

MAG 184 — Like Ants

Content Warnings

- Insects & infestation (including SFX)
- Claustrophobia
- Anxiety / Panic / Pleading
- Pain (including SFX)
- Trypophobia
- Non-consensual supernatural actions
- Mentions: Blood, body horror, crushing, loss, futility/inconsequence

[The Magnus Archives Theme – Intro]

JONATHAN SIMS

Rusty Quill presents... *The Magnus Archives*. Episode one hundred and eighty-four: "Like Ants."

[Theme finishes]

[Tape clicks on]

[Hissing static]

[Continuous sounds of a multitude of crawling, scuttling ants;
sometimes passing by in enormous waves; their bites and squeaks
uncomfortably close]

[The sounds have a dull echo and dirt falls irregularly from the
movement]

ARCHIVIST

There are so many. They are beyond number.

[Hissing static ends]

ARCHIVIST (CONT'D)

Though one could pluck a numeral from the air and add some zeros, place a figure on how many tiny, twitching things exist within these tunnels, it cannot be comprehended. Not truly. The human mind can barely understand the true extent of a billion, and there are so many more than a billion of them. A trillion. An octillion. A quindecillion.

Just words and zeros; no connection to the true scale of what they are, how much they represent. They are past the place where numbers have meaning. How many ants are there? Uncountable.

They shift and roil in dark and shining tides across the walls of the tunnels, pock-marked in their turn by tiny earthen holes from which the things emerge, retreat and move as one.

[Movements to get through the dirt and tunnels begin]

ARCHIVIST (CONT'D)

All around it may seem like solid earth that presses down and forces Jordan through on hands and knees, but it is not. He tries again to find somewhere to place his hands, an inch or less of bare rock or undisturbed earth, but there is nothing. He does not know if this tunnel has the ants that bite, the ones that reek when they are crushed, or the ones so tough his weight does not destroy them, and he can still feel them moving and squirming beneath his palm.

Jordan knows there is no way out. No twisting, squeezing passage that promises escape, that will allow him to emerge, screaming and encrusted with filth and insect gore, to take a gasp of fresh and open air. But still he must push on, press forward, keep moving. For he knows that when he stops, when he pauses, when he finally succumbs to exhaustion and collapses, that is when they descend upon him, subsume him beneath their impossible number. He can try to keep them out, to cover his ears, close his mouth, squeeze his nose shut, close his eyes. But not forever. Eventually he can't hold back the scream, but it is muffled the moment his lips part to let it out.

So he keeps moving, scrabbling, pushing forward, clawing his way towards nothing but another few precious moments where he is not covered. For a moment he hesitates at a crossroads, two tunnels before him, one large enough he need only stoop, the other narrow. He'd need to squeeze. And for a moment Jordan's sense of scale deserts him completely. Are these tunnels actually sized for him? Or has he himself been sized for this looping, intricate colony? He shakes off such thoughts. The ants remain as small to him as ever, and as numerous. He chooses the tighter passage.

[The dirt and tunnel movements continue, matching the statement]

ARCHIVIST (CONT'D)

Pressed so closely there can be fewer of them inside, and those that come for him will be quickly crushed. Or so he hopes. And as he presses himself through the jagged stone, it seems as if he has calculated correctly. The sharp scraping of rock is almost a relief after the tickling itch he has been enduring for so long, as they tear at his ragged clothes that never fully rip, and always leave crevices enough for ants to hide.

There are few ants in this tunnel, so few that Jordan can barely feel them on him. At least, until they begin to bite, and the shooting pains begin to rip through him. He jerks wildly, trying to reach his tormentors to brush them off or kill them, but the tunnel is too narrow and keeps his arms pinned to his sides. He flails, cutting his back against the ceiling, and freezes, the panicked thought gripping him, the image of those ants crawling down, into his wounds, into his skin, hollowing him out and making their colony tunnels of his veins. He screams, a wordless, haggard cry of despair.

