

MAG 168 — Roots

Content Warnings

- Death & mortality
- Hypochondria
- Potential medical neglect
- Cancer
- Convulsions
- Stabbing
- Falling

[The Magnus Archives Theme – Intro]

JONATHAN SIMS

Rusty Quill presents... *The Magnus Archives*. Episode one hundred and sixty-eight: "Roots."

[Theme finishes]

[Tape clicks on]

[Faint overlapping whispers, like running water; every so often a wooden creak]

[Gritty foot scuffs as Martin stands, agitated, by the Archivist]

(A determined sigh from the Archivist)

ARCHIVIST

Okay! Time you went for a walk.

MARTIN

Yeah, about that... You sure you'll be okay on your own?

ARCHIVIST

Um, I always have been.

MARTIN

Okay. I mean, well, I don't like this place.

ARCHIVIST

Once again Martin, that's... sort of the point! (**small laugh**)

MARTIN

Yeah, yeah, I know, alright; I get it; it's just— it's more than that. This place, what did you call it, the... (**fumbling**) the Rotten Core?

ARCHIVIST

The Corpse Roots.

MARTIN

Yeah, yeah, that. Well, it, it feels... I don't know, it feels like it's—

ARCHIVIST

Waiting.

MARTIN

Yeah! Waiting.

[A pointed wood creak]

(Beat)

MARTIN (CONT'D)

This is the one with the, um, the death guy, isn't it?

ARCHIVIST

This is Oliver Banks' domain, yes.

MARTIN

...So it's him that's waiting.

ARCHIVIST

Not just him, but... Yes.

MARTIN

So, are you gonna smite him, then?

ARCHIVIST

...Um....

MARTIN

John?

(The Archivist sighs softly)

MARTIN (CONT'D)

John, I said are you going to s—

ARCHIVIST

I heard you the first time.

MARTIN

And?

ARCHIVIST

I, I don't know.

MARTIN

Why not? Can't you just do what you did with that Sasha-thing, make the Eye see him and all that?

ARCHIVIST

I... could, I think.

MARTIN

Cool, so what's the problem, then? Take another monster off the hit list, job done.

ARCHIVIST

It's not, that simple?

MARTIN

Well, what does that mean.

(Insistent) What does that *mean*, John? What, what happened to Kill Bill?

John? John, you said—

ARCHIVIST

I know what I said, and I don't... **(sigh)** I don't know, Martin. I just, I don't think he's— I don't know; I don't think he's evil.

MARTIN

(Sarcastic) Oh, yeah, sure; he's probably a really kind, benevolent ruler of a hellish fear prison.

ARCHIVIST

It's just— he helped me. Wh-when I was...

He woke me up.

MARTIN

(Flat, derisive) Wow. What a hero.

ARCHIVIST

Martin?

MARTIN

What.

(The Archivist makes an amused breath)

What.

(Beat)

Yeah, alright; I know; I'm sorry.

ARCHIVIST

(Amused) Is there something you want to talk about?

MARTIN

No, I'm, fine; it's fine; everything's fine! I'm sorry.

ARCHIVIST

(Smug) ...Martin...

MARTIN

I said it's fine.

ARCHIVIST

(Smug) Are you jealous?

MARTIN

I told you not to know things about me!

ARCHIVIST

(Laughing) I really didn't have to.

MARTIN

I, Y-you— good. 'Cause I'm definitely not.

ARCHIVIST

Alright!

MARTIN

Look, I'm fine, alright?

ARCHIVIST

You said.

MARTIN

(Defensive) Yes, I did! And e- and even if I was jealous, I would be perfectly justified anyway, so!

ARCHIVIST

But you're not.

MARTIN

No! I'm fine.

ARCHIVIST

Alright!

MARTIN

Good!

ARCHIVIST

Good!

MARTIN

Great.

(Beat)

Alright, fine, yes, yes, I am jealous, alright? Yes, if you absolutely must know.

ARCHIVIST

Because, he woke me up.

(Martin makes a couple of sounds of disbelief)

MARTIN

I was there weeks, and nothing. He talks to you for five minutes and suddenly you're back on your feet and, bouncing around like a, like a spring chicken!

ARCHIVIST

(Laughing) I mean, that's really not—

MARTIN

I mean, what's so special about him, that you wake up for him and not me, hm? Enlighten me.

