

## EPISODE 30: PUNISHED

[Hey guys. The spinoff podcast, The Diary of Aliza Schultz is available now wherever pods are casted. It's the story of Aliza Schultz as she attempts to review every novel by genre fiction author Rafael Muslani and the surreal diversions that happen along the way. You don't have to be familiar with Aliza from the WOE.BEGONE canon to understand the show. The first 3 episodes are available now, with the 4<sup>th</sup> coming out on Saturday. And if you want to support WOE.BEGONE on Patreon at [patreon.com/woe\\_begone](https://patreon.com/woe_begone), you can get the 7<sup>th</sup> episode this Saturday over there, as well as: early episodes, instrumentals, a special discord channel, q&as, clips of my cat meowing, and more. Thanks to my 10 newest patrons: laser, David Ault, Paul Ainsworth, We must protecc Edgar squad, D S, Giles Barton-Owen, Jay, Keisha Hill, Marie Koo, and fbt for supporting the show. Enjoy!]

[Warning. This episode contains violence and gore. Listener discretion is advised.]

To whomever continues to transport human beings through time and space directly into my quaint little cabin in Oldbrush Valley: I would much prefer if you would quit. Could you don't? This is not Grand Central Station. This is not *Treading on a False Memory*, nor is it the setup to any other discount bin Rafael Muslani novel. Fun fact: did you know that Muslani just recently passed Dan Brown in sheer number of his books that wind up in secondhand stores? God, I hope that I'm not in a Muslani novel. If this whole thing turns out to be aliens or something equally stupid I'm going to flip.

My cabin is not a hip new destination for pilgrims that have become newly unstuck in time. It is my home. I just got the place in order again after the last fiasco. I do not need the sudden presence of temporal strangers to disorganize everything all over again.

The first sudden visitor wasn't a big deal. The Flinchite scared me (and saw me in my underwear), sure, but he actually ended up being of use to me, even if he acted like nothing he was saying could help me. I wonder if they have successfully retrieved him from where I sent him yet. He shone light on questions that I had been wondering about for months in our single conversation and the whole scenario convinced me to get up off my ass and actually try the badge cloning idea that I had been putting off. It was so fortuitous, actually, that at the time I believed that an ally of mine, possibly in the future responding to events I had not yet encountered, had sent the Flinchite to my location in order to relay something vital to me about my future.

I no longer believe this. If the first visitor was alarming, then the second one was horrifying. There was no pep in my step involved in solving this particular problem. It did not motivate me to do anything constructive. It made me want to do exactly what Punished Hunter warned me that I would want to do: flee, knowing that there was no real chance of getting away, looking over my shoulder every day knowing that someone would drag me back into the fray kicking and screaming. The person who sent the second visitor to my cabin wanted me to suffer.

It was a calm, warm Friday night, close to 9:00 if memory serves. So, late. That evening was a new ordinary routine that I was settling into. Edgar and I were on the bed watching the new Charlie Kaufman film, *I'm Thinking of Ending Things*. It's not a great date night movie now that I think about it, given that it is about a couple seemingly irreparably at odds with one another, but he hadn't seen it and it was my favorite movie of 2020 so I wanted to show him. I think it's a bit headier than what he wants out of a movie, but he seemed to enjoy it nonetheless. Kaufman often successfully strikes that balance.

We were watching the scene where they are arguing about the 1974 John Cassavetes film *A Woman Under The Influence* when it happened. This was an appropriate scene for something completely unhinged to happen to us because that film is about a woman whose inconvenient, eccentric reactions lead her friends and family to believe her to be mentally unsound. That's the short version, but essentially her perception of reality leads everyone in her life to view her as dangerous and unstable. Like how you might perceive your new boyfriend, if he were to suddenly get you unwittingly involved in a time travel government conspiracy.

I was watching passively, having already seen the film before and being able to enjoy it more casually this time around. I don't think my eyes were closed, but they might have been. I fully expected to fall asleep watching the movie. My occasional late night excursions had ensured that I fell asleep even earlier on nights that I wasn't sneaking around. Regardless, I did not see the time travel event in question happen as it was happening. I wasn't paying enough attention to my surroundings.

