

MAG037 – Case #0090608 – “Burnt Offering”

[CLICK]

ARCHIVIST

Tell me again.

MARTIN

Again?

ARCHIVIST

I want it on tape.

MARTIN

What? Why?

ARCHIVIST

I just want a record. To make sure I have something I can check.

MARTIN

Okay, fine. There were two delivery men. They were big, and they spoke with cockney accents that might have been fake, and they delivered a package for you. I don't remember anything else about what they looked like.

ARCHIVIST

Nothing at all?

MARTIN

[Exasperated] They looked normal. Like you'd expect. They looked like two, huge, cockney delivery men. I don't know what else you want?

ARCHIVIST

What about the table?

MARTIN

I didn't see the table. I guess Rosie must have signed for it. I mean, it's her office on the way to Artefact Storage, that makes sense.

ARCHIVIST

She says the same as you. Two men, doesn't know how they got in, too intimidated to ask, looked "exactly like you'd expect". Useless...

MARTIN

Sorry... Look, John, I do think we should destroy the table, though. I mean, if it's the one from Amy Patel's statement. Just in case.

ARCHIVIST

Elias told me the same thing. Luckily he phrased it as advice rather than an instruction, so for now

I'm more inclined to keep studying it. We're not in the business of destroying knowledge.

MARTIN

I suppose. Can I go now?

ARCHIVIST

Yes, go on.

MARTIN

Thank you.

[DOOR OPENS]

Look, you need to get some sleep.

...

I'll see you later.

[DOOR CLOSES]

ARCHIVIST

Waste of tape, really. He's right. Might as well get some use out of it.

Statement of Jason North, regarding the discovery of an alleged ritual site found near Loch Glass in Scotland. Original statement given August 6th 2009. Audio recording by Jonathan Sims, Head Archivist of the Magnus Institute, London.

Statement begins.

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

I just need to know if you can save my son. I've asked and asked and your people only ever tell me to write my statement. Put it down on paper for investigation. Is that going to help? No. Of course it isn't. Even if you had the power to do

something, would you? Or would you rather watch my son burn so you can take notes.

I've been drinking. You can probably tell from the stains. Well, I don't plan to apologise for ruining your precious paper, and I don't plan to stop. Only way to keep the fear from settling in. If I'm scared I'm going to lose Ethan like I lost everything else, then I'll curl into a ball and never get up. I won't be able to do anything to stop it. I won't let my son burn, even if you cowards don't have the guts to step up and do something.

I'm sorry. I know. There's no-one to blame by my own stupid self. Blundering in where I had no right to go. But yes, I know, you want the whole goddamn story, don't you? So you can look over it in ten years and go "Hmm, interesting" long after Ethan and me are dead. Well, fine. There's not much to it, really. For everything it's done to me,

I didn't really do anything at all. Just messed around in the wrong clearing.

I'm an ecologist. Was an ecologist. Working for the Forestry Commission up in Scotland. It was a great job. For me, at least. I suppose if you don't like hiking or being alone you'd have a hard time with it, but for me it was a great fit. Now, up in the north of Scotland, the bit without all the people, there are plantations of evergreen trees. Huge ones. And their job is the same as pretty much any other tree – to get cut down for wood. Trouble is, a lot of animals make their homes in and around those trees. Badgers, red squirrels, even pine martens. Do you know what a pine marten is? It's a wee bear. An adorable wee bear that needs to be protected. Because the pine marten, like a lot of other species that live in those areas, is protected by conservation laws; can't be legally killed without the sort of special

permissions logging companies rarely have. So it was my job to walk through all these plantations with a clipboard and note down what animals had made their homes where.

You don't need me to tell you that the job can me a long way from civilisation at times. Some of these plantations are... off the beaten track.

Everyone gets so caught up on how small Scotland is compared to other countries, but it's still huge compared to a single idiot wandering through the forests. And there aren't so many people, so you have large areas all but devoid of human life. It wasn't uncommon for me to find myself an hour or more away from a town or main road or any other human life at all. I didn't mind being alone, though, because I knew I had my little boy Ethan waiting for me back at home. Four years old and already sharp as anything. And my wife Lucy. She used to be waiting for me as well.

You see... plenty of strange things out here. That far from anywhere, a lot of folks use it as their own personal dumping grounds. Fridges, microwaves, barbed wire, all sorts. Occasionally strewn throughout the forests and over the hills. I even found a corpse once. Not as exciting as it sounds – they were far too decomposed for me to tell anything about the death. Could have been a mafia hit or could have been a hiker having a heart attack. Result was the same for me: radio it in and then lose two hours of light babysitting a dead guy while I wait for someone to get up and take charge of it.

So when I saw the clearing in the trees near Loch Glass I wasn't worried. I figured I'd seen everything messed up the forest had to offer. Heck, I even saw a friend of mine get impaled on a falling tree once. I reckoned there was nothing

left to shock me. It didn't matter that the hairs on my arm began to stand up, or that I started sweating through my coat in the middle of February, or that that dry acrid taste at the back of my throat made me want to gag. I still headed on over to investigate this odd-looking clearing.

It wasn't man made, or at least nobody had cut trees down to make it. It looked as though the trees had been deliberately planted in a circle. If that was the case, judging by their growth they must have been planted like that almost fifty years ago. In the centre was a large piece of stone, crudely hacked into what looked like a small seat or... maybe an altar. As I stood there on the edge, I realised the trees around me were completely silent, and after a few seconds of examination saw that it didn't look like there were any animals at all around this clearing. It was... unsettling, sure, but it also meant that I had all

the information I needed for my survey of that area. I could tick the boxes and move on. I didn't need to enter the clearing. But I did.

