

Mizuki wasn't entirely sure where the idea of the double dungeon had come from, but she found herself getting excited by it. There was an element of gambling to going into dungeons, and Mizuki felt that the only reason she hadn't lost enormous amounts of money gambling was that she hadn't ever really had the opportunity. When she'd been in school, she'd made bets with people all the time, but it was usually over small things, like a game of marbles, or a race, or something like that.

The fact that there were things to be found in a dungeon that could be found literally nowhere else, and that the others were willing to let her keep some of the cool things, made the prospect of two dungeons in a row seem enticing. She had her spoon and her staff, and in her mind, she could already see the pile of assorted knick-knacks they'd get, each of which might have some wondrous or at least interesting quality to it. All she needed was to picture a blanket, and then her mind would go, 'a blanket that' and fill in all *kinds* of blanks. A part of Mizuki *really* wanted to visit Alfric's house, because it seemed like the whole place would be *coated* in entads.

But the morning before they were going to go, Lola had shown up at Mizuki's front door.

"Hi Mizuki," she said. Her eyes were still purple, but she was wearing more casual clothes this time, a blouse with a skirt that was a dark purple, nearly black. She had a smile on her face.

"How did you find this place?" asked Mizuki, staring at her.

"I just asked around," said Lola with a shrug. "People in Pucklechurch are very friendly. Is Alfric home?"

"Go away," said Mizuki. She was holding the door only part way open, the better to slam it in Lola's face if she tried to come in. "He doesn't want to talk to you."

"Well, I think that's for him to say, isn't it?" asked Lola. There was, again, an element of play-acting, deliberately false innocence. But Lola had to *know* that was the impression she was giving off, and she was doing it anyway. It gave Mizuki a horrible feeling that Lola was playing at some unimaginable level of deception, but it was very possible that this was only how Lola liked to see herself. "Has he been spreading rumors about me? Because if he has, well, I don't think that's very nice of him, and more than a bit hypocritical."

"I'm not letting you in my house," said Mizuki.

"Or what, you'll kill me?" asked Lola. She grinned.

"That may be the kind of person *you* are, but it's not the kind of person *I* am," said Mizuki.

"Aren't you?" asked Lola. She cocked her head to the side. "How many times do you think we've met?"

Mizuki narrowed her eyes. "And what, I killed you?"

"Three times," said Lola, holding up fingers. "It doesn't *accomplish* anything, it just gets undone, but my *guess* is that *you* think you can figure out a way to disrupt my bindings, and as it turns

out, you're right, but it kills us both, along with everyone in a hundred yards of us. So try not to do it, please, and don't cast aspersions, or anything else. Between the two of us, *you're* the killer."

"Well I don't know why I would do that," said Mizuki. "But I probably had a good reason." She looked closer at Lola, trying to use her sorcerer's sight, and could see only a faint limning. Lola wore a discreet necklace that seemed to be an entad, and a ring on each hand that were entads too, along with black boots, but she wasn't soaked in magic like Mizuki had always thought an alienist would be. Lola wasn't moving, just standing there and smiling. "Fine, I'm going to go talk to him, but then he's going to say that he doesn't want to speak with you, and you're going to go away."

Lola gave a happy nod, and Mizuki backed away slowly, not wanting to take her eyes off the girl.

Mizuki went through the house and to the living room, where Verity and Alfric were sitting on the couch together, a little too close for her tastes. Obviously Verity wasn't interested in men, and obviously Alfric was a brick, but it poked at something in Mizuki's mind, an instinctive dislike of their positioning. They'd been talking about Dondrian, a conversation that Mizuki couldn't really join in on, having never come within a thousand miles of the place.

"Hey, unhappy news," said Mizuki. "Lola is here, at the front door."

"She is?" asked Alfric, standing up at once. "What does she want?"

"To talk to you," said Mizuki. She shrugged. "I told her to get lost, and she said it was your call, so if you don't want to talk to her, then I'll tell her to get lost *again*, and if she doesn't, then I'll kill her."

"Kill her?!" asked Alfric. He seemed alarmed.

"Well she'd just do the day over, so it doesn't really matter, right?" asked Mizuki. "And she said that I've killed her three times before, so —"

"Absolutely do not kill her," said Alfric. "I can't believe you would — I'll go speak with her."

"I mean if she were visibly sick I'd know she was on her last loop, and she could be lying, so," said Mizuki. "I mean if it's just automatically undone it doesn't seem like —"

"We'll talk about this later," said Alfric.

"Can I eavesdrop?" asked Mizuki. "If you're at the window above the door, you can hear almost everything, and it's hard to see you."

