

MAG – 133 – Dead Horse

Content Warnings:

- Body horror
- Gun violence
- Time distortion
- Spatial disorientation
- Emotional trauma
- Death and dying

[The Magnus Archives Theme – Intro]

JONATHAN SIMS

Rusty Quill presents: The Magnus Archives. Episode one hundred and thirty-three. Dead Horse.

[Tape clicks on.]

DAISY

You sure?

ARCHIVIST

No, it's um... It's fine.

DAISY

It's just, Basira's busy...

ARCHIVIST

No, I, uh, I understand. Honestly, I'd actually appreciate your insight for this one. Just, you know, keep quiet during the statement and that.

DAISY

Sure. I can do quiet.

ARCHIVIST

Right. Uh, do you want a chair?

DAISY

No.

ARCHIVIST

Oh, okay.

DAISY

Trying to get my legs right again.

ARCHIVIST

Of course.

DAISY

Just ignore me. I'll stand in the corner.

ARCHIVIST

Okay then. Statement of... Ahem. Statement of Percy Fawcett, regarding his final expedition into the Amazon. Original statement given June 27th 1930.

Audio recording by Jonathan Sims, the Archivist.

Statement begins.

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

Tell nobody I am alive. I cannot be clear enough on that point. Do not try to find me after I have left. Please. All I ask is that I be allowed to live what life I have remaining in obscurity and anonymity. I will not allow myself to be found.

Perhaps you will have read reports of my disappearance or death, constructing wild theories of violence at the hands of Kalapolo tribesmen or a lack of adequate supplies or preparation. I can only wish my hubris had been so mundane.

I was hunting once again for the lost city of Z. I have dreamed of it for decades, ever since I first read Da Silva's account of his own discoveries in 1753. The ancient ruins, the statues and hieroglyphics. The sheer, unrivalled beauty of it all. Through the trenches and the mud of the Western front, it was the thought of Z that kept me going, whispered promises of discovery. The remains of an ancient city utterly lost to time and hidden somewhere near the Xingu River.

My first expedition was alone, save for a handful of indigenous guides. I believed myself prepared, but the realities of that jungle were more than I could have foreseen, and when it finally ended, my fever-addled mind named that spot, the furthest we had reached into the jungle, "Dead Horse Camp", because that is where my horse finally fell. I retreated in defeat and resolved to return to Dead Horse Camp at a time when I was truly ready. That time was five years later, in 1925, and I honestly believed that this time I was going to find Z.

I was more prepared and, crucially, I planned not to go alone. The Xavante, whose territory we were entering, were said to be violent and distrustful, making a large expedition unwise, so I instead brought my son Jack on board, as he had been travelling with me before and I trusted his instincts almost as much as I did my own. He in turn requested I include one other on the journey, a long-time friend and confidante of his, a man named Raleigh Rimell.

I never liked the look of Raleigh. He was tall, and his features, though any one of them might have been called handsome, were badly put together on his face, giving him an appearance I'll admit I took against at our first meeting. More than that, he had also read Manuscript 512, and I could see in his eyes the same fervour to find the city of Z as I sometimes glanced in my own. Although there was something else there as well, behind them, something darker that I did not recognise, and I am hesitant to consider it too deeply, even now. But Jack saw fit to invite him, and I had never before had cause to second guess Jack's judgement in such things.

It was Raleigh that suggested we proceed alone after we left Dead Horse camp. I had ensured this time we would be well-provisioned. We had horses, dogs, mules and a pair of local laborers who had agreed to act as our guides. But on our arrival at the camp, Raleigh dismissed them, and started to move all of our supplies onto only a few of the animals. He told us we would have to be quick if we were to find what we sought, and we couldn't do that with a trail of animals behind us. He used that word a lot: quick. I tried to explain to him that a methodical search would be more effective, but he just continued to mutter it. Eventually I relented. Much as I was growing to dislike Raleigh as a person, he raised several good points about our chances of avoiding any sort of confrontation with the Xavante, and Jack was quick to voice his support. So it

was that at the death of May, myself, Jack and Raleigh set out deeper into the jungle. Alone.

