

EPISODE 21: INJURY SOMMELIER

[WOE.BEGONE is brought to you by Patreon. We just hit out \$100/mo goal, which means that next month will be the start of our twice-monthly patron-exclusive spinoff, The Diary of Aliza Schultz. Pledge to the show to get that, early episodes, instrumentals, a special discord channel, and more. Thanks to our 10 newest patrons: cookiedoughgelato, Winston, KateSherrod, Christopher Fox, si!!, Tracy, Chris McDaniel, HarveyJane, and Kevin Berrey. Enjoy the show.]

[This episode contains a depiction of assault, as well as some graphic description. Listener discretion is advised.]

[Opening theme plays.]

[There is a banging noise, the sound of a person being thrown with force into surrounding objects. Mike groans.]

[Wearily] Ugh. Hey, no need for that, I swear. You got me. No need to break all my shit, man. Some of it is expensive. [Groan] Fuck. Fuck. Can you help me up? [Heavy breathing.] I'm not kidding. You can kill me or whatever you're gonna do, but I'd like to be sitting down for it if you don't mind, preferably in a chair, not flat on my ass in a pile of my shit. I can't get up. My back, I... I assume you know about my back already. I'm not messing around, I can't get up. I need a hand. Please? [There is some dead air and then a grunt.]

Thanks, I guess. Is this the part where I start talking? Or are you going to take me to a secure room to do that? Here? Ok then. I don't suppose that it would be wise of me to say something like "I'm not talking until I have my lawyer!" Like I have a lawyer. What would I even say if I called up a law office? "Hey, I accidentally activated a magic button that my work gave me and now they're either going to kill me or send me to a room with no windows forever. Also it's a top secret government facility." I'm just fucked. I don't have Miranda Rights. No one's going to bail me out of this one. I know about that guy that pushed the button before I got here. The one Hunter told me about. I'm toast. At least you have the decency to not kill *me* in the open like that where everyone gets to take a good long look at my corpse. That's kind of you. You waited for me to walk into my own cabin. Some people here have already seen my corpse, I think, in another timeline. I'm not going to be very useful to you, I don't think. You're going to be disappointed, just a warning. I--

[There is an eerie, blaring sound, interspersed with distorted speaking. Mike takes short, sharp breaths.]

[Spluttering, each word is punctuated.] I don't know if you actually just slammed my head into the table just now or if you only made me think you did that? That was weird. It felt like you grabbed me but I was looking right at you and you didn't move. I'm getting to it. I'm talking. I'm clearly talking. You're actually making it harder to tell you. How the hell did you do that just now? [Beat.]

Do you really not know what happened? Or are you just making things easier for yourself by getting a confession out of me? I assumed that if I was sloppy enough to get caught, that everyone on the inside would know exactly what I was doing anyway. Is this just for your own vindication? I get that. I've been involved with some petty vindictiveness myself these past few months. I didn't think O.V.E.R. would be like that though. I thought they would be too busy to torture me. I guess they have spared no expense nor resource on this one.

I was working with a guy. He said his name was Ryan but I don't think that was his real name. He's the brains behind this whole operation. I'm the muscle. Well, I'm the one who does the stuff he

tells me to do. He thinks he knows what is inside the gate and was using me to get his hands on it. I stole this file for him when I started here. Stole it out of a mailbox. It came from a red flag cabin. I followed the person who picked it up and delivered it to the mailbox. It had codes in it. Wait, I have it on my phone. I can bring it up for you. Easy now, I'm just reaching in my pocket to get my phone. Look, my other hand is up. You can see my gun, it's over there at my desk. You're the one who took it from me. Do I really look like the kind of guy to carry *two* handguns? I normally don't even carry the one. You'd turn me into pink mist before I could hit one of you anyway. What do I look like, the Sundance Kid? See, my phone. Here are the pictures of the pages that I sent him. See? Eight pages of codes, printed out. Pages and pages of numbers and letters.

