

MAG 167 — Curiosity

Content Warnings

- Manipulation
- Reported violence
- Immolation / Death by fire

[The Magnus Archives Theme – Intro]

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

[Theme finishes]

[Tape clicks on]

[A wasteland wind swirls; footsteps on gritty ground]

[Hissing static starts]

ARCHIVIST

Help us with what?

MARTIN

Excuse me?

ARCHIVIST

Annabelle, help us with... what, our, our, our journey, killing Elias, vanishing the Entities— what?

[They stop walking]

MARTIN

Please don't do that.

ARCHIVIST

Do what?

Oh, oh, right, ye-, I see, yes. Well, I— Sorry.

MARTIN

It doesn't... feel great, having someone looking inside your head.

[They start walking]

[Hissing static ends]

ARCHIVIST

You can... feel it?

MARTIN

No, but that's hardly the point, John—

ARCHIVIST

Oh, no, I see, sorry, um, right.

MARTIN

I mean, I don't want to keep secrets from you, but—

ARCHIVIST

You should at least, be able to.

MARTIN

Basically, yeah!

ARCHIVIST

I-I suppose that's fair.

MARTIN

It's just— it's weird knowing that you can know literally everything I think and feel. E-especially since you're not exactly the most open of people, emotionally, I mean.

ARCHIVIST

What that's not fair; I share!

MARTIN

Sure you do.

ARCHIVIST

I do.

MARTIN

Okay, so how exactly would you describe your current emotional state regarding all of this?

ARCHIVIST

Gah—

MARTIN

Go on, I'm all ears.

ARCHIVIST

I feel...

MARTIN

Mm-hmm?

[Backpack zippers jangle as they stop walking again]

ARCHIVIST

(Sigh) I feel... sad.

MARTIN

(Flat) Sad.

ARCHIVIST

Very sad.

MARTIN

(Flat) Very sad.

ARCHIVIST

Yes, alright; point taken.

[They start walking]

MARTIN

You said you could control it now.

ARCHIVIST

I can, I, I just— I—

You're absolutely right. I will refrain from knowing anything about you.

MARTIN

Thank you.

ARCHIVIST

Unless you're in danger.

MARTIN

(Laughingly) Physical danger; If I'm in danger of being mad at you or something—

ARCHIVIST

(Crosstalk) I—

MARTIN

—you've got to figure it out the old-fashioned way.

ARCHIVIST

Fine. Agreed.

(Sighs)

So. What did Annabelle say?

MARTIN

She offered to help, but she didn't say what with; she asked us where we were going; I didn't tell her, but... it was pretty obvious she had a good idea?

ARCHIVIST

Did you, feel like she was influencing your mind at all?

MARTIN

I don't think so, but I mean... who knows?

ARCHIVIST

I could.

MARTIN

(Getting forceful) But look. She didn't control me into asking you not to look into my head, if that's what you're thinking. That's all me—

ARCHIVIST

Martin, I'm not looking for a loophole.

MARTIN

Well, good, 'cause this isn't one.

ARCHIVIST

(Teasing) Methinks the Spider doth protest too much.

[Martin stops walking]

MARTIN

(Annoyed) John—

ARCHIVIST

Joking! Just joking.

[They start walking]

MARTIN

Do you know where she was calling from?

ARCHIVIST

No. She, no. She's still... hidden, somewhere; I, I can see her voice coming down the phone line, but the closer it gets to her the harder it is to see.

Mm, Christ, this all feels so... obtuse; it's like, I have the power to drink the whole ocean, but I have to do it through a straw.

What?

MARTIN

Just, I don't know, it-it worries me, I guess? You know, when you do the whole-
(imitating the Archivist) ‘curse this flesh prison’ thing, it, I get you're different; none of us are what we were, but, well? It worries me.

ARCHIVIST

Sorry.

MARTIN

That's not... It's okay.

(The Archivist sighs)

MARTIN (CONT'D)

Anyway, my flesh prison (**small laugh**) would like to stop for a bit. How far until the next... domain?

ARCHIVIST

A while. If you want to stop, it's as good a place as any.

MARTIN

No, I just, need a moment. (**sigh**) One where I'm not just relentlessly pushing forward.

