

## this is about a stuffed bird

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## this is about a stuffed bird

by [Bee\\_4](#)

### Summary

In which Mumbo crosses several towns, learns some creative methods of self-defense, fights some monsters, sees things no human is meant to have seen, befriends a stranger, steals multiple cars, has inconvenient moral scruples, grows increasingly terrified of his own culpability in the apocalypse, grows a spine, blows up at least one building, accidentally prevents a murder, and attempts to find his best friend in the futile but ever-burning hope the man's still alive.

He has to say, he's so exhausted and terrified that he thinks he might just be mad?

(OR: the one where, after most of humanity turns into a series of terrifying monsters, Mumbo decides he's going to risk his life on an apocalypse road trip to try to find out if Grian is alive. Things, as you might imagine, devolve from there.)

### Notes

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

# the promise

## Chapter Summary

in which mumbo makes, or maybe just fulfills, a promise.

## Chapter Notes

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

Mumbo's computer keeps on flickering at him like an accusation.

Of course, he doesn't know how much longer he'll have power. So far he's been lucky. The power plants supplying power to his house haven't shut down yet, and he's charged so many of the power packs he's hoarded over the years that he's *pretty sure* he can keep both his phone and his company pager working. He has solar power bricks too! So, ideally, once his power goes out, he'll still be able to communicate, assuming that there's anyone left in the world to communicate *with*.

He hasn't opened his door in several days. Last time he tried, well, suffice it to say, it didn't really go well. He'll have to leave at some point. He needs food? Food that isn't the collection of instant soup and energy bars he had stacked for when he didn't want to have to do anything fancy while working (which is all the time). So he *does have* food and, and drinks and really he could probably last another month or so without going anywhere, even though he'd get very, very tired of soup and energy bars.

His computer flickers at him. He has not turned it off of his chat messenger in the time since he got the last message he'd gotten on it.

It's safe here. Compared to outside, it's definitely... safe-er, at least. No one has successfully broken down his door yet. That's probably good? He's not sure his neighbors know his apartment is actually occupied, though. Maybe if they get desperate they really will break in and given what the last neighbor he saw looked like he is, perhaps, a bit concerned about what happens if someone breaks into his apartment. He's never been so glad he cheaped out on windows.

He means, imagine if he were *out there*, and if he *hadn't* had enough bookcases to board up the windows? Then, then he really doesn't know what he'd do. So he can just stay here. It's safe here. He'll slowly starve to death on soup, sure, but that's probably—like, he'd die a lot faster going outside, right?

<Grian>: brb

Right. Right. He's fine. He's fine here! And he's not. His computer flickers horribly at him, that last conversation. That last message. 3:36 PM. He'd—he had tried to call! He had. Mumbo didn't... didn't just let his best friend vanish, he'd tried to call. And then Grian hadn't answered and, oh, Mumbo wished they still lived remotely near each other. Mumbo wishes that they had visited each other in person in the past two years. Mumbo plays with his earrings. Maybe he could have checked, right then, and then everything would have been—well probably not fine, really, considering what's outside if Mumbo opens his door, but—

There's a pounding on his door. Mumbo swallows. He hears scratching, scratching, pounding,

please don't be strong enough to break the deadbolt? Please don't be strong enough to break the deadbolt, please.

Please.

Please.

The scratching stops. Mumbo slumps against the ground and plays with his earrings.

He's—oh, he's running out of time, isn't he? He's running out of anything resembling time. He could barricade his apartment further, sure, and he's quite good at inventing things. But he's running out of time, incredibly quickly, for some measure of time.

His computer flickers accusingly at him.

He's running out of time, and he's running out of time to do the one thing he probably *needs* to do, too. He'll need food eventually. He waits for the scratching to leave his door and makes himself soup and breathes. He, he can stay here, he can!

It's better than outside, at least. Safer here. It's safer.

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Soup, Mumbo decides, sort of tastes like mud when you're an anxious mess and also it's all you've had to eat for like, a week. Mind you, that might just be that microwave instant soup can really only be but so good, and that he doesn't really normally pay attention to what it tastes like anyway so he just buys something he knows he'll willingly eat and doesn't consider making sure the soup is varied or anything. And he doesn't mind! He doesn't even normally notice. But when you don't have much else to focus on but the soup and your impending demise? Mud! Absolutely and entirely like mud!

He shovels mud-like chicken noodle soup into his mouth anyway, though. You know, this is the closest to regular meals he's had in a while. He tends to forget while he's working, but, uh, it's pretty hard to forget when he's trying, trying not to...

He hears... *something*... scream.

It's fine. He's fine. He'll keep eating his mud soup. Or, chicken noodle. Not mud! If he starts calling it mud soup then, haha, well, he's not going to want to eat at all, and that, that wouldn't be good, now would it?

...haha.

Really, he's lucky, here, what with the electricity still on, and his microwave still working, and his computer still glowing like an accusation on his desk. He could probably even access the internet and get something! He uses an ethernet connection, after all, rather than wireless, so he thinks that probably has a better chance of working. He'd gotten it when he'd gotten his new government job, since he'd need to be on the internet so much more, working from home.

He's probably lucky he works from home, given that he has all this lunch food. And by all this lunch food, he means the same instant soup he had every time he remembered to eat lunch, and that he's now trying to ration so he's eating it more like, uh, weird breakfast? Yeah, weird breakfast! That is also lunch. And also sort of dinner.

The fact that this is eating more regularly than usual, given the, the whole, you know, what it's like outside. That's got to count for something, doesn't it? It definitely can't just count for *nothing*.

That would be silly, and that would mean Mumbo has nothing to be optimistic about, just a, a whole lot of guilt, and fear, and even more fear on top of that, really.

He has to have something to be optimistic about. Anything at all.

There's a scream that's definitely human outside and Mumbo—Mumbo, he. Mumbo.

He eats his soup. He's almost out of soup. Eating it is mechanical. It tastes like mud. He finishes his soup. He stares at the empty can.

He—you know, this sort of thing is really funny. He doesn't go outside for days sometimes entirely on his own, no apocalypse to cause it at all! He just, he gets really, really into his work sometimes, you see, and then doesn't feel like leaving, even though he really ought to. So this isn't so bad, really!

The screaming stops. It's... it's worse than the screaming.

This isn't so bad! It's.

Oh, who is he kidding? Not even himself! Not that there's anyone else to kid. He hasn't even gotten a message from his coworkers in days, let alone his friends—

<Grian>: *brb*

Of all the stupid last things for Grian to have said, before everything went wrong, too. Of all the things to say. Mumbo—if Mumbo had lived closer, had been braver, had realized what was happening earlier on, maybe he could have gone to check. But Grian hadn't even said if what he'd left for was, was a microwave pizza, or a strange noise, or the, the. The *twisting* and *changing* that everyone outside seemed to have been undergoing. Maybe it had been Grian's cat. Maybe Grian's computer crashed. Maybe Grian was *dead and, and...*

Now, he can't go thinking like that, now can he? Even given, well, the screaming outside. And, and what little Mumbo had seen of what had happened to his neighbors. And the occasional pounding on the door. Mumbo has not left his apartment in days because of those things. Maybe Grian just lost power, and had the good sense not to get into anything? Grian lives sort of in a less populated area than Mumbo does, anyway. So he's not in nearly as much danger as Mumbo is, and Mumbo is still alive.

Sort of.

Sick on soup, sure. A ticking clock to demise, is what he is. If whatever is happening around here is caused by the water or something, well, haha, unless Mumbo's immune or something, he's really screwed, isn't he? Because Mumbo didn't think to pull out the Brita he's normally too lazy to use until like, three days in, when it hit him the tap water probably wasn't safe anymore. Even then, if it's weird mutating water, the filter pitcher probably won't save Mumbo.

Or maybe it's over.

And maybe Grian is dead.

Maybe everyone Mumbo knows is dead, and he's locked himself in his tomb, and the last things he's going to know are his terrible soup that tastes like mud and the flickering of a computer screen. Who knows? Mumbo sure doesn't! If he did, he certainly would have figured it out by now. It's all he's had to think about for the past week, at least. The fact that he's dying. Oh, dear, that's, that's morbid, isn't it?

Maybe he'll work up the nerve to do more than send one message to all his friends, asking where they are. Maybe he can send another one, and another one after that, and someone will answer.

Or maybe they still won't, and...

Mumbo hears knocking at the door again. He wants, he wants to tell it he's not here. The door shakes. A loud scraping, a louder scraping, a howling sound, a scream.

He's. He's not used to the screams. He'll not get used to the screams.

It leaves again.

Mumbo buries his head in his arms. He doesn't know what to do. He doesn't know what to *do*.

---

Mumbo's power has started flickering. Really, this has probably been a while coming. As best Mumbo can tell, there aren't, um, any people to man the power stations anymore? So. So really, the power flickering is to be expected. It means Mumbo can't safely leave all his electronics plugged in. His work laptop. His desktop. He plugs in every single power pack he owns (he owns seven, somehow) in a futile attempt to make sure they're all entirely charged before the world ends. Or, well. The power goes out.

World's already ended, hasn't it?

What will he do when the power goes out? His weather app isn't updating properly anymore, and he doesn't own a proper thermometer. Who owns a thermometer in a seventh-floor apartment, right? He just checks his phone, really, no need to hang measuring instruments out his window to inevitably drop them on some poor passerby. Except, well, that's really backfired, now hasn't it? It's summer, at least, so it can't possibly be getting so cold that a lack of power will kill him.

The lack of refrigeration for food would, but Mumbo's fridge is embarrassingly empty, anyway. He should really do something about that. He would, if he wasn't going to die here.

No, no, no, that's very pessimistic. Look how many power packs he has! And how much soup. In fact, there are other things he could do. He could pull out his old electrical engineering and mechanic's kits. He already has. A toolbox, a Raspberry Pi, and a number of small soldering parts are scattered on his table. He'd been trying to finish an old project, the one he promised to give Grian the next time they got to see each other, the talking parrot with very terrible AI. Now, by AI, Mumbo didn't mean, uh, a learning algorithm, so much as something about as smart as a Roomba with a slightly more complicated decision tree, but.

Grian wouldn't be getting it, though, which rather put a damper in things, didn't it?

(He'd promised Grian would get it when he finished.)

He hears rain hit the top of his AC unit. He has the AC unit turned off. He's saving power. He knows it won't help, should the power go out, but it makes him feel better.

It's not safe to leave his work computer plugged in. Right. That's what he was doing, wasn't it? Unplugging it.

Of course, if he does that, his status will show as offline, instead of just idle or online, and what if someone tries to message him? He won't see it! He could, he could get it set up on his phone? Right. He has six power bricks. He can keep his phone charged.

*<Grian>: brb*

Mumbo considers. He takes a deep breath.

*<MumboJumbo>: hey guys i am unplugging my computer because there might be a power surge but you should still be able to get to me on my pager!*

*<MumboJumbo>: be okay please*

He hovers over the last message. He considers deleting it. It sounds—well it sounds a bit childish, doesn't it? Asking them to be okay like that. The world is scary right now, though. He can be a bit childish this one time, can't he? He just wants anyone to answer.

He sits there for almost half an hour, hoping someone will answer. Anyone at all.

*<Grian>: brb*

They don't.

“This is all... really stupid,” he says. His voice sounds hoarse. He's been the only person he can talk to lately, and it means he's done quite a bad job of doing it, either talking too much and hurting his throat, or talking none at all and hurting his throat worse. He didn't know not using something could make it hurt that bad. Haha. His poor social skills. All this, really, after only several days of talking to no one at all?

The power flickers again. Mumbo lets himself yelp outloud, and then giggles softly to himself. “Oh, oh I'm... I'm in a very bad place, aren't I?” He rubs his face. He's so tired, but he can't just sleep. Just sleeping through every day will just make him sick, and he's run out of ways to sleep. Maybe he should go back to trying to work on his circuit boards?

He hears a noise outside and jumps again. He smooths down his shirt and looks at his soldering kit.

...maybe he shouldn't be holding a device that heats metals to 400 degrees when there are things happening that could startle him.

No, but working on circuit boards is calming. He can... put aside his current project. The bird toy was a joke, anyway. He can't get it to Grian, anyway. He'll just... work on some of his other electronics projects. Yeah. He does have that off-brand Roomba he keeps tinkering with. He's not sure it works as a vacuum cleaner anymore, but it definitely works as several other things!

He doesn't unplug his computer. He knows he needs to. If a power surge kills his laptop, well, he can't really afford to reimburse his boss, and there's a lot of good information on that machine. He should really... shut it down. Save power. Mumbo's power packs aren't good enough to power a laptop, really, not long-term. His phone, sure, but not his laptop.

He breathes in. He breathes out. He goes back to tearing apart and re-wiring the roomba again. He lets metal parts scatter on the floor around him in the humid apartment. He leaves an ear open. Maybe someone will respond. Maybe someone will. He doesn't know.

The power flickers again.

The power goes out. The soldering iron in Mumbo's hands abruptly turns off. Great. That probably... that's going to be a pain to fix later. Oh. Oh, his laptop—it's still working. It didn't surge. The screen dimmed, though, and is awkwardly showing black, and. And.

Great. Now his microwave won't work. He breathes in. He breathes out. There's no response from anyone. He shuts down his laptop. His windows are blocked, so he has to use his phone as a flashlight to make sure he doesn't kill his feet on something he's put on the ground. At least his water is still working. He can't smell or see anything currently burning, so there probably isn't anything that is urgent for him to fix at the moment, except perhaps the places where the metal he'd been soldering isn't in the right state anymore, and. Why did he do that while the power was flickering?

He unplugs his power packs one by one. Stupid. Stupid. He is going to die here. He opens his phone up.

<Grian>: *brb*

He hears something scream outside. He hears—he hears—there are too many footsteps. There are too many legs. They shuffle down the hallway. His power is out now. He only has a limited supply of food, and—and—he hears the feet scrape against the ground, circling outside of his apartment. He covers his mouth. He'd gotten too loud earlier, probably. He has his windows blocked and his door deadbolted, but he'd gotten too loud, and they. They know he's in here. Gods, gods, they're his neighbors, too, or were his neighbors, he's not sure they're the same people anymore, but they'd know, they'd know there's this, this weird computer engineer who works an obscure research job from home and barely talks and, and oh dear he's not sure he even knows enough of his neighbors well enough to stop them from hurting him when they're *like that* and the scraping circles his door and Mumbo barely dares to breathe and it could hear him—

—it leaves.

He is, he thinks, going to die in this stupid, stupid city apartment. He is going to die in a place he hadn't really wanted to actually be and hasn't been allowed to leave in too long. He is going to die here, and he doesn't even know if anyone's still alive to miss him.

He makes a strange noise in the back of his throat and curls his knees up to his chest. He needs... he needs...

He doesn't want to die though, is the thing. He doesn't.

He doesn't want to die, not knowing what's happened. Without knowing where Grian went. Without...

He doesn't want to die.

He is going to die here.

He puts his head between his knees. He's going to die here. Great. He's going to slowly starve to death and no one will know. No one will know. No one.

No one.

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And then his phone pings.

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He almost doesn't recognize the sound. And then, all at once, he does. He scrambles to open his messenger. Please, please, what—what—

<Grian>: *sfkhjddelpl*

<Grian>: HJEKLPO

<Grian>: da

Mumbo stares at it for several minutes. It's entirely incomprehensible. It might not be Grian. It probably isn't Grian. The only reason Mumbo isn't dead is because he's locked in an apartment and he's not sure his neighbors know he lives here to go after him. He is going to die here. Grian is probably already dead. The messages were probably a monster or a very ambitious rat.

Mumbo barely thinks before he scrambles to respond.

<MumboJumbo>: grian? grian where are you

<MumboJumbo>: are you alive

<MumboJumbo>: grian

Predictably, there's no answer. Mumbo's heart pounds. He stares at his phone. He tries not to cry. It's the first message he's gotten in far too long, and it's incomprehensible nonsense! He'd say that's just like Grian but he really doesn't think Grian *meant* to do that. Bizarre and frankly confusing pranks are all Grian, but cruelty really *isn't*, and Mumbo thinks Grian would know where the line is here.

Not telling Mumbo that he's alive is cruel. Grian couldn't have meant to—but he could have meant to send the message.

He could have meant to be telling Mumbo... something.

Or he could have meant nothing at all. It might not even be Grian. What's the point?

Mumbo stares at his phone for a while. He looks across the room. The soft glow of his phone illuminates the scattered parts of both the roomba and the parrot toy. There are pictures on the wall of the last time he hung out with Iskall. There's that stupid mustache poster Iskall bought him. There's the silly "Mumbo for Mayor" poster Grian made that one time to confuse their coworkers with. Outside, he hears something scratching at the walls again.

He looks down at his phone.

...that was through the work messaging system. Which means Mumbo can log in and figure out if it was sent from Grian's normal location. So he does; it's from Grian's townhouse, or at least, from Grian's IP. Which means... what? Grian lives a good distance away, at least twelve hours by car, and Mumbo doesn't own one of those. The bus system, obviously, is right out. There are monsters outside, who used to be Mumbo's neighbors. If Grian isn't dead, he's probably a monster too, and Mumbo's yet to see proof that any of the beasts are sapient.

He glances back towards his kitchen, with all of its terrible soup.

"This is a horrible idea," he says, quietly, and he walks to his closet and pulls out the biggest backpack he still owns.

The door is blocked. So are the windows. But he doesn't want to die, and *something* sent him a message from Grian's location.

"I will absolutely get eaten, or, or killed, or just die of radiation or something, if I go outside," he says. "I will have to walk, unless I find a working car I can... do I even still know how to hotwire a car? I know you normally have to hack modern ones, not hotwire them." He starts packing his energy bars into his bag, and a large water bottle with a filter on it, and every one of his power packs. He sticks his laptop in the bag, thinks better of it, and leaves the laptop in the apartment. His



phone can manage most of that. He does, however, stick his soldering kit in the bag. Maybe it would be useful? A pocket knife, certainly. And... the stupid stuffed parrot he'd bought for the joke project. He can bring that too, and—a notebook! To write down directions to Grian's address. Yes, in case his phone goes dead—

“I mean, really, what's so bad about staying here? Sure I hear, uh, terrifying noises, and I don't have power anymore, but I won't be killed, in here. I'll just... run out of food, eventually! And by then, really, maybe the apocalypse will be solved?” He realizes he's missed a change of clothes. He's probably not going to care if he smells a bit bad, but he definitely needs a spare set in case he gets drenched with something toxic. Which would seem unlikely? But he *is* in a city, and what little he's seen of the things outside, well. They seem like they'd probably count as chemicals he doesn't want held against his skin. Oh, he should grab his windbreaker, too, the one they gave him as a signing perk or something when he joined the company. That will be good if it rains, and will be easier to clean than cloth...

He's packed his bag entirely. He feels something burn beneath his skin. This is the most motivated he's felt in at least a week. He stares at his door, blocked-up and deadbolted. He swallows.

“I do need a map,” he says, and he pulls out his graph paper and starts painstakingly writing out the instructions of how to get from his apartment to Grian's townhouse. They need to be exact. He needs to be able to follow them even if it's, uh, even worse than he thinks it is, out there. It's a long walk. A truly absurd walk, really, so he'll probably also need to steal some kind of transportation at some point. He will certainly get lost. He'll probably be killed before he starves. He should not do this.

He hears something clicking on the floor beneath him. He thinks of soup that tastes like guilt. Or mud. They're really quite similar flavors, aren't they?

There's a fire in his soul.

He makes a decision.

He doesn't want to die at all. He, uh, really doesn't want to do that. Which, of course, makes the world really, truly terrifying these days! Because death seems pretty inevitable in a myriad of different, absolutely terrible ways.

But here's the thing. This apartment is safer for now, but even if it's never broken into at all, he has no power and will eventually run out of food. If he's going to die, he will not do it slowly, trapped in a box of his own design. And, sure, if he goes outside, his death will be much faster, and likely much more brutal, and really he does not want to think about it at all because the level of horrible it will be? The worst, probably. Absolutely horrific.

But if he dies outside, he will have died on his feet.

He will have died *trying*.

He takes out his earrings, looks at the electronics in them. Earrings are a liability at this point, and he's leaving the apartment by a much greater distance than these things were meant to track, anyway. It doesn't matter anymore. Nothing's the same. He should probably acknowledge that. He smashes the things with a hammer for good measure before cataloguing everything in his bag one more time.

He's made a decision.

*<MumboJumbo>: if you see this and youre alive im coming*  
*<MumboJumbo>: whoevers left tell me where you are if you can*  
*<MumboJumbo>: im not staying here doing nothing*  
*<MumboJumbo>: im coming*

(After thinking for a moment, he adds one more thing.)

*<MumboJumbo>: i did promise you'd get my bird when it was done.*

## Chapter End Notes

tomorrow: the stairwell.

**LET'S GO FINALLY GETTING THIS SHOW ON THE ROAD!**

(also, preserving the original note here, but just realized the fic no longer says this anywhere, SO: if you want to ask me for any spoiler at all before reading because the tags still leave you unsure if you can/want to invest in 78k of fic, hit me up on tumblr in private, and i'll do that for you!)

# the stairwell

## Chapter Summary

in which things go wrong basically as soon as mumbo steps out of his apartment, boding quite well for the future.

## Chapter Notes

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

The first hurdle in any journey is the first steps. This, Mumbo thinks, is no different for him. The first hurdle in his journey will be getting out of his apartment building without being killed, and really, the odds of that are so low that he's not sure it's even worth being concerned about what to do afterwards.

This is why he's been staring at his barricaded door for the past several minutes with a somewhat overstuffed backpack on his back, a cheap black windbreaker on for protection, and a pocket knife in his hands.

He did just have that big personal revelation. The one where he'd decided he'd prefer to die on his feet than on the ground. He'd even dramatically told all of his friends that he was coming for them! He couldn't really back out of it now. Presuming anyone is still alive, he wouldn't live making a declaration like that and then not going through with it down! If they're all dead he wouldn't be living it down either, because they would all be dead, but what if they were alive? He has to exit the door eventually.

It's more, ah, the terrifying creatures that used to be his neighbors, really.

He really wishes he didn't live on the seventh floor. He could climb out of the window then. He doesn't trust his ability to successfully climb out of a seventh-floor window, though, so he's going to have to take the door and then the stairs. He'd take the elevator, but the power is out. Oh, seven flights of stairs didn't sound terribly fun either, really. Maybe he should just... go over his plan again?

It's not a very complicated plan.

The first thing he needs is more food than his energy bars, and probably proper camping equipment, although that second thing probably isn't going to be something he can find. The food, at least, well, even with the power out, he can probably find a grocer somewhere. Next, he's going to find the nearest mechanic and steal some of their tools. He feels rather bad about this, but he *is* going to need them, and as long as the mechanic doesn't seem like they'd miss them, then well, Mumbo will take them. He should also be able to take some unprogrammed keyfobs, and while it's been a while since he's worked on car mechanics and he doesn't have *that much* experience with modern cars, he's good enough with electronics, and he'll be covered whether he finds an old car or a new one. Getting to Grian's then will be much faster than it would otherwise be...

...he's planning to steal a car.

What has his life come to, exactly?

Maybe he should contemplate his new future as a car thief instead of thinking about opening the door. Yes. That would be nice, wouldn't it?

"I'm a bit of a coward, aren't I?" he says, staring his certain death in the face. Alright. Breathe. It's only the first time he's left his apartment since all of his neighbors turned into terrible monsters and he started hearing screams and seeing blood outside of his window. No pressure at all!

He sits and stares at the door a moment longer.

Well. It's not going to get better the more he goes over his very simple plan of 'find the stuff he needs to steal and then drive to Grian's place'. That really doesn't solve the problem of there being scary things out there. He really... he really just has to go, doesn't he?

Okay. Okay. Deep breaths. Deep breaths. In, out, in, out...

He throws open his front door. The emergency lights are softly glowing in the hallway. There's nothing else there.

"Well," he says. He looks back and forth down the hallway. "Well. Well!" The dark hallway is eerie. The walls are painted a plain white, but there's... something... stained across them. Mumbo would guess blood from the smell, but it's in all sorts of neon colors instead of a dull maroon, so not blood? Unless blood is now neon, which, thinking about it, could be the case. There are long scratches across the terrible carpet that was probably put in the hallways in the eighties, and there are scratches and dents on the outsides of the doors.

Mumbo hears something fall and jumps several feet in the air.

He swings his head around wildly. It's hard to see in the emergency lighting. He doesn't think he sees anything? Probably? He's probably alone in the hallway?

"I have to get moving," he says. He starts walking. "I should stop talking too, shouldn't I? I mean, if there *are* any terrifying monsters here, they can definitely hear my nervous rambling. I'm just leading them all right to me!" He laughs nervously as he heads down the hallway. Funny thing is, he never takes the stairs, so it's not as easy to get there as it is to get to the elevator. Less muscle memory. He *does* know where they are, but—

—he hears a terrible scraping sound and freezes. It is coming, distantly, from behind him.

He decides he will jog to the stairs. Walking actually feels too slow. He's fine! Don't worry about it. He can most certainly out-jog a monster of unknown size, strength, and ability, well before it catches up with him! Why, that monster shouldn't have even tried to stalk him, really, he has a knife. Awfully silly of whatever is making that noise to be stalking him and *oh thank goodness the staircase doors*.

He yanks open the heavy fire door, steps into the stairwell, and lets it slam behind him. Somehow, the stairwell is even less well-lit than the hallway. Terrible oversight, that. The lights were meant to be for emergencies where they didn't have power, and didn't they know he'd have to use the stairs in that scenario? It's almost as though whoever designed the building hadn't actually imagined a situation where Mumbo had to escape his seventh-floor apartment while being pursued by something making a terrible sound in the hallway.

Actually, it's sort of funny, isn't it, that he only hears the one. He could have sworn he had more neighbors than that, and he does know, from watching with terror from his apartment window when the screaming started, that the monsters were once people. Given how many neighbors he

has, there really ought to be more than the single thing scraping past.

...oh.

Oh. Oh dear.

Perhaps he shouldn't have thought of that. Now he's thinking about what might have happened to those neighbors— *might have!*

He grabs the bannister and starts carefully going down the stairs, trying not to walk as off-balanced and sick as he feels.

He does not make it far until he hears something slam against the door and nearly trips and falls down the stairs in his sudden panic. He cannot die because he broke his neck trying to go down the stairs, he thinks hysterically. He *cannot* die of self-inflicted stupidity! Which, really, means he can't die at all, because this whole stupid, stupid idea was self-inflicted stupidity—

—the door slams in.

Mumbo hears something scraping against the floor two flights above him and starts sprinting down the stairs.

Now, Mumbo isn't the world's most athletic person. He's a computer engineer! He used to lift more, when he was still a teenager working in a mechanic's shop, but ever since he started working for tech companies he hasn't *had* to lift anything, and really, for the past few years he hasn't been really supposed to leave his apartment more than necessary, so he's not athletic. He's trying! He's trying because he doesn't want to die but also he can't trip on his feet and it's dark and he can't see and oh god he hears it, he hears it coming, he hears it. He stumbles on his feet.

Something drops down the center of the stairwell and Mumbo yells. It clings to the fifth-floor landing above him. Mumbo freezes.

In front of him is a... a... it was once a person. It has to have been, Mumbo knows this, but it doesn't look like it. It's a monster. It has too many legs to count. They're long and spider-like and they let it cling to the walls in strange ways. Its body is long, and curls around the bannister. Mumbo backs up. Mumbo realizes it's blocking his way. It opens its mouth, and it's, it's hard to focus on everything else, not when that mouth is so full of teeth. It's just. It's so full of teeth. It's so full of teeth. He can't make his brain stop buffering on that. It's so full of teeth.

It makes a rattling noise. It lunges. On instinct, Mumbo screws his eyes shut and shoves his pocket knife in its vague direction. He hears a shout. He smells blood. He yanks the knife back and opens his eyes. Something neon green and sticky is coating his blade, and there's now a lot of that neon green stuff in the thing's mouth where Mumbo had stuck the knife, and it's reeling and confused, and Mumbo—Mumbo, he's reeling and confused, too, but he doesn't have time to be. He shoves past the thing's long body. It feels like it has human skin. Mumbo shudders as he brushes past it.

He starts skipping steps as he runs down the stairs. His heart is pounding. He still isn't fast enough. He hears it click again, and then he hears a scraping along the walls. "No, no no no no—" It lands in front of him and lunges. Mumbo ducks, but he trips as he does. He grabs the railing just before he falls and breaks his neck, but it means he's not getting away quickly enough. His left arm pulls a little funny. He scrambles up to keep going. At least it missed its lunge.

He's past the third floor now, and he's practically jumping down, now. There's more scraping against the walls as he runs. He's about halfway to the second floor when it drops down in front of

him again. He nearly runs right into it. The fact that he stops himself is a miracle, really.

Mumbo thinks fast. He pulls his backpack off his back, looks away, and swings it as hard as he can. He hears something *crack* on impact. He doesn't dare look. He also doesn't dare look down, because—

Two stories is survivable, right?

He jumps.

His left arm hits the side of the stairwell funny as he falls, yanking against the stairs. His shoulder burns. He doesn't have much time to think about that, though, because he hits the ground and for a moment all he can be is dizzy and out of breath. The carpeting on the bottom of the stairwell wasn't meant for falling on. Still, he manages to scramble to grab his knife—oh, his knife, oh, he's so lucky he didn't *stab himself*, what on *earth* was he thinking—and point it blindly at the sky as he backs towards the stairwell exit.

The thing jumps after him. It makes a shout that is horribly, horribly human as both Mumbo and it realize at the same time where his knife is lined up to hit.

Mumbo doesn't close his eyes before the knife slices through the thing's throat.

The thing looks up. With its mouth closed, it's obvious how human its eyes are, Mumbo realizes. Its eyes are brown, the sort of pretty brown that someone might claim to get lost in. They're watering. They're human. They're dying.

Mumbo pulls the knife back without thinking, and it makes a gurgling noise. There's a strange whistling as it tries to take in air. All Mumbo can think is: he didn't think he'd get it in the neck. He'd been hoping to get its foot. He'd been hoping it would land feet-first. Why did it dive in a position where he could get its neck?

The blood leaking around the knife is neon green.

The monster stops taking in breaths. There's a pool of neon green blood on the ground. It had human eyes.

Which one of his neighbors had it been?

Mumbo stumbles backwards, keels over, and throws up. He's shaking. "Okay," he says. "Okay." He backs towards a corner of the stairwell. The whole place feels narrow. "Okay." There's a dead body in front of him. "Okay." It looks like a horror movie monster, but that's a dead body. "Okay." He slides down the wall of the stairwell until he's on the ground, covering his mouth as though it would stop him from throwing up again.

He doesn't want this. He doesn't...

He looks at the thing with insect legs, and wonders if it had a name. He counts the legs, and there are twenty, and he wonders how it felt to grow them. He wonders if he's a murderer now.

...then he remembers his own dead neighbors, and, hysterically, he realizes it doesn't matter. Monsters. It had been trying to eat him or something. It had probably already eaten most of the people in the building, really. It was just Mumbo's barricade and human mind that had saved him. It had been self-defense against a thing that ate people. Really, really now, did it matter...

He probably is, though. A murderer. He did just murder someone. Directly. With his own hands.

He'd done that. He'd *killed someone*.

He doesn't want to do that again. He's going to have to.

"Well," he says, quietly. "I'm alive, and it would be silly to stop now, since I've already done just about the worst thing a person can do."

Is this what they call compartmentalizing? He thinks so. He thinks he's going to have to do quite a lot of that upcoming, if he's going to make it to Grian's place.

Slowly, he stands up. He picks up his backpack. After a moment, he puts his knife into it. His hands are shaking too much to hold a knife. His hands are shaking too much to be useful with a knife. His shoulder aches. He thinks he just barely managed to not completely dislocate it, and he's lucky it's his left one. If it had been his right shoulder, well, he really would have been screwed, but since it's his left, if he just can't use the arm properly, he'll be fine.

He tries to put his backpack on and. It hurts. It hurts a lot. He just barely manages to put it on, though. The pain is a lot, but he's going to have to get used to that too.

He looks back at the body one more time, and he realizes he wishes he knew its name. Someone should know its name. There are no identifying clothes left on it, though, and there's no real way to tell.

He imagines Grian as the dead body in the stairwell. He imagines Grian, with no one left to know his name.

He realizes he can't let that happen.

"I'm sorry," he says. He takes in one more terrible breath, and he walks to the stairwell door, and he steps out.

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The apartment lobby is quiet, and lit by two large glass windows in the front of the room. Outside, it is bright and sunny, and Mumbo, who has had his windows blocked for days, can barely see in the well-lit lobby. He throws his hand over his eyes as he tries to adjust.

The lobby itself is fairly well put-together for an apocalypse. It's a simple room with a directory Mumbo has never seen anyone use, a hallway to the mailroom, and a hallway to the elevators. Normally Mumbo is going one of those places rather than outside. He doesn't tend to get out much.

He's going out now, though. Funny, that.

He looks out the windows. He sees a few wrecked cars, neon bloodstains, and no evidence of anything else alive. The other buildings look as dark as this one, which really makes sense. The power doesn't go out in a single place at a time.

He wonders if they have corpses in their stairwells too.

No! No, he really needs to just. Leave this behind. Which makes him feel like the worst person in the world, really, but it's probably not the first time he's going to have to fight someone and he really, really can't go back now, not the least because he'd have to walk past the body again.

Right then. With that cheery thought, he needs to execute the next part of his plan: make it to the convenience store nearby. He'd try to get to the supermarket, but that's more than three blocks

away, and frankly, in his current state, he'd like to think of short distances until he's forced to reckon with the long drive to Grian's. Just getting down the stairs had been an ordeal and a half. He isn't prepared to think about thousands of miles! Or even think about, uh, about two and a half miles, which is the distance between his apartment and a proper grocer.

Small steps at a time. The staircase had been bad enough, so. Small steps.

He pushes open the front door to the apartment complex and steps out into the sun.

It's far too hot for his windbreaker, but that was one of the only solid black pieces of clothing Mumbo had owned that wasn't, uh, a suit, so he can't really ditch it. It's not horrendously hot, it's just too hot for the jacket. But the jacket—the jacket helps him blend in with buildings! He can't just take off the jacket, just like he can't just go ditching any of the *other* things in his bag. He had a plan!

He'll... he'll just be uncomfortably warm. Yes. All the stories he's read about survival emphasize that layers can be very important. Of course, those are for hiking, not walking a few blocks to get to the nearest convenience store, but the principle is the same, isn't it?

He's stalling again.

He sighs and starts walking down the sidewalk. He supposes there's nothing other than some crashed vehicles to stop him from walking on the pavement, now that he thinks about it, but the sidewalk is nicer for walking. It's eerily quiet for the city. He hears pigeons, occasionally, and sometimes he hears hisses or braying noises or, terrifyingly, a roar, but—

—it is still. It is silent.

For a moment, Mumbo contemplates the possibility that the corpse in the stairwell is the last person he will encounter on this trip.

That would be a good thing, wouldn't it? It would mean that the last person Mumbo had met would be someone he'd just killed, but that sort of thing happens after the apocalypse all the time, doesn't it?

...it all happened awfully fast, didn't it?

He needs to pay attention to his surroundings. He stops at the first street corner past his apartment complex. He breathes in through his nose. Right. Pay attention. It's just that this is all happening awfully, awfully quickly, he thinks. Just earlier, he'd had a personal revelation, and now—now he's killed someone, and is outside of his apartment complex, and going to find his best friend, who hasn't been responding to his messages! Those are all awfully big life changes, and really, it's turned into a lot to process all at once. He—breathe in through his nose. Yes. He can handle this.

This coat is really too warm. And there's... there's blood on it. Oh dear. How did he... how did he only now realize, the neon green blood, it's. It's all over him. That cannot be sanitary, and...

It's a windbreaker. That's. That's one more good reason to leave it on, even if he's very hot, isn't it? He wouldn't want the blood to get on his actual clothes. The windbreaker—he can wash. He can wash the. The blood off. He can.

One foot in front of the other, Mumbo. And—and he does have to breathe, doesn't he?

He's already thrown up about this. He shakily walks down the block in the eerie city quiet and all he can think is: he has already thrown up about this, and tried to compartmentalize it, for Grian's



sake. He has already dealt with this, yes?

It's just. It was a lot, very quickly, and also, he's killed someone.

He supposes he'd less compartmentalized in the stairwell so much as processed that it was both indeed murder and necessary. He hadn't really considered how auspicious a start to his journey that was, or the full ramifications of his actions. Maybe he should think those through now. What are the ways that having a windbreaker covered in blood will make his plan harder to see through?

He's very lightheaded. He thinks he's forgotten to breathe. No, he can't be having a panic attack about this now. He's already had his panic attack about it, and it won't be the first time. Does he understand that—

—it won't. It won't be. The first time it won't be. It won't. Oh. Oh dear. Oh.

He wants to take his windbreaker off. It's too hot. He smells sweat and blood now. He wants to go back to his apartment. He's not supposed to leave his apartment. How could he forget that he's not supposed to leave his apartment? He knows it doesn't matter, now that—

No, no, no, he can't have a panic attack now. What about his plan?

He takes in several shuddering breaths. The pavement is very hot. Yes. What about his plan? His plan requires that he get to the convenience store. Also, just after he'd murdered his neighbor, he'd remembered that he wanted Grian to have someone who knew his name see him if he were dead. Mumbo rather hopes Grian is not dead—that's the whole point of this trip—but if Grian were, Mumbo needs to get there.

The point is, he can't be panicking. Look, he's stopped in his tracks. If there are more monsters about, this really would be the moment to eat him, but it's just... empty. Everything's empty.

He wonders if they've all eaten or killed each other, or if they're just all hiding.

It doesn't matter, now does it? The convenience store. That's where he's going. Besides, it wouldn't even be the first time his actions have, in the abstract, led to death. He's a government contractor, and even if he wasn't really supposed to have known what he was building, he's smart enough to.. it doesn't matter, really. None of this matters.

Convenience store.

He feels like he's swimming, or drifting, or dreaming, maybe, as he walks to the convenience store. He doesn't quite see what's in front of him. The edges of his vision are grey, and he is far too hot in his silly little windbreaker. Occasionally, he'll remember what has just happened, and his mind will start to spin again, but it's all starting to feel awfully distant. Maybe this time he's compartmentalizing? That would be nice. He doesn't think that's what he's doing, though. What he thinks he's doing is dissociating, which is something else entirely, and probably isn't good.

When he makes it to the convenience store, there is no power there, either. That would make sense. Mumbo is beginning to suspect that the people who run the power plant are probably dead, so the power plant has stopped running. That's a rather bleak thought, but, well, there's a corpse in his apartment building's stairway, so really, bleak thoughts are rather likely, aren't they?

The convenience store has two large glass windows and a sliding glass door. Inside, Mumbo sees that some of the food has fallen to the floor, and he really doesn't want to think about what's inside that convenience store hot dog machine at this point and whether or not they can be considered hot dogs any longer, but he also doesn't see any more monsters or people inside, so that's probably

best. It's totally safe to enter. He steps up to the doors.

Ah. Right. The power's out.

Now, he's pretty sure there has to be a way to slide these open when the power's out. It couldn't possibly be up to fire code, having them lock people in. However, Mumbo also doesn't have a clue in the world of how one would go about opening sliding glass doors with the power out, let alone how one would go about doing that without a key.

Well, with the power out, there's no alarm to go off, is there?

He shrugs and throws his backpack through the door. The shattering noise cuts through the fog around Mumbo's vision long enough for him to realize that it *may* have been a bad idea to send broken glass everywhere. He ducks for cover. It doesn't do much at that point, but he does duck, and he stays ducked and counts to thirty in his head.

If there are any monsters, they definitely heard that. They *definitely* heard that. Also, see, benefits of wearing layers and long pants! There is glass in his windbreaker and jeans, but it isn't, generally, in his skin at the moment. He isn't bleeding.

The only blood he has on him is from the stairway.

Focus. He has to count down. He needs to wait long enough to make sure no one is coming for him now that he's spectacularly destroyed the door to the convenience store. He was counting from thirty, right? Thirty seconds is enough time to make sure he doesn't die? He certainly hopes so, he doesn't have the patience to cower much longer.

That backpack is a lethal weapon, though, geez. That door is very dead. The whole thing shattered. It is going to be difficult to get through the door, given all the pointy glass, but it's very, very destroyed, so it shouldn't be too bad—

—a lethal weapon. A.

Oh, *really*? He's going to start feeling weepy over *that*? Honestly, if he's going to have a panic attack, can it please be over something that isn't a stupid turn of phrase about his stupid backpack in the middle of this stupid, stupid street? That would be great!

He gives up counting and marches through the shattered door.

Nothing jumps out to kill him, which is definitely a plus. Now, why was he here again? Right, his plan. The important plan. The one where he needed new food options. Luckily, if he ignores the likely very deadly sludge in the hot foods machines, the store is full of things that are safe to eat for years and years after they are put on the shelves. None of them are nutritious, exactly, which will certainly come back to bite him later, but he's very, very tired of energy bars and soup.

He starts sorting through the bags of potato chips, Twinkies, and beef jerky. Some of it isn't even food he'd actually eat, normally, he just needs food and plenty of it. If he can barely stomach it... Well, he'll cross that bridge when he gets to it.

He certainly feels queasy now, but that's probably the recent murder.

He's. Oh. He's lightheaded again and... no, no, he really can't deal with this. Compartmentalize by making a plan about it. Yes. That's what Mumbo's done with the apocalypse so far, and it's working quite well!

Mumbo stares at a bag of beef jerky.

...if he just about has a panic attack every time he kills someone, he'll just... not do that again.  
Problem solved, right?

He stares at the bag harder. Well, if this is like a zombie movie, he probably won't have a choice. He can't just talk down the zombies. However, he could... aim to incapacitate. No direct killing. If they die later, he'll simply... choose not to think about it. That could work. A band-aid solution, certainly, but. That could work.

He really needs to be able to breathe if he's going to rescue Grian.

He starts sorting out his bag to make sure it's packed properly. He pictures the body in the stairwell one more time and sweeps it away. He won't be doing that again. Yes, he's resolute. He won't be doing that again. No more killing. In fact, to show how resolute he is, he'll just... he pulls out several water bottles from the refrigerators and dumps them on his windbreaker, washing the blood away. He won't be needing that, now will he? No more reminder, either!

What's next? Right. Tools for stealing cars with.

He leaves.

## Chapter End Notes

tomorrow: the streets.

me: okay i'll post this at 7 pm est. surely that won't go wrong.  
also me: buys civ 6 because it's on sale.

i'm sure you see the problem here.

anyway, these two chapters are pretty strong tone-setters. while things get sillier in parts, if the tone of these doesn't appeal to you, the tone of the fic might not. if the tone DOES however... welcome aboard! we have now officially earned that graphic descriptions of violence warning, lol, AND shown you my... attempt? at an action scene. (the action scenes, uh, look, they're experimental for me. tell me how well they worked?)

## the streets

### Chapter Summary

in which mumbo has several encounters, and the broken-down, unusable car is the best one. it's been a day.

### Chapter Notes

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

Mumbo is uncomfortably sticky, quite hot, and quickly realizing that he's sort of out-of-shape. He'd used his phone to try to find the nearest hardware store, auto shop, or mechanic's. So he can steal a car. Because his life is truly in shambles at this point. His backpack is far too heavy. He can't take anything out of it, but it's just so, so very heavy, and it's driving him a little bonkers. He's not built for hauling lots of things around on his back! Even if the fact the backpack is so heavy *has* come in handy at least twice now, come to think of it...

It would probably come in handy again if more monsters approached, but Mumbo is beginning to get the suspicion that his apartment complex had been an outlier. As best he can tell, he'd just gotten *exceptionally* unlucky when he'd been attacked minutes after leaving his apartment. Since then, he's certainly *heard* occasional strange noises, but he's yet to *see* any of the strange things that go along with the noises.

Maybe the monsters are all scared of him? He *does* have an intimidatingly large and heavy backpack. Mumbo would be scared of someone with an intimidatingly large and heavy backpack as well.

His offline map had suggested that there would be an auto parts store in about four miles. Mumbo has started walking there. Mumbo has not walked four miles in... well. Well! A very long time indeed! Given the distance he's going to have to walk to get out of the city to somewhere he can actually drive a car... well!

He deeply wishes he'd had the capability and the willingness to stay in shape before now. Unfortunately, the nearest gym had been outside of the radius he was supposed to go from his apartment, and, well, he got pretty lazy trying to go outside at all. To tell the truth, if it hadn't been for the apocalypse and all, this walk would probably even be good for him.

As it stands, though, Mumbo's almost bored. There really aren't more monsters at the moment for some reason. Maybe they'd all gotten scared off? Or eaten. It is possible they've all been eaten. That's horrifying to think about. Is it better to be attacked by monsters, and therefore know there are still people alive, or to *not* be attacked by monsters and be alive himself? Does it even matter? Do the monsters *know* that they were once people.

He probably shouldn't even be thinking about this as hard as he is, but it's hard not to, given the uncharacteristic quiet of the city. Last time he was out and about, there were people and cars everywhere! The fact that there isn't now is just... well, it just isn't right, is it?

Well, at any rate, his feet are getting tired. That probably isn't good. He's going to have to do a lot of walking to get out of the city and to a place where he can steal a car and drive it, instead of

coming across one of the many abandoned and wrecked cars that block the road. He supposes it probably got hard to drive after turning into, for example, the weird long many-legged thing that the body in the stairwell had been, but the cars being left everywhere is really just deeply inconvenient now that they're preventing him from stealing a vehicle to easily drive to Grian's.

Well. Not preventing him from stealing. Just making it so he has to do more walking in order to steal. The stealing is still definitely happening.

...he may have already lost it a bit.

