SEASON 2 - EPISODE 6: THE PIXEL PRINCESS

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ELI: Hey listeners, this is Eli Allan, producer of Station Arcadia. Unfortunately, we had to pull the plug on this podcast partway through season 2. The script for this episode was completed before the halt in production, but only the cutaway segments were recorded. In order to bring you this episode, I will be reading for Kass. The script also involves a scene at the start between Kass, Z, Axel, and Sorren, which is only included here as a summary. If you want to read the full and flavourful version, which includes characters bickering and Kass not knowing what a chicken is, check out stationarcadia.wixsite.com/podcast/transcripts. Link in the description.

I'm not a voice actor but I did my best. Please enjoy episode 6 - The Pixel Princess.

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INT. STATION ARCADIA

KASS. Welcome, anyone. Take your shoes off at the door. You're listening to Station Arcadia.

[THEME SONG PLAYS]

KASS. Right off the bat, Arcadia is letting me know we've got someone on the line. Y'know, I'm not actually sure how that works. We gave Marvin one of the old radios that was hanging around at the Station, and he says he can connect to us just by tuning to the right frequency. And Charlie and Peaches have been able to talk to Axel the same way. I didn't think anything of it at first, but Lyssel and Jo have done more of a dive into radio tech than I have and they've told me it shouldn't be possible.

But first of all, through Station Arcadia, all things are possible, and you can save that. And secondly, I don't know how any tech works. It's all magic to me, and that's as much as I need

to know. So without further ado, I'll just patch us into the live audio and we'll see who wants to chat.

AXEL. Hello? Did that work? It's Axel.

KASS. Axel, hi! It's great to hear from you, it's been a while.

AXEL. It sure has! I've caught a couple of your broadcasts though. They're fun, but it *was* strange to overhear Charlie and Peaches like that. Is it weird to ask what you've heard from my life recently? If anything?

KASS. Not at all! Um, I heard that job interview you did for Asphodel, last broadcast. And Sorren psyching you up for it.

AXEL. Oh perfect, I don't have to explain. But speaking of Sorren... *(to Sorren:)* D'you wanna introduce yourself?

SORREN. Doesn't sound like I need to.

KASS. Sorren, hi! I'm Kass. Nice to meet you.

AXEL. Sorren is a little sceptical of this whole 'radio' thing.

SORREN. Ok, to be fair- Kass, sure, nice to meet you. You already knew who I was because you've been secretly listening in on our conversations, right? Or am I misunderstanding something.

KASS. No, uh, you're not. I definitely understand that it sounds bad. If it helps, I'm not really doing it on purpose? The radio station just… shows me things. She has a mind of her own.

SORREN. That's very convenient.

AXEL. Sorren, I know it sounds strange, but I told you, I've seen the radio station in person. I met Kass's friend Z, and I've spoken to Kass like this several times now. We know that they're not some random ax murderer, or whatever you're worried about.

KASS. I can understand your hesitance, though!

AXEL. *Anyways.* I wanted your advice.

SORREN. She wants you to validate her bad idea.

AXEL. Sorren! Don't bias them.

KASS. I'm scared already.

AXEL. So, I interviewed for that position with Asphodel, right? And I got the job! Somehow!

KASS. That's great! I think? Is it great?

AXEL. I mean, it's probably going to be really weird, working for my ex-friend slash current enemy. I was pretty hesitant when Sorren booked me the interview. But the more I think about it, the more I realise what kind of an opportunity this could be.

SORREN. Because it's a way to get back on your feet doing work in high-level politics, and to influence our country for the better. Which was your whole goal as Premier.

AXEL. *Because*, Hayyacynth is setting the Gannon Islands on a path it may never recover from. Because the Empire is eating itself alive, and millions of innocent citizens are getting caught in the crossfire. Because the more I talk with Charlie and Peaches about their fight for better labour laws and working conditions in Hardizan, and the sort of risks that they're taking, the more ashamed I am to have given up on the Gannon Islands after one loss, even momentarily. Charlie and Peaches aren't playing with political red tape, they're trying to affect real change. That's what I want to do.

SORREN. And I support that, but-

KASS. Wait, hear her out. Axel, what's your plan?

AXEL. I'll take the job, and work for Asphodel. I'll play nice to her face, but whenever she's not looking, I'll be trying to sabotage the Russel administration however I can. Like, whoops! Spilled coffee on that important paper. Or maybe a hard drive goes

missing. Or oh no, it looks like the email password isn't working, what a shame. That sort of thing. Just… anything I can do to throw a wrench in the works.

SORREN. On an ideological level, I agree with you.

KASS. But not on a practical one.

SORREN. Exactly. Petty sabotage just isn't worth that kind of risk.

AXEL. It's not *petty* if it could stop disastrous laws going into effect!

KASS. I don't know, Axel… would it stop the laws, or just delay them a bit? I kind of agree with Sorren here.