ARCHIVIST

(**Large sigh**) Alright, we can stop.

[They stop walking and sit down]

(**Long beat**)

MARTIN

Why did it have to be us?

ARCHIVIST

You'd rather be a bystander?

Trapped in one of those places?

MARTIN

I-I don't know. No, I just...

I bet Gertrude would be able to do this, you know? She-she would eat a hellscape like this for breakfast.

(Beat)

ARCHIVIST

I... don't think she would have done very well here.

MARTIN

No?

ARCHIVIST

No.

MARTIN

Do you... *know* that?

[Hissing static starts]

[Wind continues]

(The Archivist takes a breath)

ARCHIVIST

To say that Gertrude Robinson never had a friend would not be true. She was close in her way to many people but, looking back I wonder if she ever realized just how strongly she herself reeked of the Lonely.

[Hissing static ends]

ARCHIVIST (CONT'D)

When she first joined the Archives, she took the place of a man named Angus Stacey, whose face was torn from his skull by a creature of masks and smiles. Gertrude had thought of it as ‘The Grinning Wheel,’ and it was one of the first things to fall at the hands of the Institute's new avenger. Appropriately enough, Gertrude used fire.

She had some small knowledge of the truth of things when she first took the position, enough knowledge to be dangerous, as the old saying goes, but also enough to be cautious, and it was leaning into this second inclination that kept her alive through those first few years.

Angus Stacey had, in the long tradition of Institute Archivists, been a disappointment to the man whose eyes then sat in the smirking face of one Director Richard Mendelson. Angus had been too keen to learn, too ambitious in his academic legacy. He had had grand plans to revise Smirke's Fourteen, and, in trying to do so, burned through his resources, his luck, and ultimately all but one of his assistants. When Gertrude was appointed to the role, there was a single survivor left in the Archives: A woman by the name of Fiona Law.

Fiona was the most fascinating combination of curiosity and cowardice, pushing forward and forward into the unknown until the very first moment of

threat crystallized, and then she was away. Of course, retreat is not always possible in such a line of business, and when that proved to be the case, there was a single trait which Fiona possessed that saw her surviving encounters which had killed far braver souls than her. Because when she was pushed to the very limits of her terror, Fiona Law would faint.

And while there are those things in the dark that would kill you as you slept, most get no real delight from it, unless you are awake enough to know what is happening. And so, through cowardice and unconsciousness, Fiona had survived an entire generation of Archivist. And even stranger, when Angus Stacey died and she had the chance to walk away, she decided to remain. She had never got deep enough into the mysteries that plagued her to slake that burning curiosity. And she never would.

Alongside this inherited survivor, Gertrude would add two more assistants, Eric Delano and Emma Harvey. They were young, like her, keen to delve deeper into those strange secrets that back then were spoken of more openly. To them, Fiona seemed something of a joke, a middle-aged chatterbox who told stories of the Blitz and jumped at the long shadows in the corners of the Archives.

Emma in particular was Gertrude's confidant, the one whose knowledge and instincts she trusted, and the only other member of the Institute who ever knew of the strange bond between Gertrude and Agnes Montague.

But Emma had a sickness. As much as she might have despised the aging Fiona, it was the same one that plagued her: Curiosity. That desperate, grasping need to know. Emma, however, was circumspect enough to recognize the danger of such inclinations in a place like the Archives, and after those initial few years,

settled on a question. The first question to which she would apply her methods of experimentation: Why wasn't Fiona dead yet?

The experiments were simple enough. When a statement was close enough and real enough that finding its source seemed a possibility, Emma would volunteer herself and Fiona to investigate it. Eric had always been a homebody, and had no problem being left out of such expeditions, while Gertrude had far better things to do than worry about the comings and goings of her helpers, and so let her trusted Emma arrange things as she pleased.

Once out near danger, Fiona would always find herself ever-so-slightly ahead, always seeming to be inexplicably the first through the door. And more often than not it would close behind her. By the end, the poor woman genuinely believed spontaneously locking doors were a tell-tale sign of the supernatural. Emma would do her best to observe from safety, making notes, only retrieving the often unconscious Fiona when the danger passed. She watched as her poor guinea pig stumbled through a maze of whispering grubs. She timed the intervals at which Fiona emerged from a hungry fog, and recorded her barely escaping the sandman who came to take her eyes. Poor Fiona never suspected a thing.

