

# *Single Shots*



Forest over Stone  
*by Vic Winter*

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## **Chapter One**

The candles blowing out at morning Mass was never a good sign. Especially if there was no wind or breeze. Make it Sunday morning Mass and the sign was that much worse.

Andreas could only imagine what a terrible portent it was when that Sunday happened to also fall on Easter, the day the brothers remembered the resurrection of their Lord.

It was no wonder he was jumpy as he cleaned the chapel, putting away the vestments, the sacred objects, sweeping and changing the used cloths for freshly washed ones. The stone building with its stern-faced saviour upon its cross was not his favorite place to begin with; being the only one left in the dark chapel when no candles would stay lit was almost more than he could bear.

It was with great relief that he crossed himself as he'd been taught to do, and exited the chapel via the small door at the back. He hurried across the courtyard to the kitchen with its high windows and bright hearths, dropping the linens into Frau Vitman's pile of laundry before presenting himself to Olga so that he could be of service.

Olga looked him over critically, her hair grey and pulled back into a tight bun, her eyes rheumy but still sharp. "Don't forget it is still the time of silence, Andreas."

"But I haven't taken any vows," he complained. He couldn't understand why he needed to be silent just because the brothers chose to be.

"Pshaw." Her wooden spoon hit the table with a loud crack, making him jump. "You will have respect for the brothers, Andreas. They took you in when your parents died."

"Yes, Olga." It was true. The stone walls were his home and though he had never felt the call to the brothers' God himself, the brothers had nonetheless allowed him to stay, fed and sheltered him, clothed him, allowed him to earn these gifts in service to them.

Olga handed him the two large platters of bread. "Go help Old Rufus serve." He nodded and went, her second admonition—this one yelled—to remember to stay quiet ringing in his ears.

There were always one or two brothers observing the vow of silence, but when the whole brotherhood indulged, the silence was eerie and strange. The great dining hall held hardly a sound, the monks always trying to keep the silence absolute so even the noises from their eating remained few.

Andreas put his platters down, one on each table, and went to Old Rufus' side. He didn't know how old the man was, but Old Rufus had always looked ready to be put in the ground, even when Andreas had first been brought to the monastery as a child of four. Though his hair was as white as the snows and his skin sallow and wrinkled, Old Rufus stood straight and walked with the gait of a much younger man. The monks claimed that it was a gift from their God, in return for the devoted service Old Rufus had performed all his life for them.

Andreas wasn't sure that he believed it to be all that great a gift. He had no desire to spend so long a time being a

servant to the brotherhood. Especially a servant like Old Rufus who never left the walls of the monastery.

Old Rufus acknowledged him with an incline of his head and the passing of the ladle. The brothers, however, did not acknowledge him; not even Petras or Jorgen looked at him. He had asked about it once when they'd been younger after a week's trial of silence had passed. Apparently, even the eyes were not allowed to speak during the vow.

Andreas filled the rest of the bowls, biting his lip more than once to keep the words from spilling from him. It was just so quiet. The silence was heavy like the stone walls.

"That lip is mine to bite, sweet one."

Andreas jumped at the voice, eyes wide as he whirled, looking for the speaker. Old Rufus gave him a strange look, but the brothers continued to eat in silence as if they had heard nothing.

Andreas yearned to ask Old Rufus if he had heard the words as well, but Olga's admonition had him biting his lip again, keeping quiet.

"You tempt me."

There it was again, not loud, but not a whisper either. The voice was low, deep, and unlike any voice he knew. It made his heart thump and he looked around carefully, looked to see if there was a new brother in their midst. Perhaps this was some strange test the brothers felt he needed to pass.

Andreas filled the last bowl and took the pot from Old Rufus, carrying it as he followed the old man back to the kitchen. He filled the bowls of the servants and sat next to Inga, across from Olga and Old Rufus.

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"Did he speak?" Olga asked Old Rufus, who shook his head in reply. She looked pleased and when their bowls were empty she gave him a piece of bread slathered with lard and honey.

"Good boy. Inga will wash the dishes today; you can go look for berries."

Andreas' eyes widened and he bobbed his head in thanks. He'd been hoping for a moment to speak to Old Rufus, to see if the man had heard the same voice he had, but he would not risk his afternoon of freedom from the stone that penned him in and held him down.

He ate his bread quickly and cleared his bowl and mug, putting them in the wash basin before grabbing the big basket and taking off. He would not give Olga time to change her mind.

As he let the little door by the scullery close behind him and ran into the forest, the portent of the candles going out on their own was forgotten, as was the strange voice that had broken the brothers' deep silence.

\* \* \* \*

Andreas knew very well that the errand of finding berries was in reality the offer of an afternoon of play. Oh, he would need to find some berries to fill his basket, but the season was warm and there would be some brambleberries and raspberries down by the stream already.

He walked through the trees, smiling at the bright green of the new leaves, the warm, earthy scent that rose from the ground as his feet crushed early grasses and disturbed the

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dirt. It was fresh and alive out here and he liked it so much more than the monastery. He wished he lived out here and not trapped within the stone walls that housed the monks. He knew it was a selfish and ungrateful wish; the brothers had been good to him, he'd been told that almost every day since he'd been brought there, but he still dreamed that he lived in the forest, that his parents had never died.

A breeze blew, moving the straw-colored hair that fell around his face and his neck. It tickled his skin and made him laugh. He began to skip along. Such stolen moments were to be treasured, remembered on days when the stones were just too heavy, too close. Or when his service seemed more than he could bear.

There was a copse of chestnut trees near the river and Andreas found a cache of nuts from last year, half buried under old leaves, still protected by their thorny coats. He split one open and tasted it, the meaty fruit of the nut still good, not even that dry. Oh, Olga would be so pleased as the kitchen's supply of nuts grew sparse in the spring.

