

MAG – 145 – Infectious Doubts

Content Warnings:

- Elder abuse
- Supernatural torture

[The Magnus Archives Theme – Intro]

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Rusty Quill presents: The Magnus Archives. Episode one hundred and forty-five. Infectious Doubts.

[Tape clicks on.]

GERTRUDE

You don't mind, do you?

ARTHUR

Of course, I do.

GERTRUDE

Well, that's a shame.

ARTHUR

If I really wanted to kill you, that thing couldn't stop me.

GERTRUDE

If that were a possibility, Arthur, I should hardly have agreed to meet you.

ARTHUR

Hmph. Yeah, you would. You'd have set up something up, tried to get me first.

GERTRUDE

If I wanted you dead, Arthur, there are much simpler ways to do it.

ARTHUR

Yeah? Think you know how?

GERTRUDE

I do, yes, and I am very willing to, if necessary.

ARTHUR

Well, I'm sure I'm shaking in my boots.

GERTRUDE

(Snorts) Look, Arthur, I need you to understand that this isn't simple posturing. I don't see a way we can meaningfully progress this conversation while you're under the impression that your threats mean anything to me.

ARTHUR

Big talk. But Agnes is dead, and I don't know if you've heard, but your little woodland circle's been broken. So, I don't really see anything getting in my way if I wanted to burn the flesh off your snarky bones.

GERTRUDE

Huh, I assume you haven't checked on Eugene, then?

ARTHUR

... What?

GERTRUDE

Eugene, well, whatever-his-name-was – Vanderbilt or somesuch. You sent him to intimidate me a couple of years ago, you must remember. Of course, you know him. Used to live in Beckenham, but moved out to that flat in Ilford last year.

ARTHUR

(Suspicious) Yeah ...

GERTRUDE

Well, he hasn't been at your little meetings the last two weeks, has he? I suppose no-one's looked into it yet. Not surprising, he seemed a thoroughly unpleasant little man.

ARTHUR

Are you— Did—

GERTRUDE

Tell you what, why don't you make a few calls, check it out, and then we can continue our little discussion. Alright?

[Tape clicks off. Tape clicks on.]

GERTRUDE

Well?

[Arthur puts down the phone]

ARTHUR

How'd you do it?

GERTRUDE

You don't need to know that. What you do need to know, is I can do it again if I need to, to you or any of your lackeys, if I need to.

ARTHUR

(Scoffs) Not mine anymore.

GERTRUDE

Oh no, I forgot your authority isn't what it used to be these days.

ARTHUR

Yeah.

GERTRUDE

Well, if a warning from you isn't going to convince them, let me know. I'd be happy to provide a further example.

ARTHUR

You've made your point.

GERTRUDE

Good.

ARTHUR

Eugene... It, it hurt him?

GERTRUDE

Oh yes. I'm sure your master was delighted with how awful his death was.

ARTHUR

Don't push it.

GERTRUDE

You know, thinking about it, the amount of pain and loss and legitimate devastation I've cause among your little cult over the last, what, forty years? I think The Desolation is probably very fond of me.

ARTHUR

That's blasphemy, that is.

GERTRUDE

Is it? Or maybe you just picked a bad god.

ARTHUR

Shut it! I don't have to listen to this.

GERTRUDE

Hm, then feel free to try and leave.

...

Ha. Now, here's the problem for you, Arthur. The way I see it, you came here believing that whatever defences or assurances I might have had died with Agnes or were broken along with the circle and, whether or not you actually killed me, you were really hoping to use me to restore your standing with the Lightless Flame – murder, kidnap, torture, something to impress the church group. Unluckily for you, I have had almost four decades to prepare for this, and now ... Ha, well, you just don't know if killing Eugene was the end of it, or maybe I have something special prepared for you as well.

ARTHUR

You're so goddamn smug.

GERTRUDE

And you're all lazy fools, so used to it being easy, to picking off the vulnerable and the unprepared, you can barely conceive of anyone actively working against you, of being ready. You honestly thought when she died, I'd just be struck dumb with terror, just waiting for one of you to finally get around to revenge, paralysed with fear. Because that's all you've ever known.

ARTHUR

You've made your point.

GERTRUDE

I'm pleased to hear it.

ARTHUR

And do you?

GERTRUDE

Do I what?

