

Arcana Magi Cross - c.1

by H-M Brown

"I can't believe it's time." A female red bird said alongside the bank of a river in a forest. She turned around and faced a blue turtle, a yellow cat, and a green lizard. Small as they were on the ground, they each had a bead attached at the base of their necks that match color of their skin and fur. It was a sober moment for all four of them. "I guess this is goodbye right Kame?"

"Yes Tori." The male turtle said hearing the whimper of the cat. "Neko there's no need to cry. It's back to our long journey to find new Avatars after all."

"It's just..." The female cat said wiping away her tears. "It's just hard to say goodbye to my Avatar. She was such a good friend. She grew up so fast."

"That's life." The male lizard said with such a cold voice. "We have to find new Avatars and time is a luxury we don't have."

"Ryu?" Tori hopped over to the lizard but he walked away. The red bird stood beside her friends watching Ryu climb the nearby tree. He jumped off the trunk spreading his legs apart exposing the leathery wings attached to them. Everyone watched him leave without saying a single goodbye. Tori growled under her breath until Neko pat her in the back.

"He's right. We don't have too much time. It could take us a year as always to find a compatible Avatar."

"Indeed Tori." Kame walked slowly toward the edge of the river and looked back. "I'd give you all a hug but I am quite slow and the tide is in my favor. Good journey."

"We could carry you after we hugged Kame." Tori said and Neko giggled.

Kame paused for a second and realized that was true. However, it was too late for him to turn around and raised his flipper to wave goodbye. Kame swam into the river, dove underwater, and rode the currents.

Looking at the flowing river, Tori lowered her head down quietly

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and Neko leaned close to her face. The bird shifted her eyes away not wanting to say goodbye, but Neko lifted Tori's head up with her paw to face her.

"It has been a long time since we searched for new Avatars Neko."

"Yeah." Neko looked up at the sunny sky. "This time we had eight years with them. I don't know how long we'll have with our next Avatars."

"I wish it could be forever."

"It's the longest we've had our Avatars in decades Tori. Watching them grow up into adults, and then seeing them off into the world. It is hard to let go. It's also hard for us to adjust to new Avatars once we select them. It takes time."

Tori nodded in agreement and turned to Neko. They hugged each other goodbye with a smile. As Neko ran off into the forest, Tori looked up into the sky and saw a flock of birds flying together. She lifted off into the setting sun in her yearlong search for a new Avatar.

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A hand closed a history textbook with the stamp 'Property of Pierrot Junior High School'. It was set beside a notebook with the name Ai Hino on the top corner. Ai leaned back on her chair resting her hands on the back of her short black hair. She rubbed each strand through her fingers, gathering her thoughts for a moment. When Ai sat up she looked at the calendar with Friday circled in the month of April. With a long weekend ahead, today was the day she gets to spend the weekend with her friend. She packed her bookbag with her clothes, her personal items, money and a few magazines she wanted to catch up on. Ai double-checked her room to make sure everything was clean and in order so her parents would not bother her. With a smile, she hurried out of the house.

"I am leaving mother." Ai said with a cheerful tone and received her usual goodbyes with parental warnings. She hurried down the block when the sound of a cat's piercing screech made her stop. Ai looked over the fence and saw something that looked like a red ball

come at her. She shielded herself when it struck her, and she fell to the ground. Ai looked up at the black cat on the fence hissing at the red ball on her stomach.

"Huh?" Ai picked up the ball and noticed the feathers. Wings unfurled and the head looked up. Staring deep into the bird's eyes, Ai could have sworn she saw flames. Flames that reached for her heart like a hand grabbing an apple. It was so hypnotic that the memory imprinted in her mind. The cat screeched again, snapping Ai out of her trance and she threw the bird into the air.

"That girl." Tori said circling around in the sky with the imprinted memories of the girl's emotions. She felt the good in her, but was uncertain about what lied in the teen's heart. There was Mana, but Tori wanted to talk to her to make sure. So she followed the girl keeping her distance.

Ai arrived at Main Street. The bus with its route marked to 'New London' arrived. Ai ran so fast to the stop, she bumped a longhaired person at the end of the line. She took a deep breath and looked up.

