

The Elixir of Al-Rūn

A College mage tries to steal an elixir of suggestion from his alchemy teacher, but winds up pranking himself pretty hard. Mature.

The evening bells rang out over the blue domes and white walls of the College, calling all its students to dinner in the Great Hall. By rule, only primes or those with special dispensation from a College Master were exempted. Martin was neither of these, but he had come to learn that during dinner, when the halls were nearly empty, was the ideal time to avoid being caught.

The sleeves of his blue fifth-year's gown were rolled up above his elbows and his dark hair was tucked behind his ears. On his desk before him, a sigiled blue flame lapped at the bottom of his glass alembic. A vial underneath the spout collected the thin, milk-white fluid, a distillation of white betony and hyssop petals.

Crouching down, Martin tapped the side of the alembic, coaxing a few more drops to run down into the vial. The betony and hyssop was spent. They had given him less distillate than he'd hoped, but he was sure it would be enough. He only needed to make it to the alchemy laboratory and back.

Within the laboratory, in the personal collection of Isidore, the College's Master of Alchemy, there sat a glass decanter, inlaid with gold and filled with a rose-red elixir. Martin had seen it only once, when Isidore had taken it from his study to show it to a sixth-year. It had been a gift from a friend of his, a Master at the great University of Al-Rūn, the cradle of alchemy itself. As Isidore described it, the elixir was made of camomile, saffron, a lock of hair cut from a slave's head, and the claw of a tame tiger. If drunk, it would render the drinker pliant and suggestible for a time.

This was his aim: to steal a portion of the elixir of suggestion, enough for several doses, and use it for his own ends. First of these would be Nicholas.

A fellow fifth-year, Nicholas was a bright scholar and assistant to the College librarian, but more adept with books than actual magic. They had been at odds for some time; the incident the month before, where Nicholas caught him after-hours in the library and Martin had given him a pair of ass's ears at dinner a few days later, was only the latest. The thought of revisiting that, perhaps by telling Nicholas that he could only bray like an ass for a day, brought a smile to Martin's lips.

The laboratory was well-protected against would-be thieves trying to steal vials from its stores, but by coincidence, he had found a way to carry an elixir without vial or flask or bottle at all. While researching *aqua regia* in a book on the containment of alchemical mixtures, he'd found reference to a potion that could turn the drinker themselves into a vessel of sorts.

Martin frowned and tapped the alembic once more. One last drop of fluid fell from the spout. It would have to be enough; he had picked every white betony in the arboretum clean of its petals. With a tip of his head, he put the vial to his lips and poured the potion into his mouth. Hot and chalky on his tongue, it slid down his throat with ease.

After waiting a minute for the potion to settle in his stomach, Martin lifted a cup of chilled wine to his mouth. He could feel it touch his tongue, but it tasted like water, or less than water even, as if his tongue had been wrapped in parchment. No flavor, no sting of alcohol, and not even the touch of moisture lingering on his lips. After swallowing, he waited to a count of twenty, then leaned over the cup and pursed his lips like a fountain. The wine flowed back into the cup, still as cold and crisp as if he hadn't even touched it.

The potion worked, and so his plan was in motion.

Silence met Martin as he slipped out into the dormitory hall. Lest he looked like he was practicing alchemy, he let down the sleeves of his gown, then began to trace the familiar route out of the dormitories, and into the College proper. It took a careful step to keep his sandals from clapping on the floor, especially once he reached the polished marble and porphyry of the lecture halls, where the old, pale stones made every sound echo.

Twilight outside meant the halls were bathed in half-light, shadowy and dim, like a forest with columns for trees and arches in place of branches. Martin hurried quietly up a flight of stairs and to the door of the alchemy lab.

It was locked, but as Martin had always been a curious student, he had long ago learned ways to satisfy his curiosity. He closed his eyes and traced a diamond around the keyhole, then moved his finger in a slow circle, circumscribed within the diamond. With a soft click, the bolt slid back, and the door opened to Martin's gentle push.

The alchemy laboratory was as it had been when Martin had left class earlier that day. Benches of hard granite were stacked with bulbous aludels for sublimation and retorts for distillation, arranged in rows pointing toward the lectern at the front, beyond which was the door to Isidore's study.