ARTHUR

Have something for me, so I end up like Eugene?

GERTRUDE

Why don't you try to leave and find out?

...

Good. Now we can have a proper conversation.

ARTHUR

You mean, you ask me questions and I spill my guts?

GERTRUDE

No need to be petulant, Arthur. If it would make you feel better, you could ask me a question first.

ARTHUR

Alright. Agnes – how'd you do it? Never did understand it, not really.

GERTRUDE

Ah, that's a fair enough question. It was The Web. I didn't know it at the time, of course. I would call it an accident, but it never is with them. It's only after the fact that you can see all the subtle manipulations. I was very new to it all, of course. I mean, I was, what? Can't have been older than twenty-five. Would

you believe that you were the first proper ritual attempt I'd encountered? Ha! I really thought you were unique, special. An infernal cult raising their demon messiah to bring about hell on earth? You can imagine all the heroic fantasies that that played into. So, I began researching what I thought was a counter-ritual, of sorts. Like I said, I was young, naive. I somehow found just the right books, made just the right connections, and even got what I thought was a piece of blind good luck when I found a tin box in the ashes of Hill Top Road containing some perfectly preserved cuttings of her hair.

Of course, what I thought was a 'banishment ritual' turned out to not be. The circle I had constructed was more of an invitation. It let the Mother-of-Puppets bind me to Agnes, interweave our existences at some metaphysical level, as it had with Fielding and the house. It was the most painful experience of my life. I mean, I'm sure it's nothing to you, but I'd never had my lungs try to burn me alive from the inside out before. I survived, though, and you know the rest. I'm not sure exactly how it manifested on your end, but you certainly seemed to get the message. I kept the circle over the years, laced it through with signs and symbology of The Desolation to ward off the worst of the side effects and keep its attentions elsewhere.

ARTHUR

Don't envy whoever broke it.

GERTRUDE

Yes. It went very badly for them indeed.

ARTHUR

So where was it, in the end? I spent years looking for it.

GERTRUDE

Nowhere special: the middle of a forest in the Scottish Highlands – farthest place I could find from anything and anyone.

ARTHUR

(Chuckles) Yeah, fair play. Not like we were ever going to find that.

GERTRUDE

So, your turn.

ARTHUR

(Sighs) Go on.

GERTRUDE

What was Agnes like?

ARTHUR

What?

GERTRUDE

Well, for all The Web bound us together, I never actually met her. What was she like?

ARTHUR

I... I don't know, not really. You got as many answers to that as folks who met her. Never really knew what she felt about any of it, not really, not in her own words. Guess that's the thing about being the chosen one. I mean, Agnes was

always quiet, but even if you spend all day every day throwing out commandments and laying down parables, at the end of it you're always just the point of someone else's story – everyone clamouring to say what you were, what you meant, and your thoughts on it all don't mean nothing.

GERTRUDE

And were you this introspective when she was alive?

ARTHUR

That's the thing about a fall from grace, isn't it? Makes you look at things from a new angle. I miss her; I'll tell you that for nothing. Wish I'd ... I don't know, actually known her when she was alive. Maybe that coffee shop twit did have a point after all. I can tell you what I saw, at least.

GERTRUDE

Which was?

ARTHUR

I saw the sun – so much power and fire and rage inside of her, enough to burn the world and leave it nothing but desert. But to look at her, oh, it was too much for most, but it seemed so still, so stable. But it wasn't calm; it was just distant. She never told us how she felt about being bound to you, never even called you by name, just called you her anchor, the thing weighing her down and tying her to this world, stopping her destiny.

GERTRUDE

Hm, I'm surprised you didn't come for me immediately.

ARTHUR

Come for you?

We ended up protecting you more often than not! Diego was convinced if you died a violent death it would be catastrophic for Agnes. He even talked me round, and I spent decades convincing the others to wait it out – you couldn't outrun age forever, and we had time. But it didn't need to be forever, did it? Just long enough for a messiah to doubt. The sort of doubts that spreads to her disciples.

