

Episode 63: hunger.

[INTRO THEME PLAYS]

I didn't talk to Ty Betteridge for a week. He made several attempts per day to get me to talk. They were not successful. I would be lead from my quarters, identical to the quarters I was locked in the last time I was in the Compound, into an interview room where I would refuse to talk. I would say "I want to leave," after which I refused to speak at all. Ty was as polite and professional as ever, a disposition that had slowly soured for me over the time that I had to think it over since we last met. It was a weapon and an effective one at that. Refusing to speak to him while he was being so courteous to me made me feel like a petulant child. It made me want to change my tone to match his. Looking from an outside perspective, this is obviously a false equivalence: I was being held hostage and Ty was not; there was no reason that our demeanor should match.

Every day was the same battery of questions. "From your perspective, what happened the night that you, Edgar, and Hunter entered Tier 2? What do you know about my employment at O.V.E.R.? What do you know about Kasimieras Berzina? What data did you acquire while you were working with the other O.V.E.R. employees?" Always the same list of questions, which I always refused to answer.

I ate ashamedly ravenously any time that food was offered during the first days. The Compound was generous in this regard. I'm sure that they were trying to ply me with food rather than being motivated by altruism, but my stomach didn't notice. Between the stresses of the stakeout, the time travel, the forest, and the walk to the Compound, my body was unconsciously focused on obtaining and hoarding resources.

It took quite the mental effort to overcome these instincts when, after a few days had passed, I decided on a hunger strike. Melodramatic? Yes. But you protest with whatever you had and all I had was my body. I had been here before. The last time I was here, they had made me play WOE.BEGONE. I had no idea what they had planned for me this time, but their imaginations were capable of much worse than my own. I wanted to leave and I needed to convey just how serious I was about that. My body was the only thing that I had control over, the only thing I could ever hope to persuade everyone with.

It only took a day for Ty to notice. He asked me the usual battery of questions. I gave him the same answer. "I want to leave." He proceeded as usual until he had asked me all of the questions. Then, right before I was escorted back to my quarters, he looked me up and down and said, matter-of-factly, "you can starve yourself to death if you want to. We aren't a prison. Your quality of life isn't being scrutinized by anyone on the outside. I'd strong advise against it, though, Mike. My understanding is that starving to death *really* hurts. I don't think it's a pain you've become accustomed--"

At this point, I launched myself over the table at him. I could feel my hand on his throat, gripping it but not choking him. And then [finger snap] I was back in my quarters. I didn't feel the effects of time travel. Instead, I felt woozy. I might have been transported back into my room or I might have merely been restrained and sedated, unable to remember the moments in-between the attack and waking up. I had a note clutched in my hand. The inside of my palm had deep marks from my nails pressing into it while I was holding it. "I would advise against doing *that*, as well. -Ty."

I tore up the note. That was all that I could do. It was an admission that I had no power at all. I looked over at the desk in my quarters. There was a dinner tray sitting on the desk. The tray had biscuits and gravy on it. What a fucking monster.

Undeterred by what I assumed was Ty's posturing about letting me starve to death, I successfully made it another night without food. The night was long and my sleep was fitful. I kept waking up from nightmares to the smell of biscuits and gravy pervading the entire room. After 3 frustrating attempts at sleep, I picked up the tray, went to the toilet, poured the contents inside, and

flushed. The biscuits were rather resistant to being flushed down the toilet, but with some breaking up, they eventually made it down the pipes without clogging them. I looked down at my hand. There was a long smear of silver gravy on my hand, right across the scar where a Flinchite boot had stabbed clean through it months prior. I brought it up to my mouth and ate it, instinctively, as though I was sleepwalking. I had broken my fast but had done nothing to sate my hunger. It was a mistake. It activated my body. My body thought I was finally going to eat. I stayed up the remainder of the night, my metabolism kicked into high gear and slowly learning all over again that there was no food to be had.

I was dragged the next morning, tired and demoralized, back into the same interview room. Ty entered. I braced myself for the same questions. I could see a faint red mark on his neck.

“You know everyone is dead, right? Everyone,” he said.

I sighed. “I didn’t know but I suspected as much,” I said.

“No, Mike. Everyone,” he replied. Ty’s polite smile was gone, replaced with a slight scowl more appropriate for the conversation.

“Yeah, everyone at Base. I know,” I said. “I was holding out hope, but I know.”

“I don’t think you understand. There was you, still alive,” he began.

“Unfortunately,” I said.

“But then there’s Edgar, Marissa, Hunter--”

“Hunter?” I asked.

Ty kept going, “Anne, Chance, Shadow, Charlie--”

“Charlie!? What?” I blurted out.

Ty was not done, “Then there’s the Mike and Edgar that you had working at O.V.E.R. in your stead--”

“Fuck,” I muttered under my breath.

