

MAG 163 — In the Trenches

Content Warnings

- Warfare
- Gunfire / Explosions
- Loud noises
- Xenophobia
- Medical Trauma
- Body Horror
- Chemical Warfare
- Medical Malpractice

[The Magnus Archives Theme – Intro]

JONATHAN SIMS

Rusty Quill presents... *The Magnus Archives*. Episode one hundred and sixty-three: "In the Trenches."

[Theme finishes]

[Tape clicks on]

[A wind howls across a wasteland]

[Footsteps walk across a gritty surface]

MARTIN

Oh, I'm knackered.

ARCHIVIST

Are you?

MARTIN

I-

[They both stop]

MARTIN (CONT'D)

Hm.

Well- Okay, well, no, no; I suppose not. But I think I should be.

ARCHIVIST

Yep.

MARTIN

How long have we been *walking*?

ARCHIVIST

(Sigh) Fourteen hours and twenty-three minutes.

MARTIN

What, seriously?!

ARCHIVIST

Yes. I- don't think it means much out here, though.

MARTIN

We should probably rest.

ARCHIVIST

Maybe— I don't know, I-I don't know if we *can*. Rest. It... feels more like, well-waiting.

(Beat)

[Bag and foot fidgeting]

MARTIN

...So. Are we going to walk all the way to London?

ARCHIVIST

If you know an alternative, I'd be very keen to hear it.

MARTIN

I mean— cars? You know, planes, trains, automobiles?

ARCHIVIST

It wouldn't help.

MARTIN

Alright, a boat then.

ARCHIVIST

Geography doesn't work anymore. Space, i- doesn't work.

MARTIN

Alright. So what does that mean?

ARCHIVIST

It means the journey will be the journey, regardless of how we choose to make it.

MARTIN

Right. And you're sure we can't just, you know-

[He shuffles]

MARTIN (CONT'D)

Speed it up a bit?

ARCHIVIST

No.

(He exhales heavily)

MARTIN

Right. I just- Don't like being out here.

[They walk onwards a few more steps]

ARCHIVIST

You see that tower, way off in the distance?

MARTIN

Yeah.

(Beat)

(Sigh) It's watching us, isn't it?

ARCHIVIST

The Panopticon and the Institute. Merged into something entirely new.

MARTIN

(Splutters) Wai- what? No, there's, there's no way we can see it from here.

We- We must still be a hundred miles from the border, never mind London!

ARCHIVIST

You could see that tower from anywhere on Earth. And it can see you. And if you walk towards it, eventually you'll get there. But you have to go through everything in between.

MARTIN

(Bright) You're being ominous again.

ARCHIVIST

Sorry. Sorry.

MARTIN

What do you mean 'everything'? What's out here?

(The Archivist inhales)

[In the distance, drums and bagpipes start playing]

ARCHIVIST

Nightmares. Come on, that trench is our first.

[The sound of distant explosions join the music]

MARTIN

What tre-? Where did that..? Why is that here?

ARCHIVIST

In the world as was, we wouldn't be too far from Kinloss Barracks. So instead we get the trench.

MARTIN

How'd you know all this stuff?

ARCHIVIST

Not sure. I just do.

(Beat)

MARTIN

(Quiet) John. I'm scared.

ARCHIVIST

Yes. **(sigh)** That's the idea.

[They start walking]

[Tape clicks off]

[Tape clicks on]

[The sound of full warfare at close range: guns rat-a-tat-tating, explosions, tanks driving nearby; and the bagpipes and drums continue on]

[Martin and the Archivist run through the mud]

MARTIN

(Crosstalk) (shouting) Shit, shit, shit, shit, shit, shit!

ARCHIVIST

(Crosstalk) (shouting) Martin! Stay with me; don't let go!

MARTIN

(Shouting) Oh...

ARCHIVIST

(Shouting) Come on!

MARTIN

(Shouting) Shit, shit, shit-

ARCHIVIST

(Shouting) It's okay.

MARTIN

(Shouting) No!

ARCHIVIST

(Shouting) You're okay!

MARTIN

(Shouting) No no no, I'm not! This is *not* okay!

ARCHIVIST

(Shouting) Listen, come on!

(Martin groans, clearly straining with effort)

**[There's scraping as Martin and John enter a dugout, doing so just
in time to avoid a tank passing overhead]**

**[In the dugout, the sounds of warfare are duller but still present;
there is a slow drip that's sometimes audible; and the distressed
yells and cries of men further in the dugout]**

(Martin and the Archivist draw heaving breaths)

ARCHIVIST

Are you-

MARTIN

(Shaky) I'm fine, fine; I'm just- How, how about you; you're not hurt?

