The slavep's lash

The emperor's death and the subsequent collapse of the Empire loosed rampaging bands of orcs into the Empire's provinces. While many of these orcs seek the freedom long denied to them, others see opportunity for vengeance, wealth, and power. In this adventure, a band of orc slavers has moved into the Northern Reach, plundering frontier towns for slaves to sell or use for sport. When the adventure opens, the characters are among the captives, marching toward a life in chains. The adventure ends when the characters escape captivity and reach one of the few outposts of civilization on the frontier.

The Slaver's Lash is an adventure for starting characters. Like others of its kind, it helps you and your players determine the group's origin story, how they come together and how they will develop their stories over time. The characters can know each other before the adventure begins, but it's better if they don't.

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LIFE IN CHAINS

The adventure begins with the characters in the direst of circumstances. Orc slavers captured them a few days ago during a series of raids on local villages and towns. Captured and chained to wagons they must pull, they march toward a grim life of servitude and early death.

Before you start, explain to the players their circumstances, informing them that they are all chained to the same wagon and goaded to pull it by the unforgiving lash of a vicious orc brute with one eye and a scar zigzagging down the side of his face. They have no possessions other than the rags they wear.

ADVENTURE SETTING

The Slaver's Lash has no fixed location. It can take place nearly anywhere in the Northern Reach or a similar lawless border region—any area where slaving orcs, raiding beastmen, and isolated pockets of civilization can be found. You'll also need to choose or create an outpost for the characters to journey to once they've escaped the caravan. Any of the crusader citadels in the Northern Reach would be suitable. This settlement can then be used as a base for the group's further adventures.

THE CARAVAN

The caravan consists of three large wagons. Slaves pull two of them and draft horses the third. A band of **12 orcs**, all guards armed with whips in addition to their other weapons, walk alongside the wagons, while **2 orcs** ride horses and work as scouts. Vargaz Halfnose is the orc slave master in charge of the caravan, and he knows his business.

DIFFICULTY 10

VARGAZ HALFNOSE

Size 1 orc

Perception 9 (-1); shadowsight Defense 14 (brigandine); Health 23 Strength 14 (+4), Agility 11 (+1), Intellect 8 (-2), Will 9 (-1) Speed 12; Corruption 3

Rising Fury When Vargaz takes damage, he makes his next attack roll before the end of the next round with 1 boon.

ATTACK OPTIONS

Battleaxe (melee) +4 with 2 boons (1d6 + 3) Whip (melee, reach +1) +4 with 2 boons (1d3 + 1)

During the day, four orcs occupy each wagon, two up front and two dozing in the back. Vargaz Halfnose rides in the horse-drawn wagon (he prefers its smoother ride and to keep an eye on the plunder taken from the villages). The two scouts range ahead or check the flanks. At night the six orcs who rode in the back of the wagons guard the camp while Vargaz and the other orcs sleep.

A DAY IN THE LIFE

The adventure should begin at dawn, some number of days after the characters were captured. Orcs kick the characters awake and then chain them to the wagons. Slaves have their manacles looped through an iron ring on one of the wagons' three yokes. Up to four slaves can be chained to each yoke for a full team of twelve, but the orcs have just eight slaves per wagon, so the pulling is hard.

Slaves are given water and some scraps of bread or meat in the morning and again at the midday break. Otherwise, it's a long day of pulling the wagons. The drivers have whips, and they are not shy about using them. In the evening, the orcs drive large wooden poles into the ground at the campsite. They have iron rings on them, to which the slaves are chained for the night.

ENDURING THE HARDSHIPS

The characters should make Strength challenge rolls periodically throughout the day to stave off exhaustion from the hard labor and to endure the poor treatment from the orc guards. Everyone should have felt the lash for one reason or another (or no reason at all) by day's end—each strike deals 1d3 damage. At night the slaves are chained up, thrown their scraps, and finally left alone.

GATHERING THE FACTS

During the long, grueling march, the characters have opportunities to learn more about their situation. Characters can count the number of orcs and deduce who is in charge—during breaks, Vargaz inspects the merchandise and cuts free any dead slaves.