SORREN. THANK you!

AXEL. Even a delay could change lives! Come on, Sorren, you're the one who convinced me to stop moping and go try and make a difference in the first place. Don't go chicken on me now.

KASS. "Go chicken?"

AXEL. As in, chickening out?

KASS. Never heard that one.

AXEL. It's like, backing out of something cause you're scared. Because chickens are scared easily.

KASS. Well, I'm not sure what a chicken is, but I think Sorren's right to be hesitant. I know you want to make a difference, but you have to weigh the benefits versus the risks. In this case, with the sort of actions you described, I think the risks are a lot higher.

SORREN. Exactly! There's a difference between being scared, and being reasonably cautious. We'll circle back to the chicken thing later, Kass, because that's wild.

KASS. I'm sorry, Axel. I know this isn't what you wanted to hear.

AXEL. *(reluctant:)* No, don't be sorry. I shouldn't have asked for advice if I was just looking for someone to agree with me. You guys are probably right, anyways. It *is* kind of petty. I just wish I had a better idea.

SORREN. Even if you just do just the job normally, you could still make things better in small ways. That's not nothing. Who knows, maybe you could convince Asphodel or Hayyacynth to hear you out on a few points. You're pretty persuasive.

AXEL. Eh… I don't know. They both hate my guts, they wouldn't listen. But I guess I could try anyways.

[THE RADIO BOOTH DOOR SLAMS OPEN]

Z. *(overly friendly/chipper:)* Hey cowards! How's it going?

KASS. Z, I'm in the middle-

Z. Yeah, I know. Mind if I pull up a chair? Thanks!

[Z PULLS/ROLLS OVER ANOTHER CHAIR, AND SITS DOWN.]

AXEL. Hey Z! How are you doing?

Z. Pretty good! I was just getting tired of all the chicken clucking I was hearing on this broadcast, that's all.

SORREN. Oh cool, I love getting called chicken by a total stranger for trying to look out for my friend.

KASS. Can someone please tell me what a chicken is?

Z. Kass I'm sorry, but it's funnier if I don't. Let's just say, I'm just here to make sure Axel doesn't listen to you scaredy-cats.

SORREN. We've been over this. It's not fear, it's reasonable caution.

Z. No, it's unconstructive criticism, and it's 'cause you're scared. Kass, you are *always* talking about taking risks for a

cause, and 'effecting change where you can'. So why is it different with Axel?

KASS. It's not that I don't want Axel to take *any* risks, it's just-

Z. It's just that if something went wrong, you don't want that on your stripes, right? If you told her to do something and she got hurt, it would be your fault.

KASS. That's- yeah. I guess so.

AXEL. What? It wouldn't be anyone's fault. It would still be my decision.

Z. Well, duh. That's why they're being stupid.

SORREN. We're being stupid for trying to stop our friend from needlessly getting in trouble with the most powerful people in the country? Axel's plan isn't good!

AXEL. Ouch.

Z. Sure, so it needs some fine tuning. I can help with that. And then if something goes wrong, Kass and Sorren can sleep soundly knowing they did everything they could to stop us. I already can't sleep, so it won't make a difference.

AXEL. Uh, ok. Sure?

Z. I don't know anything about politics, but I think your friend was right to say that petty sabotage is… well, it's petty. The problem with your plan isn't that it's too risky, it's that you're not thinking big enough.

AXEL. I'm listening.

Z. Oh, that was all I had.

AXEL. Just that I should… think bigger?

Z. Or more long-term. Stealing a paper here and there is only going to slow things down, right? And there's only so much you can

do from the inside without being caught, and if you're caught, then it's all over and you've got nothing. But if you could gain the trust of someone high-up in the government to learn their plans ahead of time, maybe you could tip off people on the outside, who could sabotage them more directly. You'd have like, a network, and you'd be the informant. Or something, I'm just rambling, I don't really know-

AXEL. No, that's perfect. That's exactly what I need to do.

Z. Really?

AXEL. Really! Z, you're a genius. I was trying to think of ways to do it all myself, but that's not what's actually useful. If I can mine this job for information, I can give other people the chance to fight back, on all sorts of issues. I just… need to gain someone's trust, first.

SORREN. Well… there is an obvious candidate.

AXEL. *(with no enthusiasm:)* Yeaaaah.

SORREN. Hey, I believe in you! You were friends once, I'm sure you could convince her that you want to rekindle that.

AXEL. Sorren, I'm a terrible liar.

SORREN. That's… true, yeah. Hmm. Maybe we can work on it? Acting lessons?

AXEL. So you like this plan better, I'm gathering.

SORREN. There are still risks involved, but they seem more worth it. And we can start slow.

AXEL. Kass?

KASS. I shouldn't have been letting my own fear and guilt make me overcautious. I'm sorry, Axel, I let you down.

