

Arcana Magi Cross - c.4

by H-M Brown

Ai sat beside Manami on the curb. Her friend just stared out at her home, watching the removal of the undead, all taken down by law enforcement and Mystic Intelligence agents on the scene. Each corpse placed into a body bag and tossed into a wagon. Ai tried to get Manami to leave, but she refused. Manami wanted to see her parents. She wanted to say goodbye. Ai did not know what to do, nor say. She did not want Manami to suffer anymore than she already has. This was not healthy to do. It was bad enough now for Ai with her muscles still tense from the Mana awakened in her body. Thankfully, though, she was able to move around, but the burning sensations lingered on, as though she was about to explode.

"You shouldn't see this." A female officer said approaching the girls, but Manami never moved or showed signs of life.

"Please Manami." Ai said, but her voice never reached her friend. She looked back and saw Melinda talking with a male Mystic Intelligence agent that Melinda yelled out brother to his face. It turned into an argument but they were too far away for Ai to hear the rest. Katarina stepped in trying to plead but Melinda waved her away.

Everything felt wrong. The day started off so joyful, the moment ending with her laughing at an innocent man wanting his picture taken. Now it has been one awful nightmare. Ai thought about Tori's warning about the reality of being an Avatar, the risks that came from it. Yet somehow, it was like she ended up in another world. Manami's parents were so nice to her and understanding. It was difficult to see them gone. It made her think of her parents. She hoped they would be okay.

"Ai." Manami said. "I overheard the officers say that my parents never made it to the clinic. They were caught in the initial attacks and were trapped by a stampede of people trying to escape. Rumor was that they stayed to help nurse the trampled but the dead got to them. Helping people... and I chose to be a photographer as my

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future. Am I lying to myself?"

Manami felt herself turned to Ai. She saw the anger in friend's eyes. No words spoken or conveyed, just the message that what was said was wrong. Manami looked at her outfit and placed her hand over the bead. Manami had nothing else to say. Nothing more to think about. As another body bag passed by all she could do was shed tears. Manami just wanted to see her parents one more time. Just to say goodbye, but she conceded, took Ai's hand and allowed herself to be lead away. They met up with Katarina and Melinda at the corner of the street. Both looked around to make sure no one watched them.

"What happened, Melinda?" Ai said.

"My brother is going to have an agent take us back to the academy. The necromancer's army is getting bigger and spreading out of the city. He said they're in over their heads. The army will be in New London in thirty minutes."

"We can fight back. He must know that."

"It's not that easy Ai." Melinda wrapped her arms around her waist. "I told them that we were going to a costume party, which was why we're dressed like this, but my family is not buying it. I think they know we've going around fighting crime all this time."

"I don't see why that's bad."

"Ai." Katarina said. "We're not allowed to cast spells under the age of eighteen unless we're apprentices taught by certified teachers or enrolled in a certified school like Memorial Academy. We could get arrested for this."

"But I've seen kids cast spells all the time out here."

"In secret. Sometimes enchantments that are hidden in plain sight. Why do you think girls prance around in those tacky costumes they buy at those shops in Central Heights?"

"There's a shop in Central Heights that sell outfits like what I'm wearing?"

"Enough!" Manami said. The tone of her voice frightened the girls. "We need to track the necromancer now."

The girls looked at each other and turned to Manami. There was

concern for her. It was the first time she ever sounded so tense. Ai did not like this one bit and approached her friend.

"Manami we need a plan if we're going to do this."

"We don't have time."

"Ai's right." Melinda said. "We're expected to go to the academy. We could use this time to get rest and re-think what to do."

"No more regrouping. No more running."

"Manami!" Ai said. Her eyes stared down her friend with a piercing look that asserted dominance and forced Manami to step back.

"I'm sorry."

"No one says we're running away." Ai took Manami's hands and pressed them together. "But we can't fight this guy angry. He moves very fast, has an army, and can poison us with a bite. We don't know what else he could do."

"She's right." Kame said. "If you want to fight back, do it right. Don't rush in. Never rush in."

"Also Manami. We're here for you."

Manami looked at the Avatars, all nodding in agreement with Ai's point. Tears fell down her cheek and she wiped them away. With a deep breath, she gathered her friends and they worked on a plan.

* * *

The Avatars rode in a black unmarked car driven by a female agent. Melinda in the front passenger side reached out for the band radio to turn it on, but the agent tapped her hand to stop that. With Ai sitting in the middle of the back seat, she saw her reflection on the rearview window and waved with a smile. When the car came to a stop at the traffic light, Ai felt a tap on her thigh and she channeled her Mana. Just as she practiced, she built up a small ball of Mana and the girls covered their eyes.

