

## EPISODE 99: THE BEAR IS DEAD

I keep having this dream where I'm sitting in a chair in Innocent Hunter's cabin. It's the night that I first broke into 116E, the night of the connectivity strike. They can't have both happened on the same night in the same timeline. In one instance, Mike and Michael tell the younger Mikey to go home before he can go into 116E. I knock on Innocent Hunter's door and minutes later he is sitting dead in his chair while the sleepytime tea in front of us goes cold. In the other, I am that younger Mikey. Hunter is my closest friend in the Valley and the Valley is where I spend all my time. I got the door code to 116E from Edgar, some sap that I was manipulating. I do not yet have any idea how strongly I will end up feeling for him. I break into Tier 2 and I see two Hunters on the other side of the door. I run home and call Hunter's cabin. I am not inside of Hunter's cabin to answer the phone. Hunter is there. He is alive and he answers. I realize there are three Hunters: Innocent, Mystery, Punished. Codenames that I gave them because I did not know what else to call them. Innocent, Mystery, Punished. I can see both of these variations clearly in my mind. They both happened to me, they will always have happened to me. They exist in the dream, one on top of the other.

In the dream, I am in Hunter's cabin and both series of events are happening at once. I did not go to Hunter's cabin after seeing Mystery and Punished Hunter, but the dream is unconcerned with this. I knock on the door. Innocent Hunter answers, warmly. Or he isn't Innocent Hunter. A name that I gave him because I needed to tell them apart. There weren't three Hunters yet to distinguish from. Or there were three Hunters and I was sent to kill Innocent Hunter. The superposition of these Hunters answers the door for me and beckons me in. Regardless of his state, I enter the cabin. I am pulled across the threshold by inevitability. I was never going to refrain from entering the cabin. It was a normal day and I was there to see my dear friend. It was the night of the connectivity strike and I was there to kill him. I was compelled inside. I should have killed him in the doorway, before he could soften me up, I remember thinking. In my dream, there is no hesitation. I am pulled through the door by some unseen force. I will always enter the cabin.

I sit down in the chair across from Hunter Jeremiah Hartley with my sleepytime tea and study him. There is a scar across his face. I look away. The scar is gone. When I try to focus on his face, I can no longer see it.

"I'm sorry I gave you that scar," I say. He smiles at me, confused.

"You didn't give me a scar," he replies.

"The orders came from the Flinchite Compound. It was another Mikey. I didn't have a choice," I explain. "It wasn't me. Which I know you don't believe. I'll take responsibility. I'm sorry."

"They're inviting me to work inside of Tier 2 soon," Hunter says. "I'm gonna miss you guys. You didn't know me before all this, but I was something of a loner. I think O.V.E.R. collects those types. But it's been an honor being your pal, Mike. I'll still be around, but maybe not as much."

Hunter called me Mike. Mike refers Latvia Mike now. Latvia Mike who left Latvia and went home. Michael, Mike, Mikey. I'm Mikey. I'm Mikey Walters from Base. I'm Mike Walters, O.V.E.R. Security. For one instance of me inside of the cabin, none of that has happened yet and I'm Mike Walters and there's one of me.

"If you're moving into Tier 2, who is going to save me from the bear now?" I asked. I can see the bear in the dream, even though he isn't there in the cabin.

"The bear is dead, Mike. He's hanging up in the O.V.E.R. cafeteria," Hunter replies, lifting his right hand to touch the scar on his face. "Marissa shot him. That's how the story goes."

"I was the bear," I say.

"No, you're right here, alive and well, Mike," Hunter says and chuckles. "The bear is dead. He's hanging up in the O.V.E.R. Cafeteria. You can go see him. Marissa shot him... You're here to kill me aren't you?"

"I would never do that. You're my best friend," I say.

"Is that so? Even after I killed Edgar?" he asks.

"You're not going to do that," I say. "Punished Hunter did that but he isn't going to do it and you aren't Punished Hunter. We came to an agreement and I didn't kill you and you aren't Punished Hunter and Punished Hunter didn't kill Edgar."

