

Episode 72: council.

[Hey guys. Welcome to the end of season 6. That feels surreal to say. Thank you for coming with me on this journey. There will be an intermission next week. Quick plugs. Give me a 5 star review on itunes. I never plug this and it helps the show out a lot. I'm streaming on twitch at twitch.tv/woebegonepod. I've been writing the soundtrack to the episodes on Sunday nights and streaming various games like Geoguessr, so give me a follow there so you don't miss that. I'm doing a special stream in a couple weeks, more on that soon. Finally, patreon at patreon.com/woe_begone. Early access to ad free episodes, instrumentals, soundtrack albums, Q&As, biscuits and gravy, director's commentaries and more. Patreon.com/woe_begone. Special thanks to my 10 newest patrons: Kimberly Witkin, Josh Thompson, funeralcandy, Linda Cruz, Sara Czartolomna, Bri, Slwalkr, Claire M, Feline Foliage, Yvette Ono, and mileaftermile for supporting the show. I think that was 11? Anyway, enjoy.]

[Opening theme plays.]

"Did everyone get a copy of the packet?" Edgar asked.

"I didn't get one," I said.

"Well, I'm out of copies," Edgar replied. He shuffled through the pile of pages in front of him, double-checking himself. "You three know what's going on. Do you really need a packet, Bear?"

"No, I'll be fine," I said.

"Arigh, then." Edgar raised his voice. "The peace summit between Base and the Council of Hunters has come to order."

"Who named us the Council of Hunters?" Innocent Hunter asked, absentmindedly flipping through the pages of the briefing packet that Edgar put together.

"Who do you think?" Chance asked, the answer being obvious to all parties involved. I had created a title for their organization in the document we had planned for the evening and it had made it into the final product. Chance glared at me, to let me know that my joking demeanor was not appreciated at such a serious moment.

Edgar's cabin at O.V.E.R. was not equipped to house 10 people. It was organized and as spacious as was possible, but it was still small, like the rest of the cabins. Our body heat threatened to outpace the thermostat as we all breathed in the same space. We sat in a makeshift circle, largely in folding chairs that attendees brought from their respective homes. Starting with Edgar and going clockwise, we were arranged: Edgar, Me, Mike, Michael, Charlie, Innocent Hunter, Punished Hunter, Mystery Hunter, Shadow, and Chance. The mood was claustrophobic and anxious. I had wanted to have the meeting somewhere larger, but Edgar insisted on his place for security purposes. He took copious notes, planned contingencies, and had corrections standing by. Since preparations for new Base had begun, so had the return of O.V.E.R. Mike and OVEgar, who were in an undisclosed location in an undisclosed time and had specific instructions to follow in accordance with the outcome of the meeting.

"Is Anne coming?" Charlie asked.

"We do not have reason to believe that Anne is coming," Edgar said.

"Oh," she replied, looking crestfallen. "I was hoping to see her again."

"Soon, hopefully. Just not today," I replied.

"Can we get started?" Punished Hunter asked.

"Sure. Mike, I believe, wanted to open things up? Mike: do the honors?" Edgar gestured toward Mike.

"Right," Mike half-stood for a moment, adjusting his posture in his chair. Everyone was too packed together for the person presenting to be standing. In addition to the packet that Edgar made, Mike had a printed page with some prepared remarks that he looked down at occasionally as he began to read. "Thank you all for coming, especially the Hunters. I know this is a tenuous peace to begin with and we got you here in this time by exercising our leverage over your continued lives and that initial attempts to make contact required corrections. As you know, the failure to come to terms in this meeting is the enactment of the connectivity strike that leaves all 3 of you dead. You have nothing here in this time in the future relative to you and I want to make clear that I am aware of that."

"It sounds like you're rubbing it in," Punished Hunter said.

"I would be rubbing it in," Michael said and glared at the Hunters.

"I only want to establish what is at stake," Mike continued. "The connectivity strike is at the end of a long chain of cause and effect, going back all the way to before I started at O.V.E.R. Notably, it prevents you, the Hunters, from killing 11 people."

"And 3 hamsters," I added.

"Thank you, Mikey," Mike sneered. "As you can see from her upsetting lack of presence, Marissa is no longer with us as a result of changed timelines corresponding to these events. The "original" Anne, the one contiguous with us, was also a victim that could not be saved through our corrections. Therefore, we, the Base, and I hope that I am speaking for everyone, have come here to negotiate terms that result in a timeline shift that leaves all parties alive and confident in their continued existence, at least as far as it involves these two groups. Base, do you have anything to add?" Mike looked around the room.

