

## EPISODE 25: SECURITY (NOT RESPONDING)

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Well that certainly was dramatic, wasn't it? I was telling you the story in the past tense, so I clearly knew what happened directly after the season finale and before I told the story, but I left you on a cliffhanger anyway. Ain't I a stinker? I snuck into Tier 2, there were 2 Hunters there, and there was one Hunter in his cabin. I'm not an expert mathematician, but by my count that means there are at least a few Hunter Jeremiahs Hartley out there. We have graduated from "a couple" into full "few" territory. This explains what is going on with him, but also: no it doesn't? Weird things were happening around him because there were three of him, but that doesn't explain why any of the weird things happened. Though it's a given that whenever there are three of the same person, weirdness is bound to occur. Have you ever met twins? Or worse, triplets? Cursed. Almost paranormal vibes. I have to respect it.

After my reconnaissance mission, I can confirm that there are 3 Hunters and 2 of them are already within the walls of Tier 2. The Hunter that I know best, the one I am calling Innocent Hunter, will also be on the other side of the wall soon, after he completes his training. One of them is (or was) allegedly playing WOE.BEGONE, by their own admission. One of them has access to the red flag cabins and has delivered materials from said cabins to other secure locations. And, as I learned last night, the other one of them has an enormous scar across the right side of his face. Wait, no, left side of his face. It was on the right side of his face when he was facing me. Wait, yeah, the left hand is the one that makes an L shape. Yeah. Left side of his face, from forehead to cheek, barely missing his eye.

It is my opinion currently that these two Hunters, who I have nicknamed Mystery Hunter and Punished Hunter, are the result of Innocent Hunter's rise through the ranks at O.V.E.R., which eventually will result in him going back in time to our present on two separate missions. One thing is certain: they are not triplets. The use of twins is something that gets accused of magicians often by laypeople, but the truth is that it isn't impossible enough to tell twins apart. It is easier to do whatever illusion than to pass twins off as each other reliably, night after night. What I had seen were two extra copies of Hunter in the same place at the same time.

By my estimation, Innocent is the one who has yet to do any time travel, Mystery is back on his first trip, and Punished is back on a later trip. I say this because sometime in-between the two missions, Hunter must have gotten that scar. I wanna know how he got those scars. I suspect that I have been in contact with

Mystery Hunter before. He was presumably the one in the red flag cabin and in Innocent Hunter's cabin during the WOE.BEGONE debacle. I haven't met Punished Hunter yet. Unless he has some convincing way of covering up that scar, I would be able to tell him apart from the other two.

The night that I saw Mystery and Punished together, I panicked and ran. I don't know much about them, but if they are just older versions of Hunter, then they know everything about me. I don't know if they would have turned me over to O.V.E.R. or killed me, or they could very well be allies. I didn't want to risk it. Whatever their motivations, they didn't rat me out to O.V.E.R. No one ever reprimanded me for sneaking over the wall that night. I waited for someone to show up and fire me, but no one ever did. Still, I was right to be cautious. I was getting my first tastes of Tier 2 and though it appeared to be the next piece of the puzzle, it was also clearly dangerous. I should take my time with it.

Because it *is* dangerous. And it *is* instrumental to WOE.BEGONE. And I'm not going to take my time with it. How do I know? I mean, have you been listening? This is WOE.BEGONE.

[Intro theme plays.]

I can't tell if my relationship with Edgar is flirty or if we're both just gay. It was certainly not my intention to lead him on and he has never explicitly made any moves either, but there was a chemistry between us that was refreshing. It wasn't a type of relationship need that wasn't satiated by anyone else at O.V.E.R. I definitely wasn't seducing him for answers. That would be gross. This is the time travel murder show, not the romantic manipulation show. What do I look like, a Bond girl? Regardless, our platonic relationship was growing stronger by the day. With how things were changing, this was an opportune time for strong, new friendships. Hunter was going into Tier 2 soon and would likely not be seeing me as much. The other Hunters lead me to believe that our relationship will change drastically soon, in addition to seeing him less. Edgar was slotting into the Best Friend role right when I needed that the most. Another important, more practical reason that this friendship was good for me was that I learned that the code to the keypad door changes every Friday at end of business day.