After he had eaten two or three, he gathered what there was, filling the bottom half of his basket with the nuts. He supposed there would be more room for berries if he took all the skins off, but the nuts would last longer if he did not. Besides, the berries were not yet terribly plentiful and it was unlikely he would be able to find even a half basket's worth.

As he continued toward the river, he caught sight of a doe. He approached her, getting quite near before she scented him and took off, bounding through the woods. Laughing, he ran after her for a while, delighted by the flash of her white tail.

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Eventually she disappeared in the woods ahead of him and Andreas turned back toward the river, his basket heavy now that he was winded and sweating.

He plunked down his basket and stripped out of his rough linens, wading right into the river, squealing at the cold. He splashed about for a bit and then climbed out, feeding on the sweet raspberries he found near where he'd left his clothes. He would pick the remaining ones later and look for the brambleberries once he had warmed up again.

Fingers and mouth stained by the sweet, warm berries he'd eaten, belly full and happy, Andreas lay on the soft grass and stared up at the blue of the sky. The sun soon warmed his skin, the cool breezes that blew over him keeping him from becoming too hot.

Keeping him from becoming too hot and caressing him, making him aware of his skin. His eyes closed and he touched himself, hands sliding over the places the breeze touched: his nipples, his belly, his shaft which had grown hard and kissed his navel, leaving it wet.

The brothers said that touching yourself was wrong, that taking pleasure with your hand on your body was a sin, and yet the same brothers used his mouth for their pleasure, took it as their due for allowing him to live in their stone prison.

But out here, Andreas could touch himself and no one would know. Out here he could wrap his hand around his cock and stroke himself, the pleasure sweet as it settled in his balls and climbed his spine.

The breeze continued to dance over his skin, a touch that wasn't his own, that made him tremble, his shaft growing



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even harder in his hand. The grass was soft beneath, tickling his skin gently, yet another touch. Even the sun's touch spiked his arousal, made the feelings stronger, deeper.

His breath came harsh and quick, and he could feel his heartbeat in the hot, solid flesh in his hand. He pulled harder and faster, body writhing against the grasses. The pleasure built and built, so big inside him.

It was the strong breeze that slid over him, that seemed to whisper into his ear, that made him come, the pleasure pulsing from him. He lay there, gasping, rubbing the slick, hot liquid into his belly.

A pleasant lassitude filled him and he blinked slowly at the sky, smiling as his eyes closed one last time and sleep took him.

\* \* \* \*

Andreas' dreams were restless, filled with the touches of another. His nipples were pinched, his balls fondled, his shaft taken in a hot, hard grip. The head was squeezed and a wicked tongue pressed into the slit, stealing the drops of his come. It was not unpleasant, but such touches were strange, unusual and he writhed beneath them, not entirely sure that he did not wish to wake from this dream.

It changed then, just as he'd decided that he liked it, that this dark-eyed man who used him also brought him pleasure. The dark brown eyes grew sharp, became a bright blue that pierced him, looked right through him and saw only sin.

His mouth was forced by hands hard on his jaw, the smelly, hard phallus pushed in. He began to choke on the

come that filled his mouth, that poured down his throat into his belly.

Gasping, Andreas' eyes shot open, and he sat up, coughing and choking as rain poured down onto him, making his skin cold. It had been the rain that had nearly drowned him, not the brothers with their special service.

He pulled on his leggings, still shivering as they were as soaked as his skin. There were still no brambleberries in his basket, but he hoped the raspberries he'd found and the chestnuts he was bringing home would be enough to assuage Olga. He did not want to be refused another afternoon of berry gathering because he'd played instead of gathered.

He shouldn't have fallen asleep, he knew that, but the day had been so warm and beautiful and his lover had made him feel so languid after their lovemaking.

Andreas stopped beside a great oak, frowning. There had been no lover; he had used his own hand beneath the sun and wind, and their touches were the only ones that had slid over his skin. The nap had obviously addled him more than he realized.

A fork of lightning lit up the forest, and Andreas imagined he saw a figure standing next to the elm that stood across a small clearing. The peal of thunder that sounded made him jump and he suddenly remembered the candles that could not stay lit, the voice that had broken the monks' silence, but that only he had heard.

He nearly dropped his basket when the lightning came again and this time his imagination saw the strange man closer, halfway across the clearing, striding toward him.

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Andreas knew it could not be real; it had been a tree looking like a man in the storm. He refused to think about how there were no trees halfway across the clearing. Instead he ran.

Olga fussed as he came dripping into the kitchen, shivering as he handed over his basket of nuts and berries.

"You're getting everything wet! Change out of those dripping clothes, boy, and go sit by the fire. You can shuck the peas for me. Not the sense God gave you, staying out in a storm."

He tried to apologize, to explain he'd fallen asleep in the bright sunshine of the day, but Olga wasn't interested, only shoed him away.

He stripped quickly, leaving his clothes hanging near the fire as he wrapped a blanket around himself and sat close to the hearth with its roaring fire. His fingers were still shivering, still stained red from the raspberries, as he began to open the tight, green pods and push the peas from their comfortable home into the pot.

Olga exclaimed suddenly and came over to give him a smacking kiss. "Chestnuts! You clever boy! What forest god did you have to appease for such a gift?"

"I just found them," he insisted. His mind went back to the figure he'd seen in the lightning from the storm and he realized now that it matched the man from his dream, before it had become a nightmare of memory of being used by the monks.

"Do you believe there are forest gods?" he asked her as she sat next to him, thick-skinned fingers splitting open the chestnuts, ripping the dark meat from its protective shell.

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"Hush, boy, do you want to bring a cleansing down on your head?"

His eyes widened and he shook his head. He'd seen one once, some poor soul dragged up from the village at the base of the hill. The girl had begged to be killed long before the flagellation had been finished, and the monks had used her well to drive the devils from her.