"I don't appreciate that nickname," Hunter says. "And I *am* Punished Hunter. And you are Mike Walters. And you are Michael Walters. And you are MW. And you are Alaska Mikey. And you are MDawg. And you are O.V.E.R. Mike. And you are—" and he continues to lists the Mikes that I am. Hundreds of Mike Walters. Mikes that Hunter didn't have any business knowing about, pulled from my memories or otherwise completely fabricated. Mikes that I haven't heard of, from other timelines that I will never experience, rattled off like a catalog. More person than I could possibly be. An endless and pressured list of Mike Walters, one after another, with no breaths in-between. When I focus on the words, it feels like he is shouting, even though he has not raised his voice.

There's a third chair in the room now and Innocent Hunter is slumped forward in the chair, dead. Exactly as I left him the night of the connectivity strike. When I killed him, Innocent Hunter to me. The Mike native to that time period hadn't been inside of Tier 2 yet. The Hunter that was dead had not been given the nickname yet, even though the Mike that killed him knew it.

"And you are the bear, Mike," Hunter finally says, concluding his list.

I stand up and walk over to the dead Innocent Hunter. He is entirely dead, eyes peering forward thoughtlessly. I forgot that his eyes would be open. He is slumped forward, staring down. He is not looking at me. Hunter is looking at me.

"And you are the bear, Mike," he says again, as though prompting me.

"The bear is dead, Hunter," I say.

"The bear is dead," he says.

This is WOE.BEGONE.

[INTRO THEME PLAYS]

[Fading in] “MIKEY! MIKEY! MIKEY! MIKEY! MIKEY!”

The voice cut through my sleep and shocked me awake. I was standing, maybe 2 feet from my side of the bed, body tense. I was awake in the barest sense. My eyes were open and I was no longer dreaming, but that was the only way in which I was awake. I was profoundly disoriented. It took me a moment to even personalize. I was a person. They were saying “Mikey.” Mikey was me. I’m Mikey. Mikey. Where am I?

I felt my body being squeezed as my fight-or-flight response dissipated. An embrace. Warm arms around me. A cheek against my cheek. I blinked hard and focused my eyes.

“You’re okay, c’mere. You’re going to be okay, Mikey Bear,” Edgar said, kissing me on the cheek. “You’re at O.V.E.R., you’re in my cabin, and no one is in danger. You are in your present time and you are safe. Panther’s here to protect you.”

I stood in silence for a moment, collecting my awareness. Panther?

“Mikey? Are you awake?” Edgar asked softly.

“I’m alright. It was a dream,” I said.

“I know what it was, Bear,” Edgar said. “We do this almost every night. I’ve got you. Are you okay? Wanna come back to bed?”

“I don’t want to fall asleep back into the same dream,” I replied.

“Okay. Go splash some water on your face, wake up a little. That helps me shake off a nightmare. Some separation, you know?” Edgar said.

“Alright. I’ll be back in a minute,” I grumbled. Edgar’s embrace softened and broke and I made my way to the bathroom to splash water on my face.

“Get back soon,” Edgar said. “I’ve got to get up in 2 hours and the bed is cold without you.”

The cold water brought me closer to the waking world and farther from the dream. I looked at my reflection in the bathroom mirror, disheveled, half-awake, and red-eyed, like a strange cryptid caught on camera. This was the beast that had been running from Hunter. The Bear. The water helped me escape from the dream. I returned to the bedroom and got in bed.

“I’m sorry, Edgar,” I said. “It’s been every night this week, hasn’t it?”

“Don’t be sorry, just be warm,” Edgar said. I felt his feet, cold from standing on the cold wooden floors, press against my leg. “Was it the Hunter dream again?”

“It was,” I said, trying not to conjure an image of Hunter in the chair.

“My poor Mikey Bear,” Edgar whispered. “Every night since the Hunters took over. We’re going to get this all sorted out, okay? I’ve got a plan and Anne’s got a plan... and we’re arguing about those plans but once we agree, we’re gonna get out from under their thumb. Don’t you worry about that, okay? We just have to be careful and do some things that we don’t wanna do, but we’re gonna be okay.”

“You’re right, babe,” I said in a half-yawn. “I’ve got my Panther. I’ll be okay.”

From there, I wandered back into sleep. There is no such thing as a dreamless sleep. If one sleeps deeply enough, one will experience dreams. Whether the dream gets remembered is left up to a few factors, but especially the stage of sleep that you wake during. I didn't remember any more dreams from that night. Nothing pulled me from the bed like the dream about Hunter. I rested peacefully.

