

MAG 171 — The Gardener

Content Warnings

- Major/graphic body horror
- Character death
- Vocalised suffering & screams/pain (SFX)
- Dysmorphia
- Anorexia
- Toxic beauty standards
- Unhealthy bodybuilding
- Plastic surgery addiction
- Body modification
- Mortality / Existential dread
- Physical disorders / Chronic illness
- Paralysis
- Self-harm / Suicidal ideation
- Loud noises

[The Magnus Archives Theme – Intro]

JONATHAN SIMS

Rusty Quill presents.... *The Magnus Archives*. Episode one hundred and seventy-one: "The Gardener."

[Theme finishes]

[Tape clicks on]

[Sounds of countryside birds chirping happily, a stream with deer chaser fountain, and distant windchimes; all intermixed with

**cracking bone, wet flesh, and the groans, whimpers and cries of
pain of people]**

[Footsteps on grass as Martin and the Archivist walk]

ARCHIVIST

Don't. Touch. Anything.

MARTIN

I wasn't planning to, heh.

Are they still... alive?

ARCHIVIST

More or less. They're certainly still aware. But they're just the compost. The pot from which the trees grow.

[The pass nearby a voice gasping in pain]

MARTIN

I didn't think there were that many bones in a human body.

ARCHIVIST

(Humourless laugh) Normally there aren't.

(Martin exhales)

It takes a skilled gardener to get them to grow like this. The curling, cascading intricacies of collagen and marrow.

It takes devotion—

MARTIN

John.

ARCHIVIST

S-sorry.

MARTIN

You sound like you think they're beautiful.

ARCHIVIST

Don't you?

(Beat)

[Nearby sounds of flesh ripping]

MARTIN

Is he here?

[Someone nearby starts whistling, getting closer; the tune is an
English Country Garden]

ARCHIVIST

Up ahead.

JARED HOPWORTH

Look at this.

(He makes tch-ing sounds of disapproval)

It's like you're trying to grow ugly. That won't do. You're better than that.

Not to worry friend; no harm done. Just a bit of pruning will set you right.

**[He clips a bone branch; the person attached yells in muffled agony;
eventually these become sobs]**

[There is a backpack zipper jangle as Martin reacts]

JARED (CONT'D)

Shh shh shh... No real fuss. This'll sort you right out. Soon you'll be good as new. Better, even. You just need to, reach down inside and, really feel that fear. Let it guide how you grow. You'll feel it in your— Hah! —bones. **(sniggers)**

(Jared starts whistling an English Country Garden again)

**[He picks up a wheelbarrow, which it rattles as he heads near
Martin and the Archivist; his footsteps shake the ground]**

ARCHIVIST

Jared Hopworth.

(Jared stops whistling)

[Jared stops walking]

JARED

Sure.

**[Jared sets the wheelbarrow down and takes a step forward; any
time he gestures there is always the sound of bone clicking and
flesh moving]**

JARED (CON'T)

Why not? If you're still clinging so hard to names.

ARCHIVIST

You know why I'm here?

JARED

I can guess. Took a bit to figure out which rib was aching, but when I did, well. Obvious, really. Why shouldn't you want it back?

ARCHIVIST

(Huffs) It's too late for that now.

JARED

Not really. But, whatever.

(Scornfully) Oh, and who's this? Your boyfriend?

MARTIN

Um—

ARCHIVIST

(Smug) Yes, actually.

JARED

Oh. Hm.

So is there any way this doesn't end in me dead? I'm guessing that's on the docket if you're here. Unless you're just here to smell the flowers.

ARCHIVIST

No. I can't let you carry on like this. What happened, Jared? I thought you only worked on the willing.

JARED

What? (**small laugh**) Says who?

Ohhh, the gym! Ha! I mean, yeah, they wanted to change, but they were still scared. First at what I'd do to 'em, then at what would happen if the world couldn't handle their beautiful new bodies. Not like I was doing it out of the goodness of my heart. (**snort laugh**) Hearts. Anyway. Willing. Unwilling. Don't work like that anymore, does it? You made sure of that.

MARTIN

That's, not fair.

JARED

And what?

MARTIN

I, I-Mm, uh...

JARED

'sides. Don't really matter now, does it?

ARCHIVIST

No. No, it doesn't.

(**Jared growls**)

[Bones and muscle crack as he limbers up for a fight]

MARTIN

(Timid) Okay.

JARED

Right. So we doing this or what? I reckon I can get a few good hits in before I go down. Leave you a little something to remember me by.

ARCHIVIST

(Serious) No you won't.

(Jared huffs a laugh)

JARED

No, maybe not. But you gotta try, haven't you?

