

MAG – 102 – Nesting Instinct

Content Warnings:

- Knife violence
- Infestation
- Mind-control

[The Magnus Archives Theme – Intro]

JONATHAN SIMS

Rusty Quill presents: The Magnus Archives. Episode one hundred and two.
Nesting Instinct.

[Tape clicks on.]

ELIAS

Look, John, I understand you're upset.

ARCHIVIST

A month, Elias. And you did what, nothing?

ELIAS

I was doing everything in my power to locate you.

(The Archivist snorts.)

ELIAS

Everyone was working on finding the ritual site.

ARCHIVIST

You didn't tell them I'd been kidnapped, though, did you?

ELIAS

It wouldn't have helped matters. Martin's research, at least, would have been sloppier.

ARCHIVIST

And imagine what might have happened if your rescue had been slower.

ELIAS

Sarcasm isn't going to help, John.

ARCHIVIST

The only thing here that "isn't going to help" is you. I am sick of relying on the kindness of things whose stated intention is to kill me.

ELIAS

(Annoyed) I am sorry, John, that my powers have not yet reached the level of omniscience. And I am sorry that I have to spend so much time trying to help you develop your own faculties, rather than explaining everything to you like a child. But you have a job to do, and I cannot fight your battles for you.

ARCHIVIST

As far as I can tell, the only battles I've been fighting have been yours and Gertrude's.

ELIAS

I should have thought preventing the horrific transformation of our world is not solely my concern!

ARCHIVIST

Fine. At least we now know you're of zero practical use here. So aside from sending me other people's statements, what can you actually do to help?

ELIAS

I have been trying to give you the information you need.

ARCHIVIST

Sure, when you're not bashing its head in with a pipe.

ELIAS

Leitner was... I will admit I possibly... overreacted to his sudden re-emergence.

ARCHIVIST

He could have helped.

ELIAS

You? No. To you he offered nothing but the crutch of simple answers. If I hadn't stepped in he could have significantly stunted your development. Left you defenceless.

ARCHIVIST

(**Sarcastically**) Yeah. I can't imagine what it must feel like to be defenceless.

ELIAS

I do regret... Gertrude's notes on the Unknowing are... lacking. I only shared the statements for a reason.

ARCHIVIST

S— You didn't even know why you were sending me them to me, did you? Just, what, a box of random files she labelled? You were hoping I could figure out the reason Gertrude chose them!

ELIAS

There is a possibility some of them were misfiled.

ARCHIVIST

So what do we actually know?

ELIAS

John—

[The Archivist hits the table.]

ARCHIVIST

Don't you dare "John" me. If you want my help, I'm going to need that crutch.

ELIAS

Gertrude believed that the Unknowing was going to take the form of a dance. It required a great deal of intact human skin to clothe what she referred to as the, er, the "corpse de ballet", though I suspect that's just her sense of humour. There is also one, the "Danseuse Étoile" that requires a costume of

special power or distinction. Gertrude believed that Orsinov and his circus created a dancer specifically for this role.

ARCHIVIST

I-I've met it. Calls itself Nikola.

ELIAS

There's also something else in the notes she calls the Choir, but no real detail on that. As far as where it will happen, it's a, a—

ARCHIVIST

A wax museum. Old, mostly a-abandoned, I think. I-I don't know exactly where, but—

ELIAS

That still narrows it down significantly. I'll, I'll have the others start digging.

ARCHIVIST

How do we— How do I stop it?

ELIAS

Gertrude seemed to think that once the dance begins it's tied to its location. Sufficiently disrupting that might be enough to derail the ritual. She mentioned she had acquired... something, for this purpose, but she gave no detail as to exactly what that might be.

ARCHIVIST

And you can't just... See where she put it.

ELIAS

She was... She got very good at hiding things from me.

ARCHIVIST

How embarrassing for you. Is there anyone else who might know what it is, or, or where? Aside from Leitner, or Gerard?

ELIAS

Sorry, Gerard Keay?

ARCHIVIST

Uh... yes?

ELIAS

How did you... Who, who told you he was working with Gertrude?

ARCHIVIST

No-one, I-I-I just... I read it in one of the statements.

ELIAS

I don't think you did.

ARCHIVIST

But... ah...

ELIAS

You just knew it.

ARCHIVIST

What, no, I... Th— That's not a—

ELIAS

No, no, no. No, John, this is good. It's a promising development.

