

# The Fox Den - Fuyuma

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In the modern, luxurious bar, the chatter of patrons filled the space with life. The quiet traditional music barely made its presence known, adding a soft ambiance to the bar. The whispers of patrons' thoughts were louder here, the alcohol softening their inhibitions and letting their minds wander. Fuyuma listened to it all, keeping an ear out for any valuable information, spoken or thought.

She sipped a glass of cherry vodka, enjoying the sharp, sweet taste. Ever since Fuyuma had arrived in the Crossroads, she'd taken to sampling a variety of things her previous life had prevented her from experiencing. She found herself taking a liking to alcohol, a risky interest. She saw how the drinks inebriated other patrons, made them loose and more impressionable. Fuyuma didn't want to lose her composure, so she played it safe with alcohol: only sipping, where other patrons chugged. A pleasant buzz was enough for her.

Chiifu worked as the barmaid tonight, passing out drinks and making pleasantries with the guests. She sported her own margarita glass, taking drinks between orders. Chiifu played up a drunken, sloppy demeanor, but Fuyuma could sense a degree of control, even now. Even through the haze of alcohol, Chiifu wouldn't let anything serious happen. Fuyuma respected that.

Fuyuma finished her drink in some time, and Saki, the bartender, was quick to approach and offer another.

"What would you like?"

Fuyuma hummed. "Water. I've had enough for now."

"That's no fun! You gotta try some more drinks!" Chiifu flopped into the seat next to Fuyuma, drunkenly slurring her words.

Fuyuma huffed out a laugh. "I'll try more later, I'm buzzed enough as it is."

Chiifu pouted, but didn't press any further, instead ordering herself a refill of her own drink. At this, Fuyuma turned to Saki. The way Saki mixed drinks was an art, a dexterous, swift dance, that resulted in beautiful, delicious beverages. Fuyuma enjoyed watching her work, and Saki didn't seem to mind the audience too much.

"By the way, Fuyuma, the tournament will be starting soon," Chiifu said, looking to Fuyuma.

Fuyuma nodded. As a favor to Chiifu, Fuyuma promised to keep an eye out and help where possible. In preparation for the event, Fuyuma had been getting into a more regular habit of

listening in spots the contestants would likely hang out. "Have the invitations been sent?"

"Yes."

"Then they'll be arriving in no time at all," Fuyuma said.

"Absolutely," Chiifu responded. "You're prepared, of course?"

Fuyuma smiled. "Of course."

"Good."

Fuyuma warmed at the praise. And then, a new sensation filled her chest, a lurching. Suddenly, all at once, the world seemed louder, more chaotic. She could hear the chittering of a fox, behind all the noise. And then, something *split*. For a moment, she felt parts of her mind, her perception, break off, and then everything seemed to return to normal. Except for the new guests.

Fuyuma gave Chiifu a suspicious look, who only raised an eyebrow back. Before Fuyuma could think to say something, Chiifu slipped away from the bar, towards the people that just arrived. But she spared a glance and smile towards Fuyuma. A look that said:

*I expect your best.*

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