“Plus the two future Mikes that were running special operations for you in this time period. I can account for those two. The rest came as news to us.” There was a pause. “That’s all of them. Counting repeats, that’s 11 people. At least. That’s just the ones we can account for.”

I let out what could only be described as a squeak. [Imitates squeak.] Like that.

“I will take that to mean that you didn’t realize the extent of the damage,” he said.

“You killed Mike and Michael?” I asked.

“Is that future Mike and the cowboy?” he asked. “Then, yeah.”

I could feel my body tensing up.

“I will remind you what happens when you leap over the table at me,” Ty chided me.

“You understand what you’ve told me, right? You’re telling me that you killed me,” I said.

“I would think that you would be used to it by now,” he said. “And likely relieved to have the cowboy off your hands. Was he like that all the time? I got tired of it and I only had one phone call with the guy.”

“Why should I believe you?” I asked. My head was in my hands.

“You clearly do believe me. I want to know how you already suspected,” Ty said.

“Because Hunter fucking killed us. I don’t care anymore. Hunter fucking killed us,” I said.

“He’s quite the shot, that Hunter Jeremiah Hartley,” Ty said. “I should know.” He chuckled.

“Wrong Hunter,” I said. “There’s at least three of them.”

“Hmm?” Ty seemed confused. “The one with the scar on his face,” he explained.

“Yeah, there’s two of those, at least. Why am I telling you this?” I asked.

“Because you enjoy being helpful,” Ty said. “Thank you, Mike. That information is very helpful indeed.”

“Are you going to tell me how you were working at O.V.E.R., how Hunter shot you, and now an older iteration of you is here at the Compound?” I asked.

“Hmmm... no,” Ty said.

“Are you going to tell me how you got biscuits and gravy, even though you told me that we were in Latvia?” I asked.

“We are in Latvia. You can trust me to tell you the truth,” Ty said. “The breakfast was courtesy of Latif and the Oldbrush Valley 24 Hour Diner itself. Time and space aren’t much of an issue when it comes to procuring goods here. We were hoping it would bring you some comfort. Latif says hi, by the way. I think he might be the only guy on Earth to only have positive things to say about you.” His smile was back.

“At least he’s alive,” I said.

“You have some information that we want,” Ty said. “You know that we want it. We’ve been asking for awhile now. I imagine that you would like some of your compatriots to be alive again. We have things that we can offer each other.”

“Why didn’t you mention this before?” I asked.

“We are negotiating. I was seeing if I could get some cooperation for free,” he said.

“That doesn’t sound fair,” I replied. My stomach gurgled.

“We are not in a fair relationship,” Ty explained. “Though I do wish that it weren’t so asymmetrical.”

“Are you an Arbiter?” I asked.

“I don’t know what that means,” Ty said.

“You were wearing a mask inside of Tier 2. You were involved in running WOE.BEGONE?” I explained.

“Oh, then yes,” he said. “Though I’m not going to elucidate on that. But there! That’s something for you. And I can get you more than that. 11 members of your team died. If you are willing to cooperate, we can pare that number down significantly, I feel.”

“Prove it,” I said. “Start with Mike and Michael.”

“Oh, not a chance with those two,” he said. “They were sniffing around the Compound and have the potential to be quite dangerous. They are staying at the bottom of the ocean. I was thinking more along the lines of... Edgar.”

I tried to push away the mental image of Mike and Michael at the bottom of the ocean. “And what heinous thing am I going to have to do?” I asked.

“I told you that I am going to tell you the truth,” Ty said. His eye contact with me broke briefly as he stared off to the side for a moment. “You’ll get instructions tomorrow morning.”

“What am I going to have to do?” I reiterated.

“You should eat before then. You won’t want to be on an empty stomach,” Ty said.

“My imagination is going to make up something worse if you don’t tell me,” I said.

“No, it won’t,” Ty said. “You will receive instructions in the morning. For now, we should take you back to your quarters so that you can rest and eat.”

I sat there, elbows on the table, head in my hands, not moving. My eyes were closed. I had a throbbing headache and my stomach was talking uninterrupted and had been all morning.

“Up! Let’s go,” Ty commanded. I didn’t move.

“Up!” he said again. I felt Ty poke me in the ribs. “Sorry, Mike. I don’t mean to badger you, but we need to get you back to your quarters. This interview room is booked for the rest of the day.”

I still didn’t move.

“Mike, you know how the transport hurts. I can already hear your stomach. You’ll be miserable if you don’t walk out of here on your own two feet,” he said.

I laid my head down on the table.

“Sorry, Mike,” he said. I imagined him shaking his head, disappointed in my decision. Fuck it. Let him be disappointed.

