

## **Mizumi**

### **Backstory**

**Species:** Arctic fox-type kitsune, 1-tailed

**Sex:** ♀

**Age:** Under 100 years

**Height:** Not given

**Weight:** Not given

**Siblings:** 1 younger sister, born 7 years later, named Mizuko



### **Worldbuilding / Species Details**

Magic exists in Mizumi's world, and is practised at a lay level by most people. A few species, including kitsune, have a greater affinity for magic, so are capable of more impressive magical feats. The more tails an individual kitsune has, the more powerful their magic.

However, a kitsune with only one tail is no more of an affinity with magic than any other species, and some other species have an affinity from an earlier point in their lives. A kitsune can earn more tails by making noteworthy accomplishments.

Mizumi is an original character. She grew up responsible to a fault, a tendency towards depression, and a love of art. As she aged she mostly overcame the cause of her depression.

### **Trust & Confidence**

*(newborn)*

Mizumi was born to a father who worked in the military. Her mother tended to self-identify more as a military wife than anything else, so her career isn't mentioned here. Mizumi was their first-born so they were both unused to having a child around.

From the outset Mizumi felt that her mother's attention wasn't quite on her. She certainly wasn't left dirty and unfed; it was more that her mother played up the role of military wife and wanted the attention to be on her. Mizumi was often an accessory, and

feeding and otherwise tending to her when alone reminded Mizumi's mother that her husband was not around - and may not survive his latest deployment.

This had a subtle yet insidious effect on Mizumi. As an infant she felt that the care wasn't quite 'there' - that her mother wasn't as strong as Mizumi needed her to be and that she might crumble at any time. Sometimes her mother did indeed burst into tears and put Mizumi down to cry in the next room, and this was a big deal to a newborn like Mizumi. She didn't understand what was happening, just that she was unsafe because the 'big other' who was her mother was weak and had a disconcerting tendency to disappear.

### **Freedom & Self-Determination**

*(toddlerhood)*

Mizumi's life continued in a similar vein, although she matured to a point that she began to recognise that her mother and she were two separate entities - something that isn't the case with newborns, and part of the reason she had found her mother's emotional fragility so deeply unnerving.

It was during this stage of her life that Mizumi first met her father. He returned from deployment and settled back in at home. Mizumi's mother was delighted, of course, and Mizumi sensed how powerful an influence her father was on her mother's life. What else could Mizumi do but believe that her father was just an incredibly potent figure? Her father's presence soothed and brought joy to her mother, and that was more than Mizumi herself had been able to do.

To her, it seemed as if her father had some sort of otherworldly strengths and abilities, that he could soothe her mother so much better than she could. It was purely mundane of course, but it looked almost uncanny to a toddler.

With her mother feeling safe and secure, Mizumi sought her out in the hope of experiencing her mother as happy and relaxed for the first time in her life. She hoped that she would feel the full warmth of motherhood at last. She did, mostly, but again, something wasn't quite in place. Her mother was no longer too distracted to show her love, but there was a sense of over-compensation, or perhaps of mania, about it, and it quickly became clear to Mizumi that it was her father who ultimately held her mother's attention, not Mizumi herself.

All of this added up to a difficult experience for Mizumi. As a toddler, she needed to differentiate herself from her mother and assert her own personhood, but her mum had already strongly underlined their separateness from the moment Mizumi had been born, by failing to bond with her. Now Mizumi was old enough to need that separation but lacked the solid foundation of knowledge that whatever she did, her mother would be there to support and guide her.

Given this weak foundation on which to build herself, she opted to be nice - gentle, cooperative, and friendly when she got the chance, in the hope of winning her mother over. The story was similar for her relationship with her father: he seemed so powerful, that to her young mind he had a kind of invisible aura about him. How could she do anything but try to appease him by being the very best she could be around him?

### **Ambition**

*(young childhood)*

Mizumi reached her fourth birthday so her mother sent her off to school. She wasn't sure whether she wanted to go as her confidence was low, but her first day went very well.

Her teacher was calm and gentle with the children, and quickly noticed how out of her depth Mizumi was. As luck had it, one of the other children in the class, named Noel, was also unsure of herself, so the teacher introduced them. The two of them sat with each other, talked, and played all day, and when Mizumi was brought home, she felt happy and looked forward to the next day.

From here, Mizumi developed confidence at school. She built a good relationship with her new friend, and the teacher did her job well in supervising the class. A lot of her activities, given her age, were centered around art: colouring in, looking at pictures in books, reading, and either listening to her teacher sing to them or singing along.

All of this positive experience around art invested her with a love for it that lasted her whole life.

