

MAG – 121 – Far Away

Content Warnings:

- Mortality
- Undead
- Violent death (reported)
- Tendrils
- Constriction

[The Magnus Archives Theme – Intro]

JONATHAN SIMS

Rusty Quill presents The Magnus Archives. Episode one hundred and twenty-one. Far Away.

[Tape clicks on. There's a ticking clock. A door opens and faint sounds of the hospital beyond can be heard. The door closes.]

OLIVER

Um... hello, John. Do you mind if I call you John? I, I mean, you don't actually know me, it's just... well, 'Archivist' it's so formal, isn't it, and I do kind of know you? Haven't had much choice, really. Dreams are like that, you know. No matter how lucid you think they are, there's always that part that just drags you along.

Guess I don't need to tell you that. At least, not right now.

(Sighs) Wish I could tell you *why* I came here. Wish I *knew* why I came here. Suppose there's only so long you can dream about someone, and not at least

try to find them. That was it with the old woman, too. That was different, though. Way I figure it, she stuck her nose in just about everywhere it wasn't wanted and stirred up hornets 'til all the precautions in the world couldn't stop death from finally catching her. If I'd known more back then, I'm not sure I'd have bothered trying to warn her. Still, you live and learn, don't you?

Sorry to go on. I don't talk to many people these days. Putting my thoughts outside myself, it gets a bit... clumsy. Be easier if you could talk back, right? Ask me questions, and just have it tumble all out? But no, it's... it's just me. Wish there was a better way, but touching someone's mind, it's not as simple as that, is it? Doesn't always make things clearer, you know?

Still, I gave the old woman a statement, so maybe I owe you one as well? That's how it works, right? Give you a terror; give you a dream? It's not like I don't have them to spare.

Hmmm. Let me tell you about how I tried to escape.

OLIVER (STATEMENT)

So, my name is Oliver Banks. In my other statements I used the name Antonio Blake, but I don't really think either name has much meaning for me anymore. It's been almost ten years since I first started dreaming about the deaths of others; seeing those awful veins crawling into them, into wounds not yet open or skulls not yet split. People who are about to die. Every night I watch as they snake up and into throats about to choke on blood or merging into hearts about to convulse.

I've... come to terms with it.

(Bitter chuckle) I've learned to live with it.

But about two years before I came to your Institute, something happened, something I didn't want to talk about, didn't even want to think about.

I... started to see them when I was awake.

It was subtle at first, so quick I could pretend I hadn't seen. Just second of them webbed over the face of a drunk old man stumbling to his car. A chain smoker exhales, and just for a second I catch one dangling from his mouth before it slithers back inside. Crossing a bridge and I might see one snaking along the road and over towards the railing.

Looking back now I feel like an idiot, trying to pretend I was imagining it, that I was just tired or whatever bull I told myself. It started to happen more often, and I began to avoid the places that I visited in my dreams. I sort of knew, you see, that not all of the cords would have faded when I woke up.

I still remember the first time I tried to touch one. In my dreams the night before, I had found my way back to my own street. I don't know why I did it. I knew it was a stupid thing to do, walking past my own home in a dream, but I just... Maybe I wanted it this way. I mean, when I stepped out the building that morning, I didn't turn towards the bus stop, like I always do. I turned right instead, and walked over toward the little alleyway where I knew, sometime in the next week, a young woman was going to have a fatal aneurysm.

And there they were, on the concrete, like a starburst of fleshy roots, spreading and reaching out from the spot where her head was going to hit the ground. They moved just like in the dreams, throbbing and pulsing. I had to take a moment, just to be sure, just to be completely sure that I was awake. Felt like I was staring at it for hours, but I don't think it was much more than a few minutes. They didn't fade, didn't vanish, and there was no way for me to

pretend that they weren't there. So, I reached out my hand and tried to touch them.

You know what's weird, right? In all my years of being a... what am I? Death prophet? Whatever... I had never actually touched a corpse, hardly ever even seen one in real life. I could have told you in a moment how many people in this hospital were going to die, how many would do it tonight, even how it was going to happen, but I had never once actually come up close to a dead body. I always assumed they were cold, not quite damp but sort of clammy. And still.

