

WOE.BEGONE Episode 119: Outside Tier One Episode 6: The Elder Hunter Situation

Consolidation is not a linear montage of every memory that you receive from another timeline or iteration. It isn't like booting up Pokemon after not playing for awhile, where it shows you where you went last time. It is sudden and totalizing. It is difficult to discern which memories are new and which were already there. Consolidation is the least intuitive part of time travel that I have encountered so far. It feels almost like fiction. The concept of moving through time itself isn't that difficult. We are all moving through time and we always have been, albeit we usually move through time at a rate of one second per second. Consolidation, on the other hand, is a totally foreign concept. You are being combined with another person, but that "other person" is also yourself. Thinking of yourself as another person is strange enough on its own, without trying to grapple with the combinatory aspect of it all. The difficulty of understanding what is going on doesn't make any of this less real. Time travel is real. I have experienced it. I can remember events that happened in timelines that no longer exist. In order for this to be possible, something must be combined *somewhere*. Otherwise, I would exist in an infinite loop that approaches the point that I traveled back in time, at which point I would go back and start over. Alternatively, there could be no loop, but there would be a new iteration every time I transported. Since neither of these are true, there is a facet of the technology that ensures that a singular Jamilla Gardner can travel through time and return where they started from, still one intact whole. Base calls this function "consolidation." Edgar explained all of this to me. He's smart, but not even he fully understands what is happening. It's okay to handwave away the particulars. We don't have to understand. *Someone* understood and implemented these ideas. I imagine that person is from far in the future and we are downstream of the technology propagating outward through time. It only takes that one person's innovation for the rest of us to take advantage of it. I can use a computer without understanding binary. I can use a Calculator without understanding consolidation.

It didn't hurt, becoming consolidated with the Jamilla from Edgar's Timeline in his basement at O.V.E.R. I think that's what most people wonder about. It didn't hurt, not directly. I sort of wish that it *had* hurt, that it had a more physically substantial element to it, a souvenir to prove that something happened to me. There were two Jamillas, both of whom were equally Jamilla. Edgar plucked a Jamilla from an unstable timeline that he briefly created, iterated them, and consolidated the iteration with me. The two Jamillas became one Jamilla. Me. The effect was instant. I was the Jamilla Gardner from this timeline and then I was both Jamilla Gardners in superposition. I sat down on the floor of the basement when it happened. It didn't hurt, but it overwhelmed my senses. I had a headache, though I wouldn't say that the process directly induced a headache. I didn't have the bandwidth to process what was going on. I had a headache after my parents called me to tell me that my dog died, but that didn't mean that my dog dying gave me a headache. Likewise, the memories did not give me a headache. They didn't flood in. They existed where they previously did not, in an instant. It reminded me of waking up in the middle of the night, not knowing who or where I was. After a second, I would fully wake up and instantly know that I'm Jamilla Gardner. I'm at O.V.E.R. I just woke up. Consolidation was like that instant snap into reality, except it wasn't a blank slate that the memories were snapping into. Something was already there: the Jamilla from this timeline.

Edgar looked at me, expectantly. I could see the tension in his gaze. I was the last to be consolidated. The rest of the field team had already undergone the procedure. So had Mike. Edgar got it done while I was on vacation at the Satellite Base. I was the biggest wildcard. I knew Edgar in his timeline. We worked at 116E together and supposedly got along just fine, but I wasn't a member of Base. I lived my own life, completely unaccounted for by Base's records. I could have been up to *anything*. As it turned out, I had, in fact, been up to my fair share of escapades. Edgar was right to be wary. I hadn't worked at Base, but I had been intersecting with them more and more, leading up to Hunter's big correction. I did things that I needed to explain to them.

"Is everything okay, Jam?" Edgar asked. "Does everything feel normal? Physically, I mean."

"I think so. Let me make sure," I said. I stood up, stretched, paced around in a circle. I wanted to test everything out, make sure that everything was functioning. I didn't want to say yes and then stand up, only for all of my organs to fall out. That would be so embarrassing. I couldn't feel a difference. I felt like Jamilla. No better, no worse. "Nothing feels out of place," I said.

A look of relief washed over Edgar's face. "That's what I wanted to hear," he said. "That's 7 for 7. You, me, Chris, Ryan, Marissa, Sly, and Mikey."

"How's Mike doing?" I asked.

"He's in bed. He still needs a little time," Edgar said. "The new memories have been an ordeal for him. I'll go get him after we start to formulate the plan."

