

EPISODE 39: We are buying ourselves some more time.

[Hey guys. I hope you are all enjoying season 4 so far. If you like the show, you should consider supporting it on patreon at patreon.com/woe_begone. There is a monthly Q&A going up at the end of the month for \$2, so now would be a good time to ask me anything. Not to mention episode instrumentals, soundtrack albums, The Diary of Aliza Schultz spinoff podcast, Director's Commentary and more. Thanks to my 10 newest patrons: Morgan Jackson, Erinna, Isabel Wilson, Rowan, Shy Ruff, Marn S., Jaz Vallin, Grey, Rick Platinum, and Monica Quirk for supporting the show. Enjoy.]

The first challenge went off without a hitch. The first challenge always goes off without a hitch, that's the point of the first challenge being what it is. It is designed to hook you in. The only difference this time was that we were introducing deception into the equation in order to manipulate the game. I was nervous about this. It introduced an element of unpredictability into a situation that I was otherwise able to predict fairly well. The Flinchites would not elaborate on what they meant when they said that they were going to use technology to disguise my voice as Donny Evans. I didn't get to hear what that sounded like. To me, it just sounded like Mike Walters leaving a message on CANNONBALL's voicemail. Had Ryan regained and maintained control of WOE.BEGONE since the moment that I handed it back over to him, he would have instantly recognized my voice. That didn't happen. Whatever they did to disguise me as CANNONBALL's brother had worked. I completed the first challenge. I was Donny Evans, for all intents and purposes, for the length of this game of WOE.BEGONE, however long that might be. I was playing WOE.BEGONE again.

It was 5 hours and 58 minutes between the time that I finished the phone call and the time that the Flinchites were able to confirm that the first challenge prize had been delivered. Normally, this happens overnight. The phone call is made in the middle of the night, the player goes to sleep, and they wake up into their new reality. The new reality with a living CANNONBALL in it was confirmed by observing the existence of documents that were proof of CANNONBALL's death, namely an obituary in the paper and a publicly available death certificate. CANNONBALL had officially never died. I was quite relieved to hear that. Though I resented my participation in WOE.BEGONE and how he had manipulated me to do things for the sake of the game, I couldn't help but be more sympathetic towards him as I had time to reflect on who he was and what his role in WOE.BEGONE actually was. He wasn't a gamerunner. He was a pawn. The things that happened to me were not his fault, at least in the broad strokes, though he may have facilitated many of them. He hardly knew what he was doing.

The file about him and his family that the Flinchites gave me to reference for my phone call elicited some sympathy as well. He was a black sheep youngest brother who was struggling to thrive on his own as an artist and came from a family that could not even find itself the ability to be fully supportive even after he had died. The situation was bleak. It was no surprise that he had found himself in dark places and talking to shady people. Not to brag, but I'm something of a murderer

myself. It would be hypocritical of me to come down too harshly on him. I suppose its time to put my forgiving money where my mouth is, considering how I eulogized him when Ryan told me that he had died.

That is not to say that CANNONBALL was my choice for a first challenge prize. Actually, it's more complicated than that. Playing WOE.BEGONE this time, I know, of course, that the first challenge is actually a setup to the fourth challenge. Whoever is brought back by the first challenge is to be killed during the fourth challenge. That means that it is inadvisable, to say the least, to choose someone you are incredibly fond of. There is always the possibility that you will find an opportunity to counteract the fourth challenge—I was able to ensure Matt's continued existence. Personally, I am being kept alive by... someone... somehow... question mark... That only eats at me a little bit every day these days. It doesn't feel like someone's coming to kill me any more than usual. There are more important things eating me. As far as WOE.BEGONE strategies go, I think Mystery Hunter had the least traumatic scenario, bringing back his mother who was frail and dying. He got to see her again but her days were numbered with or without WOE.BEGONE, so it was still a profound loss but one that was going to happen regardless. If it were too good to be true, then at least he only ended up back where he started. Everything gets wrapped up with a nice little bow. At least with CANNONBALL, I was not profoundly concerned with the idea of having to kill him to complete the fourth challenge. I could provide another eulogy, if need be.

