

MAG 178 — The Processing Line

Content Warnings

- Dehumanisation
- Helplessness / Existential dread
- Devaluation of human life
- Reduction of people based on 'usefulness'
- Futility / Inconsequence
- Body horror & torture
- Body image issues
- Medical horror
- Paralysis
- Arguments
- Police brutality (discussion of)
- Claustrophobia
- Explicit language
- Mentions of: enclosed spaces, needles/sharp objects, substance abuse, head trauma
- SFX: persistent droning, high pitched tones, repetitive mechanical noises, sudden cracking sound, meat processing, insects

[The Magnus Archives Theme – Intro]

JONATHAN SIMS

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

[Theme finishes]

[Tape clicks on]

[Sounds of industrial processing echoing in large spaces; moving bodies; and the slow regular sound of hundreds of feet taking synchronised steps forward]

[Speaking voices echo in the corridors]

[Footsteps]

BASIRA

You're sure she came through here?

ARCHIVIST

Have I steered you wrong so far?

BASIRA

I don't know, do I? We haven't actually *found* her yet.

ARCHIVIST

We're getting closer.

BASIRA

Great.

MARTIN

Would you both just keep it down, please?

ARCHIVIST

They're not aware of us, Martin. I keep telling you.

MARTIN

Yeah, I know, but it's not okay to talk as though they're not *there*. They're still people.

ARCHIVIST

Uh um... Technically, a lot of them actually *aren't* people.

[Basira surprise brings everyone to a halt]

BASIRA

Come again?

ARCHIVIST

A-A lot of them are created by this place as, uh, set dressing, I suppose? This domain, the fear of it requires these... queues, these... this intricate hateful bureaucracy of hundreds of thousands of doomed souls — it needs far more than the number of people who actually ended up here.

MARTIN

Wait, wait, wait. So... so it just... makes the rest of them up?

ARCHIVIST

Er, maybe one in a hundred or so are actually real. The rest are there to make those people's fears more acute.

MARTIN

That's... ugh, that's somehow more disturbing.

BASIRA

How do you tell which is which?

ARCHIVIST

I mean, you could ask me, I suppose. B-But I don't really see the point. Would it help you to know whose suffering is real and whose is just a grim reflection?

(Beat)

BASIRA

No.

ARCHIVIST

Well there you go then.

MARTIN

Why are they queuing?

ARCHIVIST

Uh, I mean, I've been keeping us away from those rooms, but... Well, it's a factory of The Flesh, Martin. Use your imagination.

MARTIN

...No. No I don't think I will.

ARCHIVIST

Wise.

BASIRA

So who's in charge here?

ARCHIVIST

Not anyone you're familiar with; we won't be meeting them.

(Beat)

MARTIN

You're not going to... y'know?

(Martin vocalises an explosion)

ARCHIVIST

No. Even if I wanted to he's in the, uh... Main Processing Room. And believe me when I say that's... not somewhere you want to be.

MARTIN

Yeah. I guess.

God, I hate all of these... loose ends.

ARCHIVIST

I'm sorry.

MARTIN

It's-it's fine. We'll just have to tie them all up in one go.

ARCHIVIST

Hm?

MARTIN

Around Elias' neck.

ARCHIVIST

Ah.

BASIRA

(Impatiently) Which way?

ARCHIVIST

Left. Just up ahead. Although... uh, um, actually, you might want to head through *that* door and wait.

BASIRA

Again? Already?

ARCHIVIST

There's a lot of fear in this place.

(Annoyed sigh from Basira)

MARTIN

What's in there?

ARCHIVIST

Tool cupboard. Safe enough place to wait.

BASIRA

Fine.

[Door opens and metallic jangling is heard]

MARTIN

(Emphatically) Nope.

BASIRA

What the hell sort of tools are those?

ARCHIVIST

Flesh factory, remember?

MARTIN

New plan. **We** wait in the corridor. **You** go in the spike cupboard and tell your story to all the hooks and stuff.

ARCHIVIST

Fine. Just don't wander off.

[More metallic jangles as the Archivist enters and closes door]

ARCHIVIST

Hm. It could be worse. At least they're clean.