As Martin passed his station among the benches, he tugged a scroll he'd left underneath a brass stand and tucked it beneath his arm: an excuse, in case he was spotted.

Isidore's study was dark and windowless, so Martin risked casting a small, flickering white flame into the air above his head. On a shelf above a well-stained workbench, he saw it: the decanter with its ornate Runian gold filigree and the pale-red elixir inside. Gently, he lifted it from the shelf and removed the stopper.

Pausing, Martin touched his finger to his tongue. He could taste nothing; the potion still held. He raised the decanter with both hands and poured a small mouthful of the elixir down his throat.

Now he only had to return to his room, but he knew not to abandon caution in his haste. He replaced the stopper and returned the decanter to the shelf as it had been. Only on close inspection would anyone be able to tell a portion of the elixir was missing.

As Martin walked past the laboratory benches, he heard footsteps approaching the door. With one hand, he grabbed the scroll from beneath his arm, and with the other, he waved away the mage's fire flickering above his head. By the time that Master Isidore stepped into the laboratory, there was no sign of Martin's scheme, aside from the small tickle in his throat.

The gray-haired Master looked just as surprised to see Martin as Martin did to see him. Isidore spoke first, asking in his loud, sharp, lecturer's voice, "Just what are you doing in here?"

Martin opened his mouth to speak, but a sudden fear set across him. His stomach turned and sweat dusted his skin. He found himself searching for words, gesturing to the scroll in his hands. After a moment, he managed to squeeze out his practiced excuse: "I-I'm sorry, Master. I left this chart at my station, and if I don't finish it by tomorrow morning, Master Julian will be furious."

A mild dizziness had come over Martin. The words seemed to twist in his mouth, reluctant to be spoken and leaving him almost queasy. A side-effect of his potion, he assumed, trying to calm himself and slow his breathing.

Isidore studied Martin's face for a moment, but his shock seemed to have lent an air of sincerity to his excuse. The Master humped and stepped over the threshold. "Very well. Being in Master Julian's class is punishment enough," he said.

With a small breath of relief, Martin hurried toward the door.

"Hold on," Isidore said, pausing in his step. "Was the door locked when you got here?"

All he had to say was 'no', but as the word rose to his lips, some unaccountable fear sunk its claws into his gut. Martin gripped the side of the door with his free hand, keeping himself from doubling over as he breathed out, "No."

Isidore pursed his lips and shook his head. "Hm. I must be older than I thought," he said. "Close the door when you go."

As Martin nodded and stepped into the hall, his hand rose, as if drawn by an unseen force, to grip the handle of the door and swing it shut. All at once, the anxiety that Martin had felt broke into a sense of utter relief. Letting go of the handle, his hand raised to his cheek, feeling its warm flush. A smile lingered on his lips as he stood for a moment, breathing in his own light euphoria.

But there was little time to waste. He needed to bring the Runian elixir back out of his stomach before his potion wore off. Martin set off again, heading for the nearest stairs.

The warmth that had washed over his body lingered, leaving him hot beneath his gown, his lips parched. As soon as he was back, he told himself, he would tear off his clothes and douse himself in cold water, but still he couldn't quell the rising sense of wrongness in his gut. His gown sat heavy on his shoulders. No matter how he scratched and tugged at it, he couldn't drive away the heat beneath his skin.

Something was not right.

Martin stopped before the flight of stairs, pursed his lips, and cupped his hands in front of his mouth, as if to catch water from a fountain. Closing his eyes, he willed the elixir back up, just as he had done with the wine. It only took a thought, and it would come. It should come. Why wasn't it coming? He opened his eyes; a few red droplets had fallen to his palms, but nothing more.

"No," Martin whispered under his breath. He tried again. Nothing came to his lips. His potion had already failed. It must have happened when he was speaking with Master Isidore. How eager had he been to close the door when asked? How hard had it been to lie to him? And just how many doses had he drank?

Sudden fear left him weak. He steadied himself with one hand against the wall, wide-eyed and clutching his throat. The thought of inducing himself to vomit occurred to him, but that would only have helped if the elixir had not yet taken effect—and then he might have to explain what he'd done, and he was in no condition to make up excuses.

