

## EPISODE 10: TELL-ALL

Mike has a discreet but fiery masc4masc hookup.

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They found me standing in the middle of the road and brought me inside. Anne brought me inside. The road was slick with rain. I couldn't get any traction. They brought me inside. I don't remember how I got out there. They told me that I am sick. I don't feel sick. I don't feel sick. Other than teleporting out into the center of the road, I felt completely fine. They told me it was Wednesday, which was wrong because it was Tuesday.

I don't remember the last time that I went into work. I called them and they said that after a week of not coming in that they just stopped expecting me anymore. My last paycheck was still waiting there with them for me to pick up. I told them that I lost some time but they didn't seem to understand. It would be wrong to expect them to care. I told them that I would be in to get it sometime soon. I lied and told them that I had been sick, too sick to even call in. It was less embarrassing than the truth.

I couldn't get Anne alone. I had accidentally caused a scare and now there were people constantly coming and going from my apartment. Comforting people, bringing me things. Making me panic. Telling me they were glad I was safe. Freaking me the fuck out. I just wanted a moment alone with Anne. These other people thought that I was sick. Anne had heard the story that rhymed with mine. She knew where the symptoms actually came from.

That story was fiction. It was a fiction crafted especially for me. It let me know where my symptoms were coming from. I had been given a forced sabbatical. I was in the middle of working myself to death, but the work wasn't what was killing me.

That's strange. It's not like I forgot everything. I remembered quite a lot. I remembered what I thought was everything. Then again, I suppose that is how memory works: I remember everything that I remember. But I remember documents and conversations. Ones that I thought were dangerous. Why would I remember? Why would they let me remember?

Am I really that minuscule? It is obvious that I am minuscule against the backdrop of the entire earth or the entire universe, but am I really that small even compared to the machinations of other people? I always thought that by my age I would be the one pulling the strings, or at least I would be a person pulling *some* strings. Instead, I'm getting my strings cut and waking up standing in the middle of a road, slick with rain. When they pull the strings again after they have been cut, they will be shorter. I will be on a shorter leash.

But being on a leash presumably means getting fed, to transition from one metaphor into another. I know what I have to do to be fed. They let me keep the nourishment that I scrounged together, most of it. They gave me enough to want to feed again. I know the cabinet where the food is kept.

What I want is the hand that feeds me. Up the arm, neck, into the ear and brain of the being that feeds me. I want to be parasite that leads the ant around by the brain stem to take me straight to the food. I'm a few deep breathing exercises away from regaining my composure. Whatever has been done can be undone. I will be the one to undo it. I have the map and the key and I have seen the treasure.

A bomb works just as well as a key. This is WOE.BEGONE.

[Intro theme plays.]

The story of WOE.BEGONE is being told in order. If this is your first time listening, please go back and start at episode 1. The chaos is ramping up at this point and I don't want you to get confused.

If you were wondering, I'm safe. Aww, how nice of you to care about poor ol' Mike Walters, friendly podcast listener. Getting my brain deep-fried really did feel like that, though. I scribbled that opening bit down while I was bedridden, surrounded by family who thought I was sick. Whatever it did to my brain, it took some serious readjustment. I think the Aliza Schultz blog spot about her "forced sabbatical" was to prepare players for what happens when your memory gets radically altered. Having that as an anchor definitely helped me when I was initially disoriented and no one around me knew what was going on. It was strangely inverse to everything else that has happened to me while playing in the game. In the challenges that I completed, everyone else was unaware of what happened and I was the only one left who knew what I had done. I don't think that everyone else in the world felt like I had just felt, but I didn't know what the difference was either. Maybe Ryan did something to my brain and not to the fabric of the universe.

The odd part is that I still have most of the memories that I thought that would be missing as a result of my recent adventures. Whatever is missing is not the stuff that was in last week's podcast or this week's podcast, which goes without saying because I am about to recollect those memories to you. I got what I thought was all the information I wanted out of this stunt. All I can do is wonder what else I could have possibly learned that the gamerunners thought needed reversing.

