

Mizuki came to Kirtle Point early, with two goals in mind. The first was to meet up with a farmer there to do some work, while the second was to get some actual practice in.

Countryside rarely had very much texture to the aether, though there were some exceptions, especially where magical plants or animals were involved. The forest around Mizuki's house had a number of magical trees that altered the aether in their own ways, but they were relatively few and far between. The local twin oaks were the best of them, at least from her perspective, a type of tree that 'twinned' so that anything that happened to one oak also happened to the other.

The fractal trees that made up the Fractalwoods were something else entirely. Their branches simply kept splitting, always in twos, and at the end, there was an impossible green fuzz, so thick that it was difficult to see through. They were heavy magic, and a dungeon escape, but the forest grew slowly, and if it had been cause for concern, the whole thing would have been burnt to the ground by the Pyros in the space of a single hour. It was some kind of spatial magic, and the imbalance in the aether was in the direction of *time*, which was quite fun for Mizuki, but not terribly useful. Now though, somehow, someone had decided to take her up on her standing offer to send things forward in time.

The old man got there before her. He had gray streaking through his hair and a big hat shielding him from the sun. He was tall and wiry, with a beard that he pretty clearly took some pride in, given that it was long and forked in two. Small rings of metal circled each side of the part, and they were the only adornment he wore. He was standing next to two huge carts, each of them piled with large sacks. The lizzos that had pulled them grazing idly in the field under the watchful gaze of two young boys. A third child, a girl of about ten, was standing by the older man.

"I'm the sorc!" called Mizuki.

"Nice to meet you!" he called back. "We were told you could send things forward in time?"

"It's one of the things I can do here, yes," she said as she got closer. "What am I doing it with?"

"Frink fruit," said the man.

"Beg pardon?" asked Mizuki.

"Frink fruit," the man repeated. He reached into one of the bags and pulled out something that looked like a small orange pepper. He tossed it to her, and she just barely managed to catch it. "Try one." The fruit was roughly the size of her pinky finger, a bit knobbly, and when she bit it, it was far more sour than she'd expected it to be, so much so that she wished she had something to chase it with.

"I know this," said Mizuki. "It's ... *kinu* fruit?"

"Frink fruit," the man said. "Not quite the same as *kinu*. Ripens early, around this time of year, and stays fresh for not much longer than a week. So that's where you come in." He held out a hand, and Mizuki shook it. "Name's Gurt."

"Mizuki," said Mizuki.

“Naddie,” said the girl, not offering her hand. “Can you really send things forward in time?”

“It’s not something I would lie about,” said Mizuki. “And you’d find out I was lying pretty quickly.”

“Could you send *me* forward in time?” asked the girl. “So I could have my birthday sooner.”

“I might be able to, if you stayed really still,” said Mizuki, regarding her. “Maybe. People have a bit of resistance to that kind of thing. And I’d have to ask your parents.” She waited for Gurt to clarify their relationship — he seemed old to be the girl’s father — but he offered nothing.

“You can do the frink fruit?” asked Gurt. He gestured to the wagons and their sacks. “All of it?”

“Probably,” said Mizuki.

“The woman I talked to, she said that you wouldn’t be able to get it quite right, that I would have to come check for the sacks every day once it was time,” said Gurt.

“Uh,” said Mizuki. They were right next to the fractal trees, and she could see the aether. She stared at it for a moment. “I think I can actually probably make it pretty precise. I’d just need to ... do some math, I think.”

“Math?” asked the man.

It was complicated though, and the more Mizuki thought about it, the more she thought that the solution she was going with wasn’t something that would have occurred to her a year ago. Casting something forward in time was pretty straightforward, given the mood of time floating around, but making sure it ‘landed’ in the right place was much more difficult. The insight she’d had was that with all the time floating around, she could just build up a clock and have that be a piece of the spell. It was a lot more complicated than doing it without a clock, and without having read that book, she wasn’t sure that she’d have even considered it.

“All I need to do is figure out how many seconds are in a year,” said Mizuki. “And then I can send it forward a year. I think.”

