

MAG – 127 – Remains to be Seen

Content Warning:

- Body horror
- Mental illness
- Mortality
- Tombs
- Prison

[The Magnus Archives Theme – Intro]

JONATHAN SIMS

Rusty Quill presents: The Magnus Archives. Episode one hundred and twenty-seven. Remains to be Seen.

[Tape clicks on]

ARCHIVIST

Statement of Doctor Jonathan Fanshawe, regarding the months leading up to the death and autopsy of Albrecht von Closen. Original statement given as part of a letter to Jonah Magnus, November 21st 1831. Audio recording by Jonathan Sims, the Archivist.

Statement begins.

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

Jonah,

I must first and foremost decline your generous offer of a medical position servicing Millbank Penitentiary. While the terms you have laid out are no doubt more than adequate, I have, of these last months, come to the unfortunate conclusion that our intimacy and friendship must cease immediately. I do not know what interest you have in the poor condemned souls within those walls, nor do I care to guess, but in the light of what I have so recently witnessed, I can no longer in good conscience associate with any of your endeavours, nor will I continue to collect or provide those accounts of the esoteric and otherworldly that you and your ‘Institute’ so eagerly require. Consider this the severing of our acquaintance.

This cannot come as a shock to you. Surely you must have understood what you were asking when you implored me to visit with Albrecht and apply my meagre skills to the illness that beset him. You must have known the nature of that illness, even if only in the most general terms, and no doubt you had some intuition as to its cause. But should all this be a true surprise to you, then I shall do my best to explain, and hope that any revelations contained herein may sway you from the path you have started upon.

I arrived at Albrecht’s estate early in April. The trees were dense with renewed greenery, and the rain drummed heavily on the carriages as we approached. I remember it so clearly, the smell of the rain cut through with an unexpected whiff of smoke, and as we get closer, I saw the orange glow of flame through the trees. My first thought was that the house had caught fire and I would arrive only to a scorched ruin and blackened bone, but as we got closer, I could see that it was a single tree that was burning, a gnarled and ancient elm that sat removed from the rest of the forest. A small crowd surrounded the

spectacle. One man, who I took be a groundskeeper, stood closer than the others, with a lit torch in his hand.

On my instruction, the driver puller closer, though the horses were nervous, and I asked the man why they were burning the tree when the rain was coming down so heavily. Surely it could have waited for dryer weather. The man simply shrugged. My German is fine, though I have had little cause to use it of late, but his accent was thick and all I could get was a sense of resignation and the insistence that his master, who I took to be Albrecht, wanted the tree dead. I am sure that he used that word, though. Not ‘burned’, not ‘removed’ or ‘destroyed’. Dead. I resolved to ask Albrecht about it when I saw him.

As it transpired, that was some time later than I had anticipated. As I’m sure you’re aware, Albrecht’s wife Carla was taken by a fever some years ago and his sons were away at school, so it was the housekeeper who greeted me when I arrived. Greta, her name was, a pleasant red-faced young woman with a smattering of English that she insisted on using at every opportunity. Once I had dressed in dry clothes, she brought some food and a drop of brandy, all the while making apologies that the master of the house was indisposed. I did tell her that I was a doctor, and specifically visiting in order to help end any indisposition, but she just shook her head and told me he’d see me when he was ready.

The house seemed so empty. The rain battered on the window and the clocks ticked away in every room, but there seemed no sound of life to be found anywhere. As I sat in the drawing room, I realised Greta had left the door behind me open to the corridor beyond. I tried to ignore it, simply drink my brandy and continue waiting, but I could not ignore the sensation that someone was out there, watching behind me. The corridor was dark and I

thought for a second I could make out a shape crouched there. But there was nothing, so I closed the door.

Eventually evening came and Greta informed me that dinner was served. I ate alone, sat in a long dining hall that seemed to have far too many windows.

Turning behind me, I saw Greta watching me from the doorway. Her face held nothing of malice in it that I could discern, but still I was uneasy. I called, tried to dismiss her, but she didn't seem to hear me. I retired back to the drawing room to smoke my pipe, but even that simple, reassuring action brought me no comfort, and I made my way to the room I had been given without ever once having seen my elusive host. I noted that the window looking over my bed had neither blind nor shutter, and I was all at once very aware of my candle and the sickly illumination it spread over everything, the point of light reflected back in the glass like the glint of an eye.