"Hunter!" I interjected. Bits of memories were starting to cohere into something more useful. "Hunter from the other timeline. The... not H... the younger one of the Hunters. The one that lives in 44C. When was the last time anybody saw him? He was doing important work in the other timeline. Work that he didn't tell Base about."

"How do you know that?" Edgar asked.

"Because I was working with him," I said. "Not long, just near the end. He was trying to prevent a correction like this from happening." I was realizing this in real-time as I explained it to Edgar. "He can help us. When was the last time you saw him?"

"He has been around at O.V.E.R., hasn't he?" Edgar asked. He began to sound slightly confused. "He still comes into 116E..." He sounded like he didn't know if he was telling the truth. "I can feel him... disappearing..."

"I can, too," I said. I knew that I had seen him at 116E, that he had been a part of this timeline. And he still existed in the new memories that I had. But he was beginning to fade away. "What does that mean?"

"It means you said too much," Edgar said.

I'm Jamilla Gardner. This is the finale of Outside Tier One. Episode 6: The Elder Hunter Situation. Stay with us.

[OUTSIDE TIER ONE INTRO PLAYS.]

We sat around Edgar's kitchen table drinking coffee: Edgar, Chris, Ryan, Marissa, Sly, and myself. All six of us in a room together stretched the comfortability of O.V.E.R.'s

single-person accommodations. Marissa was sitting on the kitchen counter. Everyone was a little too close to everyone else. I felt especially claustrophobic, knowing that the spotlight was on me. The others had all worked together at Base in the previous timeline. They knew each others' whereabouts. They couldn't say the same of me. I needed to prove myself. They were going to scrutinize my story to ensure that it was safe to trust me. I understood, but it was still nerve-wracking. My hand trembled as I brought the coffee cup to my lips. The mug said "I LOVE MY CAT" in big letters on one side and had a picture of a possum on the other side.

"I minded my own business until recently," I began. "I guess that's true in both timelines. I didn't know much about Base. I knew that Edgar had a sketchy boyfriend named Mike that used to show up at 116E occasionally. I knew that Marissa would be busy and wouldn't tell me where she was going. But I didn't know what was going on. No one involved me, so I tried not to get involved. No one explicitly told me about Base until one of the Hunter iterations was killed and Base took the blame."

"You're talking about the Elder Hunter Situation," Edgar said.

"Right. The Elder Hunter Situation," I said. "Elder Hunter was dead and the other iterations of Hunter blamed Base for it. As punishment for breaking the truce between the two groups, they took over Base through traditional means, without time travel. Hunter was in charge of Base, but he didn't go as far as to correct the timeline. Do I have that correct?"

"Correctamundo," Marissa said. "It was so annoying. All of the worst parts of having a new manager at work, except that when I worked at Wal-Mart, they never asked me to assassinate anyone. Don't get me wrong, I offered plenty of times. They just never asked."

"Right. So, new boss, nobody's happy about it. Not even all of the Hunter iterations, which is where I come in. That's when the youngest Hunter approached me about the situation," I said.

"Mikey calls that one Innocent Hunter," Edgar said.

"Innocent Hunter pulled me aside one day in 116E and said that he needed help with an investigation. I considered him a good work-friend, so I was happy to help out. This is when I learned about the hostile takeover at Base. Innocent Hunter was just as unhappy with the new arrangement as you all were. The other iterations did not let him make any of the decisions and they were increasingly antagonizing his friend Mike Walters. Their friendship was a key point in the inter-iteration conflict. It was the key reason they were leaving him out."

"They should have killed Innocent Hunter if they didn't want him involved," Marissa said. "That's what I woulda done."

"Could they have done that?" Chris asked. "Would that have caused a connectivity issue with the other iterations?"

"The nature of the connectivity relationship between the Hunters is a closely guarded secret," Edgar said. "I don't think that anyone knows except for them. There was a different attack where Hunter killed all of the members of Base *except* Mikey. Innocent wasn't accounted for during that time, but we don't know if he was alive or dead. They might have sequestered him in lieu of killing him."

"That might be what they're doing right now," Ryan said.

"Innocent Hunter mighta disappeared, but I can still remember H clear as day," Sly said.

"They've got a big-ass sword of Damocles hanging over them if they need him alive," Marissa said. "All we have to do is hunt him down."

"Let's operate under the assumption that he is alive," Edgar said. "How do we use that?"

