

MAG093 – #995053 – “Contaminant”

[CLICK]

ARCHIVIST

Statement of Lester Chang, regarding the cleaning habits of his father-in-uh... Er, er, right. Um...

[ADMIRAL MIAOWS, DEMANDING ATTENTION]

Hello Admiral, how've you been? I've missed you too. I just— I'm trying to...

[Sighs] Fine, you want a belly rub, alri—aaargh. Wrong hand, cat, wrong hand. Ah-hah... just... Sorry Admiral, it-it's been a hard few days.

[ADMIRAL STARTS PURRING]

Hope I haven't upset Georgie too much. How can she be mad? She's got you. Er, yep, that's your arse. Thanks for that. Look, I know, I love you too, but can I have my lap back? I kind of... I kinda need to—Aaah... Okay. Okay. Belly rubs. You don't have to worry about all this stuff, do you? A bit over your head, I guess. Bet the world ends, and you do just fine.

[PURRING CEASES]

Oh, right. You done? Okay.

Statement of Lester Chang regarding the cleaning habits of his father-in-law. Original statement given March 5th 1995. Audio recording by Jonathan Sims, H-Head Archivist of the Magnus Institute, London.

Statement begins.

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

My father-in-law was always a fastidious man. When we first met, I made some jokes about OCD, but a few warning looks from Dani shut me right up. Greg Russell was very tidy and very clean, but balanced out, I always thought, by his wife Sandra, my mother-in-law. I know I'm meant to hate my mother-in-law, but honestly Sandra and I got on fantastically. Both of us were kind of messy, and found the chaos comforting and homely, and we had very similar senses of humour. I never figured out whether she and Greg complemented each other, or drove each other up the wall. When I first met them I was horrified by the way they talked to each other, convinced I was about to witness the messy divorce of my girlfriend's parents. But twelve years later they were still together, and I found myself privy to their more tender moments. To be honest, I'm still not sure how *healthy* their

relationship was, but it seems to work for them, and Danielle, my wife, didn't seem to have inherited any of their more *confrontational* habits when it came to our relationship.

All in all, I enjoyed seeing them two or three times a year on holidays, but was kind of glad they lived all the way up in Newcastle. Dani would talk to them on the phone for hours, and I'd get all the updates, but crucially, I didn't have to do much of the interaction myself. And that was more than enough for me.

Then, last year, the... unthinkable happened. Hereditary conditions, right? They... They can really ruin... everything. The doctors told us the chances of it happening were astronomical, like we should be proud of having something so unlikely march in and ruin our lives, but within ten months both myself and Greg were widowers. I think I

must have spent more nights that year in hospital chairs than I did in my own bed. But November rolled around, and I had it all to myself. You don't realise how big a bed can be until something like that happens.

I don't really know what I expected it to do to my relationship with my father-in-law. I mean, I didn't really expect anything at all. If you'd asked me at the time, I probably would have said that it should have brought us closer together, that we'd probably end up leaning on each other for support. But that never really happened. Instead, he stopped contacting me completely. He still answered the phone when I called, but was *polite* when I went to check upon him. Every bit of communication had to be instigated by me.

And he had gotten... cleaner. I didn't think it was possible, but every time I went over there, the

smell of bleach was almost overwhelming. More often than not he was wearing rubber cleaning gloves when he opened the door, and as I walked around I could feel his eyes making note of everywhere I walked, everything I touched. I tried to talk to him about it, suggest he get help, but whenever I mentioned it he would try to change the subject, and talk about television or news, though... if I tried, it became clear he didn't actually follow either.

Finally, I decided I just couldn't stand it any more. I sat him down, and told him that if he didn't talk to someone about his compulsions, I was going to have to set something up for him. I told him that whatever he was doing, it wasn't the right way to deal with Sandra and Dani's death. I didn't handle it well. I was still deep in grief myself, and I almost broke down, pleading with him, telling him it wasn't healthy. When I said that, he laughed.

He actually threw his head back and laughed. It was one of the most unnerving sounds I'd ever heard.

Greg stood up, walked over to a small cabinet in his kitchen, and opened it to reveal row upon row of individually packaged miniatures of gin. He picked up one of them up and inspected it, checking the top and bottom, and examining the seal to make sure it was unbroken. Then, in one swift motion he opened the tiny bottle, and emptied it down his throat. He did this three times before he finally looked back at me. His gaze was softened by the alcohol, but it still looked like an almost physical effort for him to force out the words.

"There is mould in my drain." That's all he said. Not all that strange a sentence, all things considered, especially in that context. But

something in his face, something in the way he pressed those words out through his lips made me suddenly feel cold all over. I made my excuses and left. He didn't look up as I closed the front door behind me.