He shook his head again. No, he would not believe in any forest gods.

"That would be a shame, sweet one."

Andreas looked around. It had been the same voice as earlier. "Did you hear that, Olga?"

"Yes, Andreas, you do not believe in forest gods, I believe you." She gave him a wink and a friendly pat on the arm, took his peas and her chestnuts, and went to the great table where she continued to make her dinner pie.

Andreas sat and watched the fire burning, trying not to see the face within the flames.

## **Chapter Two**

The time of silence finally ended and Andreas found Petras and Jorgen together in the garden, working unenthusiastically at pulling weeds.

"Oh, look at your hair!" he exclaimed, glad the quiet was over because he was pretty sure he couldn't have kept that in, no matter how much he'd tried. Not with both of them shorn into the silly cut the brothers favored, with the little bald spot in the middle.

Jorgen grinned, but Petras remained silent, wouldn't really look at him.

"What's the matter?" Andreas asked.

Jorgen's smile faded. "We're being officially taken into the order, taking our vows. The first step was the hair."

"But that's good, isn't it?" Andreas was confused. "It's what you wanted."

"We can't be friends with you anymore," Petras told him sharply. "You're not a monk, not our brother—just a servant."

Jorgen's hand touched his arm gently. "I'm sorry, 'Dreas, but Petras is right. We're not supposed to focus on anything that isn't about communicating with the Lord, doing our duty, listening to God's calling."

"Oh."

Petras stood and spat in the dirt, and then left, walking away quickly.

Jorgen squeezed Andreas' arm, his expression apologetic, and then he followed Petras. He turned once, giving Andreas a sad wave, and then they were gone.

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Andreas sat there, stunned, watching until their brown habits and funnily shaved heads disappeared around a stone wall. They had been his friends and now they were gone, just like that.

And he was all alone. There were no others his age, no others even close.

He was still sitting there when Olga came out and he wiped quickly at his eyes, spreading the dirt from his fingers with the wetness of his tears. He knew he was supposed to be a man now, that he wasn't supposed to cry like a child anymore.

Olga patted him on the head. "Why don't you go grab the basket and find me some more berries?"

Nodding, he took off, running across the garden. The dust was warm and dry beneath his feet, almost hard. He grabbed the basket and then he was out the little door, into the welcome cool and damp of the forest where the dirt was alive beneath his feet and squished between his toes.

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Andreas stopped at the stream and picked raspberries and brambleberries until his basket was almost full. Then he sat and munched on more from the bushes until his stomach was full to bursting.

His arms were scratched from where the bushes had caught them—he hadn't been very careful, just wanting to fill the basket quickly and complete his chore so that he could spend as much time as possible in the forest.

If he went back.

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He tilted his head, watching the water bubbling along in the stream. There was no real reason to stay now that the only friends he'd had were no longer allowed to even speak to him, let alone spend any time with him. He could just stay out here and ... and it was all well and good for the coming summer, but what would he do when the snows fell?

Andreas sighed and shook his head, pulling off his clothes so that he could go into the water. It was cold against his skin, making him gasp, and then laugh as the little fishes nibbles at his toes. It cheered him up immediately, the way the water welcomed him and made him feel good.

He frolicked within its cool embrace for ages, jumping and swimming, holding his breath and going beneath the water. It looked like a magical world when he opened his eyes under the surface, everything shining from the sun and tinted slightly green. He fancied the fish came to say hello and he grinned, the air escaping from his mouth in a rush of bubbles.

Laughing, he broke the surface, leaping for another dive. The water slid away from his skin and then rushed around him again as he dove once more. He felt free and clean and very good.

As he played beneath the surface, he suddenly came face to face with the man he'd seen that day in the forest. Dark brown eyes laughed at him, the deeply tanned skin as naked as his own, though there the similarities ended. This man was strong, well-built and muscled where Andreas was pale and slim; neither sun-bathing nor egregious exercise was approved of by the monks.

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The apparition suddenly spoke to him, that voice as clear as he'd ever heard it. "Have you come to stay, Andreas?"

Gasping, Andreas took in a lungful of water and he pushed himself up, choking and coughing as he broke the surface, tripping over his own feet as he tried to get them under him. He stumbled to the shore and hauled himself out, still coughing, trying to find his breath again.

He curled up, shivering, both from the cold and from the man who he'd heard and seen as if he were truly there. But when Andreas looked to the water there was no man that he could see. The only answer was that this man was an apparition. He knew what those were; the brothers fasted and prayed and flogged themselves in their search for enlightenment, for their own apparitions of saints and the Lord to guide them.

Somehow, Andreas didn't think that the brothers had ever had a naked man visit them.

The sun soon had him warmed through and the fear that had gripped him faded, the light breezes once again caressing him. It was funny, but he didn't feel alone out here. Not the way he did back at the stone monastery.

He dressed and picked up his basket of berries, slowly making his way back to the stone prison that was to be his home until he was as old and feeble as Old Rufus. He wondered suddenly if Old Rufus had serviced the brothers as Andreas now did, when the old man had been younger. He shivered. One day his own eyes would be that lifeless and dull.

\* \* \* \*



He dawdled on the way back from the forest and he'd missed evening meal. Olga was going to have his hide. Luckily the little door behind the kitchen was open and he slipped through, mind working to find an excuse that wouldn't get him punished.

"Changed your mind about stealing then, did you?"

Andreas whirled at the voice, finding Brother Georgi waiting for him. Brother Georgi's voice was always cold, as if there were no warmth in the man at all, but this evening it was especially so.

"I wasn't stealing, I was collecting berries."

That earned him a snort and his arm was taken in a harsh grip, Georgi dragging him, not to the kitchen but toward the Elders' Hall. Andreas shook his head and began to struggle, dropping his bucket, the berries spilling across the ground. He had no desire to service the elders with their smelly cocks and their wrinkled, grasping fingers in his hair.

