be a wayward Labbu in Lake Michigan. If there’s one, I need to find it. If it exists, it’s been there an awful long time…but still. And Chicago is a good city, right? I don’t know if there’s anything to worry about there. Percival, should we keep going on?”

There’s a Department of Magical Law Enforcement branch office in Chicago, but given the situation, Graves is fairly sure that they’ll fly well under the radar. No one will be looking for Newt, and in a city full of wanted men no one is going to take notice of a few more. “It shouldn’t be a problem. We’re the least of their concerns. No-Maj Prohibition has given us trouble in Chicago,” he says. “More than a few unscrupulous wizards have taken up with gangsters to help them smuggle liquor. Makes them a tidy profit, but also breaks the Statute of Secrecy in more ways than I can count.”

“Wait,” Kowalski says, “you mean Al Capone—the Al Capone—is working with wizards?”

“Yes?” Graves says, unsure of why this matters so much.

Kowalski looks heavenward as if for guidance. “You can’t just say that and not tell us the story!”

“Oh, tell it, go on!” Queenie says, obviously picking up enough from Graves to be excited.

Credence waits expectantly, and even Newt leans forward, anticipating a story.

Under that kind of scrutiny, Graves can’t avoid it. So he recalls the Chicago cases. The first was in ’22, he thinks (assuming that Grindelwald didn’t scramble that memory too badly), when he’d had to go to Chicago himself to deal with some of the early enterprisers who were offering their magic to help bootleggers get their wares across from Canada without having to deal with No-Maj authorities. MACUSA had initially believed that the situation was resolved, but by 1925 the issue
of rogue wizards was endemic to Chicago. Every mob boss who was even remotely important had a wizard on the payroll.

That had resulted in the establishment of a permanent station of Aurors and Obliviators in the city whose only job was to make sure that No-Majs were sufficiently unaware of the rampant misuse of magic. Graves had gone back in ’25 to establish the station, and he’d run afoul of one particular boss, a new man in the city, one Al Capone. The man was cunning and in possession of items to temporarily ward off Obliviation, and had actually directly challenged Graves in a warehouse in South Chicago. That had been a chaotic fight—they hadn’t yet worked out magic to properly block a Tommy Gun, but most of the No-Majs involved had no defense against magic—and in the end they’d called a truce. Al Capone was allowed to run his empire, on the condition that the wizards on his payroll personally see to the Obliviation of No-Majs who witnessed magical events. From that moment on, Capone had a perfect record, with not one reported case of magic-related hysteria in Chicago.

But he was still a major hole in the Statute of Secrecy, which meant that Graves got to spend a lot of time worrying about the Chicago situation and debriefing anxious Senators on it. The whole thing was a permanent headache, and Graves is well rid of it now. His only concern is that someone involved with Capone’s gang might recognize him, but given his disfigurement and the state of his hair—gone all the way to salt-and-pepper now—chances are good that he’ll never be noticed.

“I can’t believe you actually fought Al Capone,” Kowalski says, when Graves is done describing the case. He shakes his head. “This just gets wilder by the minute.”

“I take back what I said earlier,” Credence says. “You have done everything.”

Queenie laughs. “Our Mr. Graves is a man of the world,” she says. It’s oddly pleasant, hearing that he’s “our” Mr. Graves, though he immediately resolves never to tell anyone but Queenie about that thought. Better to keep his dignity and fearsome reputation at least slightly intact.

“Will this be a problem?” Newt asks. Pickett—as Graves has learned the Bowtruckle is named—is in the process of climbing up Newt’s hair. Newt ignores the twiggy little creature. “If it is, we can just catch the train on to the next city.”

“No, no,” Graves says. “I doubt Capone would even recognize me now. And even if he does, I’m not doing anything wrong by being in Chicago.”

Credence, who’s somehow ended up holding the Niffler (which is occupied with trying to pry off the buttons on his waistcoat), looks gloomy. “At the rate we’re going, he’ll decide we’re doing something wrong and we’ll have to run out of town again,” he says.

Queenie tosses her hair. “Let him try to scare us off,” she says airily. “We’ve all seen worse.”

Kowalski nods, brimming with confidence. “He’s sure as hell not ready for us,” he says. He leans forward, elbows on his knees. “So Newt, tell us about this…Labbu thing you want to find.”

Graves leans against the wall by the window, listening to the talk. It’s strange, but for the first time since leaving MACUSA he doesn’t feel pain when he thinks about his career. These people, his traveling companions, people he might even be able to call real friends, don’t think any less of him for his resignation. He feels…proud of his past, rather than ashamed.

***
The next time they’re able to emerge from the suitcase, Newt has gotten a room in a hotel on the north side of the city, as close to the lake as he can manage. He’s already pinning a map of Lake Michigan’s coastline to the wall. It’s covered in annotations and circles. Several parts of the coast have particularly heavy writing.

“Labbu prefer deep waters, like the part of Lake Michigan far away from shore,” Newt explains, darting to the map and pointing. “If they come ashore, it’s only once every century to lay their eggs. It wouldn’t have come where there are people, but I’m sure that it coming ashore was the reason that the rumor started up. They’re very large. And intelligent, much more so than wizards, even.”

Credence joins Newt at the map. “We’ll have to go outside the city,” he says thoughtfully.

"We planning to move it into the suitcase?” Kowalski asks.

Newt shakes his head. “I wouldn’t be able to convince it into the suitcase, and it probably wouldn't fit in anyway,” he says. “But I think…I think I could convince it to let me take its eggs.”

“Why would you—” Graves starts.

“So he can get them to the ocean,” Queenie says.

“Right,” Newt says. “If they hatch here, then the lake will be too crowded. All of them could die because there’s not enough food. They could be seen, they could be captured, they could be killed…”

He stands there, inspecting the map, hands in his pockets, for a long minute.

“I’m sure it will come out fine,” Queenie says.

“I can’t just stand by and watch them die,” Newt says.

Graves stares at the map. That’s a lot of coastline to search. Lots of places where a sea serpent might hide its nest. Lots of places for them to get caught. All the same… “We’ll help you find them,” he says to Newt. “After all, if we let you go on your own, you might get eaten. Or cause another breach of the Statute of Secrecy. Or both.”

Newt turns to him and smiles, shy and brilliant. “Thanks, Percival,” he says.

“Of course,” Graves says.

There’s a brief moment of eye contact—and it must be living with Credence, who still has trouble sometimes looking at anyone, which makes it an exceptional occurrence—before Newt turns to the rest of the group. “They only surface at night. The light hurts their eyes,” he says. “It’s three hours to dusk. Then we can start searching.”

Chapter End Notes

Now to the subject of trains! This is super cool and I am ALL KINDS OF INVESTED in this. Google Maps would have us believe that a trip by train from New York to Chicago would take about 19 hours. So was this speed the same in the 1920s? You might expect that it would take even longer…and you would be 100% wrong. This
Slate article details the fact that trains have actually regressed since the 1920s. Trips took much less time than they do now. I hacked off about 4 hours from the modern projected journey, because I couldn’t find an exact timetable for the same trip in 1927. As you can see in the article, the exact differences in speeds between old and new trains aren’t particularly exact. So fifteen hours it is.

ALSO. Al Capone, everybody. Old Scarface was in fact a “new man” in the gang scene in 1925. He took over the Chicago Outfit from Johnny Torrio that year. Regarding his “hole in the Statute of Secrecy” status, I was inspired by Gentleman Johnny Marcone from the Dresden Files. As the Dresden Files Wiki puts it, he is “a Freeholding Lord under the Unseelie Accords…[and] the first regular human to be a signatory.” This means, basically, that he has right to play ball with the heavyweights of the supernatural world (including the wizards) and get protection and courtesy under the Accords as well. I figure, if Jim Butcher can hand over such status to a fictional crime lord, why can’t we give it to the most infamous real-life gangster of them all?
This chapter is literally more than twice as long as the last one. I sometimes feel like I make up for short chapters by writing page-long footnotes...apologies to casual readers who came here for simple Credence/Graves and ended up with lectures on weird random shit instead. Further apologies to readers who, like the writer, thought this was going to be a standalone story. No: if you look up there at the summary, you’ll see that this story is now part of a series. That’s right: I wrote a prequel oneshot. You might wanna read it. It’s got Al Capone in it. I hear he’s pretty popular…

Betting pool update:
1—Credence realizes first/Graves is the first to make a move
2—Credence figures it out and makes the first move
1—Mutually Assured Seduction: they just jump each other at the same moment
1—Credence makes the first move; Credence figured it out first and believes that Feelings Are Mutual, while Graves may have figured it out but believes it is Inappropriate and Unrequited on his part
1—no idea how it all shakes out, but they end up happy

Continue making bets, please! I’m getting entirely too much enjoyment out of watching everybody try to work this out. One thing: unless you have a wholly new guess to add (or something Extremely Specific to say), please copy one of the existing categories so I can keep a better tally. :)

Newt brings them by suitcase to the shore. Though it’s summer, the wind off the lake is frigid, and it’s pitch dark out, the shore and lake lit only by starlight. They’re well north of the city, far away from Chicago itself. It’s almost strange to be here, far away from the masses of lights that make up the city, able to see every star in the sky overhead, seeing each other illuminated in the forgiving light.

“I thought we’d better start far out,” Newt explains, locking up the suitcase. “The Labbu wouldn’t lay its eggs anywhere they’d be discovered on accident. And this part of the shore isn’t far from the deeper waters of the lake, so it’d be easy for it to get in and out of the water.”

Graves shoves his hands in his pockets. “I hope it doesn’t take us too long to find the eggs on purpose,” he says, and shivers. He doesn’t do well with cold, dark places these days, even outdoors. It’s too reminiscent of…other things.

Credence looks up at the sky. “It’s better without skyscrapers,” he says. He doesn’t seem to be bothered by the cold at all. His only concession to the weather is a blue scarf that used to belong to Graves. When Kowalski asked, concerned, Credence had just shrugged and said that he was used to far worse cold.

“I like it better, too,” Kowalski says. Queenie is on his arm, and despite the fact that he’s wearing only a thin coat he looks happy and warm regardless. “Haven’t been out of New York since I came home from the war.”
“What, exactly, are we looking for?” Graves asks.

“Drag marks,” Newt says. “A Labbu has arms—a bit vestigial, but still big—and it uses them to drag itself onto the shore and dig the nest. It looks like someone dug two parallel trenches, and the eggs will be buried nearby. You’ll see the place where it turned itself around, too—lots of trees crushed, rocks knocked aside, that sort of thing.”

Kowalski nods. “Simple. I like it.”

Newt nods. “Nearly impossible to miss. They’re bloody huge, we’ll know what we’re looking for when we see it.” And just like that, he’s off, halfway down the beach by the time that anyone else can even think to move, suitcase banging heedlessly against his legs.

“He’s not used to working with anyone else,” Queenie says reflectively. “This’ll be good for him.”

They follow Newt, wind tugging at hair and coats, listening to the sound of the small waves washing up on the sand of the shore. When Graves looks out on the lake, it’s seemingly as endless as the ocean. It’s much calmer, though, disturbed only the few distant lights of ships coming into port in Chicago. With the city’s lights at their backs, it’s easy to pretend that they’re alone out here.

After two hours of walking, they come to a place where large rocks sit, worn smooth by wind and water. Newt scrambles over them with ungainly grace, single-mindedly ignoring everything in favor of looking for signs of the Labbu coming ashore. Kowalski and Queenie help each other, neither used to activity like this, laughing quietly when they slip and catching each other when they fall. Credence is surprisingly adept, though that’s probably his relative youth showing. Climbing over obstacles isn’t exactly foreign to Graves, but then again it’s been a long time since he had to do anything like this. He wonders why, exactly, Newt didn’t choose to go around the rocks. Singlemindedness, he’d guess.

On one particularly smooth rock, he slips. There’s a breathless moment when Graves is falling. He thinks, this is it, this is how I die, how much more ridiculous can this be, and then Credence, who’s already atop the rock, catches him with both hands by the front of his coat. He pulls Graves up, onto the flat top of the boulder.

“You should really be more careful,” Credence says.

He doesn’t let go of Graves.

“Thanks for the rescue,” Graves says, trying to catch his breath. “That would have been a silly way to go. Especially considering everything else I’ve survived…”

Credence shakes his head. “I wouldn’t have let you fall, sir,” he says, with the kind of sincerity normally reserved for pledging allegiance to someone else or casting the Fidelius Charm.

The words make Graves shiver with something that isn’t cold or fear. He doesn’t care too much to examine it. “Drop the ‘sir’,” he says, for lack of anything better. “You’re not a child or someone I can order around. Just…Graves is fine, Credence.”

“What, you don’t want me to call you Percival?” Credence asks impishly.

“That’s reserved for Newt,” Graves says. “Though he didn’t even bother to ask permission.”


There’s a pause that somehow manages to be comfortable. Credence still hasn’t let go of Graves’
coat, though his grip relaxes a bit. It’s too dark to see exactly the expression on the young man’s face, but his posture is a bit tense. As is becoming a regular occurrence, Graves isn’t quite sure what’s happening, and he’s not sure what he ought to do to stop it, or even if he should. Credence doesn’t say

“Hey!” Kowalski yells, shattering the quiet from a hundred yards further up the shore. “Hurry up! Newt found it!”

Credence lets go and steps back. “We should catch up,” he says, sounding oddly flustered.

“I am not climbing over any more rocks. I’d get killed,” Graves says. He holds out a hand to Credence. “I’d much prefer to Apparate.”

“Oh,” Credence says, small and surprised, but he takes Graves’ hand anyway, and the two of them snap out of existence.

They reappear beside Kowalski on the edge of the rocks. He doesn’t even twitch. “Nice of you two to join us,” he said offhandedly. He points to Newt, who’s standing in a trench that looks like it was dug by a gigantic scarifier. It’s deep enough that only his head pokes out.

“I told you it would be obvious,” Newt says. “The eggs will be close, probably buried under something. They’re very delicate so be careful if you find them.”

Queenie, who’s made her way across the trench and is thirty feet further down the beach, calls out, “Newt, honey, what do they look like?”

“Large, about the size of a Muggle football or maybe a bit bigger,” Newt says, holding out his hands to demonstrate. He looks up at them all, as if to check that they’re paying close attention. “They’re very soft, only a bit harder than gelatin. They have a nucleus and they glow blue.”

“I think I found them,” Queenie says. She turns back to look at them, worried. “They aren’t buried very deeply, there’s just a bit of sand over them—”

Newt launches himself out of the trench at top speed. “Something must have gone wrong,” he says, and then he’s going a mile a minute, explaining and hypothesizing.

The other three men make their way across. Credence helps Graves and Kowalski up out of the trench and they rush over to where Queenie and Newt stand in front of the eggs. All of them are piled in a depression in the earth, partly covered by sand. They’re much bigger than Graves expected, a pile of fifteen or so, each glowing a soft blue that hardly casts any light at all. Their nuclei flutter gently, as if they’re breathing.

“They’re beautiful,” Kowalski says softly, leaning down to see them better.

Newt crouches in front of the eggs and gently brushes the sand from the surface of one. It flickers at his touch, glowing a little brighter. “I don’t understand why they weren’t buried properly,” he says. “Poor things.”

A strong breeze is blowing in off the lake. Graves looks up and sees that the stars are being blotted out by quick-moving clouds. There’s a distant roll of thunder. Lightning shimmers over the waters of the lake. The skies were clear a second ago, with no sign of bad weather. “Newt,” he says, “something’s wrong.”

“Bugger,” Newt mutters, rising to his feet.
“Newt!” Queenie says, backing up and turning to face the water fearfully. “Why didn’t you tell us about this!?”

“Tell us about what?” Kowalski asks.

Newt steps toward the shore, peering into the darkness. “The Labbu can summon storms,” he says tersely. “They do it when they’re threatened. But they can only do it when they’re close by…”

Graves draws his wand. “Lumos Maxima,” he says, throwing the brilliant white light up into the air. It bathes the whole area in light, casting everything into bare shadows. And in that light, it’s easy to see the titanic creature rising up from the lake, barely twenty feet offshore.

It’s huge, easily bigger than a train, with window-sized eyes that shine gold in the light of the spell. It has a mouth that could swallow all of them whole, with enormous curved teeth projecting from its mouth. Spines taller than a man stab upward from its back. Its serpentine body curves away into the darkness, sinking into the depths of the lake. And it’s watching them.

“Oh, fuck,” Kowalski says.

Graves aims his wand at the Labbu. “Say the word, Newt,” he says, ready to throw whatever spell he has to in order to protect them.

Newt holds out a hand. “No, no,” he says, and before anyone can do anything to stop him he’s running down the shore and right out into the water. He plows into the water at full speed, slowing only as the water rises over his knees.

“Should we do something?” Credence asks hesitantly.

Kowalski shakes his head, watching Newt tensely as rain begins to fall on the shore. “I don’t think there’s anything we can do now,” he says.

The light from Graves’ wand illuminates Newt, in the water past his waist now, as he stops just shy of the Labbu’s leonine face. They can just hear him speaking: “We didn’t come here to hurt you,” he says. “We want to help you.”

For a second, Graves doesn’t know what the sound is, rumbling through the ground, and then he realizes that it’s the Labbu. It’s growling. The water thrums with it. Credence shivers and presses close to Graves’ shoulder. The shadows twist in the wandlight.

Queenie, pale-faced, says, “I can hear it.”

“So can I,” Graves says tersely.

“No, I mean that I can hear its thoughts,” Queenie says. She clutches Kowalski’s shoulder, swaying on her feet. “It’s so old…”

“Your eggs won’t be safe here,” Newt says. “People will find them. They’ll kill your children. I don’t want that to happen. I want to help.”

The Labbu’s growl shakes the earth.

“It wants to know where he’s taking the eggs,” Queenie gasps. Graves casts her a concerned glance. She has a hand pressed to her head. “If they’ll be safe.”

“I promise I’ll keep them safe,” Newt says earnestly. “I’ll get them to the ocean. They’ll hatch in
salt water, where they belong.”

Queenie is sagging alarmingly against Kowalski, who is doing all the work of holding her up. “It’s afraid to let them go, but it wants them to be safe…”

Newt holds out his hand. “I promise,” he says. The light that Graves cast from his wand is beginning to fade. In the last dying light, he sees the Labbu lean forward and press its nose to Newt’s outstretched hand.

A moment later, Newt sloshes his way back onto the shore. He’s dripping wet but doesn’t seem to notice at all. He comes running up to them, holding his wand out to cast some better light on the dark shore. “It’s all right,” he says. “It’s going to let us take care of the eggs.”

***

Getting the eggs into the suitcase is easier said than done.

First, there’s the worrying matter of Queenie. The second the Labbu is out of thinking range, she swoons. She insists she’s fine, but absolutely no one believes her when she can’t manage to stand on her own. Finally, Newt convinces her that it’s no trouble to them if she lies down, so Kowalski helps her get inside and into the room they share.

Meanwhile, in the suitcase, Newt and Graves put their heads together to Transfigure a tree stump into an acceptable container for the eggs. Credence stands back and watches curiously—this will be the first time he’s seen a real Transfiguration. It’s unfortunate, Graves thinks, that it’s one of his. He’s never been good at large-scale recreational Transfiguration. There are some things he can do well enough, but on the whole if Graves can accomplish a task any other way, he will. Transfigurations, for him, tend to go wrong. The work is too delicate and requires control he simply doesn’t have.

How in the hell he thought it was a good idea at any point to try to teach Credence control is beyond him. He’s lucky he got anything right.

And, inevitably, it goes wrong. They’re aiming for a large vessel—just something simple, a place that the eggs can be kept under water, since Newt insists that they must be kept somewhere that water can cover them—and don’t get exactly that. For some reason, they end up with an overlarge clawfoot bathtub, big enough for three people to comfortably fit.

For a moment, they just stare at it.

“Well, that’s new,” Kowalski says, coming down the steps from the workshop. “Thought you were trying for a swimming pool?”

“We were,” Newt says. “I’m not sure where we went wrong.”

“You let me participate in the spell,” Graves says. He pinches the bridge of his nose. “I warned you, I’m a damn fool when it comes to this kind of magic.”

Credence looks down into the tub, which has sides high enough that he can use them for an armrest without bending at all. “It seems big enough,” he says. “Though I think you forgot the taps.”

Kowalski looks in, too. “And the drain,” he says. “Please. Please, for the love of God tell me that wizards don’t—”

“Aguamenti,” Newt says, and a stream of water arches from his wand to begin filling the tub.
“—fill their damn bathtubs by magic,” Kowalski finishes, looking put-upon.

The next step is getting the eggs into the suitcase. They’re incredibly large, and though Newt reassures that they won’t break from touching it still feels like they’re far too soft to be handled at all. At every touch, the nuclei pulse. It’s an uncomfortable thing to try to carry, especially into a suitcase and down a ladder. There are seventeen eggs and four men, and between them they somehow get all of them into the water without incident.

The bathtub is large enough for all seventeen eggs, and they float in the shallow water, their strange light flickering.

“We have a destination now,” Newt says, with a firmness Graves has never heard in his voice. “I have to get to the Pacific. That’s where we can let the eggs hatch. The Labbu—they aren’t meant to live in fresh water for so long.”

“What do you mean?” Credence asks.

Newt stares down at the eggs. “The Labbu we met is dying,” he says softly. “It’s been trapped in the lake too long. It’s too big to get through the locks and dams that keep it from the ocean. These are its last eggs.”

A silence falls for a moment.

“They need help, huh,” Kowalski says, at last.

“Yes,” Newt says, resting one hand against an egg. Blue light flutters beneath his hand. “We’ve got to take care of them now.”

It’s funny, Graves reflects as he helps Newt to feed some of the animals later that night, how he keeps ending up in positions where he has to take care of others. First all of wizarding America, then Credence, then this odd little band of lawbreakers and misfits, and now seventeen helpless Labbu eggs. It’s a strange life, even by the standards of the wizarding world. Giles Corey knows, though, that Graves’ life has never exactly been what anyone would call normal or easy.

“You know, they’re all like those eggs,” Newt says, as they go up the stairs into the workshop. “All the beasts, I mean. I don’t just…take creatures from where they belong because they’re curiosities. Only creatures that were hurt or can’t live on their own are here.”

Graves glances over his shoulder. “They look healthy,” he says, watching some six-winged bird circling lazily overhead.

Newt shakes his head. “Some are now,” he says, “but I can’t send them back out into the wild. I saved the Erumpet from poachers. The Bowtruckles came from a tree that burned in a forest fire. Dougal—the Demiguise, I mean—was being kept in a cage and never knew anything different. They wouldn’t survive long, out of this suitcase.”

“Neither would we,” Graves says quietly. “I haven’t thanked you yet for taking us in.”

“You don’t have to thank me.” Newt looks surprised.

“I do,” Graves says. “You’re a good man, Newt. And a good friend.”

Newt ducks his head, suddenly shy. “I’ve never had many of those,” he says.

“Neither have I,” Graves says. “Lately things have been…different.”
“In a good way, I think,” Newt says, looking back at the creatures. “I like this better. It’s good to not be alone anymore.”

And that’s it, isn’t it? None of them are alone anymore. Newt has friends to watch out for him and keep him safe. Credence has people to lean on, people who don’t treat him like he’s dangerous. Kowalski is surrounded by people who don’t look down on him and is with the love of his life. Queenie is around people who don’t mind letting her into their minds, who trust her even though she’s a Legilimens.

Graves isn’t sure what, exactly, he’s bringing into this. As far as he’s concerned, his only redeeming quality is his skill with magic. That’s enough, at least, to protect these people. He’d gladly give his life for them. He’s only good at one thing. Well, maybe two, if dying counts. So he can give his protection and his life. That’s got to be a fair trade, for having people around who call him by his first name and trust that he’ll do the right thing by them. It doesn’t seem entirely fair to them—asking them to put up with him and deal with him every day—but he’ll take it, and he’ll fight to the death to keep it.

Chapter End Notes

Let’s talk Labbu! These creatures are essentially my invention. They’re inspired by a Sumerian monster of the same name, which was the only one of its kind. Here’s a detailed version of the myth of the Labbu. I took its appearance (leonine sea serpent), removed the wings (how much more OP can you get honestly), gave it arms like the Sea Dragon Leviathan from Subnautica, and shifted the “screen of clouds” from Tishpak to the Labbu. Then I pluralized it. Down in the sea, there are more of these things…I hope none of you are thalassophobes.
Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

Betting pool update:

1—Credence realizes first/Graves is the first to make a move
2—Credence figures it out and makes the first move
1—Mutually Assured Seduction: they just jump each other at the same moment
2—Credence makes the first move; Credence figured it out first and believes that Feelings Are Mutual, while Graves may have figured it out but believes it is Inappropriate and Unrequited on his part
1—no idea how it all shakes out, but they end up happy

Keep it going, y’all…
Also, heads up. In the second scene of the chapter Graves suffers a flashback/dissociative episode. If you’d like to skip this, stop reading when Credence starts trying to get the Bowtruckle out of his hair.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“I’m all right with staying in Chicago for a few days,” Newt says, looking out the window. “The eggs—we’re in no rush to get them to the ocean. I’d like the chance to study the Labbu a little more. And besides, Chicago is a nice city."

“I have no objections,” Graves says.

Queenie, perched on the small hotel bed and doing her makeup by hand, pauses and looks up from her hand mirror. “Didn’t you say that MACUSA ain’t interested in this city?” Graves considers that. Before he can answer aloud, Queenie replies, “Well, interested because there are gangsters, of course, but I mean that they wouldn’t expect us to run here.”

“No one in their right mind runs to Chicago for safety,” Kowalski comments.

“I don’t think any of us are in our right minds,” Credence points out.

Graves clears his throat. “So if no one has any objections, we’ll stay in Chicago until Newt’s finished with his research.”

“I haven’t got a single one,” Queenie says, examining her lips minutely in the mirror. She frowns critically and wipes an impossible-to-notice smudge from one corner. “I’ve heard that some of the best nightclubs in the country are here.”

“So have I,” Kowalski says. “I’ve been to speakeasies before, but they’re usually damn seedy places. Not the kind of place for a lady.”

“Speakeasies?” Graves asks, slightly confused. He’s heard the term in passing, but it was always in the context of No-Maj business, and he didn’t concern himself with it. Now, of course...

Credence, leaning on the wall in the corner, laughs. “That’s two,” he says.
Graves sighs. “You’re never going to stop needling me about that, are you,” he says.

“No, I am not,” Credence says cheerfully, ignoring Graves’ mild glare. “A speakeasy is somewhere that people go to get illegal alcohol.”

“Nasty places, most of ’em, but when you’re after a drink, there’s no better spot,” Kowalski says. Ah. So close enough to establishments like the Blind Pig, which are less about alcohol—thank Mercy Lewis for President Picquery and her fondness for good brandy—and more about traffic in prohibited magical substances and objects. Say, for instance, creatures. Which didn’t bear thinking about, in present company.

“I’ve never been, but there was one around the corner from the church,” Credence says. His expression darkens a bit. “Used to have to stand outside and try to pass out pamphlets to the men going in. My mother was as invested in Temperance and fighting the evils of liquor as she was anything else that came from the devil…” Almost imperceptibly, Credence’s hands tremble.

There’s a brief moment of silence as everyone tries very hard not to think about Second Salem or the damn Barebone woman. Graves fails utterly. He wants to say something, remind Credence that he isn’t in that hell anymore, but he doesn’t have the words.

Kowalski, luckily, steps in. “Well, I can tell you that liquor doesn’t come from the devil,” he says heartily. “If it did, why would there be stories of water turning into wine in the Bible?”

Credence cracks a smile, though it’s weak. “I always wondered about that,” he says.

“I’d like to go to one of them,” Queenie says thoughtfully. “Tina never would—we couldn’t because she used to be just a stickler for Rappaport—but, well, what’s one more law at this point?”

“Especially a stupid one,” Kowalski says, looking at Queenie with absolute adoration.

Graves feels yet another moral crisis coming on. “Just don’t pick one that’s too dangerous,” he says, in a last desperate attempt at sanity. Tina would find him and kill him if he let Queenie get into trouble. “We can’t afford to get caught.”

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Queenie and Kowalski, who are least likely to get into trouble with MACUSA, decide to take a walk around the city and see the sights. Though they invite him, Graves declines, as does Credence. It doesn’t need to be said that neither man feels particularly safe wandering around Chicago. So the pair makes their exit, promising to bring back news of any speakeasies they manage to find and also possibly food better than what can be cooked on Newt’s camp stove in the suitcase.

After Queenie and Kowalski leave, Newt asks Graves and Credence if they’d mind going down into the suitcase and just keeping an eye on things—there’s no immediate chores, but he doesn’t like to leave the creatures alone for too long. Graves agrees: what else is he doing? Keeping an eye on the creatures isn’t much effort, especially when Newt is keeping the Niffler, most troublesome of all the creatures in the suitcase, close by. Credence, who’s been a little distant since Second Salem accidentally came up in conversation earlier, jumps at the opportunity to get out of sight for a bit.

Graves sits out in the open, with a view of the Occamy nest. Most of the creatures seem to have grown accustomed to the presence of people who aren’t Newt, and pay him no mind. The Occamies are the only ones who still have a habit of getting upset when they’re attended by anyone but Newt. If they get restless, Graves is going to get Newt. He’s not risking another bite. Those
little beaks hurt like hell.

Credence sits nearby, a book in his hands. Graves doesn’t recognize it—the cover is battered and worn and has stains on it that indicate it’s been dropped in a lake more than once. Whatever title it once had is unreadable. But it must be good, because Credence is wholly enthralled. He doesn’t look up, even when the Demiguise—Dougal, Graves should probably remember that—comes and curls up against his side, the Niffler appears to hop into his lap and continue attempting to remove his waistcoat buttons, and a wandering Bowtruckle climbs up his shoulder to try to build a nest in his hair.

It’s hard not to watch the scene. Graves isn’t unused to observing events for a long time in silence, and it’s better than staring off into space. It strikes him, watching Credence absentmindedly stroking Dougal’s fur, that Credence is similar to Newt in many ways. He’s skittish and bold in equal measure. His tremendous power is hidden behind a nervous, gentle demeanor.

But—and this is the important part—Newt won’t change. He’s perfectly happy as he is. Credence, though, grows less shy with every day. He’s less afraid to use his magic: more than once in the last few days, Graves has seen him thoughtlessly summon a book or other small object to his side with a wave of his hand. He smiles more, looks people in the eye, stands straight and tall. He has a self-possession that wasn’t there mere weeks ago. The marks that Grindelwald and Second Salem left on him are already fading away.

After an hour, Credence finally looks up from his book. For a moment, he has the half-asleep look of someone lost for too long in the written word, and then he notices Graves watching him from the steps. “I’m so sorry, I didn’t know you were here,” he says, hastily closing the book. “I didn’t mean to ignore you.”

“I didn’t want to interrupt,” Graves says, keeping his voice casual because Credence looks like he’s expecting to be shouted out. He decides for the moment not to mention how long he’d been sitting and watching Credence read. He indicates the book. “What had you so interested?”

“Spells,” Credence says. He looks down and runs his hand over the cover. “They’re odd, complicated, Newt’s scribbled half of them right out of the book. I don’t think they’re the kind of magic you’d be very good at, actually.”

Graves makes a face. “Is this about the bathtub?”

Credence laughs, finally relaxing. “Yes, actually,” he says. “You’re a great wizard, I’d never say you aren’t, but you’re terrible at anything but blowing things up.”

“You’re not wrong,” Graves says, smiling. What exactly is it about Credence that gets him to feel like this? He feels—warm, happy, in a way that he doesn’t even feel around Queenie. “But you’ve got to admit I at least taught you how to control your magic.”

“Look,” Credence says, “about a week after you were standing there trying to get me to control myself, you blew up a street.”

Graves raises his eyebrows. “Do I detect a hint of irony?”

“Oh, no,” Credence says, eyes wide with false innocence, face completely straight. “I’d never do something like that.”

“Liar,” Graves says, unable to hide a laugh.

“Guilty as charged,” Credence says cheerfully. He starts trying to disentangle the Bowtruckle from
his hair, impeded by its stubborn desire to keep climbing his curls.

The conversation goes on, and it feels strange. Graves is speaking without thinking, instead considering how odd it all is. What is happening here? Is Graves even talking to Credence Barebone? He can hardly imagine this young man on the floor of that abandoned warehouse, afraid and running on uncontrolled pain and anger. Can’t really recall the last time he felt this happy.

It’s such a surreal moment that Graves thinks suddenly that perhaps he’s dreaming. This can’t be real. He’s still down there in the dark, dreaming an impossible way out because he’ll never leave. Don’t they say that your life flashes before your eyes in your last moments? That dying men dream of the life they’ll never have, a final comfort before the end? Is this only a fantasy he’s constructed to make the passing easier?

And just like that everything goes dark. The only sound is his heartbeat, getting weaker and weaker the longer he’s there, unmoving. He can’t get up, can’t cast magic to get out. He’s broken, in pieces, and can’t put himself back together again. He can taste the Dark magic, blood in his mouth —

He’s dying.

“Graves,” Credence says, holding him by the shoulders. “You need to look at me.”

He blinks, and though the sensations don’t go away Graves is shakily aware that he’s still in Newt’s suitcase. Credence is kneeling in front of him, hands on his shoulders, expression tight and worried. “What…”

“You just disappeared,” Credence says. “You were halfway through a sentence and then—gone.”

“I was…” A detached part of Graves’ brain, the one that usually dictates things in a fight, notes that he appears to be having trouble constructing sentences. “I’m…back there. I…”

Credence’s dark eyes search Graves’ face. “This is real,” he says. “You’re here.”

He’s shaking, he notices distantly. “It’s so damn cold,” Graves says.

“You need to breathe,” Credence says, level and calm. “Just take a breath.”

It’s a struggle. He feels like he’s choking on mold and rot and possibly his own damn lungs. But gradually, he manages to breathe enough to feel like he isn’t suffocating. Credence never lets go. The fear recedes, replaced as usual by pain.

“I’m all right,” Graves says, when he’s sure his voice won’t betray him.

Credence shakes his head. “You’re not,” he said. “That was some kind of…waking nightmare.”

His chest aches like someone piled rocks on him. “Nightmares aren’t usually so bad,” Graves says.

“Liar,” Credence says, a flat echo of their earlier talk. “I’m sleeping in the same damn room, remember? I can hear you.”

“Right,” Graves says. He runs a hand through his hair. How long is he going to feel like this? He’s used to it at night, but not in the middle of the day. He’s not sure he can hold up, if the nightmares that plague him every single night invade his waking hours too. He can’t escape this. It’s like Grindelwald is still in his head, still…
Credence leans into his field of view. “Are you with me?” he asks.

“Still here,” Graves says shakily. The crushing pressure is getting to him. He’s still not entirely sure what’s real and what isn’t, except possibly Credence’s hands on his shoulders.

“I don’t…” Credence starts. He looks Graves over again, a little desperate. “What can I do?”

Graves doesn’t know what to say. He’s still muddling his way through trying to help Credence, but he’d never even considered needing help himself. Never considered wanting help himself. He should be able to do this. It isn’t…

And then, just before Graves disappears again, Credence mutters, “Oh, to hell with it,” and shifts forward, thin arms encircling Graves’ shoulders. Graves has no idea how to react. He was ready for pain, for a Cruciatus Curse, not…this. It’s very nearly overwhelming.

For a long moment, he’s just frozen. Finally, tentative because he’s concerned that this will disappear too, Graves leans into Credence and rests his forehead against Credence’s shoulder. He can’t say anything, but Credence doesn’t seem inclined to either. At least for the moment, he’s sure of where he is and that he’s safe.

Chapter End Notes

So fun fact. “Giggle water”, which appears in Fantastic Beasts as a *magical* concoction, is literally just a 1920s slang term for alcohol. It must be said that Picquery really did block an attempt to institute a magical Prohibition. Per the Harry Potter wiki: “…in a light-hearted moment, the then President Seraphina Picquery stated that being a wizard or witch in America was already hard enough and at one point famously told her Chief of Staff that the Gigglewater was non-negotiable.”
Hello and good morning, welcome to the Monday update!!! History time has been moved to the beginning of the chapter because *drama*. :D

Wrigley Field: it was named Cubs Park from 1920 through 1926, and renamed Wrigley Field in 1927. For those of you who aren’t baseball fans, the Chicago Cubs play there.

Tribune Tower: flipping cool building to be honest, and *I* find it much more aesthetically pleasing than the Woolworth Building. Construction finished, conveniently for me, in 1925—the very year that MACUSA put a Department of Magical Law Enforcement branch office in the city.

The Lindy Hop: holy shit, you guys, I need to learn to do this dance. LOOK AT THIS. It’s so much fun! I can’t imagine someone like Queenie NOT knowing this dance. Just think of a slightly toned-down version when she and Jacob are dancing.

Also: if anybody would like to pitch me a better story summary, I am ALL EARS. It’s a cliche, but I actually do suck at summaries. We’re almost twenty chapters in, someone help me fix my mistake from April.

CRIMSON_VOLTAIRE HAS HANDED ME A SUMMARY WHICH IS NOW UPDATED THEY ARE A BLOODY SAINT, THANK YOU SO MUCH

Queenie and Kowalski come back later that evening, practically sparkling with happiness. “This is a wonderful city!” Queenie says, spinning into the room. She only narrowly avoids Newt’s increasingly-precarious piles of paper. “I’m a New York girl, always will be, but my word Chicago is glamorous.”

“And how!” Kowalski agrees. He doffs his hat. “I’m not a Cubs man, but their field’s great. Just renamed, too—back to Wrigley Field now. That’s how it should be.”

The references are obscure to Graves—he’s not really a sports man, let alone a No-Maj sports man, and he doesn’t care much about the No-Maj landmarks—but Credence is interested. “Did you see Tribune Tower?” he asks. “I’ve seen pictures in the paper, but I always wondered how it looked up close.”

“It’s more beautiful than the Woolworth Building,” Queenie says, a bit tartly. “If MACUSA ever bothers to move headquarters again, they should come here.”

“That’s actually where we set up the department branch,” Graves volunteers. “It’s just as well hidden as the space in the Woolworth Building. You’re probably lucky you weren’t spotted.”

Queenie ignores the mild reproach. “Lincoln Park was lovely, too,” she says.

“It almost felt like we weren’t fugitives,” Kowalski says.

Well, Graves is glad that they had a fair day, at least. He’s still feeling shaken, after that waking nightmare earlier, and Credence keeps giving him concerned looks. There’s a distinct possibility that Credence spoke to Newt about it, because he’s giving Graves the same kind of looks.
“Any interesting creatures?” Newt asks.

“Not so much as a Pixie,” Queenie says. She ruffles Newt’s hair affectionately. “You’re just going to have to be happy with your big old sea serpent.”

Newt looks up at her and flashes a small smile. “I think I will be,” he says. “Did you find that speakeasy you were looking for?”

Kowalski looks rather excited. “Queenie heard some things,” he says.

“Some very swanky men were thinking about a highly exclusive nightclub,” Queenie says. “Only the best, for the people who are the best. Which we are. It’s open tomorrow night, if their thoughts are to be believed. Which they are. So we’re all going.”

Credence looks a bit surprised. “Even me?” he says.

Kowalski looks just as surprised. “We wouldn’t go without you, kid,” he says.

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“This is a terrible idea,” Graves says for what has to be the fiftieth time as they make their way down the alley to where Queenie said the speakeasy was. This city is dangerous and he should have vetoed this whole expedition. One of his old Aurors—Winfrith Simon, she’d been with him on the first Chicago case—would have killed him if she knew he went anywhere in this city without backup. Last time he’d been here, they’d done just that, and he’d almost died. He wonders for a moment where she is. Graves hadn’t seen Winfrith since she transferred permanently to the Denver branch office of the Department.

“Where’s your sense of adventure?” Kowalski teases lightly.

Graves doesn’t answer that. He looks around the alley. It’s narrow, dark, and damp. He’s prepared to pull his wand, half expecting someone to come at them from behind. This is the kind of place they could get hurt. It’s uncomfortably similar, if he’s to be honest with himself, to a basement.

Almost as if on accident, Credence’s shoulder brushes against his. Graves glances at the young man, who says nothing, but smiles at him. Doing his best to be subtle, Graves drifts sideways so that their shoulders stay in contact. As he discovered yesterday, it’s grounding to touch someone. Especially when that someone is Credence. Judging by the expression of half-exasperated affection on Credence’s face, Graves has utterly failed to be subtle. Strangely enough, he’s fine with that.

Halfway down the long alley, Queenie stops in front of a section of unremarkable brick wall. It’s just as slimy and crumbling as every other wall in the alley. “Specialis Revelio,” she says, tapping the wall with her wand.

A door shimmers out of the brick. It’s a sturdy oak door, dark with age, polished to a shine. It doesn’t belong in this moldering alley. Before anyone can comment, a narrow panel in the middle of the door shoots open. A pair of suspicious eyes glare out at Queenie.

“What the fuck you want?”

“We’re here to have a good night,” Queenie says with a sweet smile. Graves would have been concerned if he didn’t know that Queenie was sifting through all of the doorman’s thoughts right now, seeing exactly what to say to put him at ease. Her Legilimency is without peer.

“Ain’t nobody except those what have invitations supposed to be here,” the doorman says.
Queenie tosses her head. “Would we have found this place if we didn’t have an invitation?” she asks, haughty and coy. It’s like watching a professional actress. Graves really wishes that Queenie had become an Auror. He was good at interrogations, but Queenie would have been even better. If she’d been in the Department, Grindelwald would never have gotten past the front door. Queenie would have caught him before he stepped over the threshold. She must hear what he’s thinking, because she flashes him a quick smile.

The doorman ruminates for a moment. “You ain’t from the police?”

“Of course not!” Queenie effervesces. “We just want a drink and some dancing, sugar.”

“Well…” The doorman hesitates. Finally, he grouches, “Ain’t just anybody could find that door. I guess you’re okay.”

And the door swings open, golden light spilling out across the alley. Queenie seizes Kowalski’s arm and the two of them step inside. Graves and Credence follow. The doorman was telling the truth: this is an exclusive establishment, it seems. The speakeasy isn’t packed. Perhaps forty people occupy the large room: sitting at the bar, at tables, or dancing to music that springs from an unseen source. The trappings of wealth are in full evidence, but anyone looking with half an eye can see that there’s magic here, too. Beyond the source-less music, trays of drinks circulate without waiters to carry them and glowing trails follow the hands of the dancers. Mirrors ring the room, and they show more reflections than there are people. This is definitely one of those places where the gangsters come with wizards, then.

Credence is looking around the room with unadulterated awe. Seeing him now, in a well-tailored suit with a haircut that finally fits him, no longer skin and bones, Graves is struck by the thought that Credence looks like he belongs here. He looks right in this luxury and opulence. Objectively, he’s easily the most handsome man in the room, turning no small number of heads from men and women alike. Of course, they all look nice. Queenie’s skill with clothing magic made them all look significantly more stylish than usual, though she’s the only one wearing anything remotely colorful, a gold dress that shimmers in the light of the speakeasy.

No one pays them much attention, unless it’s to eye Graves and Credence appreciatively. A few people give Queenie a look, but when they see that she’s perfectly happy with Kowalski on her arm they don’t say a word. This isn’t new to Graves—he knows he cuts a striking figure, it’s always been to his advantage—and Credence doesn’t even seem to notice. Luckily, they seem to fit in well enough with the speakeasy’s clientele. No one notices that they’re different, only that two of them appear to be single. And beyond the appreciative looks, no one approaches uninvited. From what he knows of No-Maj Prohibition, the people here will not want to be recognized outside these walls. And they’ll return the favor to this little crew.

Queenie takes a table in the corner, graciously and tactfully maneuvering things so that Graves can get in a position to see the entire room. Conveniently, his back is also to a wall. He doesn’t even realize she did it deliberately until after Queenie has already summoned one of the drifting trays with a wave of her hand. It floats to them, and when there’s a drink in front of each of them—an impossibly colorful cocktail for Queenie, whiskey for each of the men—it waits, hovering insistently, until someone puts money on the tray.

“To us,” Queenie says with a smile, raising the glass. The others echo it, and then drink.

It’s not bad, all things considered; actually, Graves finds that he prefers this No-Maj whiskey to the ridiculous burning firewhiskey that every damn wizard wants to import from Britain. Kowalski is enraptured: “This is the real stuff,” he says, “haven’t tasted anything like it since I got back from Europe…” And Credence tries to stifle a cough, face turning slightly red. It occurs to Graves that
Credence may have never actually tasted alcohol before, which shouldn’t surprise him given what Credence had earlier mentioned about his mother’s zeal for temperance.

For a moment, there’s quiet at the table. The atmosphere around them is convivial, the air filled with jubilant talk edged with caution. People glance at the door frequently, even as the band plays on and they dance and drink. It’s loud, though not raucous. This is not, Graves thinks, the sort of place that would have agreed with Newt.

The magizoologist had remained behind at the hotel. “I’d rather finish up my notes,” he said with good humor. “I don’t think I’d be a fan of where you’re going, anyway.” Pickett, in Newt’s breast pocket, muttered with indignation. Graves remembered Tina explaining that they’d almost lost Pickett trying to trade for information with Gnarlak.

Still, when they’d made ready to leave, Newt had looked a bit forlorn. Graves had lingered a moment. “Will you be all right?” he asked.

“That’s Newt’s place,” Graves suggested. “Let her know where you are. She’d like to hear from you.”

Newt looked down at the journal open on his lap. “Maybe,” he said, picking up his quill and starting to write again on a blank page. For a moment, Graves thought he was just taking notes—then he deciphered Newt’s scrawling handwriting. Dear Tina—and that was all he needed to see.

Newt didn’t even notice when Graves backed out of the room and shut the door behind him.

Now here they are. Newt was right that he wouldn’t be happy here. It’s too bright, too noisy, too chaotic. To Graves, it almost seems as if all of these people are hiding from something, dancing and drinking like this. There’s an insistent air to the place. This is an escape, not a refuge. That might, though, be only his generally fatalistic outlook that’s giving him that impression.

A song that is marginally familiar begins to play and Queenie is immediately on her feet. “Tell me you know how to do the Lindy Hop,” she says, turning a pleading gaze on Kowalski.

Kowalski looks uncertain. “Well…”

Queenie smiles, brilliant and beautiful, and says, “I don’t mind that you have two left feet, I’d rather dance with you than anyone else in this room.” Kowalski, visibly smitten, stands up and goes with her onto the dance floor, where half a dozen other couples are already kicking up their heels.

“I don’t know how to dance,” Credence says, sounding wistful.

“More sin?” Graves asks, leaning back and watching Credence.

Credence nods. He’s watching the room reflectively, studying the whole scene with the same intensity that an experienced Auror would. One hand is absentmindedly sketching patterns on the wood of the table. “Ma had to be wrong about more than magic,” he says. “I’ve seen the kinds of things that she thought were wrong. They aren’t. And I’ve seen more kindness and charity from wizards than I ever did from people like me.”

“People like her,” Graves corrects quietly. “You’re one of us.”

“I’m still working on that,” Credence says, looking back at Graves. He rests his chin on one hand, elbow on the table. “None of you are wicked. None of this is.”
Graves isn’t entirely sure about that assessment, considering that this speakeasy is definitely run and patronized by gangsters, but the point stands regardless. “I’m glad you’re finally figuring it out,” he says, instead of arguing.

Credence goes back to watching the room. “Ma always talked about love and joy,” he says, so quiet that Graves can barely hear him over the music and noise. “But I’ve seen more of that tonight than I saw in years living with her.”

He’s officially out of his depth here. Graves is incredibly unused to conversations like this. He’s still working out how casual affection works, let alone actually talking to people about things like “love” and “joy”. They aren’t foreign emotions—he’s been in love before, and he’s certainly been happy in his life—but he’s not sure that they’re what Credence is talking about.

So for lack of anything better to say, Graves says, “Then I hope you get to see even more.”

There’s an odd look on Credence’s face, and he doesn’t reply. He just studies Graves, as if looking for some answer to a question he never actually asked.

To his ongoing and infinite surprise, Graves doesn’t want to look away.

That’s when the door of the speakeasy opens and the entire room goes still. The source-less music plays on, but there’s not another sound in the whole of the room. Shocked out of the moment by the sudden silence, Graves turns, already searching for a threat. He finds one.

A man in a sharp suit and white hat strolls into the room, two or three rough-looking men on his heels. He’s heavy-set and handsome, with keen eyes that remind Graves uncomfortably of Grindelwald’s. There’s a cigar in his mouth, and when his gaze fixes on Graves he takes it out. “Director Graves,” he says, and though he doesn’t speak loudly the man’s voice seems to boom in the silence.

Graves doesn’t get up. He makes sure he can draw his wand fast. “Mr. Capone,” he says.
Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

2—Credence realizes first/Graves is the first to make a move
2—Credence figures it out and makes the first move
2—Mutually Assured Seduction: they just jump each other at the same moment
2—Credence makes the first move; Credence figured it out first and believes that Feelings Are Mutual, while Graves may have figured it out but believes it is Inappropriate and Unrequited on his part
1—no idea how it all shakes out, but they end up happy
2—Credence gets it first, a later epiphany for Graves, and they don’t do shit about it until Queenie locks them in a closet

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The night goes from surreal to impossible. No one tries to leave, and the atmosphere rises to frankly frenzied levels, except in the corner where Capone sits across from Graves and Credence. The young man has shifted closer, moving so that he’s shoulder to shoulder with Graves. It’s slightly comforting to know that if violence breaks out, Graves won’t have to go far to seize Credence and Apparate the hell out of here.

Queenie and Kowalski are at a distance, at a new table, drinking and talking as if they don’t know anyone else at all. It’s a smart play. If things really go bad, then Queenie can Apparate out with Kowalski.

“I thought we had an agreement, Director,” Capone says, tapping his cigar casually into an empty glass. “You leave me and mine alone, I leave you and yours alone.”

“I’m not Director anymore,” Graves says levelly.


This is getting better by the second. “You know a great deal, Mr. Capone,” Graves says.

“I know a few people who are willing to keep me informed on the dealings of the wizarding community,” Capone says. “Very nice, very helpful.”

“Since I’m no longer the Director of Magical Security,” Graves says, “we aren’t doing anything wrong by being here.”

The gangster leans back in the chair. “You’re on the lam, Mr. Graves,” he says. “I shouldn’t be surprised you ended up in a shoddy little joint like this. But I think I am surprised.”

“We needed a night off from running,” Graves says with a shrug. “If you’re getting information on MACUSA, you know exactly why we left New York.”

“Yeah. You brought a weapon into my city,” Capone says.

Damn.
Credence shifts in his seat. The shadows in the corner swell a bit. Without looking away from Capone, Graves clamps a warning hand over Credence’s knee, under the table. A reminder: *not yet.* Hopefully not ever. The shadows settle, if only a little bit. It’s enough.

“He’s no weapon,” Graves says.

Capone’s smile is razor-edged. “I think I see it a little differently, Mr. Graves. See, a man like me, an upstanding citizen who takes a pride and joy in his fair city, has to always be thinking about what might happen to upset the peace. You bringing that boy here could bring a lot of trouble.”

“They don’t know that we’re here,” Graves says. He studies Capone. “And if you’re half the gangster I think you are, you wouldn’t tell them yourself.”

“Well, you just see right through me,” Capone said with a chuckle.

Graves doesn’t say anything. He’s sure Capone wants him to, but he doesn’t know what the man is playing at. He’s too good at obscuring his intentions. And someone’s been teaching him the theory of Occlumency. Graves is a fair Legilimens, though not anywhere near Queenie’s level, and he can’t get *anything* from Capone. It’s like running into a wall.

There’s a long moment of silence. Capone puffs on his cigar, Credence’s shadows shift and twine with the cigar smoke, Graves tries not to look at Queenie and Kowalski.

Finally, one of the rough-looking men standing behind Capone says, “You want we should take him for a ride, boss?”

Capone’s eyes glitter in the light. “Nah,” he says. “None of you could handle him, anyway. I’ve seen firsthand what Mr. Graves can do.”

Graves inclines his head. “It’s a mark in your favor that you survived,” he says, and rests the hand holding his wand on the table. One of Capone’s thugs makes an alarmed noise, but Capone himself doesn’t move an inch.

“Is that a threat?” Capone asks.

“Yes,” Graves says. He’s never held with that idea that making a threat should be veiled by empty words. A threat is a threat is a threat. Capone won’t respond to anything less.

Capone sits back, looking satisfied. “You’re every bit the man I remember,” he says. “Now, as much as I like a nice conversation, I think you should make tracks. You’re a risk to every good businessman that makes this city his home. We’re a city of business, Mr. Graves. The best business.”

“You do run a fine establishment,” Graves says, glancing around the speakeasy. Everyone else is studiously paying the men at the corner table absolutely no attention at all. “And we will be gone tomorrow, I’ll make sure of that.”

“Copacetic,” Capone says. He rises to his feet.

Graves follows suit, stepping out from behind the table. He offers his hand to the gangster. “We won’t darken your doorstep again.”

Capone looks him in the eye as they shake hands. “That’s good,” he says. “Good luck out there, Mr. Graves. The streets are…dangerous.”
That’s an alarming statement, but it gives Graves a better idea of the lay of the land. This isn’t over. But Capone won’t dirty his hands in public. Not here, anyway.

Queenie and Jacob rise and inconspicuously go out, ahead of Credence and Graves. People might recognize that they all came in together, but everyone has the sense not to say anything out loud. Graves and Credence, side by side, make their way out of the speakeasy. The alley is cold and dark after the blinding light and warmth inside.

“What—” Credence starts.

Graves takes him by the upper arm and steers him down the alley. He’s aware that there are at least two men in the alley behind them, and he knows that Capone will send other enforcers shortly. They aren’t going to be allowed to leave the city, or at least Graves isn’t. “Not now,” Graves says, moving fast. Queenie and Kowalski are ahead, waiting at the mouth of the alley where it joins the street. This is going to get extremely ugly.

Footsteps, not bothering to be stealthy, ring out on the pavement of the alley. At the sound, Credence starts and speeds up. Graves sees Queenie yank Kowalski out into the street. He breaks into a run, and as he and Credence burst out of the alley Graves hears someone shout a curse.

He doesn’t stop to think. He tackles Credence, knocking them both to the wooden pavement. The curse hurtles over their heads and dissipates harmlessly. As he hits the ground Graves rolls with his momentum and comes up on one knee, facing back at the alley. Three men are right on their heels, two with guns and one with a wand. He doesn’t even hesitate.

“\textit{Reducto}!”

It’s a curse meant to blast holes in objects. But Graves knows what it does to a human body. He saw an Auror hit with it, once, and then never saw that Auror again. He avoids using it when he can, because he tries not to be a brutal man. Right now, though, with Queenie and Kowalski behind him and Credence on the ground with Capone’s thugs almost on top of them, Graves won’t hold back.

The wizard, a quick man, manages to fire off a Shield Charm to protect himself, but one of the No-Maj thugs isn’t so lucky. He doesn’t even get the chance to scream before he’s blasted into pieces.

“\textit{Protego}!” Queenie shouts from the middle of the street, casting a countercharm a split second before the wizard can hurl his own curse at her.

“Queenie, go!” Graves shouts, scrambling to his feet and facing the wizard and the No-Maj head on. He doesn’t look back: there’s the crack as she and Kowalski Apparate.

Credence is on his feet, just behind Graves. “I can take them,” he says, almost excited, and his eyes are shining white.

“No,” Graves says, looking to Capone’s wizard, who seems a little frantic and hasn’t moved to attack yet. Not surprising, given what Graves just did to his compatriot. “Not here. If you lose control you’ll take out half of Chicago before I can get to you.”

“Just let me help you,” Credence says. He’s close, speaking rapid and soft. “There’s another wizard coming down the street, and at least three more men with guns.” Graves calculates the odds. “You don’t know dueling magic,” he mutters.

“You never taught me,” Credence says, “but I can do it.”
“Don’t let the Obscurus go,” Graves warns, looking at Credence.

Credence gives him a frighteningly savage smile. “I won’t need to.”

And then they’re out of time. The three men start yelling when they see the bloody smear that’s all that’s left of the man Graves hit with the curse, and when the last thug points at Graves and Credence, they all turn as one and open fire.

“Protego Sagitta!” Graves snaps, with a slash of his wand. The bullets bounce off the Shield Charm—a special one meant to stop projectiles, invented after their last run-in with No-Maj guns—but with every hit the shield weakens. It won’t last long, its energy dissipating with every impact.

And there’s the matter of the other wizard. Graves can’t turn his attention from the No-Maj thugs—if he does, the Shield Charm will break—but Credence can. Out of the corner of his eye, he sees Credence turn and raise his hand. “Everte Statum,” he says through gritted teeth, and then Graves hears the sound of a body hitting the pavement.

The other wizard passes through Graves’ periphery, presumably running to his companion. But he’s Credence’s problem now: he’s put himself back to back with Graves in the middle of the street. It’s a more stable position than they were in before, one that removes their tactical disadvantage of being outnumbered on unfamiliar ground.

Graves has to figure out what to do about the No-Maj thugs, hailing bullets down on them. The Shield Charm weakens faster and faster every second. He doesn’t want to kill them—well, any more than he already has—but he has to take all of them down quickly. They’re drawing a lot of attention.

There’s a moment when the thugs have to stop to reload. As they do, Graves lets the Shield Charm go, raises his hand, places the full force of his will behind his spell, and says, “Stupefy Maxima!”

A jet of scarlet energy erupts from his palm and crashes into all four of the men. They go down hard, knocked unconscious, guns and bullets scattering around them and clattering on the pavement. He turns around—they’re of no concern now—to see the two wizards facing off with Credence.

“Drop your wands,” Graves says.

“No,” one of the wizards says.

The other, looking battered, doesn’t even bother to reply. “Incendio!”

The flames don’t make it half a foot before Graves has thrown a Flame-Freezing Charm. The fire washes over them, pleasantly warm, tickling slightly as it goes. He’s about to return with his own spell—thinking of using a Body-Bind or chains or something like that—but doesn’t get the chance.

He turned his attention away from the other wizard too long and can’t get a protective charm up in time. There’s a shout, an incantation he doesn’t quite catch, and then bricks flying toward them from a half-constructed building across the street. And again Graves doesn’t get the chance to react, because Credence just yells, flinging up both hands, and the bricks—all of them—disintegrate into dust midair.

The dust stings when it hits, but it’s better than taking a brick to the head.

The wizards, when Graves looks at them, look panicked. He smiles at them. In as cold a voice as
he can muster, he repeats, “Drop your wands.”

Two wands go clattering to the ground and roll away over the wooden pavement.

From the alley where they’d just been, there’s the sound of lazy applause. Graves thinks, *I am going to kill him*, and turns around. “Mr. Capone,” he says. “I didn’t know that your warning about the dangerous streets would be applicable so soon.”

Capone walks out into the light of the streetlamps. “You’ve got to be careful in Chicago, my friend,” he says with a dragon’s smile.

“Is that a threat?” Graves asks.

“Yes,” Capone says.

It’s good to know that he and the gangster agree on one thing, at least. A threat’s a threat. “I told you,” Graves says, “we’re leaving.”

Capone’s face is half hidden in shadow. “Make sure you do,” he says. “Stay here much longer, you just might find that I’ll decide to be a truly upstanding citizen and hand you over to MACUSA.”

“Do that,” Credence says, glaring with white eyes, “and I’ll make sure this city *burns*.”

The shadows come crawling in, billowing with menace, flickers of cold magic flashing like lightning deep inside. Graves really can’t find it in himself to care. He watches Capone. The man himself is imperturbable, though his lackeys back away.

“Let’s call it a deal,” Capone says. “You get out of my city and nobody has to get hurt.”

“Deal,” Graves says tightly. “Credence?”