"You're asking permission to listen in?" asked Alfric. "You know what, sure, fine, better that I don't have to report back, better that there's no question about what was said." He seemed annoyed, and Mizuki hoped that was because of Lola, not her request. She *had* asked, which she thought should count for something. While Alfric made his way to the door, Mizuki rushed upstairs and cracked the window in her room, being as quiet as possible. She knew for a fact

that it was a good place to eavesdrop from, because her mom had done the same to her, many years ago.

“What do you want?” came Alfric’s voice.

“Just to see you,” said Lola. “To talk. You’re looking good.” Mizuki could hear her but not see her. Her voice was annoying, but maybe that was just the person it was attached to.

“This isn’t the first time we’ve talked,” said Alfric.

“Have you been looping and seeking me out?” asked Lola. “Because we’re not supposed to do that, are we? And it’s a bit hypocritical, don’t you think?” The false innocence was grating, as was the intentional childishness.

“Did you just come here to annoy me?” asked Alfric. His voice was hard and firm.

“I came to *talk*, and I thought we could do that like adults,” said Lola. “You know, it’s been a year, both of us have been through a lot, and — well, we’re going to have to make up *eventually*, now aren’t we? So we should have a heart to heart.”

“I’m not in the mood,” said Alfric. “If you want to talk, it’s going to have to be on a time delay. Write me a letter postmarked on the previous day, and you’ll get one back from me the day after that. No undone days between us. That’s the offer. The *only* offer.”

“Somehow I sense a lack of trust,” said Lola. “You know what, let me make *you* an offer: I’ll give you your party back — and they’ll be happy to receive you — and we can put the whole year behind us, as though it were undone.”

Alfric was silent, and Mizuki felt her heart beating faster. Would he accept? It felt like he would. He talked about those plans going up in smoke like it had been a personal apocalypse.

“What are the conditions?” asked Alfric. “That we become a couple again? That we go through with the pact? That I try my best to forget? I don’t see any of those things happening. And I’m building something here, Lola. I have a team.”

“Oh, well, your *team*, yes,” said Lola. “A musician who couldn’t hack it, an inept sorceress, a zealot of what has to be the least worthwhile god, and an untrained archer? And you, naturally, who fits in with them somehow.”

“Yes,” said Alfric. “They’re *my* team, and if you *ever* want to speak with me again, do it by letter. I’m done with you.” Mizuki was hoping that she’d hear the door slam, but no, he was apparently gracious enough to let her have the last word.

“I do love you,” said Lola. “I care about you. I shouldn’t have taken your team, I see that now, it was spite, plain and simple, or maybe not even that, wanting to follow through so you’d *know* that I would follow through. If I had backed down, how would it have looked? You’d have known that every other threat was hollow.”

"The fact that you were making threats at all is where you went wrong," said Alfric. "In all the undone days, have I ever threatened you? Ever told you that I would ruin you if you didn't do the things I wanted you to?"

"No," said Lola. "You've been *marvelously* restrained. I can see why your side of our sprawling clan is held in such high regard. But that's exactly the point, isn't it? That iron restraint, even when you know there won't be consequences for your actions, even when you know it's not real. Don't you ever want to hurt someone? Don't you ever want to hurt *me*? I'd allow it. *Please* Alfric, just let loose every once in a while, stop being so incredibly uptight about everything. That's all I want."

"In writing next time," said Alfric. And *then* he slammed the door. Mizuki stayed, peeking up over the window to see whether Lola was still there. Even after she saw the alienist leaving, she watched for some time, ready to duck back down. If Lola was lying, and they *hadn't* come to blows in undone days, it was nice to think that it might have happened.

"So," said Alfric from behind Mizuki. She let out a little eep and turned to look at him, ducking beneath the window. "How was that for you?" He sat down next to her beneath the window sill. He looked exhausted, though it was early in the morning and they had most of the day ahead of them. "You're not inept, by the way."

"I didn't think I was," said Mizuki. "But thank you. I'm inept at many things, but sorcery isn't one of them, I don't think. Untrained, maybe." She let out a sigh. "She's *awful*, and she's been skulking around Pucklechurch, it seems like, trying to tease out our secrets."

"I wouldn't take anything she said as being the truth," said Alfric. "But given that she came to the region specifically for ... what she imagines to be a reconciliation, I guess, I would imagine that she *has* done the day over a few times, and has spoken with us as much as she was able, and talked to people in town. From my own experience, people are eager to talk to strangers."

"Bethany," said Mizuki with a nod.

"This might even be the first time she's come here," said Alfric. "I don't think that's likely, all things considered, but it's possible."

