

MAG 166 — The Worms

Content Warnings

- Screams
- Claustrophobia
- Reported violence
- Dehumanisation
- Anxiety
- Suffocation
- Worms (including SFX)
- Explicit language

[The Magnus Archives Theme – Intro]

JONATHAN SIMS

Rusty Quill presents... *The Magnus Archives*. Episode one hundred and sixty-six: "The Worms."

[Theme finishes]

[Tape clicks on]

**[A wind blows, and there are faint muffled cries and screams
of people]**

[Footsteps on gravel]

MARTIN

...So, are we going to talk about it, or...?

[Backpack zippers jangle as they stop walking]

ARCHIVIST

What's to talk about?

MARTIN

What happened back there? What you did to Sa—

(Beat)

ARCHIVIST

Go on. Say it.

MARTIN

What you did to... that thing.

ARCHIVIST

I... killed it.

I, finally have the power, so I killed it.

MARTIN

Yeah, but like how? I'm-I'm sorry, I just don't understand what actually happened.

ARCHIVIST

I... it's hard to put into words, lo-l, look, can we talk about it later, we're... coming to a domain of the Buried, and I would really rather—

[Hissing static, with a high-pitched tone, starts]

[Sound of three knocks from behind wood]

MARTIN

Did you..?

(The Archivist sighs)

ARCHIVIST

Look down, Martin.

MARTIN

Oh.

Wait, what?

ARCHIVIST

Don't... get too close.

[The door creaks open]

ARCHIVIST (CONT'D)

Hello, Helen.

HELEN

Oh, hello! In a better mood, are we? Feeling more secure now you've learned how to kill?

ARCHIVIST

Something like that.

MARTIN

Will you tell me how he did it?

ARCHIVIST

Martin...

MARTIN

He just keeps going all vague about it.

HELEN

Oh, goodness. You see what you've done to the poor boy, John? He's coming to *me* for clear answers.

(She snort-laughs)

ARCHIVIST

Shut up.

HELEN

(Giggle) It's very satisfying though, isn't it? Teasing out vague information? You see why Elias got a kick out of it.

ARCHIVIST

Shut up!

MARTIN

John.

HELEN

You're right, Martin. He is tetchy.

MARTIN

I didn't say he was te—

HELEN

So, so, an explanation. From little old me.

(Beat)

D'you mind, John?

ARCHIVIST

(The Archivist starts to say something, then cuts himself off, sighs)

Go right ahead.

HELEN

We're all here, Martin. The Stranger, the Buried, the Desolation, all of us. But the Eye still rules. All this fear is being performed for its benefit. And so, there are now exactly two roles available in this new world of ours: the watcher, and the watched. Subject, and object. Those who are feared, and those who are afraid.

And John, well... he is part of the Eye. A very important part. And he's able to, shall we say, shift its focus. Turn the one into the other.

And for those of us whose very existence relies on being feared, well, to be turned into a victim destroys us utterly. And very, very painfully.

ARCHIVIST

Enough.

HELEN

Yes, I suspect so.

MARTIN

Sure. Okay, that's... I mean, that's really not that complicated John; I don't see why you were being so coy about it—

ARCHIVIST

Because I'm ashamed, Martin.

MARTIN

...Ashamed?!

ARCHIVIST

Yes! Ashamed of the fact that I just, destroyed the world and have been rewarded for it, the fact that, I can walk safe through all this horror I've created like a *fucking* tourist, destroying whoever I please. The fact that I... enjoyed it and, the fact that there are so many others that I still want to revenge myself on!

(He exhales heavily)

MARTIN

...No, no I actually think you're good on that front.

ARCHIVIST

What?

MARTIN

Yeah, I, I, I think we should go for it, get our murder on!

ARCHIVIST

Sorry, what?

HELEN

(Surprised delight) Yes, Martin!

MARTIN

Th-this isn't like it was before! We're not talking about innocent bystanders in cafes here, John; these things are... th-they're just evil, plain and simple, and right now they're torturing and tormenting everyone!

If you want to stop them and have the power to, then, then, then yeah, let's do it, let's go full Kill Bill!

ARCHIVIST

I-I, I haven't seen it.

HELEN

Oh, Martin, I am so proud of you. Can I come?

ARCHIVIST

(Crosstalk) No.