Credence takes Graves’ arm. Graves doesn’t wait for Capone to try to kill them again before he Apparates away.

Chapter End Notes

So this might be my favorite thing I found out. Cities around the United States used to use *wood block paving* before other kinds of paving came into use. Although the method fell from favor in the late 1800s due to its poor durability, at least three alleys in Chicago retain the paving to this very day. It wouldn’t be unlikely that an old back-alley street, dilapidated enough to hide a magical speakeasy, might still have the old wood block paving. (Translation: this is incredibly fucking cool and I wanted to use it, so I did.)

Re: “Protego Sagitta”. Translates to “Arrow Shield”. Why not just use Protego? In the films and books, the extent of what a Shield Charm can do to block a solid object rather than the force of a spell is poorly defined. We see it used to disrupt a waterfall, block an arrow, and possibly other occasions I didn’t catch. However, it’s also very clear that a Shield Charm is only effective against one spell at a time. The rationale for this is not explained. This where we enter the “I’m-not-a-physicist-please-forgive-me” territory. I am making the assumption that a Shield Charm can’t really be effective
against high amounts of kinetic energy. Spells are OBVIOUSLY energy, but they’re clearly enough to destroy the effective protection of a Shield Charm, because a given shield can only take one hit before collapsing. Thus, a high enough amount of energy can break down a Shield Charm—more than in an arrow, and we’re going to ignore the waterfall because frankly I don’t even want to go there.

To combat this, I borrowed another idea from the Dresden Files, this time from Dresden’s shield bracelet. The unfortunate downside to the otherwise highly useful item is that the shield costs energy to use, and every time it takes a hit the shield weakens. That’s where the concept of Graves’ modified Shield Charm comes from. The modification specifically designs the shield to protect against high-speed projectiles. It’s still not very useful against a submachine gun, let alone more modern Muggle weapons, because the sheer number of high-velocity impacts will weaken the spell to the point of uselessness. The earliest models of a Tommy gun could fire 1,500 rounds per minute. (100 rounds in a given magazine of the model the thugs are carrying in the chapter.) Modern machine guns fire much, MUCH faster. Wizards, therefore, remain afraid of Muggle weapons. (Side note: the unfortunate thing here is that I’ve implied that a single Stunning Spell has as much kinetic energy as 400 rounds fired from a Tommy gun. Magic is so OP, you guys.)
Saturday update...good morning everybody. Heed the warning for this one: frank discussion of suicidal ideation and other fun things ahead. Unfortunately, it’s pretty much the whole chapter. This one isn’t very happy. :( 

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“I can’t believe,” Kowalski says he and Graves feed the mooncalves, “you let Credence get into a fight like that.”

“There was no ‘let’ about it,” Graves rejoins. “He was going to do it whether I said yes or not.”

Kowalski sighs, tossing another handful of feed to the eager crowd. “Then why the hell didn’t you Apparate out of there?”

Graves shrugs. He’s been left holding the bucket while Kowalski does the actual feeding. A particularly eager mooncalf stands beside him, looking up at him with pitiful eyes. Resolute, Graves does not pay it any attention. “I don’t know,” he says truthfully. “It wouldn’t have been a bad thing, but it just didn’t occur to me.”

“Excuse my French, but that is bullshit,” Kowalski says.

Startled, Graves looks away from the mooncalf now insistently butting at his leg. “What?”

“You heard me,” Kowalski says. He’s giving Graves the most emphatically irritated look Graves has ever seen, and he’s been glared at by Seraphina Picquery. “It occurred to you to tell Queenie to Apparate, but you somehow managed to conveniently forget to do it yourself.”

“I—” Graves starts, but Kowalski cuts him off.

“You put yourself and Credence in danger,” Kowalski says. He folds his arms. “Hell, you put the whole city in danger. If Credence lost it, Chicago would have been destroyed.”

Graves pauses. “I was confident that he wouldn’t,” he says carefully. “You didn’t see him. He’s controlling his power more than he ever has before. He had the focus to keep the Obscurus contained.”

Kowalski rolls his eyes. “And you knew that before you decided to stay behind, huh?”

“It was an educated guess,” Graves says.

“Right,” Kowalski says. He trudges out of the mooncalf pasture and Graves follows. “I’m pretty sure you’re lying to me, but obviously I can’t just read your mind.”

Graves is confused and a little angry. “What are you saying?” he asks.

Kowalski pauses on the edge of the central plaza. “I’m saying that I’ve seen men like you before,” he says. “I was in the Great War, remember? I saw men decide to ‘hold the line’ while their friends
ran, even if it was hopeless and they knew they’d get killed. And they didn’t do it because someone ordered them to do it. They did it because they wanted to die.”

The words hit Graves like a brick to the head. He drops the bucket. “I don’t want to die,” he snaps.

“Maybe you don’t think you do,” Kowalski says. “I was a soldier, Graves, I know what a death wish looks like, and it doesn’t always have to be putting a gun to your head.”

“Why do you care?” Graves asks. It’s part anger—he doesn’t want to hear this, not when he knows it’s true—and part the confusion he’s felt since Kowalski started this conversation.

Kowalski’s brow furrows. “I care because you do,” he says.

Graves has, again, no idea what to say.

“Look,” Kowalski says, “I’m about as good at this as you are. But I care about you because you’ve been taking care of us since this whole mess started. You’ve gone to bat for us by fighting everyone that’s tried to hurt us. You gave me my memories back. You went out of your way to help Newt find that Labbu even though we could have all been killed. You’re always planning ways out for the rest of us if this goes wrong. You give a damn about Credence, even when he’s all…Obscurus.” Kowalski waves his hands, approximating the drifting darkness of the Obscurus. “Which, you know, I’m pretty sure that’s part of the whole ‘death wish’ issue, but the point stands.”

Graves just stares. He actually has no idea how to respond to this.

Kowalski sighs. “I have no idea what’s going on in your head half the time, but for some reason you’ve decided you care about us. That counts for a lot, far as I’m concerned.”

“It’s not enough,” Graves says. He doesn’t mean to say it—that’s a thought that should never leave his head—but it’s there, anyway, and just like the words of a spell it can’t be taken back.

“It’s enough for us,” Kowalski says. He claps Graves on the shoulder, then walks away to where Queenie is busy feeding Newt’s strange glowing jellyfish-thing. Graves is left standing there, wondering what in the hell just happened, and thinking about everything Kowalski said.

Newt wanders over when he’s right in the middle of contemplation and puts another bucket in his hand. “Please go take care of the Bowtruckles,” he says. “They’re mostly asleep so they shouldn’t be too much trouble.”

“All right,” Graves says, and starts toward the tree.

But then Newt darts in front of him, peering at him anxiously. “Are you all right, Percival?” he asks. “You look…unhappy.”

“When don’t I look unhappy?” Graves replies. A bit sharp, and a little too honest, but he’s in no mood to dance around anything.

“When you look at Credence or Queenie,” Newt says promptly. “And right now that is not the face you’re making.”

This is rapidly turning into a worse day than expected. They have to stay in the suitcase all day, because leaving means that they’d probably end up in another shoot-out, which means that they’re spending the entire day taking care of Newt’s animals. And now everyone is trying to talk to him. “I’m fine, Newt,” Graves says.
“You’re not,” Newt says softly. He’s examining Graves like a puzzle he can figure out, as if Graves is one of the animals he saves.

“Please, just…let this go,” Graves says. He shakes his head. “I…this isn’t the time.”

Newt steps back, out of the way, and takes the bucket. “Go somewhere else and rest,” he says with a gentleness that should infuriate Graves and instead makes him feel warm inside. Newt cares.

He protests, though, because he really ought to be fine. “You need help.”

“Not with this, and not at the cost of your health,” Newt says. He gives Graves a small push toward the steps. “That’s physical or emotional health, mind.”

“I’m fine,” Graves repeats.

Newt cocks an eyebrow. “Who’s the expert, again?” he asks. “You couldn’t diagnose a disease if you had one. Go.”

And Graves goes. He ends up in the workshop, because he doesn’t feel like going any further is a good idea at the moment, sitting by the ladder under the suitcase. It’s crowded and quiet and warm in here, and—though he hates to admit it, even to himself—feels safer than the rest of the suitcase.

He doesn’t like to be alone with his thoughts. That’s why he’s been so glad of company, lately: when Graves is left to his own devices, his thoughts grow increasingly dark and desolate. He isn’t getting better; in fact, he’s getting worse. The nightmares happen nearly nightly, and while he hasn’t woken up screaming lately he’s come very, very close. That waking nightmare—how long before another one? How long before one happens and incapacitates him when he should be protecting someone else?

And now Kowalski—Jacob, it’s time he stopped pretending that he doesn’t care about the No-Maj—saying that Graves has a death wish. He’d like to say that it isn’t true, but that would be another lie. When Carter tried to kill him, the night they’d been attacked, he hadn’t even bothered trying to block the Killing Curse. He’d turned to confront Credence’s Obscurus, even knowing that he was likely to be killed. Last night he’d stayed behind to face the gangsters, even though he could have easily Apparated away with Credence. He’s not, as Jacob put it, holding a gun to his head, but he’s certainly not trying to stop himself from getting killed.

The worst part about that thought is that Graves isn’t even sure he cares.

It’s all very bleak. He’s just wondering if this train of thought will drive him right into another waking nightmare when there’s a tugging on the hem of his waistcoat.

Graves looks down to see Newt’s favorite Bowtruckle, Pickett, climbing up his clothes. It doesn’t look easy, so despite the fact that he’s rather nervous of breaking the tiny creature, Graves holds out his hand.

“Go on,” he says.

Pickett looks at him with some suspicion, then climbs onto Graves’ hand. It tickles a bit, but the Bowtruckle stays put as Graves lifts him up to eye level. Pickett chirps at him.

“Right,” Graves says. “You should know that I have no idea what you’re saying to me.”

The Bowtruckle chirrups. Its tiny face seems to be smiling.
Graves has never really interacted with Pickett much. “I thought you liked Newt best,” he says.

Pickett shrugs and murmurs something.

“You are a nice creature,” Graves muses. “Why’d you come looking for me?”

The Bowtruckle doesn’t answer. Instead, it makes its nimble way up Graves’ arm to sit on his shoulder, where it would normally sit on Newt. Graves freezes with surprise, but a moment later he realizes that Pickett has curled up in his shirt and is making a soft cooing noise that is probably a Bowtruckle’s snore.

Graves tilts his head back and rests it against a shelf. He’s not inclined to move. It’s puzzling, but having Pickett on his shoulder pulls him out of the dark thoughts that had been eating away at him. In the workshop it’s warm, and it’s quiet, and more than anything else it’s safe. Without even realizing it’s happening, Graves drifts off into a peaceful, dreamless sleep.

When he wakes up, some hours later, Pickett is still sleeping on his shoulder. And someone has covered him with a blanket.

***

They leave Chicago by train in what’s virtually the middle of the night. Graves doesn’t know where they’re going. Newt elects to purchase a ticket at Central Station, which is the station that Jacob recommended after going over a book of train timetables that Newt found somewhere in the city. “We’ll just go somewhere that looks right,” he says. “If I don’t have a good reason to go there, wherever ‘there’ ends up, then it’ll throw off pursuit.”

“How many times have you been pursued that you know how to throw someone off better than most of my Aurors?” Graves asks, slightly alarmed. Newt just laughs and shoos him into the suitcase.

This time, they don’t wait around to see what happens. Newt plans to leave the hotel at about six, find dinner, post a letter to Tina, and then go to the station to find a train that leaves late. Everyone else will spend the evening taking care of the beasts that need care, eating whatever Queenie and Jacob make over Newt’s camp stove, and, hopefully, sleeping. Newt will let them know when it’s safe, when they get wherever they’re going.

Graves isn’t even surprised at how readily he accepts this plan. He trusts Newt to make smart decisions. And he trusts that if things go badly, he and Credence can hold their own against a threat. He isn’t sure when he decided that Credence is acceptable to bring into a fight—one small duel isn’t enough to measure a wizard’s true capabilities, and Credence is still a damn Obscurial besides—but, like everything else these days, he accepts it. He trusts, for some reason, that Credence is competent. He trusts Credence to have his back. How he’s going to explain himself to Jacob if he drags Credence into another dangerous situation he doesn’t know, but Graves will burn that bridge when he comes to it.

It’s a good evening, remarkably. Queenie is teaching Jacob about potions-making. Though he can’t do much more than mix, he has a natural aptitude for understanding what’s happening. And when it comes time to perform magic, Queenie steps in. Credence watches them as carefully as he watches any magic performed in his presence. Grave is glad that Credence gets the chance to see someone make a potion; he can do it, but it’s certainly not his favorite kind of work.

Graves turns in relatively early. He falls asleep quickly, but regrets it fairly shortly after.
The memory is as vivid as if it’s happening to him now.

“I have some rather important business of yours to attend to,” Grindelwald says. There’s a malicious glint in his eyes, which means that he’s probably about to go kill someone. Probably someone that Graves likes. “Don’t go anywhere...I do look forward to finishing our chat.”

Though his ability for witty banter is slowly failing him with every passing minute, Graves still manages to look at the manacles holding his arms out wide against the wall, as if he’s being crucified. It’s not a wizard’s solution to keeping someone captive, but it’s one that causes Graves a hell of a lot of pain when his legs give out. Funny how Grindelwald doesn’t care about his own anti-No-Maj rhetoric when it serves his purposes. “I don’t think that will be a problem,” he says weakly.
Grindelwald laughs, and walks away into the darkness. A moment later, Graves hears his footsteps go up the stairs, and the sound of door slamming shut.

Now is the moment, if there’s ever going to be one. Graves can’t take much more of this. At this point, there’s no information he has that Grindelwald hasn’t taken. And yet the Dark wizard still hasn’t killed Graves—or, well, blasted his mind to pieces and kept his body alive for Polyjuice potion—which means that Graves is being kept, not as a source of information, but for fun. Graves has seen enough in his life as an Auror to know that the kind of pain inflicted on someone to get information is very, very different form the kind of pain inflicted just for entertainment. He has to get out now, before Grindelwald breaks anything he has left in him.

So Graves focuses his will. If he can get out of these manacles—horribly tight on his wrists, leaving the skin raw and bleeding, so tight that even a charm to make things slippery won’t get them off, he’s tried—then he can get out of the building, he’s sure of that. There have to be Anti-Disapparition Jinxes laid over the building, but they might not prevent Apparition within the basement. Grindelwald has his wand, and Apparition without a wand is hellishly difficult. There are a hundred ways this could go wrong. But Graves is out of options, and out of time.

He closes his eyes tight, though it makes no difference in the darkness, and Apparates.

He makes it fifteen feet.

When he lands, he hits the floor with a scream that echoes back at him mockingly from the darkness. His leg is on fire and there’s blood everywhere, he can smell it and taste it, he’s gone and fucking Splinched himself because he doesn’t have his wand and part of his leg is missing and he can’t get it back and he’s just left there on the floor, nowhere near the door, lost in the darkness, bleeding and bleeding and falling unconscious, knowing that he’ll be dead by the time Grindelwald gets back and being thankful for that—

And then he wakes up.

It’s pitch black in the room and the scar from the Splinching is aching, but he’s aware enough to know that he isn’t in the basement anymore. He can hear Credence breathing, slow and deep. It’s not entirely enough to help Graves stay calm. So Graves says softly, “Lumos Minima,” and a small light flares to life on the end of his wand.

Even that small light is enough to wake Credence up, because there’s a quiet groan from the other side of the room and Credence rolls over with a rustle of blankets. “What’s going on?” he asks hazily.

“Nothing,” Graves says, “go back to sleep.”
Credence sits up and runs a hand through his hair, mussed from sleep. “I’m already awake,” he mutters. “That’s not going to happen. Did you—”

Graves is still trying to breathe. “Nightmare.” He doesn’t even want to blink, really, because that would mean more darkness. This is never going to get better, is it?

“You should have woken me up,” Credence says.

“It’s not your problem,” Graves says, a bit shortly.

Credence rolls his eyes. “It became my problem when I started staying in your house,” he says patiently. “And now it’s my problem because you’re my friend and I give a damn about you.”

“You can’t do much.”

“I can at least be awake so you aren’t sitting alone in the dark,” Credence says.

Graves is about to respond when his scar twinges alarmingly. He hisses and drops his wand, pressing a hand to his leg to try to stop the pain.

“What happened?” Credence asks, alarmed.

“Just—an old scar,” Graves says, not letting the pressure off the old injury.

Credence’s eyes glow. It might be the reflection of the wand’s faint light, but Grave’s isn’t sure at all about that. The young man gets up and comes across the room, sitting down next to the pallet currently serving in place of an actual bed. No one trusts that they can manageably Transfigure a pile of sticks into anything that will bear more weight than a Bowtruckle, so it’s makeshift sleeping bags for everyone but Newt.

For a moment, Credence doesn’t speak. Then, as if gathering courage, he asks, “Can I help you?”

“If you could, I’d be glad to let you,” Graves says. He rubs his face. “But they couldn’t fix me in New York, so I don’t think you can do anything.”

“Let me try,” Credence insists.

There isn’t any way that this could possibly go right. But, hell, if Kowalski’s right he has a death wish and there are worse ways to go than letting Credence try to fix something. Graves leans back, pulling up the leg of his pants, so that the healed scar wrapping around his upper calf is fully visible. It’s a nasty wound, and he’s lucky they were able to keep his mobility. He tries not to think of it too often.

Credence studies the scar for a moment. “Tell me if it hurts,” he says, glancing up at Graves. “When I try to heal it, I mean. It shouldn’t hurt.”

“I’ll say something,” Graves says. He smiles wryly. “Depending on how much it hurts, it might just sound like a scream.”

“All right,” Credence says. Very gently, he rests his hands on Graves’ leg over the scar. He closes his eyes for a moment, and when he opens them they’re perfectly white. He murmurs an incantation Graves doesn’t recognize at all. “Sarus Cicatrix Exsarcio Doloros.”

Power ripples through the room. The shadows close in—more of an embrace than an attack, more protection than threat. Credence’s eyes blaze and his hands close convulsively around Graves’ leg.
There’s a moment of unbelievable wrongness—and then Credence slumps, the shadows roll back, and when Graves looks down at where the scar should have been there’s only smooth skin.

“Giles Corey’s broken bones,” Graves whispers, touching the spot Credence healed. “How the hell did you do that, Credence?”

“I…I learned the spell from one of Newt’s books about healing old injuries,” Credence says. He runs his hands through his hair. His eyes are wide and a reassuringly normal amber in the faint light from Graves’ wand. “It’s an old spell, something complicated that requires a lot of focus and power. It’s meant to help injuries that have…emotional components.”

Graves looks at the spot where the scar should have been. “What do you mean about emotional components?”

“I mean that you shouldn’t have phantom pain anymore,” Credence says. He touches the spot again, as if checking whether or not the scar is really gone. “That spell—it didn’t just heal the physical damage. It healed the emotional damage you suffered when you got the scar.” Impossible. “You can’t—”

The shadows roil and Credence’s eyes flicker white. “I did,” he says.

Graves doesn’t know what to do. This is—this is beyond anything he’s ever seen before. This is impossible magic. Impossible. It’s magic that no one should be able to perform. “You’re a miracle, Credence,” he breathes.

Credence flinches. “Please don’t call me that,” he says very softly. “He…he said that to me. It wasn’t…that was not a good day.”

“I’m sorry,” Graves says. Damn. He never wants to say anything to Credence that Grindelwald said.

“It’s all right,” Credence says after a brief moment. “I just…I only want to help you.”

Graves shakes his head. “You’ve done a hell of a lot already, what else could you do?”

“I can heal the rest of your scars,” Credence says, pulling back and staring at Graves with a frankly terrifying intensity. He looks excited, but it’s unsettling. “You can be free of some of this. You won’t have to carry it all anymore. I can help you.”

Graves puts up a hand. “Slow down,” he says. “Credence. Have you tried healing your own scars?”

Credence stops. The excitement drains from his face. “I can’t do that,” he says.

“Have you tried?” Graves presses.

“The spell can’t heal wounds the caster has sustained,” Credence says. His voice is unbearably steady and calm. “Healing yourself is a lot more difficult than healing someone else.”

“Oh,” Graves says, for lack of anything better. He can only repeat himself. “Damn. I’m sorry.”

Credence shrugs. “At least I can heal you,” he says with obviously-forced indifference.

There has to be an alternative. Graves couldn’t give half a damn about his own scars, not when Credence has so many. “Have you asked Newt? It was his book…”

“Even if he could perform the spell—which I don’t think he can—I’d rather not speak to Newt
about my scars,” Credence says.

Graves is a touch puzzled. “You’ve spoken to me. Hell, you’ve showed me.”

Credence doesn’t look at him once as he says, “You know what it’s like to have scars like this. You don’t look at me like I’m a freak.”

“Credence, you aren’t a freak,” Graves says gently.

The young man is almost angry when he looks back at Graves. “Don’t talk to me like that,” he says, and in the sound of his voice there’s the echo of a boy beaten for things he doesn’t understand and can’t control. “For God’s sake, don’t pity me.”

No, this is all going wrong. Credence will lose it in a moment and Graves might just lose him forever. “This isn’t pity,” Graves says. “Not for the scars. It’s for the fact that you can’t heal them yourself. That the world is still giving you nothing when you deserve a hell of a lot more than that.”

“I don’t deserve anything,” Credence says, with the tone of someone reciting something learned by rote. “You aren’t given things. You have to work for them.”

Graves reaches out and takes Credence by the shoulders. Credence flinches like he’s afraid, and Merlin, he doesn’t want Credence to be afraid. Of him or anyone or anything else. “That might have been true once, but it isn’t now,” he says.

Credence looks frustrated. “I have to do something. This—all of this, everything you and everyone else have given me—I’m not worth it. I have to repay you, somehow.”

How exactly does someone like Credence, so incredibly powerful and intelligent and kind, not realize his own worth? “You don’t have to pay for existing,” Graves says. “You’re enough. As you are.”

Credence bites his lip. “That’s…damn it, I don’t understand.”

“You don’t have to understand,” Graves says. He takes a shot in the dark, to put this in terms that Credence will understand more than just intellectually. “But you should believe. That’s what faith is.”

A long, searching look is his only reply. Graves waits. He’s heard Credence pray sometimes, at night when it’s too dark for him to be seen, whispering inaudible words to some god who may or may not be hearing them. While Graves doesn’t understand why someone would do something like that—wasted energy and words, in his opinion—he does understand that it’s important to Credence. His name means “faith”. In spite of all the ways he’s been betrayed in his life, Credence knows what it means to believe in something good.

“Have you ever read the Bible?” Credence asks unexpectedly.

“No,” Graves says. “I never had cause to.”

Credence looks down at his hands, where a few scars are visible in the wandlight. “I’ve read the whole thing about ten times,” he says. “And, you know, the passage that’s stuck with me is First Corinthians, Chapter Thirteen, Verse Thirteen.”

“What is it?”
The words have the power of a spell, when Credence says them. “And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity.” He pauses, then says, “I always wondered why my mother didn’t name my sisters Hope and Charity when she named me Credence.”

“What were their names?”

“Chastity and Modesty,” Credence says. He smiles, looking nostalgic. “I miss them. Even if Chastity was just like Ma. Modesty was always good. I shouldn’t have a favorite sister, but…it’s not like it matters anymore, anyway.”

Graves almost doesn’t want to ask the question, but he does anyway: “What happened to them?”

Credence sighs. “I think I killed Chastity,” he says quietly. “Or she was killed when I knocked down half the church…I don’t know, exactly. It’s hazy. Either way, she’s dead.”

“And Modesty?”

“She’s all right,” Credence says. “After I…pulled myself together…I went looking. Somebody must have found her, after everything, because she was in an orphanage. Not one of the awful ones. She looked happy. So I just…left. And you found me, not too long after that.”

There’s a moment of silence that Graves doesn’t quite know how to break.

Finally, Credence says, “I think now that our names weren’t given to us because Ma wanted us to have Christian values. It was because she wanted us to have her values.”

That sounds about right. Mary Lou Barebone has a lot to answer for, and Graves sincerely hopes her God is making her pay penance for all of it. If anyone ever deserved death by pressing, she did.

Credence goes on. “You’re nothing like her. I know what the others think—that you’re trying to get yourself killed—and I don’t think they’re wrong, but you haven’t got a gun to your head. Some part of you, some tiny voice, is refusing to let you give up. And you give more than anyone I’ve ever met before, without any expectation of payment in return. You’ve given up your whole life to helping other people. That’s the definition of hope and charity, Graves.”

“So faith, hope, and charity,” Graves says. He feels a little bitter as he continues, “Between the two of us, we just about make one whole person.”

“It’s a start,” Credence says.

Chapter End Notes

“Sarus Cicatrix Exsarcio Doloros”: Loosely translates to “heal the terrible scar”. Pardon the butchered Latin. I promise we’ll get to Credence’s Vancian specialization eventually. In a few chapters. I want it to come with an in-text explanation, so hang in there…

Regarding that Bible verse. 1 Corinthians 13:13—there’s actually a research story here. These days, one of the most common translations of the Christian Bible is the New International Version (NIV). In that translation, the verse reads as follows: “And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.” And we’re all excited, because there’s the L-word! Except no. You see, the NIV Bible was
released in 1978. Obviously, it was not available at the time. The question, then, is what translation of the Bible Credence would be most familiar with. After some digging, I found out about the American Bible Society (link is to a Wikipedia page I’M SORRY). The organization was founded to spread the Word of God through distribution of Bibles. One of their goals is “to reach the destitute of all classes and conditions”. They are still publishing and were THOROUGHLY active throughout the 1920s. If the New Salem Philanthropic Society wanted Bibles, they were likely to get them from ABS. And what translation did they use? The King James Bible, which translates 1 Corinthians 13:13 as “And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity.”
Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

Long chapter and a Footnote of Unusual Size. (The thing BARELY falls under the character limit for chapter notes! Please feel free to skip: I think it’s cool, but it’s VERY VERY VERY long.)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The next morning, everyone is impatient. Queenie and Jacob are in good spirits, though Credence keeps glancing at Graves, visibly worried about him after last night. No one objects when Queenie pulls Credence away, wanting company while she feeds the Occamies. Graves and Jacob elect to stay in the workshop and wait for Newt to knock on the suitcase and let them know it’s time to go. They talk about inconsequential things, mostly. Jacob tries to explain baseball to Graves (and Graves tries valiantly to stay interested for his friend’s sake), and Graves regales Jacob with some of his more ridiculous stories from his days as an Auror.

It’s perhaps a half an hour before the knock comes. “Just a second!” Jacob hollers up. “Graves, you mind going and getting Queenie and Credence?”

“Not at all,” Graves says. He ducks out of the workshop and heads to the Occamy nest.

Queenie and Credence are standing quite close, obviously more interested in talking than taking care of the Occamies. As he approaches, he catches Queenie mid-sentence: “—wouldn’t blame anyone for wanting him, he’s really a sheik.”

“It’s not that ea—” Credence starts, but stops mid-word when he sees Graves. He looks a bit like a startled rabbit.

“Newt told us it’s safe,” Graves says, in lieu of asking questions. He’s rather glad he rescued Credence: Queenie talking about Jacob can’t be that entertaining of a conversation.

“Good!” Queenie declares. She gives Credence a look, and the young man practically bolts for the ladder. What kind of conversation were they having?

When they emerge from the suitcase, it’s to another hotel room. Before any of the men can ask where they are, Queenie’s eyebrows shoot up and she smiles. “Newt! St. Louis? How did you know I’ve always wanted to come here?”

“St. Louis?” Credence goes to the window, looking out at the city. “I can see the Eads Bridge!”

Jacob joins him. “Damn, that’s a view,” he says. “Can’t see the brewery, but I hear it’s a real treat to look at.”

“I though you couldn’t have alcohol?” Graves asks.

“They don’t make beer anymore,” Jacob says. “They make yeast—the best baker’s yeast, by the way, don’t let anyone tell you different—and ice cream now. Refuse to go under even though that’s what the Temperance folks would like best.”
As usual, the No-Maj world is a bit beyond him, so Graves just goes along with it. “Why St. Louis, Newt?” he asks.

“It was the first train I saw,” Newt says. He shrugs. “Seemed like a quiet city. And they’ve just built a new reptile house at the zoo which is supposed to have a live Xicalcoatl ready to go on display.”

“A what,” Jacob says.

“A Xicalcoatl,” Newt says patiently. “It’s a snake, very ordinary except for being beautiful, black with a lovely colored belly. When they’re fully grown they grow a pot, what the Aztecs called a chocolate cup, on their backs. It’s so beautiful it mesmerizes a person into walking into the Xicalcoatl’s pond to get it, and they drown.”

Queenie purses her lips. “So if this thing is put on display, then it’ll kill someone.”

Newt shakes his head. “No, no—as far as I know, it’s only a young one, without a chocolate cup yet. The Muggles think it’s just a beautiful snake and want to put it in the Reptile House. But it will start to grow its chocolate cup soon and they won’t know that it’s natural, so…”

“They’ll put it down,” Credence says.

“Yes,” Newt says. “I can’t—I can’t just let that happen. The Xicalcoatl is innocent.”

This is going to be another one of those days, isn’t it?

Graves considers everything he knows about the Wizarding community in St. Louis. The city was never of much concern to MACUSA—there were too many No-Majs always passing through in the early days, making trouble and causing chaos as they went West. Of course, witches and wizards went West, too, but they didn’t stay in St. Louis. The ones who went left because they wanted to get out from under the watchful eye of MACUSA, live on their own land and do magic how they pleased. Those were the sort of people that, in those days, MACUSA didn’t even want to deal with. These days, such an attitude would be unacceptable, but it’s stuck a bit with regard to the Western states. St. Louis is still a pass-through city, where witches and wizards go on their way to somewhere else. There’s no full Department of Magical Law Enforcement branch in the city, just a small enforcement outpost. If more Aurors are needed, they travel. Otherwise, like so many of the Western cities, St. Louis is left well enough alone.

“We shouldn’t have any trouble going undetected,” Graves puts in, as Queenie is asking Newt more about the Xicalcoatl’s habits. “No Department branch. And I’m going to guess that MACUSA won’t be making a production about looking for us, because that would send all the other people who’d want an Obscurial out. We won’t be in Wizarding newspapers, so no one will know your faces.”

“They might know yours,” Jacob says. “You’re…a little famous. I don’t know if you’ve noticed.”

Graves shakes his head. “No, I had no idea,” he says sarcastically.

“Jacob’s got a good point,” Queenie says, a bit worried. “You’re a Graves. People will recognize that, and even if they’ve missed everything else they’ll know you resigned.”


Oh, here’s the history lesson that Graves has been conveniently forgetting to give him. “It’s not that important—” he starts, but Queenie cuts him off.
“He’s been forgetting to give you this history lesson,” she says with a sweet look at Graves. “It’s a matter of blood. Over in England they make a big production out of the ‘Sacred Twenty-Eight’, the pureblood families that have never had a half-blood heir. Here we put a bit less stock in blood and a bit more in deeds. The Original Twelve were the first twelve wizards and witches who stepped up to be Aurors when MACUSA was founded. They risked everything to keep the magical community in America safe. And Gondolphus Graves was one of those Aurors.”

“You mean that Graves is actually a celebrity?” Jacob asks.

Queenie nods. “It’s a bit like someone being related to your Washington or somebody like that,” she says. “Everybody knows the Original Twelve. We’ve all seen pictures of them. And they do say that Mr. Graves has the look of old Gondolphus.”

“Only my damn grandmother ever said that,” Graves protests.

As usual, everyone ignores him.

“So we can’t let Graves be seen in public,” Jacob says.

“Chances are that even if they saw him, they wouldn’t say anything to him,” Queenie says. “But they’ll remember him, which means that if MACUSA comes looking…”

“I might have an idea,” Credence says hesitantly. His voice might sound shy, but his eyes are positively sparkling with mischief.

Queenie looks at him, stunned speechless for a moment, and then bursts into laughter. “You’re the absolute bee’s knees, Credence!”

“All right,” Credence says. “If you think it’s good—”

“It’s brilliant, dear,” Queenie assures him.

“Then I think Jacob and I should go shopping,” Credence says.

This can only possibly end well.

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“You know I hate hats,” Graves says accusingly to Queenie. They’re walking arm in arm down the sidewalk, half a block ahead of the other three men.

Queenie bumps her head briefly against his shoulder, affectionate as a cat. “Well, you might hate them, but you look just keen in that fedora.”

Graves cannot stand hats. He’ll do anything to avoid wearing one, and most of the time no one in the magical community will say anything. Wizards tend to be tolerant of eccentricities, especially in people as powerful as Graves. But, apparently, this is enough of a disguise that no one has to go messing about with Transfiguration charms, so this is their best option.

“I could have just done a Notice-Me-Not and been done with it,” Graves mutters.

“Where’s the fun in that?” Queenie asks.

“It’s not about fun, it’s about security.”

From behind, Graves hears Newt going on at length about proper handling of the Xicalcoatl. It
sounds like it’s not going to be hard to retrieve the snake. Newt isn’t clear on where, exactly, it’s being held, since it’s not yet on display. What will be difficult is getting it out of the No-Maj zoo. That’s where magic will come in.

“Jacob thinks I look like a moll walking with you like this,” Queenie says suddenly.

“And a moll is—”

Queenie’s eyes flash wickedly when she looks up at him. “A gangster’s girl.”

So it’s come to this. “Do I really look that much like a gangster?” Graves asks.

“You’re distinguished and handsome and look very dangerous,” Queenie says. “It suits you. Look how they’re all getting out of your way. Nobody wants to tangle with someone like you.”

Graves watches, and realizes that people are definitely making a special effort to get out of his way. It’s odd that he didn’t notice, but, then again, he’s so used to people getting out of his way because he’s the Director of Magical Security that he hadn’t noticed the difference. “I hope none of you are getting the wrong idea about me,” he says wearily.

“You are a criminal, Mr. Graves,” Queenie says, but the way she squeezes his hand takes any possible sting out of her words.

They meet up with the others at the gates of the zoo. Newt is practically bouncing with excitement, and Jacob and Credence are both excited.

“I’ve never been to a zoo before,” Credence admits when Graves asks. “More things I wasn’t allowed to do. I know I seem like a child…”

“But not a child, just someone who’s excited to get to live properly,” Graves says. The approving glance that Queenie sends his way tells him that this was the perfect thing to say.

It’s Jacob, in the end, with his far greater experience of normal No-Maj life, who leads the way into the zoo. He’s the one with the ability manage No-Maj maps that don’t automatically point out where to go, the one who can charm ticket-takers without a single incantation, who knows exactly the right questions to ask without seeming out of place or suspicious. He navigates the No-Maj crowds easily and deftly, keeping everyone on track and making sure they don’t stick out more than necessary.

They do make an odd group, out in the mid-June sunlight. There’s Queenie, beautiful and vivacious, green dress and matching cloche hat practically sparkling, the envy of every would-be flapper in her vicinity. On her arm, Jacob is the obvious envy of every other man around, but is completely oblivious, showing off the sights of the No-Maj world with the pride that Newt shows off his creatures. And then there’s the magizoologist himself, scanning the crowd with nervous flicks of his eyes, looking for signs of his snake. His blue coat is out of place in the St. Louis midsummer heat, just as his lack of a hat shows off the fact that he doesn’t belong here at all. And Credence—well, if Newt stands out, then he’s not far behind. It’s the second time that Graves has seen him out in public, and the second time that he’s noticed how many heads Credence turns. But Credence himself seems to notice nothing, too busy staring around at the life he’s now allowed to live. Then of course there’s Graves, who apparently looks like a gangster and still hates this damn hat. Together, they look about as cohesive as a herd of cats.

But somehow it doesn’t matter. Because Queenie’s arm is linked with Jacob’s, and she’s holding onto Newt’s hand, towing him along so he doesn’t get lost, and Credence is looking over Jacob’s
shoulder at the small map he’s holding, and Credence’s shoulder keeps almost-accidentally brushing against Graves’ as if in reminder that things, for the moment, are all right. It’s enough, despite the heat and the damn hat, to make Graves smile.

To make a show of actually visiting the zoo, for any curious eyes, they do walk around a bit. There’s the bird cage, with the path to be walked through, and exhibits of various animals, all of which interest Credence and Newt a good deal and Jacob and Queenie only slightly less. Graves watches the crowd subtly, waiting for things to go wrong. But they never do, and soon enough they’re going up the hill to the Reptile House.

It’s a lovely building, with a staircase at the entrance and pillars at the doors. The No-Maj architect who built it had a better eye for design than most wizard architects, Graves thinks. The flight of steps is short, and there’s a fair stream of people going in and out. The five of them are reasonably no different from any other faces in the crowd, and no one pays attention to them as they go inside.

The Reptile House is cool and rather dark, though there’s a courtyard in the center where sunlight floods in, showing off the verdant foliage planted there. It makes this building feel like it’s been picked up from the tropics and dropped in the city. There are cages all around the edges of the room, each with its own reptile inside. The quiet murmur of conversation fills the air as people move from cage to cage, circulating and watching. Most people are clustered around a large exhibit with a python circling and roiling inside, restless and beautiful.

As they come into the Reptile House, Queenie and Jacob naturally take the front. Credence moves along behind them, enthralled, visibly taking mental notes on every single animal he passes. This leaves Graves next to Newt, for the first time today.

“I don’t like this place,” Newt says suddenly, quietly. His arms are folded. He worries at the fabric of his sleeves with his fingertips. “It’s…not good. They shouldn’t keep the animals in cages like these. They ought to build better habitats, make space for them to really live instead of being put out like objects.”

“There’s nothing we can do,” Graves says, just as quietly. “We can’t rescue all of these. We’re here for the Xicalcoatl.”

Newt pauses in front of a cage containing a lizard. He presses his hand to the wire mesh holding the lizard in. “I know,” he says unhappily. “I just wish…”

Graves nods. “I know,” he says. He takes hold of Newt’s upper arm, gently steering him away from the lizard. “The No-Majs will figure it out, eventually.”

“Not soon enough for them,” Newt says softly, looking around at the reptiles.

At the back of the room, there’s a long flight of steps down to a second level, one which obviously no visitors are supposed to access. “For exhibits that are on hold,” Jacob informs them. “I asked one of the workers who’s taking his lunch break. If Newt’s snake is anywhere, it’s down there.”

“Good,” Graves says. “We’ll be breaking even more rules.”

“Aw, cheer up,” Queenie says. She winks at him. “You know you like it.”

Graves rolls his eyes at her. “I do and I hate it.” Credence laughs at that, and the sound leaves Graves feeling ridiculously happy. Queenie throws him a knowing look, but he doesn’t ask what it’s about. She’s beyond him, sometimes.

It’s the work of a moment for Graves to throw a Disillusionment Charm over the whole group,
fading them out of No-Maj notice and into the background. None of the No-Majs say a word as the five descend the stairs. This part of the building is slightly unfinished; or, at least, not finished in a way that’s intended for public consumption.

“They’ll be down here,” Newt says, hurrying around the corner.

“This is where the trouble begins,” Jacob says under his breath.

Graves casts him a grin. “Now you’re thinking like an Auror.”

Jacob sighs and folds his arms. “You’re getting to me. Must be all that time trapped listening to you being melancholy in the suitcase.”

“I’m not melancholy,” Graves protests.

Credence casually slings an arm over his shoulders and Graves startles. “You are. Don’t keep lying to yourself like that, it isn’t healthy.”

He turns his head. Credence is entirely too close, giving him an absolutely rakish smile, and for some reason Graves could swear his heart stopped beating for a minute.

Queenie claps a hand over her mouth, muffling a laugh. Jacob looks between her and Credence and Graves and shakes his head slowly. “You weren’t kidding,” he says as an aside to Queenie.

What the hell is going on here?

Newt is ignoring all of what’s going on behind him in favor of practically sticking his head into the half-covered cages. There are only fifteen, and he’s halfway around the tables they’re sitting on when he stops. “Here you are,” he says gently, and pulls the cover off the cage.

Inside is a very small black snake, curled into a pile, hissing softly. Graves leans over Newt’s shoulder. “That’s it?”

“That’s her,” Newt confirms. He raps his wand against the lock—“Alohomora”—and it falls away to land on the table. He opens the door and bends down to look in.

Jacob hovers on Newt’s other side, peering at the snake. “She’s not poisonous, right?”

“Venomous,” Newt corrects absently. “If she bit you, she’d inject toxins into your body.”

“…that makes me feel so much better,” Jacob says in great exasperation.

“Don’t worry, sweetheart,” Queenie says, taking his hand. “What Newt didn’t say is that she doesn’t have any toxins at all. It would just hurt.”

Abruptly Newt lets out a strangled hissing noise that has everyone except Graves leaping back away from him. The snake rises up, looking back at Newt and hissing in reply. He stares fixedly at the snake, squinting with concentration. After a moment, the snake bows its small head and lets Newt reach into the cage and scoop it up. It’s small enough that it can fit into his two cupped hands. He pulls it out of the cage and cradles it to his chest, looking down at it with the softest expression Graves has ever seen him wear.

There’s something slightly more pressing than the snake, though. “Newt,” Graves says, “you never told me you were a Parselmouth.”

“I’m not,” Newt says.
“Honey, that was Parseltongue,” Queenie says, pointing out the obvious.

Newt looks around at them. “I learned a little off a snake charmer in India,” he says. “He’s a good man who cares about snakes. I respect him. He taught me so I could do a better job of taking care of serpents.”

“I have no idea what they’re talking about,” Credence mutters to Jacob.

“We’re in this together,” Jacob replies.

Graves hears footsteps coming down the stairs. They’re heavy, probably made by workmen. “We can explain later,” he says tightly. “The Disillusionment Charm won’t hold up well against people looking for the unexpected. And I don’t think Obliviating them all will work out well.”

“We aren’t going to be able to Apparate,” Queenie says, visibly worried. “I don’t think any of us know the city well enough to do it safely.”

“Right,” Jacob says. He straightens his jacket. “We’re going to have to bluff it out.”

This is going to end so badly. “We’re not exactly professional actors—” Graves starts.

“You just stand back and look impressive,” Jacob says.

“That shouldn’t be too hard,” Credence murmurs, and Graves is fairly sure he’s the only one who hears that comment. It’s so quiet that he’s not even sure he was supposed to hear it.

“Newt, you get behind him and put that snake in your pocket,” Jacob hisses. Newt listens, only half there, busy cooing over the snake and calming it enough that it will go easily into his pocket.

Just a moment later a trio of No-Maj men come around the corner. They have honest faces and well-worn clothes, all wearing soft caps, one carrying a toolbox.

“Who’re you?” one of them asks. They’re confused, that’s easy to see. There aren’t supposed to be people down here.

Jacob somehow manages to sound bombastic and pompous as he replies, “Mr. Perkins sent us to check up on the new exhibits.”

“Says you. He’s already approved them himself—” one of the workmen starts, but Jacob cuts in.

“Approved, yes, but he wants us to check on their wellbeing,” Jacob says. “Make sure they’re kept and fed adequately. This man here is a zoologist of some renown. Friend of Mr. Perkins.” He jerks a thumb at Newt, who looks as lost as Graves feels.

The third workman, who’s perhaps a little older and less credulous, scratches his head. “Well, then, who’s the dame? Why’s she here?”

“Just a little girl who likes the wild side of things,” Queenie says sweetly. Her eyelashes flutter. “I had to work awful hard to get Jacob here to bring me along.”

Jacob looks at her, and despite the straight-faced lies he’s telling some of his adoration shines through anyway. “Yeah, she had to work real hard,” he says. Credence choke a little, biting his lip hard to keep from laughing. It’s a sentiment Graves shares. If Queenie asks for anything, Jacob will do it, no matter what it is.

“And of course I brought friends,” Queenie bubbles, looking empty-headed as a doll. She tugs
Credence forward. He goes, with a nervous, helpless look at Graves. “He’s just an absolute dear. Couldn’t say no to me if he tried!”

One of the workmen chuckles, relaxing. “Yeah, I can see,” he says.

Whatever this is, it appears to be working.

Queenie turns her fluttery look on Credence. “Cash or check?” she asks.

“I—ah—check,” Credence says, eyes wide with mild panic.

Jacob looks like he’s having trouble not laughing. “I’ll take cash, doll,” he says. Queenie looks at him and then pecks him lightly on the lips, letting go of Credence. He stumbles back to stand by Graves, who can’t help the amused expression he’s sure he’s wearing.

“You’ll tell Mr. Perkins that we’re taking good care of his animals, right?” the first workman asks Newt, obviously a touch worried.

Oh, Graves knows what Newt will say, they just had this conversation upstairs. So as Newt’s opening his mouth to reply, Graves steps swiftly in. “You don’t need to worry about anything,” he says smoothly. “Mr. Perkins will be pleased with our report.”

“Good,” the workman says. He looks a bit nervous about talking to Graves—really, how menacing does he look?—but his relief is palpable.

“If that’s all…” the oldest of the workmen says.

Jacob nods imperiously. “That should be, yes,” he says. He holds out a hand to the workman, who shakes it with a firm grip. “Keep up the good work.”

They file out past the workmen, who go back to their conversation. It’s not until they’re out in the sunlight that Graves turns to Jacob and asks, “Who in the hell is Mr. Perkins?”

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“If you’d have paid attention to the building,” Jacob says, “he’s the one who built the Reptile House. He’s the Curator of Reptiles.”

“That was the best act I’ve ever seen!” Queenie exclaims, kissing Jacob on the cheek.

Newt, hand in the pocket that contains the snake, nods. “It was pretty good.”

“Please don’t ever try to kiss me again,” Credence says to Queenie, looking pained.

Queenie laughs. “I’ll at least warn you next time, how’s that?”

Credence looks put-upon. Graves isn’t quite sure why he does it, but he reaches out and puts his arm around Credence’s shoulders. “Be kind to him, Queenie,” he says.

“I am kind!” Queenie says. She smiles and people around them turn to look. She doesn’t seem to notice. “It was the best way. They expected that from me.”

Something about that statement doesn’t seem quite right, but it can be dealt with later. For now, Newt’s hurrying them along, anxious to get the little snake into the safety of the suitcase. But Jacob is insisting on ice cream, because “They make it right here in St. Louis!” Credence is agreeing wholeheartedly, explaining with enthusiasm that “The last time I had ice cream I was ten!” Queenie shakes her head at that, giving a venomous look toward the shade of the Barebone woman. Graves fully supports the anger, and it puts him on Credence’s side. Newt finally agrees to
go along with it, because the snake seems fairly calm, and what harm can a little constrictor snake do? It’s not like there’s a Runespoor in Newt’s pocket—well, not this time, anyway.

So they go, and they sit by the wide Missouri river and eat ice cream that Jacob buys because everyone else is hopeless with No-Maj money. They laugh, talking about things that don’t matter to anyone but them. Credence, who hasn’t seen the sun properly in several weeks, gets sunburned and obviously doesn’t care, though Queenie says he should buy a hat. Credence protests and Graves tells him dourly that if he has to suffer through this awful fedora then Credence can suffer through a hat too. Newt laughs at him, and tells him that he should just go to a haberdashery Diagon Alley and be glad that it’s only a fedora and not one of the more ridiculous things currently in style across the pond. Queenie plays with Pickett in the grass, though the Bowtruckle never strays far from Newt. And when Newt starts to get sunburned Graves throws his hat at him while Jacob laughs at them both. Jacob enthuses about the other things they could do, if they only stayed longer, giving a yearning look toward the city at their backs. It’s what someone might call a perfect day, if they were so inclined.

And every time that Graves even thinks that this is some kind of fever-dream, that this might not actually be real, he finds Credence leaning into him. Every time, without fail, Credence just smiles at him, eyes shining in the afternoon light, and Graves can’t help returning the smile. The young man is a very solid reminder that this is real. They’re here, all five of them, together, and this is better than things have ever been.

Chapter End Notes

The Eads Bridge is SO FUCKING COOL, you guys. I got to see it in person this past Spring Break and holy shit. It’s ridiculously impressive. I mean, I adore bridges, but this thing…gah. So lovely. It was an iconic image of St. Louis until the Gateway Arch was constructed (almost twenty years after this story concludes). It was a pioneering piece of engineering--its caissons are still among the deepest ever sunk. What the Historical Preservation Society doesn’t tell you is that they tested its stability by sending AN ELEPHANT across.

And the Xicalcoatl: I found this little beast in “A Book of Creatures”, which is a great project you all should really support. Here’s the link to its page. It’s such an interesting and unique little snake, and I’ve presented it as exactly as I can.

Wizarding history: I guess the thing I’m happiest with in regard to American wizardry is the whole “Original Twelve” thing, because honestly that lines right up with the real-world values of American political culture. A core piece of American political culture is the desire for self-governance, and even if wizards didn’t structure their entire government on that framework they can’t have escaped some bleedover from their Muggle neighbors. (You should be sensing a theme. I am going to bitch about this again later on.) Western wizards just wouldn’t want that much to do with a centralized government.

I can’t imagine that American wizards are particularly fond of being micromanaged by the primarily East-based MACUSA, even if they seem to lack all semblance of a real federal system. Even if it IS actually by some miracle a federal system, the point stands. Look at our real system: Wyomingites get reeeeeeally pissed when you start talking about ditching the Electoral College because they’d be basically
disenfranchised by the sudden power of the East Coast and West Coast populations. So would the entire rest of the American West/Midwest. (If you wanna start an argument about the Electoral College in the comments, there are two rules: keep it civil, and CITE YOUR SOURCES.)

I mean, yes, there are things like “the Federal Bureau of Covert Vigilance and No-Maj Obliviation” under the MACUSA umbrella and probably under the direction of the Director of Magical Security (oh god Percival how much paperwork did you have to do) but it’s not like we EVER see anything regarding the rest of the bloody country and whether or not this thing is ACTUALLY a federal system. Given the single wizarding school and the excessively centralized national security state that is MACUSA, I am going to guess that no, MACUSA is not a goddamn federal system… bah humbug, says the irritable little political scientist.

Re: the zoo…this is one of those times when I went ABOVE AND FUCKING BEYOND for the sake of this goddamn story. I visited the Herpetarium while K and I were in St. Louis, too. It’s a pretty cool building, and if you’re ever there you should ABSOLUTELY check out the reptiles because they’re adorable and beautiful. I took photos of everything, and I honestly did my best to make this as accurate to the layout of the building as I could.

The Herpetarium was constructed in 1927 and was, at the time, called the Reptile House. It sits on the “Historic Hill” in the St. Louis Zoo. It was run by zoologist Marlin Perkins, who would later host “Mutual of Omaha’s Wild Kingdom”. (Given the man’s biography, he and Newt would have been best friends. Perkins loved animals as much as our dear magizoologist.) There’s some mild chaos surrounding when, exactly, he became Curator of Reptiles. The Internet says 1928, information at the St. Louis zoo says 1927. I have chosen to adhere to the information provided by the Zoo.

The Reptile House appears to have been one of the first of its kind, and turned out to be intensely popular. Here’s a direct quote from an informational board at the Zoo: “One popular animal attraction was Blondie, a large Indian python that refused to eat on her own. Mr. Perkins and his staff had to force-feed the snake, sometimes recruiting zoo commissioners to ‘bring up the rear’. When the feeding was performed outside, the event would attract hundreds of on-lookers.”
Chapter 21

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Newt makes the executive decision to stay in St. Louis for a few extra days. “I want to get the Xicalcoatl settled,” he explains, when they’re in the suitcase that evening. “Poor thing’s so disoriented it doesn’t know what to do.”

“That’s fine,” Jacob says. “We’ll take in the sights.”

“As long as you’re careful,” Graves says. “Please. Be careful.”

Queenie, touching up her makeup a bit, smiles at him. “You won’t have to come and rescue us, don’t worry,” she says. “Jacob and I can handle ourselves.”

“It’s not you I’m worried about,” Graves says. “It’s other people.”

“We didn’t run into a stitch of trouble today,” Queenie says firmly. “And even if we do, we’re smart. We’ll be able to get out of it.”

Graves acquiesces. There’s not much he can do, anyway, except warn them to stay away from the Capitol building, since the Grand Crucible sits beneath. It’s a meeting place for the magical community, meant to welcome witches and wizards of all traditions. Pierre Cruzatte—a member of Lewis and Clark’s Corps of Discovery—established it after the expedition’s return with intent to bring together the many magical traditions he’d encountered on his way over the continent. These days, it’s a waystation, a place where Western wizards can get news from back East and Eastern wizards can stop to cool their heels on their way to the West.

In another life, they’d be staying at a hotel in the Grand Crucible, rather than in this No-Maj establishment. But that’s truly another life, one in which they found Credence before all of this began, one in which they aren’t traveling as fugitives. It’s a life without Grindelwald.

Queenie and Jacob head off into the city the next morning, to no great fanfare. Credence says that maybe he’ll join them, later, when they’re sure that things are safe, but for now he’d like to stay inside. It’s possible he has slight sun sickness, given how dizzy and thirsty he is all day. This doesn’t seem to be his first brush with something like this. He’s resigned, muttering about how he at least gets plenty of water this time and doesn’t have to go stand on a street corner again.

Newt is entirely consumed with caring for and studying the Xicalcoatl. He asks Graves and Credence to take care of the Graphorns—apparently they need grooming, and he trusts them to manage it—and then vanishes with the snake. So they go out to the Graphorns’ pasture with the supplies they’ve seen Newt use before, not speaking much. Credence is lost in his thoughts and Graves is content to be the same way.

The Graphorns, despite their size, are fairly easy to care for. They’re more interested in eating than in paying attention to having their fur brushed. It’s a trick not to get your foot stepped on, but it’s one easy enough to figure out. The babies are affectionate, trying to say hello with tentacles all over Graves’ face, but when he ignores them hard enough (a difficult feat) they soon lose interest and go to bother Credence instead.

Graves is very good at doing things without thinking, especially when it’s a simple task like this. And it’s hard not to watch Credence as he works. He’s methodical, thoughtful, measuring every
motion with intense care. Even the smallest motions aren’t careless. He’s aware of himself in a way that Graves has rarely seen, even in the most disciplined wizards.

That’s a function, probably, of the Obscurus. Graves has no idea how much time Credence has spent working alone on controlling the thing, but it has to be much more than anyone expected. He wants to master himself. Credence won’t settle for anything less than total control. It’s as though, broken free from the chains of other people, he’s decided to put chains on himself. But they’re chains to which he, and he alone, holds the key. Graves intimately knows the liberty of that kind of self-control. He has to exercise it himself. His magic has always been explosive. He wasn’t lying when he told Credence how much focus he needs to perform anything that isn’t a violent curse. “Maxima” is his favorite modifier for a reason. He wonders about that other life. How much alike would they be, if Credence had been taught control from the beginning? If he’d been able to harness his power instead of shackling it?

The Graphorn Graves is working on snorts and steps to the side, bumping Graves hard enough that he staggers. The motion draws Credence’s attention, and when he sees Graves falling over he just smiles. “Need help?” he asks.

“No, no, I’m fine,” Graves says, getting back up with an irritable look at the Graphorn. It ignores him entirely. “I still don’t know why Newt keeps these.”

“They’re sort of endangered,” Credence explains. “He wants to release them back into the wild eventually, but he has to educate people on them first.”

As Credence turns back to the Graphorn he’s grooming, Graves thinks how funny it is in a terribly not-funny way that listening to people talk about magical beasts sounds far too much like listening to someone talk about Credence. And he’s not anything like them. He’s proud and brilliant and powerful, and though no one in their right mind would call Credence “tame”, he’s still incredibly, achingly human. The world seems brighter when Graves looks at him.

He considers again that hypothetical life where everything wouldn’t be in this precarious limbo. Would he have ever met Credence, except possibly as a rising star in the Department of Magical Law Enforcement? Would he have seen that smile directed at him? Or would he have still been alone? Still dedicated to his work above all else, not really daring to try for anything different?

That’s the question that he doesn’t want to ask himself. It comes a little too close to rusty, disused feelings Graves hasn’t felt in years. But he does it anyway, because at this point he’s got nothing to lose. Would a life without Credence even be one he’d want to live?

***

Another day passes. Newt works himself practically from dawn to dusk, falling asleep in the middle of clarifying his notes on the Xicalcoatl’s behavior. The Niffler must have finally gotten hold of Credence’s buttons, because it entirely stops bothering him and moves on to trying to get hold of Jacob’s cufflinks again. Credence doesn’t say anything about it, just borrows some of Newt’s heavily mismatched fabric-covered buttons and sews them on himself. Queenie and Jacob go out again, promising to avoid the Grand Crucible, only slightly alleviating Graves’ concerns.

In the afternoon of their third day in St. Louis, Jacob bursts into the suitcase without warning. Credence is in the middle of trying to explain to Newt and Graves the intricacies of the card game “Rook”. He’s just explaining how the three-person variant works—apparently this is supposed to be played with four—when Jacob comes crashing down the ladder, waving a newspaper.

“We ran halfway back before Queenie remembered to Apparate us into the hotel room,” he gasps,
shoving the flapping paper at Newt. “You need to see this.”

Newt scans the page silently. After just a moment, he hands the paper to Graves. It’s the St. Louis Gateway, the major newspaper of the Midwest. Credence crowds in to read the screaming headline:

**DIRECTOR OF MAGICAL SECURITY RESIGNS**

Queenie bursts down the ladder, hair flying away, expression wild, hat in her hand. There’s also an envelope in her hand, to which Graves pays little attention. “What are we going to do!?”

Graves still hasn’t processed the headline. He keeps reading, skipping over the photograph of Tina, at a lectern, speaking bravely and tearlessly into a microphone while President Picquery looms elegantly and menacingly behind her. He also skips over the introductory babble, the part that explains how Queenie Goldstein ran away with a No-Maj and the immediate facts as they’re known to the general public. He doesn’t need those. He needs to know what happened to Tina.

*During the press conference, Ms. Goldstein was exceptionally poised. Her explanation for the necessity of her resignation was brief and clear, delivered without bias. She displayed again, and for the last time, the blunt honesty we have all come to expect from her during these trying times. During the post-speech questioning session, she answered all questions with thought and brevity. Her desire to right the wrongs committed by her sister was clear. It is easy to see why, to many, she has become an icon of the best that MACUSA can offer.*

Unfortunately, if Ms. Goldstein is the best MACUSA can offer, then it is perhaps time to seek something better than MACUSA. The competence of the Congress and particularly the Department of Magical Law Enforcement has been called into question over and over for the past six months. How did Grindelwald take the place of the Director of Magical Security? What other security breaches have been overlooked? How many Dark wizards are in the ranks of the Aurors even now? These are questions that many wizards must now ask. And, of course, the potential crisis unveiled by this latest scandal cannot be ignored. Though her actions have been exemplary throughout her brief period in office, the connection between former Director Goldstein and those involved with Grindelwald must not be denied. Her connections to the fugitive Percival Graves already caused some to question former Ms. Goldstein’s loyalty to MACUSA. If one Director of Magical Security was manipulated by Grindelwald, why not a second? Even worse, why not someone even more powerful?