"If I may," Michael chimed in. I could see Chance and Shadow tense up. "I've lost... people before. Team members. Beloved friends. Friends who're gone now and y'all cain't even remember 'em. I ain't going into the history, but I learned to make peace with that. With them being gone. Y'all are new to this, but you're capable of the same. It is possible that we might not reach a deal here, in which case, y'all, Hunter, will meet the end of your story, prematurely in my opinion. Base will be hurt but will carry on. An agreement is not an inevitability. It is something we must work toward. So [hand clap] let's work toward it."

I could see Charlie searching out our faces, looking for our responses, wondering if he was serious that Marissa and Anne might still be dead after this. I gave her a solemn nod. I sympathized, but unfortunately, Michael was right. I hate it when Michael is right. There was a distinct possibility that no amount of corrections could fix this. Even this meeting was a dangerous longshot that required extensive planning and could still go horribly wrong. All to rescue Anne and Marissa and, as a consequence, Hunter. I wanted to rescue Hunter. The other Mikes did not seem keen on it. Keen on it? I need to spend some time away from the cowboy, methinks. I haven't been the same since he had me on his movies podcast.

"Hunter, now is your time to respond," Edgar said. "After that, we'll open the floor to a more fluid conversation, if that's alright with you."

The Hunters looked around at one another, ultimately landing on Punished Hunter. "This isn't a negotiation," he said. "You're calling it one because that makes you feel better about what is actually going on. You are going to kill us if we don't do what you want, not just in this moment, but going into the future. I understand your motivations, but don't call a negotiation. I have spoken with these past versions of myself, and we have reached a decision: we will agree to your terms, if you agree to Base going strictly no-contact with my group, not just myself but anyone else who may join my group, in perpetuity for all of time. Mike, I know you have a friendship with this Hunter," Punished Hunter gestured at Innocent Hunter. Innocent Hunter looked at me, a slight melancholy in his eyes. "That ends as of this meeting. Whenever you are working at O.V.E.R. you are to strictly ignore him, continuous through time up through myself and beyond. This is to guarantee our safety as well as yours. Youngest Mike, do you understand?"

I sighed and shifted in my seat. "I understand."

"In the event that I need to speak to you, I will initiate contact. Do you understand?" he asked.

"I understand," I said.

"In return, my group will spare your group and your group will spare my group," Punished Hunter said.

"That is our chief concern," Edgar said. "I think that Base will be enthusiastically in favor. Base: do we agree to these terms? All in favor?"

All 7 of us raised our hands, mine being the slowest to go up.

"And none opposed," Edgar concluded. "I will remind you that we have a corrections team assigned to this conversation and that they are prepared to issue corrections to the effect of the original outcome preceding the conversation. Things will return to how they were, connectivity strike still scheduled. Do you understand, Hunter?"

"I understand," Punished Hunter said.

I reached over and scribbled a quick note on the front of Mike's packet. "Are we really going to be able to stay apart? What if we need them?" it read.

"Stay what? Open?" he whispered.

"Apart," I whispered back.

"Jesus, Mikey, your handwriting," he said. "Dunno."

"We have received information from our corrections team that they have already corrected this conversation once, to the recollection of none of us. Do you understand the certainty of a correction in the event of your betrayal?" Edgar asked.

Punished Hunter paused for a moment. He looked down at the ground, then back up at Edgar. "I understand," he said.

"Wait, really?" Shadow whispered to Chance. Chance shrugged his shoulders. Edgar had not informed me of this before the meeting. I had no recollection of a correction being issued. It may have been a bluff or there may have been an iteration where shit hit the fan.

"I'm glad that we could so quickly come to an arrangement this time," Edgar said. "That is not the end of the list of arrangements that need to be made, however." He picked up the packet that he wrote. "This is where the packet will come in handy if you were not party to the events in question. I will again defer to Mike as the expert in these matters."

"Long story short is that there are more than a couple unexplained mysteries. You're going to need to be forthcoming with some things that happened during your operations," Mike said.

"That depends on the operation, doesn't it?" Mystery Hunter asked.

"I'm thinking specifically about—"

"VOLUNTEER." Mike and I said it at the same time.

"The hell is VOLUNTEER?" Innocent Hunter asked.

"I got sent by WOE.BEGONE to.. Officiate? One of the Hunters playing WOE.BEGONE. You?" I pointed at Mystery Hunter.

"...I was playing WOE.BEGONE," he admitted. There was no tension in his voice or his demeanor. He was even sitting back a bit in his chair.

"What the hell was the point of that?" Mike asked.

"You're the reason Marissa shot us," I added. "I want to know about that, too. Was that part of your plan?"