"If he's alive, then they've hidden him away, probably as far away from the Keep Mike Alive Project as possible," I said. "They can't trust him. He doesn't side with them in their squabbles. Chris, for instance: Innocent Hunter told me that he helped you and Mike bring Cole back."

Ryan shot Chris an angry glare. I don't think I had ever seen him genuinely angry before. Chris turned beet red.

"Jam... Ryan didn't know that I was involved in rescuing Cole," Chris said.

"I forgive you," Ryan said, flatly. He clearly did not. He would forgive Chris, but not at Edgar's kitchen table.

"Innocent Hunter can stop all this, can't he?" Sly asked. I appreciated him butting in to prevent an argument from starting. "We don't even gotta kill him. All he's gotta do is not get iterated in the first place. Steer him clear from here so there's no Hunters but Innocent Hunter."

"Innocent Hunter probably didn't choose to be iterated and doesn't know when those iterations happened. They could have even been from before he started at O.V.E.R.," Edgar said. He took a sip of his coffee. The mug had yellow flowers on it. "Though I do think that we're on the right path."

"The compound could trace him," Chris blurted out. Everyone turned to look at him. "Mike made an iteration of me and I had Ty consolidate us so that Base wouldn't find out. But that's not a story worth getting into right now. What's relevant is that Ty offered to trace "Boone" for me. He could trace Innocent Hunter for us."

"Hello, stranger," Ryan said. "We clearly haven't met. I don't seem to know a single thing about you. Chris, you said your name was?" The road to forgiveness had lengthened.

"Sorry, babe. It was just a consolidation," he said. "We've done it dozens of times. And it was a good thing that I didn't tell H what I was doing. We wouldn't be here if I had tattled on Mike."

"I think that asking the compound to trace Innocent Hunter is a great idea," Edgar said. "We're going to need them to trace Anne anyway. We can turn this into a two-pronged mission."

"Anne? Are you saying that Anne's alive!?" Marissa asked, startled.

"Anne being alive would fill in some confusing gaps," Edgar said. "Mike came to O.V.E.R. because the WOE.BEGONE gamerunners instructed him to, but they allowed him to be killed by H as soon as he got here. So, what was the point? I think that they needed him to play WOE.BEGONE in order to lure Anne into playing WOE.BEGONE. Anne was sent to a different facility. What if used her to find a fundamental piece of the technology? She could be necessary for their continued operations. If she gave them a crucial piece of information, she could be the deciding factor as to whether H has the power to maintain the timeline. Mikey would be redundant. Ryan and CANNONBALL would have Base to access O.V.E.R. for them. H could kill Mikey if he wanted to."

"You're saying that if there's no Anne, there's no takeover," Ryan said.

"It's plausible," Edgar said. "It's not every piece of the puzzle, but I think a picture is starting to form. It makes sense to add it to our mission objectives."

"I know what you losers are suggesting. We're not killing Anne!" Marissa cried.

"Nobody said anything about killing Anne," Edgar said.

“Sure you weren’t,” she snarled. “If we’re splitting up the missions, I’m going on the one to find Anne. None of you dipshits are going to lay a finger on her.”

“That’s fine with me, Marissa. You can even lead that team. Nobody wants to hurt Anne,” Edgar said. He put his hand on her knee assuringly, her knee being roughly shoulder height because she was sitting on the counter. “This is the big show. There aren’t going to be any half-measures here. We’re returning things to how they should be. Anne *should be alive*. We all agree on that.”

“How should Innocent Hunter be?” Sly asked. “Jam, are you okay with us killin’ him? That sounds like where things are goin’.”

I stared at the possum on my coffee mug. “I’m not “okay” with it... but I’ll cross that bridge when we come to it,” I said. I was reminded of what Sly had to do in order to protect us from Bax. Conflicting memories of many iterations of Hunter clashed in my head. There was no coherence to be found. It was a cacophony of friendship and fear.

“What do you think it means that Innocent Hunter has disappeared?” Ryan asked. “Are they onto us?”

“Information is starting to propagate,” Edgar said. “If they don’t know about us yet, they’ll know soon enough. It is difficult to keep a secret between 7 people.”

“Eight people,” Sly corrected him. “There’s an iteration of me pretendin’ to be Bax and he knows some stuff, too. And Bax is with Eagle right this minute.”