[The close sound of the ant swarm transitions to a small echoing chamber; the ants are here but less omnipresent; dirt and pebbles fall every so often]

ARCHIVIST (CONT'D)

Leto hears the scream, echoing down through chamber after chamber of his friends, but he does not understand it. He waits for it to end, looking for its source, but it just seems to go on and on and on. Eventually he does not hear it, though he cannot say for certain that it has stopped. He wants to investigate, to see what sort of creature could make such a sound, but there is no step he can take that does not make him a murderer. He cannot stand or sit or shift without a hundred of those dearest to him paying for it with their lives. Once, so long ago now that it seems almost like a memory of a dream, he knew these creatures, and they had known him. They had covered him, swarmed and embraced him, and he had, for a short, glorious time, known what it was to be loved on an unimaginable scale. For each and every ant was a life, a mind no lesser than his own, guided by senses utterly alien yet as vital as any he possessed. If we are as ants to those things above us that torment and toy with

us for their amusement, why should not ants be like us, each with a life as rich and intricate as any person?

Leto knows this to be true, as for that all too brief a time his senses were attuned to theirs, and he knew them, truly knew them. Unnumbered minds and existences, all connected together as one, and they had loved him. When he thinks of it, it prickles his eyes with regret at the loss, the endless rolling mass of love that he had all but begged to consume him.

But it is gone. His friends, the minds that he had once known so intimately, had left him. Now he sees them, moving and pulsing around him in a steady tide of tiny bodies, but he cannot reach them as once he did. He cannot make them understand, and he cannot apologise as his movements, as every gesture of his grotesque, lumbering body ends a dozen, a hundred existences. Even the tears that Leto sheds in grief will fall and drown his friends. He holds his arms in close and tries not to move.

[Earth shifts and crumbles, and there are footsteps]

ARCHIVIST (CONT'D)

There is someone else here now, someone shouting at him. The voice, it is the one who was screaming in the tunnels. He is still screaming, yelling something at Leto. Blood drips from all over him, matted into his hair, crusting his lips with red.

[Footsteps turn into stamping]

ARCHIVIST (CONT'D)

He flails his arms wildly and stamps his feet, pulping a mass of ants, ending their lives with such a cruel and callous disregard that Leto is filled with a

sudden rage. His limbs are willed with an energy they have not known in an age as he lunges at the awful murderer.

[Footstep and movement]

ARCHIVIST (CONT'D)

Jordan sees the crying man coming, face twisted in some bone-deep hatred as he lunges at him. The relief he had felt, the momentary elation of seeing another human face in this dreadful labyrinth evaporates in an instance, replaced by the sick familiarity and bitter déjà vu of a cycle repeating itself once again.

[Sounds of squishing and dirt; a wave of ant noises]

ARCHIVIST (CONT'D)

He steps to the side, almost falling, feeling the bite of more ants as he pushes into a mass of them on the wall of the small chamber.

The man who charged him lets out a noise of terrible realisation as he overbalances and topples forward, his whole body slamming into the dark insectile carpet that covers the floor.

[Body collapses amidst earth and shifting forms]

ARCHIVIST (CONT'D)

The impact is heavy, and then he lies still.

He can feel them below him. The dead and the dying, murdered by Leto's clumsiness, his rash and destructive rage. The fear he felt as he was falling has been replaced by a sick dread of standing back up, of seeing the destruction his fall has wrought upon those that trusted him.

[Sporadic footsteps]

ARCHIVIST (CONT'D)

The other man, that bloody omen of doom, is talking again, ranting, spewing nonsense about a queen, about finding her, about killing her. Leto struggles not to laugh; the words rattle around his mind in hollow recognition. There is no queen, he knows that. There is no single will to command the wondrous expanse of crawling lives. Each and every one is their own, and together they are so much more. He says as much to the interloper, preparing as he does so to stand, but before he can he feels the tell-tale tickle of his friends moving over him, covering him. He cannot rise, cannot lift himself without killing them. He begs them to save themselves, to let him up, but they will not understand his words.

[Footsteps]

ARCHIVIST (CONT'D)

Jordan leaves the man to his despair, the words rattling around in his head. No queen. He knows that of course, but sometimes he allows himself the smallest flicker of hope that maybe there is a heart to this place, some core chamber where the bloated insectile monarch might sit, vulnerable and waiting.

But no, it is all the same, just the endless maze and ants and tunnels, unnumbered minds, meaningless in themselves, but together a being that dwarfs him, that if it wished to end his suffering could do so without a gesture. He turns the wrong corner, and the ants are upon him once again.