Then [finger snap] I was back in my room, on the bed. I could feel the effects of the travel this time. I wretched as though I might throw up, but there was nothing on my stomach. When the vertigo

wore off, I sat up and looked around. Same room, a new tray of biscuits and gravy waiting for me. Thanks, Latif. If only you knew that biscuits and gravy could be used for evil. You would save me. Well, probably not. You would keep your head down and not say anything. That's why Latif has lived for decades in Oldbrush Valley and I couldn't make it a year without getting captured twice. That's alright, Latif. I understand. You do what you gotta do. We all do.

I spent a few hours that afternoon catching up on my captivity hobbies. I paced around in a little circle, classic. I muttered to myself. I sang parts of a song that I didn't know all of the words to-- this time it was "You Make My Dreams Come True" by Hall and Oates. I yelled at a plate of breakfast food. I sat down for awhile because I refused to eat and I was getting dizzy. I locked myself in the bathroom for awhile so that I didn't have to look at the food, which I was too cowardly to flush down the toilet again. A grand old time was had, to be sure.

Perhaps owing to my fresh eyes viewing the room after some time away, my eye lingered on something strange when I exited the bathroom. I could see some stuffing from the mattress poking out from the underside. Curious, I pulled back the fitted sheet and examined the mattress. There was a hole dug into it, which appeared to be scratched open by fingernails or a dull object. I reached my hand inside suspiciously. When my arm was about elbow-deep in the mattress, I felt something that did not feel like the stuffing of the mattress or the springs. I pulled it out.

It was a crumpled set of pages and a pencil. I went over to the desk, sat the breakfast tray on the bed to make room, and smoothed out the pieces of paper. They looked as though they had been crumpled for a long time. The pencil writing was beginning to smudge and fade with age. It didn't take long for me to recognize the handwriting. It was my own.

I hadn't written the letters. I had lost a small amount of time due to my outbursts, but there was a clock in my room and I would not have had time to write these notes and then forget about them in the time that I had lost. For all of their faults, the Flinchites did seem to keep me in a linear time as much as they possibly could.

The notes were letters, written to Edgar, from my point of view. They detailed the excursion that I had just been on-- the one in the forest. The one with the starvation, the bilberries, the bears-- the one that ended with me walking right into the Compound. The letters detailed this time in exacting detail, demonstrating knowledge of having actually experienced it. In-between tales of this story that I had lived through, there were fragments hinting at something that I didn't remember. It hinted that I was being made to do barbaric and horrible things in order to placate the Flinchites, things that I was too ashamed to even name in the letters. Things that were presumed that Edgar already knew about, horrible things from our past. The letters sounded despondent when it came to these subjects. It reminded me of how I thought about Edgar and what happened in the Pacific Ocean: something too horrible to breach, something that must dwell under the surface and never come out. It was that multiplied by what appeared to be multiple other incidents.

I was not the Mike Walters that wrote those letters. The Mike Walters that was originally captured by the Flinchites didn't write those letters. This Mike Walters was one that had emerged from the forest, just as I had. It was an iteration of me that had to have been made after I showed up, an iteration made without my knowledge or consent. Maybe they did it after I attacked Ty. They could have done so whenever they wanted. There was no guarantee that I would even notice. The other Mike had a much different week than I had.

Was the other Mike in here? Did they get our rooms switched when they moved me? Where did the other Mike go? What was he doing? Pointless questions to ask because there was no way to secure any answers. My thoughts rushed. I thought about the horrible things that this Mike was having to do, the things that Ty was going to instruct me to do the very next morning, no doubt. I thought about Edgar. I thought about how hungry I was. I sat down on the edge of the bed. The biscuits and gravy sat in the tray beside me. I knew that I was a small fish in a huge pond, but the vastness of what I didn't know overpowered me for a moment. I sat there, staring at the wall, aching for a plan.

The plan came to me that night. Thankfully, I had managed to restrain myself from eating the biscuits and gravy. I got out of bed and went to the bathroom, leaving the lights off. I bundled up the whole roll of toilet paper and stuffed it into the toilet. Then, I took the biscuits and gravy and piled it on top of the toilet paper and flushed. The toilet flushed reluctantly, threatening to back up. I took my shoes off, then my socks, and stuffed them into the toilet as well, along with my shirt. I put my shoes back on and flushed the toilet again. This time the toilet successfully backed up. I flushed the toilet 3 more times, until water was flowing out of the bathroom and into the door of the main room of my quarters. I left the bathroom and began knocking on my locked door.

“Help! Ty? Anyone? The toilet’s flooding,” I called out. “Help!” I yelled a second time. It took a few minutes for anyone to both notice me and come to help, which only made the flooding situation worse.

A man in a maintenance jumpsuit arrived at my door, looking perturbed. I could see him through the window of my door. “Hey, uhh... I went to the bathroom and the whole thing just backed up,” I explained. “Sorry, but it’s flooding the room now and I know if we don’t stop it now, it’s going to warp the floor. You wouldn’t want that.”