“All the more reason to act quickly. We’ll move out as soon as a plan solidifies. I’ll go get Mikey. You all can give him the run-down and start working on a plan. Assign teams, brainstorm mission goals, and start preparing supplies. In the meantime, I’ll get things sorted out at the Flinchite compound. We’ll finalize strategies when I get back. Let’s get it done.”

”I’ve got a bad feeling. So much could go wrong,” Chris said. “So, just in case: I love you, Ryan. I’m sorry that I kept so much from you. I told myself that it was to keep you safe but it was actually cowardice. I love you.”

“Shut up, dipshit!” Marissa yelled. She smashed her fist against the kitchen counter. “Nobody is going to die!”

Edgar excused himself from the table. He returned from the bedroom 30 minutes later with a bedraggled Mikey. I thought he looked even more bedraggled than usual. Is that possible? Our top scientists remain divided on the subject. Marissa stole Edgar’s seat as soon as he stood up, so Mikey sat on the kitchen counter while we drew up preliminary plans. Edgar kissed Mike goodbye and transported to the compound to meet with Ty. The timeline correction was manifesting. It was real. There was no turning back now. My instinct was to second guess, to wonder if this course of action was worth the danger. I pushed those feelings down. There was no time. There were too many people with too many ideas. I focused on the plans. It was finally happening. The logical endpoint that began with my discovery of Mike Walters. I had known from the beginning that I wanted to save him, but now I knew how to do it. We were going to do it. We were going to save Mike Walters. It felt like the truth.

[SCENE TRANSITION.]

This account will only cover the portions of the story that I am qualified to tell. I can only offer the small portion that I directly took part in. The seven of us branched out from this point forward, each of us fulfilling our own mission objectives. I do not know what happened on parts of the mission where I was not present. I will leave it up to the others to tell their own stories. I cannot tell you with certainty what happened between Edgar and Ty at the Flinchite Compound, but he returned in high spirits and with two sets of coordinates: Anne and Innocent Hunter.

“Looking cocky, Edgar,” Marissa said. “What happened in Latvia?”

“Ty pointed me directly toward what we were looking for. We’re on the right track,” Edgar said. “I don’t want to propagate the information, but we are an excellent position.”

“Ty just handed over the information? Surely you didn’t just waltz into the compound and get the hard work done for free. Sure, they offered to find Boone for me, but interfering with Hunter is a different can of worms. The compound has a working relationship with H. Ty has to know that this is going to poke the bear. You had to have given him something in return. How did you get the coordinates? What did you pay for this info with?” Chris asked.

“That is between myself and Ty Betteridge,” Edgar replied, serenely. “I’m sorry, but I can’t answer any questions. It is important not to propagate what I have learned.”

The team went over the plans that we devised while Edgar was away. Edgar added his insight and subtly steered us using what he learned at the compound. I tried not to make my panic and doubt become obvious. Were these plans shakier than we thought they were? Not that it mattered. Innocent Hunter had disappeared. The clock had started. We had to act before changes started to build up. The situation could fall out of our favor if we hesitated. I latched onto Edgar’s confidence. There was no doubt in his eyes. Ty Betteridge had lit a fire under him.

“I think we have something here. Good work, team. It all checks out. I can’t say with absolute certainty that our plan is foolproof, but I didn’t receive the emergency message I set up, which is a good sign,” he explained. “Without propagating the specific information, there has to be someone in the future to stop the emergency message from being sent from the past. No one except for me knows what the message looks like or how I sent it, so it cannot be easily intercepted. This implies that there is a future version of me that is satisfied with how things end up. Hopefully.”

“Unless telling us about the message propagated enough information to intercept it,” Ryan said.

“Don’t assume that anything I just said is true,” Edgar said. “Don’t assume that it’s false, either.”

We split ourselves into two teams. Chris, Marissa, and Mikey would follow the coordinates that the compound had given us for Anne: Team A. Sly, Edgar, and myself would follow the coordinates for Hunter: Team H. Ryan would stay in the basement and manage communications between both teams. Team A would cut off the power that the Hunters were maintaining the timeline with. Team H would limit the manpower. There would be no one and nothing to stop us from correcting the timeline. We were to begin immediately. We rehearsed the plans once and prepared for transport. Marissa hugged me goodbye. Edgar sent Team A off with the Calculator. I watched them vanish before my eyes. I looked at Edgar. He gave me a determined nod. I nodded back. He pushed a button on the Calculator. We were off.

[SCENE TRANSITION.]

