

MAG 169 — Fire Escape

Content Warnings

- Swearing
- Loud/sudden noise
- Fire / Burning buildings (including SFX)
- Mass suffering
- Housing insecurity/anxiety
- Landlord neglect & tenant abuse
- Death of a parent
- Health & safety violations
- Bedbugs/infestation
- Domestic toxicity (mentions)
- Coughing/smoke inhalation (including SFX)
- Character death

[The Magnus Archives Theme – Intro]

JONATHAN SIMS

Rusty Quill presents... *The Magnus Archives*. Episode one hundred and sixty-nine: "Fire Escape."

[Theme finishes]

[Tape clicks on]

[In the distance, a building is ablaze; parts of the building regularly collapse, people scream]

ARCHIVIST

Martin? Still with me?

MARTIN

(Shaky) Y-Y-Ye-Yeah, Yeah. Jus... Oh, Jesus!

ARCHIVIST

Some fears don't need to be intensified. Only manifested.

MARTIN

Are we even going to be able to make it through all that?

[Distant sounds of part of the building collapsing]

ARCHIVIST

It's a maze in there, deliberately so. People running, desperately struggling for fire escapes only to find them blocked. We won't get lost, though. I know the route.

MARTIN

That's... not really what I was getting at, John.

ARCHIVIST

Go on.

MARTIN

Seriously? You don't— (**pointed**) It's on fire, John; it's—

ARCHIVIST

Mm—

MARTIN

—it's a burning. Building!

ARCHIVIST

Yes it is.

MARTIN

That's on fire!

ARCHIVIST

Yes.

MARTIN

Right. You are aware that traditionally, wading into a flaming inferno is actually considered bad for your health!

ARCHIVIST

(Slight annoyance) Yes, Martin. It'll be fine.

MARTIN

Alright, I just wanted to check. So. Okay. (nervous) We're planning to go through... all this, so I'm guessing the fire can't actually burn us! Right? John?

ARCHIVIST

Um...

MARTIN

John?

ARCHIVIST

Um... mm—

MARTIN

John.

ARCHIVIST

I-It's complicated.

MARTIN

Well, if you want me to go in there with you, then I suggest you find a way to make it simple! **(firm)** Yes or no, can that fire hurt us?

ARCHIVIST

Define 'hurt'.

MARTIN

(Firm) Will the fire feel hot to me?

ARCHIVIST

Yes.

MARTIN

Will it cause me lots of pain if I touch it?

ARCHIVIST

Yes, though not as much as—

MARTIN

(Distressed) Will it burn me alive and kill me dead?

ARCHIVIST

No. It can't do us any permanent harm, once we're out, we'll be fine.

MARTIN

(Quavering) You are aware that intense pain can do you loads of harm, even if there's no, you know, physical injury—

ARCHIVIST

(Snapping) Yes, I know, okay! **(sigh)** I'll take us through the parts that are more... subdued.

[Distant sounds of part of the building collapsing]

(Martin takes a breath to start to say something)

ARCHIVIST (CONT'D)

It goes in phases; sometimes there are whole apartments that aren't actively on fire for... hours!

MARTIN

(Flat) How reassuring.

ARCHIVIST

Well, it's the best I can do!

MARTIN

You're sure there isn't another way?

(Martin sighs)

(Beat)

Yeah, yeah I know, the journey will be the journey, blah blah ominous blah.

ARCHIVIST

I'm sorry.

MARTIN

It's fine. I know you wouldn't take us through if we didn't actually need to *go* through, so...

(Beat)

What?

ARCHIVIST

Well...

MARTIN

John, is there another way?

ARCHIVIST

I mean— sort of? Maybe?

MARTIN

That turn. You-you took a hard turn after the roots back there; I knew that was a thing! Why are we here?

ARCHIVIST

It's just, when you said—

MARTIN

(Firm) John, why have you taken us here?

ARCHIVIST

Jude Perry.

This is where Jude Perry rules.