*Even if these questions are unfounded, Queenie Goldstein’s choice to defy Rappaport’s Law, risking a break of the International Statute of Secrecy, is an undeniable threat to the stability of the American magical community and even the international community at large. This and Grindelwald’s attack on New York last year are incidents which show the escalating need for stricter controls on the boundaries between the No-Maj world and the wizarding world. Coexistence, peaceful or otherwise, is not possible. Though many have great sympathy for Queenie Goldstein—love is something which defies all laws—the fact remains that she deliberately chose to put the entire magical community at risk by running away with a No-Maj. This may appear like a small action, but is as significant as Grindelwald’s more serious challenge. In both cases, the International Statute of Secrecy is broken. As President Picquery explained in a speech to the Senate yesterday afternoon, “Intent does not matter: this law is meant to protect us, and those who threaten that law threaten the security of the entire magical community.” The President went on to explain that, in her own words, “those who threaten our security will be dealt with in a swift and decisive fashion. American wizards deserve no less.”*

*There are calls from the Senate for an internal investigation to formally discover structural issues*
within MACUSA and the potential faults in the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. These questions of competence are well-founded. In the past two years, a Director was kidnapped—presumably brainwashed—by the most infamous Dark wizard of our age, returned to power, resigned, and shortly thereafter stole one of Grindelwald’s most powerful weapons and fled New York. Just a few months later, a second Director has resigned amid intense scandal. The idea that MACUSA may have issues that make it prone to such attacks in the modern age is one that critics say is a more than valid idea and should be thoroughly explored.

The Ministry of Magic made a statement regarding this most recent incident… And here Graves stops reading. He doesn’t need to see what the Brits have to say about this nightmare: he’s dealt with them often enough that he can simply guess. They’ll be disapproving but in solidarity: they’ve never liked Rappaport’s Law, but they’ll still make a lot of noise about “protecting the magical community” anyway. Everything else in here is just fearmongering, meant to get people to support whatever the Gateway’s political agenda is. He looks at Newt, who’s gray with shock. “Did she write to you about this?”

“I haven’t gotten a letter since I wrote her in Chicago,” he says.

Queenie shoves the envelope she brought down into his hand. “A pigeon was banging on the glass in your room,” she says. “Read it.”

Newt rips open the envelope and yanks out the letter. They wait in silence while he reads. He doesn’t look away as he says, “She’s coming to St. Louis…oh, she’s pretty sure she’s being followed, I think, but since it’s in code I don’t know for sure.”

“You two made a code?” Jacob asks.

“Just a little bit,” Newt says. “Things we’d both know, if we wrote them down. We didn’t have the chance to write much, though.”

“How many are following?” Graves asks. “We need to know.”

Newt shrugs, helpless. “I don’t know. But she says she’s coming by train, should be here tomorrow afternoon. I think—I think it’d be best if I go alone to the station to get her, and leave the suitcase here, just in case.”

Graves nods sharply. “I’ll ward the hotel room. Tell me before you go and I’ll set the wards to only open for you and Tina. If alarms go off, well…”

“We’ll be all right,” Newt says. He’s visibly tense, playing with the edge of the letter. “Tina’s smart, she won’t let us get into trouble.”

It’s not them that Graves is worried about.

Newt sets off the next afternoon at one o’clock sharp to wait at the station. They don’t know exactly when Tina will arrive, and Newt is so nervous that it might just kill him to go later. No one protests. It might kill them, too.

Queenie and Jacob go down quietly into the suitcase. Graves and, almost by extension, Credence, stay in the hotel room, to ward it against intruders. Before Newt goes, he—with no explanation necessary—hands Pickett to Graves. The Bowtruckle curls up in his waistcoat pocket, looking miserable and wilted. It cries, when Newt leaves, but Newt sets his shoulders and resolutely doesn’t look back as Graves shuts the door after him and locks it.

Credence leans by the window. “He never leaves Pickett behind,” he says.
“Newt doesn’t want him hurt, if things go wrong,” Graves says, pacing around the room, starting to set up the wards.

“What are we going to do if things go wrong?” Credence asks quietly. He’s nervous, shoulders hunched and shadow swelling.

“You and I will leave,” Graves says. “We’ll Apparate somewhere. Work out what to do after that.”

Credence glances at the suitcase. “Queenie and Jacob?”

“That’s up to Queenie.” He tries not to let on how saying that out loud makes him feel absolutely nauseous. “It’s best for all of us if we scatter, if that’s what it comes to. We’ll be harder to track.”

There’s silence for a moment. Then Credence asks, “What if we fight?”

Graves stops mid-spell. It dies in a small cloud of sparks inches from the door. His back is to Credence, and he’s honestly glad the young man can’t see his face. It would be…difficult. “I’m not fighting this time,” Graves says slowly.

“We could take on anyone,” Credence insists. “I know we could. I’ve been studying and practicing in my spare time. I’ve seen you duel. We could—”

“We could get killed,” Graves says.

“You didn’t care about dying last time!”

He closes his eyes and wills the words out of his mouth. “I don’t give a damn about myself, but I care about you,” he says.

The only sound that can be heard is Pickett’s tiny whimpering.

“Why are you like this?” Credence asks quietly, after a long moment.

“This is the only way I know how to be,” Graves answers.

Credence laughs, sounding impossibly weary. “For years I just wanted someone who’d care about me, and then I got you.”

“My apologies,” Graves says.

“Don’t,” Credence says. “I’ve put my trust in your shadow, as the Good Book says. Judges chapter nine, if you’re curious.”

Graves schools his expression and turns to look at Credence. “You should probably stop applying verses from your holy book out of context,” he says.

Credence, hands in his pockets, half-shrugs. “At this point, I’m so far on the road to Hell that I feel like the Lord should maybe just smite me and get it over with.”

There are so many things wrong with that sentence that Graves doesn’t know where to even begin. He’s already said too much as it is. “I need to finish the wards,” he says, turning back to the door and recalling the incantation he’d been working on.

“Graves,” Credence says.

Against his entire better judgement Graves looks over his shoulder again. Credence looks like he’s
holding himself in, arms wrapped around himself like he’s trying to physically contain the shadow that’s muffling his edges. But his eyes are ordinary. It’s just Credence, scared and unsure.

“We’ll be fine,” Graves says.

“You can’t be sure of that,” Credence says.

Graves thinks about his broken cheekbone, about the scars still littering Credence’s back, about the helpless Bowtruckle in his pocket. About the two in the suitcase, about all of the hapless creatures, about Newt, about Tina running to them in hopes of safety they might not have. “No, I can’t,” he says.

Credence closes his eyes. He nods jerkily. “Right. I…right.”

“Hey,” Graves says, carefully walking around the suitcase on the floor to stand by Credence. “I won’t lie. If this goes wrong, it will be bad. But you’ll be fine. I’ll do whatever I must to keep you safe.”

“What did I do to deserve you?” Credence asks rhetorically, not opening his eyes.

Graves isn’t sure how to answer that—because his best guess is another question, asking what exactly he did to deserve someone like Credence—but he’s saved from saying anything. The young man leans forward with a small, resigned sigh, right into Graves’ shoulder. Graves catches him, a reflex he doesn’t regret. (He wants this, he realizes with a small shock, wants to be this close to Credence more than he’d even known himself.)

The Obscurus tangles around their feet, thrumming with potential energy. It’s a protective snarl of shadows and magic, and standing this close to it, in it, Graves thinks that this thing, the Obscurus—it almost isn’t its own creature. It seems like physical expression of Credence. If Graves were given to expressions like that, he’d call it a piece of Credence’s soul. There might not be another word for it.

He’d stand there for a very long time, but it seems like only a moment before Credence steps away and opens his eyes. “You should fix the wards,” he says steadily. The Obscurus fades a little, but not all the way, a reminder that if Graves’ defensive spells fail, Credence can easily handle the rest.

Graves turns back to his work, moving fast. This feels dangerous, like he’s on the cusp of making extremely bad decisions. The analysis, though, will have to wait for later. There isn’t time now to dither and have a moral crisis. There could be half of MACUSA blasting down the door any second.

He’s still very aware of Credence’s watchful eyes on him.

Chapter End Notes

Yep, Pierre Cruzatte was real. He was one of the major translators for the Corps of Discovery, and played a critical role in keeping the expedition moving and in good standing with the native tribes who encountered them. He had a good deal of geographical knowledge and spent time trading across the Midwest. The kind of guy who was probably secretly a wizard and had a vested interest in keeping everyone from killing each other over land disputes and culture shocks.
The card game Rook: a regular card game played with “missionary poker” cards. Basically, it was an attempt to market an alternative set of cards to people in the Puritan tradition who objected to cards because of their association with cartomancy (and therefore witchcraft). If Mary Lou Barebone let her kids have any kind of games, it would have been something like this. (Evidence that she wouldn’t have entirely rejected this for frivolity: Modesty’s game of hopscotch. It’s flimsy, but evidence for Percival Graves’ survival is flimsy. I’ve already taken a flamethrower to canon; I’m not going to stop for a card game.)

The Parker Brothers introduced the card set in 1906. There are four suits, 14 cards each, and no face cards. The only special card is the Rook Bird card, which acts a sort of “wild card” trump. Honestly, if you’re a Midwesterner who knows the rules to Pitch, it’s a VERY similar game. There’s about a million variants of Rook, and it CAN be played with a standard card deck. If I weren’t already steeped in the rules of Pitch, I’d be figuring out how to play this game with all of my friends…

So: pigeons! I absolutely ADORE the headcanon that was going around a while ago about American wizards using pigeons to send messages, so I just stuck with it.

Judges 9:15 (King James Version): “And the bramble said unto the trees, If in truth ye anoint me king over you, then come and put your trust in my shadow: and if not, let fire come out of the bramble, and devour the cedars of Lebanon.”
Chapter 22

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Newt is gone for almost six hours. Sometime about four-thirty, Queenie and Jacob emerge from the suitcase with sandwiches. No one is hungry, but all of them eat. It’s just good sense. If they have to run, then they’ll need all the energy they can get.

It’s a quiet group. Graves finds it uncomfortably akin to the night they left New York. They arrange themselves in much the same way. Queenie and Jacob sit on the bed, Queenie with her head on his shoulder and his arm around her. Graves stands facing the door, planning his moves ahead of time, ready for a fight if that’s what it comes to. Credence leans in the corner, uncomfortably and inhumanly still. If anything happens, they’re ready.

At seven o’clock, there’s the sound a key jiggling in the lock and the knob turning. Before he can blink Graves has his wand aimed at the door and the word for a Blasting Curse on his lips. Queenie and Jacob are on their feet, ready to Apparate. Credence steps back against the wall, Obscurus rushing up around him with a raging snarl.

The door opens. Newt steps into the room. He looks a little rumpled, hair even more tousled than usual. And behind him, a little flushed and smiling despite the definite tear tracks on her face, is Tina.

Queenie bursts into motion, a pink and gold blur, as she practically tackles Tina in a hug. It’s all a whirl for the next few moments, as everyone tries to talk and touch at once. In the confusion, Graves hands an ecstatic Pickett back over to Newt. They have their own reunion in the corner. The Bowtruckle stops looking wilted and visibly perks up in Newt’s hands.

There’s a brief, intensely uncomfortable moment where Tina and Credence are just looking at each other. The memory of their departure from New York—“I’d rather have you alive than anyone else here!”—must be at the forefront of everyone’s mind. Finally, Tina says, “I was so worried about you.”

“I’m glad you’re all right,” Credence says in the same moment. Smiles break across both their faces, they embrace each other, and relief washes through Graves. Everything’s fine. They’re all going to be fine.

For a few minutes, everyone is talking over each other, telling Tina about everything that’s happened since they left New York. Graves stands back and just lets it happen. Tina looks exhausted, but gamely goes along with it all. It takes a few minutes, but finally Tina ends up standing in front of him. “Hi,” she says. “I am really sorry for all those times I gave you hell about your job.”

“Didn’t agree with you?” Graves asks, eyebrows raised.

“No,” she says. “I missed just being an Auror.”

Graves nods. “That’s what authority does to you.”

“It’s worse than that,” Tina says, eyes glazed a bit as if she’s trying not to cry. “I missed having you around all the time. That office…it wasn’t my office. It was yours.”
“Oh,” Graves says.

Queenie gives Tina a small shove on the shoulder. “Just do it,” she says. “He’s gotten much better at this, you’ll see.”

Tina gives Queenie a doubtful look, but then steps forward with a slightly nervous expression. As it turns out, Queenie wasn’t wrong. Tina looks like she needs a hug. Graves is damn happy to give her one.

Nobody mentions the damp spot on his shirt when she finally steps away. “That’s…probably enough of that.” Tina says. She blinks hard, then looks around at everyone with a smile. “So…where do we go from here?”

They have their planning meeting in the suitcase. It feels right, having the six of them like this. It’s safe. Graves is very happy to have everyone he cares about where he can actually see them.

Newt sketches an idea of where he’s thought to go. “We have to make it look like I’m not running,” he says. “Tina told me that she let people know that she was going to join me, travel with me for a while. No one is suspicious.”

“They’re all very sympathetic for my loss,” Tina puts in dryly, and squeezes Queenie’s hand. “They have no idea what’s really going on here.”

“So we just keep moving in no set direction,” Newt says. “I can keep doing research. We keep all of you safely out of sight.”

“I’m fine with that,” Credence offers.

“So am I,” Graves says.

Jacob gives them a rather flat look. “You two are hermits,” he says. “You’d be just as happy living together in a hut on a mountain. What about those of us who want to actually see things?”

“If we stay in rural areas—which no one will question, Newt has to go off the beaten path to find the creatures he’s looking for—you can get out of the suitcase plenty often,” Tina says. “MACUSA has no idea where to even start looking for you all. They’re expecting a trail of destruction left by an Obscurial. No offense, Credence.”

Credence shrugs. “None taken.” He looks troubled, all the same.

“And no one is really looking for us,” Queenie says, picking up the trail of her sister’s thought and looking at Jacob. “We’re not quite the priority that Mr. Graves is.”

“Spectacular.”

Newt gives Graves a quick smile. “Think of it as an honor,” he says. “They think you’re the strongest of all of us, which means they want you most.”

“They aren’t wrong about him being the strongest,” Tina says.

The compliments need to stop. He’s uncomfortable. “So we’ll go—where?” Graves asks. “The rest of America is open to us, though I’d prefer not to go to Texas. The wizards there are…loose cannons.”

Tina winces. “Did I tell you about the Texas case I had to deal with last month? Some idiot
enchanted guns to float around his ranch and shoot at people who came close.”

“Unbelievable,” Jacob says.

“It’s true,” Tina says, massaging her head. “The paperwork from that was awful.”

Graves clears his throat pointedly. “Where are we going?”

“I thought Nebraska,” Newt says. “There’s rumors of Campruchs in some of the Nebraska rivers, and they’re quite rare outside of their habitat around the Maluku Islands. And then there are the odd sightings of phantom kangaroos…”

Before anyone can sidetrack the conversation again, Graves says, “We’ll call it settled, then. You and Tina navigate us. We’ll wait for your signal to come out of the suitcase again.”

“Right,” Tina says. She leans on Newt’s shoulder. Surprisingly, he doesn’t move away. “Newt and I will throw off any pursuit, convince MACUSA that we aren’t doing anything wrong.”

“We aren’t, not morally,” Jacob says. Graves looks at him, confused—when exactly did the man become a philosopher? “The law’s unjust, we’re just doing our part as concerned citizens to right it.”

Queenie smiles at him. “That’s true,” she says.

Credence, knees drawn up and arms wrapped around them, doesn’t smile. His shadow moves restlessly behind him. “I don’t think that matters to MACUSA.”

That’s a damper on the evening. The talk drifts to other things, safer things. Queenie does the lion’s share of steering the conversation, and they’re largely glad to let her. Newt brings out the snake and lets it play around his hands and arms, to the irritation of Pickett, who scrambles away to sit on Graves’ leg and chatter at everyone in earshot. Tina fills Queenie in on the banal gossip of New York. Jacob, who’s apparently been taught Gamp’s Law of Elemental Transfiguration by somebody, convinces Newt to call for dinner, which Queenie modifies and multiplies adeptly into a decent meal for everyone. Graves asks after the less critical goings-on in the Department—it’s only professional curiosity—and, when pressed, tells Tina about the run-in with Al Capone in Chicago. Only Credence is quiet, and it’s not necessarily a thoughtful kind of quiet. It seems, if the dark susurration of his Obscurus is anything to go by, to be a painful, angry kind of quiet.

They turn in shortly after dinner. Newt makes the rounds to feed and care for the animals, with Jacob’s enthusiastic assistance. Credence bids none of them goodnight, only disappearing into the cabinet-room, asleep by the time Graves arrives. Queenie and Tina talk a little while by the ladder, but it isn’t long before the only sound that can be heard in the suitcase is the quiet night noise of the beasts.

***

He isn’t sure, at first, why he’s awake.

There was no nightmare, at least not that Graves can think of. There’s no unusual noise, no alarms, nothing at all. But here he is, wide awake, knowing in his bones that something is wrong. He gets up, wand in hand, to discover what’s going on. Immediately, Graves understands:

Credence is not in the room.

Damn.
Graves leaves quickly. There isn’t time to waste. If something is wrong with Credence, he likely only has minutes to resolve it. This is, of course, assuming that Credence didn’t leave the suitcase entirely. He emerges from the workshop onto the main plaza, which is empty. None of the creatures, except the nocturnal Mooncalves, are stirring. The dead silence is not comforting.

“Credence?” he calls quietly, walking out toward the landing platform Jacob told him the Thunderbird used to use. “Are you out here?”

There’s only silence in reply. Giles Corey’s broken bones, this is not good. Graves has no idea what set Credence off, but it could very well kill them all.

He stands on the landing platform, looking from habitat to habitat, trying to guess where Credence might have gone. It’s a significant assumption that Credence has stayed in the suitcase, but it’s all Graves has got. Besides, if Credence has gone, there is absolutely nothing Graves can do to find him.

Eventually, Graves heads toward the temperate forest. If Credence is wandering, the snowfield or the scorching lava flows won’t be appealing. He’s not stupid; he won’t go into the tropical zone because the Nundu will eat him alive. The savanna is open and unsafe for someone having a waking nightmare. The cave is Graves’ worst nightmare, and the only person it might be worse for is Credence.

The leaves shift and crunch delicately under his feet. The forest is in a permanent stage of late summer, ideally warm and just right for growth. Graves doesn’t know all the creatures that are here, though Newt has hinted that there might be a unicorn slipping between the trees.

All the shadows seem too long, hissing unsettlingly. The Obscurus might be here, or Graves might literally be jumping at shadows. He moves slowly, doing nothing suddenly, wondering what happened and what might happen next. “Credence?”

“I’m here,” Credence says, appearing out of nothing and shadows. His eyes are perfectly white, and his edges are going off into smoke.

“What happened?”

Credence doesn’t move, except for the slow shifting of his shadow. “Nightmare,” he says, and continues pointedly, “You aren’t the only one who has them.”

That stings. He hasn’t noticed anything amiss lately, too focused on how much improvement he’s seen in Credence. Graves lowers his wand, finally remembering that he should probably not be pointing it at Credence right now. “You could have woken me.”

“I didn’t think it was necessary,” Credence says.

“We’ve been through this,” Graves says. “On the way to St. Louis, or did you forget?”

The Obscurus shifts mutinously. “That was about you.”

“It goes both ways,” Graves says.

Credence makes a face. “You’re impossible.”

“So I’ve been told.”

There’s a pregnant pause. Finally, Credence’s posture shifts. He folds his arms, hunches his
shoulders. The shadows shrink. His voice softens. “I didn’t think I’d woken you up.”

“I don’t know why I woke up,” Graves admits. He feels safe enough to put his wand away.

“So you just came running out after me?” One brow arches sardonically. In this light, Credence doesn’t look entirely human. It suits him. “Don’t you have anything better to do?”

Graves folds his arms and leans on a tree, papery bark rubbing against his shoulder. “Not really, no,” he says. “Are you going to explain why you ran out here?”

“Probably not,” Credence says. He shivers—though he’s wearing a shirt, he’s still barefoot, and even if the breeze is magically generated it’s still cool—and shifts around, before finally sinking down to sit cross-legged on the ground. He looks comfortable like that, at home in the darkness of the suitcase’s artificial night.

“I won’t pry,” Graves says. He’s definitely going to pry.

Credence gives him a narrow look. “I see why you didn’t want to talk in the Reptile House, and I’m not sure how you managed to ever interrogate anybody, because you are the worst liar I have ever met.”

“Interrogations don’t always require much lying. And not everyone is on your extremely gifted level,” Graves says mildly, and though it’s only banter like they’ve exchanged half a hundred times now Credence flinches slightly. He pauses. “…was that too close to the mark?”

“A little,” Credence says. He glances down at his hands. “You know…she used to hit me for lying.”

That coal of rage reserved especially for the Barebone woman ignites into a bonfire. It never fails to, when Credence mentions her. Graves has no idea how to answer in a way that won’t be a flood of invective, but he’s saved by Credence continuing to speak.

“Even when I wasn’t. If something was broken, I must have done it. If chores weren’t finished, it was my fault. If all the pamphlets were gone I must have thrown them away. I realized when I was fourteen that she was going to beat me no matter what I did, and if it wasn’t me it would have been Chastity or Modesty. And I couldn’t let her hurt them, so I never did anything.”

“That’s why you didn’t leave?”

Credence nods, still gazing at his hands. “I turned twenty-one and she came to me and told me that I could leave, I was an adult now, but that if I did it would be my fault for whatever happened to my sisters. And she made it sound like it would be other people who’d do things—I was always supposed to protect them from strange men—but I knew she wasn’t talking about them. She was talking about what she’d do to them, if I left. So I just…didn’t go.”

Graves will find whatever pit they threw Mary Lou Barebone’s corpse into and set it on fire.

“And now,” Credence says, gaining steam, “it’s my fault that everything’s happening like this. I’m the reason you had to leave New York. I’m the reason Tina resigned. I’m the reason you almost got killed in Chicago. I’m the reason that Queenie and Jacob are in danger. If you go back far enough, I’m the reason that Grindelwald kidnapped you in the first place, because he came to New York looking for an Obscurial and he used your face to try to find it. All of this—start to finish—is something I did.”

“Don’t—” Graves starts, but Credence ignores him.
“She was right about me,” he says in the most anguished voice Graves has ever heard.

Fire isn’t enough. He’s going to hand that woman’s corpse off to Grindelwald and let him use it as a toy in whatever twisted ways he can contrive.

Graves kneels in front of Credence. “None of this is on your shoulders,” he says.

Credence presses a hand to the back of his neck. He doesn’t even seem to be conscious of the action. “You’d say that no matter what I did.”

“No, I wouldn’t,” Graves says. “We made our choices. I decided to investigate the reports of a wizard killing No-Majs myself. Queenie and Jacob decided together that they wanted to be with each other more than they wanted to be safe. Tina decided to resign because she thinks she’ll do more good here with us. I’ve decided that keeping you safe is more important than anything else. You were incidental to those choices.”

Credence looks up, then, fingers digging into his palms, tendons standing out in sharp relief on his slim wrists. But his voice is calm, resigned. “How long is it going to be until you figure out that I’m not worth any of your time?”

“Damn it, Credence,” Graves says, anger finally slipping out into his voice. “I’m never going to figure that out, because as far as I’m concerned you’re worth every second of my time.”

Wind whistles among the branches and Credence stares at Graves. He’s obviously thinking furiously, but doesn’t say a word. The moment is charged. It feels like the seconds before the first lightning strike in a thunderstorm. Graves has no control over whatever’s about to happen. He can only wait for Credence to act.

But Credence never does.

After what seems like an infinity, Credence simply rises to his feet and walks away, back toward the center of the suitcase. He doesn’t look back. Graves follows, unsure of what just happened, sure that whatever it was will be important.

Credence says nothing to him the rest of the night. The next morning, he’s his usual self again, laughing at Jacob’s jokes and chatting with Queenie. He maintains a strange distance from Graves, though, a departure from their recent proximity. It shouldn’t bother Graves.

It does anyway.

Chapter End Notes

Credit for the line “Don’t you have anything better to do?” to toby fox. (Wanna yell about metatextual meanings there? Come on down to the comments!)
Chapter 23

Chapter Notes

I am strangely excited for this chapter...

So as some of you may have noticed, I wrote another prequel short. It’s now Part 1 of “the accidental epic” series, since chronologically that’s where it falls. The year is 1920, Percival Graves has just become Director of Magical Security, and a group of Texas wizards have decided to secede from the Union. It’s a good first day on the job. (Also delivers an ominous reminder of what happens in 1926. Because I like foreshadowing, dammit.)

Anyway, back to the fic at hand. Due to *drama* at the end of the chapter, research has been temporarily relocated to the beginning of the chapter. You all get to suffer through the research I accidentally did on the physics of formation of washboard roads. And THEN you get to be delighted by the song that Jacob teaches Queenie: I’m Sitting On Top of the World (Al Jolson).

Assuming that nothing went wrong with Newt and Tina, they should be well on their way into the upper Midwest by now. No one knows the method of transportation that the pair took. It could be many things, as Jacob and Credence explain over a breakfast of toast, coffee, and scrambled Cockatrice eggs. They might have taken a No-Maj automobile, a train, or even a horse-drawn wagon or buggy.

“And even if it’s an auto,” Jacob explains with enthusiasm, nearly spilling his coffee onto Graves as he gestures for emphasis, “it might be any kind of speed. If it’s a newer model, like one of the Mercedes-Benz cars, it’ll be pretty quick. Those only came to the United States last year. But an old jalopy that some farmer’s kept for ten years on washboard roads? It’ll go about as fast as a horse-drawn buggy! And from what I’ve heard about Nebraska, they could have gotten any of ’em.”

“And we won’t know until we get out of the suitcase,” Queenie surmises.

“Right,” Credence says. “Which might be a while, if they end up on some kind of really slow vehicle. Though they’ll probably take a train, at least to Omaha.”

Trains, automobiles, horses—what next, a zeppelin? Graves will take a good trip on the Floo network over this nonsense any day. When he thinks that, Queenie makes an undignified snorting noise into her coffee.

A minor distraction occurs after breakfast, when it’s discovered that the Niffler made off with six or seven spoons and then ran as far as it could go. Graves bows out of the chase in favor of going and feeding the Graphorns, which are rapidly becoming his favorite of all Newt’s creatures. They’re docile, but not tamed. In the secure environment of the suitcase, they simply don’t care about anything smaller than they are. With horns and tentacles and scales and immense size, they’re significantly more intimidating than any other beast Graves has ever seen. And for some reason, all of them have decided that they like him. The moment he’s close enough for them to touch, he’s got the baby Graphorns affectionately pulling at his clothes and trying to touch every
bit of him he can reach with their tentacles. The mother, more sedate, greets him the same way she greets Newt. It’s pleasant, honestly.

When the pursuit of the thieving Niffler shows no signs of stopping, Graves also detours to see about the Labbu eggs. They’re still in the obnoxious, enormous bathtub, serene as jellyfish as they rest in the shallow water. Newt’s laid down what he calls a “substrate” of heavy, fine sand beneath them, supporting their weight, but leaving them covered in water. All seventeen eggs are still intact, and look much the same as they did on that beach in Chicago. When touched, they still flare softly with light. It’s a calm sight, much more soothing than the shouts from the rest of the suitcase as the Niffler makes off with Jacob’s cufflinks.

They spend three days in the suitcase without a word from Newt and Tina. Credence warms back up, and Graves finds himself inexplicably glad about that. He doesn’t know what to think about all of it. It’s outside the realm of his experience—that makes three things, if Credence knew and were counting. So, like everything else that’s happened since they left New York, he just lets it happen.

A routine develops into relaxing regularity. In the morning, Graves is always the first person awake, so he makes coffee and then sits and watches the suitcase as the nocturnal beasts hide or fall asleep for the day and the rest begin to wake up. Jacob joins him soon enough, yawning and uncharacteristically quiet as he slices bread for toast. Credence wanders out shortly thereafter, still half asleep, to collect coffee and sit in silence next to Graves. He’s closer every morning until finally they’re shoulder to shoulder and the world locks back into place. Queenie is the last, and when she steps out of her cabinet room it’s with perfectly curled hair and a sunrise smile.

They eat together and then go their only slightly separate ways to take care of the beasts. Many don’t need any attention except for a glance, but someone has to preen the Fwooper daily, the Mooncalves need feeding, the Erumpet needs attention, and the Niffler needs to be checked for shiny objects. Twice, Graves spots Credence stealthily handing shiny mother-of-pearl or brass buttons off to it, muttering to it in a conspiratorial way. He’s not sure what the young man intends to accomplish, but soon enough the Niffler stops attempting to make off with everything shiny in sight. The baby Graphorns also want to play, which is an activity that requires at least two people to make sure that nobody gets trampled.

When that’s done, Queenie and Jacob usually end up taking a walk together or continuing to work on magical theory. Apparently, if they’re going to break the Statute of Secrecy, they’re going to do it in style, and that means getting Jacob as close to the magical world as he can possibly be. He’s learning, if not the magic itself, then everything that makes magic work.

Credence disappears to work on his own every morning. The books he’s reading—Newt’s obscure grimoires full of old and complex spells, some of the more esoteric books that Graves owns—pile up around their shared cabinet room at an alarming rate. No one ever sees what he’s doing, at the farthest reaches of the suitcase, though Queenie obviously knows more than she’s telling. The change in his demeanor, however, is obvious. He looks at the world like it’s a puzzle only he can understand, and the pieces are falling into place. One evening, he demonstrates his newfound knowledge by performing a scrying spell. In the oval glass Credence conjures into his hands, they can see Newt and Tina, asleep in each other’s arms in some little hotel room.

And Graves occupies himself, in the main, by being concerned over everyone else. When Queenie tells him to stop worrying about us, worry about yourself for a change, Graves does what she says. He picks up reading again, something he hasn’t done much since bringing Credence into his house. Once or twice, while he’s reading, Credence comes and sits nearby. It’s an old routine, but something’s different this time. When Graves glances up from his book to look at Credence, the young man is always looking back.
It’s their fourth day in the suitcase when Tina yells down the ladder, “Hey! It’s safe to come out!”

There’s a mad scramble for the ladder. Even in a space like this, which is impossibly large, there’s still the sense that it’s indoors. Everyone is getting cabin fever. Credence is up the ladder first, faster than anyone else. Queenie, heedless of her dress, is up next, and then Jacob goes. Graves, with a last look around and a flat glare at the Niffler—who’s looking up the ladder speculatively, as if it’s going to try for another escape—climbs up as quickly as he can.

He emerges from the suitcase into a hot blue late-June day. They’re standing in the middle of an empty dirt road, with not a single building in sight. Cicadas scream from the copses of trees that stand still by the side of the road. To both sides there’s unfenced empty pasture land, bright green in the sun.

“When you said ‘rural Nebraska’, I was still expecting a town,” Jacob says, looking around.

“How did you get out here in the first place?” Credence asks. He stares down the empty road, first one direction, then the other. There’s not a vehicle in sight.

Tina, hatless and slightly sunburned on the cheeks, glances down the road. “A farmer drove us out here,” she says. “He was confused, but pretty willing to let us hitch a ride. Didn’t understand why we’d want to come this far, and didn’t want to go any farther himself.”

Newt, closing up the suitcase, says, “And now we walk. It’s only half a mile to the Elkhorn River and that’s where the Camphruchs are supposed to be.”

“It’s good to be outside,” Credence says, stretching.

Graves strips off his jacket and then, on consideration, his waistcoat. It’s too damn hot. “Good if you want heatstroke.”

“Point taken,” Jacob says, wiping his brow. He also removes his outer layers, and after a moment’s consideration everyone else follows suit. It really is too hot for anything more than shirtsleeves. Besides, there’s no need for any of them to stand on ceremony with each other. Somehow, all the lawbreaking and bucking of general custom seems to have extended its way into every other line of social norm. They drop all the unused clothes into the suitcase carelessly, and then start walking down the dusty road toward the distant line of cottonwoods that marks the bank of the Elkhorn River.

It doesn’t take long for them to string out, walking at different paces. Newt’s in the lead, suitcase in hand and Pickett on his shoulder. Tina is only just behind him, holding his hand, barely holding him back from breaking into a run. They’re talking about Camphruchs and Nebraska and Tina’s trying to convince Newt not to dive into the trees and look for cicadas.

Queenie and Jacob are arm in arm behind them. Jacob’s teaching Queenie a No-Maj song—“I’m sitting on top of the world. I’m rolling along, just rolling along. And I’m quitting the blues of the world. I’m singing a song, just singing a song…now you give it a try.” And she does, matching him note for note in perfect melody.

And there’s Credence, hands in his pockets, a sunburn spreading across his cheeks already. He’s watching the fields around them, taking in the tall rows of corn that wave gently, the primroses erupting in profusion from the ditches by the roadside, the lichen-covered fences that line the road at intervals. And he’s smiling. It is, Graves suddenly thinks, a beautiful smile. Carefree. Unafraid. The kind of smile that deserves to be there, an expression of happiness that the young man more than deserves to have.
Graves *likes* Credence’s smile. He wants to do things to make Credence smile more often. He hasn’t felt this way about anyone in a long time, not since his first days as an Auror. That was when he was, what, twenty-three or so? Back then he’d spent all his time hanging around James McGuiness’ desk, laughing at even the stupidest jokes and telling ever-wilder stories in the hopes of getting just one more minute of attention. They’d been good friends, the best of friends. More than friends, by the end. He’d given James everything short of physically handing over his heart. For instance, only James had ever been allowed to call Graves “Percy”, because out of everyone in the world only men named “Richard” had it worse in terms of nicknames. It’s strange, because Graves is fairly sure that if Credence wanted it, he’d happily let Credence call him “Percy”.

And that’s when Graves has an epiphany that just about knocks him over.

Merlin and Nimue preserve him, how has it taken Graves this long to notice? He’s thrown away everything he had for Credence. He’s gone on the run for him, tried to take a Killing Curse for him, taught him magic, calmed his Obscurus, seen his scars, shown Credence his own scars, and let him into the hell that is his mind. He’s bared his soul to the young man and Credence has done it right back.

In short, Percival Graves has fallen in love with Credence Barebone.
THE DUMBASS WORKED IT OUT AREN’T WE ALL SO PROUD

Please note: at this point, BOTH parties are aware of their feelings. Now, whether they have the awareness to identify that those feelings are requited, and then the courage to actually ACT on those feelings…that’s another story. Literally all of you cottoned on to the idea that Credence was always going to work it out first—now all that’s left is to discern who’s going to make the first move. Given that, I’ve reworked the votes. Will now be accepting specific votes! If you already placed a bet, I request that you not put down a second one…it will take me a VERY long time to fix all the existing votes.

2—Graves is the first to make a move
4—Credence makes the first move
2—Mutually Assured Seduction: they just jump each other at the same moment
1—no idea how it all shakes out, but they end up happy
2—they don’t do shit about it until Queenie locks them in a closet
1—accidental confession! Mutual pining for a bit before someone blows their cover.
1—Graves goes into protective OVERDRIVE around Credence; this blows his cover

See the end of the chapter for more notes

His epiphany and the accompanying panic and wonder carry him all the way to the riverbank. By the time that Graves catches up with everyone else, Newt’s already set the suitcase down a safe distance from the water’s edge. He’s perched on a log, pulling off shoes and socks and rolling up his pants. Tina—wearing knickers, a fashion trend to which most female Aurors strongly adhere—only has the issue of getting rid of her stockings and shoes.

“So we’re going into the river?” Graves asks.

“Well, up to our knees, maybe,” Newt says. He stands up, leaning over the log to look into the water. “It’s a shallow river, but there are plenty of deep spots where a Camphruch can hide.”

Jacob, who is not removing his shoes, sits down on a large flat rock. “If it’s that variable, be careful,” he warns. “You could get dragged down into a pit and not even know it was happening.”

Credence follows suit with Newt and Tina, yanking off his shoes and socks and tossing them aside with abandon. “We’ll be careful, Jacob,” he says carelessly, rolling up the legs of his pants and, almost as an afterthought, his sleeves. He’s so pale he practically glows in the bright sun. The river’s rippling current sends light refracting across his face as he looks down into the water, and Graves, still stunned from his recent epiphany, is entirely transfixed.

Queenie, wrapping a thin scarf around her head and tying it back to keep her hair out of her face, glances at Graves. She breaks into an enormous grin and he knows she’s seen what he’s just been thinking. In all likelihood, she also just saw his epiphany. Considerably, she says not one word about it. “I think I’m going to wade a bit,” she says, rising to her feet. “Anything interesting to look for, Newt?”
Newt turns abruptly and nearly topples backwards over the log into the river. Tina catches him by
the side of his shirt, though he hardly seems to notice. “Mostly fish,” he says. “Not magical, of
course, unless you think they’re beautiful, which they are. You’ll see minnows and little shad,
plenty of those in the shallows. Unless someone gets dragged into a pit, we probably won’t see
catfish, though I’m counting on there being plenty down deep for the Camphruch to eat. And of
course there’s snails and river clams, so that’ll be shells.”

“Birds?” Jacob asks, shifting so he’s better under the shade of the cottonwood.

“It’s not the migratory season for most of the birds that fly through this area, so we won’t see
cranes, but we might get a heron or even a bald eagle,” Newt says. He glances around the river,
distracted. “Deer maybe, but they don’t like to share space with Camphruchs. So it’s a good thing
that I haven’t seen many signs of deer around.”

“How on earth do you know about all these No-Maj critters?” Queenie asks.

Newt shrugs. “I like all creatures,” he says, and then steps out into the river.

Queenie and Credence follow after. Credence is strangely tentative at first, as he passes through a
slightly deeper channel, but in a moment the hesitation is gone. He runs fifteen feet out into the
river, through shallow waters, to stand by Newt on a sandbar which the magizoologist is scouring
for tracks. Queenie holds her arms out a bit, for balance, as she wades into the narrow channel at
the bank. It’s only up to her ankles, but she goes cautiously anyway.

Graves comes to stand by Tina, who’s still sitting on the log despite being ready to get into the
river. “Not interested in wading?”

Tina shades her eyes against the glare off the river as she watches Newt and Credence on the
sandbar. “Wading, yes,” she says. “Also interested in watching Newt. He’s so smart, Graves, I love
getting to see him work.”

There’s a long branch, half broken, protruding from the log Tina’s sitting on. Graves puts a hand
on it and leans against it, watching the two men out on the river. “You’re really stuck on him.”

“Proudly,” Tina says. She smiles and leans forward, hands on her knees. “I’ve never met anybody
else like him.”

She’s talking about Newt, but Graves can’t help watching Credence. He’s down at one end of the
sandbar, calling Newt over to see something. He sees Graves and Tina watching, and sends a wave
their way. “I know what you mean,” Graves says. “He’s a wonder.”

Tina looks up at Graves sideways. “You do mean Newt, right?” she asks.

Graves doesn’t answer that. Now that he’s aware of the reality of the situation himself, it’s obvious
that Tina knows, too. “You should go join them,” he says, gesturing to Credence and Newt. “I
think Newt would like your company.”

“I think I will,” Tina says, and stands up. She glances from Graves to Credence and adds, “You
should maybe come too. Credence might like your company.”

“Go,” Graves says, though he can’t make himself sound irritated.

Clearly, Tina thinks he’s funny, because she actually laughs as she turns and heads out across the
shallow channel. She’s less cautious than Credence, bounding out to join the two men in the
middle of the river. Newt, who’s bent over looking at whatever Credence found, straightens when
she gets there. Even at this distance, Graves can see the soft expression on his face as he so carefully tucks a loose curl behind Tina’s ear. She leans into the touch a little, and they stand like that for a moment before Newt looks back down at whatever signs Credence might have found of the Camphruchs.

It’s too hot to stand by the river this long. Graves can already feel his forearms burning, so he retreats to talk to Jacob in the cottonwood shade. “Mind if I sit?” he asks.

Jacob moves over a bit. “Not at all,” he says. “Good day for rivers. Not a good day for sun.”

Graves sits down, grateful for the snatch of shade, feeling every second of his age. “Let the others have their fun and get sunburned,” he agrees.

“Did you ever think, when we left New York, that we’d end up here?” Jacob asks after a brief pause. They can hear laughter from the sandbar. Credence and Tina are kicking up water, splashing each other, while Newt eggs them both on.

“No,” Graves says honestly. “I never expected this in my entire life.”

Jacob nods. “Sometimes it doesn’t seem real.”

For once, though, Graves is fully convinced that what’s happening around him is real. This isn’t a fever dream or hallucination. The sun is too hot, the smell of the river is too strong, the sound of his friends laughing together is too clear. It’s impossible that anyone could put together something this strong, this good, by magic alone. “I think it does,” he says.

“Maybe you’re right,” Jacob says. He rests his elbows on his knees, watching Queenie as she wanders through the shallow water, occasionally bending down to pick up a smooth stone or tiny shell. “I couldn’t dream this up if I tried.”

“What will we do from here?” Graves asks.

Jacob makes a considering face. “I don’t know,” he says. “I think I’d be pretty damn happy just doing what we’ve been doing, but I don’t know how long that’ll work. If MACUSA is looking for us, we won’t be able to hide forever.”

A nagging worry that’s been growing in Graves’ mind for a while finally surfaces. “I’m less concerned with MACUSA and more concerned with Grindelwald,” he says.

“I thought he was in prison.” Jacob looks at Graves with the dictionary definition of a glare. “Has everyone been lying?”

“As far as I know, he’s still locked up,” Graves says. Grimly, he adds, “I checked the locking spells and wards on his cell the day I left, just to be sure. And I promise you not a day went by when Tina wasn’t down there doing the same.”

Jacob nods slowly, unconvinced. “Then what are you worried about?”

“That he’ll get out,” Graves says honestly. He stares unseeing across the river, imagined future events unfolding like the branches of a tree. “It can happen. Not easily, but—the bastard does have followers. He’s no mean power. And I know an extradition was in the works before I left.”

“That’s why you resigned in the first place?”

A laugh and a dark promise, given from inside a cell, echoes in his head. *I’ll get out. And when I*
do, we can talk again, dear Percival. Graves presses his hand against the rough stone, reminding himself that this is still real. “It was a part of the decision.”

Jacob huffs a faint laugh. “Never thought I’d get tangled up in things like this,” he says. “First I helped save New York, now I’m on the run from a secret congress of wizards. And I’m sitting next to a wizard talking about what we’ll do if an evil wizard breaks out of wizard jail. Truth is really stranger than fiction, you know?”

Put like that, this whole adventure sounds like something out of a dream. “It is,” Graves says. He pauses thoughtfully. A thought has just occurred to him. “That might be why wizards don’t tend to write many novels.”

“You don’t have a lot of novelists?” Jacob looks befuddled. He unbuttons his cuffs and rolls up his sleeves, finally giving in to the heat. “Then what the hell do you people even read?”

“Not associating with No-Majs doesn’t mean we can’t read their books,” Graves says. He thinks about his library with only a slight pang of regret. “I’ve always been a fan of Edith Wharton.”

Jacob looks, if possible, even more confused. “What?”

“She’s a No-Maj who writes satire about old New York society. It’s a nice break from the mess of modern magical society in New York. The books are tragedies. Romances.” Graves considers for a moment. “I’m guessing they aren’t your sort of novels.”

“I’ve heard of them. My—er, my former fiancée used to read them,” Jacob says. For a second, he looks distant and possibly even sad. Does everyone here have something dark in their past? But then Jacob elbows Graves lightly and affectionately, banishing whatever he was recalling. “I was just surprised to hear that melancholy Mr. Graves is a secret romantic.”

Considering everything this entire day, he’s really not sure that any of that statement applies to him at all. Graves gives Jacob a slightly sour look. “Apparently, it’s not such a secret these days. When did you figure it out?”

“I didn’t,” Jacob says. “Queenie told me she suspected and then it was obvious. You look at him the same way I look at Queenie, you know.”

Graves does a double take. “What?”

Jacob laughs. “You really had no idea, did you?”

“Forgive me for prioritizing survival in this circumstance.” Graves runs a hand through his hair. It isn’t unkempt by any means, but he’s been taking less and less care to make it perfect, to fit the image of the Director of Magical Security. He supposes it’s just one more thing that shows how fast he’s moving away from the things he thought were true.

“If I can give some advice,” Jacob says, looking again at Queenie, “you should do something about it soon. Before anything else happens.”

That’s sound advice, actually. But Graves isn’t sure he can take it. This…it’s unexpected at best, terrible at worst. The fact that Credence is only twenty-four years old alone should give pause. He barely knows how to navigate friendships, let alone the entanglements of a romance. Not to mention the fact that neither of them can be construed to be of sound mind by any objective observer! Broken hearts are bad enough when it’s just people, but when one party’s an Obscurial? It doesn’t bear thinking about.
It’s entirely possible that he’s doing that thing again, where he makes plans for events that might never unfold. He still can’t shake the thought that it would be a bad idea. No, there’s nothing Graves can do with this. “Thanks for the advice,” he says, deciding against sharing all of that with Jacob.

Jacob side-eyes him hard. “You’re a very stubborn man.”

“It’s how I’ve survived so long,” Graves says cheerfully.

Just then, there’s a lot of splashing from the river. Graves and Jacob look up to see Queenie and Credence, hand in hand, coming up onto the bank. Queenie is mostly dry, but Credence is completely soaked, head to toe. He shoves his dripping hair out of his eyes with his free hand. “Are you two going to sit there all day?”

“I was planning on it,” Graves says. He raises his eyebrows pointedly as he looks at the sunburn spreading over Credence’s arms, neck, and face. “I’d rather not look like a cooked lobster, thanks.”

Queenie comes over, kissing Jacob and ruffling Graves’ hair affectionately. “You’ll be fine, both of you,” she says. “It’s ever so much fun. Don’t be wet blankets.”

“Is Graves ever not?” Jacob asks, reluctantly removing his shoes.

“What I am,” Graves says, with his remaining dignity, “is responsible.”

“A responsible wet blanket,” Credence says mischievously. He holds out a hand to Graves. “Come on. It’s cooler out there, I promise.”

Graves looks at Credence for a second, aware that Queenie and Jacob are watching them with bated breath. There are rivulets of water running down Credence’s face and arms. He’s half covered in sand and he’s sunburned to hell and back. His shirt is plastered to his shoulders. And his shadow is small, unmoving at his feet. Like this, Credence looks…beautiful.

Feeling as if he’s doing something that can’t be taken back, Graves takes Credence’s hand and lets himself be pulled to his feet. “Alea iacta est,” he murmurs.

“What?” Credence asks.

“Nothing,” Graves says. He toes off his shoes, strips off his socks, and rolls up the legs of his pants. And he follows Credence out into the river.

Chapter End Notes

I need to thank “A Book of Creatures”; creature research took me to them again. Here’s their write-up on the Camphruch. The rest of the information about the creatures in the Elkhorn River is accurate according to various guides to the wildlife on the Elkhorn. The description of the river, however, is entirely mine, because I pretty much grew up on its banks. I have actually been where they’re standing, and have personally heard the warning about “don’t go in the water or you could get sucked down and drown”. It’s a gorgeous river and no, I am not biased at all.

Regarding Tina’s knickers: yeah, that was apparently a thing. Vintage Dancer, you are
coming through for me again. Here’s their discussion of the subject.

And, finally, the phrase “alea iacta est”. I am not even kidding when I say my sister and I got into a week-long argument over whether or not Graves could reasonably use this phrase. Google doesn’t register it as a literary trend until the 1930s (!!!), but I was incredibly insistent that it HAD TO BE A THING, DAMMIT, because I was NOT giving up my awful history joke! We ended up dragging our entire family into the argument before I finally came to my senses and asked the amazing sidereanuncia for help with the whole thing. You can see their analysis of the situation here on Tumblr. For those who don’t want to read it all: the answer is yes, a reasonably well-educated man in the late 1920s would in fact know the phrase and be able to use it.
“Looking back on it, I may have made a mistake,” Credence says, wincing as Queenie smooths sunburn cream over his blistering forearms.

“Stop fidgeting,” she scolds mildly. By a minor miracle, she didn’t get a single burn.

“Consider this the consequence of being so monumentally stupid as to stay on the river for four hours,” Graves says. Credence makes a face and rolls his eyes.

Tina, who’s nearly cross-eyed trying to get the stuff onto her scorched cheeks, says, “I can’t stand this. It smells awful.”

Jacob—whose skin is just olive enough to have avoided the worst of the burns—laughs. “This is still better than any I’ve ever used before.”

Newt examines his red forearms. “At least it’ll just freckle,” he mutters. “This isn’t the worst sun I’ve seen. There was that time in the Atacama Desert…”

Graves is waiting his turn for the sunburn cream. His arms are in a bad way, and he’s fairly sure that the back of his neck may never recover. “Did you ever see signs of the Camphruch?”

“No,” Newt says disconsolately. “Except for some tracks Credence spotted. We’ll have to keep looking. If they’re around, they’re hiding from us.”

“I’d hide from us,” Tina points out. “We weren’t exactly being quiet out there.”

Queenie, finished with Credence’s back, turns to Graves. “Want me to take care of your neck, honey?” she asks.

“Please,” Graves says. He makes a pained noise when her cold hands touch the blazing heat of the sunburn and flinches.

Credence shakes his head. “Consider this the consequence of being so monumentally stupid as to listen to me when I told you that you should join us,” he says sarcastically.

“Ain’t there some magic you could all use?” Jacob asks.
“This one is magic,” Tina says. “By tomorrow we’ll all be a nice healthy tan instead of looking like walking strawberries.”

They’re sitting outside of a tent—another object with an Undetectable Extension Charm placed on it. Newt goes a touch overboard sometimes, when it comes to making space. There’s plenty of room in the tent for all of them, though it still lacks actual beds. Tina got a small campfire going and now they’re all around it on small folding chairs. The cottonwoods rustle all around, and they can hear the sounds of the river.

Queenie steps back. “There, all done,” she says. “Don’t touch it, for Bridget Bishop’s sake.”


“Tina always tries to get hers off,” Queenie says reprovingly. “And you’re so much like her I can’t help but think you’ll do the same.”

On general principal, Graves would usually try to surreptitiously remove as much as he could. Tina is right: it does smell awful. But, in the name of not proving Queenie right, he holds very still. “I won’t.”

Queenie makes a face at him, as if he’s being deliberately perverse. Well—Graves supposes that he is. That’s another trait he and Tina share: utter bone-headedness. Being an Auror requires a certain amount of refusing to budge on any issue, and being Director of Magical Security means being the single most stubborn bastard in America. When he thinks that, Queenie gives up on him with no more than a roll of her eyes and sits down by Jacob, snuggling into his side. “This is the most perfect place,” she says contemplatively, staring into the fire. “Could we stay here forever, do you think?”

“I wouldn’t mind,” Credence says. He looks up, at the faint shadows of trees against the starry sky. “It’s a damn sight better than New York.”

“We can’t,” Tina reminds gently. “Even if they’re not watching us right now, it won’t be long before people start asking questions about where Newt and I are going.”

Credence sighs and rests his chin on his hands. “I know,” he says. “It’s wishful thinking.”

“Besides,” Newt says, pulling a damp map out of his pocket and unfolding it, “after I’ve seen the Camphruchs—they’ve been studied plenty, I’d just like to see if these are any different—I’d like to head across the state to Wyoming next. Have you ever heard about Jackalopes?”

“People use their antlers for wand cores,” Tina volunteers. “I’ve signed off enough Wand Permits to know. There aren’t many in New York, because most people get their wands from Jonker or Quintana around there. Out West it’s a different story. Wolfe’s wands are good, but if you’re a wizard out in rural Nevada you just make your wand yourself. Which means Jackalope antler.”

“Western wizards are so odd,” Queenie sighs.

The talk moves on into other things, as it always does, and Graves as usual finds himself only half listening to the others and watching Credence. It’s subtle, but every time he moves and his shirt rubs over his shoulders, the young man winces. Had he been sunburned there, too? A white shirt is nearly transparent in the sun when it’s wet, and with all the time he’d been out on the river it wouldn’t surprise Graves if Credence had a bad burn on his shoulders. So why hadn’t he…right. He doesn’t want anyone else to see his back.

Besides, it’s Credence. He’s as stubborn as Graves, if not more so. He wouldn’t ask for help if he
were being attacked by a dragon, as he’s proven over and over. It’s frustrating, but it would be more frustrating if Graves weren’t guilty of exactly the same thing. There’s half a chance that Credence will let him help, if he waits until they’re alone.

The evening drifts on, and one by one the others turn in. Queenie excuses herself first, giving Graves a pointed look as she goes. Of course she knows what he’s planning. She doesn’t have to say anything to him. “Yes, I do, honey,” she whispers as she passes, kissing the top of his head. “Don’t be afraid to try.” Graves doesn’t reply out loud. He knows very well that she can hear anything she wants from him.

Jacob follows shortly after, hiding a yawn behind a hand. “Early start,” he says to excuse himself as he stands up and goes into the tent.

Tina, blinking slowly and heavily, rises after a bit. She gestures with her wand and the fire dims, casting light but no longer the blaze it had been. Newt follows a moment later, sending an encouraging smile at Graves. Damn it, does everyone know? He’s an idiot, clearly.

Then it’s just Graves and Credence, sitting across the fire from each other.

“How bad is the burn on your shoulders?” Graves asks.

Credence’s mouth twists a little. “Was I that obvious?”

“I’m fairly sure no one else saw,” Graves says.

“Oh,” Credence says.

Graves studies the tense line of Credence’s shoulders. “Let me help,” he says, and there’s an implicit question there, the acknowledgement that if Credence says no then Graves will let it go.

But he doesn’t say no. He doesn’t say anything at all. Credence lifts a hand and the small tin of sunburn cream floats to Graves’ waiting hands. Credence gets up and comes around the fire, pulling off his shirt over his head as he goes. He’s not wearing that strange necklace anymore, Graves notes offhandedly. Credence sits down cross-legged in front of Graves, shoulders exposed. The burn is angry, dark red, spreading over his shoulders and partway down his back.

When Graves tentatively presses a hand against it, Credence hisses sharply with pain. “That—ow—damn—just get on with it—that hurts.” The burn is hot to the touch. Graves tries to be gentle, avoiding as much pressure as he can, though some is unavoidable as he works the sunburn cream into Credence’s skin. Credence shivers occasionally, whenever he’s particularly uncomfortable, but holds still enough that Graves can work.

The back of Credence’s neck, despite his long hair, is also fairly scorched, so Graves moves to brush Credence’s hair away from the burn so he can work on that. Quicker than Graves can see, Credence’s hand snaps up and seizes his wrist. He doesn’t look over his shoulder as he says, forced steadiness in his voice, “Please don’t touch my neck.” In the words Graves sees a flash of that night they’d stood in the study, of Credence’s hand against his neck in a reminder of someone else’s touch.

Graves holds very still. “You’ve got a burn there,” he says neutrally.

“I can live with that,” Credence says. There’s a small hitch in his voice. That sound is familiar, the sound of past injury that hasn’t quite healed yet. Fear, pain, things that Graves is helpless to fight. All he can do is sit there beside Credence in the dark. It’s only natural since Credence is still holding onto his wrist for Graves to turn his hand so that they’re holding hands, palm to palm. For
a moment, Credence doesn’t move. Then, slowly, as if he’s afraid Graves will let go, he carefully interlaces their fingers.

Graves feels the tension dissipate. Grindelwald’s phantom presence fades away, cheated of whatever it would have accomplished. With a small sigh, Credence leans into Graves, back to his legs. It’s a very small gesture, but it’s enormous, in Graves’ eyes. He realized this morning just why it feels so momentous to be close to Credence, to feel trusted, to trust. He doesn’t know how to say it—doesn’t feel like he should every say it—but he’ll take what he can get. Credence deserves better than Graves, but he’ll be damned if he doesn’t give the young man everything he can anyway. This, right here, is just a start.

The fire burns down to embers long before either of them moves again.

Chapter End Notes

Hey hey hey! Let’s talk SUNBURN CREAMS.

No, I’m not kidding.

I need Research Addicts Anonymous like, yesterday.

For most of history, tanning has Not Been A Thing. Pale skin, for many cultures, was indicative of being able to lead a lifestyle free of menial labor in the outdoors, where you’d get burned/tanned. In the Western world, at least, this all changed in the late 1920s (attitudes shifting right around the time this fic happens, actually). Here’s an actual research paper on the subject. Well, synthetic sunscreen wasn’t invented until 1928. Prevention had to occur through other means—long sleeves, hats, parasols, etc. —but many people, caught up in the new bathing suit trends that exposed more and more skin and caught up in the tanning fad as well, didn’t take advantage of those things. So people basically took the blowtorch known more popularly as the sun to their skin. This, obviously, does a lot of damage. So how do you fix it?

Generally speaking, you don’t. Up until the 20s, home remedies included oatmeal, cream or milk rubbed into the skin. Commercially, there were various decoctions of chemicals that were reported to smell rather terrible and were horribly greasy. Just before the 20s hit, the brand “Noxzema” appeared on the scene. Sold in a cobalt blue jar, it was greaseless and a VAST improvement on earlier concoctions, maintaining its popularity until Cover Girl appeared and stole the show.

However, due to his extended stay in Europe as part of the American Expeditionary Force and subsequent employment in an indoor factory in a big city, Jacob would probably have had little experience with it. (He left in 1917 and then came back in 1924…he literally left THE YEAR that Noxzema made its debut.) He’s also a man in the early 1900s, which means he wouldn’t have been using it as a makeup remover. The majority of his experience, then, would have been with the crap that predated it. And we all know Credence would NEVER have gotten real sunburn relief in his life (*venomous looks at Mary Lou Barebone*). So…yeah. History strikes again!
Chapter Notes

For those of you invested in Graves and Queenie as romantic partners, or who generally have Feelings about these two (or gain Feelings after this chapter), YOU MUST GO READ CRIMSON_VOLTAIRE’S FIC. YOU MUST. “The Rhythm of Your Heart” is wonderful and I’ve read it like four times now. It’s right over here.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Newt spends the entire following day scouring every inch of the riverbank for tracks and signs of the Camphruchs. He’s heedless of the sun and the fact that his skin is starting to peel, absolutely impossible to stop. Jacob goes with him, getting progressively more excited about all of this as time goes on. Credence, too, elects to explore, though he seems more interested in simply being outside than finding the Camphruchs. Tina goes along with them, and though she claims it’s to keep them out of trouble everyone is fully aware that she just wants to spend time with Credence and Newt.

Queenie excuses herself, claiming a headache, and Graves just plain refuses to get any more sunburned than he already is. The other four head off with merry warnings to Graves to stay out of trouble and kind hopes that Queenie feels better soon, and soon enough they’re out of sight entirely.

It’s a luxury to have time to himself, alone, without everyone else. For a while Graves is content to occupy himself with reading. He finds a shady spot by the river and reads one of the No-Maj novels they have. It’s a romance—not one of his, it belonged to Queenie first—and Graves finds he likes it.

The sound of the running water is hypnotic, the sun is warm even in the shade, and the sense of peace is more than seductive. The third or fourth time that Graves finds that he’s simply stopped reading and is staring at the page without understanding a thing, he decides that it’s time to get up and find something else to do. The creatures—hadn’t Newt said that the beetles needed feeding? It’s a less-than-pleasant job, but the sheer mundanity of it makes it into a novelty.

Graves climbs down into the suitcase, trying not to knock into the countless hanging baskets and close-set cabinets. He freezes in place as he exits the workshop, jarred out of his thoughts by the sight of Queenie sitting on the steps with her head in her hands, crying. Dougal is ineffectually petting her knee, and looks up at Graves pleadingly.

He has to take a moment to decide what to do. She doesn’t seem to have heard him, and he’s not sure she notices that he’s there. She must be really upset, not to have heard him at all. “Queenie?” he asks cautiously. “What happened?”

Queenie jerks upright and turns around fast. “Mr. Graves! I didn’t hear you,” she says, and that is not a look Graves likes to see. Her eyes are red and swollen, her makeup is streaked, and it’s clear she’s been crying for a long while now. “It ain’t nothing.”

“It’s clearly something,” Graves says firmly, and sits down next to her. Dougal hops back to a safe distance, visibly relieved that there’s someone else here to help Queenie. “What’s happened?”

“I don’t know where to start,” Queenie says softly. She rubs at her eyes and sniffles. “It’s so silly.”
“I won’t laugh, silly or not,” Graves says.