I woke up in Edgar's bed, alone, a few hours later, the sun shining through the curtains and into the room. I laid in bed and stared at the ceiling for longer than I could afford. I had overslept a bit—no doubt a reaction to having been awoken by a nightmare—and work was fast approaching. But I was warm and comfortable, so I laid there, lost in thought.

Things were just getting started with the Hunter Hartley regime and I was afraid of what might be in store for us. They never told us why we were being ordered to do anything. The orders came and we followed the orders. If we asked questions, we were told that answers were on a need-to-know basis, perhaps my least favorite explanation out of any explanation ever given. Base was now like any other organization I had been subject to and the reduction of Base to “just another organization” made my heart sink. We had come a long way away from the night when Marissa crashed through the Tier 2 gate and kicked everything off. Marissa wasn't even at O.V.E.R. at the moment. She was in some deliberately unknown location with August, waiting for things to cool down. They were not to report back to us except in case of emergency. My life felt as though it were depopulating and my actions felt dictated from the outside. But Edgar said that everything was going to be alright and he was smart and capable and the love of my life, so I believed him.

I sighed heavily and rolled out of bed, reluctant to leave the warm covers. I put on my work boots, pants, shirt, and a warm sherpa-lined brown-yellow-orange flannel jacket that Edgar got me for Christmas. Edgar had noticed that I was chronically underdressed for cold weather because I always felt fine when I first walked outside, but was freezing cold after 8 hours on patrol. I absentmindedly put my hands in the pockets of the jacket as I was about to head out the door and felt a piece of paper. I pulled it and unfolded it. It was a note. “Love ya, Bear! Have a great day at work! XO Edgar.” I returned the note to my pocket and left Edgar's cabin to head out on my patrol route, trying not to literally turn into a weepy, squishy ball of mush on my way out. Time to get to work.

The actual boundaries of my actual patrol route were in view when I caught some movement out of the corner of my eye, behind a nearby building. My first instinct was to write it off as not my problem. That was someone else's territory. Greg or whoever. I really should learn who has patrol routes next to me, but I haven't. Any time that I did, they end up leaving before I could make any real connection. There's suspicious activity. Go do your job, Greg. And please don't make mine.

“Please don't make me do my job,” I muttered under my breath as I turned toward the side of the building to take a closer look. My hand instinctively moved to my right hip to feel for my service weapon. It wasn't there, which wasn't surprising. I had stayed at Edgar's cabin the night before and didn't bring it with me. That wasn't entirely an accident. I still didn't like

having it with me on patrol. There was so little actual security work to do inside of Tier 1 and a gun would likely only escalate things rather than bring a peaceful end to an altercation. I have said many times before that I am not a cop. Even if I had my gun, there is a high likelihood that any actual altercation would involve spacetime technology sufficient enough that the action of a human firing a gun would be rendered moot. All I had was a pocket knife and not a very sharp one. I mostly used it for opening boxes. But I flipped it open and kept it at the ready, just in case.

As I turned, I could see the corner of a shadow peeking out from behind the building: it looked like the top of a head. There was someone hiding in the shadows. I was familiar with exactly this sort of sneaking around inside of O.V.E.R. And I knew that when I did it, I wasn't up to any good. And there was a small chance that that actually was me behind that building, from some other time on some mission that I didn't know about. So, cautiously and quietly, I made my way up to the side of the building and inched along sideways toward the back, hoping to catch the perpetrator unaware. Hopefully, I could see him before he saw me and assess the situation. If it was something that I felt comfortable leaving alone, I could always go back the way I came, no one being any the wiser.

I reached the corner of the building, took a deep breath, and turned. There was no one there. It was a typical empty space behind a building, the forest stretching past it about a dozen yards out. I peered into the trees and didn't see anything there, either. No people, no bears. The silhouette that I saw was much too small to be a bear. Bears were only on my mind because of the dream. I began to walk the length of the back of the building, looking for any sign of recent disturbance, gradually convincing myself that I hadn't seen anything at all. Perhaps it was the early morning sun casting some part of the building in an odd shadow for a moment. Perhaps my O.V.E.R. security training, as useless as most of it was, had actually affected me and made me jumpy.

