

MAG – 139 – Chosen

Content Warnings:

- Extreme violence
- Body horror
- Ritual acts and trauma (including burning alive)
- Childbirth
- Assisted suicide

[The Magnus Archives Theme – Intro]

JONATHAN SIMS

Rusty Quill presents: The Magnus Archives. Episode one hundred and thirty-nine. Chosen.

[The tape clicks on.]

ARCHIVIST

Statement of Eugene Vanderstock, regarding the creation of Agnes Montague, her life, care and death. Original statement given November 30th 2006. Audio recording by Jonathan Sims, the Archivist.

Statement begins.

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

Arthur asked me to tell you that Agnes Montague is dead. He asked me specifically because he knew I'd have to write my whole bloody story down for you and it would hurt like hell. But I talked out of turn to him, suggested that

we ought to just burn this whole place to the ground with you inside, so I suppose this counts as my punishment. He thinks I'm just afraid enough of him not to make good on my threats without his say so. He's probably right. Just as well you're not here. Smart move on your part. But they always are, aren't they? Smart moves. Someday you're going to push your luck too far, and when you do... Well, you'd better hope it isn't Jude who comes to collect.

So me? I was born in '36. I know, I don't look 70, but burning the candle at all ends does have a few advantages. Until you burn out entirely, at least. It's hard to say how much I've got left in me, how much longer my sacrifices can buy me. But when I go, you'd better believe I'm going big. And it is going to hurt.

You know I got my start in the Blitz? I remember it like it was yesterday. It was Glenn Dunlop's house that did it, you know. We were always playing together outside, and sometimes his mum would give us tea. Well, it was gone. Nothing but rubble and... desolation. Glenn and his parents had been in the shelter out back, but I guess it wasn't quite sheltered enough, and only his dad made it out. He was a tall, strong man, used to work as a stevedore, and I'd never seen him without a stern expression and a pipe. But now, staggering through the ruins of his life, the look I saw on his face, it woke something inside me. Something truly awful.

Anyone who talks about "the Blitz spirit" wasn't there, or wants to paper over their fear with nostalgia. Terrible things happened in the blackout, and we hurt each other just as much as the Germans hurt us. And I hurt so very many people. A building fire is a dreadful thing, but so much more terrible when it's shining out into the night.

It was the first of my crimes, but not the last, and arson has always been my thing. It's such a simple way to destroy everything someone has built, both literally and figuratively. I found my god through my own path, served it in my own way. And when Arthur and Diego found me, told me there were others that shared my devotion, well, I can't say it doesn't feel nice to belong. Even if we do have our little disagreements.

And one of those disagreements came down to... I suppose you could call it destiny. We all felt the calling, the dreams, pulling us ever closer to a world of fire and loss, a place of burning and agony when we remade the world in the image of the Lightless Flame, the one Diego calls Asag. We all felt it, longed for it, but a longing is not the same thing as an instruction. We'd all been touched and warped by proximity to the holy burning fire, but none of us had any special knowledge, no matter what Diego claims he might have read. He wanted a grand inferno, a ritual of apocalyptic burning that would make the firebombing of Dresden look like a sparkler.

Which sounded amazing, but a few of us pointed out that the Allied air force had a tad more firepower than we did, as none of us were likely to make the rank of Air Marshal any time soon. And that's when Arthur proposed his own plan. A chosen one. We would create a messiah, the Flame Incarnate, one who could usher in this new world and lead us in what Diego called the Scoured Earth.

When we finally decided, it was Eileen Montague who came forward as a volunteer. She was five months pregnant at the time, and had already taken care of the father in the usual manner of our little congregation. Some objected, said that unless the child was conceived of the flame, it could never be a true incarnation, but they had no idea how such a conception could

possibly even work, so it was decided that it would have to be enough to birth the child by fire.

We burned down five acres of woodland to create the site. At the centre of the blackened, ash-covered forest we build a pyre, so high and strong that the flame would be clear for miles, and so cunningly built it would catch in moments. Before it, the great bowl of pure water for Asag's scalding baptism, and in the centre of the pyre a hollow, where Eileen was to lay. We prayed, and sacrificed, and anointed her body with holy oil and a crown of kindling. I protested the last one, felt we could do better than to ape the Christians, but I was shouted down.

At last the hour was at hand, and as the first contractions started, Arthur struck a match. The fire was so immediate, so intense that I was almost brought to my knees, the light of the pyre so bright for a second, before it turned inwards, robbed of its glow and comfort, and turned entirely into blistering and unbearable heat. It covered Eileen in a second, flesh blackening and cracking, lips parting in a scream that was all at once agony and joy and terror and communion, as layer after layer of skin and muscle and bone were one by one destroyed by the force of the flames, until at last nothing remained of her but ash and bone. And on top of that, sleeping peacefully among the fire, a baby: untouched, unharmed, and to our eyes alight with a burning divinity. We baptised her with the boiling water of Asag and named her Agnes, as had been her mother's final request.

