

VIRGIN BLOOD

By Ahmed A. Khan

“I have finally deciphered the fourth ingredient of the alchemical mix,” announced the Nawab at the dinner table.

Nawab Raja Imad-uddin, one of the rich aristocracies of Hyderabad, was erudite, had a fondness for literature, and was active in the society. He held two things very dear to himself. One was his only daughter, Yasmina, now in her nineteenth year. The other was an apparently futile obsession with alchemy. He had been indulging in this obsession off and on for several decades but he had submerged himself in it extensively for the last fifteen years, since the death of his wife. His personal library held probably the world’s largest collection of books on alchemy, including several ancient hand-written tomes in a variety of languages. He had employed scholars to have these books translated into Urdu, the language he was fluent in. One of the rooms of his mansion had been converted into a laboratory where he immersed himself in alchemical experiments, helped by his long-time servant and companion, Baba. So far he had been unsuccessful in transmuting lead into gold but his enthusiasm remained unabated. Recently he had acquired a book that had looked promising. It listed four chief ingredients: mica, mercury, red sulphur, and a fourth ingredient that was indecipherable. The word seemed to belong to an unknown language.

Yasmina Imad, the Nawab’s lively daughter and his sole companion at the dinner table that day, feigned attention as the Nawab talked enthusiastically about the book.

“My scholars have deciphered the fourth ingredient,” he declared. “They have traced the word to Arwi, an extinct language of South India.” The Nawab paused and looked at his beloved daughter.

“And?” Yasmina prompted.

“The fourth ingredient turns out to be virgin blood.”

Yasmina arched her eyebrows. She knew her father’s wry sense of humor and she could anticipate the Nawab’s next words almost verbatim.

“Well, that is one ingredient which, hopefully, I will find in my own house,” he said.

“Papa,” she said with exaggerated shock.

The Nawab’s cheeks dimpled as his lips curved in a smile. “That reminds me,” he said. “What have you decided about Zafar’s proposal? Will you marry him?”

“Haven’t reached a decision yet.”

“What’s the matter? Don’t like him?”

“I don’t dislike him.”

“Better decide fast.”

“Why the hurry?”

“I want to get you married and off my hands before the upheavals that are sure to hit our city when the Nizam is deposed and Hyderabad is annexed into the Indian republic.”

“But I need to know him better.”

“Well, you will have ample opportunity for that. I have invited him to join me. He is coming here tomorrow and will be living with us for a week or two.”

The dinner ended on that note.

The next day was quite busy for the Nawab. Zafar had arrived from Bijapur by the morning train and had joined them for the breakfast. He was the son of a very close friend of the Nawab. He was quite a presentable young man who had just completed his degree in medicine and was planning to open a clinic in Hyderabad. By the furtive but frequent glances he cast towards Yasmina, it was evident that he was attracted to her. And why shouldn’t he be? Nawab Imad-uddin thought. Yasmina was

smart, intelligent, and a sight for sore eyes. And of course, the Nawab had no objection, whatsoever. He was just waiting for the green light from Yasmina.

After the breakfast, Baba showed Zafar to his room and the Nawab vanished into his laboratory. Yasmina lounged around, knowing that her father would need her shortly. The call came soon enough. Yasmina entered the laboratory to find her father eager and expectant, standing by a table on which a crucible filled with chemicals rested on a lit Bunsen burner. The chemicals in the crucible were boiling and bubbling merrily. A piece of lead and a pair of tongs lay nearby.

“Here, take my blood,” Yasmina said dramatically, extending her hand.

“I just need a drop,” her father said, almost apologetically. He picked up a needle.

“Sterilized?” She asked.

“Need to ask?” he said and pricked her finger. He collected the droplet of blood on a glass rod and stirred it into the boiling mixture. He then picked up the piece of lead with the tongs.

“By the name of Allah, the Beneficent, the Merciful,” he said and dipped the lead into the chemicals. He kept it there for about half a minute, holding his breath all the time. Then he pulled it out and looked at it in dismay. It had remained a piece of lead. He stared at it for some time. Then slowly raised his head and looked at his daughter.

“No, Papa,” she almost shouted. “Don’t say anything. Don’t even think about what you are thinking. I swear by all that is holy that my virtue is intact.”

He let out his breath with a sigh. “Then this procedure must be defective as well,” he said dejectedly. “I shouldn’t have built up my expectations this high.”

Her heart went out to her father. She wanted to hug him, console him. Suddenly, she had a wild idea.

“Wait,” she said as her father was about empty the crucible in the sink. “It may still work. I have an idea.”

The Nawab looked at her daughter and put the crucible back on the burner.

“Baba,” she called. Baba entered the laboratory.

“Please bring Zafar here,” she said.

Shortly, Zafar entered the laboratory with Baba.

“Try his blood,” she said to her father. Her father looked at her. Slowly, understanding dawned on him. He turned to Zafar.

“Can I draw a drop of your blood?” he asked. “I need it for my experiment.”

“Sure,” Zafar extended his hand and the Nawab picked up a new needle. “This is sterilized,” he said, looking sideways at his daughter, then proceeded to repeat the procedure of drawing the blood and mixing it with the chemicals in the crucible. He picked up the piece of lead once again and dipped it in the chemicals, pulled it out, gasped and dropped it on the table. It had turned to gold.

“What made you think that the virgin blood in the prescription may refer to the blood of a man?” He asked a little later when father and daughter were alone again.

“And what made you think that the word ‘virgin’ should always refer to women?” She countered. “And oh, by the way,” she continued. “I have decided to marry Zafar.”

THE END

*Ahmed Khan leads off another year at another realm. Ahmed, buddy, I look forward to your work every submission period. Your imagination and command of the language make me green with envy and avid for more. I await your responses, readers, on our BBS. --GAM*