

Devotion

S.L. Armstrong



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Cover artist: Virginie Merienne

I have been sitting at the table on the balcony of the rented room I took the night before. The sun has set, but the sky is that dark bruise I've come to admire and crave seeing. Brazil is beautiful, no doubt, and the ocean roars not too far from where I sit. I can hear the screaming laughter of children melding perfectly with the cry of the sea.

It's been over two thousand years since I was a child, since I learned what it was to truly lose my innocence. Not just physically, but in every way innocence can be stripped from you. For most of those two thousand years, I've been chasing the thief who blinded me with wealth, security, and title in exchange for something I'd not had time to appreciate.

In its own way, that is my devotion to him. My childish love, warped into this obsession and crazed need. I have chased him from city to city, empire to empire, continent to continent, but always he slips away before I can close my hand on his wrist.

Madness. I know it's madness, but I can't help it.

I am desperately devoted.

Do you know devotion?

I do not mean the paltry sense of adoration many feel in this day and age. What I ask is, have you ever loved something with such a feverish need that all else was eclipsed by this burning desire to please and be pleased, to love and be loved?

That is devotion.

Can you imagine an eternity in which to give that level of worship? I can. I still feel the very core of who and what I am call to him.

Him.

He who holds my heart in a tight grip, strangling the life from me and wringing out all my passion for him. I was but a child when I found him... or, more accurately, when he chose to allow me to see him. His very appearance stole the breath from my chest, made my eyes fill with tears for the beauty he possessed. It did not occur to me to fear such unnatural beauty; he was an angel to me, silver and ivory. My fingers ached to touch his alabaster flesh, to press my lips to his, and in that moment – one moment that led to so many, many others – I felt utter devotion. I wanted to worship him, to love him, to pledge my life and loyalty into his service.

And without a word between us, I was his. Heart, body, and soul. A street rat now to become the

devout acolyte of a god made flesh.

Do you know seduction?

Of course you do. Most humans know seduction, how to take what they want from another with the simple use of one's body and its moist, secret places. There exists a finer art of seduction, one that simple mortals do not utilize. Time, you see, is something mortals are forever aware of, and so they run about at a frenzied pace, trying to experience everything at once. Those not encumbered by the limits of time, enjoy a more drawn out, mental and emotional seduction.

Being a boy, I knew little of love and the crafts of the body. But I knew enough to recognize the racing of my heart, the burning in my veins, and the flush of my skin. When his eyes turned toward me, looking upon me with borrowed warmth, I knew devotion and seduction. His eyes, blacker than any night without stars, pierced me, pinning me against the wall of a building in the busy marketplace, and as I panted out a silent cry of need, he came to me.

I was nothing before he took me in – a rented boy to do menial labor for those who could not afford their own slaves. I could not read or write, and I spoke such crude language that the man who loaned me to others demanded I never speak. This dark-eyed man, who was taller than my keeper, spoke Latin with fluid grace, his voice thick, soft like velvet, and they bartered for me. To this day I know not what price Julius paid for me, but I do know that it was nothing for him to toss that silken purse into my keeper's grubby hand.

Names. Yes, Julius was my new lord and master. I was a bought slave. Owned by a cloaked man who seemed quiet and out of place in the streets of Rome. My name? My keeper never bothered to bestow one upon me, but – in time – Julius did. I am not certain when he chose it, or even why, but the name called in the streets when I pass is the one he eventually gave to me. But I digress.

I do not recall much about our journey from the center of Rome to his home, but I spent most of it staring up at his silver hair, which glowed like fire in the late afternoon sun. He was marvelous, and I was besotted.

If I was in awe of the man, I was absolutely dazzled by his home. The house was large, the central atrium full of warm, golden light and verdant plants. The soft sound of water filled my ears, and the scent permeating the hallway I stood in was that of clean, damp tile. The rooms I could see were filled with mosaics, paintings, sculptures, and richly upholstered furniture. Golds and reds dominated the rooms, bronze and onyx highlighting the burning color scheme. The floors were spotless, the walls scrubbed and tidy, and there seemed little need for a dirty slave boy in this grand home.

That was when the lustful thoughts clouded my mind. I had heard tales among other boys of what the Roman men sometimes demanded of the boys in their service. The stories had frightened me, terrified me into nightmares for months, but such services had never been required of me. Now, in Julius' home, this might change, and the fear almost suffocated me.

“Boy, why do you pale?” he asked as he gazed down at me. His voice had a strange lilt to it, an accent that, even now, I am unable to put a place to.

I swallowed hard, forcing the lump in my throat away. “You have a fine home, my lord. It is clean, well kept. For what purpose could you have purchased me?” I dared to ask. It was the most I had said in three summers, and thankfully, the words did not fail my addled brain.

His lips curled into a faint smile. “You have spirit, and your very demeanor speaks to me of what thoughts trouble you. How many winters have you survived, boy?”

“Twelve.”

“Do not worry about such things until the time comes for you to worry,” he said sagely, softly, and I knew then what his ultimate intent was.

He took me into his home. There were servants I never saw, other children I merely heard; we were separate from them, it seemed. In a grand suite I was bathed by his gentle hands, touched with fleeting caresses, and kissed chastely as a sleeping gown was pulled over my unruly hair. With father-like sweetness, he laid me atop the silken sheets of a great mattress, pressing his lips to my brow before he left me in the silence of this new world.

I will not bore you with the small intricacies of our initial words, nor shall I bother explaining when our relationship shifted away from adoring pupil and doting teacher. I will tell you that he gave me words. So many words! I could express anything and everything my heart felt, though saying these things aloud seemed to be unnecessary to Julius. He could simply look into my eyes and know the love I felt for him. His black eyes would become moist, richer to my sight, and then he would turn away from my shining face.

I wasn't there a week before a young man was brought in and I was told he was to be my tutor. Julius said it was important for me to learn history, to read and to write. Because Julius said it, I accepted that as pure truth. The man, Decimus, was twenty and very beautiful. Even then, I didn't truly have a name, and Decimus merely referred to me as 'boy' in the same manner that Julius did.

It was more of a name than I'd ever had, and as with everything else in my life, I accepted it without complaint.