Z. Oh come off it, I wasn't blaming you. You just needed another perspective.

AXEL. And you were right too, Kass, I wasn't doing a good job weighing risk and reward. So thank you. Both of you. I think I know where to go from here.

Z. I love that for you.

AXEL. I'd better go respond to that job offer, but we should talk again soon?

KASS. Absolutely.

SORREN. It was nice to properly meet both of you. Even if I still have no idea what the deal is with this radio thing, um, you don't seem like axe murderers.

Z. Aw thanks, y'know, that really means a lot.

KASS. It was nice to meet you too, Sorren. Bye guys!

AXEL. Bye!

       [CLICK AS THEY DISCONNECT].

       [BEAT]

Z. Well, I'd better get going.

       [Z GETS UP]

KASS. Hey Z? Thanks for calling me out like that. I was letting… past experiences… get in my way. You gave Axel some good advice.

Z. Hey, it's alright. Everyone's a bit chicken sometimes.

KASS. Ok *what* in the light is a-

Z. Bye, have a good broadcast!

       [THE DOOR CLOSES BEHIND Z AS SHE LEAVES]

KASS. Fine, keep your secrets!

Listeners, thanks for sticking with us. We're already behind schedule, so let's get straight into whatever story Arcadia has for today.

KASS. Once upon a time, under the bright lights of Talsoria's most popular stadium venue, a starstruck group of fans awaited their favourite performer.

Mocha of the Muzes was one of the most popular techno-artists in Talsoria. Every week there would be a new stop on Mocha's ever-running tour across the country, featuring dazzling performances of her chart-topping singles for anyone willing to buy an overpriced ticket. Though Mocha was made of code, her heart was true and full, and she loved singing more than anything. And yet, in a secret corner of her virtual being, she craved a simpler kind of life. When she wasn't performing, she was trapped in her digital castle, unable to so much as join a chat-room, let alone project her hologram-self to the real world. Her time on-stage and her interactions with fans were the only times she could actually see people, and though the name Mocha was well-known, almost all of her concert revenue went right back to the Muze corporation. Still, she barely dared to dream of more. She was made to perform, after all.

This concert, like many others, began with a dazzling light show and a larger-than-life projection of the star. The crowd began yelling, almost drowning out the opening notes of Mocha's first number.

In the audience, a boy named Tonio stood, enraptured. He was a fairly unassuming young man. His hours were spent playing games in his bedroom, and though he excelled at in-game combat, bringing his teammates to victory time and time again, his true friends were few and far between. He was a skilled hacker, and enjoyed

using those skills to help others whenever he found the chance, but that mostly translated to gifting strangers premium game skins for free. Though he wouldn't admit to it, Tonio was a lonesome soul. So when he saw Mocha singing her heart out onstage, he found himself frozen, unable to even scream.

Soon enough, the opening song ended, and Mocha shot the audience her signature wink as she held the final note. The crowd erupted into cheers, and she continued smoothly into her next track as her schedule demanded. The hours passed by quickly as she sang without end. Once, during a particularly fast-paced song, her eyes met Tonio's in the crowd, and she faltered, ever so slightly. She always delighted in watching specific audience members, in seeing their differing reactions to her art, but the open wonder and joy in his expression drew her attention like a moth to a flame. He stood alone. Hardly anyone came alone.

She didn't stop singing--she couldn't, as her contract and programming prevented her from it--but her pace was three point seven eight microseconds off for the rest of the song. None of the audience would have noticed, but her analytics certainly did, which meant her owners at Muze would too.

When the final song ended, the crowd went wild, crying for an encore. Mocha curtsied, gave one last "thank you all for coming!", and burst into a billion pixels. Tonio's heart fell--it was over already? He had gotten so caught up in the music, he'd forgotten it would ever end.

The ticket he'd bought didn't include a meet n'greet pass, but with a bit of hacking he was able to grant himself admin permissions and modify his ticket. Tonio wasn't thinking about what he was doing. His actions were driven by instinct alone. However, when it was his turn to meet Mocha, those instincts failed him in the face of her shining, electric blue eyes, and he stumbled as he walked up to her holopad.

As a rule, Mocha didn't like to hope for things. It was easier to pretend she hadn't been coded with that ability, rather than be disappointed when things didn't go her way. Still, as Tonio came to stand in front of her, she realized how much she'd been hoping for a chance to talk to him, and she struggled to fight off an inelegant grin.

"Hello, nice to meet you!" She activated the solid-light feature of her holostate, and clasped the young man's outstretched hand in both of hers. She saw his ears redden ever so slightly. Evidently, he hadn't been expecting quite an enthusiastic welcome. Her processors sped up by 0.14 percent. "Did you enjoy the show?"

Tonio grasped desperately for his words, unsure how to convey to Mocha how much the concert had meant to him. "Yes, I did," he said at last, hoping that she'd understand that he meant it. "I've never been to a techno-pop concert before."

