

## FAKE DRAGONS

Campaign 2 · Session 3 · October 2nd, 2025

The road from Marsember toward Tzir



*A stolen Purple Dragon checkpoint waits on the winter road, searching carts for Warmest Regret.*

They left **Marsember** in good order: two contracted horses, a borrowed road, and four or five days of winter between them and **Tzir**. **Count Nikaculus** reminded everyone of his schedule (two days of service, maybe three, then I come back when I end up). Sir **Winnington's** blanket obligations were reconfirmed. And as the frostbitten fields slid past, the party did what they had not done in six months apart: they caught up.

**Balbi** had spent the half year on careful alchemical experiments with Lotus-adjacent plants, tinctures and tests, not for personal use and not for profit, hunting a strain that could save a blighted forest without the consequences. **Irofine** had wandered town to town doing good and pointedly forming no attachments, a pattern she is starting to notice. **Art** had chased cure leads through a sorceress and come back with nothing but dead ends, a name (**the Green Knight**), and a clock that now reads about five months. **Ferrick** summarized his six months with the candor of a man entirely at peace:

*"The bad news is I'm pretty sure I did something really bad with a lot of fire. The good news is it's been six months of drinking, so I blacked out and don't remember where."*

FERRICK THUNDERTREE, CATCHING UP

**Irofine** sketched the route from memory: **Marsember** to **Suzail**, the capital and the heart of Purple Dragon authority; then a lawless frontier stretch of bandits, sellswords, and smugglers; the cramped winter trade hub of **Elversult**; and finally **Tzir**. Four to five days, if the weather held. A boat would have been faster, but it is winter, and nobody trusts the sea right now.

### THE CHECKPOINT

The road interrupted the reunion. Ahead stood a makeshift barrier flying **Purple Dragon** colors, a dozen guards, and a merchant's cart pinned at the front while soldiers searched it for **Warmest Regret** resin, which is apparently moving through every city since **Westgate** sealed. A young guard sidled over to solicit a bribe before anyone had been accused of anything. The captain, asked about **Marsember's** own **Horseman**, did not recognize the name. The uniforms hung wrong. The questions were about cuts, not order. Resin was discovered in the merchant's cart with suspicious convenience, and by then the party had finished the arithmetic: these were not Purple Dragons. These were **bandits in stolen regalia**, and the shakedown was about to become an execution.



*Overlapping magic turns the false checkpoint into a blind, grasping nightmare.*

## THE FIGHT GOES WRONG

Art opened negotiations by dropping **Hunger of Hadar** dead center on four of them: a sphere of freezing darkness, acid sleet, and unseen reaching things, which the table immediately christened with a name that cannot be printed on a player handout. **Balbi**, who had been a horse moments earlier, entangled the same ground in grasping roots. What followed inside the sphere was blindness, restraint, and slurping noises. **Irofine's** voice cracked across the barricade, commanding the rest to HALT. And **Ferrick** burned through the young bribe-collecting guard with **Aganazzar's Scorcher** so completely that even victory felt worse afterward, then battered the captain with magic missiles until surrender came out of him like a confession.

*"Please. You can have all our coin. Corn? We can have all our corn. Ignore the horse. Please."*

THE BANDIT CAPTAIN, SURRENDERING

The cheering stopped when the sphere did. The **potato merchant**, already beaten half to death by his captors, had been caught inside it. He died there, an innocent man killed by the party's own magic. Balbi did not hesitate. He touched the body with the **Staff of the Underworld**, and the winter road fell away, and **Death** spoke, thunder and lightning sharing a single voice. Back so soon? You owe me one spirit, and now you ask for another. She mused on the price of moments, on spirits who would have traded kingdoms for three more minutes. Then, generously: if his spirit is what you need, his spirit is what you get. *But remember. I need champions. A*

deal was struck. Bells, endless bells. *I hope not to see you soon.*



*The staff can return life, but the question is what comes back with it.*

The merchant stood up with his neck audibly wrong. When Irofine laid cure wounds on him, the healing slid away into an abyss and vanished, as if poured into a hole where a soul should be. He was alive. The question of what exactly was alive had been opened, and it had not been closed.