“I don’t need it sent forward a year,” said the man. “I need it sent forward, oh, six months, so it arrives in the dead of winter. Then I’ll have fresh fruit to sell when everyone is eating preserves or things from the chiller.”

“I can do that,” said Mizuki, trying to muster more confidence than she felt. She looked again at the sacks. There were a lot of them, enough to overfill two wagons. “I’ll need the fruits out of the wagons though, unless you want the wagons sent forward too.”

“No, no,” said the man, shaking his head. “We’ll unload.” He turned to the nearby field where the lizzos were grazing and gave a loud, shrill whistle using his fingers in his mouth. The boys came running.

All this moving of things took some time, and Mizuki pitched in, though she wasn’t the best at transporting heavy sacks. She was surprised by just how much there was, and said so.

“Frink trees fruit all at once,” said the man as he moved another sack. “We sell what we can, then try to put up the rest, but at a certain point there’s just too much, and you can’t even give it away, because everyone is so sick of frink fruit.”

“No offense,” said Mizuki as she hefted a sack. “But frink fruit, that’s a terrible name.”

“My great grandfather was Frink,” said the man. He was giving her a scowl. “He was responsible for the orchards in this hex.”

“Ah,” said Mizuki. “It’s just ... a name that doesn’t make me want to eat it. That’s all. Sorry.”

“Mmm,” said the man, seeming somewhat disgruntled. They didn’t speak any more until the sacks were stacked up.

“Okay, I think all I should need to do is a single big spell,” said Mizuki.

“How will we know it worked?” asked the man.

“Uh,” said Mizuki. “You’ll come back in one hundred and eighty days, I guess.”

“That’s accurate?” he asked.

“To within a day, it should be,” said Mizuki. She did the numbers again and got the same answer. She *hoped* that she was accurate.

“There will be a fair amount of snow then,” said the man. “And we’ll need the carts to move all this stuff.”

“And you don’t want it frozen,” nodded Mizuki. “Otherwise you’d just use a chiller, right?”

He nodded. “Should maybe have packed in some warming plates, but it’s too late for that now.”

“Well, no,” said Mizuki. “I’m about to send those sacks forward in time, but you could come back to this spot, which you should mark, and place out some heating elements at any time in the next half year. It would also help to melt any snow.”

“A fair idea, though I’m not sure the frink fruit will be worth it,” nodded the man.

“Alright,” said Mizuki, clapping her hands. “One hundred and eighty days.”

She circled the area, trying to put some of what she’d been reading about into practice. This sort of thing, precision spellcasting with no worry about how long it took, wasn’t really what she considered herself to be good at. Trying to build a quick clock out of time magic was also not a particularly easy thing to do, even if it seemed like it should be. She had meant to come early so she could get some practice in, and she’d *felt* early, but he’d already been there, waiting for her. It made her feel nervous about the whole thing, like she was an amateur rather than a professional spellcaster, which was often how she felt.

“Just so you know, I’ve never done this before,” said Mizuki.

"I was told by your guildmate," he replied. "She seemed skeptical. Like I said, the frinks are more or less worthless by themselves, at least this time of year, what I'm more worried about is not getting the sacks back, and the time and effort it took to get everything out here. We're a mile away, but with two lizzos, that's still some distance."

"I can check on it with a bird," said one of the boys who hadn't been introduced. "In the winter?"

"You just want snowshoes for your bird," the man scoffed. He looked at Mizuki. "Having second thoughts?"

"No," said Mizuki. "Just trying not to mess it up."

She stared at the large pile of frinks and spent quite a bit of her time thinking, trying to shape the magic in her head before actually drawing in any of the surrounding aether.

It wasn't the most complicated spell she'd ever cast, but it was the one she was the most nervous about. She didn't know this man, and he wasn't a part of her town, so if she screwed up, there'd be no built-in gentleness from him, no understanding that they were part of the same community. And it was a complicated spell, especially because she was trying to set a target in time. She had likened it to casting the frinks forward, but internally, mechanically, it was quite a bit different, more like making the frinks skip the coming days. If she'd been asked, Mizuki wasn't sure that she could articulate the difference, but she could see that it was there.

