

MAG – 049 – The Butcher's Window

Content Warnings

- Being followed
- Graphic injury & violence
- Blood & Gore
- Body horror & dismemberment
- Mutilation
- Murder
- **Discussions of:** Drugs, drug trafficking
- **Mentions of:** Screaming, alcohol, smoking, blackmail, trespassing
- **SFX:** High pitched tone

[The Magnus Archives Theme - Intro]

JONATHAN SIMS

Rusty Quill Presents The Magnus Archives Episode Forty Nine The Butcher's Window

[The Magnus Archives Theme – Intro - Continues]

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JONATHAN SIMS

Statement of Gregory Pryor, regarding his investigations into one Hector Lerado during the summer of 2007. Original statement given March 11th, 2008. Audio recording by Jonathan Sims, Head Archivist of the Magnus Institute, London.

Statement begins.

JONATHAN SIMS

(Read aloud from the archived witness statement of Gregory Pryor)

You don't mind me drinking in here, do you? No, of course you don't, bet half the guys roll in here are leaking scotch all over your precious paperwork. I'm sober enough to write it down, for now at least, and that's all that matters to you, isn't it?

I'm a private investigator. Used to be police, but not anymore. None of your business why. You can draw your own conclusions, if you want, but it's not something I care to talk about. Anyway, last June I got a job from one Nicola Lerado. She was the wife of a low-life by the name of Hector Lerado and was keen to change that to ex-wife. Except that there was some kind of pre-nup in the mix and she was looking to catch him cheating, which is where I came in. Standard stuff, pretty boring really, but it keeps the wolf from the door.

My first investigations didn't turn up much. Checking Hector online was pointless. If he owned a computer, it wasn't for hooking up or making friends. Impersonating him to the phone company was also a waste of time: only numbers he called regularly were his brother, his wife and the Chinese takeaway at the end of his road. Lazy ass. I reckoned he had a second mobile, but couldn't find any obvious paper trail for it, so I decided to take my investigation to the next stage. I began to tail him.

Hector was exactly the kind of guy I always end up following – heading into middle age, with nothing to show for it but half a head of hair and a beer belly straining against work shirts that always have some kind of food or sweat stain proudly on display. A loser. I know I'm not one to talk, but I couldn't help sympathising with the wife. And not just because she was the one paying me.

Hector worked IT for some shipping and delivery company with its admin centre down in Liverpool Street. I say he worked there, but that could easily be a lie. Even though I wasn't able to get past the front desk, the sheer number of

smoke breaks Hector took out front cast some serious doubts on whether he was doing his job at all. According to wife Nicola, Hector had recently had a sudden series of 'working late' nights and, based on what I was seeing of him at the day job, she was right on the money with her suspicions. There was no way this guy was staying a minute past closing.

Sure enough, hanging around his office, I saw him shuffling out the building shortly after six. I started shadowing him carefully, although after a few minutes it became clear that I really didn't need to be cautious as all that. The man was completely oblivious to anything that wasn't inside his own head or in front of his face, and after a while I found I could walk literally 15 feet behind him the whole way and he had no idea. I knew I was in luck when I saw him head into the Underground. His route home should have been taken him down the Central line, but instead he headed onto the Hammersmith and City, riding east. Whatever, or whoever, his illicit liaisons involved, I was pretty sure that me and my camera were following him right to it.

He got off the train at Barking, which was promising. It was exactly the sort of place I would have expected the lover of someone like Hector to live: residential, depressing and cheap, for London at least. It was almost 7 o'clock by this point and it was late June, so there was still a while before nightfall and I got more careful about my pursuit. There were less people here, so blending into a crowd was no longer an option and I made sure to keep a bit more distance as he walked down streets of terraced houses.

We had been walking for about twenty minutes when I began to realise that he wasn't going into any of the houses. Instead, he made his way south until he reached the A13. He made his way over the motorway, now choked with commuter traffic, and headed down into what looked like a warehouse or

industrial estate on River Road. I was becoming less and less convinced that this was a simple screwing around job, which made me uneasy, but it was still a long way from scaring me off. Besides, I was curious, so I followed Hector over the A13 and down River Road.

I was going very slowly now, as I was the only one walking down that road except for Hector and, if he turned around, well, idiot that he was, I don't think even he could have failed to spot me. So, I stayed close to the buildings and ducked behind them whenever I could. I'll be the first to admit I'm not as fit as I was back when I was on the force, but I was still quick enough to keep up with Hector's slow, meandering pace. After another five minutes he reached a warehouse with a 'For Sale' sign on it. There was nothing else notable or distinctive about the place and the sign looked like it had been up for years. I spotted a small hole in the decaying concrete wall that divided it from the adjacent lot and made for it. Through the hole, I watched as Hector stopped and, for the first time, looked behind him. When he saw nobody and nodded like he was congratulating himself on a job well done, I almost laughed so hard I gave myself away.

