

Episode 86: Do You Want To Try To Save Him?

You know what? It has been a long time since I've been able to clear my head. Ever since I was first kidnapped by the Flinchites, a myriad of situations were slowly intensifying and I was at the intersection of all of these slow burns. It wasn't all bad, but it was all energy intensive... and it was mostly bad. But it wasn't bad when Marissa saved the day inside of Tier 2 and we sped off to form our own Base, for instance. Or when Base was first getting started and we were only doing experiments on hamsters (rest in peace Chubbums). But soon, striking out on our own turned into a long gray slog of mishaps and correcting those mishaps. And this slog was twice as long from my perspective, because in one iteration of these events, the Hunters Jeremiah Hartley killed everyone but myself and my fellow Mikes. Energy has been draining out of the system for awhile.

Which is why it has been so nice to be back at O.V.E.R. with Edgar. We ultimately decided not to make a new O.V.E.R. Mike and OVEdgar for fear that we would have the same trouble keeping control of them, so we made the decision to move out of Base and back into O.V.E.R. together. It sounds hokey, but the long walks in the fresh air on my patrol have really done me some good. I'm getting back into shape and I have plenty of alone time to think things through that no one can take away from me by giving me more work. I can be alone with Edgar almost any time that I want to be. I am seeing people every day and rebuilding bridges that were starting to crumble: Charlie, Chance, Shadow.

There were murmurs at O.V.E.R. about another Bear stirring up trouble, that's not as fun. I capitalized Bear instinctively when I typed this up, I don't know what that means about me. The first troublemaker Bear was stuffed and mounted in the Base cafeteria. I hoped for a similar fate for this one, too.

The downside to this fresh perspective, though, was that I had less control of the other areas of my life. Base was operating without my input most of the time. I was a warm body to go on field missions. I wasn't making decisions like I used to. Edgar was keeping on top of things there better than I ever could and was definitely more keyed into what was happening.

It was a bad time to be out of the loop, because one of the things that I did right before I made my way back to O.V.E.R. was to blab to Base about Sly. There was no way to avoid talking about our adventure into the Flinchite compound and what Michael learned while he was in there. OVEdgar was Mustardseed, the central figure that Base had been working around the clock to uncover for weeks. But telling Base that we knew who Mustardseed was required telling them about the rest of the mission and it was simply too complicated to lie about. I told them that we retrieved this information by rescuing Michael after dozens of attempts to liberate him from the Flinchite compound. I managed to not mention Sylvester August Baxter during this whole recounting of the mission.

...But then I accidentally told Base about Mustardseed talking to Michael about who killed Elder Hunter and let it slip that Mustardseed told him who did it. At that point I had to either lie about what Mustardseed said and risk embedding myself and the other Mikes deep into a lie that was bound to contradict itself and cause trouble later, or to tell the truth and betray Sly and Michael's trust in the process. It was an easy decision— the truth is easier and I was dying to know how Sly ended up in that position— but it's not a decision I'm proud of.

That lack of pride extends to what Base had me do next with this new knowledge about Sly, which was to plant listening devices throughout his home while we set about bringing Michael out of retirement for the next Mike-centric mission, which was to hunt down all of the Mikes and Edgars that escaped as a result of Mustardseed iterating them continuously in an attempt to escape. Mike slipped one into the living room and I put one in Sly's bedroom while on the way to the bathroom. I noticed that Michael had moved his belongings into the master bedroom as well, but that isn't my business. I have mixed feelings about that. More importantly, Base is now spying on Sly who likely doesn't know anything, since he's new to all of this and we have it on many separate good authorities that the death of Elder Hunter will occur years from now. Sly probably doesn't know anything useful.

Monitoring Sly wasn't the only situation getting out of my control while I was taking leisurely walks at O.V.E.R Mike— as in Latvia Mike— was slowly deteriorating. Under Michael's direction, I had consolidated two iterations of Mike inside of the Flinchite compound with the Calculator because one of them had been shot and was bleeding to death. Mike seemed as though he was going to be alright as we escaped, but the problems began to manifest not long after we got him home. It soon became obvious that he should not be left alone for long periods without being checked on, which meant that I had to split my time between O.V.E.R. and Latvia most days. I accomplished this with time travel, naturally. This meant days much in excess of 24 hours and I could feel myself slowly deteriorating as well. Mike was not doing well, though. Fainting spells, collapsing, coughing up blood. He was hiding most of his ailment from me and what I was able to glimpse looked bad. Michael was adamant that the Flinchites could help him, but that didn't feel like a legitimate option. Though Mike slowly dying before our eyes wasn't either.

