

MAG – 129 - Submerged

Content Warnings:

- Drowning
- Natural disaster (flood)
- Isolation
- Grief
- Emotional Trauma
- Human remains

[The Magnus Archives Theme – Intro]

JONATHAN SIMS

Rusty Quill presents: The Magnus Archives. Episode one hundred and twenty-nine. Submerged.

[Tape clicks on. Martin is moving boxes. Door opens and closes as the Archivist enters.]

ARCHIVIST

Martin?

MARTIN

John. How did you—

ARCHIVIST

I just, uh... I know sometimes. It's a whole thing.

MARTIN

Oh. Okay? Well, uh, sorry, b-but I, um...

ARCHIVIST

You have to leave, suddenly?

MARTIN

John, come on. We've been over this.

ARCHIVIST

No, it's fine. I know you've got... whatever this is. I'm not going to question you.

MARTIN

Thank you.

ARCHIVIST

Even if it looks like you're doing something really stupid.

ARCHIVIST

Sorry.

MARTIN

It's okay, I get it. I just...

ARCHIVIST

I worry. You're working for someone really bad.

MARTIN

Yes. I'm not an idiot, John. But it's no worse than working for something really bad, so...

ARCHIVIST

At least the Eye hasn't gone after our own. Lukas has already vanished two people.

MARTIN

Yeah, and if it wasn't for me, it would have been a lot more. (**Sighing**) This isn't helping anything.

ARCHIVIST

I just ... I'm sorry. Basira's off doing god knows what and I can't talk to Melanie.

MARTIN

Mhmm.

ARCHIVIST

I suppose... I miss you. I'm just—

MARTIN

Lonely.

ARCHIVIST

(**Sighs**) Yeah.

ARCHIVIST

I, uh.... I heard about your mother.

MARTIN

Yeah.

ARCHIVIST

I am so sorry.

MARTIN

Thank you. It's... it's better this way.

ARCHIVIST

If you do need to talk—

MARTIN

I can't.

ARCHIVIST

No. Of course.

ARCHIVIST

Listen, Martin, you should know—

MARTIN

John—

ARCHIVIST

Daisy might be alive. Basira—

MARTIN

Stop. Stop, please. I shouldn't know any of this. I, I-I really need to go. I, I'm—

ARCHIVIST

Right.

MARTIN

Please stop finding me.

ARCHIVIST

What happened, Martin?

MARTIN

You died.

ARCHIVIST

I came back.

MARTIN

Yeah.

[Martin opens the door]

And I'm not going to let it happen again.

ARCHIVIST

Wait, wait, wha—

[Martin closes the door]

(The Archivist sighs)

[Tape clicks off. Tape clicks on]

ARCHIVIST

Statement of Kulbir Shakya, regarding a flood that occurred around his house in Hackney. Original statement given September 4th, 2013. Audio recording by Jonathan Sims, the Archivist.

Statement begins.

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

In many ways, I lost my home even before all this happened. I lived in that house my entire life. Hackney was my area, my community. It wasn't some fashionable postcode or investment opportunity. I should have seen the signs, I suppose. Little independent coffee shops sprouting up like weeds between the paving stones. Microbreweries and taprooms cropping up in old industrial estates, even though the Prince of Wales had to close its doors because it couldn't afford the new business rates. The faces I knew and recognised gradually being outnumbered by young, trendy white people in artfully shabby clothes who thought they were blending in, and precise estate agents in well-pressed suits taking pictures of dilapidated buildings.

I complained, of course, made all the right noises of disapproval, but I still drank the overpriced coffee, still shopped at the shiny new franchise outlets. I thought because I'd been living there so long, I'd be alright. Hell, the house had been my grandfather's before he died. But we never had the money to actually

buy it, and as property values skyrocketed, the landlord, who'd always seemed so understanding, suddenly started itching to sell, and there was no way I could afford the new rent on the meagre salary of my admin job. I looked into getting roommates, subletting, all sorts, but by that point I was already too deep in debt and there was just no way I was going to be able to stay. So I started the long and painful process of moving in with my sister.

It was... humiliating. The flat she lived in with her husband was much smaller than the house and I couldn't afford a storage unit, so much of what I owned, a lot of which had once belonged to my grandfather, had to be thrown away. We actually got into a blazing row over his old kukri. He had been a Gorkhali, serving in the 5th Gurkha Rifles during the Second World War. I have complicated feelings on his military history, of course, but he had always been fiercely proud of it, and that old knife had been one of his most treasured possessions. I didn't keep it polished like he had, even at ninety years old, but it reminded me of him.