ARCHIVIST

Uh... No. No, I'm not.

MARTIN

Good. Good... Good.

J, J,J-John. John. We're not alone.

ARCHIVIST

Ignore them; they're, they're not— Just ignore them.

[Further shouts in the background as the war continues]

MARTIN

They're not— real?

ARCHIVIST

(Humourless laugh) Oh, they're real. They were normal people before the-
Before me. But now they're here, meat for the grinder. I just mean there's no
point— talking to them.

MARTIN

Don't be a prick, John.

Hey, I'm-I'm sorry about him; he's, he's going through a lot— well, we all are, I
suppose, but well, hi, I guess.

(Beat)

Hello?

ARCHIVIST

They won't hear you, Martin. They're all— too busy waiting to die.

MARTIN

John...

ARCHIVIST

They sit here the image of everyone they hold dear locked in their mind—

[Hissing static starts]

ARCHIVIST (CONT'D)

—knowing they'll never see them again. Waiting for the order. Dreading the bullet or the drone or the barbed wire that will tear them to shreds and leave them nothing but a *bloody*—

MARTIN

J, John, enough-Enough!

(Beat)

[Hissing static ends]

MARTIN (CONT'D)

Please don't tell me these things.

ARCHIVIST

(Shakily) I-I'm sorry, I— There's just so much. There's so much, Martin, and I know all of it, I can see all of it, and I- it's filling me up; I need to let it out!

MARTIN

I'm sorry, but tough. Okay, th- that's not what I'm here for. I can't be that for you; I, I- I just. Can't.

ARCHIVIST

(Quiet) I- I know.

(Beat)

I'll, I'll use the tape recorder.

[Creaking plastic sound]

ARCHIVIST (CONT'D)

I just- **(sigh)** You'll probably want to wait outside.

MARTIN

Um, no?!

ARCHIVIST

(Sigh) Well, put your fingers in your ears, then, I, I suppose.

MARTIN

W-pff- fine, and what about them?

ARCHIVIST

They don't even know we're here. We're not part of their nightmare.

MARTIN

Right.

ARCHIVIST

Martin? **(louder)** Martin? Martin, I hate your tea, and wish you made coffee instead. Alright then.

(Sighs)

[Hissing static starts]

ARCHIVIST

There is a wound in the earth. A bayonet gouge scored through the soft and sodden mud for uncounted miles.

[Hissing static ends]

ARCHIVIST (CONT'D)

A trench that marks the front line of a war that has no name. It has always been raging, deep in the hearts of the powerful and those that thirst to see bodies piled high in their name. And now it has a battleground. A thousand pointless conflicts and bitter stalemates stitched together like a triaged chest wound. It is a butchered border, a thin and punctured membrane between the unending meat grinder and the terrified victims it longs for. You may find this trench reaching all across the world, and it will never stop, never be satisfied, never think of peace.

Charlie stands there, waiting in a transport. Once, it was a thin metal landing craft, drifting slowly through a fetid lake. The waters were red and black by turns with blood and oil and the floating bodies of those before them, that were pushed aside by the boat's wake. Next to him, Charlie saw Ryan, who he'd known since childhood, though the other details were hazy. Ryan gave him a thumbs up and an encouraging smile, before his face exploded inwards to a sniper's bullet, peppering the boat with shards of bone and gore. Charlie swallowed, and waited as the bullets kept coming and those around him died but did not fall, propped up as they were by the pressing mass of people around them. He could not move, and as he waited for the shot that would take him, his legs fell away in fear.

Now he is in a helicopter, strapped in tight and unable to move. The man in the gunner's chair is dead, bound limp in his seat harness, half his jaw gone. The thump-thump-thump of the rotors pulses through Charlie like a toothache, and he cannot hear the shouts and cries of his comrades. He looks out of the side as a tell-tale line of smoke arcs up and around towards them from the scorched earth far below. He cannot hear his own scream.

He lies upon the ground, amid the twisted wreckage of whatever he was trapped in, feeling the jagged shards of broken bone dig into him. Charlie looks up, and sees something floating there, silently. It is sleek, and merciless, its featureless carbon-fibre face regarding the shattered man dispassionately. The drone's camera blinks once, twice as he tries desperately to crawl away, pain lancing through every part of him. The thing makes no sound as it follows him, matching the excruciating pace of the bleeding soldier. Charlie knows when it decides to fire, he won't even hear it.