I did not sleep well that night. The feeling of being under observation did not lessen, and I remained unsure of the exact nature of this errand, an errand I remind you, Jonah, I undertook at your insistence. Eventually a fitful sleep found me, and I had some measure of peace.

It was still dark when I awoke, and that feeling had intensified to a terrifying measure. I was now certain that something was in the room with me, staring at me. I reached over and took a match, striking it against the bedpost. And there, looming over me, was a face, pale and shaking. The eyes were sunken, and the cheeks were dirty and unshaved. It was the face of Albrecht von Closen. In the light his eyes met mine and his mouth began to work furiously, repeating the same phrase over and over, increasing in volume until he was screaming it into my face.

“Leg sie alle zurück! Leg sie alle zurück!” ‘Put them back. Put them back.’

I felt a sharp pain in my fingers as the match burned down and I dropped it with a cry. The room disappeared into darkness once again, and when my scrabbling hands had gotten another lit, he was gone, and I was alone. I did not sleep any further that night.

When the sun finally crept through my uncovered window, I dressed quickly. Greta’s pleas that I come down for breakfast were roundly ignored, and I started throwing open any door I had not yet seen behind, looking for my host. I found him in the library, where a fire already blazed in a feeble attempt to keep the morning chill at bay. He stood in front of it, eyes lost in the flames, looking every bit as feeble and worn as he had when crouched above my bed the night before.

I shut the door behind me, before Greta could object, and demanded to know why he had come into my room. He apologised in such a pitiful tone that the anger seemed to abandon me all at once. He seemed so small. He gestured for me to take a seat and I did, as he walked the shelves, stroking the spines of each book in turn. I started to ask him about his health and explained why I was there, but he showed not the slightest sign that he was listening.

“I had them rebound last year,” he said. “Damp can do terrible things to a book.”

I told him I was certain that was the case, but I must insist we talk about his health. Again, he ignored me. Instead, he took the seat opposite me and started to tell me a story. And then another. And another. A stream of strange tales began to pour out of him, and I just sat there, transfixed, desperately wishing I had the strength of will to stand and leave, but all I could do was

listen. He told me of a seamstress who laced her body with fine black thread, and when she pulled it all out in a single swift motion, her skin dropped away like a loose shift. He told me of a man so scared to die he spent a year weaving a rope blindfolded, so that he would not know the length and could not foresee the moment it would tighten around his neck when he finally threw himself into the void. He told me of a fire that burns so hot and fierce that to even know about it is enough to burn a man's tongue from his head. He told me so many terrible things.

And at the end of it all, the only thing I could think to ask him was where he read them. My eyes darted to the books that surrounded us, but Albrecht laughed at this and placed his hands across a spine that was simply labelled, *A Warning*. For a moment, he looked as though he were about to wrench it from its place and hurl it into the fire, but it passed. He turned back to me.

"You do not understand," he said to me in German, "I do not read the books. They read me."

I did not ask him to clarify further. I got the key to my room from Greta and made sure this time that the door was locked as I slept.

As my stay progressed, I learned more of his condition. I would have initially described it as a natural mania that had found a totemic focus on the books of his library, but when he finally told me the story of how he discovered them, and the awful tomb from which they were retrieved, I began to suspect that perhaps the books had brought some contaminant into Albrecht's home which had gradually corroded his mind. I had neither the time nor equipment to conduct the sort of tests that might have confirmed such things, but I became convinced that removing the books would go some way to addressing his

health concerns. I expected some stiff resistance on the subject, but Albrecht's response seemed closer to relief than any sort of distress. He simply asked if I would help and, to my eternal regret, I agreed.

What shall I tell you, Jonah, about this fool's errand, that damnable journey we embarked upon? Shall I regale you with the awful experiences of transporting a library's worth of books through the Black Forest? Perhaps I should write you an in-depth account of finding that ancient cemetery, of descending into that bleak and frozen mausoleum? Or would you prefer to hear about the hours we spent placing volume after volume on empty, grey shelves, ignoring how out of place the new bindings appeared against the antique stonework?