"FLASH BURST!" The windows lit up a blink of light and the female agent screamed.

When the doors opened, the Avatars spilled out and ran as far as they could. The sprint last for five blocks and they all came to a stop. Ai immediately leaned on the wall, whimpering in pain. She rested

her head on Manami's chest, trying to relax.

"It's okay." Manami said and pressed her hand on Ai's forehead. She felt warmth and noticed her friend's eyes trailing off.

"I feel like I'm going to explode."

"Manami." Tori said. "Ai is at the point now that she needs to let off excess Mana. I need to teach her more spells."

"Alright." Manami sat Ai on the ground. "Tori you teach how to cast more spells and get the excess Mana out of her. We'll go on ahead and do face the necromancer ourselves."

"No!" Ai stood up to her feet with her hands curled in a fist. "I'm in this... all the way. Besides..."

Manami punched Ai in the stomach and took the air out of her. She dragged Ai over to a nearby bench and laid her on the seat. Manami stroked Ai's hair with an apologetic look, listening to her friend whimper. She turned to Melinda and Katarina, and they ran off together.

Ai watched the Avatars turn at the corner, and she gathered up her strength to stand up. She followed the direction they all went, ignoring all of the pain in her muscles. Ai saw the girls further down the block and she ran after them. She also worried about Manami, given what happened. Ai did not want her friend to make a poor decision when they fight the necromancer.

Ai kept up with them, keeping her distance. Eventually they found themselves in a devastated area, where a small group of survivors ran for their lives. The undead walked in a large herd reaching out for whatever they could catch to eat. Ai peeked around the corner to watch what happened. The Avatars stepped backwards tripping over her and they all fell to the ground forming a pile. After they helped each other to their feet, Ai cowed at Manami ready for a scolding. Instead, she found herself pulled behind a car with the others, watching the parade go by.

"There they are." Katarina said. "We're going to head in the direction they are coming from. Just like Melinda and I planned earlier."

Ai looked at the herd and realized what they were about to do.

"WE HAVE TO..."

"Shhh."

"We have to go through that."

"No." Katarina said. "We're going back to the other street and walk up parallel from these creatures. Track them for as far as they go."

"Will that work?"

"They have to come from a starting point. As you and Tori said, the necromancer is making an undead army. He has to gather them at a rendezvous in order to this."

"Then let's go." Manami said and walked away crouching.

* * *

With the moon at its peak, the Avatars heard the sounds of moaning and groaning consuming the air. They all walked slowly toward the edge of the corner, stepping over medical supplies and bed sheets. The girls spotted an overturned ambulance, with its lights still flashing. They scurried over, leaning their backs on the roof hoping that the undead did not spot them. Manami slid along the hood of the ambulance, leaning her head around the corner. Her eyes grew wide like a hypnotic trance and she stepped out into the open, staring out at what's ahead.

Ai followed the other Avatars and covered her mouth, for she read a sign that read New London Purification Clinic, completely filled with undead. Nurses, doctors, patients, and victims from throughout the city, all marched outward in platoons. Ai looked out at the building, with its flickering lights or darkened rooms and could see shadows walking inside.

"Why here?" Ai said looking to Manami for an answer.

"Because this is where unstable Mana is contained. People with unstable Mana come here to be purified, sometimes have it purged from their bodies."

"Interesting." Kame said. "He most likely would want to poison the entire city in whole shot."

"Look." Melinda said pointing to the entrance where the undead gathered and stood. "If they were hungry, they would have left

already. They look like they're waiting. He must be here."

"Let's try the back." Manami said and led her friends to the building.

Upon their arrival, they found the back entrance devoid of undead, not a single living person around, just a parked ambulance and gurney lying on its side. The Avatars walked in a crouch, watching every angle. When they arrived at the door, Manami looked at Ai and saw a reality in their current situation.

"I hate to say this, but we can't fight him with you still in this condition. If I could get to my mother's office, I should find some relaxants. That should help you cast a stronger Flash Burst to give us an advantage."

"Where is your mother's office?" Neko said.

"On the third floor." Manami hurried everyone over to the nurse's station and they all jumped behind the desk.

"We don't know where necromancer is."

"I know Neko." Manami looked at Katarina's bead. "But we need Ai if we're going to win."

The Avatars crawled to the other side of the desk and Manami peeked up over the countertop. She saw the staircase just beyond the elevator doors, and the horde of undead in between. Manami looked at the numbers above the elevator and a light shined on five.