MARTIN

(Crosstalk) No.

HELEN

So that's a strong 'maybe' then?

ARCHIVIST

(Sighs) (under his breath) Ow.

(He lets out a small exhale of pain)

MARTIN

John? Are you..?

ARCHIVIST

We've been... close for too long, I, I need, uh, you might want to take a walk.

MARTIN

Hm.

HELEN

And I'll take that as my cue. Well, I'll see you avenging angels later, don't be strangers.

(She laughs)

[Her door closes, and she's gone]

[Static and high-pitched tone ends]

MARTIN

Do you need anything?

ARCHIVIST

No.

MARTIN

Right, I'll just— ah, yeah, right.

[Martin walks away]

(The Archivist exhales)

[Hissing static start]

[Wind stops, but the muffled screams and cries of people remain]

ARCHIVIST

Down, down, down, down.

[Hissing static ends]

ARCHIVIST (CONT'D)

down below the earth, there was a worm. He had not always been a worm, of course, but time and tide and life had pushed him to it. His name, he dimly recalled, was Sam, and he was, as definitely always had been the case, trapped. Boarded on all sides with no escape and no recourse. Even in his faint and fading memories of a life that wasn't simply stone and rancid, reeking soil, he wasn't sure he'd ever known a thing that might be called freedom.

[Screams fade away as worming squelching and low muffled noise begin]

ARCHIVIST (CONT'D)

Choices he had had, that's true, and certainly compared to the relentless press of all the weight and dirt now on him, the simple choice of left or right or stand or sit would now seem the most outrageous of luxuries. But at the time, there was no joy in such decisions, for though he could point his feet left, it was a rightward turn that led him to the place where he could scrape a meagre living. And while he could choose to sit, it rarely made the news any more pleasant to hear.

When had the crushing pressure in his chest become literal? When had the empty promise of the horizon finally vanished completely, replaced by the pitch darkness of this forever wall of earth? Sam did not know. Time had no meaning here. There were no clocks or watches, and somewhere in his mind he was sure that the world had stopped spinning, his prison was still. Even that single, distant point of light, so impossibly far above him that he had decided that it must be the sky, even that never darkened with the recognition of night. His existence was static, and eternal. Immutable. Sleep was only a memory, because even the prospect of unconsciousness might have made his present state slightly more bearable. Food as well he knew must be a thing, for he could feel the hunger, but his imagination failed to picture it. The only smell he knew was the damp and the dirt.

But these things, grim and fearful as they were, were not unfamiliar. The aching hunger was not new, not simply a gift of the eager soil. He had flashes of an empty belly not assuaged by hands, cracked and calloused from long, grim hours of labour. There was a shadow in his mind of sleepless nights, spent toiling, tired and shaking, desperate for some relief from the relentless

pressure that crushed the life of the man who had been Sam, before he was a worm.

And a worm he surely was, for what else could spasm, crawling limbless through the ground, millimetre by millimetre, making its lonely way towards some secret destination no human could understand? Perhaps he did still have arms or legs or the luxury of both, but down here it was impossible to tell, pressed so close together that to draw a line between a torso and a folded, bending limb was pointless. If it moves like a worm, thinks like a worm, and screams its awful agonies towards the distant, taunting sky like a worm... well, the conclusion is obvious. Sam's pale, mottled worm-flesh pressed and squeezed its way ever forward, ever upwards, or so he hoped. So he begged.

The light was there; it was always there. So small and far it might have been a single pinprick in a pitch-black curtain. Just enough to remind him he had eyes, starved and hollow though they were. Just enough to remind him that there was such a thing as sky, that the endless, open air existed. Enough to kindle in him the fear that he might never see it again. Worms don't get to see the sky. If he had slept, he would have dreamed of it, of flying through the light and unchained breeze, mocking the ground that he had always and forever escaped. Another good reason he was not allowed to sleep.

Sometimes, when he bent his neck and gazed longingly upwards towards the light, he could feel something looking back, its vision stretching out and down and through the opaque mud to touch him, drinking in his panic and discomfort as he tried yet again to push himself up and out. He would call, then, desperately imploring the very thing that revelled in his suffering to end it. As he did so, he sometimes remembered dimly other pleas made in the open air to other forces keen to profit from his degradation. Forces of paper

and ink and decimal points. But such memories are brief and gone as Sam's lungs fill once again with sod.

