

## **EPISODE 43: Life will be difficult and you won't remember why.**

[Hey guys. Happy Halloween. If you haven't listened yet, there is a bonus episode of The Diary of Aliza Schultz in the feed that was created just for the spooky season. It is a standalone, so you don't have to have heard the rest of that podcast to know what's going on. Speaking of Aliza Schultz, on Patreon at [patreon.com/woe\\_begone](https://patreon.com/woe_begone), you can get episodes of that show AND this one early, instrumentals and soundtracks, Q&As, clips of my cats meowing (just uploaded a new one!), directors commentaries and more. Thanks to my 10 newest patrons: Ariel Diaz, Theo, Seoung Kim, Jeremy Cloutier, Bertie Archer, Moths Teeth, agustfairies, HT, indigo, and Chloe Aiden for supporting the show. Enjoy.]

Four challenges. I didn't know that there would be four challenges when I signed up for WOE.BEGONE. I didn't know much of anything when I signed up, but even after the fourth challenge I still wasn't sure. It is only after so much time has passed that I am confident in saying that there are four challenges. Still, I hesitate for fear that I might be proven wrong. Discrete challenges seem to be over after the fourth one. That is when things change, when things open up into a greater world of information, into a somehow greater scale of violence, at least in my experience—violence that doesn't simply reverse itself upon the completion of a set of tasks. Four challenges. One taught me love. One taught me patience. One taught me pain. I'm so amazing. I kid. They have all taught me pain and little else.

The new set of challenges that have served as reconnaissance work for the Flinchites could not have played out in a less ideal manner. I had been kidnapped, forced to do the challenges at gunpoint, and almost ended up in jail after completing a third challenge that was 3 extra days longer than the first time I had done it, presumably to make it more difficult for new players. The only way that I was able to make it out of captivity was because I had the good fortune of returning to the hideout before CANNONBALL and was quick on my feet enough to make a getaway in his car. CANNONBALL's car, however, was not stealthy enough to keep me from getting captured again by the Flinchites. I never learned what happened to that car. Perhaps it is still driving forward to this day, exactly as I left it. Maybe it plowed into that idiot that wouldn't let me merge. Asshole.

I didn't learn anything, hardly anything, from completing the challenges again. I learned that I am not immunized from pain. Pain is a hot and nauseating sensation that I cannot seem to inoculate myself against, no matter how many times I receive it. I don't become stronger. I don't get used to it. I don't become resistant. I lose more of myself. I write another monologue in which I talk about how close my pain has come to destroying me. You're tired of hearing about it. I'm tired of talking about it. I'm tired. I never stop being tired. If I were going to progress in any way, that is the chief aspect of my situation that I would need to fix. You can't change anything if you are always too tired to do anything but follow instructions.

The Flinchites were not terribly concerned with helping me out after they acquired me again. They gave me a bed to rest in, which was more than I had

become accustomed to in prior months in captivity, but they were not interested in helping me heal or waiting for me to be fully ready for what came next. It was not long at all after I had completed the third challenge for them that I found myself having to do their dirty work in some sort of false flag operation, the details of which were hidden from me. The details of most things were hidden from me. I gave them one crucial piece of information that I learned in my time away: that someone was stalking CANNONBALL up to the moment that he originally died, presumably the people who had taken over running WOE.BEGONE and were tying up loose ends. I was told to record some false flag message to Edgar to lure those new gamerunners out into O.V.E.R., though the true intentions behind that message were hidden from me as well. I wasn't ready, mentally or physically, to do that work for me and so I kept my head down and did as I was told without asking questions, which is almost never a good idea in these sorts of situations.

It wasn't any different than the first time that I played WOE.BEGONE, the first time that I did the four challenges, the first time that I got stuck out in the middle of nowhere in a government facility and was asked to do as I was told without asking questions. There was only the illusion of progress—the number corresponding to the challenge that I was on went up, only signifying that I had followed orders. I was helping *them* progress while I was jogging in place, getting more tired and not going anywhere. As long as I was doing as I was told, I would never acquire power because the people who were actually acquiring power did not want me to. There was not enough to go around. The Flinchites were not interested in sharing with the whole class. If I wanted out of the Flinchite compound, if I wanted out of WOE.BEGONE once and for all, if I wanted to see Edgar again (or anyone else for that matter), I would have begun to act in extreme disobedience. I would have to figure out what that meant and then set a plan into action.

