

# CLUELESS IN THE SUNLESS CITADEL

AN ODDBALL ELF RUNNING WILD AND SOLO...





## FIREBEETLE

*Wandering elf: a little thief, a little magic*

**Armor Class** 17

**Hit Points** 11 (1d10)

**Speed** 30ft.

STR	DEX	CON	INT	WIS	CHA
-----	-----	-----	-----	-----	-----

10 (+0)	16 (+3)	13 (+1)	16 (+3)	12 (+1)	8 (-1)
---------	---------	---------	---------	---------	--------

**Senses** passive perception 11

**Languages** Draconic, Common

**Short sword.** Attack bonus; +3 damage 1d6+3.

**Dart.** Attack bonus; +3 damage 1d4+3.

### Spells

Cure wounds; Guiding Bolt



While technically an elf, Firebeetle was a bit of a mess. He traveled alone, and though he'd been many places and seen all sorts of miracles, he never seemed to know how anything worked. Somehow though, things managed to turn out okay for him in the end.

Usually.

Quite recently, while hiding from a particularly hideous chambermaid he'd promised he marry in exchange for some soup, Firebeetle overheard two stable keeps chattering about a sunken citadel in the woods said to be stuffed with adventure. They actually said it was stuffed with goblins, revenants, kobolds, and possibly a dragon. It was hard to hear them for the sh slurping manure noises and terrible accents from his spot crouched in the hay. Still, he needed to get away, and this seemed like a decent idea for an afternoon or two.

He stole a set of picks from a locksmith in town and headed out in the general direction that felt right from what little research he'd done. And by research, it is meant that he peeked out from the hay and gauged the direction in which one of the stable keeps was gesturing with his warty thumb.

As was typical of him, and quite the stinker to anyone traveling along, Firebeetle only had to turn around twice before he stumbled into the very ruins he sought.

Most of the citadel had, in fact, sunk into the earth in a deep cavern in some ages-old supernatural event in which he'd shown no interest. Were it not for a couple of abandoned towers peeking out from the mist, maybe he'd have kept wandering.

Or maybe he'd have found it anyway. Who knows with this guy?!

Anyway, Firebeetle spent the rest of the evening munching jerky, practicing his newfound Guiding Bolt spell which a carnival trickster had shown him, and working up the courage to climb down a knotted old rope tied to one of the busted pillars at the top of the ravine.





The morning smelled like sweat and campfire and maybe mud...maybe something left over from the stable. Let's not dwell on the smell. The point of the morning was to get down the steep, debris-strewn ravine on that crusty old rope and to a ruined ledge that seemed to be the top of what had to be the citadel.

It of course took him most of the morning to get to that ledge though, not only because he had no idea how to climb down a ravine or where he was going, but moreso because he got halfway down and realized he'd forgotten his sword at the top by the fire. Much of the profanity, the slips and trips, and that smell of which we agreed to avoid discussing, are among the things a true adventurer in epic explorations would prefer hidden from the bards. But anyone leaving out those bits in recounting Firebeetle's wanderings wouldn't have much of a scroll to write!

By the time his feet hit the busted ledge, he could confirm those spikes and shadows down in the mist were most definitely a ruined old citadel, with rubble in places and the early orange sunlight disappearing into the occasional gulfs where the rooftops had fallen in. With a determined sigh, Firebeetle scratched himself, farted, and began down the broken switchback stairs leading down into a crumbled courtyard.



And within moments of entering the courtyard, Firebeetle fell straight through a trap door into a rank, disgusting pit...seriously, convulsively, disgusting. There were two goblin skeletons with bits of leathery meat left on them that nothing would eat and a much fresher goblin corpse with blood-draining stirges feeding on it. A stirge was, of course, a cross between a mosquito and a bat only hungrier and uglier.

### WHAT'S A STIRGE AGAIN?

Oh, man they're hideous! Flying leeches, maybe. They screech and dart about, mostly at your face. If they attach and you can't shake them, you just get weaker and weaker till kerplow.

The lone stirge that flew at Firebeetle failed to latch on, and he stabbed it with glee, immediately impaling it. Then he gathered 23 pieces of silver and 4 pieces of gold that were laying about the corpses and skeletons. They didn't need it! And that was the first kill of a day that would in end fire. It should tell you something though, that he landed in a trap with his very first steps.

Anyway, the trap door was shut tight, making it impossible to climb his way back out.





Firebeetle struggled with the trap door for a tick before at last making the connection that this Guiding Bolt spell he'd picked up could be a pretty heavy shovel if he wanted it to be. So he took aim with nothing but his open right hand at the trap door and blasted it entirely off in a charred pile. Then he climbed out, entirely pleased with himself. One thing that carnival trickster who'd taught him the trick warned him of, is every so often when you warp the fabric of magic to send these sparkly wonders along their way, the elemental who wrote the spell could show up asking just what you think you're doing. At least, that's what the little man had said with a sly grin on his face. Did the grin mean it's true, and that's why the little carnival man had shared the spell in the first place? Or was it just a big joke at the little elf's expense?

Maybe some of that sounds scary, but it's the sort of thing that Firebeetle tended to shrug off.

He cautiously entered the shell of an old crumbling tower, where he noticed three oak doors and four more goblin corpses. Seemed like a great place for a secret door, which he'd heard were peppered across such places as this one and chock with gold and magical feathers and things. No luck this time though.

He tried the big door to the southwest, leading to an old approach: a twenty foot wide hall in poor repair. On the far wall was a massive stone door with a dragon carved in relief on its surface. It would have been perfect, were it not for the ridiculously huge and intimidating lock hung off it and the sizzling pop of a magical lock in the air. He wasn't headed in that room any time soon, unfortunately. Yet something beyond that door seemed right to him, and not just because it was forbidden.

Then...of course...came the giant rat!



The beast snarled and spat, even hissed in its hunger and irritation at Firebeetle's being there.

Luckily, it missed its first swipe at him. He made short work of it with his sword, gutting the filthy thing before it could do him any harm. Sensing this wasn't a place to hang around, he turned around and headed back into the tower shell. It haunted him that the place was entirely a missed opportunity for a secret door. So he gave it another try, poking around at the walls and dragging the tip of his sword along crevices on the masonry floor in hopes of triggering something. That's when he came across a masonry block serving as a lever.

This was the way of Firebeetle. He fumbled around with no plan, and secret doors opened.

But then again, he also triggered a needle trap at the same time as he found the door. It stuck him in the shoulder and managed to poke between scales on his armor. It hurt, and drew blood, tearing some skin and perforating him in a couple of places.