"Not you, necessarily, no," Mystery Hunter explained. He leaned forward as he began to describe the situation. "We knew from... honestly, extremely obvious observations from your time beginning at O.V.E.R. that you were playing WOE.BEGONE. The game was on our radar as well and so it was clear to us that you were playing. We were not expecting you to be the one to show up at 44C disguised as a gamerunner, though. We were expecting it to be any of the other people at O.V.E.R. playing WOE.BEGONE but hoping for the gamerunner themselves to show up. We got you instead. We still learned a lot and we killed 2 birds with one stone with Marissa's patrol. I completed the fourth challenge, wasn't hard as far as those things go. We knew enough by the time that I started playing how to rig it such that it wasn't too heartbreak." There was a wistfulness in Hunter's voice. I knew that Hunter's 4th challenge was his own mother, who was already dying of a terminal illness, but actually completing the challenge would have been grueling even given those circumstances.

"Why were you playing WOE.BEGONE?" Chance asked.

"Do you even know what WOE.BEGONE is?" I replied.

"Yes." Chance didn't even make eye contact with me to answer my question. He was focused on the Hunters.

"I was playing for the same reason that Mike was," Mystery Hunter replied. "We wanted information. We were learning about O.V.E.R. together. Once we formed our group, we sat out to figure out who else was doing the same. I was playing WOE.BEGONE as an information collection mission."

I glanced over at Michael. He had been uncharacteristically quiet for the duration of this conversation, which was nice because doing an impression of his voice hurts my throat. He was watching intently, elbows on his knees, weight perched on the balls of his feet, one leg bouncing intermittently. He was figuring something out.

"Did you learn anything from playing WOE.BEGONE?" Edgar asked.

"Frustratingly little," Mystery Hunter said.

"You were going to learn more," I replied. "There are some incidents that you would have been party to that would have made some things that you experienced considerably clearer."

"What happened after the 4th challenge, though?" Edgar asked, thoughtfully writing something into a notebook. "When Mikey completed his 4th challenge, that's when the gamerunner sent him to work at O.V.E.R., but you already worked here."

"I kept waiting for something to happen," Mystery Hunter said. "More instructions, more orders, a punishment for not keeping up the game, anything really. But so far nothing has manifested. No consequences."

Michael's eyes lit up in a way that communicated to me that I was going to have to do his voice again. "No consequences..." he trailed off. Everyone turned to look at him. I think that some people had managed to forget that he was there, an exceedingly rare moment for someone like Michael. He adjusted his cowboy hat. "Apologies, this is all coming together for me in the moment. I ain't saying this is what happened, but are you positive there were no consequences?"

"If there were consequences, I would notice them," Mystery Hunter said. "Otherwise, they wouldn't be very good consequences? I can only be punished if I know that I'm being punished, right? Otherwise it doesn't really work."

"The connectivity strike." Michael looked at me and Mike. "We did the connectivity strike because the Council of Hunters killed off the whole original base during Project TBDO. The Hunters attacked us at TBDO because Mikey killed Pun—one of y'all, the oldest, inside of Tier 2." Michael stood up and began to pace in the limited floorspace, trying to wrap his mind around the chain of events. "Mikey did that as a result of the attack on 357A, which disabled O.V.E.R. and potentially other time travel organizations. We learned from our fallen brother Alaska Mikey that the Flinchites were involved in the attack on 357A, who in this iteration used Marissa to carry out the attack to a fatal end but original it was y'all that got roped into it and that's how Pun—... the eldest Hunter got that scar on his face. Since Alaska Mikey was involved, it's safe to say that the Flinchite individual responsible was none other than Ty Betteridge, who also took over WOE.BEGONE from Ryan around when you woulda been completing your fourth challenge."

"I understand perfectly what all of that means," Shadow said. "But could you please explain for the viewers at home? Or maybe someone who talks normally could?"

"We're being manipulated from so far in the future from such a powerful source that we have all been playing WOE.BEGONE without even knowing it. Do I have that about half right?" Mike asked.

"Ain't a pretty picture, huh?" Michael asked. He sat back down.

"Ty Betteridge is running WOE.BEGONE?" Punished Hunter asked.

"Ty Betteridge is a Flinchite?" Innocent Hunter asked. All of the Hunters and a few others were flipping through the packets.

"Ty Betteridge is a consummate professional and gifted multitasker," Edgar said. He turned to Michael. "Michael, are you suggesting that the connectivity strike was a manipulated outcome designed to punish the Hunters for failing to continue WOE.BEGONE after the fourth challenge?"

"I think it were a lot of things," Michael said. "But yeah, that's one of 'em. He was tired of playing with you, he wanted something out of 357A, it just checked a buncha boxes."