Though this passcode revelation limited my ability to sneak into Tier 2 whenever I wanted, I was fortunate enough to learn this before I snuck back in. By chance, I was in 116E with Edgar on the Monday after my first trip inside and instantly recognized that the number he put in wasn't the number that I had been so adamant about thoroughly memorizing. I still don't know what could happen if you put in the wrong code or what happens when you put in an old code. If I were designing it with top security in mind, I would make it so that putting in an old code causes some sort of lockdown and notification to happen. If someone is using an old code, there is a chance that it is someone like me who stole the code and didn't know about its expiration date, or maybe a disgruntled ex-employee trying to come back and cause damage. It could just be someone who belonged but put in an old code out of habit, but they should still be held there and questioned until that could be confirmed. Better safe than sorry.

An incorrect code might not have any effect at all. This was the place that left locking up to one guy who had accidentally been giving me the codes, after all. Things were not perfectly optimized around here. But I did not want to learn whether or not the person who designed this security system was as much of a special precocious boy as myself. I had access and I intended on keeping it. What this regular password changing meant for me was that if I wanted consistent access to Tier 2, I was going to have to be Edgar's best friend forever. BFFs, if you will.

As of this recording, things are still on the up-and-up between us, though. We hang out all the time, which means that me showing up around closing and watching him put in the passcode isn't out of the ordinary. I'm sure that he has seen that I can see the numbers as he puts in the code. I guess he trusts me. I don't blame him. My plan doesn't make that much sense on its face. There is the door to the lobby that he doesn't know I have found a way to bypass at night. Sneaking into Tier 2 at night is a high-risk activity with the potential for little to no reward. What if I get there and all of the doors are locked and some security guy on patrol spots me and I can't prove that I am allowed to be there? An easier way to spy would be to compromise someone already working there and I am working on that, but that's going to take awhile. Plus, the whole Mike Walters charm offensive had been a smashing success. We were truly getting along. Who cares if Mike sees the passcode? He's harmless. We're heading out to the diner after this.

I waited about a week before sneaking back into Tier 2. I was laying low to make sure that my first foray into Tier 2 hadn't come with unexpected consequences. Edgar had become accustomed to me stopping by some nights, but I also tried to keep it sporadic enough that he wouldn't suspect that I was dropping by for a reason. The code had changed: 8163345. I bought a balaclava so that if I got spotted, they wouldn't be able to see my face. I had not considered the logistics of wearing a balaclava while also sporting a big bushy beard, so I must have looked quite silly. I'm sure that they make balaclavas that are equipped to deal with this because niche beard products are an enormous industry patronized by guys who think that having a beard should be their whole identity, but I just bought the cheapest one on Amazon. If someone spotted me, they would see me in my balaclava and report that they saw a man with an extremely lumpy head. The perfect disguise. I was unrecognizable.

Getting into and through 116E wasn't much different than the first time that I did it except I wasn't as skittish this time. I had been inside the building several times at this point, so I felt like I belonged there. It felt more like going into the office after everyone had gone home for the day, so sorta strange to see a building like this in this context, but not the scary leap of faith that it once was. I made my way into the lobby the way that Marissa and I had discovered with the canned air and carefully punched in the code at the keypad door. 8163345. The door unlocked. This was becoming like clockwork.

There were no new areas to explore between the hallway and the warehouse. The other doors in the hallway were still locked. Whatever was stored in the warehouse portion was still locked away. The only difference was that this time I noticed that there was a normal sized door on the same wall as the big metal door for semis. Of course there was a normal door, idiot. Look, even before I saw the two

Hunters I was already panicking a little. It was almost pitch black in the warehouse and I was excited and scared, so I missed the door the first time. The buttons on the bay door were illuminated, so I found it first and assumed it was the only exit. I went through the person door this time. It was much quieter. I turned off the flashlight and peeked around to make sure that no one was intently watching the building this time and didn't see anyone. There was more moonlight than the first night, so I would be able to sneak around without having to turn the flashlight back on. Cautiously, I crept out into Tier 2 and used a rock to make sure that the door would stay slightly open so I could get back through. I didn't know if it would lock or not.

You'll never believe this but Tier 2 looks a lot like Tier 1. It's the same group operating at the same facility. It's not like the building planners started designing Tier 2 and said "let's go art deco for this part." They are the same unadorned government buildings on a valley landscape. It sort of felt like home. It was a type of place that I knew how to sneak around in already. Ignore what has happened to me most times that I have tried to sneak around in Oldbrush Valley.

I quickly found a building to hide behind. There were night guards with carts, but they didn't seem insurmountable. I just had to find a building that I thought I could easily get into. I knew that I wouldn't have much time. I peered through the dim night at the row of buildings across from me. Visually, they looked similar to 116E: square buildings with double doors. I wondered if they also had the same front door security as 116E, in which case I was golden. I still had the can of air duster that I had just used to thwart 116E's security system.

