

MAG – 147 – Weaver

Content Warnings:

- Spiders
- Emotional manipulation
- Dysfunctional family

[The Magnus Archives Theme – Intro]

JONATHAN SIMS

Rusty Quill presents: The Magnus Archives. Episode one hundred and forty-seven. Weaver.

[Tape clicks on.]

BASIRA

Heads up.

ARCHIVIST

The tape?

BASIRA

Something's here.

MELANIE

No shit. Look at this place.

ARCHIVIST

Yeah.

MELANIE

When did you say they finished rebuilding?

ARCHIVIST

2008. Doesn't look like anyone ever moved in though.

BASIRA

So, this is ten years of cobwebs?

DAISY

More than that.

MELANIE

(Sarcastic) No, I'm sure this is just the normal number of webs that grow up organically.

BASIRA

So, where are all the spiders?

MELANIE

I mean, they hide. You know, it's a thing they do, spiders. They hide.

DAISY

(Quietly) Perhaps they bugged out.

ARCHIVIST

Was that a joke?

BASIRA

John, focus. Are you getting any sense of anything? Can you See anything?

ARCHIVIST

No, I'm just seeing what you're seeing. Still a bit weak from our trip North, to be honest.

MELANIE

Sorry we couldn't stop for a snack.

(Basira laughs.)

BASIRA

Here, Mel.

MELANIE

What even are these?

DAISY

Magnesium flares. Technically not legal anymore. If you need more, just shout.

MELANIE

I'm fine. Uh, a-and please don't call me Mel.

DAISY

What? Since when?

MELANIE

Always. I'm trying to be more open about this stuff.

DAISY

Roger wilco, Ms King.

MELANIE

Better.

BASIRA

These flares going to work?

DAISY

No idea, but John said The Web doesn't get on great with fire, and we don't exactly have a flamethrower, so...

BASIRA

I mean, at least until we find the one Gertrude stockpiled, right next to the nukes.

ARCHIVIST

I'm sure the flares will work fine. I mean, unless it's all some elaborate plot to have us burn this place down again.

BASIRA

So what if it is?

ARCHIVIST

I don't follow.

BASIRA

I mean, anything we do could be part of the grand master plan. So, what, we do nothing? Just sit on our hands and hope that's not what the spiders want?

MELANIE

Right, sure, but it wouldn't hurt to have a bit more of a plan of our own, would it?

ARCHIVIST

Exactly.

BASIRA

You want to come back later?

MELANIE

Yes! That's what I said, isn't it?

ARCHIVIST

Well, we're here now. Might as well push on.

MELANIE

Famous last words.

[Door opens]

DAISY

Clear. Looks like nothing downstairs.

BASIRA

You want to take a moment before we head up?

ARCHIVIST

What about the basement?

DAISY

Can't see one.

ARCHIVIST

Huh.

DAISY

You want me to take point?

ARCHIVIST

No. No, I-I've got it.

[Footsteps on stairs. In the distance, a tape starts to play.]

ARCHIVIST

You hear that?

BASIRA

No, I—

MELANIE

Shh! Yes, room on the left.

[Muffled tape sounds of the Archivist's opening monologue from MAG001 – "Anglerfish", becoming clearer as they approach.]

DAISY

Is that ...?

ARCHIVIST

Yes.

BASIRA

Don't touch it.

ARCHIVIST

No, it's alright.

[The tape clicks off.]

DAISY

Something underneath it.

ARCHIVIST

I see it. Hand me that brush.

BASIRA

Is that what I think it is?

ARCHIVIST

Yep. Official Institute paper and everything.

BASIRA

Goddamn it!

ARCHIVIST

Statement of Annabelle Cane. She left it for us.

MELANIE

Honestly don't know what else you guys were expecting.

BASIRA

Well, that's it then. Come on, let's finish up and get out of here.

ARCHIVIST

I-I mean, a-are we burning it?

MELANIE

The statement or the building?

DAISY

Both?

BASIRA

Don't tempt me.

(Daisy laughs.)

[Tape clicks off. Tape clicks on.]

ARCHIVIST

Statement of Annabelle Cane, regarding her history and her observations of the Magnus Institute, London. Original Statement written 20th July 2018.

Audio recording by Jonathan Sims, the Archivist.

Statement begins.

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

Free will is a funny old thing, isn't it, John? Can I call you John? I'm going to call you John. Such a strange concept, woven together from a thousand different experiences and ignorances, a faculty we only ever truly ascribe to ourselves and, I suppose, to our gods. With any other animal, we talk about instinct, we talk about training. Perhaps, if we have spent enough time with them, we talk about personality. But we never talk about choice. We never look at a dog racing wildly after a thrown ball and think, 'What an odd decision that dog has made.' We talk about the workings of its mind and its instincts. If it doesn't chase the ball, we wonder why. Is it sick? Is it tired? Perhaps something in the nature of this particular breed, this particular dog, makes it prone to ignoring a

game a fetch? The idea of a dog simply choosing not to chase feels deeply unnatural. Is it even capable of legitimately making a decision? Some would say no.