Decades this went on, until Fiona was old and tired. There was less chaos back then. Gertrude's war was still only kindling and years might go by without anything terrible brushing against the Institute.

But at last, they found a coffin. And it was not a place that could be escaped by fleeing or by fainting. When Emma came to tell Gertrude what had happened, she found the first of the cobwebs in her hair, the ones she would wash from it every morning for the rest of her life. And Gertrude mourned the first of many losses, and did not suspect the truth.

Eventually, Fiona was replaced by a young man named Michael. Far too young to have such a job, really, but... things were different in those days. He was keen and eager, and Emma had a, slightly different idea of how to test him. She never really touched Eric, of course. He had been marked early by another who Emma was... keen not to cross. But young Michael? So innocent, so naive? She decided to experiment with how long she could keep him in the dark as to what was really going on. As it turns out, all his life. This time, Gertrude did have an inkling as to what was happening, but had her own escalating conflicts to concern herself with, and recognized the potential in a truly ignorant assistant.

At some point Eric disappeared. It's interesting the places that Gertrude did and did not think to look for him. She scoured the most warped and darkened corners of London, expecting any moment to find his remains. But she took Mary at her word when she said she hadn't seen him. She could have known the truth, of course, if she had wished but, it was so much easier to make it another pillar of her crusade. Emma knew what had happened, but had no interest in sharing such details.

Eric was replaced by another assistant, not so young as Michael, and hardened with some encounters of her own. She was eager to prove herself, and exactly the sort of person to intrigue the aging Emma. There was a fire to Sarah Carpenter, perhaps the one which led to Gertrude hiring her, and Emma's curiosity ignited once again, this time keen to find out exactly what it would take to break this brave investigator of the unknown.

By this point Gertrude was fully lost to her plots and plans and struggles, and as long as her assistants played their parts when asked, she paid them no more mind. And the frequency of genuine encounters grew as the season of hurried

rituals came nearer. It wasn't hard for Emma to convince her younger colleague to take the lead in their inquiries.

She took Sarah to a cave and sent her deep inside to see how far it went. There was no end, and the darkness was deeper than an absence of light would allow, but Sarah held firm to her cable, and Emma was gracious enough to pull her back into the light.

She took Sarah to the woods with a strange book of astronomy and suggested she go and chart the stars. The brave stargazer stayed beneath the canopy, and never quite lost herself to the cosmos, though sometimes when Emma looked into her eyes she could still see a reflection of uncanny constellations.

She even convinced Sarah to stay inside an old man's house, desperate to see her eaten by a hungry door, but was again disappointed. And all through it Gertrude could not see what was happening. And certainly the Spider smoothed things, elided questions, wiped away evidence, but it barely had to. Far better to feed Gertrude a steady string of plans to foil and rituals to derail.

Sarah's luck ran out when Gertrude and Michael were away on that last trip to a frozen island that did not exist. Emma had been given the statement of a widow whose life and home and partner had been taken by a man who, as she put it, 'burned on the inside'. And so Sarah and her secret tormentor went looking for this being, and they found him standing in the smoking ruin of an old farmhouse.

He was bald, dressed in dreary office clothes. To a cursory examination, unfit and unremarkable, save for his peculiar surroundings. If they had paused and looked closer, Emma might have seen the drizzling rain rising as steam from his skin. Sarah may have noticed the thin lines in his flesh from whence spilled a

dull orange glow. But they didn't. And as was her custom, Emma allowed her old knees to betray her, falling behind her companion.

Sarah Carpenter's last words were "Hello? I'm from—"

And then it was over. He split open like a flower bud blooming, and inside there was only the most terrifying heat. She had no time to run, and by the time she thought to scream it was too late as the thing enveloped her, closing tight, until she was simply more ash, trapped forever inside that charred and hollow shell. Emma knew as she ran that she might have gone too far.