But, raising a messiah, as it turns out, is a lot more challenging than creating one. The sacrifices we fed Agnes worked fine, and maintaining her as a vessel of the Lightless Flame proved no real problem at all, but dealing with her as a child was far tougher. She was quiet, considerate, but prone to fits of violent

rage which, while not unexpected given what burned inside her, still made living in a single location for any length of time untenable. She could not be allowed near other children for fear of discovery, could not be left alone for any significant length of time, and any who were not directly blessed were often unable to survive even an hour in her company. We even lost a few members whose blessings proved insufficient. Arthur tried to frame all this as a test of faith, and declare those we lost raising Agnes had been found wanting in their devotion to the Lightless Flame. Prick. She was just a brat.

Eventually she began to settle down, to reach equilibrium and take her lessons more to heart. She became studious, quiet, seemed to accept and acknowledge her destiny, her duties as our chosen one, and at times she even spoke dreamily of the Scoured Earth and the pain of the world to come. Her strength was growing by the day, and even some of our most devout could not touch her for more than a few seconds.

There was some division amongst us as to the best course of action, something that will surely not surprise you at this stage: some thought she needed to walk among normal children, interact with those who saw her as one of them; some thought she needed to continue training her focus; and some thought we had waited long enough to strike at our enemies and she was powerful enough already. The compromise we came to was Hill Top Road.

We knew it was a stronghold of The Web, full of other children Agnes' age. We would supervise from a distance, but were confident she would be in no danger. The Mother-of-Puppets has always suffered at our hand. All the manipulation and subtle venom in the world means nothing against a pure and unrestrained force of destruction and ruin. We were right on that front, though if we'd known exactly how powerful The Web was in that place, perhaps we

would have reconsidered. I was not one of those assigned to watch our chosen one, and so I can say little about exactly what happened within the walls of that house, but it seems the fight scarred the place in a way far deeper than simple fire. A scar in reality that I believe has since been compounded by the interferences of other Powers.

Regardless, the effect it had on Agnes was unanticipated. As far as we could tell she had destroyed the place utterly, and yet she remained bound to it, tied to it in some vital way. I knew when Arthur told me she had kept Raymond Fielding's hand that he was worried, but none of us could know what you were going to do.

Truth be told, I don't know what you actually did do. Neither Arthur nor Diego would explain it to me in detail, and Jude simply flies into a rage when it's brought up. I assume it's why we were waiting, biding our time for decades, unable to bring our designs to any culmination. Jude had only just joined at the time, and was besotted with Agnes, though I couldn't tell you if she loved her as a god or as a woman or as both.

Whatever the situation, whatever you did, we were left paralysed. Unable to go any further with our destiny and, I was assured, unable to remove the impediment.

So we waited. Agnes had reached adulthood, but would age no further, so there was no worry to that. Her fire would someday die, of course, but until then it would neither fade nor dim. We did what we could: we found her a place to live, gave her Jude for a guardian and provided for her material needs. And the years began to slowly burn away.

My job was to provide for her less mundane requirements. I was to secure her sacrifices. I would spare you the details, but I do not wish to. I worked in a factory, you see. Large, furnaces that glow red hot at all hours of the day and night. Eventually, enough of my superiors had suffered accidents or injuries that I had obtained a management position. It was difficult to take the space I needed and make the necessary adjustments, especially without anyone noticing, but eventually I was able to create a small workshop just beneath the main furnace. It was far too hot for anyone to check, so I had my peace. I took foreign workers, mostly, those with the fewest immediate connections to complicate matters and the most hopeful dreams of what their life might be. They were the ones that provided Agnes the most satisfying nourishment.

I would wait for them to be alone and then I would catch them unawares. Melting their mouth shut was a simple matter, and the screams they were able to make with their throat alone were easily drowned out by the constantly roaring machinery. I would drag them down to my workshop, and slowly, bit by bit, I would melt them, draining the now-liquid fat from their bodies, that I could later render into tallow. Their heart, their eyes and their tongue I would scorch down to ash and mix into it for texture, while the rest I simply incinerated.

Once fully rendered, I would turn these poor souls into foul-smelling candles, the wicks, twisted from whatever hair and tendon survived, didn't ignite with any flame, instead burning with an black ember that, if you listened very closely, you could almost hear screaming. Agnes would take them to her small, empty flat, lay them on the floor and light them. Over the many hours these candles burned she would crane over them, so Arthur tells me, inhaling all the agony, suffering and loss from which they were created. Or he could have been

lying to me, just keeping me busy with torture and murder so I didn't get in the way of anything. I don't think I would have minded that, actually. At least I felt useful.