I could see his calloused hand on its hilt as he meticulously, almost mechanically, cleaned it, humming a tune the name of which I never learned. He had been a man of discipline, in many ways very harsh, but he had loved me and my sister very much, and the idea of throwing away his blade felt like a kick in my chest. In the end she agreed though, and it wasn't long before I was spending my last nights in an almost abandoned house, shelves bare and wardrobes empty, trying my best to sleep on a mattress I knew I was leaving behind.

The letter came the next day. The envelope was slightly damp, like it had been carried through the rain, and it had my name printed on the front in a

business-like sans serif font. It looked at first like any other piece of financial junk mail you might glance at once and throw away, but I read it anyway.

The letter claimed to be from a financial firm named Eberhardt & Straus, at least those were the names on the letterhead. The first words did nothing to dissuade me from my assumption it was junk mail: “Drowning in debt? We can help!” in big friendly text that seemed at odds with the pseudo-respectable image the rest of it seemed to be striving for. But as I read through it, I realised that, not only was it addressed to me specifically – not a difficult job for modern batch-printing – but it made reference to some very specific aspects of my situation: precise amounts of debt, names of creditors, and the sort of details that made it very clear that this was definitely written to me. It didn’t give any indication of the exact assistance that Eberhardt & Straus were supposedly offering, but it did give an address, and told me to call on them at my convenience. At the bottom, in that same friendly typeface, it assured me, “We can help with the pressure!”

I don’t know what I expected, I really don’t. What, they were just going to hand me ten grand and another four hundred a month to cover the rent increase? I mean, I knew about loan sharks and debt consolidation companies, and the dozens of other scams that prey on those in desperate situations like mine. This was just going to be another of them. But the letter had been to me specifically, and maybe, somewhere at the back of my mind, I was genuinely hoping for a way out.

The address they gave me was for a tall, thin building in Hammersmith that housed about a half dozen law firms and a couple of tech start-ups. It didn’t look like the sort of place that high-prestige businesses would have their premises, and more than one of the names listed on the plaque next to the

revolving door had been roughly scratched out, I assume indicating they were no longer in business. I asked at the front desk about Eberhardt and Straus and was directed to an extremely cramped lift that rattled me up to the fourth floor.

There was a buzzer next to their door, but it seemed to be broken and made no sound at all when I pressed it. My finger came away wet, and looking up, I could see some sort of leak in the ceiling, dripping water down onto the button. I tried the handle, and the door opened quietly. The rooms beyond were empty: bare wooden floors, no curtains or wallpaper, a few abandoned chairs or cheap-looking desks. The light switch did nothing, though the dull grey light of a cloudy day filtered through the window bright enough to see by. Every surface was damp, slick with old water and warped with mildew. It dripped slowly down the walls and seeped into the rotten wood of what furniture was left. I could see a line of liquid in the bare lightbulbs. I was confused, obviously I was, and stepped back out to doublecheck the door, and sure enough, these were offices of Eberhardt and Straus. I felt disgust rise in my throat, the awful humid air of the waterlogged place sitting heavy in my lungs. I checked the draws in one of the desks, but even if the mushy pulp inside had once been paper, it wasn't any more. Confused and angry, I turned around and left. It started raining on the walk home.

When would you start to worry about the rain? I don't mean about it ruining your day or wrecking an event you're planning, but at what point does it stop being normal and start to alarm you? I've lived my whole life in London, so I've seen plenty of rain in my time. I've lived through weeks where you catch what minutes you can when the sky closes for a moment and you can run to the bus stop. I've seen poorly maintained roads turn into tiny lakes and I've seen

Hackney Downs turned into a muddy swamp. So the first day didn't worry me. The rain pounded down steadily outside, and I sat in my bare, dismal home waiting for my sister to pick me up. It drummed on the roof, rhythmic and insistent, cascading off in tiny waterfalls and, just for a moment, I found myself almost completely at peace. Then I felt a drop, heavy and wet, land on the back of my neck, and it shattered all at once. I looked up, and I saw the spreading patch of damp in the centre of my ceiling. Evicted or not, part of me recoiled to see my home starting to finally crumble, as though my leaving would take the last part of its hope. The water was warm and, after the heat of the summer's day, I breathed in, expecting the smell of petrichor, but the scent of the rain was something else, something earthy and cloying I couldn't quite place.

