

P R I M E V A L

THE WOLE

RED CHAINS

by Steve Winter

An adventure for characters of levels 4-6



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The vile practice of slavery casts a shadow over all of Thule. In *Red Chains*, the characters must travel to the city of Marg, home base of the Crimson Slavers who terrorize much of the continent. Their quest is simple: Rescue the son of an important chieftain from the clutches of Marg's slavers. But in their effort to free the young barbarian from his captors, the heroes find the trail leading them into a cruel, twisted realm of human bondage, underground cults, and dark rituals.

Encounter Difficulty: *Red Chains* is intended for 4th- to 6th-level characters, but because it's very light on combat, it can easily be modified for characters of any level. Only one battle in the adventure really matters; any other fight characters get into can be avoided—and probably should be.

ADVENTURE SUMMARY

The player characters are hired by Evarr Hallborn, a barbarian of noble blood, to rescue his son Leafstan from the Crimson Slavers. Before leaving on this mission, characters have an opportunity to talk to an ex-slaver and learn crucial facts about the slave trade and the city of Marg.

Once in Marg, they discover that the job won't be as easy or as simple as just buying Leafstan back. He's already been bought and sold several times before the characters pick up his trail. Instead of moving "up the chain," however, as similar slaves usually do, Leafstan is moving down along a chain of increasingly grim and disturbing owners into a world of death sport, magical experimentation, and nightmare cults. The trail also leads to followers of Asura who fight against slavery and aid escaping slaves in their flight to freedom. Earning their trust is as crucial to the rescue's success as finding Leafstan and stopping the cultists' horrid plan.

IMPORTANT NPCs

Red Chains is light on combat but heavy on roleplaying and investigation. Characters will spend most of the time speaking with, gaining the trust of, or squeezing information from NPCs involved in the slave trade. Some of them are despicable, some are valuable allies, and a few are both.

Baishum Judocus was a mercenary who joined the Crimson Slavers, but eventually he grew to admire the people they were preying on and repented his wicked ways. He jumped ship during a raid, swam ashore, and tried to teach the barbarians he found how to protect themselves against the raiders. The clans accepted him and gave him a home, and he's lived among them for 20 years.

Bearn Tuham is a seasoned warrior and raider who's seen more than his share of combat against slavers and other enemies of the clan. He lost his right arm

batTLing lizardfolk a decade ago, but he still serves Evarr Hallborn as a lieutenant and adviser.

Evarr Hallborn is the hereditary leader of his clan. He was a great warrior in his prime, and even now few of his clansmen would face him one-on-one. He wears a mantle made from griffin hide that's the hereditary symbol of rulership in the clan. His two eldest sons both died (one in battle, one adventuring) before Evarr was ready to hand over the reins of power. Leafstan is his only surviving heir.

Leafstan Hallborn is the son of Evarr Hallborn and the only surviving heir to the griffin mantle. He's 17, passionate, strong, and impetuous, and he'll become an excellent clan chief if he lives long enough.

Nafryr is an Atlantean slave trader. She bought Leafstan from the slavers who captured him, then sold him to Xauxo of Ren Sharr.

Noble Freeman is an astrologer in Marg who earned his freedom from slavery. He works with the followers of Asura to help slaves escape, and he commands a small army of urchins who can guide characters stealthily almost anywhere in the city.

Sister Uthlita runs a mortuary that disposes of the corpses of slaves, but she's also secretly a follower of Asura who smuggles escaped slaves out of Marg.

Tuhawi Dasaab is an owner of pit-fighting slaves and a follower of Set. He bought Leafstan from Xauxo of Ren Sharr and intends to sacrifice the young man to the serpent god, after torturous alterations are made to Leafstan's body and mind.

Xauxo of Ren Sharr is an owner and trainer of pit fighters. He bought Leafstan from Nafryr, then sold him to Tuhawi Dasaab. Although he's completely amoral, Xauxo will help the characters if their interference will harm his competitor.

Yoodir is a homeless street preacher who rants against the evils of slavery in Marg. He is the ultimate key to finding Leafstan before it's too late.

BEGINNING THE ADVENTURE

The adventure begins wherever in Thule your campaign takes place. The Crimson Slavers focus their raids against barbarians (there's less risk of political backlash or organized military resistance that way), so starting in barbarian lands is preferable to starting in a city. Whether characters start among the barbarian tribes or in a city, tailor the information below to reflect their situation.

The player characters are approached by Bearn Tuham, who brings a message from his warlord, Evarr Hallborn, a man of considerable influence and importance among the Ammur tribes (substitute a different barbarian tribe if it works better for your campaign). Hallborn wants to see the PCs immediately to offer them a job. Tuham explains that Evarr Hallborn is a powerful leader in his clan, a good man to have on

your side or in your debt. He needs mercenaries from outside the clan for an important task. Tuham wants the characters to come with him immediately; time is pressing.

EVARR'S LONGHOUSE

The clan chief's longhouse is a "palace" of barbaric splendor. Most of it is one tremendous, timber-columned hall. Tables, benches, and numerous fire pits are arrayed near the center of the hall. Cots and pallets covered with warm furs are pushed near the walls for sleeping. At the end of the hall opposite the single entrance, an impressive, roughly-hewn chair stands beneath the mounted head of a griffin. Seated on that chair is a man wearing a mantle made from the griffin's pelt.

Evarr Hallborn is a tall man and still impressively powerful despite his gray hair and beard. He wastes no time on pleasantries as the characters approach his seat.

A dark mood hangs over the entire hall, but especially on the man wearing the griffin mantle, whose chin rests heavily on a tightly-clenched fist. You're only halfway across the hall when he speaks loudly without raising his head. "My son has been captured by Crimson Slavers and taken to Marg, and I need someone to bring him back—bold mercenaries not of my clan, who won't be recognized as my warriors in that cursed city.

"What you must do is simple: travel to Marg, pick up my son's trail, and buy him back. Don't let anyone know you're working for me, or they'll inflate the price. Just make a quiet business transaction. That's what these jackals understand.

