



THE CITADELS

Obsidian Ridge



JESS LEBOW



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Obsidian Ridge

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U.S., CANADA,
ASIA, PACIFIC, & LATIN AMERICA
Wizards of the Coast, Inc.
P.O. Box 707
Renton, WA 98057-0707
+1-800-324-6496

EUROPEAN HEADQUARTERS
Hasbro UK Ltd
Caswell Way
Newport, Gwent NP9 0YH
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prologue

*The Year of the Leaping Frog, 1266 DR
Somewhere over Calimshan.*

The princess was ushered quickly through the black stone hallways. The shadows shifted with every twist and turn, making the entire place seem as if it had been torn straight from the nightmares of an overly imaginative child. The floor beneath her feet vibrated softly—the clicking of her escorts’ claws on the chipped stone barely audible over the constant hum.

Coming to the end of a long swooping corridor, the princess was abruptly shoved inside a large, poorly lit chamber. She fell to the ground, landing hard on her knees and hands. The door slammed behind her.

“Well met, princess,” said a voice—or rather, two voices: one high pitched, one much lower. They seemed to echo one another, one following only a fraction of a heartbeat behind the first.

The princess got to her feet, smoothing her robes and straightening herself in a rather regal fashion.

“Who are you?” she asked.

“Yes, my servants aren’t very accommodating when it comes to introductions,” replied the echoing dual voice. “I am Arch Magus Xeries, the lord and ruler of the Obsidian Ridge.”

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The princess examined her surroundings.

The walls of this chamber were made from the same black, chipped obsidian as the rest of the citadel. The ceiling, if there was one, was obscured in darkness far, far above. The floor was smooth and polished, and in the very center sat a large dais, a pair of connected thrones atop of it.

“There is only one of you?” she asked, puzzled by the echo.

A bent figure sat in one of the thrones, obscured by shadows.

“Yes,” he replied with his two voices. “But that is why you are here, so I will no longer be alone.”

The princess shuddered, a chill running down her spine. She wrapped her arms tightly around herself. “What do you want from me?”

“What does anyone want from anyone else?” replied the arch magus. “I want you by my side. Your sympathy. Your loyalty. Your companionship. Those things that everyone craves.”

The princess turned her back to the throne. “And why do you think I would give myself to you?”

“Because I can give you whatever you desire,” replied Xeries, his voice echoing over itself. “What do you wish for?”

The princess turned back around, softening her stance. “*Whatever* I desire?”

“Immortality. Riches. Power.” Xeries leaned over, lifting a decanter of deep red wine and pouring it into a goblet in his bent, twisted hand. “Is there something else you could want?”

The princess took a step closer. “And what must I do for this immortality, riches, and power?”

Xeries chuckled. He took a sip of his wine, then wiped his lips with the back of his hand.

“Like all things, there is a price.”



chapter one

The Year of the Staff, 1366 DR
The Kingdom of Erlkazar

The air stank of old blood and feces, adding to the eerie sense of openness in the empty slaughterhouse. Night had fallen some time ago, and most residents of Llorbauth were already asleep—but not on the docks. Nighttime was when the denizens of this place came out for work.

High in the rafters, the shadows moved, and a figure emerged. He stood watching, scanning the nooks and empty stalls. Far below he caught sight of what he wanted—a group of men. The figure leaped. His cloak fluttered slightly, but his feet made no sound as they came to rest on another sturdy rafter.

Down below, wearing torn overalls and discolored shirts, the group of men—the sort who made their living with their hands and their backs—drew closer, seemingly unaware of the figure above them.

“Where’d all the pigs go?” asked one, looking around the empty slaughterhouse.

“Cut up and shipped out,” answered a fat man, the only one dressed in sorcerers’ robes. “Just this morning.”

“That’s a lot of pig,” said the first.

“Yes,” agreed the fat man. “A lot of pig.”

