

MAG026 – Case #0160204 – “A Distortion”

[CLICK]

ARCHIVIST

Are you sure you're all right to do this now? You can take a few days off to recover if you need.

SASHA

No, it's fine. Tim's getting me a coffee, and I'd rather get this down while it's still fresh in my mind. Besides, you didn't give Martin any time off when he had a bad experience.

ARCHIVIST

Martin had to start living in the archives. I mean, I could hardly give him a holiday in the office. Anyway, he wasn't injured.

SASHA

It's just a scratch, John. I'll be fine. Can we begin?

ARCHIVIST

Okay. Statement of Sasha James, assistant archivist at the Magnus Institute, London, regarding...

SASHA

Let's just call it 'a series of paranormal sightings'.

ARCHIVIST

Statement recorded direct from subject, 2nd of April 2016.

SASHA

Right. Well, I'm sure you know I was sceptical about how dangerous this Jane Prentiss was when you first suggested Martin stay in the archive. I

mean, it's not that I didn't believe him about what happened, it just seemed... Well, Martin is a great researcher, but his self-preservation instincts are not the strongest, and to be frank I thought that if this Prentiss were a danger everyone seemed to think, then he'd almost certainly be dead.

Don't get me wrong, I mean, I've read the same statements and profiles as you, so I know how many people have died because of her. What was it, six hospital staff when she was first admitted?

ARCHIVIST

Six from colonisation and a seventh... with a broken neck from her escape.

SASHA

But that was two years ago, and whatever she is now, it sounds like her condition is degenerating. I just wasn't sure how much damage she'd still be

capable of. So I guess... I didn't take as much care as I should have when I was coming into the Institute yesterday. The thing is, I'm still not sure how much of a threat she is. I've seen plenty of those silver worm things squirming about outside, same as you, and made a point to step on them every time. What happened just made things more... complicated, I guess. I'm not really sure what to think.

I'll start with the first thing I noticed. I live up near Finsbury Park, and my building is old. Victorian, I think, and though it's been repaired and maintained quite well, it's got all sorts of strange little quirks. One of these is the windows. The actual windows in the flats are fine, but the stairwells they have slightly warped glass, where the window have those little bubbles. Looking down on the street below can be a bit strange, as the glass bends the light and distorts whatever's

below it. I never really paid much attention to it until a few days ago, but it's not a new thing.

It was the day before yesterday when I first saw it. When I'm heading down the stairs in the morning, I sometime like to spend a few seconds looking out of the window at the people on the street below. I'll move my head so that I see them through the warped glass, and they'll distort like a funhouse mirror. It's a bit daft, but I have a pretty dreary commute down to Victoria, so I take my fun where I can get it. Well, on that morning I paused before the window, and noticed one of the warped figures below was... off, slightly. It looked too tall, the limbs and body were very thin and almost wavy, like they didn't have any structure or bones in them. I couldn't make out a face, but it was the hands that were the most bizarre. They seemed to be stretched and inflated by the distorted light, until they were almost the size of

the rest of the torso. The fingers were long and stiff, and seemed to end in sharp points. It stood completely motionless, and I could feel it staring at me.

Moving my head to the side, I saw that the actual person I had been looking at was a large man with long, blond hair. He was neither stood still nor facing me, instead moving around the display of the flower shop opposite my building. Nothing about the guy seemed especially out of place, but I made a mental note to keep a lookout for him. I checked again through the bubble of bended glass and again I saw that tall figure with its limp arms and huge hands.

Now, you know me John, I'm, I'm not exactly the bravest person in the world. I generally avoid horror and I tend to stay off rollercoasters in the rare situation I have a chance to ride them. So I

was as surprised as anyone that this undeniably sinister figure wasn't causing me more distress. I mean, I was a bit nervous, sure. I've never had any direct experience with the supernatural before and the more I looked and checked and double-checked, the more sure I was that supernatural was exactly what it was. To be honest, I was surprised how quickly I accepted that. I've always considered myself a bit of a sceptic, and until recently I'd have said working at the Institute only made me more so.

Anyway, I watched it for about ten minutes, until the blond man bought a small bunch of lilies and walked away. Once he was gone, the distorted figure with the long hands disappeared as well. I headed down into the street and over to the flower shop. The woman working there gave me a bit of a confused look when I asked if there had just been a tall, blond man in her shop. She said

yes there had, and no, she hadn't noticed anything strange, and was I looking to buy some flowers. I was quite confused myself, and on a bit of an edge when I left. I was already late for work, though, so I decided to ignore it and just keep an eye out.

Sure enough, it wasn't too long before I saw him again. There's a small café I generally pop into when I head to work in the morning. I love the Institute's building, of course, it's beautiful, but from a money point of view, I really wish it wasn't in Chelsea. Everything around here is so expensive. I generally walk down from Victoria Station. It's a long walk, but quite pretty, and it gives me a chance to pick up a coffee on the way. As I said, I was running late that morning, so I was a bit conflicted about whether to get one, but as I looked in the window I saw a familiar figure at one of the corner tables. Again, the blond guy

wasn't looking in my direction, nor did he seem to give any indication that he was aware of my existence. He was there, though, and I was on the verge of walking in and confronting him when I noticed the time and decided getting to work was more important. Besides, what's that old saying? "Once is happenstance, twice is coincidence, three times is enemy action". I decided that if he turned up a third time, then I would ask him... something. I don't really know what I was planning to ask him. "Are you secretly a monster?" probably would have been a great opener.

