

## EPISODE 29: DIGITAL WITNESS

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[Warning: this episode contains a description of violence. Listener discretion is advised.]

Let's talk about digital fingerprints for a second. I think if you ctrl-F'd every script of WOE.BEGONE, you would probably find the term "digital fingerprint" a few times, notably when CANNONBALL was threatening to track down Anne by doing a search of every missing police officer case in the country. You don't need me to tell you that the modern internet is designed to make all of your digital fingerprints as visible as possible in the worst ways, to the worst people. Websites will track you on other websites and then sell your data to anyone who wants to buy it. Nothing is secure. This episode is not brought to you by a VPN. I could "umm actually" all day about how VPNs aren't secure in the way that they advertise, either, but we don't have all day. Some people have already pushed the skip forward 15 seconds button on their podcasting device.

I have always wondered about the impact of my digital fingerprint with regards to WOE.BEGONE. There is a lot of digital detritus that results from playing the game and talking about it. Text messages with the gamerunners, videos taken of challenges, work documents related to O.V.E.R., correspondence with Anne, missing persons reports, constructing alibis on social media, search histories, using burner phones, a podcast. Each one of them is miniscule and maybe not traceable if you only see what part of the picture, but someone who has an idea of what they are looking for can use one piece of the puzzle to find the rest of the pieces.

I have never been live-in-a-bunker-burn-off-my-fingerprints careful because I have never had to be and I don't think that I would go that far even if I needed to. That sort of living doesn't feel like living to me. I say that a bit too lightly as someone whose actions have gotten myself killed more than once, but I mean it. Well, I mean it aesthetically. I like the image of it. I like to think of myself as someone who would opt out, rather than live a life of such diminished quality. We'll see where the actual Mike Walters ends up by the end of this podcast. I've debatably already debased myself much too far in the name of perseverance. Regardless, it's good to have outsized expectations for oneself. It makes you act better.

There are a bunch of security issues that I have brushed over because I got away with whatever I was doing at the time and never had to worry about them again. I'm sure that you noticed, but for all of the brutality inflicted upon my body, I actually get away with almost everything that I'm doing out here. Part of this is

because of my fortuitous creation of a friend group that is eager to circle the wagon around me at a moment's notice, as well as governmental security not being the well-oiled machine it is made out to be in media, but, let's be honest: I should've been caught by now, right?

There should have been a camera that caught me somewhere I wasn't supposed to be. There should have been a guard with no fondness toward me who looked into one of the high-profile incidents I have caused at O.V.E.R. I've been running on borrowed time for so long that it's only a matter of time before someone knocks on my door and kicks me out, or worse. I don't think spies get a slap on the wrist when they are caught.

You will always leave a trace, is my point. Even if you think that you're not leaving a trace, someone smarter than you has figured out a way that you have left a trace. If you're making enough waves, for instance making waves from the Pacific Ocean appear inside of building in Tier 2, someone has noticed. If you think that no one noticed, then there is someone who is looking the other way. Someone is looking the other way for Mike Walters. This is WOE.BEGONE.

[Intro Music Plays.]

Life was good at the Mike Walters household for a solid minute. It's easy to forget how good it is to have some semblance of morale when you have become unaccustomed to having it. I cleaned my house like an actual adult might and got it presentable enough to have company over, or at least good enough not to feel embarrassed when intruders showed up unannounced to rough me up. Fine, break my arm, but please don't tell anybody how I live.

I had not heard from the Flinchites since my interaction that led to me introducing one of them to a bustling city in the mountains in Central Asia, but I wasn't expecting to. I don't think that Flinchite meant to come to my cabin or was sent by their organization to meet with me. If I had to guess, I would say that he was sent back by someone on my side of this conflict to give me some info that I needed.

I am increasingly seeing myself as someone who is on a side in a conflict between many interested groups. Originally, I found myself in conflict with Ryan, a problem which solved itself. Then, I saw myself in conflict with Flinch, who may or may not even know that I exist. The truth is much more complicated than these clashes between myself and other lone individuals. I am in conflict with WOE.BEGONE, who is stripping me of my agency and forcing me to cooperate towards their ends. A sidenote: they haven't made me do anything in a long time at this point and the silence frightens me a little bit. Then there's the hipper, flashier competition that came out of the shadows to show me that I wasn't the only person in this fight.

