

WOE.BEGONE EPISODE 113: OUTSIDE TIER ONE EPISODE 3: ALL HANDS

Mike Walters is a weasel. I don't mean that in an *entirely* pejorative sense. I mean that, much like a ferret, he will bring chaos and disorder upon anyone foolhardy enough to offer him shelter. *Unlike* a ferret, I do not have a cage large enough to keep him in while I'm away. Recently, I attended a get-together with friends, only to come home and discover that my record player was... missing? He had been the only other person in the cabin. I asked him about it the next morning. He pretended not to know what I was talking about. He was familiar with the record player. I played *Come On Feel The Illinoise!* By Sufjan Stevens for him while I made lamb sliders for us for dinner one evening. The record player was large and it was wired into the speakers. It is not something that could go missing easily. Mike hadn't left the cabin (*at least I hope he didn't*), it's not like someone broke in and stole it. This led me to believe that Mike was up to something the night that I went out. But what? And how could it possibly relate to my record player? The more I get to know Mike Walters, the less I feel like I know.

Conversely, the more time I spend at Base, the more I feel like I am tapping into a wellspring of knowledge that I wouldn't be able to access otherwise. I was a bit disgusted at how much I was enjoying spending time at Base. I wanted to hate Base. They killed Mike Walters. I was there to infiltrate them, to expose their murderous intent. But I found myself looking forward to being at Base when I wasn't there. I daydreamed about Base when I was bored working at the front desk at 116E, the O.V.E.R. Interfacing building. I was due for my first real mission and I understood what that entailed, but I remained in high spirits. With the situation at Base progressing, I sat down with Mike to talk about how things were going.

MIKE

So, how long until you're rich? If they can duplicate anything, they have an infinite money glitch.

JAMILLA

I asked Eagle about that, actually. No infinite money, unfortunately. From the sounds of it, that would draw unwanted attention. It seemed like he was speaking from experience. H pays us well, though. I definitely appreciate the extra cash.

MIKE

Is it worth the paycheck, though? How much money does the black mark of a killer on your soul cost?

JAMILLA

You've killed people, too, Mike. And I *haven't* killed anyone yet.

MIKE

I know. And I've got black marks all over my soul. But is that worth it to you, Jam?

JAMILLA

I like working at Base. It's like being a high level employee at O.V.E.R. I get to do stuff that O.V.E.R. would never let me do. Before this, I traveled *once* for work and it was highly

regimented and scrutinized. I had an escort and that escort was overseen by O.V.E.R. We both had to submit lengthy reports. There was no freedom of movement. We did what they told us to do.

MIKE

And now you can go wherever H says to go and kill whoever he says to kill. And you've seen his track record of what kind of handsome guy with perfect eyebrows he likes to kill.

JAMILLA

There's more to it than that. I'm learning the ropes of time travel. O.V.E.R. never would have taught me some of the stuff I've learned. I'm learning how it works and how to use it for myself.

The more trust I build at Base, the more freedom I have. And the more freedom I have, the better able I am to figure out the Mike Walters mystery. Oh! Speaking of: I joined the Base Slack channel and there are two Chrises and 2 Ryans in there. The plot thickens.

MIKE

Yeah, I thought some more about the Chris and Ryan you met and I don't think they're the ones we're after. There's no way that the masterminds behind WOE.BEGONE are some precious folksy couple. There has to be a more sinister edge to the real gamerunners. Maybe this second Chris and Ryan are a better fit.

JAMILLA

Huh? Where did you get "couple" from?

MIKE

They... the uh... you said they share an office with each other. I don't know. I made an assumption.

JAMILLA

I didn't tell you they were a couple.

MIKE

Are they?

JAMILLA

They're a queerplatonic couple. They share a cabin in Tier 1 together.

MIKE

I'm an excellent judge of character. I'm sure they're very nice and good at their jobs.

JAMILLA

I hope they are. I'm heading out on my first mission after this conversation and they are leading me through it. I'm sort of scared.

MIKE

Are you going to kill someone on this mission?

JAMILLA

We *are* tasked with killing someone, yes.

MIKE

Are you still going to enjoy working there once they start sending you on assassinations every other Thursday?

JAMILLA

We're going to find out. It doesn't feel real to me yet. I'm dreading it but I'm also strangely excited. I don't know how I'm going to feel after it's done.

MIKE

You're going to feel like a terrible and enormous being has emerged from deep in the earth directly under you and swallowed you whole with its enormous jaws. Like you're being dragged down by it and all that is left to do is struggle until you're exhausted and you finally give up. At least, that's what I hope you feel. If it doesn't feel like that, it's gotten too easy.

