

## MAG 172 — Strung Out

### Content Warnings

- Emotional manipulation & abuse (including familial)
- Body horror & wounding
- Supernatural manipulation
- Explicit language
- Addiction (including smoking & drinking)
- Substance abuse (including syringes)
- Spiders (including SFX)
- Implied queerphobia / transphobia
- Humiliation
- Schadenfreude and forced laughter
- Maladaptive coping mechanisms & relapse

[The Magnus Archives Theme – Intro]

**JONATHAN SIMS**

Rusty Quill presents... *The Magnus Archives*. Episode one hundred and seventy-two: "Strung Out."

[Theme finishes]

[Tape clicks on]

[The sound of audience laughter from behind walls comes regularly  
from different directions]

[Martin and the Archivist walk in a carpeted area for a few  
moments before the Archivist stops them]

**ARCHIVIST**

Ah, hold up. Uh, I, I need to, um...

**MARTIN**

Now? Seriously? We're almost out of here.

(The Archivist sighs)

**ARCHIVIST**

(Wry) I'm sorry. Not really up to me.

**MARTIN**

Fine.

(Martin sighs)

**ARCHIVIST**

(Flippant) If you're bored, you could always take in a show.

**MARTIN**

That's, that's not funny, John.

**ARCHIVIST**

If you say so.

**MARTIN**

Just, just give me a shout when you're done, alright?

[Martin walks away]

**ARCHIVIST**

Good. Right.

Ticket for one, then, I suppose.

**[Hissing static starts]**

**ANNOUNCER (BACKGROUND)**

Ladies and gentlemen, the performance is about to begin. Please take your seats.

**[An audience starts applauding; as the Archivist talks this transitions from muffled and quiet to crisp and louder]**

**ARCHIVIST**

The tragedy of Francis. A comic puppet show in all acts.

**[Hissing static ends]**

**[Applause ends; the sound of many quietly seated theatre goers]**

**ARCHIVIST (CONT'D)**

Act forty-eight thousand and sixty-seven: A stage that is a room that remains a stage. The audience watches, drooling, expectant. A table stands in the middle with a single chair. On that table can be seen a bottle, cigarettes, paraphernalia of all shapes, sizes, and consumptions.

**[Rope creaks]**

**ARCHIVIST (CONT'D)**

From the space above the stage hang the hooks. They shift, gently, without the breeze, as eager and hungry as the patrons in the seats.

**[Footsteps on a theatre stage]**

**ARCHIVIST (CONT'D)**

Enter Francis, stage left. They walk slowly, unsteadily. Every limb is shaking.

FRANCIS, softly: Please. Please god, not again. I don't want it to happen again.

**[Laughter from the audience]**

**ARCHIVIST (CONT'D)**

Pause for laughter.

**[Laughter ends]**

**ARCHIVIST (CONT'D)**

THE SPIDER, offstage: Then walk away, Francis, just turn and leave. All that is required is a little bit of willpower.

**[More rope creaks]**

**ARCHIVIST (CONT'D)**

You have a little bit of willpower, don't you?

Francis begins to cry. They turn back towards the wings, keen to make their exit, but where they stood a moment before, there is now a dangling hook.

**[The sound of whipping rope that ends with stabbing flesh]**

**ARCHIVIST (CONT'D)**

It lunges at Francis, digging into their leg, pushing through the flesh of their thigh. There is a thin trickle of blood. There is a thick shot of pain.

FRANCIS' FATHER, offstage: Useless piece of shit. You need to grow up!

**[The audience laughs]**

**ARCHIVIST (CONT'D)**

Pause for laughter.

**[The laughter ends with some clapping]**

**[Sounds of hops and rope creaks]**

**ARCHIVIST (CONT'D)**

The hook lifts Francis' leg off the ground. They hop painfully, trying to escape, but the thread pulls tight, dragging them towards the table.

THE SPIDER, offstage: What a funny little dance, Francis. Such a funny dance.

Francis simply screams in response. It is a scream of anger as much as it is of pain, and it cannot hide the dreadful inevitability they feel. The dull terror that this act will end like all the others.

In their thrashing jig they stumble into another hanging hook.

**[The sound of whipping rope that ends with stabbing flesh]**

**ARCHIVIST (CONT'D)**

It burrows into their wrist with a noise of triumph.

FRANCIS' MOTHER, offstage: I just worry about you, dear; that's all. We want what's best for you, even if you can't see it. I'm sure you'll grow out of it.

Between the two silk strings, Francis dangles, eyes darting wildly about.

FRANCIS: Why are you doing this?

The Spider's giggle echoes around the stage.

[A chitinous laughing sound]

[The audience laughs]

**ARCHIVIST (CONT'D)**

Pause for laughter.