You've never really had to bother with it, have you? You've got him upstairs to point the way as often as not, and the rest of the time you're just figuring out people, or things that used to be people. You've never tried to talk with that Eye of yours. You've never had to second guess a god. Cos that's what it comes down to, isn't it? We feel its joy and its anger. It warps us and changes us and feeds on us, though not in the ways we expect. The one thing it never does is just tell us what to do. It seeds us with this aching, impossible desire to change the world, to bring it to us, and then it leaves us to guess and bicker and fight over how the hell you can actually do it. If it's possible. Sometimes I think they understand us as little as we understand them. We don't think like they do.

GERTRUDE

I'm not actually convinced they 'think' at all.

ARTHUR

You might be right, but Agnes did. That's the thing about an incarnation, isn't it? She was a child and person as much as she was a god. And we messed that right up. I still remember when Diego bought us a book on childcare. Roger's

body was still in her room, blackened and smoking from when he tried to feed her. I thought for a moment he'd brought another one of his damn Leitners, but no, it was just a regular old book on looking after children. But I was an idiot, saw it as attacking my leadership. Burned the thing. Diego wasn't happy. Well, he's in charge now, of all of us that are left, at least. He can look for the answers in whatever books he likes, no skin off my bones.

GERTRUDE

I didn't actually ask.

ARTHUR

Figured if you're gonna pull this stuff out of me, I might as well get some of it off my chest anyway. Not like I can vent to the others about what a prat Diego is. Got a lot of funny ideas, still calls the Lightless Flame 'Asag' like when he was first researching it. I just want to tell him to get over it. I mean, Asag was traditionally a force of destruction, sure, but as a church, we've very much settled on burning in terms of the face we worship, so some fish-boiling Sumerian demon doesn't really match up, does it? Plus, there's a lot of disease imagery with Asag that I reckon is way too close to Filth for my tastes. But no, he read it in some ancient tome, so that's that.

GERTRUDE

Well, I can't say I know—

ARTHUR

Reckons he always knows best cos he's read a few books. Well, big deal. Way I see it, if a writer can't even save themselves, they probably don't have a lot

worth knowing. Find me one so called ‘expert’ on all of this who didn’t end up regretting all of it. That’s the trouble with overthinking any of this: you ignore your gut, and to mind, that’s the only part any of them beyond actually care about. They don’t give a toss about your rules or systems. They only care about what feels right, what freezes your belly with terror.

GERTRUDE

I rather like to think I’ve managed.

ARTHUR

Yeah, but you don’t actually care about them, do you? Not really. You forget, we’ve been watching you a long time, and I know you, Gertrude. You don’t actually care about the fears; you’re too practical. All your energy is focused down here, on monsters and murderers and all the things doing the dirty work for them beyond. You know plenty, sure, but you don’t have that obsession, that stupid urge to try and understand and classify things that use logic and reality like weapons.

GERTRUDE

Hm, perhaps.

ARTHUR

Always respected you for that. It takes a strong stomach to not give a shit.

GERTRUDE

You’ll forgive me if I’m not overjoyed at the compliment.

ARTHUR

Suit yourself.

GERTRUDE

So, now Diego has taken over, where does that leave you?

ARTHUR

Huh. Slum-lording over a nest.

GERTRUDE

A nest of what?

ARTHUR

Found a mass of the crawling rot growing, a while back. Managed to get hold of the property before it became too big. Gotta wait ‘til it blossoms before we can properly burn it, so until then, I’m just playing landlord. It’s alright, I guess. You’d be surprised the misery and pain you can cause when you have control over someone’s home. If you’re careful, if you’re smart, you can burn their life to ashes as thoroughly as any fire, and worst comes to worst, you can still do it the old-fashioned way. Had an elderly tenant last year. Oh, she was in a terrible state. I had her trapped, too poor and immobile to do anything but sit there, then I broke her boiler so the cold started to get her. Not exactly my usual, but agony is agony. But then her son and his wife moved in with her to help her out. Not much I could do against that, so I just waited until all three were home and set the place ablaze. They went up nicely, screaming all the way as the flames started to reach them. The doors were locked and the handles too hot, so they didn’t have a hope of escape.

GERTRUDE

Yes, that's quite enough, I think.

ARTHUR

Oh, I'm sorry. There I was, thinking you liked the gory details. My mistake.

GERTRUDE

I think we're just about done here.

ARTHUR

All your burning questions answered?

GERTRUDE

I'm certainly convinced you don't know anything else useful.

ARTHUR

So, I'm free to go? You're not going to, y'know ...