His footsteps echo a little bit. He's not particularly quiet with his walking. He isn't 100% certain how to be sneaky. Sneakiness isn't a natural state of being for him. He doesn't feel the need to be, though, without any monsters nearby. Instead he lets his sneakers hit the ground with a steady thump, thump, thump. Mumbo would be annoyed by the sound if someone else were doing it, but since it's him, he supposes it's ultimately not too bad. It's almost grounding.

He pauses as he looks at the side of a building that is splattered with neon colors. It smells like metal. Mumbo looks away again after a moment.

Ideally. Ideally that would have been a graffiti artist. It wasn't, but ideally, it would have been, and. Oh dear. There's... more. It's not dried. It's draining down the sides of the road into the gutter. It's neon pink and neon blue. It would be almost pretty if Mumbo didn't know it to be blood. As it is, it's just sort of... well... Mumbo doesn't want to walk *that way*, now does he?

That way, Mumbo realizes, is the way his phone GPS is cheerfully telling him he ought to walk.

Well, that's just brill, isn't it?

Maybe he can... go around? Go around where the blood is coming from. That can't be. That hard. He won't get immediately lost. He's lived in this town for years. It's not as though he never goes outside and wasn't supposed to leave a certain radius from his apartment and was sort of here against his better judgement or anything. He definitely.... definitely knows this town well enough to go around this blood and make it to the auto store that he's never been to in his life. Absolutely. That won't end poorly at all.

Maybe he should just... go ahead. Walk through the blood anyway. Blood isn't dangerous by itself. This looks fresh, but it might not be! It could just be very bleed-y! Or, or washing off of something because it rained recently!

...has it rained recently?

Mumbo. Doesn't think it's rained at all recently.

But, still! It could prove to be perfectly safe! And, besides, it's the way his GPS says to go and oh that's a kind of terrifying crunching sound just there actually he's just going to go around now. Yes. *Around* the horrible blood, GPS or no GPS. He almost starts running before changing his mind, deciding running probably isn't smart, and sort of awkwardly half-jogging instead, nearly tripping as he ducks around the nearest street that doesn't involve having to pass the blood he can. He's gotten halfway down the street, his GPS cheerfully beeping at him to turn around, when he stops moving.

He looks behind him. He doesn't see anything chase him.

He hears a scream.

"Oh dear," he says out loud, without meaning to. "Oh. Oh no." Right. Alright. Well, he's not going that way. He shakes his phone, knowing full well that won't change the device's truly terrible advice for which direction to walk. "Just get me around the block, won't you?" he says as the screaming cuts off again.

Moving. Moving. He's walking. He's going! He's going!

He... took a right to get here, so he can take another right to start walking in the same direction again, right? This street curves a little, so it can't be *that* bad, right?

It's still eerily quiet. The street he's turned onto appears to mostly be brownstones. Some of them are apartments, but on the street level, a number of them are the sorts of shops Mumbo would assume could be called holes in the wall. Many of them have broken windows. He's trying rather hard not to look in them. They can't all be empty, after all, especially if they have broken windows. Maybe the broken windows are good things. Maybe there are survivors, he thinks, who, like him, have heavy backpacks and a need for food. He doesn't necessarily approve of stealing, but he's going to do a lot of it, and it's better to think that's what's happened on this street than whatever the thing that made that crunching noise was having gotten to everyone here.

He's fully willing to admit one of those things is more likely, but - but there *are* other survivors. There must be. After all, there must be at least Grian, to have gotten that message on his phone, so there must be others in Mumbo's town as well.

He thinks he sees something move out of the corner of his eye.

"Don't mind me," he says, like an idiot. "Just passing through! You can stay in your shops. I really don't have an interest in them unless you happen to be selling auto supplies, in which case there are a few things I might need, but I certainly won't take them from you."

He hears a hiss. It's like a warning.

"I'm going to run now," he says, and he does. He doesn't *think* he hears anything chasing him? He sees movement, certainly! But he doesn't think they're footsteps that are chasing him, exactly. He thinks they're sticking to their shops. He thinks that if he went in any of them, he'd be dead, but. But! So far, nothing that's on this street is chasing him as he runs.

There are eyes following him from the windows. He ignores the eyes. Generally, eyes are among the least of his worries. Eyes just watch him. As long as they aren't teeth, or claws, or crushing arms, or, Mumbo doesn't know, flamethrowers, he can handle being watched. That won't stop him from running, though, because he still feels awfully like he isn't supposed to be here. He makes it most of the way down the street before running out of stamina and stopping for a moment to breathe.

He hears hissing behind him again. A head is poking out from one of the shops, right behind him, and. Oh. He didn't hear anything chasing him because it was a snake, and.

He stares at it. It stares back.

It's long, and was once a person.

"I really don't mean any harm," he says. He tenses, though. He prepares to slam his backpack into the large, snake-like creature, covered in flesh-colored skin. They stare at each other for a while. Then, the creature turns away. It goes back into its shop. The hissing stops.

"...huh," Mumbo says, and he turns down the next block.

His phone helpfully pings again. His feet still hurt. He doesn't know what to make of that encounter, so he'll just... ignore that for the time being. Even if he can't stop thinking about it now. The snake didn't kill him. (Was it a snake? Mumbo isn't sure that counts as a snake. It's some sort of snake-like creature, at least, so does that make it a snake? Except, no, it was once a person.) It had simply... let Mumbo leave. Is that good? He hopes it's good. He hopes that means it can think. He walks down the street. His phone, insistently, pings at him.

"Oh, are you going to lead me right back there?" he says, looking at the GPS again. It is, however, taking him around the block, rather like it ought to. Mumbo huffs to himself. Good. He prefers that to... whatever it would have otherwise been doing. He begins following it again. Get to the auto shop. Get the blank keys. Steal a car. Really, how hard can his incredibly simple plan even be?

He's almost made it around the block in the first place when he thinks he hears the ominous hissing again.

He swallows.

He pulls on one of the closest doors. It isn't locked. That's terrifying, but he takes it, stepping inside what appears to be someone's relatively cheaply decorated townhouse. Posters hang on the walls. It looks new, Mumbo thinks as he closes the door behind him and bolts it shut. He'd always thought houses after the apocalypse would look all destroyed and abandoned, but he supposes it's really only been about a week. That's not enough time for a house to collapse. The clock on the wall is still working, and the only broken thing is a mug of coffee on the floor.

He thinks he hears a thump against the door. He covers his own mouth. He hears the hiss, and then it leaves again. He opens the door once more and there is nothing there.

That monster, Mumbo thinks, had tried to trick him! How incredibly rude!

He doesn't say this out loud, because he may be a spoon, but he's not an idiot.

He creeps down the road for some time, but it stays quiet and still after that, and he's unable to decide how to process any of what's just happened, so he processes none of it at all.

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Mumbo reaches an overpass. The sidewalk had ended at least a mile ago, and he'd been walking on open asphalt. There hadn't been any more monster attacks, although he's keeping his eyes rather wide open for them. He never knows when a monster might turn up and try to eat him, or some other such nefarious deed.

He keeps on thinking about the snake. It had planned. Maybe these things aren't mindless. It had definitely been trying to kill him, though. Or maybe it had just been on a stroll! He doesn't know! He just knows it didn't kill him once, but it followed him. Maybe it had been waiting until his guard was down, or maybe it had just... not liked where he had been standing or something.

Regardless, he has to walk across the overpass, where there will be nowhere to duck and hide, so if the snake is following him, well, he suspects that will be where it strikes. He hopes it isn't. He doesn't want to get eaten by a snake. Nothing to do, he thinks. Nothing to do. He steps out onto the overpass.

"This feels illegal," he says. There's really no pedestrian space whatsoever here. There's a single car blocking the middle of the overpass though. It's covered in rust and peeling paint. One of the tires is deflated. Mumbo thinks that's rather odd, personally, but he supposes he can't judge too much. He doesn't even have a car. It's just funny to imagine this one had broken down in the

middle of the road (as it appears to have) instead of breaking down when its driver turned into a terrible beast.

Speaking of which. He looks to both sides of him. There are no terrible beasts. He can keep walking. He's not being hunted.

Maybe the eyes are as scary as the claws or the crushing arms after all? That's definitely worth considering.

Wait.

Something moves in the distance behind him. He looks at the utterly useless car that had broken down on the overpass, pries a door open, and hides under the seat, barely breathing.

He hears hissing again, but something else as well. Heavy footsteps. Are they footsteps if they come from something that isn't a human, actually? Do bears, for example, make footsteps? Mumbo thinks that's the right word, but he can't be entirely sure. He tries to still his breathing. His heart pounds. He hears the hiss again, and then a roar.

He hears a sudden, horrible shriek.

He hears a tearing sound.

He buries himself deeper into the car cushions as he hears horrific crunching. The cushions, Mumbo realizes, smell like weed, because of course they do. Outside, two monsters had briefly fought, and one killed the other. They probably don't smell like weed, Mumbo thinks, and then he thinks that's one of the *stupidest* things he's managed to think, which is saying quite a lot, really, he just doesn't want to think about that horrific crunching sound, god, god, god.

He curls up tighter against the dirty, weed-smelling car cushions in the back of the rusted, broken-down station wagon and waits for the horrible sound to stop. For what feels like an eternity, it doesn't, and then, for an eternity longer, it does, and he hears footsteps getting closer, inspecting the area. He prays the thing doesn't get into the car. He prays the thing doesn't try. He prays the car gives it tetanus, at least, from all the rust, if it does try to get in to eat Mumbo.

The footsteps walk away again. Mumbo counts up to fifty in his head to be sure. He starts over two times. Eventually, he opens the door.

The snake creature is in pieces on the ground. Neon orange blood spills out of the shreds of snake that are left. It's hardly a corpse, and Mumbo finds it hard to imagine even the scraps will remain for long. The only reason Mumbo knows that's the snake creature is the color of its skin.

He wonders if it had followed him to eat him.

He wonders if the other monster had, too.

Is it his fault, he wonders, if they had both come here to eat him, and found each other instead? No, no he can't think like that, can he? Bad enough that he has killed someone! He can't go borrowing kills that weren't him. If he does that he won't get anything done. After all, he passed by blood just earlier. He's just. Not going to look at that and finish crossing this overpass.

He has never been so grateful for a broken-down, rusted, horrifically maintained car from the seventies that smells like weed before in his life, though. If he ever meets the irresponsible driver who had this thing on the street, he's going to thank them for their terrible decisions. Then again, the sorts of terrible decisions that lead to having a car in *that* poor of maintenance likely doesn't



bode well for their survival.

Then again... again? Then again, Mumbo is somehow alive currently, so maybe his mysterious accidental benefactor will be alive as well.

He takes one more glance at the snake creature that he'd just witnessed the death of and decides he doesn't want to die either and sprints to the other side of the bridge like that will help him outrun anything. He looks down at his phone. A little less than a mile to go left. There's an off ramp he apparently has to walk down, and then he will take a right, and then there will be a large parking lot and he *ought* to be able to recognize an auto shop from there.

He still breathes a lot easier when he's off the bridge by a ways, and he's yet to be eaten.

---

The auto shop he's going to is a chain. His boss as a teenager would have probably killed him for that, he thinks, but needs must, you know? It's not as though he's giving them cash. Maybe his boss would have actually approved, thinking about it—he *is* stealing from them.

It's been years since Mumbo worked as a mechanic, to be fair. His wheelhouse is far more in electronics these days. Even if modern cars do appreciate the use of electronics, and so he supposes knowing his way around a circuit board could be useful in a mechanic's shop these days...? Well, either way, it doesn't matter; he stares at the locked door of the auto shop and sighs. The door's mostly glass again. This time, he holds his hands in front of his face as he throws his backpack through the door and watches it shatter.

He's... probably going to have to keep on doing that, isn't he? His backpack is quite the lethal weapon. He steps inside and, after some thought, turns on his phone flashlight. Outside of the very front, this store doesn't have very many windows, and he's going to have to crawl back into the shop's employee areas to find what he wants. While the blank key fobs will *hopefully* be on hand, some maintenance manuals and diagnostics kits would be handy too, and he wants a proper adjustable wrench, because he never knows when he might need one of those.

He really has to consider the fact that his backpack is already a lethal weapon and his shoulders hurt and his backpack really isn't a hiking pack. Maybe he should steal a hiking backpack too while he's here. If there is one, he means. This is a strip mall; if there's some kind of hiking store, he supposes it *would* be here. If there isn't such a store, well, in that case, Mumbo really doesn't know what he'll do. Probably continue to kill his back and shoulders with his existing backpack—oh good, they have several common keyfob types. He sweeps them into his bag. Hopefully, rigging these up with cars he's trying to steal won't be too awful.

He pauses as he heads back to the employee area and notices a checklist for... it's a more modern Volvo station wagon than the one he'd seen on the bridge. And stealing a car while he's still this in-town means that he's likely to run into areas he can't get the car through because of traffic.

But. That terribly maintained station wagon *had* saved his life. Also, the fact that it's several decades old will make it easier to hotwire...

No, no, he's being a bit of an idiot, really, he shouldn't steal a car that had broken down on the road. He can't *drive* a car if it's broken down. *That's not how cars work.* But he had been a mechanic at one point. Maybe he can get it working...?

He'll keep the idea in reserve.

He finds the wrench he's looking for. It's big, but it's adjustable, so there shouldn't be any bolts that

he can't unscrew with it. Plus, it's heavy, but less unwieldy than the backpack. That will make it easier to hit things with, even if that's not really what a wrench is designed to do. He needs something to hit things with and the knife—

—the knife—

—it's perfectly reasonable, he thinks, that he doesn't want to use the knife at all. He means, really, who would? Pocket knives are hardly decent weapons, now are they? No, big heavy wrenches are truly where it's at! Absolutely where it's at! Absolutely the right way to go about things! Not little pocket knives that Mumbo had brought as a weapon but had originally purchased for things like opening packages and feeling better about himself and hearing the spring mechanism click when he opened and closed it. He hardly needs the thing, really. He won't throw it out, because he's not stupid, but he has a wrench now, so the knife. He doesn't need that, or the dried blood on the blade.

He should really wash that off, shouldn't he? He. He really should.

Alright. Focus. He counts out the keyfobs he has and hopes he knows the correct programming method. He has several Toyota Camry ones, a few for some SUVs, at least one Jeep... it's a strange selection, made up mostly of common cars, but that means he has to find *some car* he can steal successfully using these, right?

Right! He just has to figure out how to get far enough out of town that he can drive in a straight line and then he'll be headed right for Grian's. He hasn't driven in about two years, but hey, driving twelve hours can't be that bad, right?

...He *is* rather asking for it, isn't he?

Well. He puts everything in his backpack and weighs it on his shoulders. He shoves the keys in his pockets so they don't get crushed after realizing that between the soldering kit, the massive wrench, the bottled water, and the food, he probably *would* crush the small plastic keyfobs if he left them in there. And that, that would just be silly, wouldn't it? (It's also silly, carrying a bunch of small plastic keyfobs in his pockets, but, well, he never *really* claimed to be smart, and besides, at least those are a little sensible to be carrying, right?) He has a moment of panic when he realizes that, oh dear, wait. Wait. Wait. Grian's stuffed bird. The electronics in that aren't done but those could get crushed too. And they don't really matter, but he wants to keep the bird in one piece if he can, and—his phone! His phone should definitely go in one of his jacket pockets as well. Maybe he should just carry the wrench?

He can't help but think: the wrench wouldn't have actually helped much against the thing that had eaten the snake, or the snake. It would have been helpful against the body in the stairwell, but Mumbo's really not a fighter. He can claim the wrench is for breaking things and fixing things as well, but that doesn't mean he can do it. He'll pretend, though. He'll pretend.

Besides, he's finished step one of his plan. Or, was this step one? He's finished *a* step of his plan. That's better than he thought he'd do. By a *lot*, really. He thought he'd be dead by now.

He looks outside. It's technically only been a few hours, he thinks, but the sun is setting. Somehow, going outside after dark feels more dangerous than going outside when it's light, even though Mumbo thinks there's probably not much of a difference. He goes back to the employee rooms. At least that door, he thinks, isn't shattered like the front door to this place. Did he pack a blanket?

He goes back into his backpack. Really, he shouldn't have repacked it, he just hadn't realized it was getting dark. Oh, he's thirsty too, now that he thinks about it. If he's careful, he can probably just use his water filter and the sink. Then he can eat... some of his energy bars? Now that he's sitting

down, he's very hungry. He wishes he had better food than convenience store junk, energy bars, and some extra cans of soup. How is he even supposed to make the soup?

His dinner is a bottle of water, and then another, because he's very thirsty, and an energy bar to conserve energy in case he needs to do scary things like run away or hide in broken-down cars again or kill someone (even if he's still promised not to). When he closes the door to the employee room, the power's out there, too, so the room gets terribly dark. There aren't any windows. He should have several days on his battery packs, but he's kind of concerned about wasting energy on something like using his phone as a flashlight regardless. His head hurts, and he's really sore, and his shoulder, now that he thinks about it, still hurts a lot. It's not completely dislocated, but...

He lived one day. And he made it to the auto shop! That's better than he thought he'd do.

He had packed a blanket, but he realized he hadn't really packed more than one change of clothes. He's going to smell very bad by the time this is done, which won't do at all, but he really has no room to pack extras. He lays out the blanket on the floor (because the employee room doesn't have a sofa and trying to line up the metal folding chairs sounds more uncomfortable than the concrete floor, actually) and he falls asleep fitfully. He'll continue trying to find Grian in the morning.

## Chapter End Notes

tomorrow: the dogs.

this is one of several chapters that falls into the category of "i needed a transition between two points". it also, however, is important for establishing a few things, so a few things it will establish! its a very. establish-y chapter. this whole fic is just. a chapter a set piece, and then sometimes a chapter without a set piece. you know how it is.

# the dogs

## Chapter Summary

in which mumbo does not, in fact, pet any dogs. he really wishes he could though. that's be nice.

## Chapter Notes

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

When Mumbo wakes up, he's far more sore than he was the previous night. He's not sure what time it is, because the power is still out and the room is dark and he'd turned off his phone to conserve the battery. Irrationally, he panics as he turns his phone on. He desperately shakes it as he prays there's still a cell signal, that it hasn't died overnight. That he hasn't just lost the lifeline. That he can connect to his chat client and—and—please— please—

There are no new messages. Of course there are no new messages. Why would there be new messages? Stupid. It made sense to turn it off overnight. It would have been silly if someone had contacted him overnight. He's in the dark, and his phone is glaring in his face, and he's just. He's just standing here, like a fool. What time even is it?

His phone says it's six am, which means he didn't really sleep much. That's fine. He thought he was going to have nightmares, and he didn't, so at least that didn't happen. Maybe that's something that only happens in movies? Or maybe he's just sort of good at compartmentalizing? Or maybe he's a monster who didn't care at all whether the creatures around him lived or died!

That last one doesn't seem very good at compartmentalizing now that he. Thinks that. Oh dear.

He takes several sharp, deep breaths. He'd witnessed two deaths yesterday. He was going to witness more. Deep breaths. He'd lived. That's more than a lot of people can say. Including the people he'd watched die! So, really, what's all this panic even about? Pointless, isn't it? Haha. He's just got to compartmentalize again, now doesn't he? Then everything will be right as rain, and he can go back to marching his march towards Grian's house.

What was his plan for today?

...literally just that, wasn't it? He pulls up his phone GPS and tries not to let his heart pound too hard when he closes away the chat client. He's being silly again. And, you know, maybe he had hoped a little that in the hours he'd been asleep someone would have messaged since Grian's incomprehensible keysmash, that there would be any other person alive in the world at all, but...

He'll look at the map now. He just needs to choose where he thinks it would be most likely that he could both steal a car *and* drive it out of town without crashing. The highway seems good, except it can't be the highway *in town*, that area always has traffic. He tries to calculate how long it would take to walk out of town on foot and it would probably be several hours, since Mumbo can't walk particularly fast, but he thinks he can get outside of the traffic area in a day. Of course, then where will he sleep, once he steals the car? He should probably think of that. He'd try to steal a tent, but he doesn't know where he'd even get one of those, and the car would probably be just as safe if he hotwired it correctly.

Alright. Think. Maybe he leaves through town instead? It takes three tries to convince the GPS to start routing him through areas that are more populated with buildings, probably because that would be the very slow route by almost every measure. However, it would also be the route that gives Mumbo important things like housing and hiding places. Once he's on the road, it will likely just be him, and trees, and interstate exits.

He doesn't want to be alone with interstate exits, but that's what he is likely going to be.

Either way, he thinks, he'll eventually have to walk along the highway to try to reach the point where he can leave town without crashing the car. However, this was, he can do it without, well, walking along the highway for several hours, possibly without recourse. This way he can walk through neighborhoods and *then* reach the highway to leave town from, probably saving him a *lot* of highway walking and giving him a lot more cover in general. It *would* also make it so that he has to take an extra day probably, but he can take an extra day, right?

He doesn't want to, but he can. He can. Taking a little longer, surviving a little longer—Grian wouldn't begrudge him that. One day without getting any messages back is the same as another day without getting any messages back. One day alone is the same as any other day alone. Right. Right.

He plugs in the route and pushes open the employee door. In the eerie light of sunrise, the glass on the floor from the things Mumbo had broken to get in looks a lot more dangerous. And, geez, in the morning, his shoulder is—his shoulder is absolutely killing him! It is *not* going to be fun to have to keep wearing a backpack with his shoulder like *this*. That's what he gets for jumping down a stairwell.

Oh. He has to go back up to the overpass. Well now, he sort of doesn't want to do that at all, now does he? Well, maybe a little. He still needs to thank that station wagon, and maybe consider whether stealing it is practical. It's not. It's not at all practical. But he has the irrational urge to thank it.

He makes sure he has everything packed up again, shoving things in his jacket pockets where he needs to, and he lets his phone GPS take him up the exit ramp back onto the bridge.

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In the light of day, the bridge—well, it had been the light of day before, he can't really say that the difference is that he's seeing it in the light of day now can he—alright. No, it's just that it's the next day, is all. And there's still neon orange blood everywhere. And Mumbo didn't really think the blood would go away? That would be ridiculous, it's not like blood can just *vanish*. He just thought it would look different. And it does!

It looks so much less... wet.

...he's not sure he likes it, stained like that, a thing that was once a person looking like roadkill instead of a thing that probably once had feelings. It should be less freaky because it's not wet, right? But that's not right at all. Instead, it feels far more terrifying in its lack of wet-ness. Like it had passed. Like it was...

He turns to pat the hood of the car instead. He regrets it slightly, because that thing is a terrifyingly messy thing that he's not 100% certain anyone should be touching. But he feels he owes it. "Good... station wagon. Let me check in there..." He pulls the hood up after fishing to find the latch on it. He pulls open the hood. Maybe the reason the car had broken down had been something simple, like a lack of gasoline, or a drained battery, and the part of him that desperately wanted to save the poor vehicle could—

—ah.

No, he thinks, that looks distinctly like it had been on fire.

His dreams of rescuing the same car that had rescued him the day before thoroughly crushed, he slams the hood closed as gently as he can. (He, after all, doesn't want to attract more monsters. He's on a good streak right now.) He looks down at his GPS again. Right. Time to get going oh gosh something is moving out of the corner of his eyes, okay, he can stay calm, he can do that, he can definitely do that, he just needs to breathe a little. He pries open the car's back door again. If it had worked once...

He crawls inside. He closes the door behind him. He doesn't hear anything, but he knows he saw something move, didn't he? He's not just paranoid now, is he? If he is paranoid, it's probably not not-sensible. But! He doesn't want to be paranoid, he just wants to be himself! Who isn't paranoid! Probably! He lies there on the terrible carpet between the seats for a bit again, thinking to himself that the other advantage of stealing a car would clearly be the free hiding spaces. Pity that the first car he'd found that he got attached to had an engine that had been on fire. It's been years since he's been a mechanic, see. And while he could likely fix a car that had most various kinds of car failure states, an engine that had been on fire isn't really one of them? The auto shop is relatively nearby but he doesn't think they have parts for a 80s Volvo station wagon on hand, that doesn't seem like a car many people are driving these days...

Has whatever had been moving gone away yet? Oh, he hopes it's gone away...

Slowly, he peeks his head out of the window. From there, he sees a shape, he thinks. It is smaller than most of the monsters he's seen so far, but it is dark in color. It looks relatively human-shaped, which is almost odd, under the circumstances. Maybe some monsters are just shaped like humans these days? That seems like it would be very confusing to Mumbo, but what does he know? ...also, why wouldn't the universe want to be confusing, anyway? Wouldn't that be like, like... what do you call predators that disguise as things their prey want? There's a fish that does it, Mumbo knows, what are those called again?

No, wait, focus. He doesn't need to be thinking about strange fish or other such things. He needs to be thinking about hiding, and then where he needs to go after this.

After a time, the figure passes. They never get particularly near Mumbo, although they could have, probably, had Mumbo not been hiding. Once he's relatively certain the figure is gone, Mumbo crawls back out of the station wagon and tells it goodbye. He frowns into the distance then puts his nose back down to check his GPS. He starts walking. He's going to have a lot of that to do today so he should start now.

...he isn't looking forward to it.

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It takes a bit to get back to more populated areas. The GPS takes Mumbo first through an area of town that's mostly strip malls, shops, and offices first. It's not an area Mumbo's been in much. He hasn't needed to, and he's *definitely* outside of his normal radius of the apartment now. It's sort of a grey and boring part of town. There are probably apartments somewhere, in the space that isn't being used for shops, but for the time being it's mostly shops and a hospital.

Hospitals seem like a bad place to be near, Mumbo thinks as he passes it. He's pretty sure he sees a shadow move in the window. At least one window is shattered. Eerily, the hospital has lights on that nowhere else has. It's not that strange, given that hospitals have backup generators, but the power's been out everywhere for a few days now. Seeing a building with lights when all of the

nearby buildings are dark is disconcerting, especially when it feels like there are still things in it.

The area around Mumbo has a decent number of parked cars, as well as a few crashed on the road. It hits him, suddenly, that calling this a less populated area probably isn't fully accurate. It's not a place where people live, but it is one where they go about their lives, and oh, he needs to run past this hospital *fast*, doesn't he? In zombie movies the hospital is where everyone die. He starts jogging. He regrets it immediately; his chest hurts, and his throat is dry. He hasn't been drinking enough water has he? He wheezes. Oh. Oh jogging because the hospital is scary probably hadn't been a good choice.

He hears a scream and yelps and ducks under a car. He scrapes his hands. He's grateful he can fit under the pickup truck. After a moment, he decides he'd been paranoid again and pulls out from under the truck.

...alright. Nothing there. Of course, some of the monsters. Stalk people. But whatever is going on in the hospital, it seems to have stayed in the hospital.

He sees the lights flicker. He starts washing off his hands with one of his bottles of water and keeps walking.

He feels like there should be more monsters here. He feels like there should be less. He feels horribly uncertain. He keeps on seeing things move out of the corners of his eyes. Populated spaces had been a mistake. Is he being stalked? The hospital had been just there. He hears a noise again. He pulls out his wrench and holds it tightly. The cold metal is comforting in his hands, even if Mumbo probably still can't do anything with it.

He hears something hiss.

"Stay back!" he says. "I have a wrench! And I know how to use it!" He is lying. He is lying in his threat to monsters that probably can't understand him. He breathes in. He breathes out. He can be fine. He can be fine. Breathe, breathe, he can be fine. He considers jogging more, but that's just going to tire him out if this does turn into a fight. Instead, he watches the things that are in the shadows and considers ducking under the next car he sees.

"Awfully impolite of you," he says, holding his wrench tightly, "to not come out where I can see you." His backpack feels so heavy. His shoulder hurts. His feet ache. Holding the wrench up like this makes his arms burn just a little. He really is out of shape, geez. It's far too late to fix that now, too. It's far too late for that to matter. Far too late for a lot of things. Breathe. Maybe whatever's watching him won't even come out! Maybe whatever's watching him will stay where it is, and Mumbo won't have to be concerned about it at all!

He, um, doubts it. But it's possible. And if something is possible, really, doesn't that almost sort of make it likely?

...he's confused even himself with that one.

Something in the shadows moves. The thing is that this implies the monsters can work as a group, Mumbo thinks, as he sees something else move near him. And maybe, just maybe, the monsters are, in fact, frightened of him. It would be awful convenient if they were. He just doesn't think they are.

In the distance, he sees the lights flicker in the hospital again.

And then he sees the lights flicker between the buildings.

Mumbo hisses in tightly. That's. Oh, that's concerning. That's really, really concerning. Why are the lights flickering like that? He'd thought it was the generator, but clearly, that can't be what it is. Maybe he's just paranoid and seeing things! Yes, that could be it.

Something howls.

"I told you to, to stay back!" Mumbo says, clutching the wrench tighter to his chest. He's realizing the flaw in his "go through populated areas so there are buildings and accommodations" plan. The flaw in the plan is that, actually, that had been a very, very stupid plan. Because the monsters had once been people, see. So the monsters would be where the people had been.

His GPS beeps mockingly at him as he reaches an intersection. Mumbo does not want to go through the intersection. Mumbo does not want to have to *turn*.

As it turns out, stopping to make that decision is the signal.

*Something* leaps out at him from a window. Mumbo hears the sound of its leap before he sees it. Instinctively, he ducks. A slightly-larger-than-a-man creature with long, shaggy black fur and eyes that seem to glow through its visage lands on the ground behind him, having just barely sailed over his head. It opens its mouth and barks.

Mumbo's vision briefly goes bright as some kind of strange light flickers across the monster's fur, and then something has bit his other side. Mumbo screams and slams his wrench wildly in that direction, knocking another similar monster off of himself. It barks, and lights flicker across its skin and the building. Mumbo's side screams at him. He's lucky, he realizes, that he has multiple layers, or it would be worse than this horrific stinging. He thinks he's stunned one — three more creep out from the shadows and these. These creatures would remind Mumbo of wolves but their faces are flat and their limbs are wrong and they were once people. Three howl together and the lights flicker and it hurts Mumbo's eyes.

Alright. Alright, alright, alright, how many are there even? There can't be that many, can there? He can't count them, though — for all the sun is out, their dark fur blends together, and they walk like they're moving shadows themselves.

He looks at them. They look at him. He hears something move behind him and slams his wrench at that, too. It flings the monster backwards. He hopes it didn't hit the ground too hard. He doesn't want to hurt it, he just...

Well, okay, he wants to hurt it, but not badly. He's surrounded. His GPS reminds him, once again, to turn right. Alright. Maybe he can do that? He has no idea how, not when he's surrounded by — another one jumps and he swings his wrench again, and a third one jumps and Mumbo ducks it. Alright, he is super surrounded, isn't he? Like, really, just as absolutely surrounded as possible oh god he doesn't want to be torn to shreds and eaten by a pack of shadow monsters. That's really, really not how he wants to go?

The lights flicker in time with the howls and barks of the beasts. Four of them circle him. He can't count how many there are anymore. Five of them circle him. He's terrified. As they close in more, blindly, he swings his wrench at them. They're a little too big to jump over, he thinks irrationally. If he could jump over them, he could get away. Instead, he'll have to get creative. Think, what does he have on hand other than this wrench and his backpack?

His charming good looks?

They're stalking closer now. The lights continue to flicker. Every time the lights get bright, the



shadows get longer, and the beasts get harder to see. He thinks they must know that. After all, they've stopped jumping him, like they know Mumbo can't get away regardless of whether they jump him or simply circle. Think. What can he do? He can't wack them all out of the way, and while the wrench has clearly been stunning them, they're more resilient than some of the other monsters Mumbo has seen. When they get hit, they're clearly getting back up again.

It doesn't help that they're hard to see. Between the streetlights and buildings flickering and the way they seem to blend into and stretch with the shadows, Mumbo's surprised he's hit so many. Between the... why are the streetlights flickering, actually?

The beasts creep closer and Mumbo swings his wrench at one of their heads. Think. Why are the lights flickering? He stumbles back and hears a low bark. Their limbs are so... wrong... for such dog-like creatures. Their faces are too flat. Their eyes practically spark... oh.

Oh, Mumbo has an idea. He reaches blindly into the front pocket of his backpack, barely holding the heavy wrench in his other hand. He swings it wildly whenever one of the dogs gets too close as he fishes one of his battery packs out. Well, this one's toast, but it's worth it. He watches the lights flicker, and he flips on the flashlight that had been built into the battery pack. It flickers too, which means. He'll have to be careful with this, mind you, but it means — oh, he's so glad that he packed more than one. Imagine if he hadn't. Then, oh, then he really would have been screwed, wouldn't he? But like this...

He watches the timing of the flickers. One of the dogs jumps. He slams the battery pack down and slams it with his wrench. The plastic cracks. The lights flicker.

The battery pack explodes into flame.

As the beasts around him flinch back and bark, Mumbo shoves his shoulders into one of them while it's still stunned, pushing through the ring and bolting. His lungs burn. His side hurts. His ears are ringing and he thinks he just burnt the front of his pants and his side hurts, it hurts, oh no he got bit, he'd barely noticed before but there's a *bite* in his *side* and he hurts, but he has to sprint as long as he can to get to the first safe space and "populated area" had been so, so stupid! What on earth had he been thinking?

He hears something behind him and he tries to run faster. "Stay away!" he shouts. "I have, like, at least three more of those! I over-prepare!" He wheezes. Shouting while running had been a dumb idea. Also, so had lying. Why was he lying to monster... shadow... dog things? They don't know he's lying! They can't understand him! He's being really, really stupid! Because, you know, he can't afford to break more of the power packs if he wants to keep his phone charged, see, and he really needs that, and the GPS beeps at him and Mumbo feels his ankles burn at him as he tries to get himself to turn. Turning while on a full sprint is hard. Also, he can't sprint much further and the beasts are definitely catching up, and —

"STAY AWAY!" he shouts again, sounding far more panicked than he'd like. He still doesn't know how many of them there are. He hears footsteps getting closer. But he can do it. He can get away from these things.

He trips over his own feet. He catches himself, barely, before he hits the ground, although his backpack jerks strangely as he hits it, bruising his back. He groans. He doesn't think he can get up fast enough again, not with the backpack and the way his legs burn and his shoulder and the bite in his side.

Well, he thinks. If this does end up being the end, he managed to last nearly two days. Which probably isn't a lot? But it's also longer than a lot of people probably would have guessed for him,

given the monster apocalypse and all!

He closes his eyes.

He hears a gunshot.

He hears a yelp.

He looks up. The other dogs are fleeing again (or maybe just had never quite caught up with him). On the ground, there's one of the beasts. There are brains and electric blue blood scattered around its skull that make Mumbo realize exactly where that gunshot had gone. He sucks in a breath.

"That was a person," he says. "That was a person at one point. I was trying not to kill them. I didn't do that. I was trying not to..."

He looks around, and then up. On the roof of one of the buildings is the strange figure from before. Mumbo would suppose they have to be a human, since they fired a gun. It's always possible some of the monsters remember how to use weapons, mind you! Mumbo would just very much prefer to think that they don't. Wishful thinking isn't that bad, is it? So that isn't a monster, that's a human.

...that's a human?

"HEY!" shouts Mumbo. "HEY!"

Whoever or whatever it is ducks away again. Mumbo stares after them for a moment before deciding that, whoever or whatever they are, he's not sure he wants to meet them. They did, after all, just kill that dog-like-once-a-person, and they had a gun, and clearly, Mumbo does *not* have a gun. Mumbo's pretty sure he would cry if someone handed him a gun. Mumbo's fairly certain that, since the mysterious strange has a gun, he can't just... talk to them.

"...THANK YOU I GUESS," Mumbo shouts, because he is polite, and he may not like that the stranger had killed that dog, but he knows how to be polite when someone saves his life. He drags himself off the ground, checks his phone, and sees that the screen is cracked. Well, that's probably not good, but it's still usable, so he checks the GPS again. He should... probably re-route it to get to the road as soon as possible, as opposed to going through town. That really hadn't been one of his brighter ideas.

He starts checking the map as he cautiously walks down the path to see if there's some other route he can coax the GPS to take him on where he's less likely to be assaulted by mysterious shadowy dogs, and he checks the time. Eventually, he will have to stop for the night as well. Not yet, though. Not yet.

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It doesn't take long for Mumbo to start flagging. He's pulled a water bottle out of his bag, and is at least trying to walk closer to the doors and various hiding places than he'd been earlier, which is making him go slowly, but he's not built for this, and also there's a bite in his side. He doesn't want to stop to try to give it first aid, though. He knows he really ought to, but he still has this nasty sense he's being watched. When he sits down to wash and bandage it, he's expecting to get jumped. The moment one of these doors looks like it leads into somewhere Mumbo can hide, he will, but he's also getting closer to the highway, and exiting this town on the road to Grian's. He doesn't want to stop.

The sooner he gets to Grian's, he thinks, the sooner this is over, and.... and he's definitely going to be alive there, and Mumbo won't regret this at all. The sooner he gets there. The sooner he gets there...

Everything hurts. He knows he's not walking terribly fast, because he's taking so much longer than his GPS estimate for how long it will take to walk from where he is to his destination. (His destination is an interstate exit—well, no, an interstate on-ramp? What do you call those in-town? His destination is one of those. Or, technically, it's a car dealership next to one of those. That seems like it will be a very good place to steal a car from.) He keeps drinking from his water bottle. His lungs burn from sprinting earlier, and he hurts, and he just realized that there's blood on his jacket and jeans he won't be getting out.

Not all of it is even his. Most of it is. Most of it is the red-turning-brown of the blood from his own injuries. But there's a little bit that's neon blue. From the dogs. And grey. From the dog's brain, he supposes.

It's not a very fun thing to suppose, though. Or to look at. Or to think about at all.

The point is that he's really having a terrible time. He drags himself down the street before, finally, he sees what appears to be a fairly defensible building. The door is locked. Mumbo bemoans that he doesn't know how to pick locks. That's the sort of skill he wouldn't have thought to have picked up before, because he isn't Grian, but he sort of regrets it. Imagine how useful picking a lock could be so he could get himself inside with the door intact!

...he can break another window.

He has broken so many windows *already*. He doesn't want to have to break another window. It feels like all he does with his backpack is break windows. Plus, breaking the window means it will be easier for things to get into this building. He doesn't want it to be easier to get in. He just wants to sit down and wrap up his wounds and maybe drink more since his energy is so very low. He should maybe eat something too? Yes, he can... although he really needs to be saving his food... And...

He sighs.

He breaks the window.

He uncomfortably crawls through it into what appears to be the lobby of the building. He picks up a chair and puts it in front of the broken window. He sits down heavily and finally, finally starts cleaning his side.

He's not sure how long it's been since the dog fight. He's not good at time, sometimes. He's not sure this is the same thing, though. This is more like... he just didn't have the energy to pay attention to the time. So he's not sure how long it's been. He just knows it's been probably quite a while.

He pours one of his water bottles over his side. It stings. He pulls his first aid kit out and starts hoping.

He's going to have to do this a lot, isn't he? Even on the parts of the road where people aren't. He's going to have to do this a lot. (It hurts as he pulls the bandages over the bite wound.) He's going to have to do this a lot for himself, too. He isn't going to have anyone around to help him. That... that's really bad, isn't it?

He's grumpy and he hurts. He's just going to have to deal with it. He pulls the bandages over the injury and breathes deeply before getting up again. The building lobby is calm and empty. That's fine, Mumbo thinks. Certainly better than being full. He doesn't hear any strange noises upstairs, and the directory seems to be mostly directing him to places of business, so it's probably not as inhabited by murderous creatures as his apartment building had been. (Or, well, he certainly hopes

that is the case. He's in a bit of trouble if he's closed himself in here with monsters.)

How much more walking does he have to do to get to open road again? Too much. Too much. Maybe he should just stop for the day. He had gotten chewed on by a monster, and that's stressful! Not that there is anything about all of this that isn't stressful, but, you know, there's different levels of stressful, and this is one that's on a different scale, and...

And he's making excuses for himself. He can't always make excuses for himself. He has to be willing to take risks. Isn't that something Grian told him? That he should be more willing to take risks?

Distantly, he thinks that Grian meant it about, say, joining an online tabletop group, or going on a biking trip, or something. He probably didn't mean it in the context of the apocalypse.

...that doesn't make it less applicable advice, does it?

His bandages appear to be pretty tightly applied. He pulls two large bags of junk food that he'd stolen from the convenience store out. For the time being, this will be his meal. He eats through the chips pretty quickly, and thinks that they're going to make his gut feel rather bad after he goes walking. However! He can eat more of those, and he's already had an energy bar today. He has to conserve food, since he can only carry a limited amount! Eating the junk food now would let him space out the energy bars, and...

No wonder he feels so grumpy, he thinks, but now he's eaten something, and cleaned his wounds, and sat down for a while. He can't sit down for long if he wants to make it to the car dealership with time to hot wire a car and get out of town, especially given the very high odds that he gets attacked by something before he gets out. No rest for the wicked, right?

Or, wait. The monsters are probably the wicked. He's just a man with no rest, and who is hurting quite a bit. Wicked. That's, uh, an exaggeration, right? Probably. He hopes.

Instead of going back out the window, he unlocks the door. When he steps outside, he sees blood that hadn't been there before. He's not certain what to do with that fact. It mostly just makes him feel... something. Something fairly not good, he'd reckon. Whatever had happened, it had happened while he'd been inside, and he hadn't heard or seen it. It's not his problem then, now is it?

He hopes the dogs don't come back. That seems like the sort of bad thing that might happen to him, even if he hopes it does not.

Alright. He starts heading down the street again. He tries not to limp. Now that he's sat down to rest at least once, he honestly feels like he hurts *more*. Horribly counterintuitive, that is. He'd think he'd feel less pain, not more, after resting, but apparently, that's not how the world is going to work for him. No, instead, sitting down and cleaning his wound makes him just as tired and upset.

He could just steal a car here, but up ahead, he sees another car crash. He needs to wait until he has roads wide enough to dodge things.

Something makes a strange howling noise. Mumbo ought to run. Instead, he holds up his wrench. He's still bloodied from the fight earlier. He screams at it. No words in particular, just... a scream.

Whatever had howled shuts up.

He keeps walking.

## Chapter End Notes

tomorrow: the stranger

trying a special ao3 formatting tool now. we'll see if it worked or if I go back to doing things manually. as it is I had to change a few things manually. such is life.

anyway, wonder who that guy with the gun was. not like the tags give it away or anything.

# the stranger

## Chapter Summary

in which mumbo meets a man in red armor, who he will not be getting rid of anytime soon.

## Chapter Notes

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

The sun crawls along the sky as he continues onwards. It starts to get dark. Mumbo frowns. He's fairly certain it's not actually meant to be getting dark yet. He looks up and realizes that, ah. That would be because there are clouds gathering now. Well, he can't say he's a particular fan of that. If he gets rained on, that will only add to the feeling of the day, won't it?

As the sky gets darker, and his long, painful walk gets colder, Mumbo realizes that it's only his second day, *still*.

"This is awful," he says to himself. "I wasn't expecting adventure, really, but I was expecting things to maybe be a bit less pants, generally." He stumbles over something. The weight of his backpack hits his shoulder and he grimaces. "Of course, I'm not sure what I was really expecting, if I was going to go do things like jump down staircases and get bit by dogs." He continues his march forward. His GPS says there's another turn up ahead. "Why did I go and do that? Really quite stupid of me."

He's complaining about nothing, he knows. He has at *least* a few more days of this ahead of time, because even if his stolen car gets him all the way to Grian's, it's a twelve-hour drive, and he doubts the roads will be clear and safe for all twelve hours. So, he'll have to get out and walk again. So, he hasn't driven in a long time, and this would be an awful long way to drive all at once. So... so there's a lot of this ahead of him. Even if Grian *is* at his house, there's a lot ahead of him! And oh, he's going to try not to imagine what it will be like if Grian *isn't* home. No, that's... that's just not an option at all, actually.

No. No, he just has to get over it. He's in pain, but he's not a monster like so many others are, so he'll be fine. He's being a bit of a whiny baby, isn't he? A whiny, stupid, stupid, *stupid* man. It's just some pulled muscles and some cuts. So many people have had worse. He bets that if it had been a burn, he wouldn't have even noticed, not after all the burns he's given himself while working on his various electronic projects! That soldering iron could be dangerous. But no, because it's a bite, and a pulled shoulder, and his burning legs and hurting feet, and, and...

He sort of wants to turn around and go home, but that will be worse.

He turns down another street. He stops.

In front of him, the asphalt has been torn to shreds. The pavement is in chunks. There are deep gashes in the earth. Across them, he sees occasional splashes of multicolored blood.

"Like a paint fight," he says, and he turns the other direction. He can't go that way. He's not certain what, exactly, he'll find in that direction, but it will be nothing good, that's for certain! He

continues on straight. If he goes enough blocks...

He sees a building with the side taken off of it. Collapsed lumber, plaster, stone, concrete, and electronics litter the ground. It's almost eerie to look at, actually. He hasn't seen many buildings with just... the entire sides sheered off of them, before. Now, though, he has, and he can't say he's a fan. It looks wrong. Buildings aren't meant to look like that. It looks really, really *wrong*.

Worse are the patches of pavement that are torn up.

He's not aware of any earthquakes, and he has to say, he doesn't think he's walked far enough that he would have come across places that had earthquakes his apartment *hadn't*. He could hope! Maybe it had been a very localized earthquake! Mumbo somewhat doubts it, but it, like all things, is very possible. He had meant electric light-flickering dogs before, for example. And the blood is neon. And, frankly, some of the stuff he'd worked on for his boss? Terrifying! And those had just been the electronic systems! He doesn't even want to *think* about what those electronic systems might be being used *for*! Localized earthquakes, by comparison, seemed very possible. Very possible indeed! So it's not necessarily a monster that can dig up earth and sheer sides off of buildings and he turns around and walks very fast in the other direction.