But first, I needed to complete the fourth challenge. CANNONBALL knew what was coming. He was resourceful, he had an understanding of what sort of people were interested in locating and killing him, and so unsurprisingly, he was on the run. I couldn't find him on my own. The world is a large and scary place. I both needed and wanted him dead. My objective aligned with the Flinchites for a fleeting moment, like planetary bodies in sync for the first time in thousands of years. We were going to kill CANNONBALL. This is WOE.BEGONE.

[INTRO THEME PLAYS.]

I was disappointed to find out that I would not be involved in any of the fact-finding relating to tracking down CANNONBALL for the fourth challenge. That was all going to be taken care of “for me,” even though that went against my wishes. I wanted to help. CANNONBALL, like myself, like Edgar, could not be surveilled past a certain point in the way that the technology had allowed them and everyone else with the technology to do. I was certain that this was not because he was dead. Him not being dead was sort of the problem. That gave me hope that Edgar was still alive, as they had suggested to me that he was. I wondered what exactly the shortcoming was in their technology that they couldn't see me, CANNONBALL, or Edgar. Perhaps

they couldn't see anyone at all and were covering that up. It seemed that any time that the subject was raised, the answer was that they were not able to see the person using the technology anymore. Maybe they couldn't see anyone.

CANNONBALL was the albatross around my neck. He was involved in this from the very beginning of my journey and he had proven to be an even more malicious actor than I could have ever suspected of him when I started the game. He had gone from unwitting participant to WOE.BEGONE organizer to corpse to captor. He had changed from inert entity to enemy on multiple occasions. He had hurt me severely, first from afar and then finally in person. I wanted to be in charge of tracking him down. I wanted to do everything that I could to get it done, but the Flinchites were keeping me at arms length. Being involved in the hunt for CANNONBALL would give me access to information that the Flinchites didn't want me to have. So, I spent my time like I had been spending it: doing nothing unless called upon to do something. It was torturously boring, but it allowed my body to heal in the meantime, so one could say that I was declining in some areas and vastly improving in others.

They couldn't pull the trigger on my behalf, of course. At some point they would have to involve me. My life was quiet and isolated. I had plenty of time to ruminate on the feelings that I found myself having about how badly I wanted to kill him. I knew that they were frightening feelings to have while I was having them, but that didn't stop them from happening. I knew that my personal trauma wasn't a blank check to inflict suffering onto others. I knew that I had an ideological investment in restorative and non-retributive justice. That did not prevent me from feeling how I felt. I was tired. I was too tired to actively prevent myself from feeling that way. I wanted to kill CANNONBALL.

There was a message from the gamerunners that served as the de facto beginning of the fourth challenge, then a few days passed as the Flinchites scrambled to get a location for CANNONBALL. I was skeptical that they would make any meaningful headway. Without the technology, I didn't see how they were any better than the average person at retrieving information. They had access to manpower, but that was pretty much it. Their boots on the ground could beat some people up for information, but I imagined finding the right people and getting the right information was basically a lost cause.

It took about a week (I think? Counting days was difficult) until Ty walked into my room with a file in his hand. I was in bed (I usually was). I sat up. Ty never came to see me unless he wanted me to do something.

"Did you finally find him?" I got straight to the point.

"No, unfortunately," he said in the polite way that he says nearly everything. "I believe he is expecting you, so he has done all that he can to vanish."

"Did you try his apartment?" I asked.

"Why would he be at his apartment?" he asked.

"Well, if he is "on the run," then the last place people would think he would be is at home, so he might be safe there" I explained.

"Would you be in your apartment if you were trying to hide from us?" he asked.

“No way, you’d find me there,” I said.

“We checked the apartment, Mike,” he said, sounding perhaps a little frustrated with me. He had a look for only a moment like he was filing my suggestion away for later. I don’t think that they had checked the apartment. Just a suspicion. I am very smart.