"Once Leafstan is safely home, then our thoughts of deep revenge can take form. For now, just bring him home. Bring him back to me, and your honor and reward will be great." Then he dismisses you with a wave toward Bearn Tuham and sinks again into somber meditation.

Tuham draws the characters aside at that point and gives them the specifics. The characters are offered 3 pounds of gold apiece (150 gp) as pay for the job. (This amount can be adjusted up or down to match the economy in your game.) One-fifth will be paid up front, the rest when Leafstan is brought back. He must be alive, or there will be no further payment! Tuham emphasizes that besides the monetary reward, Evarr Hallborn is a powerful and generous lord to his friends and allies. In addition to their up-front payment, he provides them with 20 Margish krakens (200 gp) to purchase Leafstan's freedom. They're expected to bring back a receipt and return whatever krakens are left over!

Leafstan is 17, blond, bearded (when he was taken), and has a stylized griffin tattoo on his right forearm. He was captured two weeks ago while hunting far

from home. One of his companions eluded the slavers and followed them to their ship, where he heard them saying their hold was full and they were sailing straight to Marg to sell their catch. It took Leafstan's friend eleven days to make his way back to Evarr and report, so the slavers now have a two-week head start. The ship was named *Tarhun's Fury*.

Bearn Tuham also recommends that before the characters depart for Marg, they meet with a man named Baishum Judocus, who lives among the clan even though he's not kin. Judocus is wise in the ways of the Crimson Slavers, and he might have useful advice for the characters.

THE EX-SLAVER

Baishum Judocus is a Kalay human, clearly an outsider among the tall, fair-haired barbarians. He is short, swarthy, and has dark, darting eyes. His lodge is indistinguishable from any other in the village from the outside, but inside, the collection of exotic weapons and other oddities on the walls and shelves makes it obvious the resident has traveled widely across Thule. Bearn Tuham introduces Judocus to the characters as "someone who knows the evil business you're about to delve into." Judocus explains unapologetically that he sailed with the Crimson Slavers "when I was young and didn't know any better."

He hasn't been to Marg for 20 years, so Judocus can't offer much specific advice about the city. He advises characters that they should be able to get information about *Tarhun's Fury* from the harbor master, but Leafstan probably will already be sold by the time characters arrive. They can track legal sales through the Master of Accounts at the central market.

Most importantly, if they run into trouble, they must not place any trust in city bureaucrats or guild officials. Instead, he offers this advice.

"Your first friend in Marg is an astrologer who calls himself Noble Freeman. He was a slave who bought his own freedom. If he's still alive, my name should get you in the door and let you explain your needs.

"If you find yourselves truly in desperate straits, you must seek out the followers of Asura. They specialize in helping escaped slaves and other fugitives reach freedom. They can get you out of Marg even with the whole city hunting you. If you need their help, go to the swamp-side mortuary and ask for 'Clestain'. I can't guarantee that'll still work, but it did 20 years ago.

"Whatever you do, protect that information with your life. Because they undermine slavery, the Asurans are the most wanted criminals in Marg. The Crimson Council would pay handsomely for their heads—or for yours, if they suspected the knowledge of how to find the Asurans was inside."



TRAVELING TO MARG

Unless characters start very near Marg, a ship is the quickest way to reach the city. The barbarians have a small coastal vessel taken in a raid that no one would associate with them. If the characters can handle a boat, they can borrow this one for the mission. If not, members of Hallborn's clan sail the characters to Marg, drop them at the docks like any other passengers, and spend the next few days nervously pretending to be merchants in search of cargo. You can create encounters with pirates or monsters along the way, or jump straight to Marg.

ACT I: CITY OF SLAVERS

When the PCs arrive in Marg, read:

Marg makes its presence known from many miles away. The city stands at the marshy mouth of the Harj River, hemmed in on three sides by the surrounding bayou. A gray haze of smoke hangs over the city throughout the day, giving way to a sullen red glow at night. A pyramid-like fortress towers over one end of the city, and the spires of an elegant palace rise above the opposite end. The harbor lies along the southern bank of the river.

The Harj River crosses the northern edge of the city before flowing into the western end of a long inlet. The river mouth is marshy and pestilential, a breeding ground for mosquitoes and other swarming insects that literally darken the sky at the height of their hatching seasons. Huge, slow-burning pyres are continually stoked throughout the city to create a pall of smoke that drives away the clouds of voracious mosquitoes from the surrounding swamp. Most of the city stands on slightly elevated ground south of the river, with the hungry bayou hemming it in on three sides and the river as its lifeline to the sea.

The smoky pyres burn year-round and create a perpetual haze over the city; residents agree that being choked and blinded by the smoke is preferable to being devoured by the mosquitoes. The pyramid fortress of the powerful Devrith clan and the spires of the Freehold Palace can be seen from most points in the city, making them twin lodestars for those trying to get their bearings.

Law and Order: Despite its well-deserved sinister reputation, Marg is a civilized city with typical laws against assault and murder. Characters who carve a trail of corpses, injured witnesses, and collateral damage through the city are likely to run afoul of Marg's authorities, which could lead to the characters being enslaved themselves as punishment. Most

of Marg's law enforcers are typical guards, but they have tougher agents to call on when adventurers cause trouble.

- Standard patrol (1,600 XP): 1 veteran, 4 guards
- Tough patrol (4,350 XP): 3 veterans, 3 guards
- Riot squad (8,550 XP): 2 veterans, 1 priest, 10 thugs

The characters' first hours or days in Marg will be spent visiting various locales and NPCs to gather information in their effort to locate Leafstan. The most likely encounters are described below, but it's important not to constrain the characters' investigation at this point. Using the background on Marg provided here and in the *PRIMEVAL THULE Campaign Setting* (page 91–92), let the characters go where they want and talk to whoever they meet. If they drift off track, use NPCs to gently steer them back toward locations with useful leads (or transplant the leads to locations the characters do visit).