"Ty is operating in at least 2 distant times from each other," Mike said. "Edgar, you said that the Ty that Hunter killed in Tier 2 was about your age?" Edgar and Innocent Hunter's faces

both sunk. "Uh, sorry. That's what used to happen. Sorry. Edgar. Fuck," My stomach dropped. Mike had forgotten that Edgar had killed Ty during this iteration. Mike took a deep breath through his nose. "He was about your age?"

"Yeah," Edgar closed his eyes as he answered. He put his hand to his face gently, 3 fingers wrapping around the side of his nose.

"He was much older than that when he was in the Flinchite compound. It's impossible to say how many of him there are across various time periods. We might not have even met the farthest-in-the-future iteration of him," Mike said.

"The cowboy iteration, if you will," Michael added.

"Here's a reach, given all that: could Casimieras be Flinch?" Mike asked. Most people in the room shot confused glances at each other. Chance and Shadow flipped through their briefing to try and make sense of what was going on. Edgar looked at Mike inquisitively.

"Uhh... explain," Charlie said. "You talked to me about Casimieras. I always thought that Ty might've killed him. Is that true?"

"Yes," Mike said.

"And Flinch is the head guy, right? Head of the Flinchites?" she asked.

"I don't think so," I said. "The boot told me in my cabin that night that the compound was developed in order to emulate what Flinch was doing. You don't have to emulate Flinch if you have the real thing."

"Maybe not everyone knows that he's Flinch," Mike said. "Not everyone there knows that Ty is in charge of WOE.BEGONE. But if Ty is so high up in the rankings that he can run WOE.BEGONE and work at O.V.E.R. and punish the Hunters for something by using knowledge that can only come long after the fact and manipulate us with such precision, then the person above him must be even higher up. Michael and I have a pet theory that the situation in Riga preceding Mikey completing the fourth challenge and leading to our exile into the Pacific Ocean makes more sense if Casimieras was not working for Ty but was instead Ty's boss, whom Ty was trying to kill in order to take his place."

"Ty was trying to kill Casimieras in order to lead the Flinchites?" Charlie asked.

"Potentially," Michael said. "We mighta witnessed an attempted connectivity strike against Casimieras, both at project TBDO and when Mike and I ended up in the ocean."

"That is all very interesting if true," Edgar said. "But I don't think that figuring out who Flinch is will bring this particular conflict into resolution any quicker. Don't worry, Mikey, I wrote it down. We'll circle back once we get the rest figured out, okay?"

"Mike, you mean. Not Mikey," Mike said.

"You're all Mikey to me," Edgar replied. He turned to the Hunters. "Middle Hunter, I wanted to ask a followup about your description of the VOLUNTEER incident if that is alright with you."

"I guess so," Mystery Hunter replied.

"You said that you were doing double duty that night," Edgar went on. "And that one of the goals was to distract Marissa. Why were you trying to distract her?"

"I wanted to get to the boulders," Punished Hunter chimed in. "I didn't want her to see me, so we set it up so that she would be busy with Mike in the woods when I wanted to be there."

"I got shot so you could check out the boulders?" I asked.

"What did you learn from the trip to the boulders?" Edgar asked, sidestepping the animosity.

"That it takes 2 people to operate it, not just the key," he replied. "The key by itself does nothing. I hope it does nothing and doesn't alert someone. I didn't see it do anything."

"The boots mentioned a necessary second party when they roughed me up," I said.

"There are more than two of you, Hunter," Chance said. "You could have done this on your own, just your group."

"We don't know where the other point of operation is," Punished Hunter replied. "Or what to do at it."

"What do the boulders do?" Edgar asked.

"That's what I was trying to find out, but since I don't know where the second point of operations is, we didn't get to the next step," Punished Hunter said. "If you want some speculation: we think that it is some sort of future-proofed communications. It's extremely simple. Its electronics are so basic that they barely work, which is why you get shocked even if you use it correctly. At least, that's my working theory. Technology can come and go, both from O.V.E.R. and from elsewhere. You've seen that yourself with the Flinchites, with O.V.E.R. and with WOE.BEGONE. The device at the boulders is covert and simple. You only know something is there if someone has tipped you off. Most people just see some landscape and what appears to be an electricity counter or something of that nature. We want to know how it works, where the second operations point is, and who it is set up to communicate to."

"You make it sound like it is for communicating deeper in time," Mike said. "Either far into the future or far into the past."

