

Arcana Magi Memorial - c.3

by H-M Brown

"Ember." Small sparks of flames splashed out of Azure's fingers. They landed on a pile of webbing as Azure grasped her shackled wrist. She clenched her teeth and looked at Sora's eyes, which trembled at the sight of Azure's inhuman hand up to her elbow. A deformity Azure ignored when that very claw ripped into the two wooden legs of a chair. She felt no pain from the impact. Azure rolled the wood over the webbing like cotton candy and placed them over the campfire to light them into torches.

"Are you sure you're all right Azure?" Sora said as her friend looked up at the sprinkler system in the ceiling.

"It's not starting." Azure said waiting for the water to activate to douse the bonfire she made. Instead she stomped her feet on the webbing to put out the fire. Azure heard silence behind her. She knew Sora wanted an answer, but it was hard telling her about this experience. 'It feels weird. It's like... it's like I can still feel my real arm. Like I'm wearing a suit.'

"Then we have a chance to reverse it." Sora took one of the torches.

"You think so?"

"Giving up so easily, Azure? That's not like you." Sora placed her hand on Azure's shoulder. She had a smile that was supportive and confident. With a nod, she received a smile in return and together they left the room. 'Let's hurry to the infirmary.'

Despite the light of the torches, the darkness around them was overwhelming. They could not see the walls unless they leaned the flames close. Nor could they see the outside, even though the breeze blew their hair from the broken windows. They were careful not to trip over the cocoons or let the flames fall off the torch. The last thing they wanted was to start a fire and kill everyone.

"These creature.' Sora said climbing over a cocoon. 'They feed on Mana. It was so painful. I thought I was going to die.'

"I'm sorry I wasn't fast enough to save you."

"It's not your fault, Azure. We didn't know what was going in here."

"Can you summon Flaros?' Azure looked at the torches. 'At the pace we're going, the flames may burn out.'

"I wish I could. That creature really took out a lot of my Mana. I feel too exhausted to do anything. Just walking right now is really pushing it." Sora heard noise nearby. It was the sound of tapping. She and Azure turned their torches at the window and there was a small four-legged creature staring at them. It froze at the sight of the fire, its eyes hypnotized by the warmth. Sora walked up to the creature, to the disapproval of Azure who wanted to keep going. The torch landed on its head, again, and again. Memories of the large monster rolling her body, covering her with webbing was raw and fresh. Tears splashed with each strike, her roar shook Azure. There was nothing left of it. Short of breath, Sora stared at the mist floating in the air. A hand touched her shoulder and Azure startled her. Sora calmed herself wiping away her tears, looking away in shame. She stood to her feet, stumbling from the wasted energy as Azure tossed a shred of webbing on her torch to keep it lit. Together they held hands, feeling comfort from each other, and made their way to the nearest stairwell.

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The door closed behind Azure and Sora. They saw the sidewalk beneath their feet and found themselves outside, though they did not know what part of the academy they were at now. All the girls could do was feel relief that they got out of the building. Unfortunately, their situation remained unchanged. It was still dark outside, and just like inside, only the fire from their torches provided the light.

"I can't believe I couldn't find my bookbag.' Azure said walking along the grass beside the sidewalk. 'I hope it doesn't get stolen.'

"We have important things to worry about. Like getting you to the infirmary."

"Yes mother." Azure rolled her eyes at Sora. She surveyed the area hoping to spot something they would recognize. Some kind of landmark, or a sign. Instead, she got nothing in her sights. 'Heh. You know this is kind of scary."

"I know what you mean." Sora stopped at the curb and watched her step climbing down. 'I used to be afraid of the dark when I was little. I would run to my parent's room to get them to check under my bed."

"Me," Azure said. 'I threw the sheets over my head to hide from the darkness, but I realized that I was still in the dark. So I closed my eyes so I wouldn't see the dark, only to realize I was still looking at the dark. So hiding from the dark was a wasted effort and I fell asleep."

"What?" Sora stopped for a moment and turned to Azure. She took a moment to reflect on what her friend said and realized it made sense. Before she could say anything, Sora noticed Azure examining the floor. Upon closer inspection, Sora found herself standing in the middle of a crosswalk. 'I understand what you're thinking."

"Yeah." Azure looked at both directions unsure of which way to go. 'Left, or right?"

"Since we're at the Advance Class Building, I think either direction will take us to the next building at least."

"Or a security guard or a teacher." Azure turned right and walked forward. 'No sense in debating. Let's go."

Azure and Sora walked for quite a while. The street winded around the recreation area and climbed over a small hill near the picnic tables. The torches held on for as long as they could, but the flames neared their hands, practically burning them. Strange sounds in the sky caught their attention. The sound of crying and screaming in unison. They prayed that it was not human. The girls wondered if there was more to these creatures than the four-legged ones. What they looked like was a mystery. When they arrived at an intersection in four directions, they found a strange black limb. A claw. A foot. It

was hard to tell. It was not from the four-legged creatures at all. At the corner was a sign. To the left was the auditorium and the sports complex. To the right was the school buildings and the dormitories. Ahead was Poet's Pond, the center of the Academy.

