

## **MAG – 064 – Burial Rites**

### **Content Warnings:**

- Burial rites
- Tunnels and underground
- Altered reality
- Body horror
- Graphic injury
- Stabbing

**Discussions of:** corpse, paranormal encounter, euthanasia

**Mentions of:** Gunshots, abandonment, knife

**SFX:** low drone, high pitched tone

**[The Magnus Archives Theme – Intro]**

**JONATHAN SIMS**

Rusty Quill presents: The Magnus Archives. Episode sixty-four. Burial Rites.

**[The Magnus Archives Theme – Intro *Continued.*]**

**[Tape clicks on.]**

**ARCHIVIST**

Statement of Donna Gwynne, regarding an unlicensed archaeological dig near the Red Sea in Egypt. Original statement given May 20th, 2015. Audio recording by Jonathan Sims, Head Archivist of the Magnus Institute, London.

Statement begins.

### **ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)**

You'll forgive me if I'm vague on the details. I have to be. The job I was on at the time was a long way from legal and even if the courts could never prove it, let's just say the people I worked for take privacy very seriously indeed. All names I give here aside from my own are aliases.

It's hard to get a job in archaeology these days. I mean, I guess it always was, but education funding is being squeezed across the board and the fact is most higher up positions in the field tend to only open up once the previous occupant dies. It's sad, but if you look at a full lecture hall on the archaeology course of any major university, you can be pretty sure that none of the people you're looking at are going to end up doing it for a living. A few might get assistant positions on a project or two, but the long, thankless hours and endless grind to climb a ladder already full up with old posh men will probably change their minds. I suppose what I'm saying is I was never going to be a 'real' archaeologist.

So when I got a chance to do some unlicensed work, I figured it was either that or train to be a teacher. And I hate children. See, the thing is that there's a lot of very valuable stuff in the ground: ancient artefacts, forgotten knowledge, all

that good stuff. But acquiring it takes a lot of time, a lot of money and a lot of fiddly licences and permissions, not to mention that governments can get very grabby when it comes to the prizes of antiquity. You can't take three steps in this field without some wannabe Indiana Jones declaring something or other 'belongs in a museum'. But museums have very limited budgets and the private market has a never-ending appetite for valuable ancient treasures. So you have *my* industry, which is like normal archaeology but a bit more... free-form. I like to think of myself as a 'rogue archaeologist', but I think most people would just call me a grave robber, which is daft because half the time it isn't even graves we're dealing with, but that makes surprisingly little difference in terms of legality.

I worked for a man named Stavo. I still might; I'm not sure. He doesn't really make contact when we don't have a job and this one ended badly enough that I'm not sure whether or not I'm getting another call. I hope so. I really don't want to be a teacher. He first contacted me three years after funding fell through for my second PhD and some professional disputes meant that the chances of my career continuing were somewhere between zero and no. He was very to the point with me, explaining right away that he organised rapid turnaround illegal digs, taking whatever high value finds were transportable and selling them to private collectors. He had plenty of labour, security and

organisational support, but he needed someone on staff to identify and quickly appraise artefacts or other discoveries. He had previously had a disgraced anthropology professor from Harvard, but he'd apparently been busted smuggling a few extras through Customs in China and was no longer available. Stavo said I was just the right choice to fill the position.

I agreed on the spot. I never did do great with the ethical aspects of my field. I love the hunt, the research and the discovery, but to be honest, expanding the body of mankind's knowledge or helping a culture connect with its roots has never been high on my priority list. Certainly not as high as money.

So for the next few years I travelled the globe with Stavo and his team. There was me, a geologist I'll call Grigori, Norman, who was the middleman to various antiques dealers, auction houses and less respectful museums, and a pair of quiet Albanians, Barry and Paul, who acted as the muscle. Well, they did the majority of it, but Stavo didn't like it when people put their feet up on a job, so me, Grigori and Norman spent most of the time working a spade alongside them, as our expertise generally came in useful in the latter half of the dig. I like to think I earned my keep. Certainly, there were plenty of times Barry was all set to toss out some priceless treasure because he took it for dusty trash. And Stavo never complained.