## WHAT THE MERCHANT KNEW

His testimony, freely given: he was hauling potatoes to **Suzail**, plus a side hustle. The resin in his cart he had bought from a city guard in Marsember, a guard named **Horseman**, intending to resell it in the capital, where the guards are really good at moving drugs. The weary, helpful soldier from the day before is a dealer, or someone is trading on his name. Either way, the rot wears a uniform, and the party is riding straight toward its source.

Up close, the captain's story finished itself. A glass lens slipped from his eye, and beneath the bright blue was a deep, familiar purple. They were hooked, all of them. They had been **bandits for good** once, they said, men who tried to save a starving town from its lord and failed. Now **Black Lotus** is getting scarce, the quarantine is working, and the hits do not last the way they used to. Either we're changing, the captain offered, or it's changing. Warmest Regret is the upgrade path. He started to explain the comparison and the party declined to let him finish it. Their equipment told the same story secondhand: showpiece armor, a captain's longsword clearly stolen from somewhere nicer, and no hidden compartments. Art checked.



*Ferrick buried the evidence. The earth did not stay quiet.*

## FERRICK'S VERDICT

Ferrick did not trust the resurrection. As the merchant trundled off down the road, alive against two separate odds, Ferrick rode him down, killed him again, separated head from body, and buried the pieces apart. Then he burned the bandits' tent with the confiscated resin and the stolen regalia inside, pocketing about forty gold on the way out. The bandits themselves were stripped and released, close enough to town to walk, far enough to not be anyone's problem. *I gave him life*, Balbi said. *I don't know what you brought back*, Ferrick answered. Nobody had a third position.

The party now owned a caravan full of potatoes, which Count Nikaculus, eating steadily from the back of it, endorsed: nothing better than potato. And as they pulled away, Ferrick glanced back at the burial site, and would have sworn the soil looked fresher than he left it, unkempt where he had stamped it down. Nobody said anything. Nobody went back.



*The Cracked Mother asks for truth, and gives warmth in return.*

## THE SHRINE OF TRUTHS

The day ended at a hamlet with no name, where a woman at the well offered the warmest welcome available: we don't take well to visitors here. Don't turn back. On the hill stood a cracked statue of a smiling woman, her serene face split by a jagged fissure, her base littered with shattered plates and shriveled offerings, faint singing drifting up from inside the crack. The air was cold, heavy, and damp; breath froze; frost crept toward their boots. And then she seeped out of the stone, as though the shrine were birthing her: a woman pale as riverstone, skin traced with black cracks, hair shedding ash, smelling of clove. Her touch left soot wherever it landed, and her voice arrived as a whisper in every ear at once. *Do you kneel to the mother, cracked, or to the ash that fills her wounds?*

*"Offer me truth and I will bless you. Offer me hunger and I will curse you."*

THE CRACKED MOTHER

They offered potatoes, and truths. Ferrick admitted he never said goodbye to a brother he had long counted among the dead, and the shrine answered, devastatingly casually, *he's well*. He confessed his fear of one day burning the whole world down, that he cannot stop himself exploring this energy, and was told that with great power comes great risk. Art confessed a truth the table will never let him forget. Balbi received a hand on the shoulder, a bite of his potato (I see the hand of a strong man), and three words: *don't feel guilty*. Then the winter clouds parted, warm sun poured over the shrine, and for the first time in six months the party felt like a team again. **Level 8.**

### GOING FORWARD

- **Threat:** Warmest Regret is replacing Black Lotus on the street, purple eyes hiding under glass lenses.
- **Pipeline:** "Horseman" and the Suzail guards are moving product, and Suzail is the next stop.
- **Fault line:** resurrection, mercy, and Ferrick's verdict; the grave did not stay still.
- **Reveals:** Death is recruiting champions, and Ferrick's brother may be alive.
- **Housekeeping:** Count Nikaculus departs within two days; Sir Winnington requires his blanket.

✦ NEXT SESSION: SUZAIL ✦