Swallowing and steeling himself, Martin began down the stairs, but before he'd gone five steps, his toes caught on the hem of his gown and threatened to tug him forward. He gathered up his gown about his waist to lift the hem higher and keep moving. He'd never before stumbled on his own gown. Though he told himself it was only his worry making him clumsy, his sleeves now hung down over his wrists, as well.

These stairs Martin had climbed almost every day for years now, and yet his feet found them unfamiliar, as if the stone steps had grown. Or, perhaps, as if he had shrunk.

His thoughts raced. Why would that be so? None of the components of the elixir should have caused such a change of size. As far as he knew, at least—the alchemists of Al-Rūn surely knew many more secrets than he. But why would an elixir of suggestion make a man shrink?

With his head lost in alchemical theory, Martin's foot missed a step, slipped, and brought him skidding down the stairs to the nearest landing. It was no great fall, only a distance of a few steps, but it brought a shrill, boyish yelp from his lips. Sore but unhurt, he pulled himself to his feet. Two problems presented themselves: First, anyone in the halls nearby must certainly have heard his cry. Second, the voice that came from his mouth was not his own.

As Martin gathered himself and picked up Master Julian's scroll, he clutched his throat, finding his Adam's apple gone. His chin, too, was smooth, as if he had never needed to shave his face, and his nervous tongue darted across his soft, thick lips.

Something more dire was happening to him than he'd expected. No longer could he hope to wait out the effects; instead, he resolved to make his way to the library. If he had any hope of finding a way to arrest what was happening before anyone found out, his hope lay somewhere in the library's shelves.

Not wanting to linger lest he be found, Martin gathered up his gown and hurried onward, out of the stairwell and into the hall. He jogged past the columns in the lingering twilight, soon to be night. The bells would soon ring out again, signaling the close of the day, but there was still enough time for him to reach the library.

Then a voice called out from behind him, "You there, fifth-year! Stop!"

His first instinct hearing that was to run, to find a side corridor to dart down, but Martin's feet came together and rooted him to the spot. A shiver ran up his back, a delighted feeling like easing one's legs into a hot bath. His hands balled into fists and he bit back a moan. It was a stronger feeling than he'd had outside the laboratory, like the first delightful rush after a cup of good wine.

A sixth-year strode quickly toward Martin, wearing the stripes sleeves of a prime on his purple gown, and an annoyed look on his face. "What do you think you're doing, out in the halls at this hour?" he asked.

Martin swayed slightly. He had to tip his head up to meet the sixth-year's gaze. The urge to tell him everything welled up inside his chest, an almost carnal desire to loosen his tongue and confess his entire scheme. In a voice sweeter and more tentative than his own, he said, "I was just coming from the alchemy laboratory, sir."

The prime glanced Martin over, then saw the scroll gripped in his hand. "Let me see that," he said.

In Martin's eagerness to give him the scroll, he nearly dropped it. When his fingers left the parchment, another rush of delight rose through his body. He began to chew on his lip anxiously, trying to keep his breathing steady.

After a moment's examination—the scroll truly was an astronomical chart from Master Julian's class, entirely innocuous—the prime rolled the scroll back up, handed it back to Martin, and asked, "And you forgot it there, I presume?" But before the truth was compelled out of Martin's lips, he huffed and added, "Fine. Head straight back to the dormitories, understood?"

"Of course, yes, thank you. Sorry, sir." Martin bowed his head, then turned away from the library and began to walk briskly toward the dormitories instead. As his feet moved beneath him, it felt like his whole body was humming to a single, sustained note, and he wanted it to resolve. He needed to resolve, to feel that release. And the only way to do that was to do exactly as he'd been told. He *could* have turned back toward the library, he was sure of it. But the aching need was too strong.

More changes made themselves known as he retraced his steps. His sandals were loose, flopping and slapping against the floor as he walked. His hair, never longer than the level of his chin, now spilled, long and sleek, over the shoulders of his gown.

