

Episode 69: circumstances.

The cabin that Anne had rented outside Oldbrush Valley, the one where she was staying before the formation of the Base, was luxurious, decadently furnished, and thematically ornamented. It was designed to feel comfortable and rustic, despite its sprawling size. Anne had been staying there for several weeks, unbeknownst to the rest of us, having received word from a future iteration of herself that her help would be required. She had been waiting patiently for me to receive the message about Edgar that would kick off the pair of missions into Tier 2– one to save Edgar and one to sabotage the Flinchites and the Arbiters, the latter of these missions succeeding in the sabotage but at the cost of Anne's life. She had been one of the opportunity costs of the Connectivity Strike. Without Innocent Hunter to help us, Anne was outgunned.

The previous and only other time I had been in Anne's rented-out cabin, I had shown up with a gunshot wound in my left arm, the result of poor marksmanship on my part, a ricochet from trying to destroy a metal box, a hasty decision made for the reasons that most of my hasty decisions are: in order to save Edgar. She had dutifully patched me up in the bathroom, set in motion the foundation of what would eventually be the Base, and kicked off the second mission into Tier 2, the one that originally had not come at the cost of any of our lives. That time would have been tomorrow, relative to this time that I had returned to. That younger version of myself hadn't shown up at Anne's cabin yet.

Michael didn't know that I was doing this. He was in his room, asleep. Or, he was in his room, at least. Probably not sleeping. It didn't matter. I would be back before he would have time to realize that I was gone. I retrieved the calculator from the safe in Mike's room, used it to transport myself, and would be back a few seconds later. Turnabout was fair play. I suspected that he had stolen the calculator the night before, anyway. I had fallen asleep in the living room as the result of a raucous boy's night in. Mike's bedroom door was unlocked for him to do as he pleased. It's impossible to say what he accomplished while I snored through Night Of The Living Dead. Whatever he had done didn't have a noticeable effect on me and he acted as though nothing had happened. I pretended not to notice.

Call that account of what happened "ass covering" if you want to, but Michael paid for his access to the Calculator. We were up well into the night, with Michael sharing stories with me, stories about the 10 years that could have been my life. Things that could still happen and things that couldn't. I learned that Michael is much more than ten years older than me. For every year, it felt like he had 10 years of overlapping memories. His life had been the experiment, designed to prevent us from needing to endure constant resets. Being the youngest of the three of us, I was the largest receiver of the benefits of this experiment and even I had spent 4 months tied to a chair in CANNONBALL's apartment.

I began to understand his laser-focus on Edgar and not merely because I had spent a week home and on vacation with Edgar and had found my strength and love for him again. Reality wasn't reality for Michael. Reality was a tenth of all that had happened to him. Trying to keep those memories separated, especially as the oldest of those memories crept into the distance, sounded impossible to me. There is a famous psychological study where scientists were able to successfully implant a false memory of a childhood hot air balloon ride that they told the subjects that they went on in their distant pasts. If an entirely false memory can take hold like that, an entire alternate reality must be more potent, more real. During that week taking

care of him, I would catch glimpses into his room and noticed several notebooks. I imagined him trying to diagram what happened, what didn't happen, and what needed to happen. Edgar was an anchor. Without him, all Michael had was 2 younger iterations of himself, iterations that he was intentionally diverting from his experiences in order to protect us, shaping our realities and his even further. Michael without Edgar was unmoored. He was floating in the middle of the Pacific Ocean, to borrow a popular turn of phrase from the old country. The stories helped me understand.

He had a story for everyone. A story about how Chance and Shadow played a song for the rest of us on acoustic guitar and we all laughed at the end and they got embarrassed and wouldn't play for us anymore. He said no one knew why they were laughing, maybe because it was unexpected to see them do something like that. I think he was pulling my leg, but he said that night contributed to 3 years of his life getting corrected. A story about taking Edgar to one of those old-timey western tourist towns and eating huckleberry ice cream and watching the sun set over the mountains. A story about Hunter gifting him his first cowboy hat, which he found when cleaning out his mother's attic after she died and didn't have a home for. It was old—well-loved and fragile and Michael had never worn it. He kept it safe and well-kept in a closet of the house he shared with Edgar, a sign of things to come. A story about how he had slunk off on his own in the middle of the night to do a mission without telling anyone (sounds familiar) and got into trouble, only for Anne to show up in the nick of time and bail him out. She had also slunk off into the middle of the night to do the same mission and had shown up minutes after he had.

