

EPISODE 26: CHANCE AND SHADOW

[Hey guys. Big days are upon us at WOE.BEGONE Industries LLC. There's a lot going on over on the Patreon, at patreon.com/woe_begone. Our Q&A goal has been met. Every month I'll be taking questions and then doing a Q&A for \$2+ subscribers. I'll be taking questions for this month's Q&A for the rest of the week if you want to get in on that. Episode 3 of director's commentaries just dropped for \$10 patrons. Remixing and remastering is well underway for the second soundtrack album for \$5 patrons. Of course, all patrons get access to the original episode instrumentals and the spinoff podcast The Diary of Aliza Schultz. All at patreon.com/woe_begone. Thanks to my 10 newest patrons: Cassie Murphy, Pineapple, johnny bazookatone, Elliott K, SRaye96, JMaths, Lucia Dubra, Julia Bambach, BertBert, and Charlie Kinninmonth. Enjoy the show.]

It's been awhile since I've heard from WOE.BEGONE and it's making me nervous. Hearing from WOE.BEGONE is a nightmare. It usually means I am about to have to do something horrifically violent or am about to be thrown into a wood chipper. The wood chipper is barely a metaphor. Not hearing from WOE.BEGONE is worse. They have made it clear time and time again that they want to use me for all that I'm worth. So, if they're not contacting me, then I'm probably doing what they want me to do without them having to ask, in which case I am putting myself in the line of fire all by myself. Mike Walters: self-starter. It made sense, though. I actually had been a self-starter recently. I was making legitimate headway into exploring Tier 2 and I had actually moved an object through space and time all on my own for the first time. Our interests were aligned and I was making progress towards those interests, so WOE.BEGONE had left me alone.

I was the most focused and motivated that I had been since I moved to Oldbrush Valley. When I first got here, I couldn't focus on WOE.BEGONE because I had to learn how things work around here and how to do my job. After that, I ran some errands for WOE.BEGONE, but they only benefitted the gamerunners, never myself. And, of course, after that were the injuries. The only success was putting in the passwords at the boulders and that also resulted in severe injury. Getting into Tier 2 and making 2 successful trips was the most I had accomplished since the old days of taking CANNONBALL hostage.

Planning trips into Tier 2 wasn't easy, though. I got lucky on my second trip and found a building that had something that I could use inside of it. Without working there, it was difficult to figure out what went on in any of the buildings, especially at night. I'm sure that a lot of them are normal, boring buildings full of normal, boring activities. I got lucky on the second night that I found something interesting and useful.

I actually made a third trip into Tier 2 that wasn't that interesting or elucidating. I broke in with no problem. The code had changed again, which I knew about, thanks to Edgar. The patrols were staggered at a more inopportune time than the previous excursion, so it was difficult to get anywhere without getting spotted. When I finally got up to a building, the doors had a different locking mechanism on them. Some of the buildings have locks that require a special badge to get in, which means there's certainly something worth seeing in there but disheartening because I don't have a way to get in. I had to abandon the mission so that I wouldn't get caught. There it is: something that could have been a whole episode of a podcast if it had gone right, explained in a single paragraph.

This painless failure did not deter me, not when I had already endured so many painful failures before it. I wasn't mentally set back at all. I immediately began making plans to sneak

in again. It was a Thursday night when I snuck in for the third time, so I waited until the following Monday night to try again. Getting the new code on Friday night wasn't an option. There was too much scrutiny at 116E on those nights. Monday was easier, if I could bear to wait that long. I could keep doing this forever if I were patient enough, methodically working my way through Tier 2 until I got my hands on what I was looking for.

I'm sure that nothing will ever get in the way of my perfectly crafted plans. This is WOE.BEGONE.

[Theme song plays.]

Breakfast on the morning of my fourth trip into Tier 2 was more dour than usual. Hunter wasn't there. He hadn't fully left us for Tier 2 yet, but he was prone to disappearing for days at a time by this point and wouldn't be allowed to tell us anything about what he was doing. Whatever his Tier 2 training was, it was lengthy, regimented, and classified—though that might also be related to Hunter's unique relationship to two of the people already inside of Tier 2. Breakfast often felt dreary on days that Hunter wasn't there. His good cheer and pleasant demeanor anchored our collective friendships and was central to our O.V.E.R. dining experience. The rest of us were too prickly to stick together without him.