Hopefully that wasn't poison.

Soldiering on, and inside, past the needles, was a little ten foot square pocket room hidden from the main citadel. Skeletons of three long-dead archers were still slumped at their arrow slits. Whatever supernatural event sank this keep into the earth apparently happened on their watch. It was getting to be a pattern so far, and not an encouraging one, but Firebeetle triggered yet another problem for himself just by stepping inside.

Now when Firebeetle chattered on about his make-believe past to bar maids and farmer's daughters, and when he was grossly exaggerating his kills and his understating his follies to storekeepers, he often said he could "smell a curse".

Apparently not.

He could hear this one though, and it sounded like three hissing and snapping reanimated skeletons, with glowing lime green arcane energy sizzling out of their eyes. What skin they still had was leather and clung like moldy rags to the bones.

One of them tried to fire a crossbow that failed due to its age. A second advanced across the entire room in one stride.





That second skeleton archer took a slice out of Firebeetle's shoulder with a short sword. He reeled from the blood loss, and was dizzy. This wasn't the time for being dizzy or confused though! In that terrifying moment, Firebeetle made the split-second decision to win the victory this moment deserved.

He turned and ran like a scared little girl. He didn't quite scream, in the way of somebody getting out of the way of a big spider or scampering little mouse. Still, he ran. He ran out of the pocket room that had seemed so important before, and back into the Tower Shell, jamming a loose bit of fallen masonry under the door to trap his pursuers inside. Then He rested to heal up from all this blood loss and unprofitable spelunking, thinking maybe a little more caution and testing out strange floors before stepping on them might have been in order.



Firebeetle at last cracked open a chipped and half-rotten old door to the Northwest, finding a long hallway on the other side. On his left was a stone-relief carved door portraying a dragon-like fish swimming. He picked the lock to that room and discovered it was just a water cache. A gentle knock let him know these cisterns were full. Given the fresh goblin corpses, he wondered if a band of them had moved in to the Sunless Citadel.

He backed out into the hallway and tried another door off the hallway. That was just an empty room, save for some litter and debris (as with most everywhere in this desolate place). It smelled musty and sounded always like dripping water and whistling wind. It was itchy too, and he loathed being itchy.

This was going nowhere! There hadn't been any sounds of life, but surely somebody was down here poking around as well. He'd need to be a fair shot more careful and a lot more quiet than he'd been thus far. Time was wasting!

At the end of the hallway, he opened a final door into what could only be called a dragon cell. He could tell by the huge pit dug in the floor in the center of the room with torn scale armor and remnants of shattered vessels littering its perimeter. There was a metal cage with a gaping hole in it, entirely empty. The place had been worked over, with items toppled. Even a thick-headed yammer like Firebeetle could put this one together: somebody's dragon had gotten away!

Whimpering was coming from a corner. It turned out to be a sniveling little kobold named Meepo who'd, of course, been placed in in charge of tending to a dragon. "You have no idea how much trouble I'm in! Whoever you are, human, I owe you!"

This dragon was a wyrmling. Firebeetle hadn't wanted to seem like a chump by asking what a wyrmling was. That probably wasn't important. Anything actually important usually wound up presenting itself anyway, so he let that whole thing go. He also would let it go that this idiot was calling him a human. The important bit here with this whining, spooked little fellow wasn't freeing him from the cage.

No, Firebeetle couldn't smell a curse, nor could he avoid a trap. He could, however, follow a lead. And this whining little fellow handed him one on a plate as soon as he freed the little guy. Meepo was eager to take Firebeetle to his boss.





## WAIT, WHAT'S A KOBOLD?

Little humanoid creatures sensitive to sunlight, travels in packs, often stupid, and usually found at the end of the dagger stuck in your leg

The scampering little fellow was incredibly grateful to Firebeetle for the rescue from the cage, and quickly and efficiently dragged the hapless adventurer in and out of the various corridors by the hand saying that he absolutely needed to speak with someone named 'Yusdrayl': the boss of the kobolds here in the citadel.

A bit breathless, Meepo spilled all kinds of information he probably shouldn't have to Firebeetle while they darted to the throne room. He even told him the kobold password for getting around, at least on their side of the citadel. That's the bit that told Firebeetle there was a cold war, or more like a skirmishing frontier with occasional raids going on here in the sunken citadel.

And then that dragon. They talked about the dragon too.

Calcryx was its name. Just being honest, Firebeetle was a bit on the suspicious side that anybody would give something like that a name. It was a frost dragon, kind of small apparently...a runt with unreliable frost breath that didn't always work because it had a recurring cough. And the wings were clipped, so it wasn't going anywhere. Firebeetle's opinion of Meepo dropped like a rock. Those things weren't pets, no matter how runtied or sickly!

"Oh, Yusdrayl will be thrilled to meet you! 'Humans will go anywhere for gold or booze'...that's what Yusdrayl always says. Is that true? Boy, if you could go get Calcryx back for us, it sure would save my hide!"

Always one to go with the current of events to see what shook from the bucket, Firebeetle let all this talk of going to get a dragon back just sort of happen. He let it continue when they came to a throne room with a slightly taller and snootier kobold sitting on it...Yusdrayl, apparently.

"Meepo tells me you saved him. That's unfortunate." She sneered and almost spat on the little guy as she said this. Seriously, this was the first thing she spoke to Firebeetle. Tells you most of what you need to know about her. The other thing that stood out with her is the gargantuan brass key hanging on a dragon-shaped mount behind her throne. Recalling that mysterious dragon-sculpted door he'd seen when first entering the citadel, the one doubly locked both mechanically and mystically, Firebeetle quite uncharacteristically drew himself a conclusion...he needed that key!



"Ahhh...you want the key? Is that what you're poking around here for? You have no idea what danger that key will bring you, elf. Still, it's yours if you get me my dragon back!" Yusdrayl scowled at Firebeetle, giving the sense that she didn't really think he could do it. He grinned at her.

Firebeetle glanced around at the gathered kobolds in the throne room, many seemingly having heard all this before. Some of the larger ones shuffled their feet, bored at yet another human dragging around looking for gold and making promises.

He turned again to Yusdrayl and grinned, knowing exactly the thing to turn this chessboard around in his favor.

He lit up his hand with a crackling Guiding Bolt ball of fire and held it out like a holiday ornament for her to see. And that was quite enough for her.

"I'm going with you."



Yusdrayl led Firebeetle to a dinner table spread with fruit and bread and huge turkey legs. They at least knew here what elves ate. Once in a shanty town by the seaside, a family of sea hags had served him Kraken meat and seaweed salad, with little barbecued baby octopus. He couldn't sit upright for a week. The smell of clams always made him queasy after that.

