

THE ART OF DEFIANCE

by

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Audio Adaptation

Substack version

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CHARACTERS

ARIANA (30), female, artist.

ZINNIE (30), female, cleanser.

NOTES ON THE TEXT

When Ariana speaks in voice-over, it should sound distinct from when she speaks in direct action: (V.O. SOUND QUALITY)

Voice-over sequences are indicated by (VOICE-OVER) in front of Ariana's dialogue.

SFX indicates a sound effect.

A forward slash (/) indicates an interruption and overlapping speech.

Starred dialogue (*) indicates two characters speaking simultaneously.

Ellipsis (...) in place of dialogue indicates an active silence between characters.

A beat (BEAT) can indicate a brief pause or a shift in thought or energy.

Actors are welcome to ignore these notes.

SFX: START V.O. SOUND QUALITY.

ARIANA: (VOICE-OVER) That day, the Echelon Director teleported into my studio and said:

"Ariana Artist. This is your final warning. One more breach of artistic standards and you will be aspirated."

That's when they remove all your thoughts, your feelings, your dreams. Every aspiration, sucked from your brain.

I was so tired. I couldn't keep fighting.

So I gave up.

Then Zinnie arrived, and changed everything.

SFX: END V.O. SOUND QUALITY.

SFX: A KNOCK AT THE DOOR OF ARIANA'S STUDIO.

ZINNIE: (BEAT) Ariana?

ARIANA: (BEAT) Huh? Zinnie? Oh my...

ZINNIE: Got a hug for me?

ARIANA: What are you...? How did you...?

ZINNIE: Ariosto died yesterday. They reallocated me this morning.

ARIANA: Here? To me?

ZINNIE: Look. It's on the report.

ARIANA: I can't. Believe it.

ZINNIE: They cocked up, huh?

ARIANA: You're so tall.

ZINNIE: I finally started growing after they sent me away from you.

ARIANA: I thought - I'd never see you again.

SFX: START V.O. SOUND QUALITY

ARIANA: (VOICE-OVER) I hadn't seen Zinnie since we were thirteen years old. We'd been friends.

ARIANA (cont'd):

Secret, forbidden friends. I was an artist: the highest echelon of Empire citizens. Zinnie was the lowest: a cleanser. In the Empire, you were born into an echelon and there you stayed. It was the law, ruthlessly enforced since the accession of "our wise leader, ever-gracious in his guidance".

SFX: END V.O. SOUND QUALITY.

ARIANA: Let's have a drink. To old friends.

ZINNIE: Old friends. Not often we get lucky, is it? A toast - to "our wise leader, ever-scratching at his gonads".

ARIANA LAUGHS

ZINNIE: And may his next shite be a hedgehog.

ARIANA: Oh, I've missed you.

ZINNIE: You look like you haven't laughed in twenty years.

ARIANA: I don't think I have.

ZINNIE: Well, I'm not surprised. The staff here are as chirpy as stuffed canaries.

ARIANA LAUGHS AGAIN.

ZINNIE: That cook. She could pickle onions just by looking at them.

ARIANA: Careful. She's a spy.

ZINNIE: Ah.

SFX: START V.O. SOUND QUALITY

ARIANA: (VOICE-OVER) There were spies everywhere. So many rules to break. And changing all the time. The media models were broadcast non-stop: announced new laws; told people what to do; what to look like; who to be.

As an artist of the Empire, it was my job to update the media models.

SFX: END V.O. SOUND QUALITY.

ARIANA: Sit. Tell me everything. Don't miss out a thing.

ZINNIE: What's to tell? I've been skivvy-ing for your lot. Always worked for artists. Ariosto for the last ten years. Arnauld before that.

ARIANA: I never thought I'd be so glad to hear that Ariosto's dead.

ZINNIE: I'm thrilled. He was a torn-faced git.

ARIANA: I liked him.

ZINNIE: You didn't have to clean up after him. Dirty sod. Always left stinking skid marks all over the toilets. And he used a different bog every time.

ARIANA LAUGHS.