Sly, Edgar, and I stumbled through spacetime and into a strange, small, white room with no doors or windows. The only way in was to transport with a device like the Calculator. It was completely closed off from the outside world. There were some folding chairs and a portable table in the room, all of which had been strewn about, broken and thrown into the walls. In the center of the room, there was a man on his back. He looked to be a bit older— in his mid-to-late-60s. He was freshly dead. Blood was still pouring out of his head, as well as from another wound in his abdomen.

I felt blindsided. What was this? Edgar hadn't warned us that this was what we were walking into. Where was Innocent Hunter? Standing on either side of the body were two men. Eagle and an iteration of Sly, the iteration that had taken Bax's place. They both had their pistols drawn. We drew ours as well. Eagle was holding a Calculator in his left hand in addition to the gun in his right.

"Elder Hunter..." I said involuntarily. I grimaced at the revelation. This was... Elder Hunter? This was... the event that caused the Hunters to take over Base? Why was it in this timeline? Eagle was here? I didn't understand. "I thought you told Ty to take us to *Innocent Hunter*," I said to Edgar.

"This *is* Innocent Hunter," Edgar replied.

"You have always been a little too astute, Edgar," Eagle said. "You'd get in less trouble if you weren't so perceptive. This here *is* the young Hunter, if that's what you mean. It has been about a quarter century since you've seen him. We caught wind that you might be trying to screw with the timeline, so we stashed him somewhere safe. I wanted to kill him, personally, but H was worried about connectivity, so we made this nice little quarantine box for him. We kept him locked up tight, but you found his cage. The three of you traveling here tripped off a security alarm. We knew you were coming for him. We couldn't have that, so Bax and I made the executive decision that we wouldn't let him be taken alive. Hunter protested, but he got outvoted. Oh, well. We've got a couple decades to figure out what to do if connectivity becomes an issue."

Bax stood silently, pistol drawn, backing Eagle up. He looked like a henchman. Sly was distraught. "But... you're *not* Bax..." he said.

"Of course he's Bax," Eagle said. He and Bax grinned at one another.

"Bax is dead," I said.

"I sure was," Bax said. "Eagle came to the rescue." I half-expected him to cackle like a villain.

"Funny story," Eagle said. "I was getting ready for a mission with someone I *thought* was Bax. He tried to remind me about this odd story where he got his eye cut out in Rugby on a Base mission. Ha!" My stomach dropped.

"That was a tall tale that I told y'all," Bax said. "I lost my eye in a poker match with Eagle, same night as that mission. I bet the ranch on a good hand, but I lost. The eye was an alternative form of payment."

"Bax was a good sport about it. The eye's sitting in a jar on my mantle. It's my prized possession," Eagle said. "We would have corrected the mission if he had lost an eye in the field. Hell, he could have it back if he wants."

"Where's the other iteration!?" Sly asked. He knew the answer.

“He went down easy after I caught him in the lie. Don’t worry, he didn’t suspect a thing. He was actually telling me a joke when I cut him. He didn’t see the knife come out. He only had a couple seconds to figure out what happened and by then, it was time for him to go. That look of betrayal was something fierce, though. He gurgled something about his Big Bear while he was drowning in his own blood. Rookie mistake. You have to have more self-control than that. Him blubbing about “Big Bear” meant that there had to be more Mikes, which meant we needed to get the youngest Hunter the hell out of the picture. He was a Mike sympathizer, you see. I iterated the real Bax from the barbeque, we geared up to pay the old man a visit and... here we are.”

My mind was racing. We were in this timeline because someone killed Elder Hunter. The Hunters took over the Base in retaliation for that killing. Then, in this timeline, Elder Hunter died *because* the Hunters took over the Base. A closed loop. If they could move Innocent Hunter across timelines like Edgar did with the iterations we consolidated with, they could send Elder Hunter to Edgar’s timeline. They could use Elder Hunter to start the whole thing over again. We had to stop them. We couldn’t let them move his body out of this room.

“You’re outnumbered, Bax” Sly said. “You can’t shoot all of us before we can shoot you. And you sure as hell can’t shoot all of us and work that Calculator to get Hunter out of here at the same time.”