So, I applied myself to all Decimus would teach me. I assumed I was naturally a quick study, as I was able to learn any trade previously assigned to me, but I was *determined*. I wanted to make Julius proud; I didn't want to give him a reason to send me from his home and back to the slums of Rome. For hours every day, I would listen to Decimus speak of wars and heroes and criminals and traitors. I would write upon my wax tablet words I'd never before seen, but somehow knew. I would read the words upon other tablets that Decimus would prepare before coming to Julius' home, and I felt such pleasure and pride in my accomplishments.

Though I rarely saw my new master in those early months, I knew his presence. I sensed him whenever he'd come to my bedside as I slept. I could smell him in the air long after he'd passed through a room. I felt his eyes on me even in the darkest of nights. It was a subtle, quiet seduction, kept in the periphery of my young life. What mattered was pleasing him, and pleasing him, I knew, meant doing well with my lessons.

In my fifteenth year, though, my lessons changed. Not instantly, and not intrusively, but Decimus' approach to our time together was different. He sat closer to me. He touched my hair or ran his fingers over my shoulders as he passed by. He was a handsome man, I won't deny that, and soon those touches and coy glances caught my attention and distracted me from military history.

So began my new lessons – the ones I soon discovered were the most important Decimus was to teach me.

He schooled me in the arts of kissing first. I had never kissed another before, but Decimus was patient. It was easy to slip into his lap, be cradled in his arms, and feel the warmth of him upon my lips. Kisses were intoxicating, setting my pulse aflame and causing heat to pool in my lap. I would cling to him, pressing against his body, wanting something I could not yet ask for.

I must admit, Julius' choice of instructor, and the manner with which that instructor approached the lesson, was brilliant. Decimus was not an older, wealthy man with a title and land of his own. He was a tutor, older than myself by only a few years, and unattached to any maiden. His touch was fire, and his words promising. I was fed from an unending fount and I drank my fill. I believe I would have been content to never move beyond the kissing and fleeting fondling on the divan, but that was not what Decimus, or Julius, wanted for me.

There was more.

Much more.

What I must make clear to you is that, though I seemed to be no more than a boy, most youths my age were married and had children already. I was an oddity. I was attractive and unwed at the age of fifteen; I was not the lover of a wealthy man, either. In this day and age, I can see how many would think Decimus nothing but a pervert, but I assure you, he was not. He knew his job, and he knew it well: to awaken in me the things Julius sought.

I find it strange that I can easily recall everything about the moment Decimus took me to bed for the first time. *Everything*. It was midsummer and the heat was stifling. It didn't help that storm clouds had rolled in during the afternoon and now the heat was accentuated by intense moisture. It was so hot and humid, I found myself spending much of my time in the cool waters of the baths in Julius' home. Just as I thought the Heavens would never break open and weep, the thunder sounded and the rain fell.

He was standing in the shadows of the main bathing room, watching me. His eyes followed every move I made, from pushing my hair back from my face to drying my body. I could feel the weight of that gaze, the heat; it set my blood rushing in a way I'd never before experienced. Shyly, I looked up at him, cheeks flushed and heart pounding, and I *knew* what he was there for.

Decimus came to me. He shook his head when I reached for my robe, and led me naked from the cool, echoing chamber. Again, I could hear the sounds of laughing children, their footsteps swift and light in some distant part of Julius' estate, but in this area, we were alone. Along the hallways Decimus took me, never a word spoken, until we entered a room I'd never seen before. It was lushly appointed, with bright blues, greens, and reds decorating every surface. In the center of the room was a

feather mattress, thick and inviting, and the room was smoky with pungent incense. The humidity was stifling in this interior room that had no outlet but the door to the hallway, and my head spun.

When I say I remembered everything, this was something of a lie. I don't remember the act itself at all. What I remember is bright pain, breathless pleasure, and hot pressure. Inside, outside, so much pressure, building with every move into my body Decimus made. The heat and the rocking is what I remember, and clutching at him as the storm above raged as loud as the storm within the room. I suppose I can say I wasn't an astute pupil in this lesson because I was simply washed along the tide of lust.

What I remember most clearly is afterward. Sheets damp – almost soaking – tangled around my ankles, my eyes heavy, my limbs sore, and my pulse still throbbing in my groin. It was a pleasant, wonderful feeling, and I clung to it just as I clung to Decimus. The storm still rumbled above us, the thunder strong enough to make the pottery rattle. I laughed. I recall laughing, a wild, free sound, and Decimus chuckling at my youthful joy. It had been wonderful, all the frivolity of that moment.

But it was just a moment.

Too soon, I slipped into sleep, dozing in the hazy heat of the room, surrounded by the scent of our tryst and the resin of the incense. I think I fell asleep with my head upon Decimus' chest, with his arm around me, but I can't recall that clearly. I was so pleasantly drowsy that all that came after my burst of laughter is lost.

When I woke, Decimus was gone, the sky above quiet, the house as silent as a grave. I untangled my sweaty body from the sheets and grabbed a robe from the chaise. My feet made no sound as I traveled the hallways, seeking some sign of life. I couldn't rouse my voice to call out, to beg Decimus to return to my side and alleviate this intense, gnawing fear in my gut. Instead, in the twilight of the halls, I searched for *anyone* – even one of those ghostly children I heard so often.

Finally, after stumbling through another grand archway, I found someone. With tears on my cheeks and my knees shaking, I recognized Julius' silhouette against the night sky. He was standing on a balcony in a room where every surface was covered with parchment scrolls, wax tablets, or artwork. It was the artwork that made me stop at the threshold of Julius' sanctuary. The art was of males and females – some together, some paired with the same gender, some alone – and all of them were exceptionally beautiful. Many of the pieces depicted their subjects in rather compromising positions.

The most beautiful piece of art in the room to me, though, was Julius himself, and he slowly turned to me, a golden goblet in his hand. He regarded me with those eyes of his, so cold and so inviting, and my cheeks felt too hot under the salty tracks of my tears.

“Where is Decimus?” I choked out, clutching the robe I wore to my throat.

“He is gone,” was all the answer I was afforded.

“When will he return?” I whispered.

Julius turned his gaze back to the scenery outside, whatever it was. “He will not. He has

performed every task I paid him for, and his employment here is no longer necessary.”

Employment? Tasks? Was that all I had been to the pretty man who had taught me over the years? I was furious. I was naïve and quite stupid. I was still a boy who thought he was in love and who believed his lover had been sent away. “I want him back here!” I demanded, my chin trembling as I fought the new tears in my eyes.

“Of course you do,” was the reply, in a mocking tone. “You are young and enamored. It will pass.”