When I got here, I realised I needn't have worried so much about the time. You were having some argument with Tim about... um, oh, who's that architect he's obsessed with?

ARCHIVIST

Robert Smirke.

SASHA

Yeah, that's the one. So, I was starting to regret not getting a coffee and talking to tall, blond and monster, since it didn't seem like I'd have missed much. I got on with my work, did some filing, cross-checked a few statements with police incident reports. I mean, I guess I don't need to tell you what a day working in the archives entails. It was a quiet day, aside from when Martin thought he saw one of those silver worms and we spent half an hour checking for it.

ARCHIVIST

Yes. I remember.

SASHA

Come on, it's not his fault he's being stalked by some weird living hive.

ARCHIVIST

I know, but it would have to have been Martin, wouldn't it? I mean, anything goes wrong around here, it always seems to happen to him. Anyway, we're getting off topic. Why didn't you report this?

SASHA

Seriously? If a member of the public came in, you would have torn that statement to shreds. No, I, I figured I'd get more evidence or it wasn't worth mentioning. Nothing else had happened until I left work. It must have been about half past six, so the sun was just about starting to go down, and I headed back up towards Victoria. The first thing I noticed out of the ordinary was that the café was still open. Normally they shut up about six o'clock, but the lights were on and the door was open. I couldn't see anyone behind the counter, though, and there was only one customer. He sat there in the exact same position he'd been that

morning, drinking what could easily have been the exact same coffee.

I looked around to see if there was anyone else who could confirm what I was seeing. The street was empty, but as I looked, a car drove past. In the curving glass of its tinted windows, I saw him there, the weird distorted body, rail thin and limp, the hands huge and sharp. And then the car passed on and I turned back to see a normal-looking man. But now, for the first time, he was looking at me. He gestured to the chair across from him, clearly inviting me inside. I don't know why I wasn't more scared going in there, but I wasn't. My curiosity apparently conquered my nervousness.

He didn't speak when I sat down, and I saw his coffee cup was empty. Whatever was inside had dried up hours ago. He seemed to be waiting for

me to ask him a question. So I asked him what he was. He laughed at this, the first sound I'd heard him make, and it sounded... unnatural. Like he was laughing very quietly, but someone had turned up the volume up so I could hear it. He said it didn't matter what he was, that he couldn't describe it even if he wanted to. What was the phrase he used... "How would a melody describe itself when asked?"

This put my back up a bit to be honest, and I told him if he was going to talk in cheap riddles I was just going to leave. He actually apologised, told me I could call him Michael. I didn't want to call him Michael; it didn't seem to fit somehow, and the way he said it made me think that it definitely was not his name. Still, it wasn't like I had any other name for him. No, not for him. For it.

It sat there, clearly waiting for me to ask another question, so I did. I asked it what it wanted, and was told that it wanted to help.

ARCHIVIST

Help? With... what?

SASHA

That's what I said. Did it want to stop Jane Prentiss? It laughed that weird laugh again and told me that I had no idea what was really going on. It didn't sound like it had any intention of telling me, though, it just seemed like it was amused by my attempts to understand. Then it said it didn't care if I or my companions lived or died, but that "the flesh-hive was always rash". It said it wanted to be friends. When it said this it put its hand in mine, and it may have looked like a human hand, but it was heavy. It felt like a...

wet leather bag full of heavy stones. Sharp stones.

I pulled my hand away quickly and got up to leave. By this point I was just about sick of this weird thing that looked like a person but was not a person and talked in riddles. It made no move to stop me as I headed towards the door. As I was about to exit, though, it called after me, and said if I was interested in saving your life it would be waiting at Hanwell Cemetery.

ARCHIVIST

Sorry, saving my life?

SASHA

Yeah. It called you by name. You. And Martin.
And Tim.

ARCHIVIST

That's... unsettling.

SASHA

It really was. At the time I just tried to ignore it. I went home and I got as much sleep as I could. I don't know if you noticed how tired I was yesterday, what with Tim's April Fools' joke.

ARCHIVIST

Don't remind me.

SASHA

Well, I was a bit of a mess. I checked the cafe on the way in, and on the way home. I even went down there on my lunch, but 'Michael' wasn't there. Part of me wanted to tell you about it immediately, to make a statement, but even if you believed me I knew you'd try and talk me out of

going to Hanwell Cemetery, and I had just about made my mind up to go. I didn't know if what Michael had said was a threat or a warning or just a lie, but I decided I couldn't take the chance. So I went to the cemetery.