She told him about a mysterious wizard living below the citadel with some freaky apples he grew twice per year and sold topside. She said there was a mystery to the whole thing: why he was doing that and why he had goblins selling them. Firebeetle sort of tuned all that out though. Sometimes when things took a little thought, a little foresight, and a sense of tactics for why you were doing something and where you were going, and what you plan to do when you get there...that sort of thing made him a little sleepy.

So he ate all her bread and turkey and drank till she stopped her attendants from bringing more bottles.

She woke him up late the next morning, and the two of them at last set off down some abandoned corridors where cobwebs and echoes ruled, and where sunlight never reached. He wanted her key; that's what he was getting from the flow of events. So that's what he'd get! The dragon was probably tiny anyway - that little Meepo guy was tending to it, and he was a pansy! Get the dragon, and get the key. Then head down past that dragon door and let the flow happen again to see what's next. If that makes you twitch that Firebeetle planned no farther than this, you're in good company.

Yusdrayl led him to a dry fountain and said these back hallways were the best approach to the goblin side of the citadel. It was in fact the goblins over there that she suspected had taken her dragon. Now why she wanted a dragon, why she suspected the goblins, what sort of consequences there could be were they to seize this dragon back from the goblins...again, all great questions that wouldn't have occurred to Firebeetle even if he'd tried to summon them. Which he didn't.

The long corridor stretched out in front of them, leading to open cells that smelled absolutely terrible. Firebeetle noticed rat and human tracks. Poking through some of the open cells, he picked up some stray bits of gold, silver and gems and stuffed them quickly in his inner pocket where Yusdrayl couldn't see.

"There are traps at the end of this hallway...a fountain looking just like that dry one we passed except it's poison. There are probably others; I haven't been very far this way. You'll have to take the lead when we get to that point."

Yusdrayl wasn't encouraged when Firebeetle only nodded knowingly at her, with a distant hum like he was thinking about a drinking song or somebody's dog's tricks and not how best to arrange this escapade. They cut through an entirely empty chamber and ended in front of a closed door.





Yusdrayl whispered, "There's some sort of problem with this door. Previous wanderers I've sent in here haven't come back from anywhere past this point. I don't know anything past here other than somewhere past here is something they call 'the goblin gate'. What's your plan?"

Firebeetle sniffed the door. Don't ask why he sniffed, or what he expected to find. He just sniffed. Strangely, his eyebrows raised like he'd actually discovered something.

He whispered back, "Definitely a bell tied to this door as an alarm. Must be some guards in a room beyond this next one, or they wouldn't mess around with the bell. We're safe to open it slowly, and stick our heads in for a better look. You see better in the dark than I do. Go ahead."

Yusdrayl glared at him like he'd suggested that she eat her arm, "What in the world are you talking about? You sniffed! You sniffed, so I should stick my head inside and get an arrow in my eye?!"

Without saying anything, Firebeetle pointed at the slightest trace of a string poking into their side of the door by the brass doorknob. When she wouldn't budge, he gingerly turned the knob and eased the door open, reaching inside to steady the bells on the other side. He was entirely right about the bells and that string. Seriously, it was maddening to anybody who traveled with him, this sort of thing! You practically never wanted him to be right, even at your own expense.

It wasn't a large room, and there were metal caltrop spikes sprinkled across the masonry floor, presumably to slow anybody down who might be running through there to attack. They were spikey and rusted, so definitely not anything you'd want poking into your boot. Yusdrayl was horrified to see that even in the danger of this moment, as quiet and stealthy as they needed to be here where so many before them had perished and deep in the enemy's lair, Firebeetle crouched down and gathered as many as fifty of the caltrops to shove in his satchel.

"Are you a complete idiot?" She whispered, but somehow still sounded terribly furious at him. "You're rattling around like an elephant! How heavy even are those things? Stop it!"

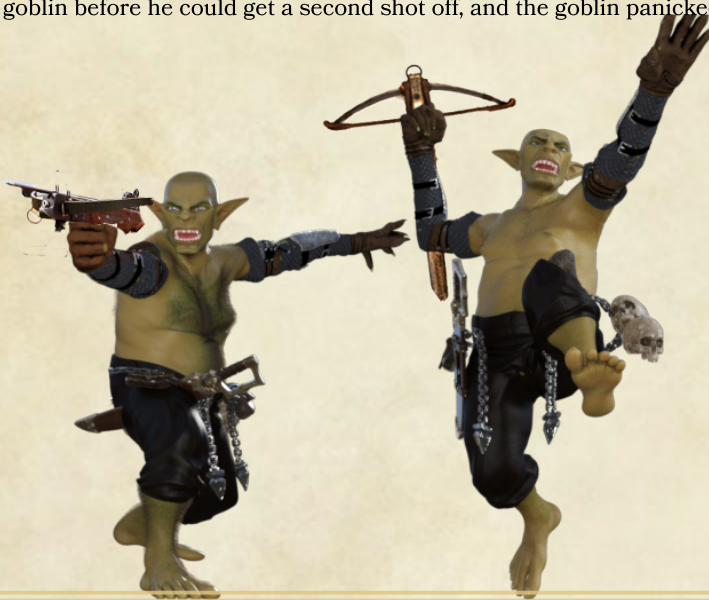
He smiled thinly and simply said, "Will probably come in handy. Maybe not. Whatever."

On the far side of this Caltrop Hall was another door, and all indications were this would have goblins behind it. Something would have goblins behind it, at least. Why not this door? Anyway, Firebeetle just grabbed the knob and slowly creaked it open to stick his head inside. So you won't think he was completely oblivious, he did at least set his hand ablaze with the Guiding Bolt before poking inside.

That's when the goblins saw them.

One of the guards got a shot off on his crossbow before Firebeetle and Yusdrayl could react, sending a bolt straight into Firebeetle's side just above the hip. It stuck in the flesh and hurt like his whole side was on fire. When Firebeetle returned fire, it was with the blazing spell from his hand, and aimed at the second goblin since the first was reloading. That second goblin burned into ashes right where he stood, right into a satisfying goblin-shaped tower of black char that toppled and collapsed. Firebeetle rushed up on the other goblin while firing at the first one, hoping to confuse and startle him.