At least he had ceased shrinking, though in all he had lost nearly a foot of height. With his gown hanging off him, he felt small and slight, like his footsteps barely touched the ground. Even the weight of his body felt unfamiliar and strange. Though he couldn't stop to take stock of his changes, he could feel his newfound thickness about the chest and hips.

When Martin finally stepped across the threshold into the dormitory hall, a physical relief flooded through him. His knees buckled, his head spun, and a fresh wave of heat broke

across his skin. Panting for air, he clutched the wall for support, leaning his cheek and shoulder against the cool bricks. His eyes were glassy and his chest slowly heaved.

As he recovered, Martin spared a moment to examine himself in the lantern-light of the dormitory hall. He now bore the features of a young lady. His face was delicate and smooth, his lips formed into a light pout, and the bridge of his nose had grown smaller. His skin was like burnished bronze, and his hair, ink-black, reached the bottom of his shoulder blades. Hidden beneath his gown were a pair of small breasts, terribly real and tender to the touch, while further down, his waist had slimmed and his hips grown broader. He didn't dare touch himself between the legs; he already felt lessened, and too embarrassed to investigate further.

Once he could walk without stumbling again, Martin gathered his gown at the waist once more and hurried down the hall. He tried to think, recalling the elements of the elixir: Camomile, saffron, lock of slave's hair, claw of tame tiger. Which of those would imbue a feminine essence? There could be some interaction between the elements he wasn't aware of...

Beneath his baggy sleeves, Martin felt something fall against his wrist. Lifting his arm and pulling back the gown, he found a golden bracelet locked tight around his wrist, engraved with a pattern like an ornate, knotted lattice woven around its length. The bracelet was heavy enough to remind the wearer of its weight without being cumbersome, and could not be taken off. A second joined the first, sliding down around his other wrist, like a pair of lavish manacles.

As he passed out the other end of the dormitory hall, Martin stumbled over his own sandals. They slipped from his feet and fell to the floor, leaving him standing not barefoot, but in a pair of embroidered silk slippers. Crouching down, he bundled his sandals up into his robe and continued on, out into the forest of columns and toward the College's library.

Each step he took seemed heavier than the last. It was not only the fatiguing heat of his gown, nor the feeling of his still-growing figure blossoming beneath his clothes, but also a sense of anxiety that he was doing something *wrong*, that with each step, he had to fight the urge to turn back.

Far above, the bells rang out the end of the evening meal, but mercifully, Martin found his way to the broad double doors of the library without interruption. The spell to unlock the door took all his concentration, but when it was through, he slipped inside and pulled the door shut. This time, he was sure to lock it behind him.

The high dome of the library stretched above his head. Bookshelves filled the floor like the walls of a labyrinth and lined the walls on the upper levels, separated by desks for the reading and copying of manuscripts. Lamps lit by magical flame provided enough light to see, even though night had finally closed in.

Martin slipped into an alcove, tucked away among the library's bestiaries, so that at last he could pull off his gown. Dragging it up over his head and throwing it to the floor in front of him, he stood to find himself not in his underclothes, but in strange, light silks of green and blue: one piece wrapped about his chest, the other like pants which only came to his knees. Locked fast around his neck was a golden collar, and around his ankles, bonds much like his golden bracelets.

The further changes since he'd examined himself in the dormitories were evident. His chest, full and heavy, bound back by the silk that hung from his collar. His hair, reaching to the small of his back, and twisted into a long braid. His nose and lips and cheeks, all delicate to the touch and comely. They all called to mind the stories he'd heard of Eastern kinds, who filled whole palaces with their retinue of female slaves.

Ah, there it was: the feminine essence in the elixir. That explained much; not only his new body, but the clothes as well: an echo of the Runian slave-woman who had given her lock of hair.

Any other time, Martin might have found his body distracting. He had always been a curious student. Perhaps he would have liked to lie back in bed and slide his fingers between his tanned legs, and explore the weight of his breasts beneath his fingers, and back in the strange sensations of a body not his own. But not now.

For a moment, the anxiety he'd felt since leaving the dormitories welled up inside of him, and nearly became panic. He wasn't meant to be in the library after hours, not without special permission. He was being disobedient. The word alone made him shiver and feel so terribly small.