Eavesdropping: The orcs communicate with each other in Dark Speech, and shout curses and threats at the slaves in the Common Tongue. Any characters that know Dark Speech can pick up some interesting details. If not, any character with a Perception score of 11 or higher notices that Heike (described below) seems to understand what the orcs are saying. She's chained to the characters' wagon. From listening or asking Heike, the characters can learn all of the following:

- They are headed for a large and notorious slave market. A character with a criminal profession can make an Intellect challenge roll, and on a success knows that it is a place of death and misery, a place from which there is no escape. You can create this place or just assume the characters are headed to Dis, the City of Chains.
- The journey will take seven days from the place where the adventure began.
- Vargaz Halfnose leads the slavers.
- There are two factions among the guards. Half of them resent Vargaz for his greed and want a bigger cut of the take from selling the slaves. The other half are loyal to Vargaz, having fought at his side against beastmen in the past.

 One orc, Toejam, has been watching Heike. It's clear to her that he's plotting to steal her away for some unspeakable purpose.

MAKING FRIENDS

As mentioned, the characters pull the same wagon and are chained up together at night. There are at least two other people in their group of eight (and maybe more, depending on how many players you have). One of them, a human woman named Heike (as a **mercenary**), starts a conversation among the prisoners at night. She wants to know how everyone got captured. She hopes (though she does not say this outright) that they can work together to escape. If no one goes first, she will. Another character, Kaspar (as a **brigand**), is willing to tell his story too.

This is the time for the players to describe their characters. Once they have done so, have each player tell how the character of the player on his or her left came to be here, so that each player describes the capture of another. If you have an odd number of players, allow one player to come up with his or her own story. Once everyone has a story, give each player **Fortune**.

HEIKE'S STORY

Heike and two friends from her home village were traveling south. They wanted to leave the Northern Reach and settle in a more civilized land. The slavers attacked while she was sleeping. One of her friends was killed and the other, named Torsten (as a **mercenary**), is in the crew of the other wagon. She knows that Torsten would help them escape if he were freed.

KASPAR'S STORY

Kaspar tells everyone that he was the night watchman for his village. One evening he drank too much to celebrate a friend's wedding, and he fell asleep on duty. That's when the orcs came. His friend and many other villagers were killed and others enslaved. He hasn't seen anyone from his village since.

It might seem strange that no one else from his village is here, and it should: he is lying. Kaspar is in league with the orcs. His job is to detect any organized resistance and signal the slavers. He does this through whistling. During the day he whistles various popular tunes, such as "The Monk and the Mead" and "Pickle in My Dilly." If he needs to alert the guards, however, he whistles "Curse of the Rancid Ham," a strange tune of uncertain origin.

The characters might grow wise to Kaspar's duplicity. Any character who watches the scoundrel as he whistles can make a Perception challenge roll. On a success, the character notices that an orc looks over at Kaspar. Each time, there's a I-in-6 chance that the orc nods, gives a knowing look, or does something else to tip off that Kaspar is in cahoots with the orcs. If the characters discover that Kaspar is a spy and attempt to hurt him, Kaspar shouts for help and receives it from the orcs, who whip the characters until they can whisk Kaspar away. For the remainder of the adventure, Kaspar rides alongside Vargaz on the third wagon.

ESCAPE ATTEMPTS

The characters will no doubt try to escape the caravan, and Heike encourages them to do so. There are a number of opportunities for the characters to escape, and you can give them hints by revealing the following details to inquisitive players.

- At night, the guards drink to the point of intoxication. Often, this results in slaves being beaten or brawls breaking between the rival groups. While Vargaz quickly quells such activity, it draws the orcs' attention enough that no one keeps track of the other slaves. When a brawl breaks out or a slave gets beaten, the characters have about a minute of being unsupervised before the situation returns to normal.
- The chains are stout metal and cannot be broken by characters with Strength scores less than 13. Those with Strength scores of 13 or higher must get a success on Strength challenge rolls made with 3 banes to snap the chains. As with any challenge roll, failure indicates that breaking the chain is beyond the character's capabilities and retries are not possible without considerably altering the circumstances.
- The hook on the wagon to which the characters are chained is loose. Dealing 5 damage with a weapon or improvised weapon to the wood into which it has been driven frees the hook from the wagon.
- Toejam, the guard that fancies Heike, carries the key to the character's manacles, and he's the one who hitches them to the wagon each day and releases them at night.
- During the day, the orcs are more alert and watchful than they are at night. Escape while traveling is almost impossible, but a clever use of a spell or some other distraction could give the characters the opportunity they need to slip away if they can rid themselves of the chains.
- The third wagon holds two swords, six spears, a crossbow with 10 bolts, two suits of soft leather armor, two small shields, a sword, a pistol with ammunition enough to fire it five times, an incantation of a rank 1 spell written on a vellum scroll, a healer's kit, and two *healing potions*. In addition, there's a small chest containing 100 cp and 22 ss. Vargaz is never far from this wagon.