“How dare you!” I screamed, the tears falling. “How dare you play with us like this!”

Julius turned to me then, and I think that was when I knew... I knew Julius was not like other men. Something was lit deep in that gaze and it froze whatever words had been poised on the tip of my tongue. “You will return to your room and remain there until I call for you,” he said in a low, dangerous voice that warned me that this was not up for discussion. “Perhaps by then you will have regained your composure.”

He resumed staring out from the balcony, and I knew I was dismissed. I wanted to shout, to cry, to beg him to not do this. Not to take Decimus from me. But in my heart, I knew it was useless. Julius was my master, as he was Decimus', and Julius' wishes were law to us.

Sobbing softly, I walked the long, winding path back to my room, where I mourned my loss of Decimus.

My days after that became my own. I never saw Julius, but I could hear those children somewhere in the vast, labyrinth-like halls of the estate. After two weeks of nothing to occupy my time but the various scrolls of philosophy and poetry that I was now able to read, I set off seeking those elusive creatures.

It took me almost a month of searching. The corridors of that estate were labyrinthine, often turning me back to my starting place or leading me down hallways with no doors, only to turn sharply and abruptly end. But I didn't give up, and at last my vigilance bore fruit.

I found them late one afternoon in a remote courtyard. I counted three girls and six boys, chasing each other and a ball, laughing and shrieking. They were strange, though. All were pale-haired like Julius; their eyes ranged in color from sea glass to worn leather to emerald. They unnerved me with the slight bodies, delightful voices, and foreign eyes. I watched them for perhaps a quarter of an hour before the ball rolled to a stop at my feet and nine pairs of unearthly eyes focused on me.

“Who are you?” I asked them.

Their young faces were no longer smiling. The eldest boy stepped forward to pick up the ball, then rejoined his companions. “We are playing a game,” he said.

“But... who are you? Why are you in this estate?” They continued to stare at me. “Are you the master's children?”

The girls tittered behind their hands. “Master has no children,” one of them said, the only one with green eyes.

“Then why are you here?” I had to know. Their laughter and happiness haunted every alcove and crevice of the estate. Everywhere I went, it seemed the walls had been fashioned to capture and echo the sounds of their voices.

The eldest girl, whose long, white-blond hair was sent floating about her by the wind, giggled, the sound reverberating throughout the courtyard. “Because Master likes us here.”

“What do you do?”

“We play,” one boy said. “We laugh,” the middle girl shouted, snatching the ball from the eldest boy's hands.

I watched them run off again, thoroughly frightened, because those children were more than *strange*. They were *disturbing*. I figured if I was to ever find out who and what they were, I would have to finally seek Julius out again. I didn't want to do that.

But my curiosity burned, and something inside of me forced my feet from that courtyard and back into the twisting halls. The oppressive heat from the weeks before lingered, and the wind that had kissed the skin of the children in the yard was absent in the halls. My bare feet carried me quietly as I searched for the room in which art and scrolls and tablets surrounded my master.

It took until dark for me to find the elusive room, and just like the night Decimus was sent away, Julius was in it, goblet of wine in hand, staring out from the large balcony. I hovered in the doorway, frightened but determined, and I cleared my throat.

“Master?” My voice sounded small, and fear made it tremble.

He turned to look at me with those frigid, bottomless eyes, his expression expectant. I don't know why it seemed he'd been waiting for me, but it did. Everything about this encounter was as if he had lazily anticipated my arrival that night.

“Who—” My voice cracked and I took a deep breath, staring down at my hands. “Who are the children in the courtyard? Why do they all look so strange? Why are they here? And why does this whole place seem to capture their sounds so that no matter where you are, you hear their laughter?”

“So many questions.” Julius chuckled as he set his goblet aside. “You are a bright boy, but you are also terribly short sighted. I suppose that is the way of your kind: seeing only what you want to see and knowing only what you want to know. It is a disappointing trait.”

I hadn't the faintest idea what he meant by all that other than I'd asked questions he believed I should already know the answers to. Perhaps I should have, but I didn't. I was a sheltered child, in all

reality, and his taunting stung. Looking up at him defiantly, I demanded, “I want to know who they are.”

“I know you do,” Julius said with a faint smile as he crossed the room. “They are children. Nothing more. Children of my family who came from a land very far from here. I like to listen to them, so this place was built so that wherever my duties took me in it, I could hear them. I’d know they were happy. Are you happy?”

I was taken aback by the question. Slowly, I shook my head. “I miss Decimus.”

He smiled, and it sent uneasy chills into my belly. “I know. That will change.” Julius stepped closer to me, his long fingers reaching out to touch my face. “You are so young.”

“Not that young. Most boys my age have wives,” I pointed out as the flesh where he touched became heated and flushed. My breath was short as I stared up into his face. His words, his touch, and his very presence were weaving a spell. Desire coursed through me, and a bitter guilt raced filled my heart.

“You are very young measured by my life,” he murmured, stepping closer. It was intoxicating. I lifted my head towards his, my lips parted in anticipation of what I *knew* he was going to do.

We stayed like that for what must have been a small eternity, and then Julius was across the room again. I was stung. Tears hovered in my eyes at his rejection of me. It didn't make sense, what I'd just felt and his abandonment. Julius picked up his goblet and returned to the balcony. “Go now.”

It was a softly spoken command, and I had no choice but to obey. I hung my head and slipped out of the room.

That almost kiss haunted me. It consumed my thoughts. Decimus was quickly forgotten, relegated to a heated dream during the fury of an adolescent storm. Now, it was Julius who made my heart race, my flesh tighten, and a deep ache begin within me. I wanted him. Desperately. However, I couldn't discover what it was he wanted from me, what sign he was seeking to signal my readiness for him. My mind played out many scenarios, many fantasies, and my need for him grew to a fevered pitch by the time the summer season shifted into the harvest.

The weather had turned, and bathing in the large pool in the central bathing chamber was no longer something I did. The water was too cold. Instead, I'd use the smaller rooms, the ones with heated water, washing myself in those pools that the servants tended to constantly. I'd grown accustomed to the joys of being the property of a wealthy man; never before had I bathed in heated, scented water!

It was during one of my late-night baths, after waking from an intense dream of Julius' hands on my body, that I saw my master outside of his room filled with scrolls and tablets. I had just risen from the water when I felt eyes on my body. Suddenly, painfully self-conscious, I frantically glanced around the small, steamy room. Leaning against the wall just inside the doorway was Julius, his cold gaze focused intently on me. Unblinking black eyes *watched* me as I stood in the bath, arms embracing myself, a blush of embarrassment creeping across my face.