I desperately wanted what the Flinchites had. They had an organizational structure. They had people who were employed instead of forced into work by an unknown gamerunner. Everyone in the organization are known quantities to each other. There can be expectations. The guy I encountered seemed low on the totem pole and even he had some idea what was going on. But even he made it sound like I didn't have the skills to apply for a job there, even if I wasn't on their naughty list. I

had no choice but to stay in my own lane, a guy playing a game while the more serious people involved were out doing a job. I have to do things my own way, using my own judgment with no one to scrutinize and improve upon my ideas.

Infiltrating Tier 2 was still the objective *du jour*. I wasn't fully sure what all I could get out of my visits there, but so far they had yielded something useful every time. If anything, regularly visiting Tier 2 in order to stumble across whatever I could on a given night seemed genuinely vital to my staying alive. I hadn't been looking for anything in particular when I saved myself from the bear. It was an accident. It was also something that I had to do. The bear would have killed me if I hadn't been screwing around on a random computer. It might have been something that I had to do in the most literal sense, as well, since I did experience the bear disappearing the night that the attack happened. Something would eventually have to cause that or the bear would not have disappeared that night. Or maybe that would have happened regardless of what I did that night in Tier 2. I don't know. What do I look like, a time travel expert? Don't answer that. I'm not a time travel expert just because I've traveled through time. You've probably flown on a plane before. Are you a plane expert? Don't answer that if you're a plane expert.

The only thing that truly bothered me about sneaking into Tier 2 night after night is that I would have to lie to Edgar about what I was doing. Since I no longer needed to manipulate him as a tool to get what I wanted, our—and I'm just going to say it so that we can all move on with our lives—*relationship* had really been allowed to bloom. It's a beautiful thing, when a twink and a hairy pile of scar tissue love each other. The need to be duplicitous around him to steal door codes had occupied a large amount of space in our relationship and once it was gone, our feelings for each other were able to expand into the newfound space.

Even though we were becoming powerfully close to one another, I could never, under any circumstances, tell him about WOE.BEGONE. I couldn't tell him about sneaking into Tier 2, even though I wasn't using him to do so anymore. I couldn't tell him about the Flinchites. I couldn't tell him that there were 3 of the weird guy with the Minnesota accent wandering around. I couldn't tell him about the oopsy-poopsy moment when I accidentally caused him to suddenly begin drowning in the middle of the ocean. And I'm not saying that we aren't there yet in our relationship. I'm saying that I can never tell him under any circumstance for the rest of both of our lives. These are things that will take up a huge portion of my life that he can never know about. Never. It would be an irrevocable black stain on our relationship. It would put him in an unspeakable amount of danger. I suspect that even knowing that WOE.BEGONE exists is a sort of infohazard, since once you learn about it there is a chance that you become susceptible to the negative consequences of actions you haven't even taken yet, but that is a hazard I am willing to subject you to, dear listener, and not Edgar. That's my only hangup about continuing to venture into Tier 2. That's what is inside the dark, shriveled half of my heart that he doesn't have access to. He never will. Thank god.

Not to get too ahead of myself here, but is this the endgame for Mike Walters? Originally, I suppose that the endgame was infinite power through the ascension as an immortal time travel god, so living a quiet life with a husband could be seen as something of a downgrade. Call it "managed expectations" instead. What if I did

enough to disentangle myself from WOE.BEGONE that they would leave me alone forever and Edgar and I fucked off somewhere in the mountains for the rest of our lives, never to be seen by the public world ever again? The only thing that is stopping me is the threat of violence implied by what happened last time I tried to fuck off and go back to my life. This is too much thinking for a relationship that has only begun to flourish, though. Maybe thinking about it in terms of this relationship is a smokescreen for how I was already feeling.

So anyway, venturing into Tier 2. I asked Marissa about a building that had a badge reader on the door, was connected across the Tier 2 wall, and was not occupied at night. After grilling me about having a badge and begrudgingly admitting that I did but not telling her how I got it or whose credentials were on it, she pointed me toward a building on her route that she thought met those criteria. 118E. An astute listener might hear that number and wonder if this is the building next door to 116E, the place that I had already been going to and aware of for a long time. It was. Could I have noticed that people were badging into 118E during my time spent visiting 116E? Yes. Did I? No. I was singular-minded every time I approached 116E. I had a mission that I was on that had to be my only focus, every time I was in that building. I had no mental bandwidth for whatever might be going on around other buildings.