This was like ice. No, colder than ice, the sort of cold that just cuts right through you. It was soft and rubbery, squirming when I pressed on it and recoiling from the tip of my finger. I've never felt anything as cold as those veins. It was so... patient. It made me think of those winter mornings when I was a kid, with no snow, just frost and frozen mist over everything, keeping the world in place, curling you up into yourself and quietly waiting for you to lose your footing, to slip up and fall. Snap. It made me think of dead worlds floating out into space, places that didn't know and didn't care that life even existed. It made me think of mortality, like the seconds that were dragging me to the grave were being pulled out of me. And the worst part was that somewhere in me I... I liked it. Underneath all that awful fear, it felt like home.

After that happened, they wouldn't leave me alone. I could see them spreading, see them growing. Even when I went to your institute, tried to warn her, I could see them crawling through the corridors towards the Archives. They never got quite as big as they were in my dreams, but it wasn't long before I was seeing them all the time. I tried to avoid them, of course I did, but sometimes I didn't notice and I would brush against them. Never mattered what I was wearing; the cold would just cut through it like a razor.

I wanted to escape. I needed to. I became obsessed with trying to find somewhere with fewer and fewer people. Moving out of the city helped, but well, people still die in the countryside. I saw them coiling around a fencepost by the road; climbing up the wall and into the top window of a beautiful little cottage. I'll never forget seeing a field of cows the week before they were sent to the abattoir. I'd spend hours researching, desperately looking at remote locations, places far away from 'civilisation' and all its dying people. Lonely summits, deep jungles, deserts where even animals couldn't live. I was so hungry for the peace that I thought these places could give me.

Then I read about Point Nemo. If you look it up online, they call it the "oceanic point of inaccessibility". It's a spot in the middle of the South Pacific Ocean. Specifically, it is the furthest it's possible to be from any landmass, fourteen hundred miles from anyone or anything. No ships ever need to travel through it, and ocean currents keep away the nutrients that would normally support sea life. It is the emptiest, most lifeless place on earth. Sometimes the closest humans are in the satellites orbiting up above it, before they fall out of the sky, of course. It turns out Point Nemo is an ideal site for spacecraft to crash land. There must be hundreds of wrecks down there, taken from the edge of one lifeless abyss and sent screaming down into another.

I loved it, the idea of it, of being so far from anything. Somewhere that there was so little life that death could never find me. Empty, clear water, free of those creeping tendrils. Of course, I had no way to get there. I'm not a rich man, and even if I was it's not like I have any idea how to organise a sea voyage. So for years it was just my little fantasy, my escape. Whenever it all got too much for me, and I woke up to those veins reaching along the wall towards my neighbour's apartment, I would go online and look at the photos people

claimed were taken at Point Nemo. I would revel in the thought that those claims were probably lies, as there was a very good chance that no human being had ever actually reached the exact coordinates that promised me my escape.

But I couldn't dream of it. I tried, of course. I spent every moment of lucidity I had trying to guide myself far, far away from land, away from those horrid tubes that sat there, throbbing doom out into the world. But each time I started to get away from them, whenever I felt I might have reached a point where I couldn't see any more of them, I would start to feel this tugging on my leg, like something was wrapped around it and starting to gently squeeze. Something that pulsed very softly. I never quite had the courage to actually look at it. I'd always just turn around and start moving back towards a city. And it would let me go. I never even got over the Channel in my dreams, let alone all the way to the South Pacific.

So, you can maybe imagine how I felt when I found an article, tucked in the margins of a regional paper, talking about an upcoming expedition to sail a research vessel down to Point Nemo. The piece didn't go into much detail about what they were trying to do – something about measuring the amount of plastic and chemicals in the water, seeing how much impact humans had had on the environment at its most extreme point. I don't know; I'm not a scientist. And I'm not a sailor, either. There was no legitimate way I was ever going to make it onto that ship.

