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Opening extract from

Serpents and Werewolves Tales of Animal Shapeshifters from Around the World

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For Gowan, Mirren and Colin,
the three most magical people in my life!

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The Snake Prince

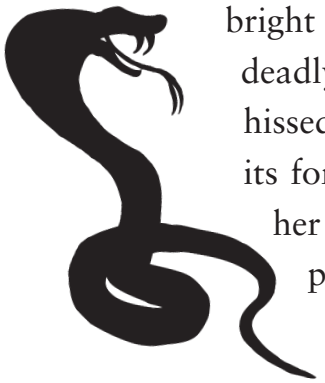
Punjabi Folktale

Snakes can hide in the most unlikely places.

One hot morning, an old woman carried her clay pot down to the river. She stood the pot on the riverbank while she washed her hands and face. When she lifted the pot to fill it with water, she saw a snake coiled up inside.

A small, brightly coloured snake.

It was beautiful, but she knew that such



bright colours usually meant deadly poison. The snake hissed at her and stuck out its forked tongue. She threw her veil over the top of the pot and backed away.

But it was her only clay pot. She couldn't afford to buy another. She had to get rid of the snake. She took a deep breath and used a stick to lift the veil.

The snake had vanished.

Inside the pot now was a beautiful necklace, made of gleaming gold and bright jewels, shaped like a snake with its tail in its mouth.

The old woman gasped. She'd never seen anything so beautiful (except possibly the snake, with its vivid jewel-coloured scales) and she'd certainly never seen anything so valuable.

She picked the pot up, with the necklace rattling inside, and she ran to the King's palace. She showed the serpent necklace to the King and Queen, and told them the story of the



snake in the pot, which they laughed at kindly. They offered her many coins for the necklace. She accepted, because coins to buy food were more use to her than fancy jewellery.

The King and Queen laid the necklace in a wooden box in their room, for the Queen to wear on a special occasion.

And a special occasion arrived the next day. The King and Queen were invited to a feast in the neighbouring kingdom, to celebrate the birth of a baby princess. The Queen tried to smile when she read the invitation. She had no children of her own, and while she was pleased for the neighbouring queen, she was sad too.

"Cheer up," said the King, "this is a chance to wear that beautiful serpent necklace."

They went to the bedroom and opened the wooden box.

The necklace had vanished.

Inside the box now was a baby boy, waving his arms and gurgling.

A perfect, healthy, smiling baby boy.

The Queen picked the baby up and hugged



him. “This is a gift to us. A child, at last!”

So they raised the boy as their own, as the Prince of their kingdom. When he was eighteen, he was betrothed to the Princess next door.

But rumours of his unusual arrival, whispered stories of clay pots and snakes and necklaces, had spread from his city to the neighbouring kingdom. The Princess heard people mutter that she was going to marry a snake prince.

At the feast to celebrate their betrothal, the Princess whispered to the Prince, “Is it true that you’re really a snake?”

He refused to answer.

She asked again, “Are you really a snake? Tell me the truth or I’ll refuse to marry you.”

He answered, “You will regret it if I tell you the truth.”

“We will both regret it if you don’t. I can’t marry a man who keeps secrets from me.”

So they left the feast and sat on the veranda, overlooking the river.

The Prince sighed. “As a tiny child, I



was enchanted by the Queen of the... erm... slithering things, to be... umm... a thing with scales. But I was granted the right to be human until someone asked me that very question. Until someone forced me to utter the word..."

"What word? What were you turned into? Who enchanted you? Tell me everything!"

"I was enchanted by the Queen of the Snakes..."

As soon as he said the word '*snakes*' the young man vanished.

And the Princess was sitting on the veranda beside a snake. A long, smooth, beautifully coloured snake. Its head drooped sadly onto the ground, then it slid away into the darkness.

The Princess sighed. She knew his secret, but now she had lost him forever.

Unless she could persuade the Queen of the Snakes to give him back.

The next morning the Princess spoke to the men who charmed snakes in the marketplace. She spoke to the King and Queen about the



day they found their son. She spoke to the old woman, now ancient and happy in her comfortable home.

The Princess came up with a plan. She rented a house by the river. At sunset, she filled four wide bowls with warm milk and sugar and laid those four bowls in the four corners of her bedroom. She sat cross-legged in the middle of the room and she waited.

She heard a gentle hissing. Then snakes came in through the windows and the door, and up through holes in the floor. Big snakes and little snakes, long snakes and short snakes, snakes as dark as night and snakes as bright as sunlight.

The snakes slithered around the Princess and the snakes slithered over the Princess.

The Princess sat still and quiet and respectful.

The snakes slithered towards the bowls of sweet milk. But they didn't drink. They were all waiting for someone. For something.

Then the Queen of the Snakes arrived.

The Princess stood up as a huge snake

approached the doorway, slipping and sliding along the ground, long and muscular and sinuous, with dark green scales. The huge snake rose up, her hooded head higher than the Princess.

The Princess said, "Greetings, Queen of the Snakes."

The Queen of the Snakes opened her huge jaws, showed her sharp fangs and spoke. "You have gifts for me."

"I have the drink that snakes love the most. I will put four bowls out for you and your people every night of my life, if you will give the Prince back his human form."

"You dare to bargain with me?" The Queen of the Snakes slithered forward. Her head rose higher. Her eyes and fangs swayed above the Princess's head.



The Princess stood firm. "Yes. You have something that I want. Give him to me, and I will give you and



your followers sweet milk every night."

The Queen of the Snakes hissed and flicked her tongue.

The Princess stood firm.

The Queen of the Snakes jerked her head forward and jabbed her fangs into the air just by the Princess's left shoulder.

The Princess stood firm.

The Queen of the Snakes jerked her head forward and jabbed her fangs into the air just by the Princess's right shoulder.

The Princess stood firm.

The Queen of the Snakes nodded. "We will drink, and you will have your prince."

She lowered her head delicately to the floor and moved to the largest bowl of milk. She drank, then the other snakes drank, then they left the room, slowly, with the dry smooth noise of scales on wood.

But one snake, with a pattern of bright gems along its back, remained in the middle of the room.

That snake writhed and wriggled and squirmed out of its bright skin. And the



Prince stood up.

He thanked the Princess for freeing him from the Queen of the Snakes, then he smiled. "So, are we going to entertain a houseful of snakes every night of our lives?"

The Princess laughed. "No, we'll put the bowls of milk in the garden from now on!"

And they lived in contentment for many years, with only a few small secrets inside their palace and many fat snakes outside.



The First Werewolves

Greek myth

The feet of the gods walked the earth long before the paws of werewolves ran here.

Many years ago, Zeus came to earth disguised as a traveller. He walked the lands and islands of Greece, to see how people lived.

After many miles, he arrived at the castle of King Lycaon. The people in the villages around recognised a strange power in Zeus. The sparking light in his eyes perhaps, or the