

MAG – 096 – Return to Sender

Content Warnings:

- Gun violence
- Imposter
- Body horror

[The Magnus Archives Theme – Intro]

JONATHAN SIMS

Rusty Quill presents: The Magnus Archives. Episode ninety-six. Return to Sender.

[Tape clicks on.]

ARCHIVIST

Statement of Alfred Breekon, regarding a new pair of workers at his delivery company. Original statement given May 15th 1996. Audio recording by Jonathan Sims, Head Archivist of the Magnus Institute, London.

Statement begins.

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

Three years. It was three years ago when they arrived. It wasn't much, the little delivery company I'd built up, poured my heart and soul into. I don't know why they wanted it. But they did.

"Breekon and Sons", I'd always wanted to call it, but I was always unlucky when it came to love, so in the end I called it "Breekon and Hope". Just my

own little joke. Backfired on me plenty; everyone always asking if I had to run things by “my partner”, and often I was too awkward to correct them. I sometimes used to disappear into the back room, pretend I was making a call to “Hope”. It was harmless enough, though, and the company was growing well. We had opened a few new depots, and had a few dozen drivers, making deliveries anywhere from Aberdeen to Penzance. Life was pretty good, to be honest.

When they turned up at my office, I remember it was their shadows that I saw first. It was early evening, and the sun wasn’t shining in through the window, but still their shadows fell across my desk, thick and dark as they loomed over me in the half-light. They wore featureless grey overalls, and even now I’m not sure I could easily describe what they look like, other than to say they seemed solid. Somehow heavier than the world around them. They stared down at me, dark eyes sizing me up as I coughed gently, and asked if I could help them.

They traded a few words between them in another language, I think it was Russian, before turning back to look at me. At this point I was pretty sure these guys must be Mafia, probably trying to shake me down, so I waited until it was clear what they wanted from me. But the silence just stretched on and on and on, and eventually I cracked; held out my hand: “Arthur Breekon at your service. Who might you be?”

There was another pause, shorter this time, before the slightly taller of the two – at least, I think one was taller – turned to his companion and opened his mouth. “Breekon at your service. Who might you be?” Instead of the Russian accent I had expected, he spoke in a broad, cartoonish Cockney that I assumed must be a mocking impression of my own voice. I began to stand up, to

tell these jokers to get out of my office, but as I did, the shorter one turned to his companion, and in a similar voice replied, “The name’s Hope. What can I do for ya?”

I don’t know why this shook me so much, but it stopped me right in my tracks. I just watched as they repeated these two phrases back and forth between themselves, introductions made over and over again. Finally they stopped, and turned back to me. I had no idea what was going to happen or what I was meant to do, but there was something profoundly unnatural about these two figures, and I had no intention of pushing too far and finding out what it was.

It was a sunny day in June, and the window was open to a bright field behind the building. I didn’t notice the butterfly until it had landed on the one who kept calling himself ‘Hope’. With a slow, languid motion he picked it up. He looked at it for a couple of seconds, then looked at me.

Then he ate the butterfly. Not slowly, or particularly fast. He just placed it carefully in his mouth and began to chew.

As his partner did this, the one who seemed to have taken my name held out his hand to me.

“Keys,” he said, this time the word still lightly accented with Russian. I gave them to him. I took the keys to the oldest of the vans, and just handed them over. Anything to get them out of my office. I’m not a small man, you understand, and I’m not used to feeling intimidated. I got into plenty of scrapes when I was young, and there was a small part of me screaming to teach these disrespectful punks a lesson. But when this other Breekon took the key from me, what I felt beneath the skin of his hand convinced me I had made the right choice. Then they turned and left.

I wish I could say that was the last I saw of them, that they stole one of my vans and drove away, never to return. But they did return. And even worse, they started to make deliveries.

They were innocuous at first; the right things delivered to the right people on time. Then it became the right things delivered to the wrong people. Then the wrong things being delivered.

Then the very wrong things. Strange folk began coming around asking for Breekon and Hope, and when I told them who I was, they just shook their heads, and I knew who they were after.

They often brought crates or boxes with them and, once, a sack full of hair. I never opened any of these, or looked to closely when they came around. There was something in me that wanted to believe if I was smart, and kept my head down, maybe I could somehow get through it. I couldn't accept that something like this could just turn up, and casually destroy me without cause.