I could hear the fumbling of keys. I moved to the side of the door in anticipation of it opening. The seconds dragged as the maintenance worker found the right key. Finally, the door opened, light from the hallway shooting into the cracked door.

As soon as I saw the door open, I pulled hard on it, forcing it open further and dragging the unsuspecting maintenance worker with it. I got a look at him as I pushed my way past him. He looked older, less mobile than me. I could get away from him. There was no security with him. I leaped over him and started running down the hallway. I could outrun him. All I had to do was outrun him.

“Whatever they pay you, it’s not enough to be worth catching me!” I shouted over my shoulder. There’s no way he heard me. If anything, he heard some garbled nonsense about “pay you” and “catch me.” So, more accurately, “[garbled version of sentence],” I shouted over my shoulder.

I sprinted down the hallway. They had lead me down this hall when they brought me in from outside. Unlike the first time I was caught here, I knew how to get away this time. I knew where the front door was. I knew where the front gate was. I knew where there was a road in front of the Compound. If I could make it to the road, I could make to safety. And, if I couldn’t, I could make it back into the unforgiving wilderness. I would have rather been in the forest than in the Compound. I would be going in just as hungry as when I left. I would only hope that the bears or whoever it was would leave me enough berries to get by until I could figure out what to do.

Much as with O.V.E.R., it was considerably easier to get out through the front gate than it was to get in. The guard was on the outside, and by the time that I made to the outside and kept running, there was little he could do to stop me short of shooting me. He could have done that. I was half expecting that to be the end of things, but if he was thinking of doing that, he hesitated, likely because he was waiting on orders for what to do that weren’t coming fast enough. I kept running. I could feel myself gulping for air, being weak and out of shape from the whole ordeal, but I kept running. My chest burned. I kept running. The letters kept saying “just don’t die.” Just don’t die. Just don’t die. Get to the road or get to the forest. Just don’t die. Good advice.

I made it to the road. I heard a car screech out of the compound parking lot and come barreling towards me. I ran the opposite direction, knowing that it was futile to attempt to outrun a car. If any car could be outran, though, it would be this one. It was a beat up, red, eastern European car.

It pulled up beside me and honked, weakly. I kept running, refusing to look back at it. It honked again. I kept running.

“Mikey!” A voice called out to me. I spun around. “Mikey Walters! Quin runnin’. Turn around and see who you’re running from.” It was... it was Michael. Who did you think it was? Some other cowboy? I did the voice and everything! I looked inside the car. Michael was hanging out the driver’s

side window trying to get my attention. Mike was in the passenger's seat, looking mildly embarrassed, as he should have. Smoke billowed out of Michael's pipe and into the chilly Latvian night air.

"Get in, dipshit! We're going for a ride," Michael yelled.

I bolted toward the car's passenger-side rear door, flung it open, and launched myself inside.

"Go! Go! Go!" I shouted. "I made a jailbreak. They're coming for me."

"You don't gotta ask twice," Michael said. He punched the accelerator. The tires squealed and the car took off. "Can't go to fast, though. This thing don't do well above 100."

"That's kilometers per hour," Mike chimed in. "It's like 60...?... miles per hour?"

"Good to know," I said. "They... Ty... told me that both of you were dead. That he saw to it himself."

"And you believed him? You really think that Ty Betteridge could take down a cowboy? [uproarious laughter]" Michael asked.

"He gave it his best shot," Mike said.

"What about the others? He told me that everyone was dead," I said.

The mood dropped. Neither of them immediately answered.

"That's what we have been lead to believe, too," Mike said. "But we're working on it."

"We'll tell you the plan when we get back to the apartment," Michael said. "This ain't the first time the whole group's been wiped out. Won't be the last. Just takes some elbow grease, is all."

"Are you... are you sure? Hunter destroyed it all, the whole Base. I'm sure he took the Calculators with him," I said.

"Don't worry about that yet," Mike said. "You're here and you're safe. We're going home. That's all that matters."

"I hate to sound ungrateful, but I know how you to were living last time I was here," I said. "I haven't been eating at the Compound and I am fucking starving. Is there food at your house?"

"Plenty," Michael said. "We got boar meat, boar meat, we got pork chops, we got loin, we got ham, we got shoulder, we got jowls, we got pickled pig's feet..."

"We got the head stuffed and mounted in the living room, too," Mike added.

"But it's a long drive home. Cooking can wait for in the morning," Michael said. "Hesburger?"

"Hesburger," Mike concurred.

"I don't know what that is," I said.

"It has the word "burger" in the name," Mike said.

"Hesburger it is, then," I said.

We sped off into the night, toward warmth and safety, towards a plan to get back all that had been taken from us.

[OUTTRO THEME PLAYS]