



FICTION

Memoir of a Serpent Woman

SOHANA MANZOOR

I am Ranire, the serpent woman who lives in the rubbles of Al-Hammar Palace. Yes, you heard right—the accursed and legendary half woman and half snake that wanders in the desert land of Ukh-Tarar. The poisonous, golden serpent that coils herself around the stones of the desert during daytime and transforms into a beautiful woman at night—the fabled serpent woman. Alas, alas! That is Ranire indeed. So many men died for me in the last six hundred years! That too, since our story became known. We have been walking the earth for about a thousand years now.... They came to capture me; after all I am

the most enchanting creature any mortal ever set his eyes on. Ah beauty! And the legend of the lost treasure of the last King of Ukh-Tarar! You are asking me if all of it is true! Well, what do I know of treasure? What good is gold to me? I am merely a serpent that has been wandering in sands for centuries.

No, I cannot tell you anything about the lost treasure. But if you want to listen to my story, I can tell you that. I can tell you about my father, Nimer, the great lord of the desert, who married Leila, the witch-queen of the western islands. I can tell you of my two brothers who haunt the deserts with me.

I still recall the piercing cry of Leila who turned her own child into a monster in her pursuit of power. How long ago was it? She turned us into snakes and along with it bestowed the gift of immortality. Follow me, stranger. Dusk is approaching, and I will soon turn into the glorious beauty you are seeking. But mind, you cannot hold me in your arms. Any man that tries to hold me dies, because my blood is poison, as is my saliva. I am also the poison-woman.

Come, sit on that stone. Yes, I speak the language of human beings, of course. Tarry a little and you will see my human form. So, what was I saying? Oh yes, my story... The first thing I remember about my childhood is my horse Rabab. Even though I was a girl, my father made sure that I learnt horse-riding, swimming, and fencing along with my brother Rion. Rion was just a year younger than I was and we did everything together. He often dressed like a girl to accompany me to the sacred shrine of the goddess Ishtar. The amazing childhood that we had, and the fun and laughter. Our mother had died when we were mere toddlers and our father did not get married until he met Leila. But that would happen years later. Our childhood was pure, unsullied and free. Father was a good king and a devoted father. He made sure that we had everything we needed. I had three hand-maidens to assist me. At the same time, he was also careful so that we did not become arrogant and useless. I remember riding with Rabab under the clear blue sky of the desert. Our spirits were made of the same element I believe. We rode—girl and horse—in the same spirit of freedom and dare.

Our palace was made of sandstone and mortar. The spiraled towers were visible from a distance. Father often went away on expeditions, to battle the distant islanders. He was a fierce warrior and he wanted Rion to be like him. But Rion was poetic and philosophic and he enjoyed roaming in the deserts. He composed music and those tunes echoed the winds howling in the sand dunes. He had watery blue eyes, eyes that reflected the desert sky. He was a quiet child and grew up to be a young man of poetic disposition.

Leila entered our life when I was thirteen years old. I had bled for the first time while father had been away. The wise woman Keira had explained everything, but I was uncomfortable. It was a wintry month of the year; the desert sky was grey and an icy wind blew. The riders announced from the North Tower that father's army had been sighted. Rion was busy in his room working on a flute when I knocked on his door. We dressed up and waited at the front hall eagerly. Father came and with him was a hooded figure; we could see that it was a woman. A little behind them walked a boy

