

WOE.BEGONE EPISODE 118: KNOWING WHAT I KNOW NOW

I did not take well to the consolidation. The physical process went fine. Edgar did a great job. I had watched him consolidate the others in the basement, my bedroom: Chance, Shadow, Marissa. I watched them transform from being curious about the weird little guy who told them he was Boone “Grizzly” Babcock, to trusting Edgar that they would want to know what had happened to all of us in a previous timeline, to being fiercely loyal to the cause of returning there and saving my life. My life wasn’t the only reason to return there, but I did get the impression that I was a large part of what we were fighting for. Each of them said the same thing after they gained the memories of their previous selves: Mikey (and now they all called me Mikey. Goddammit.) should absolutely not be consolidated. We’ll fix the timeline and he will get those memories back the relatively old-fashioned way and it will be terrible then but we can deal with it after we are successful instead of while we’re trying to prepare. On the other side of the situation now, I get it, but I found their universal response distressing. Was this timeline even worth going back to? Was this actually about me or was I just a smokescreen for something they wanted to do? Would I even want to return to that timeline?

I was stuck in Edgar’s basement. I wasn’t locked in there or neglected or anything like that. It was for my safety. I was well aware that there were people who would kill me on the spot and then kill Edgar for harboring me. Eagle actually did swing by after work one day to drop some stuff off. He came inside and had coffee with Edgar. I could hear them from inside the basement. It wasn’t an overabundance of caution that kept me down there. There was a real danger. But, being unable to leave the basement, I didn’t have anyone to go to with my concerns except people who were invested in this mission. There was no one impartial to give me the straight truth. So I went to Edgar.

We were sitting on the couch after dinner. I would stay up there for a couple hours and then head back down to the basement. “I want to be consolidated. Now. I want to know what we’re all working toward,” I said.

“Are you sure, Mikey? You’ve been through a lot and it will be difficult for you to process that as long as we are in this present,” he said.

“Have Chris and Ryan not “been through a lot”? Or Marissa? Them having their memories helps us with the mission. Why can’t I have mine?” I asked. I felt like a petulant child asking for an extra scoop of ice cream.

“I don’t think that you fully understand what “a lot” means for Mikey Walters, versus what it means for everyone else,” he said.

“Of course I don’t! You won’t let me understand,” I said.

“There are worse things than not understanding,” Edgar said. I felt him inch away from me slightly on the couch.

“Is this all a trick? Am I a pawn in your bigger plans? You just need me for something and you can discard me after it’s done?” I could feel my face getting hot. I didn’t believe anything that I was saying. I was angry. I had been cooped up in the basement and it was having a negative effect on my temper, no matter how important it truly was for me to stay down there. I didn’t have an outlet.

“Mikey! Of course not!” Edgar sounded defensive, I pushed harder.

"You already killed two iterations of me," I snarled. "You're going to dangle me over Eagle like a piece of chum while the rest of you transport to safety. Is that it? You didn't want to save me. You stole me from Jamilla so you could use me in your own little games. This is no different than WOE.BEGONE. Are you going to kill me too Edgar? You already have once!" I wasn't far off from shouting "you're not my real dad!" and slamming the door to my room, except I would have to roll up a rug to get back into the basement and the dramatic energy would have dissipated by the time I got the door open.

Edgar had turned away from me while I spoke and pulled his legs up onto the couch. I couldn't see his face. I heard him sniffle. He was crying. I hadn't seen Edgar cry, not even on the night that he iterated me and killed the other iteration. I didn't know what to do. I didn't want to say sorry. It felt hollow to try to say sorry so quickly after something I had just said. It felt analogous to opening my mouth and trying to fan the words back in with my hands. I couldn't leave.

I stood up from the couch. "Look, Edgar. I'm a shitty person. I didn't mean any of that. I'm scared and confused and I'll be in the basement if you need me."

"I'm scared, too" Edgar said. "I can't watch you get hurt anymore. I need my Mikey Bear back."

"I'll be in the basement if you want to help me understand," I said.

Edgar came down into the basement about an hour later. I had been sulking. "I'm sorry," I said. "I didn't want to say I'm sorry earlier because I wasn't sorry yet. But I'm sorry now."

He brushed off what I was saying. "Do you want to get consolidated? Right now?"

"Not if you don't want to do it," I said.

"You're going to be a mess," he said. "It's going to be pretty nasty. When I was consolidated it was the worst week I had spent in this timeline, thinking about you and what all we went through and trying to figure out how this happened. But I'll have my Mikey Bear and you'll have your Panther. Jamilla comes back from Satellite Base in less than 48 hours. You'll have to be in fighting condition by then.