Tearing my eyes from his, I began to inch my way out of the pool, towards my robe, but an almost imperceptible shake of his head stopped me. I swallowed. He wanted me where I was, as I was. I *knew* this. At the time, I didn't understand how, but I knew he wanted me to perform this intimate act for his benefit.

With my head bowed, I began to wash. My hands moved slowly over my body, wetting my chilled skin with the warm water. I knew he watched me; I could *feel* those dispassionate eyes follow every stroke of my hands, every droplet of water that fell from my flesh. Soon, my own eyes glazed over as I stared down into the shimmering water, and my head swam as if I had imbibed too much heady wine. This silent dance of the erotic of my master was intoxicating. I gasped, the sound echoing in the chamber, and I craved *more*.

I craved *him*, and still, I did not have him.

Hot need gathered in my groin, my organ roused from its slumber between my legs. It was as if that too occurred solely for Julius' enjoyment, not my own. I squeezed my eyes shut, my ears burning with shame, as my hand moved along my stomach and down into the water. I felt as if I had no control of my actions. Never had I touched myself so, and I'd never dreamed of doing such a thing. But now, with the inhumanly beautiful master of the house watching me, I took myself in hand and moaned with immediate gratification.

Even now, so many, many years later, I don't know how long Julius remained in the doorway. How long he watched me as I touched myself in the bath. All I recall is that when I'd spent my frantic passions and opened my eyes, he was gone.

It was the emptiest, most devastating feeling I'd felt, knowing he'd slipped away without coming to me. Had I performed so poorly? Had I done wrong? Had I not done what he'd obviously wanted me to? So many questions flew through my mind as I stepped from the pool on weak legs, my cheeks aflame with humiliation and tears streaking my face. As I dressed and trudged back to my room, I wondered if all my encounters with my master would end in tears for me.

I chased sleep late into the night. When my eyes finally closed and my mind quieted, the moon was high in the sky. There were fevered dreams, half remembered and clung to when I woke with a start long before dawn. The pounding of my heart matched the throb between my legs, and as I panted softly, I realized I wasn't alone in my bed. Slowly, my eyes moved from the ceiling to my bedside, where Julius sat, perched as if he had come to me in such a way every night for the last three years.

As I stared up into his face, I forgot to breathe. I couldn't move, I couldn't swallow, I couldn't speak. All I could do was look at him with wide eyes and a slack jaw. There was fear in me, yes, for I didn't understand why he would have left me in the bathing chamber only to wake me in the middle of the night. I didn't know his motivations, his reasoning, and that was terrifying.

At the same time, I craved him. That need tempered my fears; that need kept me from flinching when his hand reached out to cup my hot face. My eyes fluttered shut, and, as if a spell had been broken, I began to breathe once more as those cool fingers stroked my eyelids and brow. I wanted him to kiss me, to touch more than just my face. My body ached acutely in a way I'd never before experienced. I opened my mouth to whimper, to beg, to plead, but I had no opportunity to speak. Julius'

lips touched mine, as soft as a moth's wings, and I sobbed. I lifted my head from the pillow and wrapped my arms around his neck, clinging to him desperately for reasons I didn't know.

When his tongue slipped into my mouth, I thought my engorged organ would spill itself in the sheets. It was an intensely erotic moment, and all Julius did was kiss me. His hands never traveled below my shoulders, but each time his tongue stroked mine, he might as well have been caressing my shaft. I trembled against him as we kissed, the meeting of our lips and the incessant throb of my groin my entire life at that moment.

I expected him to take the next step, to brush aside the bedclothes and expose my nakedness to his eyes and hands. He didn't. Julius ended our kiss, pressing a final one to my brow, and stood up. I gazed at him with open, lustful longing, silently begging for more than he had given.

“Goodnight, boy,” was what he said before leaving me alone in my cold bed with my needy body.

I fell back into my mattress and pillows, kicked off the bedclothes, and took myself in hand. If I didn't, I knew I'd not find sleep again that night.

It's almost possible, looking back now, to dismiss my feelings as adolescent desires inherent in coming of age. But at the time, they were maddening. What Decimus had innocently woken in me, Julius fed like a starving, raving animal. I spent most of my days following that kiss in a fog of low-grade arousal. Each night, I fought sleep, hoping Julius would come to me again. I found no pleasure in my schoolwork, which Julius had insisted I continue without a tutor, and no pleasure in the games I could play with those alien children I occasionally ran across in the halls. There was no joy in anything I did, because I always longed for what was just out of my reach.

It was while I was sitting by one of the fountains in a courtyard, deep within the maze of Julius' home, that I made a connection. What I had done with Decimus had been wonderful. It had the innocence of two young men learning each other for the first time. The act of making love with him had been intense and beautiful and I could equate it with the spring thaw of the ground.

But what Julius did... the fire he could spark within me with a simple look or a careless touch of his hand... it wasn't natural. A kiss could bring me to the brink of climax, could leave me panting, sweating, and aching. It was debauchery, and yet he hadn't truly laid a finger on me, not in a way that one traditionally thought of alongside debauchery. It was dirty and corrupting and *unnatural*.

Doubtless there are those who would wonder how such wickedness could spring from something as small as a kiss. To them, I would say that there was nothing small about this kiss. There are things in this world that any man of sanity or reason would look upon and know – somehow just *know* – the wrongness of. The death of innocents, perhaps, or the suffering of a child. The power that Julius's kiss had to draw my thoughts to such perversity was also one such thing.

Common sense dictated that I run from that estate with its odd children, invisible servants, and strange master. Someone with the sense of a rock would have left within the hour, casting themselves into an uncaring world rather than enduring the terrible pleasure of one more touch of those lips. Self preservation would have driven anyone else to escape, to flee, to fight against the wicked peculiarity of

the home and its inhabitants.

I, though, seemed to possess no common sense and no self preservation. Instead, I remained in my Master's home with its queer people. I remained, and I longed, and I wept many, many days as the harvest passed and winter came to settle over the great city of Rome.

The days blurred into weeks, and then months. The seasons turned while I pined for my Master. A constant haze blanketed my life now, and it dampened my sight, my taste, my hearing. I ached for his touch. Julius was maddening with his restraint. Every few nights, I would wake from erotic dreams, sore from arousal, and he would be sitting beside me, watching me. Those black eyes would swallow me whole before he'd bend and kiss my lips, setting fire to the embers inside me.