The moment I crossed that threshold I knew I had made a mistake. It was like an electric shock rushing through my body, and my already warm skin began to prickle and burn. I stripped off my jacket with sweat dripping from my fingers, and reached for my water to try and get rid of that foul taste in my throat. I pulled the cap off and took a long swig... half a second before I realised the water was boiling hot. I screamed; well, it was more a gurgle, really, and fell to the floor in agony.

I lay there for almost half an hour, collecting myself and just breathing in the cold winter air of the Highlands, waiting for the pain to die down. Eventually, I managed to compose myself and

stagger to my feet. The strange sensations were still there, but I was able to mostly choke them down, at least until I had a proper look around the clearing. The altar was the focus of the whole thing, but in many ways it was the least interesting part. Clean, smooth stone. No markings of any sort, nothing on top. Just... a rock. Around it, though, on the ground were scorch marks. They didn't seem to radiate out from any one angle, they just covered areas of the forest floor. There was no ash, though, or debris, or anything that might have meant a fire, just the burn marks.

It was following these scorches that led me to the really messed up stuff, because what I saw around the edges of the clearing put them to shame. See, it looked like there were animals in that place once, but now each one lay just beyond the edge. On all of them, the fur or feathers had been

burned away, and all that was left was their skin, scalded a vivid, angry red, like they'd been badly sunburned. They were dead, every one of them, though none seemed to have decayed any more than their compatriots. Either they had all died together, or something in that place was keeping them fresh. Neither option sounded grand to me.

Finally, I looked at the trees. There was nothing wrong with the trees themselves, not exactly. Driven into the trunk of each one was a heavy-looking iron nail. I didn't count how many there were in total, maybe a couple dozen. Each suspended a worn and dirt-caked glass milk bottle that had clearly seen better days. My eyes fell on the string used to suspend them, and I couldn't help but notice it seemed far cleaner and newer than the bottles or their contents.

What was inside each one seemed to vary, some had pine needles and twigs, some were full of dirt, and one or two even held what appeared to be rainwater, though looking closer I could see that it bubbled very gently inside those bottles in an endless simmer. In each I could also see a small photograph, half-buried in dirt or almost boiled clean. They all looked to be the same photograph, though it was hard to tell for sure. An old woman, probably in her fifties or sixties, wearing reading glasses and grey hair curled into a tight bun. She stared out disapprovingly from every bottle.

Weirdest of all, on the bottom of each was tied a lock of hair. It was long and grey, in poor condition, and I reckon it must have belonged to the woman in the photograph. It was tied up with the same new string as held the bottles, except for the fact that it was burned, ever so slightly at the ends.

I was still in quite a lot of pain from the water earlier, but I've always been too curious for my own stupid good. I took a few pictures on my phone, but I wanted some clear shots of the photograph inside to show my friends. God knows I should have just left; it's not like there weren't plenty of warning signs. I just chose not to pay attention. I picked up one of jars filled with twigs and took it off the nail, trying to angle it in my hand to get a better shot of the contents.

Then my fingers slipped and I dropped it. I watched it plummet towards the hard winter ground, willing it not to shatter, not to break. It was falling so slowly, but I was even slower. It exploded into a thousand glass shards and instantly I knew that I had meddled with something I should have left alone. I turned tail and ran, stopping only to reach down and pick up

the photograph. I don't know why, I suppose it felt so weird all of a sudden that I didn't think I could get any more cursed. And I wanted a copy of that picture just to prove to myself that what I had found was real. It was real. You can have the damn thing now, though. I'll leave it with my statement. I know in my heart getting rid of it will make no difference but I have to try.

Because from that moment on, everything I love and value has burned or been destroyed. My car overheated on the way back to the Forestry Commission, and I barely got out before the engine caught fire. My house was a smouldering heap of blackened rubble before the end of the week. Electrical failure. I don't want to talk about what happened to Lucy. I don't want to think about her face at the end.

Now there's only one thing I have left that I value. That I love. And I cannot lose him. I can't lose Ethan. I shouldn't be in this mess. It's absurd. I didn't do anything wrong. I just dropped a bottle. That's all! I don't deserve this. I don't.

I asked about who might have gone to the area, but aside from some middle-aged businessmen on a hiking trip no-one's been anywhere near that clearing for years. There is no reason this is happening, but I'm still going to lose everything. I am so scared.

ARCHIVIST

Statement ends.

He didn't, in the end. Lose Ethan, that is. Ethan North is currently a healthy eleven-year-old boy living with a loving foster family in Inverness. They declined to give an interview. I can't say I

blame them. The rest is a standard muddle – Tim couldn't find evidence of the clearing, Sasha established all the accidents that befell Mr. North and his loved ones appeared mundane in nature. The set-up of the clearing matches rituals or spells in both voodoo and Wicca but nothing definitive and there is no hard evidence of anything supernatural occurring.

There's no reason to believe that when Jason North doused himself in petrol on August the 10th 2009, then lit himself on fire, he was doing anything other than acting out the delusions of a paranoid alcoholic. Paramedics took him to Raigmore Hospital, where he died three days later. He never regained consciousness.

I suppose there is one piece of evidence. Mr. North did include with his statement the picture he found in the bottle. It is a photograph of

Gertrude Robinson, my predecessor at the Magnus Institute, circa 2002 as best I can tell. I have no idea what this means. I have no idea what any of this means. I'm very tired.

End recording.