She was also taught other subjects: maths, reading and writing, and later basic science, geography, history, and more. She did very well in most of these.

Magic was more of a problem, however. Mizumi had been aware for a while that most people were capable of performing magic, and she had heard that kitsune - like her parents and herself - were able to perform especially impressive acts of magic, but it wasn't until now that she made the connection that she would be able to do it too.

She went home and asked her parents what magic they could do. Her father, who had six tails and belonged to a military squad that specialised in magic, described his magical escapades to her. They sounded so much more advanced than anything she had ever seen, and she wondered how she could ever match up to his level of skill.

This troubled her. She wanted to impress her parents, like most small children do, but even approaching her dad's level of skill, let alone impressing him, seemed impossible.

When she went back to school, Mizumi took solace in music instead. She still found art soothing and enjoyable, and she took comfort in her good grades in the various subjects her teacher taught. Occasionally her teacher would combine art with magic by creating mandala patterns with leaves or making oil move on the surface of water in complex patterns, or shaping steam or smoke into cute pets and making them run and play in the classroom or playground. This offered Mizumi some comfort, although these feats didn't come close to the ones her father had described.

## **Productivity**

*(older childhood)*

When Mizumi reached age 6 her mother fell pregnant again.

When she learned that she had a sibling on the way, Mizumi began to wonder what the little one's life would be like. Mizumi may have found comfort at school, but home was still a barren place when it came to emotional warmth and affection.

At the age of 7, Mizumi finished school and moved on to the next stage in her education: mentorship by a specialist tutor. Being a kitsune, she was assigned to a tutor specialising in magic. It was accepted by the adults around Mizumi that she would one day earn her second tail and that once she had done that, she would be able to apply the training she was being given to its fullest extent, but for the time being Mizumi was expected to treat it as purely theoretical.

This was not communicated particularly well to Mizumi.

The training consisted of weekly sessions, where the tutor and her students would meet for instruction and to demonstrate what they had learned and ask questions. Then they would return home to study and practise at home for a week.

Some of the other children her tutor was training were of species that had a natural affinity for magic and didn't have to wait for any developmental triggers to unlock their full potential, like Mizumi did. Mizumi watched them excel while she struggled to keep up with the tutorials. She felt ashamed of what she interpreted as her failure so she didn't speak up about it, and her tutor, assuming all was well, left Mizumi to her own devices. Seeing her co-students do so much better than her in their magical studies was painful enough, but Mizumi didn't get to forget it even at home. If her father was around, he served as a constant reminder of her inadequacy. If he wasn't around, her mother mentioned him often enough, and sometimes went so far as to compare the two.

Mizumi's father went out on another deployment, and her mother gave birth to a little girl, who was named Mizuko. For the first time in her life, Mizumi saw how her mother treated an infant. It wasn't drastic, but Mizumi couldn't help but notice her mother's neglect of her tiny new sister. Her mum withdrew from the infant, found ways to distract herself as if Mizuko was an unwelcome obligation, and only picked her up when she needed a feed or a change - never just to hold her or enjoy her. Mizumi observed that her mother seemed to consider her baby a 'job'.

The significance of this wasn't lost on Mizumi, not one bit. She understood that this was how her mother had probably treated her when she was an infant. It broke her heart to see it, and she resolved to care for, and love Mizuko so that she wouldn't grow up to feel unworthy.

The trouble was, the prospect of motherhood, even partial motherhood like this, terrified Mizumi. She committed herself to it anyway.

Her mother noticed this and was only too happy to let Mizumi take the responsibility. There were times when her mother took so long to tend to the baby that Mizumi felt she had no choice but to tend to Mizuko. She taught herself how to change a diaper, prepare a bottle, and bathe an infant kitsune. The little one cried in the middle of the night, every night for weeks, and Mizumi inevitably woke up to the sound.

Mizumi learned over time that her mother had no problem with leaving the house for hours at a time without providing cover to care for the baby. This meant that Mizumi felt

obliged to pick up the slack, whether she felt confident to take over or not. She didn't: whenever she was left alone with the baby she felt haunted that something would happen that she wasn't prepared for, and that the blame would fall on nobody else's shoulders but her own. She didn't feel that she could argue with her mum about this. While nothing specific happened to forbid this, Mizumi got the feeling that her mother simply didn't have the fortitude to have a discussion about this, so Mizumi avoided talking with her about it, for fear of negative consequences. She wasn't even sure what those negative consequences would be, just that it was best to avoid them.

All of this impacted on Mizumi's studies. Studying at home, maintaining a daily routine for Mizuko, and responding every time she cried, Mizumi couldn't make much headway. She already felt like the bottom of the class and felt herself slipping further behind every week.