Suddenly, there was a loud bang and then a thud, as if something heavy had been dropped from a great distance—not onto the bed, thankfully. This, combined with Edgar jolting what felt like ten feet into the air, brought me to alertness in a matter of seconds.

In the middle of my freshly cleaned cabin, on the wooden floors that I had just polished with floor polish, mind you, was an adult human male corpse; unadorned, no body bag, no coffin, already stiff. I do not appreciate unannounced visitors, even the ones who do not have the ability to announce themselves.

I processed this new sensory information in batches. There had just been a teleportation and/or time travel incident. There was a man on the ground. The man wasn't moving. The man was clearly dead. *I'm Thinking of Ending Things* was still playing in the background at a volume that had suddenly become incredibly grating but I did not know where the remote was. And then, a secondary thought: Edgar had just witnessed the same thing that I had but without the context that we had witnessed a time travel event together.

He wasn't screaming, which was good. Edgar, I mean. The corpse wasn't screaming either. At some point I had stood up and begun to approach the corpse without noticing that I was doing so. Edgar had retreated to the corner of the room in what was a considerably more safety-minded approach to the situation. Still not acting fully consciously, I knelt down to examine the body. I was more concerned with another body falling from the sky and hitting me than anything else. This

wasn't an act of violence toward me, it was the *threat* of future violence. *I'm Thinking of Ending Things* was still playing in the background.

I hesitate to describe the corpse. I had seen corpses before. I had even seen my own corpse before. I have spared you most of the graphic descriptions of those corpses. Corpses are generally just normal human bodies that have been rearranged slightly in order to cause them to cease functioning. We're fleshy bags of blood and firing neurons. It does not take a lot of rearranging in order for the bag to burst open or the machine inside to cease operations. Take it from the man that Punished Hunter considers the most killable man on Earth. A fresh corpse is capable of looking quite similar to a live person, while still being rendered permanently unable to function.

The face of this corpse had been rearranged past what was necessary to kill him. It was an older man, maybe around retirement age. His hair was greying and the wrinkles on his forehead had begun to set deeply. His eyes had been gouged out with some imprecise instrument. To put it bluntly: it looked like someone had dug around in there and ripped them out. I was doubtful that this was related to his death because he had also suffered a significant chest wound. The removal of the eyes was to communicate a message to the living. He hadn't been treated or embalmed at all. He was still in a shirt that was steeped in blood and doing an incalculable amount of damage to my wooden floors. He maintained a small amount of body heat. I could very easily have been looking at someone who had died hour prior in his own time.

The state of his face made him hard to recognize at first. I'm no good with faces on a good day, but I quickly ruled out both myself and Edgar, which was a relief. I was beginning to think that it might be a stranger, maybe a future associate, when I noticed one detail of his marred face that eliminated that possibility. Along the left side of his face, almost taken over by new wounds, was a scar that went all the way down his face. Punished Hunter. This is WOE.BEGONE.

[Intro theme plays.]

I always knew that if Edgar and I were together long enough, eventually he would find out some awful truths about my life. I couldn't be sure of how long that would take, how many truths, or how awful they would be, but it was only a matter of time. I mean, the one thing that has stayed painfully consistent from the start was the WOE.BEGONE and its surrounding intrigue had completely consumed me. If someone were going to be that close to me, they would inevitably end up seeing something. I think this is true of any relationship, though most people don't have as many horrifying skeletons in their closets as I do.

I *really* wish that Edgar hadn't been there to see what he saw. He was much more afraid than I was, poor guy. A body dropping into my cabin rattled me. It made me wonder what the hell was going on and why someone would do this. It irked me that someone was still trying to send me threatening messages when I feel like I am at the peak of understanding that yes, I am threatened by what is going on. There is no further point to threatening me.