All of these dilemmas hung thickly in the air: does Sly know anything about Elder Hunter? Where are the other Mikes and Edgars? How many are there? Is Mike going to be okay? What do we do about the Flinchite compound increasingly filling up with Mikes? What is going on at O.V.E.R. now that the technology has returned? What happened with Ty before I ever even got there? Remember that one?

And on top of this, Edgar wanted us to apply for Tier 2 positions like we had asked O.V.E.R. Mike and OVEdgar to do. So, I tried to clear my head and find some solace in the quiet of my patrol route. This is WOE.BEGONE.

[INTRO THEME PLAYS.]

Another day, another patrol. I was finally starting to get back into the swing of things. Michael was spending more time at the satellite Base taking care of Mike and sorting through the potential Mike and Edgar coordinates, hoping to find the point of iteration. This allowed me to stay home with Edgar most nights and to spend the night in one place instead of two. And I was waiting for a status report from them, indicating that we were either going hunting for bears and panthers or that I needed to get more data from inside of tier 2. Either way, I was waiting and I was happy to wait, to be a tiny little peon who was just doing his job, making sure that all of the blades of grass on my patrol route were in order. They changed mowing my route to Fridays while I was gone which is nonsense and I'm furious about it. They can't just change things like that. What was wrong with Wednesdays?

I proceeded on my route, ignoring that the grass length didn't correspond to what day it was like it used to back in my day, intent on not seeing anything. Which is why I found it more perturbing than anything else when I eventually did see something and had no choice but to investigate. It was a spin on an old classic. A mysterious trip into a red flag cabin. One of the very first things that I did upon arriving at O.V.E.R. It was someone that I knew did not have permission to be inside, that person having the name of Chance. Well, no, not actually. That's not his real name and I've called him that to his face before and he was very confused. His real name is Donder. Or Blorpo. Which was which? Chris or Ryan? Chance is Chris, right? I need to write that down somewhere.

I knew that Chance was not allowed into red flag cabins and that he hadn't recently gotten a promotion to a position that granted him such access because I was quickly rekindling my friendship with Chance as a result of being back at O.V.E.R. Our patrols weren't too far apart and I saw him in the cafeteria every day and we got to talking like we used to. Better than we used to, honestly. Him and Shadow were usually pretty quiet, but I made a point to become a better friend to him this time around. Chance and Shadow are fun guys to be around. They're more my speed than Charlie, Anne, or Marissa. They're quiet and calm and that is an energy that I need in my life.

It didn't hurt that Chance is the liaison between the Hunters and the Base, which means that getting on his good side means better navigating that tension, which always felt like it could erupt at any moment. The Hunters trusted Chance because Chance was good friends with a guy named Cole who disappeared inside of O.V.E.R. under mysterious circumstances, presumed dead. This long lost mutual friend was essentially the thread that prevented the Hunters from killing all of us. Thank you, Cole. I never knew you.

Chance and I bonded over old man shit. Folk music, guitars, old movies. Chance and Shadow had applied about couples' housing like O.V.E.R. Mike and OVEdgar had, so we were both on the waiting list. O.V.E.R. was surprisingly understanding of why a queerplatonic couple would want to live together or they didn't understand or care. Probably a mix of all three, knowing O.V.E.R. It was rewarding to learn more about him and to share more about myself with him. I would often catch him alone, either out on patrol or running errands and it helped me see him as more than a member of a pair. Not just half of Chance and Shadow. Chance is Blorpo is Chris, by the way. I did have it written down somewhere. Though it does seem as though both of them are used to answering to both "Chris" and "Ryan."

And it wouldn't be a Mikey Walters O.V.E.R. friendship if I wasn't also considering the angle by which I might get some things that I wanted out of it. "Manipulate" is such a mean word. I "manipulated" Edgar into a friendship and look how that turned out. The love of my life. I wasn't "manipulating" Chance in order to create a more personal link between myself and Innocent Hunter. Innocent Hunter came up naturally in our conversations, because he was a close friend of Chance's and a former close friend of mine. And while this may have resulted in myself and Innocent Hunter passing notes back and forth through Chance with neither side of the battle being ever the wiser, that doesn't mean that I was using Chance just to talk to Innocent Hunter again. It was a direct result of my blossoming friendship with Chance, though.

