

Arcana Magi Zero - c.1

by H-M Brown

The school bell rang at Nolan High School and the student spilled out like a water faucet. Emerging from the crowd was Alysia zippering her jacket to beat the cool fall afternoon. She approached the curb where a school bus waited and she looked around. Alysia leaned on the side of the bus with her arms crossed. She watched students hanging around, teachers watching the grounds, and crossing guards stopping traffic.

Alysia stared out at the school. She observed a group of seniors walking by laughing. The football players, with their team jackets on, pushed a freshman around. The smart kids lounged around on the benches exchanging notes. It truly was another world to Alysia yet nothing changed. Not even one of them a kid like back in elementary, yet still act as such. She clutched her shoulders taking deep breaths until she saw Megumi step out of the building talking to a female teacher. Megumi received a paper from her, bowed farewell and left the premises approaching Alysia.

"Sorry Lys." Megumi said. "Mrs. Jones wanted to talk to me about joining the Art Club."

"Oh?" Alysia said standing up leaning. "What did you say?"

"I said I would think about it." Megumi led Alysia away from the bus. "Though, I don't know if I want to."

"Well you're pretty good. Why won't you go for it?"

"I don't know." Megumi crossed the street with Alysia. "I feel kind of nervous. What if people say I'm no good?"

"Giving up before even giving people a chance to say what they think? Yeah, that will make a great life, ya know. Loser."

"I'm not a loser." Megumi stopped walking. "That's not fair."

"Then join the Art Club." Alysia placed her hands on Megumi's shoulders. "You're the one that always told me to never give up as a Guardian to your Shrine, and I'm prancing around in frilly costumes fighting monsters. That is no easy task. What you are doing is art, and you want to give up without trying. Come on Meg!"

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"And if it's not something I want to do?"

"Then quit." Alysia's removes her hands from Megumi's shoulders with a gesture. "Who am I to judge when you at least can say to my face that you tried the club. You tried your hand at art."

Alysia placed her arm Megumi and walked her forward.

"I guess... I can try."

"That's the spirit! Now let's get home. We have a lot of work to prepare for tonight."

Alysia and Megumi ran across the street and passed by stores. The people bundled up for the cold weather shopping for the coming holiday. Deliverymen unloaded crates to the shops, and a man in a trench coat waved a bell next to a donation jar. Megumi's eyes aimed at Alysia. She could see the fear in her sister's eyes. The level of fright of going home is staggering, despite the brave look on her face. Megumi turned to her as they approached the intersection.

"I noticed you crumpled up your test this morning. What did you get?"

"An okay score."

"You got under fifty." Megumi watched Alysia nod quietly. "Mom is not going to like the score you're bringing home."

"Not my fault. Fighting Jasmine last night made me forget everything."

"Don't pin this one on our mission. We studied when we got back."

"Well the dog did eat my studies." Alysia laughed out loud, only to get slapped in the back of the head by Megumi.

"This is not a joke!" Megumi looked up and watched the people walk by them. She leaned close lowering her voice. "We have to search for Madam Mayweather again tonight. You know mom is not going to let us go out after dinner."

"I know I know." Alysia rubs her forehead. "We don't have much time and have to get to Japan... somehow. The city is danger. Mayumi and Emi are in trouble blah blah blah."

"Hey!" Megumi pulled Alysia's arm to face her. "Take this seriously. We're going to have to sneak out tonight if mom says no."

Alysia and Megumi crossed the street and turned. They have now arrived at the neighborhood. Brick homes lined up side by side like small apartment buildings, but they are actually family homes. The neighborhood kids are playing outside while the nannies are pushing strollers along the sidewalk. Alysia and Megumi arrived at their house. Alysia took out a key attached to a string around her neck to get inside.

* * *

It was dinnertime. Alysia and Megumi sat with their mother and father, quietly. Alysia remained quiet. She watched her parents talk to each other. Their lips moved, but no sound came out. For a moment, they looked distant, otherworldly. She wanted to say something but her body would let her speak. Sounds built up in her ears and she heard her mother speak.

"... school today?"

"What?" Alysia said to the skip in her heart.

"I said how was school today?"

"Y...yeah. Uh... it was fine. Just another day."

"Are you alright?" Alysia's father said.

"yes..." Alysia stood up out of her seat, leaving her food unfinished. "Excuse me."

Alysia ran up the stairs and entered the bedroom. She leaned her back to the door, staring out at the two beds. She stood before Megumi's bed ruffled with clothes strewn, while her own bed was complete and clean. She looked up posters of boy bands and hockey players tacked on the walls, and placed her hands on her desk. Alysia stared at the bracelet. An aura of familiarity surrounded her mind. The trinket did not feel out of place. Alysia clenched her hands and pounded the desk. She closed her eyes trying not to think like that. She knew where she was, knew whom she was with, and knew she was safe at home. There was a knock on the door.

"Alysia?" Her mother said and Alysia looked at the crumpled ball that was her test. "Please let me in. I want to talk to you."

Alysia took the ball, and approached the door. She opened it letting her mother in. Alysia stepped aside as her mother walked in

looking at Megumi's clothing.

"What a mess?" She looked at Alysia's side of the room clean.
"When did this start?"

Alysia did not answer. She just looked at her mother in silence, playing with the paper ball in one hand. Once her mother turned around, she raised her hand up to her presenting the test.

"Here." Alysia watched her take the ball and straightened it out. She just stood there with her head down.

"Oh Alysia, is this why you're like this?"

