

MAG – 157 – Rotten Core

Content Warnings:

- Epidemic / mass infection
- Extreme body horror
- Emotional trauma
- Physical threats
- Isolation

[The Magnus Archives Theme – Intro]

JONATHAN SIMS

Rusty Quill presents... The Magnus Archives. Episode one hundred and fifty-seven: "Rotten Core."

[The tape clicks on. The following exchange is repeated from the end of the previous episode (MAG156, Reflection) and sounds a little more muffled than standard dialogue.]

(Over the top of the recording, we can hear The Archivist's breathing as he listens.)

MARTIN

Will I be coming back?

PETER

You're not going to *die*, if that's what you're asking, but – no. If all goes well, you won't be.

(Martin takes a long inhale, then exhales.)

PETER

How does that make you feel?

MARTIN

Nothing. **(Short laugh)** Nothing at all.

PETER

Excellent. I'm so proud of you, Martin.

MARTIN

I really don't care.

PETER

Perfect.

[Tape clicks off.]

ARCHIVIST

(A stressed sigh.) This tape was left on my desk. I don't know by who, but to my mind, there are three options. Martin has left it here to let me know that whatever the situation is with Peter Lukas, it is entering its final act, and he needs my help. Alternatively, Peter may have left here to... goad me into action? Or just to gloat, to highlight my helplessness at everything. Or Annabelle Cane is trying to manipulate me into thinking it's one of the other scenarios. Previously, the spiders have made their presence clear when they've

sent me... **(searching for the correct word)** hints... but I can't take that for granted.

I don't know what to do.

There's a statement with it. It looks pretty recent. Hm. First time in a while I've been... wary of reading one.

Still, I guess... **(He sighs.)**

Statement of Adelard Dekker, regarding a potential pandemic originating in the town of Klanxbüll, Germany. Original statement given 14th August 2013. Audio recording by Jonathan Sims, the Archivist.

Statement begins.

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

You must forgive me, Gertrude, for any typing and spelling errors that might be in this message. My hands are shaking quite badly and my fingers... aren't what they were. Even so, just knowing where this is going, this statement... I can feel the Eye's power on me, be it ever so slight. Steadying me. Helping the words flow.

Is it strange that here, now, that seems almost a comfort? This is the last time you will hear from me. You must trust me on that and not come looking. Not that you would – I know you're too smart for sentimentality, especially after what I have to tell you – but I feel it worth saying, nonetheless. Perhaps I'm simply prevaricating. Trying to cling on to a few more precious minutes of life. But that's not me. I know what awaits me and must have no hesitation in going to my reward. I know you've never had much patience for my faith, but

perhaps it will provide you some small peace knowing I face my death gladly, knowing I have done my duty before God.

I have spoken to you before of Christabel, my contact within the ECDC. She had a run-in with the Crawling Rot some decades ago and has since then kept me up to date with any incidents they have encountered which display... *unusual* properties. Well, she alerted me to what was internally believed to be a potential pandemic originating in the small town of Klanxbüll on the German-Danish border. From what I understand, it was a perfectly pleasant small town, remarkable mainly for a rail line running out to a large island off the mainland.

But as it was, it had been completely quarantined. Christabel reported that the disease seemed to be artificial or man-made in origin, and her colleagues were keen to label it as a bioweapon, but its behavior didn't follow any normal patterns or vectors. Combined with its extremely disturbing symptoms, which caused the skin and muscles to become loose and malleable until they sloughed completely off the body, leaving only a skeleton and organs... well, she was certain that it was the product of an otherworldly evil, and called me.

I've spoken before about how keenly I've watched news of possible pandemics, which is where I suspect the Extinction may pull away from the Corruption during its emergence. This, alongside the possibility of the disease being man-made – though I am certain no human had anything to do with it – well, it was more than enough to draw me in.

I had no interest in compromising Christabel's position, so I made my own preparations for entry, borrowing a hazmat suit from one of the tents erected around the perimeter. I always despised trying to move in those things, but it seems they've made some real improvements in them over the last fifteen

years, so I was able to stay relatively quiet as I talked my way past the cordon and headed into infected Klanxbüll. I'm certainly glad this happened south of the border with Denmark, as my German is passable compared to my non-existent Danish.