JAMILLA

It's not going to be easy. I take this all very seriously, I assure you.

MIKE

Hunter takes it very seriously, too. That didn't stop him from killing me. Don't forget that the mission isn't the only thing that's dangerous. *They* are dangerous, too.

JAMILLA

I'll be careful. You have to trust me. I haven't forgotten why I'm doing this. I need to head over there. My mission starts in an hour. Stay out of trouble while I'm gone.

MIKE

You stay out of trouble, too, Jam.

I understood Mike's trepidation. His life had been reduced to scraping by in my cabin and waiting for me to return with answers. Much like a pet ferret, I was his entire world. I needed to keep my eyes on the prize, lest I return home to find him shredding all of the toilet paper, metaphorically speaking. I could strike the balance between exploring Base on its own terms and uncovering what happened to Mike Walters. But I needed to stay vigilant, focused, cognizant of every moving part.

I'm Jamilla Gardner. You're listening to Outside Tier One Episode 3: All Hands. Stay with us.

[OUTSIDE TIER ONE INTRO THEME PLAYS]

It was stuffy inside of the Base's surveillance van on my first mission. The heat from myself and Chris was gradually bringing the temperature inside the van closer to body temperature. I would have been sweating from nervousness, regardless. I had been hoping in vain for a peaceful, low-stakes first mission to kick things off. I hadn't gone in completely blind, though. There had been some training, courtesy of Marissa. We shot some paper targets, traveled small distances in spacetime, and went over the basics of time travel theory: iteration, the connectivity between objects and people in timelines, propagation of information, consolidating two iterations back into one person, that sort of thing. But on this particular afternoon I was sitting in a windowless van, monitoring a house with Chris, with Ryan in our ears, from Base, via an earpiece. This was the real deal. The mission was simple: kill the man inside the house we were parked in front of. Take the piece of time travel equipment he had discovered, a portable time travel device called a Calculator.

"What do we know about this guy?" I asked. "Is he a murderer or something? H assured me that these missions are "death neutral." Does killing this guy prevent him from killing someone else?"

"We're *hardly* killing him," Chris explained. "There are at least two more confirmed iterations of him out there. As far as this mission being death neutral goes, I wish it were as simple as him being an outlaw and us being the big bad cowboys that need to bring him to justice." I absentmindedly wondered why everything kept circling back around to cowboys. "Base has intel that suggests that this guy and his iterations form something that we call a "council," which is an organization made up entirely of one person and their iterations. Councils are dangerous because they have the potential to be highly coordinated, extremely prolific through time, and difficult to extinguish once they become established. We have it on good authority that this council will attack the Base in the near future if they are allowed to begin legitimate operations. So far, they have only recently found the Calculator and are beginning rudimentary experiments with iteration. So, Jam, in order to ensure we stay alive, we're going to kill him and relieve him of his Calculator. Adding a third Calculator to our arsenal is an added bonus."

"How do we know all of that?" I asked. "How do we know that killing him is the only solution?"

"Most of the answers you are looking for are redacted, unfortunately," Chris said. "We got our mission brief from Eagle. Eagle gets his instructions from H. And H gets intel from the Future Team and any other sources he can get his hands on. I told you everything that we know about the situation. Being hands-on in the field puts us at risk of propagating information and propagation makes it difficult to undo errors, so there are some things that we are not allowed to know."

"So, we're taking H's word on this," I said.

"H's word is good," Chris said, "But we don't have to put our full confidence in him. Propagation can help us just as easily as it can hurt us. If H did something that wasn't in the interest of a safe and powerful Base, that information would make it back to us through Future Team. We have systems in place to make sure of that. The future holds him accountable."

"If you say so," I said. I caught myself. "Sorry. I didn't mean to play devil's advocate. I'm nervous."

"I would be more concerned if you weren't nervous," Chris said. "This is your first mission. You've never killed anyone before, have you, Jam?"

"I kill insects every now and then," I replied. "But only if they're in the bathroom. If they're near a door, I try to take them outside." I felt my face flushing, embarrassed at my explanation. "O.V.E.R. trains its desk workers the same as its security guards, so I do have full firearms training."

"Great. You know to shoot for center mass," Chris said. "If he has a weapon, be sure to get it out of his hands as soon as possible. Don't assume that just because you shot him that he's disarmed. Shoot again until you are sure he's down. I'm sure you were taught the basics. Here's a specific tip for our sorts of missions: since this is your first time and it might be emotional, try not to vomit. The less cleanup we have to do, the better. We are transporting the body, but we can't transfer fluids out of the carpet. We have to clean those up, so try not to make a mess."