The idea to choose CANNONBALL was the result of several interviews that I did with the Flinchites inside of the Flinchite compound. I say "interview" because they don't like the word "interrogation." The reality is somewhere in-between the two ideas. Ty was my handler, so he was in charge of getting everything that I know out of me. After he broke the bad news to me—that I would be playing WOE.BEGONE again—I was incentivized to use my expert judgment to recommend a course of action to ensure that the operation went smoothly. I was to infiltrate WOE.BEGONE and get information by pretending to play the game as a new player. Everything would have to be coordinated to maximize the amount of information that I could obtain. That meant choosing a first prize that would have some utility to the operation, someone who could help us uncover the inner machinations of the WOE.BEGONE machine.

After deliberating with Ty, CANNONBALL, real name Topher Evans, was the ideal candidate for a first prize. He was, most importantly, dead, a necessary prerequisite for the position. He also was someone who was "high up" in the original structure of WOE.BEGONE, WOE.BEGONE presumably being an operation of two people while he was working for Ryan, so about as high up as you can go without being the ringleader. Ryan did not seem to be an option for this task for whatever reason, though I took it to mean that he is still alive. CANNONBALL was alive during the time period that Ryan lost the game and someone else took over, which was an important area of study that the Flinchites were looking for more information about. And he was—again, a lot of presumptions here—likely killed by the faction that took over WOE.BEGONE after Ryan, at least that was what Ryan led me to believe when we met in person.

It was decided. I was the expert. I was the only one with enough experience to make this whole operation come together. It was my professional opinion that CANNONBALL should be the prize. And it was the Flinchites' opinion that I should be the one to show up to his apartment unannounced looking for those important clues that he might have.

This is WOE.BEGONE.

[INTRO THEME PLAYS.]

I didn't want to go to CANNONBALL's apartment. I had been there before and that was not a fond memory of mine. I had yet to be humbled by the enormity of what I didn't understand back then. I thought that CANNONBALL was the gamerunner and that all I had to do was whack him over the head and I would have some answers. That concept is so distant from my current self that it doesn't even feel like me when I try to remember it. I was so naive. There wasn't even a bear in the equation back then. It isn't as though I had a choice to not go back, though. The Flinchites were not going to let me leave without using me for all that I was worth. I had already started the game. These were my next instructions. It did beat the alternative instructions, though, which were to proceed immediately with the second challenge. I did not allow myself to think about the second challenge. I had already received the instructions for the second challenge. It was waiting for me whenever I was ready. I did not feel that I would ever be ready.

The point of the reconnaissance mission was to get information about Ryan: how he operated WOE.BEGONE and where he operated it from, how he lost control of it, and what CANNONBALL knew about the new gamerunners and anything that happened after that. A secondary objective was to prod CANNONBALL into talking about important aspects of the situation that we did not know that we did not know, since that was a large and elusive category for us. The Flinchites were doing their own reconnaissance in addition to this that I was not allowed to know the particulars of, but a firsthand account had the potential to help them out immensely. That is how I ended up on CANNONBALL's familiar doorstep. I was, of course, placed on said doorstep through abrupt, disorienting and uncomfortable travel through time and space, in true Flinchite fashion.

I waited for my stomach to settle, took a deep breath and knocked on the door. [Beat.]

Nothing. For a moment I thought that I had the wrong address. It had been a few months since the last time I was here. It was possible that CANNONBALL had moved. I could be knocking on a stranger's door. I was relying entirely on the Flinchites' information and they seemed to believe that he still lived in the same place. I briefly wondered about what would happen if we couldn't find the guy that I had brought back to life. The Flinchites wouldn't be happy with me, that was certain. It would certainly put a wrench in future challenges. They could try to track him down. If I were him, I would consider being anywhere besides in the apartment where the murder game was orchestrated from after Ryan lost control of WOE.BEGONE. It was inviting trouble from anyone that knew that he was there. That's probably how he ended up dead in the first place.