She just sits for a second, and then says, “I keep thinking about what happened in St. Louis.”

Had something bad happened? He doesn’t want to be insensitive, but… “What do you mean?”

“It’s so stupid,” Queenie says, and tears start to trickle down her face again. “When we were in the Reptile House and I had to play the silly doll like I always do. It just made me so mad because you all were dashing and strong and brave and I was just…there.” She wipes the tears away, but more come.

“Without you they’d never have bought it,” Graves says.

Queenie stifles a small sob. “I know,” she says. “That’s why I feel so silly, crying like this.”

“…this isn’t only about the Reptile House, is it,” Graves says after a moment.

“No.” Queenie shakes her head. “I’m so useless. I just stand there and look pretty. I’m not strong or brave or smart or clever. I’m just a silly girl who doesn’t belong here.”

He can only stare at her, feeling like his jaw is on the floor. “You’re the one who got us out of New York to begin with.”

“This is Newt’s suitcase,” Queenie says. She rubs her eyes and her hands come away with mascara on them. “Not mine.”

“You saved us when they came looking for us. Kept calm with Aurors questioning you while we hid on your fire escape,” Graves says.

“I’m always calm,” Queenie says. “Always. Can’t cry, can’t be upset, ’cause all the rest of you need me to be the strong one. Calm and good and perfect because someone has to be. And I’m— I’m never good enough.”

Graves is astonished. Does she really think so little of herself? “You’re the best of us, Queenie,” he says, with total sincerity. “Far as I’m concerned, you could cry and scream all you wanted and I’d still think you’re the best witch of our time.”

“Oh no,” Queenie says. “I can’t be, I’m not—”

“Perfect or not, you’ve kept us all together,” Graves says. “We owe our lives to you. You’re more than your face.”

Queenie looks up at him, still crying, blinking furiously and trying to hold back the tears. “No one sees it,” she says. “And it’s awful hard to know for sure when no one tells you.”

“You can read our minds,” Graves points out, perhaps a little stupidly.

“It ain’t the same,” Queenie says, and adds, a world of hurt in her voice, “and no one thinks it anyway, so I just don’t know.”

“I think it.” Graves puts his arm around Queenie’s slim shoulders and pulls her closer. “I don’t know how you’ve lived all this time, knowing every dark thing that everybody ever thinks. I sure as hell couldn’t. If I did, I wouldn’t be half as kind as you are. I wouldn’t be alive without you. You saved me and you saved Credence and you saved Jacob and you’re probably going to save us all again, before this is over. And I promise, you don’t have to be pretty or perfect to do that.”
Queenie gasps a little at that and turns to bury her face in Graves’ shoulder. She’s sobbing again, clinging to him the same way he sometimes feels like he clings to her. How long has it been since someone asked her about things like this? How long has it been since anyone told her she was more than just a pretty face?

“Forever,” she says into his shirt, between heaving sobs, “no one’s ever really said that, not even Tina, what was I supposed to believe…”

“Believe that you’re good enough just the way you are,” Graves says, rubbing her back, trying his best to be soothing. “Believe you mean something, because you mean everything to us.”

They’re sitting there for a while, until Queenie’s wrenching sobs run out and she’s just sniffling a little. “Thank you,” she says in a small voice. “Nobody else ever listened before. Not even Jacob.”

A little tentative, Graves kisses the top of her head. “You should try him,” he says. “He’s good at listening like this.”

“Maybe someday,” Queenie whispers. “I don’t want to scare him off, being all needy like this.”

“You’re no more needy than Credence or I have been,” Graves says.

Queenie sits back and rubs her eyes again. She tries for a wobbly smile. “I’ll be all right,” she says. “I always am. I’ll just…take a little time and lie down, and be all right when I get up. Don’t you worry about me. I know you will, but…”

“I want to worry about you,” Graves says.

She leans her head on his shoulder briefly before sitting up straight. “I really will be all right,” she says. “You should go take care of real business.”

Graves doesn’t argue with her. Instead, he makes her drink a glass of water before he goes, because that much crying means she’ll be dehydrated. She lets him help her get off all her makeup, completely ruined by all her tears, and lets him walk her to the workshop so she can get into her cabinet-room and sleep. She’s tiny and vulnerable and Graves would really like to take all the people who hurt her, shake them for being stupid, and possibly throw jinxes at them. Yes, even Newt and Tina and Jacob.

“Thank you,” Queenie says again, soft and tired.

“Any time you need, I’m here,” Graves assures her. “No matter what you have to say.”

She just looks at him. He feels for a moment like he could hear her thoughts, if she let him. But she doesn’t want to share them, and he understands why. He never wants to share what his thoughts, either. “Don’t worry,” Graves says gently, as he turns to go back to the ladder. “I won’t tell anyone what you’re thinking.”

Chapter End Notes

Moved to the end because...well, I don't know, I'm posting super late this morning, my brain is clearly not entirely on top of things.

2—Graves is the first to make a move
6—Credence makes the first move
2—Mutually Assured Seduction: they just jump each other at the same moment
1—no idea how it all shakes out, but they end up happy
2—they don’t do shit about it until Queenie locks them in a closet
2—accidental confession! Mutual pining for a bit before someone blows their cover.
1—Graves goes into protective OVERDRIVE around Credence; this blows his cover
Chapter 27

Chapter Notes

Keep your eyes open tomorrow for another bonus story. More Auror adventures: this time, the story of the Dark wizard in Florida who wanted to make a Horcrux. (Prepare yourselves: this one’s bloody. And features Graves/Original Male Character. May not be everybody’s cup of tea.)

In this chapter: lots of blood and violence against an animal. This is one of those where that Archive warning comes into play.

2—Graves is the first to make a move
5—Credence makes the first move
2—Mutually Assured Seduction: they just jump each other at the same moment
1—no idea how it all shakes out, but they end up happy
4—they don’t do shit about it until Queenie locks them in a closet
2—accidental confession! Mutual pining for a bit before someone blows their cover.
1—Graves goes into protective OVERDRIVE around Credence; this blows his cover
1—Queenie plans to do something about this; Newt accidentally does it first

See the end of the chapter for more notes

They move upstream the next day, and the day after that. Newt is tireless in his pursuit of the Camphruchs, which—if the droppings and chewed catfish skeletons are anything to go by—must be living the area. Graves sees fresh tracks one day on a narrow sandbar held in place only by a huge fallen cottonwood tree, bizarre prints that look like a deer and a goose had a baby. Newt practically cheers when he sees them.

It’s late in the afternoon on the fourth day of their search that something finally happens. Newt is on a wide flat stretch, with Queenie and Credence, trying to find the deep places where a Camphruch might hide. Tina’s reading—she made off with one of the few No-Maj novels they have—dangling her bare feet in the river. Jacob and Graves have wandered a bit further upstream, to where the river’s meander pulls it into a hairpin turn, almost back on itself. Someday this bit of land will be an island, if the river keeps going like it is.

“Are we ever going to find anything?” Graves muses, idly pushing a bush aside with a wave of his wand. “Tracks are all well and good, but I’m dubious.”

“I trust Newt,” Jacob says. He looks around. “He knows what he’s doing.”

Just then, there’s an odd splashing sound from the riverbank ahead. At the same time, Jacob and Graves fall quiet and peer through the undergrowth.

There’s a creature in the river, standing in the shallows perhaps ten feet out, tearing into the carcass of a huge catfish. It’s the size of a deer, perhaps a little bigger, with a dun coat. A mane of thick gray fur pours down its neck and shoulders and back, a heavy mantle that streams water as it tosses its head. Its front feet are deer’s hooves, cloven; its back feet are large splayed duck’s feet. Its head is noble albeit toothy, and it has an enormous ivory horn, more than three feet long and as thick as Graves’ arm.
“Camphruch?” Jacob breathes.

“I’d assume,” Graves whispers.

They should be running back to find Newt, but neither man moves. The Camphruch takes no notice of them at all, continuing to eat its catfish in regal silence.

Across the river, Graves’ eye is drawn by sudden movement. He has half a second to process it—a man rising up from the bushes, a rifle pointed right at the Camphruch—before the thunder of a gunshot erupts across the river. The Camphruch jerks and screams, bucking in panic, blood blooming across its mane and dripping into the water. It staggers a few steps and collapses in the water, making panicky barking sounds that grow weaker with every second.

He can hear the others shouting, the crack of people Apparating in around them, and the yells of at least two more men across the river. But the one with the gun is aiming at the Camphruch again and faster than the No-Maj can pull the trigger again Graves’ wand is out and he’s shouting, “Stupefy!” The No-Maj collapses, but Graves ignores that.

Jacob is already halfway to the Camphruch, wading through the water as fast as he can go: Graves takes the faster means of Apparating straight into the water beside the beast. It’s hip-deep here—the Camphruch was trying to escape into its deeper water. Graves sets his shoulder against its body and pushes the beast back up onto the shallow sandbar where it was standing. It struggles, but it’s weak, breathing shallowly, eyes rolling with pain and fear.

“How bad is it?” Jacob demands, dropping to his knees beside the Camphruch.

“I don’t know,” Graves says. He’s half supporting the beast, feeling its labored breathing. “The shot hit in the neck—”

Jacob sweeps the mane aside. “Oh no,” he chokes, turning pale. Now that it’s visible, Graves understands how bad the injury is. There’s muscle visible, blood pouring from shredded arteries, skin ripped and torn aside like paper. No-Maj weapons are as deadly as magic.

Newt sprints to them, crashing down by Jacob’s side. He’s furious, face white and jaw set, but his hands are very gentle as he strokes the Camphruch’s jaw. “That’s a mortal injury,” he says softly. “I can’t fix it. This isn’t—it can’t—this is why I was looking for them—”

Graves hears Tina shouting behind him, on the opposite bank, and has a fleeting thought that at least the No-Majs won’t be an issue. They have enough problems right here. He can feel every breath the Camphruch takes getting weaker. It’s dying. He wonders wildly if there’s something that can be done, if any of them have magic strong enough to save the beast—and then he remembers. “Credence!” Graves shouts, looking up, away from the bloody waters swirling around him.

Credence appears and drops down next to Newt. “How bad—” His eyes widen when he sees the injury. “Oh, God in Heaven.”

“You can fix this,” Graves snaps.

“It’s dying, we can’t do anything—” Newt starts.

“Hold it still,” Credence says. His eyes flare with white light and the sunny day goes dark. “You and Jacob. If it moves I don’t know what will happen.”

Graves braces his shoulder better against the Camphruch, trying to compensate for the silty river bottom sliding under his feet. Its breathing sounds wet and bubbly. He knows that sound. There’s
blood in its lungs. It’s going to suffocate before it bleeds out. The Camphruch’s eyes are glazed, unblinking, half dead already. “Hurry,” he grits out.

Credence rests his hands over the bullet wound, heedless of the blood that soaks his hands and sleeves. The Obscurus surges around them and Jacob lets out a yell of terror, though he doesn’t move away from holding the Camphruch’s shoulder in place. Credence is inhumanly calm. “Curare Inuriamicus Mortale!” he says, and Graves would swear the Obscurus echoes every word. There’s raw power in the air, tangible in the sparks of white light whirling through Credence’s shadow. “Clostellum Animus!”

Gradually, the bullet wound begins to seal itself shut. The muscles knit together, the arteries close, the skin falls together. The blood begins to wash away in the running river water. The shadows fade away slowly. Graves hears the moment when the Camphruch begins to breathe correctly again. It blinks and shakes itself. He’s in danger of being kicked to death as the beast scrambles to find its footing, so Graves backs away, sliding and stumbling on the river bottom.

“Get back,” Newt says, standing up slowly, still rubbing the Camphruch’s head reassuringly. “It’s scared—has every right to be—give it space—”

Jacob helps Graves back up onto the sandbar. Graves stops to help Credence, who’s practically on his side, only half conscious, and get him away from the Camphruch. They’re all soaked and bloodstained, and the No-Majs that Tina herded over onto this bank stare with round eyes. Queenie, holding the rifle, looks frightened. Jacob goes to her side, but Graves doesn’t see any more of that because he’s a bit busy helping Credence.

The young man is virtually dead weight. The way his shadow is moving is not reassuring, but that seems to be the only breakdown. He’s not coherent, eyes half open and rolled back. Despite that, his fingers knotted in Graves’ shirt refuse to let go. Graves gets him up away from the water and onto the ground in some semblance of safety. Credence won’t move at all, so Graves just kneels on the ground next to him in acquiescence. Then, in remembrance of all the other people who are potentially in danger, turns back to look at Newt.

Newt’s still there, standing sidewise to the Camphruch. His hand is still on its cheek, gently stroking the fur there. The Camphruch is simply standing, looking at Newt with calm eyes. Its flanks rise and fall steadily. It’s vital, alive, unstained by blood and wholly uninjured. He’s never seen a unicorn, but something about this beast feels like it contains a similar nature.

After a long moment, the Camphruch steps delicately forward and hooks its head over Newt’s shoulder. Newt turns and embraces the Camphruch’s neck, fingers combing through the heavy mane. He never makes eye contact. “You’re safe,” Graves hears him say. “Everything’s all right.”

As if in denial, Credence makes an anguished noise. The Camphruch’s ears prick up and it snorts, turning to look at Credence. It steps away from Newt and picks its way across the channel toward them, pacing up the bank with stately grace. Graves is ready to cast a spell or possibly just Apparate away with Credence, but Newt shakes his head, a finger to his lips.

It feels like no one is breathing. The Camphruch stops in front of Credence (and, by extension, Graves). It looks down at him with something that, on a human face, might be called pity. Slowly, it bends its head and touches its horn to Credence’s shoulder. The horn shimmers with a faint opalescent light, and just like that Credence’s hands relax and his whole body goes slack, as if in sleep.

The Camphruch raises its head and looks around at all of them. None of them dare to move. It snorts again, and turns back to the river, walking into the water. It pauses beside Newt one more
time and nibbles gently at his hair. Then, with the quickness of a great fish, it dives into the deeper water and vanishes beneath the water of the river.

***

They end up Obliviating the No-Majs. They’d come out looking for the rumors of a strange deer, which they’d unfortunately found. Tina Obliviates them with practiced ease, implanting in them a false memory that they’d found a deer but it was just an ordinary white-tailed deer like any other that might live along the banks of the Elkhorn. And then the No-Majs go, none the wiser of their experience.

Newt has endless notes to take and sketches to make. He explains, while Graves and Queenie are Scourgifying everyone’s bloodstained, muddy clothes, that the Camphruch’s horn is a potent addition to antidotes and restorative draughts. “I’d expect that’s why it helped Credence,” he says, glancing speculatively at the tent where Credence is still unconscious. “Their horns aren’t as powerful as a unicorn’s horn, and their blood certainly isn’t of any value unless it’s in their bodies, but it could at least grant him some rest.”

“Would it have known?” Queenie asks. “How smart are they?”

“More intelligent than we thought,” Newt says with a small smile, making a note in the margin of his journal. “It recognized that we were the ones that helped it, and that Credence was in pain and needed help. So it’s no dumb beast. I suppose this means I’ll be taking a trip to the Maluku Islands to investigate further…”

Graves has another question. He presses his wand to the collar of Jacob’s shirt, where blood splashed and left dark stains, mutters, “Tergeo,” and then looks at Newt. “What in the hell are spells like the one Credence used doing in your books?”

Newt shrugs. “I’ve picked up some odds and ends,” he says. “I remember that one. It’s from an old book of healing spells. There’s a few useful spells in there, ones I can cast easily enough, but that one’s beyond me. I can’t think how Credence managed it.”

“What did he do?” Tina asks, ducking out of the tent and sitting down next to Newt. Her face is pinched with worry. “I’ve never heard anything like that.”

Jacob sits down across the fire. “It was…scary,” he says in a low voice. “Not sure I appreciated the reminder about the Obscurus.”

“It’s a spell meant to heal mortal injury in the last moments of someone’s life,” Newt says. He sets his journal aside. Pickett takes the opportunity to climb out of his pocket and onto his hands, where Newt holds him absentmindedly. “Magic can’t truly bring back the dead, but if you’re quick enough, you can catch the soul before it goes and force it back into the body.”

A chill seems to settle over them all. Graves’ skin feels like it’s crawling. “How much does it take to cast something like that?”

Newt bites the inside of his cheek for a moment before answering. “I think—I think that Credence would have had to call on a lot more power than usual to do that,” he says finally. “Magic dealing with souls is difficult. You can’t engage with something like that and not touch your own soul in the process.”

“What kind of magic touches souls?” Queenie bursts out.

“Dark magic, usually,” Graves says.
Jacob looks worried. He puts a reassuring arm around Queenie. “So what Credence did—”

“Wasn’t Dark magic,” Graves says. He hesitates, then remembers that he’s not the Director of Magical Security anymore and keeping State secrets doesn’t matter to them anyway. “This is different. I’ve seen that kind. There was a case, just before I became the Director, of a wizard who’d committed a string of particularly brutal murders in Florida…”

Tina taps her chin with one finger. “I remember that. Didn’t work the case, but…didn’t the wizard kill three Aurors?”

Graves nods. “Yes,” he says. He’d watched them die. Voltimand Aguecheek, Juno Talbot, and Leonidas Reed. Names and faces that haunt him when he thinks about his failures as an Auror. “He wanted to live forever, and somehow he’d gotten the idea of using magic to break his soul into pieces and lock it away for safety so he couldn’t die. To break your soul you have to…well. Kill.”

Queenie’s hand goes to her mouth. “No.” She’s tearing up. Oh, damn, she must have seen some of the images of the carnage in Graves’ head. He forces himself to think about other things. About something other than the bodies.

“It took a hell of a lot more power than he’d ever have,” Graves says.

Newt cups his hands around Pickett and looks the Bowtruckle up and down. “Credence has all that power,” he says. “He’s very strong, and I think it’s because he’s an Obscurial. The study I’ve done on Obscurials suggests that the parasite is…not an external parasite. It’s born from the injured parts of someone’s soul. It feeds on their distress and anger and grows stronger and lashes out to protect them. The Obscurus isn’t something foreign. It didn’t come from somewhere else. It came from inside them.”

There’s another frigid pause. The fire crackles, but Graves’ hands are cold.

“The amount of pain Credence has endured,” Newt says slowly, “has made him stronger than any wizard I’ve ever met. He can do things that only the greatest wizards can do, because it’s his soul that’s directly reaching out into the world. He’d have been incredible, if he’d been taught to embrace his talent from a young age, but now he’s very close to performing miracles. Grabbing hold of the Camphruch’s soul and bringing it back to the body—that shouldn’t have been possible. I couldn’t have done it. Nor could Tina, or you, Percival. And it’s because of his Obscurus.”

Nobody has anything to say, after that. Graves is shaken through his core. He wants to go and make sure that Credence is alive, make sure that he’s still inside his own skin, that he hasn’t collapsed into smoke and drifting magic. He didn’t want to be right, when he thought that the Obscurus was an extension of Credence. There’s something terrifying about knowing that all Credence’s magic is directly powered by his soul. That all his suffering is exactly what makes him so powerful. How much is he hurting? And why the hell has he never said anything to them? To Graves?

He’s clearly not the only one thinking about this. Tina looks like she might cry, and Jacob still looks somewhere between angry and afraid. Newt is contemplative, watching Pickett scramble over his hands and arms. When Graves looks at her, feeling like he’s asking her permission, Queenie swallows hard and says, “Go.”

It’s all he needs. Without excuses or apologies, Graves heads straight for the tent and ducks inside, into the darkness within. He pauses as the flap falls shut and listens for a moment. It’s reassuring just to hear that Credence is still breathing. In the flickering light of the small lamp that hangs by the entrance, he can just see Credence, very still on his pallet in the back of the tent.
Careful not to make too much noise, Graves navigates between the other small piles of blankets to reach Credence. He sits down beside the young man. This is too reminiscent of that damn warehouse where they’d first met, when Credence had been nothing but skin and bones and angry shadows.

One of Credence’s hands is loosely curled against his chest. As if he might break, Graves takes Credence’s thin hand between both of his. There’s no response. The only sign that Credence is alive is the steady rise and fall of his chest and the faint flutter of a pulse in his wrist.

“I’m sorry,” Graves whispers into the silence. “We should have found you sooner. Taken care of you the way you deserve. Not let this happen to you.”

There’s no response, and Graves has nothing left to say.

He’s not sure how long he’s there before Credence finally shifts slightly. His eyes flicker open and they’re just his eyes, entirely ordinary, entirely beautiful. He’s confused, for a moment, and then he laboriously turns his head and looks at Graves. “Hi,” he says weakly.

A wave of relief crashes over Graves. For the first time since the riverbank, Graves feels like he’s breathing. He thinks his voice might actually crack if he says anything, so he doesn’t even try. He just tightens his hold on Credence’s hand and hopes that conveys everything he would have said. If the way Credence tangles his fingers with Graves’ is any indication, the message got across.

Chapter End Notes

More butchered Latin for you. Curare Iniuriamicus Mortale—cure the mortal wound; Clostelltum Animus—bind the soul.

So here’s that spellcasting nerdery I promised waaaaaaaaay back in Chapter 6. The spell Credence cast is definitely a healing spell, and according to 5th edition rules (which are the ones I know best) spells like cure wounds, healing word, and so on are technically Evocation spells. (They’re in the same general category as spells like scorching ray, fireball, and lightning bolt. Which, okay, I don’t get that but whatever.)

The thing is, though, that spells like raise dead, resurrection, and revivify are in a different school. These are all spells that go above and beyond healing to actually bring back the dead—limits of the creature having been dead up to 10 days, less than a century, and within the last minute respectively. This is a hell of a lot closer to what Credence did in this chapter, and technically these spells are in the NECROMANCY school. They hang out with things like finger of death (shush, no innuendos), animate dead, and so on. The kind of magic that would let you cast a Killing Curse or create an Inferius. Soul magic. Credence, with his excessive amount of soul power as described by Newt, is the kind of wizard who is well suited to cast especially from the School of Necromancy.

This is the explanation for that whole blocking-a-Killing-Curse-with-a-Shield-Charm incident back in Chapter 8. The reason Credence can pull it off is because he charged that spell with the same kind of energy the Killing Curse possesses. A regular Shield Charm has no way of blocking an Unforgiveable Curse, because it has so much less energy than something powered by the force of a soul. Credence, since he’s channeling just about all his magic straight through his soul, CAN block an
Unforgiveable Curse with a simple spell.

It also hits up his bizarre capability for wandless magic: for Credence, his focus determines his reality (as it were). I’m no expert on wands, but I’d presume they function as a physical focus for a wizard’s raw power. Graves’ wandless magic is fairly limited to spells that don’t require a lot of finesse, because those need less focus than something like Transfiguration. He requires, at least most of the time, the physical focus of the wand to channel his power. Credence is his own focus.
Chapter Notes

HI HELLO GOOD DAY I’M SORRY THIS IS A LATE POSTING I NEEDED SLEEP

We’re officially taking applications for “Research Addicts Anonymous.” The sole requirement is getting Way Too Emotionally Invested In Unnecessary Research. So far this is a two-person organization; we’d like some friends. :)

If you missed it: The Florida Case. There’s ALSO another bonus story tomorrow. Can you tell I’m on a writing bender? This time: the rest of the suitcase family is really, really sick of dealing with Mutual Pining. Someone’s got to do something.

They keep heading West. There’s no trouble, as such, except for one evening when they’re all sitting outside the tent and Tina spots an out-of-place New York pigeon flying toward them. Everyone who isn’t Newt or Tina dives into the tent, out of sight, until the coast is clear again. It turns out that the tired pigeon brought a message from back East, from New York. A friend of Tina’s from the Department—Abernathy, who as far as Graves remembers wasn’t great friends with Tina when Graves was still working there, a memory backed up by the fact that when Queenie hears the name she makes a slight face—is writing to let her know that the extradition of Grindelwald is going well.

_The German Minister of Magic is a damn demanding man_, Abernathy writes in frustration. _But he’s beginning to see sense. Some have recommended that the British Ministry bring a Dementor or two into the States to deal with the problem permanently, but President Picquery believes strongly that such an action could have more deleterious effects than handing Grindelwald over. The Senate is impatient. Believe me, the new Director (Jeremiah Fontaine, how they made that decision is truly beyond me) is sick of being grilled by them every other day about security measures. You haven’t missed that, I’m sure._

“If they send him back to Germany, good riddance,” Graves says.

Credence shivers and his shadow flickers. “I hope they know what they’re doing,” he says.

Queenie puts an arm around the young man. It’s not certain who’s being comforted: Credence, or herself. “So do I,” she says, uncharacteristically somber.

“This is the same government that forgot Credence,” Jacob says. “Don’t get your hopes up.”

Graves entirely agrees with that particular comment.

They pass into a more arid part of the country. Dust rises from the roads and the fields with the same kind of ominous darkness that Graves usually associates with the Obscurus. “Drought,” Jacob explains, when Tina asks. “It’s bad, in this part of the country. They mention it sometimes in the newspapers. Gets worse every year, or so I’ve heard.”

It’s odd, coming out here with the eyes of a No-Maj instead of the eyes of a wizard. Graves has
never been to this part of the country before (he’d gone West on business, yes, but never into the Nebraska panhandle), but anywhere he’s been he’s always looked at the No-Maj world as unimportant. It meant nothing to him. It’s different, now. He lives in this world, so that drought is important.

The thought occurs to Graves, though, that they still don’t quite belong here. He and Credence—as well as all the rest, he supposes—are exiles. They inhabit a liminal space, not entirely magic, not quite mundane. Their world is a suitcase and a road and the hands of their friends.

Time moves differently. Days pass slow and easy, dictated with no deadlines. It’s been a mere twenty-six days since they first climbed into Newt’s suitcase, but to Graves it feels like ten years. July comes and at first no one notices but Newt’s enchanted calendar, which keeps time for them.

When Graves does notice, he spends half the day in a daze. It’s the third of July, and that day has… unpleasant associations. It was the day that he met Grindelwald.

Queenie, of course, realizes it first. She’s suddenly hovering a bit more than usual, always at his side, keeping sharp, perceptive eyes on him. Next thing he knows, Newt is telling him to clear out and not worry about helping with anything today. Tina inexplicably appears and gives him a tight hug, looking distressed and a bit guilty. Jacob gives him space, but Graves definitely feels that he’s being watched. And Credence…

Graves ends up in the miniature desert, sitting on a rock that overlooks the area. It’s hot and dry and artificially sunny and about as far from a cold, wet, dark basement as it’s physically possible to get. The creatures that live here ignore him, and that suits him just fine. He’s doing his best to not think about things (and failing, he can feel the remembered agony of the Cruciatus Curse and that’s just a little distracting) when Credence appears and sits down right next to him.

“Don’t you have anything better to do?” Graves asks him.

Credence draws patterns in the dust with his fingers. “Not really, no,” he says. There’s a sense of déjà vu to this conversation. Have they said this already?

Graves doesn’t say anything else. He’s only half here, though he’s not quite in “waking nightmare” territory yet. A Kyactus ambles across the sand, needles quivering in preparation to throw them at anyone who isn’t Newt. At the moment, Graves feels close to the walking cactus: he’s fairly sure that if anyone but Credence were near him right now, he’d have a difficult time not throwing Silencing Charms at them.

“Mind if I ask a question?” Credence asks.

“Go ahead,” Graves says, because he does mind, but he needs to get out of his own head.

Credence leans back, arms supporting him from behind, long legs straight out, crossed at the ankles. By all appearances, he’s as serene as it’s possible to be. There’s a caution in his voice, though, that tells of his uncertainty. “How did he catch you?”

Graves smiles cynically. “The same way he did with everyone. Brute force.”

“But you’re…you,” Credence says. He’s confused, when Graves looks at him. “I’ve seen you fight and I’m pretty sure both times you were holding back. How did he…”

“I wasn’t prepared for him,” Graves says. He looks at the glittering sand dunes, unable to quite look Credence in the face. “It was supposed to be a routine arrest. There’d been a few murders of No-Majs, apparently by a wizard. Nothing I hadn’t handled before. And most of the Aurors were
doing more important things. I went alone. I went expecting a nobody…”

“And you got Grindelwald instead,” Credence finishes. He shifts, uncrosses his ankles, crosses them again.

Graves doesn’t even try not to sound bitter. “I made more mistakes than I can count.”

“It doesn’t sound like you made mistakes,” Credence objects quietly.

He remembers Grindelwald’s voice. Friendly, if it hadn’t just been spitting curses. What happens now is your fault. You were supposed to be the strongest of the American wizards, and if you are this weak...I’ll have MACUSA at my feet within a year. “I should have been better. Stronger.”

It’s an almost eerie echo of a conversation they’ve already had. It was just after they met, in the middle of the night. The memory is drenched in the flickering light of an uncertain Lumos spell and the rising shadows of a barely-controlled Obscurus, but even in this place so far removed from the image Graves knows with certainty exactly what Credence will say next.


Even if he knew what Credence was going to say, the words still hit him with the force of a Blasting Curse. Credence means what he says and it’s hard not to believe him. The darkness comes back, though, doubt and guilt and lingering pain from scars that Graves will never ask Credence to heal. How many times will they do this? How many times will they repeat the same words to each other before something gives? How long are they going to chase the ghosts of time?

“Hey,” Credence says gently. He shifts sideways, hands scraping on the loose sand covering the rock they’re sitting on, bracing Graves with his shoulder.

“I’m still here.” Graves can barely hear his own voice.

“Do me a favor,” Credence says. He leans in, a solid, steady presence that feels like it’s holding Graves together. The coldness that was creeping over him fades and Grindelwald’s voice, whispering in his ear, is silenced. “Stay here.”
“Not to sound paranoid,” Graves says, one afternoon while they’re stopped so Newt can take care of a cold Dougal caught, “but shouldn’t we take some time to keep our collective dueling skills sharp?”

Tina pulls a face at him. “Do not start with that ‘constant vigilance’ thing,” she says. “I got quite enough of that from that guest lecture you held last year.”

Graves raises his brows pointedly. “Maybe if the Department had some attention to what Moody said, you would have noticed I was missing sooner.”

“Tina complained about that for days,” Queenie says in an aside. Jacob and Credence both look fairly confused. “Ailward Moody—he’s a famous British Auror—came to the States on business and Mr. Graves convinced him to give a guest lecture to the Department.”

“It was awful. ‘Constant vigilance!’ Over and over and over! And then he came back to the States to grouch his way through the extradition process and he kept going on about ‘constant vigilance’! I bet he tells his grandson that at night! And he won’t shut up about him, either, some brat named Alastor…I don’t even know why Moody’s there, except as an extra security detail for that stuffed shirt the British Ministry sent. He’s got to be the most paranoid man I’ve ever seen!” Tina pauses, then gives Graves a flat look. “Present company excepted, of course.”

“You haven’t heard from Abernathy in a while,” Graves says. “Which means we have no idea how that extradition is working out. And no idea about Grindelwald. I’d like to know that if anything happens, all of you can take care of yourselves.”

Jacob raises a hand. “Point of order. I can’t duel, because, you know, I’m not a wizard.”

Newt, Demiguise asleep in his arms, wanders into the circle. “You gave me a good conk with a suitcase, though,” he says. “And that worked.”

“He hit you with a what,” Credence says in disbelief. “Was this before or after you two Apparated into a bank vault?”
“After,” Newt and Jacob say at the same time, and grin at each other.

“That was how the suitcases got switched to begin with,” Jacob says. “I had no idea I’d just run off with enough magical creatures to start a zoo.”

Queenie, aware of Graves’ steadily growing irritation, coughs. “So! We should practice?”


“You’re damn good at it even without practice,” Jacob tells him.

Credence looks away quickly, but his pleased smile is obvious. “Still. I’d like to learn.”

“And I might need a brush-up,” Queenie volunteers. “I haven’t really done anything like that since Dueling Club at Ilvermorny. Tina’s always been better, anyway.”

Tina shrugs. “I’m not that special.”

“She’s one of the strongest witches I’ve ever dueled,” Graves puts in, remembering Tina’s competence test. “She almost beat me.”

“I did beat you!” Tina protests.

Graves arches one brow. He flicks a finger and Tina’s wand goes flying. “Not quite.”

“You cheated!” Tina says, chasing after her wand. She catches it and sits down, flushed and indignant. “No one told me that you could do wandless magic!”

Credence bursts into laughter. “Constant vigilance!” he says.

With his free hand, Newt runs his fingers through Tina’s disheveled hair, carefully combing it back into place. “I wouldn’t have wanted to duel Percival without knowing,” he says. “I mean, we accidentally dueled Grindelwald, but we both thought were fighting Percival and we were prepared for that and he still was quite a challenge.”

“It’s good to know that my reputation was enough to keep you on your toes,” Graves says. “I don’t think I realized you were a duelist.”

Newt presses the back of his hand against Dougal’s forehead, checking for a fever. “I’ve had plenty of occasions to fight people,” he says darkly. “They say travel broadens the mind, and I’ve certainly seen a lot of the world.”

Queenie claps her hands. “All right, it’s settled!” she says brightly, before the conversation can derail again. “We’ll be vigilant and get some practice tomorrow.”

***

“Petrificus Totalus!” Tina shouts, striking out with her wand arm.


Tina barely gets her wand up in time. “Protego! Damn it!”

“Don’t overextend,” Graves chides, watching intently for her next move. “You’re telegraphing.”

“I was the Director of Magical Security!” Tina says, scowling as she circles him, waiting for an
“I know how to fight!”

“Get better,” Graves says ruthlessly. He snaps his wand. “Confringo!”

Tina throws a Flame-Freezing Charm. For a moment, he can’t see her through the fire, and that’s his downfall. A blast of scarlet light hits him square in the chest and he hits the ground ten feet away.

Next thing he knows, Queenie is helping him sit up, brushing him off. Tina stalks over, still irritated, and folds her arms as she glares down at him. “Don’t overextend,” she snipes.

“I’ll take that under consideration,” Graves says with a rueful smile, letting Queenie help him to his feet again.

Credence comes over with Newt. “That was fast,” he says, slightly awed.

“It helps to have an opponent at your skill level,” Graves says. Tina rolls her eyes at him, but she looks mollified. He turns to Queenie. “Your turn.”

“I’d rather not,” Queenie says quickly. He starts to think and she’s already a step ahead: “I know you’ll take it easy on me, but I’m not nearly good enough to fight you.”

Newt, brushing ash off Tina’s shoulder where it fell during the duel, sends Queenie a smile. “You’ll do all right,” he says encouragingly. Graves has already dueled with Newt. It was, essentially, a draw, because Newt conjured a massive flock of birds and sent them all to attack Graves and then they couldn’t get rid of the birds, which meant that dueling was put on hold until the birds were rounded up. By then they were all laughing too hard to continue, feathers in their hair and caught in their clothes, and they had to sit down for a minute until everyone was sober enough to go on.

Credence puts an arm around Queenie. “Really, you should try,” he says.

“So I have to duel you?” Queenie says plaintively to Graves. She looks around for help. “Why not Newt or Tina?”

“Because I’d take it too easy on you,” Tina says. She leans back into Newt and he puts his arms around her happily. “And, sorry, Newt, but the point is to see how we hold up against a wizard of Grindelwald’s caliber on our own.”

“No offense taken,” Newt says. “The only reason we survived the first go-round was because we were together, and it’s not fair to make you duel both of us.”

Queenie looks terrified. Graves feels a bit bad about that, but not bad enough to let her off the hook. “Come on,” he says, offering a hand. “I promise, no explosions. Or, well, not too many.”

“Oh, no,” Queenie says.

“I believe in you,” Credence says sincerely, giving her a gentle push toward Graves.

Queenie steps out into the empty field. The rest clear the area, scattering to watch at a safe distance. Jacob, watching from off to one side where he hopefully won’t get hit by a misfired spell, calls, “You can do this, Queenie!”

Queenie stops and Graves takes several further paces before turning to face her. He forgets, sometimes, how small she is by comparison to most of the rest of them. Jacob is only an inch taller,
but built much more heavily than Queenie. Without her usual high heels, she looks absolutely tiny and alarmingly terrified. But her expression is set and she’s facing him in a stance that’s a good mimic of Tina’s, which is reassuring. Though it’s square on to him, which means she’s presenting quite a target.

“On the count of three!” Tina calls out from Graves’ left. “Three!”

He’ll start with a simple Disarming Charm. It’s a standard for a reason. Regardless of anything else, Queenie will have to know how to block that.

“Two!” Across from him, he sees Queenie’s eyes narrow. He can practically see the wheels in her brain turning. Graves rather wishes he could see what she’s thinking.

“One!”

Before Graves can get one syllable of the incantation out of his mouth, Queenie is already hurling up a Shield Charm. He changes mid-spell—that was unexpected, what about a Stunning Spell—and even though he does manage to cast the spell, there’s already another shield in place before he can hit.

“Oh, damn,” he says aloud. She can’t do nonverbal combat magic, can she? “Silencio!”

Queenie dives out of the way of the spell before it’s even cast, nearly tripping and falling. Graves turns to follow her, to try that again, but he doesn’t even get the chance to say anything. Gripping her wand with both hands, she shouts, “Expelliarmus!”

Graves’ wand goes flying. He’s more than a little shocked. He’s going to have to fight Queenie wandless? He gathers himself and prepares to throw his usual Hurling Jinx, the spell he’s cast most often without a wand. It might hurt her but at this point he’s off-balance and willing to try anything.

Before he can even move, Queenie shouts out, “Petrificus Totalus!” Instantly Graves feels himself locked into place, arms at his sides, unable to move or cast anything, and goes crashing to the ground.

He hears everyone sprinting out into the field, unable to see anything but the sky overhead and unable to move his head enough to change the view. Newt taps him on the forehead, muttering the countercurse, and helps Graves to his feet. Newt also hands him his wand.

“—amazing!” Tina is saying to Queenie.

“Best duel I’ve ever seen,” Jacob says warmly, gripping her hand tight. “I knew you could do it!”

Queenie looks utterly overwhelmed. “I…I didn’t do much,” she says.

Graves is floored. There’s modesty and then there’s this. He was going easy on Queenie, yes, but even so—“You preempted every spell I cast,” he says. “I cast exactly two spells. You blocked one and dodged the other before it left my wand. And then you stopped me from casting anything else because you already knew what I was going to do.”

Words seem to have failed Queenie. “It was just Shield Charms,” she says when she finally finds her voice.

“No, it was the best Legilimency I’ve ever seen,” Graves says forcefully. “If you ever fight someone who isn’t the best Occlumens in the world, you’ll win.”
“You mean that?”

“He doesn’t hand out compliments often, when he’s teaching people how to fight,” Tina says, putting an arm around her sister’s shoulders. “He definitely means it.”

Credence bites his lip, trying and failing to hold off a grin. “If Queenie is always one step ahead of her opponents, does that mean she’s the only one who’s constantly vigilant enough for you?”

Tina cracks up and Queenie, seemingly out of sheer relief, laughs along. Graves stares at the sky for a moment—what did he do to deserve this, exactly?—and then points his wand at Credence. “Just for that, you’re next.”

Credence stretches, the very picture of youthful insolence. “I thought you’d never ask,” he drawls, watching Graves through half-lidded eyes.

“Giles Corey save me from young idiots,” Graves mutters. He does his best to ignore all of the intensely inappropriate thoughts Credence is giving him right now. “Come on, Credence.”

“Wait, wait, wait,” Tina says, wiping her eyes, the laugh still in her voice. “You’re going to make Credence fight you without a wand?”

Graves pauses. That’s a fair point. “Someone hold my wand, I can—” he starts.

Newt, an odd glint in his eyes, shakes his head. “Oh no, I think we should take the chance to teach Credence to use a wand,” he says.

“Right!” Jacob chimes in, almost too quickly. “We know you both do wandless magic, but still!”

“He can borrow mine, if he wants,” Queenie volunteers, holding out her wand.

Graves glances at it. “Bad idea,” he says. “What is that, rosewood?”

“…why does the wood matter?” Jacob asks, mystified.

“Wand wood has affinity for certain kinds of people and magic. So rosewood isn’t compatible with much fighting,” Newt explains. “They’re better for lovely people like Queenie who don’t like to fight much. Credence would probably blow it up. And I don’t think Credence could use my wand since it’s ash wood and ash doesn’t work well for anyone but the original owner.”

Tina frowns. “And mine probably won’t work well, either,” she says. “It’s rowan and White River Monster spine and it’s a damn good dueling wand, but I don’t think it could channel all of Credence’s power. What’s yours, Graves? It doesn’t look like one of Jonker’s.”

“It isn’t. My parents took me to Ollivander in England. Family prestige and all. It’s ebony and dragon heartstring,” Graves says, looking down at his wand.

“You literally could not be more of a stereotype if you tried,” Tina says. “You were in Wampus, weren’t you?”

Newt cocks his head, mischief in his eyes. “Isn’t ebony suited to Transfiguration?”

“The wand is, but I’m not,” Graves says dryly, and Newt laughs at him.

“Why’s he a stereotype?” Credence asks, looking between them all.

“Ebony wands are wands for fighters,” Newt explains. “People who’re determined and don’t
change easily. And dragon heartstring—that’s for a temperamental wizard.”

“That’s Graves, all right,” Jacob puts in.

Tina nods. “And Wampus is a house at Ilvermorny.”

Credence looks between them like he’s watching a tennis match. “The magic school, right?”

“Yes,” Tina says. “I was in Thunderbird and Queenie was in Pukwudgie.”

“I think Jacob would be in Wampus like Mr. Graves, if he’d gone,” Queenie puts in with a sweet smile at Jacob, who turns a bit red.

“I was a Hufflepuff at Hogwarts,” Newt volunteers.

“That’s surprising, given Hufflepuff’s reputation,” Graves says to him.

Newt rolls his eyes. “We aren’t all just meek little herbologists,” he mutters. “And I know some Hufflepuffs who couldn’t find their noses if someone gave them a map.”

“Anyway,” Tina says to Credence, “Wampus is supposed to favor warriors. So Graves was there, and he’s got a dragon heartstring wand core which means he can cast incredibly powerful spells, and then he went and became an Auror…he couldn’t do more to prove how good a fighter he is if he tried. Which I’m sure he did.”

Credence is staring at him with a slightly overawed expression. It makes Graves uncomfortable. He’d rather that Credence never look at him that way. “Right. He can try my wand; it’ll be best able to channel his power. And,” Graves continues, slightly bitter, thinking of the other hands that used this wand, “it doesn’t seem to mind having another master.”

Everyone chooses to ignore that last comment, which is probably for the best. There’s a bit of a shuffle, getting a still-shocked Queenie and a wand-less Jacob out of harm’s way. Credence simply stands there, waiting in excited silence for things to be figured out. Tina offers to be Credence’s opponent, but Newt advises that for the moment they let Credence just try to figure out using a wand at all. “He’s been wandless this whole time,” Newt says sensibly. “It might take some getting used to. And it’s not like he’s using his own wand, he’s using someone else’s.” Tina acknowledges the wisdom of that, and so they just step back a bit and let Graves hand his wand over to Credence.

“It might not work,” Graves warns.

“Let me try it,” Credence says. He holds out his hand.

With significant trepidation, Graves drops his wand into Credence’s palm. Credence’s hand closes on the wand—almost like it was made for him, Graves thinks irrationally—and a moment later, plumes of smoke burst from the wand. They ripple and curl in the air, dark as the Obscurus, lighter than air. The wand will work with Credence. And he turns to Graves with the same expression he’d worn the first time he ever consciously performed magic, surprise and wonder and joy in equal measure, and even though everyone else is cheering Graves can’t hear a thing.

“So we know your wand will work for Credence,” Tina says, when the initial excitement is mostly over. “Now the question is whether or not he can cast spells.”

Credence, holding the wand like it will fly away from him if he so much as loosens his grip, can’t seem to stop smiling. “I think I could cast anything.”
"I suggest you start with a Shield Charm!" Jacob says loudly from the fence he and Queenie are sitting on at the edge of the field.

"He’s got the right idea," Newt says.

"It should be a little more controlled than the last time you tried a Shield Charm," Graves says.

"I hope so," Credence says.

There’s a pause.

Graves looks askance. "You do know the incantation?"

Credence’s ears are, oddly, turning red. "Of course I do! I just…I have no how to cast it with a wand. Aren’t there…specific movements?"

"Yes, but they aren’t too—oof!" Newt’s cut off as Tina elbows him hard in the ribs. Rubbing his side, he says, "Oh! Right! Someone should help you with that."

Tina looks at Graves, positively smirking. "It’s your wand," she says.

Something is up here. He didn’t make it to Director of Magical Security by missing cues around him. The parts of him that have kept their survival instinct are screaming at him to run. He can’t put a finger on why he should flee, though, so he stays. "You might want to stand back," he warns. "Last time Credence cast this I think he knocked down a house."

"You blew up the street first," Credence says with a grin. "Are you going to help me, or—?"

Tina and Newt hurry back to stand by Queenie and Jacob. Graves ignores them. He stands behind Credence, eyeing his stance and grip critically. "Start by relaxing your arm a bit. I’ve seen more than one wizard knocked over by force of their own spell."

"Like this—" Credence lowers his arm, too much. He’ll be shooting from the hip like some No-Maj cowboy if this goes on.

"No."

Graves takes hold of Credence’s upper arm and adjusts his stance. "Better. The more you practice the more it will be second nature. Loosen your hold."

Credence stops white-knuckling the wand. He straightens up a bit. "Is this right?"

"It’s not perfect, but it’s better," Graves says honestly. "Now. The Shield Charm isn’t the easiest spell to start with, but the motion is simple. It’s just a simple downward slash."

Uncharacteristically nervous, Credence glances over his shoulder. "Guide me through it?"

Graves remembers the number of times in his life that he’s had another wizard physically help him through the motions of a complex spell. It’s helpful, especially when the magic is unfamiliar. "Of course," he says, stepping closer. He reaches past Credence’s shoulder, covering the young man’s hand on the wand with his own. They’re close enough that Graves can speak much more quietly. "You’re still casting the spell. Start the motion and I’ll follow you."

"All right," Credence says. They’re so close that Graves can feel Credence breathe for a moment, centering himself, before he loudly says the incantation: "Protego!"

They move together in complete synchronicity, as if they’re extensions of each other. Silver energy explodes from the wand, and though they didn’t maximize the spell it’s still enormous. It surges
across the field, kicking up dust into clouds as it goes, and dissipates before it strikes the far trees.

For a second, Credence and Graves just stand there. Credence is breathing heavily, almost panting though he’s not really exerted himself, and his wand hand is trembling. Given that, Graves is not inclined to immediately let go. His other hand has found its way to Credence’s back, resting over one shoulder blade. “Are you with me?” he asks.

“Still here,” Credence breathes. He turns suddenly, not stepping back, straight into Graves. At this point, Graves’ response is completely automatic: he pulls Credence in. One of Credence’s hands clutches at his shirt, the other going around him in a desperate attempt to get them even closer. The wand is pressing into Graves’ back, and he’s so proud that he feels like he’s going to explode, and he’s pretty sure he could stand like this forever.

And then Credence does something that absolutely stuns him. The young man turns his head and just like that, his lips are pressed against the corner of Graves’ mouth. It’s a kiss. An entirely desperate, entirely terrified kiss. Graves thinks he’s just going to keel over right then from shock.

He completely freezes. He has no idea what to do. Credence must feel it, because he stumbles back and presses the wand into Graves’ hand, repeating apologies over and over. And then, blessed woman, Tina comes in between them, talking to Credence about the spell and what it felt like to cast with a wand. Newt gets hold of Graves’ elbow and steers him with almost excessive gentleness away from Credence. Queenie appears on his other side, and he can hear Jacob behind them, talking to Credence, and it’s all complete chaos.

Graves looks back just once, and sees Credence staring after him.
Chapter 30

Chapter Notes

IT’S WEDNESDAY FUCKING FINALLY

Congratulations to those who bet on “Credence gets it AND makes the first move”! Ultimate bragging rights to you guys. You know my characters better than I do, because around the point when I was writing the bit where the betting pool kicked off, I HAD NO IDEA WHEN OR IF THESE TWO WOULD FIGURE THEIR SHIT OUT.

There’s a certain manic energy about everyone else for the rest of the afternoon. Every time Graves and Credence are within ten feet of each other, someone immediately comes in between them. It’s unstated, but everyone saw what happened. Graves is torn: part of him is grateful that he doesn’t have to think about it, and another part is screaming furiously that he should have just reciprocated right then and there, and the third part is reminding him of all the reasons that this shouldn’t even be an issue.

But it’s not as though anyone gives him a chance to do anything about it. Tina manages to convince Credence to help her organize books, Newt suddenly occupies Graves with a dozen needy Bowtruckles. Jacob engages Credence in conversation about baseball, Queenie asks Graves to tell her more about dueling magic. It’s almost more exhausting than simply confronting the Erumpet in the room—and no, that does not mean the actual Erumpet. It seems like that would be easier.

Somehow they make it through the day without anyone snapping. Finally, though, no one can avoid it any longer. They have to be together to eat, and even if the other four manage to sit in such a way that Credence and Graves are not next to each other, they’re closer than they’ve been since dueling practice earlier that day. Not even Queenie can make this less awkward. Newt and Jacob try, a desperate attempt, discussing ghostly kangaroos with a fervor usually reserved for religious observances. Tina tries to talk to Credence, but he just shuts her down, staring at his hands.

Merlin and Nimue, Graves has made a mess of this. It hurts to see Credence upset, especially when Graves could have done something to prevent it. Someone had told him once that “the heart wants what it wants”. It’s true. If he had any say in this matter he’d have never developed anything more than friendly feelings for Credence. He wouldn’t be sitting here, watching Credence over a dying campfire, wanting to go to him and—

“I can’t take it anymore!” Queenie cries out suddenly, clapping her hands to her head. She stands up sharply and points at Credence, then at Graves. “You. Both of you. Take a walk and sort this out.”

Credence about jumps out of his skin. “There’s nothing to—”

Queenie glares at him. “I can read your mind,” she practically snarls. “There is everything you need to sort out, and I ain’t going to sit here and listen to either of you pining any longer.”

Newt very cautiously scoots away from Graves, out of the direct line of fire. Smart man.
“Queenie—” Graves starts.

“No!” she says. She points toward the road, thirty feet away up the riverbank. “Get. And do not come back until you’ve figured yourselves out.”

When both Graves and Credence hesitate, Jacob says, “I don’t think that was a request.” Tina nods emphatically. Newt makes a small shooing gesture, echoed in miniature by Pickett, who’s sitting on his shoulder. It’s an oddity of his life that Graves feels betrayed by a Bowtruckle.

They maintain a careful distance as they walk toward the road. It’s not a difficult climb up this incline, but there are enough weeds that Graves does cast a quick Lumos so they can at least not trip and kill themselves. That seems like it would be counterproductive.

“So,” Credence says at last, when they’re up on the dark, empty road, “about earlier.”

He sounds scared and hesitant, but the shadows aren’t doing anything strange, so they’re safe enough from that. “I don’t…I don’t know what to tell you,” Graves says, very carefully not looking Credence in the eye.

“I won’t say I didn’t mean it,” Credence says, almost defiant. “I knew what I was doing.”

“I know you did.”

Their footsteps crunch on the pieces of gravel scattered on the unpaved road. For a moment, neither of them speak. Graves doesn’t know what to say.

“She said you were ‘pining’ too,” Credence says abruptly.

Graves winces. “I was.” He considers who he’s walking with and the fact that he really wants to stop, drop his wand, and finish what Credence started earlier, and amends: “I am.”

Credence doesn’t quite stumble, but suddenly he’s walking a bit faster. “I thought—”

“I’m sorry about that,” Graves says. “I—you surprised me. I didn’t expect that.”

“Didn’t expect—” Credence stops and then continues in the most exasperated tone Graves has ever heard, “I thought you knew how I felt!”

Graves stops in his tracks. “What?”

Credence turns to face him. “What was I supposed to think when I woke up and you were sitting next to me holding my hand?” he demands.

In that light… “I didn’t realize,” Graves says, feeling incredibly stupid. “I only knew how I felt, and I thought anything else was just my own feelings coloring things.”

“You are the most incredibly blind person I’ve ever met.” Credence is astounded. The light from the spell isn’t quite enough to catch his whole expression, but it’s enough. “For God’s sake, Graves…”

“I assumed that your affection…wasn’t exactly romantic,” Graves says. “I’m not the kind of person people generally want to be with.”

Credence expels a long, slow breath. “You do realize,” he says, “that I’ve wanted to be with you since the day you taught me how to cast a spell.”

“Yes!” Credence runs a frustrated hand through his hair. “I mean, no, it’s more complicated than that, I really worked it out in Chicago, but if I had to pick a moment…that’s it.”

It’s impressive that Credence can remember the exact moment, because Graves honestly has no idea when he started thinking of the young man as more than just a charge to be protected. “I only realized when we got here,” he admits. “But I was feeling for a long time before that.”

There’s another pause, a little less uncomfortable than the first. Crickets chirp from the fields, and the river is audible. Distantly, Graves hears Tina laugh.

This time, he’s the one to break the silence. “I don’t know what you want, exactly,” he says, “but…Giles Corey’s broken bones, Credence, I know what I want, and it won’t be good for either of us.”

Credence rocks back on his heels. “What do you mean?”

“I mean you’re young,” Graves says, trying for gentleness. “You’re half my age. Even if we put that aside, I don’t think either of us is exactly what you’d call sane.”

“All right,” Credence says, “I’ll bite. What matters about me being younger?”

“I have twenty years on you,” Graves says, “most of the time spent in positions of power. And you’re young. You aren’t used to being anyone’s equal in the way that a relationship like this needs.”

Credence takes Graves by the shoulders. “You are the densest person I know,” he says, exasperated. “If what you’re worried about is having too much power because you’re older than I am—well, that’s going to have to go both ways, I might explode into an Obscurus at any second and if you want to talk about power that’s where to start.”

“That’s not the kind of power I’m talking about.”

“Doesn’t matter to me. You’ve never once taken advantage of me in any way. And you could have, when we met.” Credence smiles, a little twisted, a little sad. “I’ve have let you do anything you wanted. You have to know that.”

Graves blinks, taken aback. “That never even occurred to me,” he says. Credence doesn’t say anything else, but he looks like he’s about to cry. “But—even so—you and I aren’t the image of sanity. I have my problems, you have yours. It’s not safe for either of us.”

“Since when have we ever done the safe thing?” Credence demands. Then, more quietly, he continues, “You make me a little more sane. I mean, you’re not the only one, the others are the best friends I’ve ever had. They could calm me down if I went all…Obscurus. But, God, Graves, you’re the only one I’d want to do it.”

Graves doesn’t know what to say. The only one he wants near him on the worst days, if he’s being honest with himself, is Credence. This goes both ways.

“I don’t know if this would even change anything,” Credence says. He glances at his hands on Graves’ shoulders, at the tiny space between them. “Look at us. I just want to be able to show you how I feel about you without being afraid you’ll…”

“Credence,” Graves says, cutting him off, “even if I didn’t feel the same way, I wouldn’t abandon you just for that.”
The young man tilts his head a bit. “See,” he says softly, “that’s what I mean about you. You’re a good man. The best man I know.”

Graves has to protest that. “I’m neither good nor safe to be around. I’m damn near suicidal on my best days. I attract trouble. You heard what Tina said about me: all I can really do is fight—”

“Stop it,” Credence says. His hands, still on Graves’ shoulders, tighten. “If you can’t see the things about yourself that make me love you, then God damn it, you need to get a better mirror.”

Graves studies Credence’s face. He’s all there, all human, all everything that Graves has ever possibly wanted. Part of him still thinks this is a terrible idea, that they’ll both end up with broken hearts or worse, because when has anything ever gone right for the two of them?

The wise thing to do is to step back. Let it go. But Graves is not a wise man. He’s very tired of waiting for this, and his self-preservation instinct is still broken. So he steps forward instead.

He raises the hand that isn’t holding his still-lit wand and, tentative, cups the side of Credence’s face. And then he closes the last distance between them and finishes what Credence started earlier. It’s a little less desperate. Still terrified, though, on both parts.

When they break apart neither of them go far. Credence doesn’t seem to want to let go and Graves doesn’t want to stop being near him. He tentatively brushes his thumb over Credence’s cheek, memorizing the way he feels when they’re this close. He says, very quietly, “In case you missed it, Credence, you are my better mirror.”
Chapter 31

Chapter Notes

THEY DONE DID IT THEY KISSED AREN’T WE ALL SO PROUD

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The next morning, before anyone can even ask how the conversation went, Credence practically tackles Queenie. “Thank you for making us sort ourselves out,” he says into her hair. She lets out a squeal of delight and flings her arms around him.

“Good man,” Jacob says, clapping Graves on the back.

“I’m glad you approve,” Graves says.

Tina nudges him with her elbow. “So,” she says, practically smirking at him, “is it acceptable to say that I knew this was going to happen?”

“If one more person turns out to have known before I did—” Graves tries to say.

“Everyone knew before you did,” Jacob says warmly.

From Newt’s breast pocket, Pickett waves his arms and gives a tiny cheer. Newt grins. “I’ve watched enough mating rituals to know where this was going,” he says. Graves had no idea that Newt could make a suggestive face. He would like to return to his earlier state of innocence now.

“Newt, no!” Tina says, laughing.

Credence, Queenie still half hanging off him, glances around at them all. “Considering neither of us knows what in the hell we’re doing, I’d say we’re all right.”

“You’ve got Graves smiling regularly, instead of scowling like the sky’s about to cave in on us all,” Tina says. “That’s much better than all right.”

“I didn’t scowl at you that much when we were in the Department,” Graves objects.

Queenie smiles. “Yes, you did,” she says in a singsong voice. “You were too busy being serious and important to look happy.”

Credence detaches himself from Queenie and turns that brilliant smile on Graves. “I’m glad you don’t have to be serious and important anymore, then,” Credence says, and Graves thinks that he’s glad about that, too.

They’re moving on again, out of Nebraska and into Wyoming. Tina conjectures that they should be all right, everyone staying outside—they’re Apparating to the nearest town and getting on a train, because Newt and Tina declare in no uncertain terms that they will never ride in an automobile again after the absolute hell that was their first auto ride on washboard roads—and though Jacob and Queenie decide to go along, Credence bows out. “I’ll just stay in the suitcase,” he says. “It will be a lot less trouble if someone sees you all.”

Everyone exchanges knowing looks. Graves cannot be bothered to be irritated.

Newt, of course, asks them to just keep an eye on all the creatures. “Don’t worry about coming out to get me if something happens,” he says. “Just knock on the inside and I’ll come help.”

“We’ll be fine,” Graves assures him. “I believe Credence is bribing the Niffler with buttons to act as a lookout.”

“…so that’s why the little pest has been so content lately,” Newt says. He pulls a slight face. “I should have thought of that.”

“You’re too nice to bribe it, honey,” Queenie says. “Just too ethical.”

“Luckily for Jacob’s cufflinks and Tina’s overwrought nerves,” Credence says cheerfully, stepping into the suitcase, “I seem to lack all sense of ethics. Are you coming, Graves?”

Newt shuts and locks the suitcase after them. For a while, Graves and Credence just sit together, side by side on the platform that had been the Thunderbird’s perch. It’s peaceful. Graves hadn’t expected to miss spending time in the suitcase, yet here he is, feeling at home again.

“So,” Credence says. “We have a long time in here. Just the two of us.”

“We do,” Graves says.

Credence glances at him. “Where do we go from here?”

A fair question. “It’s been a long time since I’ve done…anything like this,” Graves admits.

“I’ve never done anything like this, so you still win,” Credence says. “I’d think you’d have had plenty of chances, being who you are.”

Graves scoffs. “You really think anyone other than you would want me?”

Credence lightly hits his shoulder. “Stop,” he says.