Georgi held fast, though, surprisingly strong for an old man, and as soon as they were in the Hall, one hand smacked him across the face. "Shut up, you little bastard."

Andreas bit his lip and kept his mouth closed, cheek stinging. Oh, he hated the elder brothers, he really did, but Georgi most of all.

There were a half dozen brothers in the Hall, sitting in a half-circle around the hearth in large wooden chairs with cushions on them. Andreas had always wondered why the elder brothers were allowed cushions when the rest of the

monastery was not. He knew that now was not the time to ask; he was in enough trouble as it was.

Georgi dragged him to the center of the half-circle of men, the fire throwing dancing shadows over their wrinkled faces, making them seem like demons.

"I found him trying to sneak back into the monastery just now," Georgi told the other.

"I wasn't sneaking! I'd been asked to collect berries!"

Georgi turned cold eyes on him. "You were told not to speak. Do not add disobedience to your list of sins this day."

As he could still feel the sting from Georgi's hand, he snapped his mouth shut. He knew there was no point in arguing anyway. He had been brought in here to service the brothers and if he was very lucky, that would be the full extent of it.

"There are far better things for your mouth to occupy itself with, lad," said Brother Wallace, patting his lap which had sprouted a tent. The other brothers chuckled and Andreas sighed and only hoped it would be quick.

"Hold on," said Brother Warner, the eldest of them all. So old that sometimes it felt as if it would take forever before his feeble cock finally dribbled and the servicing was over. "You spoke of sins. I would hear what they are."

"Of course, brother." Georgi bowed slightly to the oldest of them. "He was asked to go pick berries just before the midday meal and only returned at sunset. I am sure he was going to run away, stealing not only the basket with its berries, but himself as well, after we have been so good to

him all his life, feeding and clothing and caring for him, letting him be useful."

"But I came back!" Andreas protested, unable to keep quiet in the face of the ridiculous accusation.

Georgi gave him a cold smile. "Of course you did. As soon as it got dark you became scared out there in the forest unprotected and realized the folly of your ways. You were hoping to return undetected, hoping that your sins would not be discovered. But the Lord wishes you to cleanse yourself of your sins, Andreas, not to continue to carry them."

"Yes, cleanse you of your sins," murmured Brother Wallace, already pulling up his robe. "Let's get started. Twice around the circle tonight."

For a moment, Andreas thought that he *would* run, that he could make it because they were old and feeble and he was pretty sure Georgi hadn't locked the little door by the kitchen, but Georgi's hand was back on his arm, dragging him toward Brother Wallace and pushing him to his knees.

### Chapter Three

Andreas vowed he would never service the brothers again. He would not lift one finger to help them ever again. Ever.

When he was allowed out of the Elders' Hall at last, he hurried to his little corner in the kitchen, sneaking in as everyone else was asleep. The fire in the hearth was banked, but he knew the room well enough that he could navigate it in complete darkness, had on occasion in the winter months, and he found his bed without making any noise.

There was a small cloth on his pallet, wrapped around a chunk of cheese, a small slice of bread, and an apple. Bless Olga's heart, she was good to him and Andreas would be sad never to see her again, never to get the chance to say goodbye.

He put his two extra tunics on over the one he wore, along with his second pair of breeches, and he wrapped his tiny pillow and the packet of food in his blanket. They were his, earned as surely as if he'd paid for them, so it would not be stealing to take them.

He began to sneak out as quietly as he'd come in.

A sound from Olga's pallet had him freezing and then turning slowly. Her eyes were open and she was staring at him, mouth open with surprise. He stared back, pleading with her not to give him away, not to keep him from going. He couldn't stay, he *couldn't*.

Just as he thought she was about to raise the alarm she laid her head back down on her pillow and closed her eyes.

"Thank you," he whispered. Quiet as any mouse, he crept out of the kitchen.

The basket of berries was still by the door where it had fallen from his hands and he grabbed a handful of the sweet fruit that hadn't landed in the dirt, shoving the berries into his mouth. The flavor exploded on his tongue, bright and sharp and sweet, erasing the bitter taste of the monks from his tongue. *This* was what the forest had to offer him.

If he'd needed any more encouragement to run, the latch on the door had not been replaced and it took no time at all before he was through it.

As soon as he reached the cover of the trees, Andreas ran.

\* \* \* \*

Andreas made his way to the stream as fast as he could. He *was* scared of the forest in the dark. The brothers had made sure they all knew that dangers and demons lurked behind every tree, just waiting for the dark to attack anyone foolhardy enough to be out and about once the sun was gone.

He was out of breath, panting harshly by the time he reached the small clearing with its soft grasses and sharp-thorned berry bushes, and more than a little afraid. There had been so many noises as he ran: twigs snapping and howls, whispers and footsteps, all chasing after him.

He sat with his back against a wide oak, clutching his blanket to him, eyes wide and searching the clearing and the trees for any movement.

He'd almost fallen asleep when he saw something move out of the corner of his eye and he jerked awake, eyes wide.

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To his surprise and dismay, the movement didn't turn out to be a branch of a tree or his imagination. Oh, no, there, across the grass by the trees, stood the mysterious man with the dark eyes.

He was dressed in a velvet robe of a rich green that blended into the forest and his hair was loose, flowing around his face and down his shoulders, thick and dark in the night. He moved slowly, his gaze holding Andreas', one hand held out, whispering softly, as if gentling a wild animal.

"That is what you are," said the man. "And I will not hurt you."

His voice was calm, soothing and Andreas felt the tight knot of fear in his belly loosen. The man came toward Andreas until he was close enough to touch and then he crouched, outstretched hand patting Andreas' shoulder. The touch was gentle, kind, and Andreas knew, he just knew, that his man would not hurt him.