Edgar, on the other hand, was traumatized. His first instinct, after backing into the corner of the room, was to pull out his phone and try to call someone. I managed to jolt across the room and prevent him from doing so. Thank God his first instinct wasn't to press the button. I don't know what would have happened in that scenario. I wouldn't have been able to get over to him in time, I don't think. Of course, my having the wherewithal to understand that getting O.V.E.R. involved was a bad idea was at least a partial admission that I knew what was going on and what to do about it. I could tell by the curiosity that speckled his fear and confusion that Edgar had picked up on this.

Things got particularly hairy once he got close enough to the body to see that it was Hunter. I explained to him that it was Hunter. He yelled. I explained that it was okay. Well, not okay, but it wasn't the Hunter that he knew. It was Hunter from far in the future, maybe decades.

"And you know that how?" Edgar asked, panicked.

"You are asking a question that you do not want the answer to," I said.

"There's a dead man in your cabin!" Edgar exclaimed, whispering "dead man" as if there were someone around to hear us. "And you understand how it got here. How did it get here?"

"I'm not going to answer that. I need you to calm down," I said. I spoke in the most reassuring tone I could manage.

"You have to tell me!" He threw his arms around me, scared and exasperated. This was the opposite of what I had expected him to do. I had expected him to get a sense of what evil I was up to and flee. He held me tightly. I could feel his body quiver and sigh. We stood there in silence for awhile. *I'm Thinking of Ending Things* did not relent in the background. It kept playing.

"Edgar," I said. "I am in over my head out here. A lot of us are, I think. Hunter is. I am not going to drag you into it with me. Just because I am in over my head doesn't mean that we both have to drown."

"You are glad I am not floating in the Pacific Ocean," he said.

"Huh?"

"The saying you told me awhile ago. From the old country. I think I understand now," he said. He was still embracing me.

"That's right. That's what it means. я рада, что ты не плаваешь в тихом океане," I said. "Things are going to be alright. What I need for you to do right now is to go home. Let me deal with this. We can talk about what "this" is first thing in the morning."

Edgar went silent for a moment. He let go of me and took a step back. The expression on his face indicated that he had pieced together a disappointing puzzle. "No, I don't believe you," he said. "You're not going to tell me. Not if you can help it. You have to. Right now."

"We're not doing melodrama. Go home, Edgar. I will take care of it," I said.

"I don't feel good about this," he said.

"You shouldn't," I replied.

"Mikey. I don't know where *this* goes," he gestured his hand in a circle to indicate the two of us, "If it's all a secret."

"It's all a secret," I said. "For your sake."

I could see the gears turning in his head. I could not tell what dots he was connecting. He looked more forlorn and betrayed every second. Had he figured out why I had gone to 116E in the first place, after everything that I went through to cover it up? “It was all a bit too perfect, wasn’t it?” he asked.

“Yeah,” I conceded.

He didn’t reply. “Are you going to come over in the morning?” I asked.

“You’ll know in the morning,” he said. I guess we were doing melodrama after all.

Without saying goodbye, he stepped over the corpse of Hunter Jeremiah Hartley, made his way to the front door, and was gone.

I turned off the goddamn movie.

With Edgar gone, I was free to deal with the situation. I didn’t know why someone would want to put a dead Hunter Hartley in my bedroom, but I did know someone who might have some skin in the game: Hunter Hartley, specifically Punished Hunter. He had recently denied my invitation to the Mike Walters Fan Club, but I still thought that he might appreciate knowing that his corpse had traveled through time for a late night meet and greet. I thought that telling him about what was going on might put me back in his good graces. Might. It was worth a shot at least. I had his number from when I needed him to bail me out the night that I almost drowned Edgar. I called him up.

“Hey, Hunter! It’s Mike Walters,” I said.

“What the fuck did you do this time? Why do you still have my phone number?” he asked gruffly.

“I did nothing this time,” I said, “but I do have a problem. A big one.”

“I don’t care about your stupid problems,” he said. “Unless you’re in the middle of ruining everything again, leave me out of it.”