Marissa and Anne were causing me to lose sleep and hearing heartwarming stories about how they improved the lives of the people around them only exacerbated things. It ate at my stomach, a physical pain, as though I had ingested something poisonous. It didn't help that I was hungover from Michael's antics the night before. The unrelated physical sensation of stomach pain and the real feeling of guilt resulted in a feedback loop that caused my brain to signal to itself that I had done something incredibly wrong. And, to be clear, I had done something incredibly wrong. Killing Hunter in cold blood wasn't off of my mind, either. Cold blood? I don't think that's fair, there was a reason for it. But not hot blood, either—Innocent Hunter wasn't in the process of doing anything to me. Moderate temperature blood? Killing Hunter in moderate temperature blood weighed heavy on my mind as well. I laid in Mike's bed, increasingly tired and completely unable to fall asleep, which was when my mind turned to the Calculator and what I might do with it.

But Anne was the one that bothered me most. I had known her longer than anyone else. I had a life, before WOE.BEGONE. And before that life, I had a different life. And in that life before a life, I knew Anne. Self-assured, deliberate, cunning, confident Anne. Anne, who came barrelling back into my life in order to pull me back into the world when I lost the second challenge. Anne, who inserted herself into this for my sake and had been swept off into a whole universe of time travel and bloodshed, a universe that intersected with mine at crucial points but wasn't her whole story. There were infinite amounts of stories for Anne to tell about what had happened to her, but Anne was dead. Anne was dead because of my decisions.

I was sitting in a cozy chair in the den of a fancy cabin, sipping coffee with Anne. She was scheduled to die the next night. "Scheduled" as sure as if I had etched it into the fabric of

the universe, circumstances staying how they were. I was not there to change the circumstances.

"Sorry if I surprised you," I said. "I know you weren't expecting me yet."

"Not at all," Anne said and shrugged. "She told me that you were going to be here."

This is WOE.BEGONE.

[INTRO THEME PLAYS.]

"It's a Kenyan coffee, pretty expensive I think. It was in the pantry when I got here," Anne explained. "Super acidic, though. I've got antacids if you need one."

"I think I'll be fine," I said.

"So," she said, "you're not the Mike that I'm going into battle with tomorrow night, do I have that right? He doesn't know that I'm here yet. You're from later than that and you're here to warn me about what's going to happen."

"How do you know all of that?" I asked.

"It was part of my preparation," Anne said. "I wasn't given much to work with. I haven't met anyone or anything like that, but I did receive some tapes and some documents and one of them dealt with what to do when the future Mike Walters knocks on the door."

"What did it suggest that you do?" I asked.

"Humor him, he's harmless," Anne replied.

"And these are messages from a later iteration of yourself?" I asked.

"The tapes are at least. I can infer that the documents are as well," she said.

"I'm here because we— me and my other iterations— killed Hunter and it changes what happens tomorrow night," I explained.

"I know: documents," Anne replied.

"Yes, but listen," I said. "The first time that I did that mission, all of us made it out of there alive. You, me, Edgar, Hunter, Marissa. Something terrible happened to us after that and we had to alter everything."

Anne cut me off. "I know, Mike. Documents. Older iterations of myself. You aren't the only person who things happen to." She absentmindedly pulled her hair back behind her ear. "I have been briefed as to what is going to happen tomorrow night."

I could feel my cheeks flushing. She clearly didn't understand. "Anne, I'm here because you die tomorrow night. I'm not here to try and correct the circumstances, either. There's too much momentum. I don't think that I could stop it if I tried. It would upend everything even worse than it already has been upended. I came here today to tell you that you are going to die. You're going to get shot down by an Arbiter trying to keep my helpless ass alive and there's nothing we can do about it. I remember the preparation for that mission. If we don't do it, the outcomes are even worse. It seemed as though someone had tested that course of action already."