I left off last time nervously waiting for Ryan to show up at CANNONBALL's door, readying myself for whatever standoff resulted from my choice to arrange that encounter. The following is a recreation of that encounter to the best of my memory. Ryan, if you're listening to this: fuck you. Tell me what you removed from my brain, coward.

There was a swift rapping on the door to the apartment. The knocking was syncopated, as if to spell out a code. It appeared that Ryan and CANNONBALL had a secret knock that they used to let the other know that it was truly them at the door. Such operation security. It was just "Mahna Mahna." Doo doo doo doo.

I looked through the peephole on Topher's door, out into the hallway. On the other side there was a man, similar in build to CANNONBALL, bulky but not bald like CANNONBALL, waiting impatiently for someone to answer. I hesitated. Two whole hours and I still hadn't figured out what to do. It sounded decent in theory to just talk to him, but this was a game about murder. This was the guy who made the game about murder and my plan was to tell him forcefully that I was going to make him stay. I'm supposed to get out of this situation through my wits alone? Past me had so much confidence in present me-- or maybe he *hated* present me. "Sorry, not my problem." Signed, Past Me.

Ryan looked nervously to the door and then back to his phone, perhaps checking to see if CANNONBALL had emailed him back about anything since it was taking so long for the door to open. I squinted. Ryan looked eerily familiar. I didn't think that he looked like someone else. I had the distinct impression that I had seen him somewhere before. My mind wandered, and it was as I thought about how he was sort of my type that I made the connection.

I flung open the door. "Seriously, it's you?" I asked.

A few expressions swept over Ryan's face. Confusion that I wasn't CANNONBALL, fear and anger as he realized that CANNONBALL's involvement in WOE.BEGONE had likely just been compromised, and then recognition.

"Mike Walters, pleased to meet you," I said and smiled a fake smile.

"You're from--"

I interrupted him. "We don't have to talk about that if you don't want to."

"I know, but what are the odds?" He asked, jaw slightly agape.

"Just get your ass inside and we'll talk while we aren't in the hallway," I said through gritted teeth.

He stepped in and looked around. "You've got Topher tied up? Why?" He asked. He was as calm as could be.

"I needed some stuff from him. You did a good job of teaching him not to talk. He hasn't said a word to me while I ransacked his house."

"Oh, I didn't tell him to do that at all," Ryan said. "Topher, don't get yourself killed over WOE.BEGONE. You don't even know anything important. Cleanup is a lot of work, you know. Thousands of lines of code for a single death."

"I had him gagged because he would scream for help every time I took the gag out," I said.

"This is why I don't let you handle any of the complicated stuff, Topher," Ryan said.

"He left all his data unsecured. I found all kinds of stuff on--"

He interrupted me. "We're seriously not going to talk about it? Are you embarrassed? Or Discreet or?"

I blushed. "Fine. Yes, we messaged back and forth on Scruff a long time ago." Scruff is a dating app, mostly for masculine gay men looking for other masculine gay men, but its use is a little bit broader than it sounds from that description and its more feature-rich than Grindr and apparently there are local guys in your area who are down to alter spacetime tonight. We had exchanged some messages and non-lewd images on there a long time ago. Well, a gay long time ago, so like a year and a half. Gay temporality is a type of time travel in itself.

"You were hot. I forget why we stopped talking," he said. See, podcast listeners? Proof that I am in fact hot. I mean, as long as you take my word on it that he said that I was hot.

"I probably flaked or we didn't have enough in common. Hobbies and interests are really important to me. I can't believe we are having this conversation while I have a guy tied up in his own apartment. I'm supposed to be interrogating you about WOE.BEGONE," I said. CANNONBALL looked on, intensely focused on Ryan, who didn't seem interested in coming to his rescue. He wasn't being swift about getting down to brass tacks, either. It was like he had all the time in the world. I guess he did.

"That's a shame. There's a parallel universe where we kept talking and you'd be on the other side of this WOE.BEGONE game," he said. "I mean, literally. There's literally another dimension where that happens. A statistically significant number of dimensions, actually. I could probably write a program to figure out roughly how many. Finding them would be almost impossible, though."