“It’s a big problem, Hunter. Maybe 200 and some-odd pounds, scar on the left side of its face, transported, dead, into the middle of my cabin tonight—sort of problem. Maybe in his 60s, likely had a Minnesotan accent when alive,” I said. “It ruined my date night, no less.” I dropped the wit and proceeded to tell him the rest of the story about what happened in detail.

“Well, good news, bud,” Hunter said. “That message wasn’t for you. It was for me. They knew that it would get to me. Messing with you was just icing on the cake.”

“That sounds like my luck,” I said.

“You said you weren’t alone tonight?” he asked. Shit. Why did I tell him that Edgar was with me? What good could possibly come from that?

“I was alone,” I said, trying to cover my tracks.

“You were with the guy from 116E,” he stated, matter-of-factly. “I know about the two of you.”

“He doesn’t know anything,” I said.

“Well, he knows one thing now,” Hunter replied.

“And what should I do about that?” I asked.

“Lie to him. As much as you can. Lie to him until he can’t even be sure that it ever really happened. That probably won’t work. I don’t know, Mike. You’re fucked on that front,” he said. “He’s gonna wanna talk. Don’t let him talk to anyone about

this. Not Tier 1 Hunter, not his coworkers, not his pet goldfish. He's in a position that he can really mess things up for both of us right now. You don't even know the half of it. Don't let him sell you down the river, no matter what. And I mean no matter what. No matter what. Do you understand what I am saying?"

"I really don't," I said.

"I guess now isn't the time to be subtle. Kill him if you have to. I think it is a good idea," Hunter said. There was no compassion in his voice. My blood ran cold.

"I'm not going to kill Edgar. I don't have to kill Edgar, I mean. We can send me back in time to call off the date night. I'll say that something came up. You're already in Tier 2, all you would have to do is—"

He cut me off. "No. We are not getting out of a hole by trying to dig up. Your dumbass plans are always bound to fail because you don't know half of what you think you do and even if you did that would be a thousandth of the truth. I am not going to move anything or anyone around on your behalf. And I sure as hell am not going to let you move anything around on your own. If I get a whiff of you in Tier 2 trying to fix this mess or any other mess, I won't be the only corpse in your cabin with his eyes gouged out."

"Bullshit," I said. "I have to be alive for whatever it is that you want me for."

"You shouldn't try me," he said. "You're going to learn very severely that you shouldn't try me. It would be better for you to wait until that can no longer be avoided. We famously do not get along. Besides, I didn't even mean your corpse."

It took me a second to understand that he again meant Edgar. I saw red for a moment. I managed a startled grunt into the phone.

"I have no qualms about killing Edgar," he said, "and only a portion of that sentiment is based on what happened tonight."

"What the fuck is that supposed to mean?" I blurted out.

"Is now the time for that?" Hunter asked, "Or is now the time to do exactly what Hunter says?"

"Fine," I said, reluctantly. "I'm not going to kill Edgar but I will drop it for now. What should I do about the body?"

"Get rid of it, stupid," he said.

"And how am I supposed to do that?" I asked.

"Beats me. Aren't you the one that did all of those WOE.BEGONE challenges?" he asked.

"What do you know about WOE.BEGONE?" I asked.

"That's my business and not yours," he said, "not to mention—it's the wrong question."

"What was the other Hunter doing that day that I had to pretend to be a WOE.BEGONE gamerunner for him?" I asked.

"That is also my business and not yours," he said.

"Did you need me to get sent back in time in order to distract Marissa? To be the bear?" I asked.

"My business. I think we're done here. Make sure that Edgar doesn't talk. Get rid of the body. Both bodies if you have to. I think you should. I will be watching. I will clean up after you if I have to," He hung up the phone.

I was surprised that the violent jerk that hates me was mean and told me stuff that I didn't want to hear. That wasn't very nice of him. In hindsight, I shouldn't have contacted him at all. I felt compelled to do so because I had seen his corpse with my very eyes, but our relationship was clearly beyond repair. I had no idea what his relationship to WOE.BEGONE was. He had never brought it up in our previous conversations, though the subjects of those conversations had been limited. It was the other Tier 2 Hunter that I had spoken to as the fake gamerunner what felt like ages ago at this point. If Punished Hunter was involved in that whole affair, it was from some vantage point that I did not recognize.