I tried to forget, tried to just move on and ignore it. If he didn't want my help, then I had no business trying to force it on him. But I couldn't do it. He was Dani's father, my last connection to her. I don't believe in ghosts, or the afterlife, or anything like that, but I knew she would have wanted me to do *something*. Dani never gave up on anyone.

Work wasn't expecting me back for another few weeks, and Dani had had a solid life insurance policy, so there wasn't any problem booking a decent hotel room for a week in Newcastle. I knew that my father-in-law would never allow me to

stay in his home, not at that point, but he couldn't stop me being nearby. So I started to check in on him every day. I brought him hot meals, and talked to him for hours, even when he didn't want to talk back. But none of it seemed to weaken the cleaning compulsion that had taken hold of him. If anything, after a few days I noticed that I had adopted the habit of cleaning my hands a second time before leaving the hotel bathroom. Greg wouldn't let me use his.

On the fifth day, I did see inside his bathroom, though. I won't go into details, but suffice to say my use of it was over his protests. It was just as clean as the rest of the house. Beyond clean, really, as I could see some of the enamel fittings had been worn down, and the tile grouting and sealant around the sink were starting to corrode. I shook my head and turned to leave, but as I did so, I saw small flash of colour in the bath. I pulled

back the white curtain and looked down.

Surrounding the edges of the plug's pristine chrome was a small halo of purple. I leaned over to get a closer look. It appeared to be some sort of fungus, scrubbed away so only the faintest traces remained. There was a spongy, fibrous look to it, and I had the sudden image of long, soft tendrils stretching away down through the pipes. It was the colour of a fresh bruise and smelled sour, like old milk.

I don't know how long I stood staring at it, but when I looked up, my father-in-law stood in the bathroom door with a look on his face that was a mixture of anger and embarrassment. He started screaming at me about privacy and respect, about how he was a clean man, and knew how to keep his house pure. He had a lump of wire wool in his hands, and I left quickly, because.... I was

somehow sure that if I didn't he was going to start scrubbing me with it.

I didn't go back the next day, both to let him cool off, and because I need to spend some time convincing myself that I shouldn't just head home and leave him to whatever the hell he thought was going on. I couldn't get that mould out of my head, though. When I went out to eat, I kept thinking I could smell that awful, sour odour, and I ended up just sitting there, watching my burger as it cooled down, searching its surface for any signs of... something. At one point a fly landed on it, and I just found myself nodding, like everything was exactly as it should be. I don't know. I wasn't sleeping well; my sheets felt odd. Slimy, somehow, though whenever I turned the lights on to look... there was nothing out of the ordinary.

I did go back. Of course I did. He wasn't well. I know I should have done something, forced some help on him somehow, but even now I'm not sure how I could have done it. Greg didn't answer the door, but it wasn't locked. The house was still spotless, but the cleanliness didn't look quite as *fresh* as it had before. Like it had been cleaned earlier, and just hadn't been used since then. My father-in-law was sat on the sofa in the same clothes he'd had on the last time I'd seen him. His skin was slick with sweat, and his face was blank. I called out to him and he looked up, but there was... no recognition in his eyes.

I glanced behind him, and saw the bathroom door was closed. Not just closed, but **sealed**. All the edges and the cracks had been packed through with sealant. He'd even nailed extra wood to the bottom of the door, and sealed all the crevices of that. It didn't do anything to stop that sour smell,

which seemed to pulse and ooze from the doorway, and as I stared at the edges of it, I noticed the sealant was laced through with thin tendrils of purple.

I turned to Greg to say something, to ask a question, but then... I noticed something. I began to realise that, aside from his head, every inch of skin was covered with clothes, with gloves, or a scarf. Whereas before he had been dressing to be sterile, now it seemed like he was dressing to keep covered. And then I looked into his face. I saw the thin crust of purple around his eyelids, the corner of his mouth, and the colour of veins in his bloodshot eyes.

He started to move, to open his mouth, but I didn't give him the chance. I didn't even stop to consider alternatives, I just turned on my heel and ran. Some people might call me a coward, but I

am absolutely sure those people would not have made it out of that house alive.

I know I should have called someone, told the police or the ambulance service, but I was in shock. I didn't know what I'd just witnessed. I still don't, not really. I went back one more time, but I didn't even get past the front gate before the smell hit me, and I turned back. It looked like my father-in-law was moving, though. I remember, it was Breekon and Hope doing it; they had a depot a ways down the street, and I recall thinking how odd that was, using a couple of local lads with such a small van, given how much furniture they were having to load up from Greg's house. I asked them about it, about where he was, but they just looked at each other and mumbled something in Polish or Russian, and then they completely ignored me. I was going to press the issue, but I got another wave of that dreadful, rotten smell

from the house, and realised I had to leave before I was sick.