<Verity, can I get a minor boost in power?> asked Mizuki. <More, um, draw.>

<Sure,> said Verity. <Give me a moment.>

Mizuki felt bad for asking, especially since they were going to be doing a dungeon in an hour, but she wasn't sure that she would be able to do it without help, and a failed spell might mean disaster, depending on how it failed. At best, it would send the frinks to some indeterminate point in the future, but at worst ... she wasn't sure, but time magic wasn't something to mess with.

Mizuki drew in an enormous amount of ambient magic and made the spells using the same process she'd already gone through five times in her head. It was absurd how much Verity helped, especially when Verity was focused on a single aspect of boosting power. Mizuki's range was suddenly enormous, and she was drawing from hundreds of feet away. It almost felt like too much power, and Mizuki held back, trying to hook the mana into the little awkward clock she'd made.

And then she couldn't hold the spell any longer, couldn't keep the magic in check for another overview, and the spell went off.

The frinks were gone.

"Okay," said Mizuki. "Done." She *thought* it was done. It was done one way or another, anyway.

<Thanks for the song,> said Mizuki. <Sorry if it was draining.>

<No problem,> said Verity. <We'll be there in fifteen or so.>

"Mmm," said Gurt. He was squinting at the place where the frinks had been, as though he could check her work. "I suppose we'll see, will we?"

Mizuki nodded.

"Now, as for payment," said Gurt, turning to her. "Fifty rings, then another hundred when we have delivery."

Mizuki frowned. "I ... guess that's fine."

"Margins are slim," said Gurt. "And it's speculative, more for me than you. The whole shipment might be lost, and I still have to gather it up."

"I said it was fine," said Mizuki. Her cheeks were growing hot though. He took some rings off a heavy string, then handed them to her, which she pocketed without counting. Her sense of embarrassment was palpable. It was the thing she always hated about doing work for people.

She wandered off into the forest rather than help Gurt hook up the lizzos, which wasn't something she really knew how to do anyway. The bark of the trees was likewise fractal, but only on the surface of it, and the interior was fractal as well, the rings self-similar. Mizuki wasn't entirely clear what a fractal was, but she'd spoken with some people who were in the forest to study the trees. They hadn't been there to try to figure out what to use the Fractalwoods 'for', they just wanted to learn more, and had been rather fun to talk with, in part because they were quite enthusiastic, though Mizuki hadn't understood half of what they said.

Something in the magic was nagging at her. Not the spell, she thought that had done well, but some possibility of time. Going backwards in time was, obviously, very attractive, but it was apparently impossible in some theoretical aspect. That was what she'd been told, anyway, and she couldn't see any way to prove anyone wrong.

Mizuki found a rock in the ground, and chucked it into the air, then quickly cast a time spell on it. It slowed down to a crawl as it moved along its arc. She watched it, squinting, and moved closer so she could look at it. The spell had wrapped itself around the stone, something that had happened without her thinking about it too much, and there was something like friction as it continued on its path through the air. Eventually, and after not more than twenty seconds, it gave out, and the rock went on as it had been, landing on the forest floor.

Mizuki frowned at it again. There were neat things to do with time as the dominant mood, but she felt like she was just scratching the surface.

The next fifteen minutes were spent casting more spells, moving through the forest and scooping up as much magic as she could. It was boring work, so she tried to make a game of it, seeing how big a spell she could do, and how far she could stretch her reach. She wished that she had accepted Alfric's offer to come along, but she hadn't been sure how long the business with the frinks would take.

<We're just about to the edge of the forest, where are you?> asked Alfric.

<On my way,> said Mizuki.

She met them at the entrance to the forest, and felt a bit of relief to be with people she liked. Everyone was in their dungeoneering outfits already, and there were new pieces of kit since last time, including a bigger hammer for Hannah and some light armor for Isra on her forearms and shins. They walked together, taking the path to the dungeon entrance, and Mizuki shared what the contract work had been like. She tried to make her unintentional insult more funny than it had been, and left out the bit at the end when she had been given what felt like a paltry payment.

When they got to the dungeon entrance, she needed to change into her dungeoneering things, and this time didn't make the mistake of telling anyone to turn around. Alfric did so anyway, because he was a gentleman, and she appreciated that.

