

<b>Student</b>	Luke Palmer, Wilmington, 11th Grade
<b>Title</b>	A Chip in the Party
<b>Result</b>	1st Place

### **A Chip in the Party**

With a well-placed stab to the gut with my trusty dagger, I killed the final kobold inhabiting the cave. While my ally Maybel worked on freeing the noble hostage, I looted the bodies of the small dragon-like beings. A few copper coins are nothing compared to the horde of loot we'll get after slaying the dragon tomorrow, but they're still something.

"Hey Digit, do you mind hurrying a little? The noble's being really pretentious, and it's really getting on my nerves." Maybel's sweet voice got me to finish up.

Maybel has always been a bit of an idol for me. Ever since we met each other in the old tavern we held sacred, she's been by my side. I've learned a lot about her during the year or so we've adventured together. She's a bipedal vixen following some fire goddess, and due to her rather reckless use of fire magic, I had to learn quickly to stay out of the blast. She also has a very strong love for cookies, almost comically so.

Then you had me. A stealthy, introverted bat with a few daggers. I have to admit, I'm not the most interesting. Which is why I prefer to think about Maybel and how she compliments me instead.

As soon as we delivered the man to their lavish mansion, we beelined to the inn and tavern we've been staying at. We picked it for a few reasons: the fare was cheap, the food and housing were decent, and most importantly for Maybel, they had a bakery she wasn't banned from next door. She stopped by to grab a treat while I scored myself a seat in the tavern.

The owners of the inn and tavern, a reclusive werewolf and a pudgy gourmand of a feline, did a good job at making this place feel cozy and welcoming. Plenty of tacky yet inviting decorations lined the walls.

I took a seat, dropping my bag on the one next to me so no one would take Maybel's seat. Tonight's meal was chicken and roasted spuds. It's not my favorite, but the food was still enjoyable.

Maybel came in a few minutes later with nothing but a few cookie crumbs on her muzzle. I really shouldn't be surprised that she already finished them. What did surprise me was that she still had an appetite. The food wasn't burnt enough though, but it's nothing that fire magic couldn't fix. For some reason she liked her food charred.

"So, Digit... anything on your mind?" Maybel asked, swallowing down a bite.

"Not much... Alright, I'll be honest. I'm a little hesitant about tomorrow. I mean, we're about to tango with one of the most feared beings in the kingdom. Are you not scared as well?"

"I don't have a reason to. I have you, remember? You're more powerful than you give yourself credit for." Even if I know that I'm just being paranoid, it can still take Maybel to fully convince myself.

"Anyways, I should probably head up to our room. I have some prayers to do. Could you go ahead and scout out the lair in the meantime? Many thanks." With that, she walks to our room, leaving me alone.

I couldn't help but feel that something was off. We seldom ever go alone. It wasn't like she needed complete seclusion either; she'd often do her prayers in my presence. But maybe this time was different? I'm not good with religion, so I decided to just give her the benefit of the doubt and headed out to the presumed location of the lair.

It took me a while to find it, but I eventually located the entrance in a rather cliché spot: right behind a raging waterfall. The entrance was too small for a dragon to enter it, so she must've hatched in there. It also explains why she has a litany of kobolds stealing wealth in her place, since the dragon can't leave. I quickly took out the two inebriated kobold guards before proceeding.

Half of the cavern's inside was taken up by the sleeping dragon and the hoard of valuables

under her. I frankly expected less wealth considering she's having kobolds pilfer for her. Since I now knew what we were working with, I figured it was time to head back to Maybel and let her know. Hopefully by now she'd be done, and we could get a restful night's sleep together.

When I got back to the inn, I noticed something strange. The door to the room was locked. Not once has Maybel locked the door before. Concerned for her, I made a gentle knock on the door.

"Hey Maybel, are you alright?"

I didn't get a response. Getting impatient, I knocked harder.

"This isn't funny, Maybel! Answer, or I'm finding my way inside."

Again, no response. But this time I was able to pick up something: the sound of frantic pacing. I needed answers, and if whoever's in there isn't going to give them, I'll have to do it myself. I grabbed an old hatchet from my bag and slammed it into the wood blocking me. Despite being the slender, frail rogue that I am, the adrenaline coursing through me destroyed the door.

Maybel wasn't in the room. Instead, it was someone else. A sort of fox spirit, with four tails and a beautiful figure that could only be described as divine. It was a kitsune. I knew they could take more "ordinary" forms, so perhaps this was the true identity of Maybel? But before I could ponder any further, the spirit let out a fearful cry before fleeing out the window. I gave chase, but not before taking out my emergency cookie. If this was truly her, then there was no way she could resist.

Despite my speed, I was no match for the spirit, quickly losing her in the forest. Left with little else to try, I set the cookie down in a decently open spot and hid behind a tree, waiting for her to take the bait.

Of course, it wasn't long before she did. Without a doubt, this was Maybel. She must've known I was there, because she spoke to me in a voice weaker than usual.

"You smug little bat..."

Not wanting Maybel to panic and flee again without another cookie to lure her back, I tackled

her, holding her tight in a comforting gesture. I could tell both of us were blushing slightly.

“Maybel... you're a kitsune? Why didn't you tell me sooner?”

“I was afraid that you’d leave me like most have after finding out. That bipedal fox form you knew me as helps me blend in, but it's draining on me. I needed time to rest in my true form, which is why I sent you out.”

"Ah... And your religious stuff?”

"Truth is, I never was a cleric. I was just using my innate powers."

All of this was a massive shock, but I kept calm so as to not make Maybel uncomfortable. It's interesting being the one consoling.

“Maybel... I want you to know something. Unless you do something absolutely heinous, I'll never leave your side. You can have your cleric persona while we're out, but I'd rather you be yourself around me. I like you more that way.”

We didn't bother going back inside, preferring to rest here. We enjoyed the proximity and warmth of each other too much to feel like going back in.

Under the moonlight of the next night, we raced over to the waterfall. In her true kitsune form, Maybel was powerful enough to levitate herself, a power that's extremely useful against a foe whose only ranged attack is fire breath.

We wasted no time. Maybel took to the air, distracting the dragon whilst bathing it in fire that seemed to pierce the dragon’s resistance. Meanwhile, I darted around and plunged my dagger into weak spots while the dragon was too busy trying to scorch a being immune to fire.

For a dragon cooped up in a den all her life, she was surprisingly resilient. In a last-ditch effort to end the battle, Maybel used her signature Fireball: effectively a massive fiery explosion.

However, neither of us realized how powerful it would be now that she wasn't handicapped by a false form. Being used to the normal blast radius, I didn't move far enough away and got hit as well.

I was launched into the wall, my body aching and screaming with searing pain. But I looked back and saw the dragon was no more. I drank a healing potion so I could properly soak in victory.

"Wow, Maybel... that was certainly something..."

"Yeah, sorry about that. Say, you know what will make us feel better?"

I didn't need to ask. Some things never change.