"No, I will never hurt you." The man bent, lips brushing his in a kiss that warmed him all the way to his toes despite its brevity. "I am Arden. Welcome home."

## **Chapter Four**

"H ... home?" Andreas blinked at the man who called himself Arden and he reached to touch his lips where Arden had kissed him. His fingers felt more real than Arden's kiss.

"Yes, Andreas. This is where you belong. Can you not feel it?"

And what could he do but nod? For it was true. In the forest he felt free, he felt right. It was in the monastery that he felt wrong, the crushing burden of the stones weighing down his soul.

"You were promised to me when you were born, Andreas. The monks stole you from me and I have been waiting for you to return."

"Why didn't you steal me back?" He had been so unhappy with the brothers, why would Arden not have taken him away from all that? If this man were truly real, why would he have left Andreas with the stupid monks?

"You were not yet ready, Andreas."

"And now I am?"

"You are here, are you not?" Arden took his blanket full of everything he had brought with him and stood, holding a hand out to him. "Come, Andreas."

"Where are we going?" he asked, taking Arden's hand and standing next to the man. He was shorter than Arden, though not by much, but Arden seemed much larger, a great power in the forest.

"To my bower. Our bower."

Andreas let himself be led, not caring that he was soon hopelessly lost, that he would not have been able to return to the monastery on his own, had he so wished. After all, he had no desire to return to that place. The ground was surprisingly warm beneath his feet, grasses and mosses tickling between his toes, making him all but bounce along beside Arden. The man was right; before, he would have been too scared to make this journey, but now he wasn't. Well, he was scared, but motivated enough to keep moving despite that.

Eventually, they came to an enormous tree in the middle of the forest, one of the huge boughs bent to the ground. They walked along it, right up to the trunk where it met another branch, this one slightly deformed and shaped like a large bowl.

Arden let his robe drop to the bough and then drew Andreas down to lie on it.

"So soft!" exclaimed Andreas and Arden smiled and nodded, fingers sliding on his cheek, his neck.

"Almost as soft as your skin."

The compliment made Andreas blush, but still, he nuzzled into Arden's touches, his skin so sensitive, growing even more so as the touches continued. A fluttering began in his belly, bringing warmth with it that spread out over all of his skin.

When Arden leaned in, lips meeting his again, Andreas pressed forward, the touches making him bold—he did not want a kiss that was soft and barely there, he wanted Arden to taste him, to share his warmth and the good feelings. A sound slid over him, Arden deepening the kiss, tongue sliding into Andreas' mouth.



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Arden tasted sweet and nutty; he tasted like the forest.

Moaning softly, Andreas let his arms circle Arden's neck and his noises became louder as Arden's fingers began to push off his clothing. "You should never hide your beauty, Andreas. Never again wear clothes."

"But the winter!" protested Andreas.

"Trust in me to keep you warm."

Oh. Oh, Andreas thought that perhaps he could do that. It was so easy to believe with Arden pressed against him, skin like silk and so hot where it pushed against his own. Soon he was just as naked as Arden and they were pressed together from nose to toes and rubbing. He was rubbing against Arden, finding such pleasure as he had never dreamed of.

His shaft was heavy between his legs and, when Arden's hand wrapped around it, Andreas thought he might die from the pleasure; it was just so good. Arden's thumb slid across the tip, spreading the liquid that dripped from him, making each stroke of Arden's hand smoother, better.

Andreas responded instinctively, pushing with his hips, his shaft sliding along Arden's palm and bumping against the man's warm belly. He ran his hands along Arden's shoulders, fingertips exploring the bone and muscle beneath the heated skin. Even touching Arden felt good, made him ache deep inside.

He had never felt another's touch on his body before, only his own hand and the sun and the wind's caresses. Arden felt like those, only better, more, and Andreas knew it would be over very quickly, the sensations too good to last. He cried

out as he came, cried out in pleasure, cried out in disappointment that he had already spent.

Arden moaned, hand still moving gently on him as he was given a long, deep kiss.

Then Arden rolled him to his back, the man's shaft large and hard and so hot against Andreas' belly. He looked up into the dark eyes, seeing the eager glint of passion. It made him gasp, and something inside him responded to Arden, his cock jerking within the sliding hand and not softening.

"That's it, my Andreas. I will show you pleasures untold."

Andreas cupped Arden's face and boldly pressed their lips together, taking this kiss for himself. Then he lay back and smiled, his hand drifting shyly down to touch Arden's shaft.

"So hot." He wondered if Arden would wish to use his mouth as the brothers had, and had a small moment of panic. What if it was like the dream he'd had and Arden's shaft turned into the monks'? What if he was still there, in the room with the Elders, everything else having only been imagined?

Arden's hands moved on him, warm and solid, very much real, and Andreas breathed a soft sigh, met those eyes and trusted in them. He thought about taking Arden's need into his mouth and found that he would be willing, as Arden had given such pleasure to him already.

Arden laughed softly. "Oh, Andreas. I do not want you simply willing; I wish for you to crave it."

He didn't know what to say in reply, but Arden only laughed again.

"I'm going to show you something, Andreas." With that, Arden slid down his body, mouth pressing kisses on its way

down, tongue sliding over Arden's skin, over his nipples and his belly until he was quivering, shaft hard again, eagerly bumping at Arden's chin.

It was only then that he realized what Arden was going to do and he shook his head. "Oh, no! You don't have to do that. I would not make anyone do that."

"You're not making me, Andreas—I want to. I very badly want to know the texture of your heat upon my tongue, the taste of it in my mouth. I am not doing this for you, but for myself." As soon as Arden had finished speaking, he bent his head and took Andreas into his mouth.

No one had ever done such a thing for Andreas and he screamed as the heat and suction of Arden's mouth slid around his flesh. He'd thought Arden's hand had been a gift, a joy that he would treasure always. This ... this was unlike anything he had even dreamed was possible.

