

MAG – 115 – Taking Stock

Content Warnings:

- Body horror
- Blood
- Cannibalism
- Masochism
- Self-harm

[The Magnus Archives Theme – Intro]

JONATHAN SIMS

Rusty Quill presents: The Magnus Archives. Episode one hundred and fifteen.
Taking Stock.

[Tape clicks on.]

ARCHIVIST

Statement of Mikaele Salesa, regarding an antique meat grinder in his possession during the autumn of 1999. Original statement given January 4th 2007. Audio recording by Jonathan Sims, Head Archivist of the Magnus Institute, London.

Statement begins.

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

So it's another statement is it? Like I owe you something? Even though I warned you the handle might have splinters, that you should always be

wearing gloves if you're going to try firing it. And you knew where it was from, the signs of rage and violence to be watching for. So far, I don't see how it's my fault, and I don't consider myself liable. That said, I don't want you thinking I don't appreciate you keeping it quiet. You all have been one of my most stable customers, and I'd hate to sour the business. So I suppose if it's a statement you're wanting... it's no inconvenience to me. I don't sleep well anyway.

So what's it going to be? Could go over what got me started in the business; that's a story I haven't told you yet. Though there's less in the telling than you might expect. My first job was working with Jurgen Leitner, but I got out of that years before the man met his fate. Started looking for the exit about the time that I saw Warren get literally eaten by a book. And before you start cross-referencing, looking for some newly-birthed monster called Warren, I don't mean eaten like that. It left behind the leg. Don't know any transformations that leave behind your leg.

So I gave Leitner my walking papers, and struck out on my own. I had no intention of following in his footsteps with the books, and when I began it was just normal, high-end antiques I was moving. Leitner's client list, which I'd taken the liberty of copying, did me proud. The man had a knack for sniffing out moneyed fools with no sense of the value of things. Combine that with my own skill at evading a lot of the 'legal entanglements' the trade can get caught up in, and making money was not much of a challenge. Once or twice one of them would try to sell me a book, but when I learn a lesson, I learn it to my bones. After a while, some of those familiar with Leitner and his library approached me with some of the more... unusual items they had locked away. The sort of thing they'd have sold to him if they'd been bound in paper, rather than ceramic or wood. I didn't want anything to do with them, not to begin

with, but you've seen for yourself that the artifacts are not so volatile as the books, and they fetch a pretty penny, so eventually I started dealing in them as well.

So there's that. But I don't think that's the sort of statement you're after is it? No. You want something a little ghoulish. Something to stick your teeth into. Fine. I've got one. You see, in this game there are a few rules it's a good idea to keep to if you're looking to stay alive. One of my mine, is that only I take stock of the merchandise. You want to know how I came by this rule? I know you do.

So there was a man worked on my ship. Let's call him 'Cook'. Not his real name of course, but real enough for this and, thinking about it, it's unlikely he signed up with his real name anyway.

Now Cook, his main job was what you'd expect: working in the galley to keep my small crew fed.

But on a ship like that, all of you pitch in all of the time, even me, and cooking a few meals a day doesn't stop you having other duties. And one of those duties was checking on the cargo, making sure none of the breakables had managed to, well, break. Any other crew I'd have been worried about theft, but I'd been with most of these for two or three years, so there plenty of trust there.

This must have been some time in September, back in '99, and for most of the journey Cook had been checking on the merchandise with no problem at all. But on the last week or so of that voyage, he'd been taking longer and longer, and it was starting to affect meal times, and so on one of those occasions I made my way down to check on him. And, of course, I found him staring into one of the boxes.

The item in question that we were transporting for sale was an old antique meat grinder. The sort with a heavy vice you clamp on the table, and a nice big crank for twisting the screw, push the meat from the funnel along and into the mincer. It was a rusty old thing, all heavy iron and brand names worn away to nothing. If it wasn't for the fact that it was near two hundred years old it would have been more valuable as scrap. Even with the age I wasn't confident we could shift it. Without looking at my records, I couldn't tell you where I picked it up, and I'm sure it wasn't pointed out to me as one of the weirder items. No warnings or nothing like that.

But Cook, he couldn't get enough of it. He was staring at the thing, a look of longing in his eyes.

With another decade under my belt, I now know how stupid my next action was, but I used to consider myself someone who looks after my crew, and Cook seemed real taken with the thing. I honestly wasn't sure how well it was going to sell anyway, so I named a fair price and offered to take it out of his wages if he wanted to claim the grinder for his own. He said yes immediately, and was mighty thankful of my generosity. He grabbed the thing like it weighed nothing at all, which was the first clue I took proper notice of, and sprinted off to make lunch.