[A rumbling wave of ants that fades]

(Hissing static starts)

[The sounds of ants continue, but less overwhelming]

(Hissing static ends]

MARTIN

Uh, J-John, uh...

(Heavy sigh)

ARCHIVIST

Are you alright?

MARTIN

Y-Y-Yeah. I-I mean, no, I just...

ARCHIVIST

Don't like ants?

MARTIN

Obviously not. No-one **likes** ants, John.

ARCHIVIST

As the embodiment of all knowledge, I am not entirely sure that's true but...
okay. What is it?

MARTIN

N-No, it's just... you know the guy you were talking about? Jordan?

ARCHIVIST

The exterminator, yes.

MARTIN

I was having a look around and... I found him. A few tunnels over.

ARCHIVIST

Yes. I know.

MARTIN

Ah sorry, yeah, of course you do. Oh, stupid.

ARCHIVIST

No, it's alright. I've-I've been trying to... I'm not sure what to do about it.

MARTIN

Well, who's the avatar in charge here then? That Amherst guy?

ARCHIVIST

No, John Amherst was encased in concrete, and shrivelled away to nothing after just a few years. If they'd unearthed him before the change, maybe, but as it was he was so starved of fear...

MARTIN

So *who*, then?

ARCHIVIST

Well, I'm not sure if...

MARTIN

John who is it?

ARCHIVIST

It's the ants.

MARTIN

What? Ohhhh, like a, like a huge ant queen or something?

ARCHIVIST

No. All of them. As a collective. Crawling, devouring, spreading. One colony, one being, one avatar.

(Further sounds of martin's lack of enthusiasm)

MARTIN

Right. Great.

[Martin moves about]

MARTIN (CONT'D)

No. No. Do not like that one at all. No. Okay. So what happens if you destroy them then? I-I mean, if they're both the avatar and the domain?

ARCHIVIST

The whole place would collapse and then without The Corruption's influence, I think The Buried would flow in to fill the gap.

MARTIN

I thought you said Smirke's Fourteen was a load of bull?

ARCHIVIST

I said it was limited, and draws artificial borders, but it does have its use when it comes to conceptualising these things. Regardless, I'm pretty sure we'd be left somewhat... entombed.

MARTIN

But we could get out, though?

ARCHIVIST

Eventually.

...Martin, do you want me to...

MARTIN

No. No, probably not a good idea.

ARCHIVIST

Hm.

Oh, uh, Martin, just one, one second... you got...

(Martin's expresses extreme displeasure at finding ants on himself)

[Extended sounds of Martin patting and swiping his clothes as he continues talking]

MARTIN

Definitely one of my least favourites, so far. Can we just go then? Please?

ARCHIVIST

I'm still not sure what to do about Jordan.

MARTIN

I mean, what can we do really? You've been pretty clear there's no way for us to help the people who are trapped here as victims so... so, we leave him here like all the others, and eventually we save everyone.

ARCHIVIST

Yeah... I just... I don't usually know them. Jordan Kennedy did me a favour. He helped me with my own fear, a-about Jane Prentiss.

MARTIN

I sometimes forget that most of the people we know are avatars.

ARCHIVIST

Yes, that... Hmm. Not sure I like *that* realisation. Our peers...

MARTIN

Yeah. Dinner parties are going to be tricky.

(Brief, sad, chuckles)

So what are we doing John?

ARCHIVIST

I want to see him.

MARTIN

Fine. Do your 'knowing' thing and then we can—

ARCHIVIST

With my eyes.

MARTIN

...Okay. But just so you know, the tunnels to get there are absolutely craw—

Yeah, okay. Yes, no, yes, you already know.

Lead on.

[Tape clicks off]

[Tape clicks on]

[The echoes of ants swarming in a larger chamber and sounds of a person flailing]

(Jordan wails plaintively and hopelessly)

MARTIN

Christ...

John?

JORDAN

You... What are—? F-From the Magnus— Ah! Help me!

MARTIN

John, what are we doing here?

ARCHIVIST

I don't... I—

(Anguished screams of agony)

JORDAN

Help! Please! Gahhh!

ARCHIVIST

Ceaseless Watcher, look upon this man—

[Hissing static starts, joined with other unpleasant electronic high tones and glitching — similar to the ‘smite static’ from previous encounters with avatars]

(Jordan continues to wail)

MARTIN

John...