I had fully convinced myself that there was nothing to see and that I had put myself on high alert for no reason when suddenly everything went black. A dark bag had been placed over my head. I felt a rope cinch around my throat— not tight to choke me, but enough to keep the bag from coming off. Instinctively, I turned 180 degrees and slashed behind me with my pocket knife. I heard the blade make contact, tearing through fabric, clothing. I heard a grunt and then the knife was pried from my hands, my right arm being held back by my assailant. Then, a hot, sharp feeling in my back and shoulder. I had been stabbed by my own knife. I cried out in pain and fell to the ground. I heard the sound of the pocket knife hitting the dirt somewhere beside me. The attacker had dropped it. He still had me by the right arm. He held me in place for a moment as I tried to escape. I spluttered and attempted to squirm away, but the attacker twisted my arm and pulled hard, keeping me in place. This altercation lasted for a few seconds before I felt the familiar disorientation of time travel. The ground below me vanished and the rest of O.V.E.R. with it.

I landed in a heap in a new location, momentarily unaware of which direction was up. By the time I got my bearings, I had been handcuffed and stuffed in a chair. I could feel the blood running down my back. It stung terribly and I sucked air through my teeth out of pain, though I

did find some comfort in the theatrics of this moment. If my attacker had simply wanted to kill me, there wouldn't be need for this cloak and dagger stuff.

"Hello, Mike," a voice across from me said.

"What the fuck is going on?" I asked.

"I hope *you* know the answer to that better than I do. I'm extremely confused as to what you and your people are up to," the voice said. It sounded... familiar.

"Look: I'm an O.V.E.R. employee. I was just out there doing my job and I saw something,"

"I know who you are, dumbass," the voice said. "I don't... sound familiar to you at all?"

"Blame the bag over my head," I said.

"Okay, well if all of this stuff you're running around doing doesn't involve *me*, then I don't understand what you are doing," he said.

"Well, everything is about Hunter these days, if you know who that is," I said. "And you don't sound like Hunter."

"Yeah, I've noticed that about Hunter. You're gonna have to fill me in sometime. Mike, seriously? It's been a long time for me, but not for you," the voice said.

I racked my brain before finally landing on a realization that might have been more easy had I not recently been black-bagged and stabbed.

"Ravi." I said.

"The very same," Ravi replied.

"In my defense, your voice has changed," I said.

"I've gotten older, remember," Ravi said.

"Why did you put a bag over my head if you're going to tell me who you are?" I asked.

"Accommodations are... limited at the moment. You don't need to know where you are right now," Ravi said. "Or how many accomplices I have, if any."

"Okay, so I'm in your Base, but you don't want me to know where that is," I said.

"A "Base" would be a very generous way to describe it," Ravi said. "You have someone on your team who can sew you up, right? I did not expect to stab you. I wanted to catch you off-guard. I didn't think that you'd have a knife or that you'd use it."

"Ravi, have you forgotten your O.V.E.R security training?" I asked. "I am always on-guard."

"Very cute, demonstrably false," Ravi said. "And we could go back and forth like this forever, but your time's valuable. So tell me what the hell your angle is and I can get you back to where you belong."

"What the hell *my* angle is?" I asked. "You show up again out of nowhere after just being a low-level O.V.E.R. employee and now you're attacking Ryan and I'm the one with the confusing motivations?"

"I didn't bring you here to discuss my personal business," he said. "What I want to know is: what do you want from me? At first, I thought that you wanted me dead. I got in the middle of your affairs and there was no other way to extricate me from them. But then some guy in a

cowboy hat shows up and sends me back in time to Canada and then much more recently, you hand-delivered my biggest rivals to some sort of black site?-- where they presumably will never be seen again. So, are you... helping me out? And if so, why?"

"Michael was given orders to kill you but he couldn't bring himself to do it so he sent you back in time so you wouldn't be a liability anymore," I said.

"And, from context, Michael is what you call yourself when you're wearing a cowboy hat," he said.

"No, Michael is his own iteration of myself," I corrected him.

"Well, tell the older version of yourself or however you think of it that I said thanks," Ravi said. "Things worked out, in the end, against all odds. So, that explains the first part. What about this stuff with the other Flinch competitors?"

"So, Ryan was right. You do know about Flinch," I said. "So, Ryan and CANNONBALL were competing with you?"

"Well, up until you came along and seemingly won the competition for me," Ravi said. "Why did you interfere?"

"No, no, no. They interfered with *us*," I said. "We didn't know that you were involved until we were inside the isolation chamber with them. They kidnapped Marissa and they were going to use her to lure you out."