(Deep breath)

[Hissing static starts]

[The sounds of industrial processing become sharper, and the multitude of synchronized footsteps clearer and are heard throughout the entire statement]

[Hissing static ends]

ARCHIVIST

Time has no meaning in this place, but that does nothing to lessen the certainty that Tyler has been in this line for years. A steady stream of sweat flows down his neck, staining his rough-weaved jumpsuit, and sticking the itchy material to the skin of his back. The heat of this place is intense, but more than that, it is the apprehension, the waiting, the inching step by step towards his own consumption. He wants to turn and run, to push past the endless row of desperate, weeping people and flee this place. But where would he go? There is nowhere else, only the processing plant, and he's heard the stories of what happens if you don't get processed through the official channels. It's messy and, more than that, they just throw the remains away. Nothing is used. And deep-down Tyler knows that's what he's for. He's there to be useful, and the thought of running from that scares him as much as whatever is waiting for him at the end of the line.

Another person processed, another step forward on the snaking line of bodies. Tyler tries for a moment to remember how he got here, where he was before this room of noise and heat and patient, waiting figures. It's faded now. He remembers aches and worries and, sometimes, something that might have been joy, but it's far away now, like something seen projected on a distant wall.

Another step forward, and he's standing at a desk. The person behind it – is that a person? – wears a loose hood of coarse black leather. Below it they wear a featureless mask of the same material without a gap for eyes or mouth or even the shape of a nose. They wordlessly slide a form across to Tyler.

[Distorted grunts and sounds of paper sliding]

ARCHIVIST (CONT'D)

His eyes travel down it: name, age, ethnicity, blood type, eye colour, body mass index, the list stretches on and on and on, and he can feel the stares of the thousands behind him burrowing into the back of his skull. He looks around, unable to find a pen, a pencil, anything. The thing sat behind the desk does not respond to his questions.

[More distorted grunts and paper noises]

ARCHIVIST (CONT'D)

Finally, Tyler takes his fingernail, now long and ragged from his time in the queue, and painstakingly scores the words into the paper. When one nail breaks, he uses another, until finally the information is carved into the thick white form. The thing behind the desk nods, just once, and points him to another line, as long or longer than the first. Tyler feels his stomach drop as he walks slowly over to join it.

This gradual procession of the doomed leads not to a desk, but to a small room, partitioned off from the wider floor of the facility. What happens within it is not clear, but the looks of apprehension and despair on the faces around him are even more pronounced than they were before. Once again Tyler considers briefly trying to run, but there's nothing for it. Whatever the management has prepared for him at the end is what's coming for him. All he can do is wait for the axe to drop.

And wait he does, as the minutes turn into hours, turn into days, turn into years, which mean nothing in the thick torpor of congealed time. Once or twice Tyler tries to engage those in front or behind him in conversation, but gets only

panicked weeping in response. He is silent; his only companion the heavy dread that is gradually expanding through his gut.

Another step and he is at the door to the small room. It is riveted iron, not rusty, but clean and polished to a sterile shine. The only smell is the smell of cleaning products. The door finally opens, and another thing stands there.

[Grating metal door opening]

ARCHIVIST (CONT'D)

It is dressed like the one behind the desk, but stood to its full height it towers over Tyler in its leather apron.

[Industrial noises now include an electric buzzing]

[Distorted grunts]

ARCHIVIST (CONT'D)

It grips him firmly by the shoulder in hands with the weight and texture of granite, and leads him into the room of clean and burnished metal. He tries not to stare at the implements that hang on the wall as he is placed on a wide metal plate in the centre. He feels it yield slightly under his feet, and a weight appears on a screen set back into the wall. One of the things adjusting the equipment seems to become aware of this, though how it could have seen the measurement Tyler does not know, and it snatches the forms that he still carries from his hand.

[Distorted grunts and page-snatching]

ARCHIVIST (CONT'D)

The noises that come from behind the mask seem to indicate the weight does not match what he has put down on his paperwork and, despite everything, Tyler is suddenly gripped with a panic that he might somehow be in trouble.

[Grunting continues]

ARCHIVIST (CONT'D)

The disruption passes quickly and the things move on to other tests: poking, lifting, stretching his limbs, and assessing them with strange metal tools. Even if he had the will to, Tyler could not have struggled: the movements of the things scrutinizing him are as gently unstoppable as a piston. Finally, he is led over to a grate on the floor.

[Swift metallic noise with bubbling sound]

ARCHIVIST (CONT'D)

He barely even has time to register the red-hot wire cutter before it is in and out of his left arm with practiced, professional ease, neatly removing a small wedge of muscle. There is almost a full second of numb confusion before the pain finally hits, and Tyler begins to scream.

The figures surrounding him do not seem to notice, instead fussing over the sample they have taken, examining it in minute detail and silently conferring about it. Then they all nod at once, and the tiny chunk of meat is tossed away down a nearby disposal.

