

EPISODE 37: Again.

[Hey guys. Welcome to season 4. I hope you enjoy the New Adventures of Mike Walters. What sticky predicaments will he end up in? Hijinks will ensue, I assure you. In Patreon news (that's patreon.com/woe_begone) the soundtrack for season 2 just dropped for \$5 patrons. You can also get it for \$5 on bandcamp, link in description. All of that and more at patreon.com/woe_begone. Thanks to my 10 newest patrons: Monica Quirk, Jesse Grace, Clydmica Haley, Maple Autumn, Alex LeMire, n13e86, Melvis Grey Mystery, ElanorInTheWoods, Brynne C, and Samantha Topfer. Enjoy WOE.BEGONE season 4.]

When you are inside of a system, sometimes it can be difficult to see the flaws within that system, or to see how differently it is run compared to other comparable systems. The things that you find to be standard operating procedure might be seen from the outside as something deeply unfair, unorganized, or unprofessional. It is tempting to lend an air of legitimacy to the institutions that you operate inside of, to think "well, I want to feel legitimate and I work within these systems, therefore these systems are legitimate." We are more forgiving of the practices that happen right under our noses because we can see the full thought process that got everyone there. It is easier to critique from afar because we cannot see the thought processes, only the materiality of the results of those processes. All we can see is what actually matters, which is how the institution actually operates. This can apply to your workplace, your nation, your... time travel institutions...

When I started WOE.BEGONE, I was coerced into acknowledging its legitimacy. Not only was it the strongest force I had ever personally witnessed, it was actively being used against me to my detriment. I did not know of anybody else who was privy to the sort of power that I was experiencing. To me, WOE.BEGONE was all of time travel. They had a monopoly on the subject and what they were doing to me was the way that things were going to be. They were legitimate, whether I wanted them to be or not. It was easy to imagine that they were unchallenged, having been strong and resourceful enough to eliminate anybody who stood in their way, just as I had nearly been destroyed by WOE.BEGONE myself.

Working at O.V.E.R. disillusioned me to that way of thinking. O.V.E.R. was truly legitimate in a way that WOE.BEGONE was merely pretending to be, I thought. They had the legitimacy of a government in control of the situation, of a physical operations site, of a security apparatus to protect those assets, of the physical containment of the technology that they were wielding. Until they didn't. Until one day there was an enormous explosion inside of one of their most highly guarded buildings and the technology that secured that legitimacy vanished. Once it was gone, it was clear that the legitimacy was never truly there. I mean, they had me as one of the guards, for God's sake! Who knows how many other spies from how many other operations could have infiltrated even deeper into O.V.E.R. than I was able to. Hunter didn't seem to put O.V.E.R.'s interests before his own, for instance. Marissa was down to break and enter with very little explanation required, that's suspicious. There is no way for me to truly know, but if you told me that over a third of every

employee at O.V.E.R. was a spy for some other organization, I would be inclined to believe you. Now that it's happened, the downfall of O.V.E.R. looks like an inevitability in hindsight.

So, now I keep on moving down the line of institutions, seeing each one as more legitimate than the one before it. Next up is the Flinchites. As it stands, they seem like they have it together. They definitely have enough disdain for the other groups to indicate that at least they think that they are better than everyone else. But are they better than everyone else? Are they better than me, the world renowned stupidest and easiest to kill man? There's only one way to find out and that is through trial and error, bloodshed and conspiracy and time travel. This is WOE.BEGONE.

[INTRO THEME PLAYS]

I calmed down quickly in the blank white room with no door. It had been tempting to panic at first, but the introduction of a man saying that he was with the Flinchites made me more curious than afraid. If I was going to get dragged back into this, at least it would be by a new group of people with a whole new angle. I didn't know much about the Flinchites. I knew that they had severely injured me in a time that now felt like the distant past. I knew that they had roughed up my friends and didn't think too highly of WOE.BEGONE. That was about it. The man who met me in the room was nothing like that. I was not afraid of him. I felt as though I was going to be reasonably accommodated. I still felt a pang of yearning for an ordinary life, for adjusting and living in a less complicated world, for having my desires met. Pangs of yearning are so much less violent than my baseline state of being. I would have to learn to live with it.