ARCHIVIST

—subsumed by terror and gripped with swarming fear. Gaze into him, through him... And out of him.

[As the static rises it morphs to sound subtlety different from previous smites]

MARTIN

What does that mean?

ARCHIVIST

Make him a vessel of your hunger, staring out and harvesting with a thousand, thousand, thousand, tiny, eager, eyes.

MARTIN

Hang on...

ARCHIVIST

Gift him your power and protection. Make him yours.

[The static crescendos with a melodic whooshing]

(Jordan's cries subside)

[Most of the statics subside, however, faint static glitches continue]

ARCHIVIST (CONT'D)

Jordan?

JORDAN

What... What is this?

ARCHIVIST

How do you feel?

JORDAN

(Quavering) I don't... I know you. From the Magnus Institute. What are you doing here? What is this?

MARTIN

(Thin-lipped) Yeah, I'm curious about that myself.

JORDAN

What did you do to me? I feel...

ARCHIVIST

Better?

JORDAN

Sick. Like I—

[There are pulses of sibilant electric static]

(He gasps)

JORDAN (CONT'D)

What? What was that?

ARCHIVIST

You're seeing it. Feeling it. The fear of all the others here.

JORDAN

All that screaming... They're everywhere... crawling over *them*, like they did me... It feels...

ARCHIVIST

Good?

JORDAN

...Yeah. But wrong. Sick.

What did you do to me?

ARCHIVIST

I helped you.

[Sounds of Jordan standing up; there are short bouts of agitated
pacing from Jordan through the rest of the conversation]

JORDAN

Helped me? I don't feel right, I, I just— Ah! No I don't— argh! I don't want this!

[Pulses of sibilant electric static, and the static glitches are louder
for a moment]

MARTIN

Jordan? Jordan, just relax, it'll be fine, you'll be okay.

JORDAN

No, I don't— I didn't ask for this!

ARCHIVIST

You preferred the ants?

JORDAN

No!

ARCHIVIST

(**Combative**) Covered and agonised? I know how scared you were, I felt it.

JORDAN

It was...

It was a nightmare. And I couldn't wake up. But... *this* is... I, I don't understand...

ARCHIVIST

I'll try to explain.

(Intones) The world is over. Dark powers that feed on fear have transformed everything we know into a twisted hellscape, where humanity is tormented to feed their hunger. We're all trapped, but I have a certain level of 'power' in this new world. So, I—

JORDAN

You turned me into what? A torturer?

ARCHIVIST

Yes.

JORDAN

Why?

MARTIN

Good question. John? Care to enlighten us?

ARCHIVIST

What was I supposed to do? I owed you. Didn't want to just watch you suffer.

MARTIN

It's what you've been doing for everyone else. It's what you're expecting **him** to do.

JORDAN

I don't... I don't know how to **be** this. I don't want to scare people.

ARCHIVIST

No. But you'll learn.

(Beat)

JORDAN

Am I still me?

ARCHIVIST

I don't know how to answer that.

I can put you back if you want. You could become a victim again? Rather than complicit.

JORDAN

...No. This isn't... I, I didn't want this. But I can't, I-I *can't* go back to that. I can't.

ARCHIVIST

Very well.

MARTIN

I'm sorry. It's... It's a lot to take in all at once.

JORDAN

Can I at least... go outside? Can I leave these tunnels, the ants? Am I... free?

ARCHIVIST

You're part of them now. And they're a part of you.

JORDAN

Oh.

ARCHIVIST

I'm sorry, the world is... It's bad all over. I just wanted to spare you what I could.

JORDAN

Yeah.

ARCHIVIST

Because... because I owed you.

JORDAN

Please. Leave.

ARCHIVIST

Jordan, I—

JORDAN

I'd like to be alone.

MARTIN

Of course.

[Martin turns to leave]

JORDAN

No, wait.

I'll never be alone again, will I?

(Beat)

MARTIN

Come on John. We should just go.

[Martin and the Archivist walk away]

JORDAN

(Heard from a short distance) The ants... If I told them to attack you. Could they?

ARCHIVIST

No.

Nothing can really touch us anymore.

[Tape clicks off]

[The Magnus Archives Theme – Outro]

JONATHAN SIMS

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