“We have a job for you,” he said. “You know Topher Evans and Donny Evans better than anyone here. We’ve watched Donny’s house but haven’t seen any suspicious activity. He’s not hiding out there. However, we can’t rule out that Donny has some idea of where he is or might know someone who might have an idea. That’s where you come in. We need you to knock on his door and ask some questions.”

I shook my head. “Donny’s not going to know anything,” I told him. “Have you looked at the file you guys put together? They aren’t exactly friends. Donny is his closest family member from what I can tell, but he doesn’t like the guy.”

“It is one of several lines of inquiry,” Ty said. “We are attempting to gather information from as many sources as possible. If this line fails, there will be others.”

“Last time you sent me out, I got kidnapped for months,” I replied.

“That won’t happen this time. It would not provide any useful data,” Ty said.

“Oh, well if it won’t provide any useful data, then...” I retorted.

“To be clear, this isn’t a request. This is an order approved by the organization,” he said.

“Don’t worry. At no point was I under the illusion that I had a choice,” I replied.

“Good. You leave in 15 minutes. Make whatever preparations you need. Wear the clothes that you were wearing when we reacquired you from Topher,” he said.

“The Donny Evans disguise?” I asked.

“Yes. Maybe it will give you something to talk about with him,” he said. “Or put him at ease.”

“Fine. Leave so I can change,” I said. He left and I changed into the clothes. I prayed that Donny didn’t ask me anything about the Red Sox. I had been happy that I had guessed correctly that they were a baseball team. I didn’t have time to get acquainted with them in the interim time. I stood in the center of the room, braced myself, and waited... for 11 minutes. It doesn’t take that long to change into a shirt, jeans, and a hat. I didn’t have any other preparations to make. How else would I prepare? I didn’t have any material possessions with me in the compound. It’s not really possible to mentally prepare. Travelling this way is awful every time no matter what. The next thing that I knew... after 11 minutes, I mean, the next thing that I knew after sitting there for 11 minutes... I had traveled.

Once my vision was good enough to look around, I found that I was standing in the middle of a cozy living room, complete with fireplace, reclining chairs, and television—a rather traditional approach to what a nice living room looks like. I immediately panicked. I wasn’t supposed to be *inside* the house! What was Donny going to think when he saw a guy wearing his clothes had barged into his house unannounced and was standing in his living room? Did the Flinchites fuck up? Did they mean to put me outside but missed for some reason? Like, were the blueprints

for his home wrong or something? Was Donny building on to his property without a permit and so there wasn't a public record of it? CANNONBALL could be a bit uninged at times, but building without a permit? That's a line a man should never cross.

As I thought these things, I noticed that no one was rushing in to confront me. I crept around the house extremely slowly. The living room was not in the front of the house so I had to pass through a large portion of the house to get to the door. I didn't see anyone. Once I began to suspect that I was alone, I even resorted to walking back through the house saying "hello?" in the way that people only do when they've entered a house that they suspect that no one is in. "Hello? Hellooooo?" Everyone does it the exact same way and nobody ever does it unless they're entering a building and are checking to see if it's empty. Where did we all learn that from? Television?

Donny Evans wasn't home. Neither was his wife. I checked the clock above the fireplace in the living room. It was midday, likely a workday, I thought. I was alone and thought that I might be for quite some time. I sat down in the leather recliner. It was so comfortable. I hadn't sat down on anything designed for comfort and not cost in a very long time. There was a window. I could see outside. I could see outside and I wasn't having to kill a policeman or flee from CANNONBALL. It was the first time that I had seen outside and not had to worry since Matt's house. I took a moment to soak it all in. I put my feet up. I had a few minutes, at least. I knew that Donny worked a normal 9-to-5 job, so it would be hours before he got home. I could go outside after a few minutes of enjoying the amenities of Donny's house. Go outside and enjoy nature for a couple hours and come back once he got home. I didn't know why The Flinchites had made these errors and I didn't care. I was too comforted by actually being inside of a home to care. It didn't even matter that it wasn't my home. I had been deprived of anything like a home for such a long time. Even O.V.E.R. didn't feel like a home, more like a job that I lived at. This is what I wanted. This was what all of that running away was about in the first place, this sort of comfort. I could finally enjoy some privacy and comfort for a short time. All I had to do was not fall asleep and everything would turn out juuuuuuust—[HARD CUT]