ARCHIVIST

No, No I... It's just, it's just... just deduction or—

ELIAS

Is this the first time it's happened?

ARCHIVIST

Look, look, I don't— Look...Haaa... Gerard's not really a lead. He's dead. Isn't he?

ELIAS

Yes, but I believe he and Gertrude travelled together, shortly before he passed away. Perhaps if we could retrace their steps, we might find something.

ARCHIVIST

And by "we", you of course mean...

ELIAS

I'll see if I can hunt down a few relevant statem— Ahh.

ARCHIVIST

What?

ELIAS

(Sigh) Melanie is on her way up here with a knife. Could you talk to her for me?

ARCHIVIST

O—ah. S-Sorry, what?

ELIAS

She's hoping that even if I see it coming she'll still be able to overpower me.

ARCHIVIST

Ah—

ELIAS

She's wrong, of course, but I'd be keen to avoid that sort of struggle.

ARCHIVIST

She, She's trying to kill you?

ELIAS

Yes. Again. Even more than the others she has a visceral hatred of being trapped. Regardless of how much freedom I afford her.

ARCHIVIST

I don't— Uh...

[There's a knock at the door]

ELIAS

Come in, Melanie.

[Door opens]

MELANIE

Elias, hi, just brought—

ARCHIVIST

Ah...

MELANIE

What are you doing here?

ARCHIVIST

Put the knife down, Melanie. Melanie!

MELANIE

(With anger) Get out of my way!

ARCHIVIST

I don't believe— This isn't the way.

MELANIE

You haven't been here! You don't know—

ARCHIVIST

I was kidnapped!

MELANIE

Oh. Sorry.

ARCHIVIST

I mean, yeah El-Elias... is—

MELANIE

Seriously?! Seriously? You too? Has he got everyone fooled? If he dies, we die?
It's not even a good lie.

ARCHIVIST

Why would— I mean, why would it not be true? If he's managed to, to bind
us... Why wouldn't he be able to, to do that?

MELANIE

John, look at me. There is only one way out of this, and it is through him.

ARCHIVIST

I get, I get that you hate being here, Melanie, but do you really want to trade it
for prison?

MELANIE

No! But the way I see it, the police seem really keen not to investigate crimes
committed here.

ELIAS

That's actually fair.

ARCHIVIST

(To Elias) Shut up! (To Melanie) Melanie, please.

MELANIE

(Frustrated) It's not just being stuck here, John. It's not just me. He's manipulating you, he's manipulating all of us. Can you seriously not see that? He's pulling all the strings, and I don't think there's any other way to stop it. So get out of my way.

ARCHIVIST

Look, I— I'm sorry, Melanie, but we need him. We, We will... We will find a way to deal with i— with him. Not today. A-And not like this.

ELIAS

I am still here, you know.

ARCHIVIST

And if you weren't, I assume you would be watching this conversation, so... Melanie, we can't do this. Not yet.

MELANIE

Alright.

[The knife is set down.]

We'll try it your way. But whatever your way actually is, you'd better figure it out fast. Because it is your fault that I'm here. Fix it, or get out of the way!

[Door slams shut]

ELIAS

Thank you, John.

ARCHIVIST

Shut up!

[Tape clicks off. Tape clicks on.]

ARCHIVIST

Statement of François Deschamps, regarding the family and presumed marriage of Benoît Maçon. Statement given June 4th 2014. Audio recording by Jonathan Sims, Head Archivist of the Magnus Institute, London.

Statement begins.

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

Why do you need me to live it over again? To recount a story you know well enough already.

You were there, at least for the parts worth discussing. You want me to tell you what happened before then? How I met Benoît? His character? How he became my friend?

Truth be told, he was not my friend. He was simply a colleague, someone I might describe myself as well-disposed to, but probably not even that. It may seem dismissive to you, but in my experience there are two situations where one finds themselves working behind a bar when over the age of forty. The first is that you own the establishment yourself, what the English call ‘a

publican', and see no reason to hire others to perform duties you are quite capable of yourself.

The second is when a profound failure in your life has brought you to the middle of your life with no wealth, no prospects, and no skills that could be applied in more lucrative avenues.

Suffice it to say that Benoît Maçon did not own Le Papillon Blanc.

