

HORSES AND APPLES

Campaign 2 · Session 2 · September 25th, 2025

Marsember, the salt market, and the road toward Tzir



Morning in Marsember: broken plates in the gutter, Purple Dragon patrols, and a road still waiting.

Marsember woke like a drunk surfacing from a nightmare. Snow drifted through the salt-stained air and settled on the canals in sheets of crackling slush. The ash of burned ledgers floated beside the ice, the streets lay littered with porcelain shards and wine-soaked rags, and half-burned lanterns bumped against the pilings like headstones. In the marsh alleys, children picked through the wreckage of last night's plates, pocketing treasure.

The revelry was gone. In its place came the **Purple Dragons**, Cormyr's enforcers, patrolling in pairs with frost on their armor, hauling unconscious revelers out of alleyways. For the party, sleepless and marked by Jamal's last stand, the city felt like a stage after the play has ended. But the world had not stopped turning. The **Weeping Mercy** sails in ten days. The clock was already running.

MORNING ERRANDS

Two soldiers in deep purple approached the strangers loitering in the square, and what began as a shakedown dissolved into customer service. *We are the Purple Dragon. Service is our mission here in Cormyr.* Asked where to buy horses, the guard first recommended the perfumed veil, a spice-heavy theatre den he described, unprompted, as a kind of sexy place, before realizing the party had said stall, not doll. The correction: the **salt-market docks**.

The guard introduced himself as **Horseman**. He did not choose the name. He was immediately asked where his horse was. He had served in the military, had not done well, and radiated the weariness of a man whose morning was already too long. The plan firmed up: three days' ride to **Tzir**, find the captain who owes the **Night Masks**, board the **Weeping Mercy** before her cycle closes.

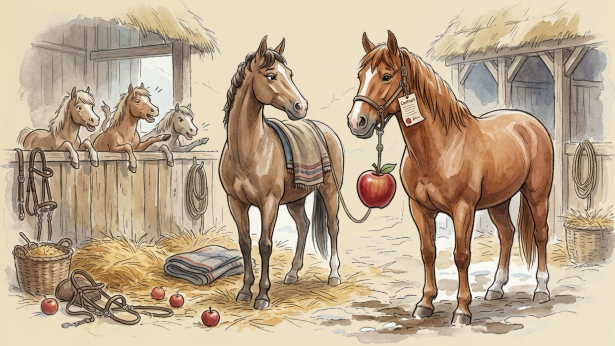
ALFONSO

A boy materialized with the words every adventurer dreads: do you need help? Art instantly checked his person for all of his gold. **Alfonso**, undeterred, offered his services as a guide, accepted Balbi's gold piece, and asked if anyone required a receipt. He knew everything: the horses, the bank (a gnomish commerce network, a local tiny market), where to gamble, and where never to gamble: the **Coin Spinner Hole**, a den even Horseman flinched at.

"Oi, the Coin Spinner Hole? If you lose there, you'll be paying long after your gold's gone."

HORSEMAN, PURPLE DRAGON GUARD

And the city's two enchanters: a good one at the genius bar, and a bad one in the **drowned quarter**. Very strong, Alfonso said, suddenly quiet. The party filed it away like a loose tooth and went to look at horses.



Sir Winnington III and Count Nikaculus, purchased under terms no sane contract would survive.

HORSE LAW

Master Oller Brine-Hoof's yard sat at the edge of the salt-market docks, where the streets rise just high enough to escape the worst of the canal flooding. The air reeked of salt, hay, and manure; the fences were patched with driftwood; a few stalls stood half sunk in brackish puddles. And yet every animal in the place was groomed, alert, and unbothered. The proprietor, broad-shouldered and bald, his hands rough from reins and rope burn, had legally changed his surname to match the business, which everyone agreed was a sound branding decision. He had principles. *You should treat a horse as good as your wife. A pause. Or husband.*

Irofine skipped the queue by summoning her war horse out of thin air, which nearly ended the relationship. Don't let her bother you, Brine-Hoof told the others. She's a witch with a fake horse. There are no fake horses at the horse shop. Balbi, meanwhile, cast **speak with animals**, and Brine-Hoof invited the yard to step forward if it was interested in a commercial partnership. Three riding horses, two draft horses, two ponies, and a mule looked over. The interviews began.

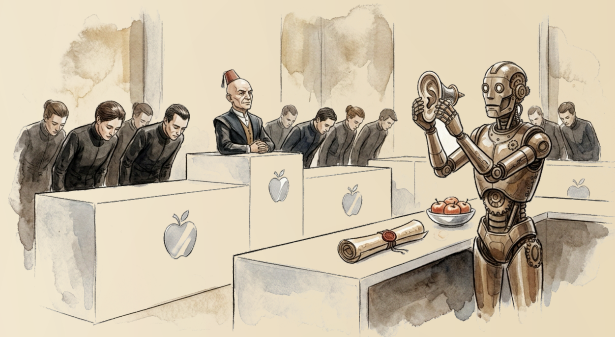
Sir Winnington III, silky black and visibly aristocratic, was eating an apple and could not be rushed. He established that the destination, Tzir, awful this time of year, could nonetheless benefit from a presence such as his; pronounced Balbi's earring rather dashing; and closed the negotiation with a flourish: I am a horse, you must speak to my business associate. The associate disclosed the rider beneath the deal. Sir Winnington sleeps only under a blanket.