He places his hand down and it sinks, suddenly, into the mud. He cries out as the rusted barbed wire curls itself eagerly around his wrist, digging into his skin. Tasting fear, more wire slithers through the churned earth towards him, stretching and gripping him tight, rough needles puncturing his legs and chest and throat, pulling him down and holding him steady as the drone lingers, its blankness giving no hint of the thoughts behind its trigger.

There is a rumbling in the earth around him as a tank speeds along its unstoppable path, and Charlie is immediately pulled under its tread. He has a moment of shocked horror, before being reduced to a smear in the mud. Inside the tank, Ishaan screams.

Ishaan remembers the recruiters. He was promised valour, and camaraderie, and the chance to be part of something meaningful. He knew that part had

been a lie, but then, so was the choice. His alternative was stagnant poverty, and that was really no choice at all. The money would help his family, and he could spend some years in hell, if he needed to. For them. But he didn't know about this war, that had always been raging and would never stop. How could he have known what the trench would be?

They had taken him, dragged him from the flooded foxhole where he had sheltered for a moment's brief respite, and taken him to the tanks, those monstrous beasts of iron that rolled forever forward, guns firing and treads leaving the earth scarred in their wake. They pass above the trench again and again and they never turn around, pushing onward, ever onwards, the bones that stick in their gears not slowing them for a moment. Ishaan had been afraid. Terrified that they were going to strap him to it, pin him to the Goliath's hull like all the other flayed flags of war, striking fear into the hearts of the enemy. But instead they fed him to it, tossed him into its burning innards and sealed the hatch behind him. Now, his body has contorted itself to fit, his fingers clutched around the firing lever; pulling it frantically is the only thing that will reduce the impossible heat even for a moment. From the tiny slit in the metal, he can see other soldiers: baby-faced friends and the monstrous, pig-faced enemy, both falling underneath his iron coffin's advance. He tries to cry, but his tears turn to steam.

He waits, craving and dreading the final kiss of the bombs, the terrible thundering guns so far away that none have ever seen them, raining their arbitrary ruin upon the endless fields of the dead and dying. They are perhaps the only thing that can fell the tanks, splitting them like rotten fruit beneath the force of their rounds. Ishaan begs, pleading with whatever god of hatred and pain he hears piping gently on the breeze to let the bombs rain down on

him. To release him from his imprisonment in a single flash of destruction. But when his prayer is answered, the white-hot agony of melted and crumpled metal is like nothing he could dream of. When Hasanna takes him into triage, she can barely bring herself to look at him.

She wheels his stretcher to its place in the stinking, vaulted tent that serves as a field-hospital, walking through a sea of stained bandages and around the piles of festering gauze. She leaves the shuddering man and approaches a nearby doctor, its long form crouched over the open chest of a patient, its many hands a frenzy of scalpel, bonesaw, and needle as it giggles beneath its surgeon's mask. She wants to ask about the wounded, about what to do, where to put the new ones, how to help them, but even if her voice were not drowned out by the thousand-strong chorus of moans and pained yelling that fills the tent, the doctor doesn't seem to notice her. Hasanna's eyes fall on the entrance to the tent, and she sees the line of civilians, stretching away into the distance. They are no less maimed, their agonies no more bearable, but there is simply no room. She tries to apologize, but instead she closes the tent.

As she does so, she sees the trench behind her, and, not for the first time, Hasanna considers trying to run. But there is no mercy for deserters here. On one side of the trench the hungry guns of the vile enemy wait. And on the other, the just guns of heroes will cut you down no slower, save perhaps a breath to call you coward. So, she waits there, in the middle, with the weeping wounded and the soon to be dead. Waiting for the enemy to overrun them.

Sometimes, in the distance, Hasanna sees them. The enemy, their skin rough, dark, and scaly; their faces twisted around cruel tusks, viciously sharpened teeth, and a pair of beady red eyes. Their lips are smeared crimson with the blood of children, and their greatest delight is to pluck the eyes of the innocent

with their bayonets. To call them monsters is the simple truth. They feel no pain, no remorse, and seek nothing but carnage. Sometimes, in the distance, Hasanna can even see an enemy triage tent, almost identical in appearance to her own. She can only imagine the atrocities that must take place inside. Far in the distance, she sees Alexei look out over the battlefield, and her stomach turns at the detestable wrongness of his face.