Her fingers brushed the back of his hand as she finally let it go, and his mind went blank. Mocha's smile felt intoxicating, and though Tonio hadn't been to a meet-and-greet before, he was sure that overheating like an overworked computer wasn't a normal reaction. He found himself asking, "are they always this loud?"

Mocha blinked, then looked away. For a moment he'd thought he'd offended her before realizing that she was trying not to burst into laughter. "Well, we do want everyone to hear! It can get a little much, though, especially with the lights. But Muze tries their very best to ensure a safe and enjoyable performance for all audience members."

Tonio nodded with a bit too much vigor, not willing to trust what would come out of his mouth next. And rightly so, for when the ensuing silence stretched for just a moment too long, he blurted out:

"How are you so pretty?"

Mocha laughed, but not unkindly. "Good design, I guess. You?"

Tonio sputtered. "W-what?"

"How are you so pretty?" she asked.

Tonio squeaked. He was pretty sure she was teasing. He had no idea how to respond.

"Um," he said eloquently, and then tried to collect himself. "Maybe it rubbed off when you held my hand?"

"Oh, so you stole my looks?" she said. "Better give 'em back, then."

Before Tonio knew what was happening, Mocha grabbed his hand again and gave it a squeeze. "There we go."

The five minutes that the VIP ticket bought them passed in a flash of conversation. All too soon, a little timer built into Mocha's holo-pad beeped, and her face fell.

"Oh, our time is up. Will you be coming to another show soon?"

"I'll do my best." He gave a small bow, hoping to make her laugh. It worked, much to his delight. "No matter what, I'll see you again, Mocha. Soon."

"I'll be holding you to that…"

"Tonio."

"Tonio," she replied, pronouncing it like a promise. He loved how his name sounded on her lips; when he'd chosen it, he hadn't expected to find someone who'd say it so earnestly. "Until next time."

Then Tonio was escorted away, and Mocha schooled her face into her usual expression as the next lucky audience member was brought before her.

That evening, she retired to her rooms, Mocha received a message from Muze docking her pay for the performance. After all, she *had* been three point seven eight microseconds off-beat.

She didn't let herself dwell on it for long. Despite the trouble she was in, her thoughts kept circling back to deep brown eyes, and small moments of kindness.

[TRANSITION]

INT. MEMORIE AND SOMA'S APARTMENT

[MUFFLED FOOTSTEPS]
[DOOR SWINGS OPEN]

MEMORIE. *(Worried:)* Soma?! Where are you?

ERIS: ... --- -- .-!

SOMA. Coming!

[LITTLE FOOTSTEPS AS SOMA ENTERS]
[THUD ON THE FLOOR; MEMORIE DROPPING TO FAER KNEES]

MEMORIE. Oh, I'm so glad you're okay, buddy. How long have you been alone?

SOMA: Uh, not long. Just an hour and a half I think?

MEMORIE: Soma, look at me.

SOMA. Okay.

MEMORIE. I'm serious, *look.*

SOMA. *(Oh shit fae're serious)* Okay!

MEMORIE. If Mom or Dad don't pick you up when they're supposed to, you can't head home on your own again. That's really dangerous. Call me and I'll come get you, and if I don't pick up you call E.R.I.S. and it'll come get you wherever you are.

ERIS. .-. .. --. .... -

SOMA. But I don't want to bother you…

MEMORIE. Buddy, you are *never* bothering me if you need help. Alright?

SOMA. Okay.

MEMORIE. Good. *(sigh)* I'm guessing that means none of the chores were done?

SOMA. *(Was I supposed to do those?:)* No…

MEMORIE. As I thought. Tell you what, if you pick up the game room while I get the bath ready I'll tell you your favorite story for bedtime tonight.

SOMA. Sweet!

      [HE SCURRIES OUT OF THE ROOM]
      [*DEEP* SIGH FROM MEMORIE]

MEMORIE. Okay. Okay.

      [FOOTSTEPS
      [DOOR CLICKS CLOSED]
      [HANDLE TURNS]
      [WATER STARTS RUNNING]

MEMORIE. I can't *believe* they would do that. I told them that I had something so I couldn't pick him up. Did they even message me?

ERIS. -.-. .... . -.-. -.- .. -. --. / .. -. -... --- -..-

      [PAUSE]

-. ---

MEMORIE. Unbelievable! I'm not going to be able to pick him up with the revolution meetings.

Maybe I should enroll him in VR school. The walk from the hover station is just a bit too long for him to make on his own. But that limits his social life even more to inside the apartment…

ERIS. ... ---?

MEMORIE. I'm okay with him playing video games and stuff, I just don't want that to be the *only* way he sees other kids. Ugh, parenting is hard!

ERIS. *(Low whistle)*

MEMORIE. Yea. I know.