I waited until the cart came back around, about 10 minutes, much shorter than Marissa's route. And they would be able to see me from a distance for a minute or 2 of that. I would have to work fast. As soon as they were far enough past the building that they wouldn't see me, I sprinted across the way to the other buildings. I ran up to the doors, put the stick from other air duster can between them at the top then [air blowing sound], beep, click, I was in. What a relief. I rushed in, pulled the door shut behind me, and made sure that I was alone. I was. I was in a full-fledged Tier 2 building for the first time.

It was a humble, unassuming office building. You could tell that people with named like Carol and Todd worked here and talked about back pain and say things like "I'm living the dream" when people asked them how things were going. It smelled like disinfectant wipes and coffee and Carol's perfume that she wears too much of because she can't really smell it anymore. Even top-secret governmental facilities like this one needed people like Carol and Todd. The bureaucracy surrounding sites like this was sizeable. I shined my flashlight around the building. There were rows of cubicles with some offices further in the back. The cubicles all had desktop computers at them. Most of them were still on, in standby.

The first logical step, of course, was to check the computers. I went up to one and jiggled the mouse. The screen came on. Password required. I do not have a password. Rinse and repeat 4 more times. Surely, someone in the office must have gotten lazy and turned off the password requirement for their computer. It's not like someone is going to break in and then try every computer until one works.

Computer #6 worked. Sorry, lazy guy with that thought process. You're right almost all of the time, but not tonight. You need to have a stern conversation with

whoever chose the locks for your building. I should not have been able to wander in here. Now I had access to a random computer inside of a random building and I can see all of your spreadsheets or whatever. There were a lot of spreadsheets in the documents folder. Mostly corpo-governmental nonsense that I didn't understand and didn't seem relevant to me. There was an .exe on the desktop that caught my eye though, simply titled "Security," with the default Windows app icon. Probably proprietary software, I thought, and launched the app. Didn't work. Open as administrator. There we go. That worked.

It was a fairly archaic looking app. I know that it's like pulling teeth to get government facilities to update their technology. It's a wonder that these computers were running Windows 10. The app had a 2000s aesthetic to it that was hard to describe. Everything looked lower res and blurrier than it needed to, like it wasn't optimized for newer hardware. The principle feature of the program was a map, spread across four tabs: for Tiers 1, 2, and 3, as well as an overview of the whole facility. Tier 1 looks massive when you're walking around inside of it, but the map of the whole facility put it in perspective as just one slice of an enormous complex. On the right hand side, there were fields for "Time From" and "Time to," as well as for "Coordinates" and "Notes" and some granular features that I didn't quite understand. My eyes lit up at the Time fields, though. This whole thing is about time, after all.

I should have taken pictures of the program so that I could go back home and safely analyze what I had found and come back when I had figured more things out and thought everything through. Did I do that? Vote now on your phones. Oh, well it looks like all of the votes are tallied and... I absolutely did not do that. This is episode 25. You know how these things work at this point. There were too many things that could happen between now and the next time I got an opportunity to break back into this building. What if something happened and I couldn't get back in. For instance, what if someone figured out that this building had been broken into and changed how the front door locked? I was here now. The time to figure this out was now.

Curious, I started to fiddle around with the app. I found the spot on the map in Tier 1, near the red flag cabin where the bear attacked me. The map let me zoom in close and with a great amount of detail, so I was able to see exactly where the bear and I were when it attacked me. Besides the location of O.V.E.R. buildings, it was one of the only things I could accurately place on the map. I clicked the spot that the bear would have been. In the "Time From" field, I entered a time period during which I knew that I was being attacked. I was fuzzy on some of the details about that night, but based on looking at my watch during my walk, I could be fairly certain of a couple minutes during which I was being attacked. I left the rest of the fields untouched. I was only guessing at what I was doing and only wanted to change one field at a time. If you change too many variables during an experiment, it is harder to tell what changing each variable resulted in. I put the cursor over the "Send" button, took a deep breath, and clicked Send.

The blue "loading" cursor appeared and the program whited out. The bar at the top of the application now read "Security (Not Responding)." Of course it did. I

groaned. Did I just crash it? It was a mental ordeal to do it in the first place. I wasn't sure that I had the willpower to do it again.

I didn't have to wonder about that very long because about a minute after the app stopped responding, the bear—*that* bear and to be clear not myself in the metaphorical "I'm the bear" moment that I had with Marissa, but rather the in-the-flesh-ripping-through-*my*-flesh bear that had mauled me on that fateful night that I will under no circumstances let you the listener forget about for even a second, *that bear*-- materialized in the office a horrifically short distance away from me, blood on its muzzle and claws. My blood. I'm not a bear identification expert, but I was sure that I recognized this bear. I recognized its size. I recognized the way it held itself. I recognized the bit of my own t-shirt that was in his mouth. Very soft shirt. I hope the bear could appreciate the mouthfeel.

