Adventure #7

Last Session...

The heroes were at an interesting crossroads: side with the Cult of the Dragon and deliver an ultimatum to Venomfang, or side with Venomfang and retrieve her stolen eggs from the cultists. It’s not too much of a decision. Venomfang is by far the more dangerous of the two parties, and the druid Reidoth is an ally of the dragon, and he’s the one with the information regarding Cragmaw Castle and Wave Echo Cave, so they elect to help the dragon.

But this will require some subterfuge.
The cultists, they learn, have the dragon over a barrel. They wanted her to join their organization, but this would require her to wear a magical necklace of dragon teeth that would enslave her to the Cult. She refused, unsurprisingly, and they stole her eggs to blackmail her into compliance. The message they send with the PCs is this: “We will await your answer at dawn.”

Reidoth and the PCs decide that some trickery is the best option. Find out if the eggs are safe, and from there, lead the cultists to think that the dragon is willing to play along.

Cora, Fyghta Wan and Thorin the Dwarf head back to the cultist’s cottage while Elgweth and Carp form a plan of their own; the warlocks touches the elf and he slips into invisibility, and when the door to the cottage is opened to usher Cora and the others inside, Elgweth is somehow able (i.e. difficult Stealth check) to slip in unnoticed.
“What did they say?” asks Barakus, the leader of the cult.

Cora, Fyghta Wan and Thorin are all uncomfortably crammed into the small area between six slightly sinister men standing too close for comfort. Elgweth hides in the shadows, invisible, ready to take advantage of any opportunity that arises and hoping that no one bumps into him. Carp hides in the bushes outside.
“They...want a show of good faith,” says Cora the Halfling. “Give us ONE egg to return to them, and then Venomfang will consider renegotiation. Those are her terms.”

The cultists mutter and whisper among themselves, and then Barakus says, “Very well. We will surrender one egg to the grace of the dragon. Tell her we kindly await her decision. Wait outside and we will bring it to you.”

Cora, Fyghta Wan and Thorin are ushered out, but Elgweth is still invisible inside, and he sees Barakus reach into a leather sack that is far deeper than its volume would otherwise indicate, and he removes a greenish golden egg. The egg is taken out to the others, and Elgweth anxiously licks his lips...he WANTS that magic bag, and he nearly bolts forward right then and there to grab it, even at the high risk of weaving through a small room full of enemies.

“Tell her we wait for an answer,” says Barakus, and the door is shut bolted from within.

“And if the dragon slays them?” asks another.

“It doesn’t matter,” says Barakus. “All the better. Then we say that we sent them as gifts to her Majesty. It will work for the best. Trust me.”

But Elgweth holds back. He has already mapped out his escape route; grab the bag, flip the crossbar and bolt out the back, but it’s a risky proposition that could get him killed. So he waits for the others and some kind of signal that it’s time for him to act. He sends a quiet mental message to the others to let them know he’s inside.
SO, back to the tower they go with the dragon egg. Reidoth is ecstatic. “It worked!” he crows. “It worked! It worked! Mistress, look!” He takes the egg inside and they soon hear a reverberating grumble, and they can’t tell if that is pleasure or anger or just general draconic evil chuckling. The second part of their plan involves a lie from Venomfang herself. Elgweth needs some kind of distraction so he can steal the second egg in the magic haversack. Once all the eggs are safe then Venomfang can have her way with the cultists. They convince Venomfang, using Reidoth as the middleman, that if Venomfang leaves her tower and approaches the cultists and just *pretends* that she is agreeing to wear their Dragon Necklace, then that will give their inside man the chance he needs to steal the last egg.

Venomfang complies, although they don’t actually talk to her, and soon they hear claws scrambling on stone and a large bulk scraping against the tower, and then the beat of leathery wings as the dragon soars from the shattered roof and soars across Thundertree to land outside the cultist’s cottage. Carp, hiding in the bushes, sees the dragon arrive and he hides even more. Elgweth hears the dragon land and then it announces in Common:

“I AM HERE, WRETCHED HUMANS. COME OUT AND SPEAK.”

There is a flurry of commotion inside. The cultists are thrilled that their plan worked! The dragon has agreed to the compromise. Barakus and two others step outside to negotiate while the others press to the windows or door, and this leaves plenty of room for Elgweth to navigate across the chamber and swipe the bag with the egg. In two shakes he’s at the backdoor, throws open the crossbar, kicks it wide and then he’s out and running, still invisible, and giggling with sadistic glee because he knows this shit is about to go down hard. The cultists inside hear the door but are too shocked to respond.

“I have your egg! It’s SAFE!” he shouts as he runs invisibly. “Kill them! Kill them!”

Barakus looks around in utter confusion. “What? What is happening?” he croaks.

A wicked smile crosses the dragon’s face, and she rises up, INHALES, and blows a gout of poisonous gas upon the three men in front of her.