"If we wait for the elevator, we may be spotted and if the elevator arrives, it will make a sound and draw their attention."

Melinda saw all kinds of objects around them and picked up a clipboard.

"Then we'll make other sounds."

"Wait." Ai said. "Why don't you just cast spells and blow them away."

"Fool!" Ryu said. "Never give away the element of surprise to your enemy. You do not know the status of the necromancer. If his guard is down, you will need that one second to cast your first spell before he does and put him on the defensive."

"O...okay." Ai looked down and felt a nudge on her shoulder. She looked up and saw Melinda hand her a vase. With a nod, she

followed the girls to the edge of the desk, watching the undead limp about. Ai saw the signal and together, she and the Avatars threw the objects as far as they could. The objects bounced on the heads and crashed into the ground. They saw all the corpses lumber toward the sound.

Manami hurried to the elevator and she pressed the up button, unaware that the lighted numbers counted down to one. When the door opened, she stepped back lifting her head up to the necromancer. Before she had a chance to cast a spell, the necromancer waved his arms to the side. The impact pushed Manami with a burst of purple mist, right into the crowd of undead. Laying on top of the pile, she heard Ai scream out for her and noticed the necromancer turned to her friend. While Melinda and Katarina's spells were blocked, Manami climbed off the pile of corpses struggling to stay on her feet. She saw a water fountain next to a door and she channeled the water that resided in it.

"ICE BLADE!" A sword of ice with a razor's edge consumed Manami's arm. She roared out loud running down the hall drawing attention to herself. As she jumped up into the air, the necromancer turned around, too slow to stop her attack. Manami rammed the blade into his chest and together they fell down. They stared eye to eye, coldness against coldness, until the necromancer smiled. She saw his finger pointing at the side of her body and he wagged it side to side. "GOOO!"

Melinda grabbed Ai's hand and followed Katarina who scooped Manami off their enemy, snapping the blade in half. They got into the elevator just when it was closing and caused it to reopen again. Before they knew it, the necromancer's arm already reached inside, but Melinda planted her hand on his face.

"AIR BLAST!" The force of wind shot like a cannon and sent the necromancer flying back. Melinda watched his body wedge into the wall and he looked up at Manami with a smile.

"Manami!" Kame said drawing Melinda and Katarina's attention.

"Shut up. Don't say anything."

"But..."

"Are you okay, Manami?" Ai said.

"Yeah. I'll get your muscles moving in no time."

* * *

The Avatars stood before a door with the name Doctor Yoshiko Mizushima on it. Manami opened the door and let Ai inside.

"Is there anything you need Manami?" Melinda said stopping. Manami and Katarina's eyes twitched.

"No." Manami looked down for a moment and felt Katarina's hand on her shoulder. "Thank you both for everything."

"Thank you for being our friend." Katarina said.

"Go." Melinda said. "Don't keep her waiting."

"How...?" Manami turned to her friends, took a deep breath, and smiled. She stepped inside and looked at the office, where Ai sat on a small chair waiting. Manami could see her mother sitting on the desk waving back to her. She picked up a picture of herself with her parents and tears fell down cheek. Manami carried to a cabinet and saw a bottle of pills inside. After reading each bottle, she found the pills she was looking for. Manami took out two pills and closed the door, with Ai's reflection facing her. With a deep breath, she turned around and handed Ai the pills with a cup of water. "I know I gave you two pills earlier this evening to relax your muscles, so this is a big risk. You'll most likely pass out or feel a lot of pain once you cast your spell."

"I understand." Ai took the pills and swallowed it with the water. "Once this is over and we get back to the academy, I'm going to take over the bed all by myself again."

"I know."

A flash of light caught Ai's attention. She saw Kame return and Manami's clothes change back. Manami placed Kame on the desk, sitting on her mother's chair pressing the picture to her chest. Ai approached her and saw the blood dripping to floor. It spread across into a pool leaving her shaken and scared.

"When I first met you..." Manami felt Ai's hands wrap around her shoulder and Ai's cheek nuzzling her head. "You were the one..."

Manami's hands slid down... and Ai's tears splashed on the fingers.

"Ai..." Tori said while Manami's hands shivered. "...channel your Mana and repeat after me."

Melinda covered her eyes and Katrina clutched her shoulder when a horrific wailing blared out the door. It stopped leaving the area silent, and the door opened. With Kame held in her soot-covered arms, Ai felt the hugs of the Avatars. She struggled to drop to her knees, but her friends prevented her from doing that.

Ai's raining tears splashed onto the floor, spreading out, into a little puddle.

TO BE CONTINUED...