Honestly? He's far more concerned that he hasn't seen what did that than he is concerned about the fact it had happened. He would have thought he'd be able to see a monster of such a size that it is capable of destruction like that, but no! It's gone elsewhere!

Oh no it could be anywhere.

He. He needs a moment to breathe. He needs a lot of moments to breathe. He has no idea how he's going to handle that.

He pulls out his phone again. He brushes off part of his jacket. He re-routes himself. He re-routes himself very far indeed. It adds another hour to his walk. It will be nightfall by the time he reaches the dealership.

"No one told me the apocalypse would be so much walking," he complains quietly, and then he starts going again. As he does, the earth briefly shakes, but his willingness to turn around and leave pays off; he doesn't run into whatever had done that.

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He's still being watched, though. Not just by monsters. He's had to scare a few more people off. He hasn't met any as numerous as the dogs, though. He also hasn't met any as vicious as the body in the stairwell. Most had been easy to scare by shining a flashlight at them and shouting a lot. They'd been far more content to continue to fight each other than to attack him. That's good. That's very, very good, because Mumbo certainly doesn't have the energy to fight back at the moment.

But something is watching him. He thinks he knows what it is.

Maybe if he gets almost eaten, they'll try to shoot whatever it is that wants to eat him?

He accidentally knocks his toes against the curb as he considers this. He yelps and has to catch himself as he trips again. Well, that's just lovely, he thinks, looking at his scratched-up hands. They aren't too badly hurt, he thinks, but it's annoying. It's annoying and he doesn't want to deal with it. He's going to have to clean them later, and.

Oh, great, he's tearing up. He's tearing up because he hurts and he can't start crying. The monsters he's been scaring off by virtue of being scary will come pick him off of the sidewalk, then. He can already hear them closing in. Well, maybe this is how he goes, he thinks, picking himself up again.

Having earlier thought he didn't want to be torn apart by dogs, he admits: while that's still true, this is probably more embarrassing. This wouldn't be being torn apart by dogs because he lost a fight. This would be being torn apart by the sorts of beasts that wouldn't normally kill him because he tripped and cut his hands and started crying. Oh, he really is pathetic, isn't he?

No, no, he has to be optimistic. Optimism. He can do optimism. For example, he's survived far longer than he thought he would! He's going to be fine.

"I am a very good survivor," he tells himself. "I will survive this. I am clearly very scary, because nothing is attacking me."

"Actually, friend," a strange voice says, "I would say you're a bit bad at this."

Mumbo whirls around. There it is; the figure that shot the dog, and that had followed Mumbo from the station wagon. Mumbo stares for a moment. They're wearing some kind of red-and-black suit with a helmet that makes it impossible to see their face properly. That's probably why their voice sounds so odd; it's had to go through the helmet. The whole suit looks terribly high-tech.

The rifle, well. The rifle just sort of looks like a gun, really.

"Uh," Mumbo says.

"Your jacket," the figure continues. "I recognize it after all. I had been wondering, but you really did work for Concorp, didn't you?"

"Excuse me?"

"Yes, you're who I was looking for," the man says.

"I'm sorry, but..." Mumbo's voice feels hoarse. It's not that he hasn't been talking; he has. It's that he hasn't been talking to other living people. There's a big difference between him talking to himself and him talking to a stranger, he feels.

"Who are you?" asks the figure.

"Well, I should be asking you that, shouldn't I?" says Mumbo at last. "Who are you? Why are you wearing that suit? Why were you following me?"

"I recognized the jacket," the stranger says. "Fine. You can call me X. I am looking for... I worked for Concorp too, you know."

Mumbo thinks very hard. X. X. He thinks he knows someone who went by a name with an X in it, so he thinks it's plausible. He'd never really met any of his coworkers in person, so he has no way of checking. "I see?" Mumbo says, instead of anything reasonable. "I guess that's true... I'm Mumbo."

"I haven't heard of you," the figure—X—says.

"Oh," Mumbo says. "I guess that makes sense."

The two of them stare at each other for a few moments. It's... it's rather awkward, isn't it? Mumbo's not sure what to do in this situation. To be completely honest, he'd expected to end up doing this entire journey without ever talking to another person again. This stranger's appearance has thrown him completely for a loop.



"To be honest I thought I would die before talking to anyone else," Mumbo says. "Oh. Uh. Thank you for saving my life earlier. That was you, wasn't it?"

"It was," agrees X.

"Thank you." Mumbo wrings his hands. He sort of wants to tell X that the dogs had once been people, and that Mumbo would prefer that they don't kill them. Mumbo's head also hurts, though, and X has a gun, and it does feel rude to say that to someone, now doesn't it? Oh dear. Oh dear, he doesn't know how to carry this conversation, or how to say that he's grateful (more than he already has), and it's sort of hard to talk to a man in a helmet. It also doesn't help that the man seems disinclined to talk. Mumbo decides, after a moment, that regardless of what the stranger is or isn't saying, and why the stranger may have appeared, they do really have to get going, now don't they? Mumbo has a Grian to find, regardless of why this masked stranger is staring at him.

"Um, well, if you'd like, can you tell me what you want? You see, my feet hurt quite a bit, but I have a ways to go before I get to the car dealership."

"Oh, right," says X. "I had things to say. You work for Concorp, right? I have someone I'm trying to reach, you see, and I was wondering if you had heard from them. Of course, I haven't heard of you, so I rather doubt it."

Mumbo blinks. "I haven't heard from anyone. Oh, except for Grian—"

"Grian?"

"You know him?"

"Not personally."

"Right," Mumbo says. "Right. Anyway, I have heard from Grian! Sort of. It's entirely incomprehensible, but it means someone unlocked his computer, so I'm going to go find him. Then I'll find out what happened to him, and both of us can figure out what happened here, and we'll both feel much better."

"Of course, of course," says X. "Show me."

Mumbo can't think of any reason not to, so he pulls out his phone, and he pulls up Grian's message, and he shows it to X. He can't see how X responds to it, because of the mask X is wearing. He can see that X spends a lot longer reading an entirely unreadable chat message than Mumbo would have personally spent. He supposes he can't judge, though, because that chat message has been the thing that has sent him on his long walk across the city, and is going to send him on an even longer drive out of the city. Oh, maybe there's a code in it! Encryption really isn't Mumbo's wheelhouse—

"This looks like it was an accident, not a message, my friend," X says.

"Well, yes, but it could be an important accident! You never know, now do you?" Mumbo says, feeling rather offended.

"That is Grian, though. Of course you know *him*."

Mumbo huffs. "Well now, that's just rude. You don't have to be rude about my friend, now do you? I'm not going to be rude about your friend. Who is, uh... who are you looking for?"

"It—it doesn't matter. My brother," X says.

"...Okay," Mumbo says. He has to say. For a stranger he met in the apocalypse wearing ominous red armor, X seems rather suspicious. Beggars can't be choosers, maybe, and X did save Mumbo's life, but, oh dear, Mumbo's not good at talking to strangers already!

Mumbo makes a decision.

"Well, awful nice talking to you, but I have, um, somewhere to be, you see. And I don't really understand what you want from me, given that I don't know who you're looking for and all that. So I think I'm just going to go? Lovely chatting with you, though!" He turns on his heel and begins walking again. This should do. There is absolutely no way that's a terrible way to end this conversation and interaction, right?

He does not make it very far until X catches up with him again. X, Mumbo thinks, is clearly far more in shape than Mumbo is.

"Where are *you* going?" X says.

"I did just tell you that," Mumbo says.

"...that you did. That you did."

"I mean, you can come with me, I guess, but if you do, you can't keep shooting things to kill them. They used to be people, you see, so it seems, maybe, a bit bad to kill them."

"They're not people anymore," X says darkly, and. Ah. Hm. Mumbo's not sure he likes that. X is... a little intimidating. And hasn't answered many questions. And is just... sort of here now. Oh, this is very suspicious. If it weren't the end of the world...

"I. Hm. I mean, I guess," Mumbo says. "I don't like it, though. So if you're going to come with me I also want you to be careful. My backpack isn't as big as it could be so I only have but so many first aid supplies."

"I'll be fine. Don't worry about me," X says.

"I really must be going, though," Mumbo says, and he continues walking. He does not check to see if X is following him. It doesn't take too long to realize that he is, though. It doesn't take much for X to keep up with him at all. Maybe... maybe Mumbo should tell X to go away? If it weren't for the voice filter, X would sound like a perfectly reasonable person. A very calming, nice person to be around, really, if it weren't for the armor. And the gun. And the voice filter making him sound a bit scarier than he ought to be. And, oh, Mumbo doesn't mind having a companion, he supposes, but he just...

He probably shouldn't be upset about this. After all, it certainly proves people can still be alive. Oh, and X recognized Grian, didn't he? That means that Grian could have a fancy suit as well! He could be fine, and just... not able to message at all! He's going to assume that now, actually. Grian has one of those fancy suits, and that's why Grian could be fine for a moment.

He takes a breath in. He takes a breath out. He keeps walking quietly.

"You know, I expected you to have more questions than this," X says.

"I mean, I could," Mumbo says. "But, I mean, I guess beggars can't be choosers? Even if I didn't particularly beg for you."

"Fair enough," X says.

"It will be easier to escape monsters with more than one of us," Mumbo continues. "And... oh. You turned off my GPS."

"I did?"

"You did."

"Oh. Uh. Obviously I meant to do that, because you were going through a dangerous part of town."

"...was I?"

"You were. Here, let me. Turn your GPS back on." Mumbo squints at X for a moment and hands the phone back. X fiddles with it for a little bit before handing back Mumbo's phone. Mumbo checks to make sure it's still routed to the auto dealership, and...

"This is routed very far out of town, you know. I was trying to go to steal a car."

"Oh. You know how to steal a car? That would make it easier to get to where... where I'm trying to go. I knew I should stick by you!"

Mumbo nods. "I mean, I know how to theoretically steal a car. So I guess you can come with me, but I'm going to find Grian. I don't know if I'll find who you're looking for in the process." He looks down at where the GPS has been routed to. He doesn't recognize the location. "I don't know if we'll even pass this place. This is pretty far away... Oh. This isn't even where I was going, before."

"We will," X says threateningly.

"Okay, we will," Mumbo says, because he's not particularly brave in the face of a man in a hazmat suit with a gun. Maybe he can just... run away from this stranger later? He really, really doesn't want to have to go out of his way to get to... wherever it is that X is going. He just wants to go find Grian. He just wants to do that, and then he will decide what to do next. Maybe he can... "If it's faster to find Grian first..."

"Mumbo, you will help me go get to my brother," says X. He holds up the gun.

"Okay," says Mumbo.

"I'm glad we've established that. You said you were going to an auto dealer, didn't you? We should probably get going. We're wasting daylight."

"Right," Mumbo says, and he starts walking again. His feet really, really hurt. He doesn't want to have this person with him anymore at all, but it seems like he's not getting a choice in the matter. Once again, he tries to convince himself it's alright. After all, in apocalypse movies, people don't normally survive by themselves, do they? People normally need to help each other.

People can't survive on their own.

Mumbo certainly almost died on his own.

He feels his head fill up with more and more thoughts as he walks. This, he wants to say, is unusual for him. It's not really. He hears the heavy footsteps of X besides him. He can make it where he's going. He can make it to the auto dealership, and maybe by then, X will have ditched him, despite whatever it is that makes X want to stick with him. After all, Mumbo can just steal a second car for X. The more Mumbo thinks, the more appealing that sounds. Yes! He'll just... hotwire a second car

for X, and then the two of them can go to their two different locations, and Mumbo won't have to deal with a man with a gun anymore.

He is so busy thinking about the man with the gun next to him, he forgets to check if his GPS had rerouted him back to the streets he'd been avoiding.

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They have been walking together for about... maybe an hour? Mumbo's not really sure how to judge the time, actually. They've been walking together for maybe an hour, though, when Mumbo trips, and looks down, and sees that the road is cracked. It takes a few minutes for him to realize what he's looking at. He thinks: oh, this is a very big pothole, and almost says that, and then he looks at more of the road, and it's. It's all the way across the road. And there's a gap in the building as well. And. Oh dear.

"We need to turn around," he says.

"What? No, we keep going. There's just been an earthquake lately. Besides, we'll be fine. There are two of us, and almost certainly fewer of them."

Mumbo considers arguing. He then considers that X has a gun.

"Alright," he says. They continue down the path. Mumbo still hasn't seen whatever made the cracks. Desperately, he hopes it really was an earthquake. That would be easy. Maybe it's even why he hasn't seen many other monsters here! Wouldn't that explain it properly? That... that there had been an earthquake that scared them all away.

He doesn't believe it.

The GPS sends them forward. "Are you absolutely certain we shouldn't turn around?" Mumbo says.

"This is fastest," X says. "I really don't know why we wouldn't just go the way that's fastest. I've saved you from them before, haven't I?"

"Alright," Mumbo says, and then the whole ground *shakes*. Mumbo screams a little, pulling his wrench out of his bag with a scramble as though it will do anything at all to help him when whatever's out there is causing the very earth to tremble. His fingers close around the cold metal just as the earth shakes again.

And then, from under the ground in front of them, a giant leg appears. It is spindly, like a crab's, with sharp spikes along it. It is red. It is the size of a small building.

"WHAT?" shouts Mumbo, because it feels like the only appropriate thing to shout in that moment. "WHAT?"

He immediately does what he believes is the correct thing to do, which is to say, bolt the other direction. He doesn't look back. Maybe if he runs fast enough, he can go back to going the direction he'd been doing before X appeared. And, and if he runs fast enough, whatever the crab... underground... whatever it is, it won't catch him. It can't catch him, right? He doesn't want to die.

He stumbles as the ground continues to shake. He hears a crumbling, a horrendous cracking. Oh no. Oh no. He runs faster. He hears a gunshot.

He.

Oh *no*.

He turns around to look back. The thing made of legs that has clawed its way out of the ground has a mouth now to go with the crab legs. Mumbo tries to remind himself that this was once a person, but that only makes it more horrifying. That thing shouldn't be something that once was a person. It's made of too many sharp angles, too many parts—god, what if it had been more than one person, instead? Is that something that can happen?

He freezes. He stares at the creature, and he freezes. The thing that snaps him out of it is hearing another gunshot. He yelps. There is X, standing in front of the creature, firing at its mouth. Mumbo can't help but stare. It's... it's almost impressive, if it weren't also...

"WHAT ARE YOU DOING?" Mumbo shouts. Oh, he should just turn and run, shouldn't he. X looks like he he has this. If he doesn't have this, it's just because of decisions X made, not ones Mumbo made. Mumbo doesn't know X. Mumbo's pretty sure X was threatening him earlier? And, and besides, X had known how to hit those dogs all the way from the roof, which is more than Mumbo can do. Mumbo's wrench certainly won't be any more effective than X's gun—

He hears another gunshot and the creature isn't stopped at all.

Mumbo thinks: he's made so many bad decisions lately. What's one more?

He runs back towards X. The ground shakes as the creature drags itself through it. A leg slams down onto the pavement, smashing it to ashes. Mumbo can barely breathe. He just has to... He has to... He grabs X's shoulder. Above them, the massive creature looms. From this close, Mumbo can tell his terrible hypothesis was correct. The creature is covered in faces. It has a mouth, sure, but it also has so many faces that Mumbo's not sure which horrified expression to look at first. None of them, ideally, he supposes, but that's not an option, so instead he stares down the maw of the beast and—

He yanks X's shoulder, hard. The armor-clad man turns to him. "Run!" Mumbo says, and then, not giving X time to explain what on *earth* he'd been doing, he pulls X after him.

"That direction is faster," X says. Mumbo hears the crab creature's legs grinding.

"Not if we're dead!" Mumbo says. "I feel like that. That should be obvious! Now come on!"

Think. Think. He doesn't know how to slow this one down. Clearly, X's gun hadn't been a viable solution, so that's probably not a solution now. It's not very fast though, at least, although the horrific grinding and clicking sound its limbs make hasn't gotten far away from them yet, so it can keep up with a Mumbo who is running fast and an X who is reluctant to run. Mumbo pulls on X's shoulder a little harder. This would all be much easier, he thinks, if X would just—move—

"Come on!" he says.

"That way was faster. I could have taken it," X says.

"You absolutely couldn't have!" Mumbo says, feeling like X is maybe a bit more foolish than he'd previously considered. "This way, please! And—"

He pulls X, hard, to the ground. The two of them tumble down just as another limb skewers where they had just been. Mumbo feels his back bruise as it hits his backpack. He barely managed to prevent his wrench from hitting him in the head. X, on top of him, in a strange black-and-red suit, doesn't look hurt at all. Given how many times Mumbo's already managed to bruise himself, something about that feels particularly unfair. He can't really focus on that, though. He needs to

focus on thinking about how to get them out of the terrible situation they're in.

He has an idea.

"Actually, you might have been right, but not the way you were doing it!" Mumbo says.

"What?" X says.

"Follow me," Mumbo says, and the next time a leg lands above him, he bolts under it.

The closer he is to the main body of the beast, the more horrific howling Mumbo hears. It's terrible. It's like bones being ground together every time the creature moves. It may even actually be bones grinding together. The closer he gets, the more he sees many people, all bound together in a horrific amalgamation. And it's a crab, some very, very tired part of him thinks. It's a crab. Isn't there some joke Mumbo knows about crabs? It doesn't seem very funny, seeing all of these people turned into a single crab, and he hears X cock the gun and he says "Not now!" like he actually knows what he's doing, and it's hard to run with the earth shaking, but.

But the crab is so big it can't easily reach something that's under it, and Mumbo doubts it can easily turn around.

Mumbo finds himself right up against the beast's mouth. The mouth, Mumbo thinks distantly, at least doesn't appear to be made of people. It is, however, made of teeth, which is worse. Mouths made of teeth are definitely, definitely worse than mouths made of people. Probably. He hasn't seen any mouths made of people to dispute it.

The creature tries to turn to eat Mumbo and X. It can't. However, there's now a massive gash across the road Mumbo and X have to navigate. Mumbo hadn't thought that through.

X grabs Mumbo. "You are coming with me, my friend," X says, and then, oh, X actually knows how to navigate the uneven terrain easier than Mumbo, and while Mumbo's not really sure what he feels about being picked up, he'll take it. Behind them, the creature makes a terrible noise, and then they've escaped it.

The GPS helpfully tells them to take a right in two miles.

Mumbo laughs hysterically. "Alright. We made it away. Alright."

"We did," X says. "You... came back for me."

"You don't deserve to die," Mumbo says. "Or, uh, something like that, I think. I don't know. I haven't talked to anyone else in at least a week, haha."

"You don't know me," X says. "You don't know me at all."

"Ah," Mumbo says, because he has no good response to that. X is, after all, correct. Mumbo had been very fundamentally stupid, just then. "We need to take a right in two miles, incidentally."

"Yes. We do. Because I am still coming with you."

"You are," says Mumbo, as though he understands why and how that's happening. He supposes it doesn't matter. His head hurts. His everything hurts. He thinks he just saved someone's life, though? He's never saved anyone's life before. It felt... good. It felt good, doing something like that.

"Onward," X says.

"Onward," Mumbo agrees, and doesn't try to argue that X shouldn't follow him. He has no excuse anyway. He thinks they both know it. They continue onward, towards the car dealership.

## Chapter End Notes

tomorrow: the car dealership

there he is. the boy. what an idiot amirite.

so, a few things to say about "x" here! first, yeah, that's evil xisuma. he's going by x for some reason, though. wonder why. ~~definitely not at least in part because i couldn't think of a reason for him to be called "evil" in my semi-grounded au, although there's at least one other reason.~~ in some older version of the draft i was a lot more cagey about which xisuma that is but honestly? no reason for me to be. that's evil xisuma.

as for his characterization... the earliest writing for this fic happened in august, and parts of ex's characterization were pulled over from concepts as early as like, july. so his characterization doesn't necessarily match the latter parts of season 8, a thing that i realized and decided was too integral to the fic as i had it planned to change. in fact, in a lot of ways? this ex is a response/reaction to how the *fandom* tends to write ex - i started watching hermitcraft in season 7, after all, and while i did eventually go back to find ex content, well... anyway, the result is interesting, and i hope people still like him, for all that said!

there's probably more i can say on that topic once the fic is *done* though. any more is probably spoilers.

# the car dealership

## Chapter Summary

in which mumbo is not exactly a locksmith, and neither is x.

## Chapter Notes

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

After another hour of walking, the sun is getting low in the sky. Mumbo thinks that, perhaps, they ought to stop for the day. They ought to find a shelter for the night. Unfortunately, X is marching stubbornly ahead. Mumbo still doesn't know much about the man, but having saved his life once, Mumbo feels as though he has a bit of an obligation now. He can't simply let X die, even if that would be the easy solution to this problem! That would be, um, morally wrong.

He is, however, despite all the recent evidence that X is perhaps not the smartest, still scared of the man's gun. He knows he probably doesn't have to be. It just feels like it's the sensible feeling to have. In regular life, Mumbo would also be afraid of large men with guns.

This does also mean Mumbo doesn't know how to tell X that they ought to stop because the sun is setting though.

Instead, he keeps walking. It's only probably about thirty more minutes to get to the car dealership, he thinks. They can walk after dark some. Perhaps it will even prove safer. Their walking in the daylight hadn't been particularly safe, after all. Mumbo's lost track of how many times he's almost been eaten. He might not be the world's smartest on occasion, but he knows that's a bad thing! And he thinks that, maybe, he should take that problem seriously. (The almost getting eaten problem.)

The downside, though, as the world gets darker, is that Mumbo really can't waste his phone battery on the flashlight. He has limited power packs.

The shadows are frightening. Things have mostly left them alone after they escaped the crab creature, but all Mumbo can think is that he feels lucky. He feels like he's on borrowed time, and he feels lucky, and he suspects people are more frightened of X than they are of him. Mumbo is frightened of X, too. He'd almost missed a turn, earlier, and X had grabbed Mumbo's forearm so hard that it bruised. Mumbo didn't know if that counted as retaliation for yanking on him so hard during the fight, or if X is just like that anyway?

...Mumbo thinks of the one coworker he knows who also goes by X.

"I can't hotwire a car in the dark," Mumbo says. "When we get to the dealership, then we'll stop for the day, I think."

"I can drive at night. I... *definitely* know how to drive, and we could go in the dark. I have good night vision."

"That's terrifying," Mumbo says without thinking. "Um, I mean, terrifyingly useful! Yes."

X chuckles. "That it is, Mumbo."



"...useful or terrifying?" Mumbo says. X doesn't answer. Mumbo considers. He'd never met Xisuma in person. Maybe X and Xisuma were the same person, and maybe they weren't. Mumbo had always gotten the sense that Xisuma was... mild. Not particularly frightening at all. In fact, Mumbo got the impression Xisuma might give good hugs, even?

X wouldn't give good hugs, Mumbo thinks, and then he thinks that's both awfully childish and awfully uncharitable of him.

"Um, I mean. Whether you can drive at night or not doesn't matter. I can't drive at night, or, um, I might be able to? I haven't in years. I just mean, um, I will electrocute myself if I try to hotwire a car at night, and I probably want it to be day to try to reprogram these spare keys? I think it will be easier at a dealership, since the original keys are probably around, but..."

"Fine," X says.

Mumbo breathes a deep sigh of relief. He hadn't really expected X to buy that. Given, it's true, but still. Hadn't really expected to be believed. X seemed like the stubborn sort so far, and. Oh, he's going to get convinced once they get to the dealership, isn't he? Just like he knows that the man with the gun is going to convince him to go find the person that he's looking for, instead of Grian, and. Oh. Oh dear, he's beginning to wonder why he bothered to save X's life? Not that saving someone's life is bad! It just seems as though it may have been awfully more convenient if Mumbo had just.

Well! It's fine, really! It's not like he can just tell X to leave, and he doesn't really want him dead. That would be cruel. He'll just... put up with it.

They fall quiet as the streets open out. The buildings get more sparse. Mumbo had been correct; this dealership was on an edge of town. There's a strip mall nearby. The signs aren't lit, since they don't have power, and Mumbo can't read them. He thinks they pass a tattoo place. Once, another monster appears to make a move towards them, but X fires the gun and it backs away. Mumbo's not sure that's the best idea, but X doesn't hit, so Mumbo supposes it must be fine. It doesn't violate Mumbo's preference they don't murder anyone, at least.

His word, but did X not seem at all like Xisuma. Well, he did—he talks just like the busy man Mumbo had heard once or twice over video call. And, well! He suspects that, should Grian see him now, Mumbo wouldn't look much like Mumbo at all, wearing a bloody windbreaker and trying not to limp around the bite in his side and following a man in strange body armor. No, Mumbo suspects he doesn't seem like Mumbo, either. It makes sense, he thinks. It makes sense. Besides, the man had introduced himself as X. That might mean he didn't want to be Xisuma right now.

Or maybe... maybe he is just a different X. He isn't Xisuma. Maybe he's just... some person who thought X would be a good nickname. These are all very possible possibilities to be greatly considered and acknowledged, Mumbo thinks, and are nice to think about instead of how badly so many things feel until they reach the car dealership.

The Toyota dealership is lined with shiny new cars. In the back, there's a used car lot, Mumbo thinks, or at least, that's what he's heard. Not all of the used cars are Toyotas. The owner of the dealership just needed somewhere to sell the cars they got used, so they had a used car lot for that. Mumbo, luckily, has blank Toyota cars, so stealing one will be easy. The road is wide and doesn't appear to have too much wreckage, so driving out again shouldn't be too hard. This place really is exactly what Mumbo had been hoping for in a car dealership.

He's really tired, though, so he's not doing any of that at the moment. He'll electrocute himself, no matter what X thinks. That would be a silly way to die.

Mumbo has an increasingly large list of ways to die that would be silly, but would also be very likely. These include: he electrocutes himself, just running out of food, X kills him, Mumbo accidentally hits himself too hard with his wrench, he jumps down another stairwell but there's a knife there or something (maybe held by a different murderer than him you never know), he gets hit by a car somehow, he gets hit by a tree somehow, a monster makes him do something silly like jump off of a building, he tries to rescue X from something X doesn't want or need rescuing from, he—well, the list is long. There are, as it turns out, a lot of somewhat silly ways to die during the apocalypse.

He walks towards the main building of the dealership. X says something, but Mumbo doesn't listen. (This is why X is on his list of silly ways he might die.) Instead, he stares at the door. It actually has a handle, he thinks. At least the door to the dealership has a handle. That means they might actually be able to pick the lock, instead of throwing Mumbo's backpack through the window again. Of course, Mumbo has no earthly idea how to pick a lock, but...

"Do you know how to pick a lock?" he asks.

"Where would I have learned that?" X asks.

"I mean, you do know how to use a gun," Mumbo starts, but he trails off, uncomfortable. He could be a sports rifleman or something. The fancy suit makes that unlikely, but it is always possible that's where he knows how to use the gun from. It's probably impolite of Mumbo to assume differently.

"I don't know how to pick locks," says X.

"I have had to break so many windows," bemoans Mumbo, and he breaks the window. "I just keep on having to do that! It's getting ridiculous!"

"It's not that big of a deal, is it? It's not like the owner's going to come back."

Mumbo thinks about that.

"I mean. They could come back, though. They'd likely be monsters themselves, but. But they could definitely come back. There's really nothing saying they won't."

"You may have a point, but I do have a gun," X says. "Besides, we're only going to be here for the night. Then we're headed out, aren't we, Mumbo?"

"Why did that sound threatening?"

"It's not a threat."

Right. Okay. Mumbo doesn't know what to do with that, but. "We are headed out tomorrow, yeah. But for now, we'll stay here, and so really, that broken window is our problem, not the former owner's fault, isn't it?"

X snorts. Mumbo decides that he'll take that as almost being some kind of victory for now, or something. They head inside. There's a sedan, a truck, and an SUV on the show floor. There are a number of other doors, as well. There isn't much light, since it's dark outside, but the glowing exit signs are still running on whatever batteries exit signs use. They make it so the dealership almost seems to be lit red, instead of the florescent white that such places are typically lit in, and also instead of some more natural color like normal white light or yellow or something. It's eerie, and it almost hurts Mumbo's head.

"I think we should go to the back rooms," Mumbo says. "It's, um, probably safer to sleep in there than it would be to sleep out here? We'll be less visible, at least."

"That's true," X says. "Good idea. Besides, that's where they're likely keeping the keys, isn't it?"

"They're probably in a safe," Mumbo says. Carefully, he walks across the smooth tile floor. There isn't grime on it, and there isn't blood on it. It's a little surprising that there isn't blood on it. Not that Mumbo thinks that everything needs to have blood on it! That would just be, um, incorrect! It's just. Most places Mumbo has been so far have either been messy or had at least a little bit of neon blood. For the clean, smooth, white tile to be so... clean and smooth... It feels wrong, somehow. Like a Toyota dealership on the edge of town next to the strip mall had made some kind of deal with the devil, or with fate, or just a generally terrible deal with terrible people.

He manages to open one of the back doors. It leads into a waiting room. That, at least, is carpeted.

Mumbo looks at the mildly uncomfortable looking bench chairs. If he's careful with them, there's enough room for him and X both to lie across the benches. It will hurt his back a little, which is probably bad, given that his back already hurts, but this room isn't open to the outside, and it has seats, and lying on something is definitely better than lying on the cold carpet, so. He really personally feels like this is a good room to stay in.

"This isn't where they keep the keys," X says.

"I know," Mumbo says, "but I don't really, um, want to hunt for it in the dark. This room's already dark enough. I can barely see! We can stay back here until we fall asleep, I think."

"Fine, fine," X says. "I'm just saying that this isn't where the safe is."

"Do you know where it is?" Mumbo asks. It comes out shorter than he intends for it to. It's just... he *hurts*. There's a bite in his side, and his shoulder still hurts, and he's bruised on basically every part of his body that's ever hit the ground. His feet hurt, and his head hurts, and he's hungry, but he knows he won't be able to get the food. So, yes, there's a bit of shortness in his voice.

"No. But you don't have to be *rude* about it. Geez."

"I—" Mumbo closes his mouth again. "Oh, nevermind," he says, and he ignores any further attempts by X to needle him into talking. Gosh, but he's tired. Gosh, but he just... he fishes food out of his bag. He grimaces. "I don't know if I have food for you." He doesn't apologize. He probably should, right? He should apologize? He just doesn't feel like it. He just feels like his head hurts, and he's hungry, and maybe he'll eat two protein bars, and, and, he knows he's tired because everything is spinning in his head again. Everything is spinning in his head. Too many things have happened today, and they're all mixing around in his head like. Um. A blender or something.

"I'll be fine," X says. "I don't need as much food as you."

"Okay," Mumbo says, instead of saying how much that sounded like a lie. He's having trouble breathing now, after all. That isn't good. His breath whistles through his teeth. How many times had he nearly died today? There had been the dogs, and the giant creature, and he's not convinced there hadn't been X, and X had shot one of the dogs, and there are so many silly ways to die.

He'll just take the win for now. He takes a bite of the protein bar. He pulls out a bag of chips and some water. He sits, and eats, and tries to ignore X watching him. He feels judged, which is silly. There's been an apocalypse. He's not going to let himself be judged for his eating habits during the apocalypse! Besides, he can only carry but so much at once, and...

He looks up at X. "Can you not watch me while I eat?"

"What else am I meant to be doing?" X asks. "There isn't much else to do here. Unless you want me to go find those car keys."

"If you can break open a safe, you know what? Go for it," Mumbo says.

"Fine. I will."

"Didn't you say you don't know how to pick locks?"

"Well, this—this would be different, wouldn't it? I'm going now."

Once X has stormed out of the door, Mumbo feels himself slump over further. He checks the bandages on the bite wound. They don't look.. great. Is the wound deep enough that he should be replacing the bandages periodically? Maybe? That last time Mumbo had a truly deep cut, he had been in the fifth grade, and accidentally stepped on a very, very sharp rock while playing outside. He'd needed a lot of stitches after that, and couldn't walk for a while. It had been really irritating. He can walk with this, though, or at least, he has to have been able to, given how much walking he's done. So maybe he doesn't need to replace the bandages as much?

They're very gross though, he thinks. Oh, there are a lot of reasons he's not a doctor... General neuroticism, sure, but also he just doesn't like things that smell weirdly, and he's been putting up with the whole apocalypse nonsense because he has to, and... There's got to be a wastebasket somewhere around here, hasn't there?

He spends a few looking for the wastebasket, and eventually finding it. He tosses the empty food wrappers in it, and his old bandages, and pulls back out his first aid kit to replace them. It's dark, which makes it difficult, but he decides to risk using his phone as a lantern in order to help himself be less injured. That feels like a good use of his limited battery power. Why, once he steals a car, he can probably even charge his phone using the car, which means his battery power will be even less limited! He hadn't even thought of that one, now had he? So, really, the lantern use isn't just a reasonable use, it's a downright smart one!

He replaces the bandages and, while he has the first aid kit out, checks his feet, since they hurt so much. As best Mumbo can tell, they're just swollen. One of his ankles is slightly bigger than the other one, but frankly, he can't afford to fix it, and anyway, it's his left ankle. The left ankle is a bit less of a big deal, since it's not the one he'll be driving with.

He's cleaning away his first aid kit and trying to clean up some of the water he'd spilled while switching bandages when X finally comes back. He's still stomping, so Mumbo thinks that, maybe, his journey had not been the most successful. Oh dear. Mumbo had hoped otherwise. Mumbo thought that if they could steal the car keys... somehow... everything *would* be a bit easier. Mumbo also had not thought they could steal the car keys, so he's not surprised, but.

"Are you alright?" he ventures.

"You. Break the safe with your wrench. Like the windows," says X.

"I don't think, um—"

"Do it."

"Okay, okay, I'm coming." Mumbo stands up with his wrench. He turns his phone light off. He follows X across the dealership. He's feeling significantly more jumpy in front of the windows

than X seems to be. That's probably not a surprise, but still—windows are, it seems, more frightening than they perhaps ought to be. Probably because, if there are monsters, or even just rather angry people, out there, they could see Mumbo, and Mumbo's been darting between monster attack and monster attack. X, though, has a gun. Mumbo supposes that monster attacks are probably much less frightening if you have a gun.

Eventually, X leads him to a door that X had clearly forced open. Mumbo swallows, hard. Around the knob, the wooden door is in splinters. Mumbo has no idea how a person could do that, but X had. And Mumbo had been... had been dragging him around earlier? Oh *dear*. Mumbo doesn't like that at all, he doesn't think. That's... oh dear.

If he wants to keep up, though, he can't dwell too long. Instead, he's lead into what's clearly someone's office. Probably a salesperson, Mumbo thinks, or maybe even the dealership owner. There's an employees only door that's also been forced open through there, and back there, there it is—a room with a safe in it. That, Mumbo thinks, is probably where the car keys are kept. That, or the money, but a car dealership doesn't seem like the kind of place to have a lot of cash on hand.

(Do people pay for cars in cash? Last time Mumbo had owned a car had been nearly four years ago. He'd paid for that one in cash, and sold it for cash, too. However, he'd paid for it in cash because he'd bought it from his cousin, and he'd sold it in cash because, at the time, Grian was trying to make Mumbo harder to track for reasons Mumbo didn't *quite* catch onto until too late. The world's ended now, though. Those reasons have become irrelevant again. The point is more that Mumbo rather suspects most people do not pay for cars in cash, as it had been fairly impractical, even if it had been an *awfully* cheap car he'd bought from his cousin. These are new cars! Significantly less cheap, typically.)

"Now, I'm pretty sure I can't..."

"You won't know until you *try*, will you? We need those keys."

Mumbo sighs. He looks at his wrench. He looks at the safe. "Honestly, um, I couldn't have done. Whatever you did. To those doors? So, um, I really don't think—"

"I'm waiting—oh, give me that." X snatches the wrench from Mumbo's hands. Mumbo, in a moment of incredible wisdom, steps back.

X slams the safe with the wrench. There's a horrible bang, and then a ringing noise, and then Mumbo looks at the safe and. Hm. Well. There's certainly a dent in it. And it's certainly a little mangled. However, it's not what anyone would call *open*.

"GAH! What does it take to open a stupid box?" says X, and he kicks the safe. This does nothing except stub X's toe. Mumbo winces in sympathy. X breathes heavily for a few moments.

"I can. I have blank car keys. I'm going to reprogram them anyway. If we can't get in, it's not the end of the world. I mean, between the two of us, how hard can stealing a car really be don't answer that."

"You know more than me. Especially since we can't just steal the keys. Who designs a safe to be this hard to open!"

Mumbo looks between X and the very dented safe. Is... is he supposed to answer that? He really doesn't know if he's supposed to answer that. Carefully, he settles on: "I mean, I am impressed with the craftsmanship. Beating it up like that made the door crunch in, so it wouldn't open, instead of making the door pop open. That must have taken some skill. In safe-making, I mean."

"*Gah*," repeats X emphatically. "Skill in safe-making? What if it had been an emergency, huh? How would they open it then?"

"With the code, probably."

"Oh, shut up!"

Mumbo shuts up and steps further back. X still has his wrench as he starts pacing. He sure doesn't deal with frustration well, Mumbo thinks. Or changes in plan. Or any attempts to convince him to change the plan. Or, uh, making plans. Those are all negative traits he should work on. Not that Mumbo would tell him that, given, well, what X had just done to that safe.

"I can steal two cars," Mumbo says. "One for each of us. It will take longer, but we can get out of here in plenty of time, still. You'll still be able to find your brother."

X laughs, humorlessly. "Oh, we're only getting one car," X says. "You, my friend, are still coming with me."

"It really would be easier to get two cars," Mumbo insists. "I need to get to Grian as soon as possible. Two cars would be good for that, you know? It would make it easier for us to, um, both get where we're going."

"You don't always get what you want, Mister... what did you say your name was? Mumbo? You don't always get what you want, Mumbo. And you, of all people, don't deserve it."

X turns around and marches out of the room. Mumbo stares after him.

"...I don't *know you*," Mumbo says, and he doesn't mean to sound so... something angry and sad pulls up from the middle of his throat. "I don't know you," he finds himself repeating. "I don't know you. What do you want with me? What do you want? I don't know you! I don't know you. I don't know you." Why can't he stop saying it? Great. Now he's so tired he's gotten stuck repeating sentences. His tongue is heavy. "I don't know you," he mutters. "I don't know you."

He hates it when he does this. When he can't talk. X isn't even hear to hear his lament. Maybe that's a good thing. "I don't know you," he repeats again. Why now? He's so tired. He had all the food he can afford to eat for the night, and he's tired, and he should go back to the room he had been planning on sleeping in. That's where his bag is. He wants his bag before X gets to it. It's probably [etty, but he does. He continues muttering under his breath, the words like lead against his tongue, as he walks towards the waiting room again.

"I don't know you," he manages to say for the last time, practically forgetting why he'd said it the first time. At least he's stopped repeating things before he got to X. That would be hard to explain. He's going to have to eventually if X continues to insist on needing him around, explain how sometimes Mumbo's words stop working correctly, but it doesn't happen that often. Only when he's stressed.

Which, thinking about it, is constantly right now. (Maybe he just won't think about it.)

When he gets back to the waiting room, he's strangely relieved to see that X has put the wrench back with his stuff and gone somewhere else. He's also left all of the food and blankets. X didn't have a bag; did he have blankets? Mumbo already knew X didn't think he needed food, but blankets—

Actually, Mumbo thinks, he's going to decide not to care.

He can't afford to care whether X has blankets when he has no idea what's happening, when frankly, all X does is scare Mumbo. No, instead, Mumbo is going to use those blankets for himself, and he is going to sleep, and he is going to sleep well.

He checks the time. The sun may have set, but it is still awfully early to sleep, even after everything. Then again, the world's ending. He can afford to sleep early. If he wakes up before the sun rises, that's a few more hours for himself. If he wakes up and X has murdered him or something, he'll add it to the list of silly ways to die. (The list really is getting quite long.)

He makes sure his phone's ringer is on while it's charging, in case Grian messages him. He goes to sleep.

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When he wakes up, the room looks like it hasn't been walked into at all. Mumbo doesn't know if he thinks that is good or bad. His back certainly still hurts; he was right about sleeping on the uncomfortable benches. He's hungry, so he eats some of the food he'd taken, even though it really doesn't taste like much of anything.

He's gotten no new messages on his phone.

## Chapter End Notes

tomorrow: the plane

this is definitely one of the *goofier* chapters. never let it be said i don't have a sense of humor in my incredibly bleak apocalypse au! not much to say about this one other than "it's at least in part here to help characterize x, and also because i thought the, uh, generously what we could call a safe-cracking scene was funny".

# the plane

## Chapter Summary

in which mumbo isn't sure what qualifies as the world's worst, most awkward road trip, but this feels like it might.

## Chapter Notes

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

When Mumbo steps out of the dark waiting room, he finds X waiting outside. He's still wearing the suit and helmet, which makes it very hard to tell what his expression is, or to ask how he slept. Mumbo sort of thinks that *he* probably looks like he slept badly. His clothes are probably all rumpled (Mumbo hasn't cared to think about it), and he knows he probably looks like he slept as terribly as he feels like.

Outside, the sun is only barely beginning to rise. It's still fairly dark.

"Took you long enough to wake up," X says in a mild tone of voice.

"It's only five-forty five. I mean, we can't really leave yet, anyway," Mumbo says.

"Hm," X says, and he goes back to... whatever he'd been doing. Mumbo isn't certain. Maybe he should ask X about the brother they're looking for? Or maybe he just. Shouldn't bother X at all.

He picks up his phone. He stares at the message he sent. He sends a message: *found someone who goes by x. it might be xisuma but i don't know. he's coming with me to find his brother.*

He hovers for a moment before hitting send. For a moment, he hopes something will happen. What, he's not entirely sure, but, he wants *something* to happen. Maybe a coworker will tell him X is actually an infamous serial killer, and then Mumbo will get stabbed. That would be bad. More likely, he thinks he'll be told... well, nothing. But if someone does respond, that suit X is wearing for protection (or whatever reason he might be wearing it) is pretty clearly something Concorp made. There isn't really anyone other than Mumbo's employers who could make something like that. So, X probably knows someone, works somewhere at Mumbo's employers, or just stole something. Mumbo doesn't know. He just knows it's almost certainly the case that X knows his coworkers somehow and...

...no response.

He puts the phone in his pocket and instead starts pulling parts out of his bag. The blank keys. His reprogrammable device. The manuals, the diagnostic tools he'd stolen at the auto shop... Okay, okay, he can probably do this. He's not totally sure how he'll get into the locked cars, but just breaking a window may well do it. He's broken so many windows. What's a broken window in a car he's stealing anyway...?

The clock slowly ticks forward as Mumbo tries to think about how he'll open the doors. X doesn't talk. Mumbo considers talking, but he decides not to talk. Instead, he reads the driving manuals and tries to ignore the increasingly anxious pit in his stomach about having not driven in like, two



years. Eventually, the sun rises more, and there's more light in the building, and Mumbo looks over his keys and diagnostic tools and manuals and hums to himself.

He sort of doesn't want to go now, though. He knows he needs to. He knows this was his whole goal of the past two days. He knows that he just needs to steal a car, as he's been trying to do for what feels like a lifetime, but. But X is here now. But it means he'll be one step closer to Grian. But he's not sure he can. But, but...

Oh, he can't afford to be insecure! He's just got to... he hits the ground as he stands up, making a loud noise. "Well," he says. "It's the time we've all been waiting for. I have keys for Camrys, and keys for Tacomas, and keys for Corollas, and probably some others, too. I think I'll try a sedan. Those seem kind of easier to drive, don't they?"

"I wouldn't know," says X. Mumbo blinks.

"...is that why you won't let me steal you a car?"

"Of course not! I can drive, I just haven't before," X says, and, hm, Mumbo had expected judgement for having not driven in two years. However, it seems like he might be doing well! He hasn't driven in a long time, but compared to X, he's at least driven at all! That does mean it will be hard to drive, sure, and that he won't have X's help to switch drivers ever, and he'll have to drive the whole way straight on his own, sure. But it also means X can't judge.

(Mumbo wonders what it means, that he's just accepted that X will be coming with him now. It's probably the threats. Or, um, the implied threats. X isn't someone who particularly does threats, unless he really has to, Mumbo has found. Mumbo gets the sense that X could probably do a lot of threatening if he wanted to. After all, given what had happened last night...)

"Well, I'm going to go try to hotwire a sedan. Um, let me see if i can force the door open..."

It takes a few tries. The car alarm goes off, but Mumbo knows how to turn it off. He eventually has to give up and break a window. He only thinks that huh, maybe he shouldn't break the driver's side window actually after he's already done it so that's thw window that's broken. He makes X help him clean up the glass, at least. Mumbo, after all, doesn't have the fancy suit and the gloves. He doesn't want to cut his hands. The car alarm is still blaring. If it keeps on going off it's going to run the battery dry, Mumbo thinks a little irritably. Then where will they be? It's not like Mumbo had enough room to also steal an emergency jump box or anything! He'll have to hotwire a *second car*! And that one could run dry too! It would be a vicious cycle!

He plugs his diagnostic tool in, along with his personal device, and gets to reprogramming the key. It takes a few tries, but once he gets used to how the auto shop's tool had worked, it's not the worst thing in the world. He realizes, with some irritation, that he probably couldn't have even electrocuted himself, and *could have* done this in the middle of the night, actually. Not at *all* like hotwiring a car, really. It's all computers, like his job is these days. It's hardly even scary!

He clicks the key to make sure it works. The car beeps. The anti-theft turns off. He is standing in a previously brand-new Toyota Camry that he just stole. He's not sure what his emotion is about that at all. Tired?

"Done," Mumbo says. "The car will now turn on and off with this key. Actually, let me make a second one for you. Hold on."