Hector checked his watch, clearly waiting for someone, and put down his briefcase. It was only then I realised how odd it was that an IT tech would carry an old-fashioned leather briefcase to work. Still, I didn't have much time to wonder about it before a red SUV pulled up and two white guys in tracksuits got out and started heading towards Hector. I couldn't make out what they were saying, but I was snapping pictures anyway. I had a pretty good idea as to what was going on and I was not at all surprised when they handed Hector a brown envelope, obviously full of money. In return, he opened the briefcase to

show a tight, white brick, before snapping it closed again and handing it over. I took plenty more pictures before slipping away unnoticed.

Drugs complicated matters, but not necessarily in a bad way. Theoretically, pictures of the crime could get Nicola out of her doomed marriage just as quick as any sleazy snapshots and, if I played my cards right, I could even make a good bonus out of him myself in the form of some hush money. Blackmail's an ugly word, but it does pay the bills and, given how bad Hector was at spotting me, it was only a matter of time before he was behind bars, so I might as well get some use out of that sweet drug money before it was taken by the courts. I mean, he took the briefcase to work, for God's sake.

The trick was going to be making sure that Hector wasn't connected in a way that would make this difficult. From what I could see, he was pretty low-rung and expendable enough that a bit of blackmail wouldn't piss off any of the bigger fish trafficking what looked to be heroin. Still, drug dealers and their bosses can be unpredictable, so I decided to keep watching the poor slob for a while to make sure I wasn't going to be stepping on the wrong toes.

So, for the next week I watched Hector all day, every day, and I can confidently say that he was the worst drug mule I've ever come across. I knew some real screw-ups back in my police days, but nothing that even came close to Hector Lerado. I genuinely had no idea how he ended up working for these guys, who I eventually pegged as Ukrainian mafia. I suppose he did look like the last person you'd suspect of running drugs, but that was the only thing he had going for him. In addition to being unbelievably oblivious, he was also sloppy and forgetful. I once watched him leave the suitcase, drugs and all, on his front porch for three hours in broad daylight, before he remembered and came back for it.

Ironically, I didn't actually see him lose the drugs. I'd needed to use the bathroom in a coffee shop I'd followed him to and when I got out, he'd moved on. Sometime in the two hours it took me to find him again, he'd managed to put the suitcase down and forget it. It was gone. I saw realisation cross his face as he began to panic. This was bad news for both of us. Worse for him, of course, but it did mean that I wouldn't be making my bonus.

I followed him a while longer out of morbid curiosity and watched as he tried to explain himself to the Ukrainians. I expected anger, a beating, maybe even a murder right then and there, but instead they just exchanged a look, mumbled a few words to Hector and handed him a small slip of paper. Then they drove away. Hector looked at the paper, typed something into his phone and threw it away as he walked off. It was an address in Stockwell and an instruction: 'Ask for Jared'.

I didn't follow him that time. I was pretty sure they'd just handed the poor idiot a death sentence, and when Nicola called the next day to say Hector hadn't come home, I was sure. At this point, I came clean to her about her husband's activities, although I did lie about the timings to make it seem like I'd only just discovered about the drugs – no need for her to know why I'd kept it to myself. When I told her about the loss and the note, she sat down, clearly trying to process everything. She didn't seem particularly broken up over the fact that her husband was most likely dead, something that was quickly confirmed as she started moving on to talking about savings and life insurance. That's when I should have taken my payment and gone. If I hadn't gotten greedy, I'd still have my arm.

So, I was all set to leave, when Nicola asked me how long I thought it was going to be before they found a body. Stupidly, I said that if the Ukrainians were any

good, there probably wouldn't be a body to find. At this, Nicola seemed to panic slightly, asking a lot of questions about missing persons and being declared legally dead without a body, which is a long, drawn-out headache. She clearly didn't want to wait and asked me to try and find some evidence that Hector was dead. I said, "No", of course. Then she named a price that... well, let's just say Hector Laredo's life insurance policy must have been a hell of a thing. Even at the time I knew I was making the wrong decision, but that much money... I said, "Yes".

So, the next day I found myself in Stockwell, at the address listed on the note, staring at a butcher's shop. No name was written over the front, but the display of chilled carcasses and slabs of meat in the window made it perfectly clear what it was. I started to wonder if the Ukrainian mafia was involved in some full-on Sweeney Todd body disposal, but quickly reminded myself that even if, and it was a big if, they were killing and disposing of bodies there, it didn't mean they were selling the meat to the public. That would be a massive and unnecessary risk and organised crime wasn't big on unnecessary risk.