The next time I went back the place was empty, the smell was gone, and I never saw my father-in-law again.

Statement ends.

ARCHIVIST

[Heavy sigh] Elias gave me this before I left. Said it might help me "clarify my next move". I should really have waited, got some rest before I recorded it, or until I'd had a chance to move out of Georgie's. I've already stayed here too long. It's not fair, putting her in danger like this. Or the Admiral.

God, if Daisy had come while I was here...

I wasn't sure what Elias meant by "my next move" until the end of this statement. Horrible as whatever it was that overtook Greg Russell must have been, it seems less than entirely relevant to the current situation. But Breekon and Hope? Speaking Russian and helping transport a victim of... whatever dark power rules over disease and rot. And insects, maybe? I was just about convinced that they served the Stranger, and their speaking Russian might well support that if it ties them to the Circus, but... this is not the first time they've been delivering things that seem to be tied to other beings. Are they a neutral party, carting round whatever horror needs delivering, just a piece of otherworldly infrastructure? Or are they fully part of the Stranger, just serving as allies of convenience for other things that need to be moved?

Most importantly, though, it mentions a depot in Newcastle. Sasha checked on the Nottingham depot when they first came up... huh, almost two years ago now. A different time. But that had long been gentrified into luxury flats. Sasha never mentioned there might have been other depots, and I never asked. I need to do some digging, because if the place is still there, if-if the building is still standing, I might just have an idea where to—

[SOUND OF KEY IN LOCK, THEN DOOR
OPENING]

Er...

[CLICK]

[CLICK]

GEORGIE

So, what? You were just packing this away?

ARCHIVIST

Georgie, I just, I needed to do *one* more.

GEORGIE

I asked you not to record them here.

ARCHIVIST

I'm sorry, I... I honestly forgot. It's been a hell of a week.

GEORGIE

Yeah, not just for you. What, you think you just disappear for five days, then turn up looking like the, like the end of *Die Hard*, and I'll just write it off? 'Classic John, what an interesting life he must lead.'

ARCHIVIST

No, I—

GEORGIE

Where have you been? And what happened to your hand?

ARCHIVIST

I don't want to talk about it.

GEORGIE

Tough.

ARCHIVIST

Look, I'm moving out anyway, so just... just forget it. I'm out of your life. Alright?

GEORGIE

No.

ARCHIVIST

No... No what?

GEORGIE

You leave, you don't get your tapes back.

ARCHIVIST

What?

GEORGIE

When you disappeared, I took the tapes you recorded, and locked them away. Honestly, I thought I might need them as evidence. You want them back, you tell me what's happening.

ARCHIVIST

Georgie please... You'll think I'm... You'll think I'm delusional.

GEORGIE

I really hope so, John. Because right now I just think you're a dickhead.

ARCHIVIST

...

Alright.

[Sigh] Okay. It started when I got that job at the Magnus Institute, you remember?

GEORGIE

Yeah, they do... studies on ghosts and psychics and that, right?

ARCHIVIST

More or less. Well, I was hired as a researcher, and that was fine. I-I enjoyed it. Nothing really paranormal, but life was... fine. It was good.

Then, a couple of years ago, the Head of the Archives, Gertrude Robinson, she disappeared, and Elias, my boss, chose me as her replacement.

GEORGIE

Why?

ARCHIVIST

What?

GEORGIE

Why would he give you that job?

ARCHIVIST

Uh... He thought I could do it?

GEORGIE

You were a researcher, John, I mean that's, that's a long way from an archivist. And I know you

don't just have a Library Science degree hanging around.

ARCHIVIST

I-I mean it's all the same... data and, and papers and stuff. Isn't it?

GEORGIE

Not really.

ARCHIVIST

Uh... Well, I was given some assistants. Tim, Sasha, and Martin. They helped.

GEORGIE

Were any of them trained in Information Science?

ARCHIVIST

I don't... No? I mean, I haven't even got to the weird bit yet.

GEORGIE

Now, I know you talk a good game, John, but hiring you out of the blue as an archivist is pretty weird.

ARCHIVIST

Head Archivist.

GEORGIE

Well that *does* make sense, actually. In context.

ARCHIVIST

I'm not sure I follow?

GEORGIE

What I mean is, if there's no-one above you, there's no-one to point out you're doing everything wrong.

ARCHIVIST

Look, can we put my professional competence to one side, please. Because I'm trying to tell you monsters are real!

