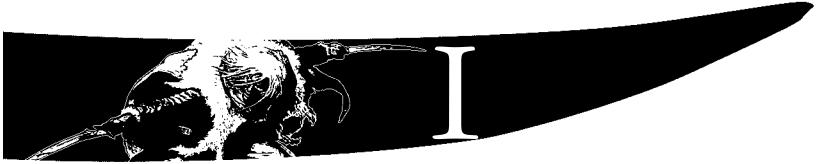


FORGOTTEN REALMS®

THE CRYSTAL SHARD
THE LEGEND OF DRIZZT BOOK IV
RA
SALVATORE





THE STOOGES

When the wizards' caravan from the Hosttower of the Arcane saw the snow-capped peak of Kelvin's Cairn rising from the flat horizon, they were more than a little relieved. The hard journey from Luskan to the remote frontier settlement known as Ten-Towns had taken them more than three tendays.

The first tenday hadn't been too difficult. The troop held close to the Sword Coast, and though they were traveling along the northernmost reaches of the Realms, the summer breezes blowing in off the Trackless Sea were comfortable enough.

But when they rounded the westernmost spurs of the Spine of the World, the mountain range that many considered the northern boundary of civilization, and turned into Icewind Dale, the wizards quickly understood why they had been advised against making this journey. Icewind Dale, a thousand square miles of barren, broken tundra, had been described to them as one of the most unwelcoming lands in all the Realms, and within a single day of traveling on the northern side of the Spine of the World, Eldeluc, Dendybar the Mottled, and the other wizards from Luskan considered the reputation well-earned. Bordered by impassable mountains on the south, an expanding glacier on the east, and an unnavigable sea of countless icebergs on the north and west, Icewind Dale was attainable only through the pass between the Spine of

the World and the coast, a trail rarely used by any but the most hardy of merchants.

For the rest of their lives, two memories would ring clear in the wizards' minds whenever they thought about this trip, two facts of life on Icewind Dale that travelers here never forgot. The first was the endless moaning of the wind, as though the land itself was continuously groaning in torment. And the second was the emptiness of the dale, mile after mile of gray and brown horizon lines.

The caravan's destination marked the only varying features in all the dale—ten small towns positioned around the three lakes of the region, under the shadow of the only mountain, Kelvin's Cairn. Like everyone else who came to this harsh land the wizards sought Ten-Towns' scrimshaw, the fine ivory carvings made from the headbones of the knucklehead trout which swam in the waters of the lakes.

Some of the wizards, though, had even more devious gains in mind.



The man marveled at how easily the slender dagger slipped through the folds in the older man's robe and then cut deeper into the wrinkled flesh.

Morkai the Red turned on his apprentice, his eyes locked into a widened, amazed set at the betrayal by the man he had raised as his own son for a quarter of a century.

Akar Kessell let go of the dagger and backed away from his master, horrified that the mortally wounded man was still standing. He ran out of distance for his retreat, stumbling into the rear wall of the small cabin the wizards of Luskan had been given as temporary quarters by the host city of Easthaven. Kessell trembled visibly, pondering the grizzly consequences he would face in light of the growing possibility that the magical expertise of the old mage had found a way to defeat even death itself.

What terrible fate would his mighty mentor impose upon him for his betrayal? What magical torments could a true and powerful wizard such as Morkai conjure that would outdo the most agonizing of the tortures common throughout the land?

The old man held his gaze firmly on Akar Kessell, even as the last light

began to fade from his dying eyes. He didn't ask why, he didn't even outwardly question Kessell about the possible motives. The gain of power was involved somewhere, he knew—that was always the case in such betrayals. What confused him was the instrument, not the motive. Kessell? How could Kessell, the bumbling apprentice whose stuttering lips could barely call out the simplest of cantrips, possibly hope to profit from the death of the only man who had ever shown him more than basic, polite consideration?

Morkai the Red fell dead. It was one of the few questions he had never found the answer to.

Kessell remained against the wall, needing its tangible support, and continued to shake for long minutes. Gradually, the confidence that had put him in this dangerous position began to grow again within him. He was the boss now—Eldeluc, Dendybar the Mottled, and the other wizards who had made the trip had said so. With his master gone, he, Akar Kessell, would be rightfully awarded his own meditation chamber and alchemy lab in the Hosttower of the Arcane in Luskan.

Eldeluc, Dendybar the Mottled, and the others had said so.



“It is done, then?” the burly man asked when Kessell entered the dark alley designated as the meeting place.

Kessell nodded eagerly. “The red-robed wizard of Luskan shan't cast again!” he proclaimed too loudly for the likes of his fellow conspirators.