Of course, people are so very different from dogs. Our brains are larger, more complex; so many more little factors and wrinkles to push us and pull us. But does any of it actually constitute free will? Free of what? We all have forces that drive us, circumstances that direct us, and even if we choose to ignore these and act against all logic just to prove that we can, is that not simply allowing the existential terror of our own powerlessness to control us instead? Scans show that decisions are made by your brain long before your conscious mind even has a chance to register them. Most of one's life is simply spent looking back and convincing yourself that you chose deliberately to act like you did.

Have you ever read *War and Peace*, John? I know, I know. I had to read an extract from it for a literature class once, ended up reading the whole thing. Another life. It's not actually as boring as people say, and its central thesis is that the tiniest most insignificant factors can control the destiny of the world. In his postscript, Tolstoy muses on the concept of free will, on whether or not he really believes in it. He ultimately decides that, if all the millions upon millions of factors and influences that weigh upon our choices were fully and completely known, then all could be foreseen and predetermined. But, he argues, it is quite impossible for the human mind to comprehend even a fraction of these, and in that vast, dark space of ignorance lies 'free will'. Isn't that marvellous, John? Free will is simply ignorance. It's just the name we give to the fact that no-one can ever really see everything that controls them.

Of course, that's not the real crux of the free will question that's bothering you at the moment, is it? I think that one probably comes down to whether or not you're choosing to continue reading this statement out loud. You didn't mean to, did you? No, I'm sure you told Basira and Melanie that you were going to glance it over and report back. Perhaps they asked you if you were going to record it and you shook your head. "Maybe later." That sounds like the sort of thing you'd say. But think about it, John, when's the last time you were able to read a statement quietly to yourself without instinctively hitting record and speaking it aloud? Is it just instinct, habit? Or is it a compulsion, a string pulled by the Ceaseless Watcher or the Mother-of-Puppets? Or both? I know the summaries have started to confuse you. Where do they come from when you read a statement afresh? How do you just sort of know what it's about before you even start to read it? But by then, you're away, the rollercoaster is dropping and you've no real choice but to hold on and hope that I don't crash you.

I'm afraid I don't actually have these answers for you. I've simply been watching. I'm sure you understand that. Maybe I've occasionally been nudging something here and there to keep you safe, to keep everything on track. But I know you've been more worried about your choices, about whether you're being controlled by me or by the Mother. So, I thought perhaps I should leave a little something to reassure you that, yes, your actions and your choices have all been your own. Have they been controlled? No more than gravity controls you when you walk, or hunger controls you when you choose your meal. There are certainly new forces, new instincts and desires that influence you and shape your actions. Perhaps you're unprepared for them, but if you choose to believe in free will, then yes, all you have done has been of your own free will. They have all been your choices.

Now, I believe the tradition is to tell you the story of my life, the sinister path that led me inevitably to the sorry state in which I now find myself? Well, let it never be said I do not dance the steps I am assigned.

I was born into what most would consider a large family. My father worked constantly, and my mother was overwhelmed, leaving some of the older children to watch over the younger ones. Some rose to this responsibility; others deeply resented it and took no pains to hide the fact. I was one of the youngest, and it soon became clear to my infant mind that, in order to get anywhere, the key was to navigate the baroque family politics in which I found myself. I became very good at it. I would instigate fights between siblings if I needed them in trouble. If I required sympathy, I would bite myself until I drew blood and then blame it on my sister Lizzy. I discovered a deep and enduring talent inside myself for lying. My manipulations were not intricate, but they were far beyond what was expected of a child my age, and I have always believed that the key to controlling people is to ensure they always under- or overestimate you. Never reveal your true abilities or plans.

Of course, I learned many of my skills from my mother, who could wield guilt like a rapier and anger like a scalpel. She never simply screamed at you. She was always aware of exactly what kind of fury or disappointment was needed to make sure you regretted ever catching her attention. She had eight children, yet weaved that life around herself in such a way that she always seemed both the victim of it, yet curiously divorced from any responsibility. In many ways, she was the victim, at least of my father, whose pathological absence spoke of a man who had no interest whatsoever in engaging with the life where he had trapped his family. However well I had learned my lessons, it was clear that

happiness was not something I could have within that family. There was simply too much there that I couldn't control.

My biggest attempt to assert some form of influence over my family was when I decided to run away. In my childish mind, I was certain that my disappearance would destabilise the entire family unit, allowing me to take my rightful place as the most important child upon my return. An infantile fantasy, perhaps, but one I was keen to realise. I intended to stay away for two days and two nights. I took a backpack and filled it with as much food as I could carry, which was barely enough for a decent lunch, my favourite blanket and the only book I could say belonged to only me: *Five Go Down to the Sea*. And then I left.

We lived in Hunstanton, in Norfolk, about twenty minutes' walk from the beach, and it was late spring, so I wasn't at all worried about the temperature. I had chosen where I was to spend the two days I had decided to disappear some weeks before. The air was warm and humid as I snuck out of the house, filled with that slight smell of salt that even now, changed as I am, I still sometimes find myself missing here in the grimy air of London.