It takes a few more minutes of fiddling with the diagnostics to convince the car to give him a second copy of the key, but once it has, he tosses it to X. "I mean, if you still want to come with

me. That only took. How long did it take?"

"Half an hour," X says.

"Oh dear. That's actually much longer than I thought it would take," Mumbo says. "I mean, I do know how to do it now, so maybe it wouldn't take as long if I was getting you your own car..."

"We're both taking this one," X says.

"Right."

Mumbo stares at the car. He's going to have to actually drive now, and he really doesn't want to. It's just, see, he has this strong feeling they're both going to die because Mumbo hits a tree or something. This is, perhaps, not a rational thought, but he really hasn't driven in so long, and these are somewhat stressful circumstances to be doing it for the first time in a long time during. All he really needs to do is...

"I feel like I'm supposed to prepare for a long road trip," Mumbo says.

"Isn't that what your little bag is for?" asks X and. Oh. Yeah. Mumbo had prepared for the trip. He'd prepared for it two days ago, right before murdering someone in a stairwell. Funny, how time's gotten all confused in his head like that.

"Right. In that case I guess I just..." He turns the car on. It has a push button. It feels somehow less satisfying than turning a key in an ignition. The motor runs, vibrating the seats and the windows and the whole car. Mumbo puts his bag in the back seat and gestures to the passenger seat. X climbs in. He carefully plugs his phone into the car, and a cheerful heads-up display shows him the GPS. He puts in Grian's address—

"Now, we both know that's not where we're going," X says.

"It is," Mumbo says, quietly. "It is."

"No, it's not, my friend. Let me put in the address." X grabs the phone before Mumbo can stop him. Miserably, Mumbo watches his goal disappear before his eyes. It all collapses in. X still has the gun with him, there in the front seat. Mumbo can't stop him while he has that gun.

Mumbo reaches for the phone again. "I'm driving, I get to choose," he tries.

"It will only take a few extra days. Only one, really, presuming nothing happens. It's only a few hours out of the way," X says.

"I just want to see Grian," Mumbo says.

X turns to Mumbo. His hands are on the gun. Mumbo remembers the argument by the safe the other day. He swallows. He tries to stand his ground a moment longer. "You're going to listen to me or else," X says.

"Fine," Mumbo says, miserably. "Are you sure you don't want me to get you your own car?"

"I don't."

"This is, um, pretty stressful as a situation to be driving for the first time in two years under. I have to say that I'm definitely concerned. I definitely did not expect to be driving for the first time again like this."

"I'm sure you'll be fine enough."

"Right. Okay."

Mumbo stares at the gearshift for a moment. The GPS finishes loading the location that X wants them to go to. Everyone, at least, has the same way they have to leave town. Mumbo's going the correct direction to get to Grian for now. It will be a while until he has to diverge. All he has to do is just... Just...

It's not quite like riding a bike. Not that Mumbo would entirely know? It's been longer since he last rode a bike than it's been since the last time he drove a car! It's a little uncomfortable, and getting off of the lot of the dealership is difficult. He's so scared the whole time he'll hit the other cars, or hit a curb, or hit... something. X makes an annoyed sound as Mumbo, as slowly and carefully as possible, gets out to the main road.

He turns on his blinker before he turns. X scoffs. "Who's that for?"

"Me?" Mumbo says after a moment.

"You are a very strange person," X says. "Don't do things that waste time."

"Right. That's... that's definitely relevant," Mumbo says blankly, driving onto the road. "Can you be quiet? I have to watch to see if there are, um, obstacles. Like wrecked cars. Or monsters. Or deer."

"I feel like deer are a kind of monster."

"Are they? You know, I hadn't ever considered that before. Deer as a type of monster. They *are* rather scary, really." Mumbo considers this as he starts nervously heading ten below the speed limit. "At the same time, though, unlike the monsters, they weren't once people. Um, unless there are people turning into deer?"

"I don't think so," X says. "Wouldn't that just be funny, though. Turning into a deer."

"I think it would be more distressing than funny."

"You could just... eat leaves all day."

"Oh, yeah, you could." Mumbo speeds up slowly. It seems to be fine, honestly. Nothing's been ahead that he might hit yet. It's just been him, the car, X, and the open road. "That would be nice. Eating grass. Having horns. Although there are hunters, aren't there? And, like, coyotes. Wouldn't want to be coyote food."

"It's a good thing I rescued you when I did then, isn't it?"

Mumbo can't help it. He snorts at that one. "Yes, well, I mean. I guess it kind of was, wasn't it? Those weren't coyotes, but monsters. I almost learned what it feels like to be a deer. Learning what it feels like to be a deer isn't really one of my goals anymore, I don't think. Except, I guess, the ability to headbutt people with my horns and eat grass."

"I think you could eat grass."

"Could I?"

The two of them fall quiet as the GPS chimes again. Mumbo has to think about that one. He could eat grass, he supposes, but should he? And would it be poisonous? Mumbo's fairly certain that

grass isn't poisonous, but he still doesn't know what's poisoned... whatever's been poisoned that's turning people into monsters. No, instead he just hasn't had it happen to him yet. He wonders if it's a waiting game. If he turns into a monster now and crashes the car, that would be very bad. X is here. He doesn't want to hurt X.

"You could," X says, making Mumbo realize he's been silent for quite some time. What could he do? Right, eat grass.

"I've never tried it."

"Did you never eat grass as a kid?"

"Not really? Did you?"

"No."

"...oh."

The two of them fall quiet again. Mumbo shuffles slightly in his seat, but not too much. He... has no idea where to go from there, really.

"Did... did anyone you know eat grass when you were a kid?"

"...my psychologist," X says.

Mumbo thinks of the gun he's been threatened with several times. "You had a psychologist?"

"Not by choice," X says.

"Did you not..."

"Don't say anything bad about him," X says, and his tone has not been more threatening yet.

"Right! Right." Mumbo pauses again for a long time. From the sides of the car, he sees movement, but they're going a somewhat steady thirty-five miles per hour. The likelihood of whatever's moving catching up with them feels low. He swerves to get around a crashed car on the street, and then has to make a wide turn to get around a very concerning bit of twisted metal. Oh, he hopes that wasn't a car. He hopes that's just... some kind of. Street. Metal. He doesn't know. It had probably been a car, no matter how much the sheer idea of that stresses Mumbo out. How... how frustrating. He just... he doesn't want to think about the things that have gotten hurt!

Something darts out in front of Mumbo's car. He yelps and hits the breaks. When he can breathe again, he sees a strange creature covered in yellow feathers. It has long arms and baleful eyes. It stares at Mumbo. Mumbo stares back. X sounds like he's saying something, but Mumbo's ears are ringing, so he doesn't pay attention. Carefully, he throws the car in reverse and starts driving around the... whatever it is.

Luckily, it neither attacks nor jumps out in front of his car again.

Mumbo's heart is still slowing down when the GPS chimes again and, oh, there's the highway entrance ramp. Good, good, then it really will be open road. He sees something out of the corner of his eyes. He hears a yell.

He pulls onto the highway.

"You know, I wonder if it's weird that neither of us have heard of someone who eats grass. Other

than deer and your psychologist, of course. I have to say that I'm also a fan of deer *and* psychologists," Mumbo starts, and then he just keeps talking. Maybe if they keep up their silly conversation about deer, things like the horrible, three-car pileup, or the blood on the edge of the vehicles that he sees as soon as he enters the highway won't stress him out. He won't think about if he and X bleed red. He won't think about what happens if he crashes his car. He won't think about any of that! He'll just drive! That would be good, right?

X doesn't respond until Mumbo says something about elk. It's just to argue that elk and deer are totally different. Mumbo's pretty sure they are, but see, that was the goal. X isn't threatening him. They aren't tripping over dangerous topics. Mumbo will talk until his throat hurts, if it means they aren't tripping over dangerous things.

As he speeds up closer to highway speeds, still watching for the semi-frequent crashed cars and evidence of former monsters, he lets the stupid conversation be the level of distraction he needs as they roll out of town in a stolen Camry with a broken window.

---

They've been driving for about an hour when Mumbo says: "You know, I've never been this far outside of town. Or, no, I guess that isn't fair, but I haven't been this far out of town in a long time, at least."

"Too busy with your job?" X says. There's something oddly bitter in his voice.

"Sort of," Mumbo says. There are, of course, a lot more complicated reasons than that, but Mumbo had crushed the earrings, and it's not wrong. It's not wrong that it is, in many ways, the fault of his employer that he's so woefully unfamiliar with leaving town these days. Had it been up to him, or to Grian, or to anyone sensible, he would have gone to visit Grian long before now. Actually. Thinking about that. "I do wish it hadn't taken the end of the world. I wish I'd been to his house more. I know why I haven't, but I wish I had."

"We're finding my brother first," X says, snorting. "At least I've seen where he lives before."

"...you don't have to make fun of me, you know, for wanting to see Grian. For wishing I'd had the opportunity before now."

"I can make fun of you for things that are your fault."

And Mumbo—

Mumbo doesn't say anything in response to that. He probably ought to. He probably ought to say something silly, like how he can hardly be blamed for the end of the world, or how if he'd been able to leave town, he would have, eventually, he just hadn't been allowed. He doesn't say either of those things, though. He just turns to focus on the road, because he's realized this probably isn't a conversation he wants to have. Especially not with the way X seems to feel about it. Especially not now, with a knot in the pit of his stomach.

The GPS tells him they still have many more hours of this to go. At least it's not walking, Mumbo thinks. At least this should be easy enough.

"We should turn on music," he says. "Here. Go through the songs I have downloaded and pick a playlist."

"Don't you not want to be distracted?"

"I changed my mind."

Letting X look through his phone probably isn't the wisest of ideas. For all Mumbo knows, X will do something bad. But Mumbo doesn't want to think about that. Mumbo just wants to change the subject. He looks blankly forward as X starts playing some playlist that's mostly pop songs.

"How do you pick songs?" X asks.

"I mean, I just... download all the ones I like. Just pick your favorites. You can switch them if you want oh hold on—"

Mumbo swerves again. There's a collapsed construction vehicle on the road. The two of them stare at it as Mumbo manages to screech to a halt and get around it. There's—something—someone—crushed beneath it. Several somethings. Several someones. The road isn't going to be finished, Mumbo thinks. Not that finishing the road or its state of completion should be anyone's top concern at the moment, but!

But the road isn't going to be finished with all the construction workers dead, it won't be—

X can make fun of him for things that are his fault—

"Pick a song," he repeats, and he keeps driving.

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The thing about long road trips, Mumbo is quickly realizing, is that they're actually just a little bit boring? Not that the constant threat of death is boring, but it sort of is? It's boring in an exhausting way, though, where not enough happens to be properly scared, but just enough happens that Mumbo feels like he ought to always be on-guard. It's very exhausting! Worse, Mumbo really does have to focus while driving, but except for the parts where he has to dodge around car crashes and such, there isn't that much to focus on.

He's still driving a little below the speed limit. This is both because there might be crashed vehicles and because he's not sure he still remembers what he's doing? He does need to get to where he's going quickly, ideally, and driving below the speed limit on an eleven-hour journey is going to add up and make it a lot longer, it's just... No, he's not ready for highway speeds.

He's especially not ready to account for the fact that, since there are not other drivers, by all accounts he should just drive the speed that makes it so he still feels like it's easy to dodge. That seems like a scary rabbit hole. There's no one and nothing to stop him from just... putting his foot on the gas and going a full one-hundred down the highway, or even faster than that. He could go at the fastest speed on his poor car's speedometer, and no one would stop him!

Of course, then Mumbo's pretty sure he would die, but it's the principle of the matter, he thinks, probably. He's not sure.

He checks the time on the GPS. Yep. Still about eight hours to go. This shouldn't really be surprising, given everything, but! But Mumbo also feels like that's way longer left than he thought. And way less time. And everything in-between oh *geez* that's a big hole in the road—

"You don't have to slam the breaks every time there's an obstacle!" says X, frustrated, as the car skids to a halt.

"Well, I don't want to try to dodge around them at fifty!" Mumbo says.

"Are we still only going fifty? Geez! We're never making it there at this rate!"

"I—I'll turn this car around, X, don't think I won't," Mumbo says. (He won't, but it feels like an

appropriate threat.)

"You won't," says X.

"Right. Let me just... steer around this... goodness, driving is different than I remember. A lot more... dodging and weaving. Do you think the people who invented cars anticipated this sort of thing?"

X seems to be seriously considering it. "I'm not sure. I guess it depends on what you mean. The end of the world?"

"Maybe?"

"Well, then, I don't know if they pictured people riding cars during it, but certainly, I imagine." X pauses. "I wonder if they thought we'd cause it. Tech types like that don't tend to think that far ahead, though."

"I don't know whether to be insulted." Mumbo starts the car up again slowly, in case there are more strange holes in the road. But no, it's just the single sinkhole. That's good. It means Mumbo is far less likely to have to witness great amounts of death or something next time he looks out his side windows. He's been avoiding that.

"You should be insulted," says X.

"Right. Why?"

"You can't be so much of an idiot you don't know who caused this. I may not know exactly who you are, but you're Concorp like the rest of them."

Mumbo swallows. "It... it probably wasn't... I work on electrical engineering and computer engineering. My work was secret, but it was... Um... It was secret."

"Missiles and satellites. And, of course. *This*. Although I think this was an accident? You know this isn't that profitable. It ending the world was the accident, I mean, generally—"

"Can we stop talking?"

"No, no I don't think we should."

Mumbo grips the steering wheel harder. "I really didn't do this. Wouldn't this be more the bio sciences anyway? Couldn't be me. And, and... It's not like... Oh, they wouldn't *tell me* if I were. I wasn't supposed to know that much. And you don't know me!"

"Did you know?"

"...I'm not an idiot."

"Hah. You know what you did."

Mumbo stares at the road blankly. "I didn't, though. I don't know why... Fine, even if I worked on part of... of whatever caused this. Which I don't think I did! I just told you they didn't tell me what I was working on, and besides, I didn't really have a choice in the matter, and—"

"Excuses. I mean, look at me," X says.

"What do you mean?"

"I stole this perfectly well, didn't I?" X says, gesturing to the suit. "And look. No end of the world."

"That feels, um, disingenuous," he says, quietly.

Mumbo thinks of Grian, and cash transactions, and being offered a job, and earrings, and the knowledge in the back of his head of what he'd actually been there for. He stares out the window. It's really, he thinks, hard to drive when his head is suddenly swimming, trying to decide which boring, rote part of his job may have contributed to the end of the world. The problem, naturally, is that he's never heard of any kind of computer system that does something like this. He has no idea what 'this' is. Computer systems and technology that does—other things—Mumbo can almost imagine himself as having worked on X's suit, certainly. But this? Whatever *this* is?

"It's not like that," Mumbo says. "It's not."

"Keep lying to yourself, then. Either way, we're getting to my brother, and then I'll be done with you." Mumbo hates that. Oh, he hates that a lot. He keeps driving.

"Why do we have to find your brother first still? Look, we're still going the same direction, there's still time for us to go to Grian! I know you hate me, even though we don't know each other, but—"

"I have *business* with my brother."

"And you keep saying things like that! You keep on. Oh, I don't know why I bother to keep arguing with you about whatever this is."

"It really was easier when you weren't arguing anything, wasn't it?" X says, and it makes something in Mumbo's head boil.

"Look, I get it, you blame me for the end of the world, but it wasn't like that, and it *isn't* like that, and kidnapping won't solve anything and neither will stopping me from doing the one thing that I wanted to do! So, so go ahead and shoot me! Yeah! You don't know how to drive, do you? Then we're in real trouble, so really, I'd say you should let me keep driving and—"

"MUMBO—!"

Mumbo whirls around and yelps at the sight of metal. He doesn't really have time to react. The airbags go off. Mumbo's head rings for a moment, everything hazy. He opens his eyes and he's sideways. He sees X struggle to get a seatbelt off. Huh. What happened—oh. Oh no. He struggles for his own seatbelt too and scrambles for the doors. None of them are quite easy to access. The two of them get out of their wrecked car.

Mumbo looks to see what they hit.

There, across the road, is a massive piece of metal, beyond Mumbo's understanding of massive pieces of metal that should be there. He stares at it for a long time. Then, staring at the splatters of neon blood and the corpses that have come out of the wrecked airplane, Mumbo feels very, very dizzy.

It might also be the concussion. He really doesn't think it is. He hadn't even thought of that. He hadn't even thought—if people had crashed their cars, then people definitely had crashed other things, too. And here it is. Scattered in pieces across the highway. He feels dizzy. He sits down. What had he been arguing about a moment ago?

"This is all..." he starts, and he doesn't know how to finish it. "I..."



He thinks his vision goes grey. He's not sure, for a while.

He presses his head into his hands. He tries to breathe. He stares at the wrecked airplane until X grabs his shoulders. X is quiet as he does. Mumbo supposes he's grateful for that. He doesn't know what he'd do if X hadn't been. There's simply... blood. And metal. And death. None of those are things Mumbo wants to deal with. At least there isn't also fire. At least whatever fire there might have been has gone out. At least, at least, at least...

If this had been him, Mumbo thinks distantly, then he really is some kind of monster, isn't he?

"Smells horrible," X says, finally. "Like a bomb."

"Why do you know what bombs smell like?" Mumbo says faintly. "It does, though. It smells like... X. X, the car. The car. We flipped the car, I think. How did we flip the car? That was hard to steal. X..."

"You don't sound so good," X says.

"I think I hit my head," Mumbo says.

"We did flip the car," X says.

"Oh," Mumbo says.

"Do you think you can still drive it?"

Mumbo takes this as the excuse it is to not think at all about the dead people in the airplane. He turns to look at the car again. He stares at it. Even if he and X did flip it back over, the front is horribly crushed. Most of the glass is shattered. Somehow, Mumbo thinks they won't be driving the car again anytime soon. Still, he finds himself saying: "Let's flip it back onto its wheels, maybe? I don't think I'm strong enough to do that."

"Hold on," X says.

They both try for a little bit, until Mumbo decides they're both more likely to crush themselves than to get the car into a usable position. They both stare for a bit at the destroyed vehicle.

"We made it four hours?" Mumbo says. "And then we... we hit a plane. We hit a. Haha. We crashed into a crashed plane. Well, that's awfully funny, isn't it? It's hilarious. I feel like throwing up again. Or just... it's really funny, isn't it? I don't think I can see straight."

"You really are inconveniently concussed," X says.

"I don't think I've ever been conveniently concussed," Mumbo says. "Ow. My head does hurt. Imagine if I hadn't had the airbag, though. Oh, wait, our things! Oh no, oh no, my phone!"

The two of them carefully pull things out of the wrecked car. Thankfully—somehow—Mumbo's phone is salvageable. Good. He'd be very lost without the GPS. His bag is mostly salvageable as well. Some of the snacks are crushed, though, and when Mumbo looks at the circuit board in Grian's fake bird, he doesn't know if it's been damaged badly or not. He hopes not. He'd hate to have done that. He wants the bird to be alright.

He picks up his phone.

"We're going to have to start walking until we find another car we can use. I, oh, I don't think the

phone knows how to route a footpath from here. Haha, that's also funny. Because you aren't supposed to walk on highways, you see."

"Inconveniently concussed," X says again, and he's not wrong, but Mumbo does find the phrasing a bit amusing. He stuffs as much as he can back into his bag and stares at the horrible wreckage they'd crashed into. He looks away again after a moment. It's not something he wants to look at much at all. He goes back to his phone. If he looks at his phone, he doesn't have to look *up*.

"Um, if we force the GPS to route us around this—well, it won't, not unless we go back towards an exit we already passed, and that's probably better than trying to walk around on our own?"

"Yeah, okay," X says. "Backwards. Fine. Let's go. Lead the way."

Mumbo nods, and leads X backwards across the highway, trying not to look at the wrecked car, or the wrecked plane, or any of the proof of how terrible things have gotten. To Grian. They're still on the path to Grian. One person who might still be alive.

The GPS is not happy with them walking backwards on the highway, and they do it anyway.

## Chapter End Notes

tomorrow: the rainstorm.

mumbo's sure not having a good time, is he? i almost feel bad, except i don't because if i actually felt bad would i have written this fic? anyway not much to say about this one other than "i'm posting it like twenty minutes early because i got impatient", and also that this is one of the times that the chapter title isn't really quite what the chapter is about, and yet at the same time absolutely is.

anyway i'm still kinda sick so if there are editing mistakes know that i spent half of today trying to make words make sense,

# the rainstorm

## Chapter Summary

in which mumbo and x get a little bit damp.

## Chapter Notes

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

Eventually, they get back to the other highway exit. By the time they do, Mumbo's head is pounding horribly, and he's pretty sure he's managed to get whiplash. He'd thought he might have before, but now he's very certain. That isn't good, he thinks. That means that at least some of his headache is actually his neck, and he really doesn't know enough about necks, heads, or headaches to be able to say which part of his headache it is. Instead, he just has to feel miserable. He really wishes he'd packed aspirin, or some kind of painkiller, but he'd simply not thought to, not over the totality of the food and bandages he would need.

He even packed first aid! Isn't painkillers first aid? But no, he'd been enough of a fool that he hadn't even thought about painkillers, and now he's just here, head hurting—

Regardless, they make it to the last exit. There is no sign for amenities off the exit, besides a single gas station that they aren't even certain will have a convenience store. They aren't exiting for amenities, though. They're exiting to find a way around the airplane and a way to sleep somewhere safe, since their car is destroyed. That's a completely different use case, really.

Walking down an interstate exit is strange. It's both longer than it feels in a car and exactly the length Mumbo thinks it ought to be. They exit onto a long, small highway. It has no streetlamps. The gas station has a convenience store, but it's entirely dark. Mumbo looks up at the sky then down at his phone again.

"There aren't that many places near here. If we, um, want to just get back on the road, we have to walk... oh, that's a lot of miles."

"It can't be that many."

"The next highway entrance ramp is in twenty miles."

"What? Give me that." X swipes the phone from Mumbo's hand. This, Mumbo thinks, will not change the fact that trying to go around the plane in the middle of a fairly rural area isn't going to be particularly easy.

(And, oh, isn't it remarkable? They've driven for several hours, true, but it hadn't taken that long to no longer be in the city, thinking about it. They'd been in the city, and now they were not.)

"There aren't many people out here, either. This road is a long stretch of empty until it hits the next town. Um, do you want to stop at this gas station, or keep going? If we keep going, we're, um, getting closer to your... brother, right? So that's, um, good for you. But, you see, there... probably won't be a shelter. We might have to sleep outside. And the weather isn't awful! Unless it starts raining or something, I think we'll probably be fine? We could get attacked by wild animals or

monsters, but I'm pretty sure monsters can attack us inside, too, especially if we use someone's house for shelter or something, you know? So, um, sleeping outside would probably not be the end of the world? It might even be good! But if we don't stay here..."

"We're going to keep going."

Mumbo considers.

"Can I check if they're selling aspirin?"

"Yeah, go steal some painkillers," X says dismissively, and Mumbo quickly heads to the dark convenience store. It's totally empty when he opens the door. It's not some kind of chain. It has ugly curtains, and shelves that look like they haven't been replaced since the eighties, and what looks like it must be some local store's produce. The produce smells sickly-sweet as it rots in the bins. Mumbo tears through the shelves. Some convenience stores have travel-sized packs of painkillers, but he's not sure if a rural convenience store he's not even certain how to find the bathroom in will have them. The odds of this place having any specific thing feels rather low, generally. It's local, and full of odd local things, but full of actual convenience?

Frankly, Mumbo probably wouldn't have wanted to stop here had he actually been on a road trip before the apocalypse, is all he's saying—oh! That looks like it could be medication! Please, please, have something? Even once his head stops hurting, it will be nice to have that sort of thing for when he gets bitten by a monster again, or he twists an ankle, or...

They have bottles of ibuprofen. That, Mumbo decides, is exactly what they need. He grabs two bottles and stuffs them into his bag. He turns to leave, but not before he notices a box of lighters sitting on the counter. He... doesn't think he has a lighter, actually. He could probably use one of those. He'll grab one and stick it in his pocket. And, oh, while he's here.

The sickly-sweet rotting fruit makes his head hurt worse, but there's probably *some* good food here. Or, if not good food, edible food? Since he's used some of his rations already... They don't seem to have energy bars, unfortunately, but they do have three varieties of very questionable trail mix. The bags are labeled with a paper label that looks like Mumbo could have designed it in Microsoft Paint. The bags are made of big, heavy plastic, and the tops are held together with zip ties. He squints at the bags. How does he tell if any of this has gone bad? Trail mix is supposed to last, right? Peanuts don't go bad, do they? What about raisins?

He grabs two of the bags and decides that if he dies because he food poisoned himself on trail mix, it would almost be funny. He takes a moment to step into the store's bathroom. He leaves again after washing his hands. The water is rusty and red, but he's pretty sure that's not the apocalypse, but that the water's just like that here. He has a filter on his water bottle anyway, so he fills it. He can deal with it still smelling a little bit like metal, he thinks. That will be fine. He leaves the store.

"I got some," he says to X, who is leaning against one of the two gas pumps.

"What took you so long?"

"Went ahead and used the bathroom and got some trail mix. I think it's some kind of local thing?"

"Oh, good, we're being tourists now."

"I mean, um, I sort of doubt this place has had tourists in years, but okay, sure," he says to X. "Do you want to use the bathroom in a real toilet while you have the chance?"

"Fine."

Mumbo sits down on the asphalt next to the gas pump while he waits for X. He tries a bite of the trail mix. It's decent, he thinks. It's salty, though. He probably should have grabbed a less salty food? He has so many salty foods...

X comes out again. "That place smells like death," he complains.

"It's the produce."

"Death smells like produce, then," X says.

"I mean, I guess it might. Produce does die. It doesn't smell like the..."

Mumbo trails off. He doesn't actually want to finish this conversation, he realizes very, very clearly. Absolutely not. "Let's keep walking, okay? Oh, hold on, let me actually take the ibuprofen. It won't do anything if I don't actually take it, will it?"

X scoffs while Mumbo downs two red pills. Mumbo, meanwhile, just breathes. Alright. He gets up, brushes off the back of his pants (though frankly the dirt from the road is nothing compared to the various amounts of blood he's already started to stain them with), and he begins walking down the road. His phone still refuses to give him walking directions on this road, as this road also has no sidewalks and clearly isn't built for walking on, but that's fine. He doesn't need actual walking directions, and he doesn't want to know the time estimate.

"Don't just start walking without me! Gosh, pay some attention to your companion, my friend," X says, easily jogging to catch up once he realizes what Mumbo is doing.

"Oh, sorry," Mumbo says. "My head still hurts. I'm waiting for the medicine to kick in."

"Well, kick in faster," X says. Mumbo considers fighting it, but instead, he decides he'll just keep walking, and bother fighting on this later. He doesn't have the energy or the functioning head to fight X on much of anything. He just wants the medication to kick in. They can make more decisions once they're further down the wooded road.

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Mumbo's luck with the weather runs out after they have only been walking about an hour. Overhead, the sky's been turning steadily darker, but Mumbo just had thought the sun had set early? Which, sensibly, makes far much less sense. Does that make sense? Mumbo's not sure he's making sense. He'd just been trying to will the world into not raining, or maybe the sky. Do you wish to the sky or the world for it not to rain? Does either make sense?

He feels the first drops well before X notices. This makes sense, given X is wearing some kind of strange hazmat suit at all times. Unlike X, all Mumbo is wearing is a black windbreaker and some jeans, so he notices when rain starts falling on his head quite immediately. He blinks slowly.

Maybe it's coming from the leaves on the trees? Mumbo thinks trees do that, sometimes. He remembers when he was younger that trees could occasionally fool him into thinking that it had rained. Yes, he thinks, looking at the tall oak trees that line the streets. The trees just had water pooled on them from all the rain they definitely had in the recent future.

It's not impossible! They'd driven several hours! It's very possible for it to have rained here and not where Mumbo came from!

It starts raining harder before Mumbo has a chance to really think through that assertion in any meaningful way.

"Oh, this is just brill," Mumbo says, as the rain slowly starts pouring down. "Exactly what we needed after the car."

"What?" asks X.

"It's raining," Mumbo says. "I know you're wearing that helmet, but it's been raining. And I'd been trying to ignore it, because I don't want to walk through the rain but I also don't want to stop walking, so I thought, hey! Maybe if I ignore it, it'll go away! But it did not go away. It hasn't gone away at all. So now it's raining."

"You're complaining about something strange," X says.

"This has all been very stressful," Mumbo says. "I think, if I would like, I can complain about the rain. Oh, it's getting worse."

"It isn't that bad," says X.

As though the universe is punishing them (and Mumbo thinks it very well might be), the light rain immediately changes into heavy rain.

"You had to say that," Mumbo says.

"Oh geez!" says X.

"Under the trees, let's go," Mumbo says. "We're already soaked, so it won't help, but under the trees!" He's already running by the time he finished talking. The trees—tall and oak and all—are also sparse. The sparse tree cover helps, and Mumbo's windbreaker does something, but he's quickly shivering as the rain comes down in sheets around him.

"You know, if I look on the bright side, this is basically a free shower, isn't it?" Mumbo says. "It's pants bright side, mind you. But it is bright! Brighter than nothing, at least!"

"We're in our clothes. I'd keep going but I can't see," X complains.

"I told you it wasn't a good bright side," mumbles Mumbo.

"Gosh. *Gosh*," says X, and he sounds both remarkably petty and remarkably like...

"You know, you're nothing like I thought the X I knew would be like. The one I know from work, I mean. I don't talk to him much, though, so I don't think I would be a good judge."

X snorts. "I wouldn't want to be like him. He's a soft fool of a man."

Mumbo stares at the rain. It gets in his eyes as it does, but he just keeps on staring. He's not sure why. It just feels right.

"I didn't ask before. Um, Xisum—I mean, X—"

"Don't call me that," X snaps.

"Okay," Mumbo says.

"I told you to call me X," X says, still angry. "I'm better than him. I'm going to prove I'm better than him."

"Okay. Okay, I will," Mumbo says. "I just... I was wondering. Why are you on your own?"

"Why wouldn't I be?" X says.

"Oh. I'm not really on my own because I want to be. I mean, um, I'm not... super good at making friends. Or meeting people. Or holding a conversation. Honestly I'm very bad at a lot of things."

X snorts.

"So it's hard to make friends when I can't leave my apartment. I mean it's hard for all the other reasons, but..."

"I don't need friends," says X.

"...okay," says Mumbo. It keeps raining. It's really cold in the rain. Mumbo is freezing.

"I can do things on my own. Being able to have... assistants... is helpful, but that's not friends. I don't need them. I'm built for this."

"I'm not arguing, mate," says Mumbo. "Why are you looking for your brother, though?"

"That's none of your business."

"It's fine if you—"

X laughs. "It's not to make friends, though."

Mumbo thinks that no one would journey like they are to make friends. That would be silly, risking themselves for friends they don't have yet. Mumbo's hunting down friends he's already made, or, well, one friend. X can be hunting down friends he's already made, too. A brother's like a friend, right? That's what makes the most sense to Mumbo.

But the way X had said that...

"I know you don't want to make friends with me," Mumbo says.

"That's right," X says harshly.

"If I knew what to do about your gun, I wouldn't even be helping you, then. I mean, not that I'm good at talking people into things either? But I don't think that I would help you, with you treating me like this, if you asked. Without a weapon."

X is silent.

"I mean, I'm getting soaked! Haha. Oh dear I just realized I insulted you I mean, not that I'm not sure you're a perfectly lovely fellow, but I mean, I just. I'm getting soaked for Grian, not for your brother—oh dear that didn't come out well either. I just mean..."

"It's good that I have a gun then, isn't it?" X says, looking up. Rain runs down his helmet. He doesn't move, which Mumbo takes as probably, maybe, a good sign that he's not about to get shot.

"I mean, not for me," Mumbo says. "Or. Um. Sorry."

"You're meaner than I thought you would be."

"You thought I was a war criminal."

"Oh, you are."

Mumbo stares at his hands. "I am," he says, after a moment. He doesn't really have a choice but to believe it. Not really. Not after the argument in the car. Not the more he thinks about codenames and blueprints he wasn't told the purpose of. Not the more he thinks about... basically everything about his old job, about Grian, about...

Well, regardless. "That doesn't change that you thought I was a war criminal. Didn't you think I'd be mean?"

X looks over to Mumbo and snorts.

"...rude," Mumbo mumbles, but he doesn't argue. He doesn't look like the mean sort, he'll acknowledge, unless... He looks down at his jacket. The blood and dirt has all washed off of it. X's armor looks just about the same, though. Funny, that. Maybe the suit repelled dirt and such. That seems like the kind of thing that might be true. Mumbo wouldn't really know. He's never worn things like that before.

They're quiet for a bit longer, standing in the deluge. Mumbo thinks he can't feel the rain anymore, he's so wet. He can smell it, though. Even during the apocalypse, rain has a distinct smell, and it's the same smell it's always had. Mumbo thinks that's sort of unfair. The rain should smell like something else. It should smell like acid, or blood, or something that isn't the same earthy smell heavy rain has always had. Something so natural and lovely shouldn't still smell nice, especially not when Mumbo's being horribly inconvenienced by the nice-smelling rain.

It's slowing down a little, he thinks. Maybe they should start walking, as opposed to just hiding and getting soaked.

He turns to X. "Should we go?"

"You're the one who gets wet," complains X, starting to walk down the road again.

"You said you couldn't..."

X spins around. Mumbo thinks that, maybe, he's been pushing it. It's hard to tell with X. He'd appreciated Mumbo saying the truth earlier, maybe, it's hard to tell since X has that facemask and Mumbo therefore can't read his expressions, but he thinks he didn't mind. This time, though—

"I'll be quiet!" Mumbo says.

"Good. Gosh, you just don't shut up, do you?"

"That's not normally a vice people attribute to me but you're probably not wrong," Mumbo says. "I think I'm a nervous talker, actually? Hm. I'm learning new things about myself, these days. I mean, I often let other people do... well, not, I don't always let other people do the talking, I—"

"I told you to shut up," snarls X.

"Right. Right! Shutting up," says Mumbo, which isn't shutting up. That's something Mumbo thinks he must be bad at then: shutting up. Also, listening. He's really trying his best. He's just...

Walking.

He's just walking again.

His legs hurt. X walks ahead. They have miles more to go, and while the rain slows, it doesn't let up.



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Mumbo's clothes cling to his skin. It's still raining on-and-off, and if he'd been cold while it was raining, he's just as cold now, except it's because his clothes are horrid and wet, not because the weather is. And he'd take them off! Except he thinks he may have read about that once, and knows it will make him more likely to freeze to death—or, wait. Was that for chemical burns? No, for chemical burns you *are* supposed to take your clothes off, right? And for freezing you aren't? What if they're on fire? Is that a chemical burn? That's a kind of burn...

None of this changes that he feels really cold, he thinks. The clothes clinging to his skin are uncomfortable. This is worse than the sweat and injuries from the past two days. It may not be killing him but it's definitely worse. Because it isn't killing him. It's just annoying. And it makes his skin feel horrid. And. And.

Oh, why had he suggested they start walking again? He may desperately want to see Grian, but not that desperately!

"Can we slow down?" Mumbo asks, itching his arms. He's not sure they're actually itchy? But they're something sort of like itchy. They're damp, and all of the hairs are on end, and scratching isn't helping but it's sort of helping, and...

"No," says X. "It's just water."

Okay, Mumbo thinks, but he might start crying if his arms keep itching. Which is very silly. He's had plenty of time to break down because everything is too much. He's even done it a few times! But because it's raining? That would be, by far, the silliest reason to have a breakdown yet. He'd almost say he shouldn't panic at all just because it's raining, and, and his arms itch, and his clothes are sticking to him, and he thinks they're chafing against his legs, and he can't focus, not when he's damp like this. It's stupid. It's really stupid. He's in actual pain in other places and, and, and all he can focus on is—his pants stick to the back of his knees and he shudders.

He's not going to have a meltdown about this, he thinks. He's avoided so many meltdowns about so many other things. He's not going to have a meltdown over *this*. That would be... would be...

He snuffles. He's immediately angry with himself, because he's a grown adult, and it's the apocalypse, but he's just cold and wet and it's still raining and X has long legs, longer than Mumbo's, and doesn't flag as easily. He rubs his eyes and tries valiantly to pretend this isn't upsetting him so badly. Oh, his head is a mess sometimes, isn't it? He goes and gets upset about—about stupid things—

"I really just think we should slow down," Mumbo says. "I need to... I don't know how to dry off. It's still raining. Maybe I use one of my blankets though. I just need to..."

"We aren't slowing down."

And Mumbo—Mumbo thinks that actually, they either are going to slow down, or Mumbo's going to burst into ugly tears. Of all the stupid places to hit his limit, he thinks. There's absolutely no reason for it to have been here! But it sure is here. His limit.

He puts his foot down. Figuratively. He doesn't have the ability to put his foot down literally, they're both already on the ground. If he could, he would have? But for now, he just puts down his figurative foot.

"I don't want to," Mumbo says.

"What?" X says. He starts pulling out his rifle. Mumbo flinches. He's pretty sure X is fully willing

to shoot him, but...

"I don't really care if you have a gun, actually. You know what? I don't care! It would be awfully stupid to die by getting shot, but there are so many other ways to die too, and I'm miserable! So we're stopping here!"

X stares at him. Mumbo stares back.

"...it's not even raining that hard anymore."

"I can't tell! I'm too wet and miserable!"

"I. Uh. Gosh. I will shoot you? I am holding a gun to you. You need to come with me to see my brother, or else."

"I don't care."

"You're throwing a temper tantrum."

"I don't *care*."

X tilts his head. Mumbo sort of wants to run, or maybe cry, but he stands his ground instead. He's not going to let X continue to bully him. Which, actually... is this bullying? Mumbo thinks it probably counts as bullying, doesn't it? In which case, yes! He won't let X continue to bully him! He'll stand his ground here, even if he hasn't managed to stand his ground on turning around and going after Grian instead of X's brother yet.

They stand in silence for a while.

"You're throwing a temper tantrum over the rain, but you're asking me to shoot you if I don't agree."

"You already think I'm a war criminal, don't you?"

"You are very different than I thought you would be, Mumbo."

Mumbo throws his hands up. "You didn't know me!"

"You're right."

"Are you going to shoot me or not?"

"I'm... not."

"Well then, I'm stopping until the rain stops and I can dry off, and you can't stop me." Furious, Mumbo marches over to the trees and sits himself down again. He stares at the rain. It's only a drizzle, but it's enough that he can't use his blankets to dry off. It takes him a moment to realize that X is still standing out in the rain too. A little, vindictive part of Mumbo wants to tell X to stay there. He doesn't care what happens to X. He's only still with him because X is basically holding him hostage, and Mumbo's just gotten too used to playing the hostage in life, hasn't he?

Still, it's just...

"You don't have to stand in the rain," Mumbo says.

"I have my combat suit," X says. Mumbo sort of wants to ask about that, but more importantly...

"Look, you can go without me, but, well, you aren't going to, are you? So, um, don't stand out in the rain. Just come stand here. I won't do anything. I just... I just needed to stop moving, or I was going to, um, probably cry, which would have been deeply embarrassing."

X comes to sit down next to him. Finally, slowly, he says: "I just threatened you with a gun, though."

"Yes, but you aren't going away, now are you? I should probably make the most of it, since you aren't going away, and I think it's probably better I have company, since none of my friends are answering their messages."

"Oh."

Mumbo starts wringing out his hair. He may as well, as the rain slows down. "You don't have to sound so surprised."

"I think anyone sensible would."

"Well, I don't think either of us qualify as sensible, so that's alright then."

"No, I suppose we don't."

They sit there quietly for a while. Mumbo hopes he hasn't said anything wrong. Somehow, he thinks he probably hasn't.

When it finishes raining, Mumbo takes one of his only blankets out, and he uses it as a towel. His clothes still feel awful and scratchy, but he puts up with it better. They continue walking.

## Chapter End Notes

next chapter: the snake

sometimes, two characters just need an excuse to *talk* some. god, if that doesn't describe half my writing. anyway did you know i wrote a decent chunk of this chapter on my phone over thanksgiving? and boy does my phone format things differently than when i type on my computer, so that was a pain to make consistent with the rest of the fic!

we're halfway there now, aren't we? this is a wild feeling, let me tell you. 8 out of 16...

oh right this also enters the part of the fic where i gave up pretending this was a fic set in Ambiguous Country and just started describing places i've actually been so if you're like. "that set piece sounds unlikely." i promise it's based on an Actual Location somewhere. life sure be like that.

# the serpent

## Chapter Summary

in which mumbo has what is somehow probably the weirdest encounter yet. this is saying a lot.

**this chapter has mild discussion of (but not the actual presence of) unreality near the end.**

## Chapter Notes

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

Even given the amount of time the two of them lost to the rain and Mumbo's maybe slight breakdown, or more perhaps carefully avoided breakdown, it still strikes Mumbo as odd just how little ground they cover on foot compared to in the car. It isn't actually odd; on the highway, especially the parts of highway that had been empty, Mumbo and X had covered a great deal of ground indeed. Also, cars can move at much higher speeds than Mumbo can on foot, or even X, probably. (For all Mumbo knows, X can run at the speeds of a car? Especially if that thing really is a combat suit. Mumbo knows that some of the... oh, he's not going to pretend. He knows some of the missile propulsion systems they had him working on had technology beyond the par, and his old earrings, well, but a suit that lets someone run at car speeds somehow seems...)

(Well, it doesn't seem impossible anymore, actually, and that's really the strange part, isn't it?)

All of this is beside the point. It's not actually all that surprising that traveling by foot takes much longer than by car. It just means that, about an hour after the sun sets, when X suddenly stops walking and Mumbo realizes he can't really see well in front of him anymore, they're much less close to getting to Grian than Mumbo would prefer.

(Or, er, well, getting to X's brother. Mumbo will work on that, now that he knows he can stand up to X. In the morning, though. He'll work on that in the morning.)

"We have to set up camp," X says.

"Do you have camping supplies?" asks Mumbo.

"No," X says.

"Well then," Mumbo says. "Well!"

The two of them stare at the road. It stretches on through the woods, rolling up and down hills. Occasionally, other roads turn off of it, but they've yet to see proper signs of civilization. It appears this back road truly is on the backside of the world.

"There has to be something," Mumbo says, finally.

"If we keep walking, I'm sure there is," X says.

"Yes. Besides, this road is flat! We probably aren't going to trip and die horribly because it's dark."

"Of course. My visor has night vision."

"Can I hold your hand?"

"No."

"...it was worth a try?"

They start walking again. Mumbo looks up. The stars are much brighter than they were in the city, he thinks. The clouds have cleared up, and Mumbo can almost name the constellations. By almost, he means that he can name Orion's Belt, and the Big Dipper, and the Little Dipper, and exactly no other constellations. But those three are easy! He knows those shapes! Orion's Belt especially is easy to pick out in the night sky, if one knows what they're looking for, and Mumbo certainly knows what he's looking for. It's the three stars, right close together! Mumbo even thinks he sees the rest of Orion!

He then nearly trips again, so he should probably stop looking up and instead keep on looking ahead, towards whatever places they're walking to.

They're mostly silent as they continue walking. Mumbo's starting to get quite cold again. The sun has set, and he may have dried off, but having dried off isn't really the same thing as having gotten dry. As the night cools, Mumbo shivers. He's not going to start complaining again, though. Not after what had happened last time he'd complained! Also, because he just wants to find somewhere to camp, too.

"Oh, wait," X says. "Geez. That's... that's an option, I guess."

"What do you see?"

"I think it's a... you know, I'm not sure. Get up closer with me."

Mumbo jogs up to X's place and walks next to him. X continues to look ahead. "I think it's a house. Why is there a house out here?"

"Some people like living alone, I think," Mumbo says. "I mean, I lived alone! I lived alone in the city, but I lived alone! It was, um, I didn't really want to, in the end? But some people like it! They probably don't have many neighbors."

"Wait. Hold on. This doesn't look... oh, it's... look at that."

"I don't have night vision."

"Right. Look at that though. That's not..."

Mumbo looks. "You know, I think this is a house that burnt down, actually," Mumbo says. It's a house. It's a small house. It's not quite old enough to have been cute, while it was standing, and it's not quite new enough to have been modern. Instead, it looks like one of those vaguely ugly constructions of the eighties, with the kind of paneling that's melted as much as burnt in whatever fire took out half the building. Judging by the appearance of the building, the fire had been put out by something or someone before the whole place burnt to cinders, at least. The surrounding forest hadn't been destroyed. About half the house is standing, and it's the half from the direction Mumbo and X had walked. The other half, though...

"How far do you think we'd have to walk to find something else?" X asks.

"Very far," Mumbo says.

"Well, I guess we can camp here. It sort of has a roof. It's better than nothing."

"Couldn't the floor collapse and kill us?"

"Oh, the floor could always do that," X says. "It won't kill me though, my friend. I don't take the suit off."

"I don't think that makes you impervious to death?" Mumbo says, and he steps in through the door, which has been pulled from its hinges, or destroyed, or something else that has caused it to not be there. The wood of the floorboards creaks ominously. It still smells vaguely of ashes. Mumbo doesn't know if that's just sort of a thing burnt-down buildings smell like forever, or if that means it burnt down recently?

He really hopes it didn't burn down recently.

On the walls, there are remnants of wallpaper. It's the floral kind, the kind no one has willingly used in a few decades. In some places, the wallpaper is clean, but in most places, the wallpaper is destroyed. The countertops of the kitchen—now, isn't that odd? Mumbo thought kitchens were normally the bit that burnt down—anyway, the kitchen is made with ugly linoleum countertops, a mint blue that dates the kitchen horrendously. The floors are all messy. Mumbo can see the places where the carpet melted.

Mumbo's beginning to get the sense that the person who lived here may have lived here for reasons other than privacy and the beauty of the woods. Or they may have just had genuinely terrible taste? The floor continues to creak ominously.