I had no choice but to flagrantly disobey Hunter. I wasn't just repeating a story beat and keeping things on the up-and-up between myself and Edgar by doing a time travel bait-and-switch. The last thing Hunter said in our phone conversation gave me pause. "I will clean up after you if I have to." The threat against Edgar's life was credible. What Edgar did with what he had just learned was unpredictable and Hunter would rather stop a problem before it got a chance to grow. Was Edgar going to become a loose end? I genuinely couldn't tell. Emotions were incredibly high between the two of us and he went from running into my arms to insinuating that it could be over for us in a matter of moments. I don't blame him. The longer he was able to process what was going on and my role in it, the better running away appeared.

Edgar wasn't safe anymore. I had jeopardized his safety by getting too close to him. If Hunter ended up deeming him a threat, he was as good as dead. Hunter was definitely capable of doing so without blinking. That wasn't something I could have expected to say about Hunter Jeremiah Hartley when I met him.

Regardless of loose-endedness, I was never going to kill Edgar, no matter what Hunter instructed that I do. One of the nights that I was sent back to help myself complete the fourth challenge, I remember laying into my younger self for not doing the right thing and letting myself die any of the times that it would have been easier to do so than to not. The trail of corpses and misery would have been so much shorter. None of the choices felt like choices while they were happening, but they were. I had a choice here. I could try to fix the situation with Edgar. I could die trying. If I had to. That wasn't the only option yet.

I got the RFID badge reader/writer out of my closet and plugged it back into my computer. I still had the data from Hunter's badge on my computer. Hunter confiscating my badge from me didn't actually do anything to prevent me from getting back into Tier 2. I hadn't tried again because I was waiting for some of the Hunter's animosity to simmer down, but that was a lost cause. Getting back into Tier 2 had become the only option that I had to keep everyone alive.

The plan was to get into a Tier 2 security building and use the Security.exe program to send myself from inside the building to my cabin before Edgar showed up that evening and warn myself. I didn't know if it mattered that I didn't remember myself appearing to myself. It could be that I would only be able to remember it once the time loop closed in on itself. Maybe I could teleport to the outside of my cabin and break the news to Edgar in person in order to prevent this inconsistency. Whichever method I chose, the plan was to break in and call the date off before it

could ruin our lives. The body would still drop into my cabin with me still inside, but it would be easier to manage with just myself to worry about it.

There were two buildings that I was relatively sure had computers with the Security.exe program on it. One was the building on the edge of Tier 3, the one that Punished Hunter had led me to the night that I almost drowned Edgar. The other was the building that I had accessed the night that I transported the Flinchite to Kazakhstan. I could look for a third building, but there was no guarantee that I would be able to find one before Hunter “caught a whiff of” me, to use his words. The Tier 3 building had security measures that could get me caught and killed. I had undone the moment of using that building in the first place the night that I rescued Edgar, so it was like I was never there. I wouldn’t have that luxury this time. The Flinchite building was my only real option.

I made my way at top speed to the building, especially picking up the pace once inside of Tier 2. I almost got caught in the headlights of a security vehicle as I crossed the path in front of the building. I was rushing around and clearly panicking. There would be no way that I would be able to play it cool and convince them that I wasn’t up to no good if I got caught. I badged in and made my way inside.

I rushed over to the computer that I had used the last time I was there and got it out of standby. It was password protected this time. Fuck. I tried another computer. And another. I sat down at a fourth computer. Bingo. It went straight to the desktop. Shaking, I double clicked on the Security.exe icon. It took its time to boot up, freezing in the process.

Before it could fully open, I was launched backward, along with the office chair I was sitting in, hitting the ground flat on my back, hard. I could feel muscle and skin that hadn’t gone back to feeling normal since the bear attack pulling uncomfortably. I cried out in pain. There was a man on top of me, pinning me down. I don’t need to tell you who it was. He had gotten a whiff of me. His eyes had been full of malice when I saw him last. This time he looked vindictive. I don’t know if this friendship is going to work out between the two of us.

