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The Magnus Protocol

**Episode 20
"Social Stigma"**

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Edited by Alexander J Newall**

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ANNOUNCER

This episode is dedicated to Blades and Chris, two maniacs who by now have probably strangled themselves with red string trying to figure out the plot of this podcast.

[Intro Theme]

ANNOUNCER

**Rusty Quill Presents: The Magnus Protocol.
Episode Twenty – Social Stigma**

[Music]

1. INT. OIAR BREAKROOM – NIGHT, DRIZZLING (CCTV)

Sam, Alice and Celia enter. Sam is almost vibrating with nervous energy.

ALICE

This had better be worth all these theatrics...

CELIA

Ok, Sam. We're here. Just us, no computers. Go ahead.

Beat. Sam exhales.

ALICE

If this is more neurotic conspiracy shit about the Magnus bloody Institute...

Beat.

ALICE

(cont.)

Goddammit Sam.

SAM

Alice, it's important. Like, actually important, I promise.

ALICE

I just had to try and talk a colleague out of a full blown paranoid delusion. I really don't know if I've got it in me to do it twice in two days.

CELIA

(to Alice)

He doesn't seem paranoid.

ALICE

We're whispering. In the breakroom.

CELIA

Granted.

ALICE

Fine. Let's roll out the conspiracy board again, add some more red string. Why not? But this better end with the Magnus Institute killing JFK or I'm officially done on your pet crusade.

SAM

It's, uh, it's more about who killed the Magnus Institute.

CELIA

(sharply interested)

Who?

SAM

We did. Well, I think Starkwall did, on behalf of the OIAR.

CELIA

(doubtful)

The security company?

ALICE

(reluctant)

They're more than a security company. They're a PMC, Mercenaries. It's not impossible.

SAM

Burned it to the ground and killed everyone who worked there. That's what "The Protocol" is.

ALICE

Not the-goddamn-Protocol again. I told you that's not something you want to mess around with! Government conspiracies are a fun hobby, until you piss off the actual government by exposing their actual conspiracy!

SAM

But that's the thing, I don't know if anyone outside the OIAR itself even knows about it. You know that case I got yesterday?

ALICE

I remember it made you weird again.

SAM

It was a letter from 1684.

ALICE

Sorry, your latest conspiracy theory is based entirely on a Freddy throwback from before they invented gravity?

SAM

(losing steam)

Uh well, it was actually about Isaac Newton, so...

ALICE

For god's sake.

CELIA

Alice. Please.

Alice sighs.

SAM

Okay, so, it talks about "The Protocol" right, about how it was used to reign in weird stuff Newton was working on and it reminded me of what happened with the Institute, but I mean, it's 300 years, right? No way it could be the same thing? Right?

ALICE

Right.

CELIA

But?

SAM

But I had an email when I got in tonight. It contained a bunch of files from 1999. Some... paperwork between Starkwall, or GSR Security as they were back then, and William Price, who used to run the response

department. The documents were very thorough, and what wasn't redacted was pretty clear. They totalled the Institute.

Beat.

ALICE

Who sent you the email?

Beat.

SAM

I don't know. The email address was gibberish and when I tried to reply it went nowhere.

ALICE

So you're receiving anonymous info that, at best, could get you fired and at worst could get you killed?

SAM

So you believe there might be something to it?

ALICE

Of course I do! That's why I've been trying so hard to protect you!

SAM

Is that what you call it?

ALICE

Yeah, I do. Because you're working to get us fired for unauthorized access to classified documents about something that happened twenty five years ago. I don't know what the OIAR looked like in 1999, but I know what it looks like now, and it's basically the five of us and

Colin, who, I might remind you, has already lost it. I seriously doubt we're still doing covert Protocol shit. We can't even turn up on time!

CELIA

In fairness, Lena is secretive and Gwen-

ALICE

(restrained)

Okay class. Let's entertain the ridiculous notion that that kind of stuff is somehow still going on. Now do we think that sticking our nose right in the middle of that steaming mess and taking a big old whiff is a good idea or a terminally bad one?

SAM

You can't seriously be okay working for such a shady organization!

