

EPISODE 82: Digging

“I don’t suppose that Michael said anything to you, did he?”

The bags under Mike’s eyes were darker than they had been the night before. It was the next morning for me, but I got the distinct impression that more time had passed for him. He had seemed contented for once, having spent the day at Base with us. He thought that he had finally wrangled Michael and all of his inflamed protective instincts. The night was cool and calm. We could breathe freely. And then the next morning, like clockwork, there was no Michael to be found. Neither Mike nor I were surprised, merely frustrated.

“He gave me that spiel about not being around forever,” I replied, “but that was it. He went right back to being the life of the party. I don’t think that he said anything to anyone about leaving.”

[Frustrated sigh] “I knew that this was gonna happen. Ever since he started traveling without telling me where he was going.” Mike sighed and kicked at the grass in front of him. “He always came back before morning, though, no matter how long he was gone. Something happened. He got himself into something that he can’t get out of. I can feel it. Took the Calculator with him, too, so I can’t even check where he went.”

“Can’t you just... I don’t know... go back to last night and follow him around until he travels and stop him?” I asked.

“I already tried that. It didn’t work,” Mike said.

“Didn’t work? He had to leave from some point in space and time, right? He was here watching *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* with us all night. We didn’t lose track of him. So, why can’t you just track him from there, or go back and warn us?”

“I don’t know why I can’t, but I can’t. I don’t understand how it works,” Mike said, “There’s some sort of trap that prevents any sort of correction. I tried following him after everyone else went to bed and I ended up back in this present. I tried correcting him when he went outside last night, same result. I went back to our apartment, same result. No matter when or where I go I end up back here.”

“Okay, so you can’t travel, but can you move Michael?” I asked.

“Also, the same result. He has to be in range for me to use the Calculator, though, so I have to get close enough and then I get sent back here. Edgar and I went to O.V.E.R. to get the Tier 2 code to move him that way and we still ended up back here.” Mike put his hands behind his head, looked up at the sky, and breathed deeply. [Sighs] “We are being actively monitored. Someone is watching me in real time and correcting my corrections on the fly.”

“Do you think that it’s Mustardseed?” I asked.

“Mustardseed is definitely watching us, so could be the case,” Mike said. “But we’re the only ones that only have these dinky Calculators with a limited range. It could be anyone. O.V.E.R. has the security system. The Flinchites have a similar technology in their compound. We got these things off of those Arbiters, but I think that they’re just field instruments. Ty is the head of the Arbiters, after all, so they have access to anything that he does. And, yes,

Mustardseed also seems to have this same ability. Being the only mom and pop time travel shop comes with its drawbacks.”

“You’re making it sound like there’s no way to figure out who took him,” I replied.

“I’m not even sure that somebody took him. I think this might all be on Michael,” Mike said. “I think he’s got some nonsense in his head about protecting us and he’s used his smart stupid clever boneheaded brain to set up some sort of trap so that nothing we do can stop him from... getting himself killed or whatever he’s doing. Maybe he thought that he’d be back, maybe he didn’t. But if he were coming back, he’d be back by now. That fuckin’ asshole.” Mike looked away from me as he muttered these last few words. He pinched the bridge of his nose.

“So, what do we do now? Give up and hope he turns up eventually?” I asked.

“No, that’s the most frustrating part,” Mike said. “Now we have to go digging around in everyone’s business to see if he said anything to anyone. I’ve already dug around in Base’s business this morning, and he didn’t tell anyone anything useful. I’m not surprised. They don’t know Michael very well. I think some of them are weirded out because Michael knows things about them that they don’t. I know those things too; I just have the good sense not to bring it up. But no leads on that front. So now we have to make some house calls.”

“Lead the way boss,” I said. “One question, though: why are you wearing a cowboy hat?”

“In order to find a cowboy, you have to think like a cowboy,” Mike said.

It was time to go digging. This is WOE.BEGONE

[INTRO THEME PLAYS.]

