

## EPISODE 54: Connectivity

[Warning: this episode contains a description of disfigurement. Listener discretion is advised.]

It was a day unique in its normalcy. It was frigid but sunny, creating a comfortable atmosphere at the Base. Edgar, Anne, and I were there, each in our respective makeshift offices, plugging away at new plans. It felt like an actual office, like we were doing actual work. Things had a tendency to slide toward entropy at great speed at the Base, so it was a rare occurrence to sit down and work at a desk and on a semi-regular schedule. Anne made coffee and everything. Too strong for my taste, but some milk and sugar and honey later I could handle it. There was a novelty to the atmosphere. It gave me the same feelings as the Tier 2 buildings that I had broken into to use the Security program. Productivity! Self-starting! Hamster shit! Likely more hamster shit than is in most offices, but that comes with the territory. The hamsters resided in my office, obviously. The others refused to get as attached, but I was willing to eventually have my heart broken if it meant that I could care for them.

Base had successfully received some data from the device that O.V.E.R. Mike had connected inside of Tier 2 and were busy parsing through that data to see what they could decipher. It was slow going, but they were making some progress. They were especially interested in the idea of “connectivity.” Sometimes actions taken in the past would result in the subject remembering both iterations of the event. For example: I remembered finding a dead Punished Hunter in my cabin while Edgar was with me, even though the “true” timeline of events excludes that from its record. Other instances result in the subject remembering nothing but the “true” timeline of events. For example, Edgar doesn’t remember seeing the dead Punished Hunter. He was transported to Mesa, Arizona, and his experience only consists of that. Matt doesn’t remember me killing him to complete the 4<sup>th</sup> challenge but I wake up screaming from a nightmare about it about once a month and Edgar has to patiently calm me back down. This phenomenon is what we are calling “connectivity.” What happened to the past Edgar was “connected” to the then-present Edgar, which presumably is connected to current Edgar. “Connectivity” and “disconnectivity” are not necessarily as separate as they are defined here, but may instead exist on a spectrum that we can’t see all of the points on.

The Calculators, on the other hand, seemed to default to a disconnected (or more obliquely connected) mode of interaction. They generally worked by exploiting movement through time/space to duplicate objects and then recombine them later. This leaves a subject with both sets of memories. This seems to be a recurring method of using the Calculators or technologies like them far into the future. That would explain why the Riga Mikes have dual knowledge of quite a number of events in the timeline and are seemingly using that knowledge to “correct” mistakes that Base is making in the now-present. They can offer the “corrections” because they are “disconnected” enough to see what needs to be corrected. Edgar and Anne were hoping to get enough of a grasp on the mechanics of the Calculators, using whatever data they could scrape from the data stolen from Tier 2 (a place clearly capable of both connected and disconnected alterations) and poking around in the code to find a method of distinguishing between the two types of travel. We didn’t think that Connectivity was impossible with the Calculators, just that it required some settings that we didn’t understand how to input. I do hope you’re not getting confused. This will all be on the exam and the exam is 20% of your grade. And if you leave a bad review on Rate My Professor because “Professor Walters is an unhinged, unstable murderer who doesn’t explain

ideas well enough in class” then I am going to Connect my foot to your--[pause. Gruff sigh.] Moving on.

Exploring a new potential for the Calculators meant devising and performing new sets of experiments. They were to start out simply and to amplify in complexity and eventually move from hamsters to human subjects, as previous experiments regarding previous concepts had. It would start with putting some colored mark on Princess Daffodil to see if she still had said mark in the present and if that connectivity could be relied upon across several experiments. Edgar specifically brought me into the conversation so that I could draw up a more rigid standard operating procedure, as well as to prepare things that I might need in the field during experiments such as these. He didn’t admit it outright, but it was clear to me that he was apologizing for almost getting me killed in the middle of nowhere North Dakota. I was healing quite well-- and O.V.E.R. Mike was healing even better since his job requirements were more relaxed than my own-- but I still tensed up at the thought of getting involved in field work again. He was right to include me in the planning. The Propagation risk seemed low enough. It would be me performing an action on myself, the result of which would immediately become our shared reality if the test was successful. We could control how innocuous the event would be and how far back in time it would happen, in order to minimize risk and then build that outward into a reliable model for affecting the past.

It was a calm, productive day full of challenging, rewarding work. The reality of the work was more complex than I could wrap my head around and I imagine that Edgar and Anne felt the same way. I spent hours thinking through, writing out, charting, erasing, and starting over again, trying to create foolproof situations and absolutely rocking out to my favorite tune for getting work done: “Smoothed Brown Noise 12 Hours Black Screen For Sleeping/Working/Studying.” Greatest piece of music ever written, if you ask me. A banger from the first note to the last.