Alfric unlocked the dungeon entrance and examined the collar with the blue runes on them.

There was something about dungeons. They always felt like they came on suddenly, even if it was something they'd planned for a whole week, something they'd mapped out and trained for. Actually going into a dungeon felt *sudden*, unavoidably so, a 'so we're really actually doing this thing' feeling that was still there after three dungeons. Mizuki wondered whether it would ever go away. It was a world of blood and violence, and there was so little that separated it from the world they normally lived in.

"Is everyone ready?" asked Alfric.

"Very," said Verity. She had her lute out and was holding it almost like someone would hold a weapon.

"Ready," said Mizuki. "As ever, I guess." They were about to cross the threshold and go from perfectly safe and healthy to mortal peril.

They descended together, and Mizuki felt a shiver go through her body as they passed from one world into another, the moment of expansive possibility and imminent danger washing over her. They'd been in three times now, and she'd come out unscathed each time, which allowed the natural fear she felt to turn into excitement.

They came out into a small room with an undersized door made of metal, so short that Alfric would need to duck to get through it.

<Good, no fight to start us off,> said Alfric. He stood next to the door with his bident and shield, eyeing it for a moment, then put his weapon down to take off his pack and set it in a secure location. It was good to have a basecamp right next to the entrance of a dungeon, that was something he'd explained to them, and explained a few too many times for Mizuki's taste.

Alfric took a breath, then gave Verity a nod, which was her cue to start playing a rousing song about rabbits running from a flood in their warren. He opened the door and stepped through, bident at the ready, and Mizuki followed after him, ready to utterly destroy whatever she saw.

The metal door led into a stonework corridor, one that twisted as they went until they were walking awkwardly on top of the corner where the wall had met the floor. The twisting continued, eventually putting them on the surface that had been the wall, then on the surface that had been the ceiling, and that was when they got to the second door of the dungeon, a flimsy wooden one with visible gaps in the planks.

<Mizuki, what's the aether like?> asked Alfric.

<Growth, space, time ... difficult things to work with,> said Mizuki. There was an unevenness too, spikes where one was higher than the other. Some of this had to be from the Fractalwoods, but it was impossible to say what. She didn't know the theory well enough. The Fractalwoods did things with *space* and with *growth*, and then the imbalance also got swept into the dungeon's collection systems as well? She hoped they wouldn't end up in another expansive room. <If we're in a large area, I could grow you, temporarily.>

<It's better for Isra,> said Alfric. <If you can do her bow and arrows too?>

Mizuki nodded, then remembered what he'd said about clarity. <Yes.>

<Breaching,> said Alfric, and he pushed through the next door.

The room was illuminated only by Alfric's lantern, but it cast light on a cavern, one with a ceiling forty feet above, crawling with chitinous creatures, like crabs but with too many limbs and a hairy center region. They each had two dozen legs, and after only a brief moment, began *throwing* the legs at Alfric, using little pincer arms. Fighting creatures thirty feet above him wasn't his specialty, and he knew it, so he moved forward to give room to those behind him, holding his shield above him and taking the hits as heavy legs were flung against him, each of them ten or fifteen pounds, thunking against him.

Isra came behind him and started firing arrows up at them, and Hannah in her full plate moved into the room as well, seemingly in order to give them a second target to throw their legs at.

Mizuki was worthless. She was trying to figure out something to do with her magic, something that would actually help to kill these distant creatures, especially because she was one of the only parts of their team that could manage proper range. With the ambient aether, the most she would be able to do was a weak firebolt, which seemed worthless. She needed Hannah to be doing something, or Verity's song to leak more.

<Isra, making you big,> said Mizuki. She cast the spell as she said it, and hoped that it wouldn't throw Isra off too much.

The effect was immediate and to Mizuki's surprise, quite potent. Isra was nearly twice her size, and thankfully, that included all parts of her, meaning that she didn't shred her clothes. She was thrown off, just a little, moving arms that had more weight to them, but she knocked an arrow and

fired at the creatures. This time, the arrow hit much harder, puncturing straight through and pinning the creature to the ceiling.

