

EPISODE FOURTEEN - HUNTER HARTLEY, HUNTER HARTLEY

Original transcript edited by Theo

[BEGIN Episode 14.]

INTRO: WOE.BEGONE is brought to you by our supporters on Patreon. Early access to episodes, instrumentals, extra stuff. When we meet our next funding goal, I'm building a website. With [Static effect.] Squarespace's easy-to-use soft- [Abrupt cut. No static effect.] Thanks to [REDACTED] for supporting the show.

MIKE [narrating]: So, picking a lock isn't *that hard*. A lock is just a cylinder with a bunch of pins in it. When you press the pins down a certain amount, it allows you to turn the bolt that connects the lock to the door, and it lets you in. You just need two pieces of metal. One to provide tension so that the pins don't fall back down, and to turn the lock once you've solved it, and one to push the pins up. In a pinch, you can use bobby pins or a paperclip. Any thin piece of metal that you can bend into the shapes that you need to fit them inside the lock.

I can do a lot of things, actually. I can rattle off to you this whole thing about how easy it is to pick a lock? However, there are some things that I *cannot* do. One of those things is pick a lock. In general, I would say that I'm good at *thinking*, and bad at... deeds. But that's besides the point. I don't know how to pick a lock. The muscles in my hand do not have a muscle memory of picking locks? I can't easily visualize the pins inside the cylinder to keep track of the pins while picking a lock? I didn't have a lock that I can practice on? There's the key to my front door, but I don't want to be seen picking that lock for reasons that I hope are obvious. "Oh, hey there, Mike, did you already lose your keys?" "Oh. No. I'm just practicing picking a lock for... reasons. Normal reasons. It's for a- It's for a game? Actually?"

Luckily for me, wafer locks are pretty generic. This has been exploited in the past for all kinds of nefarious purposes. There's a key called the CH715? It used to be the first result for "key" on Amazon. If you keep all your keys to the building inside of a box with a CH715 on the outside? Then it's very easy for someone who breaks in to go wherever they want to go. There were these service boxes in New York for professional governmental-use only (I can't remember what they were for, but I think the fire department was using them?) that were so generic, that pretty much any key would open the lock. When told about this, the city basically said that the lock worked, because putting in the correct key opened the lock. That's, um... *incorrect* for more reasons than I can bear to list here.

That's a lot of words to say that I went to the hardware store in the city outside of Oldbrush Valley, and bought a lot of keys. I also bought a few locks that looked like the ones that were on the desk drawer, because they came with the keys that might be the ones that I needed. So I guess I do have locks to practice on now, but I don't have a lockpicking set, and every second that I'm in there fumbling with the lock is a second that someone might walk in and discover me. And presumably kill me for being inside of a red flag cabin, after the guide made it abundantly clear that that was somewhere not to be. They'd kill me, right? Would you kill me? I'd kill me.

[Attempts to sing a wordless melody.] Or, i-is that how it goes? I don't remember how it goes. Th— It's the heist music. Let's do this!

This is WOE.BEGONE.

[Opening theme plays.]

MIKE: The story of WOE.BEGONE is told in order. If you haven't heard the podcast, start back at Episode 1. It will answer questions like, "Is this dude always this stupid?" *[Huffs.]* I am, but you don't have to be mean like that, dude.

MIKE *[narrating]:* I decided to wait until the next day to go back to the cabin. I thought about doing it under cover of night. Like a real heist! I decided against it, because it would look extra suspicious if I was walking around in front of a red flag cabin when I should be asleep. *I* don't have a patrol at night, but there are patrols at night, obviously. Speaking of, I have a job now, and have to do stuff to prepare for it? I can't spend all day learning to pick locks or trespassing. I have important stuff to do. Murdergame can wait, at least for an evening.

I set off bright and early for the cabin with a comical amount of keys. I felt like a movie depiction of a janitor, but without the key ring? So they all just sat and jangled in my pocket. It was like having a pocket full of change. Remember change? I decided to take the same shortcut again to save me eight miles of walking. I had a better excuse this time. I could say that I was going to visit my friend Hunter in his cabin, Whatever-Cabin-Number-His-Was. 44A? Was that it? Oh, well, it's plausible deniability, at least.