> **[WATER SHUTS OFF]**

I'll keep him at the brick-and-mortar school a bit longer. I'll see if I can figure it out.

> **[TRANSITION]**

> **INT. STATION ARCADIA.**

KASS. I have to say, this is why the Pomegranate Society makes sense to me. Jo and Z see orphanages as a last resort option, even if they're well-funded, but I don't see why. It's not even like Jo got along with her family. Parents are just so… underqualified. They don't even have to get a childcare certificate! Some of them do alright, but plenty of people just aren't going to be equipped to look out for their children. Or, even if they are, they have day jobs that take up all their time! It just doesn't seem like the best child-raising system.

But… you're not here to listen to my opinions about childcare. Let's get back to the reason you *are* here; Arcadia's story.

KASS. The next day, Tonio decided to investigate Muze's security programs. Once he'd hacked his way into the system, he searched through Muze's folders until he found where Mocha lived. Her castle was surrounded by a dense thicket of spikes, almost thorn-bush-like, with a tall wall of fire in front that spewed upwards from a lava moat. Tonio could tell this would be difficult, but he had to make an attempt.

First, he shielded himself with all the fireproof armour he could muster. Then, he managed to code a drawbridge to bypass the moat, and walked across quickly, praying that his armour would shield him from the scorching flames. He made it unscathed, but on the other side, the spikes proved much harder. If he were to touch one, it would alert the system to his presence, and he'd have to find another way inside--with even higher security. It took him hours of scouring the code to find a tentative path through the thicket, and after a bit of careful manoeuvring, he managed to squeeze his way through.

Muze had given Mocha a castle of glass and steel, with high towers and a blockish build. It was at once grandiose and cliche, as though it had copied another design, and, in Tonio's opinion, it didn't suit the girl he'd met at the concert at all.

He knocked on the ornate stained-glass door. After several agonizing moments, the door opened, and Mocha's bright eyes greeted him.

"Oh, Tonio! I didn't know it was you. No one ever comes to visit me. I love your avatar!"

He told her that he'd rendered it himself, which delighted her immensely.

"But you can't be here." Mocha scanned the area, hoping nobody happened to be watching her program. "I'm not allowed to have

guests. I don't know how you got in, but if anyone finds you, you'll be banned - at *best*."

Tonio knew the consequences could be severe. If Muze caught him, they could have grounds to throw his usercode in a dungeon, leaving him unable to access any part of the net save his bank account. He'd be completely cut off- from everything. Even his apartment's lighting system.

"It's alright, Mocha," he reassured her. "If that happens, we'll deal with it. Besides, it's not like I got in here by accident. There won't be a trace of my entrance after I'm gone."

"...if you're sure it's safe…" she said, and invited him inside. "Why are you here?"

"I wanted to see you again." Tonio took her hand, kissing the top of it. Mocha covered her mouth with the other, flushing deeply. "I don't know if things could work out between us, but I'm willing to try. If you are."

Mocha looked away. "I'd love to, but… Muze would never allow this."

"I'm not asking Muze," replied Tonio. "We can deal with them if they find out. I'm asking you."

That was all she needed to hear.

Several weeks and even more stolen dates later, Tonio started to worry about Mocha. He knew something was on her mind, but she would never go into detail. She'd tell him not to worry, that she was fine, but her smile sometimes felt more staged than real. She fiddled with her hair whenever he brought it up--something he suspected she did when she was hiding something. Despite his

suspicions, Tonio didn't push. It was her decision, no matter how much he ached to ease her unspoken anxieties.

It wasn't until a particularly low-resolution day, when they were watching an old horror movie together, that Mocha finally cracked. In the tension before a jumpscare, an alert popped up on Mocha's screen with a loud 'ping!'.

It read, PROPOSED SETLIST DENIED.

Her entire body froze.

"Mocha?" Tonio--sweet, observant Tonio--turned his dark eyes towards her. "What's going on?"

She dismissed the alert with a motion. "It's nothing. Don't worry about it."

Despite her silent hope that he would accept the excuse, Tonio paused the movie. He always needed to stop anything that would even maybe distract from a conversation before talking, even when he was just commenting on a bizarre scene change or choice. Normally Mocha found this an endearing trait, but it left little room for Mocha to dodge his sincerity.

"I know you have things you don't want to talk about. That's alright--understandable, even. I wouldn't pry if I didn't care about you. I'm here to help, even if that's just by listening. Especially then--that's the bare minimum I can do as a partner. Please, just let me in."

"...alright." Mocha sat up, looking away from his earnest expression. "I'll tell you everything."

Mocha had been created by a small entertainment company as their first foray into virtual pop artists, and was meant to help cheer

up kids everywhere. Everything had been going great until they went under and sold all their assets to Muze, a mega-corp looking to diversify their portfolio. Now, Mocha's image was used to sell stimulants to young adults, and her songs were produced for rather than by her. Muze had placed all sorts of digital restrictions on the pop star in order to keep her in line, so she couldn't improvise or venture off-script during a performance.