(Beat)

MARTIN

That's the one who burned your hand, isn't it?

ARCHIVIST

Yes.

MARTIN

Right. I just assumed this would be... who was that landlord guy?

ARCHIVIST

Arthur Nolan. He's here; he has a part of it, but it's... huge. Bigger than you could believe. There's so much fear in there.

MARTIN

But we're not going after him, are we.

ARCHIVIST

No.

(Beat)

You said you were onboard.

MARTIN

I, I was! I am. I just thought—

ARCHIVIST

It wouldn't hurt?

MARTIN

That we'd be safe.

ARCHIVIST

I never said—

MARTIN

I know! I know, okay, I just... **(bracing)** Look, I ju, I just don't want to get burned, all right? It's, it's like my least favourite pain ever.

ARCHIVIST

Is that, a joke?

MARTIN

(**Shaky**) No, no, okay? I, I legitimately hate burns, right? They're they're they're awful, and they scar horribly, and they just, it, it just makes me sick; I, I hate it. Hate it!

ARCHIVIST

Alright. If you really don't want to do this, w-we can go another way.

MARTIN

Really?

ARCHIVIST

Really. My revenge... (**sigh**) Well, let's just say you're more important.

(**Beat**)

MARTIN

...It's not just your revenge though, is it? Destroying her... it would help all those people in there, wouldn't it?

ARCHIVIST

Maybe? It's... (**sigh**) Like I said, I can't see the future. It wouldn't free them, if that's what you're asking. 'Free' doesn't really exist in this place.

MARTIN

Apart from us.

ARCHIVIST

I suppose. In a sense, though—How much of that is because (**dry laugh**) we are trapped in our own quest to—

MARTIN

Okay let's, let's not dive into another... ontological debate right now. Not here.

ARCHIVIST

Fair enough. So are we going in or not?

MARTIN

You're... I, y-you're asking me?

ARCHIVIST

I should have told you before, so, I leave the decision to you. You know my feelings on the matter.

MARTIN

I... do?

ARCHIVIST

I— oh, right: I want revenge on Jude Perry. I want to... smite her. Make her feel what, (**exhale**) what all her victims felt. But I'm not willing to force you to suffer for it.

MARTIN

Okay. So it's...

(**Irked**) I have to choose, do I?

ARCHIVIST

Or we could sit here.

MARTIN

No. No, I'm-I'm not going to choose; I don't, I don't think that's a fair decision to put on me. It's your revenge; your choice, not mine.

(Long beat)

ARCHIVIST

Fine. We go in.

[Distant sounds of part of the building collapsing]

(Beat)

MARTIN

(Shaky) Al-alright then!

ARCHIVIST

We'll be fine.

MARTIN

J— lead the way.

[They start walking]

[Tape clicks off]

[Tape clicks on]

[Hissing static starts]

[An old fridge hums, a fluorescent light flickers, a television show plays in the background]

ARCHIVIST

Home. Such a simple word. Home — not house, not dwelling, not residence or address—

[Hissing static ends]

ARCHIVIST (CONT'D)

—not domicile or flat or lodging or abode or apartment or property or accommodation. Home.

A structure of brick or wood or concrete or canvas. A box in which you pack yourself away when the long day is done. A book neatly closed and placed snugly on a shelf. There's no place like home. An Englishman's home is his castle. Home is where the heart is.

And home is where that heart can be hurt most severely, because within that place of safety, the warm and welcoming embrace of the cramped and well-trod floors whose layout has ingrained itself into your soul, there you are most vulnerable. Your home is an extension of yourself, as much as you will let it be, and the place and the people and the things that form it and fill it are as much a part of you as your blood. As your bile. As your tears.

Perhaps you know the feeling that comes rushing over you when your home is compromised, invaded, corrupted. Perhaps a burglary gives lie to the promise of safety you took from a flimsy front door and a cheap lock. Maybe the dirt and grime builds up to such a degree that the stench begins to infect your soul, or an infestation of moths or ants or bed bugs stretches itself throughout the

very structure of your home until it feels like your skin is squirming with them. You may even find yourself living with a hostile, toxic presence, be they family, friend, or stranger, that poisons your home, turning blessed relief and rest from the tribulations of the world into a choking fog of anxiety and fear.