Cut to night. Usual protocol, new building. I badged in successfully and quickly made my way inside. It was quiet, like 116E was when that was the building I was using. I much preferred this to the main gate, which always had guards at it at the minimum and could get quite bustling, even at night. The chance of getting spotted—well, no, the chance of getting spotted at the main gate was 100%, actually—but the chance of getting noticed by someone who would put together too much of the puzzle was too high. Creeping quietly through the side entrance was the way to go. Since this building was designated for badged personnel only, there was no door with a code on the inside. If you could get into this building, you had the credentials to get into Tier 2. There was no lobby for unqualified individuals like there was in 116E. 118E was a less substantial building than 116E with not large storage area in the back. I didn't figure out exactly what it was they did in there while I was sneaking through it. I made it through the building and came out in a place I recognized, directly next to my old haunt, where I would emerge from 116E.

Sometimes I would enter Tier 2 and not have a plan other than to try to get into any buildings that I could get into. This had yielded the most lucrative results but also had resulted in some trips that were abject failures. It was a real crapshoot. This was not a crapshoot night. I was planning on investigating the building that Mystery and Punished Hunter had used the night that I had spotted them. I suspected, not based on any hard data, that if they were going into that building that late at night, then that building might contain something juicy. If not then oh well, but it was a point of interest I wanted to check off the list. I don't know enough about Tier 2 to know what will be of interest to me until I am standing in front of it.

I was standing in front of the building that I had seen them enter. I badged in. Success. As far as I know, Innocent Hunter has all of the same access privileges at the other 2. He might even have full Tier 2 access. The inside of the building wasn't any different than the other office buildings I had entered. So much of this technology

was purely digital that it wasn't surprising that the infrastructure that maintained and used it was largely made up of computers. This building was a little fancier than the others I had been in, though. More people had their own offices instead of cubicles. Leave it to modern society to turn permanent walls and privacy into a luxury. The doors to the offices weren't locked.

I went inside the largest, most important looking office. There was a laptop on the desk, alongside various personal artifacts of a person that I did not recognize. I brought the computer out of standby. It asked me for a fingerprint to prove my identity. While they weren't burned off for the sake of personal privacy yet, my fingerprints proved unhelpful in this regard. Stealing fingerprints is actually possible if you have access to the person in question, but I had never seen this guy before. I didn't have any way to lift fingerprints off of his desk, or to turn those into something that the computer would read as an actual finger. If all of the computers in the building were like that, then I was shit out of luck. Since I had seen the Hunters enter this building, I thought that perhaps one or both of them could have offices within the building. If so, I could always try to steal Innocent Hunter's fingerprints and use them to snoop around on their computers. I closed the laptop and exited the office.

As soon as I had made my way out into the connecting hallway, a strong arm forcefully pushed me into the wall beside me, holding me slightly off the ground by the neck for a moment before I could get on my toes. I could breathe shallowly, but I was being pinned against the wall with more strength than I could overcome. I was too disoriented from the blindsiding to immediately fight back.

"You stupid motherfucker," the man pinning me against the wall said. "I don't even have words. You stupid motherfucker. I can't believe you. [Grunt.] I can't believe you."

After a few seconds, I managed to catch enough of my breath to calm down and get my bearings. His face so close to mine that at first I had trouble figuring out who exactly I was looking at. Eventually, my eyes fixated on a long scar that extended all the way down the left side of his face. He was swearing more profusely than I have recounted here. Punished Hunter was angrier than I had ever seen one of the Hunters get. There was malice in his eyes that made him look like a completely different person.

"...Hunter?" I asked weakly, playing up the weakness slightly for sympathy. He had weakened me and life has worn me down more generally, but I was hamming it up in hopes that he would take some pity on poor little Mike Walters. He did not relent.

"You're god damn right it's Hunter," he growled. "You're going to get us killed *again*, you clumsy fucking oaf. What do you think that you're doing right now?"

"I'm trying to find... stuff," I said. If that wouldn't convince him of my good intentions, nothing would.

"You're going to find the bottom of an unmarked grave," he said. He was still pinning me to the wall with considerable force. "Have you tried being careful? Ever? In your whole fucking life?"

"No, not really," I said. "Usually someone bails me out."

He grabbed my shirt with his other hand. "I wonder who usually does that, Mike. I wonder who is out there cleaning up your messes. Your literal messes. You've destroyed two Tier 2 buildings. Do you know what happens to people who break into Tier 2 and demolish the security buildings inside?"

"No," I whimpered.

"No one does," he said. "No one's ever had someone covering up their shit enough to get away with it. And for all of my trouble, I get what? I get to explain to my boss why *my* name is on a security transport log in the middle of the night in a building that I have never actually been in and why I moved something from Tier 1 into the middle of Mongolia or wherever."

"Kazakhstan," I corrected him.

"I hate you so fucking much," Hunter said. "I can't believe you. If someone had asked me to describe the worst person that could possibly be stuck right in the middle of my life, I wouldn't even be able to begin to describe someone as awful as you."