“I’m serious,” Graves says. “I am—I was—married to my work. I slept in my office three nights a week at least. If no one stops me, I’ll live off coffee and toast. No one wants that.”

“I do,” Credence says promptly.

Graves sighs. “And, as we’ve covered already, you’re not exactly the definition of normalcy.”

“Be that as it may,” Credence says. “I don’t get why you didn’t get more attention. I mean. You can’t have missed that you’re ridiculously attractive.”

“I didn’t miss that, no,” Graves says. “There’s just too much work involved in being Director of Magical Security to have any time for anything else. Being good at the job—keeping half the Western world safe—it doesn’t leave time for much.”

Credence slides a bit closer, leaning against him. “Then I’m glad we met after you resigned. Who was the last lucky one?”

“Someone I worked with,” Graves says.
“An Auror?” Credence looks surprised.

“Yes. I was your age,” Graves says. The memories are fond, hazy with nostalgia. “James McGuiness, the Auror who shared my desk. Worked the same cases. Only sorted ourselves out after I almost died fighting a warlock in Georgia. I…may have taken a curse for him.”

Credence snorts. “So you’ve always been a reckless idiot.”

Graves levels a mild glare at Credence, who just smiles. “That’s why I usually surround myself with sensible people. It does make me wonder why I decided to stay with you.”

“Because I’m a thing of beauty and joy forever, and I make you happy.”

He’s right about that. “You’re too aware for your own good,” Graves says, unable to hide the fondness in his voice. He pauses, and says with a bit more concern, “Does it bother you, talking about someone I used to be with?”

“No,” Credence says. He looks thoughtful. “It’s funny…I feel like I know you. I trust you with my life, for God’s sake. And I still don’t know anything about your past. Keep talking. What was he like?”

“A lot like you,” Graves says, thinking about James’ easy smile. “We were a good pair. At one point I was convinced we’d be together forever.”

Credence cocks his head. “Then…what happened?”

“Our jobs happened,” Graves says. “We were both career men. It’s why we worked so well together. It’s a lot easier to steal a few minutes when you’re always in the same place. We both had ambitions, though. He wanted to become a liaison to the Ministry of Magic or another foreign government. I wanted to become Director of Magical Security.”

“He left?” Credence says.

“It was a friendly parting. We were both looking at a promotion soon enough. He went off to the continent, I stayed in America and Picquery appointed me Director of Magical Security and Head of the Department of Law Enforcement. We wrote, for a while, but…” Graves shrugs. “Friendships, even good ones, drift away when you’re separated by an ocean.”

For a moment, Graves is lost in thought. He doesn’t even know where James is anymore, what he’s doing. Then he shakes himself. “I’m sorry to go on like that.”

“No, don’t apologize,” Credence says. He traces the grain of the wooden platform. “I want you to talk. You had a whole life before me. I want to know about it.”

“So did you,” Graves points out. “If I’m going to talk about my past, you can too.”

Credence’s hand skips slightly in its meandering path over the dark lines of wood grain. “You don’t want to hear it. There’s not much there.”

Careful, still half-expecting Credence to bolt, Graves fits his arm around the young man’s waist. It’s a slightly more intimate touch than an arm around the shoulders, something he’s been avoiding for a while. Despite what happened last night he’s still surprised when Credence sinks into the touch. “If you ever want to, I’d be glad to hear it.”

“I’m afraid there aren’t many happy memories,” Credence says. His eyes are far away.
Graves doesn’t dispute that. Everything he’s heard and inferred about that hellhole of a church and harridan of a woman says that Credence knows what he’s talking about. He presses a tentative kiss to the side of Credence’s head. “I’ll hear anything you say,” he promises. “Good or not.”

Credence doesn’t reply. He’s still looking at something that isn’t there. His hand is still, no longer following the patterns of the wood.

“Aren’t you with me?” Graves asks.

With an obvious effort, Credence tears his gaze from the past and shifts it to Graves. And when it’s there, it’s clear and direct. “Still here,” he replies.

“Good,” Graves says.

He gets a small smile for that. Credence nestles in closer to him. He tucks his head into the crook of Graves’ neck, easy as if he’s done it a hundred times before. Graves, however, has forgotten how to breathe. This has to be a dream.

When Credence speaks again, Graves can feel his breath against his neck and it makes his skin prickle more than it should. “You never did answer my question.”

“Where do we go from here?”

“That’s the one.”

Graves has to think about that for a moment. Where do they go from here? He never even thought they’d get this far. “I think we should take this like we’ve taken everything,” he says slowly. “Just enjoy what we’ve got, while we’ve got it. That would be enough.”

Credence nods. “All right,” he says. “I like that.”

The artificial sunlight and warmth are soothing, and Graves has Credence next to him at last, and for just this short time he feels like the world isn’t collapsing around him. Graves closes his eyes and lets himself not think. Not about the mistake this will end up being. Not about the potential pitfalls all around them. Not about the danger that he’s sure is lurking close behind. Nothing but Credence.

He turns his head a little, so his nose is pressed into Credence’s hair. The young man has the persistent scent of the outdoors on him, and there’s a faint flowery scent clinging to him that Graves doesn’t quite understand. It might be perfume, his rational brain supplies, which begs the question of when exactly Credence started wearing that. And then there’s the smell which is distinctly Credence, which Graves will deny until his dying day that he noticed even once before now.

Under all that is something stranger, wilder, a smell that tugs at the edges of Graves’ magic. It makes him feel dangerous, untouchable. Some kind of strange smoky thing that should be wrong, but feels right and familiar. He guesses it’s the Obscurus. It has to be, right there, below the surface.

The idea that he, a regular man, has a literal force of nature drowsing on his shoulder is enough to make him stop breathing again.

“What is it?” Credence asks.

“I’m just…I’m very lucky,” Graves says.
There’s a moment of dead silence. Then Credence says, “All right, I know you’re talking about me, and it’s very sweet, but let’s face it. You haven’t exactly been very lucky lately.”

He has a point. Still. “Catch me ever expressing my feelings about you again.”

“Don’t you dare go back to refusing to talk,” Credence says. He’s tracing patterns up and down Graves’ leg with one hand. It is…distracting. “I’d never forgive you if you did.”

“I doubt Queenie would forgive me either,” Graves says. “And if honesty is our new policy—I’m more afraid of her than I am of you.”

Credence laughs and sits up. “So am I,” he says. “At least both of us have some sense left.”

No, Graves decides as he looks at Credence, he doesn’t have any sense left. Because he’s here, with this incredible, beautiful young man, despite all the things that should tell him to run away. He’d do anything for Credence, even if it meant his death. He doesn’t say any of that. He just looks, and reminds himself that this is enough.

“Can I—” Credence starts, and stops. He takes a deep breath and tries again. “Can I kiss you?”

Graves absolutely does not dignify that with an answer. He takes Credence’s face in both hands and pulls him in. He intends for the kiss to not be too deep, intends for it to be something simple. And all his good intentions are shattered when Credence very carefully runs his tongue over Graves’ lips.

Where in the hell Credence learned how to do that is a point to address later. For the moment, Graves is completely preoccupied with returning the gesture. He has to remind himself to hold back. If it were up to him he’d have Credence flat on his back right now, and he’d—no, no thinking about that.

This really shouldn’t be remotely arousing. Credence is trying so hard, but he has no idea what he’s actually doing. Tongues are sliding awkwardly together, and Credence keeps moving so that his head is somehow at an even worse angle, and there are somehow too many noses. This is not working.

But…it is. Because Credence seems to realize how ridiculous this is and he’s laughing, wiping his mouth, not apologizing once. He doesn’t try for another kiss now, and Graves is rather glad about that because even that clumsy contact was enough to leave him dizzy and wanting. Instead, they hold hands like teeners, looking up into the artificial sky and not talking much. They don’t need to. Credence is happy, and Graves is happy, and it’s a goddamn miracle that he will never take for granted.

Chapter End Notes

Where in the hell Credence learned how to kiss somebody: I feel like the Suitcase Family held some kind of intervention to give him some pointers. Everyone was mortified. Credence tried to sink to the center of the Earth, Newt had to leave the room because human mating rituals are so much harder to deal with than animal ones, Queenie blushed from head to toe because it turns out that Credence has a REALLY vivid imagination, and Jacob and Tina just obstinately and awkwardly tried to explain that you can do a lot more than basic mouth-to-mouth contact, Credence. It was a
disaster. Graves would probably send them all to the Arctic if he found out.

If any of you would like to read something that talks about James McGuinness in greater detail, go and check out “the aurors”: the story of Percival’s early days as an Auror and how he fell in with his partner. And fell in love with his partner.
Chapter 32

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Tina comes down periodically to keep them updated on the journey. “We have to wait for six hours for the next train,” she tells them once. Another time: “We’re on the train, do you two want to—don’t give me that look, Graves, no one cares if you hold hands out there instead of in here.” And a third time: “Jacob told me to tell you that there’s lunch and if you don’t come up and eat he’ll drag you out himself.” At that last, there’s no force on earth that could stop Credence from bolting up the ladder into the train compartment.

They’re rattling on over the wide and lonesome prairie. This train is slower than the ones back East. Louder. The windows clatter, July sunlight pouring in to flood the compartment. It’s not an overnight compartment, and with only two seats facing each other they’re all crushed together. Credence takes up a resolute residence on the floor—“you’re all too old for this”—and Graves would have joined him, but Newt drops down onto the floor and knocks Graves into the seat next to Tina.

By actual magic, Queenie produces enough sandwiches for all of them. “Remind me to make you my rye bread sometime, it’s better than this,” Jacob puts in, after the first bite. If Credence and Newt eat eight sandwiches between the two of them; well, no one’s counting. In the course of the conversation, Tina’s eyes are heavier and heavier, and eventually she falls asleep in the seat, her head on Graves’ shoulder. Jacob remarks that they should have brought a camera. “What, so we can embarrass them later?” Credence asks. Newt shushes them and says that she’s been worrying too much lately and it’s tired her out. He carefully drapes his jacket over her lap.

People pass by outside; for a moment, they all fall quiet, waiting with bated breath. But nothing happens. Everyone breathe more easily. The fear fades without leaving a trace.

Newt takes out his journal and begins editing, scrawling notes to himself in the margins, with Credence looking over his shoulder and occasionally asking questions or correcting errors in Newt’s spelling. Queenie and Jacob fall into quiet conversation. Graves maneuvers himself so that he’s got an arm around Tina, holding her so she won’t crack her head on the wall when the train jolts. The atmosphere is peaceful, despite the constant rattling of the train.

It’s a little unexpected, when Jacob takes a book out of his jacket pocket and begins reading to Queenie in a voice obviously not meant to be heard by anyone else. In the small compartment, however, listening can hardly be avoided. “Chapter 5: The Tunisian Dagger. I met the inspector just coming from the door which led into the kitchen quarters. ‘How’s the young lady, doctor?’ ‘Coming round nicely. Her mother’s with her.’ ‘That’s good…” And the story goes on, the conversation between the narrator and the inspector discussing a murder.

Soon enough, Graves finds himself listening rather intently. Jacob has a good voice for reading. He changes his voice to suit the characters, narrating the story with the same quality that might be expected of a professional actor. Obviously, since it’s Chapter Five, Graves has no idea what’s happening, but it’s a pleasure to listen all the same. Newt unobtrusively puts away his journal and half turns in his spot on the floor so he can hear better. Credence pulls his knees to his chest and tips his head back against the wall, listening with his eyes closed. Tina shifts a bit and Graves thinks she’ll wake up properly, but when he looks down she seems perfectly content to stay where she is, blinking slowly.
At some point, Jacob pauses and glances up, and then stops with his mouth half open. Graves, Newt, Credence, and a half-asleep Tina are all watching him expectantly.

“Go on,” Credence says.

“I didn’t think you’d all want to listen,” Jacob says, flustered.

Queenie kisses him on the cheek. “Of course they do, sweetheart,” she says, throwing a secret smile over at Graves. Of course she knew all along that they’d listen, conniving woman. “But I think you should go back to the beginning and start again, so they know what’s happening.”

“What book is it?” Tina asks sleepily.

Newt ducks a bit to see the cover. “The Murder of Roger Ackroyd, by Agatha Christie,” he reads.

“It’s a mystery novel that was published last year,” Jacob explains. “I read it. It’s about a detective solving a murder, and it’s swell.”

Credence stares significantly at the book. “How will we know if you don’t read it?”

Jacob hesitantly turns the pages back to the beginning of the book. He clears his throat. “Chapter One: Dr. Sheppard at the Breakfast Table. Mrs. Ferrars died on the night of the sixteenth of September—a Thursday. I was sent for at eight o’clock on the morning of Friday the seventeenth. There was nothing to be done. She had been dead some hours…”

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Queenie convinces Graves and Credence that they should risk staying out of the suitcase, at least for the evening. “You could even stay in the hotel with us,” she pleads. “I’m awful tired of watching you poor boys have to stay in the suitcase night after night.”

Credence, shrugging on his jacket, looks at Graves. “I’m not fussed either way,” he says. He cracks a smile. “Should we be thinking about constant vigilance?”

“Just for that, I should make you sleep in the suitcase.” Graves folds his arms. “But I don’t think there are many wizards in Laramie. And any there are won’t want anything to do with us. Might not even recognize me.”

“I thought most of you American wizards preferred to live together, like we do in England?” Newt asks, bundling the Niffler back into the suitcase before it can make a daring escape.

“Only on the East Coast and in California,” Tina says. She still looks a bit sleepy, leaning against Newt and rubbing her eyes. “Everywhere else they want to live all by themselves. It’s a No-Maj idea that’s really stuck with American wizards, that thing about not being able to see your neighbors.”

“Makes the law damn hard to enforce,” Graves says.

Jacob, putting the book away, pauses to smack Graves lightly on the shoulder with it. “Don’t be dense. That’s what we’re counting on.”

At five in the evening, the train rattles into the Railroad Depot and people flood off. Graves and Credence don’t have tickets, but in the rush off the train, they can safely assume no one will notice two more discreet men in the crowd. It’s been decided that they’ll all take rooms at the Connor Hotel in separate pairs, so as to improve their chances of not being noticed. And they’ll make their
Newt and Tina make straight for the hotel. Tina’s asleep on her feet—come to think of it, she’s barely had time to breathe since her resignation. Of course the poor woman is exhausted. Queenie and Jacob decide to find a good restaurant for dinner, and maybe go dancing afterwards. They won’t be in until well after ten in the evening. After a short conversation, Credence and Graves elect to wander the town for a bit, and then head for the hotel. Graves manages to only tell everyone to be careful one time. Tina still says, “Constant vigilance!” at him before Newt steers her off the train.

Laramie is a surprisingly pleasant town. It looks like something out of the Old West, but there are autos parked on the streets and electric lights on the posts. Men tip their hats to ladies with a rigor that Graves never saw in New York. He and Credence attract remarkably little attention. These seem to be people who value privacy.

With little direction and a silent consensus, they make their way toward the University. The wind, which Graves has heard to be incredibly strong, is dying down as the sun sets. As they come to the campus, there are only a few other people out walking. Its buildings are a pleasant golden brown in the late afternoon sun. They’re simple and solid. As far as Graves is concerned, the No-Majs have outdone the wizarding world again: this school is much more visually pleasing than Ilvermorny.

Credence looks around with great interest. “This is the second university I’ve ever been to,” he says. “I guess only the third school, really…”

“How long did you attend school?”

“Until I was twelve,” Credence says wistfully. “Long enough to learn reading and a little mathematics and so on, but it was never enough. After that, Ma wanted to protect us from heathens…”

Well, there’s another black mark for the Barebone woman. “What was the other university?”

“Ma took us along to New York University,” Credence explains. “We were supposed to help her while she preached at Washington Square. A lot more people came than I expected. And a lot more actually listened.”

“Academics have trouble not listening to the other side,” Graves says. He can’t help a scowl at the thought of some of the people he’s had to work with in his life. “They like a debate. Even when the debate’s about whether or not people should be killed.”

“I wish someone had debated with me sooner,” Credence says. The light wind stirs the hair that’s escaped from the ribbon he’s been tying it back with, and he reaches up to brush it out of his eyes. “That might have done something to prevent…well. You know.”

“Don’t feel guilty about it,” Graves counsels. “You aren’t to blame for any of what that woman did. There are others who are much more to blame.”

Credence stops and looks out across the open pasture that sits between the main buildings of the campus. “You know as well as I do that it isn’t that simple.”

Graves waits for Credence to continue, if he wants. This feels like the natural progression of that conversation on the Thunderbird perch. He doesn’t have to wait long.

“I knew,” Credence says. His voice is soft enough that it’s practically torn away by the faint breeze. “I knew that what she preached was wrong. I read the Bible cover to cover more times than
I can count and my favorite parts even more. There’s more in it than laws. It’s full of lessons that if she’d have thought about it she’d never have wanted me to take to heart.”

“You’ve told me a few of those,” Graves says. And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three—

Credence glances at him. “I’m glad you listened,” he says with a half-smile.

There’s another brief pause, while Credence collects his thoughts. “I know what people thought of me. They looked at me like I was stupid. I’m not stupid. And I wasn’t innocent. I didn’t have the luxury. I had to be able to lie. I told you what she threatened to do to Chastity and Modesty. I had to be able to protect them, and if I had to pretend to be naïve to do it—it wasn’t the worst sacrifice I had to make.”

If Credence’s God is listening, he’d damn well better understand the error of his ways. No loving God could ever leave someone in a situation like the one Credence had endured. That haunted look is beginning to come over Credence’s face, and Graves isn’t sure if the darkness is from the sunset or from something else. He gently takes Credence’s hand, a reminder that he isn’t alone.

“When—he—came,” Credence says slowly, bowing his head, “it was the first time in years someone had been really kind to me. He listened to me. He healed me. He made me feel like I was more than my mother’s whipping boy. Like I could be worth more than anyone bargained for. I was important when I was with him. And I knew something wasn’t right about it all, but I wanted to believe so much. I wanted to…I wanted him…I…” The young man drags his free hand down his face.

Medea’s bloody hands, Graves is going to make Grindelwald pay. “It’s what he does,” Graves says. He casts about for some way to say something meaningful, and finally says, “I gave up information to him willingly, you know.”

Credence whips his head up. “What?”

“He promised to stop hurting me,” Graves says simply. He lets the words hang there for Credence to accept or not. If there’s one thing Graves has made peace with, it’s the fact that anything that happened while Grindelwald had him wasn’t his fault. Before and after are another matter. But those five months aren’t on his shoulders. What Credence did while he was under Grindelwald’s influence, Mary Lou Barebone’s influence—those things aren’t for Credence to own.

The worst part of all of it, strangely, is hearing what Grindelwald truly did to convince Credence to trust him. Graves has been assuming other things, and though objectively this is better, his heart still aches. Everything Grindelwald said is true. Credence is more than what that woman used him for. He’s powerful, intelligent, kind, important. Grindelwald took those truths and used them for lies. It explains why Credence won’t believe anyone when they tell him of his good qualities. Does Credence think the same thing that Graves thinks of himself? That he’s only good for one thing, meant for an inevitable death when that thing runs out?

“I told you it isn’t very happy,” Credence says. His tone is full of baleful reproach, and he doesn’t look at Graves, as if he expects that this will be what sends Graves away.

Graves is not leaving. Instead, he pulls Credence to his side, an arm around Credence’s waist. It’s all he can do now, because he can’t erase what the world has done to Credence. All Graves can do is make sure that nothing else like that ever happens to him.
Dan Fogler is a voice actor, so I just had to give Jacob a chance to shine. :)

Laramie: according to photos from an online archive, this town has NOT changed since 1927. There are more buildings and paved roads, of course, but the downtown looks virtually identical. And there are more buildings on the college campus. Even so, if you hauled the Suitcase Family into the modern day, they’d be able to recognize almost every landmark of Laramie today because it was there when they visited.

Yes, Credence’s monologue is full of references to “Aaron Burr, Sir”. Do NOT listen to Hamilton while you’re writing unless you want to end up quoting it. --

Child labor laws: although there were compulsory education laws in place all over the US by the time this fic begins, things were a lot looser when Credence was a teener. Being pulled out of school to work wouldn’t have been atypical for kids in his situation.
Chapter 33

Chapter Notes

So...here's a heads-up: the "plot" is being temporarily put on hold in favor of a METRIC TON of fluff. I won't tell you how many chapters lie ahead, but I will say that you all get to enjoy some happiness. For a while, anyway. :) 

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The whole group meets, as if by complete accident, in the hotel restaurant for breakfast the next morning. To the surprise of none, Graves and Jacob, the earliest risers, are there before anyone else, holding a table for the others. Queenie arrives in a swirl of perfume, Credence only slightly behind her, and Newt and Tina come arm in arm. Under the cover of the general noise and chaos of the room—and a discreetly cast Muggle-Repelling Charm to keep people from coming too close to the table, courtesy of Newt—they discuss their plans.

“Now that we’re in Wyoming, what are we doing about those Jackalopes?” Jacob asks.

Through a mouthful of oatmeal, Newt replies, “Well, we need to get out on the plains—we’ll want some help for that. Jackalopes are shy of people, rightly so, Muggles would hunt them for trophies, though no one really believes in them yet. Wandmakers who take the antlers for wand cores collect them when they fall off.”

Graves drinks his coffee and listens. He slides a bit closer to Credence, because he’s in danger of getting hit in the face by Newt’s gesticulation. Jacob, who is also sitting next to Newt, is in the same danger, but doesn’t move. He, like Graves, is not a wise man. Queenie was right: he would end up in Wampus. Jacob is half turned in his seat to see Newt better. “What do Jackalopes look like, exactly?”

“Big hares,” Newt says. He holds out his hands wide. “Much bigger than an ordinary hare. Mostly, assuming we aren’t talking about the Bunyan’s or the Dwarf Jackalope. And they have antlers, of course, that’s what makes them special. They fall off seasonally just like a deer’s. The Prong-Horned Jackalope has little antlers but it’s the best for wand-making. The Branched Jackalope is much more common, so its horns are seen more frequently.”

“There are actually different kinds of these things?” Jacob looks astounded.

“Of course! Regional variation,” Newt says enthusiastically. “And I’d like to see if I can confirm rumors about a Jackalope that chirps. It’s just a rumor but I’d like to substantiate it—there was a rural wizard who was out collecting Jackalope antlers in the Medicine Bow forest. If we can find him, we’d have a good chance!”

Queenie looks up from her omelet. “Honey, I don’t think we want to be out in the middle of Wyoming for the next six weeks.”

Tina, alert and cheerful after a thorough night’s sleep, flicks water teasingly at her sister. “It shouldn’t be six weeks, you goose. Jackalopes are pretty big.”

Credence, dexterously peeling an orange, leans closer to Graves. “Newt told me the forest is over a
“million square acres,” he murmurs. “We’re going to be there for a while.”

“I hear there’s mountains,” Graves says speculatively. “How do you feel about taking up Jacob’s ‘mountain hermit’ idea?”

“That sounds fine,” Credence says. “Though we should probably bring someone along to manage any Transfiguration we need. I wouldn’t trust you within ten feet of that kind of magic.”

Graves takes a tranquil sip of coffee. “Have you been able to master Transfiguration?”

Credence flushes a bit with embarrassment. “It may not be my best subject.”

“That’s what I thought.”

Tina waves at the two of them. “I know you two saps are busy, but we need you over here.”

“I’m sure we didn’t miss much,” Graves says. “We’re just following where Newt leads.”

“We’re going to stock up on supplies here in town,” Newt says, “and leave tomorrow. I want to see if the wizard who started the rumor is in town. If he is, I’ll convince him to guide us right to where he claims the chirping Jackalope was.”

Queenie has a thoughtful expression. She catches Graves as they’re all getting up from the table to go their separate ways. “If it ain’t too much trouble, would you mind helping me out with something?”

“Of course not,” Graves says. He lets Queenie lead him aside, gesturing for Credence to go his own way when the young man hesitates. “What do you need?”

“I’d like to get something for Jacob,” Queenie says, hesitant. “It’s just about killing him, not being able to do what he loves. He thinks about baking all the time and it’s awful for him.”

Graves knows where this is going. “You—”

“I know exactly what oven he wants, and if it ain’t here I have a good idea of what will work instead.” Queenie overrides him, looking up at him with pleading eyes. “I just thought—if we could find him something—”

In the lengthy string of poor decisions and illegal activities that his life has become, Graves doesn’t have the heart to say no. “I think a Shrinking Charm would work well enough,” he acquiesces. “I’ll cast it on whatever oven you tell me to, and we’ll get it into the suitcase without him noticing.”

Queenie bursts into a smile. “You’re just the best, Mr. Graves. Let’s go cut a caper together.”

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Jacob doesn’t realize until the afternoon of the next day.

They leave Laramie about noon, after Newt finds the man who claims to have seen this fabled chirping Jackalope. The wizard—a man who is distinctly reminiscent of a No-Maj fur trapper from the 1800s—introduces himself as Cal Snowshoe. He’s happy to help them and has absolutely no idea who Graves is. “Born and raised on the Tetons. Grandparents came out here to get away from the cities and we just never went back,” he explains as he saddles up his horse. His horse! That’s a novel concept.

Graves absolutely yearns for the Floo network.
Newt handles his horse almost as well as Snowshoe handles his. It looks about as difficult as a broomstick, when Newt’s taken the reins. Snowshoe laughs when Queenie vocalizes that thought: “It’s not like a broomstick at all, ma’am. That’s a living creature. Noble beast. Got to show respect.”

Snowshoe rigs up a way for all of the rest to ride as well. He ties the bridles together for the horses so that they’ll be able to simply follow in a line behind his horse or Newt’s, no handling required. Credence and Jacob are far more excited to ride than anyone else, scrambling into the saddles of their horses and talking excitedly of cowboys and Westerns. Tina boldly climbs up, and Graves—since Jacob is already on the horse and doesn’t want to get down—helps Queenie onto her horse.

It’s a long ride. They’re headed for the real wilderness now. Snowshoe and Newt, in the lead, talk endlessly about Jackalopes. Apparently Snowshoe is heavily invested in the antler trade. He knows more about Jackalopes than Newt does. Before long, Newt is throwing his journal back to Jacob (who’s on one of the horses Newt is leading) and begging him to take notes. Jacob’s glad to do it, and after a while Graves even hears him start to ask questions of his own. Tina and Credence start up talk about the actual mechanics of dueling, since he’d never gotten to practice. It’s easy to tell that Tina has had to give the introductory lecture and dueling lesson to Junior Aurors before, because her explanations are fluid and easy. Queenie, though looking around constantly at the plains around them, taking in the vast open sky and green range, keeps up a conversation with Graves.

They pass from the open plains of the valley into a rocky forest. Gargantuan boulders, bigger than the Labbu, sit like cathedrals amid the scraggling pines. They pitch camp in the shade of one of these enormous stones. There’s already a makeshift camp here—a ring of stones for a fire pit, a dilapidated lean-to against the rock, smoke residue left on the face of the boulder.

Graves aches fiercely from the ride by the time they stop. It wouldn’t be so bad, but the unfamiliar position has ignited fresh pain in some of the worse scars on his legs and lower back. He thinks that he’s doing well with not showing how much it hurts, but obviously not as well as he wanted. When he tries to help collect firewood, Credence gently pushes him down to sit on a rock. “I’ll take care of the scars later,” he says, quiet enough that no one else will hear.

“You don’t need to worry about them.”

“As soon as we stop moving for longer than half a day, we’ll deal with them,” Credence says. He’s not looking for a fight, but his tone promises one if Graves argues any more.

So Graves shuts up, listens, and stays put.

It’s late in the evening when Jacob has to go down to the suitcase to fetch something; Graves doesn’t catch exactly what. He does see Queenie sit up straighter, following Jacob’s descent into the suitcase with anticipation. He sits forward a little, waiting with almost as much interest. Credence gives him a curious look, but before he can ask a question, Jacob bursts out of the suitcase again. “Queenie, you’re the most brilliant woman I’ve ever met!”

Queenie practically flies forward into his arms. “I knew you’d be happy!”

“What are they on about?” Tina asks.

“We may or may not have located an oven for Jacob and installed it in the suitcase,” Graves says. Newt’s eyebrows climb up. “You did that?”
“It’s not Transfiguration, so yes,” Graves says. No one is ever going to let the damn bathtub go, are they?

Jacob looks around at them all, arms still around Queenie. “I’m afraid I won’t be joining you riding tomorrow,” he says, “since I’ll be in the suitcase baking.”

When they have that real rye bread he promised the next night, Jacob looks so proud and happy he might just burst. The morning after that, he brings out unbelievably delicious rolls and tells Grave that these are good for eating with coffee. “Better than toast,” he says with a wink.

The inside of the suitcase immediately smells like yeast and baking bread, and the scent wafts out whenever the lid is opened. Dougal—who has a distinct liking for Jacob—sits by him while he’s working, stealing bites here and there to only a mild scolding. Newt also sits nearby that next day, when he has to be in the suitcase looking after creatures, working and talking. When Graves looks in to let them know that Snowshoe tells them they’re in the right place, it’s like looking into some kind of Surrealist painting of domestic life. The Xicalcoatl is on Newt’s lap, Pickett is on his shoulder, and he’s petting the head of a large beetle that is apparently asleep beside him. Jacob is pulling a pie out of the oven, with Dougal peering at it with hungry eyes. Graves almost hates to disrupt them.

But both men are thrilled to come up, because now the hunt for the Jackalopes can begin.

Chapter End Notes

CONCERNING JACKALOPES. These things were popularized in the 1930s as a hoax. I’m just rolling with it and having them in 1927, because Jackalopes are fun. Yay cryptids!
Chapter 34

Chapter Notes

Slow chapter for a slow Saturday. It’s not quite summer yet, and it’s self-indulgent as all hell, but I figured—why not? It’s 90 degrees outside and we all need something fun.

Thanks to Pyxyl, whose obsession finally worked its way into this fic. She is WAY too knowledgeable about Shakespeare, and all research credit for this chapter came from her. She used *William Shakespeare: The Complete Plays In One Sitting* and the Royal Shakespeare Company’s commissioned *William Shakespeare: Complete Works*. She cracked the binding on that latter just for me and then stayed up late to beta this scene because I actually wrote it last night. Thanks, nerd. :)

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Snowshoe takes Newt to the spot where he first saw the Jackalope he claims was chirping. “This is their breeding ground,” he explains, as the pair swing into their saddles. “They’ll be here by the dozen in the winter and spring. Only a few around now, the rest are grazing their last weeks on the range.”

“Keep an eye on the other horses,” Newt says, as anxious for the placid No-Maj beasts as he ever is for the magical menagerie in his suitcase.

“We will,” Queenie reassures him, patting his leg. “Go, before the Jackalopes leave!”

They go, and they go the day after, and the day after that, and the day after that. Jacob gets the hang of horses and so does Tina. Jacob wants to see the Jackalopes; Tina cares a bit less about that. To Graves, it’s obvious: excuses aside, Tina just enjoys riding. She wants to let her horse run, let it carry her away from responsibilities and fears. Her horse is a stubborn animal, but eventually she builds some kind of rapport with it, and eventually it won’t let anyone touch it but Tina and Snowshoe.

Unfortunately, as much as he’d like to go with the others on their trips deeper into the mountains and out onto the prairie, Graves can’t ride. It causes too much pain. He’s not nearly as young as anyone else—except possibly Snowshoe, who won’t say how old he really is—and the scars, on top of that, make horses hell for him. Even after Credence heals some of the worst scars, it’s still not a good idea for Graves to spend hours in the saddle. Queenie is nervous of riding, and though Credence likes to ride something about him spooks the horses. He’s thrown three times before he gives up with a rueful smile and a carefree shrug.

The lack of horses isn’t too limiting, because there’s still more than enough to enjoy in the areas around their increasingly-permanent camp. It’s on a walk up an incline toward a more distant granite ridge that Queenie, Credence, and Graves are the first to see a Jackalope. It’s exactly how Newt described it: bigger than an ordinary hare, but still recognizably lapine, with large soft eyes and long ears. It has a rack of antlers that’s got five points or more. It’s at enough of a distance that Credence is safe to tell them that it’s a Branched Jackalope without scaring it off.

Newt is beyond excited when they inform him that night over the campfire. “I was starting to think
there weren’t any at all!” he says, about to go running out after the Jackalopes right this very instant. Queenie pulls him back to the fire and makes him sit down, to wait for tomorrow.

It’s the middle of July, and there seems to be no end to the Western summer in sight. They haven’t stayed this long in any place since they left New York in May. It seems like real years since then.

Credence practices every night, in public now, aware that he has an audience and playing to them with skill and laughter. Queenie and Tina team up to teach Credence some basic Occlumency. He takes to it well—“It’s all that focus and control you drilled into my head, Graves.” They work out dueling practice again. “Constant vigilance!” Graves says before anyone else can say it, with mock severity. It’s Credence against Graves in a contest of wandless magic which Credence wins handily. Then Tina challenges Credence, and Graves hands over his wand so Credence will have the chance to use it. Snowshoe watches the whole thing with great speculation, and though he can’t have missed Credence’s occasionally billowing shadow, he doesn’t ask any questions. Besides, Snowshoe leaves them to their devices: the man has his own business to attend to, and comes around only every few days, if that.

Tina receives another pigeon from Abernathy. The extradition continues as if they’re deciding the fate of the world, he says, which I suppose they are. But you’d think that such a decision would happen quickly! I’ve seen him, and I’m afraid of what he’ll do. Fontaine doesn’t hold a candle to you or old Graves. How Jeremiah Fontaine got picked for Director of Magical Security is anyone’s guess, and everyone is guessing on his father’s money... We’re working as hard as we can. The paranoia is starting to set in, though. Someone started talking about how Graves got replaced and no one noticed, and how any one of us could have been replaced just like that. And this is the frightening part: no one remembers who said it first. Not one of us, Tina. Fontaine won’t listen to me. They’re here. His followers are here—or perhaps they were all along, and that’s how Graves was taken, and why nobody knew. I wish that we had both of you back. We need you.

She throws the letter on the fire. “It will be fine,” she says, staring into the fire as the paper crumbles into glowing ashes. “He can’t get out now.”

Privately, Graves thinks that Abernathy may have hit on something there. It’s unsettling to consider that Grindelwald had planted people within MACUSA, deep enough that they’d passed background checks and tests, waiting for the right moment to strike. But there are plenty of wizards who would never endorse Grindelwald’s methods, who gasp about atrocities when they see them in the newspaper, and behind closed doors murmur to each other that even if he’s a brute and his methods are tragic he has the right idea. It wouldn’t have been hard to find the right people to climb up the ranks, or to find people who’d simply fall into line.

Grindelwald, for all that Graves would like to dismiss him as a madman, is the farthest thing from insane. He’s brutal, a murderer, willing to do anything to achieve his goals, but he’s not senseless. He’d planned and very nearly executed a complex coup against MACUSA. He’d held Graves in secret for five months almost effortlessly, a feat that could only be accomplished with impressive magic and plans on plans. He uses Unforgivable Curses and torture—for fun, yes, Graves is under no illusion that the things that happened to him were done for simple utility—but that, too, was a method. Graves has become a warning to the rest of the wizarding world. If he, one of America’s most powerful wizards, could have such things done to him, what will happen to others who stand in Grindelwald’s way? Grindelwald did not want Graves to get out, but he’s sure that in Grindelwald’s eyes his escape still appears to be a victory.

That kind of mindset—of being able to lay plans where every possible outcome is a victory—is one that requires cunning, far-sightedness, and patience. The only thing that threw a wrench into Grindelwald’s plans in New York was the unexpected arrival of Newt and his creatures. Even then,
the plans had adapted: his only real mistakes were not realizing that Credence was the Obscurial he sought and then underestimating Credence’s real power. Without Credence, Grindelwald would have won in New York. He’d have had the power to bring the entire wizarding world under his rule. And that was exactly what he wanted.

Well. Graves can only hope that MACUSA and the rest of the International Confederation of Wizards manage to sort Grindelwald out. It isn’t his problem anymore.

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“But I like Roger Ackroyd,” Credence protests. "Poirot's about to try to figure out who the mysterious visitor was!"

“I think this is far more appropriate for a midsummer night,” Graves says, passing the book to Jacob. They’re all just sitting around the campfire as the crickets chirp, and evening sets in, and the boredom is getting to everyone. “Here. A Midsummer Night’s Dream. You could all do with some culture.”

Tina gives him a look. “You picked a play?”

“Yes,” Graves says. “It’s the most accessible of the comedies.”

“Wait, wait, a play?” Queenie perks up. “Aw, we should do it ourselves!”

Newt cocks his head. “That sounds quite fun.”

“I’m in,” Snowshoe comments. “If I get a small role.”

“Sounds good to me,” Jacob says, paging through. “Don’t think I could handle this many voices.”

Credence sits up. “Give me something fun,” he says.

Tina raps her wand smartly on the back of the book and it multiplies once, twice, three times—and there’s enough books for all of them. “Get casting, Graves.”

In the end, Credence plays Hermia. Tina will be Demetrius, Newt is Lysander, and Jacob is Helena—thus fulfilling the lovers. It’s only right that the fairy queen Titania be played by Queenie, and that role is double-casted as Hippolyta, queen of the Amazons. The moment that Tina sees Oberon’s first line, she tells Graves that he has to play the fairy king, which means he also plays Theseus. Snowshoe picks up the roles of Bottom and Egeus, and Pickett is decided to take on the role of all the other fairies. One-time lines will be spoken as needed.

Somehow Graves has to start the whole thing. “Now, fair Hippolyta, our nuptial hour draws on apace—” Graves begins, and immediately has to stop because Tina starts giggling uncontrollably. He waits until she stops to ask, “Am I doing this wrong?”

“You need to look more cow-eyed,” Jacob says helpfully. “Like you’re looking at Credence.”

“…thank you for your sage advice,” Graves says, and continues.

Credence, Newt, Snowshoe, and Tina ‘enter’ and the play continues through Egeus’ presentation of the argument over who should marry the fair Hermia. Snowshoe is commendable, and manages a pomp and gravity that brings them all down to earth for a bit.

Then comes the bad moment: Graves, as Theseus, chides Credence as Hermia to obey Egeus. He has a lengthy soliloquy that’s a bad metaphor about flowers, ending with the line, “—than that
which withering on the virgin thorn grows, lives and dies in single blessedness.”

Credence looks him right in the face and says pertly, “So will I grow, so live, so die, my lord, ere I will my virgin patent up—God damn it, don't make that face at me!” He bursts into laughter, and Graves can’t help laughing along. Credence throws the book at him.

They get on with things, and Newt delivers the best insult in the play, as Demetrius and Lysander argue over Hermia’s affections. “You have her father's love, Demetrius; let me have Hermia's: do you marry him.”

Snowshoe whistles. “Now that’s good.”

The light mood takes a turn for the dark as Newt and Credence play out the love scene between Lysander and Hermia. Surprisingly, they handle it with aplomb. Perhaps it’s the subject matter, Graves thinks. “The course of true love never did run smooth,” Newt says with genuine melancholy.

Credence looks away from his book, glancing at Percival. “Don’t we know it.”

Jacob saves the scene with his entry as Helena. Lysander and Hermia, planning their flight from Athens, entrust her with their secret. This is a mistake, because the Demetrius-besotted Helena decides to tell him that Hermia is gone and the way is clear to take Helena’s hand. “Love looks not with the eyes, but with the mind, and therefore is winged Cupid painted blind,” Jacob says, looking at Queenie with his own absolutely adoring smile.

They pass quickly over the play-within-a-play preparation between Bottom and his friends, because no one is particularly interested in that subplot. There’s a moment of panic when Graves realizes he forgot to cast a Puck, and Newt suggests that they simply pass the role around.

Credence takes it first, and something about his demeanor seems infinitely suited to the role of the fairy messenger. “How now, spirit! whither wander you?” Credence asks of Pickett, perched in his hand. Pickett chatters at length, leaves trembling with excitement, but no one has any idea what he just said. Credence shakes his head. “…that’s really helpful, thanks.”

The back-and-forth-turned-soliloquy ends when Graves and Queenie ‘enter’ for the first time as Oberon and Titania.

“Ill met by moonlight, proud Titania,” Graves says sternly.

He must be doing all right, because something sparks in Queenie’s eyes and she clashes with him immediately. “What, jealous Oberon! Fairies, skip hence: I have forsworn his bed and company.”

Graves holds up his hand. “Tarry, rash wanton: am not I thy lord?”

Queenie pauses for a moment, then giggles. “…honey, no. I can’t do this.”

Of course she can, and they finish out the scene in fine fashion, ending with Titania sweeping away and Queenie begging someone to get her a drink of water because of all the soliloquies she had. And now it’s Credence’s turn. Graves gets to the line, “My gentle Puck, come hither,” and the look Credence gives him is enough to make him want to call all this off right now. Credence obviously did it deliberately, because he has the gall to smirk.

“Oh, Merlin’s beard, here we go,” Tina mutters.

Somehow Graves survives the rest of the scene, barely possible when Credence is half draped
around him the entire time, and they make it to the bit where Helena arrives, following Demetrius. Tina is magnificently scornful: “Tempt not too much the hatred of my spirit; for I am sick when I do look on thee,” she spits with a toss of her hair.

Jacob clutches his hands to his chest. “And I am sick when I look not on you!”

Newt coughs. “Percival, I think you miscast this.”

By the time that Tina and Jacob are done storming about, Queenie is nearly bouncing up and down with impatience. She handles Titania’s little speech with grace and lies down on the grass, actually closing her eyes. Pickett performs the fairies’ song, and because it’s remarkably melodious everyone claps. The Bowtruckle takes a little bow, and then it’s Credence and Newt again.

“One turf shall serve as pillow for us both; one heart, one bed, two bosoms and one troth,” Newt says earnestly, clutching Credence’s hand. He’s a bit more invested than Graves expected.

Credence shakes his head, the image of modest shyness. “Nay, good Lysander; for my sake, my dear, lie further off yet, do not lie so near.”

Now half the cast is asleep on the ground—and Queenie may actually be asleep—so it’s up to Tina to Transfigure Snowshoe’s head into that of an ass. From the ground, Newt shouts lines, “O monstrous! O strange! we are haunted. Pray, masters! fly, masters! Help!—I mean, I’d help out someone with an ass’s head, it doesn’t seem so terrible.”

Tina smiles as she says, “Newt, you’re nicer than most people.”

Out of order, Snowshoe retorts to Newt, “What do you see? you see an asshead of your own, do you?” He cavorts a bit, making Jacob and Credence laugh.

The play rushes on to Titania’s awakening. They do have to actually wake Queenie up, but when she’s awake she’s raring to go. She and Snowshoe play off each other perfectly, and in the firelight it’s easy to imagine Queenie as a real fairy. She professes her love to “Bottom” so fervently that it’s possible to believe that this is really happening in front of them.

“Methinks, mistress, you should have little reason for that,” Snowshoe says, “and yet, to say the truth, reason and love keep little company together now-a-days…what in tarnation is a gleek?”

Queenie looks down at her book, momentarily breaking character. “I don’t know, sugar, but thou art as wise as thou art beautiful.”

The next scene is when the chaos begins, and it’s the single funniest performance Graves has ever seen. Jacob, Tina, Newt, and Credence hurl insults and argue with such ridiculous fierceness that, by the time that Queenie-as-Puck laughs, “Lord, what fools these mortals be!”—this scene, too, feels real.

Credence is responsible for the next two breaks in character. He’s in the middle of shouting the best threats at Helena—“Because I am so dwarfish and so low? How low am I, thou painted maypole? speak; how low am I? I am not yet so low but that my nails can reach unto thine eyes!”

Jacob-as-Helena, who should be afraid, stops and says, “…I can’t take this seriously when he’s looking down at me.”

They try to save the scene, but when Newt shoos Credence off, even he can’t make the lines sound good. “Get you gone, you dwarf; you minimus, of hindering knot-grass made; you bead, you acorn!”
“…what kind of insult is that?” Credence asks, laughing.

Queenie, playing Puck with wicked perfection, chases everyone around, confusing them into exhaustion so that all the enchantments can be lifted at last. When Oberon wakes Titania, Graves finds that it’s not so hard to smile at her with intense fondness. They hold hands, as they ‘exit’, and when she ad-libs a kiss on his cheek Graves doesn’t mind at all.

They have to come back as Theseus and Hippolyta, to resolve the matter, and all the chaos begins to sort itself out at last. The others play their confused roles to perfection, all but Jacob. He’s holding hands with Tina when he says, “And I have found Demetrius like a jewel, mine own, and not mine own,” and looks over at Queenie.

At the wedding scene, Graves announces, “We are skipping the play within a play.”

“Why?” Tina asks.

Graves looks at Newt, who’s holding hands with Credence as Hermia and Lysander. “Too filthy for their innocent ears,” he says sardonically. “‘I kiss the wall’s hole, not your lips at all’, is a particular notary. Another is ‘my cherry lips have often kissed thy stones’.”

“I’m not reading that aloud,” Jacob says.

Queenie, busy paging through the book, shakes her head. “Well, dirty or not, this is the longest scene ever,” she says. “Let’s skip it.”

And they do. The wedding scene moves quick, which is lucky because the play is so damn long to begin with. Queenie is yawning more and more frequently by the time that Graves-as-Theseus says, “The iron tongue of midnight hath told twelve: lovers, to bed; ’tis almost fairy time. I fear we shall out-sleep the coming morn as much as we this night have overwatch’d. This palpable-gross play hath well beguiled the heavy gait of night. Sweet friends, to bed.”

“I second that,” Credence says, stifling a yawn of his own.

Tina glances at her book. “It’s just Oberon and Titania now, we could—”

“Wait, wait,” Jacob says, pointing to the last page. “Puck’s got one more thing.”

Ah: Graves knows this part. “Do it,” he says.

Jacob looks around, as if they’ve an audience watching them while they’re on a real stage. “If we shadows have offended, think but this, and all is mended: that you have but slumber’d here while these visions did appear,” Jacob says. He smiles, opening his hands. “And this weak and idle theme—no more yielding but a dream—gentles, do not reprehend: if you pardon, we will mend. And, as I am an honest Puck, if we have unearned luck now to ’scape the serpent’s tongue, we will make amends ere long; else the Puck a liar call. So, good night unto you all. Give me your hands, if we be friends, and Robin shall restore amends.”

For a second, it’s as if they’re waiting for applause. But nothing comes, of course. It’s only them, performing for no one but each other. There’s no one there to witness their strange little midsummer night’s dream.

Chapter End Notes
Snowshoe’s “small role”: Nick Bottom has 12% of the lines in the play. And he’s only in five scenes. (Theseus has 11% of lines and shows up in three scenes. Oberon takes like fifth place. Graves, you chatty Cathy.)
Chapter dedicated to my dad, who helped me work out the mechanics of One Old Cat as he used to play it with his buddies in the streets of their neighborhoods. Thanks, Dad. :)

He really must be enchanted by Credence, because the last thing Graves ever expected that he would do would be to let himself be coaxed into taking an actual hike. Credence instigated it, of course, half draping himself over Graves’ shoulders, Jacob egging him on in the background. “Please,” he’d said. “I know we can’t really ride, but we could go on foot—just the two of us—”

“Credence, do you not have anything else to do?”

“I’m tackling all his chores while you two are gone,” Jacob chimed in, and Graves rolled his eyes. He didn’t need Legilimency to know that he and Credence hatched this plan together.

With stupidly becoming flirtatiousness, Credence murmured, “Even if he wasn’t, I’d rather spend time with you than do anything else.”

Graves attempted to be unmoved. “And we can’t do that here?”

“I hear it’s really beautiful up in the mountains.”

“I don’t need to visit beautiful places. Wherever you go is lovely enough for me.”

Jacob whistled. “What a line!” Graves shot him a half-amused look, and Jacob just winked at him.

“…that’s cheating,” Credence said, laughter dancing in his eyes. “I’m supposed to be the one doing the flirting. I’ll take it as a yes, though, because I’m going whether you do or not.”

Now here they are, halfway up a mountain. It really is beautiful, there’s no denying that, and though it’s the end of July the air is crisp and cool. A nice change from the heat where they’ve been camping. Credence has hold of Graves’ hand, a pace ahead, pulling him along a bit. They aren’t really on a trail, exactly; it’s just a deer trail. There are rocks in the path and trees that are fairly close to toppling over and falling down the mountain. But Credence insisted that he knew where he was going, and at this point Graves has just decided not to argue. Anyway, it’s a pleasure to spend time with Credence away from everyone else.

He’s finally allowed to openly admit to himself how attractive he thinks Credence is. There’s no more pretense of objectivity: he wants Credence, badly. Graves has been paying attention to Credence’s looks since they left New York, though he’d previously been couching it in a pretense of objectivity. And now, without that excuse, he can really appreciate the young man. He’s still slim, even delicate—given his frame, he’ll never be large—but he carries himself with grace and confidence. He’s beautiful and he knows it. He’s picked up a habit of looking at Graves from under his long lashes, a neat trick considering that Credence is several inches taller. And more and more frequently, it’s all that Graves can do to not just kiss Credence senseless, unbelievably tempted by
a mouth that isn’t constantly set tight in fear or pain.

It’s not like they’ve done much to this point, but that’s only because Graves is desperately trying not to push Credence too fast. Credence is still a little tentative, which isn’t surprising at all. Of the two of them, Credence is the one trying to overcome years of repression and belief that desire is a sin, while Graves is just recovering from a long period of celibacy. If Credence is nervous—well, hadn’t one of the primary concerns been pushing Credence into things he isn’t ready for? He’s dealt with restraint this long. He can wait as long as Credence wants.

They break from the trees in wide, open field. A few yards out into it, Credence stops. He gestures with his free hand, a sweeping motion to encompass the whole area. “See? It wasn’t that far.”

“Is this our destination?”

Credence nods, turning to face Graves. “Any idea why I dragged you out here?”

“There was a reason for this other than youthful caprice?”

“You’re being dense again,” Credence chastises. “I’m starting to think it’s deliberate.” He raises his eyebrows, waiting for Graves to catch on to whatever’s happening here.

Graves genuinely has no idea what Credence wants.

After an expectant moment, Credence heaves a theatrical sigh and flings himself down on the ground, pulling Graves down with him. The grass is hardy and coarse, pricking through fabric, but Graves doesn’t mind. Credence still has hold of his hand, and when Graves laces their fingers together he can’t help but marvel that Credence lets him do these things.

“Look,” Credence says, “you and I haven’t had a moment alone in two weeks. I love our friends, but—I’d like very much to spend time with just you.”

“Here we are,” Graves says, giving a look to the open field around them, “just you and me.”

“And…what are you going to do about that?” Credence asks, challenging. He’s got a gleam in his eyes, anything but shy, and Graves thinks, oh, that’s what he wants.

He’s not careful, when he pulls Credence in for a kiss. He doesn’t have to be. Credence isn’t going to break. It still stuns Graves that this man who’s got a storm of magic and power tangled up in his very bones, who could tear apart this mountain with a flick of his fingers, will let himself be guided and touched like this. More importantly: that Credence, who’s been hurt by so many people, trusts that Graves will not hurt him in his turn.

“Are you—” Graves asks, pulling back after a moment, when Credence seems like he’s having trouble breathing. Somehow he’s ended up straddling Credence’s legs, practically pinning him in place, and he’s not sure that he’s comfortable with that, when this is farther than Credence has ever been.

“I’m fine,” Credence says. His eyes are dark, pupils blown wide, and it seems like he’s actually been kissed halfway to senseless. There’s a flicker of white there, the faint implication that Credence is struggling to control himself, and that’s a bit worrisome.

“This isn’t too fast?”

“Don’t stop.”
Graves considers that. Deliberately, he traces the line of Credence’s open collar, down his neck and over the sharp ridge of his collarbone. He stops, when he hits a button, and very gently tugs on it, as if he’d go on and pull off Credence’s shirt. The young man shivers. “How far, exactly?”

Credence flushes a little. “Clothes on, maybe.”

“All right,” Graves says. He lets go of Credence’s shirt as he leans in to kiss Credence again.

He’d swear he can taste Credence’s magic, when the young man opens his mouth a bit. When Credence finally decides that he’s had enough of letting Graves direct all of this and takes the initiative to lightly nip at Graves’ lower lip, the reminder that Credence is no passive participant and could easily completely turn the tables is enough to send a shock of fear and arousal all the way through Graves. He could do this forever.

They don’t. Credence starts getting a sunburn—he just can’t seem to get tan enough to stop burning—and they’re both hungry. They head back down the mountain, mutually disheveled, Graves with a love bite starting to show on his neck and Credence looking as dazed as if he’d walked face-first into a tree. Jacob is visibly amused when they finally walk into camp around sundown, asking Credence jovially how the hike went. Queenie takes one look at Graves and bursts into laughter, undaunted by his withering glare. Newt starts pulling grass out of Credence’s hair, the image of a mother hen.

“So,” Tina says, sidling up while Jacob and Queenie are dishing up whatever it is they’re eating for dinner, “did you ever expect that you’d be acting like a teenager all over again?”

Graves looks over at Credence, subjected to Newt’s ministrations to his sunburn. The young man meets his eyes and offers a particularly shy smile, and Graves returns the smile. “No, but I like it.”

***

Three days later, on a slow, lazy afternoon, Jacob and Credence start up a game of catch. Queenie sits by, watching, and Graves joins her after a bit. Newt and Tina are off who knows where, taking their turn to get away from everyone else in search of some privacy.

“You’ve got a good arm!” Jacob comments.

Credence grins, pitching the ball across to Jacob. “Street baseball’s a good teacher.”

“Didn’t expect your ma would let you play.”

“She had no idea,” Credence says with a laugh. He has to stretch to catch the next throw, sending it back even faster than it came to him. “That was back when Chastity played, too.”

Jacob bounces the ball in his hand a few times, then whips it deftly at Credence in a solid arc. “Your neighborhood let girls play?”

“No, she let us play!” Credence narrows his eyes and actually winds up properly for the pitch, clearly meaning for Jacob to miss this one.

He does miss, and the ball hurtles through the grass to land by Queenie. She tosses it back to Jacob underhand. “Careful where you’re throwing!” she calls to Credence.

“Jacob should be more careful catching,” Credence says smugly.

“Hey—Queenie, you should join us,” Jacob says, looking over to her.
Queenie pauses for a moment, head cocked, listening to whatever he’s thinking, and then hops to her feet. “I think I will,” she says. She looks down at Graves, a bright smile gracing her features. “You’ll come along, won’t you?”

He does, because he’s physically incapable of saying no to Queenie Goldstein. It’s a simple exercise. The second that Graves is within throwing distance Credence goes from playful to downright competitive, giving the impression that he actually wants to win. Jacob bans magic after the third time Queenie tries a Summoning Charm when someone throws the ball out of her reach. Auror reflexes have made Graves into a nearly impeccable catcher, rarely missing a ball aimed his way. By the time that Newt and Tina ride back in, windblown on tired horses, there’s almost a full game in swing.

A brief break occurs while they all help take care of the horses, under Newt’s direction, and look in on some of the needier of the creatures in the suitcase. By the time they’re all back together, though, Jacob has the gleam of an idea in his eye. “What we should do,” he says, “is play some real baseball.”

“Six people?” Credence asks, considering. “So…One Old Cat?”

Jacob nods decisively. “Sounds about right. Let’s get to work.”

They divide into two teams of three. Jacob and Credence split up in the name of fairness. Credence refuses to play on the same side as Graves, and Queenie decides that she should follow suit. Newt and Tina split up, with Tina joining her sister—“I’m going to take advantage of that Legilimency, thanks very much”—and Newt joining Jacob and Graves.

Together, the two who’ve actually played baseball explain. Each team will have a pitcher, an infielder, and an outfielder, with the batting team providing a catcher. Credence and Jacob mark off ninety feet from the “home plate” to “first base”. (“Well, only base,” Jacob says, when Tina points out the obvious.) The pitcher stands halfway between, the infielder at the base, and the outfielder well beyond that. Credence insists on narrow foul lines, after five minutes of merry argument with Jacob, and finally wins when he points out that this is best played on a street. So they draw lines about the width of a street with the bases between. While all this is going on, Newt locates several non-enchanted broomsticks that Queenie Transfigures into acceptable baseball bats.

Credence and Jacob deliver a slightly jumbled explanation of the rules: a foul means another pitch has to be made, three strikes mean an out, a ball caught on the fly or being tagged with the ball makes an out, and three outs means they change places so the other can bat. They decide on five innings, which is reasonable according to Credence and Jacob.

Picking positions is a bit of an ordeal. On his team, Credence calls the pitcher position. Queenie decides on outfield, because she doesn’t want people running right at her. Tina, when she finds out that she can tag people out with the ball, jumps at the chance to play infield. On his team, Jacob also decides to play pitcher. Graves takes infield, because Newt immediately calls the outfield position: “I played Chaser, in Quidditch,” he explains cheerfully. “Lots of throwing and catching for us. A Quaffle’s a bit bigger than your baseball, but it’s the same principle.”

“A bit? Newt, a Quaffle is a foot across,” Tina points out.

In the first inning, Jacob’s team bats first. Jacob actually is the first up to the plate, and he asks Graves to play catcher while Newt stands by and waits. Credence is fiend, striking Jacob out after three pitches. “Are you related to Waite Hoyt?” he shouts across to the pitcher’s mound, stepping out of the way so Graves can take his turn at bat.
Credence extends no special consideration to Graves. He makes two strikes before finally landing a hit that Tina has to run to catch, by which time he’s reached the base. Newt’s turn at bat is as bad as Jacob’s first. “I’m not a Beater!” he apologizes, as he and Jacob exchange places. This time, Jacob makes a hit, and they score one run before Credence strikes Newt out again and the teams swap places.

Tina takes the first at-bat, and hits a foul her first time. Her eyes get narrow and on the second pitch she hits the ball so hard it rockets past Graves and Newt and vanishes into the distant brush. “Home run!” Credence cheers as Tina sprints out to first base and back to home, laughing at the other team’s stunned expressions.

Queenie does hit the ball, but she isn’t particularly fast and Graves tags her out. Graves tries to tag Credence out, but the young man makes a flying dive for the base and stays in the game, though he skins his bare forearms and rips holes in the knees of his pants. Tina steps up to bat and slams out a second home run, leaving the game three to one as she and Credence both get home. On Queenie’s next try she strikes out properly, and on Credence’s second he hits the ball well but Newt catches it easily on the fly, with a Chaser’s style.

The next four innings follow in a similar vein. Tina hits six more home runs, leading Jacob to start calling her the Sultana of Swat. Jacob discovers that stealing home is difficult when the entire field is only as wide as a street, once getting tagged out by Tina and once by Credence straightforwardly pitching the ball at him. Newt catches half the balls sent to the outfield effortlessly, driving Credence—who has yet to hit a home run—slightly mad. Queenie starts dodging Graves’ attempts to tag her out by reading his mind, and when a halt is called to discuss the validity of Legilimency in the game she successfully argues that it’s making up for Newt being so good at playing in the outfield. Credence takes three more slides into a base and by the end of the game he’s bleeding from his forearms, chest, and thighs from hitting the ground, but remains cheerful. Graves eventually manages to hit a home run. He brings in another run, though not a home run, even if he has to run all the way into the outfield and back to avoid Tina’s very determined pursuit.

At the end of the game, it’s eleven to seven, with Graves, Jacob, and Newt losing. Between them, Credence and Tina manage to hoist Queenie onto their shoulders in celebration, though she nearly topples off and Jacob intervenes in the interest of nobody dying. Credence’s clothes are absolutely hopeless from his four face-first slides across the ground, and it takes Newt and Graves working together to patch up all his bruises and raw spots.

“See, that’s why I like baseball,” Jacob says that evening, after a dinner of bagels and lox, courtesy of Jacob’s hard work. “Everyone can play it.”