Aside from that, Agnes simply waited. We all did, but I think it was the hardest on her. So much fire and destruction, trapped raging inside her, as she simply sat, placid, waiting for... something. Of course, none of us suspected what was actually going to sink it all. I mean, if you'd told me, I'd have laughed at you. That stupid coffee shop twit.

I honestly don't know why Arthur allowed it, or why Jude didn't step in. She's usually so jealous. But Agnes... Maybe Agnes asked them to leave him alone, or maybe they were just surprised by her interest in this boring, unremarkable fool. Maybe they assumed it was some long, torturous plan, and she was simply building the kindling for a bonfire of aching loss and suffering such as we had never before seen. And I suppose, in a way, she was. Just not the one any of us expected.

It wasn't love, I'm sure of that. I don't think it was even happiness. But I think it was doubt. In that tiny, sliver of affection, lay a whole universe of doubt. The sort of doubt that the torturing Flame Incarnate cannot have, but that too many years spent in silent patience, followed by one clumsy flirt in a coffee shop could create. A tiny, hairline fracture which destroys everything.

When she told us... I have known anguish and destruction like few in this world, but the memory of that night still makes me shudder. The sadness and grief we felt at what we knew we had lost. It was Agnes herself that suggested it. If we tried the ritual and failed, she said, it might be hundreds of years before we had the strength to try again. But if she ceased, not in culmination

of fire, but a cold and quiet death, perhaps her spark would return to the Lightless Flame, and she could try again. Not immediately, and likely not even within my remaining lifetime, but sooner than if she burned.

And so we hanged her, as she requested. All because of that most insidious of emotions, hope. We have allowed Jude free reign on what happens to the coffee shop boy, though Agnes asked her not to interfere. She has not yet harmed him, but I cannot imagine what is going through her mind, the misery and pain he has brought upon himself. For all her anger, she is not rash, and I fear her quiet consideration far more than I worry about her temper. It may be he lives for the remainder of his natural life, but she will make sure he is never happy, and never without pain.

As for you, whatever you did, and whatever protection it might have afforded you is severed with Agnes' death. Arthur has told us not to harm you yet, but this whole thing has really rather weakened his authority, and many of us are now looking towards Diego for leadership. But we shall see, I suppose. I hope, when it is time, we may burn you forever, Gertrude.

ARCHIVIST

Statement ends.

Nice to see Gertrude also got a lot of threats. So far, it doesn't seem that any went desperately well. Except for Elias, of course, but he didn't threaten, did he? He just... did it.

I'm curious to see what it was she did to derail this big ritual, because I'm sure she didn't pay poor Jack Barnabas to fall in love with Agnes. Well, ninety percent sure. No-one's come seeking vengeance recently, though, and looking

at the details for the British Steel plant in Scunthorpe, it does seem like Eugene is still around, so I can only assume some sort of equilibrium was found. Given what happened when I met Jude Perry, I'm not in any rush to track him or any of them down myself. Diego, I assume to be Diego Molina, who Basira crossed paths with back in her sectioned days, and Arthur... could be Arthur Nolan, though going from the head of a cult to watching over Jane Prentiss as a landlord does seem like something of a demotion. God knows. It's not like I don't have my own office politics to keep track of.

The others are doing... better, I think. Basira's busy doing research for something secretive, unsurprisingly, but she seems to be adjusting to, uh, the new Daisy. I actually like Daisy now, which is, uh, a really weird feeling. Melanie's quiet, but I think therapy's helping. Haven't seen Helen much. The door is sometimes there, sometimes not. I haven't knocked. I'm never going to trust it. Trust her. Trust it. And I shouldn't. Whatever it's relationship to the person who was or is Helen... assuming that I can ever know its motivations is a mistake. And that just leaves Martin, which...

Why were we chosen? Agnes was created, crafted with a specific purpose, so finely tuned that even a grain of uncertainty threatened the entirety of her being, but I'm so full of doubt it feels like there's no room for anything else, and I'm sure Martin is the same. Is there destiny here? Bloodlines and prophecies? Or, or did we just... stumble into this? Maybe we're the opposite of Agnes. Maybe our doubts are exactly what we need. If, if that's the case, I'm a... an amazing chosen one!

Dunno how that would work though. I'm just worried about Martin. Christ, every other avatar gets to have their feelings burned right out of them, but

me? I've just got to sit in mine. I know he said he had everything under control. I need to trust him, whatever he's doing with Peter he's—

He knows what he's doing. Probably. I just— I need him to be okay. I just do.

If I Knew... what his plan was. If I Knew what Peter was doing. If I just...

(Softly) Can I?

(Grunts of exertion as he tries to know)

[Static rises]

(The Archivist cries out in pain)

[Static fades]

ARCHIVIST (Cont.)

(Pained) End... End recording.

[The 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.