That particular morning had an energy that could not so easily be explained by Hunter's absence. It was not absence of cheer, but rather the presence of hostility that defined the air that morning. Chance and Shadow were in an odd mood. They looked hungover, like they hadn't slept at all the night before and had wandered into the cafeteria in a headache-obscured haze. Their eyes were glassy. Neither of them were the type to actually be hungover on a workday. Both of them conducted themselves more professionally than I ever had, or frankly, ever will. The source of this bad energy could not possibly have been the result of some late-night partying.

We chit-chatted about small things and work gossip over frankly inferior biscuits and gravy, but I couldn't shake the feeling that something was severely off with the two of them. I was in a good mood, excited about my next mission, but I was not able to infect them with my good vibes. They were treating me differently, not responding to my wit with wit of their own and giving off the faintest hints that they were irritated with me (the least irritating person ever). I started to suspect that the two of them had begun asking questions, much like Marissa had, and that they were starting to uncover stuff about Oldbrush Valley, or about the Hunters, or about me and what I was doing. You can only stay out here so long before your pretty little head gets filled with ideas about conspiracy. And there are so many conspiracies out here that some of them are bound to be real.

Finally, the negativity got overt enough that I stood up from the table and told them, "I can tell that something is up with you two. Whatever it is, I think that it is best that we handle it in private."

I exited the cafeteria and began to walk toward my cabin. Chance and Shadow followed silently. Their behavior had me fully spooked. Neither of them were the type to sneak around the valley uncovering mysteries, or if they were, they were so good at sneaking around that I never suspected them. In either case, it was unnerving to see them behave like this. They weren't my closest friends, but they were people whom I felt comfortable eating breakfast with every morning. Seeing them pointedly on edge at me for reasons they wouldn't tell me was jarring. It was a long, torturous walk back to my cabin, punctuated with extended

bouts of silence. The chit-chatting at breakfast seemed to have been solely to make nice in public. There were much fewer people around now, no one to put up appearances for.

"I don't suppose that this is all for a surprise birthday party that you've planned for me," I quipped. When in doubt, quip it out!

"It's not your birthday," Chance snapped back, barely getting the words out from between his teeth.

"Yeah, but you don't know that," I grumbled. Silence. "Look, I've already been knocked senseless in my cabin once in recent memory. I'd prefer not to go through it all again. Is there anything I can do?" I asked sheepishly.

"It's not like that," Shadow said. "We'll explain when we're inside."

We were all alone on the path. We walked in silence the rest of the way. I had no idea what to expect, so I began to suspect everything at once. I might be walking into a heated conversation or an assassination. They could be playing WOE.BEGONE. Or they could be aliens trying to understand the human emotion of [say in an alien voice] love, what is love? Their demeanor didn't rule anything out.

We got to my cabin and I opened the door like a gentleman. As they passed across the threshold, I thought about slamming the door shut to buy me a couple free seconds and making a run for it. It wouldn't have worked. Not only did they know where I lived, they were standing in my house. I would eventually have to come back here and face them.

Instead I entered my cabin, turned on the lights, and checked the usual hiding places for intruders. "Sorry, I always check for people lying in wait for me these days," I explained. "It's happened before and I would prefer that it not happen again."

"Yeah, we remember," Chance said. "Everyone got a peek at your cabin when you ran off and it was ransacked to hell. It still looks ransacked to me. Have you not cleaned up at all?"

"I cleaned some of it up," I said, trying not to blush. "I've just gotten used to living like this since I moved back in." I would have cleaned up if I knew that I had guests coming over, obviously. "Sit wherever you can find a spot."

Chance and Shadow remained standing up. I didn't take a seat, either, still standing near the door after having shut it. I launched right into it. "I don't want to drag this out. What is going on with you two? What is your problem with me?"

I thought about my gun on the desk across the room from me. I wanted to get between them and the gun just in case I needed it, but there was no way. It was sitting out in the open and if I walked over to it, they would know exactly what I was thinking. In fact: what was I thinking? That I was going to shoot Chance and Shadow? No. Not in any conceivable series of events was that going to happen.

"You're up to something out here," Chance said. "I don't know what it is, but you need to stop now, before someone gets hurt."

I imagined pretending that I wasn't up to something out here, that I was merely doing my security job for Oldbrush Valley Energy and Resources. They would never believe me. Chance and Shadow knew far too much about how I used my time to believe that I was simply out here doing my job, especially if they had already been tipped off. There was no path but the honest path. The semi-honest path. The liar's path with small truth diversions.

"It is much *much* too late to stop before someone gets hurt, I'm afraid. I can show you the scars again if you want," I said.

"Well now we're the ones getting hurt," Shadow said.

I was perplexed. "But who would hurt you? You don't know anything," I said.