*"If he does not sleep under a blanket, he will run away.
And I'll be honest with you: he won't remind you."*

MASTER OLLER BRINE-HOOF

Banana Hooves, an amber party bro who announced that he had that herb on him, was regretfully not hired. **Count Nikaculus**, white, thickly accented, and openly disdainful of the party (I do not like you), offered the strangest bargain of the morning: half price for two or three days of service, after which, in his words, I come back when I end up. He leaves on his own schedule and takes anything left strapped to him. They shook on it anyway.

Two horses with full tack came to 120 gold, plus an enchanted rock that beeps when the horses are near. Like find my iPhone, but useful. As the party left, the ponies heckled them without mercy. Too good to ride a pony? The mule said nothing, which somehow felt worse.



The Apple Store knows what you need, and it has already priced the upgrade.

THE GENIUS BAR

On the edge of the spice market sat a sleek, oddly minimalist storefront, a rarity in cluttered, swampy Marsember: stark white walls, black marble floors polished to a mirror, no signage at all, only a silver apple etched above the door. Inside, the air smelled faintly of citrus and incense. White wood shelves displayed ration packs in wax paper, crystal flasks, and single spell scrolls, nothing labeled with a price, every placard reading only *genius*. The staff were identical: black tunics, black gloves, heads shaved or hooded, smiles held a beat too long. As the party entered, every one of them dropped into a ninety-degree bow and chanted in perfect unison: *Welcome to the Apple Store. We know what you need.* A small, well-documented sign offered the house options: buy a drink, request a one-hour enchantment, or sit at a blackstone table while a genius whispers personalized riddles about your destiny.

Behind a white silk curtain lay the **Genius Bar** itself, a tavern lit with cold blue mage lights, where young enchanters whisper personalized riddles about your destiny at blackstone tables. Presiding from the back: the **High Genius**, pale, bald, crowned with a tiny fez, an obsidian apple hanging at his chest. The product line was simple. Every enchantment lasts exactly one hour, unless you pay for two days, or four, or eight, doubling all the way to 128 at exponential prices. Asked why anyone would need that much enchantment, the party's answer, sometimes you want to take a lot of photos, was accepted with total serenity.

The deal of the day: Balbi traded one of his paired magical **listening ears** for a **Scroll of Meteor Swarm** (sometimes the cloud drops) plus one unspecified future favor from the **animatronic genius**, a constructed man who rose from behind the bar and announced, I am the second most expensive thing here. Because Balbi kept the matching ear, the party now owns a permanent open line to him. The apples were free, pending a signature on the terms and conditions. A tray of sausages was on the house. The **Doom Scroll** stayed on the shelf, to the table's lasting regret. As they left, every employee turned in unison to watch them go. *You'll be back.*

Balbi went back in alone, briefly, with an idea: hand the animatronic one platinum bar and have it duplicated into ten. The store went very quiet. The construct considered the bar, considered Balbi, and observed that he could have simply cut it ten times. The favor went unspent. The last anyone saw of him, he was holding the listening ear up to the light, studying how it worked. I feel like we have created something awful, Balbi admitted outside. Like we have started a terrible, terrible company.



Alfonso returns the money he could have stolen, and the city keeps one more secret.

THE BOY WHO STAYED

Provisions came courtesy of Alfonso, who solved the produce problem by kicking in a door and reappearing

ten minutes later in a ski mask with a sack of twelve apples, six potatoes, assorted vegetables, and one rutabaga. Balbi weighed the ethics of the thing, then flicked a gold piece onto the victim's doorstep, making it either a robbery or the city's most aggressive grocery delivery.

At the gates, the party offered to take Alfonso along, and everyone could see how badly he wanted to say yes. But he had made a promise, he said, between himself and an old friend, and he could not leave Marsember yet. Then he handed back every coin he could have stolen, including the ones they had already paid him. You're my heroes, he said. Enjoy. And remember me.

They rode out. One of them, troubled by something in the boy's voice, turned for a last look. Where Alfonso had stood, a **young gold dragon** hung above the rooftops, wings beating softly, watching them go. It winked. Then it soared up into the low cloud that covers Marsember and was gone. The witness resolved, privately and sincerely, to drink less.



The road to Tzir begins with apples, horses, and one scroll nobody should use lightly.

GOING FORWARD

- **Clock:** the Weeping Mercy sails in ten days; Tzir is three days' ride; the indebted captain is the only way aboard.
- **Assets:** Scroll of Meteor Swarm, one favor from the animatronic (callable on Balbi's paired ear), two opinionated horses, a beeping find-my-horse rock, and Jamal's platinum.
- **Obligations:** Sir Winnington's bedtime blanket. He will not remind you.
- **Threads:** the very strong enchanter in the drowned quarter, the Coin Spinner Hole, Alfonso's promise to an old friend, and whatever company the animatronic is founding with that ear.

✦ NEXT SESSION: THE ROAD TO TZIR