Yusdrayl's shot from her sling hurt him, but not nearly enough to keep him from finishing reloading. And neither of the screams these two made in their assault were really all that loud. It had sounded more like a "arrgh, get them" than anything intended to call down hordes of backup. At least that's how it came off. Firebeetle's dash was enough in that small room for him to be right up on the remaining goblin before he could get a second shot off, and the goblin panicked too much to grip the scimitar from his waist.





## WHAT IS A GUIDING BOLT SPELL?

A sizzling flash of light streaks toward a creature of your choice within range, doing radiant damage. Firebeetle barely knew the words, often messed up the gestures, and somehow occasionally managed to use it multiple times without long rests.

**Dangers** One day without warning, upon some random use of the spell, Firebeetle's time would be up when the elemental whose name he kept invoking came asking...

That's when the goblin guard blew a puff out his nose as if to clear it, and realized it was charred ash from his buddy...his burned buddy drifting in the dungeon breeze onto his nose and itching him. The goblin frowned, lowered his pointy ears sadly, and dropped his crossbow, letting the chain belt holding his scimitar's scabbard fall to the floor.

"You morons are nuts to come sneaking around back here!" His voice was tired and cracked. He whined and complained for a bit, which at first they took as stalling for backup. Then with more whining and bellowing about how it stank and was dirty and the bacon had too much fat on it, they could see this guy was as much captive as the dragon. He'd been caught by bandits and told to stand guard here for weeks at a time. The fatter and meaner goblins supposedly smacked him and had funny names for him.

"What names do they call you?" Firebeetle was genuinely interested. He probably wanted to see just how funny they were, likely to try them out on somebody later. Yusdrayl and this goblin fellow both glared back at him like that wasn't important right now. Anybody could see that wasn't important right now.

Anyway, Firebeetle suggested that Yusdrayl take their captive back and lock him up somewhere since they couldn't let him go. He'd wait till she returned and try and rest so maybe the Guiding Bolt would become available again. She reluctantly agreed and shoved the goblin a few times to speed him up as they went down the corridor through which the two of them had come. While he was waiting, he tried listening at the next door, the one just beyond this Goblin Gate. And if anyone knew what a bunch of drunk goblins sounded like, it was Firebeetle. There were absolutely at least three very drunk and hilarious goblins inside, one so drunk he apparently kept firing his arrows at his companions. It was maybe a practice range. One of them must have been dancing, given the mocking insults he was enduring.



The drunker they got, the happier Firebeetle became with his plan. Drunk goblins can't aim; how great was this!? So by the time Yusdrayl returned breathless and annoyed at this delay, he had an enhancement to the plan. He had Yusdrayl help prop up the dead goblin they'd killed when they entered the Goblin Gate as if he was still at his station but had fallen asleep. They spread the remaining caltrops from the Caltrop Hall along the Goblin Gate floor, to slow them there in the event there was a hasty retreat (and typically with Firebeetle there was a hasty retreat). Then they hid just inside the door against the wall, preparing a surprise attack against three confused and drunk goblins.

Just before he knocked on the door to trigger this whole thing, Firebeetle glanced back over at Yusdrayl clutching her little sling. He gently pulled it from her hand and slid the captive goblin's scimitar in its place. Then he turned to the door again and banged on it with his palm, shouting profanity in goblin.



In the event that you might also believe metal caltrops spread across a masonry floor slows down drunk goblins, let's just clear the air right now. They do not. Drunk goblins aren't remotely affected by such a thing. It's far more helpful that they be extremely drunk. That's a real plan.

Firebeetle managed to land a blow on one of the goblins, the one wearing a weird vest and likely the one who'd been dancing. That's just a guess, of course. Anyway, that one fell dead to the floor clutching his side. The really heavy muscular goblin took a swing at Firebeetle with his scimitar and missed, but Yusdrayl sliced his head off cleanly and with quite a bit of satisfaction with herself for the job. The third and last goblin, a hideous bearded one with a disgusting hairy chest, took a powerful swing at Firebeetle and missed as well. The swing was wild and clumsy, which was encouraging.

The last goblin miraculously parried both return blows, from Firebeetle and from Yusdrayl. Luckily, the angry brute was too furious to call for aid and just grunted and hissed as such a conflict would summon from anyone. If goblins were smarter, surely he'd have just grinned and step back from them, and screamed something like 'come here, guys...intruders'. That's just not what happened.

Firebeetle threw his Dart as a change in tactics, but the threw went off target in the confusion and movement. Yusdrayl missed again, as the goblin's eyes cleared in his fury. He was getting more accurate and stronger as he fought. Any moment, he might land a deadly blow or just call for help. Or both. Firebeetle very narrowly avoided a bold swing for his stomach. Even a successful jab into the goblin's side that drew blood didn't do enough damage to really hurt him. It was getting very bad.

Firebeetle looked at his hand, trying to call up the Guiding Bolt and do away with this beast in one shot, but the magic hadn't returned. The Dart lay across the room jammed into a small tabletop. Yusdrayl was out of breath and had a crazy, desperate look on her face. She hadn't fought like this in a very long time, if ever. Firebeetle understood the desperation. You would too, had you seen the bloodlust and raw fury in that goblin's eyes. Something had to be done, and it had to be done immediately!

So he dropped to his knees and flared the fingers of his two hands in front of his face like they were sunflowers, smiling wide enough to swallow his fist. The strange noise he made could generously be compared to a broken cart wheel that scrapes on its axle. Just what in the world he was doing, none could say. It certainly wasn't obvious to the frenzied goblin or his kobold companion.



Yusdrayl ignored his antics and readied another assault on the goblin. That's when she saw that the drunken fool was as shocked at whatever Firebeetle was doing as she was. In fact, the goblin was just kind of standing there looking at him, trying to decide whether to mock him or laugh or just slice his head off right there. That's an exaggeration; it was just a split second hesitation. Still, that was quite enough.

She seized the moment and jammed the filthy scimitar straight upwards under the goblin's jaw with both hands. It got stuck, in fact. When the huge green creature finally rolled his eyes to the ceiling and started to lumber forward, he took that scimitar with him, jutting out from under his chin in a fountain of bubbling blood.

When the goblin stopped rolling around and lay still, even now no screams for help or doors bursting with fresh backup goblins, Yusdrayl was entirely dumbfounded by their luck. She examined Firebeetle's goofy face as he stood up, brushed off the dust and cobwebs from his thighs, and slid his rapier back into its scabbard. He grinned at her, a very disarming grin.



"What the heck was that?!" Yusdrayl whispered, but there was still acid in her words.

Firebeetle scratched his beard and whispered back, "Progress, kobold. Progress. Now help me drag these bodies back down the hallway into that empty room we came across earlier. We need to buy as much time as we can before the rest of these pointy-eared apes figure out something's up." He glanced briefly at her ears and pursed his lips, "No offense on the ear thing."