No. I'm sure all you want to know was how Albrecht died. Why it was that, as I replaced the last book taken from that place, I heard his scream from the top of the stairs and ran up to find him sprawled and dead before the stone coffin. But I cannot answer that. I do not know how he died. I saw nothing and no-one with him, and his body seemed whole and undamaged. But I do have some idea as to why it happened. For as I filled those dead shelves with freshly bound volumes, I could not help but notice that every page was blank. I have since checked with Payne's, who I believe to be your preferred bookbinders, and I know that the books poor Albrecht was returning to the grave were not the books that were taken. I hope they bring you much wisdom, Jonah, for the cost was dear enough.

Nothing stood in the way of my retreat, and I dragged Albrecht's body back as far as the coach. We left that awful place and I have endeavoured most acutely to forget the route.

Before he was buried, I was able to secure permission to perform an autopsy. I had some thought as to discovering the cause of his sudden, violent passing. Do I need to tell you what I found, Jonah? Do I need to detail what covered his organs, his bones, the inside of his skin? What clustered together in their dozens, and all turned as one to focus on me as I opened his chest, their pupils constricting in the light, with irises of every hue and colour? Because whatever it was that did this to him, I know in my heart that it is your fault.

I have had the body burned. Please do not write to me again.

Your obedient servant,

Doctor Jonathan Fanshawe

ARCHIVIST

Statement ends.

Disconcerting to find my namesake in a statement, especially one connected so directly to the Institute. I can only hope breaking faith with Jonah Magnus didn't go too badly for him.

Hm. Jonah Magnus. I've never really given much thought to him, not nearly as much as I should have. I suppose I had always hoped there was a chance he was... innocent in all this. I know, I know. But I had... I had just hoped that maybe the founding of the Institute was in earnest and not simply the foundation stone for all the terrible things that have happened here.

But no. Whatever is happening now has its origins two hundred years ago, in the work of an evil man. Exactly two hundred years, in fact – don't think that little detail has evaded me. I don't know the precise date the Institute was

founded, but I do know that it was in 1818. Something's coming, I know it is, but I just don't know what I need to do.

(Calls) Come in, Basira.

[Door opens & closes]

BASIRA

I was waiting for you to finish.

ARCHIVIST

I know.

BASIRA

...

I don't like that you've started doing that.

ARCHIVIST

I, I know.

BASIRA

Hmm.

ARCHIVIST

How's Melanie?

BASIRA

How do you think?

ARCHIVIST

I, uh, I should probably talk to—

BASIRA

You should probably stay as far away as possible. She doesn't want to see you.

ARCHIVIST

No. No, o-o-of course. Um, she has ...

BASIRA

But she did want me to... apologise. From her. For the shoulder.

ARCHIVIST

Oh, it, it's fine. Scalpel wounds, they heal quickly.

BASIRA

Hmm.

ARCHIVIST

Too quickly, really.

BASIRA

Already?

ARCHIVIST

Just another scar for the collection.

BASIRA

Hmm.

ARCHIVIST

...

Do, do you think it worked? Is she—

BASIRA

I don't know. She seems more... coherent, I guess. And you did get an apology.

ARCHIVIST

(Softly) Yeah.

BASIRA

She says she can cry now, which is, um, progress? I think? She's still angry, but she hasn't attacked anyone. Not even sure she has it in her anymore.

ARCHIVIST

Well, that's, that's good.

BASIRA

(Unconvinced) Mmm.

...

So. You can't be killed by a collapsing building. Major injuries scar up fast. You can force the truth out of people and knowledge pops into your head whenever you need it.

ARCHIVIST

Yes. I, I think that, that about covers it.

BASIRA

And what was that you were doing yesterday?

ARCHIVIST

When?

BASIRA

You were sat on the floor for like four hours.

ARCHIVIST

Oh. No, I was, uh, I was... listening. You know, trying to see if any of the statements... called to me.

BASIRA

And?

[Paper rustles]

Brilliant.

ARCHIVIST

Look, I don't know, Basira. I hope I'm still human, but it— but it's seeming more and more unlikely.

BASIRA

I didn't ask.

ARCHIVIST

No, I suppose you didn't.

BASIRA

Don't snoop in my head.

ARCHIVIST

I'm not snooping! I'm not looking! That's not how this works.

BASIRA

(Sharply) Explain it, then.

ARCHIVIST

I'm not sure I can.

BASIRA

Humour me.

[Deep sighs]

ARCHIVIST

It's... hard. It's like there's a, a door, in my mind, and behind it is, is the entire ocean. Before, I didn't notice it, but now I, I know it's there and I can't forget it and I can feel the pressure of the water on it. I, I, I can keep it closed, but sometimes when I'm around people or places or... ideas, a drop or two will push through the cracks at the edges of the door. And I'll Know something.

