

R.A.
SALVATORE



THE GHOST KING

T R A N S I T I O N S



THE GHOST KING

TRANSITIONS

BOOK III

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Published by Wizards of the Coast LLC

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Printed in the U.S.A.

Cover art by Todd Lockwood

First Printing: October 2009

9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

ISBN: 978-0-7869-5233-5
620-24195000-001-EN

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Salvatore, R. A., 1959-
The ghost king / R.A. Salvatore.
p. cm. -- (Transitions ; bk. 3)
ISBN 978-0-7869-5233-5
1. Drizzt Do'Urden (Fictitious character)--Fiction. 2. Forgotten realms (Imaginary place)--Fiction.
I. Title.
PS3569.A462345G47 2009
813'.54--dc22

2009016151

U.S., CANADA,
ASIA, PACIFIC, & LATIN AMERICA
Wizards of the Coast LLC
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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PRELUDE

The dragon issued a low growl and flexed his claws in close, curling himself into a defensive crouch. His eyes were gone, having been lost to the brilliant light bursting from a destroyed artifact, but his draconian senses more than compensated.

Someone was in his chamber—Hephaestus knew that beyond a doubt—but the beast could neither smell nor hear him.

“Well?” the dragon asked in his rumbling voice, barely a whisper for the beast, but it reverberated and echoed off the stone walls of the mountain cavern. “Have you come to face me or to hide from me?”

I am right here before you, dragon, came the reply—not audibly, but in the wyrm’s mind.

Hephaestus tilted his great horned head at the telepathic intrusion and growled.

You do not remember me? You destroyed me, dragon, when you destroyed the Crystal Shard.

“Your cryptic games do not impress me, drow!”

Not drow.

That gave Hephaestus pause, and the sockets that once—not so long ago—housed his burned-out eyes widened.

“Illithid!” the dragon roared, and he breathed forth his murderous, fiery breath at the spot where he’d once destroyed the mind flayer and its

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drow companion, along with the Crystal Shard, all at once.

The fire blazed on and on, bubbling stone, heating the entire room. Many heartbeats later, fire still flowing, Hephaestus heard in his mind, *Thank you.*

Confusion stole the remaining breath from the dragon—confusion that lasted only an instant before a chill began to creep into the air around him, began to seep through his red scales. Hephaestus didn't like the cold. He was a creature of flame and heat and fiery anger, and the high frosts bit at his wings when he flew out of his mountain abode in the wintry months.

But this cold was worse, for it was beyond physical frost. It was the utter void of emptiness, the complete absence of the heat of life, the last vestiges of Crenshinibon spewing forth the necromantic power that had forged the mighty relic millennia before.

Icy fingers pried under the dragon's scales and permeated his flesh, leaching the life-force from the great beast.

Hephaestus tried to resist, growling and snarling, tightening sinewy muscles as if trying to repel the cold. A great inhale got the dragon's inner fires churning, not to breathe forth, but to fight cold with heat.

The crack of a single scale hitting the stone floor resounded in the dragon's ears. He swiveled his great head as if to view the calamity, though of course, he couldn't see.

But Hephaestus could feel . . . the rot.

Hephaestus could feel death reaching into him, reaching through him, grasping his heart and squeezing.

His inhale puffed out in a gout of cold flame. He tried to draw in again, but his lungs would not heed the call. The dragon started to swing his head forward, but his neck gave out halfway and the great horned head bounced down onto the floor.

Hephaestus had perceived only darkness around him since the first destruction of the Crystal Shard, and now he felt the same inside.

Darkness.

* * * * *

Two flames flickered to life, two eyes of fire, of pure energy, of pure hatred.

And that alone—sight!—confused the blind Hephaestus. He could see!
But how?

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The beast watched a blue light, a curtain of crawling lightning, crackle and sizzle its way across the slag floor. It had crossed the point of ultimate devastation, where the mighty artifact had long ago blasted loose its layers and layers of magic to blind Hephaestus, then again more recently, that very day, to emanate waves of murderous necromantic energy to assail the dragon and . . . ?

And do what? The dragon recalled the cold, the falling scales, the profound sensation of rot and death. Somehow he could see again, but at what cost?