My tour guide to the whole experience was a man named Ty Betteridge. That's what he told me his name was, anyway. He's the guy that interviewed me at the end of the previous episode. Tall, dignified, formal even when he doesn't need to be, the slightest hint of a British accent that only comes out when he gets to talking and it unconsciously slips out. A consistently professional man, no matter what the situation is. His job was to acclimate me without letting me know too much about what was going on. A tough line to strike to be sure. He asked me more questions than I described to you in our preliminary interrogation, but you already know my answers to a lot of what he was asking. After that, he gave me a pill, explaining that it prevented nausea. Then I was out of the room via time travel and into a larger facility—one with doors connecting the rooms, thankfully.

The Flinchite compound is huge and professional looking, or it is going to be huge and professional looking someday. I can't really say. One of the ground rules for anyone dealing with me is that I was never allowed to know the time period that I was experiencing. It could have been contiguous with the moment I left Matt's house, it could be 100 years in the future. I doubt that it was in the past. The temporal location of the organization was something that was privy to only the members of the organization, of which I was not one. The place looked modern but not necessarily futuristic. I guess things in the future won't ever be decked out in

chrome like imaginings so often describe it as, but it didn't feel like anything special. It felt like a tech company campus. A big place with big open areas, clean, minimalist, sensible, amenable. It felt professional, like professional experts working a job in their area of expertise.

Ty told me to expect a series of interviews about what had happened to me, what I had seen, and what I hadn't. I got to ask him some questions myself. Here is my recollection of one such interview, the first one between myself and Ty, the conversation that we had right after he removed me from the time travel box and walked me through the Flinchite complex.

"I don't want you to think of this as an interrogation," Ty said. "You're not in trouble nor are you in danger. Think of it as a hybrid: a friendly conversation and an information gathering session for the organization."

"So, a friendly interrogation," I replied.

"More like... I am going to tell you how it is going to be and there will be some questions along the way. Mostly from you, I would imagine," he said, smiling.

"If I get to ask the questions, let's get started. I've got a ton of them," I said. "My first question is about why you are seemingly treating me so well. I haven't been cordial with Flinchites before this. They attacked me in my cabin and I sent one to Kazakhstan as retaliation," I explained. "Why would you put effort into making me comfortable?"

"Kazakhstan? No, that guy ended up on a mountaintop in Kyrgystan. He had to be rescued by a group of pastoralists living near by. It's a miracle they found him at all," he said, "But that makes sense. O.V.E.R. security was not working with high-resolution technology at that time. More importantly, those guys are all just... well, I'll say it, they're boots, meaning "Boots on the ground." They aren't exactly the guys hanging out in the office. They're hired guns. Sometimes we need things done that can't be done by pressing a button from here so we send them out to get their hands dirty on our behalf. Not everything can be solved with soft power and time travel. Sometimes you actually do need true material force. I've personally never met any of them."

"Okay that makes sense enough," I said. I continued without missing a beat. I was not going to risk the answer well running dry. "Well, if I get another question, what is this place actually called? I've only ever heard of you as Flinchites."

Ty laughed. "That's so funny that you picked up that word somewhere. Where did you hear that?"

"I would prefer to keep that to myself," I said. I did not want to drag Anne into this if she wasn't already on their radar. My story to Ty up to this point had carefully omitted Anne, as well as everyone else that could possibly be omitted without outright lying.

"Understandable. You do not have to tell us everything in order to be useful to us. As far as the official title of our organization, we don't have a publicly available name. Sorry. Feel free to call us Flinchites, though. The rest of the people here will probably get a big kick out of it that you know that word." He was quiet a moment, considering what I had just told him. "Heh, Flinchites, good grief. But I'm afraid that I

have questions for you as well. Specifically, I'm going to be blunt with you: we want to know how you orchestrated 357A."

"The attack, you mean?" I asked.

"Yeah. There's a long name for the event in our records. We call it 357A."