"Great we're on the other side of the Academy." Azure said spinning with her arms spread out. The sparks of the flames flew and fell to the ground.

"Relax. If we go to the dormitories, we should run into teachers or security. They'll get you to the infirmary."

"Do you know how far the dorms are from here? There's no telling how many of those four-legged creatures, or whatever was attached to that limb, there really are. Our torches are almost out." Azure held the torch to Sora's face, showing her the tiny spark left. She walked in the direction of the dormitories, hoping that they both would make it safely. 'Do you feel you recovered enough Mana to summon Flaors?'"

"I told you my Mana is low, and I really would like a chance to sit down and rest."

"Rest?!" Azure stopped walking, her chest shifted up and down. 'We don't have time to rest."

"My legs feel like jelly." Sora dropped her torch and her eyes lowered.

"SORA!" Azure dropped her torch and caught her friend. She held Sora up, dragged her to curb, and sat her on the sidewalk. Azure placed both torches in an x formation turning them into a campfire. She laid Sora's head on her lap and rubbed her hair. Azure failed to understand her friend's situation. All she wanted to do was to get somewhere safe for them. Yet her anxiety of what has happened around them, as well as herself, clouded her judgment. Looking at the torches, she knew she would have no choice but to cast another fire spell. Azure nodded and accepted her fate. Sora's safety was top priority, infirmary or no infirmary. If she became a monster, like them, she hoped that she would not forget her feelings for Sora. To know that Sora was alive while in her new form, she

would accept it. When Sora opened her eyes, Azure wiped her eyes even though she never shed a tear. 'I... I'm sorry.'

"It's okay.' Sora held up Azure's injured arm. She felt the slickness of sweat oozing out of the blackened skin. 'I know you're scared, even though you try to hide it. But it's okay. I'll make sure you turn back to normal. I promise.'

"I don't care if I become a monster. I don't want you to die."

"Hey.' Sora directed Azure's head to face her. 'I won't let that happen.'

Azure nodded and smiled. The flames are nearing their end and a new sound echoed across the street. It was surrealistic. It was not the sound of tapping like the four-legged creatures or the sound from the sky earlier. The sound was both soothing and irritating. It affected their ears as their bodies trembled. They felt like going to the bathroom. The wailing imprinted in their memories as they struggled to move. Azure clenched her teeth and spread her fingers open. She wished she could cast something other than a fire spell, but the darkness placed her in that situation. Her shackles glowed as she channeled her Mana and pulled Sora closer to her body.

Across the street, a pair of red eyes waited and held a staring contest with Azure. It cried out loud, forcing Azure and Sora to cover their eyes. The curled their bodies like armadillos, whimpering like little children. The sound triggered their minds to loosen themselves. Their faces turned red. With a growl, Azure opened her eyes and slapped the ground.

"JAGGED EDGE!' The ground ripped the sidewalk and street apart. A sharp spiked rock from the earth shot out and the creature screamed. It was not enough as the flame died slowly and the red eyes charged without fear. Azure slapped the ground again screaming from the pain. 'SHELTER!'

The earth formed two scoops that connected together forming a dome. As they connected together, the fire died and the sound of pounding shook the ground. Azure sensed her spell breaking apart. She re-enforced it with each layer stripped by the monster. She screamed. The darkness crawled up her arm. Like needles poking

into her skin, there was a pop in her shoulder. Her face burned. This current transition would not stop as she kept replacing each layer of spell the monster shattered. She could not take it anymore and stopped casting. The top layer broke apart and rain on the girls.

The monster roared again staring into the shelter and stopped advancing. The scent inside was rancid. The silence ended with Sora gasping and shuffling across the ground until she yelped from bumping into the wall. Azure lifted her head at the creature. Her right eye was red like the monster, and visible to Sora. Azure could see the darkness. A red tint. The creature looked like some type of cat and grasshopper hybrid. Tears streaked down her face as the monster leaned close. It inhaled the odor Azure emitted from the oily sweat secreted from her injured arm. The monster stepped away and moved on leaving the girls alone.

Azure cried out loud, ramming her claw like hand onto the ground, ripping it apart. She felt Sora's arms wrap around her waist and felt her friend's face resting on her back.

"I'm a monster."

"No. You're not." Sora cried uncontrollably. "You're still human. You're still Azure."

Minutes went by. They was quiet for a while. No sound. No screaming. No roar. This peaceful rest ended when the ground rumbled. A pair of lights shined over the opened roof of the shelter. The sound of doors opening, and feet shuffling around. Voices. Actual human voices.

"Surround the perimeter." A male voice said from beyond the wall. A light shined over the girls as they shielded their eyes. "There are students in here!"

The light pulled back as Azure and Sora saw a security guard reach out for them. But when Azure's arm and face revealed to him, he stepped back and dropped his flashlight. Azure slinked into the corner, hiding in the shadow. Her right eye glowed and trembled.