It's all gibberish to me. It's still all gibberish. I sent them to Ryan and he told me that he knew how to decode it, but he didn't tell me the specifics. I assumed that I wouldn't know how to follow him anyway. It's all hacker computer shit that I don't understand. He told me that whatever he did to it, it spat out a three-tiered sequence of numbers. Like, whatever it is, you put in one set of numbers, then the second set, then the third. All in different places but they had to be in order. That's what Ryan told me. As far as where to put the code in, he told me that he had no idea. Nothing in the code suggested a location. Ryan said that he only assumed that it was some sort of passcode because it looked like a passcode and he couldn't imagine what else it could be. I makes sense. Sensitive, high-security areas are full of places that require passwords to get into. I got lucky. I tried them the only place that I could think to try them. Ever since the bear, I've been putting together-- [getting cut off by distortion: a list of possible places that could have been the target for etc]

[Distorted muttering.]

The night that I was rummaging around, looking for that file. I made too much noise that night while I was digging that file out of the mailbox and I got Marissa Ng's attention. She's the night patrol for that part of the valley. She thought that I was a bear that had been tearing up O.V.E.R. property and opened fire on me. I think that I was instructed to go to that specific place and time in order to distract her from something else on her route. The boulders are on her route. They're the only thingst I stood a chance of getting close to. The second gate is too heavily patrolled, I'd never get in. The other buildings are securely locked and I don't have clearance to get into them. I wanted to see what I was being used as a distraction for. If it wasn't the boulders, I didn't know what I would have done. Fuck, I wish it was anything other than the stupid fucking boulders. I could have failed and come home and there wouldn't be 3 enormous guys in my cabin beating the shit out of me for answers.

After Ryan cracked the code, I spent a few days scoping out the boulders and the other stuff on Marissa's route. She doesn't know anything about this, by the way. I'm not just saying that like I'm some gallant team player trying to keep his co-conspirators out of trouble. I'm a coward. I would sell anyone up the river if it meant that I could live to cry about it later. Marissa had no idea what I was up to. She just thought that we were friends. She trusted me and showed me everything, like friends do. Maybe not the best thing for a security guard to do, but she just thought she was showing a fellow security guard.

She took me on patrol with her one night, which means that I knew not only what was on her route, but also when I could expect her to be as far from the boulders as possible. Plenty of time to get in, scope out the place, maybe type some numbers into a keypad or something, and get out. I didn't know what they were. She said she thought they were robots. Looks like that was wrong.

Tonight was the night that I decided to investigate. I dug under the fence. Like a dog. I brought a collapsible shovel with me that I used to dig under the fence. It's all just dirt under the fence anyway, no grass. If I covered it back up then no one would ever know that I had been there. So much for that. But that's not what tipped you off, at least. I only had to do a little digging and then I jammed myself under the fence and squeezed through to the other side. Maybe more like a rat than a dog. I really need

to lose a little weight. Marissa thought I was a bear for Christ's sake. Maybe one day I'll lose some weight that isn't violently torn off of me. [Forced laugh.] [Unamused silence from the 3 men.]

So, I get through to the other side of the gate. I remember shaking pretty hard the whole time I was trying to do this whole maneuver. I'm somehow still bad at doing dangerous shit, even though doing dangerous shit has been my whole life for awhile now. I knew that I was an unlucky move away from getting caught and I wasn't positive what I was looking for. I went up to the boulders and at first, I didn't see what any of them could possibly have to do with the strings of numbers that Ryan gave me. They weren't fake boulders. They were just big rocks. There wasn't any place to put numbers into them. No hidden compartments or doors with keypads on the other side of them. I checked thoroughly.

I never expected the lock to be *that*. I'll admit that it's pretty clever, even if it's terribly cruel. That seems to be a recurring trend among purveyors of this technology. I suppose that keeps out anybody that doesn't want in badly enough. It's actually a surprisingly simple lock, too. I thought that the switch might be related to the technology, something that only its unique level of precision and power could detect. It was much more... caveman discovering lightning for the first time. Just completing the circuit, one after the other. One big telegraph, essentially. One shock means one. Repeat until you get to the number you are counting up towards, pause, repeat for the 16 digit code. Repeat for the other 2 circuits. I thought my heart had stopped beating at one point. If it did, it started again. Or maybe it didn't. This place can be strange like that sometimes. That's the last thing I need on top of everything else, a faulty heart. I'm just going to keel over one day from exhaustion and everyone's different plans to kill me will all be for naught. My heart is still racing, but it might be because you guys keep beating the-- [shit out of me while I'm trying to squeal like a little piggy for you!]

[Muffled sounds and distortion.]