"I didn't orchestrate 357A," I said. "If that is why I'm here, then you made a mistake."

"We can't be certain that you did," Ty said, "But we are nearly certain. Certain enough to put you through all of this trouble. We aren't just meddling in your life for the hell of it."

"Then whatever happens, happens in the future, I guess. Future relative to the attack, I mean. Future relative to me, to this Mike Walters. I don't know anything. Why not find a Mike Walters further in the future and ask him?" I asked.

"We tried that," Ty explained. "A Mike Walters further in the future, even a day further in the future from the time that we acquired you from for that matter, could not be reached for comment."

This was a concerning statement. "What does that mean?" I asked.

"We don't fully understand what that means. Obviously, if you were dead, we would not be able to contact you after you died. But there is no evidence that you are dead immediately after the time that we interrupted you, either. There is no evidence of anything. We cannot track you at all. This has happened a few other times, but the nature of those anomalies, their potential solutions, and the names of those involved are not something I can share with you. That probably isn't satisfying, but on the bright side it's unlikely that you're going to drop dead of a heart attack or something in the next few years. We would end up with a record of that if it happened, I think. Dead people are unsurprisingly bad at covering their tracks."

I took a moment to process this information. There was a chance that it was good news. If I really was the architect behind the attack, maybe I had some sort of power in the future, one that the Flinchites could not understand or subvert. This thought was immediately met with a deep pessimism: no, of course it's not that, Mike Walters, you complete fucking rube. At no point have I ever been or will I ever be on top of the food chain. Professionalism or not, I was in a spider's web right that moment. They probably couldn't see me because I was in a different spider's web by that point.

"Well, I don't know anything. I imagine that you knew that I didn't know anything when you kidnapped me, or assumed that I knew very little. You knew that I was on vacation, legitimately on vacation. You conveyed as much in our original conversation. Why bother with my input at all?" I asked.

"If you want to know what it says regarding your input on all of the important paperwork: we are interested in exploring your temporal perspective on 357A and to receive consultation for boots operations. We want to know what happened and what you think. Regardless of who are you now, you are going to become the man responsible for 357A. It hasn't happened to you yet, but you are the same person. We think that with the right briefing, you can tell us what you might do as that future person with a high level of accuracy. You and your future self contain the same

decision making processes, more or less. Reconstructing the cause and effect of 357A will directly aid our organization in our own endeavors.”

“That sounds logical,” I said. “But my future self isn’t working with you. If he was working with you, I don’t think you would have so much trouble tracking him down. That indicates to me that I won’t be working alongside you forever and that future Mike might prefer that I not work with you at all. Why should I trust you if I don’t have that seal of approval from future Mike?”

“Hmm,” Ty looked at me, thoughtfully. “We are going to be cordial and professional with you no matter what you choose to do. Other organizations that have used you for their own ends did not account for how precarious they have made your life. I think that is a mistake. It is how you ended up in our hands and not theirs. However, you are not currently permitted to leave the premises. Without your consultation, that arrangement will stand for an indefinite amount of time.”

“So I’m trapped here forever if I don’t help you? You’ve been kind to me in a Stockholm Syndrome kind of way, but I’ve been tortured by your organization before. I still suffer from injuries sustained from a previous torture session.” I was trying not to get worked up. I could feel the resentment rising in my chest, but it wouldn’t do me any good here. “I don’t trust you not to torture me is what I’m trying to say.”

Ty looked at me concernedly. He scowled and shook his head. “No, no, no. That was the result of a boots operation, one that was handled poorly in my opinion but not a decision that I had control over. You are inside the complex now. Torture would be ineffective. We have contemporary information gathering techniques that are both humane and convincing, rather than threatening.

Another poor consolation. The description of these “techniques” felt like they were hiding something more sinister. I did not want to know what that more sinister connotation was. I did my best to remain calm. Ty’s composure allowed me to keep my own composure while I thought about what he was saying. “Fine. I don’t think anything that I know is worth much anyway, not to me personally. Not enough to risk getting... humanely convinced. I don’t have any allegiances to WOE.BEGONE or O.V.E.R. or anybody else except for some of the people I met at O.V.E.R. Speaking of those people, can you tell me about their status?”