So, that is how I knew that Chance did not have authorization to be walking into the red flag cabin that I had just seen him walking into. That access was generally reserved for Tier 2 and up employees. Regardless, I knew for a fact that Chance's permissions did not include red

flag cabins and this particular one was on my route, not his. He was trespassing and he had no business going in there. Worse, he committed a grave sin: making a security guard on his route have to do his job responsibilities. Technically, my job responsibilities regarding red flag cabins was to call it in and have someone with permission check it out, which I was obviously not going to do. I didn't want to get Chance in trouble. But I couldn't just let this go unnoticed. And by that I mean I was curious and needed to know what he was doing in there. I looked around to make sure that nobody saw *me* enter and followed him inside at a healthy distance.

The door swung open silently. I looked into the cabin. Chance had his back to me and was rifling through some pages inside of a file cabinet. He did not hear me come in and continued going about his business. I watched him for a moment, taking it in. This was the same guy that was so deliberate about keeping his head down and here he was, getting himself involved in who-knows-what, so enthralled by it that he wasn't even paying close enough attention to his surroundings. Something had changed. I could feel it.

"You really need a partner on these things," I said. "Someone might catch you."

Chance jumped so high in surprise to being spotted that I thought he might clip through the ceiling. He already had his gun trained on me by the time his feet hit the floor again.

"Relax, Chance," I said in my most reassuring tone. "I'm not here to get in your way. I saw a friend doing something curious and I stopped by to see what was going on. And maybe if I can help. I have a longer track record of not keeping my head down."

"Don't tell Shadow," Chance said. He put his gun away.

"Don't tell Shadow? Why?" I asked.

"I'm putting myself in danger and he would kill me if he knew that this was what I was getting up to," he said.

"What are you getting up to, exactly?" I asked.

"I'm looking for some files that I am not allowed to access," he said.

"I can see that," I said. "What kind of files are they?"

"Employee files. This time of year is always the Tier 1 audit, which means that Tier 1 employee information gets transferred to different parts of O.V.E.R.-- Tier 2 and Tier 3, and so on. We aren't allowed to see them for obvious reasons." He turned his back to me and kept going through the files.

"Are you looking for your file?" I asked.

"No. They don't have anything on me. I don't ever get into trouble," he said.

"Shadow?" I asked.

"Cole," Chance said. "I'm looking for Cole's file. I'm looking to see if it says anything that they haven't said in public."

"You mean whether he is alive or dead?" I asked.

"I'm trying not to hope," Chance said. "I am looking for how he died, if he was killed, who did it... that sort of thing."

"That's probably wise," I said.

"Cole got too close," Chance said. "I don't know what he got too close to. But he was rising up the ranks. He saw something and fell down a rabbit hole. That's how it happens. And

that's the type of person that he was. And whatever rabbit hole he fell down, it killed him. I just want to know what happened."

I stood there and watched Chance flip through pages looking for the right ones. I was keenly familiar with the sort of grieving that he was doing in that moment. An ugly, ignorant sort of grieving where the details promise some solace, if only they could be uncovered. But not only can they usually not be uncovered, if they are they are not of the use that you thought that they were. They are not justice and they are not closure, because there is no external justice and there is no external closure. Those things are not real, they are internal. And once you fail to find them externally, you have to grapple with what is inside. I often find myself weak and unable to do so. I hoped that Chance was stronger than I was in that regard.

The sound of papers rustling stopped while I was lost in this train of thought.

"Found it. We should get out of here," Chance said.

"Would you..." I trailed off. "Base wouldn't even give you an opportunity to correct whatever is in that file. It's not mission related and Base has enough problems without taking on extra objectives like that. But... Base isn't everything. There's me and Mike and Michael. They have Calculators. We could... if that's something that you would be interested in... in exchange for some help."

"Spit it out," Chance said.

"Do you want to try to save him?" I asked.

"I do," Chance said. "More than anything." He furrowed his brow. "We should leave."

We took the employee file and left the cabin.

[END THEME PLAYS.]