Such are the dangers of a rotten home.

But how many truly control their home? How many have extended their soul into the walls of a place that exists only at the whim of those who would let them die in the street were it not for the gain that can be squeezed from them. A home you cannot control, that you cannot even be sure will exist with the turning of the seasons. Where stability and peace rot in calamity, exist only at the behest of faceless names that lace themselves throughout labyrinthine paperwork, chaining you to the front of a truck whose motion you cannot control.

Do you smell smoke? Do you smell the creeping ruin of a life, a stalking creature of unmaintained electicals, of cheap insulation, of cut corners and missing fire alarms and unenforced safety regulations? Do you see it creeping under the door to your bedroom as you sleep, the burning coals of its eyes regarding you in the supposed safety of your home, not indifferent but hungry, eager to take everything from you, to burn down your life in any sense it can reach. Can you hear the crackling promise of kindled despair that it whispers into your uneasy, dreaming ear?

Sabina senses it, feels it drawing near.

How long has she lived here? How long have these cramped, dingy rooms in the back of this sprawling rundown tenement been the place her heart calls home? She cannot recall, but long enough for her to grow into love for it, to

cherish every rusted appliance, every crumbling piece of plasterboard, every flickering lightbulb.

[A sounds of the apartment continue, but there is now a distant, muffled crackling that slowly increases in intensity]

ARCHIVIST (CONT'D)

Even as the widening cracks and spreading mould fill her heart with dread, they gently, slowly, inch by inch approach the mildewed room where her parents lie sleeping. Sabina cannot picture their faces, but knows that should they wake to see the state of the place, their anger would be blistering. She sits there on the ratty, torn sofa, trying to bring herself to stand up, to do something about the place that is crumbling around her. But she is locked there by the sure knowledge that anything she touches could result in the complete loss of what small stability she has. She barely notices how hot her tears are becoming.

Which sense is the first to warn her? What nerves are the first ones to fire the white-hot bolts of agonizing panic through Sabina's body? Does she smell it, the rising smoke? A slow and subtle scent, like someone's burned their toast, and... is that hair? Does she hear it, the distant roaring, like the soft growl of a lion who never stops approaching, spotted with shrieks and screams that might just be her imagination? Does she see it, the glow of the flames, pulsing slow and steady, the dull orange of old streetlights, but somehow strong enough to push through the cracks around the front door? Does she feel it, the rising prickly heat, like she has sat too close to an electric radiator for too long, and her skin has begun to redden and blossom before the bars into thick beads of sweat? Or does she taste it in the back of her throat, the sick, queasy terror

that tells her she knows exactly what is coming. Because it's all happened before.

Once again, the handle of the front door begins to glow red-hot, the metal bending and distorting as it melts. From the crack underneath, the fire drags itself forward, curling and caressing the rough coir of the mat that cheerily announced 'Welcome Home!' Its movements are flickering, rhythmic, almost hypnotic, and as her mind screams at her to stand, to run, to escape, she simply sits there, eyes locked on the dancing lights emerging around her front door. She smiles the same smile she did when she was a child, staring at the bonfire at camp, though every nerve in her body is alight with fear.

Then the welcome mat ignites completely, in an instant turning from a gentle smoulder to a gout of flame, and whatever strange compulsion holds her in place snaps like a wire cable.

[Muffled fire is joined with collapses and the sound of closer fire]

ARCHIVIST (CONT'D)

She leaps to her feet and starts screaming, calling for help for her parents. She runs to the door to their room but as she approaches she can feel the heat already wafting out from behind it. She can hear them crying out in agony, begging for her to save them as their pain crescendos.

She can smell the oily reek of charred skin as they call to her: 'We're burning! We're burning! Oh please, god, Sabina; we're burning!'

