

MAG – 138 – The Architecture of Fear

Content Warnings:

- Body horror
- Paranoia

[The Magnus Archives Theme – Intro]

JONATHAN SIMS

Rusty Quill presents: The Magnus Archives. Episode one hundred and thirty-eight. The Architecture of Fear.

[The tape clicks on. We hear the rattle of chains. The voices in the following conversation echo.]

ELIAS

There. Much better.

MARTIN

You know I don't care if John hears this.

ELIAS

Come on, Martin, it's been so long since I've seen you; let's not start with lies.

MARTIN

(Sighs) Fine.

ELIAS

I am so very pleased to see you.

MARTIN

Mmhmm.

ELIAS

No time for pleasantries? Very well then, to business. What can I do for you?

Tired of running budgets for Peter? I know I would be.

MARTIN

I— I need to—

Is he telling the truth?

ELIAS

About what?

MARTIN

Any of it?

ELIAS

Everything Peter has told you is true.

MARTIN

Oh.

ELIAS

For all his... many faults, Peter is legitimately trying to stop the end of the world as we know it.

MARTIN

So why haven't you helped him?

ELIAS

My relationship to the apocalypse is more... complicated.

MARTIN

Oh, seriously?

ELIAS

Seriously. Anyway, I *have* helped him. I've given him control of the Institute, I've provided him with—

MARTIN

Me.

ELIAS

—any manpower he might require.

MARTIN

Yeah, but i— If he's right about The Extinction, what it is, then why didn't you say anything before? Why am I only hearing about this now? And why doesn't John know!?

ELIAS

In my case, while Peter has talked of it before, it is only very recently that I've been forced to admit The Extinction is real. And as for our dear Archivist, I'm afraid I no longer have any real control over what he does or does not know. Unlike yourself.

I notice you haven't told him either.

MARTIN

Yeah well, I'm still not sure I really believe it.

A-And I don't— I'm...

ELIAS

Worried he might charge off into another coffin?

...

Quite.

As for why I have done so little about such a looming existential threat, to be blunt: I have been rather busy.

(Martin snorts.)

ELIAS

Besides which, don't forget I am still living at Her Majesty's pleasure, due in no small part to your actions. So by this point all I can do is confirm that everything Peter has told you is true.

MARTIN

I think he wants me to join The Lonely.

ELIAS

Then it sounds like you have a decision to make.

MARTIN

(Incredulous) What? That's it? No, no monologue? No mind games? You love manipulating people.

ELIAS

That makes two of us. But no, this too important for me to jeopardise with cheap "mind games". I simply have to trust that when the time comes, you'll make the right choice.

MARTIN

Great.

(Sotto voce) Great. Great.

So what you're actually saying is that you're going to be no help whatsoever?

ELIAS

(Smilingly) Just like old times.

MARTIN

I don't know what I expected. Right.

Right. We're done here.

[Chair scrapes, footsteps move away]

ELIAS

Don't forget to keep in touch Martin. There are so many people in here, but without one's friends...

[Door opens and closes]]

ELIAS

...it does get rather lonely.

[Tape clicks off. Tape clicks on.]

MARTIN

Martin Blackwood, Assistant to Peter Lukas, Head of the Magnus Institute, recording statement number 8671302, statement of Robert Smirke, taken from a letter to Jonah Magnus dated 13th February 1867.

(Clears throat.)

MARTIN (STATEMENT)

My dear Jonah,

You will forgive me, I hope, for being so forward, but I feel I must break the silence that has characterised our acquaintance for these past decades. You see, Jonah, I feel the hour of my death approaching and, though you have always been reluctant to pay due heed to my warnings or counsel, I continue to see in you the reflection of my own past hubris. I could not go easy to my grave without offering you one last plea for your restraint. What we built at Millbank should be left well enough alone, resigned to the nightmares of the reprobates and brigands contained within its walls.

I have been blessed with a long life, something few who cross paths with the Dread Powers can boast, but now, at the end of it, my true fear is that I have wasted it chasing an impossible dream. To speak plain, I have begun to lose faith in the possibility of balance, of any sort of equilibrium among them. It is telling that of those I have brought into my confidence, it is only you and I who have continued this far without falling to one Power or another, despite all my instruction and work. This is, of course, assuming you have not taken the path of The Eye that I know has called you, called us both, for so long. Even since before we began our work on Millbank.

I suppose I had to believe that the darker natures of our terror could be kept in check, weighed against each other, so that the Great Wheel would keep turning forever without reaching the velocity I feared would crush us. Perhaps my sin was to see them as something that could be knowable, and harnessed. I'm sure you recall what happened with the Reform Club, but you may be unaware of some of my other experiments below the very streets of London. Places I have tried to cover with churches of all things, in the faint hope that perhaps the sight of Our Saviour will be enough to contain them. A rather feeble hope for my own salvation.