"I guess we should find a good spot of flooring? There's a couch over there, but frankly, I don't trust it not to kill me."

"I don't either," X says, inspecting the place. "You've slept on the floor before."

"You know, I don't appreciate that you know that," Mumbo says. "Let me pull out the blanket I have that isn't wet. We can try to hang-dry the other one?"

"It's cold. I don't know if that sort of thing will work."

"It'll be fine, I think. It'll at least dry off a little, right?"

They move quietly around each other, after that. Mumbo goes to hang up the blanket. X does... X things. Checks the stability of the floors and ceiling, Mumbo hopes. Mumbo still feels like if he steps wrong, he's going to put his foot through the floor, and that's going to be a *bit* miserable if he does. He'd probably break something. He doesn't want to break something, even the floor. X is heavier than Mumbo though, Mumbo thinks. Or, at least, X is probably heavier than Mumbo? Mumbo wouldn't know.

"There's no door," X says.

"There isn't," agrees Mumbo.

X looks at Mumbo carefully. "You won't leave in the middle of the night," X says.

"Why on earth would I do that?" Mumbo says, and then he thinks about it. He hadn't considered it, but there really isn't anything stopping him from just... setting an alarm and running while X is

asleep, is there? No door he'd have to open. He could fake falling asleep. Of course, Mumbo would then likely get terribly lost, even with his trusty phone GPS, and he'd feel a bit bad for X, since X doesn't know how to drive. But he could leave. He could go to Grian. It wouldn't even be all that hard, would it? And Mumbo would get to Grian so much faster without a man with a gun and a desire to go a different direction holding him back.

He'd also saved X's life earlier, though, so it feels somehow rather silly to go back now.

X snorts. "True. You wouldn't, would you."

Mumbo thinks that all he'd do is change where the GPS is leading them in the middle of the night. That accomplishes approximately the same goal, so that would likely be enough by him. So no. He wouldn't run away. That would almost be counterproductive, he thinks. But getting them to the right place... he's working on that.

...is it selfish, for him to keep on trying to insist they go to Grian first, when he doesn't even know if Grian is alive?

Well, no more selfish than X is being. Besides, it's all a moot point.

"Maybe we should set watches," Mumbo says instead. "Since we don't have doors. Also, since we don't have enough blankets for us both to sleep, um, without either sharing a blanket or not using one, and I know I didn't give you one last night, but you really don't seem to have supplies, and..."

X stares at Mumbo. Not for the first time, Mumbo wishes it were possible to see X's face through the helmet. He supposes that's probably a big part of the point. If the suit's for combat, well then, the helmet probably shouldn't leave the face exposed, or the eyes visible, or the thoughts in X's head and the emotions he's feeling easy to read. The goal is the opposite of that. But... X is staring, now. It would be nice to know why, especially as X stares a little longer than is, um, really comfortable?

"I don't need a blanket," X says. "I don't need sleep either."

"It's more comfortable though."

"Okay," X says, like he's going to argue. He stops after a moment and sighs. "We'll set up watches. If you try to kill me—"

"You're very paranoid," Mumbo says. "I'm not killing anything, remember? They're all people. You, um, also qualify as a people. I assume. Unless you're somehow even less people than the monsters, and we know those used to be people, so they're a people. And they're trying to eat us! So you'd have to be very, very not people for it to count!"

X is silent. Almost concerningly so? The only sound he makes is a quiet scoff, which. Hm.

Mumbo stares at him back for a moment. Unlike X, Mumbo rather imagines that his entire emotions are clearly painted on his face.

"...that wasn't meant to be a question?"

"I forgot you were a stupid pacifist," X says, instead of answering what on earth any of *that* was.

"It's not stupid," Mumbo says. "It's very reasonable. And kind. It's important that it's also kind."

X shrugs. "I'll take first watch. You can sleep off whatever that was earlier in the rain."

"Okay," Mumbo says. "Wake me up in four hours?"

"Okay," X says, and Mumbo goes to sleep. It happens much faster than he would have thought it would, and as he lies on the floor beneath a blanket that's unfortunately a little damp from rain, even if it isn't the one Mumbo had used to dry himself off, he wonders how many more nights he'll fall asleep on a building that's burnt down to cinders. Probably not that often, right? There simply aren't enough burnt-down ruins for it to be that frequent of a thing. There might be enough days to sleep, though, and thinking about it, enough fires might have started that...

He falls asleep thinking of house fires. It's hardly the worst thing he's fallen asleep to, in the past few days.

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X wakes him up by shaking him. Mumbo nearly punches X in the face. He's glad he didn't; that would have hurt, given X's suit. X just looks... well, not like much of anything. Mumbo can't read his expression. But X doesn't seem mad, at least.

"Your turn," X says.

"Get some rest," Mumbo says, and he hands the blanket to X. "I think I sweated on that some, which is funny, since it's so cold? So, um, sorry."

"You didn't have to tell me that. Gosh. *Gosh.*"

"You're in armor anyway."

"I guess I am."

"Goodnight."

X doesn't respond. He just turns over. Mumbo supposes X must be sleeping? He still hasn't taken off the armor. That can't be comfortable. Mumbo watches X for a while. Maybe he should take the rifle, except that having someone who knows how to use a rifle is currently invaluable, what with the terrible monsters they are all in danger from. Instead, Mumbo turns to watch the part of the house that has no door, and that opens to the road and the woods.

The stars are still so bright. Mumbo should look up what they're called—oh. He looks at his phone and frowns. Right. He supposes most website databases will go down soon enough, when they eventually lose power. He should really just leave the offline maps of where he's going...

His messenger app.

He tries not to feel his heart sink. He's just going to research... no, no Google isn't working. Isn't responding. It's down. That's bad. He opens his messenger app. Please, please work? Please?

It doesn't... it doesn't say it's offline? Okay. Okay. That last message from Grian stares at him. Okay. Grian is alive. Or, well, no. The messenger app working doesn't say anything about Grian being alive, or dead, or anything in-between. It just means that Grian is... somewhere. Somehow. No, wait. It doesn't. Not even that. It just says Mumbo has a message from him, and Grian could send another one.

...Mumbo hopes he sends another one.

Oh, right. He plugs his phone into one of the power packs. He's going to run out of these eventually, too. He wonders if he'll be able to charge them off of the next car they steal? He



assumes they'll be stealing one.

Keeping watch is rather boring, he realizes a bit later, after trying to guess what different constellations are and failing miserably, and after sitting there and fixing as many of his injuries as he can. It's rather like his work from before: important enough he has to stay alert, but not enough actively trying to kill them that he has anything to do. It's just fear, and boredom, and mostly boredom, and probably fear again if anything shows up. Honestly, he's pretty close to just falling back asleep, except he promised he'd keep watch, and the moment he falls asleep he knows something will happen.

The time ticks by.

Then, something moves in the woods. Mumbo freezes.

Oh no. What had he been thinking about fear again? Should he wake up X? It could be a bear. Would that be a good thing? Mumbo doesn't know how to fight a bear! Then again, he didn't know how to fight the body in the stairwell either, and— no, don't panic. Something moves in the woods again. There's a flash of light. Oh no. He should really wake up X.

He remembers nearly punching X in the face. He remembers that, unlike X, Mumbo doesn't have a protective helmet. He thinks about getting punched in the face himself by someone who actually seems to know how to fight.

Maybe he can deal with this on his own?

Nervously, he pulls out his wrench. His trusty wrench. That thing has helped him a lot so far, hasn't it? And, oh, didn't he pick up a lighter? He grabs that too. He's not sure how he's meant to fight with a lighter, but he may manage it. He's not quite sure how he'll manage it, but, oh, and there it is again. Something moving in the woods. It's probably another monster, or maybe a crowd of them, but maybe it's just a bear. Mumbo holds onto that thought. It could just be a bear. Bears aren't that scary, really, compared to the other things that could be out there. Mumbo probably can fight a bear.

No, wait. He can't fight a bear. Why did he *think* that?

His knuckles go white around the wrench. He's shaking, he realizes. He'll be fine. He has to think that. He'll be fine, because he's been fine in several other fights already. Huh. Now, isn't that something he never thought he'd think of? Being fine in several fights already isn't a Mumbo sort of thing to be. That's more an Iskall thing, or maybe even a Grian thing. It certainly seems to be an X thing, from what little Mumbo knows of X so far. But a Mumbo thing? It most certainly is not a Mumbo thing, at least, not normally. But here he is, thinking about how, in a fight, he'll probably even be fine!

The thing in the woods moves again. It moves closer. Or at least, Mumbo thinks it moves closer? He's not sure. He grips his wrench impossibly tighter and watches and waits.

In the dim light of the moon, whatever it is, it appears... strange. Serpentine, so it must be a monster. It is blue, and its scales are covered in... something. Flowers, Mumbo realizes as it gets closer. It's blue and red and covered in flowers, growing from cracks between its scales. It's beautiful, in a distinctly horrifying way, seeing the stems and roots that are laced throughout this thing's body.

And it's getting closer to Mumbo.

Mumbo glances nervously behind him at where X is sleeping. He should really, really probably wake X up. Isn't that the point of a watch? At the same time, Mumbo really, really does not think he should wake X up. He thinks X will be fine, staying asleep right there.

The serpentine beast turns to look at Mumbo. It has red eyes. It has a human face. It is staring at Mumbo. Mumbo is staring back. It opens its mouth full of fangs, and Mumbo thinks— that reminds him of the body in the stairwell. That had been more like a very long bug, though, and this is more of a snake. Not enough legs, Mumbo thinks, a bit hysterically. What is he going to do. It's the middle of the night, what is he going to do?

The serpent moves as though to strike. Mumbo lights his lighter and prepares to do— something—

"Stop," Mumbo hears a strange voice say. It's distorted by echoes. The serpent stops.

There's someone else here?

"Come on. Leave them alone. You'll be fine," the voice says. "Come back."

The serpent turns to leave. Mumbo's previous hesitation has stopped. "HEY! WAIT! WHAT?" he shouts. "WHO ARE YOU?"

"...his friend," says the voice, and it splits through Mumbo's skull. Someone steps forward. They are human-shaped, but they are not human. Where their eyes should be, their mouth, their hands, there are flowers, blooming and spiraling across their skin. A humanoid monster, or maybe just an illusion, or maybe just a human with flowers growing on them. Mumbo isn't certain. They're eerie. They're *talking*. He reaches out. What did that voice mean? What does any of this mean? What does...

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He wakes up on the ground, his head hurting again. Maybe it's the concussion from earlier, but Mumbo doesn't think it is. X is standing over him. Mumbo blinks. The sun is rising. Mumbo has missed most of his watch. He'd been... "Have I been asleep?" he asks.

"Apparently," X says. "You make a terrible watchman."

"I saw a snake," Mumbo says.

"And that made you fall asleep?" X responds, audibly annoyed. Mumbo, from where he's still on the ground, shrugs.

"He had a friend. It felt sort of like a dream, honestly, but I want to go check for flower petals."

"...fine," X says. "Then we get moving."

The two of them pack, first. They leave the burnt-out house. They step out into the woods, and Mumbo walks towards where the serpent was. At first, he thinks it must have been a dream. He doesn't see trails. He doesn't see footprints. Maybe he'd been imagining the serpent, but...

No. There they are. Flower petals. Mumbo holds them up and stares.

"He said he had a friend," says Mumbo.

"What?"

"There was a voice, and it said it was friends with the snake. And this means it wasn't a dream. Which means... what?"

"I have no idea. That's scary," X says.

Mumbo stares at the flower petals a little while longer. "You know, a lot of things about this whole end of the world feel like they're a dream, though. Maybe that's the kind of end of the world this is. A nightmare that's real. Or something like that."

X is silent. Mumbo shrugs, and they turn on their GPS, and they start walking. He's still thinking about it, though. He's still thinking about how strange the world can be, and about everything that's happened so far. He's still thinking about the flowers that he'd put in his pocket. They said they were friends, Mumbo thinks. Were other monsters also friends? The body in the stairwell had been alone, but the wolves had not. Did the wolves know each other? Were they once friends? Were they once family?

They didn't bleed red, Mumbo thinks. Mumbo still bleeds red. Does that matter? Does that change what's human? He brushes his fingers across the flower petals. They'll die in his pocket eventually. That's how flower petals taken off of their flowers work. They die. Petals aren't meant to be taken from their flowers, not in this world or any other. That just kills them. It probably kills the flower too? Mumbo isn't certain. He isn't particularly good with plants, honestly. He'd like to be better with them. Maybe that's what he'll do when this is all over. He'll make a garden, and he won't take the petals from the plants, and he'll get good with them, the way that Grian is. Or, the way Mumbo thinks Grian probably is? Mumbo hasn't actually been inside of Grian's home since university, and not the one he lives in now.

Oh. That's going to change, Mumbo realizes. He'd known that, of course. He'd known he would be visiting his best friend in person. It's just... odd to think about, is all. He wonders if Grian still has all those ferns. Grian didn't really grow flowers; he'd just had this collection of ferns to add color to his apartment. Most of them were green, but some had these reds and pinks in them. They were almost like flowers, like that. Not that they were. They definitely were not flowers.

Do ferns grow in the apocalypse? Mumbo looks beside him. He doesn't see many ferns, but he's not sure whether ferns actually grow in temperate forests on the sides of roads or not. He's not even sure wildflowers do.

He rubs the petals in his pocket again.

"A nightmare that's real," X says, startling Mumbo out of his thoughts about Grian and ferns.

"Um, I mean, it is definitely real, isn't it?" Mumbo says.

"I'd hope we aren't both dead or something, yes," X says. Mumbo grimaces. Well now, that's... that's not particularly fun to think about. Or particularly productive. Or particularly... anything at all, actually!

"That isn't what I meant," Mumbo explains.

"Oh, I don't think you meant anything. You do a lot of things without meaning," X says. That's probably an insult, Mumbo thinks, except it's not an inaccurate insult, so, um, he's probably just not going to do anything about it.

Mumbo thinks for a while. He doesn't want X to think they're dreaming. That isn't what he meant. He rubs the flower petals again. No, he's not dreaming. Mumbo doesn't normally feel things properly in dreams. He thinks he does, but it's sort of floaty and wrong in a way these flower petals aren't. It's like... in dreams he doesn't think about how he's feeling, and the things he physically touches. In dreams, those things don't matter. Right now, though, the flower petals feel nice in a

way his dirty clothes don't and the road definitely don't. Dreams don't get that right, the grainy way the world feels when Mumbo's already sort of kind of at the end of his rope.

He's not sure that's true for X, though. He's not sure 'the way things feel to the touch doesn't make me as upset or as happy' is something that X would get. So he has to pin down what he meant. He has to...

"I don't think we're dreaming," Mumbo says. "I don't think this is my nightmare, exactly. I mean, I certainly wouldn't have a nightmare about you. I just mean... the rules are a little dream-like, aren't they? There are rules, and we have them, sure, but the rules aren't something that make sense, always. And I see two people in the middle of the night, and they call each other friends, and they aren't people. They're filled with flowers. That doesn't seem like something that would happen in normal, real life, now does it?"

"No, not really. I thought you had dreamed it."

"Exactly!" Mumbo gestures with his hands as he speaks. "It was exactly like a dream! Except it wasn't. It was real. And... and the monster, the one I saved you from. That didn't seem real, either. Most of this seems like a dream. It's all so wild it feels like it has to be a dream. So what if that's what's happening? What if that's what the apocalypse is? A nightmare, except it's real, and not a nightmare, so sometimes things are like dreams and there are monsters growing flowers who talk, and sometimes I have to worry about whether that dog bite might get infected and kill me if I stop paying attention to it."

X thinks for a bit. "I'm not good at philosophy. My brother liked to go on and *on* about stupid things, though. Like whether free will existed, or if taxes were moral. I always hated that about him, almost as much as I hated all the other things. Like, geez, what's the point of any of this? So what if the world's acting like a dream? Doesn't change things for me."

Mumbo thinks of the way the flower petal feels almost like oil between his fingers, and about neon blood on his pocket knife, and about X, dressed in fantastical armor, walking beside him.

"I don't know. Sometimes it's fun to ponder the universe," Mumbo says. X scoffs.

They walk in silence for a while longer, after that, and Mumbo keeps on pondering the serpent, and what that means, and the flowers, and what those mean, and whether it matters at all. He thinks about the way the house was burnt to the ground, and the way neither he nor X would know why.

He thinks about Grian and ferns, too.

And, not for the first time but certainly for one of the most intense times, he thinks about what X's brother must be like. He wonders if X's brother also would grow ferns. Mumbo's not sure. Mumbo thinks that Grian would probably agree with X on the subject of contemplating the universe, but Mumbo also thinks X doesn't seem like someone who would grow ferns. Everyone needs a friend who grows ferns, Mumbo thinks, or a friend who will let you ask questions. Mumbo wonders if X's brother is like that.

He doesn't know, and he's too afraid to ask.

Although, he thinks, the reason he's afraid has nothing to do with being afraid of X, not really. It has more to do with...

Everyone, Mumbo thinks one more time, needs a friend who grows ferns, and he moves on.

## Chapter End Notes

tomorrow: the town

one more sort of “breather” chapter. that was a weird one, right? definitely. that definitely wasn't to help serve other purposes in the story. perish the thought. anyway don't be Mumbo and X kids don't wander into random burnt-down buildings you WILL get injured,

# the town

## Chapter Summary

in which mumbo gets into a car chase, signifying just how much of a wreck his life has really become.

## Chapter Notes

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

Roads go somewhere. Even weird, back country roads through the woods eventually go *somewhere*, even if Mumbo is discovering that to use them to get to that somewhere, he's going to have to go a bit off the beaten path. The GPS pings cheerfully at him to turn left. He and X step out into the road, into the turn lane etched into the median.

Roads go somewhere. This one is leading them to a small town. Mumbo isn't much of a small town person. He'd grown up—well, not really in the city proper, that had been new, when he'd moved for work. But he'd grown up in what wasn't a small town, either. He's not sure what to expect, but he's relatively certain they'll find cars there, which is, after some discussion, their next goal. Somewhere to stay for the night, since it's probably going to be late again before they can really get on the road? And then another car to steal. Mumbo had been told, thoroughly, that he would have to pay more attention this time around while driving, which isn't really fair, is it? It's not his fault he'd been driving for hours and got into an argument and didn't notice the...

Well. It's a *little* his fault he didn't notice the entire crashed plane in the road. He cannot be held responsible, though! He hasn't driven in like, two years! And crashed planes aren't that common, and he's here digging himself a bigger hole in his own head, isn't he? It's probably good he'd just nodded along when he and X had this conversation...

There aren't many street signs along the path they're walking on. The trees are more sparse, though, and occasionally, Mumbo sees houses. They look abandoned, not that it's easy to judge, since everyone everywhere seems to be out of power. Mumbo doesn't see cars there, though.

The street eventually levels out a bit more. The trees grow more and more sparse. And then, they're on what appears to be the main street of a small town. There's a church.

Mumbo pauses. He looks at the church door.

Well, he thinks, a little hysterically. The strange, feathered body at the door of the church feels like a poor portent of things to come. Mumbo stares at it a while, its blue blood leaking down the stairs and pooling. He thinks that, not that long ago, he probably would have cried, or thrown up, or something like that, seeing that body. Instead, he mostly just feels a little frightened, both of himself and the fact there's a body on the church stairs. (The Angel of Mercy Methodist Church, according to the sign. Mumbo has a moment to think that that's awfully ironic.)

He pulls his wrench out of his backpack, just in case. Ahead of him, he hears X realize they aren't next to each other anymore and turn around. Mumbo's still staring at the feathery corpse.

"Aren't you coming?"

"There's a dead body."

"It's the apocalypse."

Hm. Maybe Mumbo isn't as freaked out as he would have been a few days ago, but, he thinks, something about this still feels wrong. It isn't as though he particularly would... go into the church, though? He has no reason to be going in there. It's not like whatever killed the feather corpse would... Actually. On second thought.

"I haven't seen that many corpses," Mumbo says.

"It's the apocalypse," X says again.

"And I haven't seen that many corpses," Mumbo says. He's fairly certain he's not just saying words. He's fairly certain he's saying words that mean something. He should try to figure out what they mean quickly, though, because X is getting impatient, and Mumbo really needs to move, to tear his eyes away from the feathered corpse with the blue blood. It's not his problem, and not anyone he knows, and it *is* the apocalypse, and no matter how ironic it is that someone has died on the footsteps of a church called Angel of Mercy, there's, um, well, there's nothing Mumbo can do, and nothing he should feel guilty about? Probably? What he needs to do is find a car the two of them can steal, and maybe somewhere to stay the night, and...

"You'll learn," X says. "Or, well, maybe you won't, my friend. Maybe you'll reach your destination before you have the chance."

Mumbo catches up to X. Once they pass the church, Mumbo is startled to realize that there is also a second church. This one is called "Third Presbyterian Church". Mumbo has to wonder what happened to the first two. There is also a great deal of blood leaking from its doors, but Mumbo sees no bodies.

There are houses ahead, Mumbo thinks, a little desperately. Houses, and what appears to be a few stores. They all have peeling paint, although some have more peeling paint than others. There's... still blood, but not nearly as much as was at the two churches. Mumbo sees another body, this one covered in scales. He steps around it. Some very, very insensitive part of him thinks that the blood makes this whole town look a lot more *colorful*. It seemed like the sort of place that would otherwise be very grey. Mumbo is well aware that the colorful neon splatters are not good, but in the city, they'd almost been graffiti. They weren't graffiti, of course. But in the city, they'd sort of fit? Bright, neon splatters of inhuman blood, coating old brick walls and sidewalks and concrete.

Here it stands out, a bright spot against a town that doesn't seem like it should have it there. For goodness sake, all of the bodies had been in the churches! Or, well, so Mumbo assumes. All of the bodies had...

"Hey, can you hotwire this thing?" X says, hitting the roof of a Civic that's a few year models old.

"Um, I don't think I have any keys that will work for that one. It's too old for the keyless keys to work, or my diagnostic tool, but that looks too new for me to be able to hotwire it particularly easily? So I think we need to keep looking. Oh, unless the trucks are a real beater, don't check those, in a town like this, um, the trucks are pretty likely to be new, and I didn't grab that many truck keys..."

"Got it."

Mumbo steps in a puddle of blood as he tries to find more people with cars. He looks back towards

the churches. There are probably cars in the parking lots there. He doesn't really want to get near those parking lots, or the churches that seem to be full of dead bodies, but that's, um, probably the best place to look? He swallows. He really, um, hasn't seen many corpses. There was the one in the stairwell, and the dog that X had killed, and honestly Mumbo is sort of surprised. It's the apocalypse. X is probably right.

...Mumbo has a healthy sense of dramatic irony, and, um, maybe it's superstitious, but since there are two churches, and they're on the same block, he's just. Going to check the Third Presbyterian before he checks the Angel of Mercy church. He gets the sense that, well, look, he just doesn't want to check a church called Angel of Mercy when he's really trying not to die. It's probably just superstition! But, well, Mumbo's still alive? And he's not been superstitious much yet or anything! He can afford to be a little superstitious this time, probably. Just a little bit. So he stays alive longer.

And, you know, doesn't have to go in the most ironically named building Mumbo has seen in a long time. Just the mildly ominously named one. Much better that way.

He sees bodies through the windows of the church (cleaner than some of the windows in town, but still yellowing around the edges) as he goes to check the cars. Many of the cars look like they're in that same spot the one X found was in—too new to be easy to hotwire, but far too old to be good with the keys Mumbo had managed to stock up on. He probably still *could* hotwire them? But it would take a long time, and, um, they probably have those systems that let the steering wheels lock up when the car isn't started with a key in the ignition, which Mumbo knows how to undo, but that takes even *longer* and is easy to screw up, and even that depends on when the cars were made, because some cars make the gas pedal and break pedal lock up too if the car doesn't seem like it's started from the ignition, and, um, *that* would be really bad.

At the back door of the church, the door is propped open. There is a body hanging out of it. It looks almost like it's made of rock, and Mumbo would have assumed someone had done something like thrown a statue had it not been bleeding. Mumbo doesn't like it, though, because it *is* bleeding. It's bleeding rather horrifically, even. Is that recent? Mumbo doesn't know how soon a dead body stops bleeding.

Oh, hey, wait, that car looks by far old enough that he can hotwire it without antitheft causing him problems! It's a Nissan Stanza Wagon. Mumbo certainly doesn't have any keys for it, but that's fine. He won't need them if he can hotwire the thing. It looks like it's one of the original models, too, which is exactly what he needs!

It also looks like it may fall apart if someone breathes on it funny, but Mumbo supposes that's what he's going to get, looking for a car that's old enough that he can hotwire it without issue.

He turns to call out to X when he sees something move inside the church. The church filled with dead people.

He turns back to the car slowly. They need the car, he thinks. Maybe it will be like the serpent. Maybe it won't care that Mumbo's here. Maybe, for once in his life, he'll be lucky. Maybe, maybe... he's just got to... he pulls out his pliers, and he starts working. The good news is that hotwiring a car is the sort of thing he won't forget!

He hears a thump.

Where's X? Where is he? Mumbo tries to work faster, but he has to be careful. Strip back the wires. Come on now, come on. He just needs ten uninterrupted minutes, and he'll have this car running, but. Oh, which wires was it again? Hotwiring a car had been a fun party trick, back in university,



when he and Grian were hanging out. Of course, it was far less impressively criminal than Grian. If Mumbo didn't, um, intentionally ignore what Grian did for a—he means, well, if he didn't know Grian as well as he did, he'd be really worried about the man's lockpicking skills. And also his social engineering skills. Grian had the opposite of a programmer's touch, but he'd been able to get into so many accounts he hadn't been meant to, just because he could convince people to tell him their mother's maiden name. No, in comparison, Mumbo hotwiring a car they already owned had been, um, unimpressive. Grian would say that Mumbo is impressive, although Mumbo doesn't necessarily agree.

Mumbo misses him.

What was he doing?

Right! He's currently trying to hotwire a car to steal it! What if the car door is locked? He'll probably just, uh, break the window again, honestly. He's so used to breaking windows at this point that he's not too worried. Right. Stop losing focus while handling the potentially high-voltage wires. He can finish wiring this, then think about how much he wants to talk to Grian again, and... Maybe he should just take the car, he thinks. Earlier, he was thinking he shouldn't leave while X wasn't looking, but now... He wants to get to see Grian, and, um, if he's being honest with himself about X, and honest with himself about what's likely to happen if he brings X with him, and...

He just wants to try to find Grian. And if Grian's not there, he just wants to... He wants to...

He hears a thump.

Finish hotwiring the car. Think about that afterwards. Think about the very high likelihood he doesn't reach Grian later. Think about driving away without X later. Think about a lot of things.

He's feeling morbid, Mumbo thinks. Very morbid. He's fine, though.

He opens the car door. It's not locked, which is, um, concerning? The keys aren't in the car, though, so hotwiring the thing wasn't pointless, at least. The car starts. Mumbo sits behind the wheel and breathes. Right. Now he can't ignore it. The fact that X has his own goals, and, um, well. Mumbo. Has some ideas about the end point of those goals, honestly. X, at the very least, won't be coming with Mumbo to see Grian, and...

He experimentally taps the gas. The car lurches forward. He's hotwired it correctly. He could just leave town, he realizes. He could just leave town, and then no one would be hurt, not him or X or anyone.

Well, Mumbo might still be hurt. His phone has no new messages. It hasn't yet. It hasn't had any new messages at all yet. He checks the gas gauge. Oh, in a car this old he really doubts that's enough for the last... he checks his GPS. Three hours? No, it's more like six, to get to Grian. He'd forgotten what had been plugged in was X's brother. Three hours out of the way. Even more hours out of the way, once they get to X's brother. Mumbo groans, quietly, to himself. Yes, it's probably better for everyone if he just... goes to get Grian on his own, isn't it? X will find a way to his brother, Mumbo's sure! And that way Mumbo's less likely to...

Three things happen in very close succession.

The first: Mumbo sees X sprinting towards him, holding his rifle. Mumbo unintentionally slams the gas and only barely avoids hitting another car in the parking lot before shoving the car back into park.

The second: the church doors slam open. A *something* comes out of them, as does two of the bodies. The rest of the *something* is practically made of death, and Mumbo hates it. He can't quite look at it. Looking at it feels like looking at death and light and hurts the back of Mumbo's head.

The third: Mumbo notices that X, too, is being chased by what appears to be half the population of this small town.

"GO GO GO GO," shouts X, and Mumbo takes exactly one moment to consider leaving X behind anyway before throwing open the door. X jumps in. Mumbo swallows. The monsters start to approach them.

Mumbo slowly starts to drive out of the parking lot. The monsters get closer.

"WHAT ARE YOU DOING? YOU *IDIOT!*" shouts X.

"I'm doing what I can! We're in a parking lot! I haven't driven in two years!" says Mumbo, watching the monsters get closer, and closer. He just needs fewer obstacles, he thinks. He just needs to breathe. He just needs to know how to drive, which is something he doesn't know how to do. He just...

"Oh, screw it," he mumbles.

He slams his foot onto the gas pedal. The wheels on the wagon spin before Mumbo and X are thrown back in their seat and the car lurches forward at—20 MPH—it's an old car, it doesn't accelerate that fast—but it's accelerating! It is! And Mumbo doesn't take his foot off the floor as the engine whines at them. The first monster approaches them. Mumbo throws the wheel to the side. The car skids awkwardly around it, jumps a curb, and barrels into the grass, immediately losing speed.

"WHAT ARE YOU DOING??" asks X.

"I'm trying to escape!" Mumbo says.

"BY KILLING US?" X asks, clearly not very appreciative of Mumbo's driving skills.

"You try driving!" Mumbo says, as their wheels start to spin in the dirt. Oh no. Oh no, that's not good. A monster leaps at the car. X immediately leans across Mumbo's lap in the seat and points his rifle out the broken window. Mumbo yelps. "Nonlethal! Nonlethal!"

"WHY?"

"Those are people!"

The rifle fires. "We're ALSO PEOPLE NOW MOVE!"

"THE CAR IS STUCK, X, I don't know—AH—!" X hits his helmet on the horn and the gun nearly goes off again as the car lurches forward dangerously out of the grass. The car flies across the pavement as Mumbo quickly slams the breaks, trying to undo the damage of the wheels spinning absurdly to get out of the grass hitting the pavement, which does not require nearly so much torque. They nearly hit a house across the street, but between ill-advised spinning of the wheel and the breaks, they manage to fly to a stop on the poorly-paved country road. They both stare ahead of them. X pants, slightly, and sits back up into his own seat. They're both silent for a minute.

X rolls down his own window, and much more calmly, says: "Pretty sure we're still being chased,

Mumbo."

"Right. My bad. Trying not to crash again."

"Oh, sure, don't worry about it."

One of the monsters slams into the back of Mumbo's car.

"Right, I'm just going to..."

He floors it again. Once again, the terrible car from the eighties that Mumbo hotwired doesn't accelerate particularly quickly, but it does lurch forward again, slowly accelerating to its (disappointingly low) top speed. The. The disappointingly low top speed that some of the monsters made of death that Mumbo can't quite look at to be catching up. Oh no. Oh no. Oh no. Alright.

"Why did you steal this one," hisses X, staring behind him as the monsters easily catch up. "Why did you steal THIS ONE?"

"I had to take one I could hotwire! Newer cars can't do that!"

"Drive faster!"

"I think the engine will die if I do that."

"WE'LL DIE IF YOU DON'T!"

"My foot is on the floor X, I really don't think I can!" Indeed, the car's transmission whines and squeaks as Mumbo tries to convince the car to get up to highway speeds at a speed that the monsters surrounding them cannot catch up with them. He looks behind him and then immediately looks back at the road. He can't look at this monster. Not just because it's made of corpses. They'd already seen one monster made of many other monsters, and Mumbo had been able to look at that one perfectly fine. No, he *can't look at this one*. Something about it burns Mumbo's head, his eyes, his heart. He can't look can't look can't look can't look they are *catching up*.

Mumbo sees a side road ahead.

"You are about to not like me," Mumbo announces.

"Didn't I already say you were a war criMOH GOSH WHY," says X, as Mumbo spins the car as fast as he can around the corner. The car, not designed to make a skid like that, makes concerning motions like it might roll instead of turning. The tires make a horrible sound across the pavement. Distantly, Mumbo thinks: oh right, don't old tires pop sometimes? He didn't check for whether the tires seemed old or dry rotted. He's also pretty sure they're normal road tires, so he's not sure they can actually deal with what he's putting them through. It's too late now, though. He sees skid marks on the pavement. The car awkwardly swings around at the tail—oh, right, front-wheel drive. He speeds down a bumpy side-road, probably heading up through the town.

"SORRY!" says Mumbo.

X leans out of the window and shoots out it at the monster. "Nonlethal!" shouts Mumbo.

"How am I supposed to aim nonlethally when you're driving like this?" says X.

"Carefully!" says Mumbo, seeing another side street and forcing the car to practically fall up it. Oh boy, a hill. The old car struggles to climb, but if he can get to the other side of the hill, then they'll

be golden.

"CAREFULLY?" says X, firing the rifle again.

"YES!" responds Mumbo.

"GAH! FINE! CAREFULLY! GEEZ!" shouts X. "If you DRIVE careful—"

"Hold on!" recommends Mumbo as the car tumbles downhill after another sharp turn. Mumbo keeps an eye on the speedometer. At this rate, he may actually manage to get the car moving at a proper rate. Oh, he hopes so. He hopes the hill's momentum is enough to make the car do what he wants it to, because, oh, Mumbo is not ready to die tonight and the thing he cannot look at has been gaining on them even given every gunshot that X fires at it and—

The car's nose crunches against the bottom of the hill a little as Mumbo hits the place the road levels out harder than he ought to. Once again, the car, for a moment, seems precariously close to flipping. Then, as though by a miracle, it doesn't. The tires level out on the main road again. Mumbo's foot is still flat against the gas. He should, uh, oh, he should definitely be using the breaks somehow? But he doesn't know how to! He doesn't want to slow down! He wants to go faster! He's going to hit the place the road curves up ahead and kill both of them, certainly, and that will probably not be ideal, but he still doesn't want to slow down! That will kill both of them too!

"Die, you stupid beast!" snarls X, from where he's firing the rifle.

"DON'T DIE JUST GO AWAY," Mumbo clarifies, feeling vaguely betrayed.

The car barrels faster and faster, reaching its staggering peaks as the engine whines and makes very annoyed sounds. The car is hitting nearly its top speed. Its hitting nearly, er. Seventy-six miles per hour. Blisteringly fast! Definitely fast! The monsters are starting to lose ground on them, because even if 'barely over highway speed' isn't that impressive, there aren't many animals who can keep pace with that sort of thing! Mumbo hadn't done a terrible job escaping! And the road is— it turns ahead it **URNS AHEAD**—

Mumbo barely manages to take the curve in the highway like a normal driver would enough not to hit the guardrail.

X makes a vague sobbing noise, and then, they're out of the town, and the thing Mumbo can't look at is getting smaller and easier to look at in Mumbo's rearview, until it's gone altogether. Oh, that hadn't been too bad. That—Mumbo barely avoids hitting a rock in the road. He's shaking. He slams the breaks and stares at his shaking hands.

"Remind me never to drive with you again," X says. "Geez. Geez!"

Mumbo stares at his hands. He didn't like that. He didn't like that *at all*. His breathing gets heavy. Now that he's out of the chase—oh, while it was happening, Mumbo had been fine! And he'd been fine a lot, recently. Just... fine. He'd been just fine. How much had he just been fine with? X had been shooting. Mumbo thinks the thing he hadn't been able to look at had been made of dead things, like much of that town had been. (And oh, some part of Mumbo that knows about things like irony thinks that town had still been too ironic and too fitting.) He needs to... He fumbles for his phone, which is cheerfully routing him towards X's brother, a place Mumbo doesn't want to go and has no reason to visit. He slips with it in his hands and drops it.

"I don't—my charging blocks, I don't have an adapter. I mean, a car adapter. In a car like this that's the... the... you shot them."

X doesn't answer. Of course he doesn't. Mumbo fumbles with his phone again. It has decent charge. He'd charged it overnight again. He's running out of power in his power packs, though. He looks at the dashboard next. One thing at a time. He hadn't really been paying attention when he stole the thing, but the car certainly doesn't have enough gas for the distance they're going, let alone enough gas considering that it's an older car that probably has poor gas mileage. He... he needs to re-route the GPS to take them to a gas station. Will gas stations even work?

He thinks again of the thoughts he'd had in-town. Of leaving without X. Of being a... is it being a bad person that he'd almost done it? Is he a bad person? (His breathing gets shallower.) Oh, he probably is, isn't he? Most people wouldn't just... just leave someone behind, even if that person clearly had poor intentions, and... (His breathing gets even shallower.)

He shouldn't be panicking again. He's done nothing but panic. It's stupid. Stupid, stupid, stupid. He's been doing nothing but panic since before he left his apartment. Look where that's gotten him! X says something that Mumbo doesn't hear as he digs his fingers into his too-dirty jeans. Stupid. Stupid.

Suddenly, something heavy and dark falls over his head. Mumbo blinks several times as small lights appear in the corners of his vision. It's like he's looking through a screen. As his vision clears, it's... nice. It's blocking out a lot of sound and visual noise from around him. It's... easier to focus.

It's.

It's X's helmet?

He blinks a few times, confident that X must not be able to see him. He has to say, he's jealous, if this is X's helmet. It makes the world all feel much more bearable, wearing something like this.

He turns to X to thank him.

He freezes.

There is X. It's X's face. The dark hair, the face, everything. Mumbo thinks first: oh, X looks younger than Mumbo had thought. That's funny. The second thing Mumbo thinks is—

There is a beating heart in X's left eye.

There are thin scales running along X's face, and the grey and red scales are probably pretty concerning, too, but more concerning is the beating heart where X's eye should be. It isn't a normal red. Instead, it's a strange, almost sickly shade of red. And it beats. Mumbo wonders if that's just where X's heart is, instead of his chest, or if he has two hearts? And, actually, given the scales and the beating heart, Mumbo probably shouldn't be staring. He does anyway.

"I remembered I can't drive well. You can't get us anywhere if you're panicking. Did the helmet help?"

"Yeah," Mumbo says.

"Start driving then."

"Okay," Mumbo says. He's not panicking anymore, that's true. The helmet is helping him block out the rest of the world, and the rest of the things he'd done so far today. It's also helping him block out how little time they have to get where they're going, and the fact that this car seems to be held together by duct tape, and just about everything else. It's not helping Mumbo particularly block out

X, though. So Mumbo decides he'll keep talking. "I was mostly upset because you kept on trying to kill our pursuers, even though I'd said pretty clearly I didn't want that, and all. Is this good, um, conflict resolution talk?"

X snorts. "I did what made sense."

"They were people," Mumbo says.

"As the prototype—oh, I know you were looking. As one of the *proofs of concept*. Please. They're monsters."

Mumbo thinks for a moment. "You're a person," he says.

"Sure," X says, not sounding particularly convincing, as Mumbo starts the car. It doesn't seem particularly happy with him, but it starts, and Mumbo plugs in the nearest sensible gas station to stop at as he goes. It's a lot easier to read X's expression without the helmet, and Mumbo thinks that, maybe, X doesn't believe that he's a person? Which is silly.

"Bad people are still people," Mumbo says.

"Are you saying I'm a bad person?" X asks.

"Um, well. You'd say that about me."

"Oh, yes. I imagine you know why now, don't you?"

Mumbo thinks about X telling him that he deserved what was coming. He thinks about thinking about leaving X in the town. He thinks about the heart beating in X's eye, and prototypes, and missiles that he pretended he didn't know he was making in order to save his own skin. He thinks about whether good people would do those things. He's not sure. He thinks that, maybe, probably not.

Those all seem like the kinds of things good people wouldn't do.

"Yeah, I do," he says. "That doesn't really change what I want, though. I don't do everything just to feel like a good person, you know."

"I would hope you don't," X says, and his face is something like mocking. For a moment, Mumbo wants to ask X to put the helmet back on. Then, Mumbo thinks about how nice it is, blocking out the peripheries of the world, and that he can read X's expression, even if it is kind of mocking.

"Was your brother a good person?" he asks instead.

X laughs.

"Was my brother a good person. What a question, Mumbo. What a question. You know, we used to... *joke*... that I was the evil clone."

Mumbo thinks for a while. "That's not really an answer."

"I'll tell you what, my friend. If you can tell me that Grian's a good person, or tell me whether you think he is, I'll tell you if my brother's a good person."

"Oh. I think... I think Grian was good to me? I think it depends on what you mean by 'good person'. I, um... He was good to me. I don't know... he was good to me."

X is quiet for a while, studying Mumbo's face. "Well, that's a non-answer."

"It's true. Do you want your helmet back?"

"Oh, what's the point. Keep it."

"Okay."

They continue down the road in their stolen car, forty-five minutes from the best gas station, and three hours from X's brother. Mumbo thinks a lot about good people, and then stops thinking, and keeps driving forward.

## Chapter End Notes

tomorrow: the gas station.

fun fact: the car chase scene in this chapter is literally one of the *first things* i ever planned for this au. mumbo was always going to get into an improbable car chase with a monster. the fact that the car is a STANZA WAGON, though... i asked a discord i was in what the first car they thought of when i said "shitty car from the eighties" was. this is definitely the most comical option thank you so much i had fun writing this very slapstick chase scene.

as for the rest of this chapter, which is mildly less slapstick... ah, *that's* a design i'd been waiting to reveal. how many of you guessed that's where that was going? (i hope it's not a horrible surprise my foreshadowing in this fic is nOT THAT SUBTLE,)

# the gas station

## Chapter Summary

in which mumbo commits credit card fraud, which he supposes had to happen at some point?

## Chapter Notes

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

The forty-five minute drive from where Mumbo started driving to the gas station are some of the strangest moments of Mumbo's life. Mind you, they probably don't live up to some of the other things that have happened to him so far. Saving X from the beast. The weed car that had saved his life. The encounter with the flower snake. The car chase. Almost literally anything that had happened for the... has it been three days or four? Certainly almost anything that had happened since the world ended is probably weirder than this.

But! Importantly! This is a different kind of weird. This is the kind of weird that settles in Mumbo's chest. It creeps into his limbs. This strangeness is the strangeness not of things like monsters, or fights, or just things Mumbo had frankly never expected to do in his life and also hadn't expected to survive through. He's done a lot of things lately that he fully expected to kill him. This, by contrast? These moments are strange in a way that he would have almost been able to do in his life, had he been really allowed to leave his apartment, or talk to other people. This is strange in a way that almost feels real, instead of strange in a way that feels dreamlike and unreal.

The strangeness is this: Mumbo is still wearing X's helmet. It really is good at blocking out the world and making it easier for him to focus on driving. It almost makes it possible to ignore X, sitting beside him, the second strange thing. X is quiet. Mumbo, um, could try to make conversation, if he really wanted to? But the last thing the two of them had spoken about had been, well, sort of heavy, and Mumbo isn't really done processing it. And if X wants to stay quiet, Mumbo figures, he's not anyone to judge, is he? No, he can just let X stay quiet, and the heart to continue to beat in his eye.

There's no music playing. Mumbo had fiddled with the radio, but there aren't really any radio stations playing music, or at least, none that Mumbo could find? The car doesn't have a particularly functional stereo, either, and no tapes in it. He'd play music from his phone, but it would be awkward and quiet without proper speakers to hook the phone up to, and he doesn't really want to inflict his music taste on X, not given the fact that they'd just had a conversation about what is now a rather large elephant in the room.

Mumbo thinks about the missiles he built, instead. He hadn't been meant to know they were missiles, but that had been obvious. What if he hadn't been meant to know something else, too? Something other than 'what Grian did for a living' or 'why Mumbo was really in that apartment' or 'what I am currently working on schematics for' or 'what Iskall does for a living' or 'what kind of people Concorp are, a thing Mumbo knew full well from before the start' or. Any number of the terrible, large things Mumbo had known, even though he hadn't been meant to, or often just hadn't wanted to. The things he'd avoided looking directly at. What if one of the things he hadn't known had been...



He doesn't look over at X almost the entire forty-five minutes. The prototype.

For the apocalypse, apparently.

Presuming that was intentional. Is it worse if it was unintentional? It can't be good for the economy, so maybe it was unintentional, but that doesn't make him feel better.

Now, Mumbo tries not to have terrible self-esteem, but honestly, he's not an idiot. The evidence is rather staring him in the face, actually. He's not as good at knowing things as Grian, or at least, not as good at knowing things about people and companies and organizations. He's not even necessarily as good at knowing things about himself, although he thinks he's self-aware enough to know that Grian probably isn't particularly good at knowing things about himself either, and Mumbo blaming himself for that is probably unnecessary. He doesn't, however, need to be as good at knowing things as Grian is to understand that, simply put, X had something of a point, what with the apocalypse, and the things X is so angry about, and the fact that Mumbo deserves it, and is probably a war criminal, and if he thinks about this too hard he'll have a panic attack again. Which is why it's good he's wearing the helmet, since it helps block out the world and stop the panic attacks.

It's this line of thought that makes those forty-five minutes very strange. He's halfway to panicking, but he's also floating, knowing full well that, at this point, he's made his bed, hasn't he? He can't do anything about any of this now. He can find Grian, in whatever state Grian is in, and he can drive X to his brother, but he can't turn back time. No one can, actually!

There's no... there's no going back from this. Not now.

X remains quiet. The car remains quiet, except for the sound of the road, and the GPS's rare reminders that it exists. Mumbo leaves the helmet on. They keep driving.

Mumbo thinks about a lot of things, but he does that all the time, so maybe he was wrong about these being forty-five of the strangest minutes of his life. Maybe they're quite ordinary, as far as minutes go. Maybe they just feel strange for some other reason. He's not sure. They feel like they ought to be strange, but there's really no proof they actually are, is there?