[Laughter ends]

[Rope creaks]

**ARCHIVIST (CONT'D)**

The Spider twists the string, alternating which of the two lines is taut, causing Francis to whirl and pivot towards the table. Its bulbous, distended abdomen can now begin to be seen protruding from above the curtains that fringe the stage. Francis goes limp, briefly allowing The Spider to guide their movements smoothly.

THE SPIDER: Good, Francis. Good.

Without warning, Francis kicks their free leg against the table. It does not move. It is part of the tableau.

[Kick and sounds of stagger]

[The sound of whipping rope that ends with stabbing flesh]

**ARCHIVIST (CONT'D)**

The force of the motion sends them staggering backwards; another hook brushes past their cheek and takes its chance, ripping through the corner of their mouth and pulling it up into a grimace.

RYAN, A FRIEND, offstage: You never smile when you're clean, did you know that? I mean, what have you got to be so sad about? Honestly. You do make it hard sometimes. I don't know.

Francis tries to respond, but the hook in their mouth pulls tight, and their lips curve upwards, distorting the words.

FRANCIS: Shut up!

[The audience laughs]

**ARCHIVIST (CONT'D)**

Pause for laughter.

[Laughter stops with a few clapped hands]

**ARCHIVIST (CONT'D)**

Francis tries to use their free hand to pull the razored metal barb from their mouth, but The Spider reaches down a leg and pulls, hoisting its victim up by their face.

The agonizing motion is too sudden to even give them time to scream, and their free leg kicks out, impotently into the air.

It hits against another hook—

[The sound of whipping rope that ends with stabbing flesh]

[Rope creaks]

**ARCHIVIST (CONT'D)**

—which penetrates their worn and weary boots with ease, digging up through the sole and out through the back of the ankle.

KRISTIE, A LOVER, offstage: Come on..! Helps me get in the mood, you know?

Just a nice thing to do together. Makes me feel close to you.

As it lowers them back to the ground, Francis tries again to curse at The Spider. To tell it it has no right to these voices, to leave all of them out of this. But the pain of the hooks travels up and down their veins in thin lines of needling torment and robs them of their voice.

The Spider leans closer. Its grinning face and quivering mandibles can now be seen; its abdomen throbs with anticipation.

THE SPIDER: Oh, but I did not bring them. I did not write their lines in your little farce. You are the one that brought them. You devised the steps of this dance; I am simply here to... help you through them, when you forget. Oh, watch out!

The Spider pulls abruptly on the threads hooked into Francis' legs, and they tumble forward, faceplanting in a nasty-looking pratfall.

**[Rope creaks and sound of the fall]**

**[The audience laughs]**

**ARCHIVIST (CONT'D)**

Pause for laughter.

**[Laughter ends]**

**ARCHIVIST (CONT'D)**

Francis' free hand hits at the wooden floor of the stage weakly. It is unclear whether they hope to achieve something or if it is just an expression of despair. The hook in their cheek pulls tight enough to form a grim smile of sorts.

FRANCIS: What do you want?

THE SPIDER: The same thing I always want, Francis, every time we do this dance, every single act of our *hilarious* production. I want what you want, deep, deep down in the hidden bit of you you've tried so hard to kill. You can't wait for the dance to conclude.

FRANCIS: I don't want that anymore. It's different now; I'm different now. I've worked so hard.

THE SPIDER: I don't care.

The strings all go taut at once, yanking the weakly protesting Francis to their feet.

**[Twisting rope creaks and sounds of dragged steps in a waltz motion]**

**[The strains of a music box kick in]**

#### **ARCHIVIST (CONT'D)**

They are dragged, back and forth and around in a series of clumsy motions that, in another time, in another place, might have been a waltz.

But a waltz has a partner. Francis only has a desire, an itch in their bones that flows into them, drip by oily drip, down the slick and glistening strands that suspend them, guide them, hold them. A desire which injects itself through razor-barbed hooks and pools inside their stomach.

They don't want to want it, but...

**[The audience laughs]**

**ARCHIVIST (CONT'D)**

Pause for laughter.

**[Laughter ends with a clap of hands]**

**[The music box music stops]**

**ARCHIVIST (CONT'D)**

THE SPIDER: A fine dance, Francis; that last measure I barely plucked the strings. Now come. Sit down. It's time for a break. I know how much you've been looking forward to it.

**[A creaking twist of the hooks]**

**[A chitinous laughing sound]**

**ARCHIVIST (CONT'D)**

The Spider is almost fully descended now; its bulk eclipses everything above Francis's head and it swells with joy and amusement.

FRANCIS: Please. Let me go. Just let me go.