Anne was looking down into her coffee, swirling it and watching the liquid travel in a circle around the cup. Hearing me finish my piece, she looked up at me. "Duh, Mike. I know all of that. I already told you. You aren't the only one making preparations. I have mine."

I furrowed my brow. "How do you even have preparations? As far as I knew, every Anne associated with Base was wiped out along with everyone else," I said.

"I don't know what Base is," Anne said.

"That's because it doesn't even exist yet. But it was mostly your idea when you still existed past tomorrow. We were all working together," I said.

"Why would you call it Base? Could no one come up with something creative?" she asked.

"I pitched a dozen names and you shot down every single one!" I replied.

"I meant besides you," she said. The ebullience in her voice disturbed me. I looked away from her, out of the large, extravagant window facing the woods. "I'm kidding, Mikey. I'm sure your names were fine."

"I know you're kidding," I said. "I don't like it."

"Mikey..." Anne stood up, took a step over to the chair that I was sitting in and sat on the arm of the chair. "I'm going to keep reminding you until you finally get it through your head. Mike Walters and associates are not the only people making plans. Thank God for that, by the way. We might all actually be doomed if that were the case."

"They told you that you were going to die?" I asked.

"Sorry to break it to you," she said, "but you didn't get to be the one to break the news. Womp womp."

"You didn't answer before," I said. "If every iteration of Anne from Base is gone, how are they able to warn you?"

"Mike," Anne said, "You're from the future, right? So you've been at this for longer than I have. You have to understand this at least a little better than I do. The Anne that is sending me messages isn't from your Base. She isn't associated with you or whatever you are doing however far in the future you are or she is. And she didn't warn me. She ordered me. At least as much as she is able to order me. I suppose she doesn't have any true power over me unless she wants to come back to this time and put me in my place. But she told me to go into Tier 2 with you tomorrow. She said that there was a high probability indistinguishable from certainty that I would be shot and killed inside of Tier 2 of O.V.E.R. tomorrow. You remembered correctly. The consequences of abandoning tomorrow's mission are, to quote her, "cataclysmic. The entanglement of resulting events comes with the potential of mass casualty radiating outward from the core group of participants." Or something like that. It was very formal. We get it, Anne, you used to be a journalist."

Anne left me enough room to formulate a response but I wasn't able to. "Edgar and I would probably die if you didn't come with us..." I said.

"You're listening to me... right?" Anne asked. "This isn't all about Mike fucking Walters. Like, for once, at least. Don't get me wrong, I'd be sad if you died. I haven't met Edgar, but I'd be sad if your boyfriend died, too. Less sad. But this isn't about you. Think about it, Mike. Within just this mission alone, there's us, O.V.E.R., WOE.BEGONE, and the Flinchites. Those other 3 organizations are so much larger than Mike Walters that you can't even fathom it. I can't either. I only know what I've been sent and a good deal of what I'd like to know is hidden from me. And on top of that, there's me and every iteration that has forked off of me, doing whatever they are doing, forming their own associations. Most of those associations are not with you. Nothing personal. It pays to diversify. And... they were right about that. Because tomorrow I'm going to die inside of O.V.E.R and only the iterations that are not connected to me will survive."

"I've died before. I've watched myself die," I said. "It doesn't matter if there are other iterations of you out there. You're going to be the one that dies. You'll be gone. You won't go into them. That will just be the end." I could feel a lump in my throat but tried to stop it from affecting my voice.

She put her arm around me and sighed. "Well, older Anne told me in the tape that she sent me that things were going to get rough with the killing me and all that, but that I needed to "hang tight," whatever that means. Maybe she has a plan to reverse all of this when the time is right, I don't know. I don't trust her to do jack shit about it, though. She's me, after all. That's exactly what I would tell another version of me if I was sending her off to die and didn't intend to do anything about it. I can't complain when I'm dead, right?" She chuckled. "Seems like I lose either way, so I might as well go down helping myself out, and helping out a bunch of other people from the sound of things. And if you can get her to throw me a bone further down the road and get me back in commission, that'll be a bonus."