The wagons the slaves pull have three coils of rope, each 20 yards long; a barrel full of rainwater; and another barrel full of salted horseflesh, enough to feed the slaves and the orcs for seven days. These wagons have canvas covers to protect the occupants from the elements. The orcs keep four spears in each wagon, and have divided up the characters' starting equipment between themselves.

MAKING THE ATTEMPT

When the characters make their attempt to escape, the orcs, of course, try to stop them, but stop short of killing them. After all, the characters are valuable property, and Vargaz Halfnose wants them alive so he can fill his purse with silver from selling them. Thus, the orcs subdue anyone who tries to escape and resort to lethal force only to preserve their own lives. If the characters manage to get away, proceed with "Trek to Freedom." Otherwise, the orcs beat them savagely and kill Heike as an example to them before returning them to their chains. This turn of events might demoralize the characters, but another chance to escape presents itself when ...

BEASTMEN ATTACK!

Fomors have been stalking the caravan, watching its movements and routines, for a few days. They are clever and have planned their attack for when the orcs are occupied with transferring the slaves from the wagons to the big wooden poles.

The fomors take advantage of the orcs' distraction to crawl toward the camp until they are within javelin range, at which point they loose their weapons. The characters see Toejam or another orc go down when a javelin takes him through the chest and sends him to the ground screaming. Then further javelins pelt the camp, causing confusion and wounding other orcs.

This is a three-sided fight, which can be a little tricky to run, so it's good to remember everyone's goals. The characters want to escape. The beastmen want to capture the slaves and any other loot they can get. The orcs want to defend the caravan and retain as many slaves as possible.

There are **12 fomors** in all, spread out around the camp. Sine their line is thin, the characters can break out by taking down two and then fleeing into the darkness. Vargaz Halfnose tries to stop the characters if he can, with Kaspar's aid if he is still alive.

You don't need to roll for each beastman and orc attack against each other. Simply describe the scene and the chaos of battle as the various sides try to achieve their objectives. If the characters work together, they should be able to find equipment and escape. If they are selfless, they might even bring the slaves from the other wagon with them, though this will make the task more difficult.

TREK TO FREEDOM

Once the characters have escaped, they must make their way to a safe haven. This can take just a couple of days or up to a week, depending on where you set this adventure. Food and supplies may become a concern.

Every eight hours until the characters reach safety, roll a d20 and consult the Encounters table below to see what happens. If the characters are having a hard time, you can skip the roll or have them encounter someone friendly

ENCOUNTERS

d20	Encounter
20	A friendly apprentice witch finds the characters and accompanies them until they reach safety. The characters can have this encounter just once.
18-19	The characters come upon a ruined village (see below).
14-17	A rainstorm or snowstorm bears down on the characters for 1d6 hours.
8-13	Nothing happens.
4-7	A small pack of 1d3 + 1 wild dogs (as small animals with the Pack Fighting trait) attacks the group.
2-3	A group of 1d6 fomors picks up the characters' trail and attempts to murder them.
1	A band of 1d3 small monsters attacks.

ORCS

Vargaz Halfnose does not give up easily. If he survives the fomors' attack, he comes after the characters to retrieve his merchandise. He brings with him half of the surviving orcs, leaving the rest to guard any slaves that remain.



RUINED VILLAGE

The characters might come across a remote village that has recently been sacked. The culprits could have been orc slavers, beastmen raiders, or another force entirely. The characters can attempt to help any survivors of the raid, and might find the ruins to be useful shelter. If they stay too long, the raiders could return.

ENDING THE ADVENTURE

The adventure ends when the characters reach the nearest outpost of civilization. They will be out of immediate danger and can take some time to regroup, heal, and make further plans. The events of *The Slaver's Lash* might suggest future adventures. For example, did Vargaz Halfnose survive? He could return to haunt them. Did Heike survive and escape with them? She'd still like to leave the Northern Reach and might try to convince the characters to make the journey with her.