"And do you think she was telling the truth?" asked Mizuki. "About wanting you back, or giving you your party?"

"I don't know," said Alfric. "I think she *is* tired of dungeoneering, and that spite didn't carry her as far as she thought it would. And if she's ready to be done, then there's no cost to her in handing things over to me, so that tracks. But." The word hung in the air.

"I'd really miss you, if you just left," said Mizuki. "Not that I think that will sway you."

"You're starting to awaken to the possibilities of being a dungeoneer?" asked Alfric, turning his head to look at her.

“Nah,” said Mizuki. “But without you, I’m not sure that Hannah would be able to keep things together, and if we got a fifth, they wouldn’t be half the man you were. Which would mean that this nice, full house would very quickly empty out. If you’ll forgive me for being sappy about people that I really haven’t known all that long, the thing that I like about dungeons is that we’re doing them together. We’re friends, and I think if we did anything that I didn’t care for all that much, like I don’t know, making dresses or having a pottery business, I would enjoy it because I was doing it with the four of you.”

Alfric slumped down until he was laying on the floor, looking up at the ceiling. “Yeah,” he said.

Mizuki tucked in, pulling her legs to her chest. “But if you do go —”

“I meant ‘yeah’, I — I don’t know if I feel the same way, but to go back to that party, with all the bad blood between us,” said Alfric. “Along with all the complications, being behind on entads and elevation ... and if Lola is trying to say that it would all be undone, surely she has to realize that’s not true? It’s a plate that shattered and can’t be put back together, and if you *did* put it back together, all the cracks would be obvious. And as far as our current party goes, yeah, I like you, and the rest. We’re building something here. If I admit that I like the feeling of building up a team and progressing through more than I enjoy the actual end, if I’m one of those saps who says that it’s about the journey more than the destination ...” he sighed. That word, ‘saps’, felt vindictive coming from Alfric, maybe just because he normally used such mild language. “I *like* where we’re at. I like this house. I like being with you.”

“But?” asked Mizuki. It felt like there was something he was going to say after that, something that would negate all the nice words and good feelings.

“But nothing,” said Alfric. “I feel like I *should* try to take her up on it, to reconnect with the old team, let bygones be bygones, but I think about the kind of life that would be, and I think that I would rather be here, doing things a bit more slowly.”

“We’ve got that double dungeon coming up, right?” asked Mizuki.

“We do,” said Alfric. “But we both know that this party isn’t going to go all the way. We’re not going to ever attempt one of the infinidungeons, never have a weeklong trek through the bowels of a metropolitan dungeon — we’ll set no records and get no acclaim, we’ll just be pretty standard dungeoneers doing enough for us to make a living.” He turned to look at her. “At least, that’s my feeling of where we’re at, if we can stay together through the immediate crisis of Lola being here, and Verity eventually leaving us.”

“Nah, I think she’ll stay with us through thick and thin,” said Mizuki. “I’m not worried about her.”

“She’s been the most reticent,” said Alfric.

“Yeah, but she’s friends with us now, and with her parents being overbearing, and her not really having had close friends ...” Mizuki shrugged. “It might be wishful thinking. Or maybe her parents will show up, and it will be all kinds of horrible, and they’ll talk her into coming back to

Dondrian. But I think so long as we stay relaxed about it, she's with us for good. She *likes* us, even you."

"Ouch," said Alfric.

"Well, you know what I mean," said Mizuki. "Sorry, I didn't —"

"No, I get it," said Alfric.

"The one I'm most worried about is Isra," said Mizuki. "But that's mostly because she doesn't live here, and she's got other things going on. Seems to me that one day she'll just up and leave."

"Like your parents?" asked Alfric.

Mizuki pursed her lips and looked at him. "My parents didn't *abandon* me, they were moving and they wanted me to come with, and *I* was the one who begged and pleaded to stay behind so I didn't have to go to a country where I didn't know anyone and barely spoke the language."

"Sorry," said Alfric. "But I know you've been a little, I don't know."

"Lonely," said Mizuki. "Sure." She folded her hands in her lap. "My place in Pucklechurch is a lot different than it was when my parents left." Mizuki bit her lip. "How do you keep friends, make sure that it doesn't fall apart?"

"You're *really* asking the wrong person," said Alfric.

"Oh," said Mizuki. "Right."

"Come on," said Alfric, getting to his feet and offering her a hand. "Let's go downstairs."

"I suppose," said Mizuki, taking his hand. He had a nice, firm grip. There was a lot to like about Alfric, even if he was a brick.