"I can't promise anything. I don't know what I don't know," I said.

"We'll have each other. That's why I undertook this in the first place," he said.

"Then let's do it," I said. "I trust you, Edgar. I want to be as helpful as I can be for the mission."

"I love you Mikey Bear," he said.

"I'll say it back once I remember you," I said.

He gathered the supplies to do the consolidation, opened a transient iteration of the timeline, iterated the Mike inside, and consolidated that Mike with me. All of this happened instantaneously once Edgar ran the executable. I became the Mike from that timeline and he became me. The feeling became familiar, the other Mike had been through this sort of thing before. It was still too much to handle. Edgar was standing beside me. I held onto his arm as reality resettled around me.

"I love you, too, Panther."

I was back. And this is WOE.BEGONE.

[INTRO THEME PLAYS.]

Edgar knocked on the bathroom door. "Is everything okay in there, Mikey? It's been over an hour. Did you... take a pillow in there?"

"I couldn't sleep in the bed," I groaned back.

"Mikey Bear... Please come out. I can't help you from the other side of the door. And I really have to pee."

"I need somewhere that I have my back against the wall," I said.

"I wasn't joking about needing to pee," he said. "Please open up, Mikey. How about this: you go put on the coffee and when I get done in there, we'll talk about Anne."

My ears perked up. "What about Anne?" I asked.

"Where she is and what we're going to do about it," he said.

"Anne is alive!? They told me that they killed her," I said.

"No. They told you she wasn't a problem anymore. Open the door, Mike." Oooh... Mike? Not itty bitty Mikey Bear? He was getting short with me. He really did have to pee. I opened the door.

"I'm not putting on the decaf. I don't like how it tastes," I said.

"Looks like we're staying up all night then," Edgar said. He briskly stepped past me into the bathroom and shut the door. The pee wasn't a bluff. This is FLOW.BEGONE. [flush sound effect].

Toilets were flushed. Coffee was made. I got right to the point.

"What's going on with Anne?" I asked.

"She's still playing WOE.BEGONE," he said. "Ryan and CANNONBALL work at Base. They mostly answer directly to H, but I am above them in the hierarchy, so I'm not completely left out on what they're up to. They're still running the game. They still have control of it in this timeline, which probably has something to do with H's intervention to bring them to Base."

"What about Ty?" I asked.

"Unclear. He still has an iteration of Ryan and CANNONBALL in storage at the compound from when we rescued Marissa. They both could be running different instances of the same game if Ty is still interested in running it."

"The game felt more like Ty's version of it this time around. The gamerunners wore masks and didn't meet in public," I said.

"Yeah, it seems like they got a big do-over in this timeline. They learned some lessons from the metal pipe incident in Tophe's house," he said.

"It was an iron rod," I corrected him.

"Did Anne ever tell you what facility she went to after she completed the fourth challenge?" he asked.

"She did not," I said. "That was sort of a rocky period in our friendship, if I remember correctly. She killed me and lied about it and all that. I don't blame her now, but I was pretty hurt by it until around the time that she helped us inside of Tier 2 and we started Base together."

"Wherever it is, she is conducting missions there like you were at O.V.E.R. and she is a vital part of WOE.BEGONE operations. It seems like she does much more for them than you ever accomplished in Tier 1," he said.

"Maybe there's just more to discover there," I said.

“That’s probably it. They need her. H wanted to kill you before you even started playing WOE.BEGONE, but he needed Ryan and CANNONBALL in order to issue the correction and part of their demands were that you make it to O.V.E.R. Why? It has to be Anne. They needed Anne on the hook so that she could send them something very important. I don’t think that cutting off your left arm did them much good from a technological perspective. It’s the only thing that makes sense.”

“I stole some codes and stuff for them, but that wasn’t until I got here,” I said. “I assumed that everything up until O.V.E.R. was a test to see if I was right for the job.”

“”And they traded however much help you were with having Base on their side,” he said. “Who needs Mike Walters when you have Marissa, Chance, Shadow, Edgar, H, and Eagle? There were missions that we went on based entirely on their intel. Those weren’t Base operations. We were acting as the enforcement arm of WOE.BEGONE.”

“What do you mean by that?” I asked. “What were you enforcing?”

“We killed players who lost the game or were falling behind,” Edgar said. “H was never explicit about it, but there were times when the mission briefing was oddly light on details. Those were Chris and Ryan getting their WOE.BEGONE work done. It didn’t happen often, but I am certain that we send Chance and Shadow out to kill a WOE.BEGONE player at least a half dozen times.”