Over time, the kisses became longer, and his hands traveled away from my face to caress my chest. Oh, the agony of it all! Never did he touch me where I desperately wanted him to, where I would whimper and plead with him to. I quickly learned that if I pressed too much, if I pushed for more, Julius would leave. Restraint was something I had to master. Basking in his kisses, the light, teasing touches to my chest, stomach, and hips, while not arching up and demanding even more was a delicate balance that took me most of the spring to learn.

But there is only so much one person can endure. I wanted more. Julius was not willing to give me what I asked for with my eyes, my body. Frustration grew inside like a festering ball, and that frustration soon became anger. When the wind howled outside Julius' sprawling home after summer had given way to a new harvest, I stalked through the corridors seeking my Master's elusive private suite of rooms. It was the only place I hadn't found in all my mad wanderings of this labyrinth of a house.

I remember being in a frenzy, rushing from room to room, ducking down strange halls, determined to find Julius' chambers. It was important. The physical need was all-encompassing, but there was also an underlying emotional craving that fed the physical desire. I wanted to be his. Not his toy, but *his*, and that need for possession kept my feet moving despite the roaring thunder and screaming wind that chased me throughout the home. Ahead, I saw the flicker of candlelight. I walked through a large courtyard, becoming soaked with rain, and crossed over a threshold into a room I'd never seen before.

It was large, bigger than any chamber I'd yet been in, and it was full of paintings, sculptures, and richly colored furniture. There were also mirrors. Dozens of them. Varying sizes of bronze polished to a high shine reflecting multiple images of me staring with wide eyes at myself. I'd never seen so many mirrored surfaces in one place, but it somehow didn't surprise me that Julius possessed so many. How could one as exotic and beautiful as he *not* desire to see his reflection as often as possible?

I began to circle the room, fingers touching everything I came near. My world was touch and sight; everything dazzled me in that room. When I returned to the main entryway of the room, I searched for a connecting door. There had to be more treasures here – there had to be Julius – and when I couldn't find another doorway, I started to circle the room viciously. My irritation abated when, behind a particularly large and ornate mirror, I found the connecting hallway. Hesitantly, my heart

hammering in my chest, I crept down the dark corridor towards the warm glow of light at the end of the hall. The storm raged outside and apprehension flooded my mind as I neared that room. I was treading where I'd never trodden before, uninvited and unwelcome. It was an insolent and defiant choice, hunting my master. It was wrong. This act could have me cast out, or beaten, or even put to death. I was my master's property; Julius was a nobleman and had every right to demand my life for my transgression.

The knowledge that my life hung in the balance as I approached the threshold of that room did not stay my feet. It did not change my course. I *needed* to find Julius. I needed to make myself his. If he would not take the step himself, I would simply have to force his hand, and that was all that mattered. The taste of him, the feel, the burning desire, those were what drove me to cross into that room with its massive bed decorated with gem-tone pillows. More bronze mirrors leaned against the walls, reflecting the light of the candles until the room seemed to glow.

Across the room, dressed in a robe made of simple, thin, white fabric, stood my master. His silvery hair was damp, and his black eyes heavy-lidded. He just stood there, eyes daring me to either leave or approach. It was the smug amusement I could see in the line of his lips that spurred me forward. My footsteps were slow, my face hot, but I knew exactly what I was going to do long before I stood in front of my master.

The smell of him was intoxicating. It was a combination of smoky musk and something darker, richer. I leaned forward, eyes closed, my nose close to his throat, and simply inhaled. Just the scent of his skin was enough to set my blood rushing! I let out a shuddering breath and then stepped back. My hands shook as I reached up and untied the lacing at the throat of his robe. Julius' body remained relaxed, like a predator lying in wait, and his eyes were lazily focused on my face. It seemed as if this moment – this *choice* – was the culmination of something dreadfully important that I wasn't fully aware of. It had a sense of ceremony and finality. I can't say, even now, how I knew it, only that I possessed that knowledge as I let the robe pool at Julius' feet.

His body was perfection, but in that unnatural way in which everything else surrounding him was perfect. The ideal beauty held me in thrall; it drew me in, seducing me completely, and I fell to my knees in order to worship him. My hands moved down his chest, over his flat stomach, and along his slim hips. His skin was cool and so very soft. It was flesh that had never known a moment's hard labor, and I cherished its smoothness. It was a lover's touch I had, a lover's eye: the eyes of the thoroughly besotted.

Julius continued to watch me in my attentive exploration of his body. Unreadable eyes, placid expression, and absolute stillness were all he offered to me as I touched whatever was in reach of my hands from my prostrated position. Once my curiosity had been satisfied, I turned my attention to his organ. It was flaccid in a nest of fine, powder-white hair that looked as silken as the hair upon Julius' head. A beast waiting is what it was, ready to awaken and pounce, take and devour, and my fingers tentatively brushed along its plumpness. It twitched as I caressed, growing and stiffening the longer I lingered there. My brow furrowed as I frowned. I wanted more than his arousal. I wanted to hear him moan, feel his hands grip my shoulders. I wanted him to become lost in me.

Before he became fully erect, I leaned in and licked at the skin covering the head of him. Julius' thighs tensed, and that was all the encouragement I needed. I took him into my mouth, my nose pressed

to the dusting of hair surrounding him. I hadn't performed the act for Decimus, but he had done it for me; I knew what was to be done, even if my steps were relatively clumsy. Given time, I knew I would master it if that pleased Julius. I would do anything if it pleased him.

I stroked his hips, thumbs tracing the hollows there, as I suckled him, learning the shape and size of him. My eyes closed, I committed his scent to my memory. His scent was enough to bring my own arousal to a fever pitch, but I pushed that aside to focus on him. Lips ghosted over hardened flesh, and tongue stroked over the soft head. It was an amazing feeling, Julius in my mouth, and oh, how I wanted it. *Needed* it. Months of teasing had driven me as close to insanity as I thought I'd ever come, and now... now I had him. I could indulge in my selfish, desperate desire to be intimate with my master.

Julius made no sound. His hands did not grip my shoulders. What I wanted to draw forth from him was being denied me, and I felt frustrated. Was I not doing this well? Was I so inept that he was merely enduring my attentions so that my curiosity might be sated and I would cease hounding him? Doubts flew through my mind, for Julius was quite accomplished at creating doubts within me without uttering a single word.