Boris’s apartment on the first floor of the apartment building was much more spacious and well-decorated than Mike and Michael’s apartment, but it still felt like an apartment in a run-down Latvian apartment building. The lights were fairly dim, and the whole place smelled faintly of Eastern European home cooking. Boris beckoned us in kindly and served us tea from a samovar without asking us if we wanted some. I drank the tea politely, despite not liking tea much at all. Bruno brushed against our legs as we took a seat on the couch. Boris sat in an expensive looking recliner across from us. The walls of the living were decorated with various taxidermied animals: a roe deer, waterfowl, even a turkey which Boris must have traveled to America in order to harvest. There was a stuffed boar’s head on the mantle, almost identical to the one that Michael had commissioned.

[All of Boris’s dialogue is spoken with an Eastern European accent.] “So, where is Michael? Your cowboy hat cannot fool me, I know you are Mike,” Boris said. (Strap in we’re doing accents this episode). “Do not think I know you,” he said, pointing at me, “But I am not type for questions. If Mike trusts you, I trust you.”

“I appreciate that,” I said.

“Michael’s why we’re here,” Mike explained. “He’s missing and we don’t have any clue where he’s run off to.”

“Well, did you call police?” Boris asked. There was a pregnant pause where Mike and I were trying to figure out how to explain that the police wouldn’t be any help here. Then, Boris let out a raucous laugh. “I am joking! I am joking! You did not call police. I say I am not type for questions. Police are, eh?”

“You understand,” Mike said.

“Michael, I adore Michael. I take him to woods, show him bear. I tell him there is bear, but he says he needs to see, so I show him bear.” My ears pricked up at the word “bear.” Ty had told me that bears were extinct in Latvia. In fact, I had looked it up to make sure that he knew what he was talking about. Boris took Michael out to the woods to show him a bear? “He watch pup Bruno so I can run errands. He shoot rifle with me. That’s how I got boar on wall. You have one, too, yes?” Boris leaned forward in his recliner. “But Michael is... cowboy... Whatever it is I am not asking questions about uh... it gets him hurt. In my experience, someone who won’t talk about past, or work is either... assassin... or insurance agent... or maybe landlord. Whatever he is doing, he is not raising cattle like true cowboy. Not in your apartment. He is putting himself in line of fire.”

“Has he said anything to you recently? Like about what he was up to or maybe he was planning a trip somewhere?” Mike asked.

“Two days ago, he come to me strange. He looked... uh... did uh, did someone die?”

“Not exactly,” I said.

“He handed me envelope with ten thousand euro. He told me thank you for waiving rent but that he was making it up to me. Said to make sure that Mike did not have to pay for very long time. He told me to pay Mike for watching Bruno and do not let him use that money for rent. Then we talked about little things, and he brightened up. We talk about hunting and movies, and I invited him to bar next week, and he agreed. And then we hugged goodbye. I planned to sneak money back to him, but now you say he is gone?”

“Right, we haven’t seen him since last night. He didn’t say anything about going anywhere, did he?” Mike asked.

“No... well...” Boris bit his lower lip in thought. “He said thank you for taking me to the bear. Uh... he said he wanted to go back to the forest. I—I cannot remember. He did not say that he was going, but he said it strange. Like he meant something that I didn’t know about. Do you think that he went to go see bear? He should have taken my rifle. I do not he has one.”

“Why would Michael want to go into the forest without telling us?” I asked. “Why would he want to see a bear?” I felt as though I had seen enough bears for ten lifetimes.

“Mikey, maybe, when you saw the bears— uh, actually not in front of Boris, no offense, Boris.”

I knew what he was talking about. The bears that I saw when I was lost in the forest.

“He should not have gone alone,” Boris said. “There are not many bears. There are snakes, wolves, badgers. Badger is small but mean he is mean. Mean like Boris. I would not want to fight one. I apologize. I should have paid better attention.”

“No, you did great, Boris. You’ve been a lot of help— more help than anyone else we’ve talked. Thank you. And thank you for the tea,” Mike said. We stood up to leave. Boris stood up as well.