I woke up to the sound of the doorbell ringing. I was startled, first by the sudden awakening and then by the knowledge that I had fallen asleep in Donny's house. I checked the time. It was still mid-afternoon. Donny hadn't come home yet. The doorbell was ringing. The doorbell was ringing? It was ringing again and again in quick succession, as if the person was frustrated that no one was answering. I did not know how long they had been ringing the doorbell. I made my way to the front of the house and did that thing that people do where they peek through the blinds to see who is at the door but sometimes the person knocking can see you and make it extra awkward. Also, Donny's door had a stained glass insert and the person on the other side could definitely tell that someone had entered the front room. I'm burying the lede here: the person was wearing a dark red mask that obscured their entire face. It was sort of like an old-school hockey mask, featureless and face-shaped with holes only for the eyes, nose, and mouth. The person rang the doorbell again. This time, he cleared his throat. He knew that I was there.

Donny didn't seem the type to entertain masked individuals in the early afternoon. I doubt that his house had seen many Eyes Wide Shut style parties in its day. It slowly began to occur to me that it was possible that the Flinchites had not been forthright with me about what they intended for me to do in Donny's house. They hadn't made any mistakes. They had plonked me down in Donny's house, knowing that he wasn't going to be home for a few hours. They also knew that someone would be ringing Donny's doorbell a short time after I had arrived in the house. That was the actual point of the mission. I was dressed like Donny Evans. They told me to dress like Donny Evans. This was WOE.BEGONE. I had spoken with RYAN after receiving the fourth challenge. I had been sent to speak with Hunter about the fourth mission. I had been sent to intercept a WOE.BEGONE gamerunner at Donny's house.

I knew that I had to open the door. I opened the door. The man was wearing all black with black shoes and a hoodie covering the top of his head. The dark red facemask was the only distinguishing feature. It was impossible to make out any features of the man himself, other than his height, which was around the same height as me.

"Donny Evans?" the man asked, speaking slowly and deliberately.

"Who wants to know?" I replied.

"Nobody ever answers with 'who wants to know' unless it's actually them," the man said. "Anyone else would say 'no, you have the wrong house.'"

"Guilty as charged," I replied. "WOE.BEGONE?"

"I'm here about a challenge," the man said. "May I come in?"

"Can you prove that you are not another player that has come to kill me?" I asked.

"71523," he said.

"I don't understand," I said.

"When was the last time you checked the desk drawer in your study?" he asked.

"I dunno. Yesterday?" I said. I assumed that he had no way to verify that, since if he did he would likely know that I am not the Donny Evans that had been living in this house.

"Check it now," he said. "There will be a note that was not there before. 71523. A player could not have put that there. It is a locked drawer."

"Wait here. I will check it and come back," I said. He nodded.

I shut the door behind me and looked for the study. It only took a few seconds. I examined the drawer. It was locked and I did not have a key for it. I checked the desk for the key and found nothing. It was likely that Donny Evans had the key on his person and not in the house at all. I ran to the bedroom and checked the bedside table: nothing. I had no way to retrieve the note. I was going to have to pretend to have seen the note and hope that he didn't ask to see it. 75123. 75123. Wait, shit. Was that it? 71523. That was it. 71523. I returned to the front door and opened it.

"71523, like you said. That's proof enough for me," I said. "Come in."

I led the man into the dining room. We sat down in chairs facing each other and he began to speak.

"You have received the instructions for your challenge," he said.

"Jagoff ran off a couple weeks ago. Nobody has seen him. Not me, not Brandon, nobody. Toph, I mean. The prize or whatever," I said.

"You will have to find him," the man said.

"Don't know how to do that," I said.

"You will have to find him," the man reiterated.

"Or, what? I lose the challenge? I go back to him being dead anyway?" I asked.

"The fourth challenge is a gateway. You have seen what is possible. You can become what is possible. The technology of the game is material. It was gained by us through material means. That means that it must be guarded in material ways. That means it can be accessed by people. We are the arbiters of access," he said.