A minute or two went by. I tried knocking again to no avail. I was still standing outside of CANNONBALL's apartment, wondering if this whole operation was about to go south. CANNONBALL was my idea. It was the idea that we all agreed on after I laid out everything that had happened and had given my expert opinion. It may have been more trouble than it was worth. We could have picked some nobody and we wouldn't have gotten any useful information, but we wouldn't be wasting our time, either, whatever it means to "waste time" in a scenario like this. Anxiously, I tried in vain to look through the peephole in his door. As expected, all I could see was obliquely reflected light.

It was while I was pressed up to the door, failing to see inside of CANNONBALL's apartment that I felt something press firmly into my back.

"Don't turn around," a voice said.

I attempted to remain calm. "Topher," I greeted him. "It's been too long."

"It really hasn't," he said.

"I don't know what it feels like to have a gun pressed up against my back," I said. "Is it something like this? I don't have much feeling back there these days, so you're lucky I noticed at all."

"Something exactly like this," he said. "So stay still while I get the door open. Eyes forward." He unlocked the door, presumably with the hand that wasn't also holding the gun, and led me inside.

"Sit." He pointed his finger past me so that I could see it from behind me, toward a wooden chair in the center of the room. "Hands behind your back, behind the chair." I did as I was told. As I turned around to sit in the chair, I could see that CANNONBALL was, in fact, pointing a gun at me. Up until that point, he could have been bluffing. CANNONBALL picked up some rope and bound my hands behind the back of the chair.

"Put your legs against the legs of the chair. If you kick me, I will become much less friendly," he instructed me. I complied. I wasn't trying to get myself killed by CANNONBALL. Not after all that I've been through. What a pathetic way to go after all that had happened to me, after all of the people infinitely more powerful than CANNONBALL had their shot at me. Once the tying was done, he stood up and faced me.

"Looks like you were expecting me," I said.

"Not at all," CANNONBALL replied. "I was sitting here in my living room, minding my own business, watching TV when I heard the knock on the door. When I saw who it was, I grabbed my gun, found some rope to tie you up with, and then went down the fire escape and back into the building. I'm playing it by ear."

"Well, then kudos, I guess," I said. "Light on your feet. Are you gonna... you know? Shove a sock in my mouth?"

"No, we're going to talk," he replied.

"Oh, good," I said. "That's why I'm here, too. Since we both want the same thing, you should untie me."

"Not a chance," he said.

"Worth a shot," I said.

"Where is Ryan? What did you do with him?" CANNONBALL asked.

"Me!?" I shot back, confused. "Why would I know anything?"

“He went to meet with you at that Area 51 place and nobody ever saw him again.” He said.

“He told you that he was coming to meet with me?” I asked. Everything was different now. CANNONBALL had been dead when Ryan had initially met with me at O.V.E.R.

“It was the last thing he ever told me. He had a plan to take the game back. You were at that government facility, the one that blew up. He was going to use you to get WOE.BEGONE back. And then you killed him.” I could hear him gritting his teeth.

“I absolutely did not. Not because I feel any fondness for him, but why would I? He didn’t have any power. He wasn’t in control of WOE.BEGONE. He didn’t have anything that I could gain from killing him. And why would you care? That guy didn’t care whether you lived or died at all,” I said. “He made fun of me for keeping you alive last time I was in this apartment.”

“I care,” he said, “because if there is going to be time travel, then I would like to be one of the people who is closest to it. Ryan was the key to all of that. He knew how it worked and I didn’t. All I had to do was run his shitty little game for him. I did all the easy stuff, played stupid and kept my head down, and as a reward I was on the cusp of getting everything that I ever wanted. And I let him out of my sight for a second and his fucking Scruff date kills him out in the middle of the mountains!? He told me that if he didn’t come back to take that as proof that Mike Walters killed him.”