It was not one of the most fashionable spots in Toulouse, sitting just on the edge of where the tourist-facing centre meets the firmly residential, and never quite settling on either side. It billed as a cafe in the day, but most of its business was after dark, when all pretence was dropped, and it became simply a comparatively cheap place to drink. I worked the bar there with Benoît and a few others, and had done for a couple of years since I left school. Of all the others who worked Le Papillon alongside me, I would probably have said that Benoît was the one who interested me the least. There was an air of sadness about him, a melancholy that I found unsurprising, given the position he had found himself in, but distasteful nonetheless. My own life has certainly had its hardships, and I cannot help but detest those who indulge in self-pity.

Though... having seen his fate, perhaps some pity was earned.

Benoît was, as far as I could tell, all alone in the world, and rather unhappy about the fact. It was rare that the topic of parents or family would be raised or discussed without his appearing, as if from nowhere, to quietly volunteer the fact that his parents were dead, or his lack of siblings, or whatever it might have been. Whatever familial bond was the topic of conversation, Benoît Maçon did not have it, and expected, no, demanded that you pity him for the fact. It will not surprise you to learn he wore no wedding ring. That when a

young couple would enter the café to pass their time in wine and affection, he would simply stare at them, his face a mask of ill-concealed envy. I am deeply grateful it was rare that we had children in Le Papillon, as the one time they came in while he was on shift with him, he vanished for almost twenty minutes and, when he returned, it was clear he'd been crying. All told, he was a pathetic, lonely man desperate for any human connection. A connection I had no intention of offering him.

Quite frankly, I believe I have spoken more words about Benoît Maçon in the last five minutes than I did in all the many months we worked together. I wasn't even the one that noticed the changes in his behaviour. That was our manager Lucille. About five weeks ago, she off-handedly asked me if I knew of any "alteration" in Benoît's personal or home life. He had, so she told me, been significantly more cordial with her over the previous few days. He had been smiling, laughing, generally not acting like himself. I told her I didn't know and hadn't noticed, but the next shift I saw what she meant. It was as though a different man were wearing the skin of Benoît, a man who had always known the deep joys of life.

I watched this new person go about their happy life for almost an entire night before I finally decided that I simply had to ask him what had happened. At first he appeared puzzled by my question, but when I told him how much happier he seemed, his smile grew wide. He leaned in close to me and looked around playfully, as if pretending to check for eavesdroppers. "A woman," he said at last, "François, I am in love. And she loves me!" And then, without warning he grabbed me with both arms and pulled me into a short embrace, which I was simply too stunned to resist.

Up close, I could not help but notice the faintest of odours from his skin. It was a damp smell, like decaying wood, and it wasn't until I had a chance to shower and change my clothes after work that I finally managed to rid myself of it completely. It was not a pleasant smell, certainly, but it was not awful. What bothered me was its presence at all. I knew Benoît to be a clean, almost fastidious man, prone to wearing slightly too much cologne. This was new, and beyond that there was... something to the smell itself, some memory of a childhood spent in the country around Lyon, of wandering out in the damp heat after a summer rain, of turning over logs slick with moisture, to reveal the crawling underbelly beneath them. But for the most part I ignored it.

After all, if I could remain unconcerned about Benoît when he was miserable, doing so when he was happy hardly seemed like a challenge.

And indeed, he continued to be happy, almost to the point of bliss, for almost the entire month following. The smell was growing ever so gradually stronger, to the point where I would occasionally see my colleagues wrinkle their noses when he went to talk to them, but it never quite reached the stage where it felt worth bringing up with Lucille. Benoît's hygiene more generally also started to noticeably decline. At first, his shirts would be wrinkled when he arrived for work, when before I had only ever seen him wear them crisply ironed. Then there were small stains or tears that could be spotted, as his clothes seemed to be washed less and less regularly.

Again, none of this was glaringly obvious, and if his behaviour hadn't drawn my attention, it's likely I never would have noticed it at all. Certainly, none of the patrons of Le Papillon Blanc ever seemed bothered by his appearance or cleanliness.

Through all of it, he would talk incessantly to anyone who would listen about this woman who had apparently changed his life, “mon petit scarabée”, his little beetle. I was never able to get her actual name from Benoît, as he only seemed to refer to her by that weird nickname. Clear details were also difficult to establish: he could talk for an hour over what his little beetle had told him over breakfast, but when asked about what she did, where she was from, what she looked like, he would always find a way to talk around it and shift the conversation in a new direction. We managed to establish that she had children, as Benoît would often make reference to “the little ones”, his eyes lighting up with parental pride. They couldn’t have been his, obviously, but that didn’t seem to matter to him. But, as with their mother, solid details about these children were almost impossible to establish. I would have suspected this new family of his wasn’t even real, were it not for the fact that he was clearly not faking his joy or contentment. Either his “petit scarabée” was real, or Benoît was suffering from a very complex delusion indeed. It never occurred to me it might have been both.