After they'd hidden the three newer bodies away and wiped the obvious blood, Firebeetle grabbed one of the ale jugs from the practice range and drizzled booze over the fourth goblin corpse, the one who'd stood sentry over the Goblin Gate and fellow to the goblin they'd taken captive. This one would continue to play decoy and ruse, as how it smelled like the poor fellow had bathed in his alcohol. Firebeetle nestled an empty mug in the corpse's hand and took a deep breath to steady himself after all the activity. Quite unknown to Yusdrayl, Firebeetle had slipped a silver flash off one corpse and a tarnished brass key off another."

The door on the far wall of the practice range was locked, but the new key fit cleanly inside the lock. Yusdrayl eyed him suspiciously when he pulled it from his satchel, but didn't say anything about it. She was probably snatching trinkets for herself as well and preferred the topic be left alone.

"Well?" He gestured towards the doorknob and widened his eyes at Yusdrayl, indicating it was her turn.

"What?"

"I've stuck my head in all these rooms first, and I can't see jack in the dark. It's your dang dragon. You look."

Very reluctantly, and with a fair amount of drama doing so, Yusdrayl creaked the door open. She was moving so slowly, Firebeetle at one point rolled his fingers to signal her to get on with it. It wasn't dark inside at all though, thankfully, as plenty of torches lit the way. It was a wide room full of holding cells, with three bound kobolds and a battered gnome in a cage almost too small for him. The little guy was having to sit bent over just to fit inside. Firebeetle picked the lock on his cage.

### WHAT IS A GNOME?

Like tiny little people, buzzed on caffeine and life. They can be a little cunning when they need to be, but always seem to come off looking innocent.

"My name is Erky. I guess you can imagine I'm pretty happy to see you two!" The gnome's voice sounded old, and his hair was white. He stood no higher than Firebeetle's thighs, maybe just a little shorter than Yusdrayl. "I heard there was bread down here in this old citadel. I have a lot of kids to feed. Unfortunately, I got caught pretty much as soon as I arrived."

Firebeetle listened with sympathy as Erky cracked his back and stretched his dense and sore muscles, "How long have you been locked up in there?"

His tired, sad voice only said, "A very long time."

"Know any spells?"

Yusdrayl snapped at Firebeetle, "You have no idea how to do this, do you?! We don't have time for your trinkets and spell nuggets and fighting everything that comes at us as loud as a parade! I can't understand why we're not both dead considering how many goblins we've come across. They can't all be drunk, you know!"

Erky listened to Yusdrayl a moment, then when she'd finished and Firebeetle only pursed his lips and nodded, Erky said, "I know a spell that can make the undead run away from me. My big brother tattooed it on my arm."





Firebeetle smiled wide enough to show his teeth, "That's fantastic. The only thing my brother ever taught me was how to burp the alphabet. Why would he tattoo such a thing on your arm?"

"Dad turned zombie. In the workshop. Melting down some rune covered cup. Where are you guys going?"

Yusdrayl tried to shush Firebeetle before he spilled the beans on the dragon and their deal, the key hanging on that dragon-shaped mount behind her throne, and whatever was happening below the citadel. Who knew what Firebeetle would say once he got started! But Firebeetle did what he felt like doing, and explained most of it. He left out the part about the key and the mysteries below the citadel because he'd likely forgotten it anyway. Instead, he just said they were looking for a dragon, and had Erky seen one? You can imagine how frustrated Yusdrayl was with their chat. In no time though, Erky had offered to join them in rescuing Yusdrayl's dragon, and bent painfully to pick up one of the short crossbows left lying in the practice range and a quiver with maybe twenty bolts inside.

Across a short wall in the Practice Range there were two more closed doors, one on the northern wall and another on the western wall. Firebeetle asked Erky if he knew where they led, since Yusdrayl had neither been to nor received intelligence from this side of the citadel. Unfortunately, Erky knew almost nothing at all. Firebeetle listened intently at the western door, and sniffed a couple of times, nodding knowingly. After a few moments of thinking, he suggested that Erky could see well in the dark and should crack open the door and peer inside.

Erky did as he was asked, then pulled his head back out, "It's a pantry, full of boxes and barrels and crates."

Firebeetle was far more enthused than he had cause to be about the pantry and hummed to himself as he stepped inside. With Erky's help, they located a few pints of oil and stuffed the bottles into Erky's pants, "We might need this later. Hold on to that." Yusdrayl of course rolled her eyes at this nonsense, though Firebeetle's weird ways did seem to sort out in the end. It still wasn't actual planning because he was only assuming you could set that oil on fire somehow and lay a trap. He was assuming they could start a fire in time to do that, when they'd probably be running from somebody. He assumed Erky would be okay carrying around bottles of cooking oil in his pants too. Yet, that's what happened, and they carried on their way with the oil.

They backed out into the Practice Range again and made for the northern door, then had Erky again crack open the door first to peer beyond it into a narrow corridor. Hearing nothing, smelling nothing, the three of them passed the threshold. Firebeetle was all set to charge ahead boldly into the dimly lit hallway when Erky quite suddenly stopped him with a harsh smack on the thigh. Firebeetle choked back his surprised yelp and gave Erky a look to signal his displeasure with his tiny new companion. Erky only pointed at the floor like that was enough. For Yusdrayl, it actually was enough, but Erky had to whisper his reasoning to Firebeetle.

"Trap door. Don't you see the unmortared rim?"

Firebeetle creased his forehead knowingly like a wise old librarian and nodded, "Ahh...yes, I see that." Clearly he didn't see a thing, of course. Still, between the eyes of the kobold and the gnome, they discovered a two foot catwalk over which they could safely pass the trap.





It being fairly dim, lit only by a couple of untended and burned up torches, Firebeetle allowed Yusdrayl and Erky the lead, and the three of them came to another closed door off the main corridor. Now this one actually did have a smell, the distinct and disgusting potpourri of goblin sweat and mold. Firebeetle didn't hear anything, but Yusdrayl said she heard snoring inside. This likely being some sort of barracks, they passed it by quietly.

Two oak doors at the end of the corridor were locked. Firebeetle smiled and gently gestured his companions away to clear room for himself, then eyed the knob like a scientist. He sized the knob and lock up with a frame of his hands, squinting one eye and making quite a show of it. Yusdrayl was furious at it, but Erky's eyes sparkled in delight. He was very impressed.