[Faint muffled screams start]

ARCHIVIST (CONT'D)

His scream, though short, echoes up and through the rough-hewn tunnel, joined as it rises with the cries of a hundred others, erupting from the holes that pockmark the rotten field in a cacophony, a stomach-churning harmony of dirt-caked shrieking. Then just as quick as it begins, it is done, and the only ones who will ever hear Sam's screams are the ones who have entombed him.

[Faint muffled screams stop]

ARCHIVIST (CONT'D)

Can he feel the warmth, from that distant spot of light, a ray of sun down there in the dark? The poor man's not to know the sun is gone, that what now remains is to serve no other purpose than to let this wretched world be seen. A lifeless, hollow illumination barely worth the name of light. But down there in the dark and icy ground, Sam still clings hard to his dream of the Sun, and the ground lets him, of course, for what true fear can exist without hope, without the belief that things might change for the better? To tug at the knowledge that they will only get worse?

When he has the will, when the cold soil around him has been still and silent for long enough, Sam may once again begin his grim and painful climb. Moving, squirming along by the merest fractions of a millimetre afforded by his pressing prison, he claws and digs in what might have once been fingers. The soft earth is always keen to slip away, but sometimes, just sometimes, the tips

of those extremities find purchase, and he pulls himself a little bit, such a tiny bit, upwards. And as he twists and crawls and wrenches himself up through the hole, in spite of the excruciating slowness, disregarding the scrapes and cuts it opens in his soft and wormly skin, Sam allows himself to dream of what might be at the top. He has long since discarded any hope of joy, but deep down he still believes there may be a place where he does not suffer as now.

And after hours, days, impossible to measure weeks, maybe he has moved a meter. Even more perhaps, and however bruised and broken his body may now be, he is closer to the sky, and nobody can take that away from him. Until the rains begin to fall.

[Things start to sound wetter]

ARCHIVIST (CONT'D)

The rains fall here as they do so many places in this new world. Thick and oily drops that taste of bitter salt, torrential tears plummeting from the watching sky, thumping and squelching onto the thirsty soil in which the worms writhe painfully towards a surface that does not want them. The ground softens. Shifts. And starts to slip and flow into a torrent of black mud.

[Ethereal singing fades in; the same music that once came from the Coffin artifact]

ARCHIVIST (CONT'D)

Deep below, Sam feels rain begin to drip upon his forehead, and he knows exactly what it means. He wants to scream again but he is so tired by his ascent that the only sound he can produce is a low, defeated wail. And as has happened so many times before in his poor, defeated life, he feels the walls

begin to shift and soften, as the slippery flood pushes him down, down, down. Deeper, perhaps, than he has ever been before, so deep the light is almost gone, but never is the darkness fully complete. There must always be a distant promise of escape.

[Wetness fades out, singing becomes part of the background]

ARCHIVIST (CONT'D)

Sometimes, when his despair is at its peak, and the sky seems only there to mock him, Sam changes his direction. He has breathed the mud so long he has no thought of suffocation, and he pushes his face into the walls of his tunnel and starts to try and dig across. He is afraid of what he might find beyond the limits of his own constricted tunnel, but between the fear and the despair he makes his choice and digs.

For days or weeks he squirms and struggles through the hard-packed soil, mind dwelling on a pinprick spot of light that he might never see again. What has he done? Abandoning the route that has been carved for his emergence. The panic begins to set in, and he shudders and weeps slick, muddy tears of his own.

But then one day, Sam pushes forward and feels his face break through a wall. The earth parts and he finds himself in a tiny sliver of open air. A room. A cavern. A way out. It is only as he slides inside so neatly that he realizes what it is. Another tunnel. For another worm. And as he falls deeper into it, he finds himself staring at the pale and hairless face of its inhabitant.

Poor Sam has no way to know his neighbour's name is Richard, that he once struggled in a life as hard and desperate as his own. That his dreams of the light and painful screaming climb towards it is just as keen and gruelling. All

that matters is that this new worm is facing up. And Sam, because of how he entered the tunnel, is facing down.