But none of that mattered. I had to do it. I hadn't been sleeping much, I suppose, and I had it lodged into my mind that if I could just get there, to Point Nemo, if I could just... If I could be far enough away from mortality and people and land, then I could rest. I could finally have a dreamless sleep.

So, I did some digging, found the identity of a few crew members, and started to track them down. I told myself I didn't know what I was looking for, but I did. Of course I did. And I finally saw them, following along behind Dr Thomas Pritchard. He was a younger guy, some sort of chemist, and he had a habit of driving his motorcycle a bit too recklessly. When I saw him that first time, the veins were tumbling out from the open visor of his bike helmet and coiling themselves around his throat so tightly that it almost seemed like his head wasn't attached to the rest of him. Of course, after he went flying over the barrier at 95 miles an hour... well, that's neither here nor there.

It was three in the morning and the motorway was silent except for me and the mangled remains of Dr Thomas Pritchard. I knew exactly what I had to do. He didn't look anything like me, not really, but that didn't matter. All that mattered was my desperation to finally have a good night's sleep. I looked at his body, but all I could think of was the gentle rocking of lifeless waves. So, I took his ID and his keys, then I touched my very first corpse, as I loaded what was left of him and his motorcycle into my van and buried them in a well-hidden spot near Epping Forest. It's strange after all that; I don't actually remember how I felt. Heavy, I think. But I had other concerns. It was a daft plan. It shouldn't have worked. Someone should have driven past while I was moving them. Someone should've seen me. But they didn't.

With his keys, I let myself into Dr Pritchard's flat and gathered as much information on the expedition as I could. It wasn't a lot, not that I could really understand, and I just had to hope it was enough to pass myself off. Even if it was only long enough to get one good night's sleep.

As it turned out, I needn't have bothered. Far as I could tell, nobody on board had actually met Dr Pritchard in person. A couple of people told me they had

the greatest respect for my work, and a few did say how different I had sounded on the phone, but once I walked up and said who I was, nobody even bothered to check my ID.

I don't remember the name of the ship. I mean, boarding it was such a blur I didn't really notice much, and later on, I was far too nervous to ask. It was large, though, with every spare inch covered in scientific equipment of some sort of another. I was relieved to find out I was the only chemist on board, so nobody was going to see me misusing anything and figure out what was going on. At least, not until it was too late to act upon it. There were a couple of marine biologists on board, a meteorologist, an engineer and someone who called herself a "macro-ecologist", though at times she looked almost as out of her depth as I did.

Beyond that, there were half a dozen crew running the ship. They were led by Captain Macaby, a tall, ugly woman with a sharp tongue, though it was never clear to me whether she was the one in charge of the expedition, or if it was Clara, the senior most marine biologist. It didn't really matter, of course. As far as I was concerned, Dr Pritchard was a private, standoffish person, who liked to spend his time alone in his makeshift lab, or asleep in his bunk.

And I did sleep. The further we got from land, the deeper and more peaceful it became. I still dreamed, of course, but I would just wander the empty deck of the ship, drinking in the quiet atmosphere of the place. I did have to force myself not to look over the railing in my dreams. Once or twice, while staring at the peaceful dream water, I almost felt like I could see something moving deep, deep below the surface, impossibly huge and dark. I quickly learned the lesson to remain fully focused upon the ship when I dreamed.

Of course, the more rest I got, the more lucid I became. I was thinking more clearly than I had in months, and the absolute foolishness of what I'd done to get there was starting to sink in. There was exactly no way that they wouldn't figure out that I did not have a doctorate in chemistry or suchlike, and when that happened, I had no idea what I was going to do. I spent days trying to think of some sort of plan, but in the end, the best I could come up with was just to wait for it and throw myself upon their mercy and hope that they'd take enough pity on me to not immediately pitch me overboard into the waters of the South Pacific.

But that was the future, and before then I had months of peaceful sleep ahead of me. And then I had weeks. Then days. The ship kept going, powering on towards a destination I wasn't completely sure I still wanted. I started to wander the decks in my waking hours as well as my sleeping, staring at the horizon. It never ended, but kept getting closer all the same. Time is like that, isn't it? It just keeps going. No matter what happens, it just carries on, and it strips everything away from you in the end, the good and the bad alike, until there's nothing left of either. "This too shall pass." "All good things must come to an end." "Memento mori."