"I'm sorry ma'am."

The longhaired person ahead of her was not a woman but a man with red hair. He stood unfazed by her bump, giving no attention. When he turned to face the steps of the bus, Ai felt coldness from his green eyes. As though there was no joy or care in him. She felt a shiver in her shoulders when the man climbed aboard and she just stood there.

"Are you coming aboard?" The bus driver said catching Ai's attention.

"Does this bus go to Memorial Academy?" Ai said while Tori circled high above the bus watching on.

"Yeah." He waved her aboard. "Come on."

Ai climbed aboard the bus, showing her student pass, and she sat in the front keeping her eyes forward. The presence of the man at the back of the bus continued to make Ai shiver. She did not understand why. This was a feeling she never experienced with anyone before, but it all subsided the moment her memories flashed the images of the flame. Ai lifted her hands up and saw they no

longer shivered. The fear was gone as though someone just came and snatched it out of her hands. It was unusual. Somehow, in her mind, she wanted to do something about that guy. Warn someone about him, or maybe confront him. It all ended when the bus sounded the horn and came to a sudden stop. Ai looked out the window watching the driver avoid a car that made an illegal turn. Her thoughts shifted to getting to Memorial Academy so she could meet up with her friend.

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Tori followed the bus for a while. With each stop the bus made, she perched on the roof waiting for the girl she met to get off. All she saw were elderly people, young couples, businessmen, and teens. It turned into a long trip. Her wings barely could stay up. The bus climbed a hill covered with trees blocking Tori's view. She dove into the branches and found herself under the canopy. Tori saw the bus drive over the hill and she followed it, unaware of the girl she followed standing beyond the gates with a sign that read 'Memorial Academy'.

"I'm here to see visit Manami Mizushima." Ai said presenting her identification card to the security guard. As she waited for the guard to check the visitors list on the clipboard, a teenage girl with long black hair approached the security booth.

"Ai!" She said with a wave.

"Manami!" Ai ran over and hugged her.

"How was the ride?"

"It was alright." Ai said walking Manami back to the guard post. She received a weekend pass and signed her name on the clipboard. "It was a little strange but nothing to make a big deal out of."

"I see." Manami took Ai by the hand and they walked deeper into the campus. "You're excited to finally see Memorial Academy?"

"Yeah." Ai looked at the school buildings and the students carrying their books. "And everyone is a Magi here?"

"Well the majority. There are non-Magi here who study history or do research. You're still into history and archeology right?"

"Got an A plus on my last history test." Ai said climbing the hill.

"Why?"

"Well you can enroll here even though you're not a Magi." Manami led Ai to a building with the sign Harriman House written on it. She opened the door welcoming Ai inside. "You are in you're last year in Junior High."

"I know. It's just that the Academy is too expensive for my parents. The tuition is higher for non-Magi."

"There's always a scholarship." Manami guided Ai up the stairs and through the hallway, passing by a couple of girls leaving the shower room. "It's not too late. I'll get you an application for one tomorrow when I give you the tour okay?"

"Okay."

Ai and Manami stopped before a door. Manami unlocked it and opened it up. They entered inside the one bedroom dorm with the view of the hillside picnic area in the distance. The room had photos of forest creatures in their natural habitat tacked on the wall and leaning on the corner was camera equipment and empty frames. On the dresser, there was a photo of Ai and Manami smiling together. It made Ai smile. Beside it was a tank full of rocks and a little cave. Ai approached it and saw something moving inside the toy cave.

"Is that Kame I saw in the picture you sent me?"

"Yes he is." Manami stood beside Ai looking inside. "He'll come out eventually."

"The photos of him in the wild were amazing. Still, I don't understand why you named him Kame. You had him for a month. It's like naming your goldfish, Goldfish or your cat, Cat."

"True." Manami's eyes wandered thinking about the logic.

"So." Ai turned to Manami with a smile. "Shall we hurry to New London and catch a movie. There are a couple of new ones out tonight. Plus there's this new restaurant I heard about that all the kids are going to."