ARCHIVIST

I mean, that's... that's not really how it worked. It-It wasn't—

Look. Martin, I'm sorry you feel that way, but I'm not going to kill a man just because you're jealous.

MARTIN

Why not?!

(Beat)

Yeah. Yeah, I know, I know, I know. (small sigh)

(Beat)

Please?

(The Archivist snickers)

ARCHIVIST

Who knows. Maybe he'll try to stop us getting through the routes, and I'll have to.

MARTIN

Mm.

ARCHIVIST

But I'm not going to... seek him out. At the very least he's earned not having me hunt him down.

MARTIN

Fine. I suppose that's... reasonable.

ARCHIVIST

Now, if you're, quite done inciting me to murder?

MARTIN

Not murder! Smiting.

(The Archivist sighs heavily)

Right, yes, yes, of course. You— (**inhale**) you vomit your horrors.

(The Archivist makes a very disgusted sound)

ARCHIVIST

Oh- I don't, I'm not sure (**small laugh**) I like that metaphor.

MARTIN

Puke your terrors?

ARCHIVIST

Just go.

MARTIN

Alright! Alright, I'm going.

[Martin walks away]

(The Archivist chuckles fondly then sighs heavily)

[Hissing static starts]

[The whispers and wooden creaks of the corpse roots continue]

ARCHIVIST

Report to prevent future deaths.

This report is being sent to:

[Hissing static ends]

ARCHIVIST (CONT'D)

The great Eye that watches all who linger in terror and gorges itself on the sufferings of those under its unrelenting, stuporous gaze. And its archive, which draws knowledge of this suffering unto itself.

One: Coroner.

I am Oliver Banks, sometimes known as Antonio Blake or Doctor Thomas Pritchard. I serve the coming End that waits for all and will not be ignored.

Two: Coroner's legal powers.

I make this report under no authority, no regulation or act of law save the hollow power and grim responsibility given me by the Termination of All Life. With it, I may see and spread the hidden veins of destiny that wrap us close and draw us through the empty, yearning parody of meaning that we call life, knowing at all stages that the last and final point of this journey is a blank and futile end. I have no power to stop it, and even if I did, I would not do so. For to rob a soul of death is as torturous as its inevitable coming.

Three: Investigation and inquest.

On the first and last day of the age of the Beholding, I begin my vigil into the doom of Danika Gelsthorpe. She was, at the time of the change, thirty-four years of age, and found herself within my domain, traveling slowly and unremittingly along the length of the stretching corpse roots. She is one of many thousands, neither remarkable nor unique in her background or destination. She has spent the last twenty of those years acutely aware and in constant dread of a death she believed to be imminent.

The earliest she can remember being certain that she was about to die was when, at the age of fifteen due to a chronic case of acid reflux, she decided that she had a malignant intestinal tumour. She would spend whole nights lying awake, imagining it lurking there, growing. Spreading. Blocking her organs and preparing to kill her. Danika knew the whole thing was ridiculous, of course, and did not visit a doctor about it, simply assuming it would be discovered when she finally collapsed. She diagnosed herself with a year to live, at most.

At the age of sixteen, she contracted a case of acute gastroenteritis which knotted her guts so severely that she had to have several scans taken by a buzzing hospital machine. Young Danika lay there on the hospital bed, waiting for the stern-faced doctor to come in and tell her what she already knew: that she had months, at most, to live. When they said no such thing, talking about her treatment for her decidedly non-fatal condition, an incredible sense of joy began to overtake her. A deep and profound relief. There was nothing there. She wasn't going to die! She was going to have a life.

At least, for the next three months, which was how long it took her to find a lump in her chest that she decided was fatal breast cancer. This one, she did get checked out, and was told in no uncertain terms that it was a harmless cyst. But she knew they'd missed something. Clearly the cyst had distracted them, causing them to miss the actual tumour. But she couldn't go back. No doubt she'd be dead within a year. Two, at most.

And so it continued for the next two decades of her life. She started smoking at the age of seventeen, battling with the addiction her whole life, and not once was there a chesty cough that she did not decide was lung cancer. When she had her first panic attack at age twenty-three, she was absolutely certain that she was having a stroke. Every dizzy spell was a sign of MS; every achy leg was a fatal blood clot. She never feared an epidemic or a plague, and the thought of infection rarely troubled her, because she knew that whatever was about to imminently kill her was going to rise up from deep inside her own body.