"I'm not sure I'll have any control over that," I said, feeling preemptively nauseous at the thought.

"You're going to do great," Chris said. He smiled encouragingly at me.

"What about the other two iterations of him?" I asked.

"They will be consolidated," Chris said. "We outsource consolidation with another group that we have an arrangement with. All of the remaining iterations will be consolidated back into one person. We're taking the Calculator so he won't have any recourse, assuming that he remembers any of this. He'll go on about his life as though nothing ever happened. See? That's not as bad as you thought, right?"

"I can see how it could be worse," I said.

"It only gets more complicated from here, juggling death neutrality and our safety," he said. "The situations get more complex, as well. That's why we have Ryan sitting around in his socks at Base keeping an eye on everything. Right, Ryan? You awake, babe?"

"I didn't want to interrupt," Ryan said over the earpiece. "You didn't have to tell Jamilla about my socks."

"They have little raccoons on them," Chris said. "I got them for him for Christmas."

"You're going to be fine," Ryan said. "Chris overexplained things. The target is at home, alone, in his pajamas. You can see the cameras for yourself. All you need to do is knock on his door and shoot him when he answers."

"It's called 'Scenario 1' in the mission brief," Chris said. "Alone, unarmed, unaware."

"Eagle is doing a Scenario 9 today," Ryan added.

"What is Scenario 9?" I asked.

"None of us know," Chris said. "We did a Scenario 6 together and that was confusing and intense. Whatever Eagle is doing is 3 more than that."

There was a dip in the conversation where I might have added something or asked a question, but the thought of the impending mission was weighing heavily on my mind. The silence felt heavy in the stuffy air of the van.

"Are you ready, Jam?" Chris asked. "No rush, but I don't think that more talking is going to make you more prepared. Probably the opposite." He put his hand on my shoulder. I was too

hot and tense for it to feel reassuring. "You can do this. H brought you on, which means he *knows* that you can do this. H does not work with uncertainty."

"Chris is right," Ryan said.

"I... just... go?" I asked.

"As soon as you're ready," Chris said. "I'll be right here in the van and Ryan will be in your ear, waiting at Base, ready to extract us if he needs to."

"Then..." I swallowed hard. "I'm going." I swore under my breath, opened the sliding van door, and stepped out into the fresh night air.

The trip from the van to the front door was a manic blur. I remember readying my pistol while half-running the short distance to the porch. The neighbors had privacy fences and there was nobody out on the street. Nobody would see or hear anything. The porch steps were under my feet before I knew it. I took a deep breath, swore to myself again, and rang the doorbell.

The next instant, I was back in the van, feeling the nauseous effects of time travel. Chris caught me before I could collapse onto the floor.

"It's alright, Jam. You're safe. You're back in the van. Everything is going to be alright," he said. His voice was soft and soothing. "There was an... unexpected deviation, but Ryan intervened and corrected it for us. Thank God for time travel, right? It's time for try number two. This time, approach from the right-hand side of the door, so you see him as soon as the door opens. Don't try to make small talk, don't try to get inside, just shoot him once he gets the door open. We have the right guy. We have cameras on the house. He's the only one in there. I can confirm that it is indeed him who comes to the door. When he opens the door, you shoot him. Alright?"

"What happened? Why did Ryan correct me?" I asked. "I didn't... Did I?"

"You died, yes," Ryan said, matter-of-factly.

"What happened?" I asked again.

"It doesn't matter what happened. It *didn't* happen," Chris said. "This is a pretty common result. It's happened to more experienced field agents than you on many occasions. It's time to get back up on that horse and try again. Quickly, preferably. You shouldn't give yourself time to second guess yourself. Try again while the adrenaline is still pumping. Are you ready, Jam?"

"Maybe...!?" I said.

"Go!" Chris said, like a parent encouraging their child to run to first base in tee-ball.

I pushed down my fear and did it all over again: half-running, swearing under my breath, ringing the doorbell. The man answered the door. I fired a round from my pistol into his chest. He fell backwards into the house and I followed him inside, closing the door behind me. I fired a second round into his chest. There was a baseball bat propped up beside the door. I imagined what he had done with the baseball bat in the first version of these events. I looked at the man. He stared up at the ceiling, vacantly, unblinkingly. He was in his pajamas.

I stared at the man staring at nothing until the sound of Chris opening the door startled me back into alertness.

"Success! That went much better than last time," he said.

"Good work, Jamilla," Ryan said.

"You were never going to talk him into handing over the Calculator, no matter how many times you tried," Chris said. "There was only one way that this mission could go. You did the right thing, Jam. You didn't even make a mess in the process. I'm going to find the Calculator

and we are going to transport him and then head back to Base. We won't even need Ryan to assist with the travel."