So. Maybe it's more like: the forty-five minute drive from where Mumbo started driving to the gas station are some of the most ordinary moments of Mumbo's life, regardless of how they feel in that moment.

(Yes, that seems to work.)

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They reach the gas station. As they first reach it, Mumbo realizes that, ah. He's not sure they'll actually be able to get gas. Do gas pumps require electricity? Nowhere has electricity anymore. If gas pumps require electricity, which they probably do, Mumbo thinks that he and X are a little screwed. Maybe they'll just have to steal another car and hope that one has enough gasoline? Leaving a trail of stolen cars on low gas across the countryside hadn't really been Mumbo's plan, but—

"Oh. They have a generator," Mumbo realizes, as he turns towards the gas station. The awning is lit. There are lights inside the convenience store. There are no people that Mumbo can see, and no monsters. There's a trail of blood. He swallows. At least the gas station is a larger one, with many places to park and pump gas. The convenience store has a bin for ice, and to the side, a large propane tank, and a smaller rack of propane for sale—it must be easier to pump it to a gas station, as well as to store it for the humming generator, than to sell it elsewhere. Mumbo turns into the

pump furthest from the convenience store and immediately realizes that, oh, he technically has to pay for gas. It's an automated system, cheerfully asking him to insert his card or pay inside. He frowns at it, then at his backpack.

"Did I actually pack my... Surely I did, didn't I?"

"What?" X says, irritated.

"I don't know if I packed my wallet."

"Why wouldn't you have packed your wallet?"

"Well, it is the apocalypse. Do you know what system they use to let you pump gas inside? Maybe we should..." Mumbo trails off. He has no idea how to steal gasoline. He's lucky his phone had guided him true and this gas station had a generator. He fishes through his bag. Please, please let him have packed his wallet. He has to have, right? Because he's not sure they're getting gas if he hasn't! He packed Grian's stuffed bird, and he hadn't packed his wallet? His decision-making back in his apartment had been questionable enough when he decided to leave, but no, he had to pack badly, too!

"...You idiot. You don't have it."

"It's got to be somewhere!"

"I can't believe you."

"There's two cars parked in the lot. Maybe, maybe one of them is a model I can steal? That would make up for it, right?" Mumbo sighs as he realizes that he, in fact, had not packed his wallet at all. Which, um, probably shouldn't be surprising, but it is. It is surprising. He'd really thought he'd prepared himself very well, all things considered! Sure, he'd had several panic attacks, but emotional preparedness is different from packing. Packing is just, um, normal preparedness, and Mumbo knows how to handle normal preparedness. Or he's supposed to. But he didn't even pack his wallet!

"I don't have my driver's license," Mumbo says, after a moment. It's a silly thing to be concerned about. It's not as though he would be pulled over—

"WHAT," says X.

"I mean with me! I mean with me! I've driven before, I told you that!"

"Geez, don't say things like that!" X says. He looks mildly panicked. After a moment, that expression fades into something that isn't really neutral. It's hard to read it as anything other than irritation, actually. "Gah. We can see if you can steal one of these cars, or I was going to go inside anyway. We need more food."

"I sort of want a candy bar," Mumbo says, and then feels kind of silly. He's not a kid. He doesn't need sweets to feel comforted. He'd just... rather like that, is all. It's not that strange or anything! Silly, sure, and probably a big waste of something to eat, but Mumbo would really just like something silly and sugary.

"Alright, fine," says X. "Then you help me try to figure out how to unlock the gas pump. Or whatever."

"It may require a key, I think?"

"Maybe it would be faster to find a wallet to steal," X muses. It's easy to think that X is thinking about it seriously, because it's easy to see a *lot* of X's expressions, now. His face is actually really, really readable now that he doesn't have the helmet. True, the beating heart where one of his eyes should be does make his expressions a bit harder to read, as do the scales, but they're still surprisingly readable expressions, all things considered? For some reason, Mumbo had thought X would be just as inscrutable outside of the helmet as he'd been in it.

Mumbo's the one still wearing the helmet now. He wonders if that makes him just as mysterious? What does a mysterious Mumbo seem like from the outside? He's not sure. He doesn't think he's particularly mysterious to himself. Is anyone mysterious to themselves? That feels like something that shouldn't be true, but then again, Mumbo can't say he knows himself that well. Maybe he is mysterious to himself?

And maybe this is irrelevant as the two of them walk into the convenience store.

Seeing somewhere that's actually lit somehow feels eerie. It should feel less eerie, Mumbo would think, but no. It's strangely frightening, going somewhere with power after days without. The refrigerators hum. The generator, outside, rumbles. Lights make the convenience store glow that sort of ugly white that only fluorescent lights can make anything glow. Those hum too. After a moment, all the humming tunes out again, as the helmet he stole from X filters out the noise. Gosh, where had *that* been his whole life, huh? Not having to hear the overhead lights screaming at him makes his head feel so much better!

He could go help X try to figure out how to unlock whatever computer or systems allowed the gas pumps to unlock for a certain amount of cash, or find a card to steal. Instead, he grabs about six candy bars. Three of them are very, very sugary—some of Mumbo's favorites. The other two are for Grian, and they're chocolates. He puts those in his bag. He slips a lighter into his pocket as well, because, well, he never knows if he might lose the first one! They're also just really satisfying to take out of the plastic box. They make a funny popping noise because of how they're held in there. If he's doing things for comfort, he may as well take both the candy and the lighter.

He turns back to X. "How is it going?"

"Found someone's wallet."

"Oh, that's easy then!" Mumbo says, brightly. "Do you know how to pump gas?"

"No," X says.

"Right, right," Mumbo says. "I'll go do that then."

He steps outside. It takes two tries to get the machine to read his card, and then it asks for his zip code. He frantically checks his GPS and guesses. Please be a nearby zip code, he can't guess this person's pin, so please be a nearby zip code... Oh, thank goodness. Guessing the gas station's zip code had worked. For once, Mumbo's life is being easy. That hasn't happened enough for him lately. He selects the normal gas (although he supposes it doesn't matter since he's stealing someone's card anyway if he gets the more expensive gas, probably, he hopes, it's a Nissan Stanza Wagon it really shouldn't need expensive gas), and he stands at the pump to start pumping. In a few minutes, they can leave the gas station and be on their way, and won't that be nice?

A stop on the road without anything weird happening! Without...

Mumbo frowns. He's not sure what, but *something is wrong*.

He's probably just being paranoid, he thinks, as the gas pump cheerfully fills up his vehicle. It's hard to hear, after all, with the noise cancellation on in X's helmet, and with the generator running, and everything else. All things considered, he should probably be a little paranoid when he can't hear things. Not hearing things is bad these days. Not hearing things is very, very bad. But that doesn't mean something is wrong! He's just being paranoid.

How long does it take X to steal food, anyway? Mumbo had just grabbed candy bars. The store doesn't have one of those anti-theft detectors at the front of it, as convenience stores, even large chain ones being run by generator, generally don't. They don't have to worry about setting off alarms or anything, and the door had been unlocked! As strangely abandoned as most of the world is, this place has power! It shouldn't be taking X that long to get out here, right?

He watches the gas pump continue to pump gas. It's been a while since he pumped gas, given that it's been a while since he's driven, but it's an easy process. He's just waiting for the automatic stop to go off and then...

Where is X?

No, X can take care of himself, Mumbo thinks. The gas pump clicks. Mumbo carefully makes sure no gas is left in the nozzle. He closes the gas cap on the Nissan, making sure it clicks twice, just to be extra certain it's closed all the way. The machine beeps loudly at him and asks if he wants a receipt. Mumbo hits yes for bookkeeping reasons without thinking about it, then immediately wonders why he'd done that. Really, that had been awfully silly of him, hadn't it? It's not even his credit card!

He puts the credit card in his pocket. He turns to the store.

It is filled with multicolored lights. He does not see X.

Mumbo panics. He turns on the car before jumping out of the seat again and running towards the convenience store, absolutely hating the fact that they'd parked about as far away from the building as they possibly could. What had they even done that for, huh? For what reason?

Inside, he finally sees X, surrounded by the glowing multicolored lights. The lights are colored like blood is, Mumbo thinks, or, well, not like human blood is, but like the blood Mumbo's been conditioned into thinking of as blood. The blood of monsters and things scattered against walls, in neon paint colors. That sort of blood. It crackles with electricity. Somewhere in the sea of lights, Mumbo thinks he sees its body. He's not sure.

He pulls open the door, and he reaches for X, who has, thankfully, not tried to shoot the mostly amorphous mass of multicolored lights, even if Mumbo's concerningly certain he'd been tempted. He's mostly fighting back with his fists. Something is holding X in place. The lights haven't noticed Mumbo yet, so Mumbo grabs X, and pulls him through the door. "The car's on, go!" says Mumbo, and X doesn't stop to consider anything else before bolting towards the car with Mumbo.

The lights have noticed him now, though.

Mumbo's not as fast of a runner as X is, unencumbered, He's not going to make it, he realizes with deadly certainty. Oh. That's not a good thing, is it? "X," he begins, and then stops as something covers his mouth, and Mumbo would scream except he can't breathe, and he feels what feels like electricity slam through his bones, and his head is horrifically fuzzy, and he hears the generator—

The generator. It's right there.

He can't breathe. He desperately pulls at... whatever it is... that's covering his mouth, even as something else feels like it's filling his lungs. He's choking. Everything is loud, even with the helmet on. He's been caught, this is it, end of the road for him, isn't it? Hahahaha! He made it a lot longer than he thought he would! He's.

He's right next to the generator, and this thing tastes like ozone and electricity. He can't beat it up with a wrench. The edges of his vision are going fuzzy. He hears X somewhere, distantly. It will keep chasing them if he doesn't stop it. He has a lighter in his pocket, and there is a propane tank. He pulls out the lighter.

He distinctly hears X say: "MUMBO, NO—"

He distinctly sees the thing's face, once, through the lights. It matches the ID card in the wallet they stole. Ah. He's being killed for stealing someone's credit card, clearly. That makes sense. He really has been stealing a lot of things lately. Oh well. He's probably about to do something far worse.

He kicks the propane tank and he drops the lighter, his head fuzzy around the edges. For a moment, he thinks it hasn't worked, even as he throws his arms in front of himself.

Then, everything goes hot and white.

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Mumbo wakes up on the ground. He looks ahead of himself. He sees a lot of fire. Like, a lot of it. And there's a lot of smoke, too. He wonders who did that? Oh. Right. Him. Oh everything actually hurts quite badly. Everything had happened awfully quickly, he thinks, as he somehow doesn't scream, even though he very much wants to. He thinks he may have broken one of his arms, which definitely isn't good, considering that they're in the middle of the apocalypse and all. He might not have! But he thinks he sees bone, so that seems unlikely. He also sees burns. He doesn't see colored lights. He sees a screen for some reason—oh, right, X's helmet.

"You idiot, I still *need you*," hisses someone from next to him.

"You... can figure out how to drive," Mumbo says. It's true. X doesn't really need him specifically. He just needs a car. Besides, it's not like X cares if anyone but himself dies, right? Mumbo almost wants to giggle. It's the end of the road for Mumbo. Game over. But it's been the end of the road for a long time. He's lived past his planned expiration date.

"I need *you specifically*," X says, as though to refute Mumbo's thoughts. "I still—I still need you, you idiot, if the monster hadn't taken the brunt of that, if it had been a slightly different angle..."

That's dumb. Who needs Mumbo specifically? Except for...

"You won't get to Grian if you don't get up," X says.

"I wasn't going to anyway," Mumbo explains. "You were going to kill me first, when you don't need me anymore."

It's funny. Even through Mumbo's fuzzy vision, X's facial expressions are so easy to read now. His face flickers through so many of them now.

"Why did you stay?" X says. He doesn't deny it, which means that Mumbo is right. He's not really surprised. He's not sure how he knew. He's not stupid, though. He's not stupid.

There are a million ways Mumbo could answer that question. There are a million ways Mumbo

could answer. Not all of them are even fully truthful. Later, Mumbo will think about the many, many far more sensible ways he could have answered why he stayed. He could mention that X would have always been able to easily catch up. He could mention the gun. He could mention the horror and dread in his heart at the idea of being alone. He could mention that he had always thought he was going to die. He could mention that he'd honestly thought hoping Grian was alive, too, had been a fool's errand from the beginning, and this whole thing more an elaborate postponement of the inevitable than any real attempt to fix anything. He could mention how X is right, and this is, in some way, likely Mumbo's fault. He could say all kinds of things.

Later, Mumbo will think: why didn't he say any of those things? They all sound like they could be far more eloquent and sensible than what he actually said. X's helmet had stopped him from getting any kind of concussion of head injury, so by all measures, Mumbo had no excuse!

What Mumbo says is this:

"I mean, you always might not."

Before he can hear X's response, he passes out again, because he had just blown up a building in an attempt to escape a monster, and passing out is probably his prerogative. As he passes out, though, he sees the strange twist on X's face, and thinks that for as expressive as X is without the helmet on, sometimes, even expressive people are hard to read.

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When Mumbo wakes up the next time, he isn't in a seatbelt, but the car is moving jerkily forward. On instinct, Mumbo tries to reach to put his seatbelt on. He immediately regrets it. He whimpers. Oh, he'd been a bit of an idiot just then, hadn't he? Blowing up a building to fight off a monster. He could have just run. He could have even just died! Which, you know, he doesn't really want to do that badly or anything, at least not until the journey's over, but! He could have died! He... he could have died anyway.

Well, that's nothing new, he supposes. 'I could have died' is an existential crisis any other time. Now, though, he just hurts. He's not really frightened. He just hurts. 'I could have died.' He could have died for a long time now. It's happened at least daily.

It's getting harder to really care, isn't it?

Oh, he can't drive like this, he thinks, as the horrible pain in his arm dies down again. He sort of needs both arms for that. X is sitting behind the wheel, and the phone is propped up in the cupholder. Mumbo realizes he must have left it there. Mumbo's bag is singed, but thrown in the back seat, after Mumbo moves enough to look at it. Alright. Alright, that's fine. He doesn't really like X's driving—it makes Mumbo nervous and sick. But! It's better than no one driving at all! A few hours by car is many, many more by foot, Mumbo has found over the past few days, and he really, *really* can't be doing that.

His voice is hoarse when he says: "I think I didn't have burn cream."

"Idiot," says X.

"I have a name."

"You lost the right to it," X says, although he doesn't sound particularly serious. The engine continues to run on a low rumble. Mumbo feels it in his gut. X continues to not really know how to break or accelerate smoothly. But at least, Mumbo thinks, X figured it out quickly, despite having not done it. It probably helps that there's no one else on the road. Actually, that definitely helps.

Mumbo is pretty sure if other people had been on the road, with the way X is driving...

"Please don't crash. I, um, think I would get rather injured if you did that."

"Alright," X says.

"We're almost there, aren't we?"

"Yes. We are."

For a while, Mumbo is quiet again. He really is in quite a bit of pain. It also hurts, turning around to grab the ibuprofen he'd stolen earlier. It's definitely not heavy duty enough to properly help much with things like burns and a broken arm, but it's something. Also something is that his broken arm has at least been put in a splint. It is, Mumbo thinks distantly, still kind of horrifying to look at? But it's not actively getting worse, at least!

He should probably ask about that conversation that they had while Mumbo was on the ground. Instead, he just says: "I'm sorry. Blowing up the propane tank was kind of silly of me. You were far away, though, and I had the lighter. One of us had to escape."

"You had the lighter," repeats X. "I cannot believe you."

"You really think you would by now. Believe me, I mean," Mumbo says. "I'm not a very good liar."

X snorts. "I figured out how to drive without you." Ah. Mumbo doesn't know what that means, given the context about Mumbo having nearly died, and also the context about Mumbo being fairly certain X plans to kill him. It certainly means that X won't need to have Mumbo drive him places anymore, which isn't very surprising, but is a little concerning, thinking about it.

"I hope where we're going has burn cream."

X laughs. It's not a nice sound, even though Mumbo doesn't think it's mocking him. It's just cracked in a lot of places. "Oh, Mumbo," X says.

"...I hope your brother is nice," Mumbo says, trying again, because he may as well. He can hear X stiffen.

"Oh, *Mumbo*," says X.

"You know, for someone with such clear expressions," starts Mumbo, and then he frowns and stops. "You didn't take the helmet back. I hadn't realized. I know you said it doesn't matter, but..."

X shrugs, then says, "I don't drive much. I haven't before, actually. I'm mostly making this up. Stop talking so I can focus."

"Okay," says Mumbo, who immediately realizes that isn't stopping talking. "Oh, right. I wanted to promise I won't blow up any more buildings. You don't have to try to answer that. I just wanted to promise that's a one-time thing, okay? No blowing up buildings."

X laughs, and this one is nicer, Mumbo thinks. It's good to know that, sometimes, X can have a nice laugh. He should use it more often. He doesn't, though, because Mumbo really doesn't want to crash, so he doesn't want to break X's concentration. That should be easy enough. So he's silent, from then on, besides the occasional unintentional noise he makes when his arm is jostled a bit more than he'd like or when he discovers a new way one of the burns hurts. He's getting used to it,

though. He's not really used to it, a few hours later, but he's more used to it, as the GPS finally tells them to exit the highway, and they head onwards, to the place X thinks his brother is.

## Chapter End Notes

tomorrow: the facility

we have reached the part of the story where *lots of things* i've wanted to write from the beginning finally happened. it was an exciting time to be writing... this scene with the gas station? yeah, long-planned. mumbo was a bit of a dumbass here but luckily i have given him phoenix wright levels of luck on his injuries, i'm sure there's absolutely no way he'll hit a hard limit for how long he can keep going anytime soon. that would be ridiculous.

anyway. mumbo brought up iskall again this chapter and i know a few of you have had questions about other hermits and [oh look is that joe hills on my tumblr who would have guessed](#). note that you don't have to read this vignette to understand anything that's going on in this story, but we've reached the point it's not a spoiler so i thought it would be fun to throw out there!

i continue to love the response this story is getting by the way you all are the best \o/



## the facility

### Chapter Summary

in which mumbo visits x's childhood home.

### Chapter Notes

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

Eventually, X turns onto a gravel road. There's a fence at the front of the road. It looks like one of those powered fences to Mumbo, Mumbo thinks, and he's not sure what to make of that. What is he meant to do with a powered fence? What is X meant to do?

"I don't suppose you have your employee ID," X says.

"No," Mumbo says. "Or, I don't think I do."

"Pity," X says. And Mumbo sort of wants to ask: why would his employee ID even work? Mumbo doesn't leave his apartment! He certainly doesn't visit... doesn't...

Where are they, anyway? Presumably, Mumbo thinks, a Concorp building. X gets out of the car. Mumbo hasn't been to a Concorp building but once. He hadn't really wanted to go, but he'd been, ah, offered a job? Offered isn't the right word. Told he had a job. And, you know, you don't say no to that. He was a bit surprised when, after their aggressive offering, they'd still made him interview, but he'd gone to a nearby office and done the interview, and they'd given him the job, and they'd given him a pair of earrings, and they'd told him he wasn't allowed to leave, not unless he was told he was.

Grian hadn't been there, but Mumbo's pretty sure both he and the people who had interviewed him were thinking about Grian, back then. Were thinking about him, because if there was any reason to have a hostage over someone's head... Well, Grian didn't have many things people could hold over his head.

The gate beeps and opens.

"Oh," Mumbo says. "They have power."

"Of course they do. Haven't we established they planned for this?"

"I mean, I doubt they planned for *this*. Is your brother really going to be here?"

"Oh, he will," X says. "The place where they made us. He's pitiful like that. He wouldn't have left."

Mumbo purses his lips. He supposes X would know his brother better than Mumbo would. He supposes X would know this place better than Mumbo would, too. X drives them through the open gate. Mumbo supposes he still doesn't really have a choice with this one; he's helping X find his brother whether he particularly likes it or not, Mumbo thinks. That's fine, though. He'd already accepted that. He's a little more worried about the building, and the sense that this is the end. Mumbo's been ready for the end for a while, but he's also very much not actually ready, you know?

Well, maybe.

They drive up the driveway. The building itself feels too mundane. It's clearly some sort of factory building, but it's made of brick and peeling paint, not of any of the things Mumbo knows that Concorp has made over the years. For a facility that does things like, apparently, create monsters, and missiles, and power suits, it looks more like the crumbling industry that belongs in the part of the country they're driving through than anything top-of-the-line. It has a big parking lot, with many cars parked in it. There are pipes and tanks in the back of the building, presumably for manufacturing purposes, although Mumbo wouldn't really know. There's rust on the tanks and pipes. In the distance, Mumbo can see a hill, and that hill looks like it's filled with dirt and reservoir water. The doors of the facility are normal, with a cheerful Concorp logo scrawled on the glass, from what Mumbo can see from the car.

X puts the car straight in one of the loading lanes. "Well, time to go in."

"I don't know I particularly feel like walking," Mumbo says. The amount of pain he's in is less than it was? But it's still more than he would personally like, you know, and he doesn't really need to go inside, and he's...

"If you need me to, I can carry you. I'm not leaving you in the car by yourself."

"...oh, fine," Mumbo says, and he takes a deep breath, and he gets out of the car, his broken arm awkwardly splinted in front of him. Everything he'd forgotten hurt hurts. Everything he'd forgotten he didn't want to deal with, he's dealing with now. He takes a deep breath in. He takes a deep breath out. He's fine! He's fine. "You said they'd have burn cream, didn't you?"

"Maybe," X says. "Sure. That's what's important. We're about to find my brother, and you're worried about burn cream. You really are a fool, aren't you, Mumbo?"

"Well," Mumbo says. "Well." He can't really argue with that, can he? He is a fool! He does want burn cream! He does, sort of, care about X's brother, even if he doesn't care about X's brother as much as things like Grian, or not being in as much pain, or, well, a lot of things. He is still mostly here because X threatened him, even if X isn't really threatening him anymore, and Mumbo's actually here for other reasons entirely, and X is probably here for other reasons too. Actually, Mumbo hasn't seen X take out that gun in a while. He hadn't realized that. Maybe it's because it's become clear Mumbo will follow him around anyway? Mumbo isn't certain.

He shoots X a shaky thumbs-up. X walks up to the doors, and Mumbo follows him. X opens the door easily. Neither of them, Mumbo thinks, have employee IDs. Mumbo sort of wants to ask how X therefore keeps on getting through doors? Maybe that's just something X is authorized to do here? It would make sense, if this is where X came from. Where he was... made?

That phrasing is concerning, Mumbo thinks, and he follows X anyway.

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In the front, there's a lobby. It's relatively boring. The walls are painted plain white, and the carpet is one of those vague patterns of black and white diamonds that makes Mumbo's head hurt if he looks at them too long. Fluorescent lights flicker above them, that weird sickly white, demonstrating that, in a facility currently run on generator power and that probably contains sensitive and volatile machinery and chemicals, the lobby lighting is apparently important enough to Concorp to keep running.. There are two signs, cheerfully proclaiming Concorp mission statements for whomever is waiting in the lobby, and there's a TV, which isn't working. Mumbo's not sure what it would be playing if it were working.

There's a desk with a plastic sign on it, cheerfully reminding all visitors to get a visitor badge, and all employees to wear their ID, so they are not mistaken for an intruder or something, Mumbo supposes. He knows full well the first step to cybersecurity is physical security and all, but an ID badge probably can't stop people that easily, right? And would you know your coworkers— Mumbo thinks you would, wouldn't you? Of course, maybe you wouldn't know them, once they become monsters.

For example: there is an ID lanyard around the corpse at the receptionist desk's neck. A large wound has been torn out of their back. They vaguely resemble some sort of strange winged fish, so Mumbo has no idea what they looked like before, but it's probably not whatever's on the lanyard. Mumbo's not willing to get close enough to check. He stares at them blankly for a moment.

"You know, last time we saw a corpse instead of just, um, the place where a dead body would have been..."

"Don't worry about it," X says, dismissively. "There aren't enough here to do whatever that church did."

"Oh, thanks, that makes me worry a lot less," Mumbo says weakly. X keeps going, and Mumbo has to wonder if X, er, knows that was sarcasm? Mumbo thinks that had been fairly obvious communication, but... well, it is possible X just doesn't particularly care if it had been sarcasm. That actually seems more likely. X opens one of the doors out of the lobby, and Mumbo follows him.

They enter a hallway. There's a helpful map on the back of the door. Here, only emergency lights are lit, emergency lights and exit signs. The map's too baffling to understand, but it does show where emergency exits are. Mumbo takes a picture of it with his phone before he follows X down the bad carpeting on the hallway and the ugly white paintjob. It's honestly a little bit depressing of a place. Which, well, probably makes sense, given that it is... what Concorp is. It would be more concerning if it were very, very appealing! But as they pass doors leading to various computer labs, they start getting to stairwells and doors with labels on them like "no entry without goggles", and with chemical safety warnings on the doors, and at least one with a radiation warning. None of them X opens yet. All of them are eerily silent.

Should Mumbo make a joke? He feels like he ought to make a joke. X is marching through multiple secure hallways, just an absolute maze of hallways with corny safety posters that make Mumbo feel something strange in his gut and doors to experiments. Mumbo feels like they've walked down, somewhere, but they haven't gone down any stairs, so the hallway must be sloped. It must be—there have been too many turns, the hallway's been far too long for it just to be an ordinary hallway.

It would be just like Concorp, with all of its sideways ways of going about things, to make its offices into an absolute maze, Mumbo thinks, and one that gradually slopes and crosses over itself. Yes, that seems about right.

X seems to know exactly where he's going, though.

Well, Mumbo thinks. If this is where X had been made, that makes sense. Mumbo thinks he'd still know his childhood house like the back of his hand, even if he hasn't talked to his parents in a little bit too long.

He... wishes he'd phoned them. Not that it matters, or anything! It's just... you know. He wishes he'd phoned them, before he'd gone out to get himself killed hunting down Grian. He doesn't want to die. He doesn't want to die without calling his parents. And now he doesn't know if he can call

his parents anymore. He just hadn't thought to, until just now, walking through the corporate walls of a no-longer-stranger's childhood home. A no-longer-stranger who probably didn't even have a childhood. He didn't think of his parents until *that*.

Does that make him a bad son?

He hopes not.

Finally, X stops at a door. It has been inexplicably long since they started walking. Mumbo's not sure how deep they are, but it has to be pretty deep, because Mumbo has realized there's nothing resembling windows. His legs hurt in strange ways. It's probably the subtle slopes. His arm hurts, too, but he hasn't had the presence of mind in this soulless place to ask X where the burn cream would be, or the painkillers, or anything like that. Now, they've stopped somewhere, and.

"He probably just stayed here," X says, and he pulls open the door. Mumbo doesn't get the chance to read the safety warnings, but he's pretty sure he's supposed to be wearing PPE, right? Maybe he should say something—

—the room smells like iron, and Mumbo reels back.

"He's not," X says, after a moment. "Actually disobeying for once, huh, Xisuma? Come in, Mumbo, we're looking for clues to where he went."

"It smells like..."

"Nothing worse than what we've already smelled," X says. Mumbo had wanted to say a dead body, but unfortunately, X is right, so he steps inside.

The room is... disappointing, somehow. Mumbo had expected to see floating vats everywhere or something? There are a few doorways to other places, but in here, there's just... a bunk bed. A TV, and it's unplugged. The same soulless carpet. The same soulless walls. Several computers. One of the other doors is propped open, and Mumbo looks in, and he thinks it looks like a gym. It's certainly bigger and more complicated than any gym Mumbo's seen in his life, and there's what looks like a large section of training mats in the middle, but it's still... just a gym.

X is trying to convince the computers to turn on. Mumbo opens another of the three doors. Here, he finds what appears to just be a bathroom. He doesn't find the source of the iron smell, or X, so he closes the door again. There's no need to, to horrendously invade X's privacy or anything. Mumbo certainly wouldn't want anyone going through his bathroom! They might find, er. Mumbo's... shaving cream? His shampoo? His... choice in toilet paper? Actually, what private *is* in his bathroom?

Maybe Mumbo should search it after all...?

No, he still thinks he doesn't want to do that. It still feels somehow wrong. Instead, he walks over and opens a third door, the last one out of the room, and immediately reels backwards.

"X," Mumbo says. "X."

The room he's opened is filled with bright splatters of neon green blood. This room has a single operating table in it, and is otherwise bare. There are no surgical tools or anything to suggest that's where the blood would have come from. There are, however, some concerning wires and a stand for an IV stand, along with some heavy, harder-to-move equipment, like an EKG scanner. And it's covered in blood. It's where the overwhelming smell of iron had come from, Mumbo thinks, but even that doesn't account for it, because there's so much blood. There's so much that—

"Oh, he's not there," X says dismissively.

"X," says Mumbo.

"He's not there," X says, again, and he sounds so certain that Mumbo can almost bring himself to believe him. Still. Still. "I know what it looks like when it's our blood. He's not there."

"Are you sure?" Mumbo says.

"That's old blood, and not his. He's not there," X says.

Mumbo closes the door again, a bit harder than he should. The slam makes a ringing noise. The air blows several sheets up. Mumbo turns on his heels to X. He should be used to blood by now, but that had been... a lot. He can't get the idea of someone who looks vaguely like X on the ground where that blood had been—or, perhaps, on that operating table. One of those things, he thinks, seems more likely, and he doesn't particularly like the odds of... of either.

"Where do we look next?" says Mumbo, suddenly aware of the total lack of posters, or drawings, or photographs, or anything, really. There's a plush bird in his bag that feels like it weighs as much as bricks. He doesn't want to be in here, with the bunk bed and desks and weird gym and bathroom and everything else that tells Mumbo too much about X, and too much about X's brother.

"Maybe one of the lab rooms," X says.

"Oh," Mumbo says. "Is that not what—"

"No."

"Right. That's fair," Mumbo says, and he follows X out into the hallway again. The lights are still just as dim, just as flickery as before. They're still mostly emergency lighting. He looks behind him at the door, which locks as X leaves it. It declares that only authorized personnel should go in. It declares that the room contains biohazards. It has a list of reasons the contents of X and his brother's bedroom has dangerous things in it, and no names, and... And...

Mumbo doesn't like it one bit, that's for certain. He files it somewhere in his mind with all of the other things on his journey so far that he's really, really not liked one bit, and then he moves on.

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The hallways remain maze-like as Mumbo and X continue to walk down them. X is muttering to himself as he goes. Occasionally, he stops at a door. Having seen the warnings on X and Xisuma—well, Mumbo doesn't know it's Xisuma, but he thinks X has said his name a few times? Regardless. He's seen the warnings on X and his brother's door. So, the warnings on these new doors... they read differently. The ones that say there's something combustible in them, those, Mumbo thinks, are probably straightforward. The one saying to wear eyewear because there are lasers are, oh, that's very cool, but also frightening, but also probably not a person. It could be a weapon, though, Mumbo thinks. It could be.

Then there are the doors that say things like—there is a biohazard in here. Trained personnel only. Or, wear a pacemaker. Or, do not unlock both sides of the airlock. Or... well... See, the thing is, now Mumbo thinks: if X had grown up in a bunkbed in a place that Mumbo is fairly certain is underground, what might be in those rooms? What's in the rooms X has looked at, and stopped looking at, and moved on from?

Mumbo hears something move behind one of the doors and yelps. He wants to ask X to open the door. He doesn't want to ask X to open the door. He just wants burn cream. He didn't want to be

here in the first place. He just wants...

Well, he's not sure exactly what he wants. He just knows that he doesn't want to see this, and he doesn't want his heart to hurt, and frankly, those two things seem directly related. At the same time, he feels guilty about wanting to simply look away from X's past. That would be rude, and selfish, right?

X stops, after it feels like they've looked at a lot of doors. "If I were X, this is where I would go," X says. Mumbo blinks for a moment, disconcerted. Right. Right, if X's brother is named Xisuma, that would also make him an X, wouldn't it? Gosh, that's confusing. X pushes open this door, too.

This room is, Mumbo realizes very immediately, full of weapons. As someone who made weapons for Concorp, even while valiantly pretending he hadn't been, Mumbo thinks he's uniquely prepared to recognize experimental weapons. A few—like blades, and rifles that look a lot like X's rifle—are sensible weaponry. A few are not. Mumbo thinks he sees grenades. Why are they all stored in the same room, he thinks. Why. Isn't that, um, an explosives threat? This whole facility is an explosives threat, probably, but isn't this especially an explosives threat?

"I'm not taking a gun," Mumbo says. "Um. I don't really have much against guns, but I don't know how to shoot them, let alone shoot them nonlethally."

"I thought I'd see X in here. I still have munitions for my rifle. We can leave. Maybe nearby, one of the computer monitoring rooms. I was the better weapon."

"Right, okay," Mumbo says. He swallows. He leaves the weapons room. He puts his head down. He follows X, who soon opens another door. This room is full of computers, a thing Mumbo feels far more comfortable with. Large screens display different parts of the facility. Mumbo would question the wisdom of keeping the cameras up on emergency power, but he supposes the recordings would almost work as a sort of black box. A way to diagnose what's gone wrong, when everyone dies. Presuming the cameras survive and keep recording, at least. It's morbid to think about, but given how many cameras there seem to be, it probably isn't even wrong.

There are dead bodies in several of the cameras. Sometimes people move. X is frowning. There's no one else in here, either. There are bodies in the cameras, and...

"I don't know this place well, but, um, those look like pretty big blind spots."

"They are," agrees X.

"That seems like it would be odd."

"It is," says X, and he frowns, and he looks across the cameras. "This probably isn't how they're set by default. Especially not in the manufacturing areas. Normally, some eye is kept on those, but a lot of the chemical processing areas are automated. They wouldn't need more than automated moderation and a motion sensor to trip if something that shouldn't go in there."

"Which means that. Someone turned the cameras. Probably your brother."

"Probably."

Mumbo looks up at the screens. The manufacturing area is full of ominously still moving parts. In some areas, parts are still moving. Stirrers are preventing sitting chemicals from sitting too long, or heating or cooling systems rumble, or, in at least one place, there's a single warning light, flickering on and off. But the manufacturing itself—that's done, and has been done, it would seem. For good or ill, the manufacturing area manufactures nothing now, just as the laboratories here research

nothing. It shouldn't be eerie; it's not as though Mumbo's seen that many manufacturing facilities. Somehow, though, like the downed plane, this helps really drive home the fact that this place has been forcibly abandoned by the apocalypse, besides the terrible things that made noises behind the doors, and the dead receptionist, and maybe X's brother.

Mumbo thinks: he's never wondered too much how many people have died, but it has to have been a lot. For the world to feel this consistently empty, so many people had to have just... died. Maybe they were eaten. Maybe they were killed. And maybe—Mumbo remembers the screaming he'd heard, when it had all started, and he remembers the terrible shapes the monsters have all taken, and he simply wonders.

X is still frowning at the cameras. "Well, I have to say, that's not an area I go much. Gosh. Why'd he have to go there, huh? How am I supposed to get to him there? That foolish man. Making this harder on me than he should."

Before Mumbo can ask about that one, X spins on his feet and leaves the room.

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Mumbo tries to mentally mark down where the camera room is, but he's not sure he's done a good job of mentally marking down where *anything* is. Giving up, he follows X. If he tries hard enough, can he make a mental map back to here? In case they go to the wrong place? Mumbo just... he isn't sure he can even get out, at this point. How on earth did they design this facility to be such a maze? Mumbo's fairly certain it had to be intentional.

Mumbo thinks of the things they've kept inside.

He thinks about hearing things behind the doors.

He thinks about...

"We haven't seen what killed the receptionist," Mumbo says. "We should probably look out for that, shouldn't we?"

X shrugs. "I can take it. That's why I grabbed more weapons."

"Alright," Mumbo says. "Sure. But, um..."

"But nothing. I'll keep an eye out."

"There haven't been many other bodies. I've seen blood, sometimes, but not..."

"I thought you'd think that was good," X says.

"Okay," Mumbo says.

He follows X a little longer before X stops and frowns at a crossroads between the hallways. Oh, even X isn't fully certain which direction to go. That's a little concerning, maybe, but it gives Mumbo more time to talk, or think, or try to make a mental map.

"Right, I guess," X says, and then they walk down the right path. It starts to get tiring; they must be going the opposite way on the subtle slopes than they'd been before, heading back more above ground instead of further under it. That makes sense, honestly, given the existence of the production lines that Mumbo had been able to see from the outside. The chemical processes are probably less classified than the research, too. In this part of the country, various manufacturing plants are really common. Having that external on the building probably helps Concorp look

unassuming.

There's a lot of blood along one of the walls. It forms a trail. In a bit of spectacular irony, there's a safety warning sign hanging above it.

Mumbo wonders what it would be like, growing up as one of the things safety warnings warn people about. That sounds strange, Mumbo thinks. Maybe he should ask X. Also, maybe Mumbo should get shot. Because that's probably what would happen if Mumbo started to pry. Wouldn't it? Did he care? If he's being honest with himself, he's probably going to be shot anyway, judging by the way that X hadn't denied it, before.

He may as well ask.

"Did you go this way often?"

X turns to stare at him for a moment. Nailed it.

"...no, I did not. My brother did sometimes. It was decided he was the more intellectual of us. Which is silly. Xisuma—My brother, he's a derp. Self-described. Intellectual? I couldn't think of anyone less so. But good at fighting? Hah. No wonder they decided he would go for intellectual pursuits." X's fist is clenched. "No, he'd get to run on out and play with chemicals and lab experiments while I was learning how to be a proper weapon. He even got to be *in charge*. I learned the facility through hard memorization, and he got *maps*. Really, he didn't deserve any of it, but what do I know?"

Well, Mumbo thinks, that's a landmine he absolutely didn't mean to hit. "That, er, sounds hard?"

"Oh, it won't be hard for much longer," X says, with grim determination.

"...that sounds. Alright," Mumbo says. "Are you—"

"Shut up."

"I'll do that," Mumbo says, "it's just, I..."

"Shut up."

Mumbo nods. He rubs his arms as X grows increasingly frustrated with the hallways, and this entire place. There's more blood on the floors and walls. There are more doors with strange thumping behind them. Mumbo almost asks to open one. He knows they'll probably die if they do, but... There's blood in a stripe, under one of them. As though someone's been dragged inside.

"Are you sure we shouldn't—"

"We're so close," X says, and Mumbo swallows. He's not sure what to make of X's voice. He's not sure at all. Mumbo wants to tell X to turn around. He wants to tell X that having a gunfight in a manufacturing area of a plant that manufactures weapons and mysterious chemical compounds is a bad idea, since that seems to be what X wants to do. He wants to apologize to X for working for Concorp, and whatever part he may have paid in X's childhood. He wants to do a lot of things, but he does none of them.

He should do one of them, right? But he doesn't. Instead, he just follows until they get to a set of heavier-set doors proclaiming that everyone who goes beyond the door should wear PPE.

"You should take this back," Mumbo says, taking off the helmet to hand to X. X places it back on



Mumbo's head.

"I'll be more fine than you without it. My body is better at handling weird chemicals. You're still entirely human, and you have to stay that way," X says, sounding far more reasonable than Mumbo thinks he has any right to sound. Mumbo sighs, but leaves the helmet on. He'd comment that he doesn't think it does that great of a job of filtering the air without the rest of the suit, but, well, he sort of thinks that maybe, kind of, X doesn't care? Maybe it's something like... Mumbo has already seen X's face, so why continue to hide it? Or maybe it's something more like: he wants to look Xisuma in the eyes when they see each other again. Or maybe it's even something else. Maybe it's something more like:

He just doesn't feel like wearing it. Not everything, Mumbo thinks, has to have a reasonable reason behind it.

"Well, I guess this will be my PPE. This is a factory floor, right?"

"They don't call it a factory. They call it a... oh, what was the nonsense word they used... a synthesis facility? No one with clearance worked in it, though."

"Right," Mumbo says. "Sure. A synthesis facility. Um, still. There are volatile chemicals in there, right? I don't want—"

"I'll tell you if you're about to die."

"You know what, that's good enough."

Mumbo takes a deep breath as X pushes open the doors. There's a second set of doors—an airlock, Mumbo realizes, which feels like a poor sign? Already, on this side of the airlock, things smell a little strange. There's a hiss of air as the second door opens, and the back of Mumbo's mouth starts to taste like oil and mint. Oh. Oh he most certainly shouldn't be in here, should he? There are definitely chemicals in the air, and they're definitely, definitely poisoning Mumbo's lungs right now. He swallows, and it feels like he's swallowing around tar, or maybe... licorice?

He turns to say something to X. Maybe like, oh no, there's a chemical leak in here, or like, oh no, they shouldn't be in here, Mumbo is going to get sick, and if there are chemicals that taste like something slick and unhealthy, then there are also probably chemicals that taste like death, and Mumbo doesn't really want to die of a chemical leak in a chemical synthesis plant that makes bombs. Something about that feels far too on-the-nose for Mumbo's liking.

"X," Mumbo doesn't get to say, because as he says it, X starts walking at a fast pace. Mumbo has to nearly sprint to keep up with him, a thing Mumbo can't actually do, given that he's limping on empty at this point. There's something frightening about X's expression, just now. X starts moving faster. Mumbo follows.

X pulls out his rifle.

"WAIT," Mumbo says, but before he can process what's happened, X has fired the gun. Mumbo waits for an explosion. Thankfully, one doesn't come, but it feels like a near thing. Explosions shouldn't be near things. Explosions shouldn't be a possibility.

Mumbo hears an aborted scream as the bullet presumably hits true. He wants to say something about nonlethal shots. He does not. There's something strange in the air, and he wants to breathe as little of the licorice air as possible, to feel as little of the slime in the back of his throat as he can. Once again: respiratory problems from a strange factory floor is not the way he really wants to go

at all.

X makes a shaky huff. "Dead," he says. "Good."

Mumbo winces. His throat feels so strange. His head feels strange, too. He makes a hand gesture. He hopes it gets across to X what Mumbo would have said.

"We're so close," X answers, so it must have. "I'm not risking it. Come on."

Mumbo makes a gesture towards his throat.

"You'll be fine," X says dismissively. "Or, fine enough for our purposes."

Mumbo gestures more insistently.

"You'll be fine," X repeats. And Mumbo...

He thinks that this is a bad idea. Really, he's chosen the worst time to have character development. X's brother doesn't deserve this. X maybe doesn't, either, Mumbo isn't sure. He feels something for X, given the room full of nothing personal that had once been X's bedroom, as best Mumbo can tell. He feels something for everyone involved, but.

This is a bad time for character development, he thinks, given that X has the rifle out, but his throat feels terrible already, and he genuinely can't stand in here long. And he'll get lost leaving again, but that's fine, isn't it?

"I'm going," he says weakly.

He turns around and goes back to the factory doors. He hears X say something. His ears are ringing. He needs to not care. He doesn't care! That's what it needs to be from now on. He just needs to not care, as much as he can manage to not care about whatever it is that X is saying. He just needs to leave. Go back to the car. He should have run before, he thinks. Or, not even run. He can still help X find his brother! He doesn't mind doing that! (Is he even walking the right direction? He's not sure, he'd just turned away from X in the direction he thinks the door is.) He just needs to leave before he, um, dies, and frankly, he will die if he stays, so—

His foot hits something. He blinks and looks down.

It's a dead monster, Mumbo thinks, at first, seeing the body in the puddle of neon red blood, and he almost moves on, like he has increasingly had to with every other monster. It's just that this one is humanoid. It's just that something about it makes Mumbo pause—well, pause more than he would, hitting his foot against a...

The face is familiar, Mumbo thinks.

He screws his breath as deeply as he can, then he shouts: "X!" He immediately doubles over coughing. Whatever's in the air is really, really messing with his throat.

He steps back, two large steps. That face is familiar. That face is the *same*. But that doesn't seem right. X is too... unkillable, Mumbo thinks. He's too tough. He stands there with his rifle above everyone, and yells, and sometimes makes some very bad decisions, but he doesn't die. But this isn't X, technically, Mumbo thinks. This is awfully sudden, Mumbo thinks. Maybe he should be worried. Maybe he should be...

X catches up. "You fool," says X. "You finally think to run when you're in a maze you can't

escape? You won't get anywhere without me. You're just going to get more hurt, especially—"

Mumbo coughs again. Talk, he needs to talk. He coughs again through the horrid muck that's gathered in his throat. "Look at his face," he says.

X looks down.

X looks up again. "No, that's not right," X says, and with them right next to each other, Mumbo has to acknowledge: they're identical, down to the hearts in their eyes. And oh, the body has a few fewer scars, and oh, the body on the ground isn't wearing the same armor, but that's definitely the same face. They have the same face. "You. You've seen monsters, too. Have you seen any that—"

"—I don't think they can steal faces."

"What do you mean? This isn't right. You're—you're lying somehow."

"I—I, oh dear, I don't, I don't want to," says Mumbo, and he coughs again. Whatever's in the air here is horrible for him in some way it isn't for X, because X looks like he's still breathing fine. He's staring right at Mumbo. That eerie heart in his eye is pounding, and Mumbo feels his heart pounding in his chest and his throat and temples, too. Fear spikes through Mumbo, and something else, because it hits Mumbo that he's not at all equipped to tell X that this man isn't breathing, that he hasn't yet seen a monster that didn't have a human face if he'd looked at its eyes too long, the face they'd once had, Mumbo thinks.