“Start a shootout if you want,” Eagle said. “Take the chance. I could use the excitement. Some of us can bleed out on the floor together with Hunter. It’ll be fun. I’ve spent the afternoon in worse ways before. But if we ship Elder Hunter off before you kill us, this whole thing will be retroactively erased. We’ll start over without you bozos. So much for salvaging who we could from Base. Clearly a terrible idea. I was never into H’s whole “death neutrality” schtick. Next time we’ll just take WOE.BEGONE and find our own people. What a headache. Hey, Bax—”

Eagle turned to look at Bax. Bax was pointing his gun at Eagle. Eagle gave him a confused look. Bax fired, hitting Eagle in the shoulder. His right arm went limp, the pistol dangling loosely in his weak grip. Eagle charged Bax and tackled him to the ground. Eagle’s pistol fell inertly to the floor. He dropped the Calculator from his left hand and unsheathed his hunting knife.

“Edgar!” I called out. Edgar knew what to do. He was entering coordinates into the Calculator before I even shouted out his name. We had to transport Elder Hunter before they could.

Sly and I rushed toward Bax and Eagle, but Bax had already been cut deep. His face contorted in pain. The gunshot wound hadn’t slowed Eagle down at all. I couldn’t shoot. I was afraid of hitting Bax. I leapt at Eagle, trying to shake him off. He held his right elbow up like a meat shield to fend me off and slashed at me with the knife. I felt heat and pressure on my left side. Blood. He got me. I stumbled to the ground. Pain and heat consumed my attention. I heard the sound of metal against bone beside me, the sound of someone getting pistol whipped. I couldn’t see through the haze of pain, but I heard Eagle’s breathing become more and more ragged. I stood up and joined Sly.

Bax and Eagle were separated now, both lying mangled on the ground. Eagle was completely disarmed and severely wounded but not dead. I fired a round into his chest. The Calculator was lying beside him. I picked it up. The knife was still in his hands, but he was too weak to move. He wasn’t scared. He looked me in the eyes. He looked... proud of me. Maybe I

was imagining the weak smile on his face. Blood dribbled from his mouth. He didn't gasp, didn't try to breathe. He stared directly out at me, no desperation, no clinging to life. He gradually went fully limp, peaceful despite all the chaos, as though he had practiced dying many times before. As though it were an inconvenience, but not something that he minded too much.

We turned our attention to Bax, who had also been fatally wounded. Sly knelt down beside him. "This whole time..." he muttered. I had been thinking the same thing. He stayed close to Eagle in order to protect Sly. Bax looked knowingly into Sly's eyes. He had lost copious amounts of blood. The whole floor was covered in it. He laid his head down against the cold tile floor. His chest stopped rising and falling in a matter of seconds. He went completely limp as well.

I looked to the center of the room. Elder Hunter was gone. I hadn't even noticed. Edgar had quietly done his job amidst the fray. He managed to make it out of the battle without a scratch.

"Did you know?" I asked him. "Did you know this would be Elder Hunter? Did Ty tell you? Did you know about Bax?"

"We would not have attempted the mission if I weren't certain of the outcomes," Edgar said.

I looked down at my side. I was hurt badly. I had forgotten. It was a deep wound, but it didn't feel like any vital organs were damaged. The pain was unbearable now that there was time to focus on it.

"Come in, Ryan," Edgar said into his earpiece.

"Go for Ryan," he said.

"Team H status update. We located Elder Hunter, already deceased. Elder Hunter is Innocent Hunter. He has been transported to the compound. Eagle has been neutralized. What is the status of team A?" Edgar sounded authoritative. He reported to Ryan like he was reporting the weather. This had all gone perfectly according to a plan that Sly and I weren't fully aware of. Sly was holding Bax's head in his lap, gently weeping. Bax had done it. He had been on his own mission for over a year.

"Everyone on Team A is dead except for Marissa," Ryan said, "But Team A met their objectives. I guess that means that we're waiting on Ty for synthesis and then... it's going to happen."

"Mikey and Chris are dead!?" I asked.

"For now," Ryan responded. "Not for long."

"It doesn't feel real," Edgar said. His mood had become more wistful.

"What's going to happen?" I asked. "It... it hurts." It was beginning to feel unbearable. My side felt white hot and it was becoming impossible to focus on anything else.

"Hold tight, Jam." Edgar said. "We're going home."

Ryan's voice crackled from the earpiece. "Attention Team A, Team H. Both missions were successful. Brace yourselves. I have just received confirmation from the compound, which—"

The world spun disorientingly around me. I was being transported, but it felt different this time, more violent. It was more than relocation to somewhere else in spacetime. I could still feel my blood leaking out of me. I felt tired, weak, nauseous. I thought this might be what it feels like

to die. Weak and tired, the world pulling away from you, until you have no choice but to drift off. Was something happening? We were correcting the timeline? Or was I dying? I couldn't tell if I was still bleeding. I couldn't feel my body. I blacked out.