"Okay. Okay. But we can't stay out too late. Harriman House has a curfew for us since we're fourteen. The house mother will be waiting at the front door after ten."

"Then what are we waiting for? Let's go!"

* * *

The girls arrived at New London and got off the bus. Ai looked at Kame resting on side pocket of Manami's purse, and not too thrilled that he came along. The tall buildings around them enshrouded the setting sun in the horizon. The streets filled up with commuters heading home, shopping, or going to a bar. The billboard signs lit up with advertisements, large monitors aired commercials, and the news tickers showed the latest headlines or sports scores. It took them awhile to get across a park and they arrived at a calm street where a movie theater lit the area up like day. There were only two lines of moviegoers on opposite sides of the entrance approaching the ticket booth. Ai and Manami hoped there would be early tickets so they could get back before ten.

"Wow." Ai said standing at the end of the line. "It looks like there is a new zombie movie playing."

"You want to see that Ai?"

"Yeah why not, it will make tonight very interesting."

Manami looked at the movie poster of the undead walking towards, as if they wanted to reach out and grab her. She hoped it would not be scary. As Ai leaned to the side to look at the line, Manami felt a tug on her purse. She saw Kame tilting his head to lure her closer. With Ai distracted, she lifted the purse and turned around.

"What?" Manami whispered.

"I thought you were going to tell her about me."

"Sorry. I haven't seen her in a month. I got excited."

"Will you tell her toni..." Kame's nose twitched and he sniffed the air.

The crowd cheered at the entrance and Manami turned around. She felt Ai tugging her sleeve without looking and she leaned over. Manami saw a group of seven people, dragging their feet along the ground. The crowd took out their phones and cameras to take pictures of the group.

"I'll be back. I want to get a picture." Ai ran off before Manami could grab her. She approached three people with cameras aimed at

the group.

"Take a picture of me with this guy." One male photographer said handing his camera to a young woman. As he wrapped his arm around and waved off the harsh stench, Ai and the crowd laughed. "Wooo... you did a good job with the costume. Smell and all."

Ai took a couple of pictures when Manami pulled her back. She turned around with a glare in her eyes and crossed her arms.

"You ruined my picture."

"Get behind me."

"Why?" Ai turned around and saw the teeth of what she thought was a costumer sink into the arm of the man who just wanted to have fun. Her heart felt like it stopped beating the moment she heard his scream. The other two picture takers found themselves tackled, screaming from the tearing of their flesh. As the women from the crowd screamed, four men left the line to help the victims, but they found out that those victims became one of them and pulled down their would be heroes into the swarm. "This isn't happening."

"Necromancy magic." Manami saw two of them approaching her and Ai. They turned around to escape. Unfortunately, there was another crowd of undead blocking their route. Manami saw most of the people escape into the theater, but it became a stampede of the living and the dead fighting a war with each other at the entrance. Their only escape was in the hands of Kame, who she pulled out of her purse.

"Manami?" Ai said unaware of Tori's arrival in the air. "Let's go!"

"FUSE HEART WAVE!" Kame became a ball of light in the palms of Manami's hand with the blue bead floating in the center. Manami slapped the ball of light onto her chest creating a flash of light forcing Ai to shield her eyes. The blue bead embedded onto her chest, and a blue and white sleeveless outfit stretched from her neck down to her thighs forming shorts. A pair of gloves and boots formed over her arms, and blue highlights slid over her black hair alongside a pair of hairclips. When Ai opened her eyes, Manami stood before battle ready. "Is this part of your Magi abilities?"

"Yes." Manami said keeping her eyes on the undead thinking of a

plan.

"Amazing." Ai noticed Manami's purse was gone. "Where's Kame?"

"Within my heart."

Hearing that, Ai placed her hands over her chest and she felt her heart skipped. The memory of the flames she experienced flashed in her mind again. With a quick turn to the left, she saw the red bird she rescued staring right at her from the roof of the car. She approached the bird ignoring the carnage around them and Manami channeling her Mana.

"My name is Tori." The red bird glided onto Ai's arms. "Would like to be my Avatar?"

TO BE CONTINUED...