There are four strong leads the PCs can initially pursue: looking for *Tarhun's Fury*, locating Noble Freeman, heading straight for the slave market, or making contact with the Asurans at the mortuary.

TARHUN'S FURY

Characters who begin their search for Leafstan by looking for the ship that brought him to Marg discover that *Tarhun's Fury* isn't in the harbor when they arrive. They'll need to check with the harbor master or ask around the waterfront for more information.

THE HARBOR MASTER

The harbor master, a friendly but busy Atlantean man named Marcan, confirms that *Tarhun's Fury* offloaded barbarian slaves two weeks ago, took on provisions, and sailed out of the harbor again eight days ago. He helpfully adds that she's crewed largely by mercenaries, so a few members of her crew might not have signed on for this voyage. If any are around, they probably can be found at some dockside hangout, but he has no idea which one.

FINDING THE CREW

Searching riverfront winesinks and taprooms for the crew of *Tarhun's Fury* requires a successful Intelligence/Investigation or Charisma/Persuasion check (DC 15). Each attempt takes one hour and costs 1d6 gp. When the PCs succeed (or when they employ some other method, such as the discreet use of divination magic)



they find a few of the ship's crewmen in a taproom called the Cracked Keel.

The Cracked Keel is a typical waterfront dive populated by out-of-work sailors, down-on-their-luck gamblers, prostitutes, pickpockets, layabouts, and rough-looking mercenaries. When you ask about *Tarhun's Fury*, the barkeep nods at three men slumped at a table in the corner. Only one is conscious at the moment.

The conscious sailor is named Baltyr. He is not antagonistic to a group of dangerous-looking characters who outnumber him, but he won't say anything helpful unless he's paid at least 5 gp or someone makes a successful Charisma/Intimidation check (DC 15) against him.

What Baltyr can tell the characters is that the slavers captured the man they describe (he refers to Leafstan as "the barbarian prince") on their final raiding stop. They knew he was valuable, so they came straight to Marg. Most of their other captives were fit for nothing but labor and were sold at standard rates to brokers at the city's slave market, but "the prince" was sold to a dealer named Nafryr who specializes in slaves with rare qualities.

Creatures (1,000 XP): If the characters throw their weight around in the tavern—if they use Intimidation on Baltyr in front of the other patrons, for example—they gain the enmity of a rough crowd. Baltyr's fellow sailors won't leap into a battle against well-armed adventurers, but they'll trail the characters through town and either ambush them in a dark alleyway, or creep into their sleeping rooms with knives and blackjacks in the dead of night.

- 5 thugs

Development: Unless the characters do something to prevent it, Baltyr leaves the Cracked Keel moments after the party departs, and races through the streets to reach Nafryr first. He informs her that strangers are looking for "the barbarian prince" and collects a small reward from Nafryr for the information. (What Nafryr does with this information is explained under Nafryr in Act II.)

NOBLE FREEMAN

The shop of Noble Freeman is identified by a stylized astrolabe hanging above the door. Finding it requires a successful Charisma/Persuasion check (DC 12) to find someone who knows the location, followed by a successful Wisdom/Survival check (DC 12) to actually find the building in the maze of streets. Each check, successful or not, uses up an hour. If characters want to make individual checks, then they must split up; if they stay together as a group, then one check is made per hour for the group.

Freeman is a Lomari human of forty-five, highly educated, generally outgoing, but wary of armed

CASUAL BRUTALITY

Casual brutality is commonplace in Marg. Quick scenes can be used to convey to characters some of the suffering inflicted by the Crimson Slavers.

- At the docks, characters see freshly-arrived slaves being unloaded from raiding ships: chained, filthy, terrified, starved, being driven toward holding corrals and warehouses under whips and cudgels.
- In the streets, they see slaves being struck by their owners, laboring with heavy burdens, or being publicly lashed or confined in stocks for disobedience.
- Heavy, unpleasant, or dangerous labor, such as unloading ship cargo or mucking out livestock stalls, is done by slaves.
- All but the poorest taverns and inns have one or two slaves to handle menial labor.

While cruelty is the norm, not every slave is beaten or mistreated. Allowing characters to see an occasional exception to that treatment underscores the unnecessary cruelty of most owners.

strangers. He'll answer questions about Marg for free or give an astronomical reading for 2 sp, but nothing else unless characters mention Baishum Judocus. At that, he locks the front door, draws the blinds, turns to the characters and says, "How is my old friend Baishum, and how can I be of service to you?"

The ways Noble Freeman can be of service include:

- He can give reliable directions to anyplace in Marg.
- He knows urchins and beggars who can lead the characters almost anywhere in the city through alleys, sewers, and other hidden paths. A "darkways guide" costs 5 sp each time one is used.
- He knows two safehouses in the city where fugitives can find shelter from any manhunt. One on the south side of town expects a payment of 4 gp per night; one near the river expects a payment of 10 gp per night. The characters are welcome to sleep on the benches and rugs in his shop for free if they'd like, but his shop is not a safehouse. All freed slaves are perpetually suspected of aiding escaped slaves, so his shop is routinely searched when a runaway is being hunted.
- He knows that dropping the name Clestain will make the followers of Asura clam up instead of gaining their trust. The correct code name is "Edegast."
- He's never heard of Leafstan and has no idea where he might be, but Freeman can put people on the young man's trail. If characters go for this option, NPCs track Leafstan's progress to Tuhawi Dasaab, then refuse to go any farther. This information takes 1d3+1 days to collect, and the characters must reimburse the NPCs 1d6 gp per day in fees and bribes.

Almost any other information the GM wants to place in the characters' hands can be delivered through Noble Freeman. The astrologer has many gossipy clients, including close relatives of Kaz Vurin and family members of the Crimson Council (though none of the councilors themselves), so he's privy to all the news and rumors circulating through every level of Marg.