"Y...yes." Alysia did not know why she answered. She wanted to say what was really going on. For some reason, she could not say, despite what her will wanted. It was hard for to grasp what she wanted to convey.

"You really need to stop bringing these grades home."

"I know." Alysia said with a low voice.

"You've always brought good grades." Alysia's mother extended her arm presented the test. "I don't get it. I can't say the magic was the problem here because you had no problem keeping up once you started this. Or has that change now?"

"No."

"Don't lie to me."

"I'm not lying. It's not the magic."

"Then why bring home this?" Alysia's mother put her hands on her hips. She looked deep into Alysia's eyes. "Does this have to do with you and Megumi's little adventure in Japan?"

"No." Alysia shrugged her shoulders. "I don't know."

"Are you finally going to tell me what happened in Japan last year?"

"Nothing happened. It was just a mission."

"Why won't you tell me? It's like you and Megumi are strangers when I try to talk to you about this."

Alysia turned her back on her mother looking out the window. The window created a reflection from the night sky and lamp. Alysia saw her mother just stand there, waiting. She stood up straight and turned around.

"I am fine."

"No you're not." Alysia's mother approached her. "Is it something you can tell your father? Or do you want to try talking to Doctor Richardson again? We can do this together. You're not alone."

Alysia felt her mother's hands on her shoulders. The touch felt foreign suddenly.

"I don't..." Alysia pulled away from her mother and walked to the door. She opened it signaling her to leave. "I won't fail the next test. I promise."

There was silence, but Alysia gestured her mother to leave. She received the crumpled test paper, but before her mother left, she received a hug. Despite that distant feeling, Alysia responded in kind.

"I love you, Alysia."

Alysia felt her mother pull away, that did not feel weird whatsoever, and that frightened her. Once she closed the door, Alysia let out gasps of air. It was as though she had held her breath underwater. Her heart ached and tears fell. She pounded the bed, struggling to hold back her anger. So many emotions cascading her thoughts like a waterfall and not a single one can be focused. She wanted to say something, anything, but her mind just could not put it to words. Then her mind went blank for a second, and she regained focus. Lying on her bed with her left arm over her forehead, all she could do is stare at the ceiling. She heard the door open.

Alysia sat up and Megumi closed the door quietly. She looked up at her sister, her eyes turning side to side unsure of what to say. Not a single word came out from Megumi. Alysia stood up to her feet, taking a deep breath, but Megumi just shook her head in disbelief.

"Yeah." Alysia said. "Like you're one to talk."

"We'll discuss this later."

"Did you tell mom?"

"I'm not the one freaking out."

"Did you tell mom?"

Megumi covered her mouth, her head shifted to Alysia, but

turned away. She shook her head saying no. They both embraced each other in tears, whimpering but not crying.

"Lys." Megumi held tight. "I don't how to tell her either. I don't know."

Alysia and Megumi pulled away from each other, still holding each other's arms. They calmed down for a moment, though they looked exhausted. Alysia spoke.

"We can look for Madam Mayweather tomorrow okay?"

"Yeah." Megumi said with a nod. "Let's clean up and go watch TV."

* * *

The morning night sky just past midnight was full of stars that were able to get past the polluted atmosphere of the city. The moon is now at the corner on pace for the horizon. On top of a tall business building in Downtown Newark stop a woman in a hood cloak. The cool wind revealed her long dress as she held her staff up high, aimed at Orion's Belt. Her body glowed red like a ruby and mana gathered at the end of her staff. She held a map of Newark focusing on the line that shaped its city limits. The woman whispered her incantation and a beam shot out of the sky. It lined up with the middle star of Orion's Belt. The beam scattered into orbs connected by a wave of ruby light outward across the city.

Each star vanished out of the sky. The moon blinked out of existence. All the lights throughout the city turned off save for headlights of vehicles and flashlights; whatever light not connected to the city's power generators. Everything was veiled in darkness. Out on the streets, the people who were still out awake at this time murmured. Some pulled out their phones to call. Suddenly an explosion rattled the sky. A few more happened. Plumes of fires gave light to parts of the city, but they were the result of the spell, disconnecting gas lines. The first responders were on the move. Their sirens and lights lit parts of the city.

All the chaos occurring outside was nothing more than just another night of the city with its typical crime rate for Alysia and Megumi. They slept peacefully as this happened, unaware of their

touch phones lighting up their room. Eventually their window rattled from another explosion opening Alysia's eyes. She sat up needing to go to the bathroom. Alysia saw the light of touch phone on and she picked it up. It was a phone call from Mayumi. She scrolled through to see if there was text, there was not. It was a phone call. Alysia noticed that there was no signal to call back. She assumed she was dreaming all this until she noticed Megumi's phone. Alysia picked it up and saw it was text message from Emi. She read it.

[Your city disappeared. Is everyone okay?]

"What?" Alysia turned toward the window and noticed the darkness outside. She stood up and saw only the lights of fires and first responders far into the city. The neighbors outside with their flashlights. Alysia grabbed Megumi and pulled her upright.

"Meg! Wake up!"

"Whaaat?" Megumi opened her eyes and received her phone.

"It's the city." Alysia said pulling the blinders up as Megumi read Emi's message.

"No way." Megumi got out of her bed and stood beside Alysia.

Together they looked up at the sky and saw nothing but emptiness. They looked at each other with a nod and opened their jewelry case revealing their trinkets of Saga and Fable.

TO BE CONTINUED...