ALICE

Sam, we already know we work in a global atrocity factory. It's called the British government.

SAM

This isn't a joke Alice! People died, they might still be dying!

ALICE

(restraining herself)

Look, of course I'm not happy with anything about this. We're trapped in a vicious, petty, awful machine that rules over a vicious, petty, awful little country. I hate that that's how things are. I hate it. But that doesn't stop it from being true and if I'm going to

put myself and the people I care about in actual, physical danger, it's not going to be over a matter of principal. It would need to be for something that'll actually change something. And I'm sorry but going to the press with "British government did another bad thing in the past" doesn't exactly scream revolution does it.

SAM

What about you Celia?

Beat.

CELIA

Are we sure it was the wrong thing to do?

SAM

(Thrown)

What?

CELIA

Destroying the Institute.

ALICE

Well, that's a take...

SAM

(shocked)

Celia, they killed like forty people.

CELIA

I know. And that's awful. But from what I've found the Magnus Institute was up to some pretty bad things. Like catastrophic, world-endingly bad.

ALICE

Okay, reign it in Nostradamus.

SAM

What makes you say that?

CELIA

Never mind. The point is we don't really know what happened and as horrible as it is to say it, for all we know this Protocol thing was a necessary evil to stop something worse.

SAM

Maybe. But that still leaves us working for evil.

Beat.

ALICE

I'm sorry but I'm out. I can't help you with this. You're in way too deep and I'm... I'm scared for you. And for me! For all of us. So if you're dead set on shoving your face into this hornet's nest... you'll have to leave me out of it.

Beat.

ALICE

(cont.)

If you need me I'll be filing cases. We're falling behind again.

Alice leaves.

Beat.

SAM
(despondant)
And you?

CELIA
Keep me posted.

**2. INT. AN ABANDONED WAREHOUSE – NIGHT, DRIZZLING
(GWEN’S PHONE)**

Gwen walks nervously through the cavernous warehouse. She is walking towards the distant buzz of a tattoo gun.

GWEN
H-hello?

The tattoo gun stops buzzing.

GWEN
(checking paper)
Hello? Is that... Grace Wilde, AKA
“Inksoul”?

Beat.

INK5OUL
Police?

GWEN
No.

The tattoo needle starts buzzing again as they go back to work.

INK5OUL
How’d you find me?

GWEN
We uh have our ways.

INK5OUL
I don't do walk-ins.

GWEN

I don't- I'm sorry, are they alright?

INK5OUL

Hm? Oh. Hang on.

The tattoo gun stops again and Ink5oul slaps the face of the body she was tattooing a few times, with no response.

INK5OUL

Nope. Still dead.

The tattoo needle starts buzzing again.

GWEN

(Swallowing)

I see. Well Grace, I'm here to-

INK5OUL

You got any ink?

GWEN

Excuse me?

INK5OUL

Tats. You got any?

GWEN

Ah no.

INK5OUL

Shame. You've got lovely skin.

GWEN

(nervous laugh)

Yes well, I'm actually here to present you with an opportunity.

INK5OUL

Don't need sponsors.

GWEN

I really think you should listen to what I have to say.

INK5OUL

Oh yea? Why?

GWEN

(slightly pompous)

I'm with the Office of Incident Assessment and Response.

Beat.

INK5OUL

Don't need insurance.

GWEN

(snapping)

We're not-

(catching herself)

We're part of the civil service.

INK5OUL

(snorting)

Government? Shit, you guys really do have it in for the small business owner don't you?

GWEN

(slightly incredulous)

I'm here to recruit you, actually. If you want.

INK5OUL

(Sardonic)

You don't say. Need a lot of tattoos in the civil service, do you?

GWEN

Not exactly. We have some use for someone of your... type.

Beat. The buzzing stops.

INK5OUL
And what's that exactly?

GWEN
Sorry?

INK5OUL
What's my type?

GWEN
I'm sorry I don't-

INK5OUL
(growing intense)
Tell me what's happening to me.

GWEN
I don't understand-

The buzzing restarts more menacingly.