This last dig was high risk. Stavo and Norman had ears in the appropriate offices of most universities and museums, so we got word that the Egyptian government had denied permission for the University of Pennsylvania to look into a possible tomb complex located between Cairo and the Red Sea. Again, I won't go into specifics, but it was right in the middle of the Eastern Desert, a good 30 or 40 miles from the closest known explored pyramid or tomb. If the university researchers were right, this place could be both a significant find and, more importantly for us, completely untouched.

It was dangerous though. When a government denied permission like this, you could never be sure that they weren't going to send people of their own instead, and Stavo had plenty of stories of ex-colleagues that had got themselves inadvertently arrested when the military abruptly turned up to secure a dig site. Still, the opportunity was too good to pass up and Stavo had some contacts within the Cairo police force, so was able to get us a pair of well-bribed policemen to stick around and give us at least a passing air of respectability for any civilian who might stumble across us. So off I went to Egypt, dreaming of finding a new pyramid. I know that sounds daft, but most pyramids are not as huge, obvious or intact as those at Giza. After four or five thousand years, most of just look like hills or sometimes dunes and there could be any number of them waiting undiscovered beneath the Egyptian earth.

I was surprised by how easily we found it. Stavo had gotten a location from the university's application and Grigori quickly located a likely looking geological formation on the satellite images. Less than 14 hours after I got the call, I was standing, shovel in hand, in the middle of the Eastern Desert, breaking ground over a tomb that had been unopened for millennia. It was exhilarating.

Grigori had done some work to make sure we were digging at what he believed to be the entrance and it only took a day to unearth the slab of limestone that covered it. I could see hieroglyphics etched onto the surface, but they were far too worn to read. Large upon the stone was carved the closed loop of a shen ring, the symbol of infinity. This struck me as odd, since just based on the entrance, I was pretty sure this tomb was at least fourth dynasty and the shen ring was usually used to designate a royal burial place. But there were no cartouches among the hieroglyphics on the entrance, which I would have expected if the tomb contained royalty. It was a subterranean pyramid, I was now quite certain, but if it housed the remains of a Pharaoh, their name had not been protected upon death.

Barry and Paul wasted no time in hoisting the limestone slab off the entrance, revealing a dark, yawning passage. In the heat of the sun I was acutely aware of the cold draft seeping out of the opening. Stavo gave it a look over and asked if there was anything we could salvage from the hieroglyphics. I gave

him directions to chip off the shen ring and take photos of the rest for later study. Before you ask, I don't have access to those photos - Stavo still has the camera. You know, in my haste to make sure everything was going smoothly, it hadn't really hit me what we had found until that moment, as I stood on the threshold and breathed air 4,000 years old. It was dry and smelt faintly of cedarwood. I had just helped discover an untouched tomb of the fourth dynasty. We collected our bags, picks and torches and headed into the dark.

Two things struck me as soon as we were inside. The first was how big the place was. The passages were far wider than I would have assumed, based on my research on comparable tombs. The other was that there was also significantly less ornamentation. And by less, I mean none. The walls were bare, unpainted, and for a horrible moment I thought it might already have been ransacked. Stavo had the same thought, but Grigori assured us that the condition of the entrance indicated that it hadn't been opened since it was originally sealed. The tomb hadn't been robbed; it was just empty.

As we headed deeper, I began to notice passages branching off our path. In each case they seemed to be heading more or less back the way we came. I called a halt and Stavo and I took a few minutes to explore one of them. At first, they seemed to be heading back towards the surface, but further

corridors branched off until we finally reached a dead end. Then another. And another. It took longer than I was comfortable with to find the others again.