If told that Leafstan might be taken to the catacombs of Qurothaq, Freeman is horrified and urges the characters to arrange a rescue as quickly as possible.

THE SLAVE MARKET

Marg's slave market is not too different from other big, urban markets the characters have been in, except that the goods for sale are human beings.

The slave market is a sprawling collection of colorful tents, open-air stalls, and a few permanent structures where slave buyers and sellers conduct business. Humans in various stages of dress, cleanliness, and health shuffle to and fro inside small corrals, but the fences alone couldn't contain someone who wanted to get out. Most of the slaves are shackled at the wrists, ankles, or neck. Guards armed with cudgels and whips patrol everywhere, and they lash any slave who moves too slowly, bows too shallowly, speaks too often, or stares too long at a free man or woman.

Each seller appears to have a specialty: slaves from the north or from the south, slaves from the mountains or from the coast, slaves for field work or for domestic work, slaves freshly arrived or born into captivity.

The carnival atmosphere of fluttering pennants and friendly hawkers shouting their wares can't overcome the nightmarish background drone of groans, rattling chains, and cracking whips. Drifting walls of smoke from nearby pyres add a hellish accent to the scene.

To the citizens of Marg, this is just business; buying and selling people is how they feed their families. Few of those involved in the trade feel any doubt over whether what they do is ethical or whether the people they subjugate are inferior, and they react angrily to outsiders who raise such questions.

Important Leads: Characters can learn a lot about the slave trade in the market, but they can't learn much about Leafstan. Information that can be gleaned is described below.

The *Master of Accounts*, an obese Nimothan man named Hosk, knows that *Tarhun's Fury* unloaded a cargo of barbarians two weeks ago. Most were bought by the trader Loceth Aloudain to be resold for field work; a discount dealer, Nyall the Short, took the old, weak, and sick.

Loceth Aloudain, a wizened old Atlantean, explains that he already sold most of the shipment, but he still has eight remaining from the lot. He'll let characters

talk to them for 2 gp. The slaves recognize Leafstan from a description and know that he was separated from the group as soon as they arrived in Marg, but none of them know what became of him. Aloudain himself knows that Leafstan was sold to Nafryr because he was at the sale, but he won't mention this knowledge until after the characters pay to question slaves. Then he "suddenly remembers something useful," which he'll share for another 3 gp.

Nyall the Short is a cruel, brusque man who sells slaves that are likely to die soon from disease, injury, or old age, mainly for jobs with a high probability of killing them even quicker. Neither he nor any of his slaves from *Tarhun's Fury* know anything about Leafstan.

Other Leads: Characters asking around at random can attempt Intelligence/Investigation or Charisma/Persuasion checks (DC 20). Each attempt takes one hour. On a success, a character learns from a random NPC that a slave matching Leafstan's description was bought by Nafryr, but she had him killed.

Scores of Guards: The Margish expect trouble here and are ready to quash any slave rising immediately. Characters who start trouble here immediately face a tough patrol (see Law and Order, above). Additional patrols and riot squads arrive every round or two until the troublemakers are overwhelmed—there are literally hundreds of Margish guards in and around the market.

THE SLAVE MORTUARY

This low, grim building stands along the southwest edge of the city, very near the surrounding swamp. Slaves die at an alarming rate, especially fresh arrivals who are weak from a long sea voyage, possibly injured, and despondent over their fate. Their bodies are brought to this mortuary to be carted far out into the swamp, where they'll be devoured by crocodiles, giant leeches, ghouls, and worse things.

Most of the workers at the mortuary are human slaves, but the person in charge is a tall, world-weary Nimothan woman named Uthlita Beelyr. The slaves call her Sister Uthlita, but that's just a tradition as far as anyone knows. Sister Uthlita and certain of her attendants are secretly followers of Asura; they aid escaping slaves by guiding them through the swamp to the secret Harbor of Asura, some miles up the Harj River from Marg.

Sister Uthlita knows nothing about Leafstan. If characters come here looking for the body after asking around the Slave Market or speaking to Nafryr (Act II), Sister Uthlita confirms positively that she's never seen a corpse with a griffon tattoo on the arm, let alone one in the last two weeks. She also points out that mock executions of disobedient slaves aren't unknown.

If told that Leafstan is headed to the catacombs of Qurothaq, Sister Uthlita urges the characters to rescue him as quickly as possible.

“Clestein” or “Edegast”: If characters come to the mortuary and ask for Clestein, Sister Uthlita assumes they’re informants to the Crimson Council; that code word was compromised years ago. She remains polite but tells them nothing. She’s never heard of Baishum Judocus.

If they ask for Edegast instead, she knows they’re friends of Noble Freeman who can be trusted. If characters get into trouble—for example, if they rescue Leafstan and have all the slavehunters in the city on their trail—she can smuggle them out of Marg by hiding them in a cartload of corpses, then guiding them safely through the swamp. Noble Freeman’s “darkways guides” know concealed routes to the mortuary from everywhere in the city except the Devrith Ward and the Freehold Palace.

ACT II: ON THE TRAIL

During their initial investigations, the characters learn from the sailor Baltyr or the slave trader Loceth Aloudain that the barbarian Leafstan was sold to a high-end dealer in “exotics” named Nafryr. The PCs may also believe that Leafstan is dead—but, if they make an effort to verify the tale at the Slave Mortuary, Sister Uthlita informs them that she hasn’t seen his corpse, which ought to point the party back to Nafryr.

Finding Nafryr: Nafryr is a well-known figure in Marg. She is a wealthy “noblewoman” of Atlantean descent who runs her business from her home, a palatial courtyard-house a few blocks from the slave market. Her agents frequent the slave market, looking for quality wares. Anyone at the Slave Market can direct the PCs to Nafryr’s home (and so can Noble Freeman, or most Margish citizens).

What’s Next: Which scene you present next depends on whether the PCs interacted with Baltyr. If the characters threatened Baltyr or used force against him and did not prevent him from leaving the Cracked Keel afterward, Nafryr sends a contingent of guards guided by Baltyr to intercept the party. Run “Nafryr’s Bruisers” next.