"It was a Flinchite," I sputtered. "He was in my cabin."

"I don't care who it was. You're lucky that I didn't know that it was you or I wouldn't have been able to lie well enough to cover it up. I told him that it was contraband and that I moved it to an arbitrary location in order to neutralize it." He still had a hold on me, but he was quaking with anger, almost shaking me as a result. I felt deep remorse. This is who Hunter ends up becoming? And this is what he thinks about me? What did he say about me being stuck in the middle of his life?

"Was that a lie that made sense to him?" I asked, despite every neuron firing in my brain begging me not to try and make witty back-and-forth with a man who might actually strangle me to death.

"No, Mike, it did not. It was just plausible enough that nobody opened an investigation into it. For once." I was actually surprised that he had not loosened his hold on me by this point. It was a long time to be pinned against the wall. I imagined that he must be uncomfortable, too, having to hold in that position and apply force for so long.

"I need to know what's going on in Tier 2," I said, a half-hearted justification.

"No, you don't," Hunter said. "You need to go back to Tier 1 and stay put until we're ready for you. Stop digging your own grave or someone is going to come by and push you into it."

"What does that mean?" I asked.

"You are incredibly necessary to what I need to do here. I know this for a fact. You are also nigh-impossible to keep alive. I don't know how you do it. It's like the world is cosmically designed in order to kill you and only you. You are the world's most killable human being. It's unreal. I'm surprised that your heart didn't stop when I surprised you and you didn't drop dead on the spot. It doesn't help that you're as dull as a crayon either, bud."

His grip loosened a little. I didn't know whether he was calming down or was just tired of holding me there. I think that he thought that I would bolt for the door as soon as he loosened his grip enough for me to get free, but I had no intention of doing that. I couldn't run out on someone who was telling me so many things about myself that were breaking news to me. I didn't like that I had a reputation for being

difficult to keep alive. Being alive is something I consider one of my core qualities and not something that I am interested in giving up any time soon. I was intrigued, though, that I was vitally important to him in some way.

I pressed the issue. "How am I important?" I asked.

"Thank God you don't know," he said.

I gave him a puzzled look. "What is that supposed to mean?" I asked.

"If you knew, you wouldn't stick around. You would get in your car and drive until you found a place that you thought that we couldn't find you. We'd haul you kicking and screaming back in anyway. There isn't much hiding that you can do anymore, with all of the info you've given us, but it would be another huge pain in my ass to track you down. What is going to happen is unspeakably horrible and it involves you directly. There is no way to prepare for it, either." He gazed off while saying this, remembering a traumatic memory, no doubt.

"Is that how you got the big scar on your face?" I asked.

"If only that was the souvenir that I got from it," he said.

"I'm sorry that happens to us," I said.

"Well, you're going to pay for it, don't you worry," he said.

"Not even a hint?" I asked.

"You would do anything to get out of it. You're squirrely enough without knowing what's going on. If you got even more out of hand I'd have to put you on an actual leash," he said.

"If that's what you're into," I said. He did not respond to this statement. "So this point of this ambush is that I shouldn't use the key card anymore?" I asked.

"Yes, that's the point of this conversation. You are making our jobs harder. You are putting our lives in danger. And you're not even doing whatever it is that you think that you're doing. You're not close to figuring out whatever it is that you want to figure out and you never will be. You're about as close to the truth as that guy you sent to Mongolia is to Oldbrush Valley." He finally, *finally* let me go. I did not attempt to run for it.

"Kazakhstan," I corrected him again.

"Oh," he said. "I had no idea what you said the first time."

"You had your arm against my throat," I reminded him.

"Yeah. I did. I'm not sorry," he said. He sounded a little bit sorry, in my opinion.

"I know the feeling," I said.

"Give me the badge," he said, reaching out his hand, expecting immediate and enthusiastic cooperation.

"Really?" I asked.

"Fuck yeah, really," Hunter said. He opened and closed his hand in the universal "hand it over" motion.

"But I have to get back into Tier 1," I explained. I wasn't actually even thinking about Tier 1. I just didn't want to hand over the badge.

"No, you don't," he said. "Come." He turned and began to walk. I followed him.

He led me into an office. "Sit in the chair," he commanded. It was a much less inviting way of instructing someone to sit than saying, "have a seat." I sat in the chair.

He sat in the office chair at the desk, across from me and logged into the computer that was sitting there.

“Put the badge on the desk,” he said.

I didn’t move.

“I will hurt you. You absolute idiot,” he said. “I can’t believe you. Put the badge on the desk.”