Then Martin realized what he was he thinking and shook off the subservient thoughts. There was no time to waste; the elixir's effects were still mounting within him. After tucking his gown and scroll behind a copying desk, he set off across the library, searching for the books on alchemy. Each step he took was poised, standing on the tips of his toes in his thin Runian slippers. His arms swung carefully at his sides, as if trying to balance on a fine line.

The bookcases of the library towered over him. In his proper body, he could reach high enough to pull down books even from the topmost shelves, but now, even on tip-toes, his fingers could barely reach the second-highest shelves. The sense of being small

and helpless threatened to overtake him, but, biting back a whimper of fear, Martin forced it into the back of his mind.

Absently, Martin tugged at the collar around his slender neck, and pulled at the bracelets around his wrists. They were unyielding; a slave's adornments.

It was then that the backs of his palms began to itch. He rubbed his fingers over them, feeling hair growing that seemed at odds with his graceful, feminine body. Halting between bookshelves, he traced a quick sigil in the air to bring forth his mage's fire again.

When he spread his hands out in front of him, he saw hair: thick on his palms, already trailing upward along the backs of his arms. In color, it was a warm, golden orange, struck across with dark bands like lines of charcoal. Before his eyes, the hair spread up his fingers and down toward his elbows.

Only when Martin noticed the sharpening tips of fingernails did he realize it was not hair growing along his arms, but fur. It now grew along his chest, too, standing out thick and white against his bronzed skin and colorful silks. His heart quickening, he clasped his hands and rubbed them together. Already, the flesh of his palms and fingertips was swelling outward, smooth and leathery, like the paws of some great beast.

A tiger, for instance.

Caution thrown aside, Martin sprinted across the tiled floor, past the books on conjuration and divination, past magical theory and the crafting of enchanted items, until at last he reached the section on alchemy. There were shelves upon shelves of tomes and treatises, so many that he could read for months and still not reach an end.

Martin grimaced and dipped his head, feeling the pangs of his shifting face. His teeth swelled from his gums, growing into tall, curled fangs that stretched his mouth forward. The broadening, flattening shape of his nose and the sprouting whiskers along his upper lip made clear the bestial aspect rising within him.

Tugging at the spines with his new claws, Martin began to gather any books which might have held some solution for him: those on potions of the mind, or on Runian alchemy, or on the essential qualities of elixirs derived from animals.

His mind swam as if intoxicated. He brushed at his eyes, at his cheek tickling with striped fur, and fought to focus, but the task seemed insurmountable. He was helpless against the elixir's effects, and there were so many books. He couldn't do this; it would be better to find a Master and confess everything. His body ached sorely for him to fall to his knees and submit to authority.

Biting his lip hard enough to draw blood, Martin's thoughts were brought back out of his subservient haze. He could tell his emotions were beginning to slip out of his grasp, trying to rob his rational self of control. He had to ignore them, to press onward, to trust that he could solve this.

He scratched anxiously at the striped fur climbing up his arms, and noted that his fingernails had curled into long, proper claws.

Turning back to the books, Martin spotted, on the highest shelf, a book, bound in red leather, stamped with the seal of the University of Al-Rūn: the twin lamps. Finding an empty spot on the second shelf, he planted a foot there, and gripped the stack of books he'd gathered in one arm. He leaned up, rising onto that foot, hand outstretched to grasp the book. His claws caught the cover. He began to tip backward. The balance of his body was too strange, too heavy to correct. For a moment, the whole library tumbled around him, and then he hit the floor with a distraught yelp.

As Martin heaved himself up on his hands, his cheeks were flushed and his ears burned as they rose up higher on his head, cupped and round, sprouting fur as black as any silk. From his collared neck to his bare navel, his chest was covered in downy white fur, which faded along his sides into orange and black stripes. Along his arms, where it had first sprouted, his pelt had grown thick and rich. While his paws were no larger than his hands had been, they felt smaller, owing to the soft pads on finger and palm.