If you walked down the short hill from Hunstanton town centre towards the beach, and took a right just before you reached it, you could find yourself on a small stretch of sand that seemed oddly quiet. Most days it was completely deserted, and even in those summer holidays where the number of sunbathers was so high no part of the beach could fully escape them, it would only have a handful of dedicated loungers lying around, quietly reading and studiously ignoring their own unease. Exactly why it remained like that and no-one seemed to notice is a mystery to me even now, but whatever the cause, it was

a shunned place. And sitting on the side of the road above it, casting a thick, angular shadow, was the squat, brick structure of the old chip shop.

I'd never seen it open. No-one had, as far as I could tell. It was painted a dark blue that never quite matched any colour of sky that was behind it, and had a hand-lettered sign that could still be seen covering much of the bare left-hand wall in curling, faded typeface: 'Chips'. The old chip shop had been there as long as I'd been alive, probably much longer, and its silent one-storey silhouette had always unsettled me. It was only looking back that I realised how few windows it had, just one tiny panel of glass either side of the big doors. The rest of the structure was just plain, unadorned brickwork. I don't really know why I decided to hide there, but assuming you've been paying attention, then I'm sure by now you understand how little that means. Perhaps, deep down, I simply knew it would be unlocked.

The sun was setting by the time I reached it, and if there had been any tourists trying to enjoy the beach in that place, they were long since gone. I was utterly alone, the only sound a few distant seagulls screaming to be fed as they circled aimlessly looking for food. Against the vivid, red-orange of the sky the old chip shop seemed almost black, like a fallen obelisk. A light rain began to patter down and I, not having had the foresight to pack an umbrella, ran to it and opened the door as quickly and as quietly as I could. Inside, it was warm and dry. Dust coated everything and I struggled more than once not to sneeze, something I was convinced would somehow alert my family to where I was. So, I crawled under one of the counters, and soon enough sleep had come for me.

I awoke to the sound of rhythmic clattering, the noise of wood striking wood in a complex, intricate pattern. I got up, more curious than fearful at that moment, and took a few tentative steps towards it. The sound seemed to be

coming from one of the back rooms and, seeing how light seeped from below only one of the doors, it seemed to me pretty obvious which room contained my answers. So, I went inside, another action which, looking back after the fact, I find myself pleasingly baffled by.

Inside was a young woman I did not recognise, sat at what I would later learn was an old-fashioned wooden loom. Her eyes and face were sunken, her hands and arms a blur as the machine pressed on. They arced over and through the loom, and I could see much of her inside forearms and upper legs were covered in tiny holes: small red pinpricks, like insect bites. Looking back, of course, and remembering the crunch of used syringes beneath my feet, I realise that addiction is one of the strongest vectors of control there is.

The woman looked up at me, disinterested, and I saw that the threads of the loom were laced into her skin, all through her track marks, and that dozens of tiny spiders ran up and down those weaving threads and scurried in and out of the holes in her skin. Her eyes met mine, then travelled upwards, towards the ceiling. I followed her gaze for barely five seconds before I fled home and abandoned my plans to run away entirely. I decided not to describe what I saw up there. I will only say that it is what engendered in me that terror of spiders which eventually led to my volunteering at Surrey University. I will simply say that when a spider reaches a certain size, it is not entirely made up of spider anymore.

So, how much free will was involved in that story? What could I have chosen to change? Would a different path have been possible? I felt no loss of control – no puppet strings guided me – and yet the Mother got exactly the result she no doubt wanted, one that would lead to a fear of spiders so acute that I would later have that horror focused and refined into a silk-spun apotheosis.

Unless, of course, none of it was intentional, none of it was planned. The Mother is the fear of manipulation and lost control made manifest, so perhaps it is our fear that projects her influence on everything that happens, like the mind retrospectively assigning reason to our actions, so we fit whatever occurs into the neatest pattern we can and declare her web both intricate and complete. Perhaps she is no more active than Terminus, simply sitting and revelling in the inevitable cascade of paranoia, as those who hold her in special terror cocoon themselves in red string and theory. Or perhaps I am simply telling you what you need to hear in order to behave exactly as the Mother wishes you to. Perhaps I have never even seen a beach.

Don't go to Hill Top Road again.

ARCHIVIST

Statement ends.

(Shaken) That was, uh ... I d-didn't like that. I couldn't ...

(Clears throat) So, she is watching the Institute, interfering with things. Is that reassuring or really, really bad? I can't say I'm ... I can't say I'm sad to have another ally allegedly on our side, but I don't like the idea of being important to The Web. That's a really bad place to be. Annabelle's right, though. I mean, I can't trust anything she says to not be another lie to further manipulate and manoeuvre us, but deep down, I think she's right. What I've been doing to these people, it hasn't been because I was puppeted or controlled or possessed. I wanted to do it. It felt good. But at least I know I *can* stop. I just ... don't know how. I don't want to stop.

Goddamn, this one really took it out of me. I need to go lie down.

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, Frank Voss as Basira Hussain, Lydia Nicholas as Melanie King and Fay Roberts as Daisy Tonner.