“Glad to help. Get my cowboy home safe, pozhaluysta,” Boris said.

“We will. It was a pleasure meeting you,” I said.

“Did not catch name. I’m thinking... Mike,” Boris said. I froze. “No questions.” Boris smiled at me. I smiled back.

What all did Boris already know? There was no telling. He spent a lot of time alone with Michael and Michael was prone to saying whatever he felt he felt like saying. He could’ve told Boris everything for all we knew. Boris shook my hand, a firm handshake if there ever was one and let us out of his apartment.

“Well, that certainly was quite the lead,” I said once we were out of earshot of Boris. “Do you think that Michael went to send the bears to help me?”

“No, I don’t,” Mike said. “I can picture Michael helping you make it through the woods. I can imagine Michael going to see a bear in the woods. I cannot imagine bears in the woods helping you survive, Michael’s intervention or not. I think that whatever it is you ate out there made you have an altered experience.”

“No! I looked them up. They’re called bilberries and they’re real,” I explained. “And people eat them all the time.”

“Sure, they do, Mikey,” Mike said.

“The bears brought the berries. I know what I saw,” I said.

“And I truly believe that you saw that,” Mike said. “But you are not a Disney princess. You do not commune with the animals. You explicitly anti-commune with bears. We have the scars to prove it. If anything, someone kept you from being eaten by those bears.”

“I’m not a Disney princess *yet*,” I corrected him. “You’ll see, once that WOE.BEGONE Disney Plus deal comes through, I will be a Disney princess and we will be rollin’ in the dough.”

“Yeah, I’ll hold my breath. Come on,” Mike said. “We have other places to be, and you walk slower when you talk.”

[SCENE TRANSITION.]

I felt disgusting sitting at Matt’s kitchen table. There was so much violence that had happened over this very table, and I was responsible for all of it. The smell of the kitchen brought back unwanted sense memories. I had made an uneasy peace with what had happened there, but Mustardseed had sent a recording of the fourth challenge to Matt and had driven everything back up to the surface. I wanted to beg for Matt’s forgiveness, but that wasn’t why we were there. He had already seemed to have forgiven me and there was other business to attend to. I could see some conflict on Mike’s face as well—a resting posture that subtly conveyed discomfort. Matt was the first one to break the uncomfortable silence.

“Well, if it isn’t Mike Walters, the constant enigma himself,” Matt said. “What a fortuitous time for a visit. Last time you were here, you were with the cowboy, but this one is... my time period Mike, right?” he asked, pointing to me.

“I go by Mikey, to keep things straight,” I said.

“Michael is the reason that we’re here, actually,” Mike said. “He’s gone missing and nobody at Base has any clue as to where he went. So, we’re reaching out to people. We were hoping that you had heard from him.”

“No, the last time that I heard from him was when the two of you showed up on your way home from Alaska. Does this have to do with Mustardseed?” he asked.

“We don’t know yet,” Mike explained. “But didn’t Michael come here when you—”

I cut Mike off. “That didn’t happen,” I said.

“Something I don’t want to know about I presume?” Matt asked.

“Exactly,” I replied.

“Then I don’t want to know about it,” Matt said. “I’m sorry that I can’t help you with Michael. The Mike Walters enigma gets even more complicated every day, it seems. That’s who you want to end up as? A cowboy? I’ve known you a long time, Mike, and I can’t say that I saw that coming. I mean, I get it but it’s still a surprise.”

“I didn’t see it coming either,” I said.

“Eh, at least it’s something to be,” Matt said. “Better than being nothing at all, I suppose. I tried that out for a while. Not very rewarding.”

“...Edgar likes the cowboy thing,” I admitted.

“There it is!” Matt said. “The puzzle pieces fit together perfectly. I was just missing the one piece. Hey uh, speaking of you and Edgar and puzzle pieces, I’ve got another one that you can solve for me.”

“What? It involves Edgar?” I asked.