Martin sniffed and blinked, then blinked again. A lump sat in his throat, refusing to go down no matter how hard he swallowed. He rubbed at his eyes, and his knuckles came away wet with tears. He was helpless. He pulled his knees toward his chest and wrapped his arms around them. The books he'd been carrying were spilled all around him. He felt so small he might vanish. He'd made an utter mess, and he'd stolen from and lied to a Master of the College, and even now, he was violating the rules by being in the library after-hours. Maybe he deserved this.

Brushing his arm against his broad feline nose, Martin tried to steel his will and quiet the whimper in his throat. These thoughts were the elixir's doing; it had intoxicated him and confused his senses.

His whiskers lifted as he pursed his lips and grit his fangs together. He forced himself to his feet and searched among the fallen books. The book with the twin-lamp seal was nearby, fallen flat on its pages. He scooped it into his hands and clutched it anxiously to his chest as he brought it to the nearby reading desk.

As he walked, something flicked and rolled behind his back, feeling almost like the long black braid of his hair. A quick glance over his shoulder revealed his striped tail, lashing through the air with each step.

At what point would the changes stop? Martin had to hope that the feminine essence in the elixir was enough to counteract the tigrine essence, lest he become nothing more than a tame beast.

Spreading the book out atop the reading desk at the end of the shelves, Martin flipped through the pages with one hand. With the other, he gripped the edge of the desk for support. Underneath his silks, his sleek pelt slipped around his hips. A shiver slid up his spine, drawing his thighs together. The fur had spread between his legs. A warm, trembling sigh left his throat as he leaned harder against the desk.

Martin tugged at his silken pants, ground his thighs against one another, and refocused himself on the book. His eyes roved across the lines, hunting for any help it might offer. He paged through chapter after chapter, while the tiger's pelt swallowed up his thighs and moved down along his calves.

...may be used, with modification, for the creation of elixirs of suggestion (to be discussed in the twelfth chapter)...

Beneath the Runian gold clasped tight around his ankles, Martin curled his clawed toes. His ears perked on top of his head, as if they could hear the words on the page. He flipped faster, searching for the twelfth chapter.

But even with the hope of an antidote close at hand, he found it more and more difficult to focus. His thoughts strayed to his body, with the aspect of a tiger yet the sensuous form of a young woman, and to his own disobedience. He squirmed and sunk his claws into the desk and pressed his palm between his thighs. As much as he tried to drive it back, his submissive urge would no longer be quieted.

What a relief it would be to sink to his knees before a Master of the College and tell him everything, to lift that guilty burden off his shoulders and bask in the heady bliss of submission. He might be expelled, but perhaps he could beg on their mercy to stay on as a servant-girl...

No! He struck himself across his cheek. The scrape of his claws, hot against his warm skin, was enough to cut through his intoxicated thoughts. Breathing shakily and rubbing his soft-furred mound with his padded palm, Martin forced himself to keep reading. He came at last to the twelfth chapter, and as he flipped through it, he found where it began to discuss elixirs of suggestion, first in theory, and then in practice.

A voice called out above the quiet shelves, "Hello!" Martin's ears lifted and swiveled back; somehow, he knew the voice had come from the other side of the library, near the double doors. "Is anyone there?"

Martin's mouth began to open. Warm bliss rolled around him, compelling him to speak the truth, but with moments to spare, he realized what was happening. He clapped a hand to his face, sealing his lips and squeezing his snout shut. His eyes fluttered and his tail lashed behind him.

...in heavier doses, may instill more extreme compulsions in the imbibor, including obedience, subservience, and effects not unlike aqua verus, or 'truth potions'...

After a few moments, the need to speak passed, and Martin placed his hand back on the desk. His breath came in desperate pants. His body was aching hot, and it took all his will to remove his other hand from between his thighs. The words before him swam together unless he focused on each one in turn.

Someone else was in the library. They must have heard his fall, and come searching for the source of the noise. With a wave, the mage's fire over his head dissipated; he found his eyes no longer needed the light to read. Martin leaned closer to the book, hunting for his antidote, rubbing his face with the pads of his paws when his focus began to waver.

...to counteract the effects of too strong a dose, prepare a distillation of dandelion and cardamom and a feather plucked from a wild bird, to be given in a one-tenth dilution of spirits...