Did I ever tell you about the dreams? I'm sure I must have. I would dream about them, you see, as a young man. Long before I devised my taxonomy. I would find myself in nightmares of strange far-off places: a field of graves, a grasping tunnel, an abattoir knee deep in pigs' blood. I believed then, as I still believe now, that these places I saw were the Powers themselves, expressed in their truest form, far more entirely than any secret book can claim. And if, as I came to believe, the Dread Powers were themselves places of a sort, then

surely with the right space, the right architecture, they could be contained. Channelled. Harnessed.

So yes, hubris. Not simply in that, I suppose, but in believing that those I brought into my confidence shared my lofty goals. So many have abandoned us, casting about for rituals that I helped design. In my excited discussions with Mr Rayner, I perhaps extrapolated too much from his talk of a grand ritual of darkness. The Dark, I thought, was simply one of the Powers, so it stands to reason that each of them should have its own ritual. And perhaps they already did even before I put pen to paper. But they certainly do now, and I shudder to think how Lukas, Scott and the others may use this conception. Fourteen powers, with their opposites and their allies, each with an aim no more nor less than manifestation. Apocalypse. Apotheosis. I wonder, did my work bring about these dreadful things, or did I simply develop the means by which they can be known?

I should have realised, of course, when first we discussed The Flesh. For how can there be true balance, each one to its opposite, when new fears can emerge and change as civilisation grows and alters? When a new Power can birth itself screaming from the torn remnants of others? I know you say the Flesh was perhaps always there, shrivelled and nascent until it's recent growth, but to grant the existence of such lesser powers would throw everything into confusion. Would you have me separate the corruption between insects, dirt and disease? To divide the fungal bloom from the maggot? No. No, I stand by my work. And thus we must conclude that the only explanation is a new power, created from what was once others, yet also distinct. And if such change is possible, how then can any true balance be achieved through immutable, unchanging stone?

I have been dreaming again, Jonah. The same every night for months now. I imagine myself a boy again at Aspley. I awake, cold and alone, in the dormitory. The sky outside is dark and I see no stars. I light a candle to better see my way and step down the silent corridor. The masters' rooms are empty, the fire in the kitchen is dead. Eventually my steps lead out into the courtyard. It is so quiet that the sound of my feet upon the grass is painful to my ears. I stop and look up at the sky, that empty black nothing and I see the edges of the horizon becoming a dull white. I cannot understand what I am looking at. And then the sky blinks. And I awake.

I am not a fool. I know well enough what this dream is likely to mean, and I warn you again that if you have any remaining ambitions to use our work to try and wear the Watcher's Crown, you must abandon them, not simply for the sake of your own soul but for that of the world. I have always had the utmost respect for you as a man of dignity and learning. Do not allow yourself to fall to this madness.

I have been thinking, of late, about the first origin of the Dread Powers, if such beings can really be said to have true origins. Are they eternal? Or were they created from our own fear by some grand accident or, worse, some grand design. I believe the latter to be the case, as you well know, for I have in vain struggled to reconcile their creation with the existence of a loving God. They are not demons, of this I am sure, though we have drawn parallels with their acolytes and certain monstrous figures from ancient myth. No, I feel certain they were brought into existence by some ancient civilisation, some foolish tribe from pre-history.

Do you know of Alexander Cunningham? He's been working with the Viceroy of India on the Indus Valley digs and has discovered some quite remarkable

things. Burial pits full of burned bones and ash, skulls with markings as though the eyes were removed and others that seem buried alive. Perhaps a dying civilisation sought to harness its own terror, as we once thought to harness its results. Of course, such things are pure conjecture. I have not brought Cunningham into my confidence on this, nor do I believe there will be any cause to. Even if there was still time remaining to me.

Perhaps you wonder why I am so convinced of my imminent demise, and why I should see it as a cause to reach out to you, after so much silence and distrust has passed between us? Certainly you must either wonder or you already know all too well. I have been watched for some time now, since shortly before the dreams began. It was subtle at first, easy to ignore and dismiss. What possible harm could there be in the idle glance of a footman, staring at you as you leave your home? And no doubt the shopkeeper is permitted to watch whomsoever he pleases within the confines of his own establishment? So I have been reassuring myself as I attempted to ignore my own growing disquiet.

But what is not to be dismissed is when your driver, on the long road from London, takes his eyes from the horses and begins to turn his head. Slowly at first, but with a clear determination, inch by inch without ceasing, neck cracking and skin stretching, until his whole head seems as though it were placed atop his shoulders in reverse by some careless sculptor. The others in my carriage seemed not to mark this awful sight, but I could scarce look away, and the eyes of this twisted figure were locked on my own, tears streaming from their corners. It was such a dreadful spectacle that it took every ounce of my composure not to hurl myself bodily from the coach. The journey was not a

short one, and for all those hours the driver did not for a second look away. The horses seemed to take it all in stride.