This part of the excursion ended up being quiet and pleasant, though. I guess it's a boring thing to say in a podcast, though. Oh, so you're saying that you *don't* want to hear about how I knew it was going to be a little cold out, so I thought about wearing gloves, but ended up not wearing gloves because I hate wearing gloves, and then it was cold outside, and by the time I got to the cabin, it's not like I was freezing or anything, but my hands felt uncomfortable, and it was annoying to touch things because my hands were cold? Well, too bad, cause I just *did*.

You know what sucks to have to do with cold hands? Rummage around in your pockets for a bunch of pieces of metal. Yet, somehow... I persevered. Key One? Nope. Key Two? Nope. Key Three? Nope. Key Four. Nope. Maybe this was a really bad strategy? Key Five? Nope. Key Six? Nope. But Key Seven? ...Nope. Key Eight? No. But that's when I reached in my pocket, and pulled out Key Nine... Nope. But Key Ten! Nope! Key Eleven—

The doorknob on the outside door of the cabin started to turn. Surprised, I jumped what felt like ten feet into the air. I quickly swept together the keys that I had tried. I had just been putting them down on the desk in front of me. I managed to get them all in my pocket just as the door swung open. I thought about hiding under the desk and waiting for the person to leave, but this was a bad idea for two reasons. The person had already seen me, and would see me trying to

hide under the desk; and the desk was the only thing in the room, so of course the person who entered the cabin would approach the desk upon entering. No choice but to play it cool, I guess. Good ol' cool as a cucum— [*Lower pitched in an attempt to sound more calm.*] Good ol' cool as a cucumber, Mike. Walters... That guy never freaks out. What's up with that? I'm not freakin' out. [*Said quickly.*] Would a guy who's freaking out talk this *slow, huh?*

[*Normal speed.*] A man entered the cabin. White, in his late 40s, plaid flannel shirt with a badge on it. It was Hunter Jeremiah Hartley.

"Hunter!?" I exclaimed.

He looked surprised to see me. "Who are you? I don't see a badge. Do you have proof you're allowed to be in here?" he asked.

"Hunter, it's me. It's... Mike Walters? We met yesterday?" I said.

"Ah, the new guy. They told me there'd be a new guy. We talked yesterday?"

"Yeah, you told me all about Oldbrush Valley, and why you were here. And then I told you why I was here. You don't remember?" I asked.

He paused for a moment, deep in thought. "Oh, yeah. Sorry, Mike. I had a real busy day yesterday. Talked to more people than I could count. Not very good with faces, either. How are ya?" he asked.

"Oh, I'm... fine," I said. "Aren't... Aren't you going to ask what I'm doing here?"

"Well, it is a red flag cabin," he said. "Did you get a chance to read the *Field Guide* yet? You did get a field guide, right? Some of the new guys get here, and there isn't one in their cabin."

"Well, I started reading it, but I didn't get to the part about what the red flag means. I thought it was just like a public building or something."

"Nope. Strictly off-limits is what it means. It's where we keep the alien technology from the crash site."

"My bad," I said.

"I hate to be a stickler for the rules, but you really can't be in here. Heck, I can't even tell you what this cabin's really used for. Information in Oldbrush Valley is distributed on a need-to-know basis, and if I tell you something that you don't need to know, then I could be in hot water if you ever blab about it to anyone," Hunter said.

"Understood," I said. "Hey, do you think you can point me to the mess hall? It's about breakfast time."

"Sure thing. Mike," he said, pausing right before my name, as if to make sure he was getting it right. "I'm heading that way myself. I just gotta grab one thing, and then I'll walk with you." Then he walked up to the desk, took a key out of his pocket, opened the locked drawer, and retrieved a manilla envelope from the drawer. The envelope was the only thing in the drawer. Then he walked towards the cabin door, and motioned for me to walk with him.

Well... shit.

This was all wrong. I felt, to use a term that might have lost some weight due to its overuse online, gaslighted. Hunter didn't remember me, and he completely contradicted himself. He told me the day before that he'd never been inside one of the cabins. Well, he didn't, but it was impossible to come away with any other understanding of the situation. He said that they *told* him about a new guy? And yesterday, he said that they *hadn't* told him about a new guy. He didn't remember us talking about the *Field Guide*, either my reading of it, or him saying that he was hiding the guide from new employees. He just walked in like he owned the place, and took the one thing that I needed, and left. This is apparently within his job description now? The day before, he told me that his job was basically the same as mine, with a minor promotion for being there long enough. I could not rectify the two Hunter Hartleys that I had conversations with. But, like the *Field Guide* said, it's all need-to-know, and there was no way I was going to hear it from Hunter. He's a stickler for the rules. ...Wait, no, he's not! He told me in the other conversation that he literally hides the rule book from new people because he doesn't believe in it!