I took a deep breath. "You had orders to console me, didn't you?" I asked. Her body heat against mine sent me reeling through sense memories: working in cramped spaces at Base to get important work done, studying together in college, riding around smushed together in the back seat of a friend's car. It was overwhelming.

"Like I said, she doesn't really have the authority to order me to do anything," Anne said. "I don't think that she would come find me and punish me if I had told you to fuck off." Another laugh. "I suppose I owe you one. Between you and me, my fourth challenge didn't go as smoothly as I may have told you that it did."

"I put that together myself," I replied. "Not everything that you told me adds up. That's alright. It all worked out."

"Did you ever figure out how it all worked out?" she asked.

"Never did," I said. "Back then, all we could imagine was someone playing WOE.BEGONE, but nobody ever came to finish their fourth challenge. I think at this point it's safe to say that I wasn't anybody's prize. Don't get me wrong, there are at least a handful of people trying to hunt me down, but I don't think that any of them are doing it to finish the WOE.BEGONE challenges."

"Well, that's good," Anne said. "You're safe, at least from that."

We both fell silent. I continued to look out the window. Anne shifted on the arm of the chair. My face felt hot. "Well, you consoled me. Great job, Anne. So, what do we do now?" I asked.

"The door's right there if you want to leave," Anne said. I turned and looked at her. "Kidding! Mike, you know I was kidding." My concern must have been showing on my face. "Let's just talk. We haven't had a chance to just talk, you know? It had been months since I heard from you, you died, I started WOE.BEGONE, we did the third challenge together, then I went off on my own and only came back to kill you. At no point did we get to hang out, unless you count that time when we were hiding from the police."

"We had some time to hang out when we worked at Base together," I said. "It was nice. It reminded me of college. I saw you all the time, so we were either working together or hanging out together. We rented out a house for everyone to collaborate."

"I would have liked that," Anne said. She stood up and went back over to her own chair. It was the first upset energy that I had seen from her in the entire conversation. It wasn't directed at me, but instead into the ether, one of the many potential futures she was losing.

"Do you want me to tell you what the future used to be like?" I asked.

Anne pursed her lips. "No, I don't think so," she said. "That would only make it more difficult, I think. Do you feel any solace in knowing what the future used to be like?"

"None at all," I answered, quickly. The answer was obvious.

"Case in point," Anne said. "I was pretty great, though?"

"Irreplaceable. Between you and Edgar you ran a tight ship. It was me that messed everything up," I said.

"That's all I needed to hear," she said. She was smiling. "I was hoping we could, you know, reminisce, you know? Talk about the good ol' days that probably weren't that good but we were 19 or 20 and had the energy to power through it. I feel like an old lady these days. I'm sure that reckoning with my premature death isn't helping. Do you remember when we first met?"

"Hmmm. The very first time we were introduced to each other?" I asked. "No, I don't think so. We were in the same dorm room freshman year, so we obviously met there. But I don't remember the first time."

Anne sighed. "I was quieter back then, that's probably why you don't remember," she said. "You and your buddies were in the common room doing... something disruptive. I think you might have been making a pyramid out of the chairs?"

"Oh, right. I think I still have a photo of that on my computer... if I still have access to my old apartment. I haven't checked it in awhile, but I assume I'm still paying rent on it," I said.

"And I had seen you and your friends around some in the dorms and it seemed like you all were the other weirdos there. And I had just moved, didn't know anyone in town, had just started transitioning, doing pretty well all things considered, new school new me, and I remember thinking like "I'm going to walk in there and just start hanging out. Just make friends. I think that's how most people do it." And I did it. And you all were my most important friend group for the rest of college."

"What was I like?" I asked.

"Honestly? A little competitive," Anne said. "As in: new person, I need to make sure she understands how brilliant I am, how well I can build this stupid fucking chair pyramid."

"Stop! I feel seen and I don't like it," I said. We were both laughing.

"But eventually you let your guard down and became the prickly weirdo that I know you as today, basically, just with some growing up to do. I got exactly what I signed up for," she said. "What did you think of me?"