“It is a bit more accessible than Quidditch,” Newt says thoughtfully. “Nobody has to be good with a broomstick. Did any of the rest of you play in school?”

“I went out for Quodpot once, if that counts,” Tina says. “The damn Quod blew up in my face and I decided no more sports.”

Queenie shudders. “I couldn’t think straight, trying to play and having to listen to all those people at the same time. ’sides, no one wants a Legilimens on the opposing team. I cheat just by being there.”

“I do not use broomsticks unless under extreme duress,” Graves says.

Credence, who’s wearing one of Graves’ shirts—borrowed without permission, though Graves doesn’t mind—and is practically asleep on Graves’ shoulder, laughs a little. “Of course you don’t.”
“It’s beneath the dignity of the Director of Magical Security,” Tina says. She’s sitting on Graves’ other side, and nudges him playfully in the ribs with her elbow.

“Since I’ve got no dignity, I’d like to try a broomstick someday,” Jacob says.

Newt perks up at that. “You know, I’ve got one in the suitcase somewhere.”

“You can take him flying,” Queenie says. “I’m not very good at broomsticks.”

“Tomorrow,” Graves says firmly, when Newt makes to go into the suitcase. “It’s dark and you’ll crash into a tree.”

Jacob smirks. “Wet blanket.”

“He’s a responsible wet blanket, remember,” Credence murmurs. His eyes are closed; his whole body is completely relaxed. Graves takes his hand and Credence smiles sleepily.

Queenie looks across the fire at them. “Maybe we should all think about going to bed.”

Tina rubs her sides, wincing. “I hurt all over. I don’t think I’ll sleep much tonight…”

Newt, already standing, offers her a hand. “I’ve got some remedies for that,” he says, helping her to her feet. He tucks a wayward lock of hair behind her ear, smiling softly. “Come along and let me take care of you for a bit.”

They go off together, and Queenie and Jacob follow shortly. Graves sits for a minute or two as the fire dies down, letting Credence doze for a minute. He’d played more strenuously than any of the rest of them, and the Obscurus hadn’t stirred at all today. At the moment, Graves can see flickers of it in the darkness around them, but its murmuring is quiet and content. Credence isn’t trying to control it, or keep it in, but it seems happy enough. And the flickers of wild magic, loose in the darkness—they’re captivating.

He hates to rouse the young man, but Graves doesn’t fancy staying outside all night. So he helps Credence up and gets him into the suitcase, drowsy as he is, and Credence is asleep before his head hits the pillow. Graves watches him for a moment. He looks very young like this, scraped and bruised from what has been the most lighthearted day since they left Nebraska, exhausted not from fear or pain but from healthy, happy exertion.

This whole afternoon has been a reminder of things about Credence that it’s very easy to forget, watching him shoulder burdens that grown men struggle to carry and harness magic that would have killed anyone weaker long since. Credence was denied a childhood, though scraps—the games he’d apparently played in the street once upon a time, a friendship with a sister he barely recalls, presumably tenuous friendships with other children—remain. There’s a sort of guilt there, all of the usual thoughts about the failures of MACUSA and the magical community at large, and a much more recent kind of guilt specific to Graves. He’ll never stop worrying that he’s doing the wrong thing with Credence, that he’s somehow taking advantage of him.

He shoves all of those thoughts away, because he’s probably thinking too much again. Today has been good. Better than good—wonderful. And if there’s one thing Graves can do right by Credence, he can make sure that Credence sees more days like this, from here until Credence doesn’t need him anymore. And he will do that. He will.

Chapter End Notes
The word “hickey/hickie” did not come to be associated with making out until 1934. I about had an aneurysm when I found that out. Like, come on, I JUST WANTED SOME EASY SLANG FOR ONCE IS THAT TOO MUCH TO ASK?? Apparentlly it is. “Love bite” had to do.

Waite Hoyt: the Yankees’ best pitcher during the 1920s. His peak seasons were 1927-1928, but he was VERY good well before that. Pitching fiend, mortician, vaudeville comedian, painter…this guy did it all. And maintained some good stats while he was at it! Referred to as “The Schoolboy Wonder” because he signed with the New York Giants at the tender age of FIFTEEN.

There’s some innuendo in the baseball part of the chapter. Hit me up in the comments if you think you got it. (Pyxyl, NO CHEATING. I know you know.)
“Tina,” Graves asks one morning while they’re filtering the water in the Carbuncles’ saltwater pond, “I have an odd question.”

“…oh, this is going to be good,” she says, looking up from her side of the long strainer. It’s an incredibly fine net, which stretches all the way across the pond. Graves has one side and Tina has the other, and together they’re filtering out the algae that inevitably creeps up in this pond. “Go on.”

Graves glances around, feeling rather awkward. No one else is about—Credence is feeding the Marmite, Newt and Jacob are out observing the Jackalopes again, and Queenie is out of immediate thinking range. “Look. I…you know it’s been a long time since I’ve actually, well…”

Tina grins at him. “Is Credence giving you trouble?”

“…in a manner of speaking.”

“In what manner?”

“Don’t laugh at me.”

“You have my word.”

With a sigh, Graves admits, “He sleeps like a damn octopus.”

Tina drops her end of the net with a splash and claps a hand over her mouth, badly stifling a laugh. He gives her a withering look, and at that, she bursts into real laughter, bending double and practically cackling. At last she straightens up, wiping her eyes, and says, “Sorry, that was sympathy laughter, I promise. I’ve never thought to say it quite like that.”

“Does Newt—”

“Yes!” Tina exclaims. “I keep waking up because my arm is asleep, and I have to move him.”

Graves drops his side of the net, feeling bizarrely relieved. “Credence practically strangled me last night, which…well, that’s why I asked.”

At that, Tina nods emphatically. “I completely understand. Newt doesn’t understand the concept of ‘sharing’ when he’s asleep. He ends up with all the blankets.”
“Knees. And elbows. In uncomfortable places.”

Tina splashes across the shallow pond to hop up on the bank next to Graves, plopping herself down. “How do you sleep with him?”

Only slightly more sedately, Graves sits down. There won’t be any filtering finished for a while. “I generally don’t. I was hoping you’d have some advice.”

“If I had advice, I’d have already taken it,” Tina laments. She draws up one knee and links her hands around it, stretching a bit. “I swear, at some point I’m going to end up with bruises from how much he moves around!”

“I already have one,” Graves says. At Tina’s skeptical look, he pulls aside the collar of his shirt to reveal a small bruise near his collarbone. “I told you. Credence just about throttled me.”

Tina shakes her head. “You win.”

“A gracious concession.”

“You know, if we’d even had half of this conversation six months ago, I would have told you to mind your own beeswax,” Tina says abruptly.

Graves, buttoning his shirt back up, glances at her. “We’d never have even tried to have this conversation six months ago.”

“Yes, I know,” Tina says serenely. It’s rather sudden, but Graves notices that she looks much calmer and happier than she’d ever looked as an Auror. There’s confidence there, the hot bravery he knew changing into nerves of steel. “That was before we were friends.”

For the moment, Graves is content to let that lie. She’s quite right. They sit in silence for a minute or two. That’s enough time for the Carbuncles to decide they’re safe, apparently, because a few of them let their shells open up so that light shines out. They only do that, so Newt tells them, when there’s no noise around and they believe that they’re alone. Therefore, because no one in this suitcase is ever exactly quiet, none of them but Newt have ever seen the Carbuncles lit.

Tina’s watching Queenie chase the Niffler, not paying attention to the pond, so Graves taps her on the shoulder, and when she looks at him he holds a finger to his lips and points at the pond. Tina looks and a smile breaks across her face. She leans forward, peering down as the creatures—shelled, lights shining within them and from a gem set in their insectoid faces—begin to move about in the water. It’s an impressive sight.

The moment is interrupted by the Niffler racing past, headed for the forest. “Catch it!” Queenie shouts breathlessly, and instantly the Carbuncles’ shells snap shut and the lights go out. “The little thief stole all my hairpins!”

Tina bolts to her feet and pulls Graves up with her. “You aren’t getting out of helping this time,” she says with an enormous grin, and doesn’t let go of his hand as she takes off after her sister and the Niffler. Graves finds he doesn’t mind following along at all.

***

“Look,” Newt says, “it’s not that dangerous, as long as we don’t startle it.”

“It’s called the Mongolian Death Worm,” Credence calls from a safe distance. He, Tina, and Queenie are well out of the way on the central plaza, watching with varying degrees of amusement.
Jacob is off on his own observation trip of the Jackalopes at the moment, and isn’t privy to this mess.

Graves points at Credence. “He has the right idea.”

Newt holds out a heavy case full of dentistry equipment, a shy, pleading look on his face. “Please? I just need someone to stand by and hand things off to me.”

Even knowing that this is going to go horribly wrong, Graves takes the case. Newt straps goggles onto both of them—“just in case of emergency,” he says, then leads the way into a particularly arid area of sand dunes, well cordoned off from the rest of the desert habitat. Newt holds out a hand when they reach the edge, indicating a halt. He picks up a flat stone, bounces it once in his hand to test the weight, and then skips it across the dunes with an expert hand.

Waves ripple across the dunes and a moment later a huge worm erupts from the sand. Its thick red body is at least five feet long. It’s eyeless, with a cavernous, circular mouth full of teeth. Electricity crackles along the sand wherever it touches.

As it settles, Newt approaches slowly. “Now then, Betty,” he says, sliding his feet along the sand to make as little motion as possible, “I need you to just hold quite still for a moment. You’ve got a bad infection, haven’t you? We’ll take care of that and then you can go on back to hibernating.”

Graves follows, attempting the same care that Newt shows. The case is heavy but he manages well enough, setting it down on the sand with intense care. The worm twitches, turning in his direction, and Graves freezes. Newt doesn’t falter, though, opening the case and taking out a small pick. He lights his wand and, with a boldness that Graves admires, pokes both his hands into the worm’s maw to search for the infection. It’s a torturously slow process. Graves has to hand Newt tools without making so much as a disturbance on the sand. If upset by too much motion, the worm will spit acid right into both their faces. Newt has to be careful with his dental work, avoiding causing the worm too much pain. Yet things seem to be going very well.

And then they aren’t going well. There’s a howl from behind as one of the Graphorns takes noisy offence at something, and the sound of rapidly pattering footsteps, and then an eruption of sand as the formerly-invisible Dougal lands right beside the Death Worm. The worm emits a piercing screech and before either Newt or Graves can get out of the way, spits acid all over both of them.

Queenie is screaming, and Credence may well be too, but both men on the sand are able to keep their heads long enough to get back from the Death Worm. It’s busy burying itself back in the sand. Graves’ face is on fire and Newt is shouting at Tina to hurry up with water.

The next thing Graves knows, Newt is ripping off Graves’ shirt. He’s got it almost all the way off by the time Graves splutters, “What are you doing!?"

“It’ll burn you worse if we don’t get your clothes off!”

Well, then. There’s just as much acid on Newt as there is on Graves and it doesn’t seem like the other man is going to attend to his clothes any time soon, so Graves returns the favor by the expedient of a Severing Charm applied to Newt’s entire shirt.

They’re both half-dressed, shirts and undershirts on the ground, by the time that Tina sprints up to them. “Aguamenti! Aguamenti Maxima!” Freezing cold water douses both men, but when Tina tries to let up Newt shouts her down and tells her to keep casting.

When Newt is finally satisfied that they’ve been properly rinsed off, Tina stops casting. Graves and
Newt are soaking wet, shirtless, sitting on the ground. Graves’ face is still burning a bit from the direct hit of acid. He’s happy Newt thought of goggles beforehand, but now he wrenches them off and looks around. Queenie, Credence, and Jacob are hovering nearby. “No more dental work,” Graves says.

“That’s what wizards call dentistry?” Jacob asks, eyebrows climbing off his face. “I thought that was something else entirely!”

Credence snorts. “If I hadn’t seen it happen…”

Newt helps Graves to his feet. “Well, we mucked that up, but thank you for trying to help,” he says earnestly. “I do think we might’ve gotten poor Betty to an improved condition, so I don’t think we’ll need to do that again.”

“Good,” Graves says vehemently.

“Where did you get that?” Jacob asks suddenly. Graves glances at him and Jacob points at Graves’ side. There’s an arc of scar tissue there, one of the few scars Graves had really forgotten about entirely. It’s fairly remarkable, even given the rest of his extensive collection.

“Oh, that one was a Biting Jinx. Takes a chunk out of you. I got lucky.”

Queenie looks horrified. “Lucky? And what do you call it, Newt?”

Graves turns to Newt and anything he would have said sticks in his throat. If he thought he and Credence were bad—Newt may just be worse. There are acid burns on his arm, a bite mark on his shoulder, huge claw marks that cut a diagonal path across his chest from left shoulder to right hip. And those are just the poorly-healed ones. Others, older, discolor his skin in subtle ways, in all the places that he’s normally covered by clothes.

Newt shifts uncomfortably under the scrutiny. “It’s not that bad,” he says.

“What—how did you get those?” Credence asks softly, indicating the claw marks.

“Oh, that—I came too close to a Roc’s chicks,” Newt says, touching the scar. “She was just protecting them. My fault, really.”

Jacob shakes his head, looking Newt and Graves up and down. “You two…and I thought I lived a risky life in a factory where people boiled to death.”

Queenie whips her head around to stare at Jacob. “What?”

Unconcerned, Jacob shrugs. “Canneries are dangerous. Lots of boiling water. Got to be careful around the pressure cookers…some men just ain’t.”

Tina clears her throat. “And that’s enough of that,” she says firmly. She takes Newt’s hand and pulls him away toward the workshop. “Everybody needs to get some clothes on, and then we’ll get back to not performing dentistry on deadly animals.”

Credence is staring after Newt in naked horror, and as Jacob steers Queenie away Graves moves to stand by him. “Are you all right?”

“I should be asking you that,” Credence says. He’s not looking Graves in the eyes, but at his bare chest, at the variety of scars on display, and it occurs suddenly to Graves that this may be the first time Credence has seen him shirtless.
“I’m fine,” Graves says, tilting Credence’s face up with a gentle hand under his chin. “I was in the field for twenty years. I was bound to pick up some scars.”

The young man still manages to look down. One of his hands traces the outline of a long-faded curse scar that sprawls across the right side of Graves’ chest. That one wasn’t Grindelwald. “I don’t like seeing you hurt.”

Graves ducks into Credence’s line of sight, brushing a few long loose strands of hair from the young man’s eyes. “I’m not hurt,” he says. “These are old. They’ve got no power anymore.”

Credence looks at him for a moment, then leans in and kisses him. It feels like an apology—though for what, Graves doesn’t know—and he’s willing to accept it, for whatever it is. If this absolves Credence of whatever source-less guilt he’s feeling right now, then it’s good.

Chapter End Notes

I am not linking you to research for this chapter. Yes, I did read about industrial accidents in canning factories. Yes, the things that Jacob talks about have happened. No, I am not going to send you articles, they were horrible to read. I had to take a break from the internet for a day. Do yourselves a favor and just…don’t.

THERE IS STILL SOMETHING AMAZING: CRIMSON_VOLTAIRE DREW AN ART. IT IS WYOMING!GRAVES AND IT IS THE MOST BEAUTIFUL THING. GO LOOK AT IT AND SCREECH YOUR LOVE TO THE ARTIST.
Newt convinces them to Apparate to a lake some miles away one day. “It’s lovely, even if there’s not much there but fish,” he says. “I thought we all could swim for a bit.”

They have no bathing suits, but no one is bothered. The men strip down to pants and shirts (well, Credence leaves his shirt on, the other four don’t), and the ladies both work down to the minimal possible clothing. Tina takes a running start and dives in, popping up ten feet further out. “It’s cold!” she yells.

Credence is hesitant, almost as if he’s talking himself into the water, which gives Graves pause. He knows Queenie noticed, but apparently Credence’s Occlumency is good enough now to keep some of his deeper thoughts from Queenie, because when Graves looks at her curiously she shakes her head. She doesn’t have a clue. Besides, Credence is already in, splashing Newt and laughing like nothing’s wrong at all. It’s too sunny and warm to worry about anything, and when Jacob is apparently trying to drown Newt and Snowshoe is competing with Tina to see who can dive deepest in the clear waters of the lake, Graves manages to put it all out of his mind. Credence never goes in deeper than his waist, and he comes out of the water when Tina accidentally dunks him. He assures them all he’s fine, and more than willing to lie on the grassy lake shore and watch them while he soaks up the sun. Graves assumes that Credence is fine.

He really regrets that later.

In the middle of the night, in the small room he shares with Credence in the suitcase, Graves wakes up to the sound of a keening wail and the roar of the Obscurus. He’s on his feet faster than he thought possible, surrounded by a surging darkness that almost blocks out the Lumos Maxima glaring from his wand. The darkness doesn’t quite touch him, but he can taste the magic in the air. And in what little light is getting through the shadows and miasma of terror, Graves can see Credence curled on his side, arms over his head, screaming.

The Obscurus lets Graves pass. He hits the ground next to Credence on his knees, dropping his wand as he goes. Credence never stops screaming, though now that he’s truly awake Graves can hear the words buried in the Obscurus’ howling. NO PLEASE I’LL BE GOOD PLEASE NO NO NO—

Graves grasps Credence’s shoulder. His skin is icy cold. His lips are blue. At the touch Credence opens his eyes, burning white, and looks up at Graves. “Please,” he says, a raw echo of the Obscurus’ rage. “Don’t make me—don’t—please, Ma—”

“It’s me,” Graves says urgently. How long before the Obscurus finds its way out? Credence is going to smoke at the edges, fingers translucent already, body flickering in and out. “You’re not with her! You’re safe! Wake up!”

There’s a moment that Graves thinks Credence won’t hear him. And then Credence catapults into
Graves, arms around his waist, face buried in his stomach. Graves catches him. Credence is just making terrible sounds now, panicked and fearful and heartbreakingly alone. Graves can’t do anything except hold on tighter. He strokes Credence’s bowed back, trying to get him to realize that he’s safe, that he’s not trapped wherever he thought he was.

Gradually, the roar of the Obscurus fades, though it doesn’t go away. It settles around them, waiting to be needed again. Agonizingly slowly, Credence drags himself up so that he’s curled into Graves’ chest. Graves helps him up, pulling him in as close as he can. Credence is still too cold, but he’s not screaming anymore, and that’s slightly better.

“I’m sorry,” Credence says in a cracked voice.

“You haven’t got anything to be sorry for,” Graves says.

“I didn’t know this was going to happen.”

“The Obscurus is unpredictable.”

Credence coughs out a weak laugh. “I should have seen it coming this time.”

“Why?”

Instead of answering directly, Credence asks, “Have you ever heard of the fact that witches can’t be drowned?”

Graves runs through his vague memories from the History of Magic classes he’d taken back in Ilvermorny. All the ways that No-Majs killed suspected witches. Burnings, stonings, that one incident with pressing…oh, yes, and swimming. “Yes,” he says.

“So did…she,” Credence says.

No.

“I was eleven,” Credence goes on. He pauses to swallow, trying to make his voice less rough. It doesn’t work. “Odd things were happening. Things falling when no one was near, things like that. And she…got it into her head that I’d gone the same way as my mother. My real mother.”

His real mother. That’s the first time that Credence has ever mentioned her, and it’s in the context of…this. Graves closes his eyes and tries not to think too hard about homicide. He doesn’t want to upset Credence or the Obscurus. That would be bad.

Credence shifts a bit, speaking so quietly that he’s almost drowned out by the soft hissing of the Obscurus. “I was in the bath. A pot flew into the wall earlier and she…she was angry but she didn’t hit me, so I thought it was all right. And then she came in and told me that it was the devil’s work, and that if I was a witch I wouldn’t drown…” The Obscurus curls in closer, flickering with unsettling light. Credence’s fingers dig into Graves’ ribs a little harder. “…I tried to get out but she forced me under the water…”

The Obscurus mutters like distant thunder, crackling with its own white lightning. Graves combs his fingers through Credence’s hair, trying to keep him calm. The young man is soaked with sweat, almost as if he’s just been pulled out of that bathtub.

“I almost drowned,” Credence whispers. “I woke up on the floor. She wasn’t even there. She just left me. She didn’t even stay to see if I was alive.”
“Oh, Credence…”

And Credence *whimpers*. He tries to speak, fails, and chokes out a sob instead.

Graves draws him slightly closer, though there’s virtually no space between them anyway. “I’m here. You aren’t alone.”

The Obscurus presses in as if seeking comfort, too. Its raw energy is subdued, if not calm. Credence doesn’t even seem to be crying. He’s just trembling, as if he’s going to burst out of his own skin. At least, Graves thinks darkly, he’s still in one Credence-shaped piece.

“I’m sorry,” Credence repeats, over and over.

Graves shushes him and keeps stroking Credence’s hair. This worse than anything he ever expected to hear. What that woman did to Credence is worse than anything Grindelwald ever did to Graves. Credence was a *child*. An innocent boy subject to forces outside his control. He had no choice in the matter, no decision to make. It breaks Graves’ heart that this is what Credence remembers, that when he said *there aren’t many happy memories* what he meant was that what he remembered was this torture. How Credence survived that long without tearing himself apart—it should have been impossible. But here he is.

He wakes up some time later with Credence still clinging to him in his sleep. They’re like parentheses, open and closed, bracketing hell between their bodies. The Obscurus is settled around them, a sleeping storm of magic, moving with every beat of Credence’s heart. There’s still exhaustion written in every line of Credence and tension around his eyes, just visible in the dim, flickering light of the Obscurus, that won’t be erased. But his breathing is deep and calm, his hands are solid and human, and more than anything else, he’s alive.

Chapter End Notes

_The “swimming” of witches was a real thing, unfortunately._
Chapter 38

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The suitcase is quiet one particular evening. They’re all gathered around the central plaza. Newt is working on the full chapter about the Camphruchs, with Credence leaning over occasionally to correct his spelling. Jacob was reading *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* to them earlier on, but has now begun to doze. Tina studies a map, making notes; Graves is sure that they’ll be talking tomorrow about whatever she’s planning. He himself is just watching the Niffler, which is sorting cheerfully through its hoard of stolen coins, shiny pebbles, and the dozens of buttons Credence has given it.

“What we need,” Queenie says suddenly, “is some music.”

Jacob, blinking into awareness, nods. “Yeah, that would be nice.”

Newt coughs. “Ah—I don’t have anything to play music on. I had a phonograph, once, but there was…an accident.”

That’s quite suggestive. Knowing this case as he does Graves is fairly sure that accident has something to do with a stampede. “Care to elaborate?”

Newt’s ears turn a bit red. “No.” Pickett, on Graves’ shoulder, laughs a tiny laugh. So the Bowtruckle knows, but there’s no real way of asking. Unfortunate.

Credence rolls his eyes. “Well, then, what are we supposed to do?”

“Those of us who actually know how to perform Transfiguration could do something,” Tina says, with an oblique look at Graves and Credence.

“I’ve been practicing!” Credence protests. “I could try!”

“Should we talk about yesterday?” Graves asks. Credence groans, planting his face in his hands and going red with embarrassment.

Newt looks between them. “What happened?”

Jacob, who’d been spectating at the time, snorts. “He was supposed to turn a match into a needle. Instead, he turned one match into three hundred.”

“I’m not even sure how he pulled that off,” Graves says. “It was as if he’d cast the Gemino Curse on the thing, but he didn’t come in contact with them at all until they were off the table. That curse isn’t even Transfiguration, either…”

Queenie stands up. “Well, then, Tina, should you and I—”

Tina hops to her feet. “Right. Newt, do you have any chairs you don’t care about?”

It takes a few minutes to find a suitably ugly chair that no one will miss and for Tina and Queenie to put their heads together to come up with the best way to cast the spell. They’re doing it in multiple parts, because neither of them are quite skilled enough to pull off a Transfiguration straight to a phonograph. It’s still elegant, and there are no mishaps or accidental multiplications.
Queenie sets music playing with a simple charm or two, nothing loud or particularly jazzy, but it creates a nice atmosphere.

No one is surprised when Queenie pulls Jacob to his feet to dance with her, setting the phonograph to playing a sweeping waltz. He’s not particularly adept, but a waltz is not that difficult, especially with the more modern embrace. Graves is, however, surprised, when Tina looks at him and says, “We should dance.”

“...you and I?”

“Yes,” Tina says. “I went to a dozen formal events while I was in the Department and I never got to dance with you.”

Graves helps her to her feet. “Was that something you wanted?”

“You know I was no exception to suffering through the mandatory massive crush,” Tina says with a grin. “Of course I wanted to dance with you.”

“Wait—you can dance?” Credence asks as Tina and Graves take up the slightly archaic ballroom position preferred by most people at MACUSA. It hasn’t changed since the 1890s, a rotary waltz with a respectable amount of space between partners and intensely formal conduct.

“You don’t survive twenty years of white tie events without knowing how,” Graves says, and then catches the beat of the music and draws Tina into the waltz. She’s good, lighter on her feet than he is, and impeccably precise. It’s not quite textbook-perfect, but it works out.

There’s polite applause from Newt and Credence when the music draws to a close. Tina flourishes a bow to them. Before much can be said, Queenie flicks her wand and the music changes to a highly informal, sprightly tune. Graves, whose judgement is perhaps a little skewed this evening, holds out a hand to Newt. “If you’d like—”

Newt is visibly biting back a grin as he gets to his feet and takes hold of Graves’ hand. “I’ll warn you that I’m only really good at the Erumpet mating dance.”

“...just follow me,” Graves says.

He sees Queenie pull Credence onto his feet, overruling the young man’s protests that he can’t dance. “This ain’t a marathon dance, sugar, we can take our time,” Queenie says. This leaves Tina and Jacob to pair up, which they do, though they’re hopelessly mismatched by height and can’t seem to stop laughing at each other. Credence has no idea what he’s doing, leaving Queenie to manage the whole dance. Newt is terrible at following, continuously going the wrong direction, once nearly knocking Graves off his feet. Tina keeps stepping on Jacob’s feet. It’s a complete disaster.

When the music ends they’re all laughing. It takes a while for them to calm down. Tina has her hands over her face giggling, Jacob is expounding at length about his broken toes, Newt is sitting down laughing and clutching his sides, Credence is on his back declaring that he’ll never dance again, Graves can’t stop laughing at all the rest of them, and Queenie has to hide in the workshop so she can stop laughing at their thoughts.

“One more dance?” Queenie asks, looking around at them, as she comes out of the workshop.

“Slow?” Tina asks, crossing the plaza to stand by Newt.

Queenie smiles and sends a spell across the plaza to the phonograph. A slow, sweet waltz begins to
play, and she turns to Jacob. Tina draws Newt to her, gently coaching him through the steps; he’s much better at dancing slowly. Of course, that only leaves—

“I don’t know how to do this,” Credence says quietly, when Graves turns to him. Credence has moved, standing at the edge of the plaza, out of the way.

“It’s no harder than magic,” Graves says.

Credence looks helplessly at him. “It is.”

This isn’t about the mechanics, is it? This is about how slow dances are different, how they’re meaningful and romantic and sensual and all the other things that they’re still sorting out together. To Graves, this has been a matter of course—something that he’s shared with friends and political enemies alike. He hasn’t felt the way Credence feels since the first school dance at Ilvermorny, when he’d dared to ask a crush out for the first time.

Oh. Wait. He actually feels like that right now. Incredible.

“Play along with me,” Graves says, and takes a step back. He sketches a bow and smiles at Credence, affecting the manner he used to wear at MACUSA formal events. “Mr. Barebone.”

Credence gives a shaky laugh. “Mr. Graves,” he says.

“I know we’ve only recently become acquainted—” Graves raises his eyebrows pointedly, and at that Credence laughs again. “—but I would still be honored if you would dance with me.”

“Very well,” Credence says, in a passable attempt at haughtiness, wrecked only by his nervousness as he lets Graves pull him closer. “Didn’t you and Tina dance further apart?”

“That,” Graves says, “is how I dance with people who aren’t you.” His voice is shaking a little. Fantastic.

Credence’s eyes are very wide. The modern style of dancing is body to body, the hold a gentle embrace. Graves’ hand rests between Credence’s shoulder blades, Credence’s hand near the nape of Graves’ neck. Their other hands are palm to palm, fingers interlaced, and both of them appear to be sweating. Spectacular.

“And now,” Graves says, “just follow along. Trust me.”

That’s what every good dance needs: trust. And Credence, for whatever reason, does trust Graves. Maybe more frightening, Graves trusts Credence. The music is in four, albeit a very slow four, and by some miracle Graves remembers what he knows about the foxtrot and keeps them moving. Though they’ve certainly done things that are more intimate than this, there’s something about dancing here, where their friends can see them, that seems much different.

He definitely understands Credence’s nerves.

“Why are you so good at this?” Credence asks, after a few moments of finding his feet. He’s close enough that he doesn’t have to speak loudly to be heard over the music.

“I’d like to say I learned for sheer enjoyment, but when I was younger I really learned because they say dancing helps you become a better duelist,” Graves replies.

Credence draws back a bit. “You don’t like dancing?”
Graves pulls him close again. “Not until I was dancing with you.” Well. Now he’s spouting bad poetry. Credence is going to leave him over this.

Except he doesn’t. Credence stumbles a little, losing the beat for a moment, and then presses a kiss to Graves’ jaw. Graves returns the gesture, closing his eyes for a moment and savoring the proximity.

“You should look at Newt and Tina,” Credence says a moment later.

Curious, Graves pulls them through a turn and sees their friends, who aren’t really dancing at all anymore. They’ve got their arms around each other. Newt’s head is on Tina’s shoulder while she, eyes closed, runs her fingers over and over through his hair. They’re swaying in place a bit and nothing more.

Jacob and Queenie are still dancing, though they’ve slowed a bit. Queenie, who’s got her heels on, is a little taller than Jacob, and she’s leaned down a bit to rest her forehead against his. They aren’t speaking, but the conversation they’re clearly having with their eyes is clear enough.

“Do we look that sappy?” Credence murmurs.

“I’m fairly sure we do,” Graves replies.

“Good,” Credence says.

***

For what’s really the first time, Graves regrets not convincing Credence to cut his hair. This awakening would be much nicer if Credence’s hair had not somehow found its way into his mouth. It shouldn’t be that bad—Queenie’s been sharing her beauty concoctions with Credence after he’d decided that he really liked floral scents, and that helps—but it certainly isn’t a thrilling thing to wake up to. But, damn it, Credence is still sound asleep, his head on Graves’ chest, and it’s so impossibly peaceful that Graves doesn’t want to wake Credence up.

They’d slept outside last night. After the dancing was over they’d ended up sitting outside stargazing, unwilling to go to sleep just yet, Graves pointing out the constellations and telling Credence everything he remembers from his long-ago Astrology classes at Ilvermorny. “There’s Polaris—the North Star—and Ursa Major under it,” Graves said, gesturing to the northern sky. “I’d guess Newt was born under the old Bear, since he’s so good with creatures and that’s what those stars are supposed to influence. And then there—that bright red star, do you see it? That’s Arcturus.”

“And his sons?” Credence asked.

“Yes, why?”

Credence only responded with a question, staring up at the sky: “Canst thou bind the sweet influences of Pleiades, or loose the bands of Orion? Canst thou bring forth Mazzaroth in his season? or canst thou guide Arcturus with his sons? Knowest thou the ordinances of heaven? canst thou set the dominion thereof in the earth?”

“Your Bible?”

“Sure,” Credence said. He didn’t sound particularly confident. “My Bible.”

Graves wasn’t entirely sure where to go with this. “Do you…not consider it yours anymore?”
“That’s a really, really complicated question,” Credence said.

There was no good way to address that. Graves was no theologian, and matters of faith were always beyond him. “So. Which book from the Bible is that verse from?”

“Job Thirty-Eight, Verses Thirty-One to Thirty-Three,” Credence said, looking at Graves. “That’s always been one of the better books, to me. Job was a prosperous and pious man, and God allowed the Devil to bring injury to him to prove that his piety wasn’t just because of his good fortune. He lost everything, even his family, but in the end it turned out he was truly a good man, and God in the shape of a great whirlwind restored all that he lost.”

Graves raised his brows. “Oh? Sounds like a familiar story.” Credence sighed and looked heavenward again, but he was smiling. They hadn’t talked much, after that, the conversation disintegrating into a much quieter, more intimate kind of dialogue. Still nothing more than increasingly passionate kissing and careful touching. No clothes disappearing. Credence froze, once, when Graves accidentally ran a hand down the back of his neck, but he didn’t disappear for good.

And now here they are, still dressed like they were when they fell asleep last night. It’s early, but then Graves has always been an early riser. The light grows stronger, still soft, and eventually Credence stirs. As he shifts restlessly, stretching out of the curl he’s been in all night, Graves takes the opportunity to get the hair out of his mouth. Instead of half lying on him, Credence stretches out beside Graves, on his side, one arm pillowing his head.

When Credence actually looks at him, blinking sleep out of his eyes, Graves says softly, “Good morning, Credence.”

“Good morning,” Credence whispers, voice a little hoarse. He rubs his eyes with one hand. “How long have you been awake?”

“Not very long,” Graves says. “Haven’t seen or heard anything to worry about.”

Credence huffs, amused. “Of course you wake up and think about that. Constant vigilance isn’t a joke, is it?”

“I’m trying to keep you safe.”

“I know,” Credence says, kissing Graves gently.

They just stay there for a while, listening to the birds waking up, watching the sky slowly change colors. Credence traces slow designs across Graves’ arms, abstract patterns whose graceful curves feel like the Obscurus looks. Graves runs his fingers through Credence’s ever-longer hair, combing out tangles and smoothing it down.

Of course, inevitably, Graves starts thinking. This is never really a good idea, but he can’t really stop it from happening. He considers the young man next to him. He’s so inexperienced with things that Graves takes for granted. Not just magic. It will be trouble for him, having someone like Graves constantly looking over his shoulder. Credence needs time and space to work out who he is outside of the terrible influences he’s had up to this point in his life and—

“I can hear you thinking,” Credence says.

“Nothing bad.”

Credence sighs. “You have the face on that means you’re worried. What about?”
Graves looks at him. Credence’s gaze is steady. “You.”

“Why?”

“What we’re doing is—”

A finger comes to rest on Graves’ lips, silencing him. “Never mind, I don’t want to hear it,” Credence says. “Just trust me, all right?”

Graves takes Credence’s hand, pulling it away from his face. “I do,” he says, “implicitly. I just don’t want to hurt you. You’ve been through more than enough.”

“That’s not trusting me,” Credence says.

“You don’t understand. I don’t trust myself.”

He’s slightly stunned when Credence reaches out and pulls him close, so that his head rests on Credence’s shoulder and he’s got Credence’s arms around him. It’s such a reversal of their usual positions that Graves has no idea what to say. “I trust you,” Credence says. “I do. Always.”

Chapter End Notes

And now to history: dancing! And not the Lindy Hop this time, though that’s certainly fun. No, this time we just get ballroom dancing—which is a FASCINATING story unto itself. The Jazz Age was a period of collision between the old and the new, the time when the existential crisis triggered by the senseless slaughter of World War I drove the entire world mad. Dance figured prominently: though dances like the Charleston, the Lindy Hop, and others were certainly trendy and prominent (the marathon dances that Queenie mentions were quite the phenomenon), they competed against new forms of ballroom dancing that still shocked and appalled. After all—waltzes and foxtrots required body contact between the dancers! What scandal!

A general history of dance in the 20s. (Vintage Dancer, coming through again!!!)

On the subject of the foxtrot. You can actually watch video here, and explore a great many other dances that are relevant. The rotary waltz mentioned is under “Victorian Dance—The Victorian Waltz”. MACUSA is…a touch behind the times.

On the subject of same-sex ballroom dancing in the modern age (which informed this part of the story). While it doesn’t feature prominently, in any future fic I write where the boys dance I will be sure to emphasize the lead-and-follow aspect of same-sex dance. It’s the “versatile dance” that DeVries discusses, where partners switch roles in the middle of the dance. An advantage, when you’re not dealing with the requirements of traditional gender roles…

Re: part two…I’m aware that “Arcturus” was likely a mistranslation of “the Bear” which is a reference to Ursa Major…which was also included, for the sake of completeness and accuracy. :)
They’ve seen several Jackalopes by now, all adult males with branched antlers. Snowshoe assures them that there will be more soon: “They’ll be comin’ in from the range by now,” he says. “Does with year-old kits, lookin’ for a nice buck.”

Graves is fairly sure that Snowshoe has figured out that not everything is right here. He obviously knows that Jacob is a No-Maj, but Graves has caught the trapper watching Credence speculatively on more than one occasion. “You know,” Snowshoe tells Graves once, completely out of the blue, “it wouldn’t be too bad for you and your young man to come out here.”

“What?” Graves asks, jolted out of his work scouring the horse tack clean.

Snowshoe puts his hands in his pockets, seeming to lounge without being anywhere near anything to lounge against. “Seems that you and Credence are in some trouble,” he says, staring off at the horizon. “Out here, folks don’t mind that much. Most of us are jest as happy if MACUSA stays back East where it belongs. We vote for our Senators when the time comes, but they know we don’t want anyone interfering in our lives. There’s plenty land for two more men.”

Graves is wary of the whole conversation. “What do you know about us?”

“Jest what I’ve picked up by listening,” Snowshoe says obscurely. He slopes a smile at Graves. “I think you two would be plenty happy out here on the range, is all.”

If Newt didn’t like the man so much, Graves would have taken off right then and there. It might be paranoia, but the only thing that will keep them alive in the long term is…well, constant vigilance. But no one else, not even Queenie, is nervous, so Graves chalks this one up to Credence’s shell shock idea and bites his tongue.

Newt and Jacob come galloping in one day, both in a state. “We saw them!” Jacob says, nearly falling over as he dismounts the horse, one foot caught in a stirrup. The horse snorts at him and dances sideways, away from the clumsy weight.

“Chirping Jackalopes!” Newt says, pulling Jacob free of the stirrup. “There were two! I’d guess a male and a female. Antlers very much like the Prong-Horned Jackalope, but white instead of black, and slightly shorter. The male was performing a mating ritual, I think—hopping around the other making the most incredible chirping sounds!”

Credence hops down from the rock where he was sunning himself like some kind of overgrown cat. “Only two?”

“Only two,” Newt confirms. “But I really do think it was a breeding pair, which means that there must be more about. I can’t think why no one’s seen them before!”

“They were pretty small,” Jacob says. “And shy. Bolted at the first sound one of the horses made and disappeared. If you saw them in a herd of other Jackalopes you wouldn’t really notice that they were any different. I’d put money down that’s why no one saw them before.”

“Probably,” Newt says. “I’m going back tomorrow to watch. Their mating rituals are so different, most Jackalopes win over females by fighting each other. I’ll probably be gone for most of the
Tina comes over, too, one of Queenie’s scarves tied around her head to keep back her increasingly long hair. “You want company?”

Newt shakes his head absentmindedly, scribbling madly in his journal even though he’s still standing up. “I don’t mind, I’ve gone out alone lots of times.” He pauses and looks up from the journal at Tina with a small, adoring smile. “You look really pretty, you know that?”

“I do,” Tina says, coloring a little at the compliment, “but thank you.” Newt flicks the end of the scarf over her shoulder and lightly knocks his forehead to hers before heading off to the suitcase to pack for his day-long expedition.

“Have you heard anything from Abernathy?” Graves asks, when Newt’s out of earshot and Jacob is off with Queenie. None of them know where Snowshoe is—he had some business of his own to attend to and won’t be back for a day or two. He said something about riding to Powell. It might be a town off to the northwest. Graves doesn’t quite get it even after looking at the map. The geography of Wyoming is beyond him entirely. There’s just too much empty space.

Tina shakes her head. “Not a peep,” she says. “I doubt he’d write unless something bad happened, though. Are you worried?”

Credence stands just to the side, making them into a triangle of sorts. He watches with eyes that are just slightly off. Since that night when the Obscurus broke out, Graves has noticed that there’s been a change in Credence’s demeanor. Even if his smiles come easily and he doesn’t let on to any problems, he’s constantly slightly distracted. When his concentration wavers, his shadow gets a little longer, his eyes a little brighter. He’s been going off on his own, too, practicing out of sight of everyone and refusing to tell them what he’s doing. Queenie can’t get a read on him, and Graves is worried.

“Yes,” Graves says. “The longer this extradition goes on, the more likely it is that Grindelwald will get out. All the way out here, we might not hear anything until it’s too late.”

Tina furrows her brow. “I think we’re ready, if something happens,” she says slowly. “Queenie’s been practicing with me. She still isn’t very proficient in much beyond Shield Charms and the Body-Bind Curse, but with her Legilimency it isn’t much of a handicap. Newt’s just plain good, I know that. Jacob’s got common sense. I’m all right. And you’re…well, you’re you. And Credence…”

“If he comes, he won’t be leaving,” Credence says flatly. The shadows don’t grow longer, the air doesn’t crackle with magic, but Graves feels that an opportunity might have been missed here. Normally, when Credence is in a mood like this, the Obscurus is…active. That it isn’t is more than a little worrying.

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“Right,” Tina says. She puts her hands on her hips. “I know we’ve been treating ‘constant vigilance’ as a joke, but it’s not, really. I’ve been keeping an eye on things. We could really fight him, I think, if we tried. And we wouldn’t be fighting to kill. We’d be fighting to run, which means we wouldn’t have to hold him long…”

She’s right in that assessment. If Grindelwald comes, MACUSA and the ICW won’t be far behind, and at this point Graves isn’t sure which of those is worse for them. “As long as you’re keeping your eyes open, I’ll sleep easier,” he says.

Tina glances at Credence. “I’m definitely keeping my eyes open,” she says, and it’s as much a
reassurance to Credence as it is to Graves. Apparently Graves isn’t the only one who’s noticed the change in the young man these last few days.

The conversation leaves a pall over the afternoon, but they recover well. By the time that Newt returns from his expedition, Queenie is trying to explain the rules of Quodpot to Jacob and Credence. Tina and Graves—neither of whom are particular sports fans—sit by and interject outrageous, faulty information, just to get Queenie to throw pebbles at them and see Jacob and Credence laugh. Newt joins in, going on and on about Quidditch again, until Tina asks him about Jackalopes, just to divert them off the subject of sports. It’s a good evening, the right kind of evening, and Graves is content.

***

Credence wants more practice with a wand, and who is Graves to say no? Credence deserves the chance. And he’d never admit it out loud, but there’s sort of a possessive thrill in watching Credence use his wand. They go to an empty space, away from anything that could be catastrophic if destroyed, and far away from where Newt is searching for Jackalopes. He hands over his wand to Credence.

They start again with proper posture. Credence is used to standing however he pleases, exerting his will without worrying about good form. Even with recent practice, he hasn’t been working on posture. Not a problem when he’s doing simple Charms, but that’s the kind of thing that could get him killed in a bad fight. Luckily, unlike many of the young Aurors Graves has trained, Credence is already used to exercising total control over his body. He’s receptive to criticism, working until he has the stance right.

“It will become automatic with practice,” Graves says.

“I know,” Credence says. “I’ve seen you fight. It’s very…instinctual, isn’t it?”

Graves winces a bit at that—he’s a soldier and he knows it, but there’s something a bit unsettling about handing that knowledge off to Credence of all people. He goes on anyway, setting aside his misgivings. Tina may make endless fun of him, but Moody has the right idea. Constant vigilance. This is just another weapon in Credence’s arsenal.

The wand is a bit hesitant, but Credence warms up to the work quickly. He likes to gesture widely, the kind of wand-work that looks more like a performance than a utility, and after a few minutes of watching Graves realizes that Credence is copying Queenie’s style. She casts spells like she’s dancing, fluid and styled with flourishes and grace notes. Newt’s style is quick, given to small movements, not easy to read, or to mimic. Tina’s just about the same way. And though Graves doesn’t make any pretense of subtlety, lashing out without any attempt to hide what he’s doing, he’s been told that he lacks a certain style. It’s about efficiency. None of them would be appealing to copy, so Credence has clearly been watching Queenie.

He’s good at it, and impressive enough to watch—Graves tries his best not to get distracted watching the way Credence moves—but it’s not a style for fighting, and that’s why they’re doing this. He coaches Credence through bringing the style down a bit, avoiding overextension, reining in his tendency toward exuberance.

By the end of the day, Credence can barely hold his wand arm up anymore. “I don’t know how you do it,” he admits, handing the wand back over to Graves and massaging his shoulder with a wince. “Just sticking your arm out like that all the time…ugh.”

“You get used to it,” Graves says. “I’ve had a lifetime’s practice.”
It’s an incautious statement and he thinks about taking it back, but Credence just nods. “I’d like a wand of my own, someday,” he says. “I’ve got a lifetime left to practice with it.”

Chapter End Notes

Minor politics bitching. I’d like to know if the Senate of MACUSA is elected or not. (I know I commented on this, way back in Chapter 4, but it bears repetition.) Can we have more information on this, please?? Also, unicameral legislature, for real?? I mean, NEBRASKA has a unicameral legislature, but honestly…not everywhere is Nebraska!

Anyway. Next chapter is Saturday as usual. :)
Chapter 40

Chapter Notes

In the business, this is what we call the endgame.

Two nights later, a bedraggled pigeon nearly crash-lands into the middle of the camp. Everyone starts in surprise, but no one moves to hide, because the pigeon is nearly dead and obviously won’t be flying back to New York any time soon. Tina seizes it and pulls the small scroll from its leg, then hands the pigeon to Newt, who coos to it and gently starts preening its skewed feathers. “It’s from Abernathy,” Tina says tersely. She scans the paper and then, wordless, hands it to Graves.

HE’S OUT.

*I’m sorry to start with such a warning but you have to know. Fontaine is dead and so is Ailward Moody. I was right. His followers were among us the whole time. No one saw it coming. I’m lucky to have escaped with a broken arm. They didn’t fight to kill: they were fighting to run. As soon as they had the upper hand they fled. We’re working overtime to find him but be careful. You and Scamander helped bring him in. He’ll be looking for you too, if he’s half the vindictive son of a bitch I think he is.*

Graves passes the letter on to Jacob, who reads it and swears. “Fuck! We’re in for it now.”

“What do we do now?” Queenie asks, reading over Jacob’s shoulder, eyes wide with fear.

“He’ll come looking for me,” Credence says. He’s sitting almost in an attitude of prayer, elbows on knees, forehead resting on his clasped hands. “He’ll know they didn’t kill me. The best thing would be for me to—”

“No,” Newt says, cutting Credence off. “You aren’t running away and fending for yourself.”

Credence doesn’t look up. “I can fight for myself now. I don’t want to put any of you at risk.”

“We’ve come all this way to protect you,” Tina says, getting up and coming around the fire to sit by Credence. She rests her hand on his back, rubbing slow circles over his spine. “We’re not just going to give up now.”

“It ain’t worse than having to hide from MACUSA,” Jacob says, almost cheerful.

Graves does think there’s something to Credence’s argument. “If he and I went together—” he starts. His sentence doesn’t get halfway out of his mouth before Queenie is starting up with indignant, righteous fury.

“Oh, don’t you start that too!” she snaps. “You’re one of us, and you don’t get to just take off as soon as it looks like we might be in trouble.”

“Think about it, Queenie,” Graves says, losing what little patience he has. “Of all of us here, Grindelwald has the most reason to chase Credence and I. He wants his weapon back. He’ll want to finish what he started with me.”
“Percival, that’s all the more reason we shouldn’t just abandon you,” Newt says. He’s still petting the pigeon, keeping it calm, but he’s watching them all with worried eyes.

“We have the best chance of surviving him,” Credence argues. The unspoken thought—and neither of us cares if we don’t—passes through Graves’ head, and from Queenie’s wince he knows it was heard. It doesn’t need to be repeated aloud.

Jacob sits forward, the fire casting worried shadows over his face. He’s leaner now, Graves notices suddenly, the weight of the well-fed New York baker disappearing under the strain of a life on the run. Choices be damned, it’s because of Graves and Credence that he’s out here now. “You don’t have to survive him alone.”

Credence jerks upwards, knocking Tina’s hands away, and around him the Obscurus explodes into the night. Tina falls back, crashing into Jacob with a cry of fear. The sudden eruption of shadows is enough of a shock that even Graves gets back. “I won’t put you in danger!” he snarls. The Obscurus rages around him, never touching any of them, only boiling with controlled magic and anger. “I won’t have your blood on my hands!”

This is new. Every other time the Obscurus has appeared it’s been an accident—triggered by negative emotions or an outside event—or as an incidental entity, brought out by the use of excessive power. But now—now it’s there because Credence called it. He’s standing in the middle of it, perfectly clear, eyes still dark, skin not bleeding off into the Obscurus.

“You see this?” he asks, voice reverberating from the roiling monster behind him. “It’s me. Didn’t you say that, Newt? This is what I can do. I’m not helpless anymore.”

“Merlin’s beard,” Newt whispers.

It seems that nobody knows what to do. Queenie is shivering, eyes wild, lost in listening to the explosive thoughts of the Obscurus. Graves isn’t sure that right now Credence will listen to anything he has to say. Tina is frozen in place and so is Newt.

And then Jacob says, “Kid. You’re not helpless, and I’m really glad we have you on our side. But if you think we’re going to leave you just because you can take care of yourself, you’re not as smart as I thought you were.”

“What?”

Under Credence’s glare, Graves isn’t sure how Jacob doesn’t quail. But the No-Maj doesn’t budge. He just sticks his hands in his pockets. “All of us can take care of ourselves,” he says. “I ran a bakery. Tina was the Director of Magical Security. Newt’s a world-famous scientist. Queenie’s the smartest Legilimens in the world. Graves is one of the best wizards in America. But you don’t see us running off on our own, do you?”

Credence visibly hesitates. The swirling of the Obscurus slows. “No,” he says.

“That’s ‘cause we might be all right on our own, but we’re better together,” Jacob says. He shrugs, almost lackadaisical. “None of us is very good at being alone. None of us had friends, back when Newt showed up in New York. Pile of misfits, we are. Sure, we could be okay on our own. Hell if I’m not happier with all of you, though.”

“I could get you all killed,” Credence argues weakly.

Jacob smiles, lopsided and sad. “I could get Queenie killed, you know,” he says. “If we get caught, they’ll just wipe my memory again. They’ll execute her.”
“And you don’t see me running away,” Queenie whispers, clinging to Jacob’s arm.

Graves thinks, fleetingly, of the idea of mirrors. And then—why not? “We’re better mirrors of each other,” he says, half to Credence and half to everyone else. He looks around at them—at Newt, who’d cared about him from an ocean away; at Tina, who’d trusted him when no one else cared to; at Queenie, who’d looked into the dark mess of his soul and smiled anyway; at Jacob, who despite barely knowing him had tried to save him from himself.

It’s another epiphany, one that feels like the sudden lifting of the weight of the thousand stones pressing down on his chest. There are many people in this world that Percival Graves would gladly die to protect. He’s built his life on this assumption: he would not live to see old age. Even without his post-Grindelwald death wish, he’d always been ready and willing to die. No good Auror could ever assume that they wouldn’t be called upon to lay down their life to save someone else. He’d die for any innocent person caught up in Dark forces beyond their control.

But these people—these are people who Graves wants to live for. He wants to help Tina carry the weight of her fears for everyone else. He wants to see the beauty of the world through Newt’s eyes. He wants to learn from Jacob how to laugh and smile at even serious things. He wants to see Queenie dancing through life every day. He wants to wake up beside Credence tomorrow and all the days beyond.

This epiphany makes him miss what happens next, because next time he’s really aware of what’s happening around him Credence has dismissed the Obscurus and he’s between Jacob and Tina, possibly crying into Jacob’s shoulder. Queenie is there, too, saying, “It’s okay, honey, we’re not angry with you…”

“Are you all right, Percival?” Newt asks, appearing next to Graves. He’s studying Graves with some concern, as if he’s trying to diagnose an ailment.

“Better than I’ve ever been,” Graves says honestly.

Newt’s smile is bright as he takes Graves by the hand and pulls him around the campfire to the others. Pickett scrambles over their joined hands and up Graves’ arm to perch inside his collar, tiny arms tickling at his neck. Queenie hears them coming and pulls them into the small crowd. Newt steps in and fits neatly into the space between Queenie and Tina, putting a gentle arm around Tina and letting go of Graves’ hand to put his other arm around Queenie. For a moment, Grave isn’t sure where he fits into this—and he’s more than content to stand outside, keep watch over them, and then Jacob steps to the side and casts him a meaningful look. It’s all the invitation Graves needs to reach out to Credence, who practically buckles into him, leaning on Graves and Jacob like they’re the only way he can stay upright at all.

The weight of the world is not gone from his shoulders. But it’s easier to carry when he has other people to help him bear it.
Chapter 41

Chapter Notes

So.

FBAWFT 2 announcement, eh?

I have...thoughts. Those are Yet To Come because half of me wants to reserve judgement and half of me wants to lose it right here, right now. I only have one question as raised by the announcement: Where Is Percival Graves And Why Include Abernathy But Not Him?

Shortest chapter ever, I am SO sorry, but it’s because the footnote is AS LONG AS THE FUCKING CHAPTER ITSELF. Together, they make an only-slightly-short regular chapter! (Please forgive me. Please.)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Their plan, when they make it, must be simple: wait. When Snowshoe returns, they’ll ask his help in getting over the Medicine Bow Mountains and across the rest of Wyoming into Utah. From there, they’ll find their way to the Pacific coast, where Newt has a friend who’ll be willing to sail them wherever they need to go. “She’s hauled me as far North as the Arctic and all the way south to Tierra del Fuego,” Newt says. “She won’t think that a trip across the Pacific will be a problem.”

“That’s our best chance at getting MACUSA to let us go,” Graves says.

“Why?” Jacob asks.

“If we can get out of the United States, we’re no longer in MACUSA’s sole jurisdiction,” Graves explains. “Once we’re off shore, we enter a no-man’s-land where no one country has legal authority to pursue us. The ICW as a whole would have to decide that we’re enough of a threat to be worth pursuing, which they won’t.”

Tina interjects for the confused others. Graves hates foreign policy and the intricacies of the ICW enough that he's quite content to let her explain things. “The International Confederation of Wizards has a lot of power to enforce the Statute of Secrecy, but its authority is subject to concord among countries. Hypothetically, any country could swing a veto on an action, but in reality it’s Nigeria, Brazil, the United States, Britain, and China who hold the most sway. They lead the biggest internal coalitions and have the most individual power. The Supreme Mugwump could make a unilateral decision to pursue us, but if enough countries disagree he’d be risking his seat of power. He won’t do that.”

“So if we can get on a boat, we don’t have to worry about MACUSA anymore,” Jacob summarizes.

“Right,” Tina says. “And, even better, if we get on a boat, we can get to a country where the laws about enforcement of the Statute of Secrecy are a little less strict.”

“Like England,” Newt says. “You and Queenie could have a public relationship there. I mean, I
don’t recommend that we go there, the Ministry would probably turn us right over to MACUSA. But in China I don’t think they mind relationships with Muggles much. The United States has a bit of a chip on its shoulder about the Statute of Secrecy, honestly.”

“I’d have a chip on my shoulder if I’d been founded because of Salem,” Credence points out.

Tina frowns thoughtfully. “China, huh?”

Queenie cocks her head. "Are we really thinking about going there? We'd be total foreigners!"

"I doubt that even if Britain and MACUSA joined forces to convince people to chase us that China would let it go," Tina says, eyes narrow. "They’re still rightfully angry about how the British Ministry of Magic and MACUSA didn’t help them at all before the No-Majs got their independence. And the Party is controlled by nationalists right now so they’ll veto anything Britain or MACUSA tries to do. Hell, they might even grant us asylum out of justified spite."

“Hold up, hold up. The ‘Party’?” Jacob asks.

“The National Magicians’ Party of China,” Tina says. “They used to have a bureaucratic service that looked like the No-Maj one, but since the No-Majs transitioned to an independent government they followed the rest of the country and founded a party. It’s the equivalent of MACUSA or the Ministry of Magic. They’re a damn reasonable bunch. Zhou doesn’t hold with a lot of the stuff MACUSA and the European Ministries have done, especially since she was in New York during the mess last December."

"We wouldn’t be bothered if we went to China,” Newt chimes in. "They're quite lenient in their statutes about lots of things. Very progressive country, honestly."

"And you think we'll be able to get away with it?" Credence asks. He's leaning against Graves, looking tired and drawn.

Tina nods. "Madame Ya Zhou might be Picquery’s personal friend, but at the end of the day, politics are politics…she'll bow to the will of the Party.”

"Anything you wanna add, Graves?" Jacob asks,

Graves shrugs. “That’s where I was going to recommend we go to begin with,” he says.

“You should have said that before Tina started her lecture,” Credence says.

“I didn’t want to interrupt,” Graves says. “There’s a reason Tina was a better Director of Magical Security than I ever was and it mostly has to do with foreign policy.”

Tina grins at him. “I was always picking up your slack,” she says. “You just didn’t notice.”

“Oh, I noticed,” Graves says. She really hadn't, she'd been too junior for most of her career to handle high-level negotiations, but the teasing is much lighter than the rest of the conversation. So he goes along. “I just let you do it. Less for me to worry about.”

The planning meeting dissolves into ordinary talk, as it always does, and Graves is more than content to let it happen. Although he can’t stop looking over his shoulder, it’s good to have a plan. They have somewhere to go, somewhere they're reasonably certain that they’ll be safe. Grindelwald is on the move and MACUSA and the ICW won’t be far behind. Soon enough they’ll have to strike out boldly, taking decisive action if they want to survive. For now, on this early-August day surrounded by his ridiculous band of misfits and malcontents, Graves is content.
Nice question first. Did you know that “international waters” as we know them weren’t really a thing until 1958, when the Convention on the High Seas was ratified by the UN?

Now on to the screaming. (Tina sums up most of this in-text, if you wanna just skip it and wait for Wednesday. I won’t be offended at all, I annoy myself. <3)


Just...go read this. This rant right here. It’s my very angry screaming about how much of a clusterfuck the politics of the wizarding world really are when you stop to look at it. A summary: the International Confederation of Wizards is not a UN equivalent, the entire Wizarding World is a completely dysfunctional national security state the likes of which has not been seen since Orwell, JK Rowling should have hired a political science consultant before she started in on international affairs, there is no such concept as “human rights” in the Wizarding World, and I need to get a fucking life.

Now: let’s talk about China and ICW politics and why I made the call to send the cast there, specifically. So, I’ll buy Rowling’s idea that the Western countries brought wand-making to all the other countries in the world and nobody had a problem with this or called them out on imperialist activity, even though I have a lot of reasons to call bullshit on that. What a creepily-utopic and Eurocentric idea. EVEN given that, I’m fairly sure that China would still REALLY have issues with Britain/America. Here’s your history lesson for the day.

In 1839, the First Opium War began because Britain was trying to import a metric fuckton of opium into China to get rich quick. The Chinese government, rightfully alarmed by revenue losses and increasing numbers of opium addicts, abolished the trade. The British government lost it and went to war on the Chinese. Though they called it “gunboat diplomacy”, which is a nice way of saying "shoot you until you do what we want".

The war ended with the Treaty of Nanking, which ceded Hong Kong Island to the British and ALSO granted an indemnity to the British. This is the first of the “Unequal Treaties”. And it’s where the shit really hits the fan, because the Chinese are (again) rightfully pissed about this and eventually the Second Opium War kicks off, ending with MORE Unequal Treaties and the ceding of more Chinese territory to Britain. Things continue in an uneasy kind of weird “absence of violence” punctuated by outbreaks of fighting as various groups try to boot Britain out of China (one of the most famous being the Boxer Rebellion). America got involved, too, at various points.