"The fuck does that mean?" I asked. "You're gonna let me use time travel?"

"You will be closer to the access," he said. "We will still require your work, but you will have proven yourself qualified for the work upon completion of the fourth task."

"And if I refuse?" I asked.

"Life will be difficult and you won't remember why," he said.

I didn't remember that being part of the deal when I played the game for the first time. I thought that if I quit playing that life would simply go back to the way that it was before WOE.BEGONE, with Matt dead but the rest of my life staying the same. I wondered if this was always the way things actually were or if this was a new addition made by new gamerunners. I hadn't ever met anyone who had stopped before completing the fourth challenge, to my knowledge, so I couldn't know for sure. It's also possible that if I met someone who backed out of the fourth challenge, I wouldn't be able to remember it.

"Is that a threat?" I asked. I mean-mugged him, trying to put on the Donny Evans bravado that I lacked in my real life.

"It is a statement of intent from someone with power to someone without," he said. "A credible threat. Were you planning on completing the fourth challenge?"

"Well, it's not like I have a choice, according to you," I said.

"I only ask from curiosity," he said.

"Are you going to help me find him?" I asked.

"Consider finding him to be part of your qualifying task," he said, "But we will give you one piece of guidance. We like to reward people when they are on top of the leaderboard."

That sounded like the WOE.BEGONE I knew. Once upon a time, I received the honor of getting to cut off my hands for being "in the lead" if that's even a real thing. "Okay then, what's the clue?" I asked.

"Right now," he said. I could hear something briefly rattle in one of the rooms, sounding like metal against metal. "It is in the same drawer in your study. I will take the steps necessary to put it there later, but it is there now."

"Yeah, yeah, I know what time travel is," I said.

"You should wait until I leave before you retrieve it. It is unwise to leave a stranger alone in your house," he said.

"You make a strong argument," I said, thankful that he wasn't expecting me to retrieve it in front of him.

"You're going to kill him, then. Topher Evans, you're going to kill him?" he asked.

I nodded.

"I believe you. Even if I didn't believe you, that would also suffice. I was merely here to tell you what is at stake," he said.

"Well, thanks for tellin' me, I guess," I replied.

"You will receive instructions upon completion of the task. The sooner the task is completed, the more competent we will see you and will devise future opportunities accordingly. That is the end of what I have prepared to say. It has been nice meeting you, Donny Evans. Goodbye." He barely got the word "goodbye" out of his lips before vanishing into thin air, travelling through time and space back to wherever he came from.

How dramatic. The whole thing was dramatic. It was exhausting to talk to someone who talks like *that*. "You shall retrieve the prize for extrication of the fourth quantum of the task of" blah blah blah. I went to college, too, dude. You're not impressing anyone. I was glad to be rid of him. I would have liked to stick around for a bit longer, but I already felt like I was running on borrowed time still being in Donny's house, especially after inviting a WOE.BEGONE gamerunner inside.

It was at that moment that I remembered that the gamerunner had left some sort of clue inside of a locked drawer in Donny's study. Shit. Shit. Donny probably shouldn't be allowed to get a look at whatever it was if we were planning on stealing his identity to kill his brother.

I proceeded to tear the house apart very gently, moving absolutely everything that wasn't nailed down and then putting it back exactly as I had found it when I was done so as not to alert anyone of my presence. The key was not in any unlocked drawers, on top of any coffee tables, dinner tables, under any litterboxes, inside the tank of any toilets, or in the pockets of any of his pants. I checked for over an hour. The key was not in the house. The clue was too important. I needed to get it out of the drawer. Donny would be back eventually and I needed to get the clue and get out before then.

After a few minutes of deliberating on what to do, I went to the garage to look for something to bust the drawer open with. I found my old friend, the ball peen hammer, sitting out in the open. Good memories with that good ol' ball peen. It had only been a few weeks since I used one to kill a pig while a kidnapper had a gun trained on me in case I decided to get wise and try to use it to free myself. Good times.