A chill ran down my spine. It was a nightmare. Base working for WOE.BEGONE was an actual nightmare that I had before. I sipped my coffee. “So Anne is fueling WOE.BEGONE and WOE.BEGONE is fueling Base. Have you tried to get in contact with her?”

“The Council won’t speak to me, though I’m pretty sure that they’re still out there,” he said. “That’s the point of the Council, after all. Iterate and diversify, so that no one point of failure results in everyone getting wiped out. I’m not surprised that they don’t want to talk to me. This timeline is completely out of our control. They wouldn’t want to interact with it if they didn’t have to, lest they get pulled in. The one Anne that is presumably working for them at a different facility probably isn’t part of the council yet.”

“So, how do we find her?” I asked.

“Did you steal H’s computer and leave it in Jamilla’s cabin?” he asked. “If Anne’s location is anywhere, it is on that computer. Ryan and Topher answer directly to H and he keeps them on a tight leash.”

“I did steal H’s computer, but it was out in the open in my room when Eagle came to kill that iteration,” I said. “Surely he noticed it and destroyed it or opened an investigation or something, right?”

“If he noticed, he didn’t say anything about it,” Edgar said. “But he would have noticed and been suspicious of a computer in your room, especially if it looked just like H’s computer. It has that green O.V.E.R. logo sticker on the top. He would know who it belonged to.”

“So why didn’t he notice the computer?” I asked.

“Because it wasn’t there,” he said. I could see the gears turning in his mind. “Because I’m going to sneak in and take the computer before he can notice it, before he started the cleanup.”

“Alright, but you don’t have a very large window to steal it,” I said. “I stole it from Base the night before you killed me, I think? Maybe the night of, even. Sorry, it’s been a few weeks and that iteration of Mike is only half of me, now.”

"I think I have to steal it during the mission," Edgar said. "We're having this conversation because I noticed that you had H's computer during the mission. If the computer wasn't there, then I wouldn't notice, so I wouldn't have said anything. I think a future version of me is already committed to stealing it during the mission, so that intentionality tracks backwards, hence it is already gone but I still have to take it."

"Is that how it works?" I asked.

"No, it's actually much much more complicated than that," Edgar said. "We don't even know if intentionality is real. It's just a model that helps us get desired results more often. Do you want me to dig out the academic literature? I actually wrote a paper on it for Base."

"No, you go get the computer," I said.

"Oh, you're coming with me," Edgar said.

"There's a man in that cabin who will kill me if he sees me," I said.

"And he'll kill me, too, if he figures out why I'm there," Edgar said. "I need you there to shoot him if things don't go according to plan."

"I've been back for 6 hours and we're already planning to shoot someone," I said.

"It's good to have you back, Mikey Bear," he said.

[SCENE TRANSITION.]

We appeared behind Jamilla's cabin in the dead of night on the night that he and Eagle were sent to kill me. Eagle was already inside. We had to wait until the mission was over to steal the computer because if we got there any earlier, Eagle would have been guarding the back door and walking through the front door would add potential errors to an already complete mission by Edgar to iterate and save me. This gave us very little time to do what we needed to do.

My room had been in the back of Jam's cabin. We watched the events unfold through the window. We heard a gunshot from the other room, the first iteration of me dying. The second iteration was tied up. I watched Eagle pull out a hunting knife and work it into my torso. He was cool, calm, and collected. He told me to stay dead. I couldn't tell if that iteration of me could still hear him, but I could. Edgar walked in just in time to see me die. We watched Edgar talking to Eagle. My body laid there, bloody, still tied up. Eagle had a jovial nature to him. He was talking with his hands, which were covered in my blood. Edgar didn't look upset. It was hard to tell. I'm sure it was hard for him to know how to feel. Everything was going perfectly according to plan. He had just saved me, but he still had to look at my corpse.

They spoke for a minute, then Edgar exited the room, walked out of the front door of the cabin, and transported home. That was when he and I appeared in his cabin and he explained to me what he had done. Eagle had been left alone on cleanup duty. My room was in severe disarray. I had put up a fight and objects were scattered all over the floor. Oh, and there was a corpse in there, too. He likely hadn't seen the computer yet, but he would once he tidied everything up. Edgar told me that he left the cabin spotless for Jamilla and that Jam hated that because Eagle had cleaned up all of my messes. Aw.

After Edgar left, Eagle immediately went to the bathroom to wash up. He was covered head to toe in my blood. It was even on his face from where he had absentmindedly touched it

while talking to Edgar. He looked feral. He sang the “clean up clean up” song from Barney as he exited my room and entered the bathroom.