That night dinner was hamburgers. I made a joke to Cook about him getting good use out of the meat grinder already, and he laughed, told me it was from frozen, but looking back now I don't think he laughed as long or as hard as I might have liked. The meat was good, juicy, and honestly it didn't taste as if it had been frozen at all. The sausages the next night were the same.

Cook was different as well. Whenever I passed him I got a little bit of a smell. Like a raw steak just hitting the grill. Not an unpleasant smell, not at all, but certainly one I'd never noticed on him before. Occasionally, if he was wearing white, I could see small spots or smears of blood just at the edges. It might have been his own, working on a ship you get your share of cuts, but after a couple of days it became a little bit on the... unnerving side. He smiled more as well, and I'm not sure, but I feel like that might have been the thing that tipped me off the most that something was up with him. He'd never been the sort to... smile.

The meaty dinners kept coming, and I was began to wonder a bit about where he was getting it all. I talked to Leigh about it, who generally deals with supplies and acts as a sort of quartermaster, and she told me she'd definitely stocked up on plenty of canned and frozen meats for Cook before we set out, though only he'd been keeping track of what we actually had left.

But it wasn't that I thought he didn't have the meat available, it's that I just didn't know how he seemed to make it all taste so fresh. By that point I was pretty much convinced that whatever was going on with Cook was outside the area of the natural, and that usually traced back to one of the items I was carrying for sale. The fact that I'd just given something to Cook, well it tracked too closely for me to not come to some... obvious conclusions.

I started to avoid eating the meat I was served, kept my feeding to the small portion of vegetables that he'd add to the side, more a garnish than anything else. It didn't escape my notice that Cook was also hiding increasing amounts of his arm inside his coat when he spoke to me.

First fingers, then the hand, then finally he kept the whole forearm tucked under his jacket so I couldn't get a decent look. When I thought about it I'd get visions of Cook slowly reaching in, cranking the handle wildly with the other arm, while he pushed his skin and flesh into the whirring iron, mouth open and smiling, as it began to come through the mincer grate like a string of meaty bubbles. It made me feel ill, but I just couldn't get it out of my head.

So a few days out of port I snuck into the galley when he wasn't in. I mean, it was my ship, so I shouldn't have felt like a thief sneaking around, but I did. Secured over the hobs was a bubbling pot of water that Cook was gradually turning into stock. At first I didn't know what was it that made me so uncomfortable about the sight. Then I realised that he was making it the same way you make most meat stocks: he was boiling up some bones. And I am a hundred percent certain that Leigh did not supply us with bones, especially not the sort of bones I was seeing in that pot.

The meat grinder was there, clamped onto the side, a ways away from the main counter, and with no sign that it had ever been used. But there was something to it that alarmed me. When it had been in the box it was old, rust creeping at the edges. Not something you'd want to put raw meat through. But now the thing was spotless, like new, and as I got closer that... same smell that wafted off Cook got stronger and stronger.

Now I'm not one for hiding, or dodging a confrontation, but if this was happening like I thought, I really wanted to catch Cook in the act, see exactly what he was doing. So I went, and I waited until he was in the kitchen, preparing dinner, and I just walked in. Well, I tried to walk in, but Cook had locked the door. I had my own key of course, but I was also aware of how flimsy the lock was, so in the interest of time, I just kicked it open.

In many ways what I found in there was exactly what I expected, but in other ways... I don't know. Cook did have his right arm up to the elbow in the mincer, his left hand working the crank, around and around. I could hear the sound of bone and flesh grinding, but there was nothing coming out the other end of the machine. Then I saw what was lying on the counter. It was his arm, neatly sliced off and butchered into cuts of meat, the bone shining white through the blood and dark skin. And I remembered he'd promised us pork chop tonight.

Looking back at Cook, I saw the ecstasy on his face, with just a hint of manic terror, as he turned the crank, and a new arm came out, bit by bit, raw and glistening. It didn't look like his old one, but there was a part of me sure it would taste just the same.

It didn't look like he'd even noticed me breaking through the door. He was wrapped up in his own sickness. So I walked over and grabbed him by the shoulder, screaming to know what the hell he thought he was doing. That snapped him out of it alright, and he lunged at me with a sudden cry, ripping the lower part of his arm back off, and leaving it sitting there, ragged in the grinder. His left hand went to the boiling stock, blistering and peeling as Cook reached in and pulled out one of the larger bones, swinging it wildly about the place. I don't speak any Croatian, but given the way he was salivating I'm pretty sure he chanting something about dinner.