ARIANA: So many times I've wished I could talk to you. This feels like. Like a dream. Are you really real?

ZINNIE: Ow. Stop pinching.

ZINNIE SHOVES ARIANA.

ARIANA: I've got to make sure you're not a figment of my imagination.

ARIANA RUSHES AT ZINNIE WITH A FLYING TACKLE.

ZINNIE: Ow. Gerroff.

THEY RUMBLE ON THE FLOOR LIKE CHILDREN: YELPING, LAUGHING, GASPING.

ARIANA: Well. You're real alright.

ZINNIE: So is this bruise. You're an animal.

ARIANA LAUGHS.

ZINNIE: So what have you been doing all these years? Besides abusing your devoted servants.

ARIANA: Ha!

ZINNIE: Tell me everything. Don't miss out a thing.

ARIANA: Nothing to tell.

ZINNIE: C'mon. Can't be that boring. A top echelon artist like you.

ARIANA: (BEAT) It's really hard.

ZINNIE: I know. All this. Silk cushions. Velvet sofa. Servants becking and calling.

ARIANA: I tell barefaced lies. Every day.

ZINNIE: Just find a way to survive it. / We all have to.

ARIANA: / But. What I do is. Wrong.

ZINNIE: You're just an artist. / You can't change the Empire.

ARIANA: / Just an...

ZINNIE: It's screwed.

ARIANA: And I'm not doing anything to make it better.

ZINNIE: You'll drive yourself crazy.

ARIANA: Last week, I had to make the media model attack a disabled person. Tip him out of his wheelchair. Ask "What do you do for the Empire?" Then I see people copying it. This woman kicked a crutch away from a man with one leg. Told him to get a job. I felt like killing myself.

ZINNIE: C'mon. It's not like any of it's your idea.

ARIANA: I think they roll around in their palaces drunk and stoned. Making up stupid rules. Just because they can.

ZINNIE: Sounds about right.

ARIANA: And. I do the wrong things. So badly. That I'm *this* close...

ZINNIE: What?

ARIANA: I'm on a final warning.

ZINNIE: A final... (BEAT) Why can't you / just...

ARIANA: / I can't. Live with myself.

ZINNIE: Well. You're going to start.

ARIANA: I will not.

ZINNIE: If you think...

ARIANA: What?

ZINNIE: I will not let you do this to me.

ARIANA: This isn't about you.

ZINNIE: No?

ARIANA: I have no choice.

ZINNIE WALKS TO ARIANA AND SLAPS HER
FACE.

ZINNIE: I just got here. First bit of luck I've had in
twenty years. And then you go and get yourself
aspirated. Don't be so bloody selfish.

ARIANA: But I...

ZINNIE: You can choose to stay here. With me.

ARIANA: I...

ZINNIE: Like old times.

ARIANA: We were just children.

ZINNIE: We were friends.

ARIANA: We can't be friends. It's illegal.

ZINNIE: So. Let's enjoy it as long as we can.

BEAT

ARIANA: I've only got until 5 o'clock.

ZINNIE: How come?

ARIANA: I've got to get my next commission done. My
final warning. It's due today.

ZINNIE: What have you to do?

ARIANA: Ugh. I've got to adjust the media model. For "safety reasons".

Women's boobs need to be bigger again. So all the plastic surgeons are going to make a fortune. The men get to cop a bigger handful. And the women waste their money. Safety reasons.

ZINNIE: Don't think about it.

ARIANA: The other day. They made me do an advert that reclassified tobacco as a "healthy and nutritious vegetable". Because they had overproduction in the colonies. Killing people. Just to shift the bloody stock.

ZINNIE: Just get it done.

ARIANA: Then last week. They decided that Global Corporation would run all the art schools. What do Global know about educating artists? They sell carpets. And I had to make it seem like a brilliant idea.

ZINNIE: You've got three hours.

ARIANA: (BEAT) I don't think I can.

ZINNIE: Do it for us.

ARIANA: Will you help me?

BEAT

ZINNIE: * Like old times.

ARIANA: * Like old times.