“Here, let’s just go into the other room and I’ll show you,” he said. We stood up and left the kitchen for the living room. I was overjoyed to be out of the kitchen. The living room was just as I had remembered from when I stayed at Matt’s house, before I got kidnapped by the Flinchites. It was comforting seeing it again. The three of us squeezed onto the small sofa in the room. There was just enough space for all three of us without being majorly uncomfortable. Matt turned on the television.

“You guys are lucky that I’m one of the only people left on Earth who still pays for cable,” Matt said. “I think about canceling it all the time, but I keep it for football and hockey. But I had it on in the background the other day and I managed to catch something that might interest you. I assume that you don’t know about it already or you would’ve brought it up by now. I thought that that’s why you were here until you brought up Michael.” Matt was menuing through DVR menus as he spoke. He finally found what he was looking for: a recording of the 11 o’clock news.

“And now, you’re wondering why I was recording the news that evening and the answer is that I wasn’t. They reran the same segment later that evening, thank God. Because you’re

gonna wanna see this.” Matt was navigating through the broadcast until he came across the segment that he was looking for. “Tell me when you see it.” He hit play.

It was a news segment about the grand opening of a new indie theater in town. There was a small but enthusiastic crowd gathered around to usher in the new theater and the crowd was behind the field reporter as she spoke.

“You see it, right?” Matt asked.

Of course, I saw it. In the second row of spectators, there they were. Or, rather, there *we* were. Mike and Edgar. There to see the launch of a brand-new movie theater in British Columbia, Canada.

“That’s not either or you, is it?” Matt asked. “If you had been in town, you would have dropped by and said hello. Or at least mentioned that you were going to be out this way. You definitely would have said something about it when you got here today.”

He was right. That wasn’t either of us.

“Who are they?” I asked.

“They appear to be Mike and Edgar,” Matt said.

“Unhelpful,” I replied. “Where did they come from? We didn’t authorize them. I’d know about that.”

“They look like you and your Edgar, like they’re from your time,” Mike said. “Look at the Mike. I’ve been roughed up pretty badly since then. So, if it were me, then you’d be able to see it. Even from far away. That is a Mike that is much closer to *this* time period.”

“An escaped Mikey from the compound?” I asked.

“Why wouldn’t an escaped Mikey contact the Base?” Mike asked.

“Well, the other escaped Mikeys got killed by Michael,” I replied. “Maybe that has something to do with it.” Matt’s eyes widened as I explained this, but there was no time to fill him in.

“Still, that doesn’t explain the Edgar,” Mike replied. “The Edgar in the compound is older. According to Alaska Mikey, the Edgar in the compound has a wedding ring. I would be able to tell the difference between my Edgar and yours. They are closer in time to you and Edgar. And you say it’s not you.”

“Of course, it’s not me,” I said. “Why would I hide this from either of you? Matt’s right. If I was in town, I would have said something to him. I know that Mustardseed got us a little bent out of shape, but I thought we talked that out.”

“We did,” Matt said.

“So, I have nothing to hide and no reason to lie. That isn’t me,” I said.

“So, we’re back to square one. Who are they and what are they doing?” Mike asked.

“They appear to be enjoying an independent cinema experience,” Matt said.

“Sounds like me which means that Mike dragged Edgar to it,” I said. “But why Vancouver?”

“To send some sort of message through Matt?” Mike didn’t sound sure of himself.

“Or to enjoy an independent cinema experience,” Matt said.

“You said that already,” I said.

“But you didn’t take me seriously,” Matt replied.

“Is there something to seriously consider?” I asked.

“Look at them,” Matt said. “Mike is wearing a Hawaiian shirt. Edgar is... well, he’s still well-dressed, but he looks casual.”

“Edgar’s actually not that well-dressed. He just can just make anything look good,” Mike said. “It’s sort of aggravating. We’ll go to a thrift shop, and he’ll be all like, “isn’t this shirt cute?” and it really isn’t it just looks good on him because he can wear anything and pull it off. Meanwhile, I make it home with 2 shirts that make me look like a slob and that I only wear on laundry day.”

“Point being,” Matt continued, “They do not appear to be there on business. They’re on vacation.”

