

**RUSTY FEARS 7**

**“CLUNK”**

**BY NAIRIS SANTINI**

**PROMPT: DEEP SPACE**

**ALEXANDER J NEWALL:**

Hi everyone, Alex here, founder of Rusty Quill and Nightmare-in-Chief for the Magnus Protocol. I'm just taking a moment to introduce this latest instalment in our Rusty Fears series. We once again challenged our fans to write short horror stories based on 7 prompts and selected winners in each category to have their stories given the full Magnus Protocol treatment.

Each story is read by a different cast member, directed by our producer, April Sumner, and edited by our very own in-house editing team.

This series begins our fortnightly release schedule leading up to the premiere of The Magnus Protocol Season 2, Part 3 returning Thursday, July 16th, or two days early on Tuesday, July 14th for our Early Access supporters.

That's all for now, so thanks for listening, and we hope you find this as horrific as our judges did (in a good way).

[Music]

**ANNOUNCER:**

Clunk by Nairis Santini

[Music]

**NARRATOR:**

I do not tell this story often.

It always feels like speaking it out loud might make it happen again, like describing the shape of a doorway no one else can see and then finding it waiting for you, open and patient. Recently, though, it has been pressing at me from the inside, and I found myself needing to lay it out piece by piece.

It begins with the pier.

When I was a child, my whole world was bounded by the sea stretching behind our house. Between them, the beach stretched like a lick of paint on a canvas, full of rock pools, dry, knotted seaweed, and shell fragments that cut my bare feet.

The pier jutted out from the center of it, an old wooden thing with rusted railings and gaps between the boards that fascinated and terrified me in equal measure. It was technically condemned, or so my mother claimed, but no one had ever come with tape or barriers so it just stayed there. It was old, and it was ugly, and it was dangerous. And it was mine.

The planks had their own language; some thudded solidly beneath my weight, others gave a subtle, complaining creak. One board near the end of the pier rocked underfoot with a soft, hollow *clunk*, as though it was missing a few nails entirely and held on out of spite.

On clear nights, if I stayed out longer than I was supposed to, I would be able to see the stars reflected in the water like shimmering splotches of bright paint. The town was small enough that the streetlights failed to drown them completely. On rare occasions the clouds stayed away and the wind flattened the sea into a dark, glossy sheet, the sky below would almost match the sky above.

The pier would become a thin, hesitant line between them, and I would feel strange and light, as if all I had to do to fall forever was *dive in*.

While looking above, I would shuffle back to the loose board, listen for its clunk, and know I was safe and away from the edge.

Years went by, the pier rotted further. I grew taller, less easily impressed by vague reflections, more easily irritated by the people I lived with. My father had left when I was nine. My mother remarried when I was eleven. By fifteen, the house had become a place of thin walls and careful silences. My stepfather's presence was like a piece of mismatched furniture shoved into the middle of a familiar room: my mom constantly tried to adjust everything else

to make it fit and I was forever bruising myself at the edges of him. My mother echoed his complaints and tiredness, and suddenly every door in the house seemed to close louder than it ever had before.

When she told me we were moving, it felt like every last boundary of my world had been quietly redrawn without my consent. A better job for him, she said, a bigger flat, closer to the city, a better school for you. She spoke as if she was rescuing us from something, from the damp, the wind, the rust. All I could see was the beach disappearing behind us like a tide that had decided to never return.

The night before the move, the argument that had been building up like water behind a paper dam finally came. It doesn't matter anymore, now, exactly what was said. I just remember it followed the usual shape: raised voices that were not supposed to be raised, my mother's face tightening with every word I threw at her, his heavy steps in the hallway. It built and built until I couldn't breathe in that room, in that house, anymore.

I grabbed my jacket and ran.

Outside, the world had blurred at the edges. A thick fog had rolled in from the sea while we had been turning on one another. It swallowed the streetlights, leaving haloes of damp, weak gold and a chill that seeped under flimsy clothes. I couldn't even see the outlines of the neighbouring houses, just the vague verticals of fences and poles. But I knew the beach like the back of my hand, I could've headed down there blindfolded, the salty smell growing stronger with each step.