I put the badge on the desk.

He typed something on his computer. “Now, don’t move. Like, hold your breath if you can manage it,” he said.

“I don’t like where this is going,” I said.

“I don’t care,” he chuckled. “We’re getting you back home, safe and sound. It’s time for bed, kiddo.”

“I don’t like where this is going,” I repeated.

“Well, honestly, fuck you, Mike Walters. Bye,” he said, and pressed a button.

I was back in my cabin, disoriented from the travel. Unlike last time, I was standing on the floor and not on my bed, which was a nice touch. I checked the time and it seemed to be around the time that I was in the building with Punished Hunter, though I wasn’t at all certain of that. Once the world stopped spinning around me, I laid face down on my bed in shock for a few minutes. It was late and I was exhausted.

It wasn’t that long ago that I considered Hunter Jeremiah Hartley to be my best friend. We had drifted apart naturally, as our lives demanded different things out of us, but we still kept in close contact with each other. That close contact was how I was able to get access to Innocent Hunter’s badge in the first place. I was unable to imagine how the situation between us deteriorated so severely that Punished Hunter would be so irate with me. It made me want to do better by him. But if Punished Hunter is from the future and that’s how he feels about me, then I suspect that no matter how I feel now, I won’t ever do better by him. Otherwise, what happened tonight would not have happened. I’m cursed, essentially, to ruin that friendship. And to be hooked into this whole thing for the long haul, from the sounds of it. None of it was news that I wanted to hear.

It was 2am. I wanted to call Edgar. I wanted to go over to his cabin. I wanted to vent about what had happened to me. I would probably cry. A valve being opened and unable to close until it empties out. It was not enough to be that vulnerable in the privacy of my own cabin. I needed someone to see me be that vulnerable and tell me that it was alright. That things were going to be alright and that it was alright that I wasn’t strong enough to handle it right now. That I won’t be strong enough to handle whatever ominous fate Punished Hunter says is coming for me.

And of course, I couldn’t do that. If I called him up and told him “Punished Hunter says I can’t use my illegal Tier 2 badge to investigate Flinch and WOE.BEGONE anymore because I used Security.exe on a Flinchite,” he wouldn’t have the slightest clue what I meant. Any explanation would drag him into my seedy world. Any explanation would make him hate me or at least never be able to trust me ever again. The “stupid motherfucker” that got in way too deep, as Hunter put it.

The “clumsy fucking oaf.” I don’t know that I had ever heard Hunter swear before. It drove home exactly how poorly he thought of me.

Ring ring. My better judgment can’t come to the phone right now. That’s supposed to be a metaphorical “ring ring,” but also onomatopoeia to indicate that I called Edgar. It’s clever if you think about it.

“Mike?” he groggily answered.

“Yeah, it’s Mike,” I said, sullenly.

“What’s wrong?” he asked, concern quickly bringing his wits about him.

“Is it okay if I don’t say?” I asked.

“Uhh...? Yeah,” he said, clearly confused but trying to be comforting.

“Is it okay if I never tell you what’s wrong? Like, not just now but more generally ever, any time that something is wrong?” I asked.

“Well, no,” he said, “but we can work on that some other time. Are you okay?” he asked.

“I don’t think so,” I said, being a complete drama queen and likely worrying Edgar much more than he needed to be worried.

“Do I need to come over there?” he asked.

“I don’t think so,” I said. “I’m not in any danger. I just needed to hear someone’s voice.”

“Oh, just anyone’s voice will do, huh?” he asked.

“You were actually third on my list. Hunter and Marissa didn’t pick up,” I teased him.

“Well, lucky me then,” he said.

We talked that way for some time, until I had calmed down enough to get to sleep. The conversation only got more saccharine from there, in a way that doesn’t make for good material for a podcast. What I decided to include is already too mushy, honestly.

My relationship with Edgar is so clearly a good thing for me in this part of my life. I can only wonder how I will destroy it. For a fleeting moment when Hunter was telling me off while also telling me how bleak my future was going to be, I thought about asking about Edgar. I wanted to know what happened to him. If my unkindness and the world’s unkindness drove him away or worse. I couldn’t bring myself to ask about him. There isn’t an answer to that question that doesn’t involve heartache. I am choosing to feel that heartache later, rather than getting a head start on it.

Ugh, this touchy feely nonsense! What is this? Not on my horror-mystery podcast. In my house, we don’t use those words. This isn’t the deep introspection power hour. This is WOE.BEGONE. Next time: well, I still have the badge data on my computer, so let’s start there. Thanks for playing.

[End theme plays.]