"It could be for anything," Punished Hunter said, "but that is what I was implying. We know about some of the methods of interacting within relatively recent timeframes, but communicating outside of that becomes more precarious, for obvious reasons. It is easy to imagine getting stuck. Or worse. It's a risk." Punished Hunter made deliberate eye contact with Michael when saying this last part.

"The calculators we got are chargeable with backup batteries to boot," Michael said. "But that don't help if you wind up in a time without electricity and your batteries run out."

"That could be why the Flinchites were interested in how Mikey used it," Edgar said.

"Would Ty have had access to the boulders?" Charlie asked, turning toward Edgar.

"Potentially. I don't think I can rule out anything about Ty at this point, but it is among the sorts of things he could have been allowed to do," Edgar said.

"Do you have access to the boulders?" She asked him.

"I have never accessed the boulders," Edgar said, "unless you want to count the worst night of my life so far."

"But can you access the boulders?" She repeated.

"Theoretically, under some circumstances, circumstances that have never arisen, yes," Edgar said.

Nobody spoke.

"You can think that's suspicious if you want," Edgar said. "I don't know what you think that I could've done. Hunter explained the problem well, in my opinion. There's no guarantee the second location is even at O.V.E.R. or strictly in this time period."

"I do think that's suspicious," Punished Hunter said. I could see Edgar looking at me, silently asking me to play nice and not to get riled up defending him. We were so close to the finish line. We were bordering on the edge of diplomacy. He could taste it. I could taste it.

"I am not asking you to trust me, though it would smooth things over, in my opinion," Edgar said. "I know that you want an enforced lack of communication between yourself and our Base, but even this small exchange of information has been highly elucidating. We have built extensively off of each other with just a few minutes of communication. Is there anyone in this room that you think that you could perhaps have regular constructive correspondence with?"

Punished Hunter looked over at Innocent Hunter. Innocent Hunter pointed his thumb forward and to his left, across the circle, at Chance.

"Chance, you knew Cole, right?" Innocent Hunter asked.

Chance grunted. "Cole was a close friend of mine."

"Cole was a teammate," Mystery Hunter explained.

"Cole trusted him?" Punished Hunter asked.

"Yeah," Innocent Hunter said.

"Correspondence will go through Chance and only Chance. Not anyone else. Not the Mikes, not Shadow, nobody," Punished Hunter said.

"Is that alright with you, Chance?" Edgar asked. Chance nodded.

"What about the times that Hunter corrected me?" I asked.

"Go through Chance," Punished Hunter reiterated. I nervously looked at Michael. He met my gaze. He knew exactly what I was thinking about. The Pacific Ocean. I couldn't tell Chance about that. He gave me a reassuring nod. He would protect me. My eye wandered down to the gold wedding band on his ring finger.

"Is... is that it? Are we done?" Mike asked.

"That's everything that I wanted to hit. We have the agreement and we're sticking to it, right? And if not, we're going to end up right back here again with no memory to do it all over again. So, if you could all do us a favor and keep to your word, we can get back to a safer timeline for us all. How does that sound? All in favor?" Edgar asked.

All ten people in the room raised their hands.

"...and none opposed," Edgar concluded. "Perfect. Perfect. I'm excited. Hunters, thank you for joining us. I hope this arrangement works out for both of us. I think we're building bridges."

"Think whatever you want," Punished Hunter said. Innocent Hunter shook his head slightly, apologetically. For the hundredth time, I imagined the chain of events that transformed him into Punished Hunter, a timeline several times longer than the timeline that was being corrected at that meeting.

"I will think whatever I want, thank you very much," Edgar said with the tone of a customer service representative that knew better than to argue with a customer. "We will get you set up back in your time, continuous with where we left you, set into motion the correction to stop the connectivity strike, and await our failsafe to ensure that you have held up your end of the bargain. If everyone would please exit, except for myself and the Hunters, so that I don't accidentally send you back to that night..." We all got up and left. I kissed Edgar on the cheek on my way out.

A few moments passed, all of us waiting outside of the cabin. Not long at all. Edgar had practiced and prepared for sending them home. The door to the cabin opened. Edgar looked out at us, exhausted from running the meeting, but smiling.

"They're home. We did it. Get ready."

[song plays.]

We will never know how many attempts it took for us to get that negotiation to go the way that we wanted it to. O.V.E.R. Mikey and OVEdar know, but they know better than to tell us about every catastrophic failure. I remember every catastrophic failure from when I had to help myself complete the fourth challenge. They are simultaneously traumatizing and mundane. There is nothing of substance to gain from these small and obvious failures that we are all constantly making. There is no need to account for every failed state. The meeting as I have described it is the one that ended in a ceasefire. It is the one that mattered.

