

ARCANUM

By

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INT. MARISSA'S STUDIO - NIGHT

SUBTITLE: THE ARTIST

MARISSA sits hunched over her drafting table. A single light illuminates her desk, her ART SUPPLIES, her COFFEE.

SELF-PORTRAITS are scattered about. Her smile in each image is enigmatic, contagious.

She's not smiling now.

A furtive glance at the CLOCK. 3:19 AM.

Marissa SKETCHES with furious intensity. Beneath her practiced hand, an ARCANE SYMBOL takes shape.

Her pace increases. The pencil SNAPS, but her hand continues to sketch for a heartbeat. Her hand trembles, stops.

She stares at her drawing with haggard eyes. Her voice is soft and hoarse at first, but it escalates to a SCREAM.

MARISSA

Wrong, wrong, wrong, wrong, wrong!

She crumples the paper and discards it. It bounces off a MOUND of discarded sketches that overflow from the tiny trash can.

Marissa's fingers scratch for a fresh pencil and a blank sheet of paper. Frustrated tears creep down her cheeks as she begins another sketch.

INT. REHEARSAL STAGE - NIGHT

SUBTITLE: THE MUSICIANS

LINDSAY caresses the keys of an EBONY BABY GRAND. Her melody is bold, passionate.

DOC stands in the crook of the piano, humming along.

Lindsay adds lyrics to her melody. Doc adds his own voice. Their harmony is seamless.

The looks that pass between them suggest a relationship that extends far beyond a simple duet.

Lindsay stops suddenly.

(CONTINUED)

DOC
(confused)
What about the other verse?

LINDSAY
I'm not sold on the harmony.

DOC
I guess it could work with the two
of us singing in unison.

LINDSAY
I was thinking this might work
better as a solo piece.

Doc studies the score, then it clicks. He realizes this
isn't about the music.

DOC
Oh.

Uncomfortable silence. They break it simultaneously.

LINDSAY
I think we should-

DOC
I'd be willing to-

Another silence.

DOC
Maybe we should call it a night.

Lindsay avoids eye contact as she pecks at the keys. Doc
gathers his things.

Lindsay finds an eerie motif, repeats it, repeats it again.

DOC
You coming?

Lindsay ignores him. The music has her in its grip.

Lindsay begins to sing. Doc stands mesmerized as Lindsay's
new song melts into a haunting chant.

Doc joins in, much to his own surprise. His discordant tones
fit perfectly.

Their voices fade in unison.

DOC
(stunned)
Lindsay, that was...

He struggles to find the right words, fails.

DOC
What was that?

Lindsay finally meets Doc's gaze. She shakes her head, terrified, unable to answer.

INT. DL'S APARTMENT - NIGHT

SUBTITLE: THE DANCERS

Wine. Candles. A romantic dinner.

DARLA and DL savor their meal, their time with each other.

DARLA
Any word from the conservatory?

dL's face falls.

DARLA
You'll hear back soon.

DL
(disappointed)
Sure.

Darla moves closer.

DARLA
Stop it. You're better than that,
and you know it.

She takes dL's hand in hers.

DARLA
I know it.

dL offers a wry smile. The MP3 player plays a new song, and dL's eyes light up.

She stands and flows into a seductive dance. Darla sips her wine, unable to look away.

Darla rises and responds in her own style. She dances for dL. Although her style is contradictory, her movements complement dL's.

The music stops. The dancing stops. The two women face one another.

(CONTINUED)

dL steps toward Darla and sways her hips. Darla takes a step toward dL, mirroring the movement.

In the silence, a new dance begins. Where the first dance was seductive, this one is primal, ritualistic.

The dance descends into sharp, jerky movements. Although no music emanates from the MP3 player, an echo of Lindsay's song carries on the air.

Darla and dL wear masks of pain and agony as the dance reaches a fever pitch.

The dance ends as suddenly as it began.

Darla and dL face one another, panting heavily, wearing identical expressions of confusion and fear.