It was a sunny day and the smell of the hot tarmac mixed with the odour of raw meat that drifted from the door. It had a 'Closed' sign displayed prominently, despite the time of morning, and there were no interior lights on. I couldn't see anything inside except the old, poorly refrigerated meat hanging in the window, dripping silently onto the trays below. I reminded myself how much money was on the line and tried the handle. To my surprise, it was unlocked. I slipped inside the shadowed storefront before anyone spotted me.

The smell was rancid, but not as strong as I had expected. A quick glance around the place told me why – aside from the window display, the room was devoid of meat. In fact, there didn't seem to be much there at all, aside from a

refrigerated counter and drinks cooler. Both sat empty. I waited and listened, prepared to bolt through the door at the slightest sound, but it was quiet.

I gathered myself and made my way around the counter to open the door into the back. I was keeping on an eye out for anything that might have given a hint as to Hector's fate. As soon as I had proof, I was gone. The door to the back opened with a puff of air, like there was a change of pressure, and I noticed how thick the steel door was. Even the glass porthole at the top seemed a few inches. It was only later I realised it must have been soundproofed.

The room behind it was lit by several bright fluorescent bulbs on the ceiling and walls and, much as I suspected, looked closer to a morgue or an operating theatre than a butcher's shop, despite the well-kept and razor-sharp tools hanging on a nearby rack. There were several large lockers along one wall, a steel chair in the corner and, though there were no stainless steel drawers, the tarpaulin covered shape that lay awkwardly on the large central table was disconcertingly familiar. I took a breath and pulled back the plastic sheet.

Hector Laredo lay there on the table. He was naked, utterly still and, though he seemed to be in one piece, his skin had the sickly pallor of a corpse. I sighed, relieved at this discovery, which, from my perspective, was about the best result I could have hoped for. I spent a minute or two taking pictures for Nicola and headed back towards the door. And that's when everything started to go horribly wrong.

When I reached the doorway back into the shopfront, I took a second to glance through the window and I froze. In the entrance to the shop stood a huge, hulking silhouette. It reached to push it open and I staggered back into the room, looking for another way out. There was only one other door, apparently into the rest of the building, but it was firmly locked, and I didn't have time to

try and get through. Without any other options, I covered Hector back over with the tarpaulin, opened one of the lockers and squeezed myself inside. Luckily for me, they were large and didn't seem to have any shelves. I stepped on something soft and, looking down, saw a rough pile of clothes at my feet. I didn't have time to consider this before I saw the door begin to open and I had to shut myself in.

I stood there in the dark, trying not to make a sound, as I heard heavy footfalls approach and the door to the room slammed shut. From my position, I could just about see out through the vents in the locker and I very much hoped the huge guy now strapping on an apron could not see in. He was immense, almost seven feet tall with thick limbs that looked like they'd been badly carved out of lumpy rock. Even his head was massive, but there, like everywhere his skin was on show, it bulged slightly when he moved, hard bumps forming and stretching his skin in odd places. Was this the 'Jared' mentioned in the note? He pulled back the tarpaulin covering Hector's body and cracked his knuckles. I don't think I'll ever forget the sound of him doing that.

Then he reached into Hector. No cutting, no saws, he just reached in, and I realised why the room was soundproofed. Because it turned out Hector wasn't dead. And it was going to be a while before Jared got around to his lungs or throat. Jared pulled out what appeared to be a handful of ribs. He considered them for a few moments before he began to twist them like warm putty, making them into some sort of braid. He considered his handiwork silently, as Hector lay screaming on the table, before he shook his head and walked towards my locker.

For a terrible moment, I was sure he was going to wrench open the locker and pull me out, but instead he grabbed a crowbar that had been resting against

the wall and levered up one of the metal floor tiles. From where I was standing, I could see there was a hole underneath that seemed to disappear deep into the ground. There was something not right about that hole, the texture of the walls was too smooth to be earth and it seemed to glisten, wetly. It was when I saw the teeth that studded the inside of the fleshy throat that I realised what I was looking at and I choked back a scream. Jared casually tossed the bones he had been twisting inside and they disappeared into the dark opening without a sound.

And so it went on for four gruelling hours. After the first, Hector wasn't conscious enough to scream anymore, but Jared continued to bend and warp him, occasionally pulling bits out and throwing them into the pit. Once I even saw him take one of Hector's femurs and, after twisting it into a corkscrew spiral, he reached into his own torso and left it there with a sigh of contentment.

At last, Hector died, and I almost wept with relief. Jared sighed in what sounded like disappointment and then fetched the butcher tools from the wall. It took him another half hour to fully dismember the corpse, tossing each piece into the pit when it was small enough and hosing the blood down into it. He removed his apron, walked to the chair and sat down. His movements were sluggish now, uncoordinated, almost like he was drunk. Once in the chair, his huge frame slumped forward and his eyes closed. It looked like he was asleep.