Hephaestus drew a deep breath, or tried to, but only then did the dragon realize that he was not drawing breath at all.

Suddenly terrified, Hephaestus focused on the point of cataclysm, and as the strange curtain of blue magic thinned, the beast saw huddled forms, once contained within, dancing about the remnants of their artifact home. Stooped low, backs hunched, the apparitions—the seven liches who had created the mighty Crenshinibon—circled and chanted ancient words of power long lost to the realms of Faerûn. A closer look revealed the many different backgrounds of these men of ancient times, the varied cultures and features from all across the continent. But from afar, they appeared only as similar huddled gray creatures, ragged clothes dripping dullness as if a gray mist flowed from their every movement. Hephaestus recognized them for what they were: the life force of the sentient artifact.

But they had been destroyed in the first blast of the Crystal Shard!

The beast did not lift his great head high on his serpentine neck to breathe forth catastrophe on the undead. He watched, and he measured. He took note of their cadence and tone, and recognized their desperation. They wanted to get back into their home, back into Crenshinibon, the Crystal Shard.

The dragon, curious yet terrified, let his gaze focus on that empty vessel, on the once mighty artifact that he had inadvertently annihilated at the cost of his own eyes.

And he had destroyed it a second time, he realized. Unknown to him, there had remained residual power in the Crystal Shard, and when the tentacle-headed illithid had goaded him, he'd breathed forth fires that had again assaulted the Crystal Shard.

Hephaestus swiveled his head around. Rage engulfed the creature even more, a horror-filled revulsion that turned instantly from dismay to pure anger.

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For his great and beautiful shining red scales were mostly gone, scattered about the floor. A few dotted the beast's mostly skeletal form here and there, pathetic remnants of the majesty and power he had once shown. He lifted a wing, a beautiful wing that had once allowed Hephaestus to sail effortlessly across the high winds curling up from the Snowflake Mountains to the northwest.

Bones, torn leathery tatters, and nothing more adorned that blasted appendage.

Once a beast of grandeur, majesty, and terrible beauty, reduced to a hideous mockery.

Once a dragon, earlier that very day a dragon, reduced to . . . what? Dead? Alive?

How?

Hephaestus looked at his other broken and skeletal wing to realize that the blue plane of strange magical power had crossed it. Looking more closely within that nearly opaque curtain, Hephaestus noted a second stream of crackling energy, a greenish dart within the blue field, backtracking and sparking inside the curtain. Low to the ground, that visible tether of energy connected the wing of the dragon to the artifact, joining Hephaestus to the Crystal Shard he thought he had long ago destroyed.

Awaken, great beast, said the voice in his head, the voice of the illithid, Yharaskrik.

"You did this!" Hephaestus roared. He started to growl, but was struck, suddenly and without warning, by a stream of psionic energy that left him babbling in confusion.

You are alive, the creature within that energy told him. *You have defeated death. You are greater than before, and I am with you to guide you, to teach you powers beyond anything you have ever imagined.*

With a burst of rage-inspired strength, the beast rose up on his legs, head high and swiveling to take in the cavern. Hephaestus dared not remove his wing from the magical curtain, fearing that he would again know nothingness. He scraped his way across the floor toward the dancing apparitions and the Crystal Shard.

The huddled and shadowy forms of the undead stopped their circling and turned as one to regard the dragon. They backed away—whether out of fear or reverence, Hephaestus could not determine. The beast approached the shard, and a clawed foreleg moved forward gingerly to touch the item.

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As soon as his skeletal digits closed around it, a sudden compulsion, an overwhelming calling, compelled Hephaestus to swing his forelimb up, to smash the Crystal Shard into the center of his skull, right above his fiery eyes. Even as he performed that movement, Hephaestus realized that Yharaskrik's overwhelming willpower was compelling him so.

Before he could avenge that insult, however, Hephaestus's rage flew away. Ecstasy overwhelmed the dragon, a release of tremendous power and overwhelming joy, a wash of oneness and completeness.

The beast shuffled back. His wing left the curtain, but Hephaestus felt no horror at that realization, for his newfound sentience and awareness, and restored life energy, did not diminish.

No, not *life* energy, Hephaestus realized.