The sound of the waves was strangely distant, even when I stepped on the beach, as if the sloshing of water was happening somewhere else. The pier rose out of the whiteness ahead of me, more a suggestion than a structure, its railings lost in the grey.

I climbed onto the rickety steps and began to walk.

The planks welcomed me with their familiar voices. Wood, wood, creak, wood, creak, hollow—jump! Wood again. My mind, still buzzing from the argument, fixated on them as if their song could

drown the rage that kept me warm. They told me that at least something in my life was predictable, measurable, known.

My footsteps fell into a rhythm. Wood, creak, wood, wood, creak, wood. The fog beaded on my eyelashes and hair. I couldn't see the beach behind me anymore, but that was almost a relief. I focused on the planks appearing beneath my feet, the faint shift of weight in my ankles and—

*clunk*

My stomach tightened with anticipation as the boards changed tone underfoot. *I'm close*, I realised. *Almost there*. I looked forward to the end approaching, the way you feel when you reach the last step of the staircase. I got ready to feel for the edge with my foot, to kneel and sit at the end. I took another step.

Wood.

Another.

Wood.

Another.

Creak, wood, wood.

The pier didn't end.

My next step landed on another plank, then another. The song continued beneath me as if nothing had changed. I frowned, slowed, stopped. The fog pressed in close, the light from the beach almost gone. My phone was in my pocket, and my fingers closed around it with the kind of desperate gratitude you reserve for ordinary objects that feel suddenly life-saving. I turned on the torch.

The light scattered and instead of carving a beam of light in front of me, the dark became just... grey. But still impenetrable. Everything was swallowed by the fog, both behind and ahead of me. I couldn't see the end or the beginning. Just the pier.

I walked slowly forward, listening to a familiar song. Maybe it had just been another board that had come loose, maybe the pier was just longer than I remembered it. Wood, wood, creak, wood, creak, hollow— I stopped, and almost fell. My heartbeat sped up, a stuttering drum in my throat. I jumped and started walking faster now, searching, waiting anxiously for the edge to appear. Wood, creak, wood, wood, creak, wood.

*clunk*

I looked down. I recognised that board, the rotten edges and the scars of barnacles on the underside where it had curved upwards just slightly. Now I was at the end. I breathed with relief and pointed the light ahead to see the edge...

Nothing.

Just more rotting wood and metal, vanishing in the grey.

I tried to force logic into the situation. Fog distorts perception: distances feel longer when you're anxious. The pier was *not* that long. If I kept moving in one direction, I would hit the end eventually. These were sensible thoughts, rational and clean.

I turned back and moved quickly over the boards. Wood, creak, wood, wood, creak, wood. Jump. Creak, wood, creak, wood, wood, and— *Clunk*. The first clunk I'd heard. Almost there. The cold soaked up from the boards into the soles of my feet. My breath became a steady rasp in the silence, louder than the barely-there hush of the waves. The beam of my phone showed me the same pattern of warped wood and flaking paint. Wood, creak, wood, wood, creak, wood. Jump. Creak, wood, creak, wood, wood. I reached the point I should've stepped back onto the beach, transition from hard wood to the soft crunch of sand and...

*clunk.*

My knees almost gave way.

It was impossible. Even accounting for panic, for the fog, for my memory playing tricks, there was no possible way I could've circled

back to the same point on a straight pier, and yet the board underneath my foot looked exactly the same, the same rot, the same warp, the same *clunk*.

I broke in a sprint. I ran until my legs ached. I was certain that if I could reach the end, reach the beach, and stand on steady land, something inside me would still. I ran and ran and jumped over the holes and—

*clunk*

I froze. I looked up, hoping for anything, a light, sand, or even the dark edge of the pier, welcoming me to its end. Instead, the pier still continued ahead, straight and endless, its outlines fading into a blurred, grey nothing.

I continued walking. After a long stretch of identical boards I heard the loose plank again, under my feet, familiar and *wrong*. As I looked up, I realised I could tell I was nowhere near the end... because the fog was lifting.