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The figure watched as the men crossed the slaughterhouse floor and slipped out of his view. The figure leaped once more. The moment his foot touched the solid wood, he was bounding toward the next perch. With three great jumping strides, he covered nearly a third of the slaughterhouse. Then with one final push, he flung himself, arms out, toward a much farther rafter.

A large hole in the ceiling spilled the half-moon's weak light into the building, and for a moment, the figure's lithe frame was silhouetted against the night sky. Had any of the men looked up, they would have seen the glint of metal at the tips of the figure's outstretched hands.

Catching the rafter, the figure swung twice then pulled himself up to crouch, waiting and watching.

The men had converged on the northern end of the slaughterhouse, where three huge stacks of crates were piled against the wall. Without talking, they got to work.

Inside the first crate, nestled in a huge pile of straw, was a large glass vessel. One man pulled the wooden planks off the top of the crate, and two more converged on the contents, lifting the heavy glass from both sides. The men had to squat and waddle to move it. As they did, one of them stumbled and nearly lost his balance.

The others gasped and rushed to his aid. But it was unnecessary. The man regained his balance and finished moving the vessel to a safe location on the floor, only a few more steps away.

"Be more careful!" shouted the fat man. "My brother is going to be here soon. If you break one of his vats, we'll all get it."

The clumsy man nodded frantically. "Yes, Master Tasca." Then he hurried to unpack another crate.

The other men followed suit, unloading more glass and iron. The pieces came out one at a time, and the men worked smoothly and carefully. There were no more stumbles.

A contraption materialized from the men's efforts. Three

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huge glass vats, each half again larger than the last, rested on metal stands that held them off the floor by several feet. Each was connected to the next by a series of twisted tubes. It looked like a monstrous glass centipede, cut into sections and strung together by clear veins or intestines.

Not breaking their stride, the men continued. From the next stack of crates they pulled out glass beakers full of viscous, red liquid. Each was sealed with wax, which the men peeled away before pouring the contents into the largest vat.

“Don’t spill any of that, or you’ll be sorry,” scolded the fat man.

The men continued their work in silence.

It took some time, but the vat grew fuller, and it reached the halfway point when the men finished unpacking the second stack of crates.

The man they called Master Tasca bent down beside the largest vat. Rubbing his hands together, he spoke a series of quick words. A bright purple flame erupted in his palms, and he set it down on the flagstones below the vat. Struggling to his feet, the fat man nodded at the others, and they began unpacking the last of the crates.

Inside were more beakers, each holding a bright blue liquid that glowed, illuminating the blood-stained floor.

Once again, the wax seals were pulled and the liquid poured into the vat. When it hit the thick, red substance already inside, a gray vapor formed. It swirled up the sides, heavy and dense, clinging to the glass as it climbed.

“Quickly now,” instructed Pello Tasca. “We don’t want to lose any.”

The men formed a bucket brigade, working together to pour the beakers in as fast as they could. There was much less of the blue liquid, and the men had it finished in half the time. Then they lifted the final glass tube and fitted it over the largest vat, sealing the top.

The gray vapor rose, climbing through the twisting tubes. The clear glass became opaque, and the vapor poured into the

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second vat, filling it. It stuck to the sides, growing more dense and collecting in large drops that rolled down into the bottom of the second vat. A brownish liquid the color of muddy water pooled at the bottom.

The fat man bent down again and lit a second fire under this new vat. The muddy liquid boiled immediately, and the steam rose, darker and more energetic than the vapor. Black lines twisted themselves in between the gray, looking like interlocking fingers on opposing hands. Then the blackness broke free, climbing out of the vat and into the final stage of the contraption.

Wrapping his pudgy arms around the glass, the robed man embraced the final vat. His hands grew white with power, and icicles climbed up the sides of the glass. The black steam condensed and rained down into the bottom of the vat in inky drips.

Above them, the figure watched. The vats gurgled, creating their dense black substance, and the men stood by silently, watching the magical fires and ice catalyze the process.