That night the mosquitoes were out in force, thick with fever and hungry for our blood. I did my best to simply ignore them, safe as I was within my net. But over in Raleigh's tent I kept hearing a sporadic thumping or clapping sound, as if he were killing them with his bare hands. When I asked him about it the next day, he simply told me he had inside him a strong and enduring hatred of bloodsuckers. Jack nodded, as though the statement were in some way profound, and I didn't know what to say to it.

That was the day we found the stone. Half-buried, worn almost completely smooth by time and exposure, but still clearly covered in those same hieroglyphics as I had seen in Da Silva's manuscript. I was overjoyed, almost to the point of weeping. I had been right. Jack clapped me on the back and started making some sketches of the symbols. Raleigh was silent, staring at our discovery with a look I'd never seen before. He didn't blink for almost two minutes. Then, he gradually, painstakingly lowered his head, until his face was right next to the rough stone surface. He took several long breaths, as though sniffing the thing, and then I thought I saw his tongue shoot out, just for a moment, and taste the air around it.

Without a word, he took off into the jungle at a dead run. Myself and Jack, startled for a moment, quickly followed. Raleigh was quick, but the uneven jungle floor and terrain made moving difficult, so we were able to keep him in sight until he stopped short. I caught up to him, breathless from exhaustion, and asked him what in God's name he thought he was doing.

"We're close," he said. "I can smell it. I won't let it get away again."

I told him I didn't understand, that we were looking for a ruined city, that it couldn't "get away". But Raleigh just repeated himself, "I can smell it," and to my dismay I could see Jack nodding along.

This was where things started to turn, and my memory begins to fragment. I kept a journal, but the entries were sporadic and shaky. The dates no longer make sense. At some point, I realised that there were no animals around us anymore, that the Amazon had become strangely quiet, but I don't know whether this was before or after I found the pile of dead birds in Raleigh's tent. It must have been before, but my journal is not clear on the matter.

What I do know is that we kept going deeper and deeper into the jungle. Jack had taken over the compass and sextant by that point, and I had little idea where we were actually going. Raleigh no longer slept, of this I was sure, and the inconvenience of setting up camp was clearly starting to grate on him. I no longer had any fear of meeting the Xavante, as I somehow knew that wherever we were, it was no longer in territory they would want to claim. There were other animals now. I could never get more than a glimpse, but they were not the birds, or the mule, or any of Raleigh's other victims. They were far too sharp for that. And they were definitely following us.

When we met the second expedition, it seemed like I was the only one surprised. There were almost a dozen of them, fitted with cold weather outfits and icebreaking equipment, and they seemed to take no heed of the thick, humid heat of the jungle. They greeted us like old friends, and Raleigh began to ask them what they had found, how their search was going, how many had made it. I tried to say a few words, but by this point I was so disorientated, so out of step with whatever path the expedition was treading, that even if they could hear me it was clear they had no intention of listening.

The leader of the second expedition, a man in a thick sealskin coat, was talking excitedly about their progress, about their hunt for the northwest passage, and I realised with a start that this man was John Franklin, the famed polar explorer, whose ships the Terror and the Erebus had been trapped in the ice and lost in northern Canada. The crews had disappeared, and many believed they had resorted to cannibalism. Of course, that seemed far less of a concern to me at that moment than the fact that John Franklin's expedition had taken place almost a hundred years previously. There was no way these people could be real, no way they could be here. But they were solid enough, and the gleam and obsession in their eyes matched Raleigh's exactly. Jack looked on in awe at the both of them.

We were briefly fourteen people, but then the things that had been following us attacked in the night. I awoke to screams and gunfire, the scents of blood and death. Something more cunning than a jaguar tore through my tent, teeth eager to find my throat, and it was only my paranoia of the other members of this expanded expedition that had kept my revolver close enough that I survived the struggle. When it was over, and the beasts were dead or driven off, I heard a sound that chilled me more than the vicious screams of the predators. The blood-drunk cheering of the survivors: a sound of triumph, elation and cruelty. There were six of us left, and I reloaded my pistol before I returned to my bed.

The world was changing with every day we marched forward, feverishly hunting for a destination I was no longer sure of. Raleigh hadn't mentioned the city of Z for days, and Franklin at no point indicated any destination other than the northwest passage, though he walked through the heart of Brazil. And now the very trees seemed to be fleeing us, branches and trunks bending away as

we passed, save for those that sharpened themselves and stretched towards us. There were things moving through the trees now that looked at first like men, but they did not move like them. Their mouths never opened, but I knew there was something dreadful about them.