THE SPIDER: Oh, Francis. It's such a shame that I couldn't do such a thing even if I wanted to. The man in the audience saw to that. **(chuckles)**

I am no more free than you are, little puppet. Ah! If only you could see the strings that bind me, that wind together as they pull me along my own path. Perhaps then you would not blame me so. But they are not the tripping threads that we are here to watch, no. So sit, Francis. It's time.

**[A creaking twist of the hooks, and chair noise as Francis is seated]**

**ARCHIVIST (CONT'D)**

Another tug of the hooks stretches the skin as Francis staggers towards the table. The blood flows faster, so dark it is almost black. Their chest rises and falls rapidly as they are lowered into the only seat, the dusty air of the theatre scratching their throat and drying their mouth. There is the taste of tin, growing stronger.

The hits are all arranged before them, spread across the table in a cornucopia of promised oblivious, releases, and delights.

**[A creaking twist of the hooks]**

**ARCHIVIST (CONT'D)**

Francis feels the hooks tighten as they look upon the offering.

That deepest want bubbles up to the surface, but at its core there is still that mute fear, that anticipation of what surrender will bring.

There is no escape to be found here, no respite from the charade that is now the sum of Francis' existence. By now, Francis knows with utter clarity what falling to the call will bring, the awful crawling fate that they will endure before the next act eventually begins.

The syringe vibrates, almost imperceptibly, as the dark mass of legs and tiny, glittering eyes that sit within it shifts in anticipation.

The cork of the bottle moves ever so slightly proud of the top, pushed by the unfurling thing inside. The cigarette scuttles closer, inch by impatient inch. Their longing is awful. And mutual. Pause.

FRANCIS: I don't want it. Any of it.

THE SPIDER does not reply.

Staring over the table, a memory now tugs at Francis, the faintest residue of an earlier time, when the things before them would have brought a genuine joy to their heart and even a temporary peace. A time when the hunger was sharp and real, not this dull, unending ache that does nothing but propel them towards one grotesque act of consumption after another, but... for all their keen awareness of what it might mean to do so, Francis cannot deny the want. The Spider has gifted them.

They resist. They sit oh-so-very still and keep their hands held tight to their chest.

FRANCIS: No. Not this time. I won't.

**[The audience laughs]**

**ARCHIVIST (CONT'D)**

Pause for laughter.

**[Laughter ends]**

**ARCHIVIST (CONT'D)**

Francis looks up at The Spider, so close now the thick drippings of its jaws fall onto their shoulders in a sticky stream. It says nothing—

**[The sound of whipping rope that ends with stabbing flesh]**

**ARCHIVIST (CONT'D)**

—but a hook leaps from the darkness backstage, fastening itself into the soft skin on the back of Francis' free hand.

FRANCIS, offstage: You don't get it, like, it's my decision. I know what I'm doing; just— can we stop talking about it, please? It's fine, i-it just... just helps. It helps.

Francis' whole body shudders at the sound of their own voice, as the hook pulls their arm forward, across the table.

FRANCIS: No. No!

Their hand closes on the bottle, which shifts and chitters with delight as Francis, shaking, brings it close.

**[Rope creaks]**

**ARCHIVIST (CONT'D)**

THE SPIDER's legs twitch and jerk as it shifts the doomed marionette's strings.

FRANCIS watches as their hand gently uncorks the bottle, and the first of the tiny crawling spiders begins to emerge — just as their mouth is yanked open by its hook and their arm upends the bottle.

**[Cork popping sound, followed by sounds of many crawling spiders]**

**ARCHIVIST (CONT'D)**

As FRANCIS feels the cascade crawl over their tongue and down their throat, they wonder just for a moment, whether this is better or worse than when they scuttle up through their veins, or down into their lungs.

It is an impossible question, and quite, quite pointless.

**[Crawling spiders, chitinous laughing, followed by unpleasant low  
rupture sound and more crawling spiders]**

**ARCHIVIST (CONT'D)**

Above them, their tormentor cries out in exaltation as its abdomen ruptures, and the spiders within are joined by a rain of countless, tiny legs from above, covering them, embracing them. Drowning them.

There is no unconsciousness here, no calm detachment or serene buzz. There is only the arachnids. Biting. Scurrying. Consuming.

And so it will be until the curtain descends at last and The Spider resets the scene, its belly already beginning to swell once again with replacements for the creatures it so gorily birthed.

[The audience laughs]

**ARCHIVIST (CONT'D)**

Pause for laughter.

[The laughter transitions into end-of-show clapping with some hollers from the crowd]

**ARCHIVIST (CONT'D)**

And so the curtain descends.