At last, Firebeetle pulled just the lockpick for the job and wiggled it in the keyhole tenderly, twisting it only once. Erky didn't clap, but anyone seeing him just then would have thought he might. And without any scan inside for more traps or the caution due a citadel flourishing with killer goblins and animated skeletons and blood-sucking stirges, Firebeetle just stepped inside.

It was a trophy room, with mounted and stuffed heads on the walls and a skin rug on the floor in front of a massive fireplace. Some of the heads were kobolds, a fact that very much upset Yusdrayl. She gasped at a kobold head with moon-shaped eyes and a mole on its cheek mounted to a pine plaque. It was a hideous face with a fish hook piercing its nose as a joke, and a false tongue prepared so as to hang over its lips the way a dog's tongue might. She turned away and looked at the floor to steady herself.

"My last boyfriend. They're disgusting."

Firebeetle awkwardly patted her on the shoulder and shook his head, "Agreed. We can burn some things on the way out if you want. Could make you feel better."

Erky waved his hands to gain their attention and whispered, "Guys! Look at this spike."

Firebeetle followed Erky's fingers to a rusted iron spike bolted through a flange to the masonry floor, with a broken chain trailing from it. Tracing the chain's direction and extrapolating from its snapped end, they saw it crouching behind a broken table: Calcryx the wyrmling dragon!

Calcryx wasn't that big, actually, maybe a foot taller than Firebeetle when she stood straight up. She was squatting on an oddball pile of what passed for treasure in goblin land: some random gold and silver coins, a chipped and dented chalice, crafted leather quivers, a pile of dirty silks, and an intriguing looking leather scroll case. There was probably more stuff under her; that's just what they could see. And she wasn't at all happy with their being there. Just based on that look in her glowing blue eyes, this wasn't looking so much like a rescue anymore. That room was torn to bits, and no one was in here watching her. The smart guess is she was doing whatever she felt like doing here. Maybe this wasn't going to go the way everyone was thinking...



Firebeetle noticed that Calcryx was especially sizing Yusdrayl up like she was dinner, even starting to rise above the overturned table behind which she was perched. He patted the kobold on the shoulder and gestured towards the door, whispering that her being there was going to make things more difficult for them. They still needed very much to stay as quiet as possible, and a thrashing frost dragon wasn't going to suit that circumstance. As he watched the Yusdrayl leave, he scratched his chin at this turn of events: the dragon didn't like Yusdrayl. On one hand, no surprise there. He didn't like her either. Of course the other hand kind of held a stinker...there was no way this dragon was coming with them peacefully.

Firebeetle glanced over at Erky for his thoughts on the matter, and the little guy just blinked and grinned back at Firebeetle, "Got any treats?"

Delighted with the idea, Firebeetle reached into his satchel and withdrew the silver flash he'd taken earlier, then held it out like a biscuit for Calcryx. If treasure was her thing, then this was all sorts of shiny. He thought he might tempt her to follow or maybe slip into a rope or something.

"Why are you waving that piece of junk in front of my nose?" Calcryx glared at him. The dragon spoke. Oh boy!



"I've come to rescue you!" Firebeetle felt a little ridiculous talking to this beast. He of course hadn't known dragons could reason and ask demeaning questions and look quite so impatient like this one was doing.

"It looked like you were teasing me like a dog...like a pet, stupid for cheap treats." Her dragon eyes narrowed, "Is that what I am? Your kobold's pet?"

He held up both hands in surrender, "Not my kobold. Not anybody's pet. Aren't you a prisoner here?"

"What does it look like, genius? Since I ran their beast handler out, I've got my run of the goblin side of this citadel. Nobody bothers me. I've got my pick of their loot. And I eat the occasional goblin who ventures in here thinking he's the guy to set me straight. Now putz off! I'm irritated with you and your little tag-alongs." She smiled a terrible dragon smile, "Or maybe I roar some goblins in here to deal with you instead."

"Whoa! Whoa!" Firebeetle sniffed in frustration, licking his lips nervously. "What if I told you things would be different this time with the kobolds?"

Calcryx arose to her full height, her cobalt eyes shimmering as a frosty mist swelled inside her jagged mouth. Firebeetle's cheeks turned ice cold suddenly, his nose numb. Absolutely any moment at all, with a passing and idle fancy, Calcryx could either tear them to frozen pieces or summon a room full of murderous cutthroats. This wasn't at all what was supposed to happen! Firebeetle very much needed a miracle turn of luck.

Erky pulled on Firebeetle's shirt to gain his attention.

When Firebeetle sighed and stepped aside, Erky slid up the sleeves of his torn shirt and took a cautious step towards the dragon, "These marks here on my wrist came from the iron cuffs the goblins kept me in, crouched in a little cage too small for me. I couldn't sit up in there. They fed me leftover slop full of bugs. They yelled at me so I couldn't sleep, and they insulted me till I cried. And they threw slop from the stables at my cage for contests. This elf...this elf right here...for no reason at all, no benefit to him...he picked the lock and pulled me out. He did that. Now he wants to do something for you. Maybe just hear him out."

Calcryx looked the gnome over, from the fuzzy crown of his little head to the worn tips of his boots. She hissed and squinted and hesitated. It was a tense moment, especially given the thundercloud threat of a pending changing of the watch when all the dead goblins would doubtless be discovered. They simply didn't have time for this.

She turned to Firebeetle, "Different how?"

He glanced nervously at the door, beyond which Yusdrayl stood guard safely out of view, "No beatings. No chains, your own room. A pig a day. Keep everything you're sitting on. Except that leather scroll case. I want that. You take this flask in its place."

Surprised at this, Erky made a half-turn just to see Firebeetle's face and understand just why he'd ask for a useless leather case when treasure was at hand.



But that sort of thing was the root of this ridiculous cloud of luck that somehow followed Firebeetle around...the way he eked out his profits and how he made his way. He gathered caltrops and stuck them in his satchel because he might need them. He shoved bottles of oil in a gnome's pants because they might need to set a fire. He freed captives because he might need them to be grateful.

And he went looking for wayward dragons because that key hanging on the other side of the citadel might be handy.

You might say that's an odd path to follow, and subject to the currents and whimsy of fate. Never a plan; never a concern it will fail. Never a schedule; never a worry over being late. Yet here he was with gold and silver in his bag, a new tiny friend vouching for him before a frost dragon, and a nervous grin on his silly face. It sort of worked for him. Usually.

Calcryx side-eyed Firebeetle suspiciously, "And what will all this cost me, elf? Apart from my scroll case?"

Firebeetle cleared his throat.