[Meat lands wetly]

[Metallic buzzing starts]

ARCHIVIST (CONT'D)

One of them moves to the wall and picks up a long metal rod connected to an intricate arrangement of looping metal.

Tyler is so preoccupied with the pain in his arm, he doesn't notice the switch turn on, or the metal begin to glow red with heat. When the brand hits him in the small of his back, he has no idea what is happening.

[Flesh sizzles; more grunting follows]

ARCHIVIST (CONT'D)

The sensation is so overwhelming that it's only after they push him out down a long metal chute and he finds himself at the back of another queue, he realises what has happened, as he sees the stamp of this place scorched into every back that stretches off into the distance.

[A rhythmic processing sound slowly builds in volume]

ARCHIVIST (CONT'D)

This is the last processing line. Tyler can feel **that** truth deep inside him. There is no longer the wide open space surrounding them. Instead the head-height dividers lock them into single file, snaking back and forth in a zig-zag as their path approaches the shining metal gate at the end. The ground is angled ever so slightly down, making it uncomfortable to stand still, and always gently urging them to move forward. At last, the prospect of seeing what might happen if he runs from the line seems worth it to Tyler, but the realisation sets in that it is far, far too late for that.

One step, then another, then another. The production balance of this place means it must be impossible for this line to be moving quicker than the ones

before it, but it seems to press on with a determination that makes Tyler feel faint. The interminable dread of the wait has dissipated into a very present panic of reaching the end of this line, but with every scream it seems to accelerate and all too soon he is through the gate.

[The processing sound fades, replaced by an electric neon buzz and muffled sounds of a machine turning on and off]

ARCHIVIST (CONT'D)

In the room before the killing floor there are three things. A mirror, a diagram, and a thick, black, permanent marker. Tyler stares at himself, a hundred thoughts running through his head as he waits his turn on the floor. He could refuse, a final petty act of rebellion against a system it feels like he has run through a hundred times. But what would be the point of that? It won't save him. A wasted pile of discarded tissue is all that would be left. Is it not better, at least, to be useful? Tyler picks up the pen, and begins marking the cuts of meat upon his body. When he is done, he walks through the door.

[Cranking metal; a stun gun fires through meat]

[Grunting sounds, and cutting including a bandsaw follow]

The bolt goes through the back of his neck with a crack, and Tyler feels himself fall, paralysed, to the floor. It does not kill him though, and he watches as his limp body is hoisted onto the butcher's frame. They take their time as they disassemble him, making sure to let him see exactly what is about to happen at each step of the way. The last thing he sees before returning to the processing line, is everything going into the garbage. There wasn't single suitable cut.

"Useless," one of the butchers says. And Tyler is gone.

[Hissing static starts]

[The sounds of industrial processing and synchronised footsteps
become duller]

[Hissing static ends]

[Door opens with a metal jangle as the Archivist leaves the room]

MARTIN

—know you find it hard whe—

(Beat)

Done already?

ARCHIVIST

Yes. Talking about me?

BASIRA

I assume that's a rhetorical question.

ARCHIVIST

I am trying to keep my powers to myself.

BASIRA

Sure.

MARTIN

I was just... giving Basira some advice.

ARCHIVIST

(Good-natured) Avatars are from Mars and humans are from Venus, that sort of thing?

MARTIN

I mean... yeah, sort of?

(Brief chuckle from the Archivist)

Well, w-we were pretty much done anyway.

ARCHIVIST

Great. Well in that case, shall we move on?

BASIRA

After you.

ARCHIVIST

Right.

[They start walking; after a few seconds Martin jostles a body]

MARTIN

Excuse me.

ARCHIVIST

(Exasperated) Martin, they can't hear you—

MARTIN

(Sharp) I know, John. That's not the point.

ARCHIVIST

Alright.

[More walking]

ARCHIVIST (CONT'D)

Next one's through here.

BASIRA

Next one?

ARCHIVIST

Her latest victim.

[Door is wrenched open with a metallic creak]

[Sounds of flies buzzing]

(Martin reels)

ARCHIVIST (CONT'D)

Recognise her.

BASIRA

...No... I don't think I do.

ARCHIVIST

That wasn't a question. It was an instruction. We can't move on until you do.

MARTIN

John, what are you getting at?

ARCHIVIST

This isn't just a journey through spaces.

(Beat)

BASIRA

Fine. I recognise her.

I don't know her name though.