For her whole life, as each milestone of adulthood passed, Danika never believed that she would live more than two years further. Every relationship was tinged with a melancholic guilt that she would leave them so soon. Every achievement overshadowed by the certainty she wouldn't be around to enjoy

it for very much longer. Real health problems — her acid reflux, her blood pressure — were ignored, because, well. They wouldn't matter for much longer, would they?

When the change came and the fears oozed forth into our world, the End that laces through every fibre of my soul reached out and gave Danika to me. She had fed it well for so long; it was only right that she should be here.

Four: Circumstances of the death.

In exactly thirteen stretches of the route on which Danika travels — a stretch being measured in the waves of nauseating terror that flow out of her with such rhythmic regularity — she will finally arrive at her destination. It will be a crowded place, a shopping mall or somewhere similar, though her feet will never leave the route that binds her. She will feel it first as a dull ache, a sensation not unlike being pinched, but in the inside of her leg. Her skin will prickle like a faint and shuddering electric current were passing through it, and she will absentmindedly scratch at it, as though it were a simple itch that could be dismissed.

She will know exactly what is happening, but after so many scares and false alarms and dismal, morbid obsessions, she will not feel comfortable enough to sound any alarm or ask for anyone's help. She will simply stagger over to a bench that is nearby and find herself a seat to try and wait out whatever unpleasant sensations are washing over her, even though she is certain it will never leave her. It is, alas, the act of sitting down that dislodges the long-foreseen blood clot in her leg, formed when she took that long-distance coach trip. She should have known with her dreadful circulation that cramming herself into so little leg room would be the end of her, but she had dismissed such thoughts, waving them away as more paranoia. But the End knows there

is no paranoia about your own demise. Only that dim, plodding awareness of its constant approach.

The clot, now broken, will travel up and through her. Danika will feel its passage all through her body, aware of it as every vein of the corpse roots is aware of her and those just like her, walking along their all-too-brief span. She will begin to cough as it hits her lungs, her anxious dread and sense of doom bubbling up to fever pitch as the pink mucus bubbles up through her lips. She clutches her chest, as if desperate to pull the knotted blood vessels out with her bare hands, and looks wildly about. But the crowds that were there such a short time ago have vanished, and there is nobody to help her. Nobody to see her collapse and call an ambulance. It is too late. It has always been too late.

Danika Gelsthorpe will try one last time to stand, and instead collapse into a corner, mostly obscured by a large pot plant, and will not be discovered for almost half an hour, by which time any hope of saving her has long since passed. She remains conscious for several minutes after she falls, unable to move or speak or even think in any recognizable sense, but aware enough of what is happening to be grasped with the despair of a terror realised.

And then, at last, she dies. Her last thoughts a certainty of the yawning well of nothingness that awaits her as consciousness slips away. Danika takes another step along the corpse root.

Five: Coroner's concerns.

I watch, as with each motion, each laboured, reluctant movement along her path, Danika Gelsthorpe is painfully and inescapably aware of what it is that lies at the end of it. She tries to move backwards, off to the side, any direction other than that unstoppable, inescapable forwards. But her limbs seize up with

the attempt. She tries to stay still, but can do so only with the most incredible of efforts. To eke out another few seconds of stasis sets every nerve in her body aflame with agony and effort, begging her to scream despite her jaw being set in a frozen rictus of sombre mourning.

I see her relive the coming moment of her inevitable demise. Every inch along the route she moves, she sees another flash of what is to come, the sickening knowledge of where she is going, the sensation of traveling there, through the movements of her own body, as much as those movements may be made under duress. No amount of protest or effort can travel any other way but towards the end.

Sometimes, for some small variety, I will allow Danika to brush against another route. The final fate of someone she loves. She may see Maria lying in her hospital bed, monitors crowding her as the doctors struggle to get an IV into her wildly convulsing arm. She might have a flash of Bobby, fingers tightening around the rungs of the ladder as the rusted nails give way. She often sees Dennis's face as the knife slips eagerly between his ribs, even though he doesn't die for hours afterwards. And with each one she knows her steps forward bring closer not only her own end, but all of theirs. Time walks forward with her but she has not the strength to stop it.

Her fate draws ever-nearer, filling me with the joy of watchful fear, but also my own concerns.