[For a second, I let two player control the cultists; “Make a DC 16 Constitution save. Oh, you failed. 42 points of damage. Oh, you’re dead? And, you’re dead. AND...you’re dead too.”]
Poisonous fumes envelope them, searing flesh from bone. Their eyes bulge and rupture and pop from their sockets like jelly. Their leader Barakus crumples, his flesh pocked and smoking from the attack, and the remaining three cultists inside simultaneous try to flee as all of their careful plans suddenly end in disarray and death. [DM Note: This whole scene was AWESOME. I was laughing the entire time, and vividly reminded of this]:
“Here! Your egg!” says Elgweth, approaching, now visible, and reaches into the sack for what he hopes and prays is a dragon egg and not a loaf of cornbread. Because that would be bad. But it IS an egg, and the dragon greedily snatches it. Her wyrmling brood is safe.

Meanwhile, Cora, Fyghta Wan and Thorin reach the backdoor to prevent any cultists from fleeing. Cora trips one, Fyghta Wan nearly beheads the other, and Elgweth drops one who flees with an arrow. The last cultist tries to rise to his feet, but the PCs point out to Venomfang, “He’s here! He’s here! There’s one left!” She immediately soars over the cottage, roughly pushes the PCs out of the way, and picks the surviving cultist off the ground and holds him up to her snout.

“You and I are going to PLAY,” she growls menacingly, and then she launches up with her prize and wings back to the tower and crawls down inside, the cultist screaming the whole way. In fact, they hear him screaming for quite some time as he is slowly flayed alive.
The party searches the corpses and the cottage and retrieve some interesting items, including *potions of fire breath* and *frost breath*, not to mention the magical *handy haversack*. The cult leader Barakus carries two things, the dragon necklace intended for Venomfang, and small clear potion that hangs from a thong around his neck.

![Dragon Necklace](image)

Pleased with a job well done, they return to the dragon’s tower to complete their business with Reidoth the Druid. He upholds his end of bargain and takes them to his abode at the entrance to town, the small root-covered dwelling the PCs previously ransacked, but left everything exactly as they found it just in case the druid returned. Which, he has. He pulls out papers and maps and ledgers and quills and draws them an accurate map to Cragmaw Castle and Wave Echo Cave, along with instructions regarding time and distance, landmarks to look for and local flora and fauna, including the goblins, hobgoblins and owlbears that are known to infest the area around Cragmaw.
Cragmaw Castle, he tells them, is an ancient place, and it was not originally called Cragmaw, but instead was the home of a powerful, reclusive wizard who has long since passed away. King Grol, the self-proclaimed goblin king of this neck of the woods, has taken it over, and hobgoblin patrols are known to frequent the area, as well as both wild and semi-tame owlbears. Elgweth asks if Reidoth can give them an animal guide, and he huffily agrees, and then they REALLY put the pressure on and ask if they can stay in his hovel overnight and leave in the morning. Relenting, the druid allows them to stay. They don’t want to travel at night in this area, but they’re not too comfortable remaining near the dragon either, but they feel that she is complacent for now, pleased with her revenge and the safe return of her eggs, and they can leave without any undue incident, particularly with Reidoth there to placate her.

Their assumption pays off and they are able to rest and heal up and leave in the morning, but Elgweth is surprised to find a small, reddish dragon sitting on his chest the following day.
Chirp chirp chirp chirp...

It can’t speak, but it mentally communicates by pressing an image into the elf’s mind, that of a castle rising above the forest on some kind of weird rock formation. This is Cragmaw, and the pseudodragon will lead them there.

There’s some brief discussion first regarding their options. A) They want to find Gundren Rockseeker, the dwarf from Neverwinter who hired them to escort the mining equipment to Phandalin in the first place. He was kidnapped at the behest of someone named THE BLACK SPIDER because of Gundren’s intimate knowledge regarding Wave Echo Cave, the Lost Mine of Phandelver and ultimately the Forge of Spells within.

Now, they have not seen Gundren since the very beginning of this whole mess. They don’t even know if he’s alive. Probably 4 days have passed since he was abducted. They don’t even know if he IS at Cragmaw Castle still; that’s just the last clue they had regarding his whereabouts from Sildar Hallwinter, the agent of the Lord’s Alliance they rescued from the goblin hideout.

It’s possible that he has been tortured for answers, OR, he has been physically dragged all the way to Wave Echo Cave, which is on their map now, and it’s not too far from Phandalin. This whole trip to Cragmaw Castle might be a dangerous waste of time.

And lastly, there’s that wizard that Sildar was hoping to find, Iarno Albreck, who ASO turned out to be Glasstaff, the leader of the Redbran gang, who coincidentally were also hired by THE BLACK SPIDER to stir up trouble.

This Black Spider it seems is causing trouble all over the region and many of these incidents are related. If not all.
They decide to try Cragmaw anyway, it’s on the way south, so the group heads off at daybreak, enters the southern Neverwinter Wood, following the little reddish dragon fluttering ahead of them.