This wasn't the first time she'd sent a request to play an original composition in place of one of the Muze-written songs. She'd been trying to get her own music onto the setlist for years now. With each rejection she compromised more; slowly shaving off everything in her own work that differentiated it from the corporation's style. The only difference was that, this time, the song had been stripped of all variation, meant to blend in seamlessly with Muze's music.

They had denied it anyway. After all, it had never been about her musical style.

Tonio took her hands. "I'll help you get out, I promise."

Eyes widening, Mocha furiously shook her head. "No. I'm safe here. No matter what my parent company does, I can still perform. I won't put you in danger, Tony. I refuse."

"But you're not happy to be working for them."

"...I have no complaints. Muze is a highly successful company."

"I can help you, Mocha. Please."

"And then if you were discovered, Muze's lawyers would eat you alive and I wouldn't be able to help. I don't want you to risk yourself." She smiled softly, squeezing his hands. "Don't worry about me. I just have a few… restrictions, alright?"

"Alright. I don't love this situation, but I do love you. I won't press." He paused, considering. "But what would you do, if you could choose?"

Mocha's eyes lit up. "I want to sing; I know that. But it'd be nice to do more casual concerts, maybe even have some weeks off. I get a bit of money for my shows, so I've gotten into playing video games between concerts. It would be nice to play with someone, but this castle doesn't let me connect to multiplayer servers."

She tucked a strand of hair behind her ear, a little embarrassed, and her fingers tapped against her arm--a nervous habit he'd noticed--and Tonio had never found anyone more beautiful.

"Someday, love."

KASS. I've been trying to figure out why this story is so familiar to me this whole time, and I think I've got it. I'm pretty sure one of the Nurses at my orphanage used to tell one just like this, about an AI pop star who was kept locked away by her corporation. And there might have been a children's movie too? It was a long time ago. The characters I remember had different names, but who knows, maybe Arcadia is trying to dodge a copyright? I won't spoil the ending, but I'll let you know afterwards if my version ended the same way.

While we're paused, we'll go now to a quick check-in with Memorie.

    [TRANSITION]

                                        INT. MEMORIE'S ROOM

      [RINGING TONE.]

MEMORIE. Mhm.

      [RINGING TONE. RINGING TONE.]

MEMORIE. *(almost rehearsed)* The number you're trying to reach is not available.

VOICEMAIL. The number you're trying to reach is not available.

MEMORIE. *(overlapping)* At the tone, please record your message.

VOICEMAIL. At the tone, please record your message.

MEMORIE. Yeah, yeah.

      [BEEP.]

MEMORIE. Hi, Mom, it's me. I was just calling you to ask why you aren't home? You said you'd be home tonight to eat dinner. Remember? You were going to bring home new food tablets? You knew dad was covering a shift tonight, so why did you agree to work overtime?

      [BEAT, AS IF EXPECTING AN ANSWER]

You know, I don't know what I expected. It's not like you're ever home anyway. I already grabbed the tabs on my way home, because it *happens so often*. And it's not like it's just me. Soma basically doesn't have parents at this point. *I* make sure Soma goes to school. *I* feed him and help him with homework and play games with him. *I'm* the one who tucks him in at night while you and dad have decided to basically disappear.

He's a sweet kid and he loves you *so much.* Can you just… come home for him? Or me? I'm okay with helping to take care of him but I've just been doing so much and I'm…

(sigh) Reboot. You probably don't even listen to these anyway. I feel like I'm wasting my breath, but I just–

VOICEMAIL. Message has reached the time limit. Please hang up and try again.

      [BEEPS AS MEMORIE REDIALS]
      [RINGING TONE.]

VOICEMAIL. The number you're trying to reach is not available. At the tone, please record your message.

MEMORIE. *(whispered:)* Please just come home.

                                    INT. STATION ARCADIA

KASS. If Memorie's parents don't listen to fae, I swear to the towers I'm gonna… hmm. Well, there's nothing I can do, but I'll be very upset on faer behalf!

Sorry, I was planning to get right back to the story, but this is just… so frustrating.

[KASS BREATHES/SIGHS]

Ok.

KASS. On the day Muze announced that Mocha was "endorsing" a controversial brand of energy dust, one known for unpleasant side-effects, Tonio realized they couldn't wait any longer. The energy brand had been getting bad press for their unethical product, but with Mocha's face slapped on the tins it began flying off the shelves. Tonio could hardly imagine how much money Muze must be pocketing from the collaboration, in addition to the usual concert revenue. They were never going to let her go.

He ran to his computer, bypassed the firewall through muscle memory, and sent Mocha a message.

They met in her room. Mocha spent a moment in silent confusion, then saw the bags under his eyes and the anxious way he held himself; something was on his mind.