Suddenly, the beam of light illuminated a dozen boards either way, then more. The fog had started to finally thin. I stood, turned ninety degrees and stared into the distance off the side of the pier. The grey scraped away from underneath as though a curtain was slowly lifting before a show. Above me, the same thing was happening: the fog was fraying, unravelling, revealing something beyond.

I recognised the pinpricks appearing in the darkness with a sigh of relief.

Stars.

The sky cleared from the top down, the last scraps of fog dissolving into the kind of perfect, endless night that rarely exists near houses and civilisation. It was so clear it almost felt indecent: every star was sharp, uncaring, ancient. Constellations sat in their habitual positions, familiar patterns that should've been comforting.

I looked down.

The sea had impossibly stilled to glass. There were no waves, no ripples, no visible movement. It lay there in absolute, impossible calm.

And it held the sky.

Not a reflection of it, not a trembling, distorted mess of lights, broken and scattered by movement. It was the same, identical. I couldn't see where the horizon was because the sky just seemed to continue in all directions.

The pier existed between them like a single, uninterrupted line, continuing endlessly in both directions until it faded in the darkness. My house, the beach, they were all just gone.

Vertigo closed around my throat. For one horrible, weightless moment, I couldn't tell which way gravity was pulling. My knees locked, my body swayed. I knew with absolute, animal certainty that if I took a wrong step I would not have fallen into the shallow water but instead into the unfathomable gap between stars, and I would never stop falling. Upwards, downwards, sideways... directions all felt like lies.

There was only *away*.

I tried to reach for the reassuring kiss of the sea, to feel something cold and ordinary on my skin. I lay flat on the pier and stretched my arm down between the boards until my shoulder burned. My fingers grasped at empty air. The water should've been right there, it was high tide, and yet my hand stayed dry.

I rolled on my back, panting. The stars did not flicker. They looked back with all the indifference of things too large to notice me. The more I stared, the more the world reoriented itself around the vastness. The pier under my body felt thinner, less real, as if it were only sketched there, a suggestion someone might erase in a moment, by mistake.

I became acutely, horribly aware of my own size. Of the little heat of my body seeping through the wood. Of the smallness of my heartbeat. Of the finite number of breaths I contained. The universe

below and above did not care for any of my thoughts, worries and hopes.

Something in my head whispered I ought to move, to crawl back towards shore. Something else told me that there was nothing else but this, ever, in all directions I could move towards, and that the safe thing, the only thing I could do was stay pressed to the boards, as wide and flat as I could make myself, lest I slipped and fell upwards and beyond and away.

I stayed still, clutching my phone until its beam of light — small, and useless and swallowed by starlight — flickered and turned off by itself. At some point, my thoughts stopped forming proper sentences: they thinned and frayed and scattered like the fog had, until all that remained was the dizzy, nauseous sense of my own insignificance, basking in the light of stars that had long died and whose light was only now reaching me.

I don't remember falling asleep or deciding to close my eyes. The next thing I remember was the moment I woke to the sound of gulls.

The sun was pale and low. I was lying on sand, a short distance from the start of the pier. Someone had thrown a blanket over me. I could hear my mother's voice, frayed and angry yet relieved. My stepfather had called an ambulance, something about hypothermia—

They said they had found me curled up by the beach, just beyond the high-tide line, fast asleep. The pier stood exactly where it had always been, short and stubby and visibly decaying. No fog. The sea... moved the way seas do. Everything looked heartbreakingly normal.

But my jacket hung tangled by the last, loose board.

We moved house the next day. I watched the sea recede through the car window until it vanished behind the lumpy inland hills. I haven't been back since. I haven't set foot on a pier again.

In the city, the sky is mostly colourless at night, a muted orange haze that hides anything worth seeing. People complain about it: they miss the stars, they say.

On the rare nights when the clouds part and a few sharp points of light break through the polluted glow, I keep my head down.

I know that if I look for too long into those pinpricks of light again, the ground will remember that it is only pretending to hold me. The thin line of whatever I am standing on will narrow and turn to damp rotten wood. The world will fall away on both sides and I will hear a familiar, hollow *clunk*.

And this time, when I fall, I don't think I will wake up on sand.

[Music]

**ANNOUNCER:**

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Thanks for listening.