"Sounds good to me," Ryan said. "I already took my shoes back off after the correction."

"We'll see your cute little toe-sie woe-sies back at Base, babe. The Calculator was on the coffee table. Total newbie stuff. He hadn't even found a place to stash it yet," Chris said.

I stood beside the man that I had killed, feeling distant from the conversation. I watched Chris operate the Calculator through the haze: its physical buttons and crude screen obfuscating its tremendous power. Chris pushed a button and the man's corpse vanished in front of my eyes, unceremoniously, silently. There was no evidence there had ever been a man there at all. He took some wipes and cleaned what little blood remained on the hardwood floor and stuffed the used wipes into a special bag.

"Only one correction. Not bad at all, even for a Scenario 1," Chris said. "Let's get you out of here, Jam. We've got an all hands meeting later today. You should get some rest and have some time alone to think. I'm sure there are a lot of mixed emotions going on. There were for me after my first mission."

I stood wordlessly, not having moved since Chris had opened the door. I could feel myself shaking.

"You'll be okay, Jam," Chris said. "It's a strange thing to process, I know. It's time to go. We need to get out of here. You ready for us back at Base, Ryan?"

"I'm ready," Ryan said. "See you soon, babe."

Chris tapped the buttons on the Calculator. "Initiating transport in 3... 2... 1..." We were back at Base as abruptly as we had left.

[SCENE TRANSITION]

I sat in a folding chair in the living room at Base, elbows on my knees, watching the sun set in the tall windows in front of me. H was in the front of the room, setting up for the all-hands meeting. He had moved the couch and the TV and populated the room with neat rows of chairs. He bustled around, preparing, humming to himself contentedly.

"Congrats on a successful first mission, Jam!" He said. I didn't look over at him, but I could hear him smiling. "Chris and Ryan said that you did a great job. I can't wait to read the report. We have big plans for that Calculator, ya know."

The rush of the mission had worn off. It had been about an hour and I was feeling tired on top of my conflicting emotions. I didn't respond. I continued to stare off into the sunset. I heard H's footsteps briefly pause. He came over and sat down near me, leaving an empty chair in-between us.

"I didn't tell Chris and Ryan this, but you saved my life today, Jam," he said. There was the smallest tremble in his voice. "The guy you killed was forming a council and my intel showed that his council was going to attack my Base. The attack wasn't going to wipe us out, but there were going to be a couple casualties and one of them was... well... it was ol' H here." I looked over. H was staring out at the sunset, too. "If you hadn't taken care of this for me, I woulda been a goner, Jam. You saved me."

I closed my eyes. "Is it ever going to feel like I'm doing the right thing?" I asked.

"It might," H said. "You're still a newbie. You haven't seen anything yet. Base is a small fish in a huge pond and the further you swim, the better you understand how big the pond is. We have to fight all the bigger fish for any scraps we can get. You saved my life and secured a third Calculator. Those are some dang good scraps for your first mission. And this is only the beginning for you, Jam. You'll see. You know as well as I do how capable you are. I know you're going through a lot right now. Meet me in my office after the meeting. We'll talk more in private, okay?"

I opened my eyes and looked at him. He looked... earnest. "Alright," I said.

"Wonderful," H said. I could see him perk back up as he stood up and went back to preparing for the meeting, as though he had switched modes. I watched him work and thought about the goofy murder victim that was living in my cabin because of him. Why did he kill you, Mike?

I was slowly returning to my usual self as the all-hands meeting approached. Exhaustion was setting in as my body was learning that it was okay to let my guard down. The setting sun was setting off sleep signals in my brain. I yawned as the members of Base began to file in. The field team arrived first, since they were already at Base. Chris, Ryan, Eagle, Marissa. They all said their small congratulations but also gave me some distance, which I appreciated. I think they all understood what I was going through. Two men I didn't recognize came in shortly after and sat on either side of Eagle. Two more came in after that and sat as far away from everyone else as they could. It was while I was looking at the two loners that I felt the air shift to my right as someone took a seat in the chair directly beside me.

"Well, well, well! If it isn't Jamilla Gardner!" a cheery, familiar voice said. I turned to look as I realized who it was.

"Edgar!? What are you doing here?" I asked.

I knew that there were members of Base that I hadn't met yet, but I never would have suspected Edgar to be among them. Edgar worked at the front desk of the Interfacing building with me. We didn't see each other outside of work, but I considered him a close work friend. If anything, we didn't see each other outside of work because we were constantly hanging out *at* work. We were extremely friendly with one another.