[The clapping ends and the audience settle again]

[Hissing static starts]

**ARCHIVIST (CONT'D)**

The tragedy of Francis. A comic puppet show in all acts. Act forty-eight thousand and sixty-eight—

**MARTIN**

**(Faint and muffled)** John?

**ARCHIVIST**

—A stage that is a room that remains a stage.

**MARTIN**

**(Faint and muffled)** One is enough.

**ARCHIVIST**

The audience—

**[Martin slaps him]**

**ARCHIVIST (CONT'D)**

I, oh, wh-what?

**[Hissing static ends]**

**[The audience waiting sounds are gone; now the sound of audience  
laughter from behind walls comes regularly from different  
directions]**

**MARTIN**

Sorry. You were starting another, and I didn't want to wait. We should get going.

**ARCHIVIST**

You-you were listening, I-I, I, I thought that—

**MARTIN**

No, I— Not for most of it. I just thought I heard... something. Whatever. I went exploring, alright? I don't know why; I shouldn't have.

**ARCHIVIST**

No, you—you shouldn't have!

**MARTIN**

You know how many stages there are in this place, how many, little theatres?

**ARCHIVIST**

Yes. Yes I do.

**MARTIN**

Right, stupid question.

**ARCHIVIST**

Martin...

**MARTIN**

Well, let's just say they have a full bill, alright?

[In the background, an announcer makes a show-starting announcement]

**ARCHIVIST**

Martin.

**MARTIN**

What?

**ARCHIVIST**

Why did you go looking?

**MARTIN**

Can we just go, please?

**ARCHIVIST**

Of course. But... you were safe here. And after everything that's already happened, I, I-I just don't understand why you would...

**MARTIN**

(Sudden burst) Me neither, okay!

**ARCHIVIST**

What?

**MARTIN**

(Emotional) I mean, that's it, isn't it? I don't know! I don't know why I went exploring.

**ARCHIVIST**

(carefully) Are you saying you were... Compelled?

**MARTIN**

I'm saying I don't know, do I? I-I thought I was just curious; it felt like curiosity, but, given where we are, and with the Web everywhere, and Annabelle Cane still out there playing mind games with payphones, I just...

I mean, how d'you even know if it's your motivation, you know? Being here...  
**(sigh)** it-it just makes me second-guess all of it, and I, I don't like it, it... really scares me.

**ARCHIVIST**

I, uh...

**MARTIN**

Oh, don't say that's what it wants; I know.

**ARCHIVIST**

I, I wasn't going to.

**[In the background, there is another announcement]**

**MARTIN**

Okay. Right.

**ARCHIVIST**

I was going to suggest that I could... maybe... *Know*. I could look. Just a quick peek, to, to see if it was just curiosity or... something else.

Well?

**MARTIN**

I don't—

If you look, and I was... influenced, then how can I trust anything else? How can I believe any of my thoughts and feelings are really mine?

**ARCHIVIST**

**(Struggling)** Uh— Well, I, I'll still be here to check. I-I'm not leaving you.

**MARTIN**

Sure, but you'd be looking through the details of everything that ever crosses my mind? I don't want that, y-you *know* I don't want that.

**[In the background, there is another announcement]**

**ARCHIVIST**

I know.

Don't do this to yourself, Martin. This is what it wants, the, the paranoia.

Trust me, I, I know.

**MARTIN**

Fair.

**(Beat)**

**(Exhale)** John, what does the Web want? It's... I mean, we know it's got a plan; can't you just, see what it is?

**(The Archivist sighs)**

**ARCHIVIST**

Knowing... seeing... i-it's not the same thing as... understanding. Every time I try to Know what the Web's plan is, if it can even be called a plan, I see a hundred thousand events and causes and links, an impossibly intricate pattern of consequences and subtle nudges, but I, I can't, I can't hold them all in my head at the same time.

There's no way to see the whole, the, the point of it all. I can see all the details, but it doesn't provide context or... intention.

I suppose the Web doesn't work in knowledge, not in the same way.

**MARTIN**

Oh. Right.

**ARCHIVIST**

Sorry.

**MARTIN**

And Annabelle?

**ARCHIVIST**

Still can't see her. If it wasn't for the phone call, I'd have said she was probably already dead.

**MARTIN**

**(Quiet)** Yeah.

**(Beat)**

**ARCHIVIST**

So... Do you want me to? T-to tell you, if...?

**MARTIN**

No. (**small sigh**) No, I'll just have to live with it, I guess. Hardly the worst thing I'll have gone through since— I— um. It's fine.

(**The Archivist sighs heavily**)

**ARCHIVIST**

Would you like to leave now?

**MARTIN**

Yeah, screw this place. Never liked the theatre anyway.

[Tape clicks off]

[The Magnus Archives Theme – Outro]

**JONATHAN SIMS**

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