"I *know* that we don't know anything," Chance said, "But somebody who is after you doesn't. Three somebodies to be exact, not exactly friends of yours by the sound of it."

I inhaled sharply at this last detail. "Three people? Odd question, but did they hurt you with their minds?" I asked.

"I'll take that as an admission," Chance said sternly. "You need to sort your shit out. Whatever they want with you, they tried to get from us."

My stomach turned over. The Flinchites came for Chance and Shadow? How could they possibly be of use to them? I could feel my face turning red, first at the idea that my secrets were seemingly slowly spilling out all over the valley and second that a shadowy organization was shaking down my friends for information and it wasn't even the shadowy organization that *I* was cooperating with.

"Did they think that you knew something? Did they think that you were working with me?" I asked.

"Oh boy, did they," Shadow said. I should note here that as soon as the discussion of the Flinchites started, the conversation became more heated and overlapping than I can convey here with my one voice. Just imagine confused people talking each over loudly and quickly and you'll get a feel for what it was like.

"We know you've been sneaking into Tier 2 Mike," Chance said. "We know that you stole some device inside of Tier 2 and have been using it to do God-knows-what. They didn't find it in your cabin so they tore apart our cabins trying to find it last night. When they didn't find anything, they told us that they weren't done with us until they are done with you. Whatever it is you stole, you've put us all in danger from these freaks. They slammed me into the wall using only their minds. What we should be doing is reporting you to O.V.E.R. but we decided that we don't want you to get tortured at some government black site for the rest of your life. Just give them whatever the fuck thing it is you stole, Mike. "

I held off on explaining to them that the Flinchites probably weren't actually psychic and instead were doing something super cool and fun with computers. The details didn't make any sense. "I have no idea what they meant by a "device." What device? How would I even get into Tier 2? There's a big wall with big scary guards between here and there," I said, feigning indignance. Me, in Tier 2!? Why, I never!

"Oh bull-shit, Mike," Shadow said. "We know you dug under the fence. Marissa didn't rat you out to O.V.E.R., but she did show us the button that she found buried on her route that night. You went missing *and* your cabin was trashed the morning after she found it. Me and Chance put together what happened. We're not stupid. Marissa has interrogated us about you, too. *Everyone* thinks that we're in cahoots, Mike. Whatever you're doing has consequences for us by association. What are you doing out here?"

"You owe us an explanation," Chance grumbled in agreement.

I relented. They weren't wrong about being owed an explanation. "Fine. Fine! I'll tell you. I dug under the fence on Marissa's route and snuck into a Tier 2 area. I didn't find anything. The button went off, I buried it, ran home, and got roughed up by the guys with the mind powers. There is no device! I have no idea what they were talking about. I was trying to figure out what the boulders on Marissa's route were for."

"They said that you and an accomplice stole a device from Tier 2 that night and used it to gain unauthorized access to that area," Chance said. "When we didn't have anything to give them, they stopped telling the story of your night of crime and got started on the psychic beatdown." Chance absentmindedly touched his left shoulder when he said this.

"I thought they were O.V.E.R. personnel at first, but if they were then they would have fired you the second they suspected you of stealing from Tier 2," Shadow added.

"No, they're definitely not O.V.E.R." I said.

"Well, you need to get your shit sorted out with them," Chance said.

"That is made all the more difficult by not knowing what the shit is," I replied. "Look, I feel awful about this. They attacked one of my friends at another facility, too. I don't know what they want from me. The snooping they are doing is clearly superior to the snooping that I'm doing. They think that I know something that I don't know. They think that I have something that I don't have. How can I stop them when I don't have what they want? What could they possibly want from me?"

"A device of some kind, it sounds like," Shadow said. Now who's quipping?

"I'm telling you, there is no device! To use the boulders, you have to complete the circuit to input a passcode. I shocked myself—"

A thought hit me, passively at first. It was easy to dismiss, because if it were true, then these circumstances would be too stupid to be real. More directly, Mike Walters would be too stupid to exist. There couldn't be a device that you plug into either side of the circuit to input the electrical pulses corresponding to the passwords in order to use the boulder. There couldn't be. That would mean that I rigged myself up to a torture device when I could have fashioned something to do it quickly and painlessly. There's a device. Of course there's a device, one that you can put the numbers in with. The codes Hunter was delivering were for the device. I was so used to enduring pain to progress that I did things the hard way without a second thought.