If there was a reason they've picked me, I have never found out. I have asked them, but unsurprisingly got no answers. There must be other delivery companies, surely, and it was the deliveries they seem to focus on. They're out most of the day and night, usually, allowing me some rest away from their horrid blank faces. But they always come back. When not on delivery, they stand in the break room, facing the wall. Sometimes they laugh, suddenly and abruptly, as though they've both simultaneously thought of a hilarious joke. It sounds like the laugh track in an old sitcom, and cuts off almost immediately. When I get fitful sleep in the small fold-out cot I keep in my office, I can sense them standing there, looking at me. I don't go home anymore. I'm afraid of

what might happen if they followed me outside of a professional environment.
My other drivers have been disappearing.

For all that, they do seem to have friends, or at the very least, people who come to see them regularly. Most I don't remember, the features difficult to put together from memory, but I know that more than once I've seen the pair of them talking to a figure at the other end of the depot. They always make sure these meetings are in shadow, and I can never get close enough to see exactly who they're talking to, but I think they're dressed like a circus ringmaster.

And so it's been going for the last couple of years. I think I might even be paying them, though it's hard to tell. The account book, as well as the shipping logs and manifests, keeps filling up with entries I don't remember, although it is definitely my handwriting.

I am not sure how long this might continue for. Maybe years. Maybe forever. Whatever fight was in me at the beginning is gone. Occasionally, when they first began to take over, I would start to march up to them, my mind whirring, filled with demands and threats and ultimatums. Then they'd look at me with those blank, impassive eyes, and I'd feel all my resolve simply melt away.

Now it's just a memory. A daydream. I've forgotten the taste of determination. It won't last forever, though, because I think they've decided they're done with me.

I came into work yesterday to find a box sat on my desk. The address and label had been completely scribbled over in black marker pen, and it was impossible to tell from what was left where it had originally been sent to. It didn't matter,

though, because on top of it, written in my handwriting with a vicious precision I've always lacked, were the words: "Return to Sender".

They'd put it there for me. They'd never delivered to me before. The package was still, but every part of me recoiled from it. I slowly walked forward and touched it, but I did not pull away the tape. The day was warm but the box was ice cold, and the cardboard was spongy and strangely yielding. It didn't move when I pressed it with my hand, but there was a sound like shifting sand.

I don't know what was inside. I don't what is inside. It won't be right. It's not my package. I didn't send it.

I tried to look it up in the logs. I found it easily enough. Everything seemed to be in order, except the item description. That line simple read, "Goodbye". God knows how long I spent staring at it. Nothing about that box was right. The card fitted together at slightly-off angles, and the corners were damp, like it had been left out in the rain. The table seemed to bend slightly under its weight, yet when I tried to move it, it seemed so light I doubted for a second it could have anything inside. Even then, I never dared to fully lift it up or pull it towards me. There's a gravity there, though, and I don't know how much longer I can resist its pull.

My brother came to you people about ten years ago. He had been having visions of demons and witches, and came discuss them with you. He never recovered, but he always told me that there was little quite as freeing as making a statement for you. So I snuck away. But I need to be back soon. It has been freeing, talking to you, but not enough to free me from my fate. I am not the sender, but I am going to open that package. I know I leave Breekon and Hope Deliveries in safe hands. Safe hands where the skin feels wrong.

Statement ends.

ARCHIVIST

I found Mr. Breekon. The real one. It's strange, for all he talks of worrying that what's in the box will get him, all the bite marks appeared to be coming from the inside going out.

What does it mean when death no longer phases you, even the most grotesque? Perhaps it's a sign I'm adapting to my new situation. Useful, I suppose, but... I was right about the Newcastle depot. It's still here, and it seems like it's been deserted for a long time. There's a pile of mail at the door almost two feet high, and today it was topped with a crisp brown envelope addressed to me, containing this statement. A gift from Elias, no doubt.

He could have sent this to me any time, filled me in on Breekon and Hope, but no. I had to find it myself, just in time for him to show me he knew all about it. Cocky prick.

Still, there's not actually as much information here as I'd hoped, either here or in the statement. It shows that Breekon and Hope didn't own the company, I guess. That those aren't their real names. It does seem to confirm that they have some connection to the Circus, judging by clandestine meetings with someone apparently dressed as a ringmaster – as if it's not obvious if you're dressed as a ringmaster! And their apparent Russian origins. I say 'origins', perhaps... perhaps it's just the last link in a very long chain. If the Circus is connected as closely to the Stranger and the Unknowing as I believe, I should probably keep an eye out for delivery vans.

The other useful thing I found here was one of the old log books. It lists deliveries quite a ways past the point where the company technically ceased to exist, right up to 2013. I need to go through it in more detail, but probably not here. This place... this place is done with its story.