It was a labyrinth, not entirely unlike the one found at Hawara, but crucially, it seemed to only assume its deceptive, maze-like form when heading back towards the entrance. When walking deeper in, it was rather straightforward. I made these observations to Stavo and he immediately headed back out and returned carrying the end of the jeep's winch. It was 150 feet in total and he figured if the tomb ended up going deeper than that, we should probably reconsider our approach entirely. I could see he was getting irritated by these delays and the lack of obviously bankable artefacts. I couldn't blame him – I was starting to feel quite on edge myself.

As it turned out, the winch finished just within sight of the central chamber, so we tied a torch to the end and headed inside. Like the rest, this room was simple and plain, built out of rough limestone. It was completely empty, save for a raised dais in the centre, about 3 feet off the floor. Lying there were the remains of an unpainted wooden sarcophagus. It had long since rotted away, though the uncharacteristic copper bands that wrapped it still seemed in good condition. Among the debris, I could see the pale wrapping of the corpse, tight around in a way that reminded me disconcertingly of a straightjacket. It had worn away in many places, leaving the flesh of the mummy itself on show, dark



black and almost shiny in the torchlight. There was nothing else there at all. No treasures and no other exits.

It was at that point that Stavo lost it a bit. He'd spent a lot of money on this expedition and to find that there was nothing there except an old corpse and some shards of wood was a significant problem for him. I mean, the architectural implications of the place in terms of mid to late fourth dynasty construction practices were kind of amazing, but I didn't think that was something he wanted to hear just then, so I kept quiet. We all did. When Stavo got angry, it was best to just let it run its course, rather than trying to talk him down from it and draw his anger your way.

I busied myself making another loop of the room, in case there were any secret entrances that I'd missed, while behind me he stood there, swearing. I did notice something in the corner though. About a half dozen small bones, with carvings on each face. Dice. I knew that dice games pre-dated the Old Kingdom by some time and these were excellent quality. I decided to wait until Stavo had finished ranting before I drew his attention to them.

I turned to see him leaning over the corpse, rage on his face like it was somehow this dead Egyptian's fault that the trip had been a bust. I had to stop myself laughing, until I saw that he might actually punch the thing. The

mummy was the only thing in that place aside from the dice that we had any hope of selling and I couldn't let him damage it. I shouted at him to stop and his eyes fixed on me with hatred burning behind them. I explained to him calmly and reasonably that the mummified body before him might be worth a lot of money. This did seem to calm him down a bit and he was just starting to apologise for his outburst when he went completely still.

His eyes were wide and he had gone deathly pale. I stepped a bit closer and as my torch travelled down from his face and along his arm, I saw it. A blackened, desiccated hand gripping his wrist, the thin fingers clenched tight. It was moving. It was alive.

It opened its eyes, but beneath those brittle eyelids were empty crevices where they had long since rotted away. It opened its mouth as though to scream, but no sound came out at all. I remember thinking of course it can't scream, it doesn't have any lungs. Lack of jars meant this would have been a cheaper mummification and they would have liquified all the organs over the course of 70 days. Was this thing alive when that had happened? Was it buried in salt for 70 days, feeling the cedar oil slowly melting its insides?

These thoughts ran rapidly through my mind as I stood there, frozen in terror. The sound of Stavo's pistol shocked me out of my stupor. He always carried a

gun when he went on a dangerous job and he was emptying it into the glossy flesh of the mummy before him. Each shot sent shards of dry skin and dusty bone flying off it, but it didn't stop moving. Not even when he shoved the gun in the corpse's mouth and blew off the back of its skull.

It had released him now and Stavo turned to see the others had already fled back from the chamber, heading towards the surface, following the cable back. The strange, half-dead creature had spasmed its way off the raised platform now, onto the floor, and lay between me and Stavo. And the door. He gave me an apologetic look, and then ran, leaving me alone with the thing.