X steps closer to Mumbo. His voice is a low hiss. "This isn't right. You're tricking me somehow!" X says. Then, suddenly, he slams an arm into Mumbo's chest, and Mumbo is thrown against some kind of tank. It's burning hot to the touch. Mumbo shouts, and then is in a horrible combination of coughing and pain as he collapses to the ground. His already-broken arm hits the tile, and for a moment, Mumbo's vision goes white-hot, and he doesn't think he thinks at all, for a moment. "No, this isn't right! You weren't—I was going to kill you!" roars X. Mumbo can't see through his coughs. He just has to breathe again. He has to breathe again, and then... "This isn't—how dare you! How dare! Who did this? Who?" Mumbo starts to pull himself off the ground again. He's dizzy. He can't stand up. "What's the point! You weren't—this isn't right. Come on out, Xisuma! You don't get to die now."

He hears footsteps stalk towards him. Mumbo's lifted up by his shirt collar. He looks up to stare X in the eyes.

"Don't lie to me," says X. "Where is he, really? Don't *LIE TO ME*."

Mumbo wheezes.

"I have to," says X. "He can't be dead. He can't. That's not fair. I don't actually.... He's not supposed to actually die, you see. So you're going to tell me where he is."

There's a body on the ground and Mumbo can't breathe and he's dizzy and X is holding him up like a sack of grapes. That's almost funny, Mumbo thinks. He coughs again. X is still holding him up.

"Tell me," X says.

"I'm sorry," Mumbo wheezes out, because he doesn't know what else to say. He starts coughing again. He's pretty sure he's about to throw up. X should put him down. X should—

X should—

X's expression is easy to read without the helmet on. It goes through many emotions, but Mumbo is fairly certain the easiest one to read is one Mumbo hadn't expected to see: *despair*.

The noise that tears from X's throat isn't human as he slowly, gently, falls to the ground, lying Mumbo down almost gently and reaching for his brother's face.

"Oh," X says, but the tone of voice he says it in—that says everything else. "Oh."

Mumbo curls in on himself. He should care more, some distant part of his head thinks. He should care about X, and he should care about X's brother, and he thinks he does, but he also thinks he can barely breathe, and he's in pain. If X wanted him to care, Mumbo thinks distantly—if X wanted Mumbo to bother—

"I was supposed to kill him," X says.

"He's dead now," Mumbo says, and it's harsher than he should have said it, probably.

"I don't want that," X says.

"It's too late now, isn't it?" Mumbo says, and this time, it's exactly as harsh as Mumbo means for it to be.

"Fuck," X says, very quietly.

They stay there, Mumbo trying to figure out how to breathe, or see, or even just get up and move, and X doing—something. Mumbo doesn't care what he's doing.

Then, slowly, X picks up Mumbo in a fireman's carry. It hurts. Mumbo couldn't break the hold if he wanted to, though—he can barely move as it is. For a moment, X lingers, standing above his brother's dead body, a furious Mumbo in his arms. Mumbo's not sure for how long.

Silently, X turns, and with Mumbo, he leaves.

## Chapter End Notes

tomorrow: the hospital bed.

you have been warned from the start; there was only ever one way this would go. still, for what it's worth, i'm sorry.

# the hospital bed

## Chapter Summary

in which mumbo does and doesn't have some important conversations.

**this chapter contains some discussion of suicidal ideation.**

## Chapter Notes

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

Mumbo doesn't say anything as X carries him. This is, of course, at least in part because of the fact his throat is currently in a bad shape, but it's also because he's not sure he's going to be able to say anything that isn't bitter, and pained, and lonely, and aching, and *mean*. It's not so much, Mumbo thinks, that he's afraid to be mean! That bridge has already been crossed. No, it's more that he's currently being carried in the man's arms, and everything hurts, and he's not sure exactly what he wants to say. He wants, he thinks, to go *home*.

Distantly, he realizes he's still, somehow, wearing X's stupid helmet. If his broken arm weren't hurting and he could move without feeling pain, he'd probably take it off, but it is, at least, blotting out some of the noise of the world, so he leaves it on despite himself. It means he doesn't have to look anyone in the eyes, at least, before, what? Whatever happens next.

After a bit, Mumbo realizes that they've stopped. X opens a door. The room they step into smells like antiseptic and death, and Mumbo coughs immediately through the smell. There's a single hospital bed in the room. There are cabinets and other doors out, but only one bed. It strikes Mumbo as almost needlessly eerie, or maybe just a very bad use of space? It almost reminds Mumbo of the surgical room that had been attached to X and Xisuma's rooms, in that it's clearly meant for specific people and is clearly not the world's easiest of places to be.

X puts him down on the hospital bed. Mumbo looks up at X.

"Why are we here?" he asks.

"You kept asking about burn cream," X says, which Mumbo supposes is an answer of sorts, even if, at the moment, it makes no sense to him.

"Alright," he says. He's not going to argue, he's decided, just that moment. It's not worth the effort, and besides, this is good for him, maybe?

He lies there, coming down from furious anger, as X grabs things from cabinets. He returns with burn cream, several bottles of pills, and, concerningly, what appears to be a syringe. Mumbo winces back. "What's that for?"

"Taking blood."

"Are you a doctor?"

"No."

"Then don't," Mumbo says. "Give me the—ow, oh, that was a bad idea—" He begins to cough again as his body submits its complaints against him attempting to reach for the burn cream himself, to snatch it from X's hands.

"I need to go get Xisuma," X says. "I need to... this bottle has painkillers. They're strong. This bottle has something I would be given if I was overexposed to certain things. It might help your cough. Um, the burn cream..."

"I'll do it," Mumbo says.

"Okay," X says. There's something newly quiet about his voice, Mumbo thinks, trying very hard not to become sympathetic again. He's had his character growth! It may have been at a bad moment, and it might be a bit selfish, but he—he's not going to see Grian, and he has to be very angry about it. Those are some things Mumbo is fairly certain of, so he can't be getting all sympathetic towards this, this...

"You don't have to go alone," Mumbo says, and then immediately kicks himself. He can't walk on his own and he's not meant to be being sympathetic, not after *that*.

"Yes I do," X says, and he leaves.

"Alright," Mumbo says to no one. "Alright."

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It takes effort to get the burn cream on. For a little bit, it's easy to basically only think about that, and possibly taking one of the pain medication pills. He should, but Mumbo knows it will make his head feel bad, as heavy pain medications normally do. Also, the bottle has no label, has no setting to tell Mumbo whether he should take one, or three, or maybe none of them with the burn cream and whatever the pill he'd taken that was meant for helping for his cough was. Given that he has a better idea of how his body responds to painkillers than he does to mysterious medication he knows nothing about, maybe he should have taken the painkiller instead? But his throat no longer feels like licorice and mint and death, so it probably did something good. He's not entirely sure. He's hardly a medical expert. Or a chemical poisoning expert, really!

He's also hardly an expert in getting the burn cream to work properly on the many, many places he's been burnt. At least none of it's on his face; he doesn't have a mirror, after all, and also he doesn't really want to have to climb out of bed to try to find a mirror. Now that he's lying down, it's as though every ache he's accumulated over the past few days has flared up and then sunk into his bones, chewing at the calcium and eating at his nerves. Logically, Mumbo knows that's not quite how it works, but even the shoulder he'd started ignoring a few hours after he'd pulled it feels like it's killing him again now, so who's to say that 'eating his bones' *isn't* how all of his old injuries work, hm?

Do they count as old injuries if Mumbo got them a mere few days ago?

Has it really only been a few days?

Mumbo tries to count sleeps, count sunrises. Okay, there was the week he'd been locked in his apartment. There was the first day he left, and that he slept in the auto shop. There was the second day, when he met X. There was the third day, when they left the car dealership. There was the fourth day, when the gas station blew up. Which might, Mumbo thinks, still be today—that can't be right, can it? He counts again in his head. No, that can't be right. It has to have been more than a

few days. Too much has happened, Mumbo thinks, for it to have only been a few days.

...maybe enough time has passed here that it's been longer than he thinks it's been, Mumbo thinks, and he leans back against the bed and hurts. At least the burn cream has helped with the hurting.

He decides that having a horrible crisis over how much things can change in only a few days isn't worth continuing to fail to put on burn cream, so he goes back to trying to figure out how to get it on his back without the use of one of his arms, and with the fact that twisting too much makes his whole body hurt, hurt, hurt.

If he had less pride, maybe he would have asked X to help. Not that he exactly has pride. Had more trust? Maybe it's like that—he doesn't *trust* X. And, well, who would? Trust X, he means. Who would trust him? Given that, as Mumbo had suspected, X had always planned to kill Mumbo once he was no longer used to him, and had come here planning on killing his brother, and had... a lot of things, really. There are all sorts of reasons Mumbo absolutely could not have trusted X to help put on the burn cream, one of which is the fact that Mumbo is currently sitting alone in this room at all, and is in nearly as much pain as he is.

It *would* have been nice though, he thinks, and he's talking himself out of his anger again. What a useless pushover, he thinks. What a useless pushover. That's how he'd ended up working for Concorp and in this mess in the first place—he's a useless pushover, and it didn't matter how much Grian had tried to keep him out of it, it's—oh, he's not an idiot, he's just...

There's no one else in the room with him, and he is going to die alone, he thinks, and he buries his head in his hands and cries.

This was all so stupid from the beginning, and maybe he'd planned it that way. He's not an idiot. He's not. He's just...

The helmet he hasn't taken off yet catches his tears.

He's such an idiot.

---

After a number of minutes—Mumbo's not sure how many, but surely more than ten—he stops crying and finishes putting burn cream on himself. He'd started this, and he'd made a promise. He'll see it through.

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When X comes back, his human eye is red and puffy. Mumbo's eyes are also probably red and puffy, so he can't really say anything about it. He just watches. The taller man hovers in the doorway. Mumbo watches, still.

"My bag," he finally asks.

"It's locked in my room. Not locked. Safe. It's in the room."

"Alright."

X looks over Mumbo and doesn't quite frown. "You missed spots on your back. You didn't take the pain medication."

"It seems like it's a bad idea to be loopy during an apocalypse."

"You're talking."

"Whatever was in those pills worked."

X looks away. He wrings his hands. It's an odd gesture on X, Mumbo thinks. That's a perfectly reasonable gesture on Mumbo, but on someone as confident as X, to see him unsure, it's almost unsettling. Mumbo doesn't like it.

"I'm helping you put the cream on the spots you missed."

"I don't trust you."

"Oh. Right."

X wrings his hands again. He's still not looking Mumbo in the eyes, and not even looking Mumbo in an approximation of his eyes as hidden by the helmet. Finally, he says: "I buried him."

"Okay," says Mumbo.

"I'll be outside."

"Okay," says Mumbo. "If..."

"Not now," says X.

"Alright."

"Take the pain meds. I won't let anything kill you."

"Except—"

"I won't."

"I don't trust you."

"I know."

X steps outside again. He closes the door. It latches. Mumbo stares after the door for a while. He's not sure what to make of any of that. He looks at the bottle of pain pills. He doesn't trust X at all. X has never had his best interests in mind. X has just seen his brother's dead body, and can't possibly be stable. X just almost killed him, after seeing his brother's dead body.

They've only known each other for three days, Mumbo thinks. Is that really true? Time doesn't feel real anymore, and Mumbo's an idiot anyway. A real spoon, to use Grian's words, or anyone's, really.

He takes the pain pills, and it doesn't take long for him to fall asleep after that.

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When Mumbo wakes up again, he feels sick. He's not in pain, but he feels ill, and shaky. He realizes he has not eaten in quite some time, and that while the pain pills have worked, they have, as they always do with him, made him feel terrible alongside working. Wonderful. He'd, uh, known that would happen, but he still feels miserable and drawn-out thanks to the medication, so, you know, knowing it would happen hadn't really made it better. He'd even go so far as to say it had made things worse.

There's no one in the room with him. X had kept to his word and stayed outside.



"Hey," Mumbo says hoarsely. "Are you still outside? I'm going to throw up. Or eat something? Maybe both? You know, why do I feel so much like throwing up when I really, really need food? I'm not sure, really, and, oh, maybe I'm still a little loopy, what with the pain pills. What was in the pain pills? I'm going to eat something and die, I think—"

"I'm here," X says, stepping inside. "Right. Food. You need that. There's some somewhere. Let me come back with some in a few minutes."

"Oh, that's fine," Mumbo says. "You know, my voice feels funny when I talk like this. Funny. Oh, that's a nice word to say. Funny. Funny. Funny. Fffffffunny. Ffff. Ffff."

"Geez," X says, and leaves the room, which feels rude.

"Ffff," Mumbo says, stuck on the word now. Not a word? Sound. "Ffff. FFffffffunny. Fffffuuuuun. Fffffff." He continues doing this until his lips are tired, and until he discovers that the sheets feel too scratchy. He pulls them off of himself. Funny—he doesn't remember getting under them, but his head is fuzzy, and he does feel dizzy and miserable, so maybe he'd imagined not putting the sheets over himself? He can't normally sleep without sheets or a blanket or something like that over himself, so he probably did that so he could sleep. Fff. Funny.

X comes back with what appear to be ration bars.

"Try to keep one down."

Mumbo's not sure how he manages it, but he eats one. Then, he squints at X. "Is this poisoned? Oh, that's also a fun... poisoned. Is it? pooooisoned."

"You are very high," X says, "and it's not."

"Okay," Mumbo says. "Poisoned. Funny. Poi. Poi. Pppppoi. Pp."

"I'll be outside," X says.

"P," Mumbo says, which he will later realize isn't much of an answer at all, but in the moment feels appropriate, and is probably the only thing he can get himself to say, anyway. His brain has gotten stuck on sounds and words, and when it does that, it's very hard to say anything else. "P. P. Poooi..."

He eats the ration bars and he falls asleep again soon afterwards, because he gets bored of making sounds with his mouth, and bored of thinking about feeling sick, and bored of feeling like anything at all.

---

When Mumbo wakes up again, everything aches, but not as badly as it did before. He blinks, blearily, through the visor of X's helmet, which is surprisingly comfortable for sleeping in. He supposes he knows why he never saw X take it off. He blinks blearily again when he realizes that, at some point, X had come into the room with him. The burn cream on Mumbo's back had been changed. His broken arm has been better bandaged and slung up again, so it's once again nearly impossible to accidentally move it. X looks like a deer caught in the headlights, though.

"You..."

"You said you didn't trust me. I did it while you were asleep." There's a long pause. "You fool. For sleeping."

"I'm a fool for sleeping. So you could do first aid."

"Yes, exactly."

Mumbo is too tired to try to process that. He just nods instead. "Well, if you could do it while asleep, you could do it while awake, I suppose. You haven't killed me yet, even if you *were* going to take blood earlier."

"It was stupid," X says. "It was really stupid."

"I know that feeling."

"I don't want him to be dead. I thought... you're immune, I think. They were keeping someone around who was... That's why I was going to kill you, originally. Find and kill whoever Concorp had nearby. I knew you had to be, I'd heard. And, well, I didn't know how to drive, and if they'd screwed up this badly, I may as well use their last hope, right? Take you here and do... something. I don't know. I'm not the smart one. I'm not the—Xisuma was the one who would have—I don't know how experiments work. I couldn't drive, even though it turns out I could learn quickly. Once I didn't need... I probably just would have... God, I don't know. I don't know. *I don't know.*"

"Right," says Mumbo, weakly.

"It was stupid," X says.

"Right," says Mumbo.

"I'm not going to," X says.

"Right," says Mumbo, a third time.

"There's no point anymore. I've realized that now. Not much of a point to anything. It made so much sense at the time, but it... It's stupid. It's stupid."

Mumbo blinks. He hadn't expected that. X still isn't looking at Mumbo. "My plan wasn't very well thought-out. Xisuma used to tell me when I was doing that. When I was making plans that didn't make any sense. I was going to... so I was going to kill you. Use the blood to, what, fix me? I really hadn't thought it out. Kill everyone in Concorp. Probably find your friend, too. Grian's a prick. So's Xisuma. I was going to kill him. I didn't actually want Xisuma dead, though."

"Oh," Mumbo says. "Well, I guess I was right. You decided you wouldn't. Except you nearly did, so I don't really feel like believing you."

"You know, that's fair," X says.

They fall quiet for a bit. Mumbo doesn't know what he's supposed to do here. He's still feeling quite terrible, as he could have predicted he would after taking the pain medication. X looks like he also feels quite terrible.

"You really didn't have a plan," Mumbo says. "I hadn't really known I was being kept around because I was immune to being a monster, though. I'd always sort of assumed I was around to make sure Grian stayed in line, and for, um. I'm good at what I do. I'm really good. Even remotely, I'm really good, at mechanics. And I didn't mean to know so much. Um, more than I was meant to by far. That's Grian's job, not mine. I just..."

"Well, it's that too," says X. "Probably."

He falls deeply silent again. Mumbo opens his mouth to speak, but the expression on X's face makes Mumbo stop again. For a moment, Mumbo wants to ask. He wants to ask about X's face. He wants to ask why X claims to no longer want to kill him (other than that it was a dumb plan). He wants to ask if X is okay, but Mumbo thinks that's probably a really stupid question. Mumbo's not okay himself. X just buried his brother, apparently. Or, not just. It depends on how long Mumbo had slept for. Also, X hated his brother, Mumbo thinks.

"Do you know where a phone charger is?" Mumbo asks instead of anything sensible. "My phone is out of battery."

"Oh," X says.

"My charger's in my bag, and I don't think I can leave right now, can I? So I want to know if you have anywhere I can charge this. Just in case Grian tries to text me, or something."

X snorts. "Good luck with that."

This time, it's Mumbo's turn to be tellingly silent. He grips his phone in his pocket. He doesn't say anything. He could, um, say that they need a phone charger anyway, but he doesn't want to? That's not why he wants it charged right now, and he's pretty sure both him and X know it. He clenches his hands around the sheets. He hates this, actually. He really, completely hates this conversation. No wonder X kept on being so quiet. No wonder!

They stare at each other a while longer. Mumbo feels like he's almost not allowed to look away.

"You know he's probably dead, right?" X says.

Mumbo is silent.

"If Xisuma was dead, Grian's probably dead, too. My plan was terrible. What's your plan? What do you plan on doing when he's dead? Do you even have a plan? Tell me Mumbo, what do you plan to do when you turn up, and Grian's dead?"

There's viciousness in X's voice now. It rings in Mumbo's ears. He knows what X is saying is mostly meant to be cruel. He knows X is hurting. He knows he's tired of hurting, too.

"I was planning on dying," he says, and he doesn't really take pleasure in the expression on X's face. He's just tired.

"What?"

"I said, I was planning on dying. I mean, what was all of this if not an elaborate way to make me feel better about my inevitable death? So if Grian's dead when I get there, I mean. I won't have much of a reason to keep pretending anymore, now will I? So, um, that's my plan. To die."

X stares at him, mouth open.

"Sorry about your brother," Mumbo says. "I don't know what to do either, clearly. But, um, please don't. Throw Grian in my face. Can you leave now? This clearly isn't going well."

X leaves. Mumbo realizes he never got his phone charger. Great. Fantastic. What is he going to do for the next... however long it is until the painkillers wear off enough that he feels like standing up? He doesn't have anything to do with his hands now! Just fantastic. X had already finished making sure Mumbo was mostly bandaged up properly, while he was asleep. There are only a few places that probably need bandages that don't have them left. Mumbo can bandage those, he thinks. He

can get those patched up, just so he has something he can do with his hands, instead of thinking about the way they're shaking.

He hadn't been lying to X at all, is the thing. Mumbo knows full well when the truth will hurt more than anything else.

---

X walks back in after a few hours.

(It hits Mumbo that another day of knowing each other has probably passed. He doesn't know what he feels about that. Empty, mostly. There are no windows in this cheap hospital room, or whatever it originally was; Mumbo has the sinking suspicion that, given everything else Concorp does, 'hospital' probably isn't an accurate word. Well, it doesn't particularly matter, either way; they're underground, and the mood is strange and icy.)

"I won't do that again," X says.

Mumbo nods, silently.

"I wanted to say I appreciate you trying to be my friend," X says, and it sounds sort of like squeezing toothpaste out of a tube. Mumbo tilts his head, baffled. "I never told Xisuma that. I mean, naturally, I hated him. He wasn't going to *change that*. He deserved every bit of hate I gave him. Every last bit of it. *I hated him so much*." He paces across the room. "But I never told him that I appreciated him for trying. That I..."

"Do you have my phone charger?"

"Yes, yes, I have your phone charger. I brought your whole bag. You have some stupid things in there. I have so many questions about your priorities while packing. Here." He tosses it across the room. Mumbo plugs his phone in and waits the precious minutes it takes for it to reboot after its battery has drained entirely. He'll be able to see Grian's messages again. He'll be able to use the GPS again, even if it's just the offline maps. He'll have his lifeline again.

He's staring at his phone, waiting, when X says: "You know I am not allowing you to die now. You understand that."

Mumbo looks up.

"You're unallowed, my friend. I've decided I'm not allowing such things, no matter what you said earlier."

Mumbo considers yelling again. He considers punching X. He'd really, *really* deserve it. "I don't want to be alone," though, is what comes out of Mumbo's mouth.

"You won't," X says.

"You know, we've only known each other for a few days," Mumbo says.

"Well, they were very hard days," X says, sheepishly, and for the first time in a while, Mumbo laughs. It is an awfully silly thing to be the first thing he's laughed at in a long time. There are probably much better options, and much funnier things someone could have said. There are less dire times for his first genuine laugh in a long time to have happened, and less dire, dark, desperate parts of his heart that can drag a laugh out. But the laugh, it's genuine, and it's not really bitter at all. It's mostly at the tone of X's voice. It doesn't help when X puffs up and sputters about being laughed at. Understandable, Mumbo thinks, to puff up at being laughed at. He'd done that before

he realized it was more fun to laugh along. Unfortunately, it doesn't help X at all, and Mumbo laughs harder.

"You, you... fool—"

"You, like that word, you, haha, really like it—"

"Why are you laughing at me? What have I done?"

"I mean," says Mumbo. "I mean, you're right! They were, haha, hard days?"

"What's so funny about... about..." X giggles, a little bit. "Well, I suppose your face is funny enough, and, hehehe, it is a little catching when you—why are you laughing harder?"

"You have a funny laugh."

"I hate you!" X says, and it doesn't sound genuine at all.

Mumbo thinks he's a bit of a pushover still, for all he's decided he won't be anymore, because hearing X continue to try not to giggle as Mumbo laughs at something that wasn't much of a joke at all, Mumbo is prepared to forgive X, just a little bit. Not all the way. But he's tried. He's trying. Maybe if the circumstances were different, he wouldn't have. Certainly if they'd met when the world wasn't ending, he wouldn't have. But right here, right now—

Mumbo doesn't want to be alone when the time comes, is all. It's nicer, not being alone. He doesn't have a choice, he thinks, but to try to forgive X, or, well, maybe not so much forgive him as...

He finishes laughing, and he feels a bit better, still.

---

After a time, X tells him: "Put Grian's address in your GPS."

"Why?" Mumbo asks. He's somewhat wary. He has the right to be, he thinks.

"I made you drive me here to find my dead brother. You have a broken arm. I'll drive you to find your stupid dead friend, or something."

Mumbo blinks. There's something odd in X's tone. It's like an apology, he thinks, or the closest thing to one he's going to get. Taking the offer, of course, is still objectively stupid, given everything that's happened, but Mumbo doesn't want to be alone, and neither does X. That, Mumbo thinks, will certainly have to be enough for now.

"Okay," he says. "Sure. But, uh, hold on."

He considers for a moment, and then, with great satisfaction, punches X in the face. It's not a very good punch, and Mumbo doesn't think it does any damage, but he *does it*.

"OW! HEY! What the heck was that for, man?"

"Everything?" Mumbo says, and X mostly just pouts, which is sort of an apology too.

...that really did make him feel much better than it should have.

---

They leave shortly after that. They bring the pain pills, and the burn cream, and a lot of bandages, and that bottle of whatever Mumbo had taken to feel better after being poisoned that he's sure must

be illegal. As they walk outside of the building, Mumbo sees it. There's a sheet of bent metal sticking out of the ground. Ugly yellow reflective tape has been used to spell Xisuma's name. It doesn't seem like it will last well in the rain, but then again, reflective tape *is* meant to survive the weather. As far as headstones in the apocalypse go, Mumbo thinks, it... it almost works.

It's nicer than what Mumbo would have gotten. Thought he'd get. It's fitting, Mumbo thinks distantly. It is.

"I'm sorry," Mumbo says.

"You should be," X says on instinct, curled into himself. It doesn't sound like he means it at all, though, so Mumbo lets it go.

"I didn't know him that well. Only distantly. But, um..."

"I buried him," says X. "Out here. So he'd get to see the sun."

Mumbo looks at the headstone, and looks back at the facility, and looks back at X. "It's visible," Mumbo says. "With the tape."

"...you know, that's exactly the kind of joke that—that—that—"

X starts crying. Mumbo, vaguely panicked, pats X on the back. He's not sure that helps? He thinks he's probably not being helpful. "There, there?"

"Shut up," X says.

"Okay," says Mumbo.

"I was going to kill him. I loved him. Let's go get Grian," X says.

"Um, well, if you'd like—"

"Don't say anything else."

Mumbo nods. It's, at the end of the day, not his grief, really. He'd honestly barely known Xisuma, the sort of distant coworker who mostly seemed nice as someone he'd interact with on rare occasions. It's not his place, and not his grief, to say anything to. Instead, he lets X cry, and keep crying when they get in the car, and stop crying after three failed attempts to get the engine running before they both realized they needed to hotwire it again to get it to turn on. He doesn't say anything about it, because it's not the same thing at all as what he'd feel with Grian in circumstances like that, but in some ways, maybe it is.

He just sits there next to X, and he thinks about the fact that this is probably a very bad time to be the second time in X's life for him to be driving a car. If, um, they both die of X having crashed the car. Is that technically Mumbo's fault for encouraging it? Also, does that give them both, technically, a 50% car driving success rate? Mumbo's fairly certain those would be terrible odds. Would it be more or less embarrassing if they don't crash and die a fiery death on the way to Grian's place? It's only a four and a half hour drive, so he'd assume probably less, but it's really hard to be certain.

He straps his seatbelt on and ponders. It would be embarrassing, he thinks, given that Mumbo's the one of the two of them that's driven before. X might be some sort of lab-grown super soldier or something, but that doesn't excuse the fact that he's never had driving lessons and Mumbo has and, oh boy, they're moving now. They're moving.

The GPS tells them to turn left. X turns right, realizes his mistake, and awkwardly backs right back into the driveway for Concorp, while Mumbo grips the armrest like no one's business.

"Are you sure you know how to drive?" Mumbo asks.

X rubs his eyes. They're still watery. "Honestly, no. But I did it before. How hard can it be to do it a second time?"

"It can't possibly be that difficult," Mumbo says. "Right. If we both die, this is your fault, understood? I had nothing to do with any of this. I was perfectly content to prepare for you to murder me, as was the original plan. Not that I planned on dying."

"I have words from you that are a direct contradiction of that," X says, his tone significantly brighter but still wobbly, and then they're on the road.

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"Do I still call you X? I mean, well, I'm pretty sure you told me that was your name so I'd think you were Xisuma, right?"

X concentrates closely on the road as they pull down the gravel road that had taken them to the facility's doors. "No, call me X. It's the one name I've given myself. There's no one left I'm stealing it from anymore. It's only me. It's... I'm the only X, now."

"Alright," Mumbo says, and that is that.

## Chapter End Notes

tomorrow: the sheep

this is mostly a chapter about dealing with the fallout of things, isn't it? to be fair, at this point, there's a ton of fallout to deal with. they... sure haven't processed all of it, but they sure actually *talked through* some things. desperate times and all that!

we're getting real near the end now.

# the sheep

## Chapter Summary

in which mumbo and x talk about life, because what else are you supposed to do when the car ride isn't trying to kill you for once?

## Chapter Notes

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

After a bit of driving, two things become clear. The first is that X is an almost annoyingly good driver. It should not be allowed, Mumbo thinks, for someone who hasn't driven before to be so good at driving, but X is, and here they are. Mumbo sort of wants to shove him, or maybe convince him to crash the car. His only weakness appears to be a total inability to tell left from right while driving, and, well, who *doesn't*? Have a total inability to tell left from right, Mumbo means. That's just most of the population, unfortunately.

So, X can drive, and Mumbo's going to have to deal with that, emotionally. He's going to, emotionally, have to deal with the fact that he's worse at driving than someone who's been driving for all of two days. Should that be a surprise? He did crash one car and nearly crash the second, but there had been extenuating circumstances both times, hadn't there? So it's hardly his fault he'd nearly crashed the car! Why, he might even claim it's the opposite of his fault!

None of this, he thinks, is actually helping with his self-esteem in this situation, or with the awkward air of silence the car has taken on, like neither of them know what to say after X had been crying earlier. After the weight of everything that had happened. Under the weight of where they'll be in several hours.

They can't just be awkwardly silent for... Mumbo checks the GPS. Four hours and six minutes? Surely they can't.

Mumbo remembers the first long stretch of driving they'd done together.

...perhaps they can, he thinks. They'd certainly managed a lot of awkward silences then. They'd mostly only filled when Mumbo had started talking. The thing is, this time, that Mumbo doesn't really want to start talking. If he starts talking, he might start saying things. If he starts saying things, those things might end up being things he regrets. Altogether, no one would be happy with that, now would they?

The silence grows more oppressive. X's inexplicable ability to drive a car despite having never done it before grows more annoying. Clearly, despite Mumbo's lack of desire to do something, something will have to be done.

"How did you and Xisuma meet?" he asks, and then kicks himself.

"...Mumbo," X says.

"Right, sorry, obvious question, right, right." He laughs. How does he bring this back? "Grian and I met in university! I was trying to learn computer engineering, and I was doing work study, and he'd



broken a laptop? I still don't really understand what he'd done to it, it genuinely baffles me what he can... Anyway, we managed to hit it off." Mumbo stops to consider for a moment. "When we graduated, I think he'd changed majors like, three times, but somehow he was still graduating on time? Honestly, given what he does now, it may have been that he'd already been scouted out for a job, you know? Honestly, it wouldn't surprise me if he'd already been, you know, when he started school."

"Right," says X.

Mumbo thinks. He's not really talked to X much about Grian, has he? Of course, there had been the animosity between them, and the fact that animosity from X had almost certainly extended to Grian, but still! The animosity had been almost sickening, and maybe talking about Grian would have cut through it? Come to think of it, Mumbo doesn't know much about X, either, or Xisuma, outside of the bits of things you learn about someone by occasionally being in long Teams calls with them. If they're going to be stuck in the car together for the next several hours anyway...

Well, no. Mumbo wouldn't normally consider oversharing with just any stranger in the car, or bus, or other mode of transportation. That would be absurd. The thing is, simply, that Mumbo is still wearing X's helmet, and X is driving the car, and until Mumbo's arm heals, X will still be driving the car, and Mumbo rather suspects that X will still be in the car after that, too. And probably driving, given how irritatingly good at it X is for some reason? The point is, Mumbo rather suspects they'll spend a lot of time together.

Also, Mumbo doesn't want to think about how close they are to Grian now. He does, but he doesn't. He wants to see Grian again. He doesn't want to think about seeing Grian again. He doesn't want to think about what they might find when they get there. So, he needs something else to think about. So, they all need something to talk about instead. So, so...

"You know, I don't know much about you."

"You're the one who pointed out we only met a few days ago, aren't you?"

"I mean, I guess that's true," Mumbo says. "I *am* the one who pointed that out. But, um, maybe we should know more about each other?"

"...this isn't a date," X says, sounding a bit strangled.

"What? No! No, I have absolutely no interest in dating you whatsoever." Mumbo pauses long enough for it to be mildly uncomfortable. "Or, no, wait, that sounded bad too, didn't it? I mean to say that I... I mean, I don't want to date you at all. I'm sure you're perfectly dateable, mind. A very lovely fellow. You've got handsome eyes and all that. The scales are a lovely color, really, and your personality is... well, that *could* use work, but..." Mumbo trails off. "...my point is! This isn't a date! Unless, of course, it's a friend date? You know, when you first meet a new friend, isn't that a sort of friend date? A getting to know each other day? I see no harm in friendship dates! Why, friendship dates are..."

"Mumbo," says X.

"Right," says Mumbo. "Sorry. I do talk too much sometimes."

"You answer a question I have about you, I'll answer a question you have about me," X says.

"Oh, good, that's what I was going to suggest. Or, well, not actually that, I was originally going to look up getting-to-know-you icebreakers on Google, but then I remembered that Google is down,

and then I was going to panic a little."

"I am not doing icebreakers with you," X says, sounding far too exhausted. Mumbo concedes that maybe the idea had been a tad silly.

"Fine, I mean, good. You already came up with one."

"...is that an icebreaker?"

"I mean, I guess?"

The two of them ponder the very important categorization problem they'd just invented for a moment. Mumbo thinks that... well, it's a game about asking each other questions? That's basically an icebreaker. Oh, he hopes that X doesn't ask Mumbo for any fun facts. He's not very good at those. They always make him anxious. He feels like all the fun facts in his life are depressing, like the fact he hadn't been meant to leave his apartment, or aren't particularly interesting, like the parrot toy he'd been making for Grian. How is he supposed to make himself fun? He mostly just feels strange at best!

Er, what were they thinking about again...? Oh, right, asking each other get-to-know-you questions.

"I can start?" Mumbo says. "I mean, I know I just told you about Grian and I, so I can ask the first question. Unless, of course, you have a question."

"No, by all means."

Mumbo considers. "What's your favorite color?"

"Red, like blood," X answers, with almost impressive promptness. "Also black. Red and black. Because they're very cool."

Somehow, this knowledge about X doesn't surprise Mumbo at all.

"You know, blood isn't actually red anymore. Or, well, my blood is, and I suppose from what I saw, Xisuma's... sort of was? It was a weird, saturated, neon-y sort of red, though. Not really the same red as blood is supposed to be at all. And the other monsters? Well." Mumbo pauses.

"Actually, I haven't seen you injured at all. I'd guess that your blood is sort of neon-y red, too, from the heart, but is it? I don't know. It makes me feel something that my blood is still red, but I'm not sure if it's a good or a bad feeling, so frankly I've mostly ignored it."

"I heal quickly," X says. "It's one of my... intended qualities? Really, though, I'm also far better at not getting injured in the first place than you, geez."

"I mean, that's fair," Mumbo says.

"But yes. My blood is the same color as Xisuma's."

"Oh. That's neat, I think."

"Neat," mouths X, and Mumbo graciously decides not to respond. It's a perfectly reasonable response! Far better than the other response to these things, which would be to panic. Mumbo's had quite enough of panicking, honestly. No more panicking for Mumbo now.

"Yours is still red," X says.

"Yes, well, I think that's, um, more normal than it not being. Or, was more normal. I suppose it isn't more normal now?"

"No, given that most people died or became a monster," X says bluntly.

"Right," Mumbo says. "You know you're a person, right? I think I've said that before, haven't I?"

X makes a face. "You know what I meant, Mumbo. It's my turn to ask you a question, right?"

"Yeah," Mumbo says.

"Did Grian ever try to kill you? He was remarkably adept at—"

"What? No! What on earth kind of friends did you think we were? Did Xisuma ever try to kill you? Because frankly—"

"Hm? No, but I didn't like him."

"What?"

"I don't know. I felt like my question was obvious, wasn't it?"

Mumbo throws his hands up. "I mean, I don't know! It's certainly not a normal question from where I'm looking at it, that's for certain!"

"Well, my bad," X says.

"Who did you like that tried to kill you?" Mumbo asks, curiously.

"My psychologist. Well, I guess it was a fake trying to kill me. It was mostly so I'd have an excuse to fight back and steal this thing. He was cool like that."

Mumbo winces. "You know, the more I hear about this, the more convinced I am your childhood must have been a war crime. Like, I know I've committed war crimes, apparently, but whoever was in charge of your childhood must have committed several."

X falls silent for a while. Mumbo realizes he's probably overstepped a little. Calling someone's childhood a war crime is the sort of thing a lot of people would find upsetting, Mumbo thinks? Or, he'd assume so? Oh, he should probably apologize for that, except he's not really sorry, because he's not lying or anything. He's telling quite a lot of truth, even. It's just a truth that's a bit uncomfortable. One isn't meant to simply apologize for uncomfortable truths.

"Not all of it," X says, finally.

"That's fair," Mumbo says.

They fall back to silence again for a bit. Mumbo decides to try to remember to not ask X more questions about his childhood. It's less that X is unwilling to talk now, and more that Mumbo feels uncomfortably like he's not meant to know yet. Like he hasn't unlocked a high enough level of friendship for this. He stares out the window as the trees and hills roll past. The trees are getting less frequent, and the ground is getting flatter.

They're getting closer, Mumbo thinks, and, well, who knows what he thinks of that. Mumbo doesn't. It feels like a clock ticking down. A good clock, mostly! But also a dread. He hadn't known. Not knowing, that was terrible. Will knowing be more terrible, he wonders? If he knows what happened to Grian—if he knows what's happening now—will he be happy? Or will he be

horrified? He can see himself being horrified. He's not sure he knows how to see himself being happy.

"What makes you happy?" Mumbo asks.

"Uh, flowers, I think," X says.

"That's nice," Mumbo says, and he tries to imagine X somewhere surrounded by flowers. It's nice, but also somewhat incongruous. Maybe the flowers should have guns.

"What about you?" X asks.

"Circuit boards," Mumbo says, instead of saying any of the other things he could say about what makes him happy. There are a lot of abstract things that do, like the wind, and a good night's sleep, and Grian, and not being alone, but the one he thinks would be comparable to flowers is his circuit boards.

"Nerd," X says.

"I don't claim otherwise?" Mumbo responds, baffled, and X snorts.

"Who's turn is it?" X asks.

"Um, yours," Mumbo says.

And so the game continues. It almost distracts Mumbo from the turning in his head and the time left on the GPS.

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The thing about the landscape on long car rides, Mumbo decides, is that it changes altogether more slowly than you expect it to. He expects that, suddenly, he'll feel like he's away from the sort of landscape he's familiar with from his city entirely, and into flat grasslands or something. Instead, though, with a few deviations, they're mostly heading straight, and the landscape changes slowly, and suddenly Mumbo realizes that the trees are subtly unfamiliar, the leaves colored slightly wrong, the ground beneath them slightly too flat, the air around them slightly too steady. At some point, the dense trees have started to give away to fields. It's been a long time since he'd left home, he thinks. It'd been a real long time.

Two hours from their destination—hours have passed, and they're just talking and driving—two hours from their destination, they come across a roadblock.

"We're going to have to go around," X says, slowing as they come across what appears to be a large collection of crashed cars. Mumbo's guard goes up. The highway must be approaching a formerly populated area. They'd done poorly in populated areas in the past.

"Alright," he says. "Does this GPS have one of those via features? Or waypoints? To tell the truth, I hadn't tried before."

"I guess we'll see," X says, and they both spend several minutes fiddling with it, trying to convince it to route them around the crash in the manner that requires going through the fewest populated areas possible. Unfortunately, there's only but so much they can do; apparently there's some suburb right next to the highway they'll have to drive right through.

"If I'm killed in the suburbs," Mumbo starts, and then he doesn't know how to finish the joke, so he just shrugs. X looks at him before looking back at the road. "Why did they even build these here

anyway? We aren't all that near a city. I mean, eventually we'll be near a city, but it's such a strange place to build all of these houses that look exactly the same. At least if you live out here, wouldn't you want to live somewhere that makes you feel less like a hostage?"

"We're close enough to a city, I guess. I don't know how real estate works," X says.

"Well, why not?" asks Mumbo.

"...Mumbo, why do you think?" asks X, bemused, and, ah. Right. Science experiments probably aren't taught many things about real estate. Mumbo thinks that's a shame. What if X had ever needed to buy a house? Knowing real estate would have been essential! He's not sure when X would need to buy a house, but...

The neighborhood feels depressing, though. It's so... constructed, Mumbo thinks. It's not that suburbs are somehow inherently depressing! As far as Mumbo knows they're, uh, probably fine? He doesn't spend much time in them. He didn't as a kid, and he wouldn't now. Still, he's sure they're perfectly reasonable, in places that suburbs feel like they *should* be. This, Mumbo thinks, just doesn't feel like a place one should be. It feels like someone decided to try to build a town, and decided to make that town out of suburbs, and decided not to care about anything else. Everything else nearby is the middle of the country, but here, it's suddenly populated, and it's populated in these terrible houses, and it's just... strange. Strange.

Mumbo looks back to the front of the car. Maybe he shouldn't be judging? He's currently riding in a Nissan that he'd stolen from a small town in the mountains. He really, really can't judge, he thinks.

They're quiet for a while. Mumbo watches the horizon, and the doors of the buildings, and everywhere he can for any sign of life. There's none. As best either of them can tell—or at least, as best Mumbo can tell, he supposes he doesn't know what X can tell—this sprawling suburb is mostly full of houses for sale, Mumbo thinks, rather than houses with people actually in them. It's a place filled with shells, so many shells that there aren't even shells of people left. There are still signs hanging in front of some of the abandoned lots.

It feels like a waste of space, and it feels like it's lulling Mumbo into a false sense of security. He has to keep an eye out in case something moves. He has to...

"You know, I wasn't supposed to leave my apartment, but at least it was in the city," Mumbo says.

"Oh?" X asks, and Mumbo's going to have to guess what part of his statement is the part X actually wants to know more about, isn't he? Well, doable enough.

"Um, well. You already knew I wasn't supposed to leave. I crushed the thing they were using to make sure before I left. Um, unless they were tracking my phone. But, really, if they were also tracking my phone, then... that isn't how you found me, is it?"

"No, I don't know how to do that," X assures Mumbo.

"How... did you find me?" Mumbo asks, now deeply curious.

"Um," X says.

"You didn't have a plan at all," Mumbo says.

"...maybe," X says. "Maybe I knew you were supposed to be *somewhere* in the city, or at least, one of the people with immunity they'd been keeping around, and..."

"X, just my neighborhood has hundreds of people living there. The city proper has a population in the hundred thousands. The metropolitan area has nearly a million."

"Well, how was I supposed to know that!"

"By googling it?"

"I found you anyway," X says, and Mumbo supposes he can't really argue with that. He had, indeed, been found. Somehow. Honestly, the utter lack of reasonable plan that X had in general had been... something, Mumbo thinks. He's not sure how to describe what kind of something, but some kind of something. It makes X less intimidating, maybe. More human? Mind you, it still annoys Mumbo that he was going to die for almost no plan at all, and hurts something in Mumbo that he'd been dragged halfway across the country, practically, to go get to someone who turned out to be dead, in a plan that no one had thought out at all, but...

Well, it's also a little endearing, how Mumbo has done most of the actual planning. It's a bit different from being with Grian, who is very good at planning everything, or Iskall, who is... very Iskall about things. X does make plans! They're just also terrible plans, so Mumbo shouldn't listen to them, which leads to a very strange sense of who is and isn't in charge indeed.

Now that Mumbo is (probably against his better judgment) no longer particularly afraid that X is about to kill him, it's mostly just silly and endearing.

"...can you tell me more?" X asks. "You said you thought you were there for—"

"To keep Grian in line," agrees Mumbo. "And because I knew a lot of things, um, I probably wasn't meant to, and because I'm smart, and I guess because of the immunity thing you... But also for Grian. I mean, he's very good at his job. Or, I think he is. He hasn't talked to me much about it. I know he does... a lot of things. He's an intelligence asset, mostly, but a lot of things."

"I know what you meant," X says, looking strangely annoyed. "I've dealt with him."

"Um, right. Also, I wasn't supposed to tell you that. Normally I'm good about telling people that he works as a business analyst, even though I think that would make him go right mad. Or a personnel officer? I think that's the one he normally says. I guess that's more accurate."

"I already knew, so," X says, shrugging. "Continue."

"Anyway, um, from what I understand, he's... scary on his own? I sort of get it. I mean, when he's really talking things through, or leading stuff, he, uh, he's kind of ruthless? He's really good at what he does, when he's talking for all of us. Or just... talking for me." Mumbo shrugs. "I mean, he hasn't, I don't think, ever gone full-bore with me, he doesn't, but..."

"I have seen the ruthlessness. That is rather what he's known for," says X, turning a corner in the suburbs. The empty houses practically seem to echo back the (frankly wet blanket-like) sound of their engine back at them. There's nothing here to attack them at least, Mumbo thinks, and that's probably a good thing! It's just them, and the road, and this conversation.

"Yes, well..." Mumbo thinks fondly back. "He's rather bad at knowing where to stop sometimes. He does try, though. It doesn't seem like it, if you don't know him? But he tries not to go too far. At least, not with his friends."

"To be honest? From what little I'd worked with him, I hadn't realized he had those."

"What?"

"Friends."

Mumbo blinks. "Oh, he's a very friendly person. He can be a little mean about it, but in a sweet way? I don't know. I miss talking to him. Normally we talked a whole lot."

"Wait," says X. "Stop talking. I think I see something."

If Mumbo squints, whatever it is, he thinks he might see it too? There's something shifting in the empty houses. He steadily reaches into the back of the car to grab his wrench. It will, of course, be less effective when he only has one hand to swing it with and will be even *less* effective than having X fire his rifle out of the car, but X is driving, and Mumbo will make due with what he has, alright?

Something shifts in the distance, and Mumbo sees it. It looks remarkably like...

"That's a sheep," X says. "Why is there a sheep?"

"Is it an evil sheep?" Mumbo asks, immediately feeling very silly. "I mean, there is farmland out here. I didn't see any livestock on the farmland. I figured it had all... well, I'm not sure. What *has* happened to the animals?"

"This," says X.

Slowly, they drive the cow towards it. Yes, as best they can tell, it's an ordinary sheep. The eyes aren't right for it to be a monster. It doesn't have any of the echoes of a human face. It is simply a sheep that had gotten loose in the suburbs. The two of them stare at it for a while.

"This reminds me of Dr. Zedaph," X says.

"How?" asks Mumbo, a little incredulous.