"Careful, elf! The next thing you say to me determines whether I leave with you or roar to summon a band of angry goblins. What is it these kobolds will require of me for all that you promise?"

While Firebeetle considered his words with extreme caution, Yusdrayl stuck her head inside and whispered harshly, "Hurry up! What's taking so long?!"

He pointed an accusing finger at Yusdrayl, "I don't have time for any arguments from you! You agree right now to no beatings, no chains, her own room, and a pig a day. Say it now." Calcryx hissed at the very sight of Yusdrayl and what the kobold represented.

Yusdrayl scowled, making a hideous red skull of her leathery face, "Why in the world would I agree to that?! Bash it on the head, and let's get out of here!"

Calcryx rose up in a fury, fully doubling her height, with glowing blue light bathing her eyes and her mouth, a blue mist forming from her breath. Firebeetle stepped between them, holding out his hands to try and halt the escalation. With a wicked, malicious and threatening stare, he scowled at Yusdrayl with his open palm outstretched dramatically. It was a threat she should have understood: the Guiding Bolt.

Yusdrayl chuckled, "You used it already, genius. Not that long ago. I know it will be hours before that works again. Come on, bash that thing. We need to move!"

Firebeetle gritted his teeth and called up the nastiest, hottest, brightest sizzling ball of lightning he'd seen. He surprised himself with how incandescent this spell was just then, and how terrifying it really looked. There was, of course, always the chance that some elemental who wrote this spell might come calling on one quite this loud and popping, but Firebeetle knew he had business to transact here. And this would do the trick. Just how he managed to light things up again this soon after using it before, that was as much a mystery to him as anyone. What was certain, was this was a threat that worked. Yusdrayl's eyes went round as pies.

This elf didn't make any sense.

Yusdrayl was furious, "You're stealing my dragon."

"I'm not stealing her. And you're not either. She won't come because you're a jackass. Agree."

"I agree to nothing, thief!" Yusdrayl was no longer whispering.

"You've got a room with glass windows. I saw it. Give it to her. You'll have bragging rights, can see her any time and show her off. Just keep her fed, and she can help defend you if the goblins come back for her, or for you." Firebeetle was out of breath holding the spell and trying to persuade her. He had her attention, but it was too late. The rumbling of goblins was like thunder and hammering from the corridor. They were coming. Lots of them.

She frowned, despairing, "We don't have pigs."

"Feed her goblins then. We have some. Maybe we're about to have more. Hurry up, kobold!" He glanced behind him at Calcryx, "You eat goblin, right?"

She smiled a wicked smile, "I eat kobolds too."

For just a moment, it very much seemed Yusdrayl was readying some play to side with the goblins when they arrived, perhaps to confuse and distract them long enough to leave the rest of them behind and make her break. She might even have been planning to fight her way out alone, or take a shot at Firebeetle for the mess he'd handed her. That was the sort of look in her kobold eyes, at least.

"This is a bad deal"

That's when goblins appeared crowding the door and shouting, "Hey! Get away from our dragon!!!"





Firebeetle gestured towards a door on the south wall for all of them to escape through, a door leading in a direction that should have adjoined the pantry they found earlier, "Calcryx, frost blast!" He launched the Guiding Bolt from his hands into their attackers, but it entirely missed all three of them. Firebeetle was dumbfounded at his poor aim. He froze in shock at how pathetic that shot was, at just how bad this was for them that he'd entirely missed three goblins who were directly in front of them. He stared at his palms like he was going to eat them out of frustration.

Erky took a swing with his scimitar at the first goblin that entered, who'd come up on him too fast for Erky to run. That goblin blocked the blow and took a wild shot with his short bow up close, which missed. The bolt flew stray and stuck in the rafters with a loud thump. Another goblin made it inside the room and fired a bolt at Firebeetle, also missing. Yusdrayl managed to cut that one's head cleanly off where he stood. Firebeetle's dart flew wild as well. It was chaos in there, full of blood and fury.

They couldn't quite get to the door to run with these last two goblins crowding them. It seemed there were only three for now, but certainly their time was up because of the noise of all this. They needed to leave. Now.

Calcryx discharged a mighty blast of blue-green frozen mist at least fifteen feet and wide enough that it might have hit both attacking goblins. It actually did strike one of them, crystallizing him in place. The second goblin managed to roll out of the way, dodging any damage. It helped, but not enough. That goblin started to stand, holding out his scimitar and screaming for aid from his fellows who were beginning to rumble down the corridor. Firebeetle hurried Yusdrayl, Calcryx, and Erky through the door behind him and stood between the door and the remaining goblin.



"You're some kind of moron!" The stalking goblin snarled at Firebeetle as he took a step forward. "The sentry barracks are right behind me. You're not going anywhere."

Firebeetle frowned, disheartened by the clamor arising in the corridor. He saw that his own blade was chipped. There really wasn't much he could do other than try and look tougher than he was.

The goblin lunged and made a powerful swing with his sword, which Firebeetle side-stepped. Firebeetle's own swing was blocked. He was very tired, and his muscles ached. He was hungry. This goblin was a mountain compared to Firebeetle, and he saw that the fight wouldn't likely go his way. The point here was delay anyway.

Firebeetle blocked another blow and landed one in the goblin's side, drawing a wide splatter of blood that followed the arc of his swing. But the goblin's next blow ripped into Firebeetle's stomach between scale plates. He could feel his own blood warm and pooling along his waist.

He'd stalled enough, and this fight was lost. So he ran.

Firebeetle managed to slam the door shut behind him and wedge a broken piece of masonry against it with his boot to try and jam it. Maybe it was better than nothing, but not by much!

The room he'd entered was a wide torch-lit hall, hazy with smoke. In his haste, he noticed two more doors on this northern wall by which he'd entered and one on the far southern wall. A fifth door, including the one he'd just jammed, was on the eastern wall. All closed. No sign of his companions.

Four more goblins emerged shouting from the far southern door, scimitars raised and one with a bow. The one behind the jammed door was strong enough to shatter the oak and get through any second. Firebeetle made an educated guess where the pantry might be based on memory of his path so far, and chose the door on the eastern wall.

Sure enough, it was the pantry after all. And it was on fire.



Good old Erky! There was no doubt, it was Erky and that oil Firebeetle had shoved down the little guy's pants! He'd set the fire in hopes of masking Firebeetle's exit. What a helpful little gnome! It even smelled like an oil fire. Of course, the smoke was thick, the heat oppressive, and it was practically impossible to see his way through. Still, the thought was kind.