INK5OUL
(approaching)
Tell me what's happening to me.
Something is happening. I can tell.
I'm not- There's- I'm changing
there's all these – I don't- **TELL ME
WHAT I AM!**

GWEN
(panicking)
I-I don't know! I'm sorry! They
haven't told me! All I know is we call
you **Externals!**

INK5OUL stops. So does the buzzing.

INK5OUL
External to what? Your department?
Society? The world?

GWEN

I don't know. All of them?

Beat. INK5OUL returns to their victim and resumes tattooing.

INK5OUL

Sounds like you know jack-shit to me.

GWEN

I only just got promoted.

INK5OUL

(bitter)

Congrats.

GWEN

Thank you.

Pause. Silence in the warehouse save the tattooing.

INK5OUL

I don't want this. I just wanted some views, wanted people to like my work. How does that turn me into an, an "External"?

GWEN

I honestly have no idea. How did you end up here?

INK5OUL

Here? Just hiding.

GWEN

From police?

INK5OUL

From everyone. I just... Have you ever had followers? Fans? Ever gone viral?

GWEN

Can't say that I have.

INK5OUL

It's weird. It... does something to you. Some weird hormone thing – I shared an article about it once, but can't say I really understood it. It's amazing and it's horrible. Like, there's these strangers you've never even heard of and they insist that you've changed their life. And you have! They've marked themselves because of you, enshrined you onto their skin, and yet you don't even know who they are. That's so much power. Too much and you're an addict.

**3. CONT. INT. AN ABANDONED WAREHOUSE – NIGHT,
DRIZZLING (GWEN'S PHONE - CASE)**

INK5OUL

I remember the first time I blew up. It was a wolf design I inked over a client's heart. I'd never have thought of it as my best work, but I took a photo of it for the feed anyway. My hand had slipped ever so slightly at the edge of the mouth. Nothing the client would notice but it turned the snarl into more of a cheeky little grin. Everyone really liked that. It was reposted by HellYesTattoos and suddenly my 79-follower account was getting thousands of favourites, hundreds of new followers and so many... lovely messages. They were trawling through all my old work, really amateur stuff, but they still left

the nicest comments.

Next came the haters who were sick of “smirking wolf.” “Sloppy work” they said. They didn’t see the appeal, didn’t understand why everyone was sharing it. Those messages hurt. They hurt a lot more than the nice ones boosted me, but... it was still thrilling, you know? Knowing that a stranger looked at you and saw someone important, someone worth getting angry about. I didn’t feel good, I felt... important.

Maybe I should have resisted that feeling more but why would I? These people wanted to hold me up, tell me I’m better than them, I’m special. Why should it be on me to convince them otherwise? Why should I spend my life scabbling in the dirt telling them “I’m just like you, honest!” when I’m not. I’m better than them. I must be otherwise they wouldn’t all spend so much of their time thinking about me.

The next year was hard. First my follower-count plateaued, then it started to drop. I was churning out arty shots of my work but nothing was catching any more, nothing was making it past my little ring of hardcore fans and out into the culture. No-one was looking at me! At one point I made a bit of mess of client’s Satan design and it got posted on that OopsTattoo blog. It got more traction than all my other

recent posts combined, so for the next few months I deliberately started having “accidents” with client’s tattoos. All it got me was a black eye and a handful of refunds. I was getting desperate. I needed to be seen again.

That’s when I found Oscar Jarrett. He was a pupil of Sutherland Macdonald. Do you know anything about him? He was this pioneering tattoo artist back in Victorian times – real popular, tattooed Prince Alberts cock or something, and everyone adored him. Anyway, he had a bunch of students and one of them was Oscar Jarrett. I learned later there were all sorts of stories about him, rumours of him doing hand-tapped tattoos with sharpened human bones, mixing strange chemicals into his ink, all that sort of stuff. I doubt any of that’s true myself. Don’t get me wrong, his work was... unique but I know better than anyone how important branding is. He probably just needed the mystique.