"But Marissa is okay now, right?" he asked. I felt his voice soften.

"Yes, she's safe. Base got taken over immediately after that and we sent some staff away with instructions not to report their locations and to lay low, so I don't know where she is or what she's up to but she's safe, as far as I know. And she's got good backup."

"Well, I'm glad she's safe," he said. His response felt genuine. "Okay, next question: where was that place that you took them after you retrieved Marissa?"

"It's called the Flinchite compound," I said, not considering whether that was something that I wanted him to know.

"Flinchite? So they're competitors, too," he said.

"No, they have a whole different thing going on. Their name is symbolic or metaphorical or a joke or something. And it's not even what they actually call themselves," I said. "But you aren't the only one that Ryan was fighting with. He picked a fight with them, too, and even managed to steal some tech from them, but they are *much* more powerful than Ryan and CANNONBALL. Powerful beyond anyone else. Powerful beyond O.V.E.R. And it is *very very bad news* if you find yourself in their sights."

"Noted. So now what is your group's role in all of this?" he asked.

"We have a... working relationship with the compound, evil as they may be," I said, "But for now, we mostly do whatever the Hunters tell us to do. Tightly controlled research projects, so far. And some dirty work that they won't explain to us. Hired gun shit. We crossed them pretty severely and this is their final peace offering to keep a cold war from going hot again."

"So something happened there," Ravi said. "You and Hunter seemed pretty buddy-buddy back when we were working together."

“Yup. A lot has happened,” I said.

“I don’t really need the details. Sounds like interpersonal conflict,” he said. “But to circle back: it does seem that you and your people know a lot of information that I’d like to be in the loop about. Maybe we can come to some sort of arrangement? Is returning Base to your command something that you’d be interested in? Scratching each others’ backs?”

“I don’t know that I want you scratching my back while there’s still a knife wound in it,” I said.

“And whose knife was that, Mike? I didn’t bring a weapon with me! That was your knife,” Ravi rebutted. “And you got me pretty good on the side of my neck, here: look. Well, you can’t see it but take my word on it?” He sighed and took a second to collect himself. “But I did not mean to hurt you and I don’t intend to hurt you further. Can we work together? Now that we’re on an even playing field?”

“Can you be more specific about what you think I can offer you?” I asked.

“You have a working relationship with that compound you mentioned,” Ravi said. “I want you to be my liaison between myself and them, for starters.”

“From experience, I would recommend not getting involved with them on any level,” I said.

“I can judge that for myself thanks,” he said.

“And what are you offering in return? Getting rid of the Hunters? You can’t just kill him. Even if that successfully got rid of him, the ramifications of killing Hunter reverberate outwards and fuck everything up for us. The Hunters are their own organization in their own right. There might be a solution, but it’s not going to be easy,” I said.

“Well, no, if it were easy, then you would have got it done already,” Ravi said. “I know that you work with a team with members that are much more capable than you are.”

“And I’ll talk your offer over with these much more capable members when I get back,” I said. “I think that they’ll be intrigued. We are on our back foot. But I can’t make any promises. There is a lot of risk to assess. Maybe we can meet again with a little less spycraft? Our Base has developed a way of transporting to what we call an RSC: a randomized secure coordinate. We can use it to meet in private in a location that nobody can easily trace. A place where Hunter can’t look for us, for example.”

“That works for me,” Ravi said. “You talk to your team and I’ll be brainstorming some solutions. I’m glad I could catch you, Mike. I feel much more secure, knowing why you’re out there doing the things you’re doing. It makes you a little more predictable.”

“I oddly feel better, too, knowing what *your* deal is,” I said. “Except the stab wound, which is... throbbing.”

“Yeah, I’ll get you back where you belong so you can get that looked at. Tell everyone I said hello. And keep Marissa safe for me, okay?” he said.

“Oh, she is quite able to keep herself safe,” I said.

“I know,” Ravi said. “Alright, well, we’re ready to go. Bye, Mike.”

“See ya round, Ravi,” I said.



I felt the handcuffs open, followed by that same familiar disorientation. In an instant, I was back in Oldbrush Valley.

[END THEME PLAYS.]

[POST CREDITS.]

I heard the sound of the pocket knife hitting the dirt somewhere beside me. The killer—the killer—the killer! I called him the killer! [Laugh, Pause.] I'm still alive, folks.