Since then I have attempted to avoid such situations and have travelled primarily by the railway, but even then it seems I cannot avoid the ceaseless gaze of those silent figures who gather along the sides of the track to stare at me as I pass. I count the billowing smoke as a blessing, for though it sends me into coughing fits it at the least serves to hide me from their relentless eyes.

I am assuming that these manifestations are unintentional, Jonah, and you have not simply decided to implore a dark patron to end the life of an old man. I further find myself supposing that they may emanate from your own intrigues and preparations to culminate those plans we agreed to abandon so many decades ago. I beg you, do not pursue this goal. If only a single lesson may be gleaned from my life of long study and longer hardship, it is that the fear of death is natural, and to flee from it will only bring greater misery. Repent of your sins, Jonah. Seek forgiveness. I am certain the Dread Powers cannot take a soul that has keeps faith in the resurrection.

As for myself, I must cling to hope, for I cannot ultimately deny the wavering of my own faith. I have pleaded with the Lord to give me strength, to help shield me from the things I have sought these many decades, to protect me as my end draws near. I do not believe my prayers have been heard.

Last night I was awoken by a noise from the drawing room. I was in my own bed, and the moon shone through the window, casting the place into a pale and sickly hue, though it was illumination enough to assure myself I was alone. The noise came again, however, and I called out to Laura, asking if she had woken in the night. There was no reply. I struck a match and lit my meagre

candle, clinging desperately to its small pinprick of warmth and light, and I crept towards the drawing room. The door opened slowly, and the room within was in pitch darkness, the heavy curtains having been drawn across the window. In the sputtering glow of the candle I could see a figure stood in the corner opposite the door. It wore a long nightdress, and seemed at a glance to be my dear, sweet Laura. I let out a breath and began to settle myself, asking her what she was doing out of bed. She did not respond, however. She remained silent instead, facing into the corner of the room. I approached, slowly, that restored confidence fleeing me as swiftly as it had arrived, and asked her again. This time she began to turn, with such a slowness I was reminded instantly of the driver. I started to speak again, but at that moment my candle went out, plunging me into abject darkness.

I fumbled desperately for a match and, finding one in my nightgown, I struck it in a panic, casting sudden light on my surroundings. Laura's face was inches from my own, her eyes staring into mine, so wide that they seemed to take up half her face or more, bulging grotesquely from their sockets. I screamed, just once. She gave no response of her own. I wanted to run, to lock myself in my room, but under the sight of those horrible eyes my entire body seemed to freeze, and I stood there, match held aloft, eyes locked with this awful parody of my daughter. After an eternity, the flame reached my fingers and I dropped the match, letting the relief of darkness wash over me. I stood there until morning, only to find Laura gone. It was then I began composing this letter. Laura, of course, claims no knowledge of the night's events having no memory of even leaving her chamber.

The Eye has marked me for something, of this I have no doubt. My humble hope is that it may be a swift death, an accidental effect of your own

researches, which I once again implore you to abandon. It is likely too late for me, but I will not—

[Paper rustling]

MARTIN

The, um, the letter ends there. Uh, a-apparently Robert Smirke was found collapsed in his study that evening, dead of, uh, “apoplexy”. I d— I don’t know how the letter reached the Archives. I mean, well, I can guess, but...

So, so what? What does it mean? Am I supposed to be reassured that new entities can be born? That there’s some, some kind of precedent for The Extinction?

Peter?

...

Huh. Maybe he *has* gone to a party. Anyway, Smirke was clearly wrong about the Powers balancing each other, at least. I mean, i-it-it’s obviously impossible. There’s too much variation in, in how much something is feared by people at any one time.

And, and if that’s the case, I suppose it’s not impossible that Peter... *might* be telling the truth. I don’t know what he’s talking about when he mentions Millbank. The old prison, I guess. Tim said the tunnels under the Institute were all that was left of it, but John said he’d checked them pretty thoroughly.

(Heavy sigh.) I’m not the one who knows all about this stuff. I wish— No. No, it’s fine. I’m fine. I... I can do this. I don’t know what Peter’s planning, but my, my guess is that it might involve something below the Institute. Hopefully by

the time you get these tapes, I'll have something more concrete for you. Good luck, John, I—

Stay safe.

[Tape clicks off.]

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Today's episode was written by Jonathan Sims and directed by Alexander J Newall.

It featured: Alexander J Newall as Martin Blackwood and Ben Meredith as Elias Bouchard.