It was a storm, there seemed to be no doubt of that, and I didn't blame Bhawana for not wanting to drive in this weather. I was a bit annoyed that she hadn't called, but looking at my phone, it was clear it wasn't getting any signal. Now that wasn't necessarily a surprise, given the storm, but it did present me with a problem. Namely, that my television and computer had already been sent over to my sister's place, and without any signal, I was left with pretty much two options: sit doing nothing and listen to the rain, or head out into it. I opened the door for about three seconds before I decided that sitting and waiting was the better choice.

I walked upstairs, pulled a seat to the window overlooking the road, and I sat there, watching. The drains were already starting to flood, puddles growing around the parked cars, reaching up and over, eager to meet in the middle, to turn from a pool of water into something much more. I expected cars, maybe people running desperately to their homes, but the street outside was quiet,

save for the pounding of the downpour. Ten minutes, twenty, half an hour passed, and I didn't see a single soul. Not a car or a bike, not even a bus. That started to worry me a bit. The 394 should pass by every fifteen minutes or so, but I definitely hadn't seen it. Did they know something I didn't? Was there some sort of weather warning out that I'd missed, for Hackney?

That was when I heard the first peal of thunder. There was no lightening, I want to be very clear on that, nothing broke the uniform iron grey of the sky, dark and solid as far as I could see. But the thunder hit like a hammer. It rolled, deeper than I had heard even in the most violent of storms, and it just kept going. I could feel it shaking through my whole body, and for a moment, I thought I was wrong and that it must have been a proper earthquake. Then it faded and the world was silent again, save for the impact of the rain. When my watch told me it was nine o'clock, I dragged myself over to the mattress and told myself I might as well sleep through the rest of the storm, even though the sky seemed no darker than before. I tried to relax, to let the rhythmic tapping of the rain lull me off to sleep, like it always had when I was a boy, but I could find no comfort in it. It sounded too much like it wanted to get in.

The thunder woke me: another long, deep roar that seemed to come as much from the ground as it did the clouds. The rain still hammered down outside and I checked my watch, staring at it in confusion. It didn't make any sense. It said it was three AM, the middle of the night, but looking out through the window, the world was still light. The sky was cloudy and grey, as it had been the previous day, and the rain made it impossible to see further than the end of the street. But all the same, it definitely wasn't night. There were no streetlights turned on and, now that I looked for it, I couldn't see any windows

lit in any of the other houses on the street. It seemed like it was just me. Me and the steady, driving rain.

The road was beginning to properly flood now, with an inch or two of water creeping up over the edges and starting to cover the pavement and climbing up the tires of the parked cars. I started to consider trying to leave. Perhaps I had missed some sort of official evacuation, some huge storm warning, and I was in terrible danger. No, that was ridiculous – this wasn't some rural town panicking at the prospect of a flash flood. This was East London. If there was some sort of disaster coming, I would have seen something: an emergency vehicle, or at least someone in a high vis vest. I was overreacting; it was just the rain, keeping everybody home. They all just wanted to stay dry. I lied to myself like that until the water was too high for me to even consider going outside in it, and I was trapped.

By the time it started to pour into the downstairs of the house, I had just about accepted that, whatever was going on, there was no longer a day or a night, just the storm and the rain and the thunder. It's odd how you gradually come to accept things as real. By the time you drop the last of your rationalisations, there's no surprise left in you, just an awareness that, no matter how wrong it might feel, it is the reality you are now in. I walked down the stairs, as low as I could without stepping into the water, and I watched it. It was dark and murky, obscuring anything below its surface as soon as it was covered. I reached my hand out and pushed it gently into the flood. It was warm, as warm as my hand, and moments after the water covered it, my mind could no longer easily tell where my skin ended and the water began. It should only have been half a foot deep at most but, reaching in, I couldn't feel the floor. I pulled my hand out and returned upstairs.