“I didn’t kill him! I had no reason to kill him. Yes, he met me out there. The place is called Oldbrush Valley, by the way. In fact, quite the opposite of killing him, I gave him everything that he wanted and he tried to kill me anyway for my trouble,” I said. “Something doesn’t add up. I heard from him again after that. I gave him the game back.”

“Did you see him after that? In the flesh?” CANNONBALL asked.

“No, but it was his phone. I worked with him twice, actually. He helped me with some codes right after he visited me. And then after that, he led me through the steps to giving the game back to him,” I said.

“So, you *don’t* know that it was him,” he said, “Or you could be lying. Either way, not helpful.”

“He hasn’t responded since the attack on Oldbrush Valley. We can’t find anything on him after that point,” I said.

“We?” CANNONBALL asked.

“I am working with some people. We are trying to get to the bottom of what is going on. They’re way more advanced than Ryan ever was. They are disguising me. I’m playing the game again under an alias. I—” I stopped short. I had almost told him that I had saved his life. I couldn’t tell whether or not telling CANNONBALL that he was a WOE.BEGONE prize was a wise idea. I didn’t know how he might react. I held my tongue for now.

“I’m here on a mission from them. We want to know what happened to Ryan, too,” I continued. “We want to know how he lost the game in the first place. What happened?”

"I actually thought that maybe it was you that took over the game," he said. "You got lucky and seized the opportunity, broke into his house and wrecked shop. And then that drew him out to you once he found out where you were and that's when you made your move. Now that I see you in person again, I remember how pathetic you are. A coward. You killed Ryan but you didn't take the game from him. You wouldn't be in the mess if you had."

"Whoever it was broke into Ryan house? I thought he said he had a failsafe installed," I said, trying to steer the conversation.

He ignored me. "Why would you come here after you killed Ryan?" He wasn't asking me, he was thinking aloud. "The only thing that I can think of is that you are here to kill me, too. Is that it? Because I'm the only one left who knows what you've done?"

"No," I assured him. He looked more volatile than he did when the conversation began. I was afraid of what he was convincing himself of. "I didn't kill Ryan. I'm trying to figure out what happened to him."

He was not listening to me.

"Why should I believe you and not just beat you to death with an iron rod? The evidence is not in your favor," he said, half shouting.

"Because I'm not lying... Wait what? An iron rod? You have a gun in your hand. Why not use that?" I asked.

"Because my walls are paper thin and I don't want the cops coming," he explained.

"Oh, makes sense," I replied. "I didn't come to kill you. Do I look prepared to kill you?"

He looked me up and down and thought for a moment. "Then why the fuck are you here?"

I saw an opportunity to keep myself from getting killed, to alleviate his suspicions that I had killed Ryan. A long shot, but the last weapon I had in my arsenal.

"Because you're my first challenge prize," I replied. "I brought you back when I started the new game of WOE.BEGONE. Ryan told me that you were dead when he came and visited me. He showed me a picture of your corpse. He did not seem to be too broken up about it. I brought you back because we thought that we could use you for information, which seems to be something of a bust."

I let him process this for a moment before I continued. "You are alive because of me. You're welcome, asshole. I had to pretend to be your stupid brother and leave you a fake voicemail to complete the challenge. I'm back in the game. Now, are you going to tell me what I want to hear or not?"

"I... was dead?" he asked, still processing.

"The file said it was carbon dioxide poisoning," I said. "The timing feels like it wasn't a coincidence. Whoever took the game from Ryan wanted you permanently out of the picture. We need to know what happened. Can you remember anything at all? About what it was like after Ryan lost control?"

CANNONBALL was no longer listening to me. "You're playing WOE.BEGONE," he said. There was a flatness to his voice. "I'm alive because you're playing

WOE.BEGONE.” The idea seemed to make sense to him. It explained why Ryan was missing and he wasn’t.

“The people I work for... I don’t know what they are hoping to achieve exactly, but I do know that they want to get to the bottom of WOE.BEGONE. They want whatever the gamerunners have for themselves,” I said.