This was the time to strike. Edgar opened the back door. He left it open. I stood in the open doorway with my gun trained down the hallway. If Eagle left the bathroom and headed back into my room, my orders were to shoot him. The door to my room was open. Edgar would have no time to hide if the door opened. It was vitally important that I kill Eagle if he left the bathroom. We would have to figure out what to do with him after that. He couldn't stay dead, obviously. H would launch a full investigation on what happened, issue a correction, and it would probably come to light that Edgar was trying to hide me. I would have to kill him and then we unfortunately would have to figure out how to bring him back to life.

Edgar dug around in the mess that Eagle and I had made. He found the computer wedged under a chair in the corner. Eagle never would have seen it there. We were safe in that regard. He picked up the computer, as well as the files that I stole from H's office.

I heard the toilet flush. This is WOE.PEEGONE. The door opened. I could see Eagle. I froze. Why wasn't I shooting? I wanted to shoot him, but I was paralyzed in fear. I had just watched this man kill me. It felt like he had a power over me. This was the first time that I had actually seen him, since I had been iterated and transported away before he entered the cabin. That was the face of the man that killed me, that enjoyed killing me, that made a comfortable evening out of it. He didn't see me at all. He didn't look towards the back door. Instead, he walked right back into my room. Edgar was still in there. The door was open. I could see both of them in there. Edgar looked at me like a dog who was being forced to take a bath. I didn't shoot. I was too late. Edgar put down the computer and files, whipped out the calculator, mashed some buttons on it as quickly as he could, and transported the computer. It disappeared just as Eagle turned the corner. I breathed a sigh of relief. No matter what happened next, we didn't get caught in the act. I hoped that Edgar had managed to send the computer to the correct place. Edgar touched his eye as Eagle entered the room. What was he doing?

“Edgar! You're back! Wanted to clean up after all?” Eagle joked. Edgar forced a laugh.

“No, no... I... lost a contact lens? I got home and it wasn't there. I was thinking I might have lost it in here,” he said.

“Ha! Did it fall out while you were crying over your little boyfriend?” Eagle asked. His laughter was too much for me.

“Ha ha... something like that,” Edgar said.

“Never fear! I'll help ya look for it, buddy,” Eagle said. They began searching for the missing contact. They left no item unperturbed. The box of Matt's belongings was open on the floor. Eagle tore through it, throwing everything in it across the floor. No contact.

After a minute or two of searching, Eagle used his boot to kick over my corpse, rolling me onto my side. Sitting in the blood where my body had been was a contact lens, covered in blood. Eagle picked it up and perched it on his index finger.

“Found it!” he proclaimed. “Though I'm not sure that you're gonna wanna wear it anymore. Unless you want to be *really* close to your Mikey Bear.”

“I keep telling you that he's not my Mikey Bear. I don't remember that iteration of events. That's just some stupid shit in my file,” Edgar said. I knew it wasn't true, but it still hurt to hear.

“You know I'm just picking on you,” Eagle said.

“I know, I know. Give me my contact,” Edgar said.

“Put it in!” Eagle said, handing him the contact.

“No way in hell am I doing that,” he said. “I’ll leave you to get started on cleanup. For real this time.”

“See you in the morning, Edgar,” he said. “Remember: donuts!”

“Can’t wait,” Edgar said. He exited my room, then walked out the back door.

“Sorry...” I whispered.

“Don’t be. It worked out.” He entered the coordinates on the Calculator and we returned to Edgar’s cabin in our time period.

The computer was waiting for us when we returned. We were both relieved to see it. Edgar had entered the coordinates fast and he didn’t have time to double check them. A triple check is part of the official Base protocols because it is so easy to miss a number in a long string of numbers, or to accidentally switch a coordinate to a negative coordinate. Flipping a positive to a negative was how the iteration of me in this timeline sent that iteration of Chance into the ocean, which had an exactly opposite coordinate to Jam’s cabin.

“Do you remember his password?” Edgar asked.

“I don’t. But I remember what I googled in order to figure out how to find it,” I said. “Grab your laptop. We’ll bring up the guide. And after that, all that’s left to do is to find Anne.”

“It’s 2 in the morning, babe,” he said. “Let’s get some sleep. I’ll put the computer in the basement and we can figure that out in the morning.”

“In the morning it is, then,” I said.

I slept in the bed that night, holding Edgar close to me. I would squeeze him tight any time a vision of Eagle killing me would pop into my head. After a few times, Edgar politely asked me to stop squeezing him so hard. I tried to focus on the more positive things. We had the computer, we were going to find Anne, we were going to return to our timeline. Mike Walters was back.

[END THEME PLAYS]

[PUSH PLAYS]