I should have waited longer, should have made sure he was fast asleep, but I was close to breaking point at this stage and I could think of nothing but escape. I opened the locker and walked quickly, silently over to the door and opened it. As I did so, the gentle sounds of the street at night filtered through from the shopfront. Compared to the grim silence of the butcher's workshop,

it was beautiful. At least, it was until an ambulance roared past, siren blaring at full volume.

I heard a roar from behind me and turned to see Jared charging towards me. It was like a strange, lumpy freight train bearing down on me. I tried to close the door, but I was too slow. Just before it slammed shut, he grabbed my arm and tried to pull me back.

There is no way to describe what it feels like to have bone pulled out of you through your unbroken skin. If you've ever been stabbed, or had a decent size object embedded in you, maybe you can remember how it felt to have it removed, but even then, the pain is of a different quality. The nerves aren't being torn or cut; they're being pushed aside like water. Imagine the feeling of removing a rubber glove from your hand, but you're the glove, not the hand, and it hurts like the worst toothache you can imagine. That's as close as I can get to putting into words.

I slammed the door shut and ran into the street, through the people still wandering Stockwell in the evening and away, my now empty left arm hanging limply by my side. I didn't stop running for a very long time.

I guess in many ways it was a happy ending. The photos, combined with what the police found when they raided the butcher's shop, were enough to declare Hector dead, even without the body, and I got my payday from Nicola Laredo. They never did find Jared though. He was long gone when they arrived. The doctors amputated the arm in the end and I'm getting used to the prosthetic, but I can still feel it sometimes, like it's still there. I know it's just phantom limb syndrome, but sometimes I swear it feels like my bone's still out there, twisting in someone else's arm.

JONATHAN SIMS

Statement ends.

I don't think it's unreasonable to assume this butcher to be Jared Hopworth. It seems that if Mr Adekoya's account from statement #9991006 is accurate, then Hopworth has found new ways to profit from his abilities in the eight years since his acquisition of *The Boneturner's Tale*. The book itself is conspicuously absent from this account, though it may simply mean Hopworth no longer needs to keep it with him. No idea about the pit though – that's new. Its description puts me in mind of some of the more... 'meaty' statements, but there isn't enough evidence to make any direct connections.

Mr Pryor was unavailable for a follow-up interview as he emigrated to New Zealand in 2013, following a four-year jail term for tax evasion. He seems to have largely dropped off the map. Nicola Laredo confirmed the basic details of the job she had given to Mr Pryor, although she was unaware of any of the more gruesome aspects of her husband's murder. At least she was until Martin interviewed her. I should warn Elias to expect another complaint.

The police aspect of this statement has been the hardest to follow up. Sasha has recently been having problems with her normal backdoor access to police records, as despite IT's best efforts, her computer has broken yet again, making this the third time in the last two months. Until we can source some more reliable equipment, we may have to rely on other methods.

Basira has refused to compromise her position any further, so we're having to rely on Tim's involvement with certain staff at the police records office. Apparently, he is involved both with one of the young ladies there, as well as the gentleman who manages the other shift. This is useful for acquiring

information, but I am uncomfortable with how easily discovered this arrangement might be. The last thing I want is for the Archives to become involved in pointless personal drama.

Still, he has managed to get copies of the appropriate files. The police did raid the butcher shop following Mr Pryor's report, but found no one there. It had apparently been abandoned shortly before. They found articles and clothing belonging to roughly fourteen people, five of whom could be tied to active missing persons' cases. They did tear up the floor in the end, but rather than any sort of pit, they found the body of one Harry Gogh, the registered owner of the business. He had apparently been dead for six months. Jared Hopworth remains at large.

End recording.

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Supplemental.

Elias Bouchard is a difficult man to pin down, certainly since he became head of the Institute in 1996, taking over from James Wright, who ran the place from '73 until he passed away. It was a remarkably fast climb to the top, as, from what I can find, it looks like he only joined the Institute five years before, in 1991, working in the artefact storage. Perhaps he was simply that impressive. Certainly, the Elias I know now is almost unmatched in terms of paranormal knowledge. Well, theoretical knowledge, at least.

And yet. Everything I've found about his life before the Institute seems an ill fit with the austere man I know. He apparently graduated with a 3rd from Christchurch college in PPE, and I found an old gossip column in the student

newspaper, *The Cherwell*, that mentioned him. If I'm not reading too much into it, the implication seems to be that he was something of a pothead. Was he like that when he first came to work here? The difficulty comes from the fact that the only person in the Institute who worked here before he took over was Gertrude. Did he kill her because she knew something about his past? And if so, how can I prove it?

End supplemental.

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[The Magnus Archives Theme - Outro]

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