The sun was starting to go down when I got there, and the gates of the graveyard were lit with the bright orange of the dying light. It had been raining earlier that day, and the pools of water reflected the vivid colours of the sky. Hanwell is an old cemetery, and past the walls I could see the weathered old gravestones standing silent. As it turned out, I didn't have to go inside. Michael was waiting for me next to the tall iron gates when I arrived. I caught a glimpse of its reflection in one of the deep pools of rainwater, and shuddered as I saw again – the warped body and swollen bony hands.

It didn't say anything when I arrived, just nodded at me to follow. I have no idea how long he had stood there waiting for me. I expected to go into the graveyard, but instead Micahael started walking down the road towards a nearby row of houses. The sign on the road said Azalea Close. Most of the buildings were in good repair, but there was one at the end that looked abandoned. It might have been a pub at one point, but now all the windows were boarded with metal sheets, and covered with dirt and graffiti. The door, however, was open and swinging gently. Michael went inside, clearly expecting me to follow, so I did.

Inside was dark and dusty. I was annoyed with myself that I hadn't thought to bring a torch, but just enough of the setting sun came through the door for me to see by. It clearly had once been a pub, and the bar appeared to be intact, though riddled with woodworm. Sitting on top of it was

what looked like a builder's kit, with a toolbox and a small fire extinguisher. I was just about to ask Michael why we were here, when I heard it. A low, wet groan coming from the far end of the room, where the light didn't reach. It sounded like someone in a great deal of pain.

I walked towards the noise. As I got closer my eyes began to adjust, and I saw the floor was covered in pale, writhing shapes. I had a listen to Martin's statement after you recorded it, so I knew what to expect. But hearing about something doesn't even come close to seeing it. To smelling it. I expected to see what Martin described, a squirming mass that was once Jane Prentiss, but the figure slumped against the wall looked like it was once a man. The worms wriggled out through the holes in his skin. The 'flesh-hive', Michael had called it, and the silver

things formed clustered knots where his eyes used to be. I couldn't help it. I gasped.

It wasn't a loud sound, and given how sick the whole situation made me feel I think I actually was quite composed. It was loud enough, though. The head snapped around to face me, dislodging a small cascade of twisting shapes. The mouth opened as he tried to scream but that wasn't what came out of his mouth. The worms also seemed to have taken notice and began to move towards me at an alarming speed. I backed away, but slipped on a piece of loose wood and fell into the bar. I glanced desperately at Michael, but it just watched me, its face unreadable.

I started to try and stamp on the worms as they approached, but there was just too many of them. Staggering to my feet, I felt my hand come to rest on something cold and metal – the fire

extinguisher. Without thinking, I pulled the pin out and squeezed the handle. A cloud of gas shot out and, to my surprise, the silver worms began to shudder and recoil, shrivelling and dying. I began to walk forward, catching every last one in the jet of gas. Finally, I found myself standing over the mass of pitted and hollow skin that was once a man. He shuddered violently as the gas engulfed him, and then lay still.

I was breathing heavily, and the CO₂ from the fire extinguisher was making me feel light-headed.

For some reason I felt like I should check his pockets. They were empty except for a wallet. It was stained with blood and other substances, but the name on the driver's licence was still readable: Timothy Hodge.

As I stood there, staring at the wallet, I felt a sharp pain in my right arm. I looked up to see

Michael, reaching into my shoulder. Its fingers were long and distorted as they reached through my skin, cutting it like paper. I screamed. After a few seconds, it withdrew its hand. Held there was a single silver worm, wriggling pathetically in its grip. I hadn't even felt the thing burrowing into my arm.

After that it's all a bit of blur. I remember I was going to phone the police, but Timothy Hodge's corpse was gone, and I was worried about trespassing, so I just sort of wandered away. Michael, or whatever it was, had gone as well. Eventually I found my way back to the Institute, where I must have woken up Martin and, well, here we are.

ARCHIVIST

Yes, I suppose we are.

SASHA

So what do you think?

ARCHIVIST

I, uh... I don't really know. We can look into it more later.

SASHA

I should really quit, you know. We, we all should. I don't think this a normal job. I, I don't think this is a safe job.

ARCHIVIST

You're probably right. Do you want to quit?

SASHA

No. I'm just... I'm just too damned curious, I suppose. You?

ARCHIVIST

No. Whatever's going on, I need to know. Get some rest.

[CLICK]

Statement ends

Obviously there is little we can really do to follow up Sasha's experience. If it was any of the others I might have cause to doubt, but she has always been the most level-headed of the team, and if she says that this is what happened, then I believe her.

This does at least explain what happened to Timothy Hodge, whose disappearance shortly after making his statement in late 2014 has been something of a concern since I discovered it. It seems odd how different the effect of Prentiss'...

infestation was on him and Harriet Lee, but without more information I don't have a working theory on why that might have been.

The thing that most disquiets me about Sasha's statement is this 'Michael'. She seems pretty convinced that he was not human, at least not in the conventional sense. Almost every statement I've catalogued has engaged with the paranormal in some form of antagonistic relationship. The idea that there are things out there like that that want to help us... For some reason, that makes me more uncomfortable than the worm-infested creature stalking the Institute.

Sasha has taken a few days off to recuperate, and I'm having a word with Elias about getting some extra CO₂ fire extinguishers for the Archive.

Recording ends.