"That won't be necessary," I said. "Shit. What was I going to say when you showed up?" Any time I plan to steer a conversation, I practice what I am going to say over and over again and the other person almost immediately derails it and makes all of my prep worthless. "Uhh... I don't want to hurt you or Topher, but I need answers. I'm not going to let you leave until you tell me--"

"Yeah, no worries. Ask away," he said.

"Wait, why?" I asked.

"Because you can't really get that much more information than you already have. You're about to have a pretty disappointing conversation, based on what you think is going on," Ryan said.

"Have you already experienced this conversation?" I asked.

"Ha! When you know an outcome well enough already, you don't have to do any extra legwork to predict it. It's like those people who swear that their phone is listening to them to show them specific ads. Your phone isn't listening to you, you are just that predictable. Spying on you through your phone receiver would be a waste of time that could be spent tweaking algorithms. Not to mention the non-negligible size of audio files if you're going to pull audio from every phone on earth."

“Well, maybe you’re right that I am going to be disappointed by this conversation, but I would rather learn that for myself. I’m just gonna start asking questions. So, is CANNONBALL your *partner in crime* or...?” I asked.

“Oh, no,” Ryan said, amused. “Especially if you mean *that*. He’s somewhere in between an assistant and a paid actor. If I’m a gamerunner, then he is the showrunner. I wanted to put an extra layer between myself and the game for security purposes and I wanted someone with a bigger creative streak to work on the more artistic side of the game. No need to get my own hands dirty. I had him build the additional fictionalizations around the WOE.BEGONE game: the Aliza Schultz stuff, his CANNONBALL character, online recruitment tactics, some other stuff that you hadn’t worked up to yet but that we were ready to deploy. Stuff like that.”

“So much for your security,” I said.

“It’s not so bad. You’ve seen our player roster so you know that with a tech-savvy player base that large, incidents are bound to occur and I wouldn’t consider this one especially severe. Or unique even.” He smirked.

“You wouldn’t?” I asked.

“It’s just CANNONBALL and you didn’t even kill him,” he said. “Even if this were my house and you were calling me by my real name, we wouldn’t have a huge problem. I’ve got all kinds of contingencies coded in. I basically can’t be made to do anything against my will. This game has been going on long enough that I’ve been able to patch out some security flaws that got exploited early on, as well as some that I managed to find before a player could get to them.”

“How do you mean that you can’t be made to do anything against your will? Surely you’re vulnerable here, away from whatever machine is used to orchestrate WOE.BEGONE.” I asked.

“Well, you’re a guy with a killswitch that bricks his computer if you don’t enter a password every week. You should understand. I’ve essentially got a backup of the entire universe from two weeks ago that goes into effect if I don’t take a set of specific actions to stop it. I actually did trigger the killswitch myself on accident once and had to do two whole weeks of my life over, being the only person who knew that it was a repeat. That shit sucked. I didn’t even learn anything in the first iteration of those two weeks to make it worth my while to repeat it.”

“Well, that explains why no one came to shoot me in the head the second that I took CANNONBALL hostage,” I said, “if there isn’t anything at stake for you.”

“Yeah, I’m not all that concerned about CANNONBALL. And I’m not very concerned about myself, either. Even if you seized all of the files that I have on the game, you wouldn’t be any closer to actually wielding the technology behind WOE.BEGONE. Honestly, I am not even sure how to wield *all* of the different aspects of it. I’m just the programmer. I didn’t build the platform that it is based on.”

Ugh. There’s *another* layer of bureaucracy in this? “If you didn’t build the time travel technology, then who did?” I asked.

Ryan just shrugged his shoulders. “I’ve never met the guy. I won a contest and the prize was access to the platform.”

“Wait, so you won WOE.BEGONE in a contest?”

“No. There was a contest on a dark web black hat forum to create a competent SMB worm. Think WannaCry, but EternalRocks is the newer spin on it that you might not have heard of. Using stuff like ETERNALBLUE and DOUBLEPULSAR to infect SMB ports and spread to other machines. There are a lot of uses for programs like this, none of which are above-board. WannaCry was a ransomware program. EternalRocks is a lot more mysterious. But they both use leaked backdoors from the NSA, so you get the idea. This would have been contemporary with EternalRocks, 2018-2019, so that worm wasn’t a point of comparison against the ones made for the competition. The one I submitted hasn’t been on anyone’s radar yet, so who knows what he did with it.”