I was four and a half hours into “Smoothed Brown Noise 12 Hours Black Screen For Sleeping/Working/Studying” when I saw the front door swing open from my seat. I couldn’t hear it because I had headphones on, but the door swung open violently, hitting the opposite wall. The dramatic entrance stirred the still air of the Base.

Marissa burst through the doorway in a clear “we have a problem” sort of way. I took off my headphones and made my way to the front room. Anne and Edgar were doing the same, also having seen Marissa come through the door. I could tell that getting things done was going to take a backseat to putting out fires.

“Why didn’t you fuckers tell me you ran into Ravi?” Marissa demanded.

“Who is Ravi...? Anne asked, as befuddled as the rest of us.

Marissa turned to me. “Ask Mikey who Ravi is.” I stared at her blankly.

“Ravi,” she continued, “works nights and mornings on my patrol route. Were you not going to tell me that you ran into him? Twice!? Did you think you were being stealthy? Because now we have a fuckin’ problem.” Marissa looked as though she might devour me. The cold air crept in from the open door. I looked helplessly at Edgar and Anne, putting my hands up in an embarrassed shrug.

“And you’re lucky,” she said, needling me with her eyes, “because I’m in the middle of taking care of it.”

This is WOE.BEGONE.

[INTRO THEME PLAYS.]

Marissa Ng, as one might imagine, is someone who does not take kindly to being kept in the dark about things that involve her. She was part of this now. She drove her patrol cart through the Tier 2 gate to come to our rescue. Propagation be damned, she was entitled to information. I was sympathetic to that point of view, having seen the wrong end of Need To Know Bases before, but I was too weak-willed to put my foot down about it like she was. On top of that, she was about to explain how this approach had completely backfired.

I offered Marissa a seat and asked if she wanted coffee. She ignored me and began telling us what was going on.

"I ran into Ravi this morning when he was getting off shift and I was heading back to the cabin to go to sleep," she said. "You're lucky he likes me so much. I trained him. Showed him everything he knows. I kept him under my wing and made him the best damn security guard he can be. He's young. Looks up to me. Asks me for advice. He's started calling me the Bear Slayer after the bear went up in the cafeteria. I don't mind having my ego stroked. I don't get along with everyone, but Ravi's alright with me. He's a lot like you, Mike. Talks too much."

"That's Mikey, alright," Anne added.

"He brought it up as casually as I had told him what I had for dinner. 'Hey, Marissa, I know it's not technically our jurisdiction, but I've been seeing shit on the other side of the fence.' That shit being you, Mike. He doesn't know who you are, but he's seen your face. He's seen you sneaking around in there. Ravi says that he's seen you twice: once the night before I saved your ass in Tier 2, and once only a few days ago. Ring any bells?"

"...The second time was O.V.E.R. Mike," I said. "So technically not my responsibility."

"Right, not your responsibility, but exactly what you would have done in that situation had you been there," she countered. I blushed. "If someone had told me that something was going on I could have taken those shifts and looked the other way. I tried to play it cool with Rav. 'Tier 2? Something going on? Whatever could you mean?' He believed me, no reason not to. 'Yeah, Boss.' He calls me Boss sometimes. I hate it. I'm not his boss. 'Yeah, Boss, I'm in the middle of filing a report on it right now. I've got some stuff written down but there's a connection that I'm missing. I want to point them in the right direction when I tip 'em off, you know?' I told him I understood. 'Wow, man. That's so weird. Who all have you told about this?' 'Just you.' And that's when I knew that I had exhausted being cool." She had stopped talking with her hands and had them together, rubbing her thumb against the opposite palm slightly.

"And things got... 'hot'... I presume?" Anne asked.

Marissa scoffed.

"Marissa, did you hide the body?" I asked.

"Fuck you, Mike," she scowled at me. "I didn't kill him. He's tied up in my cabin right now. I'm not killing Ravi. Dumb kid just needs the fear of God put into him."

We all stared at Marissa for a moment, triangulating what next to say.

"Is... he alone in your cabin right now?" Anne asked.

"No. O.V.E.R. Mike and Edgar are keeping an eye on him until I get back," she replied. "We all decided that I should come in person to establish initial communications, since I'm the one who knows the story."

"Makes sense," Edgar said. "Our earpiece is end-to-end encrypted. No need to risk a phone call from you to Base."

Marissa continued. "Hunter was headed to Ravi's cabin to destroy any relevant documents. I told him to burn the place down if he couldn't find them. He's probably done with

that already. Edgar, I assume that you are going to suggest the same thing as you did in my cabin?"