Ty shrugged. “Operations at O.V.E.R. ceased a long time ago. Cleanup operations were just a façade of control after 357A. The dream of O.V.E.R. died that day, but it took awhile for everyone involved to come to terms with that. They did everything that they could to project confidence and competence, but once everything was on television and the thing that everyone was there for was gone, there was no holding it together. That isn’t to say that they didn’t try for as long as they could. I’m not at liberty to say what happened to any individuals, but honestly I also could not tell you even if I wanted to because I simply do not know. There will be a time in the future where you may attempt to contact friends and family under organization supervision for limited times and concerning limited subjects.”

“...Edgar?” I half-blurted.

“Your husband, you mean?” He asked.

"Boyfriend," I corrected him, wondering if this was an error in their information about me or something else. This was the second time that Ty had made that mistake.

"Edgar was also involved in your orchestration of 357A. That is our current understanding. As such, it will be a considerable amount of time before we will be able to allow you to communicate with each other, because, unfortunately for the two of you, we would like for those communications to be strategic" Ty said.

"Are you holding him, too?" I asked.

"No, we do not have him present with us in the way that we have you," he said. "He, strangely enough, has also been difficult to track temporally following 357A."

"When is the last time... uh... in time... that you can see him?" I asked in a demanding tone.

"That is not a question I can answer." Ty briskly moved on in the conversation. "I'm afraid that I am reaching the outer limits of what I am able to tell you about what you want to know. The time has come for me to explain to you what we want you to do. The preliminary steps, anyway."

Ty walked across the room to a file cabinet, unlocked it, and flipped through until he found a file folder. He returned and sat it on the table in-between us. The file folder remained unopened.

"The role that WOE.BEGONE plays in this whole scenario peaks our curiosity. What do you know about that?"

"I gave the game back to Ryan. At least, I think that is what I did. WOE.BEGONE went silent on me immediately after that."

"Interesting," he said. "So you assume that Ryan is in control again?"

"Considering that my actions on the night that Ryan presumably regained control ended Ryan bothering me and WOE.BEGONE bothering me, that is the only conclusion that I can come to," I said. "I tried to contact Ryan after 357A to no avail."

"Interesting indeed," he repeated. "I think it is safe to say that our organization had completely written off WOE.BEGONE both as a threat and as a matter of interest, especially any version of WOE.BEGONE that Ryan considered himself in charge of. I mean, I led you through our office just now. WOE.BEGONE doesn't have any structure comparable to that, does it?"

"No, it's just Ryan telling guys what to do," I said. "One employee working out of his own apartment at most, plus a handful of guys like me mutilating ourselves for his enjoyment."

"Which makes it all the more strange that 357A happened right after you returned the game to Ryan. We don't think that is a coincidence, but we don't know how to connect the dots yet. That is one place where your insight will help us immensely. Out of all of the sources that we tried to acquire in the same way that we acquired you, there were no living WOE.BEGONE players that we were able to obtain. So, not only are you vital to our understanding on 357A, you are vital in our understanding of how WOE.BEGONE intersects in this whole equation. As far as we know, you are the only living WOE.BEGONE expert in the entire world."

He said this nonchalantly, as though he didn't have any expectation that I might have an emotional response to what he had said. "Anne!? Hunter!?" I demanded.

"I am not at liberty to say," he said, maintaining his infinite composure.

"Are they dead!?" I asked.

"That information is classified. But I hope it is of some comfort to know that my organization is not one of gods: just because we aren't able to access someone does not mean that they are dead. I'd like you to take a moment and take some deep breaths before we continue to the next segment of this conversation. It is important to reset before we move on. The next part of the conversation is a request that I believe you are going to find challenging. Can I get you some water?"

[Inhale sharply.] "Uh... yes, please. I do need some water. I've been talking all day," I said. What I wanted more than water was a second alone in the interview room, so that I could be alone with my thoughts.