When my uncertainty reached a crescendo, when I was about to pull away from him in tears, one of his hands came to rest on the back of my head. It encouraged me, gently nudged me to take him deeper into my mouth, and I tried with all I was. I sucked and licked him, drew him as far as I could into me, and gave myself wholly over to the act. Without realizing it, my hands pulled on his hips, pushing him farther than I thought I was comfortable with. Thinking back on that moment, it was a wanton display of utter devotion. In that moment, when I opened myself to him in such a way, allowing him that power over me, whatever I may have been before ceased to exist.

I knew I would belong to no other. I would never take a lover, never take a wife. I was Julius', and I *knew* without a moment's hesitancy that I would never be anything to anyone else.

Julius hissed, his hand tightening in my hair, and I felt his muscles under my hands contract. Strangely, the shaft plunging between my lips seemed to swell. I was fascinated by this, and was taken by complete surprise when my mouth was filled with the viscous, bitter fluid of Julius' climax. To my embarrassment, I gagged on it. His seed spilled down my chin as I coughed and panted, dry heaves threatening to humiliate me further.

My cheeks flamed, and my eyes watered. I refused to look at him because I feared his expression, feared what I would see in his eyes. I remained hunched on the floor, swallowing repeatedly, trying to calm myself. When the minutes seemed to drag on into hours, his hand touched the top of my head. With a trembling chin, I dared to look up at him. Just looking at him stole my breath, and I simply stared up at the soft, kind expression I'd *never* before seen on my master. Though it didn't quite reach his black eyes, it was still reassuring as he smiled down at me.

“That will get easier with time,” he said in his rich, oddly accented voice. “You are young yet.”

Which meant there would be more opportunities. More encounters! Despite the rawness of my throat, the aching of my jaw, and the soreness of my stomach muscles, I stood up and threw my arms around his neck. Those simple words offered me all the hope I needed. It was a relief.

If his arms were cold around me, if the embrace was only heartfelt on my side, I didn't notice it.

I should have.

What happened during the next several months prepared me for life as his slave. Not in the sense of menial work, but in the sense of the unconditional devotion that would drive all my actions until the day I die. My days were spent learning as much about the known world as Julius' scrolls and maps could teach me. I would find hidden alcoves and rooms filled with beautiful trinkets, artwork, and furniture. It often puzzled me why he had so many rooms, so many material things, when there seemed to be only the children, him, and me living in the estate. I still never saw the servants, but they *must* have existed. Food was prepared, clothing mended and washed, rooms cleaned. Whether they lived in the estate or were rented workers, I never discovered.

What I did know was that my master was wealthy and worldly, and his home held many surprises. He silently encouraged me to discover as many of his secrets as I could, but I wasn't interested in scrounging in his personal rooms and scrolls. My days were no longer long, distracting, horrid times. Instead, I focused on the various lessons I'd set for myself as I tried to attain some sort of unknown goal. I ate, I read, I wrote, and I watched those strange children as winter bled into spring and I aged another year. Those children never seemed to grow older, though, and as I studied them, they appeared ruthless and even more frightening in their childish play. I feared should they ever find an animal in their midst.

The nights were no longer filled with feverish dreams and aching desire. I now took supper with my master. Every night I'd arrive and the table would already be set with an abundance of food, more than enough for the two of us. We would eat in silence, watching one another. My eyes never left his face, and the longer it was that we ate, the more my need for him would grow. By the time he set his empty plate aside, I was always flushed and aroused, eager to serve him.

If I'd had any more experience than the encounters with Decimus and the almost-nightly trysts with Julius, I might have suspected something wasn't quite right. Julius never touched my body intimately. He would kiss me, stroking my cheeks or my shoulders, but he never went beyond that. Rather, I would kneel before him each evening and bring him pleasure with my mouth. He instructed me in quiet words that were never breathless or hurried. I quickly learned how to perform without pause, and how to drink his seed without gagging. He taught me the intricate dance of tongue upon flesh, and I greedily soaked up his knowledge.

What I didn't know was the devious undercurrent to my master's tender teachings. I gave up everything I was to him each night without asking anything from him but a gentle word of praise when I was done. I was *starved* for it. Pleasing him was my only thought, my only need. By giving without the thought of receiving, I bound myself to him. The first leap I took had been letting him kiss me that night that seemed ages ago. I opened the door to the bogeyman and made him my welcome bedmate.

Vividly can I recall when Julius informed me he had to leave the estate for a fortnight. He told me to continue on with my studies, to leave the children be, and to remain away from his private quarters until he returned. He kissed me chastely on the cheek after supper and sent me away from him.

It was the first night in many that he did not allow me to taste him. I was uncertain of what to do with a whole night away from him, let alone two weeks! To say I was distraught was an understatement. I was panicked. How was I to pass the time? How could I cope with so many days to myself? It was one thing to know my Master was somewhere in the house when I was away from him, but to be away from the grounds... the city? I collapsed into bed after leaving him and cried until my nose stopped up and my eyes swelled. Only then did I exhaust myself enough to find restless sleep.

The following two weeks were hell. I can only describe it as that. I was sick for most of it, unable to keep down food or water, constantly feverish, always alone. I thought I would die. Near the end, I wished for death, because it would have meant the end of my suffering. Death, however, did not come for me. No one did.

I lost count of the days. When Julius appeared at my bedside, I thought he was a hallucination. A figment of my fevered, tired mind. His fingers traced my face, cool against my hot skin, and I stared up at him through tears and heavy eyelids. I was so *tired*.

“Are you real?” I whispered to him, my voice cracking. “Please, tell me you are real, Master.”

Julius' voice was smooth as sick and cold as steel. “I am quite real, boy. You are unwell.” I thought, for a moment, there was a hint of satisfaction in his words. His tone was almost... pleased. “Let me ease your sickness.”

He bent down and kissed me. Deeply. Much more intrusively than ever before. I opened my mouth to him, wide and inviting, moaning quietly in the back of my throat. His hands moved over my body, seeming to learn every curve and angle until I felt as if my blood would boil. I wanted him. Even as fevered as I was, I wanted him. It wasn't like all those times when I eagerly and happily gave to him. This time, I wanted to *take*. I wanted to feel him above me, in me, to drive me to that delicious realm of pleasure Decimus had once shown me.