But in the end, he only had one arm, and wasn't thinking properly. His movements were clumsy, like a drunk, and even at his best I've killed worse than Cook. He went down easy. That's another good thing about having a crew you can trust. They tossed him overboard, and cleaned up without asking any sort of prying questions. Of course they belly-ached about another week on

canned food, but I think they understood the alternative would have been worse.

Story has a happy ending, though. I managed to sell the grinder to some rich Canadian gourmet, who I assume was bored of the standard options for his meals. Didn't even have to leave anything out. Of course he disappeared about a year later, and they never found the body. But there's no way to prove that had anything to do with me. Besides, it's not like he was paying me in instalments.

ARCHIVIST

Statements ends.

(Sigh) I suppose in some ways it's strange I'm not a vegetarian yet, what with everything I know. But... I rather think someone in my position has to take their small pleasures where they can, and if it occasionally delights some grotesque meat-god, well... c'est la vie.

So Salesa was one of Leitner's old assistants. That makes some sense, I suppose. The sort of small revelation that a month ago would have filled me with wild conjecture. Now it seems, I don't know, almost trite. Filling in the puzzle, but not touching on those parts of the picture I still don't understand.

Maybe it's not that. Maybe it's just this... stillness, the anticipation. I— We know what's happening, we know what we have to do about it, we even have something approaching a plan for once. And while it's a welcome change not to be desperately praying for a deus ex machina, I don't really know how to handle the waiting. Whatever Elias has Daisy doing, it seems to be working. Nothing's made a move on me or the Institute since I returned, and last time I

saw her there was the distinct smell of burnt plastic. So I suppose I'm safe. But everything just feels like... killing time, running down the clock. I don't think I like it.

God, do I— do I miss being chased? That's depressing. No, it's... I just miss feeling like I'm moving, like I—

[There's a knock on a door.]

(Calls) Come i—

[There's another knock on the door.]

(More sombrely) Come in.

[A door creaks open]

(Sharply) What do you want?

HELEN

Not sure. To talk.

ARCHIVIST

You're keeping her face, then.

HELEN

I am Helen.

ARCHIVIST

Don't pretend to be people I know. Knew.

HELEN

I'm not pretending.

ARCHIVIST

You're not Helen Richardson.

HELEN

I wasn't Michael, either.

ARCHIVIST

Who do you see? When you, you look at yourself? There are mirrors in those corridors of yours. What do you see?

HELEN

I don't.

ARCHIVIST

Why are you here?

HELEN

I... I'm not... I'm not entirely sure. I'm... having trouble. I don't think I was meant to be Helen.

ARCHIVIST

I'm— I don't understand.

HELEN

Neither do I. Michael was... pulling away. His anger was interfering. I don't, I don't think I have a choice but to be Helen. Self is difficult.

ARCHIVIST

Michael, he, uh, he, he wasn't meant to be you either, though, was he?

HELEN

No.

ARCHIVIST

So... (**Slowly**) Why are you here?

HELEN

I took someone.

ARCHIVIST

You t— Wh... L-Like Michael ate you?

HELEN

I took a man, wandering the halls of an old tenement. He's dead now, he never even came close to finding me. It was nourishing, but...

ARCHIVIST

But...

HELEN

I didn't like it.

ARCHIVIST

You d— (**Sigh**) I'm not sure I follow.

HELEN

I feel... wrong. I feel this—

ARCHIVIST

(Angry) Why are you telling me this?!

HELEN

Something happened when I became 'Helen'. She wasn't right, she wasn't ready.

ARCHIVIST

I don't...

HELEN

Before, talking to you made Helen feel better.

ARCHIVIST

You're not that Helen!

HELEN

I just want... I just want to feel better.

ARCHIVIST

I don't believe you.

HELEN

You don't?

ARCHIVIST

Wh-what? Why should I believe... a-a-any of this? You've told me over and over that you're... what was the phrase? The 'throat of delusion'? All of this is—

HELEN

I have never told you a lie, Archivist. I wouldn't dare. I, I just thought you might understand.

ARCHIVIST

Uh... How could I possibly...

HELEN

We're both changing, Archivist. I had hoped, that together—

ARCHIVIST

(Angry) Get out.

HELEN

Archivist...

ARCHIVIST

Get. Out.

HELEN

Fine.

[The door creaks closed.]

(The Archivist sighs.)

[Tape clicks off.]

[The Magnus Archives Theme – Outro]

JONATHAN SIMS

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