"Sheep," X says sagely, and he sort of wants to know more, but he's not going to ask. He's absolutely not going to ask. That sounds like an entire story that Mumbo isn't ready for.

"...it's nice seeing a normal animal," he says.

"I guess?" X says. "To be honest, I hadn't seen that many before. It was mostly things like guard dogs! The sheep is so... fluffy."

"I want to get out and touch it," Mumbo says, "but it's definitely for the better if I don't."

"We aren't getting out of the car," agrees X, and they drive past the sheep. They watch as it wanders into a broken door for one of the houses. Suddenly, Mumbo is struck with the odd image of a family of sheep living in the house. Maybe, he thinks, the sheep will take over? This suburb, built in the middle of the country practically for no reason at all, will become a place of sheep and livestock. They will live sheep lives inside the houses, and make sheep meals, and go to sheep school. What would a world taken over by sheep instead of humans even look like?

Well, for one, Mumbo thinks, as they drive across the soulless paved roads of this suburb, the sheep would probably plant more grass. That couldn't be a bad thing, having more grass around, right?

They leave the suburb, and they're in fields and country again. It's an odd experience, Mumbo thinks, going through a town built for no one except, apparently, a single sheep. They haven't been attacked yet. Maybe they won't be, Mumbo thinks distantly. Maybe all the monsters here had died

already, and that's why the sheep were coming in.

He wants a sheep, he thinks. Maybe, if this all ends—which it won't, he knows, but maybe...

"Do you think sheep make good pets?"

"Oh, I doubt it," X says, and they keep going. Not too many hours left, Mumbo thinks. Not too much longer. He leaves the wrench in his lap. Not much longer, but there's still time to come across danger, Mumbo thinks. There's still time.

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"Why don't you think we've seen much on the road?" Mumbo asks, trying to ignore the timer on the GPS. The GPS timer may be wrong. Their Nissan can't reach a lot of the highway speeds, after all, and the GPS, it's assuming they can go highway speed, especially since it can't download the maps. "I mean, we saw all kinds of monsters in the city, and then we left, and when we were in the country, we were nearly killed too. But now we don't see any, and it's honestly a bit concerning, isn't it?"

X turns. They've reached the point where they're going to have to turn again, Mumbo thinks distantly.

"Maybe they're scared of us now," X says, and that is, of course, nonsense, but they both nod like that's exactly what they believe, and move on. Mumbo almost wishes there were monsters. There's a sick sort of dread in his chest, when it comes to reaching the end. He wants to see Grian. He wants to see Grian so badly. But...

They're quiet for a while. Normally, Mumbo would make some kind of argument, but he's reeling. Maybe he's in pain again. Maybe he should take the pain medication again, even though it made him sick. Maybe if he took the pain medication, his chest wouldn't hurt as much? His lungs wouldn't burn? He'd thought the strange pills X had him take had mostly fixed the chemical poisoning, though. His lungs shouldn't be burning at all. His head shouldn't be spinning so much. He's dizzy. He's not looking at how much further they have until they get to Grian. The time estimate, after all, might be wrong.

"I took quantum physics in college," he says.

"Nerd," X says.

"Yes. Well," Mumbo says. "Well. It's not a electrical engineering requirement, but I'd wanted a minor in physics, and it seemed good to know. Electrons are very quantum, you know. That's not often relevant when you're working with electricity, but they're one of those things that exist as probabilities."

"Sounds like nonsense to me," says X.

"The world's a bit nonsense," Mumbo says. "You've heard the thing about the dead cat before, right? Mind you, the person who made that thought experiment, he wasn't trying to be serious about it. In fact, he thought quantum was rather silly."

"He killed a cat? That's very mean," X says.

"Well, not a real cat. Also, the cat might not be dead?"

"We should save the cat."



"That's, uh, not how this works."

"What do you mean? We're perfectly capable of saving cats," X argues. Mumbo notes down in his head that X clearly must like cats.

"Well, the thing is, the cat might already be dead," Mumbo says.

"That's stupid," X says.

"Well, that's—look, the idea is that, until you look at the cat, you don't know if it's dead or alive, right? So it's both. It's both dead and alive, until you observe it. Then, by looking at it, you know," Mumbo says. "And I was just..."

"But that's stupid," X says. "Either you save the cat, or you don't. Either you show up and your stupid... you show up and he's alive, or he's not. He can't be both."

"Well, that's why the cat was supposed to be an absurd hypothetical. It's just... that's how electrons work, is all," Mumbo says. "You don't know what they're like until you look at them, and when you do, you make it so their changed, because you looked at them."

"I don't get it at all," X says. "Looking at him isn't what killed Xisuma. Being too late is."

"Okay," says Mumbo. He's not sure what else to say. This isn't about Xisuma, after all. Or, maybe it is? Maybe Mumbo's idea of idle conversation is a mess these days. He's not sure. "I just. I think quantum mechanics are interesting, is all, or at least, the idea of the effect of measurement changing the thing you're measuring, and the idea of, of things that exist as something definitive only once you can measure that they're definitive—"

"We're here though," X says. "Or, just about. I think we shouldn't just park in front of his house. That way, if something happens, the car is still fine."

Mumbo stares at the windshield.

"Mumbo? Mumbo?"

Mumbo stares at the windshield some more.

"Geez," says X.

"We're just going to steal one of his," Mumbo says at last. "He has some nice cars. We can take those. We don't have to keep using this one."

"From your friend," X says. "Ruthless! I have to say I'm a fan."

Mumbo stays quiet. His hand, the one on the arm that isn't broken, is shaking, and he thinks the one on his broken arm is shaking too. He looks at the door of the car, and at the windshield, and he can't quite breathe.

"...geez," says X. "Didn't we just talk about this? With the cat? It's fine."

"Yeah," says Mumbo, dread and a number of other things that must not be dread curling in his heart. He grabs his bag from the backseat, and he puts it on his back. Either way, he's not coming back to this car, he thinks, but he does not tell X that, because X had told him he wasn't allowed to say things like that, and Mumbo will listen.

Then, with aching limbs and heart: he proceeds.

## Chapter End Notes

tomorrow: grian.

the calm before the storm, perhaps. or maybe: the hope in the eye? who knows. i will say that i've driven right past this big, recently-constructed suburb right in rural va, and that I remember also thinking "why would you move out here and then willingly move into the most horrible, cookie-cutter neighborhood imaginable" very distinctly. it was still at least half an hour to the nearest city center it made sense for it to be a suburb to. i don't know why I'm telling you this story but i sure am!

anyway. next chapter is the shortest in the fic by far. I'm sure between that and the title you aren't at all worried. haha. wild.

# **grian**

## Chapter Summary

do you know what this story is about?

## Chapter Notes

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

There are a lot of things about the neighborhood Mumbo won't remember well until later, or won't notice until later, or won't think about until later. For example: Grian does not have many neighbors outside of his surprisingly large and lonely house. He won't notice until later that the house is well-maintained, and, while a bit large, not particularly ostentatious. He won't notice until later that the yard has gotten a bit out of hand, though, or that there's a generator for power that isn't actually running, or that the driveway has blood and tire tracks on it. He won't notice until later the scraps of something terrible on the yard, nor will he notice the dents and scratches in the otherwise well-maintained windows.

These are all things that Mumbo, on a normal day, would have been perfectly capable of noticing. Perhaps he even would have wanted to notice the brick walls and white paneling, the small decoration hanging from the door, the tools outside of the garage that look like Grian just bought the first hardware he could find and had not considered whether he could or should actually use it. Perhaps he would have wanted to notice other details, like the way the air here is warmer than it is where Mumbo lives, or the way that the house feels like what Mumbo would have expected Grian to have and nothing like it all. He probably would have wanted to notice more about the neighbors, even, than that they were far away.

After all, Mumbo has not been here before. He has not seen Grian's house yet, not since they lived so far away these days. At another time, he thinks that, maybe, he would want to see everything here. He would want to see every bit of his best friend that Mumbo has never been able to see, and they would laugh, and Grian would say that next time, they can go make fun of Mumbo's apartment instead. Mumbo would joke about how only he's allowed to make fun of his terrible apartment, and Grian would say that he'd seen it in enough video calls to have an opinion, actually, and they would... they would have a good time, Mumbo thinks, the first time Mumbo would have seen Grian's house, if it weren't the apocalypse. If the power weren't out. If Mumbo weren't shaking like a leaf.

The thing is...

He's not sure what the thing is, he thinks, as he walks forward and notices none of the details at all. He has a key, he realizes, distantly. Unlike every other building he's walked in so far on this journey, he has a key for this one. Grian mailed it to him. For emergencies. It was a silly thing—they lived many hours apart, after all. There would hardly be emergencies when they needed each other's keys, not really.

Mumbo sent Grian a key too. He wonders if Grian would have done this. He thinks Grian would have. He thinks that's why he's doing this; because Grian would have done this, too.

He *hopes* Grian would have done this, too.

He continues walking up the driveway, and he doesn't see the grass. Somewhere behind him, he knows X is following, but suddenly, Mumbo doesn't care at all. What does he do after this? What does he *do*? He'd told X what he'd actually expected to have happen, and now it hasn't, and now Mumbo's heart is pounding.

He's not the ideas person, he thinks from a distance. That was Grian. That was anyone else. It's not that Mumbo doesn't have ideas. He has a great deal of ideas all the time, actually. It's just that, for something big like this, he liked to have other people who would help. Other people with ideas. Other people—anyone. Anyone at all. X's ideas are, as a whole, terrible though, and Grian is... he might not even be here, Mumbo thinks. He still doesn't see the driveway. He just sees the house.

He gets to the door. He puts the key in the lock. He unlocks the door politely. It has been far, far too long since he'd unlocked a door politely. Maybe he should break a window? For old time's sake. It would feel more like a rescue if he'd broken the window, he thinks. More like an invasion. More like the anomaly that this is meant to feel like.

Grian's front hall, Mumbo thinks, is small, and there is a red carpet in it. He notices the carpet. He's not sure why. He's not really registering much of anything else, but that red carpet stands out to him. Later, it will stand out in his memory, too. This whole day will feel red, like the carpet, and fuzzy, also like the carpet. Mumbo will be told that saying it like that is silly, and he'll say that his brain is silly, and he's allowed to have strange recollections of strange days, isn't he? He's allowed to remember the red carpet more than what time of day it is—evening—or anything else, really. Sometimes, his brain just thinks about the red carpet in the front hall, and that's alright, isn't it?

Anyway, he's just noticing this carpet, and trying to decide what to do about it, when he hears a horrible hawk-like screech, and something just slightly too big for the hallway barrels towards him.

Mumbo yells and stumbles backwards, tripping back out of the front hall again. He slams the door. He turns to X. He turns away from X. Whatever that was, he hadn't gotten a good look at it. It could have hurt Grian, he thinks distantly. Maybe that's why Grian had panicked, all those days ago when Mumbo had first gotten his message. There's a monster inside, and Mumbo doesn't know what to do about it. He's frozen.

"We do this my way," Mumbo says, after a moment. X rolls his eyes.

"Nonlethally, sure," he says. "Well, it is your friend."

"Right," says Mumbo. He pulls his wrench from his bag. "Right. We deal with this, and we find Grian, yeah? I mean, all things considered, that shouldn't be too hard. Too bad."

X shrugs. He says something that Mumbo doesn't hear properly. Behind the door, Mumbo hears the monster make another horrid, hawk-like screech. Something about that noise especially scrapes against the insides of Mumbo's ears, even with the noise canceling that X's helmet has been providing. He, uh, really doesn't like it. It makes him want to curl up and run away, or maybe throw up, or maybe just cover his ears and pace until he feels better. Or, well. Maybe that last feeling has nothing to do with the terrible screeching of the monster inside? Maybe that's just how Mumbo feels in general, right now.

Like throwing up. Or running away.

If he thinks hard enough, he thinks that he knows. He just has to remember that he already knows, really. He just has to *see*.

He opens the door again.

The monster is facing away from him now. It reminds Mumbo of a dinosaur. He doesn't remember what that kind of dinosaur is called. A raptor? Maybe? It's covered in feathers, reds and yellows and blues, though mostly reds. It has wings, and claws on the ends of those wings that scrape against the ground as the thing walks on all fours. It has a long, feathered tail. There are what appear to be eyes all along its spine, somehow, connected by neon purple blood vessels that poke in and out of the monster's skin. Mumbo doesn't know if the eyes work. They certainly don't seem to be blinking. They just seem to be watching the monster's back from where they dot along the monster's spine, but the monster hasn't turned around yet.

Mumbo raises his wrench. If he hits the monster in the leg, he thinks. If he manages to break a leg, well, he's not sure that, with the way those wings are built it can fly? So a good shot to the leg will probably be enough. He steps forward, mentally prepares himself—just this, he thinks, and he can figure out where Grian went—

The monster turns all at once. Mumbo shouts as the creature knocks him over with a wing and flings the wrench up, but it doesn't land true, and those claws look terrifying. Mumbo barely scrambles out of the way as the monster's claws slash straight for his throat, stumbling further backwards back out onto the yard. The carpet in the front hall, he thinks hysterically, is still red. Why does that stand out to him so much? It's such a stupid detail! No, wait, focus, he has to dodge out of the way of the claws again and he doesn't know what he's meant to *do* now, he just knows this is a fight he has to win, and probably on his own because the monster moves unpredictably in such a way that X probably won't be able to line up a usable shot on his own.

Of course, if X, who is decently good at sniping, can't line up a shot with the wild way the monster is moving, then Mumbo, still recovering from so many injuries that it's almost silly, holding a wrench, and with one arm, is also having some trouble lining up a hit. He's having trouble doing more than looking at the thing's claws, actually! He needs to focus to dodge, but his head is starting to pound. He just needs to finish this! He just needs to, to finish this, and to get to Grian, and it's almost over, he thinks, dodging another claw strike. The thing is chasing him across the lawn. Mumbo's about to run out of room to dodge. He just needs to get one good hit in, he thinks. Don't birds have hollow bones? Do dinosaurs have hollow bones? Maybe he should consider whether dinosaurs have hollow bones—

The thing is, Mumbo will think later: after everything that had happened, he was pretty distracted anyway, not even taking into account the fact that all the burn cream in the world couldn't quite solve the damage from the propane tank explosion. It was probably inevitable that Mumbo would miss a dodge.

It was probably a little silly, though, that he missed it while he was contemplating whether or not dinosaurs might develop hollow bones, if they're the winged kind.

Mumbo is slammed against the ground. X's helmet cushions his head, but the wind is violently knocked out of him and his back, already tender, screams it's displeasure at this turn of events. The monster weighs less than Mumbo thinks it should, even as it feels like it's pressing the air and strength out of Mumbo's chest as it leans on him. Points, he supposes, towards hollow bones.

He's so close, he thinks, as the monster raises a claw. He's so close. He's literally at Grian's house. Grian. *Grian*—

The claw bounces harmlessly off of X's helmet. Oh. Honestly Mumbo can't believe that thing is actually protecting him.

The monster turns to look at Mumbo. Mumbo stops cowering and looks at the monster, and then he stops altogether, going completely limp beneath the monster's feet. The monster doesn't stop,

taking the talons on its feet and grabbing Mumbo and starting to flap its wings, but Mumbo stops entirely. He has just caught a glimpse of the monster's face. The face. The thing that Mumbo has found the most consistently human, the most consistently recognizable. The eyes, the face.

Of course, he thinks hysterically, he'd be a bird.

Mumbo is lifted off the ground, into the air. So, he can fly. It seems to be hard. Mumbo wonders what it would feel like to fly; Mumbo wonders what it would feel like to be Grian. Mumbo wonders a lot of things.

They are getting awfully high.

"Grian," says Mumbo, at last. "Hey, Grian."

There is, of course, no recognition in Grian's eyes. Why would there be? Grian is just like every other mindless monster—except he's not. He's also a person. *They're all also people*, Mumbo thinks, and Mumbo had only gone and made himself a murder for *one* of them. He thinks of the serpent. He thinks of the body in the stairwell. He thinks of X.

"Grian," says Mumbo. "It's me. It's Mumbo. It's—hold on," he says, to the monster with no light behind its eyes. "Hold on."

He grabs the edges of X's helmet. It had protected him a moment ago, but now, Mumbo wants nothing to do with it. He tears it off and throws it down towards the ground. He needs his face to be visible. He needs...

He looks up at Grian, eye-to-eye. Grian is going higher. Ah, Mumbo realizes. This is an actual tactic some birds use, he thinks; they lift their prey high in the air while it's stunned, and then they drop it again to kill it. If he dies falling from the sky—Mumbo wonders what that would feel like.

He'd been made a murderer for this, he thinks. He'd been made a lot of things.

"Hey, it's me, it's your friend," he says to Grian, who doesn't respond. "Hey. I got your text. Awfully silly message of you, by the way, no idea what you meant by it, but I got it, Grian. I got your message." Grian doesn't respond. "I came all the way here after I got it. I thought I'd die Grian, I really did, but I made it all the way here. I didn't know I could do that, you know. I didn't know I could make it this far. I stole two cars. I broke a lot of windows. Considering some of the things we used to get up to—haha, you'd be proud of me."

Grian doesn't answer. Mumbo thinks they've stopped ascending.

"Are you proud of me?" he asks.

Grian doesn't answer.

"Grian," he says.

Grian doesn't answer.

"Please," he says. "Please. I came all the way here. I made it. I see you now, Grian. I'm here now. I'm sorry I took this long. Just, please..."

Grian doesn't answer.

"Please answer," he says.

Grian doesn't answer.

Mumbo feels his eyes begin to well up. He feels Grian's talons begin to loose their grip on Mumbo. Ah. In some ways, Mumbo thinks, it would be fitting if he died here. He'd get killed by his best friend. Wouldn't that be fitting, all things considered? Honestly, it's probably what Mumbo deserves. He'd set out knowing he'd probably die, he'd made it to his goal, and his goal is now about to kill him. Doesn't that describe how a lot of things in life go? He should probably just accept it. After all, they're high enough in the air now that there isn't much else Mumbo can do *but* accept it. It's not as though there's escape at this point.

He remembers something. His eyes well up further. He chokes as he says: "Wait. Grian, wait, wait, please—"

Grian doesn't answer, but he hasn't let go yet. It's hard to grab something out of a bag you're holding on your back when a monster is holding you, Mumbo thinks, but he does his best anyway. It takes a few tries to fish it out. It's dented. He holds it up.

"I'm sorry I brought it to you before it was finished. Um, it's—it's the bird. The one I promised that I'd bring you when I was done, so we could see each other. Here."

He squeezes the voice box. The bird chimes: "Pesky bird!"

Grian doesn't let go of Mumbo yet.

"It's for you," Mumbo says. "It's for you, Grian. That's your voice. I'm sorry. I'm sorry. *I'm sorry.*"

They hang in silence. Mumbo feels the claws slip around his shoulders. He squeezes the bird again and listens to Grian's voice, and then he falls. He has a moment to consider everything that brought him to this point. He has a moment to hear X shout. He has a moment to consider—

Something grabs his shoulders again. He can feel it leave long scratch marks from the momentum as he jerks to a stop. He looks up.

"P... pesk...y bird," says the monster.

"Ye—yeah!" says Mumbo. "Pesky bird. That's you! Haha, that's you, Grian, that's..."

"Pes... pesky bird!" says the monster. Mumbo holds up the bird and squeezes it again.

"Yeah," says Mumbo. "Yeah. That's you, buddy. That's you. That's you. That's you."

"Mumbo," says the monster, sounding confused as he does. "Pesky bird. Mumbo."

Mumbo laughs, and it turns into something hysterical. "Yeah. Yeah, you've got it. You've got it. Grian. *Grian.*"

They hang in the air for a while, and then, slowly, Grian brings Mumbo back down to earth. Mumbo does not stop looking at Grian's eyes. Grian does not stop looking at him. When they touch the ground, carefully, Mumbo hands Grian the bird. Grian takes it in one of his claws, staring at it.

"Pesky bird," Grian says.

"Yeah," says Mumbo. "Yeah. We'll figure this out. It's okay. We'll figure—we'll—we'll—we'll figure this out. We'll figure this out. We'll figure this out."

He begins to sob as X runs over. He does not stop as X grabs his arm as gently as possible and

starts making concerned noises about bandaging the claw wounds, and he doesn't stop as Grian warily follows them, and he doesn't stop as they go back to the house. The front hall still has a red carpet, Mumbo thinks, and Mumbo's blood is still red, and Grian's isn't, it's purple, and Grian's there. Grian's still there. Grian's still there.

He's there. They can figure the rest out. They'll figure this out.

Grian holds a stuffed bird in the hallway as X bandages Mumbo's injuries, and none of them speak. Occasionally, though, Grian presses the voice box in the stuffed bird again, and it's the strangest, most shattered sound Mumbo has ever heard. At some point, maybe Mumbo will stop crying.

He made it.

## Chapter End Notes

tomorrow: the beginning.



## the beginning

### Chapter Summary

in which mumbo works out what to do after the only future he could imagine is already past.

It takes a bit after that to sort each other out. There's a strange calm, between the three of them; Grian doesn't seem to know what to do, now that he's aware enough to know something is up with Mumbo and not want to hurt him. X doesn't seem to know what to do now that the monster isn't much of a monster at all. And Mumbo... Mumbo's heart just hurts.

But he'd made it, is the thing, is all he can think, as the three of them warily take a room in Grian's house—the living room, Mumbo thinks—and finish cleaning Mumbo up from the damage that Grian's claws had done. Grian's following him, Mumbo realizes. Grian won't leave him alone now. That's good, he thinks? It's probably not bad, at least. It means that Grian... probably cares what happens to Mumbo now? Or at least, recognizes him? Mumbo really, really hopes this means Grian recognizes him. He's not sure what he'll do if it doesn't. He's not sure he knows how to handle if it doesn't, if Grian's just somehow planning a gruesome ending.

It's X, though, who gives in and asks Grian where the bedrooms are. They're upstairs, it turns out, and the fact that Grian has the presence of mind to show them is... a good sign? Even if he doesn't seem to have the presence of mind to know *why*.

Mumbo starts narrating. If the toy had helped, maybe Mumbo talking to Grian will too?

He passes out in one of Grian's bedrooms before thinking about whether he should lock the door. If Grian relapses in the middle of the night and sneaks in to kill him, well, maybe Mumbo had it coming.

The room is cold. That's the only detail he really properly notices and processes. Freezing. Whoever had done this room hadn't insulated it properly, and the nighttime breeze slips right between the wooden walls, making the whole space feel horribly chilly. There are probably other details about the room Mumbo's taken he should notice before he falls asleep, or afterwards, but he doesn't.

He hears Grian squeeze the toy one more time before he fully falls into sleep.

---

The morning is still strange. Mumbo feels like a ghost. He's alive. Grian is alive, if not exactly well. He's...

What is he meant to do now?

He sits down to Grian and goes to find Grian's computer. It takes three tries to get it to turn on, and it still doesn't turn on for more than a few minutes; Grian's generator had well run out of fuel, and the desktop isn't quite like a phone when it comes to the ability to run on worn-in battery packs. Still, the half-destroyed keyboard tells some kind of story about what had happened there. Mumbo stares at the letters that he thinks Grian must have been trying to hit, the letters he hadn't quite

managed to hit.

"You know," he says to Grian, quietly. "A lot of people died, instead of changing. And other people changed, instead of dying. I hadn't considered you wouldn't know what was happening. You always seemed to know. I mean, that was your job, but also, you'd always seemed so unstoppable to me. But it hits me you probably didn't really know, either. I don't think anyone did."

It's pretty clear Grian had tried to ask for help.

The large dinosaur stares at the keyboard, and Mumbo can't read his expression at all. That is, after all, most likely because he's a bird now. Mumbo will have to relearn the way to understand what Grian's saying with his face. He'll have to relearn the way Grian's head moves, the ways his body does, the ways his eyes do. But—Grian is alive. Is this a worthwhile price to pay for Grian being alive? Mumbo certainly thinks so. He's alive, and in there, and they'll figure it out. Mumbo told Grian they'd figure it out. He's not really sure anymore what he's figuring out, but, as he narrates everything he's doing out loud to Grian, they'll figure *something* out. At the very least, they'll figure out how to get Grian to talk properly again, instead of just repeating things he's heard like a parrot.

"You really are a pesky bird now," he says.

"Pesky bird," agrees Grian, still looking at his own last words.

"I wonder where X is," he says. "I'm sure he has an opinion on your peskiness, or lack thereof. You know, I really did worry you'd forget overnight. You'd attack again. You didn't, though. You didn't forget. That makes me really happy, Grian."

"That makes... makes happy," agrees Grian.

"Yeah," says Mumbo. "Yeah, exactly."

He breathes in. He breathes out. They probably have a long way to go, but it's... something. He wants to go talk to X. He feels itchy. He feels distant. He feels a lot of things, and Grian is alive, and right next to him, and they're working on it, aren't they? They're working on it, and that has to count for something.

"You know, I think you would have thought it was pretty cool to be a dinosaur. Not because you were secretly some big fan of dinosaurs or anything, just because I think that most people would think it is pretty cool to be a dinosaur. I mean, you couldn't have known what came with it, could you? Had no way of knowing the part where you'd try to eat me. Or something. I think you were trying to eat me. Really, for all I know you could have been trying to kill me for fun. That would have been terribly rude of you, you know. I am your best friend, or at least, I think I am, if you haven't gone and picked up any new best friends while I wasn't looking. You haven't, have you? Because it's the apocalypse and that would be even more rude, finding a new best friend while I—I wasn't sure if you were alive."

Grian doesn't respond with more than quiet click.

"You used to talk all the time, you know," Mumbo says. "It was one of your more annoying qualities, actually? I mean, not that annoying, you do have very sharp teeth and claws, but definitely just a little annoying. It's... oh, I wonder where X is. Um, I mean. You're a lot quieter now. You probably can't do anything about that though, can you? You're just a lot quieter now."

Grian clicks again.

"I'm going to go find X," Mumbo says, and wonders why he doesn't know what to say to Grian

anymore. He and X are hardly friends in the first place. X had not been there that time in college that Mumbo had accidentally gotten his key stuck in his apartment's lock, and tried to get it out, and instead broke the key inside of the lock, and had to call a locksmith, except the locksmith was busy, so Grian had shown up with pliers, WD-40, and a concerning amount of knowledge on locks. X had not been there when Mumbo had been foodsick and homesick at the same time, and had thrown up on Grian, a thing Grian had never let Mumbo live down. Those were Grian.

The sharp, witty, secretive Grian, who always knew what was happening. The Grian who didn't always know what to say, but knew how to fake it. The one who laughed at jokes that weren't funny, and once filled all of Mumbo's mugs with craft feathers as a joke.

But Mumbo can tell Grian hasn't been watering the ferns anymore.

He'd been friends, too, with the Mumbo who was a little quiet and awkward, and bold, and too smart for his own good, and who had latched on and not let go until it was too late for any of them. The Mumbo who hadn't acted without a plan, or without a reason. The one who wouldn't have made it cross-country.

A different Mumbo, a different Grian. They make quite the pair, don't they?

What has happened, Mumbo realizes, is that his attention span is short, and there's a part of his brain that's terrified, and a part of his brain that's floating. He just needs a real person to talk to about everything. To make decisions with. Mumbo isn't in a headspace for making decisions, he doesn't think. Decisions are hard, and he just... can't, at the moment. Not really.

Grian follows him, and oh, it's only been about a day, but as reassuring as it is, that's going to get annoying, isn't it?

But he can live with it, as long as Grian's alive, he thinks.

---

He finds X sitting on top of the car they'd taken to get here. Grian looks at X and stays back near his house. Mumbo supposes that makes sense; the expression on X's face is oddly dark, and the man's cleaning his rifle. Generally, one doesn't mess with people who are cleaning their rifles. Or, Mumbo would assume that to be a general rule? To tell the truth, he hasn't met enough people with rifles to really tell for certain, now has he?

He climbs up on top of the car next to him, immediately flying in the face of the logic about not messing with people with rifles. In his defense, he's already, technically, prevented his own murder once? So it would be awfully silly of X to decide to kill him now, what with the admission that the whole plan involving Mumbo's death had been rather stupid, all things considered.

X doesn't look at him. That's probably a poor sign.

"Um," Mumbo starts. "I mostly just wanted to know where you were, I think. Maybe we shouldn't sit on top of the car, though? The roof seems pretty dirty."

X looks at him for a moment. "I wanted somewhere nice to sit. There's nothing wrong up here. I can see fine."

"Alright," Mumbo says.

He watches Grian from where Grian is standing in the doorway to his house. He only barely fits, but Mumbo knows from experience that Grian can move pretty quickly through there. Then, almost deliberately, he turns away again to look at X. X is still cleaning his gun. It's methodical.

Mumbo wonders if he'd done this the past several nights that they'd slept, just where Mumbo couldn't see. Probably, right? Unless, of course, X hadn't been cleaning his gun at all, but that just seemed irresponsible. Not that X is known for being responsible, but. Blowing himself up with his own weapon doesn't seem like much of an X thing honestly.

It's cool outside, Mumbo thinks. There's a nice breeze.

For a while, the only noise is the sound of X methodically cleaning his gun, the breeze, and Mumbo's feet tapping against the side of the car. Mumbo breathes.

"I don't know what to do now," he says. "I honestly didn't think I would get this far."

X doesn't respond, which strikes Mumbo as almost odd. He puts his hands next to him on the car and kicks his feet again as X seemingly finishes cleaning out the barrel.

"It's like... here I am! And I told Grian we would work things out, but to be honest, I don't know how to do that? I mean, I can't un-end the world. Even if whatever your plan involving killing me worked as you expected, and you somehow got a cure, or, er... got rid of a cure? I never really understood what your thing was there, although to be fair, I don't think you did, either."

Here, Mumbo helpfully pauses for X. X still doesn't answer. This, Mumbo thinks, feels somewhat rude.

"Um, so I was wondering if there was anything you—"

"It isn't fair, you know," X says, and he snaps the parts of his rifle back together, the weapon suddenly and sharply lethal once more.

"Um," Mumbo says.

"Life isn't fair, mind you! I'm not trying to claim it should be fair, I'm not." He checks over the gun where he'd put it back together. "It's just not particularly fair, that you're here, talking about how you don't know what to do because Grian's alive, is all, and I don't know what to do because Xisuma's dead."

Mumbo doesn't have much to say to that. It *isn't* fair.

"I'm sorry," Mumbo says.

X stretches. "I mean, don't apologize. You can't do anything about it. I just thought you should know it isn't fair, and that I sort of want to kill you for that."

Across the yard, back at the house, Grian screeches.

"I'm not going to do it!" shouts X. "I'm pretty sure we already had the conversation about that anyway. Not me and you, but you and... gosh."

"You don't know what to do either, do you?" Mumbo says.

"Why would I?" responds X, and, that's fair, Mumbo thinks.

"I probably shouldn't ask you."

"I am this close to shooting Grian and leaving," X says. "It's just... I don't want to be alone."

"Me neither," says Mumbo. "Sorry for bothering you."

X picks up his rifle and watches the horizon from the top of the car. He doesn't respond. Mumbo doesn't either. They sit there for a while before Mumbo pushes himself off of the top of the car again and goes to walk back to the house. He'll leave X to it, then. Not being alone isn't the same thing as not spending time alone, after all, and Mumbo thinks that X could use some more time alone. He doesn't seem like he'll want to help Mumbo continue to narrate life to Grian anyway, not really. They both need to do some thinking first.

---

This is how the next few days go, really.

Mumbo wakes up. He wanders around the house. He makes himself food, although it is cold, and sometimes a bit gross, but Grian has a lot of peanut butter and peanut butter doesn't go bad. At some point, he and X talk, or they don't talk. It's a bit awkward. Mumbo tries to continue the making-friends games. Then, Mumbo continues to narrate everything to Grian, and sometimes, Grian manages to say something back. He takes it easy. His arm gets better. His burns get better. He rests.

It feels... strange.

Mumbo had made it, in many ways. Grian's house is... if not totally safe, and if eventually going to run out of food like anywhere else, relatively safe, and relatively easy to sleep in, and it has Grian in it, and really, it's much bigger than Mumbo's apartment ever was, and Mumbo feels like this should be an ending. A stopping point. He'd done it.

Things don't feel resolved. No one else has ever responded to Mumbo's texts. X still goes and sits on the roof of the car and looks for things that aren't coming. Grian still can't talk properly. This is all, at least in part, Mumbo's fault.

But this should be the ending, Mumbo thinks, feeling more and more antsy, and beginning to realize that it may have only been a few days, but it had been a few of the most emotionally intense days in his life, and frankly that's probably enough to change who someone is as a person, actually? If he thinks about who he was as a person before all of this, and who he is now, has he changed? He's not certain. He knows that a few weeks ago, he'd probably be far more frightened of Grian, and of X, but that's not really fair. A few weeks ago, the world hadn't ended yet.

He's not sure he deserves this, he thinks, as he finally changes out of his bloody clothes and into some of Grian's, staring at himself and his new collection of burn scars in the mirror. He doesn't want to stay here.

The world's still ended, Mumbo thinks. The world's still ended.

He's making up things for himself to do when he looks inside the car and he sees that X's helmet got destroyed when it hit the ground. He stares at it for a while. It's dented, and cracked, and almost certainly doesn't work for its intended purpose anymore. He could fix it, he thinks. He still has his soldering iron. He doesn't know why he'd packed that. He still has it, though. Why does he still have it?

"I looked rather ugly in it, I think," he tells Grian, pointing to the helmet.

"Ugly," agrees Grian.

"Well you don't have to be rude about it," says Mumbo.

Later, he asks X what to do with it.

"Seems unsalvagable to me."

Mumbo puts it under a fern he'd just watered on the windowsill and stares at it. It seems fitting not to repair it, but not fitting at all to get rid of it, and he'd been planning on stealing one of Grian's cars when they left. Putting it in the Nissan will get it lost somehow. Or wrecked. He doesn't want to lose the helmet, he just thinks there's no need for either of them to be wearing it anymore, anyway. It's not as though it had actually saved Mumbo from getting injured more than maybe the once. Or, well. Maybe it had. He's not sure.

He looks at the helmet and wonders why, after being in the same place for years, it feels so strange to be in the same place for days on end. Only days! It hasn't even been weeks! Just days!

Someone should go buy groceries. Or, er, steal them. They would be stealing groceries. No one to buy them from, is there?

Of course, that's dangerous. This whole trip had been dangerous. He's at the end of it now, though. There's no need to be doing anything more dangerous than absolutely required, and frankly the amount of non-perishables Grian already has in his house is astonishing. They're fine without Mumbo having to go anywhere, he thinks.

He finds Grian's car keys and puts them in his pocket, and then he uses the tap to water the rest of Grian's ferns.

This is how the days go, for a while after that.

---

There are two things that eventually break the pattern.

The first goes like this: Grian's house is relatively safe. Mumbo isn't sure why that is; maybe it's because the neighborhood is relatively sparsely populated?

He learns why it's safe one morning when he hears a shout from X and a screech from Grian and looks outside, and there's some large monster that looks like the twisted mix between a bulldog and an elephant. Honestly, it would almost be funny, if it weren't so horrifying? Mumbo grabs his wrench, knowing full well that it won't do much of anything against something like that. He trembles. He's pretty sure that thing can knock down walls. How are they going to incapacitate it?

Grian darts out the window and tears out its throat before Mumbo gets a chance to think much further.

"Nonlethal!" squawks Mumbo, rather too late to tell Grian the rule that he wouldn't have known yet. Grian, with claws and teeth covered in highlighter yellow blood, turns to Mumbo.

"N... N... Lethal," says Grian, looking far too proud of himself. Well. It's not repeating the whole word. Grian's able to make new words now. That's a step towards talking properly. It's just...

"They're people too," Mumbo says, looking at the spilled yellow blood. "If we'd gone for Grian lethally first—"

"Lethally," agrees Grian—well, not agrees, really, more argues—and Mumbo shudders.

Mumbo doesn't know how to say he's picturing Grian with his throat X with his throat a dead body on the factory floor a dead body in the stairwell, or maybe all of those things at once, or maybe mixing those things up. He doesn't know how to say he's thinking about people, and survival, and blame, and association. The words stick to the back of his throat, and come out wrong.

"Look, you two are both arguably also monsters, and I wouldn't shoot either of you. Or, maybe I would? But nonlethally. I'd shoot you nonlethally. And only if you were attacking me! I wouldn't shoot you nonlethally if I didn't have to shoot you. I wouldn't shoot you lethally either. Just, generally, I wouldn't—"

"Well, you don't have a gun," X says reasonably. "Do you want one? In a neighborhood like this, at least somebody probably owns a hunting rifle."

"No!" says Mumbo. "No, I don't want a gun!"

"Suit yourself," says X, and Mumbo is still picturing bodies that aren't the one in front of him, or maybe the wrong people as the body in front of him, and the sound Grian made, and... He can explain it properly to Grian later. It's... fine. They'll work it out. That's been the plan all along; they'll work it out, they'll work it out. It's a mantra in Mumbo's head. He doesn't even feel appropriately sick about it, anymore. He doesn't know what to do. He goes back inside.

He slumps against the wall and puts his head in his hands and shakes. He can't fix this. There has to be something more he can do. It's his fault. He couldn't have done anything. Grian comes in to follow him and Mumbo can't even be mad and there has to be...

---

The second goes like this—well, It's silly, in hindsight, but they run out of pasta.

Pasta, generally, is hard to cook without a stove, but fires aren't hard to make, and also both Grian and X will eat dry pasta like nothing's wrong with it, so. They go through a good deal of it. And then, one day, they run out.

Mumbo stares at the empty box, and the blood still outside on the lawn, even though he'd managed to convince X and Grian to let him bury the body. He looks back at where X has decided to try to ramble to Grian himself about who knows what, and then looks back at the empty pasta box.

"Right then, this is unsustainable," he says, even though all sensible measures say that they should stay in place.

He isn't sure what he can do—but he knows he has to do *something*, doesn't he?

---

It takes two more days for Mumbo to pull together a plan. He writes it down on any paper he can find. (It's strangely difficult—Grian's storage system is either the least organized thing Mumbo's ever seen or—actually, no, it's just the least organized thing Mumbo's ever seen. Blank paper and pens were stored in completely different rooms. Who *does* that?)

The internet doesn't work, but Mumbo's brain still does. He writes them down while sitting in front of where he'd put X's helmet, looking out the windowsill. He does it with the jacket he'd gotten once, when he'd originally signed onto the job that would doom him, hanging behind him on a hook. It had brought him this far; it can bring him a little farther. He is wearing one of Grian's red shirts, and it barely fits.

Once he's written enough things down, he goes to each of them.

"Do you have anything you want to do?" he asks Grian.

Grian tilts his head and squawks. Ah. Right.

"Uh, we'll get back to you. Um, I'm still workshopping communication aids, we'll... we'll figure

something out," he says, swallowing.

"Do you have anything you want to do?" he asks X.

"...existentially?" responds X.

"Just, in general. Personally, I want to buy pasta, and maybe try to figure out where Iskall is, and then, I don't know. Go to Concorp headquarters?"

X blinks at Mumbo.

"Why?"

And that's the hard part, isn't it? *Why? Why* hasn't Mumbo felt like anything's done? Why doesn't Mumbo feel like anything's... he made it to Grian. They're somewhere safe. Neither he nor X have any goals left to speak of, and Grian isn't really in a state to have many goals of his own, at least, not at the moment. The world's ended, rather definitively, and the vast majority of people out there seem to be very, very dead. That's not something that anyone can do anything about. They can't bring the dead back to life. If they could, Mumbo thinks, he rather suspects that X would not be here, and that maybe he would not be here, either. He rather suspects, in fact, that he'd be dead, and Xisuma would be—well, Mumbo's not certain, given that he's not certain whether X would have reacted as he had, had X not been...

None of that's really the point, though. The point is... why? Why isn't this good enough?

Well, it's a bit sad, Mumbo thinks. A bit sad, to settle for the best they're going to get. "I'm not going to settle for the best we're going to get," he says. "I'm not... not acting. Not anymore. Not after I've already started moving, you know?"

"We can't fix any of this," X says, gesturing out the window. "Although, you might be right. We do need more spaghetti."

"We can't, but I'm not going to sit and do nothing. Afterwards, I want to go to Concorp headquarters to—"

"Yeah, sure. Nothing better to do. Maybe they know where Dr. Zedaph would have been."

Mumbo nods. "Or Iskall. Okay," he says. "It'll probably be more dangerous than staying here."

"Grian's the dangerous thing here. Your friend has tough claws. We'll be bringing the safety insurance with us."

"Yes, um, well, I'm trying to forget that."

He holds up the sheet of paper he's been writing on. It says: PLANS FOR THE FUTURE. "I figure we should, regardless, keep writing things down on here? Until we don't need to make more plans, although I don't really see that happening. I mean, we have enough trouble deciding what we're going to do without plans. We have a future, you know. Do you think we should wait for my arm to finish healing before we leave, by the way? I don't know if my arm is finished healing."

"Probably, if we're smart. There's no time constraint."

"If we're looking for Dr. Zedaph, and maybe also Iskall, there sort of is?"

X seems to consider that. "Isn't Iskall a mercenary? He's fine."



"Bold of you to say," mutters Mumbo. "Aren't you supposed to be a weapon? How long would you have—"

"Give me your list. I'll write down my ideas," says X, snapping the paper from Mumbo instead of answering.

And that, Mumbo thinks, rather is that. He does check with Grian though, one more time, and tells him to loudly object to anything he doesn't want to do, at the very least, even if he can't find the words to describe what he actively wants. (It's getting closer, Mumbo thinks, to the point where Grian can sort of kind of talk. He hopes, at least. He misses the way Grian talked.)

Grian doesn't object. Grian stares at the paper again like it holds the secrets of the universe, and looks up at Mumbo, and mumbles something about a pesky bird, which Mumbo will have to take as agreement. He's not sure.

Mumbo prepares to leave a house again, this time with even less of a plan.

Honestly, he feels better. X had said life isn't fair, and it isn't, but maybe...

---

The day they leave is a cloudy one. They are following the first item on the list—finding pasta. They have each packed bags. The next item on their list is 'camping supplies (for real this time) (do tents fit dinosaurs?)', so that's their next item of interest. It's a decently long walk but not an awful drive to find the first place that sells them.

Mumbo unlocks Grian's car with the keys.

"...that feels *weird*," he says. Grian promptly lands on the roof, denting it, undoing whatever feeling of triumph he may have felt for finally not breaking a car he wanted to drive. Grian's car is *expensive*, too...

"A criminal to the bone," X says jovially. He is carrying his rifle. He leans on the side of the glass in the passenger seat. "Are you driving?"

"Um, sure," says Mumbo.

The radio turns on with horrible static. All three of them jump. Grian's claws make a horrible groaning against the metal top of the car as he does. (Oh boy, when Grian's in his right mind he's probably going to be mad about *that*.) Mumbo takes three tries to get the radio to turn off, then realizes he can plug in his phone to charge, which. Thank goodness. Without a GPS they were going to get terribly lost on this fool's mission they've made up because they needed an excuse to feel as though they were trying something. Mumbo had worried about that.

Mumbo shifts the car gear into drive. "Right then. I figure we'll buy supplies and be back in a few days, after we're done checking to make sure no one else is alive at some other Concorp location."

"Optimistic," X says. "Sure."

"I said make sure no one else is alive? I really don't feel like I'm being that optimistic."

"Optimistic," agrees Grian, though which one of them he's agreeing with is a bit unclear. Probably both, if Mumbo knows Grian, just to see what will happen next. That seems like a rather Grian thing to do, siding ambiguously to start an argument with whoever's funniest to argue with.

They leave the house, the three of them together, two of them in the car and one of them clutching

to the top of it. Behind them, there is blood on the grass, and a front hall with a red carpet, and probably the last sensible place any of them would have had to stay. In front of them is approximately nothing good. But then again, what's behind them...

Maybe one day, they'll find somewhere that's actually good, and feels *alive* and not like it's just on loan from death, and they'll stay there. It's unlikely, but so was everything to get to this point. One more fool's errand for the day. Probably for the rest of their lives, Mumbo thinks pessimistically, but well, he's always been a fool, hasn't he?

(He's not going to stop *trying*. Not now. Not when it's worked at least once.)

And with that, they go, the three of them, forward, to the future, no matter how short and terrible or long and terrible it may end up being. That's the best Mumbo thinks they're gonna get.

---

(The bird sits in the back windshield, staring at the road behind them, as X's helmet sits on the windowsill of the house, watching the place they left.)

## End Notes

and that's all they wrote.

thank you SO MUCH for reading this! as always, i am found at [theminecraftbee](#) on tumblr, where you can contact me more easily than most other places, find my random ramblings and oneshots, and yell about hermitcraft with me. i'll also now answer any questions you have in asks if you'd like, since it won't be a spoiler.

i love all of you, this ride has been fantastic. thank you for sticking with my weird genre fiction and giving it such an enthusiastic response. i've loved all the comments and responses i've seen, and i'm glad that you all liked my story! like, seriously, the level of positive response this has gotten is frankly absurd and i'm just... man. *man*.

since we're here at the end, i have gotten a bit of fanart, and it all deserves love. however i genuinely. ran out of characters to link everyone. so all of the art i have ever found on tumblr can be found in this tag on my blog: [stuffed bird art](#). PLEASE go look at all of it, it all deserves so much attention even if i ran out of ability to link it here! (if you do art on twitter or instagram or something and i can't reblog it i will still link it here, but i genuinely. can't link everyone anymore. gosh.) and if you do any fanart, write a fan analysis or writing, or do literally anything... feel free to link me in the comments! i will Yell the response has been INSANE and i love literally all of it.

ALSO FATESERPENT8 MADE AN ENTIRE ANIMATIC TO THE SONG GOODNIGHT CHICAGO [GO WATCH IT RIGHT NOW IMMEDIATELY OKAY](#)

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