SFX: START V.O. SOUND QUALITY

ARIANA: (VOICE-OVER) When we were children, I was always being punished for breaking artistic rules. Zinnie used to find me. Comfort me after I'd been beaten. Then she started helping me with my art. She was so talented. Easily as good as me. But if they ever discovered a cleanser making art...

ARIANA (cont'd):

That day, Zinnie helped me, just like old times. I gave the media model bigger boobs. Zinnie helped me follow the guidelines. Corrected my mistakes. She saved me again.

SFX: END V.O. SOUND QUALITY.

ZINNIE: You did it.

ARIANA: All the rules?

ZINNIE: Every single one.

ARIANA: I'll send it.

ZINNIE: Hold my hand. (BEAT) How long does it usually take? (BEAT) The suspense is killing me.

A GREEN TICK APPEARS ON THE SCREEN.

AN ELECTRONIC VOICE: "YOUR COMMISSION HAS BEEN ACCEPTED".

THEY WHOOP AND DANCE WITH JOY AND RELIEF.

ARIANA: I did it.

ZINNIE: You did it.

ARIANA: I did it.

SFX: START V.O. SOUND QUALITY

ARIANA: (VOICE-OVER) We chased each other round the room, deeply happy to have more time together. Our joy became. A surprising passion. We locked eyes. Caressed. I was choked with love for this beautiful woman who had found me again and saved me again. And we fell into our passion. It pulled us under. And we kissed.

All night long, we loved.

BEAT

Next morning, I woke to Zinnie's kiss.

She handed me a plant, flowers tumbling over the edge of the pot.

SFX: END V.O. SOUND QUALITY.

ZINNIE: You always loved gardening. There's nothing growing in here.

ARIANA: They bring me vases of flowers. I hate it. I hate * watching flowers die.

ZINNIE: * watching flowers die.

ARIANA: I don't think I've ever felt this happy.

ZINNIE: I have that effect on people.

SFX: START V.O. SOUND QUALITY

ARIANA: (VOICE-OVER) But I knew. We both knew. They were never going to let us be together. No one in the Empire was allowed to love.

Ever since the richest one percent retreated behind walls of fear and money, citizens' lives have been controlled, separated, limited by the system of Echelons.

Love can't be controlled. It connects people. And so it is crushed.

SFX: END V.O. SOUND QUALITY.

ARIANA: I wish this could last forever.

ZINNIE: How long d'you think we'll get?

ARIANA: Not long.

ZINNIE: How long?

ARIANA: Days. A week if we're lucky.

ZINNIE: Days.

ARIANA: The cook with the pickling look might have reported us already.

BEAT

ZINNIE: What shall we do?

ARIANA: There's nothing we can do.

ZINNIE LEAPS UP.

ZINNIE: We need to make the most of every minute.

ARIANA: Come back to bed.

ZINNIE: We must - Carpe diem.

ARIANA: Oh God.

ZINNIE: If this might be the only day we have, we have to seize it.

ARIANA: It's not like we can go anywhere. Come back to bed.

ZINNIE: But we have so much to do.

ARIANA: What?

ZINNIE: (BEAT) I don't know.

ARIANA LAUGHS.

ZINNIE: What shall we do?

ARIANA PULLS ZINNIE BACK INTO BED.

THEY KISS, AND SETTLE INTO EACH OTHER'S ARMS.

ZINNIE: How can we take them down with us?

ARIANA: What do you mean?

ZINNIE: Let's not go without a fight.

ARIANA: We can't beat them. They control everything, everyone, all the time.

ZINNIE: They're not controlling us right now, are they?

ARIANA: Suppose not.

ZINNIE: What would get them where it really hurts?

ARIANA: They'd go nuts if they'd knew you'd made art yesterday.

ZINNIE: That's it. We'll make art. Tell the truth.

ARIANA: We could film it.

ZINNIE: Film me making it. A cleanser making art.

ARIANA: Making love to an artist.

ZINNIE: Break every rule we can. On camera.

ARIANA: And then I'll set it to broadcast. All media channels. All over the Empire.

ZINNIE: After we're...

ARIANA: (BEAT) Aspirated.