I was quiet for a moment with my head in my hands, baffled at my hasty oversight, my mind racing to recontextualize the events of that night. I showed the Flinchites the codes that I had sent Ryan and they were still sending their thugs to brutalize people. That means that they hadn't figured out how to decode them yet. They knew about the device that goes with the codes and were still trying to get their hands on one. Wow, maybe Ryan was actually really good at this stuff. I wonder if he could build me a device like that. I wonder where the real device is. What if—[smash cut]

"Mike! Earth to Mike!" Shadow was yelling at me.

"Sorry, sorry. I had a Dr. House moment and figured everything out in my mind palace. I think I know what kind of device they are talking about now. The bad news is that I don't have it and never have," I said.

"Well, you better figure *something* out," Chance said, absentmindedly touching his left shoulder again. It pained me to think about why he kept doing that. "They said that they would come after us again and I couldn't tell if it was an empty threat."

"I know," I said solemnly, showing him the back of my injured hand. "I don't have a plan. But I will make a plan."

"That's not good enough. You have to tell us how you are going to fix this," Shadow said. Their faces were still stony and cruel. Whatever the Flinchites had done to them had severely rattled them. I understood the feeling.

"I'll-I'll pull out all the stops. I have a contact. He's not one of them but he works in a similar field to them. He's not trustworthy, but he is resourceful. He might know who they are or what they want or how to stop them," I said.

"That's the best you got?" Shadow asked.

"Unfortunately. We're outmanned and outgunned by these guys," I said. I left out that we were also outsmarted. "But I'll fix it. They won't come back and hurt you. I promise. That

was a bluff. They don't have any reason to hurt you. They hurt me, too." I picked up an empty plastic cup with my bad hand and showed them that I couldn't keep my grip on it for very long. Their faces softened a bit. "That's not even my worst injury. Not even close."

"Alright, Mike," Chance said. "I think we've gotten all we can from this talk. I'm sorry that it got to this point, but we have to protect ourselves. Steer clear of the cafeteria for a while, ok? Let us know how your plan goes, but keep your distance. If anyone asks, we don't know each other. Knowing you has made too much trouble for me."

"Okay," I said, solemnly. No more quipping.

Unceremoniously and without further conversation, they opened the door and left my cabin. I laid down on my bed and stared at the ceiling, thinking. I didn't blame them. My reaction to being attacked by the Flinchites was much worse than that. They were hurt and scared and they took it out on me. I was the one who accidentally dragged them into this so I was the one responsible for making sure that they didn't get dragged in any further. It was horrible that I promised them that I would protect them and fix this. I didn't have the power to make that happen. If the Flinchites were going to go after people I knew, Chance and Shadow were going to be targets for a while. There wasn't anything that I could do to stop them. Even if I could give them everything they wanted from me, I wouldn't do it. The central mission was too important. Every assurance I gave Chance and Shadow was a lie.

I had almost forgotten that I had made plans to sneak back over the wall that night. The morning had put me in a foul mood and for a moment I had considered canceling, but that wouldn't do anyone any good. As long as I was making forward momentum, WOE.BEGONE was still leaving me alone, so I wanted to keep that up. In addition, I had just promised Chance and Shadow that I would get to the bottom of this. I wasn't going to do that by laying on my bed in my cabin feeling sorry for myself. I had every other conceivable moment in my life to spend feeling sorry for myself and I absolutely planned to do so.

It was nice to see Edgar. At this point he was easily the person happiest to see me on any given day, but I couldn't get out of the funk induced by my altercation with Chance and Shadow that morning. I felt considerable guilt for what had happened to them and helplessness in the face of an enemy that, let's face it, was smarter and more organized than me but also smarter and more organized than the gamerunners which is what *really* scared me. I was quiet all afternoon. Edgar was his usual self, but I could catch him stealing glances at me, trying to figure out what was going on in my head. It was a relief when he said that he didn't feel like having dinner that night and was just going to go home for the evening after his shift. "I think we both have a case of the Mondays," I said. We both laughed. We didn't laugh because saying that you have a "case of the Mondays" is funny. It's not. We were laughing ironically. Like, isn't it funny that people actually say that? Wouldn't it be funny if I were actually like that? Do you understand? How when I told the joke I wasn't just telling the joke, I was—[smash cut]

Night came. Only a couple days past the full moon, which wasn't great for hiding, but not a dealbreaker. I snuck past Marissa and got into 116E. I didn't have to sneak past Marissa, but she didn't need to know everything that I knew and that included how many times I had been into Tier 2 and when. She hadn't approached me to do more work with me yet and I intended on keeping her as far away from this stuff as I could manage. While moving through her patrol route, I wondered if the Flinchites had tried to intimidate her, too, and how that went for them. I'm sure that encounter would play out differently for them than their usual attacks.