There was a grotesque absurdism to it all, and I sometimes thought I might burst out laughing, though I knew that would quickly change to sobbing, and I would be exposed. I had felt my safest option was to feign that same obsession that gripped Raleigh, that had taken my son. Though they both seemed to have a clearer idea of exactly what was going on, they didn't question me too closely as long I seemed to share it. For all my navigational and cartographic skill, I had not the faintest idea where we were. At times, the position of the sun cast doubt on even the continent through which we travelled.

We found Eduard von Toll a few days later. I recognised him immediately, as he had always been an inspiration of mine, right up until he and his ship, the *Zarya*, had vanished while hunting for the elusive polar island of Zemla Sanikova. Now he and his crew were pinning the things that looked like men to trees with long iron spikes. They thrashed and struggled, and a long, bulbous tongue hung from their throats, pinned by the iron of Von Toll's men. "I cannot stand bloodsuckers," Raleigh said approvingly, as he conversed quietly with Baron Von Toll in French. Two of the figures pinned to the trees screamed in pain. They had no tongue, no distended belly filled with stolen blood, but no-one seemed to notice, or if they did notice, no-one cared. In the joy of the hunt, they had been seized, and that was that.

And so, the expedition began again, with no sign of progress or clear destination, only the pure focus and wild excitement to find ... it. Whatever it was, wherever it might be, they would not stop, would never stop, until it was

found and taken. The supplies had run out days ago, and it was becoming clear that zeal will only sustain you so far, as one or two of the group began to falter and fall from exhaustion and hunger. They were left behind. The most painful part was Jack, who would spend hours walking beside me, telling me of all the wonders we would see, all the delights we would be a part of, when we finally found it. Or caught it. Or killed it. Whatever it might have been. It broke my heart to see what I had done to him, to know where my path had set him.

When I finally felt my own body give out, it was a relief almost too acute to describe. I fell, and they left me behind.

I awoke back in Dead Horse camp. Some of the Kalapolos had found me collapsed in the forest and had taken pity on me. I won't bore you with the details of my fevers and suffering, save to say that the shellshock I received in the Great War was nothing to what I went through after my return. I have been careful, though. Nobody knows I am alive, and I desperately wish to keep it that way.

I am sure, deep within myself, that what Raleigh Rimell hunted out in that jungle, he will never find, he can never find. What those people pursued, what I pursued, doesn't exist, and I dearly hope that no others will ever suffer for our obsession. The sooner the world forgets them, forgets me, the better. I just wish I hadn't lost my son to learn that lesson.

ARCHIVIST

Statement ends.

What do you make of that then?

DAISY

Don't know. Why?

ARCHIVIST

Oh, well, you're a ... you're a Hunter, right?

(Daisy grunts)

ARCHIVIST (Cont.)

I just wondered. I've been looking for evidence of a Hunt ritual, to see if it was one of the ones Gertrude stopped, and this is the closest thing I've been able to find.

DAISY

Could have been one. I think.

ARCHIVIST

But it didn't work. I don't even know how it was meant to work.

DAISY

No.

ARCHIVIST

But why? There was no outside interference, no other powers, even the indigenous tribes who could theoretically have derailed it seemed to stay away. So why didn't it work?

DAISY

I don't think it was about that.

ARCHIVIST

I'm not sure I understand.

DAISY

Just a feeling. When I was ... You know what my least favourite part of a case was?

ARCHIVIST

Police brutality lawsuit?

DAISY

(Curt laugh) Arresting them. I hated the handcuffs. Th-the click. It meant the chase was done; the hunt was over. Satisfying, on a good day, sure, but... “moreish”. I never really wanted it to be over.

ARCHIVIST

Hm. You don't think the Hunt would let its ritual end? You don't think it would let them find the culmination.

DAISY

Don't know. Maybe? Sometimes I lost purpose because I let myself get too into it, gave them openings just because I wanted to keep chasing. Like with you. Sometimes it meant I lost them.

ARCHIVIST

One of the bits I've managed to decode from Gertrude's notes, it references something she calls "The Everchase". You think that might be it? The ritual that never ends because the Hunt is all in the pursuit?