Mizuki looked over and saw that Hannah had stumbled, maybe from a thrown leg having hit her, but she was leaning awkwardly to one side and moving around like she was drunk. There was nothing that Mizuki could do about that, and very little that she could contribute to the fight until there was more of a build-up of magic, but she did her best to have some awareness of what was going on while she waited for there to be enough charge in the air for her to contribute in some meaningful way.

She was the first to notice something that they might have been able to notice right from the start: the creatures on the ceiling weren't clinging there with their feet like bats, they were simply standing on the ceiling, moving around without gripping it at all. And with Hannah having trouble getting to her feet, it was clear that something strange was going on.

Mizuki grabbed a rock from the ground and threw it up at the creatures, and watched as it followed a path that was utterly wrong. At a certain point it was falling toward the ceiling.

<Gravity is weird in here,> said Mizuki over the sounds of the fight.

It was the enlarged Isra doing most of the work, with Alfric serving as a distraction and shield as she put oversized arrows into them. She was getting them, but with her height, she was getting pelted with more than her share of legs, though they seemed to faze her less. Once Mizuki had said her bit though, Hannah was able to straighten herself out, and she began to run toward the side wall, then up the side wall, and finally, she was going along the ceiling to join the crab-like creatures in battle.

<Toss me up here,> Alfric said to Isra.

Isra paused for just a moment, then set her bow down and put out her hands. Alfric stepped into them, and she didn't hesitate at all before she launched him up toward the creatures. The more she looked at them, the more they looked like bugs instead of crabs, but maybe it was the hair. Mizuki was worried that he was going to take too hard a fall, but he landed on one of the crab-creatures with a crunch and got to his feet without seeming to think too hard about the complete change in direction he'd gone through. He was in among them, fighting them with his bident, and it almost looked like he was going to be overwhelmed on several occasions, but Isra was firing arrows up into the melee. She seemed to be landing them perilously close to him, but they were mostly hitting their targets.

Hannah eventually arrived at where the monsters were, having gone the long way up the side of the wall, and began laying into the ones that were left with her hammer. Alfric was quite a bit bigger than her, and a skilled fighter, especially with the bident being able to cause small explosions within the creatures, but there was something about the weight and ferocity with which Hannah moved that made her seem more deadly. She was putting her whole body into the swings, where Alfric focused on an efficiency of action.

Isra killed the last of them, and by Mizuki's estimation, had fired off more than twenty arrows in total, almost all of them having hit.

<Clear!> called Alfric. He was looking up/down at them from the ceiling. <Variable gravity.>

<I noticed,> said Mizuki.

<Is the whole place goin' to be like this?> asked Hannah. <I feel ill.>

<I need some healing,> said Alfric. <Otherwise I'm going to be mostly bruise.>

<On it,> replied Hannah. She was breathing heavily, her energetic walloping having taken a lot out of her.

The rocky cave had two exits, each of them going off to the side, and Alfric was looking down them as he was being healed, bident at the ready.

<Really banged yourself up,> said Hannah as she laid hands on Alfric. <Not sure that launching into them was the best idea.>

<I was getting pummeled on the ground,> said Alfric. He looked up. <Isra, Mizuki, good job.>

<Nice work,> said Verity.

Mizuki looked at her. <Did you stop the song?>

<Still going,> Verity replied. She had the lute in her hands, and was plucking at it every now and then. <I can talk if I don't talk too much.>

<That's amazing,> said Mizuki. She looked over at Isra, who was slowly shrinking back down. <Are you okay?>

<Yes,> said Isra. <It was ... odd. Everything felt off.>

<So do you want me to do it again, or not?> asked Mizuki.

<Yes, again,> said Isra.

<We should get going though,> said Alfric. <We'll go left and come back later to clear right. Hopefully we're not going to be faced with open spaces. I'm worried about the gravity.>

Mizuki was too, but with a first successful encounter under their belt, she was feeling good about the dungeon, and what it might contain within it. There were strange magics in the air, and this was her chance to prove that she had been working to get better. They were back in it, the land of danger, and it was starting to feel like a place she was meant to be.