She grabs the handle, ignoring the sizzling of her own flesh and pushing through the lancing needles of torment to force it down, trying to free her unseen parents.

[Sizzle of flesh; fire sound is building intensity]

ARCHIVIST (CONT'D)

But the door latch never really aligned properly, you see. The landlord always said he was going to get it fixed, and it refuses to open. Sabina pounds helplessly on the smoking wood as the voices of her parents go quiet. Pushing down a grief that threatens to overwhelm her senses, she charges to the window, rushing to reach the old fire escape beyond. The window frame never really opened properly, you see. The landlord always said he was going to get it fixed. And it judders as she tries to force it open, freezing a few inches from the bottom.

Sabina pushes all her might into it but the glass cracks and shatters, peppering her with razor-sharp shards, cutting her face to ribbons. She stumbles, trying to climb through the jagged window regardless, and she can feel the cool iron of the fire escape, a moment of blessed relief that shines through her suffering.

But the fire escape was always really rusty, you see. The landlord always said he was going to replace it. And at the first tiny bit of weight she puts upon it, she can feel the fastenings pop out of the old brick one by one, and her salvation tumbles away into the impossible distance below.

[Collapse sound]

ARCHIVIST (CONT'D)

What floor was her flat on again? Surely it can't be this high.

Falling back into the inferno that is now her home, Sabina dashes over to the laughably small fire extinguisher the landlord begrudgingly provided. It is sputtering and empty.

She runs to the sink, to the tap that has always made that unpleasant grinding sound, and turning it, unleashes only a slow trickle of a thick, dark, oozing substance that smells faintly of gas.

[Collapse sound; distant screams]

ARCHIVIST (CONT'D)

Limping and desperate, she turns to see her furniture in flames, the bookshelves full of memories that she can't quite place but knows are precious to her curl and float away as ash.

[Hissing static starts]

ARCHIVIST (CONT'D)

The photos on the wall of her family—

MARTIN

(Faintly in the background) (shouting) John!

ARCHIVIST

(Continuing) —whose faces seem indistinct but she knows that—

MARTIN

(Background) John!

ARCHIVIST

(Continuing) —she loves, begin to blacken as the glass—

MARTIN

(Background) John!

(Martin coughs)

ARCHIVIST

(Continuing) —pops out of the frame. Her home is being eaten alive by—

MARTIN

(Getting louder) John, she's here! You need to come back!

ARCHIVIST

(Continuing) —this devouring Desolation, and she—

MARTIN

(Loud) John!

[He slaps the Archivist]

[Inferno sounds change from muffled to crisp as the Archivist is slapped out of the statement; the fire is all around, parts of the building regularly collapse, and people scream]

MARTIN (CONT'D)

She's here!

(Martin coughs)

[Hissing static ends]

[A thunder-like crack as nearby part of the building collapses]

ARCHIVIST

Hello, Jude.

JUDE PERRY

(Sarcastic) Fancy seeing you both here.

To what, exactly, do I owe the pleasure — the honour — of being graced by the great and powerful Archivist, harbinger of this new world and his, mm...
...valet?

ARCHIVIST

Actually, we came to see you.

(Jude inhales)

JUDE

What a treat.

(In the background, Martin coughs wheezily)

ARCHIVIST

I have a question for you. I've been wondering: did you know what you were doing?

JUDE

Excuse me?

ARCHIVIST

When you burned me. Marked me with... Did you know it would lead to, all of this?

JUDE

(Unimpressed) You came all this way just to ask that?

ARCHIVIST

Answer the question.

(Martin coughs again)

JUDE

If you want to know so badly, why don't you just reach into my head and pull it out?

ARCHIVIST

Because I want to hear you say it. Willingly.

JUDE

What difference does it make if—

ARCHIVIST

(Snapping) Just answer the damn question!

(Beat)

JUDE

No. I had no idea.

ARCHIVIST

So why did you do it?

JUDE

Why d'you think? Because I wanted to hurt you.