In 1912, Chinese nationalists founded the Republic of China. In 1919, Sun Yat-Sen established the Kuomintang, which would eventually go on to become the politically dominant party in China under Chiang Kai-shek, who would lead China during World War II. This was the beginning of the rise of China, in many ways, as they finally made it out of the trap of imperialism.

During World War II, they WERE one of the Allied powers, joining the United States
after the U.S. laid an embargo on Japan. A lot of the relationship had to do with common enmity with Japan—notably, the U.S. and China cut ties after 1949. To this day, China rhetorically tends to justify its international actions by claiming that it's time for someone non-Western to carry the torch of imperialism. Which. I don't particularly like any brand of imperialism, but fair enough.

What does this mean for the story? Well, assuming that the Wizarding World is real, and functioning behind a curtain of secrecy, I would assume that the Chinese magical government would be PISSED that the British and American magical governments didn’t lean on their Muggle counterparts to back the fuck off. It's only 1927; the real-world historical events that made the U.S. and China allies haven't happened yet. People in China are still celebrating throwing off the Western yoke, which happened on 15 years previously. Historical context is a bitch, honestly.

In essence, this is what this lecture boils down to: you CANNOT tell me that the Wizarding World is never influenced by political movements of Muggle society. The second that political cultures come into contact, there’s cross-pollination of ideas. Even if Muggles aren’t aware of what’s happening, wizards certainly would be. Even in Rowling’s own writings, there’s hints of it: AMERICAN WIZARDS PARTICIPATED IN THE GODDAMN REVOLUTIONARY WAR. You can’t tell me that wizards didn’t get addicted to British opium, that Chinese nationalism didn’t filter into the wizarding community, that there was NEVER any spillover of real-world politics into the wizarding world. THAT’S NOT HOW IT WORKS.
Chapter 42

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Jacob shows up a day later with a Jackalope kit in his arms.

“…oh, Houdini save me, what is that?” Tina asks from where she stands studying a map of the United States, spread out on a folding table Newt dragged out of the suitcase this morning.

“It’s a baby Jackalope!” Jacob says, scratching between its ears. It’s trembling, tiny nose whiffling, snuggled into Jacob’s arms. “I found it by its mother’s body. Don’t know what happened to her, but…I couldn’t just leave it there.”

Graves, sitting in the shade of the boulder, can feel the headache already. “How many more lost creatures are we going to pick up?”

“It won’t take up any space at all!” Jacob argues.

Queenie comes over and gently pets the tiny Jackalope’s back. “It really won’t. Ain’t a problem for us to just take one more.”

Credence, sprawled insouciantly on the ground with his head on Graves’ lap, turns his head to look at everyone else. “Really. We just went through the ‘we’re better together’ speech and you’re all going to say no to a baby Jackalope?”

Tina plants her forehead on the table with a thunk. “I can’t believe this.”

“You know Newt will love it,” Jacob says.

“I know!” Tina wails into the map. “Just—you’re the one who gets to feed it and take care of it! I won’t do that!”

“How long will it be before she starts taking care of it too?” Credence stage-whispers to Graves.

Queenie laughs. “She already wants to pet it.”

Newt, when he comes back from observing Jackalope mating rituals that evening, is exactly as excited as Jacob predicted. “Poor thing,” he says, kneeling down to look the Jackalope in the eyes. “I wouldn’t usually take in a baby like this, but if its mother was dead…”

“It was,” Jacob says. He hasn’t put the Jackalope down since he came back. “I wouldn’t have just picked it up for nothing.”

“Damn it, Newt,” Tina mutters halfheartedly, “do you even have space in the suitcase for it?”

“Her,” Newt corrects absently. “See these markings behind the ears? The females all have them.”

Tina throws a pebble at Credence, who’s badly disguising his laughter. “Do we have space?” Tina repeats, slightly louder.

“He’s not listening, honey,” Queenie says. “But yes, we do.”

“Give this one up,” Graves advises. “I can say from experience that when you bring something as
sweet as that Jackalope home, you’ll do just about anything for it.”

Credence looks at him. “…are you talking about me?”

“It was a compliment,” Graves says with a smile. “Don’t let it go to your head.”

“Oh, for…” Credence tries to look exasperated and fails, only succeeding in looking slightly lovesick instead. He looks away, watching as Tina constructs a rabbit hutch under Newt’s direction. And his hand sneaks in to curl tight around Graves’.

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That’s the last carefree evening they have. Snowshoe rides in the next morning, laden with supplies, and he isn’t surprised when Tina bolts over and tells him that they need to leave immediately. “I was thinkin’ of you when I was in Powell,” he says. “Couple of good witches there, pay a pretty penny to get the New York Ghost every day instead of the Denver Gold Dust Weekly like everyone else ’round these parts. They jest about knocked me out with a paper yellin’ about Grindelwald gettin’ free.”

“Yes, he’s out,” Tina says. “And we need to get to Utah.”

“It’s a good time to go,” Snowshoe says, looking back at the great shadows of the mountains standing monolithic against the sunset. “Not snowy up there yet. Sure you don’t want to go to Denver and take a train?”

“We’re sure,” Newt says.

And because no one dissents, they head out the very next morning, breaking camp as quickly as they initially pitched it.

“Are you sure you’ll be good to ride?” Credence asks, pulling Graves aside for a moment amid the chaos of packing and preparation. “You could always go in the suitcase, no one would fault you—”

“I’ll be fine,” Graves says, pressing a kiss to Credence’s forehead. “I’d rather be where I can see what’s happening and keep an eye on everyone.”

Credence gives him a searching look, but lets it go. Everything is packed into the suitcase, Newt included. He apologizes, but needs to look after the baby Jackalope and take care of the other creatures. Tina takes point, then, riding next to Snowshoe. There’s magic at work here, because the horses are more tireless than they have any right to be and ride much more quickly than an ordinary No-Maj horse should.

They stop for the night after hard riding all day. Snowshoe has a copy of the Ghost which they’ve all passed around. It tells them no more about Grindelwald himself than Abernathy did, but seeing the pictures of the damaged Woolworth building and reading about all the things that Abernathy didn’t tell them—the injured Aurors, the fact that the President herself was nearly killed—injects a new urgency into all of them. Snowshoe picks up on it, and doesn’t stop until after night has fully fallen.

Graves stays stoic that evening, though he thinks he might actually need a cane before he’s fifty if this keeps up. He’s not quite in real pain yet, thanks to the healing Credence did those weeks ago, but he suspects it will become worse soon. Their journey isn’t over yet.

Talk that evening is quiet. Tina has a pen. She marks up the map, plotting routes through Utah, Nevada, and out to California. Jacob and Newt look over her shoulder, quietly suggesting
improvements. Queenie holds Jacob’s hand and stares unseeingly into the fire. Newt vanishes after a while, alone, to take care of the creatures; Graves thinks he’s feeling the strain of fugitive life in a way that he possibly hadn’t earlier on. Snowshoe keeps his own counsel, smoking a cigarette, and Credence is off to the side, reading a heavy book.

“I’ll stay out here,” Graves says, waving the others off when Tina finally folds up the map and suggests they turn in. “It will be better to have two on watch.”

“Should I—” Credence starts, tucking the book under his arm.

Graves shakes his head. “Snowshoe and I can keep our eyes out just as well,” he says.

“I’ll come up with Newt in a couple of hours so you two can get some sleep,” Tina says firmly. “It’s called a watch rotation for a reason, Graves.”

The night is quiet. A few crickets chirp and the woods occasionally rustle; the horses snort and stamp sometimes; but there’s very little to hear. The fire dies to embers. Snowshoe dozes off, as much a part of the landscape as the trees around them.

Graves stretches, now that he has a moment when no one is watching him, more than a little envious of how limber everyone else is. They’re so young. At this moment, aching from old scars that no amount of magic can truly heal, Graves feels older than his forty-one years. He wonders again what in the hell Credence sees in him, a man forced out of the prime of his life and into early twilight years. Graves isn’t particularly bothered by the question of his age except when he considers Credence. The young man, undernourished and abused for most of his life, has finally reached real physical maturity. He’s stronger and faster and healthier than Graves, and the disparity will only grow as time goes on.

He’d like to bring this up to Credence, but there’s a part of him that suspects they may not need to have that conversation. Graves is fully aware of the risk they’re running right now. There are many ways this could end, and most of them are bloody. He or Credence or both could die. One or both of them could be taken by Grindelwald or MACUSA. There’s only one happy ending—they survive and get away to safety—and a dozen tragic endings. If they survive, Graves will worry about the question of age. If they don’t…well, it won’t be a concern anyway.

Tina comes up from the suitcase, sleepy-eyed and mussed, four hours into the night. “Go sleep,” she says, muffling a yawn behind her hand. “I’ll handle it from here. Newt’ll come keep me company in a bit, he’s watering the Kyactus sprouts…” She sits down on a log and blinks at the fire, trying to wake herself up.

Graves is almost not surprised when he steps into the cabinet-room and finds that Credence is still awake. A candle is burning. He kneels with his back to the door, and that book open next to him, speaking softly. Graves pauses, not wanting to interrupt this obviously private moment.

Credence’s voice is that same reverent tone he always uses when speaking words from the Bible. “…daily oppresseth me. Mine enemies would daily swallow me up: for they be many that fight against me, O thou most High. What time I am afraid, I will trust in thee…”

Careful of making too much noise, Graves sits down against the wall, listening. Credence must know he’s here—the door opened, there were footsteps—but he’s not taken from his reverie. He keeps speaking, reciting this long prayer. It’s a plea for deliverance, one Graves wonders how many times in his life Credence has whispered to a deaf deity.

“Thy vows are upon me, O God: I will render praises unto thee. Amen,” Credence says, and there’s
a small, quiet moment, before Credence turns to Graves and closes the Bible beside him. He moves to sit down next to Graves, in their customary position, shoulder to shoulder and hip to hip. “Psalm 56. I’ve always liked that one.”

“It’s appropriate for the moment.”

Credence doesn’t answer immediately. He winds his fingers between Graves’. The candle flame wavers. “I didn’t finish the Psalm,” he says after a while.

“Why not?” Graves asks, looking at Credence.

“It didn’t seem right,” Credence says. He tilts his head, resting the back of his head against the wall. “I might be able to say it to God someday. Not yet.”

Graves hums a noncommittal sound. He lets his gaze trace the clean line of Credence’s profile, the graceful curve of his neck. He’s not sure what Credence needs to hear, so he won’t say anything. It might be best for him to say nothing at all.

Then Credence turns his head so he’s looking steadily into Graves’ eyes. “This is the end: For thou hast delivered my soul from death: wilt not though deliver my feet from falling, that I may walk before God in the light of the living?” He hesitates, then plunges on with something like recklessness in his voice, “I can’t say that to God. I can say it to you.”

His heart strikes his ribs once, twice. There are inexplicable tears burning at the corner of his eyes, but Graves manages to keep his voice steady. “You really are going to go to your Hell if you keep this up.”

They’re almost nose to nose; Graves can feel the warmth of Credence’s breath against his face when he speaks. “I’m a witch,” he says, amused by himself. “I’m already halfway there.”

Graves could protest: no one like Credence could ever go to hell for something like this. But he’s not one for theology, never has been. And Credence’s head is already at the right angle, so Graves takes the simple expedient of closing the gap between them. Credence smiles into the kiss, bringing his free hand up to Graves’ face, thumb running along that damn broken cheekbone with a reverence Graves doesn’t deserve.

The candle burns itself out before they fall asleep, still wearing their travel-stained and dusty clothes, wrapped around each other. Newt has to wake them up the next morning, and though by midday Graves is fighting to stay alert, he doesn’t regret anything. When Credence glances at him, he gets the sense that Credence feels the same way.

Chapter End Notes

Psalm 56 (KJV): “Be merciful to me, O God: for man would swallow me up; he fighting daily oppresseth me. Mine enemies would daily swallow me up: for they be many that fight against me, O thou most High. What time I am afraid, I will trust in thee. In God I will praise his word, in God I have put my trust; I will not fear what flesh can do unto me. Every day they wrest my words: all their thoughts are against me for evil. They gather themselves together, they hide themselves, they mark my steps, when they wait for my soul. Shall they escape by iniquity? in thine anger cast down the people, O God. Thou tellest my wanderings: put thou my tears into thy
bottle: are they not in thy book? When I cry unto thee, then shall mine enemies turn back: this I know; for God is in me. In God will I praise his word: in the Lord will I praise his word. In God have I put my trust: I will not be afraid what man can do unto me. Thy vows are upon me, O God: I will render praises unto thee. For thou has delivered my soul from death: wilt thou not deliver my feet from falling, that I may walk before God in the light of the living?”
Chapter 43

Chapter Notes

ANNOUNCEMENT (THAT WAS ALSO MADE ON TUMBLR)

NOTICE THAT THIS CHAPTER HAS POSTED A DAY EARLY

THIS WILL REPEAT NEXT WEEK

THE AUTHOR IS HAVING A LIFE CRISIS AND THEREFORE THE SATURDAY CHAPTERS FOR THIS AND NEXT WEEK WILL HAPPEN FRIDAY

IT WILL BE A LONG WEEKEND FOR ALL OF US (someone save me these are going to be such long weekends) BUT WE WILL ENDURE

I LOVE YOU AND WILL SEE YOU ON MONDAY

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The journey through the mountains is uneventful. Snowshoe is familiar with these lands. He goes unerringly, and they follow him faithfully. This a wild place, where few people come, and Newt listens alertly when something roars from a distant peak. “There are supposed to be dragons in these mountains,” he explains, staring off with a preoccupied expression. “Though I wouldn’t want to meet a wild one just now. I worked with Ukrainian Ironbellies in the war, but I had help then, and they were nearly tame besides…”

“You’ll tangle with the Swooping Evil alone but not with dragons?” Jacob asks.

“The Swooping Evil isn’t as bad as its name makes it sound,” Newt replies. “Dragons are.”

They’re lucky enough not to see any dragons in person. Snowshoe keeps them to the valleys at the feet of the peaks, well below the treeline. There’s already a white dusting at the tops of the highest peaks, and the nights are colder than ever.

“I’m keepin’ us away from mountain towns,” Snowshoe explains. “Don’t like outsiders much. And you seem to want to stay away from other wizards much as you can.”

“You’re perceptive,” Jacob says, looking up from feeding the baby Jackalope.

Snowshoe cocks an eyebrow. “Got to be out here,” he says. “You think Dark wizards only come out back East?”

And there’s something new for Graves to worry about. His headache is ever-present these days, alleviated by absolutely nothing. It feels like Grindelwald is only a step behind, and that’s enough to keep him awake all night just to try to avoid the nightmares. He isn’t alone: Credence is twitchy and abrupt and snappish, all trace of good humor gone.

They’ve given up on even pretending to sleep separately at this point. Graves breathes easier when he knows exactly where Credence is and that he’s alive, and Credence seems more settled in his own skin when he’s near Graves. Ghosts haunt them both, and the only time either of them seems
to feel safe is when they’re close enough to each other that they might as well be one body. Even so, neither of them are sleeping well, and everyone notices. No one says anything. They understand.

After three days they cross into what Snowshoe says is Utah. It looks absolutely no different to Graves. Two more days pass before they’re within seeing distance of Salt Lake City. Here, Snowshoe leaves them. “Got to get back to business,” he says. “If the sense I get from you all is right, and I don’t doubt it is, there’s trouble comin’, and I owe to folks back home to be there for them when it hits.”

“Stay out of the way. It’s more than any of us can handle alone,” Graves warns, shaking Snowshoe’s hand.

“Thank you,” Newt says sincerely, handing over the reins of his horse. “We’d never have made it this far without you.”

“I think you’d have been jest fine,” Snowshoe says with an inscrutable smile. He swings into the saddle and tips his hat. “Good luck to you all.”

And just like that he’s gone. He takes the horses back with him: now that they can see the city, Tina and Newt will Apparate to the outskirts, while the others stay in the suitcase. It’s strange to do this again, but they can’t avoid it. Salt Lake City has considerably fewer wizards than many other cities—due to the powerful influence of the Mormon religion there, which with less rancor than other denominations condemns the “Black Arts”—but it’s a population center, and there will be a magical community with much stronger links to the East and MACUSA than any place in the rural Midwest.

So they wait in the suitcase. With sudden downtime and a sense of general anxiety, no one feels much like talking. Credence makes the effort, though, and now that he has three other captive players he convinces them to try that card game “Rook” again. It’s a welcome distraction, even if Queenie wins every time because she can read their minds and no poker face is good enough to fool her.

It’s after dark by the time that Newt and Tina come down into the suitcase. “Everything’s gone to hell,” Tina says, rubbing her eyes. “It’s—it’s all we could find—oh, Newt, just give Graves the damn paper.”

Newt hands over a paper, much-crumpled and torn on one edge, like someone had been waving it frantically. The headline takes a moment to sink in.

**GRINDELWALD ATTACK IN CHICAGO**

“No,” Credence whispers.

*On Saturday, a pitched battle occurred at the branch office of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement in Chicago. Grindelwald and two dozen or more of his followers launched a brutal attack on the Tribune Tower, deliberately attempting to provoke the No-Majs into action. Five Aurors and several No-Majs caught in the crossfire were killed. Grindelwald was only driven back by the unexpected assistance of the infamous No-Maj gangster Al Capone, the only American No-Maj to win concessions from MACUSA regarding the International Statute of Secrecy. Between the combined efforts of the Aurors and Capone’s men, Grindelwald was forced to flee the scene.*

*President Picquery will travel to Chicago to inspect the damage to the Tribune Tower Auror Office and personally oversee the investigation and pursuit of the Dark wizard...*
“It’s coincidence,” Jacob says stolidly. He puts his arm around Queenie, steadying her. She looks like she’s about to topple over. “Got to be. He’d know there was a branch office, wouldn’t he? I mean, he was pretending to be Graves for a while. If he wanted to hit MACUSA where it hurts, Chicago is the obvious choice.”

Graves can’t escape the unsettling feeling that this isn’t a coincidence. Somehow, Grindelwald knows where they are. Credence has his arms wrapped around himself like he’s trying to hold the Obscurus in. Newt looks—not afraid, but cold. And Tina folds her arms and looks around at all of them. “We have to assume it isn’t a coincidence,” she says, an echo of Graves’ thoughts. “We have to assume he’s looking for us. That he has some way to track us.”

“On that assumption,” Graves says, “we can’t afford to stay long in Salt Lake City. Is there any business you have here, Newt?”

Newt shakes his head. He’s standing behind Tina, arms around her, chin hooked over her shoulder. “Even if I did, this is more important,” he says. His gazes flicks around at all of them, at the creatures, and if he’s thinking anything else he doesn’t say it.

“Let’s stay a day or two,” Queenie says. “We ought to take some time and store up on supplies, especially if we think we won’t get another chance.”

“That’s fine,” Graves says. “I’ll ward the room tonight, make sure it’s safe.”

Credence gets up. “I’ll start brushing up on…well. On everything,” he says, cold and grim. His shadow mutters mutinously, anger in the sound. And just then, Graves thinks that he would be all right if Credence let the Obscurus out.

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That night feels like the night before a battle. As usual, in tense moments like this, Graves can’t sleep. Credence is out cold, though, and so Graves feels safe enough to leave him and take a walk. He doesn’t leave the suitcase: rather, he meanders through the artificial world, trying to stay calm.

It’s very unexpected when he runs into Jacob near the edge of the jungle habitat. They nearly trip over each other in the dark, and for a second there’s a lot of panicky whisper-shouting and apologies.

“What are you doing out here?” Graves finally manages to ask.

“I could ask the same thing!” Jacob says.

Graves, finally remembering that he can’t see a thing, mutters, “Lumos.” His wand flares with light. “I couldn’t sleep. Now please explain why you were out here where you could almost get killed.”

Jacob sighs. “Do not tell Newt.”

This is going to be wonderful, isn’t it? “Jacob…”

“I’ve been trying to make friends with the Nundu.”

“You what.”

“The Nundu,” Jacob repeats.
No, it doesn’t make any more sense the second time he says it.

“And you say I have no sense of self-preservation!?” Graves says. He can barely restrain himself from just shouting. “It would eat us as soon as look at us!”

Jacob shakes his head. “It’s aggressive, but it’s not a brute,” he says. “Newt introduced us, and it didn’t eat me on sight, so that means it probably won’t.”

Graves is too damn tired for this. He runs a hand through his hair. “I can’t believe this.”

“Look,” Jacob says. “It’s incredibly dangerous, and it isn’t a tame animal, but it’s not going to kill me. I just feel like it needs to be…really on our side.”

“It’s never been subdued by fewer than a hundred wizards working together,” Graves says, remembering the Nundu entry in Newt’s book. “What makes you think you can?”

Jacob shakes his head. “You’re missing it,” he says. “I’m not trying to subdue it. I’m trying to get it to be our friend. You really think Grindelwald will bring a hundred wizards to a fight? He’ll never see a Nundu coming.”

Graves could shake the man. This is, bar none, the worst idea that any of them have had since this whole mess began. Jacob could get them all killed.

It’s almost as though Jacob can hear his thoughts, because he says, with tired frustration, “Look. If you’re going to get mad about trying to tame things that could kill you, then maybe take a look at your whole thing with Credence.”

Graves does not want to admit that Jacob is right. “You don’t need to worry about this,” he says, changing tack. “If it comes to a fight—”

“If it comes to a fight I’m not leaving you all to die,” Jacob says. “If all of you die, I’ll get killed anyway. Might as well try to help while I’m at it.”

“You’re more of an idiot than I am,” Graves says. “Not to be blunt, but you’re a No-Maj. In a fight, you’ll get in our way.”

“Not if I’m directing a damn Nundu,” Jacob says. “It’s the only way I can even try to help. I’m not like you. I ain’t got much, but I’ve got courage.”

Graves stares at Jacob. In the wandlight, against the shadowy backdrop of tangling tropical plants he looks formidable. He was a soldier, Graves suddenly remembers. He’d served on the front lines of the Great War. It’s easy to forget, because Jacob wears his scars so differently than anyone else. Graves hadn’t served himself—he’d been an Auror, too busy trying to cover up the actions of wizards who’d illegally joined in the fighting. But the Great War had touched all of them.

Credence had been in hospitals, Newt had tamed dragons, Tina had been a Junior Auror and working under Graves at the time, and Queenie…well. She’d have heard a lot about it. And Jacob had been there, in the trenches, fighting in that war to end wars. He knows what this risk is, what he might lose if he stands by them.

“You know what you’re doing,” Graves says, stepping back. “Please. Just don’t get yourself killed on a fool’s errand.”

“I won’t,” Jacob says. He claps Graves on the shoulder as they start their walk back toward the center of the suitcase. “We’ll both see this through. Don’t worry about it.”
The thing is, Graves feels as though things are coming to an end. And that end will be dark and bloody. It will be ugly. People will die. As much as he wants to live for his friends, his family, he suspects that he may not get the chance.

Chapter End Notes

Regarding the Nundu. Okay, so…I’ve always had the assumption that many of the creatures in Newt’s case are, a) slightly more domesticated than your average magical beast, and, b) are significantly more intelligent than your average No-Maj beast. I do not think, given Newt’s relationship to the Demiguise and the Bowtruckles and the Occamies and all the rest, that it would be impossible to formulate something similar with even something as deadly as the Nundu.

And if anyone were going to try something like that, Jacob’s the one.
Salt Lake City fades behind them, almost unnoticed. They’re all looking forward, at the events to come. They have to cross the rest of Utah, all of Nevada, and California before they reach their tentative safety. It’s been easy to forget that this was a fugitive attempt, that they’re not safe and never have been. Chicago and its speakeasy, St. Louis and its Reptile House, Nebraska and its river, Wyoming and its sky—they’re like snapshots now, fond memories fading fast in the face of a hard, cruel reality. It’s hard to remember what the music had sounded like in Chicago now, or—even further back—what it had been like to live in that brownstone in New York. What an awful joke life plays on him, Graves thinks: his memories of Grindelwald are much stronger than any happy memory he has. He couldn’t cast a Patronus Charm now if he tried.

Lately Graves feels like nothing so much as broken glass, cobbled together into the vague shape of a man. Like he’d cut himself if he isn’t careful. He’s not the only one feeling unsettled. The others are withdrawn, each lost in the fugue of their own private fears. They try to help each other, but there’s not much to be done. There’s no reassurance that will guarantee the uncertain future. The only thing they have no is the unspoken promise that, come what may, they’ll stick together until the very end.

Tina produces a jacket with a Shield Charm in it for Jacob, which can take a few hits before it falls apart. Credence practices magic, dueling and healing, until he collapses. Queenie drills all of them in Occlumency, refusing to listen to any protests of competence, saying only that if Grindelwald is half the Legilimens they think he is they can’t afford to be lax. Newt and Graves fight each other until they can’t hold their wands anymore. Jacob is awake at all hours, spending every spare second with the Nundu.

It feels desperate. It is desperate. Graves is afraid, bone-deep terror guiding his every move. He knows too well what Grindelwald can do, what he’s willing to do, what he will do if he catches up with them. Graves has already decided that if push comes to shove, if there’s no other way out, he’ll put his wand to his own head and cast a Killing Curse. He knows how difficult that is, how much it has to be meant, willed with every fiber of the being.

He also knows that if he’s driven to that point he’ll be able to do it easily.

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“I sent a pigeon to Abernathy,” Tina announces one evening, when she and Newt come into the suitcase to confer. “I know it’s a risk, but I wanted him to know where I was, because if Grindelwald moves toward us again he’ll be sure to write.”

Newt has another newspaper. “The ICW is going to pass a resolution declaring Grindelwald an international threat,” he says, holding the paper up so they can see the headline.

“They didn’t already?” Credence looks stunned.

“No,” Graves says. He rubs his eyes. “He was Germany’s problem, then England’s, then ours. But of course trouble like this spreads. People agree with him. He could be Vietnam’s problem next, or Ethiopia’s, or Peru’s.”
“I don’t see how anyone could agree with him,” Queenie says. “He’s a murderer!”

Graves looks up at her. “He wants the same thing you do,” he says.

Tina slaps him hard on the shoulder. “Don’t you dare—!” she starts, but Jacob cuts her off.

“Graves is right,” he says. “Grindelwald wants to get rid of the Statute of Secrecy. So do Queenie and I. We aren’t supposed to be together. In an ideal world, we wouldn’t have to be on the run.”

Tina very gently slips an arm over Queenie’s shoulders. She’s staring at Jacob with a tragic expression, barely keeping her composure.

“Don’t just—it isn’t just MACUSA,” Credence says. “I mean—the reason no one found me, it was because Tina tried to rescue me and got in trouble for breaking the Statute. Which was MACUSA, but they didn’t make the Statute. The only reason I needed to be rescued at all was because no one could know that I might be supposed to have the power to throw plates through windows. What about that girl in Sudan? What about other people like us? We’re all like this because of the Statute of Secrecy, no matter where we’re from.”

There’s a moment of silence.

“And now we have another problem other than trying to flee the country,” Graves says heavily. “If the ICW passes that resolution, there will be international support flooding into America to find Grindelwald. Which means that if anyone finds us on American soil, they’ll be obligated to hand us over to MACUSA.”

“What about if we get out like we planned? Will anything change?” Jacob asks.

“No,” Queenie says. She sits up a little straighter. “I’ve listened to enough politicians in my life to know that the ICW will worry a lot more about Grindelwald than they will about us. America was the only country damaged by an Obscurial. And if the Obscurial isn’t in Grindelwald’s hands where it can be used as a weapon, they won’t care about it. I’m sorry to be so blunt, Credence, but you know it’s the truth.”

Credence leans into Graves. “No offense taken,” he says softly. He doesn’t sound offended, that’s true: he simply sounds hurt and tired.

“Then nothing changes,” Jacob says. “We get out of here and head for the coast. We get on a boat, we sail to China. MACUSA can’t touch us.”

“That’s the theory,” Graves says.

“It had better be true,” Tina says.

The conversation ends on that abrupt note. Newt goes away with Jacob, both of them immersed in discussion of the Nundu. Tina pulls Queenie off to talk, leaving Credence and Graves alone.

“God,” Credence breathes, resting his head with a small thud on Graves’ shoulder.
“I know,” Graves replies, reaching up to run his fingers through Credence’s hair. “I’m sorry.”

Credence is altogether too still. “He’s right, you know,” he says. “That we shouldn’t have to hide what we are. Not because we’re better. Because we’re just like them in the things that matter.”

“I know,” Graves repeats. What else can he say? Credence is right. Graves knows Jacob now, knows Credence (a wizard, certainly, but raised as a No-Maj), has met the exceptional-though-wicked Al Capone. He’s seen the marvels the No-Majs are capable of producing: those huge ships sailing on Lake Michigan, the railroads stretching unbroken from New York all the way to San Francisco, the cities full of steel skyscrapers that no wizard has ever even bothered to try to create. No-Majs are every bit the equals of wizards.

“I’m sorry I came to you,” Credence whispers after a moment.

Graves freezes, shocked. “What?”

“I shouldn’t have come with you, when you asked.” Credence’s hands are twisted together, painfully tight. “I’d have kept you all out of so much trouble.”

“Credence…”

“If I’d let them take me,” Credence says relentlessly, “you’d still be all right. So would everyone else. You wouldn’t be hunted. No one would be trying to kill you.”

This is all wrong. “And you’d be dead,” Graves says.

“Good,” Credence says.

No. “Listen to me,” Graves says, voice harsh even in his own ears. “We’d all have been unhappy. Jacob still wouldn’t have his memories. And you’d be dead. I wouldn’t know you.”

There’s a damp spot on Graves' shoulder. Credence is crying. “I brought this on all of you. Just like I did everything else. You’d be better off if I was dead.”

“Oh, hell…Credence, no,” Graves says. He wraps his arm around Credence’s shaking shoulders. “I wouldn’t be. I swear. I’d rather be here with you than anywhere else.”

Credence doesn’t answer for a moment. “Where else would we be?” he asks quietly. “I mean. If we weren’t here. If things were…better.”

Graves half-smiles. He’s thought about this before, and it’s not hard to elaborate. “You’d have grown up in a happy family and come to Ilvermorny right on time,” he says. “With a heart like yours, Wampus would have roared so loud the whole school would have shaken. A wand would have picked you out right away. And you’d have been the best of students. Old William—the oldest Pukwudgie at the school—he’d have loved you.”

“Did he like you?”

“Oh, hell no,” Graves says with deep feeling. “I was a ‘rapscallion’, in his words. Climbed things I shouldn’t have climbed, set off spells I shouldn’t have set off…I just made more work.”

Credence sniffs a little, but he might be smiling. “I bet you did. I’m too responsible to be ridiculous…what happened next?”

Graves looks up at the distant ceiling of the suitcase, thoughtful. This he’s definitely considered at
length. “You graduated at the top of your class, and went tearing right off to Auror training. And you worked yourself to the bone, because you wanted to help everyone and the best way to do that is to be an Auror. So you passed the aptitude tests and became a Junior Auror.”

“We were—you—”

“It was nineteen twenty-three,” Graves says. Credence’s knuckles are a little less white, his hands a little less shaky. This is calming for both of them, it seems. “You had the desk in the back left corner of the Auror Office, the one right under the window. Shared it with some nice kid. You’d have been shy as all hell, first day, and about died of nerves when I walked in and said hello.”

Credence twitches. “You were the Director of Magical Security. Why would you have said hello to me? I was just a Junior Auror.”

Graves shrugs. “I made it a policy to know all my Aurors, junior or not. And the shy ones like you always want to know that you belong. I should know, I was just like that when I was a Junior Auror.”

“You? Shy?”

“Terrified,” Graves says. “I imagine I’d have looked just the same to you as the Director did on my first day. Stalking around all in black, looking impressive while I ordered people around.”

Credence shifts a little bit. One hand comes to rest on Graves’ leg. “But you smiled at me anyway,” he says quietly. “And I decided I was in the right place after all.”

This is ridiculous, and Graves should feel ridiculous. But he doesn’t. “And things went quite well all the way through to nineteen twenty-six,” Graves says. “You followed me around with a terrible case of hero-worship, and I let you because I saw a little of myself in you. Of course it wasn’t only that, because…well. We’re who we are. But I was a professional. So you were just a very good wizard on a fast path toward becoming a Senior Auror, showing your bravery over and over.”

“And I thought you were stupendously handsome and talented,” Credence says. “I just wanted you to think I was good. So I did my best for you all the time and hoped you noticed.”

“I did notice,” Graves says. There isn’t a world where he wouldn't notice Credence.

“…and then nineteen twenty-six happened.”

Grave nods slowly. “July third,” he says. How’ll they resolve this one?

“It went differently,” Credence says. “I knew—I knew something was wrong, because suddenly you weren’t treating me professionally. I couldn’t say anything, because I was a Junior Auror and what was I supposed to do? But I reached out to Tina anyway and we started working together, because I was always going to love her. So when Newt came to New York, we were ready.”

“There was no Obscurus, because you were already safe,” Graves says. “Newt’s creatures got loose anyway, but they all had you to help recapture them. And Grindelwald showed his hand too soon, because you and Tina both knew that I’d never order an execution like that.”

“We brought him in and ended things right there. And then we found you,” Credence says.

Graves sighs. “I still promoted Tina to Director of Magical Security, and I also made you a Senior Auror. And we got Jacob an exception so he and Queenie could be happy.”
“And we got to be happy, too,” Credence says, sitting up. “You retired, but I didn’t let you hide. I stayed around and kept on having terrible feelings about you, until I finally cracked and kissed you. And once you got your head back on right you kissed me back.”

“So things turned out the same for us, in the end,” Graves says.

Credence looks away. “Just… happier.”

“I think,” Graves says, turning Credence back to look him in the eye, “that I’m plenty happy right now, Grindelwald behind us or not.”

The smile Credence gives him is wobbly at best. “All right,” he says softly.

He can’t ask Credence to feel the same way. He just pulls Credence into a tight hug, trying to reassure him that things will be all right. Of course Graves isn’t sure that they will be, but he wants—Giles Corey, how he wants—that happy ending they both imagine.

Chapter End Notes

My beta reader: "This is the best shitty cheese I've ever read. Like. Top-quality Velveeta right here. I mean it's really good, but damn."

Isn't she nice when she tells me she likes my writing? :P
I care deeply about Nevada and its people and find it a fantastic state. Graves, on the other hand, is fucking terrible at geography and gets confused about anything west of St. Louis. He also does not like the desert. Ergo the comment about Nevada being boring.

Tina receives a pigeon from Abernathy when they’re halfway across Nevada. This state is mostly empty desert, devoid of interest. They’re stopped in a hotel in some small town whose name Graves didn’t bother to learn when Tina comes into the suitcase with the letter. Her face is drained of all color.

“It wasn’t a coincidence,” she says simply, and throws the letter down on the table.

You said you weren’t going to be able to get to a newspaper because you’re in Nevada and Tina—you have to know, I know you were there—he’s in St. Louis. There was an attack on the Eads Bridge and then another at the Grand Crucible. No one was ready. There’s no MACUSA branch in St. Louis! There are dozens of people dead, hundreds of No-Majs Obliviated. I don’t know how but I think he knows you were there. He has to. First Chicago, where you said Newt was, and then where you and Newt were together? President Picquery won’t listen to me—I swear that someday someone in this damn government will hear what I say—but you must know. Be careful. You were in Nebraska—I’ve at least convinced the President to send a team there as a preemptive countermeasure. And we’re posting bulletins in every state of the Union that extreme caution must be exercised.

“Damn it,” Credence says. He closes his eyes and shakes his head. “This is…”

“How is he tracking us?” Jacob demands.

Graves has an awful feeling. “It has to be Credence or I,” he says. “It has to be. We’re the only ones who’ve been in close enough contact to him for long enough for him to plant something in us. There are spells…he could have left something in one of us that would have let him follow us.”

Queenie swallows hard. “I can look,” she says. “I can…I can go inside your head. Much deeper than I do normally. If he left something, then I can find it. Maybe even get it out of you, if I try. That isn’t a sure thing…”

“But do it,” Credence says, turning to her. “Now. Right now. Please. Get him out of me.”

“Wait, wait,” Tina says. She pushes in between Credence and Queenie, hands on Credence’s chest, placating. “You don’t know—this takes a lot of energy, okay? It’ll hurt you a lot. If we do it, you have to mean it.”

Graves pulls Credence back. “Then let me go first,” he says. He ignores the sudden thrum of fear in his blood. “I’m—I believe I’m used to this kind of Legilimency.”

Queenie makes him sit down and tells Newt and Jacob to clear the area of any easily excited
“I won’t be able to stop once we start,” Queenie warns as she sits down facing him. “I have to get all the way to the bottom of your mind. If he put something in your head—he’s a smart enough wizard to know it would have to be buried deep.”

“I trust you,” Graves says, looking her in the eye.

Queenie reaches out and takes his head in her hands. She studies him for a moment, and says, “I need you to let me in.”

Unable to suppress all the shivers of reflexive fear, Graves lets his defenses fall away.

And then he isn’t alone in his head. Queenie’s there, dragging him down through his memories.

He’s not in the suitcase anymore, he’s talking to Jacob. He’s riding on horseback. He’s turning his head to kiss Credence. He’s on the bank of the Elkhorn River. He’s throwing spells on a night street in Chicago. He’s walking into a warehouse. He’s in a hospital. He’s in the cloying darkness of a basement. It goes on and on, faster and faster until Graves is dizzy with his own life.

Queenie doesn’t stop. He can only feel her intent, her thoughts driving forward, searching through him for whatever Grindelwald might have left behind. She tears through his emotions—love, fear, pain, rage, joy—and leaves them scattered. He can tell she’s trying to be gentle. This isn’t Grindelwald’s brutal Legilimency, but Graves feels stripped bare all the same.

She finds shame. The names and faces of Aurors killed on his watch, the murderers who escaped, the times he’s failed to cast a spell because he’s too afraid to hold his own wand. She finds desire. That’s mostly Credence—body and mind—and because it’s new, untouched by Grindelwald, Queenie leaves it be, and with what conscious thought he has Graves is grateful. She finds contentment. There’s little of that except Jacob’s voice reading a book aloud, the sound of a river running, the ticking of a clock.

Queenie dives into deeper memories. These are things Graves had all but forgotten. He’s at Ilvermorny on his first day, claimed by Wampus and unsure of himself because he doesn’t feel like a warrior. He’s sitting by James at their desk on his first day as a Junior Auror, laughing and falling in love. He’s falling off a broomstick for the first time and vowing never to use one again. He’s setting the curtains on fire and instead of scolding him his family is laughing and cheering because he really is a wizard. He’s declining a girl’s invitation to a dance because he’d rather ask another boy. These don’t come in a line, but in a confusing torrent that leaves Graves unsure of where he really belongs.

And then Queenie is confronting the deepest, darkest parts of him. This is where anything Grindelwald would leave would be, and against all his best instincts Graves doesn’t fight back. He knows Queenie is seeing the worst of him. The part that wants to kill indiscriminately, that doesn’t care where his spells land as long as they do, that would let him cast Unforgiveable Curses without a second thought if he wanted. The selfish part of him that wants to run, not to save the others, but to save himself; the same part that wants to take Credence and keep him, the part that understands what Grindelwald wanted him for and would use him the same way.

The part that’s empty, that black hole inside him that would do anything to die, the part that’s slowly eating away anything else he ever was.

There’s nothing good here. If Grindelwald left something behind, this is a fitting place to do it.
And just like that it’s over. Graves snaps back to himself, his body a foreign feeling, gasping like he’s been yanked out of a river. Queenie lets go of him and he falls back without her support. “There’s nothing in him,” she says, sounding like she’s a million miles away.

Credence and Jacob are there, asking concerned questions, and Graves feels like he must have gone mad because he can’t hear anything. It feels like his chest has been cracked open and his internal organs laid bare. He should know. He’s experienced exactly that, and right now, it’s like the memory just happened.

“…be all right?” Jacob asks.

“I’m fine,” Graves says with an effort.

He must not look fine, because Newt insists on helping him to sit down next to the Occamy nest. Pickett, as if the little Bowtruckle senses that something is wrong, scrambles to sit on his shoulder, a tiny comforting weight. Newt stays beside him, watching the proceedings with concern.

“Are you sure you want to do this?” Tina asks Credence, glancing at Graves.

Credence nods. “We have to know,” he says. “If it’s here—it’s in me.”

He sits down in front of Queenie and Graves watches as Queenie takes Credence’s head in her hands and stares at him. It’s a charged moment, but to Graves’ utter shock it really is only a moment. It had felt like hours that Queenie was in his head. But not a minute passes before Queenie lets go of Credence and says, “There’s nothing there, Tina—” and Credence bolts upright and sprints for the workshop.

“What the hell?” Jacob stares after him in befuddlement, and Graves shares the sentiment.

A moment later, after a few crashes, Credence stumbles out. “I remembered,” he says hoarsely, “I know how he’s tracking us.” And he throws something on the ground before staggering to sit beside Graves, looking as torn apart as Graves feels.

Tina slowly picks up the object. “With…this?” She holds it up for them to see.

It’s a pendant, spinning gently on the end of a fine chain. The design is simple and strange: a line bisecting a circle inside a triangle. It takes a moment, and then Graves remembers:

“You were wearing that the night we met,” he says.

“He gave it to me,” Credence says. “He—I was supposed to use it to call him if I found the child he was looking for. I stopped wearing it.”

“Why?” Jacob asks, almost wary.

Credence laughs weakly. “Because I finally figured out that he was using me,” he says. “I don’t know what kind of charms he put on it, but I’d bet money on it that he’s listening to us right now.”

They all go completely still. The pendant, dangling from Tina’s closed fist, turns gently, shining beautifully. Graves feels sick.

“Did you hear that?” Credence asks, staring at the pendant. “If you’re listening, Grindelwald, I’m not wearing your fucking collar anymore.”

The pendant’s gleam seems sinister.
Graves’ skin crawls.

Tina throws it on the ground and points her wand at it. “Reducto!” she snaps. A blast of force erupts from her wand and punches into the dirt, which explodes in a cloud at her feet.

“He knows where we’re going,” Jacob says, not even waiting for the dust to settle. “If that thing has been around any of us he has to have heard our plans.”

“I haven’t told anyone which city I was planning to go to,” Newt says, rising to his feet.

“No, you haven’t, but hell if I didn’t figure it out anyway. There’s only one major port city in California that’s in a direct line from Salt Lake City!” Jacob says. He pulls the map from Tina’s pocket, where it’s been living lately, and opens it violently. He holds it up and stabs at the California coastline. “If he knows we’re getting on a boat, he’ll know we’re getting on it in San Francisco!”

“Okay, you don’t need to shout!” Tina says loudly.

Graves lets the others argue. He still feels raw, broken edges sanding against each other and leaving grit between his teeth, but he’s more worried about Credence. “Are you all right?”

“When am I ever,” Credence says. His body is taut, his expression empty.

Before Graves can say anything else, Queenie hurries over. She kneels in front of them, between them and the others’ argument. “I’m so sorry,” she whispers. “I don’t ever do that because it hurts too much for you, I wish there had been another way…”

“You didn’t hurt me worse than Grindelwald did,” Graves says, trying to be kind and ending up with blunt honesty. “This is better.”

Queenie looks impossibly sad. She brushes loose hair out of his eyes with a gentle hand. “You know, I saw more than dark things in you,” she says. “There’s a lot of good. Hope. Love. Kindness. Don’t let that emptiness swallow you too fast.”

Graves has no idea what to say to that. But he’s saved from trying anything because Queenie is already turning to Credence. “You’re not a monster,” she whispers. “All you’ve ever wanted is to do is help people. You’re wonderful. There are people who love you for more than what you can do.”

Credence just looks at her, expressionless. It seems that their silent conversation goes nowhere, because Queenie eventually stands and turns back to the argument. It seems to have become one of those familial disagreements where everyone is shouting, no one quite understands why, and no one is in any kind of mood to stop. It’s not serious, Graves can easily see that much. Newt is calming Jacob and Tina down, speaking undeniable sense, and they’re looking less and less angry. It will end soon, and they’ll go on, getting on the train rattling toward the coast. That’s all they can really do now. What else is there?
Hey look: the official M-rated chapter, the payoff for all your waiting. (I’m not going to spike the rating of the whole fic JUST for Chapter 46, of all things.) Should you wish to skip it (or should you be a minor and therefore STRONGLY ADVISED TO SKIP IT -.-), the next chapter will be up on Monday and I’ll put a short summary of relevant plot content in this chapter at the outset. :) But for now...the author is hiding from sheer undiluted embarrassment (as usual when I post adult content), so please read on and enjoy.

#ObscurialJesusApprovedThisSmut

They spend an entire day in Reno, Nevada. It’s an unspoken assumption they all share, that this is their last day of peace. Tina finds a newspaper and, with an unsurprised air, reads off the headline to them: “Grindelwald attacks in Salt Lake City,” she says. She sighs and hands the paper to Dougal, who takes it and studiously begins to scan it. “He’s on us. He knows.”

“He’s trying to scare us,” Newt says with certainty. “He wants us afraid. He wants us to make mistakes, do things we shouldn’t do.”

Jacob, who’s furiously reading one of Newt’s unfinished tracts on the Nundu, looks up. “Well, we’ve been doing those all along,” he says. “Looks like he’ll have to try something else.”

The day is a day of respite. They’ll get on a train tomorrow, heading for San Francisco. There, they’ll get on a boat with Newt’s friend and sail away.

Or they’ll all die.

Either way.

It’s a slow, sleepy day. Graves and Credence brush down the Graphorns. Jacob continues to read “The Murder of Roger Ackroyd” to them. Newt regales them with the story of an encounter with a mad wizard somewhere in Sweden, which makes them all laugh despite themselves. Queenie sits alone, until Credence pulls her off to go and play with the Mooncalves and take her mind off things. Tina reads a No-Maj novel while she sits next to Graves with her head on his shoulder. There’s nothing frenetic about any of it. They’ve all accepted that this is the end. One way or another, their journey is coming to a close.

In pairs, as the night sets in, they disappear to their own devices. Tina and Newt say their goodnights and go up the ladder to the hotel room. Queenie and Jacob retreat to their room. Last of all, Graves and Credence to theirs.

There’s one candle; Credence lights it with a thoughtless flick of his fingers. “So,” he says quietly, sitting down, “this is it, then.”

“Yes,” Graves says, sitting down by the wall facing him.
“And we’re probably both going to die.”

“Yes.”

“Thanks for being honest, at least,” Credence says. He shifts restlessly, gaze roaming the room. Graves half-smiles. “I promised you once that I’d never lie to you about anything.”

“You really haven’t,” Credence says softly. “So…since this is it…can I ask…”

“Whatever you want,” Graves says, leaning back against the wall.

“Why did you look for me in the first place?” Credence asks.

Graves thinks about that. “I don’t know,” he says honestly. “I wish I did. I’m glad I found you, but…I don’t know.”

Credence nods. “All right,” he says. He slides forward a bit, the motion oddly hesitant. “When did you decide I was worth saving?”

“You’ll laugh,” Graves warns. Credence just raises his eyebrows expectantly. “I knew from the second I saw you that you were worth saving.”

That does get a laugh out of Credence. “I should have known you’d say that.” He’s closer again, within touching distance. “All right. Have you figured out yet when you went and fell for me?”

“Still working on that one, I’m afraid.”

And then Credence moves again, and Nimue save him Graves did not expect this at all because Credence is leaning against him, hands braced against the wall on either side of Graves, somewhere between scared and wanting. “Do you…” Credence’s voice seems to fail him.

Graves knows where that sentence is going. “Yes,” he says honestly.

Credence’s eyes light up, not white, but from that brilliant smile. He lets Graves pull him forward into a badly-angled kiss that quickly rights itself. Though this isn’t much different from anything they’ve done before, Credence seems to have no idea where to put his hands and is visibly at a loss. Graves pulls Credence’s hands to rest on his hips, letting the young man figure out how he wants to do this.

He has to resist the desire to simply tear off Credence’s clothes and kiss every single inch of Credence, drive him as mad as Graves is feeling. When Credence’s fingers hesitantly brush over a sliver of exposed skin on Graves’ side, he can’t restrain a small gasp. Right now, that very simple touch feels electric, igniting want in a way that Graves hasn’t felt in a very long time.

“All right?” Credence asks in a small voice.

“Perfect,” Graves assures him, stroking over the young man’s cheek with his thumb.

Credence looks relieved. He moves a little more boldly, rucking Graves’ shirt and undershirt up to explore further, running his hands over everything he can touch. Graves keeps his hands where they are, one cupping Credence’s face, the other on his shoulder, trying to reassure him that everything he’s doing is more than fine. Graves is nervous, too. He doesn’t trust himself not to violate Credence’s trust in some way. The best way to avoid that is to let Credence lead the way.
They kiss again and this time Credence coaxes Graves’ mouth open, deepening the kiss. Graves leans into it, considering this permission given to tease Credence’s soft lips with his tongue, to taste Credence properly. Credence makes a small sound when Graves does that, shivering. Graves tries to pull back but Credence doesn’t let him, chasing after him, crushing himself against Graves.

“Where are we going?” Graves asks, breathless, when Credence finally draws back.

The young man is breathing heavily, lips a bitten red, eyes dark with desire. “As far as we can,” he says hoarsely. He swallows hard, waves his hand, and just like that their clothes are gone. All of them. There’s nothing between them anymore, and there’s an awful lot of very naked Credence suddenly lying practically on top of Graves.

“Credence. Are you sure about this?” Graves is deadly sure about this; the aching tightness between his legs is a testament to that. But if Credence isn’t—

“This is what I want,” Credence says. He sits up and leans back, looking Graves up and down with deliberate slowness, despite the blush rising in his cheeks. “I swear.”

For a long, long moment, Graves just studies Credence. It almost isn’t new—he’s already seen damn near every inch of pale, scarred skin at one time or another. And he’s sure that Credence has already done a thorough job of studying Graves’ body. They’re too familiar. They always have been.

Graves decides it’s time to take a bit more initiative, if Credence will let him. He comes forward from the wall, kneeling in front of Credence, and pulls the young man into a kiss so strong it’s nearly bruising. And he doesn’t stop there: without breaking the kiss, he guides Credence back and back until he’s flat on the floor, not quite pinned under Graves.

Now Graves can really feel how aroused Credence is, in his erratic heartbeat and harsh breathing and the hardness pressing against Graves’ thigh. “Let me take care of you,” Graves whispers against Credence’s ear. There’s an implicit question there, the acknowledgement that if Credence says no then Graves will let it go. This will be over, no questions asked, no demands made.

The pause is agonizing. Credence’s fingers are digging into Graves’ ribs and Graves feels like his self-control is going to snap at any second. And then Credence, staring into Graves’ eyes, says, “Yes.”

And Graves gives up on self-control. He reaches out and finally lets himself feel every subtle curve of Credence’s body, kissing and stroking every inch he can reach. The young man has so damn many scars but between them the skin is soft and smooth and sensitive. Credence shivers and makes small, needy sounds every time that Graves touches someplace new, and that alone is just about enough to send Graves over the edge.

He works his way down Credence’s body, from sharp collarbones over his ribs, down the flat plane of his stomach all the way to the stark angles of his hipbones. He’s about to go further when Credence says, choked, “Oh God—wait, wait—”

Graves lets go of Credence like he’s on fire. Any arousal he was feeling dies instantly. “We’re done,” he says, sitting back. He was right, this was too much, too far, and now—

“No,” Credence says, scrambling to catch Graves before he can get too far away. He gets his arms around Graves, pulling tight. His breath is hot and his words stutter against Grave’s neck. “That was just—too fast, but—don’t stop now—”
Careful, trying to settle his own nerves, Graves cards fingers through Credence’s hair, damp from sweat. “Shhh,” he says, rocking Credence a bit. “Shhh. I don’t want to hurt you.”

“You weren’t hurting me, I just…” Credence takes a deep breath. “I don’t know what I’m doing.”

“You don’t have to,” Graves says. He presses a kiss to Credence’s temple and gets a shuddering sigh in return. “I do. If you want me to keep going—”

“I want you,” Credence says softly. He reaches up and moves one of Graves’ hands to rest against the back of his neck, and Graves freezes. Credence doesn’t let go, holding his hand in place. “Just touch me. I trust you.”

And then, before Graves has a chance to do or say anything, Credence takes his turn. He pulls Graves forward while leaning back himself, letting them both back down onto the floor. Credence leaves a line of open-mouthed kisses along Graves’ shoulder, fingers skimming gently over his back, and Graves could swear that somehow Credence is smoothing over every invisible broken edge of him, making him feel calmer than he has in days, months, maybe even years.

They rock against each other, trying to find a rhythm that works. The friction is too much or it isn’t enough. Credence, never having approached something like this, struggles, unable to get himself together. He tries, but the combination of inexperience and desperation brought on by the danger waiting for them tomorrow does him no favors.

It comes to a head when Graves makes a wrong move, sliding a knee between Credence’s thighs to give him something to work against, and Credence jerks with pain, letting out a small whine. Graves stops, pulls away a bit, and gives Credence a chance to collect himself. Despite the sudden stop, the young man looks utterly wrecked, so far gone that the shadows are whispering. The feeling is mutual; while Credence pulls himself together, Graves rests his forehead on Credence’s shoulder and tries to remember what air is. He’s not sure there’s any left in the room, not now.

When Credence’s pulse isn’t pounding quite so hard and he’s not breathing quite so fast, and when Graves is certain that he won’t actually explode, he asks, “You all right?” His voice is rough, as strained and taut as he’s feeling.

Credence nods. He doesn’t say anything, but they lock eyes for a moment, and that’s an eloquent answer. Graves slides back down Credence’s body, not slowly this time because he can’t make himself do that. His patience is gone. He pushes Credence’s legs slightly apart, enough for Graves to kneel between them, and makes eye contact one more time before bowing down and taking Credence in his mouth.

The broken moan Credence makes sends a shock all the way through Graves. Credence bucks, hips stuttering, fingers clawing at the floor. The shadows snarl, curling out from Credence’s fingers as his eyes flare white. The only thing Graves can think to do in the moment is to reach up and catch hold of a smoking hand, lacing their fingers together, grounding Credence even as he takes the young man apart with his mouth.

Credence doesn’t last. It seems like mere seconds before he’s going completely tense, arching up, body inhumanly still and silent. The Obscurus goes mad, surging out from his body like it will consume them both. Graves wonders for a split second if maybe his sense of self-preservation is so broken that he actually finds danger attractive, because he feels like he’s going to follow Credence right over the edge.

He doesn’t. Spent, Credence hits the floor, boneless; the Obscurus settles, though it doesn’t disappear. Credence isn’t moving at all, except the flutter of his pulse in his throat; Graves gathers
him up, concerned for his health. He situates them with Credence’s head on his shoulder, draped over his lap. He shivers, sweat-slick skin cooling, and considers what he’s going to do if he actually broke Credence.

It takes a moment before Credence finally opens his—thankfully normal—eyes. “Christ,” Credence says, “why did we wait this long?”

Graves throws back his head and laughs, absurdly relieved. “I don’t know,” he says.

Credence runs a hand down Graves’ neck and over his shoulder. “Did you—”

“No, but it’s all right,” Graves says.

“It is not,” Credence says.

“It—” Graves starts, and Credence cuts him off with the expedient route of a kiss. Graves makes a surprised sound and surrenders. He’s not going to be able to talk Credence out of this—and half a second later, when Credence’s hand finds him, he doesn’t want to.

Credence has no idea what he’s doing, but he’s a fast learner and works out quickly just how to drive Graves wild. Credence doesn’t just take hold and bring Graves off—no, it’s a single finger running along the length of him, a palm stroking his thigh, a thumb teasing circles around him. It’s agonizing. Graves sounds desperate, moaning and practically begging Credence to just finish him. Graves is not sure when it happened but Credence is supporting, bracing him, holding him together. He lasts a little longer than Credence did, but not by much, and he collapses against Credence when he comes.

He’s fairly sure that he could manage more, especially given the fact that Credence already looks nearly ready for a second round, but time has run out for them. The candle gutters and goes out, and they call a mutual halt. A wandless, wordless Evanesco is enough to clean them both up. They fall asleep face to face, Credence’s hands against Graves’ chest and his head tucked beneath his chin. Their legs are tangled together and for the first time in so damn long Graves doesn’t feel broken.
Chapter 47

The next morning, there are still chores that are required even if they’re all sure they’re going to die. The beasts still need to be fed, eggs have to be collected, and so on and so forth. So it’s a surprise when Newt pulls Graves aside in the workshop, out of everyone else’s earshot. Newt doesn’t say anything for a moment or two, looking anywhere but at Graves.

“What is it, Newt?” Graves asks, suddenly slightly concerned for their collective well-being.

“Percival, I…” Newt sighs and runs a hand through his hair, mussing it beyond repair. “I just wanted to say thank you.”

Graves doesn’t quite know what to say. “…thank you?”

“Yes,” Newt says. “People…people don’t generally stay around me for very long. I’m too odd.” It just about breaks Graves’ heart, seeing the old hurt on Newt’s face. Someone has told Newt that very thing, in no uncertain terms.

“I don’t think you’re odd,” Graves says, fishing for the right thing to say.

Newt nods. “I know you don’t,” he says softly. “That’s why I wanted to thank you. You kept writing to me. I…I looked forward to your letters. You wanted to hear about me, not just my creatures. You’re about the fifth person ever who’s really believed in me.”

If they get out of this alive, Graves is going to actually track down the people who hurt Newt and hex them until they can’t see straight. “Newt, you’ve been the one believing in me the entire time,” he says. “I should be the one thanking you.”

And then Newt, who doesn't like to touch people and can be absolutely skittish around people, very shyly steps forward and wraps his arms around Graves. It’s a good thing that Graves has been practicing so much, because he knows exactly how to react. It’s not a long hug, but when Newt ducks away he’s almost beaming. He doesn’t say anything else, just nods and hurries away, going to check on whatever task he set Jacob to doing.

Graves is fine with that. He goes back to what he was doing, glad to know that, in some small way, he’d done the right thing by Newt. It feels like the final piece of a puzzle has fallen into place. The world feels, despite the imminent disaster, like it’s finally what it should be.

***

It’s time for Tina and Newt to board the train to San Francisco. “My philosophy is that worrying means you suffer twice,” Newt says reassuringly to all of them, and before Graves can muster up a suitably scathing response Newt is up the ladder and out of the suitcase.

“He told me that right before the Erumpet charged at me,” Jacob says dolefully. “We’re doomed.”

Credence spends the first hours reading. He’s fully focused on the book, some dusty grimoire of Newt’s, full of theory that makes Graves’ head spin a bit when he looks over Credence’s shoulder. “I feel like you’d need a university education to understand that,” he says.

“So did I, when I started,” Credence says, squinting at a near-incomprehensible diagram. “Then I really got into it. It’s not so bad.”
Queenie practices. “I want to have a nonverbal Shield Charm,” she tells Graves. She flicks her wand and nothing happens. “It’ll be easier for me to get ahead of people if I’m not shouting.”

“It’s about will,” Graves says. He adjusts her stance slightly. “You might find it easier once you’ve got someone throwing curses at you. And don’t square off. You want to be as small a target as you can.”

“Right,” Queenie says. She holds her wand tightly and flicks her wand. A silver disc of energy, weak, but definitely a Shield Charm, flies out. “I’ll keep working.”

As for Graves, he’s as ready as he could possibly be. There’s nothing left for him to do. So he waits, sitting by the ladder under the lid of the suitcase, in that strange calm that precedes a fight. He’s ready. If he sees Grindelwald…what’s one last law? Graves is absolutely certain that he could cast a Killing Curse, if it meant saving someone else. Unforgiveable? Yes. It cracks the soul into pieces, to do something like that. But Graves is ready. He’ll do it without a second thought. It’s the natural next step, when he’s given everything else that he can. He’s done it before; his soul is already in pieces anyway.