The matters of concern are as follows:

A: When Danika Gelsthorpe reaches the end of her corpse root, she *will* die. This new world of fear reviles death as a release, but the Coming End cannot exist without its reality. It is not a being of dangled promises and shifting

torments. The certainty of death waits for all who travel the corpse roots, and that certainty will be delivered on, without hesitation or consideration of any other factors.

B: This places a limit on the fear that can be generated from them, as their pool is necessarily finite and ultimately, however slowly, it will be exhausted. To be offset, this consideration will require the acquisition of victims from other domains as replacements, potentially inciting... bad feeling between those domains.

C: A metaphysical quirk of this new reality's divorce from the traditional concept of time, and, one for which I have no further explanation, means that I do not believe new humans are being created or born. The souls trapped within this transformed world are the only ones that will ever be here, and the presence of the Termination of All requires that, ultimately, that is what will happen. However slowly, the domains of death will be removing sufferers from a closed system. However many thousands of years may be experienced in the meantime, eventually this world will be left barren and empty.

D: When this happens, the great powers themselves will also fade and die, withering away into nothingness and releasing this reality from their grip. I... do not know how I feel about this.

Six: Actions that should be taken.

None. Even if such a fate could be avoided, as it comes closer and the other entities grow in their awareness of their own end, the grotesque ripples of their own impossible panic shall glut and feed my master, gorging it to the point where perhaps it will even surpass the Watcher in prominence. The others may take what actions they wish; they may plot and plan and tear

themselves apart in an attempt to separate from the fate that they know they cannot escape, but they will fail. The currents of perception and reality may twist in whatever shapes they want, but none of them can ever render things truly eternal.

And I shall help, ushering on this final, blank emptiness. Perhaps once it might have horrified me, or given me some sense of pursuing the ultimate release of the world that *you* have damned. But I am too much of my patron now, and my feelings cannot help but reflect the shadows of anticipation that lurk within the grave. The End does not fear its own cessation, for it is the certainty and promise of all life, however strange, that it will one day finish, and that includes its own stark existence. It shall be the last and, when the universe is silent and still forever, it shall, perhaps, in that impossible moment before it vanishes, finally be satisfied.

Seven: Your response.

Please, John, do not interpret this report as a plea for mercy or a call to action. I would have offered it willingly, of course, but to do so is no longer an option. You cannot ask. You may only take. And so the scope of my domain is yours. Enter it and destroy me, if you wish. I fear the annihilation you would gift me as little as I desire it.

I am now, as the thing I feed, a fixed point, that has neither the longing nor the ability to change its state of existence.

I can do nothing to you, and you may walk the corpse roots in safety should you choose, though if you wish to confront me, you will have to seek me out. You know, of course, where I am.

But know that- even you, with all your power, cannot keep the world alive forever. All things end, and every step you take, whatever direction you may choose, only brings you closer to it.

Report ends.

[Hissing static start]

(The Archivist exhales heavily)

[Hissing static ends]

[The whispers and wooden creaks of the corpse roots continue]

ARCHIVIST (CONT'D)

Lot to think about. I-I feel...

No. I don't want to destroy Oliver Banks. It wouldn't do any good. I know that, and he never asked for this any more than I did.

I feel badly for those that exist in his domain, o-of course, I do, but... at least their suffering will be over. Eventually. I can't destroy everyone I cross paths with, it— (sigh) No. If Oliver will not seek me out then, I will leave him be.

(Quiet laugh) The Avatar of Death shall live. Martin's going to be thrilled.

[He starts walking]

[Tape clicks off]

[The Magnus Archives Theme – Outro]

JONATHAN SIMS

The Magnus Archives is a podcast distributed by Rusty Quill, and licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution Non-Commercial ShareAlike 4.0

International Licence. Today's episode was written by Jonathan Sims, produced by Lowri Ann Davies, and directed by Alexander J Newall. It featured: Jonathan Sims as The Archivist and Alexander J Newall as Martin Blackwood. To subscribe, buy merchandise, or join our Patreon, visit rustyquill.com. Rate and review us online, tweet us at TheRustyQuill, visit us on Facebook, or email us via mail@rustyquill.com. Join our community on the Discord via the website, or on Reddit, at [r/TheMagnusArchives](https://www.reddit.com/r/TheMagnusArchives). Thanks for listening.