I can't believe I brought the fucking button. Of all of the days to bring the button with me. I thought I was being safe. You know what they say: if you commit a murder, you need to drive the speed limit on the way to drop off the body. Don't commit two crimes at once, that's how you get caught. I was being a good little O.V.E.R. security guard with my gun and my button that I'm not even allowed to press. If someone stopped me and asked me what I was doing, I could prove that I wasn't up to anything. I was just a regular guy out doing regular things and being as normal as can be. See, here's my gun, here's my button. I work here. I am just out for a pleasant stroll at night in the valley. The weather is nice, isn't it? Please turn around so that I can break into a higher security area in peace, please and thank you.

I normally leave the button at home, when I'm on my patrol route. We are expressly instructed not to push it. It doesn't make sense to bring it with me, where I might accidentally push it or push it out of desperation. I've seen what happens to people who push it. The lucky ones get fired. I'm starting to suspect that I was hired to replace someone who pushed the button and might have retired to the security guard patrol in the sky. There is no use to having the button on my person, except to avoid getting in trouble. And I was trying to avoid getting in trouble, so I brought it with me.

Of course, the one time that I bring the button with me, it fucks me over. As soon as I put in the final string of numbers-- well, nothing at first. I was expecting a hidden door or tunnel to open up for me to sneak down and reveal the deep dark secrets of Oldbrush Valley. Maybe one of the boulders moves and reveals an underground passage that leads further into the complex. In fact, I thought that I had done something wrong because nothing happened. Maybe I had put the code in wrong? Maybe Ryan deciphered it wrong? Maybe this isn't where the code goes? God dammit, I just shocked myself probably 200 times, it had better be for something. For about 30 seconds, I thought that the whole thing was a bust and that I had just wasted my night sneaking into the place.

Then the button went off. It started to make an ear-piercing noise from inside my pocket. It was excruciating. It was like those mosquito tones that are supposed to only annoy children because they

are the only ones who can hear it, except my old man ears could hear it. I wish that they couldn't. In addition to the ear-splitting came the realization that I had royally screwed up. On the plus side, I had clearly done something, something that had activated something else, which meant that the codes were real and I had used them in the right place. That's something. The only problem was, whatever I had done had activated an alarm and caused the button to go off and I know the button doing anything is a bad sign. Plus, everyone in the valley had to be able to hear that noise. I looked around to see if anything about the boulders had changed once the alarm went off: nothing. Still no secret tunnels, nothing. I was so hung up on the secret tunnel thing. It was the only realistic option that I could think of, but there was no tunnel to be found anywhere that I could see, but I couldn't stick around long. If I stood there, waiting to see what the codes did, someone would find me and then it would all be over. That's when I decided to make a run for it.

I scurried back under the fence through the hole that I had dug. I put the button in the hole and covered it with dirt as quickly as possible. It muffled the sound, which I hoped was enough keep it from drawing attention. I could come back and get it in the morning if it wasn't making noise anymore. I knew that I couldn't take it with me back to the cabin. It would be blaring my location to everyone on the way there and would serve as a beacon once I got it inside. "Attention everyone: the criminal is in this cabin. Shoot the idiot in this cabin!" Not that it ended up mattering. Burying it wasn't a foolproof plan either, but I was freaking out and I was trying to do all of this while my body was telling me to run full-speed back to my cabin and lock the door.

After that, I ran full-speed back to my cabin and locked the door. It was after I locked the door that I noticed that I had actually locked myself in here with you three gentlemen. Hi. Hi there. You remember. I attempted in vain to unlock the door and flee-- I don't know to where, just not here-- and that's when you grabbed me and subdued me into submission-- meaning of course that you beat the shit out of me and left me crumpled up on top of some boxes. My ankle really fuckin' hurts, by the way. It might just be sprained. I'm sorry that I pulled your hair, by the way. That's not a sportsmanlike move. I was not my best self this evening and I apologize for that.

But that's that. That's where we are. I've done my duty. I've told you everything, just as you have demanded of me. I've snitched on myself and Ryan as much as there is to snitch. So, it's over, right? The end of the line. It's your turn to do whatever you are going to do. I don't have any--

[Another cacophony ensues.]