“I could see that,” Mike said.

“But who? Who are they? Where did they come from?” I asked. “Mike, O.V.E.R. Mike and OVEdgar still at O.V.E.R. right?”

“They were as of this morning,” Mike replied. “Edgar and I planned our trip there around their schedules so as not to bother them. They don’t know that Michael is missing, and we didn’t want to fill them in.”

“Then I am entirely out of ideas,” I said.

“Should we... go look for them?” Matt asked.

“Wouldn’t that be difficult without some sort of lead?” Mike asked.

“Well, Vancouver’s got about 700,000 people in it,” Matt said. “If we start knocking on doors today, we should be able to find them before we die of old age. Or you could use your little time travel thingy and just go to the movie theater opening.”

“I think that this needs to go on the to-do list, guys,” I said. “As much as I would like to get to the bottom of it, the clock is ticking on Michael. The first 48 hours after someone goes missing are crucial. At least in normal non-time travel scenarios.”

“You guys are going to take me on the mystery Mike adventure, right?” Matt asked. “I never get to go on your adventures, and I’m the one that found them.”

“It’s dangerous, Matt,” Mike said.

“I know that it’s dangerous, but if Anne gets to go on these missions, then I should be able to,” Matt said.

Mike huffed. “Fine. We’ll have Michael back by then, anyway. Shouldn’t be the most dangerous trip we’ve ever taken.”

Matt smiled. “It’s settled then. Glad you rolled over easy. I’ve been thinking about it ever since I recorded the clip.”

“Matt... this might be a silly question but: do you want to work for Base?” I asked.

“Me? Oh, no,” Matt said. “I’m settled in pretty firmly here in Vancouver. I couldn’t just up and move. I just recently convinced the city not to condemn the house. It would be a shame to move out of it after all that hard work.”

“We’ll talk to Base about it when we get back,” I said.

“If you wouldn’t mind,” Matt said.

“Well, we best get going,” Mike said, standing up from the couch. “It has been enlightening, Matt. But we have one more place to get to before we’re done for the day.”

Matt and I stood up as well. “We do?” I asked. “Who? We’ve talked to everyone who’s ever known Michael.”

“I guess it’s going to be a surprise, then,” Mike said. “Matt, see if you can find the mystery Mike in the present for us if you don’t mind. It would be better to not have to travel to them. It gives us more options as to how to handle it. We’ll be back for that after we find Michael.”

“My first order from the Base,” Matt said and winked. We said our goodbyes, Matt lead us out of the house, and we were off to the next contact.

[SCENE TRANSITION.]

“He’s not going to know anything,” I said. “Don’t get me wrong, I appreciate coming out here. It’s beautiful and I wish that we did it all the time, but we only met this guy once.”

“We’ve only met this guy once,” Mike said. “I have a sneaking suspicion that that isn’t the case for Michael.”

“I guess it doesn’t hurt to try,” I said. “Wait, is this why you wore the cowboy hat all day?”

“Yep,” Mike said.

“You didn’t have to wear it all day you could have just worn it here,” I said.

“Well, we would have had to go back to the apartment to get it and it would have been a whole thing,” Mike said. “Alright, enough sightseeing. Let’s head in.”

The saloon doors of the Sidewinder creaked as they swung open. We were met with the dim interior of the saloon, the clack of pool balls, blues rock music playing from the jukebox. We found the nearest barstools and bellied up to the bar.

“What can I get for your gentlemen?” August asked without looking up.

“Hi, August,” I said.

August looked up at us. “Oh,” he said. “You two. Mike and Mikey,” he paused a moment, looking past us into space. “You fellas are lookin’ for Michael, ain’tcha?”

“Do you know where he is?” Mike asked.

“I don’t,” August said. “But if I tell you what he told me, I think that you will.”

[END THEME PLAYS.]

[POST CREDITS.]

[Accent starts off as Eastern European and then slowly transitions into the cowboy voice.] The line between Boris and Michael is a little bit thinner than I thought it was, partner.