Firebeetle lifted the collar of his shirt to mask his mouth and nose and bowed his head, rushing to the far side as he remembered it...where the other door had been. Those caltrops he'd left behind in the Goblin Gate might help slow his pursuers, hopefully more than happened last time he'd tried that. The room was spinning for him, his feet growing unsteady. Firebeetle was losing a lot of blood, and the choking breaths of smoke didn't help either.

Ahh...his fumbling hand seized the knob of the far side door! He rushed through, trying like mad to ignore the raging of the goblins that seemed to sound from all sides. Squinting his eyes shut, forcing himself to move, He shoved through the licking curtain of flames. The fire was spreading quickly, and the black and gray smoke filled the corridors. It was still hard to understand the muffled shouting through the walls, but much of it was more likely a fire brigade now rather than sentries in pursuit.

"Erky, remind me not to have you save me next time." Firebeetle murmured under his breath, marveling at how quickly this fire had grown. It would only be moments now before he would black out; the floor felt soft like a sponge under his feet. Blood was still freshly warm on his stomach, and it stung terribly where the sword had drawn against his flesh.

The formerly empty room where they had hidden away the first goblin dead from this adventure was filled with smoke. Soon, those bodies would catch as well. Just beyond this should have been the main corridor through which they'd come to the goblin side of the citadel. With refreshed vigor, Firebeetle lowered his head further and pressed through the room to seize the final doorknob.

He opened the door without thinking, only to meet head-on with a goblin fire brigade. At least six goblins were flailing and flapping through the corridor, each carrying huge wooden barrels of water on their backs and chanting in unison something that sounded like 'chum chum chum'. Firebeetle froze in place, his eyes wide. They were coming right at him.

Chum chum chum.

The lead goblin saw him when they were nose to nose, and the hideous fellow frowned and pointed in the direction from which he'd come, "Go grab a barrel, elf." With that, the brigade continued up the corridor chanting their little song.

He only nodded and trudged with determination in the direction of Yusdrayl's throne room, unnoticed. Amazingly, he was going to get away with that. He still had pursuers though, and wasn't going to last much longer. He did have that other spell he'd learned from the carnival trickster though, the healing spell. He wasn't sure just how much of the wound on his stomach, the blood he'd lost, or the smoke in his lungs that such a spell could clear up, but he couldn't continue like this. That much he knew.

Firebeetle came up on the dry fountain in the corridor and hid behind a marble statue while a second goblin brigade passed by, then climbed inside the fountain. He was still crouching inside the fountain behind a stone gargoyle when what seemed like an army of goblin soldiers ran past searching for him. He was afraid to even breathe for fear they'd hear him. And that's where he lay as he cast the healing spell. He hoped it wasn't a noisy spell. That wouldn't do at all.

But for a few magical sparks that flew up from his hand, and the delighted and very unintentional sighs of relief he emitted, his pause in the fountain to heal himself went unseen. It was a little disconcerting to see his stomach glowing, the skin stitching itself back together, and even the dried blood evaporating into the citadel air. Firebeetle rubbed his eyes and tried to calm himself. This was supposed to be a stealth affair, sneaking in and disappearing with a dragon...hopefully some dumb goblins assuming the monstrous thing had gotten away on its own. He'd just wanted that stupid key hanging by the kobold throne. It was hard to believe what had come from that. Not overly profitable, but not a disaster either.

He slid from the fountain and found his way to Yusdrayl's throne room, where she sat on her throne surrounded by her elite guard. She held Calcryx in a neck chain and muzzled by her side, too weak to do anything and glaring at Firebeetle with a vengeance. Erky stood in the corner smiling widely and giving a thumbs-up.

"Thanks for getting my dragon back, elf." Yusdrayl's voice was cold and threatening. She tossed the key to Firebeetle.

He let his hand linger in the air, casting a glance back to Calcryx and said something in the dragon language. Hearing it, Yusdrayl bristled at him, suspicious.

"What does that mean?"

Although he told her it meant "good luck", he was gambling none of them knew its real meaning. That's who he was after all, a gambler.

What he really said to Calcryx just then, was "Be ready at midnight."



# Welcome!!

I sincerely hope you enjoyed this little project. As you could hopefully tell, this was a bit of a love letter to the grand old lady of role playing games: Dungeons and Dragons. As I'm writing this, it's April 2020, and we're in a global quarantine. Much of what we'd call normal life is shut down, and it struck me that a little escapism would be in order. For me, it took the shape of a book that was sitting idle on my shelf called 'Tales Of The Yawning Portal'.

The setting of the Sunless Citadel, as well as a handful of the character setups (Yusdrayl, Calcryx, Meepo) and the encounters were drawn from one of the excellent adventures in that book. I hammered out a set of principles for converting a packaged adventure from Wizards Of The Coast into a solo adventure:

1. Carefully build the character sheet with all the spells, inventory, and weapons you intend to use without cheating and adding things later when you need them
2. Since you won't have companions (at first), think through what challenges you'll face and add items and skills to deal with them (I figured I'd need to pick locks, so brought along tools for that)
3. Pick an adventure that has decent maps and plenty of rooms to explore, with a story that adds purpose to what you're trying to do
4. Don't read ahead in the book, only the description for a room or corridor after you've decided you're entering based on the map and the story
5. Once you've entered, deal with whatever you came across without cheating (I accidentally reanimated some skeleton archers and almost got toasted)
6. If the adventure doesn't already require it, find a roll table for encounters (on-line or in the Dungeon Master's Guide) and make the occasional surprise roll
7. Follow whatever side adventures are offered (I wound up making a daring raid into the goblin side of the citadel to recover a little dragon they wanted back) and be willing to deviate from the original plan
8. If a character offers to join you, let them. You'll need help when things get rough.
9. Try and get in your new companions' heads and determine what they might actually do in these circumstances, then deal with that.
10. Journal out the entire story as you go, including dialogue if you can. Things get muddy and dull unless you can reflect on where you've been, what you were thinking, and you lock things down tangibly.
11. Don't cheat. Don't cheat. Don't cheat. The rolls are the rolls. If the lock won't open, the attack doesn't hit, even if you're killed. Don't cheat.

Firebeetle was a name I was given by my first dungeon master for my first character, a very long time ago. I hope you liked him; he made me smile a couple of times through all this. And if anything at all here made you smile, then fantastic! That's why I did it.

Let me know what you thought!

Brian Bennudriti

[www.grailrunner.com](http://www.grailrunner.com)

@grailrunner on Twitter and on Facebook

Yusdrayl, Calcryx, Meepo, and the Sunless Citadel are the property of Wizards Of The Coast.