Mizumi simply wasn't the kind of girl to show her anger, at least, not to other people, and certainly not to her mother. Instead she quietly hoped that something would happen to ease the load. Her first hopes were on her kitsune heritage: she wondered what was happening with her supposed affinity and hoped that at some point, the lessons would click.

This is how she entered adolescence: full of fears, holding onto hope that seemed increasingly unrealistic, obligated to care for an infant she didn't feel competent to care for, and terribly afraid to fail.

### **Child to Adult Transition**

*(adolescence)*

Adolescence brought a few changes to Mizumi's life.

All of the members of her study group were well-acquainted with one another by this point. Mizumi's co-students all knew that she had a little sister at home whom she was deeply involved in raising, and that she was finding the magic training difficult. They were kind and understanding towards her, but to Mizumi their kindness looked like pity. As unwelcome as it was, she didn't feel as if she could reject their sympathy.

There were a few people who Mizumi looked up to as role models. Her father was one of them, although that relationship was still tinged with feelings of inadequacy. Aside

from that, there were a few scholars and priests who came from the same establishment as Mizumi's tutor, and these inspired her.

As the years went by, Mizuko aged and became more independent until Mizumi no longer felt under so much pressure.

Mizumi couldn't take much time away from her studies and Mizuko to relax, but when she could, she would often visit a shrine. This is where she started to experience profound healing.

As an infant she had always felt that her mother wasn't really there. Visiting the shrine, and by extension, the pantheon of gods who resided there, gave her a similar experience. But this didn't seem like neglect. It felt like behaviour she might reasonably expect of gods. She had expected her mother to be physically present and tangible. The gods, not so much. Just being in the shrine made her feel connected to them. She spoke to them and allowed herself to feel the peace and reverence of the sacred space. When she left, she felt replenished and connected in a way she never had with her mother.

Mizumi had always been privy to the common knowledge that a kitsune had to have more than one tail to develop an affinity with magic and become more powerful, but until now that had been an almost irrelevant piece of trivia in the back of her mind, something she had known but never applied to her own life. One day, when thinking about this, she made the connection. Mizumi's struggles with her studies finally clicked for her, and when she realised this, she sought more information about how to earn her second tail.

One answer was to go on a quest. She had heard that the forests around her home were the habitat of a mystical beetle, and this was the kind of quest where a kitsune might very well earn her second tail, so this was the quest she chose.

She went into the woods, and it didn't take too long before she got lost. Mizumi tried to recover the trail but every effort she made to find it failed. She spent long enough in the woods that one of the scholars of the magic school came looking for her. He found her and guided her back to the trail.

She burst into tears as he led her to the trail: she felt as if she had failed, that she couldn't do anything right, and that the fact that another person had had to go out of their way to lead her back reflected badly on her. But he talked with her as they returned

to the trail. He pointed out that taking a wrong turn was common, that everybody did that, and that there was no shame in it. That she didn't need to learn how to never make mistakes, and that her best learning would be to give herself permission to make mistakes. If she could learn to be 'on her own side' by making an internal promise to protect herself rather than talking so harshly to herself, then she would be doing even better.

Mizumi told him that she didn't have time to care for herself and that putting herself first would be selfish, so any promise to herself would be worthless. The scholar disagreed. "You have responsibilities, and you take those very seriously. But to fulfil those responsibilities you must keep yourself in good shape, and know how to correct for your mistakes. Self-care is not selfish, it is part of the reality of serving others."

That made Mizumi burst into tears again, but the scholar said nothing this time. He understood that she needed to cry.

Mizumi opted to return home as she had already spent longer lost in the wilderness than the whole of the time she had allotted for the quest. She felt that she had failed and reflexively started thinking harshly of herself, but then she remembered the scholar's words.

She sought him out again, a few days later. When they met, she felt very uncertain of herself and he noticed this. He asked her why. She explained that she wanted to hear what he had to say but hadn't been able to justify meeting him as she didn't want to waste his time.

"Helping you is not a waste of my time, Mizumi," he told her. "My task at this school is to support our students. I am sorry that you felt you could not come to me until now, and I am sorrier still that you have been in such a dilemma about it."

She asked what he meant, and he told her that many people felt caught between I must and I mustn't. "The world is full of musts and mustn'ts", he told her. "We must be careful not to let them tear us apart."

"How?" she asked, for this sounded like the single biggest struggle in her life. She wasn't sure what she expected him to say. She didn't think there was an answer, but somehow she believed that he would say something that would make her feel better.



What she didn't expect was such a clear answer. "Permission," he said. "Tell yourself that it is okay to make mistakes, to fail, to get a lower grade than you were hoping for. Tell yourself that while there are reasons not to do something, there is no ultimate must. That is when you ease the pressure on yourself."