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Azure lied on the bed in the infirmary. She was by herself, surrounded by Mana-powered lamps. The darkness still held its own

against the light. Outside was a different story though. Bonfires surrounded the building, with two rows of flaming torches lit outward along the street. She learned that it was the same in all four directions. All she could do was stare at the ceiling, shifting the blanket closer to her bare shoulders. The screaming from students and teachers outside, calling for help did not calm the shock in her mind. Her injured arm held up by a strap, she flexed her fingers, and struggled to feel her human part from the monster part.

Staring out the window, her right eye saw the sky so clearly. Large things flying high, circling around in the distance. It was searching. Hunting. For the moment, it looked free. Azure's mind drifted as she watched the creature fly. It was hypnotic. Memories of what happened to her moments ago flashed. She threw her body up reaching out for someone, or something, and pulled the blanket up to her bare chest, short of breath. She turned to the door and Sora entered, carrying two small bottles of orange juice. Sora's right arm had a gauze and tape covering her vein.

"Sora." Azure took a bottle from her friend. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah." Sora opened her bottle and took a sip. "They injected me with liquid Mana and gave me orange juice to recover. I just have rest and relax."

"I'm glad." Azure moved her right arm off the sling and opened her bottle. It was so natural in action when she used that arm to take a sip. Her eyes caught Sora's smile. "What?"

"Nothing. I'm just happy to see you're okay. That's all. You seem to have gotten used to your new hand."

"I'd be lying if I said I was okay about this. I don't know how I could explain this to my parents. The doctor said the acid from the barrier has bacteria that reacted to the Mana I channeled. I don't even know what I will look like if I keep casting spells."

"Don't worry Azure. The doctors will get you back to normal when they get you into a hospital."

"That will not happen." A cold emotionless voice said from the door. Madam Mayweather stepped inside and approached Azure. There was no sense of sympathy or apathy for what happened to

Azure. When she directed her student to face her, only one eyebrow raised at the sight of the red eye.

"Madam Mayweather.' Sora said. 'What happened here?'"

"We are trapped inside a creature."

"A creature?" Sora and Azure said as Madam Mayweather stood before the window, looking out into the darkness.

"What you bumped into was not a magical barrier made of acid, but a living creature. It's stomach."

"How?' Sora said. 'It's so big."

"Someone summoned it Ms. Narutaki."

"Somebody outside had to have seen the spell cast.' Azure said as Madam Mayweather shook her head side to side. 'What about those creatures that attacked everyone?'"

"They are alike flies that feed off the backs of lions and elephants. They take their share, but the domed creature right now is preparing to digest."

"Digest.' Sora said. 'You mean this dome is going to eat our Mana right. Just like the others?'"

"Yes.' Madam Mayweather turned to Azure and approached her. 'Only this dome creature will absorb every single Mana from us to the trees. When its finished, we will never cast spells or channel Mana again."

Azure and Sora faced each other. They did not know what to say or what to do. It was as though they were facing the end of the world and their lives would be over. Azure opened her mouth to offer help, but the cold stare she received from the dean told her to keep quiet.

"Madam Mayweather.' A security guard arrived at the door. 'The chief would like to see you."

"Very well." Madam Mayweather stopped at the door and looked back at the girls. She noticed Azure rubbed her black wrist. Her stare caught Azure's attention and she stopped. Without saying a word, the dean left the room wondering if the girls were going to try something they should not.

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Azure stared out the window, resting. The light in her room was off, but the light from the hallway provided made up for it. She saw Sora sitting on a chair, resting her head bedside on a pillow. Azure smiled knowing her friend was okay. It was difficult for her to sleep. Whenever she closed her eyes, it was like the darkness kept her awake, similar to how the sun kept her awake in daylight.

A strange aura appeared in the sky. It was red and hazy, falling down like a cascading waterfall. Her right eye focused on it. Her mind could not ignore it. There was something attractive about this aura. So pure and beautiful. She wanted to touch it. Feel it. Become one with it. It was as if it called for her. She wanted to go there so badly. Azure stood to her feet and looked out the window. She saw the flying creatures head for the haze.

Azure's thoughts drifted away. She imagined herself wading through fog as she felt something on her back. Azure opened the window as her shackles glowed teal around her human skin and purple around dark skin. She felt her imprisoned Mana within reach. It made her smile for an opportunity arrived to unlock the shackles, and that pillar was the key.

"Azure." Sora said as she woke up and saw Azure. She grabbed a blanket and approached her. "You shouldn't be walking around with no shirt on."

A white light sprouted out of Azure's back. The flash caught Sora off guard. The intensity of her Mana kept Sora from reaching out to her. Without warning, Azure jumped, and Sora screamed out attracting the guard's attention. The wings guided Azure over them. The dark acid spread over her chest and back until she landed. As the guards ran after her, the wings disappeared and she blended with the darkness. Azure, with neither thought nor control over her body, her obsession her guide, walked toward the red haze.

To Be Continued...