"I got an ad saying this was a good place to meet single bears in my area," he said, his sweet professionalism almost making his joke sound earnest.

"That's not too far from the truth, from the looks of it" I said. I wanted to tell him about the additional hairy critter I had in my cabin. "Why didn't you tell me that you work here?"

"I wanted to tell you, but I couldn't tell you at work, so... surprise. How are you liking Base so far?" he asked.

"My first mission was this afternoon," I said. "I'm still processing."

"Ooh, that's tough," he said. "You're just now getting a feel for how large this whole project is, how many other projects there are out there, and what it takes to preserve what we've built. It'll take some time to develop a broad enough view of everything. But there will be more missions and you'll see more every time and each time you'll be able to make more sense of everything."

"H said something similar," I said.

“H is a smart guy. He hides it under that “aw shucks” Minnesota personality, but don’t underestimate him,” Edgar said.

“I’ve picked up on that,” I said. “It’s reassuring that you’re here, Edgar. I trust your judgment. You have good taste.”

“It’s an honor to be trusted,” he said.

“I do have a question, though,” I said. “If you’re here, then why was Eagle excited that I had access to the 116E codes? You work at the same desk I do. You get the same codes that I get.”

“Funny story about that,” Edgar said, crossing one ankle over the other in his chair. “I have 116E codes but they are not the same codes that *you* get every day. I used to get the same codes as everyone else in the office. Base was using those codes to get into Tier 2 via 116E. One day, I noticed that my door code was different than everyone else’s. I think it was a canary trap. O.V.E.R. gave me a different code, which means that they would know that anyone else who put that code in got it from me. If someone from Base had put it in, it might have tripped off an alarm and compromised the whole organization. Luckily, I noticed in time and nobody used the canary code. We have been working without 116E codes ever since. Why O.V.E.R. doesn’t give everyone a unique code is anyone’s guess. I think it might be to ferret out employees who are susceptible to sharing codes. That’s why Eagle was excited. You should be careful before you hand out codes, though. Always compare your codes with the rest of the office before you give them out to Base.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” I said. “You aren’t the first person to tell me to be careful today, Edgar.”

“Now is a great time to be careful, Jam,” he said. “Now and always.”

H stood in front of the large windows in the living room, cleared his throat, and began the all-hands meeting. The majority of the meeting was boring, bureaucratic bookkeeping. I felt my eyelids getting heavy more than once and had to make an active effort to stay awake. After some project forecasts and other matters of business that I didn’t understand, H switched topics to my mission. “And, last but not least, I want to congratulate our newest member, Jam, on a successful first mission. They did a Scenario 1 with Chris and Ryan today. Give them a big round of applause!” Everyone clapped politely except for Marissa, who was quite boisterous.

“I won’t bore you all any longer,” H said after the clapping subsided. “Everyone grab some pizza on your way out if you haven’t already. I’ll see you all on Monday. Thanks for coming.” I hadn’t even noticed that there was pizza. The members of Base began to file out as quickly as they had arrived. The two loners were the first to go. I lost track of them by the time H was finished talking. I considered introducing myself to the two people that Eagle was with, but Marissa blindsided me and I ended up in a long conversation with her and Edgar about a new rocket launcher that Marissa had come into possession of. We were not allowed to ask about the source of said rocket launcher, though we were invited to shoot it with her that weekend.

I was almost cheery as I made my way down the hall to talk to H in his office. Learning that Edgar was on the team had put me in high spirits. Maybe Mike was wrong. Maybe I wasn’t going to be swallowed whole and dragged into the depths of the Earth. Maybe there was a strange sense to be made of the world and an organization like Base with sufficient technology

and minds could tie everything together. Time travel exists, whether Base is involved or not. Maybe with the correct amount of thoughtfulness and diligence, our decisions could be a net good on the whole system, on the whole timeline, even. Maybe death neutrality was real. Maybe there really was a whole pond to explore and things worth finding in its far recesses. The potential boosted my mood as I opened the door to H's office.

"Jam! You're looking better. Shut the door behind you," H said. I did as he asked and sat down in the leather guest chair.

"We need to talk about Mike Walters," he said.

Thank you for listening to Outside Tier One. I'm Jamilla Gardner. Next time: we need to talk about Mike Walters. Until then, stay safe.

[OUTSIDE TIER ONE END THEME PLAYS.]

Outside Tier 1 is a Drop Stitch Audio Production. Created by Jamilla Garner. The theme song is "Roadtrip" by the band Cutting Grass. The background music was also provided by Cutting Grass. Check them out at wearecuttinggrass.bandcamp.com/. Special thanks to Mike Walters for his help with this episode.