Otherwise, go to “Nafryr’s Courtyard” next. (If the PCs defeat Nafryr’s Bruisers and continue on their way, they may actually run through both encounters.)

NAFRYR’S BRUISERS

If Baltyr alerts Nafryr that the characters are coming, she arranges a special ambush for them. She has no reason to expect they’ll be any politer to her than they were to Baltyr, so she sends her guards to intercept the characters before they reach her home, with Baltyr in tow to identify the targets.

Spotting Baltyr: Make a Dexterity/Stealth check for Baltyr (+1) and compare the result to the characters’ passive Perception scores to determine whether they spot him before he points them out to Nafryr’s minions. PCs whose passive Perception score is beaten by Baltyr’s Stealth result are surprised when the attack comes. Everyone else sees the slave warriors maneuvering into position to attack from all sides.

Creatures (2,250 XP): Baltyr hides at the edge of the fight and takes one or two shots with his crossbow if he can do so safely, then disappears into the crowd. Use the street map provided for “The Ambush” in Act III, or sketch a similar one of your own.

- 1 veteran
- 4 thugs
- 1 bandit (Baltyr)

If characters throw around explosive spells or cause collateral damage, a standard patrol shows up moments after the fight to investigate the ruckus. If Baltyr is still alive, he steps from the crowd and vouches that the characters only defended themselves against a surprise attack, which satisfies the patrol. Baltyr then tries to extort 10 gp from the characters in exchange for information about why they were attacked (“We must have been overheard at the Cracked Keel, and Nafryr sent these killers after you”).

Nafryr’s slaves are wearing or carrying nothing that connects them to her. If defeated and questioned, they admit that their mistress sent them to deal with the PCs after Baltyr came and warned Nafryr that the PCs were on their way.

NAFRYR’S COURTYARD

The house of the slave-dealer Nafryr stands in one of Marg’s better neighborhoods. High walls and a sturdy gate protect an inner courtyard with fine furnishings and colorful canopies. Several house-slaves cater to an elegant Atlantean woman who reclines on a divan, dictating to a scribe. Several guards keep watch nearby.

Nafryr’s trade is built on slaves with rare skills or with special qualities that lift them above the run-of-the-mill. She seldom sells in the common market; her “goods” fetch higher prices when offered direct to buyers with specific needs. These special qualities can be anything: youth, gender, beauty, region of origin, or rare talents such as an angelic singing voice, fluency in exotic languages, or knowledge of magic. She is protected at all times by a bodyguard comprised of 1 gladiator and 4 guards, who will gladly die to ensure that her will is carried out.

Nafryr is forthcoming to questions about Leafstan, or at least appears so. She opens the conversation with friendly conversation such as “What brings you to Marg?” or “How was your journey?” and offers the party wine (but see Treachery, below).

“I was invited by the slavers to bid on this “prince” in a private auction, where I bought him for eight Margish krakens. That’s eight times the price of a healthy laborer, but I was sure I could double the investment by training him as a lady’s consort or as a noble’s bodyguard.

“Unfortunately, some of these barbarians are intractable. Such was the case with this one; he strangled his trainer. I had to have his throat cut as a demonstration to my other property of the price of defiance. It was a dreadful loss of cash and a waste of valuable flesh, but it’s better this way in the long run.

“Simply put, you’re too late. His body was dumped in the swamp, and I doubt any trace of it remains. There’s nothing more I can tell you of the creature.”

Leafstan did kill one of Nafryr’s trainers, but she’s lying about having his throat cut. The execution was staged for the other slaves; Leafstan was drugged so he would pass out as a trick knife was dragged across

his throat, spouting fake blood. After his “corpse” was carted away, he was sold for 4 krakens to a man named Xauxo of Ren Sharr, who manages gladiators.

If characters ask whether they detect any signs that Nafryr is lying, let them make Wisdom/Insight checks (DC 14). Those who succeed are certain she’s a skillful liar but can’t pin down any specific lie in her story. Those who succeed by 5 or more suspect that Leafstan is still alive.

The Truth: If characters are rude, arrogant, or accusatory toward Nafryr, she dismisses them without another thought. The slave who ushers them out of Nafryr’s presence whispers to one character, “seek Xauxo of Ren Sharr,” then slips away.

If characters are respectful toward Nafryr, then they’re greeted by one of her guards when they exit her house.

The guard bends down on one knee and bows deeply to you, saying, “My mistress bids me deliver this.” In his right hand, he extends a scroll. Hastily written on it is this message:

“Although you are strangers here, you respect our ways, so we reciprocate in kind. The man you seek may yet live (monetary losses must be minimized). If so, Xauxo of Ren Sharr will know. You understand why I could not tell you this in the presence of my servants.”

The note is unsigned.

Anyone in Marg can give directions to the compound of Xauxo of Ren Sharr.

Treachery: If Nafryr was warned by Baltyr, or if any characters appear valuable (Strength 18 or better, Charisma 15 or higher, unusual race, etc.), Nafryr decides to add the PCs to her stock of slaves. During the conversation, the Atlantean asks the characters if they would like wine. Two slaves step forward, one with a pitcher of wine and one with a tray of goblets. All the goblets are identical. Nafryr takes a goblet from the same tray (last if the characters don’t hesitate, or first if no one else is willing). The slave fills all the goblets from the same pitcher.

Neither the wine nor the goblet rims are poisoned, but the stems of all the goblets are lightly treated with a contact poison. Nafryr is wearing elegant, elbow-length gloves that match her gown, so she never touches the poison and is unaffected. Characters who pick up a goblet with bare hands must make successful Constitution saves (DC 13) or fall unconscious; they wake up 1d6 hours later, or when they take damage. (This is a good time for the GM to roll the saving throws secretly, or to ask the players to roll 1d20 each without telling them why, to keep players guessing about what’s happening.) The character who failed with the lowest saving throw result falls unconscious 60 seconds after picking up the goblet, and everyone else who failed the saving throw drops a round later.