Once inside the town, it became rapidly apparent how bad the situation truly was. You and I, Gertrude, have seen more visions of hell than anyone has a right to while living, but this was something else entirely.

Thin trails of blood and skin crisscrossed to the streets, and the walls and windows of nearby buildings were coated in a fine sheen of discarded gore. It didn't take me long to find my first victim, wrapped around a lamppost. He had clearly tried to lean on it for support in his distress, but his flesh had begun to spread and fuse over it in thick, ropey tendrils. His bones were almost bare to the elements.

But it was then that I saw the thing that, to my mind, is perhaps the worst of it. His heart was exposed. It was beating fast, so fast, despite the awful green decay that seemed to be eating at it. I knew at that moment there was nothing that could be done to save the town. But I could, perhaps, identify the cause.

And identify it I did. I began by checking houses, looking for anything that might have been an unusual artefact or one of those dreadful books. Few doors were locked, and many seemed to be swinging open in the breeze that I was deeply thankful I could not smell. Still, for all the quaint homes with their slanted roofs that I combed through, I found nothing that might qualify as an origin for the small town's gruesome demise. But neither did I find many other victims. There were a few: a woman melted into her now crimson bed; an old man whose bright eyes still stared out of his skull, watching the television,

though the rest of him lay pooled on the floor. And in all of them, the frantic beating of their decomposing hearts.

The state of these homes, however, would seem to indicate that many had begun to develop symptoms while still inside. Countertops in otherwise empty houses would be coated with blood; wooden floorboards peppered with flecks of gristle. Yet of these individuals, there seemed to be no obvious sign except a line of viscera leading towards the front door.

It was then I realized that I had been following the trails entirely the wrong way. They were not people returning home to die. The sick were pulling themselves out of their houses, crawling, dragging themselves towards some other place, leaving bits behind on the rough pavement as they did so. So, I began to walk, slowly, both because of my bulky suit and the rising sense of dread in my stomach. I wonder, Gertrude, whether you are truly as fearless as you seem, or if you are simply a master of disguising your terror. I suppose I'll never have a chance to find out. I rather hope it was the former. However, much I disagree with some of your methods, it feels good to believe there are people in this world who can stare down the Devil without flinching.

I found the source of this sickness in the *parkplatz* opposite the train station. The cars had been pushed to the side, clearly at great cost to the bodies of those that pushed them, and in the center was a figure from whom the rot clearly flowed.

He was sat upon a most dreadful throne, formed from a dozen, two dozen bodies mixed together like putty. Eyes staring out like horror-stricken stars twinkling in the night, and their hearts beating for all to see. A moaning came from that awful seat: voices trying to scream through things that weren't their

throat. And it is a sound I shall be glad to leave behind me when I go to my rest.

I will confess to being perversely disappointed when I saw the figure sat upon it – no pale specter in a lab coat, or twisted golem of petri dishes and test tubes. No, he was lanky, wearing an ill-fitting brown suit and a smile. I'd never previously had the misfortune to meet him, but I knew the description well enough to recognize John Amherst. So, it seemed it was not the Extinction, as I had anticipated, but simply a new and awful strain of Corruption.

Still, it was not something I felt I could leave to run its course unopposed. At first, I was struck almost with despair, having nothing to hand with which I might attempt a confrontation with this creature, but upon retreating some ways and considering my options, I realized I actually had almost the exact resources to hand that I might need. A few minutes spent scouting the surrounding streets even revealed a small construction site almost precisely suited to my requirements. I returned to the cordon and took what I needed: a stretcher, as many quarantine sleeves as I could carry, and a syringe. The medical staff appeared to have retreated to the large tent that served as their base of operations, and if anyone noticed me, they didn't interfere. I loaded the gear into a wheelbarrow I had taken from the building site along with a thick metal chain, and began to head back towards the *parkplatz*, stopping only to fill the syringe from a can of garden pesticide I had noticed during my earlier sweep of the houses.

Finally, I revealed myself. He approached me coyly, clearly believing me to be a foolish or lost ECDC medic. Perhaps he assumed I was frozen in terror at the sight of his work, and luckily my hazmat suit did much to hide my expression.