What? I don't know! I didn't know that. I didn't know any of that. That doesn't even make sense. It was just me out there. I don't know where Ryan is. I wouldn't even know how to begin to track him down. He's secretive. For exactly this reason, I might add. I never even let him inside of the gate. You can check with the front gate. He showed up one day to talk to me and I didn't even let him in. I talked to him on the outside. We aren't friends, we are just working together. I don't trust him either. I am working alone in here. There is no way that I could have entered other passwords at other sites at the same time that I was entering passwords at the boulders. I swear to God it was just me out there. I *thought* it was too easy. But I didn't have someone timing a second set of passwords. I don't know where those other passwords go. You have my word. No matter how hard you try to beat it out of me. I don't know. I only know about one set of passwords.

[There are some more banging sounds.]

Fuck you! I actually don't know! Fuck, I think I ripped open some stitches. Oh, yep. I can feel the blood dripping down my back. Fuck. [Teeth sucking pain sound.] What do you want me to do? Speculate for you? Maybe *you* did it so that the button would activate and you could come find me and rough me up over it. Fuckin' sadist. Look, the way this thing works means that I don't ever know

everything that's going on. I don't know what you know about this, but the whole mechanism makes everything unpredictable. There are too many people working across too long a span of time and all of those people are even more private and secretive than I am. You caught the dumbest fish in the pond and put him in the barrel, hate to break it to ya.

You know what's inside there, I assume. At least you know what it is capable of. You might just be some hired thugs like me, but you're hired to keep people like me in line. You must have access to the next level of information past what I can see. At least. You know there is some intense power at the center of this. The kind of power that you can't even truly comprehend even while you are wielding it. This is the manipulation of the basic components of the universe. Maybe there was somebody at a second location, putting in a second set of passwords with identical timing to my self-electrocution. If there was, I was not in contact with them. I didn't have to be. Time is not an issue anymore. If we didn't get it right this time, we could always get it right this time later. Hell, it could have been me in the second location putting in the second set of passwords. Who knows? Who cares? How could it possibly be important? You couldn't possibly track them down. You don't have enough perspective. You couldn't even tell *when*--

[There is the sound of something slammed down hard, like a solid object onto a table.]

[Wailing.] Fuck! Oh, shit. Hnng. I can't. I can't. Fuck. Why would you do that? I told you everything. I told you everything! [Gasping.] What else do you want to know!? Do you want to know about WOE.BEGONE? Fine! I'll tell you all about WOE.BEGONE! About this stupid little game. What don't you know so I can tell you? Fuck. Just pull it out. [Heavy breathing.] You're gonna kill me over the stupid time travel murder game. I was trying to figure out why I got sent back to get shot in the middle of the night. The guy's name is Flinch. There's a god damn time machine in the middle of Oldbrush Valley. Fuck. Just pull it out. Kill me if that's the plan. I don't have anything else. [Sorrowful.] I... I... But I won. I know I won. Who else could have saved me? Who saved me from the bear? Who told Matt? I won. I had to. It can't be over.

[Silence]

Hello? Guys? Jesus Christ.

[Mike's phone buzzes.]

"Thank God you don't know anything important, you imbecile. No, we could not have intervened any sooner. You're lucky we were able to stop this at all. You absolute moron. Stop talking to Ryan. You get what you pay for. PS. Those guys don't work for O.V.E.R. If they did you would be dead. -W.BG"

It... wasn't O.V.E.R.? Who the hell was it then? What just happened to me? Who just put a knife through my hand and into the table? Why don't you ever answer questions like that, huh!? Who even are you? What do you want anymore? What do you want from me? What do you want from me!?

I don't heal anymore. Every wound just adds up on top of the one before it. I'm mangled. I'm being passed through increasingly smaller meat grinders. I do not have any unaffected body parts. My brain has patiently learned how to better understand extreme amounts of pain so that I can savor every little morsel. I have become an injury sommelier. This new one has hints of... hmm... [Mike smacks his lips] I'd have to say... hints of copper and Episode 6. A bit of a retread as far as hand-related torture goes, but who doesn't like a good callback?