Hunter did not speak. Pinning me down with one arm, he used the other to punch me squarely in the temple. The world shook violently, but I was able to squirm out from under him while he only had one hand on me. I retreated shakily toward a group of cubicles across from where we were fighting. I say that we were “fighting,” but at no point was I on the offensive. He tackled me at full force again, sending both of us flying into the cubicle walls and knocking a whole set of makeshift offices over. I could hear office supplies crashing all around us. I had been slammed into a desk, which had hit me across my back at the shoulders. I whimpered in pain.

Hunter did not speak. The computer at the cubicle we had toppled had not fallen to the floor. The monitor came on as it came out of standby. Ironically, it did not require a password. I could see the Security.exe icon on the desktop. I looked at Hunter. The blue light from the monitor made him appear otherworldly, as though I was being subjected to a force that I could not possibly understand, motivated by factors that I could never grasp with my puny human brain. An eldritch god. Hunter Jeremiah Hartley. The last thing that I remember was him slamming my head into the cold tile floor. The world went dark.

It was daylight when I opened my eyes. They did not open easily. I had the worst headache I have ever experienced. My whole head was sore to the touch. My eyes felt almost welded shut. I was so weak and my mind was so foggy that I couldn't even tell where I was. Every sound overloaded me. I couldn't even think straight enough to consider that I might still be in danger, as the recollections of the last time I remembered being conscious came back to me slowly. I didn't know how long ago that was. I might have still been in that office building, lying on the floor, only a matter of time until someone from Tier 2 came in and busted me. It would serve me right.

It took a few minutes of lying there, trying to muster the strength to think about thinking about trying to get up before I started to piece together where I was. *I'm Thinking of Ending Things* was blaring from a television that I could not see. I recognized the polished wood texture of my cabin floor that I had tried so hard to get right to impress Edgar. I was home. In fact, I was lying exactly where the corpse of the late Hunter had been the night before. Where it had gone, I had no idea, but I was relieved that it was gone.

My phone was buzzing. I could hear it across the room. I wondered if it was Edgar. [Pause.]

And then I wondered if Edgar was still alive. Hunter admitted to having no qualms about killing him. He didn't seem to have any about killing me, either, except that I was vitally useful to him at some point in the future. I wondered if I was a part of a plan to help prevent him from becoming that corpse that had manifested in my cabin. Dread set in as I lay there, unable to move, as I have been unable to so many times since I've been at O.V.E.R., playing out the worst possible scenarios in my mind. What if someone was calling me in order to tell me that they had found Edgar's body? When I first arrived at Oldbrush Valley, Hunter (the original Hunter) told me a story of a body that he had seen not far from his cabin, someone who ostensibly got in the way of something larger going on. What if Edgar had been dumped on someone's patrol route to be discovered in the same way? *I'm Thinking of Ending Things* was still blaring on the television. It was louder than it had been the previous night.

After some time, there was a banging on the door. It was a polite knock at first, but after a few attempts of knocking and waiting for my response, it started to get more frantic. Collecting some strength from the dread and adrenaline pumping through me, I managed to get up and stagger to the door. It was hard to see my way across my cabin with my two black eyes and what was likely a concussion. I opened the door. Between the bright light of the outside world and my limited vision, I couldn't tell who was there.

"Mike? You weren't answering my calls... Holy shit! What happened?" Edgar embraced me. I could feel his hand on my cheek more than I could see it. I didn't say anything.

I muttered something. I don't remember what. Edgar began to lead me back inside. I could still hear *I'm Thinking of Ending Things* from the other room. It was the scene where they are arguing about *A Woman Under the Influence*. "You're gonna

be okay, Mikey. Let's get you inside and you can tell me everything. But, really, Mike: what happened? Do you know what happened to me? How did I end up in Arizona last night when I knocked on your door? I know that you know something."

[End theme plays.]