DAISY

I don't know. You're the expert.

ARCHIVIST

No, no. I like it. It's a good theory.

DAISY

Basira said you could just "know" all this now anyway.

ARCHIVIST

It's, uh, I can't really control it.

[Door opens]

ARCHIVIST

Oh.

BASIRA

Hey, there you are. You're meant to be doing your exercises.

DAISY

You were out.

BASIRA

The Magnus Archives – 133 – Dead Horse

You could have done them alone.

DAISY

Sure.

ARCHIVIST

Everything alright?

BASIRA

Yeah... Daisy, could you give us a minute?

DAISY

Oh. Should I...?

BASIRA

Yeah, please.

DAISY

Sure.

[Door closes]

ARCHIVIST

Are you...?

BASIRA

John, is that her?

ARCHIVIST

What?

BASIRA

You've had people switched before, right? Replaced?

ARCHIVIST

I mean, s-sure, but...

BASIRA

How sure are you that that's the real Daisy?

ARCHIVIST

Uh, I'm sure. Basira, that's her.

BASIRA

But do you... Do you know?

ARCHIVIST

Yes. Why?

BASIRA

Hmm.

ARCHIVIST

Talk to me, Basira. Is she ... wrong in some way?

BASIRA

No. No, she still sounds like her, says things Daisy would say, laughs like her.
She just seems ... lost.

I want it to be her.

ARCHIVIST

Do you?

BASIRA

What's that supposed to mean?

ARCHIVIST

She's trying to keep a clear head, to stay away from the Hunt as much as possible. You valued her purpose, her resolve. The sort of things—

BASIRA

I get it. It's her.

ARCHIVIST

We've all changed, Basira.

BASIRA

Yeah, I just... I didn't realise she'd change into someone who can't look after herself. Even without the muscle atrophy—

ARCHIVIST

You were hoping for a defender.

BASIRA

I was hoping for someone I can trust to share the load. Because right now it's all on me.

ARCHIVIST

It doesn't have to be.

BASIRA

Hmm.

ARCHIVIST

You're not happy she's back?

BASIRA

I didn't say that, John! I will never abandon Daisy, and having her back is— But right now, she's dead weight, and I need to be able to travel light.

ARCHIVIST

You're starting to sound like Gertrude.

BASIRA

Good. Far as I can see, Gertrude Robinson was the most effective person in this place.

ARCHIVIST

That's what Tim said as well. Look, I've been where you are.

BASIRA

Have you?

ARCHIVIST

Yes, I have. Like you're the only one responsible for everyone, the weight of all their lives on your shoulders? It leads to bad decisions.

BASIRA

Yeah, well, when I get myself kidnapped three times in a row, maybe I'll look to you for advice.

ARCHIVIST

Bad decisions like wasting three weeks chasing dead ends and false leads rather than talking to us about the plan.

BASIRA

I told you not to look in my head.

ARCHIVIST

I didn't. This one's just me. You've not mentioned anything about where you were, avoided talking about anything you learned, and that file you were studying the clippings from? Empty.

BASIRA

Maybe I found something and I'm not sharing.

ARCHIVIST

You didn't, though, did you?

BASIRA

I had good intelligence.

ARCHIVIST

Which you charged off to investigate without telling anyone. You know who that reminds me of?

BASIRA

Drop it.

ARCHIVIST

Fine. I don't care if you trust me, but I think I've proven at the very least that I'm useful. So, use me. Because if you go it alone, you are going to die. Even Gertrude worked with people. We make bad decisions when we don't communicate.

BASIRA

You literally jumped into a spooky coffin without telling anybody.

ARCHIVIST

Case in point.

BASIRA

Okay.

ARCHIVIST

The Magnus Archives – 133 – Dead Horse

And give Daisy a break. She was there eight months. I was only in there for three days and...

BASIRA

Yeah, I know. I just...

ARCHIVIST

What?

BASIRA

Nothing... I've got work to do.

[Door opens and closes; the Archivist sighs. The tape clicks off.]

[The Magnus Archives Theme – Outro]

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

It featured: Jonathan Sims as the Archivist, Fay Roberts as Daisy Tonner, and Frank Voss as Basira Hussain.