Even worse than someone I had only met twice being a little weird, he had the thing that I was supposed to get for WOE.BEGONE.

"So, what's inside the envelope?" I asked.

"No idea. Couldn't tell you even if I did. Just had to grab it from the cabin, and deliver it to an O.V.E.R. building somewhere on the campus. It's on the way to the cafeteria, luckily enough," he said.

I tried to keep my face from falling. "Sounds important," I said.

"That's the thing about O.V.E.R. Everything is treated like the most important thing in the world. Even here, and this is the lowest level of security in the valley. There are rings of increasing security going in," he said.

"To the juicy center," I added.

"Nuclear bombs," Hunter said.

"Excuse me?"

"That's what I think is in there. Why else would they act like this?"

"You told me just yesterday that you don't think that there's anything in there, and that this is all a fake operation to run diversion from a real operation," I said.

"Did I?" he asked, and scratched the back of his head. "I guess it could be nothing, but I was probably just pullin' your leg. That would be a lot of money and work for just a diversion."

"That's what I thought, too," I replied.

"I mean, I guess there could be nothing inside this envelope, too," he said.

Unlikely, considering how badly the gamerunners wanted me to get my hands on it. "Haha! Could be!" I replied.

I wish Hunter was collecting the envelope for himself. It would be a lot easier to break into his cabin and steal it, or find if he had an office somewhere, since I already knew him. Whoever he was giving it to was an unknown unknown.

"Oh, here's my stop. Told you it was on the way," he said.

"I mean, I don't know where we're going, so I can't tell if it's on the way, but I believe you," I replied.

He smirked. "You're funny, Mike. They'll like that," he said. Then he walked up to a mailbox-like container attached to the building we were in front of, and dropped the envelope in.

In the field of profession WOE.BEGONE-ery, the industry term for what just happened is an "uh-oh whoopsie."

"So you don't even know who you're giving the... envelope to," I asked. *[Said quickly.]* "I'm not panicking, you're panicking. Could someone who's panicking talking this slow? Huh?"

[Normal speed.] "Nope. Could go to someone in that building, or they might pass it off to someone else. I don't have a clue. They do that so that it's harder to trace. If someone stalked me, and saw me pass off the envelope, they would know who it went to."

[Sharply.] "...Yeah, that's the point, Hunter– *[Nonchalantly.]* "Yeah, that would suck," I said. "A lot of work if there's nothing hiding in there."

"You got that right," Hunter said. "A lot of work, period. I swear, if it's not one thing, it's another. I don't know how they find so much work for so many of us to do. Do you know how many people

are working security here, Mike? 112. And that's just the people who are in-between the first and second gates. 112 cabins for 112 security officers. That's 112 Paul Blarts. Who knows how many people are working the security past the second gate. I've never been in there. Maybe that's where the envelope's going."

"That would be cool, like how the information gets inside. I haven't seen or even really heard of anyone from past the gate," I said. I had to break into the box, and get the envelope tonight. That was the only way I could ever possibly see it again, and even then, it might already be too late.

"Yeah, they keep to themselves. Or they keep to not-us, at least. I haven't ever seen any of them either," Hunter said.

The cafeteria was pretty big. I guess it had to be since there were apparently 112 of us. It was fairly bustling for an early morning. There weren't 112 of us, for sure? But I was planning on skipping breakfast until I needed a good cover for Hunter. We got our food... bacon, eggs, breakfast stuff? You know, breakfast? And went to sit down.

"Hey guys, can we sit with you?" Hunter asked two guys at a table nearby.

"Sure thing, man," one of them replied.

"Mike, this is Chris and Ryan. Chris, Ryan... Mike Walters. He's the new guy," Hunter said.

"Nice to meet you," they said almost in unison.

And... this is *awkward*. Sorry, guys, we already have a Chris and Ryan on WOE.BEGONE? These were not they. Clearly the writers of reality did not take into account the fact that putting more people in my life with these exact names would make it harder to tell my life story in the form of a podcast? They didn't say their last names, either, and I didn't ask, because that would be a weird thing to do. So, I'm gonna call 'em... Blorpo and... Donder. I really hope they don't become important enough that I regret that decision.

"So what brings you to O.V.E.R.?" Blorpo asked.