Alexei in turn looks out from deep in the trench. He catches sight of the enemy, their shrivelled rat-like heads causing the bile to rise in his throat. He is bored. The boredom is the worst part, the part that erodes his will and drops him to despair. There is nothing to do, nowhere to be. The only thing to occupy his mind is the inevitability of the next attack, the next order to charge, the next dropping bomb. There is no way to know when and where these things will come. But no one will talk of anything else.

His stomach growls, the hunger pushing its sharp fingers out from his belly. There are no more rations, and what there is tastes of cordite and sand, and coats his tongue in an oily film that makes him gag. He has heard the enemy will eat your body if they find it in the mud. They won't even check if you're dead first. Alexei shudders at the thought.

From far down the trench, a cry of panic cuts through the silence. A faint haze can be seen in the distance, moving with the breeze. A new weapon? Alexei feels his knees start to buckle as he sees his comrades stagger out of the cloud. Their melting teeth flow down their faces like tears, and their limbs begin to fold and collapse as the bones within them liquefy. He turns and starts to flee down the trench. There is no cruelty so foul the enemy will not perpetrate it.

He runs almost headfirst into a portly man in a tailored suit with a blood-red flower on his lapel. He smiles, pale skin splitting beneath his bristling white moustache, and he begins to shake Alexei by the hand.

“Good lad,” he says. “Good lad. Heroes one and all. A noble sacrifice.”

Alexei starts to speak, to say he doesn’t want to be a hero; he doesn’t want to be a sacrifice; he wants to go home. But the man with the flower reaches his hand into the soldier’s chest, and with a single, jolly motion, plucks out Alexei’s heart and places it in his wallet.

Next to his bleeding corpse, Charlie wakes from what passes for sleep in this place. A sergeant is yelling at him, screaming for him to take his gun and get into the waiting transport. There’s about to be another attack, and heavy losses are expected. A familiar fear courses through him, but Charlie still picks up his gun, and goes back to the war.

(The Archivist sighs heavily)

ARCHIVIST

I, um. **(sighs)**

End recording.

(He clears his throat)

MARTIN

Hm- All done?

ARCHIVIST

(Shaky) Yes.

MARTIN

Good.

[Tape click off]

[Tape click on]

**[Distant sounds of warfare and bagpipes, while a wind howls across
the wastelands]**

[Martin and the Archivist walk through deep puddles and mud]

ARCHIVIST

(Calling) (distant) Try to keep up!

MARTIN

(Distant) Yeah, yeah.

Pfft.

[He walks closer to the recorder]

MARTIN (CONT'D)

Oh! Oh, hey- John!

[Sound of the recorder being picked up]

MARTIN (CONT'D)

Did you— No. No, he was carrying his.

Alright! What're you doing here? It's dangerous. Could get yourself blown up,
like all these poor...

Who d'you think they were? Really don't see why we couldn't just—

[He returns to walking]

MARTIN (CONT'D)

go 'round, picked a better place to— I guess there- aren't really any better places anymore, are there? It's all this, or worse, or— or different.

(Beat)

You still haven't told me what you're doing here.

[A phone rings, like that of an older-model landline phone]

MARTIN (CONT'D)

Uh.

(Beat)

John? Uh, J, John- the, uh, payphone that's- here, for some reason- it's ringing?

(Beat)

John? Is, is that— **(turning away from the recorder)** I-Is anyone gonna get that?!

(Beat)

Unless it's for me?

(Beat)

Eh—yeah, it's for me. Uh... no, n-, no, I don't think so, actually! Erm, thanks, but that- that sounds like- a really, terrible idea. Hm, sorry!

[The phone stops ringing]

MARTIN (CONT'D)

Huh.

(Beat)

Well, alright then!

[The Archivist stomps through the water to him]

ARCHIVIST

Martin, you need to keep up. It's not safe.

Martin? You okay?

MARTIN

Uh, I- Th-th-there was a phone. *That* phone.

ARCHIVIST

Wh- Oh.

MARTIN

It- Yeah, it was ringing?

ARCHIVIST

Oh. ... Right. Did you answer it?

MARTIN

No.

ARCHIVIST

Hm.

Probably for the best.

MARTIN

Yeah.

(Archivist takes a breath)

ARCHIVIST

Let's keep going.

MARTIN

Mm.

[They slosh on]

[Tape clicks off]

[The Magnus Archives Theme – Outro]

JONATHAN SIMS

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