He looked down his body, not quite able to believe that Arden was doing this for him. That Arden wanted to do this for him. Those dark eyes turned up to him, twinkling and pleased. There could be no doubt that Arden was enjoying the experience. Not as much as Andreas himself, surely, but enjoying it nonetheless.

Arden licked and sucked him, explored him with a hot, clever tongue. Soon, Andreas' hips were rocking; he tried to stop, but it was beyond his control. Rather than pull away, Arden was encouraging the movements, hands sliding beneath him to capture his buttocks and bring him up.

Over and over again, his prick slid along Arden's tongue, the sensation maddeningly wonderful. Then Arden began to

hum and to swallow around the tip of his shaft every time he went deep and Andreas began to shake.

Coming in Arden's hand had been wonderful. This was so far beyond that he had no words. Instead he just moaned, opening his mouth and letting the trees have his sounds of pleasure and need and amazement. His voice went silent as he came, whole body tight as he emptied himself into Arden's mouth.

Sobbing, he went limp, soft shudders wracking him as Arden continued to suck, to lick him gently clean. He lay there, gasping for breath, his hand reaching to slide through Arden's dark hair.

"Tha ... thank you," he murmured. "Oh, thank you." It was no wonder the brothers enjoyed that so much they demanded the service from him.

Arden growled suddenly, and rose up to glare down at him. "No."

Andreas blinked, confused, drawing in on himself. "What?"

"What I have done for you is nothing like what has been done to you by those petty little men. They took what should be freely given. I wanted to take you in my mouth, to make you scream with the pleasure of it. Never, ever, compare anything we do with what you were made to do."

"I'm sorry," Andreas replied, hand reaching up to smooth the frown from between Arden's eyes. "I'm sorry, I didn't know. I didn't mean—I knew you weren't them."

Sighing, Arden relaxed down next to him, nuzzling into his touch, breathing into his mouth. "I'm sorry, Andreas. It is just that they stole you from me and then stole your pleasure

from you, made a mockery of something that is beautiful and fun and pleasurable. I and angered at them, not you, my own."

Andreas gasped again at being called Arden's own. Arden made him feel so special.

"You are special, Andreas. You always have been."

"You can read my thoughts!"

"You are my own—of course I can."

"So it was you who spoke to me that day when the brothers had taken their vow of silence. I wasn't imagining it." He hadn't been alone.

"No, I have been with you always, though you were not always ready to hear me. Or to see me." Arden smiled warmly at him. "I'm glad you are ready now."

"Oh, me, too!" He wrapped his arms around Arden and hugged the man tightly to him.

The wind blew a warm breeze over them, bringing with it the scents of the forest, the dark, loamy smell of the earth, the green of the trees, nuts and pine as well as the fading hints of blossoms with their promise of fruit to come. There was also a hint of the sharp tang of berries and with that the cool and fresh smell of the streams that made this forest their home.

Just like he now did, Andreas realized. He was home now with his forest spirit to keep him warm and safe and happy.

Arden laughed softly. "Yes, sweet Andreas. I will keep you in my heart."

For the first time, in a very long time, Andreas felt settled within himself.

## **Chapter Five**

Every day when Andreas awoke, he marveled again at how he was living now. He and Arden spent their days running through the trees, playing with the deer and the foxes and the rabbits. They would stop when they were hungry and eat whatever the forest provided. They would stop when they were randy, feeding eagerly from each other's bodies.

Arden made him feel so good time and again and Andreas would return the favor, learning that the things he enjoyed having done to him, were likewise enjoyed by Arden.

The first time Andreas took Arden into his mouth, he was scared he wouldn't like it. He knew that Arden enjoyed sucking him, but he had only his experiences with the brothers to go by and he wasn't entirely convinced that Arden only said he liked it because he wished to make Andreas happy.

The first tentative touches of his tongue to Arden's shaft had dispelled those thoughts immediately. Arden smelled like rich male musk, the flavor of him was dark and earthy, salty and yet sweet, and Andreas soon came to crave the taste of the drops that slid one by one from Arden's shaft when his need grew.

And it was his whenever he wished it. All he had to do was stop no matter where they were and drop to his knees in front of Arden. The eager shaft would leap for him, and Arden would feed the silky heat into his mouth. Sometimes they would fight over who would get to suck the other first.

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One time they sucked each other, head to shaft and head to shaft. The pleasure ran in a circle between them, from his mouth to Arden's shaft and up through to Arden's mouth and Andreas' own shaft. They'd lain together afterwards and Andreas had wept that something so beautiful had been kept from him by the brothers. If only they'd shared this pleasure with him instead of turning it into a foul service that had no caring in it.

Arden held him as he let his feelings about it flow away with his tears.

As the days passed, one summer sunrise after another brightening the sky, Andreas became as brown as a nut, his hair flowing over his shoulders and down his back in a wild, tangled mess. He learned to blend into the forest, to play with its inhabitants. He belonged.

He was happy.

\* \* \* \*

The hottest part of the summer had passed, the days not so terribly hot in the forest, the winding streams and rivers keeping him both cool and clean. The days were beginning to grow shorter again, the evenings bringing fall's cool promise with them.

Andreas was floating in the water, laughing and playing, the fish nibbling at his toes and his bare bottom. Arden had left him there several hours earlier to go check on the east end of the forest; the trees had been whispering tales of hunters leaving injured animals to die and of taking only horns or feet or tails of others. Arden said it was his duty to

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protect the forest, and that one day he would teach Andreas to do so as well, but today he wished to spare Andreas the sight of hurt and dying animals.

So Andreas spent the day alone, an unusual occurrence these days, but as he had the forest and its inhabitants to keep him company, he didn't mind.

He played in the river until he felt quite waterlogged and then he hauled himself up onto the bank, shaking like a wolf or a fox, the water flying from his skin and his hair, making him laugh.