Everything moved quickly, else I was too consumed by my own lusts to notice the passage of time. All I knew was that his kisses were drowning me, his touch scorching, and I desperately arched up against his nude body. I welcomed him, my hands tangled in his long, silver hair. Each gasp I made drew me further into the maelstrom of emotion and need that threatened to sweep away everything I was. I don't recall the words that spilled from my lips, or when maddening touch finally gave way to completion. What I remember, what never leaves me, is the darkness, the coldness, of Julius' eyes just before my own closed and I shuddered beneath him. They were devoid of the fire I felt, of the devotion and adoration that coursed through me.

They were empty at a moment when they should have been anything but. I should have known then... oh, so many times I should have known that he wasn't what I wanted him to be. But I was young and stupid and completely his. He knew this and used it – used *me* – and I allowed him to.

With his warmth trickling from my backside and our sweat drying on my body, I fell into a deep, troubled sleep. His arms were like ice around me; it was as if I were cradled between frozen tree limbs. There was no comfort in his embrace, and that knowledge bled into my fevered, exhausted mind as I slept. Twisted images hunted me as I ran through shadowed woods, weeping and screaming for help. Something chased me, something that wanted to devour my very soul, and no matter how fast I

ran, how much my lungs burned, I couldn't get away.

I woke with a scream, my bed drenched. Julius wasn't there. He'd left me. I laid there, staring at the dark ceiling, confused about what I had dreamed, about what had happened, and why I was now alone. My body ached, and I was so very, very tired. It was a weariness I'd never felt before, like my bones themselves hurt. It wasn't just the overuse of muscles that had yet to be fully exercised. No, it was something deeper, stranger, far more unnerving, and as I looked at the dark ceiling, I realized that nothing would ever be right again.

Not the same... no, nothing had been the same since Decimus had come into the estate. Nothing would ever be *right* again, and that knowledge devastated me. It was an intrinsic knowing that brought tears to my eyes, and I wept until the sun rose for the loss of something I didn't fully understand.

Life was strange after that. I slept a lot. My days blurred into sex interrupted by sleep or the occasional groggy meal. I lost weight rapidly, soon becoming far leaner than I had been as a rented slave. In my mind I was very aware of all these changes and how wrong they were, but I had little actual interest in them. If Julius was unable to come to me each day, I balanced precariously on the edge of insanity. I became a ghost of myself, something that subsisted on its master's flesh. Somehow, I was bathed regularly and the bedsheets were changed, but I still can't figure out how. I was distracted at the time, though, so I'm sure there were those unseen servants that I finally saw.

The heat of summer was oppressive. I sweated almost constantly. There was no breeze to move the stifling air, and my head swam. I stopped eating completely, only taking water or Julius' seed into my body. It was dirty and debauched, and most of what we did I can only describe as depraved, but I wallowed in it. Giving to him, taking from him, learning all the delicious, frightening pleasures the flesh could offer up, it was all I wanted. With each coupling, I grew more fatigued until it became nearly impossible for me to leave my bed.

Which Julius didn't mind. It was the only time I saw him, when he came to my bedside, brushed aside the linens, and touched me. As the summer progressed, and there was no rain to break the heat, Julius came to me only once, in the evening, and the rest of the time I remained in my bed, soaked through, blurrily wondering what was happening to me and why my skin crawled, as if trying to part itself from my muscles.

Tortured dreams, uncontrollable tears, and gnawing hunger were my constant companions.

At least, they were until that day when the smothering humidity finally broke and we had the first rain in months. One of those horrific children crept into my room. It was the slim, willow-like girl with green eyes who slipped inside and stood at the foot of my bed, staring at me with her unblinking, alien eyes. I swallowed, intent on shouting at her to leave, but I couldn't muster the strength to even cough. She tilted her head, frowned, and, like a delicate bloom on the wind, walked to the table and poured me some water.

I cringed when she lifted my head. Her touch was like maggots burrowing through dead flesh. That was the image that flashed behind my tightly shut eyes, vivid and real, but my scream was drowned by the water that flowed over my lips. Then she was at the foot of my bed again, as if she'd never moved.

“You are dying,” she told me matter-of-factly. “Like all the ones before, you are dying, and you do not care.” An innocent voice, like wind chimes, soft and feminine and beautiful, but there was something dark and slick behind the words. Something sinister, like sharp claws beneath soft velvet, waiting to strike.

“What?” I croaked at her.

Her face seemed to blur in front of me, like an image over an image. Both young and terribly old, and never, ever human. “Lying in the beds, lost to the body, lost to the devourer of their souls. Poor things, so lost and eager to meet their murderer.” She giggled, the sound crazed and rasping. “Little boy, little boy, who sleeps with the knife that shall slit his throat.”

“You are no older than I am!” I snapped at her, finding the words far too disturbing.

She was beside me again, those huge green eyes near my own bloodshot ones. “I am very old, little boy, and I know that you are bleeding and bleeding and will soon bleed out. Maybe then you will play with us.”

I squeezed my eyes closed, wanting her to go away, seeing only maggots in rotting meat, and when I finally opened them, I was alone. I turned on my side, shuddering, and the water she had given me spattered onto the stone floor as I weakly heaved, smelling only decomposing flesh. When my body had finally worn itself out with vomiting and fear, I was dragged into the hell of my dreams, where green eyes watched me and sword-sharp claws waited to rip me apart.

I wish I could say the pieces fell into place in that moment, but they didn't. My mind was too addled, too full of Julius, for the girl's words to make any sort of immediate impression. But they stuck in my thoughts and grated, like a grain of sand to an oyster. And, like an oyster, it took time for me to make anything of value come of it. Time I didn't really have.

When the heat broke, signaling the beginning of autumn, I weakly went to sit in a nearby courtyard every afternoon. A trek that should have taken no more than five minutes now took me the better part of an hour to make. But I could no longer stay in my bed, not with those maggot-filled words echoing in my memory. I did not long for death as she said, and with that decision came a resolve and a new wellspring of strength.

Once upon the bench, I would stare up at the blue sky and white clouds until my vision darkened and the stars came out. Julius would then come to me, lift me in his arms, and carry me back to the bed, where he would have me until the moon was high and the night was silent.

I watched. I paid attention. I began to notice things that I'd been oblivious to before. Julius tended to be cold, pale, hard when he visited my bed, but when he left it, he was flush, warm, and supple to touch. He had life, while I slowly lost mine. It was one such evening, as he lay beside me, cheeks pink and eyes bright, that everything finally made *sense*.