Either way not many of Jarrett’s original designs are still around and he’s not very well remembered. I stumbled across an old photo of one of his designs in 1930s book. I’d taken to hunting down vintage inkwork books as people were less likely to notice when I lifted a design from some old obscure artist. My own stuff clearly wasn’t cutting it, so

I had to try something else. Anyway, this photo, it stopped me in my tracks. The guy was old, clearly in his 70s or something, but the skin under the ink pristine, smooth as a newborn, and the design was so crisp it might have been done a week before. It was an abstract sun design on his shoulder, shaded in this dull, muted yellow and there was a black dot in the centre that if you really squinted, you could see was an intricate network of crosshatched lines. The round edge of the sun was ragged and wavy, and I could almost feel the warmth of it. It was labelled “Fig.3 One of the few surviving examples of Oscar Jarrett” and I knew right then that I had found the design that was going to save me, that would put me back into the spotlight.

He was called Harry, the man who would bear my mark. He’d asked for a “tarot-inspired sun” on his back, and I knew this was my best chance. I worked for almost a full week to try and properly copy the design from the photo. I didn’t quite manage but it was close enough that it gave me a bit of that same sense of heat. Of course, Harry didn’t like it. I think he just wanted a basic riff on the Rider-Waite-Smith deck. So I lied and showed him a safer tacky magic-shop design that he loved to get him on the table. After all, once he was face-down I could inscribe whatever I

liked into his skin. Don't forget I'm the artist. He was just the canvas. Besides, I had slaved over that design.

He started screaming about twenty minutes into the session. He said it burned, that it felt like his whole shoulder was on fire. He didn't move, though. It was like he was nailed down as my ink spread across his skin, the smell of scorched flesh filling the room. He stopped screaming by the time I finished. Just whimpers at the end. I cleaned off the blood and took my photos, and for all the smell it didn't look like there had been any burning at all. Harry stumbled out like the drunk he was, not even bothering to put his shirt back on. At first I was worried for when he'd be back to complain about the design I had actually given him, but I never saw him again. At least, not in person. Saw his picture on a news site though, he'd been killed in a house fire. The story got decent exposure actually.

It didn't matter, though. His part was already done, canvas complete. What mattered was what people thought of the work. And oh, how they loved it! Followers, views, messages and... sponsorships. It wasn't much, really. Almost nothing in cash terms but it wasn't about the money. I have a small inheritance that takes care of that, it was about the respect. The adulation. The love.

They started calling me an “influencer”, A “bold new voice in skin art”. I started making all these connections, hanging out with other influences whose follow-counts dwarfed even mine. I had arrived.

My old friends didn’t get it, of course. They might have even believed it when they said they were worried for me, that it was out of love, but it was just plain jealousy. Not great loss to me when they dropped away, they were never very photogenic.

But a handful of pictures do not a career make, and so after another lull where I pushed through some more of my own designs I had to admit to myself that my skill, my real skill was in adapting Oscar Jarrett. If anything, I was doing him a favour – nobody remembered him at all but thanks to me his designs were fresh and relevant. Besides, its not like he was around to miss out on anything.

Finding other pictures of his designs was difficult, but not impossible. There were a few obscure corners of the central European tattooing scene, that had some records of him and for a while I was able to get pictures of ones I hadn’t done before. But after those dried up... Well, I’d managed to source an old ledger from his shop that listed most of his clients and I had discovered an interesting little quirk of his ink:

none of the skin touched by it decayed at all. Even after death, they were all flawless. Soon I had quite the collection.

The other problem of course was that designs based on Jarrett's originals were brilliant for socials but not so good for the clients. Those old Victorian inks seemed to last forever, but my adaptations definitely didn't. It was very difficult keeping canvases still on the more complex designs and after I was done they would usually end up having grotesque experiences. That didn't matter so much to me once the pictures were captured and posted online but after a while the police did notice a definite, if unprovable, connection between my tattoos and a series of rather disturbing accidents. Eventually it was easier to just use some chemical cocktails to keep clients quiet and become a bit more... nomadic when it came to studios. Funny thing, all this only seemed to add to the mystique. The fans ate it up, and all these empty warehouses gave me some space to think and reflect. Everyone wants a piece of you when you're this famous.

I don't remember when my own tattoos began to change. I know it was around the same time I started craving "the look" more. Not the pleasure in a client's eyes when they see their new skin, but the one I saw

just before they went under: terror, helplessness, and the certainty that they would wake up changed in a way they could not understand. It filled me up in a way I can't quite explain but I have never felt any other time. And as it did so, inside my skin the ink- There! Do you see it?