MARTIN

Please don't.

JARED

What?

MARTIN

You've already made your mark.

(Jared considers, then chuckles)

JARED

Fine. Consider it a favour. But I want something in return. Before he does it.

MARTIN

Um.

ARCHIVIST

Alright. Let's hear it.

JARED

You still do that talk-y thing? You know, drink up all the fear and spit it back out?

ARCHIVIST

Sort of, yes.

JARED

Right. Well, I'd like to hear about my garden.

(Beat)

ARCHIVIST

Okay.

MARTIN

Look, if this is some kind of trick—

ARCHIVIST

It isn't.

JARED

Don't fret yourself, little man. Just thought it might be nice, is all.

[Hissing static starts]

[Background garden sounds continue, with clear flesh and bone noises throughout; there are no groans or screams]

ARCHIVIST

Cultivation notes for *Fortisium Reece*. Commonly known as the Gristlebloom Orchid.

A popular feature in any mortal garden—

[Hissing static ends]

ARCHIVIST (CONT'D)

—the striking petals that spring from the stems of the Gristlebloom are certainly dramatic, stretched and straining as they are in a kaleidoscope of reds and pinks and browns around the pale cream of bony stalk. While proper conditions for development can be tricky to get precisely right, caution should be exercised as — should an ideal environment be created — this plant can grow and grow and grow.

The soil should be prepared first, a rich and earthy cocktail of insecurity and self-hatred that allows the roots to twist and contort freely. The temperature should be kept the steady, humid warmth of air conditioners struggling to cope with the perspiration of a dozen bodies pushing themselves too hard, while the lights must be kept at a harsh, fluorescent glare. Counterintuitively, growth is most effective when the orchid is suffering from aggressive dehydration, and it is vitally important that the air roots be rarely praised, and only for the flowers' appearance and growth.

Above all, the deepest fear must be laced throughout what the Gristlebloom Orchid is fed: That they're not enough. That their inadequacies are embedded all the way into their flesh, and that they must always and forever be more. This unspoken terror can be viewed in the intricate lattices that marble the gory petals of a well-cared for Gristlebloom as it expands and swells and grows to its full and bulbous potential. Never let it believe itself good enough, and continue always to ensure the body that it is certain it must attain is that impossible, distended mess to which it will endlessly contort itself until it dominates your garden in its sheer, impossible, beautiful mass.

Even if there were mirrors in this place, Reece could not possibly recognize himself. Not because anything that might once have registered as a human body has long since blossomed into sinewy flowers and muscles and burst skin, but because, were he to see himself, the only image in his mind would be the him he was so afraid to be. And the Gristlebloom Orchid grows.

The agonies of this gore-streaked orchid are pointedly exquisite as it willingly and keenly pushes its physical form past any recognizable point of pain and shuddering anxiety until it towers over your garden, dripping blood and bitter sweat.

Cultivation notes for *Gracillium Patricia*, commonly known as the Bone Rose.

While the Gristlebloom Orchid may be the most eye-catching of the plants that you will find in the mortal garden, the Bone Rose is perhaps the most delicate. Thin and brittle, it is constantly on the verge of collapsing under its own weight, even as its ossified stems reach and twist and stretch in a desperate attempt for closeness.

The soil for the Bone Rose must be thoroughly rotten, a mulch of corrupted romanticism turned toxic and watered by an uncertain desire that curls back upon the roots and feeds into it a single, constant, pulsing thought, an instinct that fuels every cell within the rose: ‘To be wanted you must be less.’

The temperature should be kept cold for optimal development, the coldness of rejection, of hostile and pitying glances cast over a hated body. A coldness that creeps through the bones and lashes the vicious iciness to the flower’s core.

Light should be unrelenting, allowing every flaw and mark and sag to be stared at and warped and ogled.

With this preparation, the Bone Rose will conceive a grotesque horror of its own flesh, of the skin and fats and all that makes a body present. It will tear and starve and leak until there is nought but bones, the hungry bones so desperate to be touched, to be held. To be wanted.

Patricia is beautiful at last, so sharp and narrow and hard. Her angles and creamy white entirety is the centre of the garden for all to admire. But she strains and shakes and fears the wind that pushes and bends the brittle stiffness of the bones. It takes every drop of her strength to keep herself aloft, to not collapse in a heap of splintered femur and broken rib. There is no moment of her new existence that is not a shuddering, terrified effort. She is beautiful. And she cannot allow herself to lose that at any cost. She cannot shatter into fleshly ugliness again.

The Bone Rose, properly cultivated, will be a fearful and wonderful centrepiece for a carefully tended mortal garden.