I snapped into reality quickly and harshly. I was no longer spinning in the void. I was sitting in the living room at Base, doubled over on the ground. I looked down at my side. I wasn't bleeding. There wasn't evidence that I ever had been. I looked around. Everyone else was in a similar state of recovery. We gurgled and groaned as we rectified our surroundings with our understanding, the second time that many of us had done so that week.

There were so many people. More people than I had anticipated. Me, Edgar, Marissa, Sly, Chris, Ryan, Mike... Mike, Mike, and... Mike. I hadn't met the other iterations of Mike in the other timelines. One of them had to be Michael. He was wearing a cowboy hat.

After the groaning stopped, a profound silence washed over us. It didn't seem like any of us had the strength to break through it, as though we were being held in thick soundproof rooms, separated from each other. After maybe a full minute of 10 people sitting in the most total silence I have ever heard from a group of that size, Sly managed to speak.

"We did it, Edgar. We did it! We did it!" Each "we did it!" more triumphant than the last. He hugged Edgar, picking him up inside of the hug and spinning around.

"I died. I remember dying," Mikey said, stunned.

"You never get used to it," Michael said.

"I died, too, Mikey. It was a little touch-and-go there," Chris said. "I died thinking that we failed."

"You're welcome, boys," Marissa said. "Someone had to stay alive and get shit done."

"How did Team H do?" Mikey asked.

"Yeah, about that... does Hunter exist anymore?" Marissa asked. I searched my memories. The memories of three separate timelines collided with each other, vying for space. Hunter was not present in this timeline, at least in my recollection.

"What was all of this, Edgar? What deal did you make in the compound?" I asked. "You made some sort of deal with Ty and sent Elder Hunter to the compound. And in return, he did something that eliminated the Hunters. That is the only way you could have been so sure that this plan would work. The plan was..." I searched for a work.

"Cockamamie," Michael said.

"I left Innocent Hunter's fate up to Ty," Edgar said. "Whatever he chose to do with him is at his discretion. I think we're in good hands. He seems to prefer Mikey Bear running the Base. It's good for his continued existence as well as ours."

"Well, I definitely don't remember Hunter at O.V.E.R. this time," Marissa said. "Hmm... do you think that I could get his cushy tier 2 job now that he's gone?"

The Base burst forth in a cavalcade of conversation. The floodgates were open and everyone found their voices. Sly and Michael were on the couch, blubbering into one another's arms and holding each other. Edgar and Mikey were much the same. The two intermediate iterations of Mike chatted with Marissa, Chris, and Ryan about how good it was to be back, about their own Satellite Base in Latvia and what was waiting for them there: a dog, a surly landlord, 11 crows in the garden.

I watched them all, still an outsider. I was in a Base that I never worked at. The portions of the lives I knew had been reduced to fiction. I was glad that it was fiction. I was excited to

meet them under these improved circumstances. I felt proud. I was in a timeline that existed because I happened to follow my curiosity where it had led me. I radically altered spacetime by wondering who Mike Walters was. We did. We actually did it.

[SCENE TRANSITION.]

We treated it like a happy ending, or at least an end of an era. There was a party, of course. Everyone had worked so hard. The relief was palpable. It was necessary to celebrate such good fortune. We all showed up at Base on a beautiful Sunday evening. It was a wonderful day in the valley. There wasn't a cloud in the sky. Even Chris and Ryan showed up without complaining too much. Everyone was there.

We had a delicious dinner together and with dinner came a toast. Michael clanged his glass to get everyone's attention. He stood up from his chair.

MICHAEL

Eh-hem... Pardon me, folks. If I could have yer attention for just a second. I wanted to propose a toast. A toast to... Jam.

JAMILLA [ASIDE]

I got Michael to voice this part! Hi Michael!