[Squelching worm sounds increase]

ARCHIVIST (CONT'D)

How do you fight, when you cannot move beyond the slowest inching crawl, without limbs or weapons or the kinetic force of violence? You do it slowly, pressing, biting, tearing gradually through each other until at the very end, one of you is still. There is no light, for Sam is faced away from it, blocking it from his opponent. But even were it bathed in stark illumination, no one could have said for sure where the sticky mud ended and the ragged, bloody faces began. A cloying mass of teeth and tears and torn skin as two terrified victims slowly chew through each other over a distant hope that neither would ever be allowed to achieve.

When it is done, Richard is dead, or quiet enough as makes no difference, and the tunnel belongs to Sam. It is identical to the one that he has left, in all ways other than that he had to do an awful thing to get it. And still he faces downwards. He rests there for days, with nothing to keep him company but the remains of his opponent, quietly mouldering, until at last he begins the gruesome task of turning around. The contortions that he undergoes, the bending and the breaking that he subjects his pale wormish body to, is a greater pain than any he has thought possible, and the snap and pop of bone and sinew echoes to the surface far above.

[Squelching worm sounds slow down, singing fades out]

ARCHIVIST (CONT'D)

But at last Sam has his victory: he has claimed another tunnel, and he can see the light. Perhaps this one will be better, will let him squirm up higher. But underneath is still that lurking fear that maybe, it is worse.

**[Wind, rain, and muffled screams begins to fade in, replacing the
squelching and underground noise]**

ARCHIVIST (CONT'D)

The truth is plain enough, though, even as he fights so hard not to know it. There is no difference, and as the rains begin to fall once again, he knows the world will never let him escape the depths to which he has fallen. Better to keep him buried, neatly away.

(He sighs shakily)

God, I hate the Buried.

End recording.

[Tape clicks off]

[Tape clicks on]

[Wind and rain, with muffled screams and cries]

(Martin sighs)

(Beat)

MARTIN

Kinda wish the apocalypse had some magazines. A-actually no, second thoughts, probably not. Ooh. Def-definitely not.

[He changes his posture]

MARTIN (CONT'D)

(Sigh) Come on, John. How long does it take to describe scary mud?

[There is a wave of howls and screams from below]

(Martin breaths shakily)

MARTIN (CONT'D)

Oh, oh, o, okay, okay, okay— sorry, sorry! Sorry.

[The wave subsides, the distant screams remain]

[There is a faint electronic vibrating sound turning on and off;

Martin turns]

MARTIN (CONT'D)

(Under his breath) Oh, god— **(normal)** What now?

[He walks towards the noise, which buzzes at regular intervals; he stops; there is muffled musical notes accompanying the buzzing]

MARTIN (CONT'D)

What, seriously? A spade?

Is that not kind of, I don't know, insensitive? Given where you are?

(He sighs)

Fine. Fine, fine.

(He sighs)

[He picks the spade up with a scraping sound and starts to dig, revealing a mobile phone playing a distorted version of the ‘Gran Vals’ aka the ‘Nokia tune’]

MARTIN (CONT'D)

For god's sake.

[He drops the spade, dusts his hands off, picks up the phone, and accepts the call with a little low button ‘boop’ noise]

MARTIN (CONT'D)

Hello?

ANNABELLE CANE

(Over the phone) Hello. Is that Martin?

MARTIN

Don't do that.

ANNABELLE

What, no stomach for games?

MARTIN

Well, your games aren't exactly fun for everyone, are they?

ANNABELLE

(Smirking) Very few games are.

MARTIN

Look, look, look, I'm talking to Annabelle Cane, right?

ANNABELLE

You never gave me your name, so why should I offer mine?

MARTIN

Just— what do you want?

ANNABELLE

I want to help you, of course.

(Beat)

MARTIN

No. Thank you.

ANNABELLE

It's a hard place to find yourself in. Maybe I can be of some... assistance.

MARTIN

You can assist me by giving me the creepy-phone-thing arrest!

ANNABELLE

He's more powerful here than he's ever been, isn't he? And you're not sure what that means for you.

MARTIN

I'm hanging up now.

ANNABELLE

Does he even need you at all?

MARTIN

Bye!

[He hangs up with another boop]

(Martin sighs)

[A howling comes from below]

MARTIN (CONT'D)

Gah I know, right?

[Tape clicks off]

[The Magnus Archives Theme – Outro]

JONATHAN SIMS

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