It takes a while to reach their destination, but two Random Encounter rolls later they are fortunate not to meet anything nasty on the way. They arrive at the outskirts of Cragmaw Castle in the evening as the sun is setting, standing on a rocky crest looking down into a valley where the strange castle rises mysteriously above the forest. Unfortunately, now that they see the place with their own eyes, it’s NOT going to be easy to get inside. Not without trouble, anyway.
Well, the group decides to just hunker down for the evening at wait and watch and see what happens. Running up to the front door seems like a bad idea, as archers could pick them off the whole way up. And they really have no clue about the castle’s defenses. Unfortunately, it seems well fortified, with only one easily defendable entrance.

The sun sets and the moon rises, and the night critters come out and the sounds of the forest surround them – for better or worse -- and two MORE Random Encounters are rolled for, but again they’re lucky and avoid an owlbear attack. But the evening does not exactly pass without incident. Sometime later they hear noise down below, the neigh of horses and the jangle of bridles and metal, and six mounted horsemen appear heading toward the castle stairs.
Now, these guys looked downright intimidating, and the earlier warning from Reidoth the druid passes through their heads: *hobgoblin patrols frequent the area...*

The PCs watch and wait, not interfering, and the horsemen clatter up the steps to the rock bridge and approach the front gates. There’s light inside the castle, so someone is definitely awake, and the gate opens and they enter and it closes behind them. There’s not much the PCs can do about that, so they keep waiting, and dozing, and finally dawn arrives and they ascertain the situation again.

Elgweth is willing to scout ahead, invisible, if that’s the only way to get inside, but even he is hesitant to do this. He’ll have NO backup, not even within shouting distance. They decide to slink around and down to the bottom level of the castle’s foundation, to where it rests on bedrock rising from the forest floor, and see what they can find there. Perhaps there’s another hidden entrance.

Eventually they do find a curious anomaly – two boulders inscribed with arcane runes. Unfortunately, between poor Arcana rolls and limited knowledge, the best they can ascertain is that the magic on these stones is active only under moonlight. And it’s no later than 9am right now. They have a long while to wait to see if anything changes. The boulders look ancient, weathered and worn and smooth, and they’ve surely been here for hundreds and hundreds of years, long before King Grol the Goblin ever took residence.
They keep poking around, and soon find that a trickling waterfall from somewhere above collects below in a pool.

And then they see the half-naked woman standing inside the pool on the far side.

She smiles winsomely at Elgweth. “Oh, approach me, my sweet,” she says, and Elgweth feels magic skitter across his mind, but he’s immune to her fey charms.
“What do you want?” he demands.

Her laughter tinkles and she stares at him with seductively glowing eyes. “Approach, elf. Talk to me.”

He’s not sure what manner of creature she is, but he does approach, but stays back from the water. “Do you know a way into this castle?” he asks.

She nods, trailing a finger through the water to create ripples. “Perhaps. If you do something for me, I will do something for you. Agreed? But you must make a blood pact with me first. Then a favor you will owe me.”

Well, not quite liking this, Elgweth agrees. Apparently this water lady has lived here a long, long time, she says so, long before the goblins ever came. She steals them sometimes and keeps them alive down in the pool with her, gurgling for eternity. She thinks that Elgweth would make a wonderful addition. He disagrees.

She tells them to return that night and she will help them enter the castle. What kind of favor he owes in return remains unclear.

The group heads back to their campground, making sure to take the long route and remain unseen from any potential guards in the castle, and they hunker down and wait for the day to pass before they return to the pool and the water lady at moonrise. But the afternoon does not pass without incident. The same troupe of mounted hobgoblins depart that afternoon, and this time they have a SEVENTH person, but this one with a hood over its head.

This creates a problem. It might be Gundren Rockseeker, the very dwarf they came here to rescue, so they need to find out quick if this is a fight worth risking. Hobgoblins, they have heard, are deadly combatants, although they have never confronted them before. Elgweth sends his bat familiar fluttering ahead to sniff out the prisoner, and they are able to determine that it is NOT a dwarf...it’s a human.

The horse riders are trudging through the forest, still oblivious to their presence, but they’ll soon outdistance the PCs. They have to make a decision quick. They’re headed south on a path that goes in the direction of Phandalin and the Triboar Trail. Elgweth the mage/thief sends an enchanted message to the prisoner while he’s still in range:

*We are friends. Listen to me. Jump off the horse and run. We’ll save you.*
The psychic message allows a brief pulse back from the hostage, who is blindfolded and bound, and his response is understandably one of confusion and mistrust. This goes back and forth for a short time, but finally the prisoner throws himself from the horse, lands in the brush and thickets, picks himself up and runs blindly back toward the party.

Elgweth immediately follows up with an arrow, piercing a rider’s throat as he wheels his mount around in surprise, and the hobgoblin topples dead from the saddle.

Initiative is rolled...and we had to stop. Party levels to 4th next session. That arrow in the throat gave them all such a tingle of inspiration that they felt like they could do just about anything now.... (Actually, we could just as easily assume you “leveled up” during the long rest overnight)

[DM Note: Believe it or not, this session only took 2 hours. It seems like a whole helluva lot happened when I look back at it].