Edgar furrowed his brow. "You mean stopping Ravi from seeing Mike?"

"Nailed it," Marissa said. "You're gonna press ctrl-Z on everything?"

I looked at Edgar. We weren't prepared for this.

"I feel like collectively we need to come up with a better way of dealing with our problems than kidnapping," he said, "but we can try to prevent any of it from ever happening. We've been working on that. We'll connect to the O.V.E.R. crew and see if they can help."

[MUSICAL BREAK/CUT]

"H-hello?" O.V.Edgar mewed into the microphone. I could hear someone else rustling uncomfortably in the background. "We're here with Ravi." I could hear in his voice how uncomfortable he was with the situation. "Marissa just... left us here with him?"

"Put Mikey on," I said. "Sorry, Edgar, but he has more experience with strangers tied up in cabins than you do. Plus, I don't want you and Edgar talking to each other that much. It increases the chances of cowboy iterations." I could hear O.V.E.R. Mike seizing the earpiece and muttering something about cowboys as well. Great minds think alike. Great Mikes think aMike...

"Marissa filled you in? I wanted you guys on the line before I start asking questions," Mikey said.

"We've got the story so far," I replied. "Let 'er rip."

"Cool. Let's get started then," Mikey said. "Hi, Ravi. Do you recognize me?"

Ravi didn't respond.

"That's not a trick question. We aren't here to hurt you. We're just trying to get some resolution here. You told Marissa a story about me, right? You recognize me?" Mikey was trying to play good cop.

"Y-yes?" Ravi said, trying to tell us what we wanted to hear but not knowing what that was.

"You do understand that you don't owe O.V.E.R. anything, right?" Mikey asked him.

"They are a shady covert operation and they don't care about your wellbeing. They would just as soon kill you to make sure you didn't tell anyone what you saw as they are to reward you for doing your duty. Do you understand?... Mike, he nodded. Sorry, I'm speaking to my team via earpiece so they can't actually see you. Ravi, Marissa is at the Base with my team. She is on my team. We are doing things that O.V.E.R. can't know about. Do you understand? Mike, he nodded again. Information has to be very tightly controlled or it will spill out everywhere. It's not personal. We just can't let this get away from us. Marissa respects you. She's your friend."

"Strong words but okay," Marissa grumbled beside me. "Work acquaintances."

"We only want to interface with you in order to come to a mutual agreement about how we are going to alleviate tensions from here. I know that we can come to an arrangement that makes both of us happy. No one has to get hurt. If you had filed that report, it would have hurt me and Marissa terribly. I don't want to hurt you. We have a technology that makes us capable of enormous and powerful evil. And, no offense to you Ravi, but I've killed men that I liked a lot more than I like you. People that I've actually known and loved. But we don't have to resort to that today. We only want your cooperation. ... Can you repeat back to me the gist of what I've told you? So that we can be sure that we understand each other? What?" I could

tell that final “what?” was directed at the criticizing look that Edgar was giving to Mikey because that’s the look that Base Edgar was giving to me. I gave him a look back to the effect of “well, what am I supposed to do about it?”

I thought that Ravi might either stick to his silence or start screaming. Either one would have been an appropriate response to the situation. Instead, he started talking immediately. His nervous energy was palpable.

“So, you guys are terrorists. Marissa is a terrorist? I assume that you guys are the one who attacked that building in Tier 3. And I saw something that I shouldn’t have when I saw you on the other side of the fence.” Ravi said this matter-of-factly, not as an accusation. “I was going to report the suspicious activity I saw but when I told my boss about it, she was in on it the whole time.”

“Not his boss,” Marissa reminded us.

“And now, sorry if I don’t actually understand this,” Ravi said, “you’re going to kill me but you want me to understand why you are killing me first? Like you’re trying to be as nice as possible about it.”

“We’re not going to kill you,” O.V.Edgar shot back, spoken as nicely as a rebuttal that is “shot back” can be. “We said that we don’t want to hurt you, right?”

“But I saw what I saw,” Ravi replied. “You can pay me off or get me to agree under threat of violence or whatever, but I’d still be a loose end wandering around O.V.E.R. And I’d remember this, too, being tied up in Marissa’s cabin. You can’t trust me to stay quiet, because I can’t unsee what I saw.”

Mikey chuckled. “Well, actually, that’s the plan, basically. To have you unsee what you saw. Can you help us with that? I promise you that we are not going to kill you. We have methods that you aren’t aware of. If we kill you, it will be entirely by accident. You have my word.”

“I don’t know what you mean by having me unsee what I saw,” Ravi replied.