That was it. With a sigh of relief and a shudder, Martin pushed himself up from the desk. It would be no great feat to lure a bird to his dormitory window with some bread, and from there, it was so simple even a novice could brew it. If he crept out to the arboretum tonight (his stomach churned and he found himself whimpering at the thought of breaking more rules) he would be cured by the morning.

He rested a hand atop his collar of Runian gold and took a deep breath to still his racing heart. Just as he was turning to slip away, plotting a path that would let him retrieve his gown and leave unnoticed, he heard the voice again, far closer, shouting, "Halt!"

Martin's foot, already in the air, thumped heavily onto the ground. For a moment, his momentum made him lurch forward, then rock back, unable to lift his feet from the ground. Perhaps he could have done so in theory, but the euphoria bubbling up into his mind made it impossible to resist. The stripes along his brow knotted in concern as his hands balled into fists. No, no, he was so close. Just let him disobey, just this once. But he couldn't.

A blue-robed fifth-year, lit by bright mage's fire dancing above his head, came toward him between the shelves, stepping over the books still scattered on the floor. The features of his face became clearer. It was Nicholas, his fellow classmate, so often the victim of his schemes, and quite possibly the last person he wished to see right now.

By the look on Nicholas's face, he hadn't expect to find a bashful tigress-woman in the silks of a Runian slave before him. Martin's sleek fur gleamed like satin in the light from his mage's fire, and his large, green eyes glinted like sparkling coins. His lip sat in a tender pout. The honey-sweet smell of saffron rose from his skin like perfume. He had the poise of a tiger, but none of the ferocity.

After a few seconds, Nicholas found his voice again and asked, "Who are you, and what are you doing here?"

A frown crossed Martin's face. He bit his lip and curled his claws against his silk slippers, fighting the urge to tell the truth, but it welled up so tightly in his chest that he couldn't help but let it out. When he spoke, his voice was refined and docile. "It's me, Martin," he said, then winced and swallowed. The rest spilled out. "I..stole an elixir of suggestion from Master Isidore's study. The potion I was using to carry it failed, and it did this to me." Head lowered, he spread his arms wide. "So I came to the library to find an antidote."

Martin's legs trembled. It felt so good to say it, an utter relief after leaving it pent up inside him for so long. He almost said more, but he forced himself to be quiet, and gazed up at Nicholas.

There was silence as confusion, disbelief, and then a sort of amusement washed over Nicholas's face, followed at last by a dawning realization. "An elixir of suggestion... Were you going to use that on *me*?"

Martin sunk into his shoulders and stared at the tiled floor. His teeth squeezed together. He tried to swallow back the words, but they came surging up into his mouth anyway. "Yes," he said. His head was spinning, his breaths hot and heavy. Once one word had slipped out, more followed. "I thought it would be funny to make you bray like an ass."

Nicholas narrowed his eyes and tightened his lips, but said nothing.

A whimper left Martin's throat. Every inch of him wanted nothing more than to please those around him, and yet he had made Nicholas angry. It was his fault. He found himself fighting back tears again. His legs buckled and he fell to his knees. "I'm sorry," he said. It was true, which was a surprise even to himself. It was his own remorse he was feeling, even if it took an elixir to drag it out. "I'm sorry for all the things I've done."

At last, Nicholas spoke again, looking down at the tigress kneeling before him with a discerning eye. "You can't lie, can you?"

Martin's ears folded against his head. "No, I can't."

"And why, exactly, are you dressed like a harem slave?" Nicholas asked. Extending a hand, he touched the collar around Martin's throat.

A worryingly powerful rush of delight shot through Martin's body at the touch. A lilting moan rose from his lips, his heart fluttered, and his thighs tensed. He suddenly wanted very much to do all he could to please Nicholas. It took a moment for him to recover his words. "Ah...hm...th-the elixir was made from the hair of a slave and a tiger's claw, so their essences—"

"Be quiet," Nicholas said.

Martin's jaw clacked shut. A glassy look flicked across his eyes. He pressed his paws against the tops of his thighs and took deep breaths through his nose.

Nicholas stepped around Martin and peered down at the book laid out on the reading desk, then turned back to face the kneeling tigress. "You're going to address me as 'milord', understood?"