INT. DRESSING ROOM - NIGHT

SUBTITLES: THE CLOWN

CAT sits before a lighted mirror. The POWDERS, PAINTS, and PENCILS of her CLOWN MAKEUP lie spread out before her.

Cat applies her makeup, a troubled expression on her face. She creates a perfectly sad countenance, then admires her handiwork.

Wrong. All wrong.

Overcome with RAGE, she SMEARS the makeup. The result is a streaked disaster, but it's somehow... better.

Cat dives into her makeup with uncanny speed, applying the tools of her trade with the skill of a true artisan. The new face she creates is darker, more sinister.

Her creation complete, Cat arranges her supplies with tenderness and precision. She stares into the lighted mirror, and her creation stares back at her.

Evil. Pure, unbridled evil.

Cat picks up a pencil and traces an ARCANE SYMBOL on her forehead, one nearly identical to Marissa's sketch.

As CAT applies this finishing touch, her reflection twists into something INHUMAN.

The mirror CRACKS.

(CONTINUED)

Cat lets out a cry of surprise as she falls to the floor. She peers over the edge of the table.

Her shattered reflection stares back at her.

INT. LINDSAY'S APARTMENT - NIGHT

Lindsay sits wrapped in a bed sheet at her computer. Doc slumbers on the bed behind her.

Lindsay pulls up Google and stares at the screen. Her fingers hover over the keys as she considers what to type. She settles on a single word:

"CHANT"

She skims the results, disappointed in what she doesn't find. She alters the query:

"EVIL CHANT"

Page after page of occult symbols, of spells and incantations. Still not what she's looking for.

She forces herself to hum the chant, to remember the words that frightened her so much. She hones in on a musical phrase, on one word. She pecks away at the keyboard:

"HAFHDRN"

One hit. She clicks on the link.

The landing page is an artist's online gallery, all sketches and charcoal drawings. Lindsay's gaze is drawn to a sketch of an ARCANES SYMBOL from an artist named Marissa.

Lindsay clicks on the image, enlarges it. Her breath catches as the image fills the screen.

Her hand drifts unbidden to the image. She traces it with her fingers, fascinated.

The title of the image: Hafh'drn

Scrawled beneath the image, two words.

"please help"

Something GRABS her shoulder. She spins around.

Doc stands over her, staring at the screen. His gaze shifts to Lindsay.

An unspoken understanding passes between them.

INT. COFFEE SHOP - NIGHT

Lindsay sits at a table in the rear of the shop. Doc appears at her side, holding two cups of coffee.

They scan the other patrons, searching for someone.

MARISSA (O.S.)

Lindsay?

Lindsay starts, almost spills her coffee. Marissa stands behind her, clutching a LEATHER PORTFOLIO.

LINDSAY

You must be Marissa.

Marissa nods. She looks like hell. She scans the shop, her paranoia evident.

DOC

Here.

Doc pulls out a chair. Marissa sits.

An awkward silence settles as the trio realizes that no one is quite sure how to begin. Doc gestures toward the portfolio.

DOC

Is that...

His words trail off.

Marissa lays the portfolio on the table and opens it with ritualistic precision. She spreads out a series of sketches, covering the table.

Variations on a theme. THE ARCANE SYMBOL.

Lindsay and Doc handle the sketches as though they were religious relics.

MARISSA

So what does it mean?

LINDSAY

We were hoping you could tell us.

Marissa is crestfallen.

(CONTINUED)

DOC

What prompted you to draw this?
What was your inspiration?

MARISSA

I don't know. IT just... it got
stuck inside my head, and I had to
get it out.

She loses her focus, like someone remembering a distant,
painful memory. Doc and Lindsay don't push.

Marissa snaps back to the conversation at hand.

MARISSA

So why the interest?

Lindsay and Doc exchange a glance.

MARISSA

What?

Lindsay's eyes dart around the coffee shop. When she's
comfortable that no one is paying them any attention, she
CHANTS in a low voice.