He walked up to me with a smile so wide it tore the edges of his mouth, leaking a sick green liquid from the edges, and reached a hand out for my mask.

It was then I gripped his hand and plunged the syringe into his spongy flesh and pumped him full of the chemical cocktail. He staggered back, ripping the needle from my hand, and fell to the floor, shaking.

I had no illusions of poison being sufficient to destroy an avatar of Filth, though from what I knew of his affinity to insects, I hoped it would be at least temporarily effective. Regardless, I had to work fast. I dragged him to the stretcher and strapped him down, wrestling against his thrashing spasms. Even through the hazmat suit I could feel the diseased heat of his skin.

I wrapped him around with the chain, which would, I hoped, hold him fast, as I pulled the plastic over the stretcher in layer after layer until I could barely see him through the thick clouded material. I hadn't brought any of the supports with me, so in the end, it looked less like the well-constructed tube of a quarantine stretcher, and more like a lumpy vinyl sack. Still, it was sealed, and that was enough for my purposes. I dragged the thing over to the building site and, with the last of my strength, threw him into the hole that had been left.

By this point, the concrete truck I'd turned on earlier had been mixing for some time, and it was a simple matter to open the pump and pour the contents of its hopper down on top of him. How much he had recovered by this time, I couldn't say for sure, but... he certainly moved around plenty as that thick gray sludge began to cover him.

I can't deny some pride in my solution, Gertrude. In all our discussions of how to contain a being that we could not destroy, I'm not sure we ever hit on a method quite so neat. I am no builder, but by the end I think you would have

been hard-pressed to criticize how well that concrete had been laid, and Amherst four feet beneath it.

And now, the part of my tale you must have anticipated from the beginning. During the altercation, the adrenaline had kept me from noticing the tear that Amherst had made in my hazmat suit while I wrestled him onto the stretcher, but as I sat to savor my victory, it became clear that a great cut on my leg had gone clean through the material. There was no way that I was not infected, and indeed over these last few hours, I have felt the sickness working on me. My pace is sluggish, and I can feel my skin begin to loosen. My heart is beating so fast it shakes my whole body.

But I shall not wait for it to putrefy as the rot overtakes me. I have dragged those other afflicted I could find into the *parkplatz*, laid them at the feet of that appalling throne, and taken the last gift of that generous construction site: a dozen cans of petrol. I will sit upon that seat and release these poor souls from their suffering, and hopefully make things simpler for the ECDC cleanup crews.

But it did not seem quite right to leave without letting you know what happened, and Herr Becker was kind enough to succumb to the sickness without signing out of his computer. So.

Perhaps you were right about the Extinction. I've been hunting it for decades now, and while I have seen evidence of its influence in other powers, I have never found anything to genuinely prove its emergence as a true power of its own. Perhaps it is an existential fear that flows through the others like a vein of ore, or perhaps the birth of such things is longer and more complicated than I believed. For all that, though, I cannot regret at the time I have spent seeking

it. I have done my duty, and none may ask more of me. I am proud of the work we have done, and it has been an honor to do it alongside you.

Goodbye, Gertrude. May you find your rest where no shadows are cast, and no eyes may see you slumber.

ARCHIVIST

Statement ends.

This, er... this changes things. I – I think. If Martin found this- read it already, then perhaps he's having second thoughts about – about Peter and the Extinction. This – this could be a cry for help, his way of asking me to follow him without Peter knowing, or... or what? I don't understand. Martin's been quite clear he doesn't want my help. Am I just hearing what I want to hear? I need a second opinion, but... Basira and Daisy are... out... somewhere. They left in a hurry and didn't tell me why, now their phones are going to voicemail. Maybe they're just on the Underground, and probably – that doesn't help me now.

(Sigh) I need someone I can trust.

(The Archivist sighs heavily.)

[Tape clicks off. Tape clicks on. The Archivist is now outside – we can hear the gentle hum of traffic in the background.]

GEORGIE

No, John, you've done enough!

ARCHIVIST

I just need to talk to –

GEORGIE

What don't you understand? She mutilated herself to get out of that place, and there is absolutely no way I'm letting you involve her again.