ARCHIVIST

Isabelle Moran. Shoplifter, drug addict. Daisy was certain she was dealing as well. Derailed her recovery twice.

BASIRA

Fine. Noted.

Can we just move on please?

ARCHIVIST

I'm afraid not.

BASIRA

Why not?

ARCHIVIST

We aren't finished here.

BASIRA

Is that a threat?

MARTIN

Guys come on, don't do this, not here.

ARCHIVIST

I told you before — we can't hunt a monster you refuse to see.

BASIRA

Don't give me that patronising, ominous-oracle bullshit John. I'm not an idiot.

ARCHIVIST

I never said you were.

MARTIN

Guys...

BASIRA

(Angry) Look, I need you to lead the way. I don't need your advice, and certainly don't need you stood there judging me!

MARTIN

(Loudly) Enough. Enough! Someone has died! Show some respect. Or don't you care?

BASIRA

(Incensed) Of course I fucking care!

(Beat)

(Quieter) That's the problem.

MARTIN

I... I don't understand.

BASIRA

I just... I don't need him laying everything out for me like I'm some kind of idiot. I know all right. Daisy is the only person I could ever rely on and... and she... she did things, terrible things and I... I refused to see it or... said it was my duty or whatever, I don't know.

MARTIN

Basira...

BASIRA

I care, I just... I don't need to wallow in it. I need to end it. All of it.

MARTIN

...We're here for you.

BASIRA

No. **She** was there for me.

ARCHIVIST

Cops vs robbers and monsters...

BASIRA

I thought we were doing good. I really did. I knew there was some bad shit. I knew Daisy was into a lot of it, but... I thought it balanced out.

(Weakly) I thought we were good.

ARCHIVIST

(Softly) I know how that feels.

(Beat)

BASIRA

I wanted to help people, you know? When I first joined. Protect people. But then I saw what some of those same people were capable of, and... something changed. I wanted to hurt them, the ones that deserved it, and it... it felt good. It felt righteous.

I thought I could feel the line though. I really did. Eventually, though, it was too much... I was going to quit. I couldn't take what I saw myself becoming. But... then I got sectioned, and suddenly... suddenly it turned out there were real monsters out there, and, well, that just made the power feel better. So things kept slipping. But, Daisy was always there for me.

MARTIN

All those innocent people...

BASIRA

Were they? Innocent?

ARCHIVIST

Some. And if not (inhale) what crime warrants what was done to them? Theft? Violence? Disrespect?

BASIRA

You knew her. She was trying to be better.

ARCHIVIST

She was.

But she never asked me to forgive her.

BASIRA

Forgive her?

ARCHIVIST

I've been scared, terrified for my life so many times these last few years — but I've never, not once, felt so horribly, abjectly, powerless as when she took me into that forest to kill me. I'll never forget it.

MARTIN

You never said...

ARCHIVIST

(Shaky) It's not easy to talk about.

MARTIN

Oh John...

BASIRA

And would you have? Forgiven her?

ARCHIVIST

No. But she never asked me. She knew she had no right.

(Beat)

BASIRA

I really am going to have to kill her, aren't I?

ARCHIVIST

There's no way to bring her back. Not anymore. At this point, if I tried to take away her fear i... it would destroy her anyway.

BASIRA

Am I even going to be able to?

ARCHIVIST

Yes.

BASIRA

And she stays dead?

ARCHIVIST

In this case, yes.

MARTIN

What about the powers?

ARCHIVIST

Dream logic remember? She won't come back. Trust me.

BASIRA

...Does she *want* me to kill her?

ARCHIVIST

She asked you to, didn't she?

BASIRA

No, I mean, right now? Is she suffering?

ARCHIVIST

...No. Right now she's... She's happy.

(Martin reacts)

BASIRA

Killing her won't undo any of it.

But that's not the point.

ARCHIVIST

No-one gets what they deserve. Not in this place. They just get whatever hurts them the most.

Even me.

(Long beat)

BASIRA

Can we move on now?

ARCHIVIST

Yes. I believe we can.

This way.

[Tape clicks off]

[The Magnus Archives Theme – Outro]

JONATHAN SIMS

The Magnus Archives is a podcast distributed by Rusty Quill and licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution Non-Commercial ShareAlike 4.0 International licence. Today's episode was written by Jonathan Sims, produced by Lowri Ann Davies, and directed by Alexander J Newall. It featured: Jonathan Sims as The Archivist, Alexander J Newall as Martin Blackwood, and Frank Voss as Basira Hussain. 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.