"Yes, milord," Martin said. He shouldn't have liked this as much as he did, but it was sweet, blissful relief: having orders to follow, knowing that he was being good and obedient. It was an odd feeling, as he had not lost control of himself so much as given control to a different side of himself, a side of himself that lacked all vanity and pride. He ought to have been thinking about how to slip away from Nicholas, but instead, he was thinking about how best to please him.

Reaching out, Nicholas patted Martin's head and stroked his ears as one might a housecat. Martin could neither hide his warm gasp of delight, nor the happy rumbling that rose from his chest. His head pressed against Nicholas's fingers and his tail thumped against the floor.

"Good," Nicholas said. "And since you're acting like a servant, you must want a master, right?"

Martin rolled his head into Nicholas's hand, splayed his ears wide, and let out a sweet whine. His paws kneaded his thighs, flexing and retracting their claws. No, he wanted to be cured, not to...to be tame and obedient and fulfill his master's every request because nothing pleased him more than seeing his master happy. "Y-yes! Yes, milord," Martin said.

"You know, you're very agreeable like this," Nicholas said, running his hand from Martin's ears to the back of his neck. "Now, is that the antidote?" he asked, indicating the book still spread open on the reading desk.

The antidote? Martin's eyes fluttered as he tried to think, which was very difficult while his head was being stroked. Two lamps stamped into firm red leather. Elixirs of suggestion. Dandelion, cardamom, and a feather plucked from a wild bird. Right, right, the antidote! "Yes, milord. Are you going to turn me back?"

Nicholas leaned closer to Martin and stroked his warm, flushed cheek. "I don't have to," he said. "I could leave you like this. But three days as my servant ought to be enough to teach you a lesson, don't you think?"

The moment of desperation that chilled Martin made the rush of relief that much greater. If it hadn't meant pulling away from Nicholas's hand, he would have thrown his arms about his legs and hugged him. "I think that milord is very gracious and wise."

"And will you be glad to do anything I ask of you? Tell me truthfully," Nicholas said.

If Martin's pride had been able to speak, he would have answered differently. Humbled as he was, the truth slipped free. "I will please milord in *any* way I can," he said. Though Martin struggled to believe it, the shudder of delight that washed over him was all his own. Already, he began to fantasize about the various positions in which he might please his master.

Nicholas slipped his hand down to lift Martin's chin and rub it while he looked into the tigress's blissful green eyes. "Martin is hardly a name for a Runian girl. Your name is Saffron now, and if anyone should ask, you are a gift to me from my uncle."

Martin's mouth parted, but before he could speak, his thoughts began to spin like mulled wine, rolling and whirling in his head. His eyelids fluttered. A moan left his throat. And then, Saffron shook her head and blinked her eyes. *Her*. It felt as natural as her new name, or the silks wrapped around her chest, or the collar snug around her throat.

"Now, get up," Nicholas told her. He lifted his hand away and stood straight. "And first things first, clean up the mess you made of those books."

Saffron rose to one foot, then both. Even standing straight, her head only came up to the middle of Nicholas's chest. It no longer distressed her, though. Yes, she was smaller, lighter, more delicate, more submissive—but she didn't need to be tall or strong or powerful. With a smile and a deep bow of her head, she said, "Right away, milord."

For a second, she hesitated; she wanted to embrace Nicholas, but it felt improper to do so when she had been given an order. Tail and braided hair swaying behind her, she walked down the aisle, then knelt down next to the fallen books and began to gather them and return them to the shelves one by one. The happy glow in her chest warmed her body and left her rumbling still.

Once she had picked the last book off the floor, Nicholas closed the red leather-bound book with the seal of the University of Al-Rūn, and slipped it back into its spot on the highest shelf. He nodded at Saffron and said, "Follow me."

The tigress fell in step behind him, letting him lead her back toward the dormitories with a humble smile on her lips.

Nicholas would keep his word and prepare the antidote. Whether or not Saffron wished to stay as she'd become was another matter entirely.

20 January, 2018

[male](#) [human](#) [gender](#) [mtf](#) [tiger](#) [slave](#) [mature](#)