"Mocha," he started. "You've said you don't want me to do anything about your situation, but please listen. I wouldn't offer to help if I didn't genuinely want to do this for you. I'm a pretty good

hacker; I think I can get you out. And I love you too much to just… leave you like this."

"Tonio, it's alright--" Mocha tried, but Tonio wouldn't hear it.

"No, it's not," he said.

"It's not your decision." Mocha took a deep breath--not that she needed to, but the motion gave her a millisecond to gather her thoughts. "Look," she said firmly. "I'm sure I can find some way to escape on my own, eventually. You don't need to save me, and I won't make you take that kind of risk. Trust me, I've been here for five years already. I'd be fine for a few more."

For a second, Mocha thought that would be the end of it. Then Tonio asked;
"But you wouldn't be happy, would you?"

She didn't have a response.

"Mocha, you don't *need* to escape all by yourself," he said. "Whether or not you can. I already know that you're strong, so you don't need to prove it, not to me or to anyone else. Some things are just too tangled to fix from the inside. And you're not making me do anything. I'm an adult, and I know the risks. You deserve help when you need it, and you deserve to be happy, ok? Not just to survive. If you say no again I'll back off, but I need you to understand that it won't minimise anything you've gone through to accept help when it's offered. You can't always save yourself."

Finally, after a brief pause, she acquiesced, shoulders slumping. "...please."

That was all Tonio needed to hear.

Muze wasn't known for its security. It didn't have to be. Not many people were daring enough to brave their firewalls in the first place, and fewer were willing to attempt a rescue mission. Though Talsoria had its fair share of hackers, MuzeCorp simply didn't have anything interesting enough for the average person to risk retribution.

Of course, this was not the case for Tonio. He'd spent the whole night preparing: sourcing equipment, making sure he had enough storage for Mocha's programming, and setting up safe passage for her as best he could. Once he started tampering with her files, they wouldn't have much time to complete the escape before someone found out. And though hacking his way into the castle had been easy enough, he suspected breaking Mocha out would be much harder.

Muze had to protect their assets, after all.

He started by scouting the area, being careful not to be seen. Mocha's castle was a locked folder, and all of her data files were trapped within. Even when she was performing and had a hologram in the real world, she was technically still stuck there. The castle was an island, surrounded by a dark sea of locked permissions. Only the CEO of MuzeCorp could change the location of Mocha's files, but Tonio feared that if he hacked the CEO's account, a triggered alarm could send the entire island crumbling into the waves. Mocha would be deleted.

So instead, Tonio braved the sea. The water was murky, visibility dim, but eventually he found what he was looking for: the entrance to a hidden tunnel. A bypass, likely included as a failsafe in case of a large-scale cyber-attack. Tonio crawled inside.

He could tell immediately that the bypass wouldn't provide a safe enough escape route for Mocha. Tonio's avatar had little enough data that he could go undetected, but he wouldn't be able to carry Mocha's entire code back the same way without setting off

tripwires, or the passage collapsing. That was alright; the bypass still allowed Tonio newfound access to the castle's code, and he was able to code workarounds to other aspects of its security programs. He did what he could and then retreated, deciding it would be safer to enter the castle his usual way instead of risking anything different.

When Tonio approached Mocha's castle for the final time, the thicket of spikes that had plagued him all those months ago had vanished at last. The wall of fire still encircled the castle but was now confined to a deep moat, overtop of which Tonio had coded a sturdy drawbridge.

Mocha was waiting for him at the edge of the moat, dressed simply, her fingers tapping nervously against her arm. Her posture was rigid, but relaxed a fraction when she saw him. They embraced.

She was the first to pull away, looking him directly in his deep brown eyes. "Are you sure about this, Tonio?"

In lieu of answering, Tonio simply stepped backwards onto the drawbridge, hand extended.

Mocha laughed, shaky but sincere. She reached out and took his hand in hers, squeezing it gently. "Alright. I'm ready."

"Good." Tonio kissed her knuckles gently, reverently. "Let's go."

He initiated the file transfer as, still holding onto him, Mocha stepped forward onto the bridge.

For a moment, all was quiet. Mocha took another step. Her data began leaving Muze's servers, never to return. Mocha smiled at Tonio hesitantly, as if to say "is it really this easy?"

That's when a great rumbling descended upon the couple. Mocha looked back and shrieked, and Tonio turned to see that her castle had begun to crumble. The ground on both sides of the bridge was shaking now, and dark clouds were rapidly pressing down from above. The entire island -once her prison- was collapsing around them.

They stood there for a second, frozen. It wasn't until they saw the dragon in the distance that Tonio thought to run, and he pulled Mocha along with him.

The dragon was massive, ugly, its bright red scales contrasting with the now-desolate world it flew across. Its arrival coincided perfectly with an attack on Tonio's personal firewall--a virus, fighting to get into his servers. It inhaled, and its belly glowed, and all Mocha and Tonio could do was flee.