“I get the idea,” I said. I knew that “black hat” meant “bad guy hacker” and that NSA meant “intrusive government surveillance.” I don’t think the rest really mattered from a narrative perspective.

I promise you that whatever he actually said was a much truer version of what I have re-enacted for you here. I tried my best to google what he was talking about so that I could include this part of our conversation.

“You *don't* get it and that's why I'm not worried,” Ryan said. He continued, “I was a total idiot for building the thing and an even bigger idiot for entering it in a contest. The contest entry was promising “access to a remote quantum computer, one-of-its-kind” with “unrivaled deep learning capabilities.” Psh, sure. All of that smacks of bullshit. What he was asking to be built would be something that would be worth millions of dollars to a government if it was built correctly.

So, I messaged the guy asking for proof that what he had was anywhere near as capable as what he said it was. He wrote back with a 5-digit authentication code. The code was handwritten and placed in my computer desk drawer. As in, it was already there when he messaged me back. You probably are accustomed to that feeling at this point.”

“Yeah, I can see why you were interested,” I responded.

“I decided that access to computing that powerful was worth more than anything that another black hat or government could offer me for what I had written. Plus, it's not like I wasn't already making money with one hand designing web injects and making money with the other hand analyzing malware with a pen-testing company. Not so much gray hat as a zebra.”

He continued, “A quantum computer that actually exists isn't something that should be real at this point in time, with our technology. It's not represented in the academic literature at all. Academic and corporate papers are all still talking about the possibility of building the thing that I actually have access to. Knowing what I know about how to program for it, I wouldn't be surprised if it was actually from the future and was sent back to our time for whatever reason. Or maybe the machine is actually still in the future and the guy who runs the machine is receiving my requests in the future and implementing them backwards through time. I mean, he would be implementing them backwards through time anyway, so what's another decade between friends? At least a decade, if not 50 years. Or more.”

“So, how do you run WOE.BEGONE? Do you know where the machine is?” I asked. This was beginning to feel more like a tell-all interview than a hostage situation. CANNONBALL was still on the other side of the room, looking immensely annoyed.

“I have to send everything to |=\_1^/(|-. That's spelled vertical bar, equal sign, underscore, one, forward slash, backslash, forward slash, vertical bar, hyphen, vertical bar,” he said.

“Jesus fucking Christ,” I replied.

“Yeah, hackers suck,” Ryan said. “Anyway, I send everything to |=\_1^/(|- and he sends everything to the computer. When I won the contest, he sent me some materials on how the platform he had built utilized the hardware and what commands I could use to get the unique effects that you've seen in the game. WOE.BEGONE actually wasn't my first project on the platform. I sent some “HELLO WORLD”s back in time to myself, which I got a real kick out of the first time. I wrote a find-and-replace script to turn every shirt I had ever worn black. I was going through a sorta Zero shirt era Smashing Pumpkins phase and wanted to work that into my testing. Turns out, I did not do that in the dimension that we are currently in. The black shirt I am wearing now is just a coincidence.” I have no idea where the machine is. I asked |=\_1^/(|- once and that was the only time he ever responded to me after the initial emails where he told me that I had won and sent over the documentation. It was a video supercut of every time that someone in a movie had ever said “if I told you, then I'd have to kill you.” It was extremely long, as if he had the power to crawl a database and compile something like that instantly. I took his threat seriously and never asked him again.” I recognized that tactic from the gamerunners' messages to myself. Ryan was the same guy that sent me the “Mike Walters cuts off his own arm” audio clip, after all.

“So |=\_1^/(|- doesn't have any say over what happens in the game?” I asked.

“No, only the implementation. I send him the code and he punches it in. The “credentials” that I received were the email address for `|-|_1^/(|-|` and the recognition of my own email as a source that can write to that email. The prize said that it was “remote access” but it’s more like “double remote access,” since I can’t put anything in myself. Implementation can take a long time, I guess depending on how much time he has to set aside for my code on any given day. That’s why some of the challenges have week-long instructions to lay low and not do anything. If I submit code and something a player does radically changes what that code needs to be, then who knows when he will get around to implementing the fix. Who knows how many people won one of this guy’s contests and is submitting code to him on any given day for their crazy quantum computing project. You and Anne are lucky that you only almost got killed by the cops. Not everyone is so lucky and I don’t have the time or patience to go back and fix everything.”