"Not to get all high-minded about it," I said, "But... you seemed quietly determined to become the best version of yourself. You wanted to come out of your shell and you did. I watched it happen once I started getting to know you. You wanted to be this big brave combat journalist and you got exactly what you wanted. Which makes sense, I don't know who could stand in your way."

"You're too kind," she said. "But you're right. I spent my high school years feeling lost. I mean, I think everyone does. Hormones and all that, especially the wrong ones. I wanted to plant my feet firmly and figure out who I was. You know, normal college bullshit. But I think that I came out the other side having a good idea of who I was."

"You had a better idea than I did, that's for sure," I said.

"Don't be too hard on yourself, Mikey," she said, "But, yes. Absolutely. There's nothing wrong with that but also you are correct."

"I've seen later iterations of myself. I can see who I am and who I am going to become. And I think that I turn into a cowboy? It's not what I was expecting."

"I can see that," Anne said.

"Huh? Really?" I asked.

"Yeah. You've got cowboy energy. Yeah, for sure," she said.

"Elaborate on that," I said.

"I don't think I can," she said. "It's not something that I would have suggested myself, but now that you've put it out there, I can definitely see it."

"Between what you just said and informing me that there's a whole network of future Annes, you've blown my mind today," I said.

"Glad I could help," she said.

We spent the rest of the afternoon sitting around, telling stories about college, reminiscing. We went on a long walk in the nearby woods and talked. Stories about parties and run-ins with the law and dating and breaking up. Where people had ended up after we graduated, who was still together, who was dead. I told her about Edgar, how I felt like he molded me into myself. Time slipped through our fingers and the sun was setting before we knew it.

"Well, I had better go," I said after some time putting it off. "You have a busy day tomorrow. I show up bright and early if I remember correctly. Mikey's hurt, so be gentle with him."

"Oh, I will," Anne said. "It was nice catching up."

"I wish we had more time," I said. We began walking to the front door of the cabin.

"Well, I got here 5 weeks ago," she said. "You could have shown up back then and we'd have 5 whole weeks together. I mean, I guess you still could, but I won't remember this conversation."

"I might just do that," I said. "Is there anything you want me to pass along to Annie?"

"Annie? What the fuck, Mike?" she asked.

"Well, the youngest Mike is Mikey. So... I thought maybe the youngest Anne was Annie and the oldest was like Annabelle or something?" I said.

"No, Anne's fine. Pfft. Annie," she said. "Tell her... not to freak out when she hears about how tomorrow night is going to go. It's a lot of wasted energy and emotion and it didn't help me find solace or catharsis or prepare myself or anything like that. Just a few days lost in the void for no reason."

"I can do that. I don't know if it will help, though," I said.

"It probably won't," Anne said, "But I thought I would give it a shot."

"Is there... anything else?" I asked.

"Uhh... the later Anne that I've been talking to said that they're aware of your movements and that they might send someone once things get settled," she said.

"Send an Anne?" I asked.

"I assume so," she said. "You have to have someone giving orders, right?"

"Right," I said. I looked down at my feet. My eyes traced the eyelets on my boots, then over to Anne's baby blue house shoes. I hadn't taken my shoes off when I came inside. "I should... be going then."

"Thanks for stopping by, Mikey, I really mean it," Anne said. "I think both of us got what we needed." The door was open.

"Anne..." I embraced her in a tight hug. "I hope so, I really do."

"Don't you start crying on me," Anne said. "We made it this far." There was an extra squeeze and then our hug ended.

"You're right. Stiff upper lip," I said.

"I'll see you around, Mikey," she said.

"Yeah, I'll see you around," I repeated. I stepped through the threshold of the door. "Love you, Anne."

"Love you too, Mike. Take care of yourself," she said.

"You too," I replied.

"Bye, Mike!"

"Bye Anne." The door closed. I was alone on the other side of it. I could feel the tears welling up. I pulled out the calculator, confirmed the coordinates to the apartment at the correct time, and transported myself from Anne's doorstep back to Latvia.

[END THEME PLAYS.]