(Martin coughs)

Because you were annoying and I didn't like you, so I hurt you.

ARCHIVIST

And if you had known?

JUDE

But I didn't. Look, I don't care, okay?

(Martin keeps coughing)

I just... I don't. Raking over the past like it matters, like it means anything. The past is dead, Archivist: ashes in the wind.

We're. Here. Now. And that's it.

ARCHIVIST

I suppose you're right.

(Martin coughs)

JUDE

So the real question is: What happens now?

[The fire rushes up in volume and intensity for a moment; there is an added continued sizzle to the inferno afterwards]

MARTIN

John, look out!

JUDE

What's wrong? Scared of a little flame?

[Martin takes fear-filled breaths)

(Delighted) Oh, you are, aren't you? (laugh) Pathetic.

MARTIN

(High) Screw you!

ARCHIVIST

Leave him alone.

JUDE

You're not scared, though, are you, Archivist?

ARCHIVIST

I can feel the pain of every person you have trapped here. My own isn't all that different.

JUDE

Yeah, but you like seeing their pain, don't you? Their fear?

ARCHIVIST

...Yes.

JUDE

You and that stupid Eye; god, you make me sick! Lording it over everybody like you own the place? You're just leeches. Voyeurs.

[Additional sizzle gets intense for a moment]

JUDE (CONT'D)

Parasites on the real monsters.

ARCHIVIST

Enough.

(Beat)

JUDE

Fine. Just messing around!

[Additional sizzle ends]

JUDE (CONT'D)

Wouldn't want to keep you from your oh-so-special business, your holiness.

ARCHIVIST

I wouldn't worry about that: I'm right where I want to be.

JUDE

What's that supposed to mean?

ARCHIVIST

I'm here for you, Jude. To end you.

JUDE

What? No! No way.

(Martin's breath hitches, and then he's wheezing again)

You won. What would be the point of... You're bluffing.

ARCHIVIST

You know I'm not. You're already afraid.

[Distant building collapse]

JUDE

Oh, I see. I get it. You finally get a sniff of power, and the first thing you do is try to settle some old scores.

(Martin coughs)

Play the big man; get off on some good old-fashioned petty revenge.

ARCHIVIST

(Serious) I'd have thought that was a mindset you would appreciate. Now, feel it. All the terror and pain you've inflicted.

JUDE

Oh, piss off—

(She gasps)

Look, look. Wait. Right? I'm sorry, okay? I shouldn't have burned your hand.

ARCHIVIST

No. You shouldn't have.

JUDE

Please don't kill me, I, sure —

(Martin coughs)

— I moan about the Eye; who doesn't? But, we've won, both of us! And that's great.

[Hissing static builds, alongside unpleasant electronic high tones and glitching — the ‘smite static’ from the Not-Sasha encounter]

JUDE (CONT'D)

If I'd known, would I still have marked you? Yes. I would. I'm... happy in this world. I belong here.

And so do you.

(Martin coughs a lot more)

(Jude's breaths come in gasps)

JUDE (CONT'D)

Listen, listen. You're enjoying this, right? Of course you are. You want to use those powers of yours to hurt people. You want to murder everybody who can't fight back at you now?

I can help you.

MARTIN

(Half screaming) Just DIE already!

JUDE

You're not... better... ...than me!

[The ‘smite static’ crescendos to a loud digital glitching sound]

(Jude yells in pain; it echoes and fades away)

(Martin coughs)

[The statics, tones and glitches — the ‘smite statics’ — fade away quickly]

MARTIN

Is it...?

ARCHIVIST

It's over.

She's gone.

MARTIN

(Despondent, hoarse) The fires are still here. Doesn't look like much has changed.

ARCHIVIST

No. I suppose not.

[More collapse sounds]

MARTIN

Let's just get out of here.

[Tape clicks off]

[The Magnus Archives Theme – Outro]

JONATHAN SIMS

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The Magnus Archives – MAG 169 – Fire Escape

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