I gave a truncated version of the "start a new life" spiel from last episode?

"That's so interesting. I think a lot of us are like that," Hunter said, seemingly having forgotten that I'd already told him that story. He then told his story of mental illness, giving no indication that he had told me that story the day before.

"Personally, it was to get away from my old friends," Donder said.

"That means drugs," Blorpo said.

"Yeah, basically. Nothing too hard, but the whole situation was making me live wrong, and it was starting to make me really unhealthy. I'm getting too old to live like I did when I was 25," Donder said.

Blorpo didn't tell his story, which means that it was either too boring or too dark for the conversation.

"Do you like it here so far, Mike?" Blorpo asked.

"Yeah. New job jitters, but everyone I've met has been really nice. I mean, I've only met the three of you, so..." I trailed off.

"They keep us pretty spaced apart. Even with a hundred of us, this place is massive, and we have to cover a lot of ground. I assume you're on foot so far?" Donder said.

"Do some people get vehicles?" I ask.

"Yeah, but usually it's people who've been here awhile that get golf carts. They want everyone to be able to keep a close eye on every little part of their areas, and that means walking. *This* asshole got a golf cart on his first day. I don't know why." Donder pointed his thumb at Blorpo.

"Because I was a game warden for two years before I came out here," Blorpo said. "Not all of us are here fresh off a G.E.D."

"No, need to get all testy, Blorpo," Donder said, and took— Okay, I-I already hate this. It was funny, but I'm already tired of saying "Blorpo." What if he's Flinch, and I have to keep saying Blorpo for, like, ten more seasons? [*Exaggerated, whiny voice.*] "I liked the show, but one of the characters is named 'Blorpo,' and I just can't take it *seriously* anymore. Two stars." [*Normal voice.*] I don't know what that voice was. How about... Chance and Shadow? Chris is Chance is Blorpo, and Ryan is Donder is Shadow.

"Is it a hard job?" I asked.

"Not really, if you don't mind a lot of walking," Hunter said. "My feet were sore for a while when I first started, but I'm a lot better at it now. Faster, too."

"They'll team you up with someone for your first patrol. They'll walk you around your area, and tell you what they know, if they know anything at all. They'll tell you about everything you might see, and what to do about it," Shadow said.

"If you ever see anything at all," Chance said.

"Didn't you tell me you've never seen anything, Hunter?" I asked.

No look of recognition. "Hmm, I've never thought about it before, but I guess that I haven't ever seen anything. I saw a bear once, if *that* counts."

"I saw Bigfoot. That's what they're hiding in there," Shadow said.

"This is why you don't get a golf cart," Chance said.

There was a lull in the conversation.

"I think there's a time machine in there," I said. Nobody leapt up and shouted, "THIS GUY'S IN LEAGUE WITH WOE.BEGONE!" so I don't think I put myself in too much danger.

"Why do you think that?" Hunter asked.

"Well, think about it. All three of you just told me that you haven't seen anything here, except maybe some local fauna. If there's something here, a time machine could make it so that even if something did happen, whoever's in charge could go back and keep it from ever happening. It would look like nothing's here. And it goes without saying why a government would want to have a time machine, and want to protect it so badly that there's a security team of a hundred people at the front gate."

"That's smart, Mike. They'll like you," Hunter said. I was beginning to wonder who "they" were?

"But do we really have the technology to make a time machine?" Chance asked.

"It doesn't matter," I replied. "All that matters is that the government has access to that technology some time in the future. If they do, and the time machine can go back in time, then all they have to do is send it back in time to themselves."

"Interesting," Chance said. "But then why did World War Two happen? Surely going back in time and winning wars before they could be fought would be a major interest to the United States."

Because, Chance, that's basically the plot of *Ars Paradoxica*, and this is *WOE.BEGONE*— [*Brief start-stop of the opening theme.*]

"We can only see the timeline that we live in," I said. "Maybe they did try to do that, and this was the best result that they could create. The Axis lost, many countries had post-war economic miracles happen to them, and the United States became the largest country in the world, and Europe essentially united, ensuring that a war across Europe wouldn't be fought for the rest of the 20th century."

"Wow, you just got here, and you've thought this much about it?" Chance asked.

"I mean, I think about stuff like this all the time," I said, 14 episodes into a podcast where I talk about stuff like this all of the time.