Blah blah blah, doors, passcode (1943522), human door for normal people, Tier 2. It was brighter out that night than I wanted it to be because it meant fewer and smaller hiding places. I waited for my chance to move from 116E and made it into the shadows of the building that formerly housed the computers with the security program on them. Even through the dark, I could tell that the building was under considerable renovation. The outside of the building looked the same, but the inside looked like it had been hit by a tornado, even all of these days later. Who knows how long the bear was in there trying to get out. I'm sure it didn't limit its destruction to the cubicles, either. The whole inside would have to be redone, top to bottom. And, annoyingly, the computers with that security program on it would be somewhere else for the time being.

From my new vantage point in the shadow of this building, I could see deeper into Tier 2 than I ever had before. It wasn't a magnificent view, it was the same sort of buildings as the ones that I had already seen, extending even further into the valley. It would be easy to get lost here without knowing which buildings were which. I had only seen a map of Tier 2 once: in the Security program map tabs, but I spent much more time that night looking at the map of Tier 1. Securing a map was definitely on the to-do list. I didn't want to get deep into Tier 2 and get lost, only for my carriage to turn back into a pumpkin before I was safely back inside 116E.

Without any concrete plans or buildings that I wanted to visit, I just crouched in the shadows and waited, watching the lights from the patrol carts come and go. Tier 2 was busier, even at night, it seemed. There were more people patrolling areas, less time to run from building to building. There were a few people out at night seemingly on business, entering and exiting buildings. I didn't have any intentions of breaking in somewhere tonight unless it seemed both safe and promising. I was only hoping to see something useful by chance, some knowledge that I could take back home to scheme over.. So much of espionage comes down to Chance and Shadow. Chance and Shadow, get it? Like the dogs from *Homeward Bound*?

I had finally made myself fully uncomfortable crouched in the shadows behind the building, my knees old and aching like my knees constantly are, when by chance I finally saw something interesting. My two old friends, Hunter Jeremiah Hartley and Hunter Jeremiah Hartley—Mystery and Punished Hunters in the flesh—were walking down the path in front of me. They strolled past, unconcerned, eyes on the path in front of them, not noticing me. They weren't on patrol. All of the patrol security used carts in Tier 2, at least from what I could tell. I could see them talking but I was too far away to be able to tell what they were talking about.

They walked for a minute down the path, then approached a building and began to enter. I saw Mystery pull a badge out of his pocket and use it to badge into the building. The door unlocked and they stepped in. I couldn't see into the interior of the building. It was late, not quite midnight but pretty close. What could they possibly be doing in these operational facilities this late at night? They weren't trying to hide what they were doing. They were fully out in the open. Still, it felt intriguing and important. Important missions happen at night, right? These aren't your typical 40-hour secret government facility employees. They were working around-the-clock, getting the dirty work done when it needed to be done, even if that was past Mike Walters's regular bedtime.

I had seen enough to satisfy me for one night. I didn't want to put myself at risk by hanging around too long. It was too bright outside. I couldn't break into the building where I saw the Hunters enter. I didn't have a badge and I didn't know how to get in if I didn't have one. Also, the Hunters were already in there and I didn't want to risk waiting around for them to leave. I knew that I would have to confront them eventually, but I wanted that to be under

different circumstances. I could work on stealing a badge from them in the morning. Maybe Innocent Hunter's badge would work, too? Assuming that he even has a Tier 2 badge yet.

I carefully made my way back, staying safe and taking my time, staying in the shadows at every possible moment. This was a much-needed nightcap on a shitty day. I hoped that whatever information or technology I eventually gained from getting into this important seeming building would help bring an end to these confrontations with the Flinchites. Something I could use to pay them off and get them to leave Chance and Shadow alone. Something to show that I was as capable as they are and propose an even-footed alliance. Something to scare them away once and for all. Maybe something I could use to drop a bear in their offices and see how they like it.

I was feeling frisky as I entered back into 116E. I had a new lead and I was safe. What more could I ask for? I was whistling casually as I made my way back through the building. I walked through the warehouse, down the hallway, and back to the password protected door. I opened it and entered back into the main lobby.

I pulled the door closed, making sure that the lock latched and that it was fully armed again. I turned around to leave. There was a man standing there in the dark, only a handful of feet away. It was Edgar, his features edge-lit by the moon peeking in through the windows. I had never seen him look so angry.

I was still wearing my balaclava. Maybe he couldn't tell that it was me?

[End theme plays.]