I returned to the study with the ball peen hammer. I pulled the desk out from the wall to get a look at the back of the locked drawer. It was made of the same flimsy metal as the rest of the desk. I proceeded to strike the metal with the hammer until a hole formed. **I then stuck the head in the hole and used my body weight to pull the hole open wider until I could fit my entire fist inside.** Please don't

isolate that sentence and take it out of context. I took the note that had the number written on it. There were other documents inside, as well as a cellphone. The documents appeared to be Donny's personal documents, so I left those alone. The cellphone appeared to be a burner cellphone with important messages for CANNONBALL. I seemed to remember the phone, though I couldn't be certain it was the exact same one. Regardless, that seemed to be the clue, so I took it. After I secured the clue, I did the best that I could to pull the remaining back off the drawer so it looked like there was never a back to it. Maybe Donny would think that the drawer never had a back? But why would a locked drawer not have a back? That would be for him to figure out, but I doubt that he would figure out the relationship between that and a time travel murder game. I took the metal scraps, shoved everything in my pockets, returned the hammer to the garage, and went out through the garage door, having it close behind me. This meant that I could get out without having to leave any doors unlocked.

I walked down the driveway to a sidewalk and proceeded to walk, pockets full of garbage, for a few minutes, maybe 15 at most. I wanted to get away from the scene of the crime. Eventually, I turned a corner into an alley and felt the familiar nauseating sensation of being transported by time travel technology.

I was in the white room again. It wasn't as unpleasant an experience as the previous times I had been in the room. This time I was expecting to be picked up by the Flinchites. The other 2 times were sudden and against my will. Ty was prompt in entering the room this time.

"Took you long enough to get alone," he said. "We couldn't transport you with the cars on the road seeing you. We had to wait until you went into that alley."

"I wasn't even thinking about that," I said. "Why didn't you tell me why I was actually going to Donny's house?"

"We didn't want you to know," he said, matter-of-factly.

"Why didn't you want me to know?" I asked.

"That is none of your business," he replied. "I am not here to explain operations to you. I am here to debrief you. Did you meet the person from WOE.BEGONE?"

"Yes," I said. "I assume the point was to intercept him so that Donny didn't see him?"

"Correct," Ty said. "Did you get any extra information?"

"No, he just told me that if I fail then life will be worse and I wouldn't remember why. I don't remember a threat like that from the first time that I did the challenges. I thought everything would just go back to normal," I said.

"They have taken some liberties with the format, even if they have kept the bones the same. I assume that it wasn't Ryan that rang the doorbell?" he asked.

"Whoever it was wore a facemask. It was hard to tell anything about him. If it was Ryan, he didn't tell me that my cover was blown," I said.

"Well, he probably wouldn't tell you," he said, "but, still, it probably wasn't him." I nodded in agreement. "Alright, well now that the meeting is done, we can focus all of our efforts on finding CANNONBALL. You are to remain in your quarters until we are ready to deploy you. Do you understand your instructions?"

“Doesn’t get any easier than that,” I replied.

“Alright, good meeting,” he said. A moment passed and then we were transported back to the main section of the compound and I was led back to my room.

I changed back into the clothes that the compound had given me, waited for a bit, then got under the covers and took out the cellphone, like a child trying to text after bedtime without getting caught. I didn’t tell Ty about the phone because I wanted a chance to look through it first. If they knew that I had it, they would have taken it away from me without letting me see it. They would be able to poke through it eventually. I would have to tell them about any information that I found if I wanted them to investigate it. It was better to ask for forgiveness than permission in this case. What were they gonna do, punish me? They needed me and there was little that they could do in the way of punishment anymore.

I looked through the contacts: none. I looked at incoming and outgoing calls: none. I checked the text messages: several. I started at the top and just started reading in order, trying to figure out his plans. Some were boring, some had salacious information that was not at all relevant to WOE.BEGONE but that I appreciated reading anyway, and one text thread was the clue that the gamerunners were presenting to me. I read through the text thread. CANNONBALL had been making arrangements. He was sneaking around. He had a guy to hook him up with everything he needed to make a getaway to... Riga? Where the fuck is Riga?

This has been WOE.BEGONE. Next time: we’ll probably pull out a dang map. Thanks for playing.

[END THEME PLAYS.]