MICHAEL

Thank ya kindly, Jam. [CLEARS THROAT.] A toast... to jam. Now, I ain't been around in awhile. I was blissfully unaware that I didn't exist for a few weeks there. Can't say I minded. My back didn't hurt at least. Anyway, the reason we are all here today is because Jamilla Gardner is such an upstanding human being. Curious, compassionate, brave, caring. I see ya blushin'. I ain't tryin' to flatter ya, Jam. The Mikes owe you our lives. Badger and Panther owe ya everything they got, too. Hard times ain't over. I don't reckon they ever will be. But at least when those times come, we will have the solace of the embrace of the ones we love and the ones who love us. For awhile it didn't look like that would ever be possible. So I raise my glass. Thanks Jam. From all of us. You deserve it. Cheers! [Pause.] How was that? Did it go somethin' like that?

JAMILLA

You left out the part where Mikey drunkenly yelled out that he was sorry about my record player.

MICHAEL

Aw man! I did forget. That was the best part! It was good to see him drunk and happy. He deserved it. It was a hard time for him. Cheers to him, too!

JAMILLA

This is just a recording, Michael. There's no one here to toast with.

MICHAEL

There's some nice bourbon in the liquor cabinet. I'll go grab it. [Riff until fadeout.]

JAMILLA

That's not... I've got to finish recording the episode!

The bacchanal lasted late into the evening, growing drunker and louder as the night went on. I kept my drunkenness and loudness under control, for the most part. Though I did get quite loud with Marissa and Michael singing songs off the Rocky Horror Picture Show soundtrack at one point. I had never seen any of them this happy. It was an appreciative happiness. Everyone understood that the happiness had been fought for, held onto for dear life, and could be ripped away at any moment. But for now, there was happiness. Peace. Not peace and quiet. A loud peace. A peace that exclaimed itself after an era of being stifled. Thank god Base doesn't have any neighbors close by. We would have had the cops called on us.

I quietly ducked out of the party and into the night air. I was the first to leave, even beating out Chris and Ryan. I didn't say goodbye to anyone. I just left. Everything had been perfect and I didn't want to suffer the slow winding down of a good party. Michael was standing on the front porch, smoking his pipe.

"A loner just like me," he said.

"Something like that. I'm just ready to go home and get some rest," I said.

"Ya did good, Jam." He put his arm around me and squeezed me in a sideways hug.

"Don't be a stranger now. You got our backs, we got yours, ya hear?"

"Thanks, Michael. Glad to finally meet you," I said.

"Stay safe walkin' home. Take care now, partner." he said.

I could have transported home, but the long walk was what I wanted. I needed time to reflect, process, and sober up. The moon was full and illuminated the beautiful mountains that surrounded Oldbrush Valley. I cannot remember a time that I have ever felt better.

I walked for a few minutes, lost in thought. I pulled out my phone and scrolled through my contacts. Innocent Hunter's number was gone. I felt a bittersweet pang, noticing its absence. I opened a new text message thread and typed in his number from memory. It was the first time in my adult life that memorizing someone's phone number had paid off. I typed a message: "hope you're out there somewhere..." I erased it and rewrote it three times before finally mustering the courage to hit send. My phone showed that the message had been successfully delivered. I choose to believe that means something. Goodbye, old friend.

I started Outside Tier One to explore a real-life mystery and to expose its intricacies to whomever cared to listen. The contents of the show no longer happened. It is no longer real-life. I made the fiction podcast that I joked that I would make in episode one. But this podcast does stand as a record of something that happened to me. It will remain as a testament to how things were. I know what to do with it now. This recording is a peace offering. Let it strengthen the connection between your compound and Base. If you are listening to this, I hope that it helps you understand the timeline that this timeline branches out from and how things ended up in this particular order. I know that there are other materials and even people inside of storage, but this is the only account by someone who was working with Base when it happened. Use it to train, to understand. Use it to help the Base, because we will need help. This timeline feels inevitable. Things feel comfortable in the here-and-now, but that is how I have felt in every timeline I have

lived in. Stability is an illusion. When the boat starts rocking again, we will need people to navigate. I hope that I have put some stars in the sky to help you find the way.

This has been Outside Tier One. I'm Jamilla Gardner. And I'm going to bed. I'm getting biscuits and gravy with the Mikes first thing in the morning. Until next time, stay safe.

[END THEME PLAYS.]

Outside Tier 1 is a Drop Stitch Audio Production. Created by Jamilla Garner. The theme song is "Roadtrip" by the band Cutting Grass. The background music was also provided by Cutting Grass. Check them out at wearecuttinggrass.bandcamp.com/. Special thanks to Marissa, Edgar, Sly, Bax, Chris, Ryan, Mikey, Mike, MW, and Michael. And an extra special thanks to Michael for lending his voice to this episode.