

----- The Glowering Pines -----

The words were there again this morning, scratched during the night into the new snow that slicks the cabin's front steps. "I love you," it read, beautiful in its simplicity. Every time snow or wind obliterates the message she rewrites it. The letters are clear in the crystalline covering but no other marks mar the frozen surface. From the stoop to the black wall of silent pines more than a dozen yards away there is pristine expanse. Not even a footprint.

Breakfast almost comes from a bottle but I resist; have to conserve the precious amber anesthetic. Supplies are getting low, and there's no way to get back to civilization for more. I have food for several weeks yet and I can always melt snow for water but the really critical stuff is almost gone. Two fifths of oblivion won't last long. A week, maybe. Then the blessed stupor that stills the whispering voices of the pines and lets me catch a fleeting few hours of sleep will be gone. Then it will only be a matter of time before I succumb to the seductive whispers and walk out into the trees. Part of me thrills at the thought of meeting my precious one among the dark, eternal trees, of holding her again as I did in the happiest moments of my life. And part of me cowers in numb horror at the same thought.

I stand at the window looking out at the early morning sunlight trying to pierce the shadows under the glowering pines. The woods are too thick, the branches too heavy with needles for the feeble light to reach the ground during the summer. Now, with the shroud of snow added to the fortress' walls there is only murky light beneath the trees. The clearing where this cabin stands fills with watery light as the sun rises but outside that small oval the light never quite wins the battle. Somewhere out there she sleeps, in a hollow log, perhaps, or in the silent, stony crypt I built for her.

Behind me the hearth glows with cheery flames. I can't quite say why I build the fire every morning. True, for survival I need the heat, but I don't really care whether I survive another day -- yet, for all that, the flesh and its encoded self-preservation instinct won't permit me to just let the cold claim me. I suppose that's why I still lock the door every night, even though I know she can't come in unless I invite her.

I see myself reflected in the glass panes with the dancing fire behind my image. It brings to mind a quote from many years past: "A vampire has had a glimpse into Hell. They know what awaits them." I wonder if that's true, that she's seen past the veil into the infernal pits and if she's damned to that torment when she truly, finally, dies. Is that also what waits for me if I lose the will to resist and fall into the velvet noose of her embrace? Will her kiss condemn me as she is? Is the end worth the cost of admission? Every morning I decide that it is and every night I change my mind and lock the door and pour another four fingers of oblivion.

I was never a drunkard, but I became one a few nights ago. I stumbled from my bed, more asleep than awake, knowing I was going to open the door and find her hungry lips. I lurched across the floor, fingers reaching blindly for the door latch, the whispered siren's call a magnet drawing me irresistibly to my fate. I started to lose my balance as I passed this window and had to halt a moment to regain it. Through the window I saw her standing against the ebony wall of the trees. She was silhouetted against the blackness of the numberless tree trunks, a chilled wraith of drifting snow and mist, her platinum hair blowing gently in the eddies of a breeze I would never have felt with my human senses. She was as cold and white as the full moon; the only color were her eyes. Even from this distance I could see them, like glowing

emeralds in her perfect, alabaster face. Her body was more real than fog but less physical than smoke and the white shift she'd worn when I placed the cruel stones around her still form flowed like water against her flesh. It faded and reformed, a shifting pattern of pale shadows tempting to reveal her one moment and obscuring her more solidly in the next. The falling snow did not blow or twist and the branches of the trees were motionless so I know there was really no breeze. I wonder now whether this was an alluring trick to entice and entrap the unwary.

She was standing on top of the snow, eyes seemingly focused on the cabin door and in her concentration not realizing she was being watched. I felt my arm reaching for the door latch as though someone else was doing it and I knew that in a second that alien hand would open the door and I would at last be hers again. I felt the chill metal against my fingertips and it was as though she heard them brush the iron. She started like a cat and her face turned to the window where I stood entranced. The emeralds flickered into rubies, hot as coals in a forge, and her mouth writhed into an open, unmistakable, lurid invitation. Immediately I stiffened in their gaze and the whispered voice that my ears never truly heard sang louder and more plaintively. "Come, my prince," it crooned, "be one with me again. I miss you so. Let me show you how desperately I love and need you. Open the door, my love...open the door and join me."

**COMPLETE STORY IS BEING REVIEWED BY A PUBLISHER.**