By the time the rain stopped, it was halfway up the staircase and had almost completely submerged the cars parked outside. The thrumming of the rain gave way to sudden silence, and for a moment, I allowed myself the smallest sliver of hope. The streets outside were still, the top of the floodwaters flat and undisturbed. The sky remained those same dingy cloud, but it seemed to be holding its breath. Then, one by one, the headlights on the cars lit up. They shone out into the water that covered them, faintly illuminating the murky liquid for a few feet below the surface. And that's when I finally saw things moving. Silhouettes, gliding through the water with smooth, undulating motions. They might have been the shape of people; it was hard to tell for sure. They moved too fast, darting in and out of the lights before my eyes could fully register what they were seeing.

I left the window and returned to the mattress. I was tired, I was hungry, and without the motion of the rain, the air had become intolerably humid. Every breath I took filled my lungs with that thick, wet scent and it felt like I could barely get enough oxygen to think. The walls of my house were slick with moisture now, and there was nowhere I could go to be dry, no way out of this oppressive, cloying damp.

Then the thunder came for the last time. It shook and rattled with more force than it ever had before, and the empty oak wardrobe fell over with a crash. I ran to the window and saw that the floodwaters were rising again, but faster this time and not because of any rain. The house, the street, the world, was sinking into that unending line of water which I was now certain stretched out to the horizon. Inch by inch, foot by foot, everything was descending into the water's embrace. It would wrap itself around me, reach down my throat and fill me with its choking darkness. There was nothing I could do.

As the water reached the top of the stairs and started to flow outwards, towards my open bedroom door, I looked around desperately for any escape that I might have overlooked. And I saw something lying just behind the fallen wardrobe. It must have fallen there months ago. It was the worn leather sheath to my grandfather's kukri. I walked over and picked it up. I stared at it. I could feel that warm, grasping water cover my feet, my ankles, slowly working its way up my calf, but in that moment all I could think about was my grandfather and how he had looked when they gave him his diagnosis: calm and solid. He had thanked his doctor without hesitation, and although I knew he had been afraid, he had spent those last months methodically preparing for the end. He had always endured his problems, never tried to squirm out of things he felt he had to face. I gripped the sheath in both my hands and waded to the window. Corpses floated by slowly, waving at me gently, their lifeless hands grey and bloated. I ignored them and stepped out into the water.

I don't know if you've ever drowned, but it's the most painful thing I've ever experienced. I tried to remain calm, to think on my grandfather and his firm, stony face, but even he had begged for painkillers at the end. Even he had been afraid. My lungs spasmed painfully, desperately trying to wring air out of the warm, rancid water that filled them, and as I felt the water embrace me fully, pressing in on all sides, I gripped the last connection I had to the world I knew. The last thing I was conscience of was the water getting colder.

I don't remember them fishing me out of Regents Canal, or most of my treatment, to be honest. At a certain point it all blurs together. I'm alive, that's what matters, and I've been living with my sister and her husband for a month or two. She doesn't believe me, of course, and is keen to put the whole thing behind us, though I catch her staring at me sometimes. I suspect she thinks I

might have done it on purpose. But she doesn't know. She doesn't know what it's like to really hear the rain.

ARCHIVIST

Statement ends.

One thing that always strikes me when I read statements like this is the bias of survivorship. With one or two notable exceptions, the only statements the Institute receives are those where the witness has successfully escaped whatever terrible place or being has marked them for a victim. I wonder how many don't make it out? How many of those shapes in the water were once just like Mr. Shakya? Hm. Or perhaps I shouldn't wonder. Even as I say it, I can feel the knowledge pushing at my mind, eager to find a way in. But I don't want it. I don't want to know. I don't want to see.

No more than I wanted to see how Gertrude stopped The Buried and their ritual, but that came to me as well. They called it the Sunken Sky, and she calculated, correctly, that casting a void-touched body down the pit at the right time would be enough to disrupt it... something she found in Jan Kilbride. But Gertrude also realised that the body need not be alive. Or in one piece. She thought it was a mercy. It wasn't.

I don't like this. I don't like not being sure what's going to be in my mind, what thoughts are mine and what are from... elsewhere, why I just know some statements are what I should be reading. I assume this one is related to the coffin, to Daisy. I haven't heard from Basira since she left on whatever secret errand, and I feel like I'm no closer to understanding any of this. I suppose if this one managed to free himself from The Buried, to find a way out of whatever part of Choke embraces drowning ...

I need an anchor. I, I could go in myself... I could find her. Then I just need to get out. I need something out here, something I can know the way back to. I don't know what, but... it's a start.

End recording.

[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 and Alexander J Newall as Martin Blackwood.