It was... two days ago that it happened. I was thinking earlier how unlikely it was, to have been looking so precisely at such a specific spot at such a specific time as to make me absolutely sure of what I witnessed. If I had glanced over a second later or only caught it from the corner of my eye, I could easily have dismissed it. After all, the simple presence of insects is not, in and of itself, remarkable. It was the where this particular insect came from, however, that shook me so deeply. Benoît was leaning over the bar, listening to a young man who, I believe, was ordering for quite a large group. As this customer listed off his drinks, Benoît’s hand rested lightly upon the countertop, and I found, for no reason I could readily provide, my gaze was resting upon the fingers of his hand.

Without any warning, or reaction from Benoît himself, there seemed to be movement from the ring finger of his right hand. A slight shudder, a shifting of the skin beneath his fingernail. A small patch of darkness seemed to grow just below it, expanding until it resolved itself into the shape of an insect. It pushed itself smoothly and quickly out from below his fingernail and dropped down onto the bar, scuttling away and out of sight so quickly I lost it almost immediately. It had all happened in a matter of moments, and there was no blood, no reaction from Benoît, no evidence that it had truly happened at all, apart from my shaking legs and the feeling I was going to collapse. And it was in that state that your associate found me.

At the time I thought he was your son. His French was significantly better than yours, and it took some time and some difficulty translating before I could fully explain to you what had happened. You rebuffed all my questions about your interest in Benoît and his situation, as you resolutely have since. I am... telling you my story, since you have asked so nicely, but I will never truly forgive either of you for what you have shown me. I should have been more suspicious of this man, too old for his poorly dyed hair, leading me to an old woman who promised me answers in exchange for an address. I should have walked away. I shouldn't have offered to go with you. But I was in shock from what I had seen, and I believe you could have told me to do almost anything, and I would have been unlikely to argue. You tried to cross-examine me about things I didn't understand: "Étranger ou la saleté?" I honestly had no idea what you were talking about, but I didn't put up a fight when you told me to get Benoît's address. I don't know why you agreed when I asked to come with you. I wish you hadn't.

Do you really need me to describe it? You saw it for yourselves. The flowing tide that swarmed and scuttled as soon as the door opened. The smell that rolled out of that apartment like a choking wall. The thing that embraced Benoît. Mon petit scarabée. The only thing I don't know is if you saw in as much detail as I did the look of sheer contentment and joy on poor Benoît's face as his family crawled all over him. I don't care about what the police might have done; your young colleague was right. You should have burned the place to the ground. I have nothing more to say to you.

ARCHIVIST

Statement ends.

Th— (**Sighs**) This is, um...

[Pages turning.]

This is written in French. A-All of it. I don't... I don't speak French. I-I don't read... I've never...

(**Sigh**) I wish I could find it in myself to be surprised.

[More pages turning]

Er, statement, it seems, given directly to Gertrude. Though not apparently recorded. Did she perhaps leave her tape recorder at home when she took this little 'field trip' with Gerard? June 2014. Barely a year before her murder, and less than half that before Gerard Keay's brain tumour would lead to his own death. Did he know already? That his life was ending? Was he trying to accomplish one last good deed before the end? Were they both? "Étranger ou la saleté?" Foreigner or dirt. Stranger or Filth. I can see why with limited

information Mr. Deschamps' account could lend itself to either interpretation: sudden appearance of a vague and previously unknown figure inserting itself into someone's life on the one hand, and on the other... bugs and bad smells. Let it never be said the Hive and its ilk are subtle. Still, closer examination points pretty conclusively in that direction. It must have been a disappointment, especially if, as I suspect, Gertrude and Gerard were searching for information on the Unknowing.

Basira did some cursory follow-up on the statement itself. Benoît Maçon definitely died in late June 2014, but the Toulouse police records regarding the matter are firmly sealed. François Deschamps has refused our request for a follow-up interview. He did forward us one item, however. (**Snorts**) I can't read the French on this one, but it appears to be a crudely printed wedding invitation. Benoît Maçon is the only name legible on it, as most of the details are obscured by a wide variety of dried stains.

Most helpful of all, though, is the simple fact that Gertrude was in Toulouse in June 2014. The information I found from her laptop doesn't give a complete picture of her travels, but now I know when to look, and it appears that when she left Toulouse she did not return to London.