"Alright, then. Stay right here," Ty said. "I will be back soon with water. Do not go anywhere." He stood up and left the room.

I immediately stood up and began pacing the room. I was not able to keep pace with my thoughts. What if Anne and Mystery Hunter really were dead? Why couldn't they tell me where Edgar was? What did it mean to be missing from the future? What exactly could these people see or not see? What did I do? Did I really do 357A? Did I drag everyone else into this with me as a result? Was O.V.E.R. gone? For how long? What time was I in? Would I be able to get back? How long were they going to hold me here? Could I trust them to let me go or would they kill me when they were done with me?

That was roughly the amount of thinking that I was able to fit into the short time between Ty leaving and coming back with ice water in hand. He examined me, standing beside my chair, only stopping my pacing once I noticed that he had entered.

"Well, I see that deep breathing wasn't helpful for you," he stated matter-of-factly. "Perhaps some water will help? We do need to get on with this and we will require your full cooperation, regardless of whether or not you are able to participate with a level head."

"Sorry," I said. "You have given me a lot to think about and none of it is good."

"There is nothing to be sorry about," Ty said. "We have put you in an unenviable position. Frankly, I think it would be a bit bone-chilling if you weren't experiencing some anxiety right now. I am the one who should be sorry for compounding a difficult situation with a difficult order. It is the nature of our work here. I don't suppose that you looked into the folder while I was gone?"

"Didn't even cross my mind," I said.

"That's too bad," he said. "I was hoping you would have looked inside and begun to prepare yourself so that you would be more ready when I came back."

The file folder was upside down. I flipped it over and looked at the outside front cover. The word "WOE.BEGONE" was written on the front in block letters and the words "Mike Walters" were written in the spot where the tab is.

"I don't understand. WOE.BEGONE isn't anything new to me," I said. "I can tell you anything you want about it. I can tell you about anyone that I know that was involved."

He stopped me short. "We have reason to believe that the processes that allowed WOE.BEGONE to function have started up again. We think the game is active and being played again. The WOE.BEGONE recruiting methods have come back online, much as they probably were when you started the game."

"Okay, so what?" I asked.

"So we think that this would be an excellent first fact-finding mission for you to participate in," he said.

"Sure. Who do you want me to talk to? I can try and get ahold of anyone. You might have to give me some help with regards to how to contact people across time, though," I said. "Or if you need help guiding your "boots" as you call them through the game, I can do that, too. I did a messy job when I played the game but I've spent the last several months thinking about things I could have done better."

"We think this might be an excellent first fact-finding method for you to *participate* in," he said, his emphasis suggesting that he was saying something that I was not understanding.

"Participate in?" I asked.

"Participate in," he said one final time.

I opened the file folder and looked inside. Ty began explaining as I was reading.

"We need someone with a breadth of knowledge about the game. As a result of the strength of our own in-house technology, we will be able to seamlessly present you as someone with a different identity and location. The game won't ever know that it is you. We have a specific plan in mind, one that only works if the person playing the game is someone who has played the game under all of the different iterations and gamerunners. It is a plan that requires masking and unmasking you to people within the structure of WOE.BEGONE for reconnaissance purposes. Mike Walters is the only person who can accomplish this plan. Do you understand now?"

I had understood by the time I was asking him to repeat himself, but I didn't want to believe it. I couldn't believe it. I couldn't parse it into my understanding of the world. I would internalize it and then immediately think, "no, that's not right, that's not true" and attempt to dismiss it. And yet, here was Ty Betteridge and a file folder full of plans telling me what was going to happen. What I was going to have to do if I ever had a hope of getting out of this place, of getting my life back, of seeing anybody that I had ever known ever again. My "precarious" life, as Ty had phrased it.

"I'm playing WOE.BEGONE. Again," I said.

"You're playing WOE.BEGONE. Again," Ty replied.

So I played WOE.BEGONE. Again. [Tense beat.]

This has been WOE.BEGONE. Next time: WOE.BEGONE, again. Thanks for playing.

[END THEME PLAYS.]