The broken, juddering mummy began to drag itself towards me. It was still partially bound in the tight burial cloth, but that didn't stop it making its painstaking way over the dusty ground. There was plenty of room to run around it, it wasn't even that fast, but my legs just wouldn't work as it got closer and closer. Its mouth opened and closed stiffly, dark brown dust falling from it in a steady stream. I have no idea how it knew I was there. It had no eyes, no nose. There's no way it should have been able to detect me, but it knew, and crawled directly towards me.

I managed to reach to my hip and pull out my own weapon, a large hunting knife I'd picked up on our last trip to North America, more because its weight

had given me a sense of security than because I knew how to use it. I waved it at the approaching corpse, but there was no reaction. When I felt its cold, leathery fingers grip my shin, it was like the panic pushed my mind so far that it suddenly snapped back into place. I gripped the knife in both hands, leaned forward and plunged it into the thing's throat.

The blade sank in with a dry creaking sound and the mummy's arm shot up to grip it. I almost threw up from the feeling of its blackened, dead hands on mine, but it was astoundingly strong. Twitching, it pulled my hands away, dragging the knife out of its throat and moving my arm down lower, positioning the point of the blade on its chest, where the heart should be. Then it made me push the knife in. The poor creature hung there for a second, then pulled the knife out and made me stab it again. Over and over it made me do it, while its torso wracked and convulsed. It almost seemed like it was crying, but without tear ducts or lungs there was no way to know.

After the fifth time it had made me stab it, it loosened its grip on my hand enough that I could release the knife. With a burst of adrenaline, I took to my feet and fled. Luckily, Stavo hadn't withdrawn the jeep's winch cable yet, or else God knows how long I'd have been trapped down there, especially since when I emerged into the intense sunlight of the desert, I found Paul and Barry arguing over the best way to replace the slab over the entrance. It took many

hours to re-bury it completely, but when we were done, it was like no one had ever been there. Stavo didn't say a word as we drove away.

In ancient Egypt, dying was the most important thing a person would ever do. Your whole life was preparation for it, readying yourself and acquiring what you would need for the journey. Back then the Nile was the source of all that kept you alive. The land of the living. But as you got further from it, the very earth itself became hostile to you, unable to support any sort of life at all. It was there, at the outskirts, the edge of life itself, that they built their tombs and pyramids. I cannot imagine what they would have thought of a person who could not die. I can imagine what they would have done to them.

### **ARCHIVIST**

End statement.

If there's one thing that I hate more than statements that can only be followed up by making contact with uncooperative foreign agencies, it is statements where everyone involved is a criminal who either cannot be tracked down or is unwilling to discuss their business in any way. This statement manages to neatly combine the two in such a way that any verification or follow up has proven utterly impossible. The only thing I have found is that Ms Gwynne is now training to become a teacher. I can't deny I find a certain cruel satisfaction

in that fact. I feel anyone who brings me a statement about mummies deserves everything they get.

End recording.

**[Tape clicks off. Tape clicks on.]**

**BASIRA**

You can't just come down to the station asking after me.

**ARCHIVIST**

I'm sorry, I didn't think.

**BASIRA**

No, you didn't. Now I've got a whole bunch of questions being asked. They're keeping tabs on me at work.

**ARCHIVIST**

I just wanted to see—

**BASIRA**

The next tape. Yeah, I get it. But right now, I can't do anything about that, because I feel like they're watching me all the time.

**ARCHIVIST**

I mean if that's the case, should you even have come down here?

**BASIRA**

It's fine, it's... it's just work. But if there's one thing I've learned, it's that you and me, we suck at this whole spy thing.

**(Archivist sighs.)**

**BASIRA**

I need to wait until things calm down a bit.

**ARCHIVIST**

Well, keep me updated, I suppose.

**(Archivist sighs.)**

**BASIRA**

Yeah, if I can. Stay safe.

**[Door opens and closes]**

**ARCHIVIST**

Damn.

End supplement.

**[Tape clicks off.]**

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Today's episode was written by Jonathan Sims and directed by Alexander J Newall.

It featured: Jonathan Sims as The Archivist and Frank Voss as Basira Hussain.