

FICTION: THIRD PLACE

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“Her throat was serpent, but the words she spake

Came, as through bubbling honey, for Love’s sake.”

— *Lamia*, John Keats

The Uncoiling

She lay in the damp, blackened earth, her body contorted in a sinuous, unnatural curve, as though she had slithered into that desolation only to find herself forever stilled. The soil, heavy with the scent of rot and rain, clung to her like a burial shroud. The night’s chill seeped into her skin, coiling about her ribs, but it was not the cold that gnawed at her—it was the abyss carved within her flesh, the absence where once life had kindled and flourished. A vacancy that pulsed like an open wound, raw and unceasing.

That ancient and inexorable duty of nurture had clung to her as a celestial prayer whispered into the dark. She had felt the slow, aching stretch of her body, the tender invasion of something sacred and small. It had filled the hollows of her existence with warmth and weight. And when that life was gone—ripped from her, stolen, vanished into the cruel, unyielding dark—she had been left as a husk, an empty reliquary, a bell robbed of its chime. A woman’s frailty, her irreparable flaw: to be defined by creation, to be measured by the success of her womb.

But the body is not a tomb, not forever.

Something moved inside her. Not in the hollow where her child had been, but deeper, wreathed in the marrow, waiting.

A scent threaded through the wind—velvet skin, milk-sweet breath. A delicate lullaby trembled through the hush of night. A child. Living. Breathing. Her lips parted, and yet the voice that slipped forth was not her own. It slithered into the dark, thick with longing, with hunger, with the aching chasm of want.

What is taken may be reclaimed.

The change came swift as a snapped violin string—a rupture of bone, a sundering of flesh too frail to contain the thing unfurling beneath it. Her fingers curled against the earth, but they were no longer fingers. They were something sinuous, sleek—something made to grasp, to ensnare. The hunger, ancient and insatiable, uncoiled within her.

She rose, silent as the creeping dark, her mouth shaping the lullaby. It had never been hers. But soon, the child would be.

And this time, she would not let go.