Cultivation notes for *Secarium Leopold*, commonly known as the Cutaway Tulip.

At the edges of the mortal garden, if one is lucky, one may find the rare Cutaway Tulip, the pride of any diligent gardener. While easy to grow to a small size with some casually applied insecurities, to create a true masterpiece of carved and peeled and sculpted flesh requires a lengthy and involved cultivation.

Ensuring a properly grotesque blossom, an elegant and graceful flowering, is more in the pruning than in the preparation. The soil can be anything mulched in hostility to self-worth, and the light and temperature must simply be kept at a level to allow the appropriate growth of an obsession.

An obsession, with the changing and hacking of itself, that from stem to root to petal it cuts and breaks and sticks itself into ever new configurations and shapes, each a new summit of repulsive symmetry and stomach-churning perfection. A perfection sought in the blade and the shears of the gardener. Or the edge wielded by its own wildly waving roots, eagerly digging into a knotted and knitted form and pulling itself apart.

The Cutaway Tulip's growth is less reliant than other blooms on the moment-to-moment terror of themselves, the sharpened, pointed fear of a form you are appalled to look upon. Instead, what must be grown and fed and watered is the lingering, nagging dread of falling short of what could be. At the final, glorious culmination that a body may someday achieve, the ever-retreating perfections that sit always on the tip of a knife.

But also growing with the flower must be that other dread: Not of perfection to be hunted, but of decay to be fled. The wrinkled, greying translucent marks of encroaching mortality, a body that seeks to turn all that looks like you into a mouldering parody. And the fearful slicing and desperate stabbing that is no

longer to seek the golden promise of an eternal beauty but a tearful attempt to rewind a spring that ticks itself ever looser with every snap of the clock face.

Leopold is aware of what he has become, of the bleeding, twitching caricature of a human body he inhabits, the ribbons of himself that are pruned and broken and woven into dazzling petals. But as much as he is scared to his roots of the next form the shears will chop him into, even more he fears the spreading stagnation that moves through his stem like rot, the start of a decline that can only be postponed by the mutilating torments of his gardener. He would cry, but he has no idea where his tear ducts are anymore.

While initially a very intensive and time-consuming flower to grow, a well-cared for Cutaway Tulip can stand as a torn and wretched testament to the gardener's skill, especially if successfully brought to the point where it begins to operate and dissect itself.

Cultivation notes for *Supramium Maeve*. Commonly known as the Lily of the Damned.

While a somewhat difficult flower to acquire the seeds for, the actual growing of a Lily of the Damned is a task that requires remarkably little input from the gardener, although, if it is to be a strong feature of the mortal garden, it must be regularly pulled up into fresh air.

Any soil works for a Lily of the Damned, though some contend a rough and damp texture causes them to blossom faster. The important aspect to bear in mind is to never allow the lily to forget its physical existence. Temperatures can be hot or cold as long as it is uncomfortable, and light levels need only be high if the preoccupation with its body's presence has a visual component.

Most importantly, the absence of any transcendence or death should always be emphasized when watering or pruning. Spirituality, afterlife, transhumanism, religion; all must be roundly dismissed or mocked, at all times with the clear conclusion that the meat from which the lily blooms is the only form of being it will ever enjoy.

The flowers that spring from a Lily of the Damned are less predictable than those of other denizens of the mortal garden, being haphazard black growths of calcified fluid and sinuous, dangling nerves. They can grow very fast, but are in no danger of dominating any arrangement, as they will by nature attempt to retreat beneath the soil, hiding the painful existence that horrifies them so from any who might be watching, including themselves. Periodically, if you wish to display and grow your lily to its best advantage, you must seize whatever part of it remains above ground and pull, bringing it up into the open air. Use as much force as you have available without worry of dislodging it entirely. The lily's roots go deep, and can withstand almost any attempt to dislodge them.

This is Maeve's nightmare. There is no other word for it. To be trapped, unmoving, within the body that has betrayed her so often, feeling every sensation as it grows and warps and sprouts, never knowing what new mutation it will visit on her next. She is unable to even hide. There is no promise of the peaceful sleep of the innocent dead, not the dream of a digital escape from the hell her body has become. She is here, and she is trapped in the same soft prison of skin she has always so despised.

While it will never be a focus piece for a mortal garden, the Lily of the Damned is a popular choice among experimental gardeners, as its almost indestructible

nature allows them the opportunity to exercise a great deal of creativity in its cultivation.