The conversation went on for longer as Mizumi asked him more about this philosophy, and gave examples from her own life where she had felt obligated. By the end of it, she saw several ways to ease the pressure on herself. She felt better than she had in a long time.

Before she left, she said, "I want to learn so much more of this, but I don't want to disturb you when you are busy."

"Then let us set aside time," he told her. "Come to me, this time, every week, and we will talk."

Mizumi stuck to this. At first she learned purely by listening. The scholar told her things that hit the mark:

"We must all have the time to be a child, even if we only get to do that inside our heads. Children construct vivid fantasy worlds, where if they want to imagine something unacceptable, then that is what they do. An angry child will imagine murdering their enemy. Murder is wrong of course, but if he desires to fantasise about it, then what good will come of him denying his own imagination?"

"But thoughts can become actions..." Mizumi protested.

"Thoughts, feelings, behaviour, they are all different things," the scholar told her. "A child can feel murderous without behaving murderous, or thinking it is the right thing to do." He paused to let this sink in. "And you are welcome to do the same."

Mizumi laughed uneasily at this. "I've never wanted to kill anybody." But his words stuck, and she listened to her feelings for the next week.

She hadn't completed her quest and she still had only one tail. The other students continued to race ahead of her in their magical studies. Mizuko, while more independent than she had been, still required care. Her mother still left the majority of the work to Mizumi, and her father - whenever he was home - continued to regale his family with tales of his magical prowess.

By the time she met with her scholar for their weekly chat, she had certainly noticed herself feeling angry.

“None of it’s serious,” she told him, full of exasperation. “Why am I this angry?”

The scholar told her, “If you earned a coin for every time a person had annoyed you this week, perhaps you could buy a house.”

“I wish,” Mizumi snorted.

“And that is the point,” he told her. “You could never buy a house with just one coin, but does that mean that none of those coins have their worth?”

“They would,” Mizumi answered, thinking that this was a mere flight of fancy, “but I would have to save them up-” This was when she understood the scholar’s message. “I’m saving up my anger, aren’t I?”

Once again, the conversation continued, and Mizumi came to understand what had been happening. She saw the ‘coins’ she had been collecting throughout her life and saving away for another day. The scholar pointed out that she could do anything she wanted with the coins: saving them up, or spending them at all, was only one option. The metaphor of course, was that she could discard her coins - forget the injustices and forgive her family, tutor, and co-students - but she didn’t feel ready to do that.

She continued to see him every week. Some of the lessons he taught her were easy to learn, but others, like the anger she secretly harboured for the many injustices, were harder. Regardless, this was the situation she found herself in when she entered young adulthood.

### **Closeness in Relationships**

*(young adulthood)*

Mizumi remains a student of magic to this day. She still has only one tail, but she feels freer and lighter for not feeling so obliged. She still sees the scholar and he continues to impart wisdom. She values this, but it hasn’t granted Mizumi her second tail.

The reason for this is that she is keen to act on his advice, and that isn't his true goal. Mizumi may benefit from acting as he suggests, but actions are not attitudes. They are not philosophies or beliefs. She will truly begin to develop wisdom when she adopts an attitude of empathy. The scholar underpins his words with this in the hope that she will learn to treat herself with empathy, and to learn that her frantic efforts to keep other people happy are actions of appeasement.

Mizumi will take a while to achieve this. Replacing the frightened cub, frosty mother, and distant, imposing father in her soul will take time, and working through her layers of fear, resentment, and desire to rebel, will require patience, courage, and much self-reflection, but that is what she must do.

The scholar has the patience to let her learn that attitude of empathy, and to see her through the storms that will come if she learns to recognise these lessons for what they truly are. Time will tell if Mizumi sticks it out too.

### **Passing on Responsibilities**

*(older adulthood)*

Mizumi is going through a time of her life when she may change drastically from the harried, under-prepared first-born she is to a calm young woman, capable of gentleness towards everyone - including herself. The outcome of her relationship with the scholar could make a huge difference to the life she leads as a young adult, and in turn how her life looks by the time she reaches middle age.

As such, it is difficult to predict at the current time.

### **End of Life**

*(old age)*

As a kitsune, Mizumi's lifespan will be very long indeed, so she hasn't given her mortality much thought at all.

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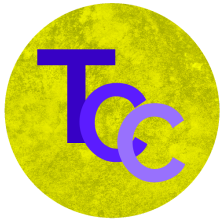
Erikson, E., (1951) 'Childhood and Society', W.W. Norton & Company, Inc. chapter 7.

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~ Hayley, Founder of The Character Consultancy

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