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## Serpent

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# Serpent

by Joan McCarthy

Serpent sinuously slips unseen and smiling through the grass with eyes narrowed to cruel slits. It has heard the cry of pain and rejoices.

“That cry echoes across the universe. It trumpets my victory. Scream Eve, scream,” it hisses. “Today something new will be added to creation. Adam, the namer, will have to provide a name for the cessation of life.”

On its belly it slithers silently to a low tree and peers at the woman who lies curled beneath the branches. Fear and pain are on her dirt streaked face, and sweat gives a sheen to her skin in the light of early dawn. She moans. Serpent tingles with delighted anticipation and moves up the trunk of the tree and on to a branch to watch with eager, glittering eyes.

“You chose to know good and evil,” it lisps. “My gift to you, Eve. Know evil. Know pain in your once perfect body. Feel the coming of the end. God has cursed us, but your screams are my laughter in God’s face.”

Eve’s body jerks at the sound. She recoils in recognition and struggles to push herself away, but the tree trunk blocks her. “Not you. Not now,” she whispers through clenched teeth. Her whole body begins to tremble before Serpent’s icy stare.

“Yes, woman, it is I, the one you accused.” Serpent brings its head within inches of her face. “But why are you fearful? I sought only to make you wise. This suffering is the Maker’s doing. It was the Maker who denied you eternal life and drove you from Eden.” Serpent draws back, lays its head on the branch and coolly regards Eve. “Remember the Maker’s words, ‘you shall surely die.’ What do you think is happening to you now woman, you mere afterthought of a jealous God?”

Eve’s eyes widen with terror and she screams for Adam. Serpent sneers. “Ah, yes, Adam, the crown of creation, over there crouching behind that tree. He is not in pain. His body is not swollen and deformed, but yours . . .” Serpent averts its eyes in revulsion. “Adam blamed you, you know,” it says turning back to her. “Now see what has befallen you while he goes free. Perhaps, the Maker is destroying you and will create a fresh, new Eve for Adam, one that will once again delight his eyes. You will be returned to dust and the breath that quickened you will blow, lost forever.”

Serpent draws its face close to hers. “Call on me. I have the power to deliver you from your pain.”

Eve stares, her eyes wide with bewilderment that changes to horror. She tries to move toward Adam. In a louder voice Serpent addresses her once again. “Do you not know what awaits you? See the fear in the eyes of Adam. He shall not help you. His manhood melts before your cries. He hears his own mortality in them and knows terror for the first time. He will run as far as he can from you and your groaning. You shall face your end alone.”

Serpent draws back to watch with a satisfied smirk as Eve’s body convulses once again. Her hands tear at her swollen belly. But, this time, no sound escapes her lips.

As the pain ebbs, her eyes seek the man. Seeing him, indeed, gathering himself

to flee, she calls out with all her strength, “Adam, stay. Be man for this woman.”

Adam hesitates and turns his head to look back at her. She extends a trembling hand to him. “Do not fear my pain, Adam. It is mine alone. You too will have pain that will be your own. Comfort me now as you shall desire to be comforted.”

Serpent drops his coils from the branch and slips to Adam’s side. “Flee, Firstmade. Save yourself. She has no comfort left to give you. If you stay, you will see her end and taste your own. Run while you can. You never needed her to do great things. She was only a gift, a helper for your great deeds, a pleasurable amusement. She has ceased to be helpful or amusing.”

Eve rises on one arm. “Do not listen to the words of the cunning one. Serpent twists truth. I have always been with you. The Maker did not start over with me. He drew me from you—as you have said, ‘bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh.’ All we have left of the Maker’s image is each other— together we bear that image in its completeness. I do not believe the Maker will destroy part of it. We must not let this evil one tempt us to shatter it and doom us to wander incomplete and alone. That will be worse than pain.”

Adam stops. Slowly the terror leaves his eyes. Serpent rises up before him. “Take care. She deceives you once again. You are the important one.”

But Adam pays him no heed. With his eyes fixed on Eve’s, he goes to her. He cradles her in his arms. With gentleness he wipes her brow and holds her through her pain.

Hissing in disgust Serpent tries to insinuate himself between them. “Fool, fool, save yourself.”

Suddenly Eve gives a great cry and Serpent sees her draw something from her own body. Its eyes widen in horror. Eve has not died. She has brought forth a new creature, small and wet and shining in the growing light.

Then the new one opens his mouth and begins to cry. The gleam returns to Serpent’s eyes. “This is not a new creation. It too feels pain. It is just one of them. I will coil around the door of his heart and have my way with this one too. I can wait.”

But the crying hushes. Adam, his face full of wonder as he tries to name what he has seen, has broken a large leaf from a nearby tree and brought it to Eve. She covers the man child with it and cradles him to her body.

All that can be seen is the kicking of tiny heels. A smile of triumph flickers across Serpent’s face and then suddenly dies. A shiver runs along its body, and it quickly lowers its head and slides silently away through the dust.