We had treated the negotiation as a return to the "original" way of things, but of course those weren't the original way of things and we weren't returning to them. We had not all collectively decided to do nothing. Had we done that, we would end up where we started again, presumably. Instead, we both held up our ends of the bargain. The Mikey from that time stretching between that night that I first broke into Tier 2 until the previously failed Project TBDO mission had received corrected instructions, much like he had on the night that the connectivity strike originally was carried out. Instead of Mike and Michael scaring him off, he was briefed not to interact with Hunter anymore under threat of fatal and propagating consequences, to which he obliged, whimpering like a puppy dog who doesn't understand why he isn't able to see his other puppy dog friend anymore.

I don't know who fixed the Pacific Ocean situation, but it wasn't Hunter. I didn't call him that night. Instead, I paced around in the worst panic of my entire life, a panic that makes my chest hurt even describing now, knowing that someone, Michael perhaps but I truly do not know, came to my rescue. Knowing that this was one of now 3 of such moments synthesized together, never truly a lost cause, all of them with happy endings. Edgar smelled like the ocean when he came back and he couldn't remember why. Maybe I imagined the smell.

Hunter was still the pawn in the 357A incident. The correspondence with Chance and Base became quite heated because of my known involvement, but all we could do was promise that we had a lead on the investigation, that the suspected Mikey was quite dead, and that we were working on further corrections. And we were, though it was a needle-in-a-haystack situation trying to come up with any legitimate plan to stop the Mikey or Mikeys in the Flinchite compound from doing their worst. We asked for their cooperation, perhaps a joint mission, but they declined, saying they were putting their own mission forward. If there have been ramifications to that mission by the Hunters, it has not been visible to us.

The attack inside of Tier 2 went differently, with no Hunter to come to our aid. Thankfully, and I hate that I am thankful for this, Michael had killed Alaska Mikey, which meant that Edgar was not captured for the Lost Year, so we had the amount of firepower that we needed to get the job done. We all survived, with Marissa receiving a note from an unknown messenger telling her that her unique services would be necessary in order to rescue us. It worked and Base was ready to be established.

Base was largely unaffected. Things played out in much the same way as they originally had, according to my memory. We did experiments. Rugby happened. Hunter was taking a backseat in the original iteration, so his presence or absence did not make or break most of the missions. Chance, Shadow, and Charlie filled in, becoming de facto members of the Base. TBDO was a failure in a much quieter way that fateful night, with just myself going on patrol. Just as Latvia Mike had reported that Alaska Mikey had said, I was transported suddenly and without warning into Latvia, instead of Hunter sending me there. There is still no known explanation for how I got to Latvia or how I survived in the woods. I broke out of the Flinchite compound, I was rescued by Mike and Michael, at which point we resumed Base operations as normal, sitting on pins and needles hoping that this correction was everything that we needed it to be.

Many other things were different. The smallest of things. It reminded me of what Mike said that Alaska Mikey said that most of the consolidations were like. Erratic changes of no importance. A new favorite color, a scar moved a half inch to the left, stuff like that. Entering this third iteration felt like entering the second iteration, the psychic pain of memories butting up against falsehoods with the only way of distinguishing them being taking stock of the actual reality in front of me. Base grappled with this together. Michael gave us tips on how to stay grounded. The most important tip was that we needed to stick together.

I didn't understand how scared I was going to be. This was supposed to be a victory. Everyone was alive again. But that life was contingent on the continued peace with the Hunters, something that it felt like could be revoked at any moment. I was notoriously hated by them, famously incapable of placating them or even doing the right thing in their presence. I tried to tread lightly, but time travel was like stomping around in steel-toed boots. During my greatest self-doubt, it felt like an inevitability that I would breach this tenuous peace, that I would be responsible for the deaths of everyone I loved, all over again. It is an impossible thought to be cognizant of, to fully take in, much less to process. It would hit me in waves, laying in bed with Edgar, being in the room with him and feeling that I was in a completely different reality.

But the peace had lasted. So far.

[song plays.]

We waited a full week relative to the negotiation time before breathing a sigh of relief. It was done. We were in unaccounted time, from our perspective. It didn't feel real. Sometimes I would call up Marissa just to hear her voice. I filled her in on why, obviously, but she didn't remember and she thought it was asinine.

"It's a miracle you lasted long enough to fix your fucks ups, dipshit," she said to me, lovingly. "Thanks for not fucking up too bad, I guess."