The mortal garden grows and twists and screams and bleeds. It is loved by the hands that tend it, but that love sows only misery and fear. It is the worst place that has ever been beautiful—

[Hissing static starts]

ARCHIVIST (CONT'D)

— and it should not exist.

(Jared takes a deep growly breath)

[The sounds of the garden, flesh and bone noises continue, with some whimpering and groan of victims]

[Hissing static ends]

JARED

Cheers for that.

ARCHIVIST

Don't.

MARTIN

John are you, alright?

ARCHIVIST

Yeah. Um, uh, sorry.

MARTIN

No— it's-it's alright.

JARED

Is it really that bad? Seeing what I've done here? Or, heh, is it maybe that deep down, you think it's as beautiful as I do?

ARCHIVIST

Shut up!

JARED

It's a shame. Who's gonna look after the garden when I'm gone? There are a few real pretty ones.

Who knows. Maybe they'll uproot and start landscaping themselves. That'd be nice. Then again, maybe it'll just grow wild.

ARCHIVIST

I don't. Care.

JARED

No. You don't, do you?

ARCHIVIST

I can't. There's too many. I can't save everyone. Huh, I c— I can't save anyone.

JARED

If you say so.

So. I guess that just leaves revenge, then, don't it? Can't say I blame ya. That's all life is, really, innit? Just people using each other up.

ARCHIVIST

(Snide) Spare me the crude philosophy.

JARED

Grow well, my darlings. Grow well.

[Hissing static begins to build alongside unpleasant electronic high tones and glitching — the 'smite static' from the Not-Sasha encounter]

ARCHIVIST

Feel it.

Feel all the terror and despair as your garden grows.

[Jared's body cracks and squishes, his footsteps stamp, as he squares up for his end, growling continuously]

ARCHIVIST (CONT'D)

Let it flow through you and blossom.

Just people, using each other up. Ceaseless Watcher, turn your gaze upon this thing and drink. Your. Fill.

[The 'smite static' crescendos to a loud digital glitching sound]

(Jared's deep, low growling echoes and fades away)

(The Archivist takes a few gasps of breath)

[The statics, tones and glitches — the ‘smite statics’ — fade away quickly]

[The sounds of the garden, flesh and bone noises continue, with some whimpering and groan of victims]

MARTIN

(Worried) John?

ARCHIVIST

I'm here.

MARTIN

Are you okay?

ARCHIVIST

I'm... (bitter) great. You?

MARTIN

(Slight laugh) I really thought this one would be messier.

ARCHIVIST

What do you mean?

MARTIN

Well I mean, he's a Flesh... thing, right? I thought he'd be all meat and blood and gore and all that.

ARCHIVIST

(Slight laugh) Apparently not.

MARTIN

He didn't even put up a fight.

ARCHIVIST

No.

(Beat)

MARTIN

(Sighing) So what now?

ARCHIVIST

Carry on, I guess.

MARTIN

Yeah.

[The Archivist turns to walk away]

MARTIN (CONT'D)

John!

ARCHIVIST

Hmm?

MARTIN

I need to ask you something.

ARCHIVIST

Okay.

MARTIN

I meant to ask. A-after the fire, actually? But, well, then there was the house and everything, and it just sort of—

ARCHIVIST

What is it, Martin.

MARTIN

Why didn't we go after the landlord guy? In the tenement?

ARCHIVIST

Arthur Nolan?

MARTIN

Yeah. He's still there, right?

ARCHIVIST

(Sighing) After Jude, the, the fires, I-I didn't want to put you through anymore.

MARTIN

(sigh) Don't do that.

ARCHIVIST

What?

MARTIN

Don't use me as an excuse.

ARCHIVIST

I-I'm not. I just... It didn't seem worth it. I didn't, hate him like I hated her.

He never hurt me.

MARTIN

But all the people inside.

ARCHIVIST

Killing Nolan wouldn't have made it stop. It would just leave it... unsupervised.

MARTIN

Hmm.

(Beat)

(Sighs) John, we are, doing good, right? Making things better?

ARCHIVIST

I don't know if that was ever an option.

[Tape clicks off]

[The Magnus Archives Theme – Outro]

JONATHAN SIMS

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by Lowri Ann Davies, and directed by Alexander J Newall. It featured: Alexander J Newall as Martin Blackwood and Jared Hopworth, and Jonathan Sims as The Archivist. To subscribe, buy merchandise, or join our Patreon, visit rustyquill.com. Rate and review us online, tweet us at TheRustyQuill, visit us on Facebook, or email us via mail@rustyquill.com. Join our community on the Discord via the website, or on Reddit, at [r/TheMagnusArchives](https://www.reddit.com/r/TheMagnusArchives). Thanks for listening.