Marissa's eyes widen in surprise.

MARISSA

You sang my sketch.

LINDSAY

You sketched my song.

DOC

But what's the connection?

No answer.

DOC

What if...

He pauses, embarrassed. Lindsay and Marissa watch him
expectantly.

DOC

What if something is trying to
communicate through us?

Lindsay looks skeptical. Marissa, not so much.

DOC

For centuries, for millennia,
people have been trying to figure
out what creativity is, where it
comes from. We're creative, and we
have no idea where our ideas really
come from or why we're compelled to
share them.

Another pause. Doc's excitement is palpable.

DOC

What if we've found a way to tap
into the source? Magic. Heaven. The
Real.

(beat)

What if something has chosen us to
be its vessels?

MARISSA

Then it needs to pick someone else.

LINDSAY

Maybe it already has.

DOC

Excuse me?

LINDSAY

Creativity is more than sketches
and songs. Maybe we're not the only
ones. Whatever this is, maybe it's
affected a pianist, or a painter,
or-

DL (O.S.)

A dancer?

The trio turns as one.

dL stands near their table, nursing a coffee.

INT. MARISSA'S STUDIO - NIGHT

The creatives stand gathered around Marissa's drafting
table: Darla, dL, Doc, and Lindsay. Marissa remains seated,
a sketch of the arcane symbol before her.

LINDSAY

Now what do we do?

(CONTINUED)

DOC
How should I know?

LINDSAY
You're the one with all the
answers. I thought-

DARLA
Together.

All eyes on Darla.

DARLA
We should put them together.

Nods of silent agreement all around.

Marissa finds a piece of charcoal and draws her symbol on each creative. She starts with her own hands. Next, the necks of Marissa and Doc. Finally, the legs of Darla and dL.

Lindsay closes her eyes. She begins to hum. When she finds the chant, Doc joins his voice to hers.

dL and Darla flow into their dance. The connection to the chant is unmistakable. Their movements trace an invisible symbol on the floor.

The light over Marissa's table dims. A SHADOW enters the room, hovering just beyond the edge of the light.

The performance reaches its zenith. The entire studio trembles at this new presence.

Then, it's over.

The performance ends. The apartment settles. The shadow disappears.

DL
What the hell just happened?

LINDSAY
Did everyone see that?

Frightened expressions and averted eyes.

MARISSA
It's still not right.

DARLA
Something's missing.

DOC
Someone.

DL
Who?

A GUST OF WIND arises within the closed apartment. Sketches fly in the enclosed space, scatter, settle on the floor.

Lindsay bends down and picks up the sketch at her feet. She holds it up for everyone to see.

A DEMONIC CLOWN stares back at them.

EXT. BACKYARD - DAY

Cat's makeup may be happy, but it doesn't conceal her expression of overwhelming sadness.

A label that reads "CLOWNS FOR HIRE" is plastered on the side of her bag.

She distractedly twists a balloon shape into being. Its resemblance to the symbol is undeniable.

She hands her creation to the BIRTHDAY GIRL.

CAT
Here.

BIRTHDAY GIRL
I asked for a monkey.

With unnerving calm, Cat picks up a nearby CAKE KNIFE and POPS the balloon. The look on the birthday girl's face is priceless.

The birthday girl's FATHER appears at Cat's side. He grabs her elbow, pulls her aside.

FATHER
(hushed)
Look. I don't care what the fuck your drama is, but I'm paying good money for you to entertain these kids. If you don't get your shit together, I'll-

CAT
You'll what?

The father looks down, sees that Cat is still clutching the cake knife. She has the knife pointed at his belly.

(CONTINUED)

FATHER
You're crazy.

The father takes a step back.

FATHER
Leave. Now.

Cat frowns at the knife in her hand, wondering how it got there.

Silence. All eyes on Cat. No one dares move.

Cat lays the knife on the table and simply walks away.