"[Insert bear noise.]" the bear said.

"Fuck," I said.

What happened next could best be described as utter calamity. The bear was confused and angry but it didn't seem particularly interested in me. After all, I was wearing a balaclava and it was relatively dark inside of the office building. It didn't know that I was Mike Walters. More importantly, it didn't seem concerned with the idea of a person in front of it at all. It seemed more concerned with the fact that it was outside moments ago and now it was inside. Bears have little experience being inside and don't know rudimentary things like how to sit in a chair or not to completely wreck the place with their enormous and powerful bodies. The bear proceeded to completely wreck the place with its enormous and powerful body. These cubicles were nothing to it. It tore through them like paper, knocking over and likely destroying many of the computers. Sorry, Carol. You're gonna be pissed when you come in in the morning. Maybe your boss will replace your computer with one that doesn't freeze when running a clearly vitally important program. The bear sped from one wall to another, leaving chaos and office supply rubble in its wake each time. It damaged the walls, but not enough to break through and allow it to exit the building.

The bear's confusion allowed me to make a run for it this time. I could hear it behind me, obliterating the office; not knowing which way was out. I, with my superior human brain, knew exactly where the exit was and ran that way. The bear was not smart enough to follow. I was not concerned for the bear's well being.

I ran outside and closed the door behind me. The night patrol had just passed through here and was heading away from me. I could see their headlights further down the path. I took this opportunity to run back to 116E and get inside. The door was still propped open for me. I made my way back through the building and out into the Tier 1 side. I took off my balaclava, took a moment to catch my breath, and started the walk home. My beard looked like shit. There was no need to run. I wasn't somewhere that I wasn't supposed to be anymore and there was a giant gate between the bear and myself. Running would only cause anyone who saw me to ask themselves why someone was running. I did not want to be spotted looking distressed around the same time that a bear was suddenly somewhere that it wasn't supposed to be.

It was nearly another harrowing experience that could easily have killed me, but least something got resolved this time. The time loop closed itself. I'm the one who disappeared the bear and I did it on a whim. When I clicked Send, I suspected that something would happen regarding that incident, but I wasn't sure that the program was going to teleport the bear at all. Nothing about the app explicitly said that was what it was going to do. It could have been some sort of surveillance program that showed a video feed from that time or something. WOE.BEGONE contains that sort of technology as well. In fact, I believe that I was on a walk to calibrate such a system when I was attacked on the original night. I just had a gut feeling to try the program and it paid off. Before my experiment, I had suspected that saving me would be the first act of Innocent Hunter when he got into Tier 2 to save me from the bear and in a way it *was* directly related to his promotion. If he hadn't been promoted, I wouldn't have learned about the inside of 116E and I wouldn't have found a way into Tier 2 by myself. He set the whole thing into motion, even if it was me that pushed the button. Thanks, Hunter.

This was another definitive refutation of the evidence that I had that winning a game called WOE.BEGONE was still on the table for ol' Mikey boy. If I'm being honest with myself, I think I've actually been disabused of that notion for awhile now, even if I haven't admitted it. I think that I held onto it as strongly as I did because it was the only tactic I had to convince Matt to let me complete the fourth challenge. If it wasn't true, there was a good chance that I was sending Matt to his permanent death. If I was lying to myself, then I was lying to him, twenty-one attempts in a row. If I admit my powerlessness and inability to save him, I have to start living with being responsible for his death. At least when he died the first time, in the traffic accident before WOE.BEGONE, I wasn't responsible. It was the result of a natural sequence of events. It wasn't an artificial prolonging, facilitated at every turn by people with nefarious intent.

I would also be responsible for the way that he lived in the time leading up to his death. I never figured out why Matt lived like he did in the final act of his life in Vancouver. He could have been up to something out there. He could have figured out that something happened to him and was living like he had to in order to get to the bottom of it, whatever that meant for him. WOE.BEGONE could have been actively making his life miserable, though I don't see what point they would find in antagonizing him. He could have lost everything in a divorce right before I showed up. He could have really come into a lot of money and the trouble associated with that tore his brand new family apart. There's a chance that I'll never get to know. There's a chance that I won't be able to help. There's a chance that I succeed and I will be able to help him, but I am too busy with other stuff to put the work in, like making sure that I'm not getting killed by a bear. And I have to live with that.