“Let’s start from the beginning,” O.V.Edgar said. “Do you start your patrols the same way every night?”

“I think so? Yeah,” Ravi said. “I don’t know how that helps, though. Me and Marissa split the cart. I get it from the lot after she’s done with it, fill out my paperwork, and get going. It’s the same route every night.”

“Marissa, is that the same parking spot every night?” Base Edgar asked her.

“Yeah, we have reserved spots so that management can check the carts,” she said.

“Think you can find that on a map and remember when your shifts ended on those nights?” Edgar asked.

“Yeah, no problem. It’s the same every time,” she said. I looked around. Anne had ducked out to another room. I didn’t know where she had gone.

“Hey, Bear, we got it, I think,” Base Edgar said across the line to O.V.E.R. Mike. “Good thinking with the cart. No cart, no patrol, no getting spotted. We’re having Marissa pinpoint a location and time for us. We’ll find a way to sabotage it...”

“We’re popping the tires!” Anne yelled from the garage.

“We’re popping the tires, I guess,” Edgar repeated. “There is no need to exchange operations information with Ravi anymore. Repeat: do not exchange further operations information. There is no need to risk further propagation. We are going to perform a connected transport event. I would say to prepare to jump uncomfortably through time, but if it works, you won’t be able to remember it, in which case: good luck everyone. Stand by.”

“Connected transport event,” Mikey laughed. “I love it when you use professional jargon. 10-4 on the prop. We’ll talk about the weather until we receive further instructions. Do you like the cold, Ravi? I’m starting to get used to it from living out here, walking around in it every day for hours. It’s refreshing...” Edgar turned down the volume on the coms while the Base was preparing to begin action.

Base had an intricately detailed map of Tier 1, a combination of available maps and our own meticulous additions. Marissa was easily able to find her parking spot, as well as a time on the offending dates that the cart would be parked there. Anne emerged from the garage with a big handful of nails. The plan came together in a flash. We were going to transport the nails to pop the tires to delay the patrol to prevent Ravi from seeing me. Anne could do the math and Edgar could punch the right numbers into the Calculator. It was set. Still, the idea of using connected transport to undo something that so desperately needed to be undone didn’t sit well with me. It felt like the first human experiment all over again. Sometimes trying to understand the Calculators on the fly worked out just fine— Edgar was consolidated with no problems whatsoever— but sometimes they left a trail of bodies and it wasn’t possible to tell which outcome was in front of us. I didn’t want to speak up about it. I was ashamed. I had been too careless and had been seen twice. If Ravi hadn’t made the mistake of telling Marissa what he had seen, then those Mike sightings would have been reported to O.V.E.R. and there is no telling what would happen from there. Maybe one of the Hunters would be able to squash it before it became a big deal, but that’s a big “if” and not one that any of us felt comfortable relying on, Innocent Hunter included. I had acted in a way that made whatever we did next a gamble. At least with this particular gamble, we were rolling the dice ourselves.

It was while I was internally grappling with what had led us there, while Edgar was punching in coordinates for the nails to travel to and Anne was checking the math, that there was an urgent knocking on the door at the Base. “Stop!” A muffled voice said from the other side of the door. “Correction!” He said, leaving little doubt as to who was on the other side of the door.

Being the most attuned to the Latvia Mike Brigade, I was the one to go to the door and open it, hoping for the presence of one particular Mike and not the other. I certainly didn’t expect what I saw. It was a Mike, more gaunt and frail than either Mike or Michael had ever been in my experience. He looked like he had been thoroughly chewed up and spat out. His right eye was completely clouded over. Without so much as a word to me, he brushed past me and into the front room. Marissa, Edgar, and Anne stopped what they were doing, transfixed on this Mike Walters. It occurred to me then that none of them had ever seen a Mike from further in the future.

He turned back to briefly glance at me, since I was still standing behind him after closing the door. On his face was contempt. Like I had failed to prevent something terrible from happening to him.

He turned and faced the group. “Hi everyone, Mike here. Nice to meet everyone at Base. Congrats! You figured out connectivity! Fucking congrats! I am so proud of you. I just have one minor correction here: did it never occur to any of you dolts that if the cart is out of commission on a certain night that SOMEONE might be captured and interrogated, imprisoned, tortured, used as a blackmail pawn and generally be a profound hindrance to Base for YEARS? All because the cart didn’t get fixed in time? That cart has to come crashing through the border of Tier 2 or Mike Walters is in trouble. So, if you’re going to go through with that, could you do O.V.E.R. Mike a big favor and make sure you drive one of those nails right

through his brain stem while you're at it and save us the trouble? Do you know what it's like to wake up disoriented with a full set of new memories in fucking *Latvia* while a fucking *cowboy* is trying to field dress your wounds and calm you down? I give it one thumb down, personally." He held up his left hand to show that it was missing the thumb. It was long scarred and healed over. Whatever happened to it happened a long time ago. I held my tongue regarding my own experience being bandaged and reassured by Michael. "Don't do the connection."