Quite the opposite . . . precisely the opposite.

You are the Ghost King, Yharaskrik told him. *Death does not rule you. You rule death.*

After a long while, Hephaestus settled back on his haunches, surveying the scene and trying to make sense of it all. The crawling lightning reached the cavern's far wall, the rock surface suddenly sparkling as if holding a thousand little stars. Through the curtain came the undead lichs moving into a semi-circle before Hephaestus. They prayed in their ancient and long-forgotten languages and kept their horrid visages low, directed humbly at the floor.

He could command them, Hephaestus realized, but he chose to let them grovel and genuflect before him, for the beast was more concerned with the wall of blue energy dissecting his cavern.

What could it be?

"Mystra's Weave," the lichs whispered, as if reading his every thought.

The Weave? Hephaestus thought.

"The Weave . . . collapsing," answered the chorus of lichs. "Magic . . . wild."

Hephaestus considered the wretched creatures as he tried to piece together the possibilities. The apparitions of the Crystal Shard were the ancient wizards who had imbued the artifact with their own life-forces. At its essence, Crenshinibon radiated necromantic dweomers.

Hephaestus's gaze went back to the curtain, the strand of Mystra's Weave made visible, all but solid. He thought again of his last memories of sight, when he had brought forth his fiery breath over a drow and an illithid, and

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over the Crystal Shard. Dragonfire had detonated the mighty relic and had filled Hephaestus's eyes with brilliant, blinding light.

Then a cold wave of emptiness had slain him, had rotted the scales and the flesh from his bones. Had that spell . . . whatever it was . . . brought down a piece of Mystra's Weave?

"The strand was here before you breathed," the apparitions explained, reading his thoughts and dispelling that errant notion.

"Brought from the first fires that shattered the shard," Hephaestus said.

No, Yharaskrik said in the dragon's mind. The strand released the necromancy of the ruined shard, giving me sentience once more and reviving the apparitions in their current state.

And you invaded my sleep, Hephaestus accused.

I am so guilty, the illithid admitted. As you destroyed me in that long-lost time, so I have returned to repay you.

"I will destroy you again!" Hephaestus promised.

You cannot, for there is nothing to destroy. I am disembodied thought, sentience without substance. And I seek a home.

Before Hephaestus could even register that notion for what it was—a clear threat—another wave of psionic energy, much more insistent and overwhelming, filled his every synapse, his every thought, his every bit of reason with a buzzing and crackling distortion. He couldn't even think his name let alone respond to the intrusion as the powerful mind of the undead illithid worked its way into his subconscious, into every mental fiber that formulated the dragon's psyche.

Then, as if a great darkness were suddenly lifted, Hephaestus understood—everything.

What have you done? he telepathically asked the illithid. But the answer was there, waiting for him, in his own thoughts.

For Hephaestus needn't ask Yharaskrik anything ever again. Doing so would be no more than pondering the question himself.

Hephaestus was Yharaskrik and Yharaskrik was Hephaestus.

And both were Crenshinibon, the Ghost King.

Hephaestus's great intellect worked backward through the reality of his present state and the enthusiasm of the seven liches as his thoughts careened and at last convened, spurring him to certainty. The strand of blue fire, however it had come to be, had tied him to Crenshinibon and its lingering necromantic powers. Those powers were remnants but still mighty, he realized as

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the Crystal Shard pulsed against his skull. It had fused there, and the necromantic energy had infused the remains of Hephaestus's physical coil.

Thus he had risen, not in resurrection, but in undeath.

The apparitions bowed to him, and he understood their thoughts and intentions as clearly as they heard his own. Their sole purpose was to serve.

Hephaestus understood himself to be a sentient conduit between the realms of the living and the dead.

The blue fire crawled out of the far wall and etched along the floor. It crossed over where the Crystal Shard had lain, and over where Hephaestus's wingtip had been. In the span of a few heartbeats, it exited the chamber altogether, leaving the place dim, with only the dancing orange flames of the liches' eyes, Hephaestus's eyes, and the soft green glow of Crenshinibon.

But the beast's power did not diminish with its passing, and the apparitions still bowed.

He was risen.

A dracolich.