They went downstairs together, where Verity was sitting, having picked up a book in their absence. "How'd it go?" she asked. "Is this day going to get undone?"

"It's quite likely, yes," said Alfric. "But that doesn't change anything. And it wouldn't necessarily be Lola doing it, it could be any of the other chrononauts doing it incidentally while they go about their business. Lola was ... I don't know."

"I was listening in," said Mizuki.

"Oh?" asked Verity, looking at Alfric.

"I would tell the two of you everything anyway," said Alfric. "You're members of my party. The short version is that Lola offered me her spot on my party, and — I didn't say no, and would like some time to think about it, but I'd wager she hasn't told her team members about that offer, and I'm not sure she's in a position to offer anyway."

“So that might be it for our group?” asked Verity. She frowned.

“No,” said Alfric. “But this just happened, and I need time to think, not just about how I feel about things, but to figure out what Lola’s game is. *Everything* is a game, even the things she’s serious about. Maybe *especially* the things she’s serious about. I told her that we’d be using mail from here on out, and hopefully she’ll abide by that. It’s a way of ensuring that we don’t let time get in the way.”

“So the double dungeon?” asked Verity. “And the opera?”

“Those are still on,” said Alfric. He hesitated. “Is it bad of me to try to give this some honest evaluation?”

“That might have been her plan,” said Mizuki. “Throw some fire, see what lights up.”

“I know,” said Alfric. “But we know there’s discontent in her party.” He shook his head. “I’m trying not to get thrown off by it, but I wanted to let you know, and ideally, I would have some time to think. I’ll be in my room, if that’s alright with the two of you.”

Mizuki waited until he’d left to speak with Verity. “I’m really hoping he’s not ducking out.”

“He won’t,” said Verity.

“No?” asked Mizuki.

“What has Alfric gotten the most excited about, in his time here?” asked Verity.

“Um,” said Mizuki. “That stupid wardrobe?”

“Yes,” nodded Verity. “That, and teaching us things about dungeons, and plotting and planning. He’s got a strong energy when he’s laying things out and thinking things through. If he left to go be with his old party, what would there be for him?”

“I guess you might be right,” said Mizuki. It felt *bad* though. “I mean, we’re better than those guys, right?”

“Not at doing dungeons, no,” said Verity. “But better company ... I would *hope* we’re better company than a group of people who stabbed him in the back.”

“Well I don’t know if I’d say they did *that*, the way that Mardin and Grig described it, I could sympathize,” said Mizuki. “They signed up to do dungeons, not to do dungeons while working their way up from the ground floor with no support.”

“Anyone sounds reasonable from their own point of view, if you listen to their version of the story,” said Verity. “The lesson, then, is to just not listen.” Mizuki laughed, and Verity gave a little smile. “I’m halfway serious. It’s how I eventually ended up dealing with my parents.”

“Well, I hope we keep Alfric,” said Mizuki. “And if we don’t have him, would you still want to do it? The dungeons?”

"I don't know," said Verity. She'd had her finger in the book through the whole conversation, and seemed like she wanted to get back to it, not in an impatient way, necessarily, but Mizuki was aware of it. "Who would be our fifth?"

"Well, ideally a chrononaut," said Mizuki. "I really like having the safety net."

"Lola?" asked Verity. She had a wide smile, as though she thought that was *hilarious*. "You can hire their services," said Verity. "You get a letter in the morning if it's not going to work out. There's really no need for the person coming with us to be a chrononaut. Of course, chrononaut services are *horribly* expensive."

"Well, whatever," said Mizuki. "I'm not going to line up anything until he says for certain that he's out, I just wanted to know if you would still be here or not."

"We could start a different business," said Verity. "Though I've no idea what the four of us could do together."

When Mizuki left Verity to her book, she felt marginally better about the whole thing, which was a bit of a surprise, given that Verity didn't particularly feel like the comforting type.

Upstairs, Hannah and Isra were looking over the egg, which wasn't far from hatching, and Mizuki filled them in after letting them talk about the herb dragon, or whatever it would actually end up being. Hannah, through clerical touch, had a better sense of the *structure* of the creature, but Isra had some intuitive sense of it, and had been practicing pouring herself into things, which allowed her a bit more insight. The creature would come out weak and feeble, like a human baby, unable to care for itself. This was all well and good, but Mizuki's mind was still buzzing with Lola's unexpected visit and the dilemma that she'd laid on Alfric's lap.

Neither of them seemed all that concerned, Hannah because she had some faith in Alfric to make good choices, and Isra because she seemed to not *care* all that much, though it was hard to say with her.