At the south end of the slaughterhouse, the huge sliding doors slammed open, and another group of men entered. These men were dressed in armor and fine robes—the types who paid other men to do their dirty work.

The fat man turned and with a smile opened his arms.

“Jallal,” he said. “Brother, your timing is impeccable.” He embraced a tall graying man with a thick beard.

Unlike his pudgy sibling, Jallal was fit and muscular. He wore a fine chain shirt over equally fine padded clothing. With him, he had a half-dozen armed and armored guards.

“Well met, Pello,” said the graying brother. “I trust everything is in order and that you haven’t had any problems with the Magistrates?”

“No problems,” replied Pello. “It’s been very quiet, and we are nearly ready to begin packaging the Elixir.”

High above, the figure in the rafters gripped the beam tighter. Just as the figure had been told, the Tasca brothers

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were manufacturing Elixir—a dark, magical substance used to put the drinker into a euphoric trance. It was rumored that while in this magically induced state, the user would be able to see into the future, predict events that would come to pass, and even, if the potion was strong enough, be able to make adjustments to one's own personal fortune.

Black magic potions such as these were becoming very popular in the seedier parts of the kingdom, and not only with those who had no access to the Weave. Word of the great powers that could be had traveled fast, and people flocked to buy the Elixir in droves.

As the rumors grew, so too did the expectations. The stories of the visions and their ability to change the future were getting more and more outlandish, driving the prices for the Elixir higher and higher. People began selling anything they could get their hands on. Bottles of unguent from skin ointment to rat poison and everything in between were being peddled as new forms of this wonder Elixir. Those unlucky enough to buy into the scam not only lost their gold, they oftentimes lost their sight or even their lives.

The desire to see into the future was so great that even knowing the risks, many people drank whatever they could lay their hands on, trusting that the stranger in the back alley was telling the truth about the contents.

Of course, magical potion or rat poison, it didn't matter. No one was able to reach into the future. The rumors and the hope that they were true were powerful enough on their own to fuel this illicit business. The problem had grown so bad that King Korox had been forced to declare the Elixirs illegal.

Jallal crossed to the smallest vat and lifted the glass tube from its top. Sticking his thin finger into the opening, he scraped out a small glob of the black substance.

The older man rolled it around on his fingertips. "Funny that such a simple substance would cause so much trouble." He pulled his fingers apart. The Elixir stretched into a long,

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thin strand. "Sometimes I wonder if it's worth it."

"What are you saying?" Pello waddled up beside his brother and secured the glass tube on the collection vat. "If King Korox is going to target *us*, then we should target *him*." He wiped his palms on his robes. "Why don't you let me take care of this? Just say the word, and the king will no longer be troubling us."

The older brother chuckled. "You want to kill the king? Very bold. But I'm afraid we've already beat you to it."

"What?"

"You heard me, little brother. Everything is in place, and plans move forward. In another tenday, the king will be dead, and our Elixir operations will be back in full swing."

The fat man lifted his arms in the air. "This is great news. Great news indeed. But what of the Magistrates? Won't they continue to be a problem?"

"We'll deal with one piece at a time. First the king, then the Magistrates."

Behind them, the glass contraption sputtered and creaked.

"The batch is almost ready," said Jallal. He pulled out a handkerchief and cleaned the sticky, concentrated Elixir off his fingers. "I should leave you to your work."

Pello ignored his brother's prompting. "You must tell me, Brother, how are we going to kill the king? Does the Matron know? When will it happen?"

"Patience, Pello. This is not the time nor the place to be outlining the details. You will know what you need to soon enough." He handed his soiled handkerchief to his brother. "Now really, get back to work."

The older man nodded to his guards and headed for the sliding double doors at the other end of the slaughterhouse.

"You heard my brother," shouted Pello Tasca. "Get to work."

The workers began dismantling the Elixir contraption.

The older brother and his entourage passed through the beam of moonlight illuminating the slaughterhouse floor.