Ryan’s status as the gamerunner who still wasn’t physically handling the tech was disheartening. He didn’t even know where the quantum computer that ran his code was located or who was running it. That means that his power was limited entirely to his ability to write code and since I had absolutely no experience in that regard, even if I stole all of his stuff, there wouldn’t be anyway for me to do anything with it for years at least. Not to mention, if he ever disapproved of what I was doing, he could simply let his killswitch go into effect and undo everything that I had done. I couldn’t see a way to force him to do anything.

“I guess you aren’t going to let me in on this whole thing, are you?” I asked.

“For someone as sexy and smart as you... no,” he said. “I haven’t decided what I’m going to do yet, but letting you into the fold doesn’t seem like the move. It’s fun that you know all this stuff now though, right?”

“I would call it something more like “deeply frustrating,”” I said.

“You have a bare bones understanding of pretty much the whole shebang, but there isn’t anything that you can do. You’ve met me. I’m somehow both the mastermind and the dead end. Even if everything I’ve told you is true, and some of it is, then there isn’t really anything that you can do about anything. All you’ve really done is unlock some flavor-text in the game. And scare CANNONBALL shitless. I will have to do something about him,” he said.

“So, I’m still playing WOE.BEGONE,” I said, crestfallen.

“And you’re still on challenge 4, my man,” he said.

“Fuck,” I said.

“Oh hey, did you ever figure out if Anne was going to try to kill you? Or kill CANNONBALL? Whatever happened with that?” he asked.

“Nothing yet. You’re going to make me kill Matt?” I asked.

“You’re still playing WOE.BEGONE. I’m not making you do anything. But now you have an even better idea of what I am capable of and what I can do for you,” he said.

“What is even in this for you?” I asked.

“Well, the first players gave me a chance to experiment with changing people’s past and not accidentally, for instance, sorting all of their molecules by color in the process. I created a structure to the game that gave me coding tasks that increased in difficulty: more difficult past intervention, more difficult player surveillance, etc. My end goal is some prized information for you, I can tell,” he smirked for like the 50<sup>th</sup> goddamn time in this conversation.

“What do you mean, “prized information?””

“I am being as literal as can be. You want that information. I can see you getting angry with me for being coy about it, which means it has value. I am running a game where you are a participant, so dangling something of value over your head seems like a great idea right about now.”

“Is it to hunt down the quantum computer so that you can seize it for yourself and skip the middle man?” I asked.

“Well, it seems like you have some ideas of your own, so I won’t ruin your fun. You seem to get off on wildly speculating. You should add that to your Scruff profile,” he said.

“I try to imply that through euphemism on my profile,” I shot back.

“Guys on Scruff don’t get subtext, Mike,” he said.

As frustrated as I was with Ryan, nothing that he said during our conversation felt untrue. “What are you going to do when you walk out of this apartment?” I asked. “I assume that I am relatively safe based on what you have said to me tonight.”

“I don’t have to decide that right now. I can decide it whenever I want to. But I know what would make it most entertaining for me,” he said. “I think what I will end up doing is getting a little closer--” He came and sat right beside me on the couch I was on. “And leaning in real close--” He brought his lips up to my ear. “And in the faintest whisper, telling you.”

And then I woke up standing in the middle of the road.

What a boner killer. He could have just told me. I’m so bad at listening, especially when someone lowers their voice. I probably wouldn’t even remember it no matter how important what he said was. I think I might have a sensory disorder? But that’s the last thing that I remember him telling me. I went straight from that couch to standing in the pouring rain in the middle of the road, feeling like my brain had been replaced with a walnut.

What perplexes me is the sheer amount of information that he let me keep from our encounter. I still have all of those files that I stole from CANNONBALL. In the moment, I was sure that something on that computer would give me the key to unlocking this whole thing. It wasn’t until Ryan showed up and told me that I was barely doing any damage that I felt like I had hit a brick wall. I don’t think he was bluffing, either. If he was, then why would he get rid of some memories and leave the bulk of them intact? I thought I was in control and making my own choices to the detriment of the gamerunners and then one of them showed up and basically rewarded me for doing exactly what they expected me to do.