Creatures (4,200 XP): When Nafryr is threatened or when the poison begins to take effect, Nafryr's guards attack to subdue the PCs. If Nafryr is not attacked and nobody is affected by the poison, the guards do not attack (they are uncertain what to do, and let the moment pass).

- 1 gladiator
- 4 guards
- 1 spy (Nafryr, armed with two daggers)

If characters lose this fight, they awaken stripped and chained together in a holding cell beneath Nafryr's estate. How they get out is up to them and the GM. If characters win this fight, Nafryr gives them the information they seek and admits she staged Leafstan's "death."

Treasure (1,000 XP): Nafryr keeps a locked wooden coffer nearby, since she conducts business from her courtyard. If the PCs get a chance to loot the place, they find 160 Margish krakens (1,600 gp) in the coffer, along with 8 small rubies worth 50 gp each.

Development: There are no repercussions for killing her slaves, but Nafryr is another matter. If she is killed, the characters become wanted criminals in Marg. Anytime they move through Marg openly (without one of Noble Freeman's darkways guides), they must make a group Dexterity/Stealth check (DC 10). If at least half the character pass, they avoid contact with soldiers looking for them. If the group check fails, the party runs into a patrol with orders to take them, alive or dead. Roll d6: on 1–4, it's a standard patrol; on 5–6, it's a tough patrol.

XAU XO OF REN SHARR

Slave pit fighting is popular in Marg. Fights to the death aren't common; trained fighters are too valuable to throw away callously. Most bouts are fought until one fighter can't continue. A skilled fighting slave can survive many bouts and gain fame, if not fortune. Slaves who are useless, untrainable, or rebellious can provide a few minutes of entertainment as they die or they learn the value of obedience while being beaten into pulp.

Xaouxo of Ren Sharr specializes in keeping the pits filled with fighters and victims. He runs a training facility on the east side of the city that houses eight slave gladiators and twenty more fighters in training. Two guards stand watch at his compound gate, and turn away strangers. To get an audience with Xaouxo, either one character must make a successful Charisma/Persuasion check (DC 15, one attempt only) or the guard at the gate must be paid 2d6 sp. Once inside, characters are escorted to a well-appointed room where Xaouxo is watching young warriors go through their training routine.

Xaouxo is a man of contrasts. He buys and sells humans who he regularly consigns to a painful, bloody death for his own profit, and he harbors no illusions or self-deception about the evil that he perpetuates. But he's also an educated, philosophical man with some empathy for the characters' mission. He admits readily to buying Leafstan from Nafryr.

"A slave who overpowers and kills a trainer with his bare hands has the makings of a great pit fighter. This Leafstan of yours was difficult and contentious, but I was certain I'd made a smart purchase.

"But five days ago, I described my new trainee to another owner, who suddenly became very interested. He dropped by to watch the man training, and afterward offered me an astounding sum for the slave. I might have earned more from wagers over the lifetime of this Leafstan, but you never know. Even the best of us have off nights, and all it takes is one unlucky slice to end a fighter's career. Yesterday, I took the money and they took the man.

"I know your next question: who was the buyer? Normally, I wouldn't reveal that, but this man is a nasty competitor and, frankly, he . . . said things, as your man was being taken away. They seemed trivial in the moment, but they weigh on me. I suspect your Leafstan is headed for the Qurothaq catacombs. If my gut is correct, his only hope is for you to get him out of Marg instantly.

"The buyer was Tuhawi Dasaab. Whatever you might think of men like me, he's worse. If you have any friends in this city, or favors to call in, now is the time. Once your friend descends into that pit, it would be better for everyone if he never emerges again. It will be too late for him in every imaginable sense of those words."

If characters ask Xaouxo about the Qurothaq catacombs, he relates the following.

"The Qurothaq clan specializes in providing slaves with unique qualifications. Sometimes, that means attributes not countenanced by nature—attributes that can be achieved only through the cruelest types of psychic conditioning, or by cutting and rearranging the flesh, or by abhorrent magic, attributes that make a human into the perfect offering to some inhuman entity. Whatever darkness the mind can imagine, the Qurothaqs can tailor from once-human flesh."

Xaouxo will continue talking to the characters, answer their questions about his business and about Marg, even give them a tour of his gladiator training facility if they'd like one, but he reminds them that time is running out for their friend. He can't offer them any more aid; Dasaab is too powerful for a man like Xaouxo to cross openly.

ACT III: SMOKE AND SORROW

From the time characters learn that Leafstan is on his way to the Qurothaq catacombs, they have 24 hours to rescue him. After 24 hours, Leafstan disappears into the catacombs and becomes so severely damaged that nothing short of a wish will return him to normalcy and sanity.

Qurothaq Catacombs: No one will talk to the characters about the Qurothaq Catacombs. As soon as the subject is raised, people shake their heads, say “I don’t know anything about that” or “that’s none of my business,” and then either hurry away or slam the door in the characters’ faces. Only Noble Freeman will discuss the place. He explains that many people in Marg don’t even believe it exists; “you’ll wind up in Qurothaq” is something to threaten naughty children with. Most of those who do believe don’t know where it is. He suspects the rough location but has no idea how to get inside, and he’s happy not knowing. He urges the characters to forget about rescuing Leafstan from the catacombs and concentrate on preventing him from getting that far.

Tuhawi Dasaab: Characters can get information about Tuhawi Dasaab in the slave market with a successful Charisma/Persuasion check (DC 10); anywhere else in town, the DC is 15. They can get the information automatically from Noble Freeman or Sister Uthlita. No matter who they talk to, they get the clear impression that people don’t like talking about him. Even in complete privacy, people lower their voices and glance over their shoulders while speaking Dasaab’s name.

Dasaab is an elf of a dissolute, degenerate bloodline. He came to Marg decades ago with fabulous wealth that he used to start a successful stable of pit fighters.