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A shadow flashed over them, and one of the guards looked up—into eight steel blades, glimmering in the moonlight. The man had time to let out a single scream before his face and neck were cut to ribbons.

The figure hit the ground and tumbled past the entourage, coming to his feet between the older brother and the open slaughterhouse doors. Shrugging off his cloak, the figure lifted himself to his full height, then crouched, holding his arms wide as if he were preparing to grapple a wrestler. Dressed all in black, the figure wore a thick featureless mask. Simple, smooth, and black, the mask made him disappear into the dark, leaving only his piercing eyes and the heavy metal gauntlets on his hands—each with four sharpened steel blades—as his only distinguishing features.

“What sort of beast is this?” the older brother cried. Then realization struck the man, and he shivered. His voice dropping to a whisper, he sputtered, “The . . . the Claw!”

The guards pulled their swords. The air rang with the grinding sound of steel on steel, and the men spread out, surrounding the masked man.

The dark figure didn't give them the chance to trap him. Taking a single step, he somersaulted forward in a tight ball. Jallal tried to sidestep the tumbling mass, but he was too slow, and he left his feet, falling hard onto his back.

The Claw came out of his roll on top of his victim, the blades on his right hand buried deep in Jallal's gray beard.

“No!” shouted Pello, recoiling at the sight of his older brother pinned to the wood floor.

The guards closed in from all sides.

The Claw did not wait. Yanking his blades free, he stood, stepped, and tumbled, dodging between two of the armed men. Both took quick, short strikes, but both missed their target, and the Claw came to his feet again, outside the circle of guards.

Pello Tasca rushed to his brother's side. Dropping to his knees, he lifted his head from the floor, smearing blood all

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over the sleeves of his robes. "Jallal! Brother!"

Jallal Tasca sputtered, trying to speak. But it was no use. He fell back limp.

Pello shook his brother. "No! No! Open your eyes."

Jallal didn't respond.

"This can't be happening. This can't be happening," Pello looked up and pointed at the Claw. "Kill him!" he shouted. "Make him pay for this."

The guards charged, a wall of chain mail and sharpened steel. Their blades came down, and the Claw bashed them aside, his gauntlets catching the incoming swords and turning them away.

Flipping forward, the Claw bounded over his assailants. Upside down, hurtling through the air, his bladed hands flashed out, striking one guard on the shoulder and another along the back of the neck. Both collapsed to the floor, one clutching his arm, the other simply in a heap.

That was all the workers needed to see.

"I'm getting out of here!" shouted one, and he ran for the door. The rest followed.

"Where are you going?" shouted Pello. "I gave you an order. Kill the Claw!"

The workers ignored the pudgy sorcerer, flying past him and out the open doors.

Three of Jallal's guards remained. They looked at each other, then at their fallen leader. Pello was struggling to get to his feet, the front of his robes covered in sanguine stains, his brother's dead body folded on the floor.

The Claw took one step, and all three guards turned and bolted. He made no motion to follow. They weren't the reason he was here.

Casually, the masked man crossed the wooden floor to loom over the sorcerer. Pello slipped in the pool of his brother's blood and fell flat onto his back.

His voice shook as he scrambled away. "What . . . what do you want?"

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The masked figure lifted his arm, his bladed gauntlets reflecting the moon's glow.

Pello screamed, "No. Please no," and covered his face.

The Claw's right hand came down, grasping Pello Tasca by the arm and flipping him over onto his stomach. Producing a thin rope, he bound the fat man's hands behind his back. Then he turned his attention to the glass vats.

From a tiny pouch on his back, the Claw recovered two small globes of alchemist's fire and hurled them at the contraption. The fluid-filled orbs impacted and flashed, then exploded in a huge ball of flame.

He watched for a moment until the concentrated Elixir caught fire. It didn't take long. The sticky substance bubbled and spat, flames reaching high into the air.

Satisfied with his work, the Claw grabbed Pello Tasca by the back of his robes and dragged him from the slaughterhouse.