It wasn't until he was tackled to the ground that he realized the forest had gone still, the breeze dropped, the birds quiet. He fought as hard as he could, trying to hit out with his arms and kick with his legs, but there were too many of them—four brothers, one of them Petras, his old friend's grip strong, holding him around the chest, keeping him still.

"Cover him up, he offends the Lord," spat Brother Georgi, sneering at Andreas before turning his back and walking away.

The other brothers got a ragged pair of breeches onto him by sheer force, but they could not hold him down and put the blouse on at the same time and in the end, they let it be.

Petras tied his hands together behind his back and put another rope around his neck and they led him like a dog after Georgi.

"Petras! Petras, please, why are you doing this?" His old friend wouldn't even look at him, though, and it was like the vows of silence all over again, only worse, harder to bear, for



Petras was helping the brothers do this awful, humiliating thing to him. "Please, I don't want to go back."

When his pleas fell on deaf ears, Andreas screamed, calling to Arden to help him, begging the trees to bend their branches and block the brothers' progress. He called upon the animals of the forest to band together and stop this, but none of it happened and he was slowly and surely led back to the great stone building where he had been dying inside.

The whole trip, the four brothers who led him prayed for him to repent, to cleanse his soul before they sent him to meet their Lord. They cared little if he was scratched or banged up as they dragged him along, and when he tripped they only pulled harder on the rope, calling to him to "get up, dog".

He tried to make a break for it as they approached the edge of the forest, but the monk who held the rope at his neck was not startled, did not let go, his grip did not even loosen, and Andreas succeeded only in tightening the rope around his neck and giving himself rope burns.

By the time they arrived at the monastery he was crying, scratches and bruises covering his skin.

Olga came running as they entered through the wide front gates that Andreas had only used once in his life—when he first came to this stone place—but she screamed when she saw him and crossed herself. "What has happened to him? Oh, Andreas, the devils have taken you."

He shook his head, trying to tell her it wasn't so, to beg for her help, but his voice was raw and Georgi's deep tones easily overrode his own.

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"Yes, old mother," said Georgi. "Andreas has fallen in with an evil lot. From the looks of him, I don't think there is anything we can do for him, but to put him out of his misery."

Andreas renewed his struggles after that. He had no desire to be tortured and even less to be put to death. He screamed and fought, the rope around his neck growing tighter and tighter. He knew, though, that they would show him only the mercy of death and he continued his struggles until the world grew dark and finally faded away.

## **Chapter Six**

Andreas knew not how long he'd been unconscious, but when he came again into himself he was still tied, lying on the flat judging stone. The Elders were gathered in a semicircle around him, the entire company of brothers beyond them, gathered and watching.

He could feel their eyes, like points of fire against his skin.

"Stand," ordered Georgi. "Stand and face your death with honor. Stand and repent."

Andreas struggled to his feet, but he did not beg for his life, nor did he offer anything in the way of repentance. He was not fearful for his soul—he belonged to the forest and after he died, he would return to it, to blow as a breeze through the trees or to begin life anew as an acorn or maybe even a mouse or small fish.

Brother Wallace took a step toward him, Georgi moving to support the old man. Andreas wanted to move away, to not let Wallace come any closer to him, but he stood his ground, finding strength inside himself, strength that Arden and the forest had revealed he had inside him. He would not look away from Wallace's eyes either; he had nothing to be ashamed of. Nothing.

"Repent, boy. Or you will find yourself in the devil's hands for all eternity."

"Better his than yours." Andreas spat at the old man's feet. The gasp that rose from the assembled brothers was satisfying. They might have him and they would kill him—he had no doubt of that—but they would not break him. He knew

he was worth something to someone. Arden and the forest, they valued him. Loved him.

A breeze blew over him, cool and soothing against his overheated and bruised skin and Andreas closed his eyes, reveling in the touch. He could smell the forest on it, the loam of the dirt and the verdant green of the trees and grasses. If he could die with that smell in his nose, with the touch of the breeze, so much like that of his lover, on his skin, then he could be happy in his last moments, no matter what they did to him.

"You will repent under the lash, boy."

He shook his head. He would not. They could not touch him. He opened his eyes and met Brother Wallace's eyes. He was not ashamed of himself, and while he was scared, he had the strength of the forest behind him.

Brother Wallace was scared, too, Andreas could see it now. He frightened the monks. All of nature frightened them, with its uncontrollable life, the way it grew and did as it would.

"You will."

Olga cried softly as Georgi brought Wallace the whip. It was leather and soaked black with the blood of its many victims. "Oh, please, Brother Georgi, please. He is but a boy."

"A boy who has damned himself, woman. He will have lashes until he repents."

"I never will," Andreas said softly. The breeze increased, the wind moving his hair against his skin, beginning to make the trees rustle noisily. It felt so good, having something standing with him. He'd never had that before; he'd always been so alone in this stone place.

"Then we will lash you to heaven!" A bolt of lightning lit the sky, thunder crashing around them and Georgi smiled most unpleasantly. "You see?"

Andreas shook his head. He smiled. "That is my forest spirit coming for me." He raised his head up to the sky, watching as the clouds rolled in, growing dark, promising a great storm. The wind blew over him, holding in it his lover's touch; Andreas could even smell Arden on the air.

Georgi's face grew twisted with fury, and he snatched the lash from Wallace, screaming at Andreas to stop this heathen madness, to repent before it was too late. Andreas held firm, refusing to give up the knowledge that Arden would not let him be killed.

Georgi's arm raised, his face resembling the very devil he accused Andreas of giving in to. Before he could lay a single lash on Andreas, another bolt of lightning brightened the dark sky, hitting Georgi. The man screamed, an unpleasant smell filling the air and the wooden dais began to smoke beneath Georgi's feet.