I hope they kill that fucking bear. I wish I had been able to lure it out on this side of the wall so that Marissa could kill the bear like she always wanted to. It's a bear, an animal. So it is equally silly to either believe that it can be rehabilitated in some way through restorative justice or that it can even conceive of what it was doing and whether or not that was an ethical choice to make. It is impossible to place any blame onto it and I want it dead all the same. I don't think that it is particularly cruel to feel this way about the bear at this point in my life. Since I have

been The Bear myself, I think I might be uniquely qualified to pass judgment. But I am also less concerned than I ever have been with whether or not my thoughts are cruel. I don't have any control here. The people inside of Tier 2 will do whatever they wish with the bear and I will have no input on the matter. Let me stew in my own cruelty. Surely I've earned that.

I was sitting there, stewing in my own cruelty, checking my email when I saw that I had received an email that night from none other than Anne. That was surprising. I thought we were mostly done with each other for the time being. I hadn't told her, but I felt weird knowing that she had killed me and I wasn't sure how to process it. It felt like uncharted territory from a psychological perspective, grappling with being successfully murdered by someone. I agreed to it, according to her, but my lack of memory of this consent made it even harder to process. She had access to a part of my life and even my death that I didn't and I don't know if I could ever fully believe her version of events. I opened the email, which was titled "Another Mysterious Group?" which might be the first email title not in all caps in the history of the show. It read:

"Mike,

I hope this finds you well. As we talked about when I came out to see you, I am deep into my own investigations at a different facility. It is through these investigations that it has become clear to me that WOE.BEGONE is not the only group in these places who is trying to gain information and access. I was recently the victim of a shakedown from a group of these people. I don't think that they gave me any permanent injuries, but they did exercise some power that I wasn't familiar with. They were able to hurt me without laying hands on me, akin to telekinesis, though I don't think that's what they were doing.

They called themselves Flinchites. I mean, they didn't outright say, "we are the Flinchites, here's our theme song," but I did overhear one of them referring to the group by that name. Searching online doesn't bring up anything relevant, much less than searching for WOE.BEGONE for instance. I remember you saying that Ryan says that he ran WOE.BEGONE through a guy named Flinch, which can't be a coincidence. Do you think that these guys work for him or have taken his name for other reasons? Either way, something to look into, for info and for your own safety.

Toodles,  
Anne."

I mean, I don't suppose it *has* to be people from the same group that beat the shit out of me after I attempted to use the code at the boulders, but that would be one hell of a coincidence. The strange power sounded like them, as well. When I was being interrogated they did something funny to my head without touching me. It had to be the same guys. And they were apparently making their way around to these secret sites.



Flinchites? How were they related to Flinch? I don't think that Flinch employs anyone. I don't see why he would need to. The ones who need to amass an army are the ones looking to take the throne from him. Flinch can thwart the past with a keystroke. He doesn't have to go through anyone else to do it, unlike us. It was everyone else that needed to use the buddy system to stand a chance. So, I don't think that they were working under the orders of Flinch. I think these guys know who Flinch is and what he is capable of. They want to *be* Flinch. And I mean who doesn't? That's the whole reason that I'm out here. I want to be Flinch. Maybe I'm a Flinchite, by that definition. Except these guys clearly do not want me to be in their little club based on how they treated me, so I guess I'm not. Some solidarity would help us all get some of what we want, but I don't think that anyone involved is amenable to that mindset, myself included.

I didn't know if the people who attacked me worked for O.V.E.R. Given their unique power, I could easily imagine them being able to get inside of Tier 1 without much effort in order to attack me. Or they could be guards, even Tier 2 guards. I didn't recognize them, but I also didn't know everybody. This was especially true of Tier 2. I was already keeping my eyes peeled for them because I didn't want to get attacked again, but now I was resolved to keep my eyes double-peeled for them since I had an idea of what their angle was.

Maybe it's getting out into the fresh air again, maybe it's putting an end to the Bear Saga, maybe it's the arbitrary line of demarcations between seasons of a podcast, but I am beginning to feel like things are possible again. Things got dark after the Flinchites attacked me. Perhaps not as physically violent and gorey as other parts of my story, but more emotionally depraved than ever before. I felt completely hopeless, but I stayed on the path I had been put on all the same. I think it was because I wanted to destroy myself and the way I was going seemed like a proven method to do so. Well, I didn't destroy myself. I came out on the other side of something. I have somewhere to go now. It's season three. We're going back inside Tier 2 and we will keep doing so until I find what I'm looking for, whatever that might be. Thanks for playing.

[End theme plays.]