Remember the good ol' days of WOE.BEGONE? The Ryan days? I didn't know they were the Ryan days back then. I thought they were the CANNONBALL days for awhile there. One ridiculous challenge after another, each one of them a chance to prove myself. All I had to do was swallow any

shred of humanity that I had-- and I'm not gonna lie, I was already primed and ready to swallow all of that humanity because it was doing fuck-all for me before WOE.BEGONE. All I had to do was let loose and become the monster I always knew that I was going to be. The monster that I knew I was going to be and yet convinced myself that I never would be at the same time. Surely something would happen to me, some sort of deus ex machina that would swoop in at the last second and prevent me from transforming. But, nope! It was disgustingly easy to play WOE.BEGONE. At least it was better than sitting on my hands all day, thinking about every selfish decision that pushed most of the people in my life away from me. At least with WOE.BEGONE, it was a pain-in-pain-out transaction. I knew which direction it was coming from and why. I got the tiniest shred of something and it was enough to send me into the WOE.BEGONE death spiral. That's not a coincidence. That isn't something that everybody is secretly capable of doing.

But *your* WOE.BEGONE? It's so much more painful. If I was letting loose playing Ryan's game, then I have been let loose upon playing yours. The bear, the shooting, Anne, killing Chris, these guys who stabbed a *knife through my hand*. There isn't any respite. There isn't any reversal. Ryan's game was supposed to test my limits, but it failed. It did not get to my limits. *These* are my limits, Flinch! Whoever! I'm supposed to hang on now because I eventually win. At least, that's the theory. You would be more than happy to let me keep believing that whether or not it is true, as long as it keeps me doing your wet work for you.

Whatever the truth is, I hate it. I'm not phased by twists and turns that I didn't see coming anymore. I cannot contain my antipathy at learning that I have been fooled again. Of course I've been fooled again! Even if I wasn't an idiot, I'm just a guy. Even if I was smart enough to put some things together, I'm still bringing a knife to a gun fight. This knife in particular is keeping me from standing up from this table because it has connected my hand *to the table*. That's where I'm at and I know it. I'm never going to outsmart you. I'm never going to outpace your technology. I'm sure that if I ever defeat you it will be some sick joke that I didn't see coming. "Oh, you took control of WOE.BEGONE and convinced Matt to let you complete the fourth challenge. But now everybody's cactuses or some shit." Fuck you!

I know this thought process. I know where it has lead me before. Every crappy retail job I've ever worked, when they pull the most egregious stunt for the last time. It was so easy then to say it. I was young and stubborn and if it didn't work out I could always move back into my parents' house. The next thing would be waiting for me sooner or later. I'm actually pretty good at tolerating being mistreated. I can trick myself into thinking "if I can just make it through this week, things will even out and it won't be so bad." The most noxious sentiment is "I can just quit. Anytime. I can quit right now. I can just walk out the door and be free. This could be the last hassle I get put through here and then I just quit." That's the black pill. It lets you feel like you've accomplished something that you haven't. You probably don't mean it and yet you feel free from the weight of the situation anyway. You think that every day for 4 years and eventually you can't even recognize the you that wanted to quit in the first place.

Can I just say it? Can I just do it, right now? I don't even know what would happen to me. You could do whatever you want. I don't even know what that is. Maybe you'll kill me. I'll just hit the ground before I can get the words out. Or just never exist to begin with, that seems fully within your power. I could "lose the game." Are we still doing that shit? The game shit? You're still signing text messages with "W.BG" like this is a fun alternate reality game that we are playing together. This isn't a game. It is violence and power and politics.

It's bringing Matt back to life. It's cutting off my arm and dying. It's killing a pig. It's killing a cop and then helping Anne kill a cop. It's cutting off my hands. It's holding CANNONBALL hostage. It's getting my brain fried by Ryan. It's killing Matt. It's moving here. It's getting mauled by a bear. It's getting killed by Anne. It's getting shot by Marissa. It's electrocuting myself to put in the password. It's being beaten to within an inch of my life in my own cabin. It's this knife sticking out of my hand.

This isn't a game. I don't lose. I quit.

Shit, I said it. I quit. I quit. I quit. I'm not going to do it anymore. I can't. There isn't any Mike Walters left for you to take. I am completely spent. I fucking quit. I hope I am sufficiently impressing upon you how fully *quit* I am right now. This isn't a joke. This is 12 dimensional checkers. I am not pulling one over on you. This is exactly what it sounds like it is. It's over. Whatever happens next happens. Whatever happens in your "game" won't be happening to me. It's over. It's over. There isn't any more of this. There can't be.

[Mike can be heard breathing heavily. He pulls the knife out of his hand and stabs it back into the table, letting out a wail in the process. The door to the cabin opens and shuts.]

[End theme plays.]