INT. CAT'S CAR - DAY

Cat climbs into her car. She grips the steering wheel in an effort to control her trembling hands.

She glances in the rear view mirror.

The EVIL stares back at her.

Cat lashes out at the mirror.

CAT
No! Go away!

She breaks down, begins sobbing.

CAT
Go away.

INT. CAT'S BATHROOM - NIGHT

Cat lies in a bath of steaming hot water, illuminated by candles. She's still wearing her CLOWN MAKEUP.

An empty BOTTLE OF WINE lies on the floor by the bathtub. Resting precariously on the edge of the bathtub, a RAZOR.

Cat drunkenly opens the razor, pops out the blade. She admires the stainless steel in the dim candlelight.

Cat touches the corner of the blade to her wrist. A droplet of BLOOD appears.

In another part of the apartment, a cell phone RINGS.

Cat starts. She stares at the bathroom door as she lets the phone ring and ring and ring.

(CONTINUED)

Finally, the ringing stops.

Cat closes her eyes. She takes a deep breath. Her hand tenses as she presses the blade against the soft flesh of her wrist.

Her phone RINGS again.

Surprised, Cat fumbles with the razor blade and drops it in the soapy water. She considers for a moment. Finish what she started or answer the call?

Cat climbs the bath, wraps a towel around herself, and sets off in search of her phone.

INT. CAT'S APARTMENT - NIGHT

Cat finds her phone on an end table. When she reaches to answer it, the phone stops ringing.

She hesitates, then picks up the phone. It RINGS in her hand. She presses the answer button.

Cat puts the phone to her ear and listens, saying nothing. She hears soft breathing on the other end, then a voice.

LINDSAY (O.S.)

Cat? Is this Cat Migliaccio?

CAT

Who's this?

LINDSAY (O.S.)

Are you the clown who got kicked out of the kid's birthday party earlier today?

CAT

Go to hell.

LINDSAY (O.S.)

I know about the symbol.

Cat's blood runs cold. She can't find her voice.

LINDSAY (O.S.)

Cat? Are you there?

CAT

What do you want?

(CONTINUED)

LINDSAY (O.S.)
We want to meet you.

CAT
We?

INT. MARISSA'S STUDIO - NIGHT

The creatives stand assembled in a rough approximation of their previous gathering. Cat stands apart, facing them. Her clown makeup is gone.

CAT
You're crazy. All of you.

DOC
Cat, please. This is huge. Imagine the possibilities. We may be able to connect with something at the edge of our understanding, the very source of our inspiration.

CAT
We have no idea what we're dealing with here. What makes you so sure it's all sunshine and roses?

MARISSA
Who cares? I just want it to stop.

DL
I don't. I'm with Doc. This could change my life. It could change all of our lives.

A look passes between Darla and dL. Darla squeezes dL's hand in encouragement.

Lindsay moves close to Cat. She pulls Cat aside, lowers her voice.

LINDSAY
I can't speak for anyone here except myself, but I'm tired, Cat. I'm tired of seeing other people get ahead while I'm still struggling just to pay rent. I need to break out, I need my shot, and this... I think this might be it.

Lindsay lets Cat chew on this for a moment.

(CONTINUED)

LINDSAY

How many more birthday parties do you need to get booted from before you're ready to change your circumstances?

No answer.

LINDSAY

What do you want, Cat?

CAT

I want to stop hiding behind a mask. I want to be me.

Lindsay takes Cat's hands in hers.

LINDSAY

If we do this, everything changes.

Cat looks at each creative in turn as she deliberates. When she nods her assent, a hushed wave of joy and relief rushes through the group.

Cat picks up her makeup bag and disappears into the bathroom.

INT. MARISSA'S BATHROOM - NIGHT

Cat opens her bag and removes her supplies. She stares at her reflection for a long moment before she begins.

Cat applies her makeup with a patient, steady hand. The clown face that appears is both menacing and melancholy.