I would have to wait until nightfall to try and retrieve the envelope from the mailbox. Plus I also had my first day of work ahead of me. 15 minutes before my patrol was due to start, a woman in a golf cart sped up to my cabin, which I had returned to after breakfast. I walked out, and she yelled, "Get in dipshit! We're doin' patrol!" I do whatever a person calls me a "dipshit" tells me to do, so I grabbed my patrol gear, and hopped in the passenger side of the golf cart.

"Mike Walters. Nice to meet you," I said.

"Yeah, I know. I'm Marissa Ng? That's Marissa with an "r," Not like *A Kindred Spirit*." I had no idea what that meant, so I just nodded. "They want me to show you around your patrol for your first day," she said.

"Someone told me that someone would show me around. I'm glad. I feel like nobody's really told me what I'm supposed to be doing yet?" I said.

"Oh, yeah? Who have you met so far?" Marissa asked.

"Hunter, Chris, and Ryan, but Hunter's the only one I've met more than once," I said. To be clear, that's *Chase and Shadow*, aka Blorpo and Donder, aka Blorposter and the D-Man.

"Hunter's a weird guy. Nice as can be, give-away-the-shirt-on-his-back-type of guy. But it sometimes feels like he only remembers half of what's said to him?" she said.

"I know exactly what you mean. I've introduced myself to him *twice* already," I replied.

"The other two are sort of chuckleheads? But they're fun to be around as long as you don't need anything from them," she said.

"Glad to hear that my assessments of everyone have been fairly accurate so far," I said.

She showed me my patrol route, and even outlined it on the map that I had been given. I was grateful because of how horrifically bad I am at maps. I don't know if this is because of my lack of spatial awareness, or just because I never really needed to use a map that wasn't electronic. Essentially, the job boils down to walking the route for an hour, taking a 15-minute break; repeat six times with a lunch in the middle; fill out an observation form at the end of the day. She also warned me to not push the button. Not if there's an intruder; not if there's an animal; not if you get crushed by a rock. She gave me a walkie-talkie, and told me to use that instead. Or my gun.

"I've never fired my weapon on patrol before, but if I see that bear that people keep talking about, he's all mine," she said. I couldn't tell if she was joking or not. "Have you ever fired a gun before, Mike?"

"A couple times," I said, embarrassed.

"That's okay. Like I said, you won't really need it. I think a lot of people lie about having firearms training on their application to O.V.E.R. There's a shooting range right outside of the valley if you ever want to take a field trip and get to know your weapon a little better."

"Have you ever seen anything out here?" I asked.

"I've seen about... four snakes, I think," Marissa said. "If you mean things that we're supposedly keeping out, then no. Maybe that just means we're all doing our jobs *really* well." A smile crept across her face. *[Playfully.]* "I *did* see a *newbie* walk into a red flag *cabin* this morning."

[Normal tone.] My stomach sank, and my heart stopped, and my pancreas turned inside out. *[Anxious.]* "I-I... *[Laughs nervously.]* I didn't... see that part of the guide until a-after. Hunter-Hunter came in and told me--"

[Normal tone.] "Save it, Mike. I don't care if you were peeking, or doing something nefarious, or whatever. I'm sure if you're a spy, then someone more important than me already has their eyeballs on you. But I don't think you're a spy. You just wanted to know what all the fuss was about. I just wanted to let you know that you're *not invisible*." She was still smiling.

"Point taken," I said, and breathed a sigh of relief.

The rest of the patrol was as uneventful as everyone told me it would be. It would be considerably more effort on foot, but not difficult by any stretch of the imagination. The only danger seemed to be the possibility of getting eaten by a bear. Marissa dropped me back off at my cabin, said, "See ya, Mike. Don't do anything I wouldn't do!" and sped off before I could tell her that I couldn't see how I could do anything she wouldn't do. I was exhausted from the introvert energy. I wanted to crawl in bed, and just sleep until the next day.

But I couldn't crawl in bed. This is WOE.BEGONE, *[Very brief start-stop of the opening theme.]* I have to get ready for my heist. *[Stutters.]* My *real* heist, my *new* heist. Much different than my equally riveting old heist where I opened a door that was unlocked, and stepped into a room. The kind of heist where I snake my arm into a mailbox, and hope that there's an envelope in there.

You've been listening to WOE.BEGONE. I might have abused this request before, but start up the heist music. Next time, I break into a mailbox, and do some more patrolling. Thanks for playing.

[Closing theme plays.]

[END Episode 14.]