The other brothers came rushing to Georgi, pulling him off and away from the dais. They shouted and crossed themselves, looking at him with horror.

"Devil!"

"Unclean!"

"Burn him! Burn the witch!"

The words were shouted and repeated, but Andreas hardly heard them. Instead he focused on the thunder that resounded, on the voice within that thunder that calmed and soothed him, that praised him for his belief.

Petras came running to the smoking dais where Andreas was still bound and for one moment, Andreas thought his old friend would rescue him. He should have known better. Instead of helping him, Petras seemed bent on helping the smoking wood burst into flame. With some help and a few twigs, the spark ignited by the lightning bolt burst into life, and soon Andreas was separated from the brothers by small flames that the wind quickly fanned into a blaze.

Andreas looked up into the sky and shouted to his lover. "I have faith that you are coming to save me, Arden, but I would appreciate it if you came soon."

The skies opened up in answer, rain pouring down and soaking everything. The flames were doused, and the tracks of Andreas' tears cleaned. The rain fell so hard, Andreas could barely see and he couldn't make out what the brothers were doing. He jumped when fingers brushed against him, working the ropes loose.

"Go," hissed Olga. "The side door is open—go and never come back."

When he looked back, she was gone, but he was free and so he ran. There was chaos everywhere, brothers running, and brothers praying, the rain making the ground instantly muddy and slippery.

He'd not gone far when Petras grabbed his arm. "You will not escape the will of the brothers, Andreas! You will be burned."

He knew he would not find any softness in Petras' eyes, but he had to look, had to see that his friend was truly no longer his friend. He saw only a brother, stern and unhappy,

and full of hatred for him. "Don't you mean the will of your god, Petras?" he asked quietly.

"You wouldn't know anything about it!" hissed Petras.  
"You're no better than an animal."

"Better an animal than one of you!" He tried to yank his arm away, but Petras held him firmly and began to drag him back toward the dais.

More lightning lit the sky, one bolt hitting the dormitories, setting the room ablaze despite the heavy rain. The chaos in the courtyard grew, and Petras let go of him, running to Wallace's side as the old man began to slump.

Andreas took full advantage of his reprieve and began to run, making it to the side door without being noticed. He slipped out and ran for the trees, not looking back.

He would never look back.

\* \* \* \*

The trees shielded him from the worst of the rain and when he could no longer hear the flames or the shouts and screams, he risked stopping long enough to pull off the scratchy trousers. He flung them away from him, glaring at them as if they were responsible for all his troubles.

He continued running until he reached the stream, striding into it and washing himself. He used leaves to scrape the dirt from his body, and dunked himself over and over until he finally felt as if he'd rid himself from the touch and stench of the monastery. He still had bruises, and his neck was ringed with rope burns, but he was himself again.

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*by Vic Winter*

He would have tarried in the water, happy there, but he knew this stream was no longer safe. There were other streams, deeper in the forest, and he knew instinctively that the brothers would not venture that far.

So he began to run again, fear no longer at his feet now that he was running toward his lover, his home, his life.

The rain stopped as he approached the bower of trees that made up their home, drying the water from his skin, warming him. And welcoming him home.

Arden was making his way from the other direction, a wide smile crossing his lips as he caught sight of Andreas. Arden stopped and opened his arms and Andreas ran into them, coming home.



## **Epilogue**

Andreas made his way home, dancing through the forest. It had been a good day. He'd patrolled the far borders, discovering a group of children and their teacher having a picnic by the stream. They'd played with the water, and cleaned their garbage up after themselves.

Andreas blessed them with a breeze to cool the heat of the day, and sent a rabbit to run across their path and into a bush of blackberries, the children squealing first at seeing the wild animal, and then at the discovery of the sweet treat.

The poachers he was checking for were nowhere in evidence; there were no traps to be found and no dead animals lying around. It seemed they'd managed to scare the men off.

The ground was warm beneath his feet, and the trees bent in the breezes to touch him, the flowers and grasses making the air smell bright and sweet.

Arden was already at their bower when he got there, arms opening for him. Arden skipped to his lover, laughing happily as Arden's arms came around him.

"You've had a good day." It wasn't a question, and he nodded happily at Arden.

"I did. I saw lots of beautiful things today."

"As did I, though none compared to the beauty of my lover in our home." Arden smiled at him, eyes heated through.

Andreas melted against Arden, their bodies rubbing together. It was so easy to make love to Arden, so easy to be free and happy and give his body over to Arden. Their kiss

tasted of salt and sweet, Arden's mouth hot and wet, devouring his own.

"I want to taste you," Arden whispered and Andreas nodded. He loved it when Arden took him in that hot mouth.

Soft, sucking kisses led the way to his cock, Arden thorough in his attentions. Andreas moaned, hands sliding through Arden's long hair, shivering as the long strands slid over his hips, thighs and prick.

He was hard and leaking by the time Arden's lips wrapped around him, his hips snapping at the touch, pushing his cock deep. Arden accepted the thrust, throat swallowing around the tip of his prick. Hands wrapping around his hips, Arden encouraged him to continue moving and he did, sliding between red lips, his prick shining.

It felt so good. He would never tire of this, never tire of the things they did together.

"Stop thinking." Arden spoke into his mind, the words echoed in his head along with Arden's laughter.

"Make me," Andreas replied the same way.

And Arden did, pulling harder on him, tongue playing over his skin, fingers sliding to cup and roll his balls.

"Oh!" He cried out, hips bucking as he came, his seed pouring into Arden, filling Arden with *him*.

He slid to his knees as soon as Arden's mouth came off him, twining together with his lover.

The sun shone on them, a light breeze blowing, touching them like the lover it was, making the trees dance and the grasses bob and bow. A bunch of dandelion and milkweed

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fluff flew past them, some of it catching in Arden's hair, a portent of good things to come.

End.

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