“Speak quietly, fool,” Dendybar the Mottled, a frail-looking man tucked defensively within the alleyway's shadows, demanded in the same monotonous voice that he always used. Dendybar rarely spoke at all and never displayed any semblance of passion when he did. Ever was he hidden beneath the low-pulled cowl of his robe. There was something cold-blooded about Dendybar that unnerved most people who met him. Though the wizard was physically the smallest and least imposing man on the merchant caravan that had made the four-hundred mile journey to the frontier settlement of Ten-Towns, Kessell feared him more than any of the others.

“Morkai the Red, my former master, is dead,” Kessell reiterated softly.

“Akar Kessell, this day forward known as Kessell the Red, is now appointed to the Wizard’s Guild of Luskar!”

“Easy, friend,” said Eldeluc, putting a comforting hand on Kessell’s nervously twitching shoulder. “There will be time for a proper coronation when we return to the city.” He smiled and winked at Dendybar from behind Kessell’s head.

Kessell’s mind was whirling, lost in a daydream search through all of the ramifications of his pending appointment. Never again would he be taunted by the other apprentices, boys much younger than he who climbed through the ranks in the guild step by tedious step. They would show him some respect now, for he would leap beyond even those who had passed him by in the earliest days of his apprenticeship, into the honorable position of wizard.

As his thoughts probed every detail of the coming days, though, Kessell’s radiant face suddenly grayed over. He turned sharply on the man at his side, his features tensed as though he had discovered a terrible error. Eldeluc and several of the others in the alley became uneasy. They all fully understood the consequences if the archmage of the Hosttower of the Arcane ever learned of their murderous deed.

“The robe?” Kessell asked. “Should I have brought the red robe?”

Eldeluc couldn’t contain his relieved chuckle, but Kessell merely took it as a comforting gesture from his new-found friend.

I should have known that something so trivial would throw him into such a fit, Eldeluc told himself, but to Kessell he merely said, “Have no fear about it. There are plenty of robes in the Hosttower. It would seem a bit suspicious, would it not, if you showed up at the archmage’s doorstep claiming the vacated seat of Morkai the Red and holding the very garment that the murdered wizard was wearing when he was slain?”

Kessell thought about it for a moment, then agreed.

“Perhaps,” Eldeluc continued, “you should not wear the red robe.”

Kessell’s eyes squinted in panic. His old self-doubts, which had haunted him for all of his days since his childhood, began to bubble up within him. What was Eldeluc saying? Were they going to change their minds and not award him the seat he had rightfully earned?

Eldeluc had used the ambiguity of his statement as a tease, but he didn't want to push Kessell into a dangerous state of doubt. With a second wink at Dendybar, who was inwardly thoroughly enjoying this game, he answered the poor wretch's unspoken question. "I only meant that perhaps a different color would better suit you. Blue would compliment your eyes."

Kessell cackled in relief. "Perhaps," he agreed, his fingers nervously twiddling.

Dendybar suddenly grew tired of the farce. He motioned for his burly companion to be rid of the annoying little wretch.

Eldeluc obediently led Kessell back down the alleyway. "Go on, now, back to the stables," he instructed. "Tell the master there that the wizards shall be leaving for Luskan this very night."

"But what of the body?" Kessell asked.

Eldeluc smiled evilly. "Leave it. That cabin is reserved for visiting merchants and dignitaries from the south. It will most probably remain vacant until next spring. Another murder in this part of the world will cause little excitement, I assure you, and even if the good people of Easthaven were to decipher what had truly happened, they are wise enough to tend to their own business and leave the affairs of wizards to wizards!"

The group from Luskan moved out into the waning sunlight on the street. "Now be off!" Eldeluc commanded. "Look for us as the sun sets." He watched as Kessell, like some elated little boy, scurried away.

"How fortunate to find so convenient a tool," Dendybar noted. "The wizard's stupid apprentice saved us much trouble. I doubt that we would have found a way to get at that crafty old one. Though the gods alone know why, ever did Morkai have a soft spot for his wretched little apprentice!"

"Soft enough for a dagger's point!" laughed a second voice.

"And so convenient a setting," remarked yet another. "Unexplained bodies are considered no more than an inconvenience to the cleaning wenches in this uncivilized outpost."

The burly Eldeluc laughed aloud. The gruesome task was at last completed; they could, finally, leave this barren stretch of frozen desert and return home.



Kessell's step was sprightly as he made his way across the village of Easthaven to the barn where the wizards' horses had been stabled. He felt as though becoming a wizard would change every aspect of his daily life, as if some mystical strength had somehow been infused into his previously incompetent talents.

He tingled in anticipation of the power that would be his. An alleycat crossed before him, casting him a wary glance as it pranced by.

Slit-eyed, Kessell looked around to see if anyone was watching. "Why not?" he muttered. Pointing a deadly finger at the cat, he uttered the command words to call forth a burst of energy. The nervous feline bolted away at the spectacle, but no magical bolts struck it, or even near it.

Kessell looked down at his singed fingertip and wondered what he had done wrong.

But he wasn't overly dismayed. His own blackened nail was the strongest effect he had ever gotten from that particular spell.