GERTRUDE

(Laughs) I suppose you'll have to wait and see.

ARTHUR

Suppose I will.

GERTRUDE

You tell the others. Make sure they know what happened to Eugene.

ARTHUR

Sure. Can't make any promises, though, especially for Jude. She really hates you.

GERTRUDE

Tell her she's welcome to try. Oh, and tell them I'm extending my protection to young Mr Barnabas. They hurt him anymore, then what happened to Eugene will seem like a mercy.

ARTHUR

You're really pushing it, you know that?

GERTRUDE

Feel free to push back. But until then, get out of my archives.

[Tape clicks off. Tape clicks on.]

ARCHIVIST

The more I listen and learn, the more it seems to me we're all just groping about, trying desperately to find out what we're actually meant to be doing. These things that loom so large over our lives, trap us and push us and sometimes kill us, but never actually tell us what we're supposed to be doing. So, we scheme and we plot. We lash out at each other without ever really knowing why. I think Gertrude knew this, knew to focus her attention on those parts that could be understood and, well, and killed. But I'm really starting to worry there aren't any answers, not like I want there to be. There aren't any answers at Ny-Ålesund. There aren't answers in the past. I've been inside the

Buried, and there were no answers there. Elias always seemed to know what was going on, to have a plan, but I sometimes wonder just how orchestrated some of it really was.

We've been back in London for just over a week now. I'm more or less recovered physically. It's just this nagging sense of unease that won't leave me. I was so sure I'd find something up there, but instead it was just another broken person trying to come to terms with the wreckage of their life. And here, I reached out, took another tape, hoping for a bit of guidance, but to be honest, this hasn't helped.

I did some more digging into Eugene Vanderstock. I thought he was still alive and working at the steel plant, but it looks like he's just listed on one of the directory pages on their website. I really miss having people who know their way around a computer better than I do. A bit more digging found a rather bizarre case. Apparently, he disappeared in late 2009, leaving behind only one thing: a life-sized statue of himself, crafted from candle wax and sawdust, missing its head. I wish I didn't know how painful it must be to be alive while your whole being is infused with agonising grit, but as I was investigating, it came to me. Eugene is still alive, frozen in place by the razor-sharp particles that are mixed up into what he chose instead of flesh. I don't know where Gertrude stored his head, but I do know it desperately wants to scream.

Perhaps I—

[Knock at the door. The door opens.]

GEORGIE

Knock, knock.

ARCHIVIST

Oh, G-Georgie? What are you—

GEORGIE

Oh, sorry, I thought, um ... Is Melanie about?

ARCHIVIST

Melanie? Uh, yeah, I saw her a couple of hours ago in the other office. I can show you?

GEORGIE

Oh, I'm sure I can find it. Don't worry yourself.

ARCHIVIST

All right. Why are you, uh, well, here? If it's not too personal a question.

GEORGIE

It is a bit. It's not really my place to discuss it.

ARCHIVIST

Therapy! You're taking her to therapy?

GEORGIE

She told you, then?

ARCHIVIST

Uh, yes.

GEORGIE

Well, you don't need to sound quite so psyched about it. She gets nervous travelling there alone.

ARCHIVIST

Yes, of course. I forget you two know each other.

GEORGIE

So, how are you doing?

ARCHIVIST

I'm ... I'm alright. I'm trying to, uh, rest up a bit, take it easy.

GEORGIE

Really? Cos I'm pretty sure I heard you talking about a screaming headless corpse just now.

ARCHIVIST

Oh, were you listen—

GEORGIE

Oh, um, didn't mean to. You know, these doors are not that thick.

ARCHIVIST

Fine. I'm deep in it. Had some close calls.

GEORGIE

I'm sorry to hear that. You should probably get some therapy too.

ARCHIVIST

Would you go with me as well?

GEORGIE

No.

ARCHIVIST

Yeah, I thought as much.

GEORGIE

The other office, you say?

ARCHIVIST

Yeah.

GEORGIE

Yeah, thanks. Take care of yourself.

ARCHIVIST

(Sighs) You too.

[Door closes]

ARCHIVIST (Cont.)

End recording

[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, Sue Sims as Gertrude Robinson, John-Henry Falle as Arthur Nolan, and Sasha Sienna as Georgie Barker.