Anne hosted a party at Base when the coast seemed that it had finally cleared. Using a charisma that she possesses and I don't, she was able to get everybody from Base to make an appearance. Chance and Shadow clearly preferred a quiet night at home and declined to perform their music for us when asked, but they did attend. Mike didn't want to go because he didn't want to watch Michael embarrass them, but Michael ultimately dragged him there regardless. Charlie and Marissa were enthusiastic and helped set up. I was living at Base again, as I had in the first iteration, so I had no choice but to attend.

Like Chance and Shadow I much prefer quiet nights alone with smaller groups, myself. Anne, Charlie, Marissa, Michael, Mike, Chance, Shadow, and Me was a list larger than my comfort allowed, but I had spent ages away without them. Ages that most didn't know about, so they couldn't appreciate the comfort of their return in the way that I could. I remember being away from Edgar for so long in the Flinchite compound, the look of non-understanding grief when he realized how long I had been gone away. This was an inverted form of that. I was still the one with understanding, but they were the ones who were away. Seeing them together at once in a time later than the destruction of Base served as visual proof that they were, in fact, alive. The memories of them alive were the memories that were true and the memories of them dead were the memories that were false.

It was a pleasant evening. The warm outside air made the cool inside feel like a place of respite, a watering hole for tired beasts. There was music and places to sit in one room, drinks in the kitchen, a party game on the TV in another room. Michael and Marissa were hogging the party game, each determined to outcompete the other one. I think they went about 50/50. I sat curled up to Edgar on the couch until he prodded me to go talk to the others, since that was the point of a party. I made chitchat with Chance and Shadow about guitars, about bands, about how I should really get back into both but can't find the time. I showed Charlie the hamsters in my bedroom and had her feed them the milk and honey treats. She adored them. Rest in peace, Chubbums. Michael hijacked the music for a song and played a country ballad that the rest of us hated while he and Charlie slow-danced in the living room. I think she enjoyed it.

I tried to needle Mike about his engagement, but he wouldn't budge. He had shown up back to Riga after his vacation covered in blood and wearing an engagement ring. He told us about what had transpired with Alaska Mikey, how Mike had got him to admit to being forced by the Flinchites to help experiment on Edgar. He pulled Michael into Michael's bedroom and locked the door to tell him things that he didn't want to tell me. I heard Michael punch a hole in the wall while he was receiving the news. I told them that my imagination was worse than whatever happened, but Michael assured me that it was not.

Even so, the vacation, the engagement, the end of this major conflict, and the party had loosened Mike in a way that I had not yet been able to witness. Not even this newfound levity could get him to reveal the details of his engagement to Edgar. He floated through the evening, at peace, stopping in on whoever was huddled together at that moment.

"Did you get down on one knee or him?" I asked.

"No, no, no," he chided me, no matter what I asked him. "That's going to be your story. I want you to live in that moment the same way that I did. I don't want it to feel like *deja vu*."

"That's what Michael told me about the wedding," I said.

"He was right. Don't ever tell him that he's right. He doesn't need encouragement. But he's right," Mike said.

"Did you go on his podcast?" I asked.

"I didn't have a choice. He was not going to relent until I went on that stupid show of his," he said.

"Does anybody listen to it?" I asked.

"No, thank God," Mike said. "That's the last thing the world needs right now, another podcast about movies. I think he got Boris to listen to it."

"Poor Boris," I said.

I felt replenished. A profoundly ignorant misunderstanding lodged in my head: things used to be so simple when I first met these people. Incorrect. Bzzt. Things were just as complicated and I understood them even less. But by some point, I couldn't pinpoint which, their friendships turned into abstractions that I was fighting to preserve without indulging in them. I indulged in them that night. I felt their warmth. I was warmed by it and I warmed them in return. And there was an ache that this was the exception and that time travel and bloodshed were the norm. And that that wasn't going to change. And that, if I interrogated it, truly interrogated it, that I didn't even want it to change. I still wanted the Base. I still wanted the power. I wanted it for all of us. There was no stopping now.

There was a sound barely audible over the music. I couldn't tell what it was at first. After it played a handful of times, I figured it out.

"Anne, the doorbell," I said. "Are you expecting someone else?"

"Hmm, no," Anne said. "Pizza's already here."

"Maybe Hunter decided to join in," I said.

"Not funny," Anne said. "Let's get the doorbell." She took my hand. I was going with her to check. She was scared.

Anne and I made our way through the front room to the door. She looked at me expectantly, even though she was slightly closer to the doorknob. I opened the door. The muggy night air hit me in the face.

It was Anne. Better late than never, Anne. The one that she had told me would arrive once we set up shop again. I thought that meant getting Charlie, Chance, and Shadow on board. She greeted us with a coy smile, then, grabbed my other hand, pulled me out of the party and Anne with me, and closed the door behind us. We were alone with her, outside.

