

Darrol: The Lesson

Master Illucid fed Darrol nothing but scraps and gave him foul water to drink. He administered beatings for the slightest failure, all the while dishing out constant verbal abuse. Only the cat kept Darrol from giving in to despair during his tutelage under the disgraced necromancer.

Darrol had found the stray in the yard, on one of the few occasions Illucid allowed him to venture outside. Under the sun and blue sky, Darrol could almost imagine he was back with his friends at the Academy, learning in a clean, airy classroom and given proper meals in the dining hall. Then the pleasant daydream would evaporate like smoke, and the reality of his nightmare existence would return in full force.

On one such outing he'd spotted the kitten near the rough-hewn stone wall forming one side of Illucid's home. A wary creature, and skittish, but he'd approached carefully, holding out morsels of food from his meager afternoon meal. The cat accepted the bits of meat and bread, and didn't run away. Darrol spoke to it in a low, singsong voice, the one he'd used to soothe his little cousins at his aunt's hovel long ago. The cat seemed to like Darrol's lullaby, and allowed him to pat it. He named it Nina, after the smallest sow on Yerrof's farm back in Aram.

Over time Nina had come to trust him, and even allow him to hold her without hissing and scratching. She would eat the crumbs he brought her, then lick his fingertips clean with her long, rough tongue. Darrol looked forward to his time with the animal, a short respite from a life of pain and drudgery in the clandestine school. He tried to keep the cat a secret from the old Master, and thought he had succeeded for some weeks, until the day he entered Illucid's lab for his daily lesson and saw Nina locked inside a large wire enclosure at one end of the foul-smelling room.

Darrol stood, mouth agape, as Illucid stepped out from behind some crates, a smile on his pockmarked face.

"Don't worry, boy," he said. "I'm not going to whip you for wasting the sustenance I provide on this mangy creature. It will make an excellent teaching tool for today's instruction."

"Please," Darrol begged. "Don't hurt her."

Illucid laughed, then doubled over as his laughter became a fit of wet coughing. When he'd recovered somewhat he wiped the filthy sleeve of his robe across his mouth, then stared at Darrol with bloodshot eyes. "Whether the cat lives or dies depends entirely on you, apprentice."

Darrol felt his stomach sink. "What do you mean?"

Illucid reached behind him and lifted a cage from the floor. A large lizard crouched inside, as green as the rampant vines that wound their way up jungle trees far to the south.

"This is a Ghengu," the old Master said. "Few realize these creatures yet persist in the dark places of the Earth; fewer still ever witness one in the flesh." He opened the latch on the ceiling of Nina's prison. The kitten stared at Darrol, its gaze a silent cry for help.

Illucid turned and pointed toward a nearby chair. "Sit there, dullard," he told Darrol, who obeyed due to instinct rather than conscious thought.

The necromancer reached into the cage and grabbed the Ghengu by its neck, lifting it out and holding it near the enclosure in which Nina cowered. Illucid glanced at Darrol, a sly grin on his cracked lips. "These reptiles enjoy warm-blooded prey," he explained. "With their venom, one bite means certain death. Your little friend's life is now measured in seconds."

"No," Darrol breathed. He leaned forward, his fists clenched—but he knew better than to leave the chair without the sorcerer's permission. *I won't let Nina die!* Blue *thauma* leaked from his pores, forming a glowing aura around him. Illucid grinned like a demon, then placed the Ghengu inside Nina's pen.

The lizard's tongue flicked out once, twice, then it hissed and ran toward the kitten. Nina, hair standing on end, bravely faced the oncoming monster.

Darrol considered Nina more than a mere pet—she was his only friend. Desperate to save her, he sent his power forth like an azure wave. The energies flew past the smiling Illucid and struck the Ghengu, but the blast slid off its shining scales like water from a duck.

"I'm afraid these creatures are proof against Academy magicks, boy," the necromancer said, a smirk on his lips.

The Ghengu snapped at Nina, who shrunk back against the corner of her jail. She lashed out with her claws but the lizard seemed unfazed.

Darrol, frantic now, hurled a second surge of power at the attacking reptile. He'd lost his best friend Jasef, his father, his girlfriend Olina, and now his freedom. *No more. Please. I can't bear it.*

Again the Ghengu shook off Darrol's energy. Its head darted forward, poisonous fangs sinking deep into Nina's neck. The kitten mewled piteously, then fell still.

No.

Darrol's eyes shifted to a blazing red. Volcanic fury rose inside him as he leapt to his feet.

"That's three lashes, boy, for disobeying—" A pulse of crimson force emanated from Darrol, cutting Illucid off mid-sentence and tossing the exiled Master away like a ragdoll. Scarlet *thauma* melted the wire to slag and seized the screeching Ghengu inside, burning it to a sizzling skeleton in moments. Darrol ran forward and took Nina's

torn body from the pen. He cradled it, tears streaming down his cheeks, as all traces of his magic vanished from the air.

Master Illucid dragged himself back to his feet.

"Good work," he said. "No lashes tonight. Go bury that fleabag in the yard." He glanced at the smoking remains of the Ghengu. "Then clean up the mess in there. I'll expect you back at your studies by moonrise."

He exited the room without saying another word, leaving Darrol holding Nina's remains, alone with his thoughts—dark thoughts, tinged with scarlet like a promise of flame.

To be continued...