CANNONBALL had stopped listening to me. He stared into the middle distance for a second. Then, without saying a word, he briskly walked over to the chair and started dragging me into a back bedroom. He did not need to tell me why he was suddenly taking a different course of action. He did not need to say out loud that if I was the one who brought him back to life, then I was the one who would eventually try to kill him. We both understood this. He took me into a bedroom in the back of the apartment, rummaged through a drawer and found a sock inside of it and jammed said sock into my mouth to prevent me from talking further. Having a sock in your mouth is a genuinely uncomfortable experience. I do not recommend it for anybody for any occasion.

Telling CANNONBALL about the first challenge was not a slip of the tongue, as spur-of-the-moment as it may have been. I told CANNONBALL that he was the prize because I knew how he would react. I was not getting useful information from him the way that things were going. This way, I knew that he wouldn’t kill me. CANNONBALL knew how the game worked. He knew what would happen to him if I died. If there were even a chance that I wasn’t bluffing, then he would be making a fatal mistake if he killed me. There was a good chance that I wasn’t bluffing because it explained why I was on his doorstep better than any other hypothetical.

I suspected that he would hold me captive and I was right. Being held captive meant that I had just bought a lot more time with CANNONBALL inside of his apartment. More time meant more time to think. It meant more opportunities to get information from him, more things that I could use to make myself valuable, to earn my freedom. On the flip side, it meant more time away from the Flinchites, more time to formulate an escape plan, first out of CANNONBALL’s apartment and then so that the Flinchites could no longer find me. It meant more time between then and the time that I would be expected to cut my arm off. It meant more time that I could spend figuring out how to avoid doing that at all.

“You’re a huge fuckin’ idiot for coming here and telling me that,” he said. “Fuck. I don’t know what I’m going to do, but you are going to stay right here while I figure it out.”

“[MUFFLED YELLING NOISES]” I said. He wasn’t convinced. He walked out of the bedroom, slamming the door behind him. I was left, alone, tied to a chair.

It wasn’t much of a plan, but it was a plan. CANNONBALL got the drop on me and the whole situation was threatening to go belly up. I wasn’t getting what I wanted, I wasn’t getting what the Flinchites wanted me to get, and, maybe most top-of-mind when I decided to take this route, I didn’t want to cut my arm off. My survival instincts surprised me. I did not realize what lengths I was willing to go to in order to stop myself from cutting my own arm off again until I saw a glimmer of a chance. But, hey, it was worth a shot, right? How long could I stay held hostage inside of CANNONBALL’s apartment until either I find a way to escape and make a

run for freedom, CANNONBALL gets bored or afraid of retaliation and lets me go, or the Flinchites intervene and begrudgingly bail me out of the situation?

[Beat.]

Four months. Whoops!

[Beat]

CANNONBALL was surprisingly attentive to my situation. He fed me well and made me stretch and walk around every day, albeit at gunpoint. I got regular bathroom breaks. I still spent almost all of my time in that wooden chair, though, including sleeping, even though there was a bed right in front of me the whole time. I existed in limbo for all of that time. CANNONBALL was in a pickle. If he let me go, he knew that I would be back to kill him later, but what else could he do? There was some kind of timer on the WOE.BEGONE challenges. How long until I failed out of the game?

He tried not to talk to me, to no avail. I learned some things, piecemeal, as the days went on. It is impossible not to talk at all to someone who is around for that long. I learned a couple things, piecing together the things that CANNONBALL would imply by the way that he said them. I learned that someone tore Ryan's whole house apart, at which point he lost control of the game. He emailed Flinch about it but Flinch went silent, which is what I would expect from Flinch. I don't think he really cares about exactly who is doing what.