Julius was using me! Our sex fed him. In some sickening, unnatural way, my life was waning while his was renewed.

I had to escape. I knew this as surely as a drowning animal knows that it must be free of the water to survive. When he left me the following morning, promising with touches that set my body on fire to return by nightfall, I made the decision to run. When the estate was silent, I pooled what little strength I had and clothed myself. I used the walls for support as I feebly shuffled along the hallways, my eyes focused on the main entrance to the estate. I *had to leave*, and I refused to be swayed. No servant appeared, no haunting child, and so I was able to slip out of Julius grand home and into the streets of Rome without incident.

Of course, I had nowhere to go. I was a slave, and I had just left without the permission of my master. As unobtrusively as I could, I joined the throng of citizens and slaves, moving like a starving beggar, until I was able to duck down an alleyway and to the safety of a darkened corner where buildings met. I remained there as the afternoon sunlight dwindled, watching people pass the mouth of the alley, afraid to see Julius appear and drag me back to his home. When night settled, and the time when Julius usually came to my bed passed, I began shivering. I was terribly cold, unable to keep from shaking, and sweat poured down my face. It wasn't long until my stomach clenched on itself and I was taken with fearsome pains. The longer I stayed hidden, the worse the sickness became. I was delirious three days later when I was found and taken to a nearby home to be cared for.

I must have babbled. I must have told them who I was, who I belonged to. I must have told them many things, because when my mind cleared and my eyes could focus, it was Julius who towered over my sickbed. His eyes were blazing, his lips set in a thin line, and I turned weakly onto my side and cried.

Back in my room at the estate, I waited. For two weeks, I waited. He had not come to me since my return, but I had my wits about me once more and I was determined to free myself. I thought that the only reason for the sickness was that I was bound to Julius in some arcane way, and my logical conclusion had been that one of us had to die.

Or perhaps both.

I had a dagger hidden beneath my pillow, and I waited with grim determination. The moon was sinking in the sky when he stepped into my room, naked and hungry. I knew he was starving for me; I kept still, unwilling to move or speak. His hands touched my thighs, parted them as he knelt on the mattress, and I sighed, sliding my hand under my pillow. As he pushed into me, I winced, the blade cutting my palm as I misjudged where I'd left it. Julius assumed my wince was out of the physical discomfort of our coupling.

"It will be easier," he purred in that slick-sharp tone the young girl had used. "In time, this will be all that matters to you."

I held his gaze, my bleeding hand now around the hilt of the dagger, and smiled. I could see my face reflected in his eyes, and the smile was barbed and harsh. "No," I whispered up at him. "No, Julius, this will never be easy."

With him locked in my body, I lashed out with the blade, slicing across his throat. Hot, sticky blood splashed on my face and chest and ran down my hand and arm. He bucked against me, withdrew,

and staggered to his feet. I sat up, watching with a detached fascination as crimson stained his marble flesh.

“How dare you!” he cried, the words wet and bubbling.

I wasn't done. I felt this inrush of power, and I stood, dagger in hand, and made to stab at him again. Julius hissed, snake-like fangs appearing in a yawning mouth as reptilian eyes glared at me with vicious fury. Then he was gone, the room still and silent, though smeared with red. I looked around, my head pounding, my body sore, and licked my lips. I tasted cold copper when I swallowed and gagged. I stepped out of my room, heading for the baths, when my path was suddenly blocked. That damned child with the green eyes! Her gaze was accusing, her smile cruel.

“You are the murderer with the knife now,” she said in a teasing, sing-song voice. “Covered in blood. Forever bound.”

“I am free,” I told her proudly. “I killed him.”

She laughed. Chilling, sharp as glass. “You cannot kill Julius. You cannot kill what was never alive.”

“He was alive,” I replied, my words stilted. “Warm, moving, breathing... Julius was alive.”

The girl shook her head twice, very slowly, her grin making my stomach roil. “Never alive, never dead. Stupid boy. Stupid, stupid. Should have let him eat you.”

I lifted my head defiantly. “I survived! I have escaped!”

“You will never escape,” she said, taking my sliced palm, slick with both my blood and Julius', in her small hand. “Bound, tighter than before, bound lifeforce to lifeforce.” Her eyes seemed to grow larger, her pupils becoming slits. “A bit of him in you. Crave him. Need him. Hopeless in your devotion now. In time, you will know how hopeless it is.”

I swallowed, yanked my hand away from her, and managed to choke out, “Why did he not kill me? Why did he run?”

If that smile of hers could have become any more maliciously satisfied, then it did at that moment. “Because that, little boy, would have been a mercy, and Julius is not merciful.”

She turned away, skipped down the hall laughing, and disappeared from my sight. I was alone. The estate was cold, deathly quiet, and I knew I was utterly alone.

She was right. In time, I knew. It didn't take long. I cleaned myself up, took what was of value from Julius' estate, and fled Italy. I spent months running, hiding, thinking he would be behind me if I turned around, but by the time I reached France, I knew he wasn't following me.

I sold everything. What money I had, I spent on food and drink. Soon, I was whoring myself in French brothels, trying to grasp even the shade of lustful passions I'd felt with Julius. I *craved* the burning touch, the mind-numbing climax, but I couldn't find it! Then... then I had an itch in my blood. Wanderlust gripped me by the throat. I began to travel.

It was Julius. Our mingled blood, the bond that existed between slave and master, it was undeniable. It called to me. Every city I came to, I always knew he'd just been there. I chased him, desperate, but I never caught up with the demon.

Years passed, and as they did, I became fully aware of what my hasty, careless choice had wrought. I didn't age. Not a day beyond that night. I was trapped in the body of a boy on the cusp of adulthood. When I understood what Julius was, what I had done, I knew true, absolute terror and deep, unfathomable regret.

I've not given up hunting him. Thousands of years, thousands of cities, thousands of dead young men and women in his wake as he consumes those who are snared by devotion, but I still hunt him. I keep hoping that, if I find him, he can undo what I've done. I'll willingly give myself to him again, let him feast on what is left... just so long as it *ends*.

The ocean roars, the stars glitter above, and Brazil is as beautiful as it ever was, with its bright city lights and pulsing beat of life. I know Julius is somewhere in that beating heart of humanity, slipping into the bed of his next meal...

...and I will find him.