GEORGIE

Okay.

ARCHIVIST

[Confused] Okay? Okay, what?

GEORGIE

Okay, I know monsters are real and I... assume there's more?

ARCHIVIST

I... erm, you, you know?

GEORGIE

Yeah.

ARCHIVIST

Y-You just believe me?

GEORGIE

Yeah, I mean, it's not *belief*. I've seen them.

ARCHIVIST

You've seen monsters?

GEORGIE

Not the time, John.

ARCHIVIST

Right, it's... it's just I think I'm turning into one.

GEORGIE

Really? That's... not great.

ARCHIVIST

Yeah. Ever since I took this job, I've felt a compulsion to read out some of the statements. The ones that really touched the supernatural. And when I do... I... I feel them. I feel their confusion and fear. I tried to write it off, but... And, and I can make people tell me their stories. Anytime I ask a question, people just... answer.

GEORGIE

Okay, well that bit... will need some proof.

ARCHIVIST

Fine, er...

What is something you would never choose to tell me?

GEORGIE

When we first met I thought you were putting on that accent to sound more impressive.

Oh. Oh, John... I'm so sorry.

ARCHIVIST

Oh... No, it's alright. I, er, I mean, I-I guess I did exaggerate it. It's a long time ago, anyway.

Proof?

GEORGIE

Yeah. Yeah, I guess so.

ARCHIVIST

The Institute is... There are beings. Like, weird gods, or powers, or... something. They're outside our universe somewhere, but they push through sometimes in the form of these monsters. A-A-

And sometimes they choose people to be... er,
servants? Conduits?

GEORGIE

Avatars?

ARCHIVIST

Avatars! But they end up getting these abilities,
and they lose a lot of their *self*. Sometimes all of
it.

GEORGIE

And you think... that's what's happening to you?

ARCHIVIST

Yes. Yes. The Institute serves one of these beings.
A-At least, Elias, who runs the place, does. Since
accepting the Archivist job, I-I've been... different.
A-And I can't quit or, apparently, do any violence
to him. I'm bound somehow.

GEORGIE

That does at least explain why he picked you.

ARCHIVIST

Uh?

GEORGIE

If your job is asking questions, I mean. You were always the one who pushed too far, and asked smart-arse, awkward questions. I always was surprised you never got punched.

ARCHIVIST

Well, I think that bit of luck's run out.

GEORGIE

So, you've discovered your boss is evil, making you kind of evil, and you can't quit, so you... fled here.

ARCHIVIST

And... there were some... murders.

GEORGIE

Oh. Ah. I assume that's why I had the police asking after you?

ARCHIVIST

Oh, they came here?

GEORGIE

It's fine, you were asleep. Anyway, that... that makes sense, but it doesn't explain the hand.

ARCHIVIST

Oh, that was... that was one of the other... 'avatars'.

GEORGIE

Of your guy, or...?

ARCHIVIST

No, no. My... My patron is focused on knowledge and observation. Elias calls it The Eye, but I've also heard it called Beholding, or Ceaseless Watcher... a lot of names. This one was... The Lightless Flame, or, or I think she called it The Desolation. It's burning, destruction, pain. All the bad bits of fire without any of the light or joy.

GEORGIE

Sounds lovely. And you were meeting them because...?

ARCHIVIST

One of the powers, The Stranger, is... Its beings are trying to perform a ritual they call The Unknowing. Apparently it's meant to remake the world, bring it closer to their master. I don't know exactly what that means, or where it is, but... I need to stop it.

GEORGIE

Jonathan Sims, are you trying to save the world?

ARCHIVIST

I...

Yeah. I... I guess I am.

But, but I need information, so I've been trying to find as many like me as possible. I've got a lot of leads: a weird Russian circus run by Gregor, or, or Nicola, Orsinov, and these weird van drivers that seem to turn up everywhere and mannequins and taxidermy and skin and all sorts, but... nothing solid. Elias has been sending me statements, apparently to prepare me, whatever that means, but some of the people I've been talking to have been... very dangerous. I'm starting to feel like a bit of a punching bag, to be honest. Would be nice

to meet a monster, and not have a scar to show for it.

GEORGIE

Well. Shit.

ARCHIVIST

So... You believe me?

GEORGIE

Yeah. Yeah, I do.

ARCHIVIST

[Exhales] Oh, thank god.

GEORGIE

John. These, these things you're talking about?

Is... Is one of them, like, Death?

ARCHIVIST

Uh, yes. I-I-I think so. There's one I've heard called "The End". Why?

GEORGIE

...

I'll make us a cup of tea.

[CLICK]