They sigh like an addict getting a fix.

INK5OUL CONT.

Jarrett doesn't matter now. The ink flows through me and out of me, transforming the lucky into something newer and more beautiful than their own shallow tastes could have conceived. But I... I don't understand it. There's something inside me that remembers worrying about... I'm not sure. Did I always want to hurt people? To make them afraid? It's so much a part of me know that maybe it always was. Have I changed, or have I simply emerged? What am I? I'm...

I suppose it's too late for remorse, isn't it? And why should I be sorry? This is what I deserve. I don't even need to wait for clients anymore. I can do it to anyone, whenever the mood strikes me. But then I wouldn't have anything to remind all those people that they are right, I am better than them. Besides I wouldn't get to see "the look".

**4. INT. AN ABANDONED WAREHOUSE – NIGHT, DRIZZLING
(GWEN’S PHONE)**

GWEN

That’s... very eloquent.

INK5OUL

What’s that supposed to mean?

GWEN

Nothing. Just... helps me understand you a bit more, that’s all.

INK5OUL

So you understand? You can explain to me what all these changes, these *hungers* are?

GWEN

Well, uh, it sounds like, perhaps through your actions you made contact with some sort of... power? And it’s changed you?

INK5OUL

Really? Wow. Thank god you came. There’s no way I could have come to that massively obvious conclusion on my own!

GWEN

Look, I’m just here to make you an offer. That’s all.

INK5OUL

You think I’m so goddamn thick, don’t you? Just sign on the dotted line and become nice little attack dog right?

GWEN

That's not- We're offering you the opportunity to continue to do... what you do, just in a sanctioned manner.

INK5OUL

**Doing everything on your terms.
Nah, I never was good at following orders.**

GWEN

You've got completely the wrong idea-

INK5OUL

Piss off. Maybe send someone a bit more senior next time. Someone who actually knows what they're talking about.

GWEN

(bristling)

I know what I'm talking about when I say you're being an idiot. It's a good deal, and the only way your story doesn't end in a "where are they now?" article that no-one clicks on. So just sign the damn contract while you still have a chance. You've got plenty of ink, and I'm sure even you can manage to write your own name.

Beat.

INK5OUL

You want ink?

GWEN

(realizing)

No I just- I just meant-

INK5OUL

You really do have the skin for it...

GWEN

(scared)

I'm sorry.

Beat.

INK5OUL

This is the part where you start running.

[Music]

ANNOUNCER

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The series is created by Jonathan Sims and Alexander J Newall, and directed by Alexander J Newall.

This episode was written by Jonathan Sims and edited with additional materials by Alexander J Newall, with vocal edits by Lowri Ann Davies, soundscaping by Tessa Vroom, and mastering by Catherine Rinella with music by Sam Jones.

It featured Billie Hindle as Alice Dyer, Shahan Hamza as Samama Khalid, Anusia Battersby as Gwen Bouchard.

The Magnus Protocol is produced by April Sumner, with executive producers Alexander J Newall, Dani

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**McDonough, Linn Ci, and Samantha
F.G. Hamilton, and Associate
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Thanks for listening.**

The Magnus Protocol 20 – Social Stigma

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Transformation (tattoo) -/- Social Media (influencer)

Incident Elements:

- Atychiphobia (fear of failure)
- Desecration of Corpses
- Body Horror
- Non-Consensual body modification
- Mentions of: exhumation, needles (tattoos), conspiracies, burns/fire, drugging
- SFX: Tattoo buzzing

Transcripts: <https://shorturl.at/gzF15>

This episode is dedicated to Blades and Chris, thank you for your generous support! You can a complete list of our Kickstarter backers <https://rustyquill.com/the-magnus-protocol-supporter-wall/>

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Produced by April Sumner

Featuring (in order of appearance)

Billie Hindle as Alice Dyer

Lowri Ann Davies as Celia Ripley

Shahan Hamza as Samama Khalid

Anusia Battersby as Gwendolyn Bouchard

Vera Chok as Ink5oul

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