- He only enters fighters into battles to the death, and only for very high stakes.
- His fighters are feared for their savagery.
- It’s rumored that he engages in dark rituals and that his fighters gain some of their inhuman ferocity by making sacrifices to Set.

AVOIDING CERTAIN DEATH

This act may lead characters to two locations that they can’t defeat: the estate of Tuhawi Dasaab and the Qurothaq catacombs. Despite the obvious clues that these locations should be avoided, some players might insist on bulldozing ahead with a plan that can only get their characters enslaved, killed, or worse. If the players need encouragement to reconsider tactics, drop a tough patrol or riot squad in the characters’ path to shoo them away from certain doom. Alternatively, one of Noble Freeman’s urchin guides could appear at an opportune moment with a message calling the characters back to the astrology shop or providing them with a missing clue (from Freeman’s own investigation) to put them on the right path.

- His home and training facility are in a fortified compound adjoining the Devrith ward. Thieves occasionally try to break in; their bodies are nailed to the gates as a warning to others. It’s commonly whispered that the thieves’ guild forbids its members from making further attempts.

DASAAB’S DOOR

When the characters go to Tuhawi Dasaab’s compound, it should be obvious to them that a covert incursion is a daunting prospect.

This fortress-like compound is surrounded by windowless walls twenty feet high. A single reinforced wooden door stands in the outer wall. Above the door, the rotting body of a thief with snakes crawling through its ribcage is nailed to the wall. Passers-by shy away from the building and avoid looking at it, although a crazed beggar shouts and shakes his fist at the place from a short distance away.

If the characters knock at the gate, the corpse lifts its head and begs them to leave for their own sakes, and they realize that the thief is somehow still alive! A madness save is certainly called for here (DC 13 for unwholesome magic).

Add whatever other details are necessary to make players understand that any attempt to break in is certain to cost them their lives (or worse), even if that means the grounds are patrolled by cyclopes while stone golems stand guard.

The Beggar: Only a few dozen paces from Dasaab’s compound stands Yoodir, a crazed follower of Asura. When the characters take note of him, read:

The beggar is a wild-eyed, emaciated man covered with scars. He continually harangues the compound, although people passing by pay him no heed. “I have seen your monstrous handiwork, and eternal punishment shall be your reward!” he shouts. “The judgment of Asura awaits you! I have seen those cast into Qurothaq, and they scream to me for vengeance! Your path is the path of downfall! Your ways are the ways of Set! The tormenter will fall and be trampled beneath the feet of the tormented! I have seen your blood dripping from a prince’s blade!

Yoodir is as unhinged as he appears. If characters don’t approach him, he begins to harangue them directly.

“Only minutes ago, the slaves of Dasaab dragged another to unimaginable doom! Will slayers such as yourselves stand by while brave men are wracked and slaughtered to feed the serpent?”

If characters show any interest in what he has to say, Yoodir grows momentarily calmer and more rational.

"The doomed one? A young barbarian from the northern forests, fighting every step of the way. The hooded ones dragged him forth not ten minutes past. They are taking him to Qurothaq to ruin him, but if you hurry, you can stop them. Deny the Great Serpent its prize! Make IT hunger! Leave IT to starve and howl in darkness! This way, hurry, hurry!" The madman clutches at your arms and tugs at you to follow him, then races a few paces away, doubles back, and races away again, like a dog trying to lead its master.

If characters follow, Yoodir leads them on a frantic chase through narrow streets before stopping suddenly at the point where a dark alley opens up onto one of the city's larger thoroughfares.

THE AMBUSH

This is the characters' best and only chance to rescue Leafstan before he disappears into the hellish catacombs of Qurothaq.

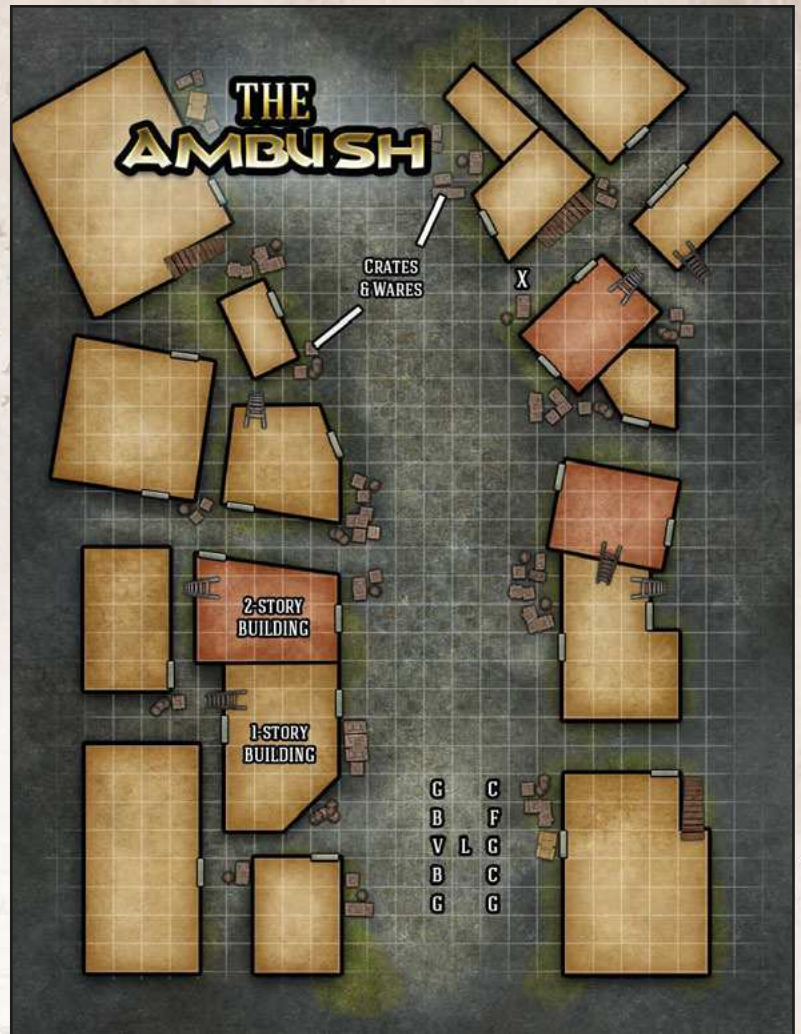
The main street is 30 feet wide, lined with one- and two-story buildings with flat roofs surrounded by low parapets. Narrow alleys separate the buildings and connect to the street at all angles. It's a perfect spot for an ambush.