Once, he said something that indicated to me that he discovered that he was being watched for some time, by guys in a van on his street that clearly didn't live in his building. They don't watch him anymore. I think they were sent on behalf of the new gamerunners. I think those were the people that killed him. Maybe they eventually decided to pose as maintenance workers and poison him in his sleep. This meant that there was yet another organized group involved in this whole fiasco. I don't think that it was the Flinchites. The Flinchites were not above this, obviously—their boots operation is why my hand doesn't work like it should, they definitely are capable of the cruelty necessary to kill CANNONBALL. But they would have told me. It would have been in his file. It would not be a shameful secret that they were hiding from me. I hoped that they could use this information—that someone was watching CANNONBALL from the street with dates that align roughly with his former death date—to track them down.

Four months is a long time to never slip up, especially when you have to deal with someone all day every day for that amount of time. People are not that disciplined, not that regimented. Eventually, you are going to get careless. You are going to run low on the energy that it takes to keep up appearances. You are going to make a phone call in your boxers at seven in the morning with the spare bedroom door open because you forgot to close it that night after you gave your hostage his bathroom break. It is going to slip your mind that your hostage has been sleeping upright in a chair and so he wakes up pretty frequently during the night. And then you might, for instance, say in your phone call that you were interested in purchasing the circular saw that the person on the other line had put up on Craigslist, but had some questions about safety. Could it, for instance, cut through your arm if there were an accident? Was there a failsafe stopping it? No? Alright, but

I better get a discount, then. Who calls a stranger about a Craigslist ad at 7 in the morning? Truly a warped mind.

CANNONBALL wasn't going to wait any longer. He could feel time running out. It had been four months. How much longer until I lost the game and he popped out of existence again? He used to have a hand in such things. He would know better than most what kind of timeline we were looking at here. He was planning to force me to attempt the second challenge at gunpoint in his home. I was close to having a meltdown thinking about it, but I still had to pretend to be asleep. The bedroom door was open. If he noticed, then I did not know what would happen. Keeping my eyes closed and my breathing even while I waited for him to get dressed and leave to get the circular saw was more torturous than the months that I had spent tied up. Eventually, he did leave, still not noticing the open bedroom door. I quickly began making my desperate moves.

I pulled my shoulder violently to the side. The muscle hurt, but it wasn't enough to get my arms around the back of the chair. I did it again this time, even more violently, the adrenaline pushing me to ignore the pain. This time, my shoulder popped and both of my arms were on the same side of the chair, allowing me to free them from behind the chair. I let out a cry of pain, muffled by the sock that was in my mouth. I could finally stand up, but my hands were still bound and my legs were still tied to the chair. I waddled awkwardly out of the bedroom and into the rest of the house.

I looked around for something to free my legs. I was still too immobilized to make a break for it. I wouldn't even be able to open the front door. My hands were useless behind my back. I couldn't bend down and untie my legs. I couldn't find anything sharp to rub against the rope. I tried jumping backward, putting my weight into the chair in order to smash it. This didn't work. Because my legs were tied I wasn't able to jump much at all. It was more like falling backwards. I only injured myself further. I landed hard on my neck and part of my face. I could feel what would eventually become a black eye begin to form. With much effort, I stood back up, continuing with my slow wandering.

I waddled into the kitchen. After all of the effort that it took to get the silverware drawer open, the only knife inside was a butter knife. The rope was thick. I didn't have time for that. Who doesn't own a single kitchen knife? How do you cook without one? Through some strenuous gymnastics, I was able to get the dishwasher open. Among other things, inside was a large kitchen knife. It looked sharp enough to cut through the rope... and it was on the bottom row inside one of the spots for utensils. The door to the dishwasher made it impossible to get close enough to grab it. Using all of my strength, I launched the chair onto the door of the dishwasher. I could hear it bend and break under me. I reached around blindly for the knife, stretching as far as I could. I was unable to grab the knife in my flailing.

This is the situation that I found myself in when CANNONBALL came back through the door, circular saw in hand. The saw was not new, in-box. It was well-loved, speckled here and there with signs of wear.

"Goddamnit. I leave you alone for one second and you made a mess," he said. "Oh, well. Easy come, easy go. We are doing something special today. I think you've

already figured that out, though. I hope that you're prepared. We are buying ourselves some more time."

[END THEME PLAYS.]