"Nice to see you guys again," she said. "We're all very proud that you managed to figure this one out. Mostly."

"Are you here about "mostly"?" I asked.

"Mostly," she said.

"And it can't wait until after the party, I suppose," my Anne said. "I was serving drinks."

"I think they can tend bar by themselves for a minute. The good news is that I am here to stay for as long as you need me. But I do come with some orders that need to be acted upon ASAP, just to get them out of the way," she said.

"I don't like this," my Anne said.

"No, you don't. It's not a likable sort of thing," Anne said, "but there are a series of events that need dealing with because our friends in there may have been acting rather against our interests, is how I would put it?"

"Meaning?" I asked.

"You know the old dead Hunter that dropped into your cabin, Mikey?" Anne asked.

"What about it?" I asked.

"You might remember that killing Hunters was the thing that sparked this whole powder keg. It goes against the agreement that you made. That Hunter is not an exception, unsurprisingly," Anne said.

"You're saying that one of us killed the older Hunter?" I asked.

"That is what our intel leads us to believe," Anne said.

"You don't have anything more than that?" my Anne asked.

"We are very strict about the propagation of information," Anne said. "The way I see it, there is one option. We can put a bandaid on this and correct the discovery of the body by you and Edgar. That will buy us some time in the present. Hopefully it will buy us time until the actual event that caused the death of Hunter to occur, which by the looks of it should be several years. That does leave us with a sticky predicament, though."

"Someone at Base killed Hunter," my Anne said.

"And someone at Base ratted you all out by dropping off the body," Anne said.

"Someone is the murderer and someone is the mole," I said.

"That's what makes the most sense to me," Anne said.

"But why?" I asked. "We have it so good right now. Why would anyone ever do that?"

"Something happens over the next several years that changes the arrangement, I guess," Anne said. "That's not strange, that's the way years work. An infinite amount of things happen between now and then. Things are going to change."

"If Hunter's body appearing in my cabin ruins the arrangement, why hasn't the arrangement already been ruined? That is something that has already happened," I said.

"Because of the intentionality of this exact conversation," Anne said. "Get with the program, Mikey. You should know how cause and effect works or doesn't work by now. Which means I already know that you agree to help me out on this one. They sent me without a way to travel, so you've got to kick it off yourselves. Mikey, you remember the coordinates and date, right?"

"I do," I said. "Should I go get Michael? He might be old enough to know what happened."

"Propagation, propagation," Anne said. "Michael's a stickler for it, too. Sometimes, at least. He wouldn't want you to involve him. It could create a whole mess of contingencies to cover up in addition to this one. I'm not even positive that telling you two won't. But I can't just waltz in, say "honey I'm home" and start using your stuff. You're owed an explanation." She pointed at my Anne. "And you're me, so you're cool. And you're unavoidable, so you're tolerable." Anne winked at me.

"Mikey, this makes sense to you?" my Anne asked.

"It does," I said.

"This feels all above board, right?" she asked.

"It does. It makes sense," I said. I remembered a time when Anne wasn't on my side. We were playing WOE.BEGONE. We were pitted against each other. We lied to keep ourselves alive. Being alive was a zero sum game. We hid everything from each other. It took being out from under the thumb of that horrible game to find our altruism again. And that altruism hadn't faltered as long as we had been free. As long as we had been liberated to operate on our own as we pleased. I felt confident, standing in the warm night air in a way that I hadn't felt since that night when we sped away in Marissa's patrol cart. We were back at Base. We were in charge of our destinies. And we were going to maintain a tight grip on that, no matter what corrections we had to make.

"I'll go get the Calculator and try not to alarm anyone," my Anne said. She disappeared back inside and reappeared less than a minute later.

"Let's go," I said. "Welcome to Base, Anne."

"It's good to be here, but they did warn me," Anne said.

"They were right to warn you," I said. I put the coordinates for my cabin into the Calculator. I put in the time that Hunter fell dead into my cabin, an older Hunter from an unknown time, that warm Friday night around 9:00pm, when Edgar and I were watching *I'm Thinking of Ending Things*, the scene where they talk about *A Woman Under the Influence*.

"Let's save ourselves," I said. I pushed the button and sent us careening from one warm night into another, the loud music from inside still in my ears as I landed on my knees in a time prior.

It was an easy correction. Bust in and tell Mikey and Edgar to mind their own business. No Hunters needed to know about this. Tell Mikey that it was time for a serious conversation with Edgar. Move Hunter somewhere that he wouldn't be found with the Calculator. Back in time to enjoy the rest of the party. Easy.

It was everything else that was about to become difficult.

[song plays]

[End theme plays.]