BASIRA

What happens if you open the door?

ARCHIVIST

I drown.

...

Look, I'm sorry, Basira. I, I will try to keep anything I learn about you to myself.

My priorities haven't changed. I hope you can believe that. I'm still on your side. You can trust me.

BASIRA

Yeah, people keep saying that.

ARCHIVIST

Do they? Wh-who else? Did Martin say something?

BASIRA

It was a few months back, after the attack. He'd started spending time with Lukas, at least he said he was, and I wanted answers. He kept telling me to trust him, to hear the guy out even though he still wouldn't actually show his face. I told him he could drop me an email or vanish me.

ARCHIVIST

Right.

BASIRA

Honestly, I kind of regret not just grabbing Martin and shaking an explanation out of him. But I didn't want to push it. He was in a bad place, what with the attack and his mum and everything. So, I didn't press it. Now I try and bring it up, he just disappears. Nothing to be done.

ARCHIVIST

S-Sorry, you said— What happened with his mother?

BASIRA

Oh, yeah. She died. About two months after you, uh... Martin was— He tried to stay strong, keep it together, but that sort of thing... Then those Flesh things burst in and, well, here we are.

ARCHIVIST

God.

BASIRA

He didn't tell you?

ARCHIVIST

No.

BASIRA

Hmm. Guess you don't know everything, then.

ARCHIVIST

No, I-I guess not.

So, what do we do now?

BASIRA

You tell me. Just don't expect much on trust these days.

ARCHIVIST

Yes, I... I suppose that's fair.

[Tape clicks off. Tape clicks on. Faint sounds of prison, growing briefly louder
as a heavy door is unlocked and opened, then closed.]

ELIAS

Good evening... Detective.

BASIRA

I'm not a detective.

ELIAS

Of course.

BASIRA

You wanted to see me?

ELIAS

Yes.

BASIRA

Something 'too important' to tell the Inspector?

ELIAS

Maybe I just wanted to have a chat.

BASIRA

Well, good luck with that.

[Rattling of chain and handcuffs]

ELIAS

I found one of these in my cell. It wasn't recording, but I assume this means he's awake.

Basira?

BASIRA

Can we cut the bullshit?

ELIAS

What bullshit might that be?

BASIRA

The part where you pretend you don't spend your whole time watching us?

ELIAS

Sometimes I'm eating.

BASIRA

You know he's back. You've seen him.

ELIAS

Fine. Yes.

BASIRA

So, what's with the recorder? Who gave it you?

ELIAS

Oh, no, that... that really did just appear in my cell.

BASIRA

Right. So, what, you figured you'd record us for him? Sow some distrust from afar?

ELIAS

Our 'arrangement' with the Inspector notwithstanding, I rather feel that right now all the distrust is very much your own. And as to whether he'll ever hear this... maybe he'll get the tapes, maybe he won't, but the recordings have helped so far, so...

BASIRA

Do you know what they are?

ELIAS

What a question.

BASIRA

Fine. So, you won't see him, but you're happy for him to hear our conversations.

ELIAS

He can listen all he wants, but he's at a very delicate stage right now and I fear my presence would be a, uh, distraction. I've made it clear my cooperation is contingent on his not seeing me, and my terms have been accepted thus far.

BASIRA

So, why am I here? What do you want that's so important you needed to tell me to my face?

ELIAS

I believe you recently lost Melanie.

BASIRA

We saved Melanie.

ELIAS

As a person, yes. But as a defender... I would have thought you would want all the help you could get, or have you forgotten what happened last time you let your guard down?

BASIRA

We'll work it out.

ELIAS

Possibly. Then again, you are beset by enemies on all sides, Basira. And, unless you expect John to record them into submission, it would seem you are in rather dire need of another option.

BASIRA

And you just happen to have one.

ELIAS

I might have an idea, yes.

BASIRA

And what does it cost?

ELIAS

Just some of your time, Basira. Just your time.

[Deep sigh]

BASIRA

Okay. Let's hear it.

[Tape clicks off]

[The Magnus Archives Theme – Outro]

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The Magnus Archives – 127 – Remains to be Seen

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, and Ben Meredith as Elias Bouchard.