BEAT

ZINNIE: Will it hurt, do you think?

ARIANA: I think they remove the part that feels pain.

ZINNIE: No more thoughts or dreams. Will we even be - us?

ARIANA: We won't feel a thing.

BEAT

ZINNIE: How will you make it broadcast?

ARIANA: Trade secret. I could tell you but then I'd have to kiss you.

THEY FALL TOGETHER ON THE BED,
LAUGHING AND KISSING.

ARIANA: I could make the stuff I was always too scared to make.

ZINNIE: A picture of our wise leader - shagging a pig.

ARIANA: Being impaled on a rhino horn.

ZINNIE: All the Government ministers. Lying about stoned.

ARIANA: Smoking "healthy and nutritious vegetables".

ZINNIE: Sticking them up each other's arses.

ARIANA: Women with boobs any size they like.

ZINNIE: It could start an artists' rebellion.

ARIANA: A Cleansers' rebellion.

ZINNIE: God, the place would be filthy.

ARIANA: We could tear down the media models. People would be free.

ZINNIE: This shit would stick. Even better than Ariosto's.

ARIANA: For once, we'll tell the truth.

SFX: START V.O. SOUND QUALITY

ARIANA: (VOICE-OVER) For many hours, Zinnie and I made art. Subversive art. And we made love. Frenzied. Joyful. We filmed it all. To prove that a cleanser can make art, and that an artist can love a cleanser, and be loved in return.

We broke the rules.

Eventually, exhausted, I loaded our art and our film, and set it to broadcast.

And we fell asleep in each other's arms.

BEAT

We woke to sirens and searchlights.

Lifted from bed, teleported to prison. Bars slammed into place. Our sentences passed.

In separate cells, we waited.

SFX: END V.O. SOUND QUALITY.

ARIANA: I know you can't hear me, Zinnie. But I rejoice. In just one day, you set me free. One day with you was worth a hundred years of that other life. We lived a lifetime in one day. We loved a lifetime.

I feel this space beside me. Where you are not. And yet you're here. The emptiness is full of you. I feel the press of your hand. The brush of your kiss. This veil is physical. But we're more than that, Zinnie. We're light and love and magic. I'll meet you in the stars.

SFX: START V.O. SOUND QUALITY

ARIANA: (VOICE-OVER) Then they aspirated me. A lobotomy of all my thoughts, feelings, and dreams. My consciousness removed and stored in a crystal jar. My body, still breathing, but lifeless. To be used for spares.

I couldn't sense anything at first, and then I realised I could hear Zinnie...

SFX: END V.O. SOUND QUALITY.

ZINNIE: I know you can't hear me, Ariana. My heart is breaking. Grief suffocates me. And the rage. We had so little time. One day. A sip of a life. Just a sip. It should have been glorious.

But, your love. It catches me. I feel held. Grief must be torn from love. It's made from the same stuff. And we loved - in our one day. You made me the most - *me* - I've ever been. Just from a sip with you. Imagine we'd been able to drink our fill.

SFX: START V.O. SOUND QUALITY

ARIANA: (VOICE-OVER) Then they aspirated Zinnie. She fell forward into blankness. I sensed along the shelf until I reached her crystal jar, and our consciousness watched together.

As our film broadcast across the Empire.

People were shocked. Then they began to rebel. Break out of their echelons. Start riots. The Empire tipped into chaos.

Sirens. Crowds. Running. Fighting. Screaming.

Winning.

The leaders were hauled from their palaces, and the Capital City fell, reclaimed by its people.

BEAT

Zinnie and I sit side by side on our dusty shelf, cobwebs stretch between our crystal jars. No one has been aspirated for years now.

ARIANA (cont'd):

We don't have bodies, but our love doesn't
need them. Our consciousness roams the world.
We learned how to travel across time, to think
across the ages. So we came back. To warn you.

When you start to see the richest people
retreat behind walls of fear and money.

When they divide the citizens and set them
against each other.

When they control people using media models.

Then, you'll know it's coming.

SFX: _____ END V.O. SOUND QUALITY.

END