Everyone stared at Mike, unable to speak. I wondered if O.V.E.R. Mike had heard him through the earpiece or if he was still making chitchat with Ravi. "He... didn't look like that when I met him," I managed to squeak out.

"We haven't met yet, dumbass," he said. "I know that's a contradiction, but it works out. Connectivity works via a decision matrix. You can suss out the general outcome, for instance that I'm standing here looking at you through my only good eye, but it's impossible to accurately predict the endpoints. As it stands, the *de facto* decision is to continue with the connection, which means that the results of that connection are viable. Don't ask me how this works, but this is how the tech overcomes the initial paradox of time travel. Logically, If you succeeded in doing what you intended to do backward through time, then you wouldn't ever need to use time travel to accomplish your goals, so you wouldn't use time travel, so the event wouldn't go as intended, so you would need time travel, and so on in an infinite loop, forever. None of what we do would be possible if that connection between the present and the past couldn't be overcome."

"I don't understand any of what you just said," I replied.

"I know," Mike huffed.

"So, if we agree to stop what we're doing, none of this will happen to Mike?" Anne asked. I couldn't help but notice that she was still holding the nails.

"That's right. I go back to whatever I was before the decision rippled forward," Mike said. "It's that easy."

"And Ravi?" Edgar asked.

"I can't say. Something different happens," he said.

I looked nervously at Anne, who was still holding the nails.

"Anne..." I said, gesturing toward the nails.

"Right," she said, setting them down on the table. Mike was still there, even though it looked like a new decision had been made.

"We'll figure it out. This isn't our only option," Edgar said. He looked at Mike in the eye and grimaced. "I'm sorry, Bear. I didn't know."

"It's worse for you. You're the one that has to look at me all the time," he said and winked at Edgar. It was the first levity that he had shown. A good Edgar can melt even the hardest of hearts. I felt oddly territorial in that moment.

"We should let them know over the earpiece," Marissa said. Edgar and Anne nodded. Marissa shuffled her feet. There was a look in her eyes that I had seen once before, when I explained to her that she had shot me in the arm the night that she thought that she shot the bear. The look that she gave when her strength and confidence were subverted to terrible outcomes. Just like last time, I felt oddly compelled to console her even though she was the one who had hurt me.

"Hey, Bear? You still on the line? Change of plans," Edgar said into the earpiece. "We got corrections. We are abandoning the connectivity plan."

"Okay... but we still have Ravi tied up here. What's the new plan?" Mikey asked.

“Anything else,” Edgar replied. “The correction did not include a new course of action. We need to get back to the drawing board. The unexpect–”

Latvia Mike, brought into the equation only between the connectivity between himself and the failed plan to sabotage the cart, blinked out of the room in less than an instant. It felt like thunder struck where he had been standing. It reminded me of the times that I had been transported, though none of us at the Base went anywhere. I fell backwards onto the couch behind me. Marissa braced herself on the desk. Anne and Edgar were already sitting down. The room was quiet and still while we got our wits about us again. I could remember everything that Latvia Mike had told us. Of course I did. His warning would be useless if we forgot it when he left. It was disconnected in that way. I would be outright lying to you if I said that I understood all of that. The more that anyone discovers how it works, the less I seem to know about it. I’m going to fail the exam. I’m going to give myself a bad review on Rate My Professor.

“...Edgar? ...Mike? ...Edgar!?” O.V.E.R. Mike was calling out to us from the earpiece, becoming increasingly concerned. “Is everything okay out there? You cut off mid-sentence. Edgar?”

Edgar scrambled back to the microphone as soon as he could manage. “Yeah, we’re fine,” his sudden lack of breath not instilling much confidence in the matter. “There was a sudden transport. I think we narrowly escaped catastrophe. But we need a new way of dealing with Ravi.”

“We could always kill him,” O.V.E.R. Mike said. “I know we told him that we wouldn’t, but...” I could hear Ravi’s sputtering “what!?” in the background.

“Don’t freak him out like that,” Base Edgar said. There was legitimate disdain in his voice. “We’re going to figure this out. All this means is that we are back to where we started. We’re not in the red yet.”

This has been WOE.BEGONE. Next time: how do you solve a problem like Ravi? How do you catch a guard and pin him down? Thanks for playing.

[END THEME PLAYS]