Instead, it looks like she took several connecting flights, eventually ending up in Wellington International Airport in New Zealand. I can't find any other details on the computer, but I'm going to ask the others to see if they can hunt down any statements referencing New Zealand in or around mid-2014. It might be a wild goose chase, but it's the best lead I have.

In the meantime I... I have a new flat. I should try to get comfortable, change the locks. Even if I might need to be leaving it for a while. Oh, and... I suppose I... I did tell Georgie I'd try to talk to Martin.

(The Archivist sighs.)

[Tape clicks off. Tape clicks on.]

ARCHIVIST

You're, er, sure you don't mind?

MARTIN

No, no, no, it's fine, I've... I've kind of stop noticing if I'm honest. They just sort of... turn themselves on these days. (Pause. He becomes agitated and upset) Look I'm, I'm so sorry, John, I— Elias didn't even tell any of us that you'd been kidnapped. I didn't know— No-one else was telling me— And there wasn't any—

ARCHIVIST

(Overlapping) Oh. Hey. Hey, hey, hey... It's alright, it's alright. Elias didn't tell anyone, there was, there was no way you could have known. I-I mean, I wasn't exactly here before.

MARTIN

(Terse) No, you weren't. (Pause) But I'm sure that if you could have been, you would have. (Pause) Are you alright? They didn't hurt you?

ARCHIVIST

No. No, no, I'm... I'm okay. Just— I mean my skin's in better condition than... ever. Is that a weird thing to say?

MARTIN

A bit?

ARCHIVIST

It was basically all she talked about. Orsinov. I-It was— How's everyone been?

MARTIN

Oh, well, we've, we've been fine. I mean... Well, not great. Tim's still... not doing well. Melanie seems okay, but I get the feeling she's... I don't know, planning something?

ARCHIVIST

I- I got that feeling too.

MARTIN

Basira's the only one doing— well, she seems weirdly calm about the whole thing. Like it's... like she's on a vacation or something.

ARCHIVIST

Maybe she just suits the academic life. What about Daisy?

MARTIN

Don't see her much. Which is fine by me.

(There's a tense pause.)

ARCHIVIST

Does the rest of the Institute know what's going on down here? I mean, I never really paid attention, but...

MARTIN

N-Not really? I think? I mean, Tim's been going on about it to anyone who listens, but I think they just... think he's had a bit of a breakdown.

ARCHIVIST

Well, I mean...

MARTIN

I mean, they can quit. Hannah just left to have her baby, though.

ARCHIVIST

I don't know who that is.

MARTIN

Yeah you do - Hannah? She works in the library. Black, kind of stocky. Had that whole thing with the milk in the break room last year?

ARCHIVIST

I, er... Sorry. I really don't...

MARTIN

Well, anyway, I... Well, I think they all just see the Archives as kind of weird and leave us to it. Y'know? Better us than them.

ARCHIVIST

I mean, they're not wrong.

(Another a tense pause.)

MARTIN

So... are you coming back or...?

ARCHIVIST

I-I-I-I don't know. Probably not yet. There's a lot of... I-I think I might be on a bit of a treasure hunt.

MARTIN

Oh?

ARCHIVIST

Treasure in the sense of the... the world not ending.

MARTIN

Oh.

ARCHIVIST

I will keep in touch. I'm, I'm going to need all of you digging into stuff. E-Elias mentioned... he said you'd been... reading statements?

MARTIN

Oh... uh... yeah. Um... He thought it might help.

ARCHIVIST

Right. I-I-I mean, they're not... They haven't... You've been okay?

MARTIN

B-B... Yeah. I mean, i-it wasn't fun, but... I mean, if it, if it helps then I—

ARCHIVIST

Okay. If you're sure, just... Make sure the others help you, alright? Statements can be... If you're not used to them it can... be a bit weird.

MARTIN

Er... Sure.

ARCHIVIST

An-Anyway, I-I-I should go. I-I've got a few leads to follow up.

MARTIN

Right, right.

ARCHIVIST

I'm, I'm sorry, Martin. We haven't... I know we haven't talked much since...
Sasha and everything.

MARTIN

Well, I mean it's not too late, y'know. Unless the world ends.

(Martin laughs nervously)

ARCHIVIST

Yeah.

[Tape clicks off.]

[The Magnus Archives Theme – Outro]

JONATHAN SIMS

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