Cat's hand rests on the makeup pencil for a long moment as she stares into the mirror. She puts the pencil back in the bag and reaches for something else.

Her hand emerges clutching the RAZOR BLADE.

INT. MARISSA'S STUDIO - NIGHT

Each creative prepares for the impending ritual in his or her own way, some alone, some together.

The door the bathroom opens, and Cat emerges.

Cat stands before them as the dark clown. A BLOODSTAINED BANDAGE is wrapped around one forearm. The arcane symbol on her forehead stands out DEEP RED against the greasepaint.

(CONTINUED)

Shocked expressions all around, save for a relieved smile on Marissa's lips.

CAT

So. How do we do this?

Doc steps forward and leads Cat into the center of the room. He looks to Marissa, who nods her approval.

Darla and dL takes positions on either side of Cat. They look to Lindsay.

Lindsay begins to chant. Doc adds his voice to hers. Darla and dL begin their dance, keeping Cat between them at all times.

The force that visited them earlier returns with a vengeance.

The light in Marissa's lamp FLARES, then DIMS. Sounds of BREAKING GLASS and SLAMMING DOORS accentuate the chant. The wind returns, blowing sketches everywhere.

A DISEMBOodied VOICE adds itself to the chant, transforming discord into dark harmony.

Cat's face contorts, transforms, reverts to normal.

The chant, the dance, and the chaos all peak simultaneously. Cat HOWLS in agony, then collapses to the floor.

Everything stops at once.

Lindsay takes a step toward Cat's prone form.

LINDSAY

Cat?

Cat's body shudders. A wet, gurgling sound fills the room.

She's LAUGHING.

Cat twists, contorts, flies to her feet. Her movements are inhuman.

Cat isn't Cat anymore. Now, she's HAFH'DRN. She's the reason that humanity is afraid of the dark.

She continues to laugh.

DOC

Are you-

Hafh'drn spins to face Doc. The laughter stops.

(CONTINUED)

Doc gestures to his companions.

DOC
We answered your call.

Hafh'drn smiles. The sound that emanates from its lips are invasive, more felt than heard.

HAFH'DRN
Thank you.

The lights go out, and PANDEMONIUM sets in.

SCREAMS pierce the darkness. FLASHES OF LIGHT accentuate the terror and violence shared by the small band of artists.

FLASH. Something SLASHES at Doc's throat. FLASH. His hand covers the wound, drenched in an unstoppable flow of BLOOD.

FLASH. Two HANDS grasp either side of Darla's head. FLASH. Darla's head is turned completely around, her neck BROKEN.

FLASH. Lindsay raises her hands before her face in a futile attempt to defend herself. FLASH. Lindsay's hands are gone, replaced by TWO BLOODY STUMPS.

FLASH. dL turns to run. FLASH. dL is on the floor, both of her LEGS broken at odd angles.

FLASH. Marissa stares at the horror, wide-eyed. FLASH. Marissa is blinded by TWO PENCILS sunk deep in her eye sockets.

Darkness. Whimpering. Silence.

It ends as abruptly as it began.

The LIGHT above Marissa's table FLICKERS to life.

The mutilated creatives lie scattered about the studio in a rough approximation of the arcane symbol.

Hafh'drn fades to Cat, fades to Hafh'drn, fades to Cat. Cat finds a tenuous grip on reality and refuses to let go.

She stands at the center of the carnage, clutching a piece of BROKEN GLASS in one hand. BLOOD drips from her palm as she squeezes the shard.

An uncanny calm settles on Cat as she absorbs the scene and realizes that this violence came at her hand.

Her eyes settle on the shard. Hafh'drn's reflection smiles back at her.

Cat raises the shard to her neck and slits her own throat.

EXT. SIDEWALK - NIGHT

A YOUNG GIRL, far too young to be out alone at this hour, strolls by the studio on the sidewalk far below. She's blissfully oblivious to the horror within.

The girl begins to whistle a familiar tune softly to herself.

Lindsay's chant.

FADE TO BLACK