As soon as I woke up, I knew we had finally reached Point Nemo. Everything felt different, like the calm I had been getting accustomed to had been torn away completely, and where it had been was just this horrible, ice-cold terror. I felt something on my chest, coiling up my back and pulsing gently around my throat. I didn't need to look down to know what it was. In a second, I was out of my bunk and charging onto the deck, just to see veins, dark and cold and bigger by far than any I had ever seen, rise up from the water below us. They

towered over the ship for just a second before starting to wrap themselves around it. For a moment, the embrace almost looked like affectionate.

The rest of the crew didn't seem to notice, walking through those immense grasping tendrils like they weren't there at all, even as the smaller branching cords stretched off and wrapped around each one of them in turn. And the soft, icy flesh that wrapped around me kept gripping me tighter and tighter, until I could barely move. I wanted to scream, but the others were already staring at me as if I were screaming obscenities. Perhaps I was.

At that moment, a sudden calm came over me. I understood it all. I could follow the line of the huge veins that encased the ship, down into the water, leading off to a point almost a mile from the south-east. There. That was it. That was our fate. Where we would always be, because I was going to take us there. Running was pointless. To try to escape from my task would only serve to fulfil another. I finally understood what I needed to do.

I couldn't steer a ship myself, of course, but there were plenty of other people on board who could, as long as I could persuade them, which I did, to a point. I don't know where I got the gun, but once Captain Macaby was dead the others were very keen to sail wherever I wanted. The doom held me tight and pulled us all slowly, inevitably, towards our grave. And when we got there, we cut the engines and began to wait. I could feel all of their eyes look to me, panicked, hoping for some sort of explanation.

I almost tried to give them one, but I barely got the first word out before the falling satellite debris hit the ship at 200 miles an hour, killing us instantly.

OLIVER

Right. That's it, I suppose. Maybe you heard me. Maybe you'll dream. Then again, maybe I just wasted my breath, but I don't think so.

Honestly, I'm still not exactly sure why I'm here, but you know better than anyone how the spiders can get into your head. Easier to just do what she asks.

The thing is, John, right now, you have a choice. You've put it off a long time, but it's trapping you here. You're not quite human enough to die, but still too human to survive. You're balanced on an edge where The End can't touch you, but you can't escape him. I made a choice. We all make choices. Now you have t—

[Door opens and faint hospital noises can be heard]

GEORGIE

(Suspicious) Can I help you?

OLIVER

Uh, uh, I'm a friend... of John's.

GEORGIE

Are you now?

OLIVER

Y-y-yes.

GEORGIE

Right. Just... haven't seen you visiting before.

OLIVER

I've been out of town.

GEORGIE

Right. (**Pause**) The nurse didn't say anyone else was here.

OLIVER

Oh, oh, oh, well... Sorry if I surprised you.

GEORGIE

It's fine.

OLIVER

I'm Antonio.

GEORGIE

Sure.

OLIVER

Do you mind, um, giving us a minute?

GEORGIE

No, I think you're done here.

OLIVER

Oh, uh, right. Have I upset you, miss?

GEORGIE

No, you just remind me of someone.

OLIVER

Ah. I'm sorry, were they—

GEORGIE

Evil, yes.

OLIVER

Oh. Okay, then. I... I just, uh, I guess I should just go.

GEORGIE

I guess you should.

OLIVER

(To Archivist) Make your choice, John.

[Door opens and closes; Georgie exhales]

GEORGIE

Sorry about that. But you really don't need friends like tha— ... Did...?

[Door opens]

GEORGIE (BACKGROUND)

Hey! Hey, get back here, I need to talk to you!

[Door closes]

[Ticking of clock continues. Static crackle, followed by gasps and several deep breaths. 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: Russell Smith as Oliver Banks and Sasha Sienna as Georgie Barker.