I do think that Ryan’s end goal is to find the quantum computer and have direct access to it himself. Funnily enough, that means that we both want the same thing, even though he is running the game and I am merely a player in it. I think that the first few challenges are to prepare you to be a soldier in the WOE.BEGONE army. The fourth challenge is to prove to you that the game still exerts its ultimate power over you. He said that what I did wasn’t unique. I wonder how many times CANNONBALL has been tied up (or worse) and interrogated by players who didn’t want to do the challenge at this point. It is the highest point of desperation so far. And who knows what happens after challenge four? Maybe it is more focused on locating the quantum computer. Maybe the gamerunners will send messages with far less direct tasks, like: go to a place wearing a blue hat and say the word “platonic.” Stuff that they can use to put the pieces together on their side but not stuff that the player has any idea of the reasoning behind. Maybe the player is *supposed* to do something to learn about the machine behind WOE.BEGONE by the time they get to this point in the game. Ryan was right about my penchant for speculation, but I think it is important to lay it all out.

I’m not convinced that Ryan is the only gamerunner, hence me continuing to say “gamerunners.” He off-handedly said something about how even if I had found and kidnapped him instead of CANNONBALL that I wouldn’t have the material that I need to do anything to him or to get a hold of WOE.BEGONE. That leads me to suspect that he might be working with someone else and the information is split at least two ways, if not more. I don’t know if that stuff he said about sending his code to a guy name FLINCH was supposed to be a trailhead or not-- he said himself that CANNONBALL was more in charge of those creative decisions than he was. It didn’t feel like a trailhead. I tried to search for his stupid looking handle online, but didn’t come up with anything. I think that might have just been the regular old truth.

Anne didn't take my moment of vulnerability as an opportunity to kill me in my own bed. After my delirium broke, I started to tell her everything that had transpired between myself, CANNONBALL, and Ryan. She was relieved to learn that CANNONBALL was not actually out to kill her and that also meant that he was not actually recruiting me to kill her, either. It was all some sort of test, or prank, or game. It was narrative. It was creative spice for the WOE.BEGONE game to have a better story. If it led me to kill Anne, all the better for the story. If it created paranoia and tension, all the better for the story, all the same. CANNONBALL was constructing an ARG, while Ryan was playing with the very fabric of spacetime itself. Quite a raw deal for CANNONBALL, all things considered.

Anne swore up and down that she never had any plans to kill me, that I had imagined all of that in my paranoia and that my delusional state that she found me in made all of those feelings worse. Sure, Anne. One question though: why were you outside my house just in time to find me walking out into the middle of the road instead of being safe and sound back home in St. Louis? I didn't actually ask her that question. I felt like I already knew the answer and I wasn't in any mood to force her to say it out loud.

I have yet to decide what I am going to do about the fourth challenge. I had it all figured out last episode. I was going to catch CANNONBALL off guard and take control of the game for myself, thus bypassing the need to complete any more challenges and giving me full control over WOE.BEGONE. Now I don't even know who I would need to get out of my way in order to take over WOE.BEGONE. FLINCH? I wasn't lying about not being able to go to Vancouver. Even if I decide that I do want to kill Matt, I don't know how I would get there to do it. I would have to sneak over the border or get some sort of exception that I don't know how to apply for, I think. Maybe once vaccinations roll out there will be flight exceptions for people who receive the vaccines. It's quite the annoying kink in a plan that I don't even want to go through with anyway. I don't think that Ryan cares enough about my individual success to either give me a pass on this one until I can do the challenge or to use the technology to help me out.

So that's where I am rudderless, without a plan, sitting on a dragon's horde or new information. Maybe there is something in there to jumpstart my ambitions, at least. Whatever comes next will be a lot of work. My momentum has been thoroughly halted by all of this.

This has been WOE.BEGONE. Next time: Mike Walters gets back in the saddle. Hopefully. Thanks for playing.

[End theme plays.]