You see armed warriors and three hooded figures escorting a manacled and bedraggled but defiant-looking Leafstan up the street toward your position. A block behind this procession, an enclosed sedan chair carried by four slaves follows; you can't tell whether the two groups are connected. Normal citizens still in the street are grabbing their wares and scurrying to get out of the way.

Characters have about half a minute before Leafstan and his guards reach their position. That's enough time for characters to move into positions on both sides of the street, to move out in front of or behind Dasaab's men, or to get inside or even atop nearby buildings via outside stairs. They won't be noticed if they move with the crowd. Thirty seconds is not enough time to make detailed plans; push the players to think and act quickly.

The crates and clutter marked on the map consist of typical trade goods, food storage, wares for sale, and other bric-a-brac. These squares count as difficult terrain and provide cover. Ladders are difficult terrain, too, but characters fighting from the rooftops have cover from enemies on the street below.

Creatures (5,500 XP): The escort includes the NPCs listed below. They're moving in two tight columns, as shown on the map. Note that the letters on the map indicate the escort's arrangement but not necessarily its location; the procession is moving up the street, and characters can let it advance as far as they want before attacking. The hooded figures (cultists and the cult fanatic) are representatives of the Qurothaqs; they are indistinguishable from one another.



- 1 Veteran
- 1 cult Fanatic
- 2 Cultists
- 2 Berserkers
- 1 Guard per PC
- Leafstan (ally)

Leafstan quickly recognizes the PCs as rescuers and turns against his captors. He fights as a berserker, using his manacles as a flail until something better becomes available. He can't dash while shackled, but his shackles can be cut with a slashing weapon and a successful Strength check (DC 15).

Tuhawi Dasaab (2,300 XP): Dasaab rides in the sedan chair about 50 yards behind Leafstan's escorts. His four slaves (commoners) set down the chair and retreat as soon as fighting breaks out. The slaver casts *fly* and *mage armor* before joining the battle, and reaches the fight around Leafstan at the beginning of the 7th round. Time his arrival for maximum drama, not necessarily for maximum danger to the characters.

- Tuhawi Dasaab (mage)

If characters stick around to fight Dasaab, they run a high risk of being defeated. If no one thinks to grab Leafstan and dash away into the alleys, Yoodir suggests this (from the safety of the shadows).

Treasure (1,000 XP): Dasaab carries a moneypouch with 60 gp. He also wears a fine gold ring and a copper ring set with emeralds, each worth 250 gp.

THE ESCAPE

With Leafstan in their possession, the characters have four good options: they can head for Noble Freeman's shop, for the Slave Mortuary, or for one of the two safehouses IF they got directions from Freeman. No other course leads to safety. If they flee into the swamp, they'll be overcome by monsters, lizard folk, and ghouls. If they head for the river and steal a boat, they'll be chased by every slave ship at the docks. A generous GM can allow characters a slim chance to fight their way through if they choose one of these options, but if more than a few escape alive, it's only through an excess of pity.

Even if the characters kill Tuhawi Dasaab, plenty of witnesses interpret the battle as another outrage by followers of Asura. Before long, characters see plenty of evidence that the whole city is mobilized against them. To reach one of the safe havens, they must make group Dexterity/Stealth checks (DC 10) to avoid the slavehunter patrols prowling the streets.

- Freeman's shop is closest (3 checks to reach safety).
- Either safehouse requires 4 checks to reach safety.
- The mortuary can be reached after 5 checks.

If a group skill check succeeds (half or more of the characters, including Leafstan, make successful Dexterity/Stealth checks), then the characters see a group of slavehunters but aren't noticed by them. They can avoid that group by sitting tight while it passes or by backtracking and taking a different street, or they

can choose to attack. If the group skill check fails, the characters are spotted and attacked immediately. Other tactics may work, such as an effort to disguise the party as a Margish patrol (a group Charisma/Deception check), taking to the rooftops (a group Strength/Athletics check), or the use of appropriate magic.

The slavehunter groups are only easy or medium encounters, but the characters cannot rest until they reach safety. If they try to rest anytime after the fight against Dasaab's men, they're discovered and attacked by slavehunters before they complete the rest.

For each group of slavehunters, select one of the following randomly (or pick one you like). Include Leafstan when counting characters.

- 1) 2 guards per character (1,250 XP)
- 2) 1 berserker and 3 guards (1,050 XP)
- 3) 2 berserkers (675 XP)
- 4) 1 bandit captain, plus 1 bandit per character (1,150 XP)
- 5) 6 thugs (1,200 XP)
- 6) 1 veteran and 3 thugs (2,000 XP)

FINAL SAFETY

Once characters reach a safe haven, the adventure is essentially over. From a safehouse or from Noble Freeman's shop, they are led by a darkways guide to Sister Uthlita's mortuary. From the mortuary, they are smuggled into the harbor of Asura, a concealed riverside cavern where eventually they can board a boat that will carry them downriver past Marg and along the coast to Danagra or Garadu. From either of those towns, the party can hire a ship to take them back to Leafstan's people.

Evarr Hallborn is elated to see his son alive and safe. If Tuhawi Dasaab was killed, Hallborn might let the matter rest there. If Dasaab still lives, the characters could be enlisted by Hallborn for another expedition into Marg; this time, for revenge!

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