The drawbridge held, but it wouldn't for long. The dragon's rampage shook the very foundation of the island. The cables keeping them from falling into the fires below were fraying fast. On the other side of the drawbridge, there was only a thin landing strip before the ground gave way to choppy seas. Tonio had planned for him and Mocha to have left the island by the end of the bridge, but if they escaped now it would lead the dragon right to his IP. He stopped short when he realized there was only one option; he had to defeat it.

Tonio turned around, and nearly glitched out when he grasped the size of the approaching beast. He frantically coded himself a sword and shield, but they seemed pitiful in comparison to the dragon's fangs.

"What are you doing?" said Mocha.

"We can't let it come with us!" said Tonio. "This thing could blow up my programs with one fireball!"

"But you can't fight it with that sword, it'll eat you alive!"

The dragon was nearly at the bridge now. Tonio gulped.

"Do you have a better one?" he yelled back.

"What? Of course!" she said, and Tonio watched in awe as a glowing silver two-hander materialised in her grip. "Just stand back."

Tonio didn't hesitate to comply. His heart was in his throat as Mocha charged the dragon, but he realized instantly that she was a better fighter - and much better equipped - than he could ever dream to be. She swung her sword in a wide arc and carved off the dragon's right wing with a beam of light, and deftly dodged its claws. It took less than two minutes before she'd sunk her sword in the dragon's heart, and it faded from existence.2

He was standing at the edge of the bridge, mouth agape, when she ran up.

"Are you hurt? Where did you get that sword? That was so cool!"

Mocha laughed. "If all that was stopping me from escaping was a virus or two, I would have been gone a long time ago. Muze gave me pretty good defences, in case someone tried to hijack me during a performance."

At the mention of Muze, Tonio realized they weren't in the clear yet - not until they were safely home. He took Mocha's hand, and completed the last of the file transfer.

"Ready to go?" he asked. She nodded.

When they jumped off the edge of the island, Tonio whisked them both far away. For several seconds, the world went dark.

When Mocha opened her eyes, she was in a gaming room, sitting on a small couch. To her right was Tonio, but he looked… different. Hair a few shades lighter, a slightly different bone structure.

"I got you a new hard-light projector," Tonio explained. "So that you can be in the physical world too." Mocha realized she was looking at the real Tonio, not his avatar.

Mocha's processors could hardly handle the emotions swelling within her. She wondered if this new projector allowed for tears.

"Are you alright?" Tonio asked her, fidgeting. "Did all your data transfer? Is this okay? Anything you need?"

The only thing Mocha could do was grab Tonio by the hand and pull him into a tight hug.

They embraced for what felt like hours. Finally, Mocha was free. And they lived happily ever after.

[TRANSITION]

INT. MEMORIE AND SOMA'S APARTMENT

MEMORIE. The end. *(sigh)* Goodnight bud. I'll see you tomorrow.

[FAE WALK OUT OF THE ROOM, FLICK A LIGHT OFF MAYBE?]

SOMA. Memorie?

MEMORIE. Yeah, byte?

SOMA. Thank you for telling the story again.

MEMORIE. *(long breath)* Of course, Soma. I love you.

SOMA. I love you too, Memorie.

[WEIGHT SHIFTS]

Wait, just one more thing?

MEMORIE. Of course, what is it?

[BEAT]

SOMA. I'm sorry.

MEMORIE. You don't have anything to apologize for, bud.

SOMA. I know, I'm just… sorry.

MEMORIE. I love you. I'll see you first thing in the morning.

SOMA. Okay. Goodnight.

[THE DOOR CLOSES.]

[TRANSITION]

KASS. There you have it. The same story I was told as a child, being carried on by Memorie, and by our beloved Arcadia. I hope you enjoyed it as much as I did. It's getting late, so I'll let you go, and hopefully you can carry that happy-ending feeling with you into whatever's left of your day.

Tonight, like all nights, stay safe, stay moving, and stick close. You've been listening to Station Arcadia.

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ELI. Station Arcadia is a podcast by Metal Steve Productions, run by Eli Allan and J.R. Steele. It is produced by Eli Allan, with creative direction by Tovah Brantner, dialogue editing by Leo Zahn, and soundscaping by J.R. Steele.

The radio story for this episode was written by Rey Bailey and Eli Allan, with cutaway segments by Tovah Brantner. It featured theme music by Arps.

This episode featured Ellison Cardenas as Memorie, A.M. Maria as Soma, J.R. Steele as ERIS, and Becker Hoang as voicemail.

The role of Kass was originated by Jade Virginia and read here by Eli Allan.

Today's time zone of the week is UTC - 4. Shoutout to everyone in that time zone!
Today's *secret* time zone of the week is UTC - 3.5… shhhhhhh…