When Gertrude returned with no Michael to a silent Archive and only Emma's stammered lies to fill it, she finally started to suspect the truth. She wondered briefly if it was hypocrisy, to feel such anger at what Emma Harvey had done, when she now had blood aplenty on her hands, including Michael's. But it didn't matter. The rage she felt was ice-cold. And so Gertrude went to the one person she was certain she could trust on the matter.

Agnes Montague and Gertrude Robinson only ever met once in their lives. Even if the Lightless Flame had allowed it, what would there have been to say? The bond between them, real as it was, was no one's choice but the Web's, and neither of them were keen to play its game any further than they had to. Their discussion was brief, and tinged with a melancholy, an awareness of mistakes, of their choices and duties and destinies. Neither of them smiled. But Agnes did confirm what Gertrude knew, and the details of Sarah's suffering only sharpened that deep and wounded hatred.

It was a trivial matter to convince the man who now watched from the skull of Elias Bouchard to allow it, so long as the deed did not take place within the Archives itself. But it didn't need to. An employee's home address is a simple

thing to acquire. When Emma Harvey awoke to the searing heat, she knew she was already dead. As the fire took her, and left her flesh running off her bones like oil, all she willed was not to give it the satisfaction of being afraid. I wonder if it would have upset Gertrude to learn that, even at the end, Emma had no idea it was her that had arranged it. Maybe not. For all her anger, there was no thirst for revenge in the Archivist, only an eagerness to expunge an infection that had gone unnoticed for too long.

And with that, Gertrude Robinson was without assistants. She never hired another. She worked with those that seemed useful until they were no longer so — Leitner. Dekker. Keay. Even Salesa on occasion. But she never again allowed herself to trust.

(Beat)

I, I, I'm sorry; I-I didn't, um—

MARTIN

Oh, no, it's, uh, it's okay. **(cough)** I just, I couldn't... not listen, or interrupt. Or—

ARCHIVIST

I, I, I promise, I, I didn't know I was going to do that.

MARTIN

I, I understand.

(Sigh) Well, let's... try to avoid that next time. **(little laugh)**

ARCHIVIST

Yes, quite.

(Martin sighs through puffed cheeks)

MARTIN

So. What? Without assistants she'd be bad at the apocalypse?

ARCHIVIST

W-without trust. W-without a-a reason.

Gertrude needed both the purpose her mission gave her and the control her position allowed. To be here, like us, without a, a reason, without someone to ground her? She-she'd have power, but, no control. No real purpose.

Perhaps she'd d-dedicate herself to a-a d-doomed quest like us but...

(Quieter) No. I think this would have broken her. And she'd have resigned herself to, ruling her domain.

MARTIN

What domain?

ARCHIVIST

We all have a domain here, Martin. The place that feeds us.

MARTIN

Oh.

Where's yours?

ARCHIVIST

(Laugh) I mean we're... traveling towards it.

MARTIN

Oh. Right, obviously. (**small laugh**) Duh. Um, what about me?

ARCHIVIST

(Cautiously) Would you, like me to—

MARTIN

(Quick) No, no. Don't tell me. I don't want to know.

ARCHIVIST

Okay.

MARTIN

(Coy) So. If you say Gertrude wouldn't have been able to go on without a reason—

ARCHIVIST

(Fondly conceding) Yes, Martin, you are my reason.

MARTIN

Just wanted to make you say it!

(Beat)

Cool.

ARCHIVIST

Right. Shall we press on?

[Jangling zippers and gritty footsteps as they stand up]

MARTIN

Oh, ju-, uh, just, uh... before we do.

ARCHIVIST

Mm?

MARTIN

A moment ago, when you were talking.

ARCHIVIST

Right.

MARTIN

The old Archivist, Angus.

(The Archivist inhales)

You said Fiona was...

(The Archivist sighs)

...released when he died.

ARCHIVIST

Yes.

MARTIN

If you had died, would the others have been able to quit?

ARCHIVIST

Yes.

I didn't know.

MARTIN

If you had, would you have told them? Would that have, have changed what happened?

ARCHIVIST

(**Sigh**) I don't know, Martin. I...

I don't know.

[They start walking]

[Tape clicks off]

[The Magnus Archives Theme – Outro]

JONATHAN SIMS

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