He honestly has no idea how much time has passed. It could have been seconds or days. But finally, the suitcase opens, and Newt scrambles down. “I had to come,” he says breathlessly, “Tina was caught up in—oh, bloody hell, Graves, there are Aurors on the train.”

Graves is on his feet in a second. “What do you mean!?”

“Aurors,” Newt repeats, clutching the ladder with one hand. “That Abernathy who’s been writing Tina all this time, a few others.”

“Do they know—”

“Not about you,” Newt hastens to reassure. “But they knew where Tina was, and since she’d been in Salt Lake City and Grindelwald attacked there too…Abernathy finally got the President to hear him.”

Graves feels like this is not right, but at this point what is right? Everything’s wrong. The time is again out of joint. The specters that have haunted them have finally arrived, no longer phantoms, but real. “Where do we go from here? I’m assuming they won’t just let us leave San Francisco?”

Newt shakes his head. “They want Tina’s help. She was the best of them, except for you, and she and I have fought Grindelwald before…what do we do, Percival?”

“Talk to the others,” Graves says. “This isn’t a decision I can make alone.”

The plan they make is this: Newt and Tina will help the Aurors. After night falls on San Francisco, the others will make a break for the port, where Newt’s friend is waiting. They’ll get themselves and the suitcase on board, and Newt and Tina will get away from the Aurors under cover of darkness and find their way to the port. It’s not a perfect plan, and the idea of splitting themselves into pieces like this leaves a bad taste in everyone’s mouths, but it’s all they have.

Tina finally gets into the suitcase, having escaped Abernathy and the other Aurors on the pretext of helping Newt with the animals for a bit. They catch her up to the details and she agrees, looking hard and determined and every inch the Director of Magical Security she should have had the real chance to be. “I don’t like splitting up,” she says, “but I can’t see another way that doesn’t involve us fighting half of MACUSA. President Picquery is on her way, and she’s got what sounds like the entire ICW with her…”
“What are the chances that we’ll get caught in some kind of crossfire between Grindelwald and MACUSA?” Jacob asks, visibly thinking hard. “If Grindelwald is looking for us, and MACUSA is looking for him, there’s a chance they’ll hit us at the same time.”

“Then we try to run,” Graves says. “Who will be looking for us if there’s an all-out war happening?”

Tina nods. “They’ll be too focused on each other to worry about us,” she says.

“Something isn’t right about this,” Credence says suddenly. “I mean, we’re all here, we’re on a No-Maj train, and suddenly Aurors just show up?”

Tina folds her arms. “I get the same feeling,” she says. “But what can we do? If I try to send them away that will look much more suspicious than if we just go along with it.”

This is claustrophobic. Graves wants to just fight his way out, go up there and Stupefy all the Aurors, take the others, and run. They could do it. It would be easy, until it wasn’t. Until Grindelwald caught up with them, until MACUSA realized what happened and brought their full might to bear in catching them instead of Grindelwald. They have just one chance to get out, and that’s contingent on secrecy and safety, on stealth.

Tina and Newt have to leave, to meet with the Aurors and discuss plans to look for Grindelwald in the city. They promise to let the others know when they’re in San Francisco and they can make their move. “I’ll make contact with my friend,” Newt says. “She’s moored at the docks so she shouldn’t be that hard to find. I’ll leave a note for you.”

“We’ll make our move after nightfall,” Graves says. “Just make sure you leave the suitcase somewhere we can open it.”

There’s a strange moment when it feels like everyone is saying goodbye. Queenie and Tina embrace each other, possibly crying a little. Credence and Tina stand talking quietly for a moment, then she hugs Jacob. She tells Graves to stay safe and look after the others, and if she doesn’t embrace him too it’s because she looks like she’s about to cry. Newt does much the same thing, though he does give Graves another brief, hesitant hug. He waves at Pickett, sadly perched in the tree with the other Bowtruckles.

“We’ll see you on the other side,” Newt says, glancing around at all of them. “On the ship, right?”

“Right,” Credence says, because he seems to be the only one capable of speech.

And then they’re gone, out of the suitcase, possibly out of their lives, and Graves feels like he’s just been cast adrift in an ocean without land to swim back to.
Chapter 48

Chapter Notes

Footnote moved to the beginning because *drama*.

If you’d like more on the Nundu, more of me ENDLESSLY complaining about wizarding world politics, and a Newt-centric story, head on over to The Accidental Epic, Part 5.

I am fully aware that I have a mild obsession with street lights. And because *verisimilitude*, I wanted to know exactly what the color of light would be from a street lamp on a San Francisco street at night. Turns out it would probably be orange, just as it would be today—except not from modern high-pressure sodium vapor streetlights. It’s most likely that, by 1927, street lights would have been tungsten filament incandescent lights. Though arc lamps were popular into the early 20th century, the shift did occur. And early tungsten filament bulbs were quite orange. So there you go: imagine the whole of the following chapter cast in an eerie orange light, diffused through heavy San Francisco fog.

Please ensure to check back tomorrow AND Friday, as chapters will be posted consecutively all the way through Saturday. 49 is tomorrow, 50 is Friday, and then there’s the usual Saturday update.

This is the final waiting game. There’s nothing left to do, nothing left to practice. There’s a sense of déjà vu when they finally gravitate together to sit under the ladder together. No one speaks. Queenie is distant, eyes unfocused, listening to who knows what. Jacob, who has Nundu fur dusting his sleeves, occasionally hums a snatch of an old war song. Credence, leaning against Graves, hardly moves a muscle, waiting with his eyes closed for whatever comes. And Graves, never one to let go of old habits, works over plan after plan, trying to prepare for things he can’t possibly predict.

The train should have pulled into a station in San Francisco. Newt and Tina would have excused themselves, to find a room in a hotel. Newt would have vanished quietly for a bit, to find his friend so that he could leave a map for them to follow. Tina would meet with Abernathy and the other Aurors, and they would plan and prepare. Graves can imagine that Tina will take the lead, and they’ll fall in line, because she’s more competent than anyone else and such things tend to show through even when authority is informal. Newt will leave the map beside the suitcase, and they’ll leave the suitcase in the room, and go off with the Aurors to hunt for Grindelwald.

And then it’s time to go. It’s ten o’clock, and when Jacob notices the time on his wristwatch they all get up. Queenie is clutching her wand and Jacob looks ready to punch someone. Graves’ nerves feel like live wires. The only one calm is Credence, though it seems more like the calm within the eye of a hurricane than true serenity.

“I’ll go first,” Graves says, looking up at the suitcase lid overhead. “Wait for my cue to follow.”

No one objects. So he goes up the ladder and, heart in his throat, Graves pushes the suitcase open and climbs out.
They are not where they’re supposed to be.

It’s cold, not the biting chill of winter but the settled cold of night and fog. The air smells of salt, though Graves can’t hear the sound of the water in the bay. He’s standing halfway down an alley which dead-ends into a building. The suitcase was tossed onto a pile of rubbish, broken wood and bricks and other unidentifiable trash. The cobblestones are slick, not good to stand on, and the fog creeping down the alley isn’t helping. The orange glow of street lamps shines muffled through the fog at the end of the alley, but doesn’t penetrate this far back.

Graves is instantly wary. He doesn’t hear anything at first, though he draws his wand as a precaution. For a long moment, he simply stands, letting his eyes adjust, and listens. A dog barks, somewhere distant: an automobile backfires even further off. But there’s no sound of engines, of tires bumping over cobblestones, nothing.

He calls Credence up, careful to be quiet, and when the young man steps out of the suitcase he looks around with what has to be shock. “This is not what I expected,” he breathes, stepping in close to Graves. “Where the hell are we?”

“I don’t know,” Graves replies. He’s watching the end of the alley. Something must have gone badly wrong, for them to be here. The questions are infinite, and Graves has no answers.

Jacob climbs out, then, and he doesn’t waste time on asking where they are. “Do we go to the docks?” he asks in a low voice.

Queenie steps out and Jacob picks up the suitcase, locking it. “Yes,” she whispers. “Ain’t much else we can do. We’ve got to stick as close to the plan as we can.” She’s pale, in the faint light of the alley, but she looks ready for a fight anyway.

There’s the sudden sound of footsteps, coming closer, from the street. All of them fall silent and Graves raises his wand, ready to cast he doesn’t know what, and then a man walks past. He doesn’t spare the alley a glance, only hurries by with a cigarette glowing in his mouth.

“Then we’ll go,” Graves says. “I don’t know this city. We can’t afford to get lost. If something happens—”

“We know the plan,” Jacob says.

It’s not without some degree of anxiety that Graves leads the way out into the street. The fog isn’t quite pea-soup but it’s close enough that he’s glad of the extra cover. They’re on a hill, very steep, and assuming that it has to be right they go down the hill. A couple of other pedestrians pass, and on a street nearby there’s a brief snatch of music and laughter as some restaurant door opens and closes. Credence is right next to Graves, shadow wavering in the diffuse glow of the street lamps; Queenie and Jacob are just behind on their heels.

This isn’t a residential district, Graves realizes after a few minutes. They’re passing store after store, windows dark and doors locked. That’s why there are so few pedestrians. He’s glad that there’s not many people out. Every person they see—a woman in a fur coat walking quickly, a man toiling up the hill on a bicycle—seems to him to be hostile. And he’s not hiding his wand. He’s prepared for recklessness. None of them have time for hesitation.

But it’s Queenie who sees the threat when it comes. They’re walking on the right side of the street, keeping close to the buildings, when a man comes walking uphill toward them, hat pulled low over his eyes. This isn’t new, other people have come the other way on this sidewalk, but there’s a moment when the man glances up. His eyes flash and Queenie must see something that Graves
can’t because the next thing he knows Queenie is bursting past him and shouting, “Stupefy!”

The blast of scarlet light hits the man straight on. He crumples like wet paper, a wand rolling away from his hand down the sidewalk.

It’s as if that was a cue. There are shouts from all sides—orders given, at least a dozen people mobilizing, and Newt’s voice yelling for them to just run. They don’t get the chance. The storefront to their right explodes outward and it’s all Graves can do to tackle Credence out of the way, sending them both flying into the street. Jacob simply drops flat, and Queenie staggers backward onto the cobblestones with a cry, dropping to her knees. Graves spares her a glance—she’s bleeding, glass in her arm. But there’s no time for him to go to her.

More than a dozen Aurors are moving in. One is inside the storefront, wand pointed directly at Graves and Credence as they scramble upright, back to back. The fog is bad, but Graves can still see Calla Carter glaring at him, wand steady. So he hadn’t killed her in New York. And then—

“Drop your wands,” Abernathy commands. He fades out of the fog in front of Graves, just down the hill, staring up at him with a more than venomous expression.

“That won’t do much for you,” Graves says. “Ask Carter how that went for her team.”

“Let me rephrase,” Abernathy says. “Surrender.”

“Go to hell,” Credence snarls. Graves can feel the Obscurus stirring around their feet, can hear the nervous murmurs of the Aurors unfortunate enough to be facing Credence head on.

“Probably,” Abernathy says, almost cheerful. He waves a hand and more figures fade in out of the fog and Graves’ stomach drops through his feet. A tall man Graves doesn’t recognize—is he even an Auror?—is holding Newt, battered, arm at an awkward angle. And another man drops a body on the ground, a familiar body—

“Tina!” Queenie screams.

“Just run!” Newt says hoarsely. There’s a bruise on his face and blood on his shirt. The big man cuffs him on the back of the head and Newt falls silent.

“Does MACUSA want us that badly?” Graves asks. He doesn’t look at Tina’s body. He can’t look at her body. She can’t be dead. She can’t.


Credence shudders. Graves feels it, where their shoulder blades are pressed together. “You bastard,” he says. “You’re working for him. For Grindelwald.”

“Of course I am,” Abernathy says. He’s still smiling at Graves. “How do you think he was so effective in replacing you, old sport? Even he couldn’t have done that entirely on his own. No, he needs me. He needs all of us who are here tonight.”

The worst thing is that it makes sense, that Abernathy was the one who flung open the door for Grindelwald, who’s been the traitor this entire time. Hadn’t Tina told him, months ago, that it was Abernathy who performed Priori Incantatem on all the Aurors’ wands, confirming that they weren’t Grindelwald’s servants? Abernathy was one of the few people in a position to go over Tina’s head to look for Credence, to try to kill Graves. (And that explained why Carter had been throwing around the Killing Curse that night: if she’s the kind of person who’d serve Grindelwald,
Unforgiveable Curses are a thing she’d know well.) Abernathy had been keeping tabs on them the entire time, keeping up a steady flow of letters that would tell him exactly where Tina was, where they all were. This has always been a trap. Abernathy must have known, somehow, Graves doesn’t know how, that Tina really was protecting Credence. And Abernathy was just waiting for Grindelwald to get out so he could make his move with his dark messiah in the lead.

Tina’s dead. Graves doesn’t give a damn about anything else, except making sure that the others can get away. Yet he finds that he’s remarkably steady, considering that the entire planet just fell out from underneath him. “Are you just going to talk until he gets here?”

“I thought so, yes,” Abernathy says. Graves understands now why Tina didn’t like this man. Self-righteous, self-satisfied, and working for Grindelwald. Who would like him? “Unless you’d rather we take the Obscurial right now.”

“I’d like to see you try,” Graves growls.

“Stand in the way or not,” Abernathy says. “We’ll kill you, if we have to.”

Credence laughs. It’s a brilliant, delighted sound, but it makes Graves very, very afraid. The Obscurus surges around them, dark and terrible and wonderful. “We’ll kill you first,” he says.

Abernathy goes for his wand, but he never gets there. Graves already has his out.

“Reducto!”

It’s messier than the Killing Curse. But the end result is the same. Abernathy’s body hits the ground. They’ll be hard-pressed to find his head later, since it’s nothing but a splatter of blood and pulverized bone on the cobblestone street.

Graves doesn’t have time to think about it. There are other spells flying at him and Graves is fighting harder than he ever has in his life. He stays back to back with Credence, holding the Aurors’ attention. Out of his periphery Graves sees Credence slash a hand through the air, whipping an arc of white light at the Aurors on that side. They’re well trained and don’t run, but they have to cast Shield Charms anyway, and it slows them down, keeping them from attacking for long enough for Credence to get off another offensive spell.

He and Credence must keep their attention. Queenie has to be able to get away. She has to be able to get to Jacob and Newt and get away. He’s chain-casting spells, one after another until he’s not sure he even knows what he’s throwing. It’s a blinding blur of light and force and fire. And against him—a few more than a dozen Aurors, all casting spells with the tactical brilliance that Graves himself instilled in them. He knows he took out the one in storefront window and he thinks Credence managed three off to the side and Abernathy’s dead. And still, that he’s not dead already is a minor miracle.

He sees Queenie, hurling Shield Charm after Shield Charm, covering Jacob as he runs out into the road to Newt and Tina’s body. Graves moves to fire a Stunning Spell at the man holding Newt, but he doesn’t have to: one solid punch from Jacob and the man goes down just as efficiently. Next time Graves looks, Jacob is helping Newt into the suitcase while Queenie, sobbing, pulls Tina’s body in the same direction. Good: they’ll get away. It will be all right.

But it isn’t over. There’s the snap and crack of more people Apparating in, shouts and cries, and Graves decides that if there was ever a moment to make peace with death this is probably the moment to do it. He glances over his shoulder for just one second, seeing how many people are behind him now, and then there’s an almighty crack like a glacier shattering and when he looks
back he sees a face he prayed he would never have to see again.

The whole fight stops. Graves steps back and runs into Credence, who’s gone stock-still, as if he knows. Graves can’t move, can’t breathe.

He’s standing down the hill, past Queenie, who’s standing frozen over the open suitcase.

“Hello, Percival,” Grindelwald says, smooth and charming. “Credence. It’s good to see that my two best friends finally met each other.”

Graves physically can’t speak. He can feel Credence shaking like he’ll fly apart.

Grindelwald strolls forward. His wand is in his hand, loose, casual, ready. “I’ve so missed both of you,” he purrs. “Credence, I hope you like me just as well with this face. I won’t be keeping Percival around to let me wear his anymore.”

Credence makes a choking sound. The Obscurus is coiled around their feet like a frightened cat and it doesn’t move at all. Graves can’t make himself raise his wand and he knows, he knows what Grindelwald is going to do, he can see the incantation forming on his lips, Avada Kedavra, and Graves wants to die but not like this—

And Queenie steps right in between them. She’s in perfect form, sidewise to Grindelwald, and says in a ringing voice, “Confringo!”

Grindelwald barely gets a Shield Charm up in time as a firestorm erupts from Queenie’s wand and sweeps over him. There’s a split second when he looks astonished and then he snarls and comes forward, throwing hexes and jinxes with abandon. Queenie holds her ground and doesn’t let him past, flinging Shield Charms before he can cast a curse and throwing counter-jinxes before he can speak an incantation, facing him like she’s completely unafraid.

And that’s when the other unexpected thing happens.

The suitcase is still open on the ground. There’s a roar from within it and then the damn Nundu explodes out of the suitcase, teeth and claws and poison and rage and Jacob is on its heels, shouting for it to attack, and that’s enough to shock Graves out of his stupor. He didn’t expect that scheme to work but it did, and Jacob’s directing the Nundu toward Grindelwald’s horrified servants who scatter as it plunges toward them, and they might just stand a chance of survival.

But Queenie is being driven back. Grindelwald has figured her out and she has a limited arsenal of spells. Graves can see what he’s doing—he’s playing with her, poking holes in her defenses, testing her. If you ever fight someone who isn’t the best Occlumens in the world…and Grindelwald might just be the best. It won’t be long before he tires of the game and just throws a Killing Curse at her, impossible to block unless you’re Credence on the best day, and if Queenie dies…

Everything else has gone wrong, but Credence and Graves have a plan for this. It’s desperate and terrible and their friends will hate them forever, because it’s not a plan that all six of them agreed to. But everyone else will be alive, and a long time before now they’d decided that this is what they have to be willing to do.

“Credence,” Graves says, “hold on.” Credence doesn’t hesitate. He turns and wraps his arms around Graves, face pressed into his shoulder.

Just for that one, brief moment in time, Graves doesn’t want to die. He sees Queenie, fighting a losing battle against Grindelwald, just to protect them. He sees Jacob, risking life and limb, standing in plain sight where an unwary curse could kill him, directing the deadliest beast in the
world. And then he sees Newt, hauling himself out of the suitcase, arm in a messy sling, with a bloody, angry, living Tina right behind him, both of them throwing curses as they come surging out into the street, blasting into the few Aurors who didn’t flee the Nundu. They’re alive, all of them, and come hell he’s going to keep them that way. Graves is filled with determination.

“Grindelwald!” he shouts, and Queenie bolts away as the Dark wizard turns his attention to Graves. “You want us? Come get us!”

And Graves Disapparates.
Chapter 49

Chapter Notes

It's the end.

Graves can’t go far. He’s trying to lead Grindelwald and his fanatics, not escape them. And Graves doesn’t know this city well, has only been here once in his life. Long jumps could be dangerous and he can’t afford a Splinching. Besides, he has Credence hanging onto him, and the young man has no idea how to Apparate. If he loses Credence—it doesn’t bear thinking about.

So Graves makes it sixty feet, far enough that he’s out of reach, close enough that they’ll be able to track him. And track him they do: a yell goes up, and people start to Apparate toward him. The exact second he actually sees someone, Graves goes again: straight to the top of a building. And then across the street, and then down into another street, and then somewhere else again.

It’s a nasty game of chase. He has no clear destination. He only knows that he has to get them away from the others. In those brief moments when they aren’t Apparating, Graves can hear Credence’s ragged breathing and feel the pressure around his chest where Credence is hanging on. The young man has done Side-Along-Apparition before, but not like this. Graves is trusting the Obscurus and Credence’s tremendous self-control to keep him in one piece.

Grindelwald can’t be far behind. He’s single-minded: the fact that he let Queenie go at all is proof enough of that. That’s good.

What isn’t good is the sick feeling Graves is getting that they’re being *herded*. It doesn’t take long to realize that people are getting closer on every side, like they know he doesn’t know where he’s going, like their destination has been chosen for them. But what can he do? They always knew it would end like this. As long as the others are safe. As long as he can get Credence out of this. Or—if they can’t get out…

He lets Grindelwald and his people drive them. Through the city—across rooftops, over streets, onto a dock at one point, all the way to the eastern edge of San Francisco, far inland. It’s there that Graves makes the decision to try to go to ground. He’s exhausted, pushing himself beyond all his limits to do this already. So if they can throw the pursuit, they might be able to lay low until MACUSA catches up with Grindelwald and escape in the confusion. He sees an empty building ahead, with wide-open windows, and the floor is visible beyond. That’s enough for him to get there.

They crash-land on the floor, and when Graves doesn’t keep Apparating Credence is on his feet in a moment. “Why are we stopping?” he asks, eyes wild.

Graves stumbles to his feet and almost topples over again. How much energy did he use, making those jumps across the city? Credence catches him, and *when* did he get this strong, exactly? “We need to hide,” Graves says, looking around only slightly frantically. “I can’t keep going…”


Credence pulls Graves along to a row of arches at the far wall. What this building was used for,
Graves has no idea, but the arches provide cover enough. They’re out of sight of the doors and windows. It’s not perfect, but with any luck no one saw them hide here.

The exhaustion is creeping into Graves’ bones. He’d fought a duel against a dozen wizards and then Apparated his way across a city in more jumps than any sane wizard should ever attempt on about four hours of sleep. It must show, because when they’re safely ensconced in a dark hall that runs behind the arches Credence helps him sit down.

“We’re going to need to catch up to the others,” Graves says.

“Can you find them?” Credence murmurs, sitting down next to him.

“It’s not as reliable as location-based Apparition, but you can Apparate to a person if you really need,” Graves says. He aches, adrenaline fading and leaving behind the slow sear of pain. “Usually someone you know well.”

Credence laughs, low and quiet. “God knows I’d probably only be able to Apparate to you.”

Graves reaches out in the dark to touch Credence’s face. He can’t see anything back here, only the dim floor beyond the archway. Credence leans into the touch, letting Graves feel his sharp cheekbones and jaw, slightly rough from lack of shaving. “If we get out of this,” Graves says softly, “I should probably teach you to Apparate at all.”

“When we get out of this,” Credence corrects gently. He turns his head slightly and kisses Graves’ palm lightly. “We’ll be all right.”

There’s a moment of quiet. Credence’s hand finds his, warm and slightly shaky. Graves doesn’t know how long they’ll have to wait for MACUSA to catch up, if they’ll even know it happened at all, but he doesn’t get the chance to find out.

The door of the building slams open and there are footsteps. Credence starts and Graves seizes his wrist, arresting him before Credence can move at all. They stay frozen in silence as people come in. It might be five, Graves isn’t exactly sure. And then—

“I know you’re in here,” Grindelwald says, slow and sweet. “And don’t try Apparating again… we’ve put plenty of Anti-Disapparition Jinxes on this whole building.”

Graves closes his eyes for a moment. This is it, then. This is how they die.

He gets to his feet, as quietly as he can, with Credence’s help. They only have one chance to surprise Grindelwald. If they can do enough damage they can end this right here.

“I’m behind you,” Credence breathes against Graves’ ear. He’s so close that Graves would swear he can hear the young man’s heartbeat. “Until the very end.”

Grindelwald is talking, and Graves can’t hear a single word. He turns slightly and kisses Credence briefly, gently, and then he moves, rolling up his sleeves, holding his wand at the ready, stepping out of the shadows into the wandlight of Grindelwald’s followers. There are five of them, ranged close to him, one at his right hand, the rest behind him, tense and ready to fight.

“We’re right here, you sick bastard,” Graves says coldly.

“Ah, Percival,” Grindelwald says. He smiles and his eyes are as dead as stones. “I knew you couldn’t resist a fight. Want dear Credence for yourself? I don’t blame you, he’s a pretty thing…”
Graves stares him down. His wand hand is remarkably steady, all things considered, considering that his heart is trying to rip itself right out of him. “Fuck you.”

Grindelwald laughs, throwing his head back with glee. “I knew you had it in you, Percival! You finally grew a spine!”

In that half a second when Grindelwald’s eyes are closed, Graves musters his will. He brings his entire being to bear on the spell. He remembers telling Credence, once, that you have to want a spell, will it with everything you are. And it’s even more true for an Unforgiveable Curse, for the Killing Curse itself. And Graves wants Grindelwald dead more than he’s ever wanted anything in his life.

“Avada Kedavra!”

It should have been over then, but it isn’t.

The man at Grindelwald’s right hand screams and pushes Grindelwald aside. He takes the Killing Curse full in the face. He falls to the floor, eyes wide open, dead.

The element of surprise is gone. He’s tired, running low on energy to cast spells. Exhaustion has clouded his mind. And, worst of all, Graves has done what he once chastised Tina for doing, what he taught Credence never to do: he overextended himself. He follows Grindelwald, ready to cast the spell again, ready to kill, but he never gets the chance to open his mouth.

The Cruciatus Curse hits him dead on. Graves can do nothing but scream, falling to his knees and toppling over onto the floor, unable to control his body. It feels like he’s being ripped apart, like his eyes are melting, his skin sloughing off, his blood boiling in his veins. His whole body locks up and he can’t move from the pain, can’t escape it, trapped in a cage of his own flesh. He hears Credence distantly shouting and is too busy trying not to choke on his own tongue to do anything at all.

When the spell lets him go, Graves is shaking, panic and agony making him even weaker, but he somehow kept hold of his wand. He staggers to his feet. Credence is behind Grindelwald now, held back by two men he could easily destroy, a wand to his temple, staring at Graves. And Grindelwald is pacing toward him with the gravitas of a royal procession, malicious amusement sparkling in his eyes.

“Perhaps I should keep you alive a while longer,” Grindelwald muses. “You’re a good leash for my Obscurial. He seems attached, poor boy…of course, soon enough, he’ll have a new master, but for a while you might serve as an…encouragement.”

Graves looks past Grindelwald, at Credence. The Dark wizard keeps talking, a monologue that Graves doesn’t hear. It’s time for the final contingency they’d discussed. The other one they hadn’t told the others, that they’d locked up behind every shield they could muster so Queenie wouldn’t know. If Credence is incapacitated, if they have no other way out—which they might have, even now, but Graves knows that his stubborn, wonderful Credence won’t risk Graves’ life on a slim chance of escape—then it’s left to Graves to make sure that Grindelwald can never have Credence.

He meets Credence’s eyes and the young man gives a tiny nod, biting his lip.

Graves does not want to survive what happens next. One last Killing Curse, meant for the person Graves cares most about in the world. He knows Grindelwald won’t let him die, not for a long time, but he’s willing to live with that. He’d rather save Credence the pain.
He jerks his wand up suddenly, praying he’s fast enough that Grindelwald won’t be able to stop him, pointing it directly at Credence.

But it doesn’t work. Grindelwald is a step ahead. Maybe he heard Graves’ thoughts. Maybe he just guessed. Either way, Graves doesn’t hear the incantation Grindelwald uses. He only sees the wall of blazing force hurtling toward him, feels it smash into him, breaking him, hurling him backwards into the wall, shattering everything.

He hits the ground on his back, and when he tries to get up he knows that isn’t going to work.

He should be in pain. He knows a leg got broken in that fall, but he can’t feel it. He can’t feel anything below his waist. His back must be broken. Distantly, he’s aware that other things are broken, that his sternum is in pieces and he’s bleeding into his lungs, that his skull might be fractured, that he’s bleeding out from the gaping wounds torn into him by the force of the spell, and he can’t really feel any of that either. It’s shock and maybe, just maybe, he’s finally doing what he’s wanted to do since he first met Grindelwald.

Credence lets out a howl of pure agony. Laboriously, Graves looks up from his shattered body and sees Credence explode, sending the two men holding him flying. The Obscurus is huge, a storm of rage and pain and wild magic, lashing out at everyone in sight. It’s hypnotic, and it’s the last thing Graves sees before he blacks out.

He wakes up to Credence’s cold hands on his face. “—up, damn it,” Credence is sobbing, “just wake up, Percival—”

“Credence,” Graves says. He feels distant, outside of his body, but he’s got enough in him to reach up and try to touch Credence, reassure him.

“Oh God.” Credence’s eyes fly wide. “I thought you were—”

Graves smiles weakly. “I think I’m going to be,” he says.

“No,” Credence cries, gripping Graves’ hand with desperate strength. The Obscurus is still all around them, jagged swirls of smoke and white lightning, alive and vivid.

“Where are they?” Graves asks.

“I killed his men,” Credence says savagely. “I didn’t get to him—he dispelled the jinxes and ran, I think MACUSA is on its way—we have to go.”

Graves feels like he might be breathing in his own blood. “I’m not going anywhere,” he says, and blood trickles out of his mouth.

Credence presses a hand to Graves’ chest. “I can heal you,” he says desperately.

“You can’t,” Graves rasps. He fumbles at his side and finds his wand. It’s hellishly dangerous to Apparate without a wand, so—he presses it into Credence’s hand, closing the young man’s fingers around it. “Don’t waste your energy on me…you’d be too weak to run.”

“You’d be alive!” Credence is crying in earnest now, but he doesn’t let go of the wand, and Graves is content with that. “Please—”

Graves is really having trouble breathing now, and he’s lightheaded from blood loss. They don’t have much time. “Go,” he says, forcing the words out, “just go. Apparition…you’ve seen me do it. Focus on your destination…Tina…go to Tina…”
Credence doesn’t let go of his hand. “God damn it, I am not leaving you!”

Graves coughs. He can’t get enough air. “I’m sorry,” he says, with everything he’s got left. “I wanted…” He doesn’t know how to finish that sentence. He can’t make words make sense. He can’t keep his eyes open.

“No!” Credence is shaking him, and Graves manages to force his eyes open. Credence is looking down at him and his eyes are amber, beautiful, and Graves can’t help a smile. This is better than any death he’d ever expected.

“I’m still here,” Graves rasps, the words coming unbidden, and something in his chest cracks.


Graves wants to say something, but he doesn’t have words any more.

The last thing that Percival Graves sees before he dies is Credence Barebone’s face.
He wakes up.

For a moment, Graves is completely disoriented. The room is white, but not sterile, and there’s a gentle rocking motion which is not at all what he expected to feel. He’s in a bed, comfortable, and his injuries have been bandaged. It’s daytime, and there’s light coming in through the window. It’s warm, and when out of curiosity he tries to move his legs he finds that he can. There are a few aches and pains, bandages wrapped around his arms, but he’s had worse.

After a few moments simply lying there, Graves thinks back on what happened. There was the fight, the Apparition chase, the not-quite duel with Grindelwald, and then that spell hitting him, and the Obscurus exploding free…and then Credence, begging him to stay alive. And he did, apparently, even though he thought he was finally going to die. He was sure that that building would be his tomb, and now suddenly he’s been granted a stay of execution.

This time, unlike the last time he nearly died, Graves is happy with that.

He sits up after a while, when he’s sure that he can, and looks around the room. It’s narrow, small, and out the window he can see the flat ocean and white-blue sky. There’s another bed, just as narrow as the one Graves is sitting on, and in it is Credence, fast asleep and very much alive.

Carefully, Graves gets up, wincing at the pull of injuries that haven’t been healed, and crosses the small divide between them to sit on the edge of the bed. He brushes the hair from Credence’s face and though he barely touched the young man at all Credence startles awake with a gasp.

For a moment, Credence seems as disoriented as Graves, and then he lets out a small cry and sits up, throwing his arms around Graves. “I thought you weren’t going to wake up,” he says.

“I didn’t expect to wake up,” Graves admits, closing his eyes in relief, leaning on Credence. “I guess it was you who healed me?”

“Just the mortal injuries,” Credence says wryly, muffled by Graves’ shirt. “Couldn’t really get to the smaller scratches, sorry. I Apparated to Tina with you and then healed you. And then…well. I passed out. It wasn’t a good idea to do all of that at once. You can say I told you so, if you want.”

Graves doesn’t bother. He’s too damn happy. “How long were we out?” he asks instead, loathe to let go of Credence or open his eyes. Part of him is afraid that this is some kind of near-death dream, and that if he opens his eyes he’ll break the illusion.

Credence shrugs. “I don’t know,” he says. “I’ve been…in and out. You haven’t moved at all.”

Graves thinks on that for a moment. Memories are flooding back, of those final moments on the cold floor, not all of them pleasant, but…
“I love you,” he says.

“Oh God,” Credence says. He moves and Graves opens his eyes to find Credence looking into them. The young man is red with embarrassment. “I thought you wouldn’t remember that.”

Graves smiles. “Of course I would,” he says. “I didn’t get the chance to say it back.”

Credence is possibly crying. Graves wouldn’t know; he’s absolutely certain that he is. As if he’s afraid Graves will break, Credence leans in and kisses him. One of Credence’s hands settles over Graves’ formerly shattered sternum; the other comes up to rest on the side of Graves’ head, fingers tangling in his disarrayed hair. Graves is just happy to be this close, able to feel Credence breathing and alive.

After a while, they leave the tiny room to go find the others. Credence turns out to have natural sea legs, and navigates the rocking boat handily and without a problem. He helps Graves, who isn’t exactly nauseous but keeps getting thrown by sudden motions of the boat. They go up on deck, and the moment that Graves appears there’s a general cry and suddenly he’s at the middle of a pile of people.

Tina is still battered and has a black eye that she wears with fierce pride. Newt’s arm is in a sling still, but he’s beaming happily all the same. Jacob has a nasty gash on his arm, but he’s obviously proud to have survived having a spell cast on him. Queenie has small scars from the broken glass on her arms. And they’re all gloriously, impossibly alive. Even Pickett, who’s happily in one piece, scrambles up to chatter excitedly at Graves and pet his face as if to make sure he’s really alive.

“Did we make it?” Graves asks, still slightly unsure if this is reality.

“Yes,” Queenie says, smiling tearfully, “we made it. We got away.”

Newt makes him sit down, and they explain it all to him. Jacob and Newt got the Nundu on their side because it was rather upset that its mummy was injured, and it was willing to listen to Jacob if it meant killing the people who hurt Newt. Tina was only knocked out, not dead—“though I really felt like death after that,” Tina says—and she refused to leave the fight. After Graves and Credence ran and most of Grindelwald’s remaining people followed, it was easy to make tracks for the docks. MACUSA had shown up, but they’d gotten away—“by a Kneazle’s whisker!” Newt exclaims—and made it to where his friend was waiting. They’d had no choice but to sail out, and they’d been on their way out of the bay when Credence had Apparated screaming onto the deck and virtually on top of Tina. And then Credence had healed Graves and proceeded to collapse senseless for three days.

“He would not listen to reason, and I’m damn glad he didn’t,” Tina says.

“He’s lucky that he didn’t Splinch himself and lose you for good, Apparating untrained with someone else’s wand,” Newt says.

Graves, who hasn’t been able to make himself take his arm from around Credence, smiles at the young man. “It might as well be his wand,” he says. “It seems to think I belong to him…I don’t doubt that it’s right about that.”

Jacob tries and fails not to laugh as Credence hides his face in his hands. “Own up to it, kid,” he advises. “You’ve got him wrapped around your little finger.”

“I might face it someday,” Credence says, “but I’ve gone through too much today for this.”

“It’s been three days,” Tina points out.
Credence looks up at her. “As far as I’m concerned, it was just one,” he says airily. “I was asleep for most of that, so it doesn’t count.”

“You mean to tell me,” Graves says, squeezing Credence’s shoulder, “that you can manage to make Grindelwald run away, Apparate without trying using somebody else’s wand, practically bring somebody back from the dead, and do all of it without a second thought, but you don’t like hearing that I’m an idiot romantic when it comes to you?”

“He is carrying the biggest torch I have ever seen,” Queenie says with a laugh. “I still can’t believe that it was you who finally got him to settle down! You’re really something, sugar.”

Credence makes a sound of mock despair. “None of you are ever going to let this go, are you.”

“Jacob still hasn’t let go of the Erumpet,” Newt informs him. “We aren’t.”

None of it is really that witty or eloquent, but they’re all giddy with survival and it’s enough. It’s more than enough. Graves leans back and lets the chatter wash over him. After a while, Newt’s friend comes over to wish him and Credence well, and shake his hand and meet him formally. She’s a weather-beaten woman with a good smile, who seems excited at the prospect of a journey to China. And then it’s back to talk, Newt and Tina explaining to Graves and Credence how they got captured in the first place, Queenie describing her duel with Grindelwald to everyone again by popular demand, Credence telling them about Graves’ feats of Apparition.

He’s still exhausted, but there’s something different about the feeling now. The darkness in him—the part that wanted to die, to just let everything end—is quiet now. It doesn’t feel like it’s chewing at his soul anymore. It’s not gone, but he feels like he can ignore it. He’s here with his friends, his family, and they’re going to be safe. They might still be on the run, still a little beaten, a little broken, but still together and still good.

He must have drifted off a bit, because the next thing he knows the others have gone off to make dinner and Credence is nudging him gently. “Are you with me?” he asks with a small smile.

Graves doesn’t hesitate. He leans forward and kisses Credence thoroughly, leaving them both a bit breathless when he pulls away. “Until the very end,” he says.
Graves wakes up to an empty bed. Credence is not next to him, but one of the lamps is lit, casting a gentle glow across the room. For a second, Graves thinks that maybe he shouldn’t even bother getting up. This is, what, the fourth time this week? He could get some sleep. Credence might not come back tonight, but that isn’t Graves’ problem, is it?

But no, he’s awake now, and if his reckoning is right it’s two in the morning. And Newt, Tina, Jacob, and Queenie will be arriving tomorrow to pack them up and haul them off to who knows where on some new adventure. Credence, therefore, needs to have slept. So, with a weary sigh, Graves gets out of bed, not bothering to locate a shirt.

He wanders out of the bedroom and looks down the short hall. There’s golden light flickering in a doorway, and he can hear the frantic scratch of pen on paper. He pads down the hall and stands in the doorway, blinking in the sudden brightness. It’s the study: small and packed with as many books as they could physically fit in the space (all, of course, alphabetized). There’s a desk, ostensibly for both of them and in practice used only by Credence, and a small sofa that tends to get covered with books when one of them doesn’t fall asleep on it.

Credence is at the desk, his back to Graves, writing like his life depends on it. Graves watches, wondering what it will be this time. The last one was about the failings of the magical community in their duty toward children. The one before that was a scathing critique of the International Confederation of Wizards and its habit of only using its power to strong-arm smaller nations into falling in line with the dominant countries’ desires. Given some of Credence’s irritable mutterings and the schoolbooks left everywhere around the house the last three days, this one may be about the deliberate misuse of magical theory in the official school system in order to handicap people into not using their full potential.

Credence, who’d once handed out other people’s words in pamphlets on street corners, writes his own now. Credence discovered, once he was well away from his past, that he loves to write and preach as much as Mary Lou Barebone did. He wields ordinary words like spells, attacking injustice everywhere he sees it. Of course, he can’t really publish them himself. He hands them off to Newt, who gets them published anonymously by Augustus Worme, who’s made good money off of Newt’s book and owes him a favor. From Tina’s letters, some of Credence’s essays have caused quite the stir. Graves is quite proud of Credence, but he really gets tired of waking up to find that Credence hasn’t slept that night or has fallen asleep on the desk again.

“If you’re going to watch me write,” Credence says, looking over his shoulder with a spark of amusement in his eyes, “you might as well sit down.”

“I didn’t want to be a bother,” Graves says mildly. He takes up a place on the sofa, wincing as he sits down, feeling the pull of that injury to his back that, despite Credence’s power, has never quite healed. “How long is this one?”

Credence takes a moment to stretch his hands. Once or twice, he’s gotten cramps bad enough that he’s actually asked Graves to take dictation for him. “Long enough that I might have to split it in two,” he grumbles.

“Or three,” Graves teases gently. Credence gives him a look, and Graves holds up his hands. “I’ll
just sit here quietly.”

“Thank you,” Credence says. With one last shake of his hands, he bends over his work again.

Sometimes, when this happens, Graves picks up a book and reads, but tonight he doesn’t. He just watches. Credence is absolutely focused on his work, sometimes mouthing words to himself, squinting at the page, and crossing out what he wrote before re-writing it to his satisfaction. Other times, it seems as if his pen will just run right off the page to the table from how quickly and fluidly he writes. He never stops moving. It’s enthralling to witness.

And of course Graves wants to just look at Credence. He may possibly be the luckiest man alive; he is well aware of that, and thanks Credence’s God daily for letting them stay together. Credence now, at twenty-six years old, is more incredible than he was when Graves first realized what he felt about the young man. His intelligence is without peer, and though he’s still shy enough around people he doesn’t know well, his wit is enough to make Graves smile on the worst days.

Right now, in the light from the lamp on the desk, Credence looks like some kind of painting. His eyes are aglow with creative energy. One hand is clutching his pen, the other holding a book open for quick reference. He’s let his hair grow out and now it falls in gentle waves all the way to his shoulders. In the right light, Graves sometimes thinks that the model for Clarke’s Faust could have been Credence. He’s everything but ordinary. As far as Graves is concerned, he’s perfect.

Credence pauses and points his pen at Graves without looking up from his reference book. “If you’re thinking about how beautiful I am again, I am going to have to come over there,” he warns, smiling down at the book.

“I am thinking about that, yes,” Graves says. “But I wouldn’t think of interrupting you. Even if you should be sleeping because everyone else is going to be here tomorrow…”

“Oh, God, I forgot about that, please interrupt me,” Credence says. He turns in the chair so he’s facing Graves, elbow on the desk, head resting against his hand. “Sometimes I feel like the Obscurus found another way out by making me write until my head explodes.”

This is one of the things they have most in common: they hurl themselves single-mindedly into whatever they do. Credence has thrown himself into writing, doing what he can from exile to fight back against the world that tried to kill him. Graves, bereft of a traditional job, has thrown himself fully into being Credence’s partner.

Soon after they’d moved into this tiny house in the middle of the northern Ural Mountains, they’d hit a bit of a rough patch. Graves knows well what happens to relationships forged in fire once the fire goes out: they either temper like steel or flake apart into ash. Credence was forced to come to terms with the flaws in Graves’ character that he hadn’t had a chance to see and Graves suddenly had to deal with Credence’s inexperience with so many things Graves took for granted. There had been a few shouting matches and one Obscurus outburst before they’d finally decided to talk it about it and work on it. They still needed each other and, more importantly, wanted each other.

It worked out, in the end. Graves might have years on Credence, but Credence is definitely his intellectual equal and much more powerful. Their strengths and weaknesses are complementary. And there’s something to be said for the fact that their relationship was founded on knowing each other’s deepest secrets and desires. What they’ve learned about each other has had less to do with that and more to do with Graves discovering what Credence likes best to read and the fact that he has a love of plants which has filled half the house and a garden with green things; with Credence finding out that Graves actually will try to live off coffee and toast if he’s left to his own devices and that he would someday like a cat now that he has time to care for it.
And they’ve both grown for it, though Graves sometimes thinks that he has grown far less than Credence. When he’d got hold of a copy of Whitman’s Leaves of Grass, sent by Jacob because of their shared fondness for No-Maj books, he couldn’t avoid thinking of Credence. “The boy I love, the same becomes a man not through derived power, but in his own right,” he’d said, and Credence had turned bright red and kissed him to shut him up before he could try any more poetry. But it was true: the man that Credence has become isn’t something of someone else’s creation. He’s himself, made by his own will, and Graves wouldn’t have him any other way.

Credence follows through on that earlier warning: he comes and curls up into Graves’ side, into what seems his favorite place to be. “I just wish the thoughts would stop sometimes,” he says, one hand idly tracing patterns across Graves’ chest.

“There’s a lot you weren’t allowed to think when you were younger,” Graves says. Like so many of their conversations, this one is comforting in its familiarity. “It seems it’s all finally getting out.”

“Maybe,” Credence says, fingers slowing in their sketch. “That’s probably a good thing.”

They’re still recovering, both of them, and maybe they always will be. Credence avoids wearing a belt whenever he can and will not ever get into a full bathtub, taking sponge baths instead and getting Graves to help him wash his hair. Graves, when Credence isn’t in the room, can’t sleep without a light on, and he keeps the house at a nearly uncomfortably warm temperature because he can’t stand the cold. They work around it. They learn. The bad days are fewer and farther between. The good days come more and more frequently.

“It is a good thing,” Graves says.

Credence doesn’t reply, just rests his head on Graves’ shoulder. A few minutes of silence later, Graves realizes that Credence has fallen asleep. He’s going to regret this in his morning—his back will give him hell all damn day—but Graves maneuvers them so that he can halfway lie down, Credence asleep against him, and falls asleep himself.

He’s right, his back is practically on fire the next morning, but Credence alleviates most of the pain with some spell he’d picked up somewhere. He just touches the tip of his wand to Graves’ back, murmurs an incantation, and there’s instant relief for the pain.

And that’s the other thing. Credence has a wand now.

While they were stopped in China, working out the details of their asylum with the Russians and the Chinese, they’d taken Credence to a Chinese wandmaker, a man barely known outside the country but held in high regard within it. And a wand had chosen Credence. It’s the same length as Graves’, but made of flexible fir wood. That’s a wood meant for survivors, people of immense staying power and focus. And the core was a material that none of the Western wizards had ever encountered before: qilin hair. The qilin are fearsome, beautiful, rare creatures that soar through the sky wreathed in fire and smoke, but are gentle and just, only becoming fierce when an innocent is threatened. It’s a core that can channel Credence’s power, and will help him guide his spells to be used in only the best of ways.

By some miracle, though they’re both a bit distracted by each other—Graves would like to say that it’s Credence who instigates most of that, but it would entirely be a lie—they manage to be dressed and out the door with time to spare. Each has a bag packed and ready to go, and before they leave they thoroughly lock up the house. Who knows when they’ll be back?

The walk is more than a mile to the little wizarding town down in the valley. It’s late September, so the walk is chilly but not unbearable. Graves wears his favorite coat, of course, and Credence has
his own now, a heavy sable thing with irritatingly bright maroon lining. Graves has a gray scarf now, because Credence has permanently claimed that blue one. It turns out that now that Credence doesn’t have to wear black he prefers to wear a riot of colors, whether they match or not. With healthy color of his own, instead of that unhealthy pallor, the colors don’t make him look washed out.

In the depths of winter, Graves sincerely regrets the move to Russia. It was, however, unavoidable. He and Credence are persona non grata for most of the magical community, and though Russia was willing to give them asylum it was on the condition that they stay far away from population centers. Their only contact with the outside world is through regular letters and packages from their friends and the small wizarding village they’re now walking to. They can’t just Apparate, because there are Anti-Disapparition Jinxes laid for a mile around their house. It’s not that they can’t leave at all: it’s that they can only really leave from the village. It’s appropriate paranoia, Graves knows, but it’s still damn irritating.

The walk is quiet, each man absorbed in his own thoughts. Credence is probably thinking about his essay and Graves is thinking about what comes next. This will be the first time in a year and a half that he and Credence have been out of the area, and the first time in five months that they’ve seen their friends. They’ve rather fulfilled Jacob’s long-ago idea that they could become mountain hermits: they have virtually no human contact anymore.

The village isn’t unfriendly by any means, but Graves and Credence have only broken Russian between them, and almost no one in the village has any English. Credence attends services periodically at the small Russian Orthodox chapel—currently serving as a sanctuary for a dozen or so No-Maj priests fleeing the persecution of the No-Maj government—and though he’s welcomed there, it’s not his religion. He’s having trouble with religion in general. He’s told Graves a bit about his struggle to reconcile years of belief with this new reality, and Graves hopes for Credence’s sake that things change for the better.

Although it’s a bit cold, they arrive soon enough, and before anyone else does. Graves and Credence wait at the edge of town, where the others are most likely to Apparate, and they aren’t waiting long before four people pop into existence in a whirl of color and talk.

Queenie pitches herself into Graves’ arms immediately. “I’ve missed you!” she cries.

“And I’ve missed you,” Graves says, smiling. “Sorry we couldn’t make the wedding.”

“Aw, sugar, you know it’s fine,” Queenie says, stepping back and pulling Credence over for a hug of his own.

Newt sets down the infamous suitcase and reaches out to clasp Graves’ hand. “It’s good to see you, Percival,” he says earnestly.

“What are we off after this time?” Graves asks, catching Pickett as the little Bowtruckle scrambles over their hands to greet Graves properly.

“We’re going to hopefully watch the Labbu eggs hatch,” Newt says. He’d buried them on an isolated beach somewhere in Africa, where they’d be safe to incubate.

Tina gives Graves a cheerful hug. “God, I’ve missed your grouchy face,” she says with a grin.

Graves returns it. “And I’ve missed your insolence. How are things with MACUSA?”

“I’m still not allowed back into the States,” Tina says. “But like hell I care, I get to spend all my
time with Newt now.”

Jacob, to Graves’ surprise, hauls him into a hug as well. “You look a damn sight better now,” he says, studying Graves critically.

“It helps, not being on the run or concerned about getting sent off to be executed,” Graves says dryly. “How’s the bakery?”

“Fine,” Jacob says with a delighted smile. “Diagon Alley is better than any street in New York!”

“All the wizards in England just love Jacob,” Queenie says, taking her husband’s hand.

“It’s a shame we’ve got to leave it, but this is our honeymoon,” Jacob says, and Graves couldn’t hold back the smile if he wanted to.

Credence, done greeting Newt and Tina, turns to the rest of them. “So. Now that we’re all back together, what’s next? Obviously Africa and the Labbu eggs, but…”

“We aren’t dragging you straight back here, if that’s what you’re asking,” Tina says. She’s still holding Credence’s hand firmly. “You’ve had to suffer through one Russian winter. We thought we’d give you a holiday from that.”

Graves sighs with relief. “Perfect,” he says. “I’ll go anywhere to avoid another winter.”

“Back by April, at the earliest,” Newt says cheerfully. “We’ve got a lot to see. That second volume of Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them won’t write itself!”

“Do the Russians know you’re leaving?” Jacob asks, as Graves and Credence bundle their things into the suitcase.

“They don’t care,” Credence informs him. “They really just want to forget that we exist. We’re a headache for everybody.”

Queenie’s mouth drops open in disbelief. “Did they really send a dozen Aurors up here when you sent for seeds?” And Credence launches into the story of that time the Magburo had sent a dozen Red Wizards up into the mountains because they were just sure that Credence was up to something nefarious.

Graves, uninterested in rehearsing the last five months at the moment, glances at Tina. “Did you and Newt keep the other rooms in the suitcase for everyone?”

Tina nods. “Just wait ’til you see them! We have real beds this time!”

“My back thanks you,” Graves says.

Newt, arm around Tina, laughs. “You’re getting too old for gallivanting, aren’t you?”

“Not old, just injured,” Graves says. “Age has nothing to do with it. Blame Grindelwald for breaking my back.”

Tina raises her eyebrows. “I guess you want us to blame Grindelwald for all that gray hair?”

Graves sighs, touching his temple ruefully. “That’s all me, I’m afraid.”

“Well, at least it makes you look distinguished,” Newt says with a sly smile. “Perhaps we should stop in London so you can show off.”
Credence turns into their conversation with a grin. “They’d like to see me with a handsome man on my arm, I think,” he says. “Befuddle all the young ladies by stepping out with a man who might just be prettier than myself, if the light is right.”

“You’re a rascal,” Graves says, but he’s smiling.

“Oh, he’s no worse than Jacob!” Queenie says.

Jacob scoffs, pretending offense. “I’ll have you know I’m a perfect gentleman!”

And just like that, off they go, as if they had never been separated. Graves looks around at them all, at his strange little family. Queenie, intelligent and brave. Tina, indomitable and witty. Jacob, clever and strong. Newt, smart and kind. Pickett, steadfast and friendly—strange to list him, but given that he’s taken up residence in the collar of Graves’ coat it makes sense. And Credence, free and independent. Looking at them is like looking in a mirror that shows his better self.

This is how they should be, all of them, together. And whatever comes next—whatever adventures and dangers come their way, no matter if Grindelwald tries to hunt them down again or if MACUSA tries to find them or even if the whole world turns on them—Graves is absolutely certain that they’ll make it through. He’s lived for these people, and he plans to go on doing that, come what may.

Newt has everyone go into the suitcase for travel: “Easier than trying to get you all to Apparate to the right places,” he says apologetically. “And easier to keep everyone together. Jacob, keep an eye on the Niffler, please…I bribed it with buttons but I’m not sure how long that’ll hold…”

The suitcase, as they climb into it, still feels like home. Credence is hanging onto Graves’ hand, talking a mile a minute with Tina. Jacob is expanding on the welfare of the baby Jackalope, not so much a baby now, which still tries to launch itself into his arms when it sees him. Newt is calling down that it won’t be long but would someone please make sure the Occamies are fed anyway and Tina is shouting back that of course she will, love. Queenie is beaming at all of them, knowing exactly what they’re thinking, and all of them trust her with their thoughts.

It feels like it’s been a long time coming. Graves is not alone anymore. They’re finally safe.

“But our lives will only ever always continue to be a balancing act that has less to do with pain and more to do with beauty.” –Shane Koyczan, “To This Day”

Chapter End Notes

The final history note. ;.;

Clarke’s Faust: the illustrator Harry Clarke worked on an edition of Goethe’s Faust that was published in 1925. Reasonably (given the amount of reading I’ve headcanoned that Graves does), he’d have had a copy. It’s quite the image.

On the subject of Russia. I’m sure you all remember my screeching about cross-pollination of political cultures. There is ABSOLUTELY NO WAY IN HELL that the magical community in Russia wasn’t affected by something as momentous as the
creation of the Soviet Union. Within the Central Committee of the Communist Party, there were two bureaus charged with the operation of legislative/executive powers and maintenance of order within the Soviet Union (the Politburo and the Orgburo, respectively). If the wizarding community existed, it would be as a sort of shadow bureaucracy behind the Muggle structures, just like the British and American (and Chinese, if you buy my meebling) governments. Thus, the Magburo (the Magical Bureau) came into being.

Cross-pollination of political cultures, you guys. I’m just saying.

Please hop on over to the next chapter for the actual final author’s note. I needed a lot more characters than a regular footnote would give me.
Chapter 52

Hi.

So...this is really long, and in the interest of all of you who don't care about this I'll put a Tl;Dr right here: thank you. Thanks for sticking with me since April 1 and reading this whole thing and giving kudos and commenting. I didn't expect it and I am in awe that people cared. You're all amazing, and I hope to see you back as this 'verse continues. If you don't, I understand. This was a hell of a fic and if you're ready to move on, then good luck and goodspeed. <3

If you don't...well. This doesn't end here. I’ve mentioned The Hypothetical Sequel a lot, and to be honest it is no longer hypothetical. As of this author's note, it's 36,200 words. And counting. Next week sometime I'll post the first of...many...interim short stories. The sequel takes place in 1932, five years in the future from the time that the Suitcase Family got on a boat to China. Next week's is written from Jacob's point of view, and it's about how in the hell six foreign wizards ended up getting asylum in China at all, as well as some other things. And after that things just get crazier. I don't have a posting schedule for these, so you might get one story a week or three stories a week, but it will be a while before I post the full sequel. If you're planning to follow the madness, consider subscribing to the series for your own peace of mind and ease of access.

I don't know how to start this next bit, so here goes nothing. Bluebeholder: queen of oversharing on the Internet.

This fic was not written with intent to publish. I fell into Percival/Credence accidentally. Someone I followed was posting lots of art, and I didn't get the pairing at all but the art was pretty, and then I saw a defense of the pairing that made me go "...hey wait that's kind of cool." So I binge-read half the fanworks on here and started writing my own. IT WAS LITERALLY SUPPOSED TO BE 5,000 WORDS AT THE MOST. But then there was a toaster, and Tina, and a realization that "happily ever after" could only happen if the boys left New York. And suddenly it was a goddamn road trip and I couldn't just leave Jacob and Queenie out of the happy ending and Newt is a walking deus ex machina and...you know how it ended.

But it was written, initially, for me. I wasn't going to share this or post it, and so it's very personal in a lot of ways. I've discussed on tumblr the many ways that Credence is a blank screen for projecting of a viewer's issues. He was certainly a projection of mine: I was diagnosed with a disorder in December that made me terribly aware of all my flaws and problems at the same time. The Obscurus is kind of...I don't know, a symbol of that? I relate really hard to having a personality that just explodes out of you and hurts people. So Credence, as my beta reader so eloquently pointed out (thanks Pyxyl), is me.

And Percival frankly is 100% worse, because he got handed all my other issues and left to deal with them. I think he did okay on that? I'm from the Rick Riordan school of writing, which means that each story should have a happy ending--and in the next one, I'll tell you why it wasn't. For now, though, they're okay. Which is something I badly, badly want. I'm sure we all do.

This has been one hell of a bad year (in the microcosm and the macrocosm) and for four months--a THIRD OF THE YEAR WHAT THE HELL--I've been posting this story. I didn't expect it to get attention, but it did, and suddenly I had people reading this. And I care about you. I want you to be happy in the same way that this story has made me happy. Some of these chapters have posted on days when, quite honestly, my will to live was at a complete nadir. Nobody cared. And then someone would come back and say "I just want to give [insert character] a hug!" and because that character was at least a little me, I felt like somebody did care. There have been lots of those
Which is how we come to this. I think it's worth linking, at this point, to one of my formative fanworks, the literature that shaped the writer I am: Diary of a Lovesick Mutant, a year-long Maximum Ride fanfic that chronicles not only a year in the life of Fang as he tries to confess his love to Max, but a plan to take over the world and all of the ridiculous pop-culture and news and stuff that came out of 2009. And at the end, the author (Phoenix Fanatic) left a note that hit me like a ton of bricks. I'll just...quote her, shall I?

"This story was never about me. This story was never about Fang Percival Graves. This was about you, not you the collective, but you, the individual. I started this in the middle of a recession. People were depressed. I didn't like that, and I wanted to do something that would hopefully be able to cheer people up. The entire point of this story was to make just one person forget about their problems for just one minute. I wrote this story so that people could forget."

I hope you had the chance to forget. And more than that I hope that all the love you poured into those comments and gave to these characters is something you're giving to the rest of the world, too. There are 203 subscriptions to this fic (I recently found out that authors can see that people have privately subscribed, so HI MY GHOSTLY FRIENDS) and that's...a lot of people. Doesn't count lurkers/people who follow this without accounts. Point is: there's a lot of you. There's a lot of love here, a lot of CARE. Please, please, PLEASE give that back to people.

There are a lot of people in this fandom who are hurting. Deeply, genuinely hurting. We're all dealing with things, and they're awful things. Some of you have talked to me about it. Some of it I've seen on tumblr. Some of it I can just infer. And we need love if we're going to get through it all and find a little peace.

See, this whole adventure (the fictional one) wasn't possible without everybody. The real adventure, OUR adventure, isn't possible without everybody either. The Suitcase Family are all better mirrors of each other, and in the same way, we, the REAL Suitcase family, are better mirrors of each other. I see the person I want to be reflected in you. I hope you see the same in me. And I hope you see the same in each other.

That's...pretty much it, I think. I'll get off my soapbox now and come back down to earth. The only thing I have left to say is thank you. This has been one hell of a ride, and even though the AU continues, things are never going to be quite the same as they are now. You're all amazing, and I love you deeply. My tumblr (wanderingnork.tumblr.com) is kind of chaotic, but my inbox and messages are always open and I take anon comments. If you want to yell at me, be party to all the craziness of me researching The Hypothetical Sequel, or ever need a listening ear...I'm there. I love to talk (as if you can't tell) and I would love to talk to you.

Because I am, forever, Undertale trash, and I am also crying my fool eyes out, I will let someone else speak for me: "I'm not ready for this to end. I'm not ready for you to leave. I'm not ready to say goodbye to someone like you again." But here it is anyway. From here on forward, I hope that we all live happily ever after. <3

The End.

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