It's just... empty.

I don't like it.

[Tape clicks off. Tape clicks on. There are sounds of a struggle.]

SARAH

Who the hell are you people? Let me go!

[The click of handcuffs.]

DAISY

Like I said, you're under arrest.

SARAH

What for?

DAISY

Shut up. I've—

(Exasperated) You're recording again?

ARCHIVIST

What? It's hardly your first crime on tape, and if we're going to question her...

DAISY

Is that what we're doing?

SARAH

You're making a mistake, is what you're doing.

ARCHIVIST

Ohhh... You thought we were going to, er, y'know, kill her.

DAISY

EI-Elias didn't say.

ARCHIVIST

No, he doesn't, uh... He's not big on micromanagement.

SARAH

It's Elias now, then?

ARCHIVIST

(Confused) What?

DAISY

Get on with it.

ARCHIVIST

Not a fan of taxidermy?

DAISY

Don't like wasting time.

SARAH

Last chance.

ARCHIVIST

I... I really don't want to be interrogating her where those... a-animals can see us.

DAISY

They're dead. They can't see us.

(Sarah snorts)

ARCHIVIST

Yeah, it would just be a bad idea. (**Deep breath**) What's your name?

SARAH

Sarah Baldwin.

ARCHIVIST

Are you the same Sarah Baldwin that disappeared in Edinburgh in August 2006?

SARAH

Some of her. Skin. A few memories. Not on the inside.

DAISY

Hand us that knife, and I can check. Smells rank enough already.

ARCHIVIST

No, not... not yet. Did you go as part of a filming expedition to the Cambridge Military Hospital?

SARAH

A mistake. Thought I'd have fun with some over-curious idiots, but it turned out I had trespassed. I paid for it.

ARCHIVIST

So, what, now you sell dead animals? What is this place?

SARAH

The Trophy Room. A taxidermist shop in Barnet. It says above the door. Surprised to meet an Archivist who can't read.

ARCHIVIST

No, I—

DAISY

(Laughing.) Nice.

ARCHIVIST

Why are you here? You and Daniel Rawlings and, I assume the others taken by that... mimic thing. The anglerfish.

SARAH

It's where we were told to be.

ARCHIVIST

What is it? The thing that stole you?

SARAH

It doesn't have a name.

ARCHIVIST

What did it do to you?

SARAH

Exactly what you think. (**Pause**) They always suffer.

DAISY

How do we kill it?

SARAH

(Laughs) You don't.

ARCHIVIST

There are, er... there, there are dozens of deliveries recorded here by Breekon and Hope. What were they delivering? What is the significance of this place?

SARAH

Nothing, except what people give it. But they give it a lot, make it a place of power for us. Enough to keep certain items here. The couriers brought them, and took them, and moved them where they needed to be.

ARCHIVIST

What items? What was stored here?

SARAH

Books, relics, but nothing since the skin.

ARCHIVIST

The... The skin. The, er... The ancient taxidermy. The-The one that, erm... Scaplehorn. The one he saw.

SARAH

I-I don't know who that is.

ARCHIVIST

He was a-a tax inspector. He came here, and Daniel Rawlings, or his replacement, showed him something he claimed to be the oldest piece of taxidermy in the world. Gorilla skin from Carthage.

SARAH

Was this when you sent your 'Sasha' to interrogate us?

ARCHIVIST

Don't you dare talk about—

DAISY

Sims. Sims. Shut up and focus.

ARCHIVIST

Right. Right.

Is the skin important?

SARAH

Yes.

ARCHIVIST

For the Unknowing?

SARAH

Yes.

ARCHIVIST

And where is it now?

SARAH

(Surprised) You have it.

ARCHIVIST

I... W-what?

SARAH

You don't know?

ARCHIVIST

What do you mean I have it?

SARAH

The old woman, the one before you. She stole it. She killed Daniel, and took it.

ARCHIVIST

G-Gertrude? But, why would— What?

SARAH

You really don't know where it is?

ARCHIVIST

Ah...

SARAH

I see.

[There's the sound of a punch, then running as Sarah escapes. Three
gunshots are fired.]

DAISY

(Panting.) I hit her. I'm sure I hit her.

ARCHIVIST

Oh, you did. Look. Sawdust and cloves. Damn.

DAISY

Come on. Before the Met get here.

ARCHIVIST

Whatever you say.

DAISY

And wipe that grin off your face.

[Tape clicks off.]

[The Magnus Archives Theme – Outro]

JONATHAN SIMS

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