

The Master's Lesson

by David L. Craddock

This story, set in the world of the Gairden Chronicles and first published in 2010, introduces readers to Mathias, a young apprentice learning dark magic from a cruel master. To see what becomes of the young apprentice, make sure to pick up [Heritage: Book One of the Gairden Chronicles](#) in paperback and on major eBook platforms beginning July 30th.

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The corpse lying face-up on the cold stone floor shared many similarities to the living man standing beside it. Both wore baggy trousers and a plain wool shirt. Both were young and tall with arms that swelled with biceps earned over years of hard servitude. There were minor differences, of course; the living man's eyes were green while the deceased's were blue. But to Azram Sain, who stood on the body's opposite side, two major disparities distinguished his apprentices from one another.

The first and most obvious difference was that the living man lived, which meant he did not suffer from the three days' worth of death that had caused the body's decayed flesh to permeate the study's air--*And my books*, Azram thought --with its putrescence.

The second difference was a rounded bulge in the living apprentice's rear trouser pocket. Azram knew what the object was. He also knew his apprentice would not be able to escape with it. Fighting to keep from immolating the impudent boy where he stood, Azram forced the object from his mind. He would let Mathias broach the subject himself. It would make his death all the more satisfying.

Azram laced plump fingers around his ample belly. "Do you know why Sarad is dead and you still breathe, Mathias?"

"Because I am stronger," Mathias said, his eyes fastened to the floor.

"No, fool," Azram said. Mathias did not raise his eyes at the insult. "Because you are *smarter*. You were meant to survive my tutelage; Sarad was not. Through surviving, you have earned one final lesson: Transfiguration. But before I teach it, know that it is forbidden. The Lady's followers"--Azram turned and spat--"believe transfiguration pervades Her perfect vision of our creation."

Mathias looked up. "How?" he asked, then flinched and looked down. "I apologize, master. I was overeager and should not have--"

Azram growled a phrase that caused Mathias to scream. Grinning maliciously, Azram watched as his pupil's facial bones cracked and his skin shifted like sand. Howling, Mathias crumpled, his hands clutching his face.

"Rise and face me," Azram said.

Quivering, Mathias climbed to his feet. Azram suppressed a laugh. His student's face resembled a melting candle. His right eye sagged below the left, and his nose appeared to have been broken. Drool ran from his drooping jaw, making him look like a halfwit. Azram spoke again. Mathias shrieked as his face bent and shifted. Moments later, Mathias's face was righted, and his pain, along with the bruises decorating his cheeks, had vanished.

"That," Azram said, "is how. The living rarely survive transfiguration, but the dead feel nothing, and thus can be reshaped for many purposes--deception chief among them. Now, did you hear the words I spoke to cast transfiguration?"

Mathias nodded.

Azram waved a hand, and a small gilded mirror appeared and hovered before Mathias. "A test, then. Make Sarad's face your own."

Steadying his breathing, Mathias began. His lips moved silently as he glanced from mirror to corpse. Almost instantly, the bones within Sarad's face began to snap as his rotten skin warped. Hot

annoyance flashed through Azram. It had taken him days to perform his first transfiguration. Punishing Mathias's insolence would be immensely satisfying.

Minutes later, Mathias swayed with exhaustion as Azram studied Sarad. His skin appeared lively and vibrant--an illusion, but a clever complement to the transfiguration, Azram had to admit. Sarad's face, pock-marked and scarred in life, now perfectly resembled Mathias's handsome countenance.

Almost perfectly. Sarad's eyes remained blue.

"Good enough," Azram said, annoyed. "Now be gone. I have nothing left to teach you." Then he waited.

Mathias's mouth worked for a moment. "One lesson remains." Reaching into his back pocket, Mathias withdrew a transparent orb half the size of a fist.

Azram gasped dramatically. "The spirit stone!"

Mathias licked his lips. "Possessing one is as illegal as performing transfiguration. Teach me how to use it, or I will report you."

Raising his hands in surrender, Azram said, "Very well," adding a quaver to his voice. Inwardly he bubbled with delight at his performance. "How did you find the stone?" he asked as he crossed the room to his desk.

"Behind some of your books. It was not hidden well."

Smiling, Azram turned and patted the desk's bare surface three times. On the third time, his hand sank through as if the desk were made of air.

He heard movement behind him.

Azram spun, one hand still deep inside the desk. Mathias hadn't moved. His arms were at his sides as he clutched the stone, his face blank. Satisfied, Azram pulled free an orb identical to Mathias's, then gestured at Mathias. Thick strands of air shot from his fingers and coiled around Mathias, causing him to go rigid. The orb fell from his hand and thudded against the floor.

"I knew you'd go prying for secrets," Azram said, holding his orb before him as he sauntered toward Mathias. "You always were inquisitive, yet not astute enough to discern that the artifact you hold is a fake."

Azram paused near Sarad's corpse. "Rise."

Stiffly, Sarad rose and stood behind Azram.

"Retrieve the fallen stone."

Sarad obeyed.

"A spirit stone is a vessel for souls," Azram continued. "Any mortal who holds the stone controls its souls by placing them within vacant bodies. Yet to claim a soul, one must know the command word that initiates the stone's power. You, my thieving former apprentice, do not know that word. Would you like to hear it?"

Mathias remained motionless.

Azram smiled. "I thought you might," he said, and slammed the stone against Mathias's chest. "Luthrios!" he shouted. Then he tensed, anticipating the thrilling rush of magic that accompanied a soul being stripped from its body.

Nothing happened.

Nonplussed, Azram retracted the spirit stone and stared dumbly at it before looking at Mathias. Then he gasped.

Mathias's eyes were blue.

Something round and hard pressed against his back.

"Luthrios," said a triumphant and vengeful voice behind him.

The End