And at the end of it all, Mizuki still felt nervous, like this was all going to collapse.

Given that the day was 'free', Mizuki elected to do something useful, and went down to the local government office, which wasn't much more than a room with a few desks in it, used by the mayor and the others as a place for them to make notes and answer requests. In a hex like Pucklechurch's, none of the positions were full-time jobs, so they only came in on specific days, and if you wanted something from them on some other day, you had to track them down. Mizuki had checked the schedule though, and knew that the censusmaster was in.

"I'd like to report a crime," said Mizuki. "Someone stole things from my friend Isra roughly five years ago. The man's name was Angun, and I don't have a last name for him, but he lived out in the woods."

Terra gave Mizuki a skeptical look. "And you're the one reporting it, not her?" she asked. "Five years late?"

"Yup," said Mizuki.

"Hmmm," said Terra. She was on the older side, childless, which meant that Mizuki hadn't had much cause to interact with her. She'd had the position for ages, and when she wasn't sitting behind her desk, she was a woodworker of some skill, though mostly on the artistic side rather than plain, practical craft. "It would help if you knew whether Angun was a first name or last name, or a nickname."

"Well, I don't," said Mizuki. "I'd heard that you can send out a blast, right? Talk to the other censusmasters and see whether they know anything? And he should be in your records from the past years. You were censusmaster then, weren't you?"

"I was," nodded Terra. "Wait, Isra, the girl who lives in the woods?"

"Yes," said Mizuki.

"So she's actually talking to people?" asked Terra. "Not just running away before anyone catches sight of her?"

"Well, about that," said Mizuki. "It's ... kind of your job to have caught her, isn't it?"

"There are limits to how much force we can apply," said Terra. "Practical limits, for someone who can disappear without a trace, and political limits, if it's just someone who wants to be left alone aside from bringing in meat on market days."

"Well, she's part of the town now," said Mizuki. "I'm running dungeons with her. And five years ago, after her father died, someone named Angun robbed her, so I'd like to, you know ... have that resolved."

"Her father *died*?" asked Terra. She swore. "Worse than we thought then." She had a grimace plastered on her face.

"She's mostly fine," said Mizuki. "And she was coming in on market days."

"Mmm," said Terra. "Well, I can go looking through the records, but the name Angun isn't familiar."

"He was probably in the woods," said Mizuki. "One of those people with a small cabin that stays away from the rest of the people?"

"I'll check," nodded Terra. "And if I find him in my records, then yes, I can go send something out across the whole province, though it will take some time, especially for the smaller hexes to get back to me."

"Good," nodded Mizuki. "I've got descriptions of the entads that were taken too, if you need that for your investigation. I sent out letters to the entad dealers east and west, and we'll see what I get back from them. I'll let you know."

"You're trying to solve a five year old crime?" asked Terra. "And without the actual victim here?"

"I'm doing a favor for a friend," said Mizuki. "If she had to come in here to speak with you, I think she probably just wouldn't. There were a few years there when she was terrified that you were going to take her house, or arrest her, or some other thing."

"And we probably should have," nodded Terra. "To provide her a better life."

"Well, I think she's been doing well for herself," said Mizuki. She almost let slip that Isra was a druid, but managed to keep that bit to herself. "You'll let me know if you find anything? I just need to know where he lives, and I don't imagine that he's gotten all that much farther from Pucklechurch."

"No taking matters into your own hands," said Terra, frowning.

"We just want the entads back," said Mizuki, which was a little white lie. "I should mention that there was an assault that happened with the theft, so a little justice wouldn't hurt."

"You should have mentioned the assault first," said Terra. Her lips went thin. "Against a thirteen year old girl?"

"She wasn't hurt," said Mizuki. "Just frightened."

"I'll do my best," said Terra. "That's all she had? A single name, not first or last?"

"A name, and a timeframe, and descriptions of entads," said Mizuki. "Do you think it will be enough?"

"I hope it will be," said Terra, nodding. "But I'll get back to you on it later, it will take some time for me to comb through the records. I can tell you right now there's no one with that name, first or last, in the current census."

"Thank you," said Mizuki. She let out a little sigh. It felt good to have done something, even if it felt like she might be setting Isra up to go on a quest that would take her away from the party. Isra deserved some closure, and she definitely deserved to have her entads back.

"Wait," said Mizuki, just before she was about to leave. "There's a girl named Lola, can you tell me if she's been in town?"

"Recently?" asked Terra.

Mizuki nodded.

"Yes," said Terra. "Every day for the last six days."

Mizuki swore. *That* did not bode well. She was going to have to hope that they could weather the storm.