ARCHIVIST

Look, is she here or not? She – she said she was staying with you.

GEORGIE

Yes, she's here.

ARCHIVIST

Really? Where's all her stuff?

GEORGIE

Bedroom. Why?

ARCHIVIST

No, I just...

[Some static]

Oh. Oh, I'm sorry, I didn't – I didn't realize you were to-together.

GEORGIE

That's 'cause it's none of your business. Now leave.

ARCHIVIST

Please, Georgie, it's not – I just need to know I'm not overreacting to something. I need an outside perspective.

GEORGIE

Sure, well, here's one. Get out of my flat.

[A door opens.]

MELANIE

Oh – what's go... what's going on? You – you woke the Admiral.

GEORGIE

(A gentler tone to Melanie than when she speak to The Archivist) Hey, hey, easy. It's – it's all right, he was just leaving.

ARCHIVIST

Melanie, I...

MELANIE

John?

ARCHIVIST

Yeah. It's me.

GEORGIE

It's all right, Melanie.

[Over this final exchange we can hear purring from The Admiral.]

John, leave.

ARCHIVIST

I'm sorry, I just... it's Martin.

MELANIE

John... don't. Please.

ARCHIVIST

No, you're right, I'm sorry. You alright?

MELANIE

Yes. I'm... I'm actually doing okay.

ARCHIVIST

That's good.

MELANIE

(Laughs) My therapist isn't happy about it, you know. Unsurprisingly. Tried to have me put away, but they, um... they let me come here. It's – it's been good for me though I feel alright. I'm – I'm not scared anymore.

GEORGIE

Melanie, you don't have to do this.

MELANIE

It's – it's okay. He's welcome... as a friend. But that's it.

ARCHIVIST

Right.

MELANIE

But you're not after a friend, are you, John?

ARCHIVIST

I need an ally.

MELANIE

Then I can't help you.

ARCHIVIST

I suppose not.

[The Admiral meows.]

GEORGIE

Okay. You're done?

ARCHIVIST

Yeah. **(Sigh)** Yeah, I am.

GEORGIE

Come on, Melanie. Let's get you back to bed.

ARCHIVIST

Look after yourself. Both of you.

MELANIE

You too. Good luck, I guess.

ARCHIVIST

Thanks.

[The door closes. Tape clicks off. Tape clicks on. There's a loud, persistent knock on a very different door. It opens, creaking.]

ARCHIVIST

Helen.

HELEN

Jonathan.

ARCHIVIST

(Determinedly) I need – you said before you knew the tunnels, right? That you'd been a... part of them?

HELEN

Not my exact words, but close enough.

ARCHIVIST

I need to know what's in there. What's at the center? I-it's important, Martin – I need to know.

HELEN

(Gleeful) That's a shame, because I'm afraid I'm not going to tell you!

ARCHIVIST

What? Why not?

HELEN

Because I have a good enough sense of what's going on to know that it will be much more fun without my involvement! **(The end of her words are almost lost as she laughs.)**

[The laugh echoes slightly.]

ARCHIVIST

What? You – you said you were going to help!

HELEN

I am.

ARCHIVIST

I don't have time for this. **(Compellingly)** What is at the cen–

[Something changes. There's a high, unsettling metallic sound and the sound of a knife (or something like a knife). Helen is threatening The Archivist.]

HELEN

(Threateningly.) No. We're not playing your game. Now don't forget how sharp I can be, Archivist. Perhaps here, now, you're powerful enough to learn what you want from me, but if you try, I promise you I *will* resist. And only one of us is going to survive the attempt.

[The knife is removed.]

ARCHIVIST

(Breathing heavily) Fine. Can you take me there? To the center?

HELEN

I honestly don't know. But I'm not inclined to risk it.

ARCHIVIST

Damn you!

HELEN

Run home, John. Find a victim on the way. Chaos is coming and I think you'd best be ready.

ARCHIVIST

Just tell me what's going on. Please.

HELEN

Bad things, Archivist. Really bad things.

[Helen's laughs echo as her door swings shut. Tape clicks off.]

[The Magnus Archives Theme – Outro]

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