

# **World Science Fiction Spring 2019**

## *Islamicates Volume 1: Anthology of Science Fiction short stories inspired from Muslim Cultures*

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# Congruence

## Jehanzeb Dar

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<http://reverie-pictures.wixsite.com/vilifiedmovie>

For a moment, Azal panicked.

She had been staring at the clock hanging in the corner of her office for God knows how long. Her eyes hurried back to her client, a middle-aged White man seated across from her in a comfortable armed sofa. Thankfully, he had not been making eye contact to notice her drifting away. He was leaning forward and had his hands buried in his dark brown hair, venting about personal issues that Azal had not been paying attention to. She shifted in her chair and sat up straight, discreetly taking a deep breath as if she had woken from a nap, and made an effort to track his story.

"... To change her mind, it's like, um, I know I shouldn't have done that, I shouldn't have gone over there," the man was saying, his voice shaking with remorse. Azal forgot his name and prayed that she

had written it down. She glanced down at the notepad on her lap and saw his name written: William Extenkamper.

"I just don't know who I am anymore," he continued. "This was my dream job, to help do good in the world, to make it a better place, but I can't focus on anything, I can't concentrate at work. I just feel lost. I know that sounds cheesy, but that's what it is, you know? I'm not the man I was before; I don't know what to do. What do I tell Nina?"

Azal had no idea who Nina was. Obviously it was someone William brought up earlier in the session. *Should I ask him to remind me? God, that would make him feel terrible*, Azal thought.

"So, what I'm hearing is that this feeling of emptiness and guilt is having an impact on your everyday life," Azal paraphrased. *Ugh, that sounded so mechanical.*

William let out a sigh and stared vacantly off into space. "It really is," he said with a tone of realization, as if he had not framed his feelings that way before.

Suddenly, Azal felt a wave of heat come over her and she started to feel dizzy. The room seemed to slowly whirl like she was on a carousel. She pressed her eyes shut and tried massaging her temple. Within seconds, the feverish feeling faded away, but this time, William had noticed her discomfort.

"Hey, are you alright?" he asked. "I'm sorry; I've been rambling on."

"No, there's no need to apologize. I'm listening," Azal said, hoping that he would believe her more than she believed herself. "I just started to feel dizzy all of a sudden."

Before she could say anything further, there was a knock at the door and she heard the office manager, Emma, call out to her. "Azal, your 3 o'clock appointment is here."

Azal looked at the time; it was almost 2:00. *Wait a minute, I don't have a 3:00 appointment*, she realized.

"Excuse me," Azal said to William as she walked to the door and opened it. To her surprise, no one was there. She saw the empty halls of the counseling center. All of the doors for the other counselor offices were shut. At the entrance of the building, she noticed Emma was seated behind the front desk, answering a phone call. It didn't look like she had moved at all. *But how could she get back to her seat so fast? She just knocked my door*, Azal wondered, mystified.

"Hey, did you hear me?" William asked.

"I'm sorry?" Azal replied, as she walked back to her seat and tried to regain her composure.

"I said, of course you're feeling dizzy, it's because you have to listen to crazy people like me every day," he said with a laugh.

Azal forced a smile, even though she hated the word "crazy" and how it stigmatized people with mental illnesses. Although she didn't hear most of what William said, she was confident that his problems stemmed from marital issues, not mental illness.

"Looks like my time is up," William said while looking at his watch. "I wish we had more time to speak."

Azal felt terrible. "I apologize, Mr. Extenkamper, it's really unprofessional of me to zone out like that. I think I have you scheduled for next week, don't I?"

"No, I mean, I wish we could talk outside of all this," William said while pointing to Azal's office.

"Oh," she responded. "Well, I'm flattered to hear that, but as you know, ethical standards of my profession prohibit—"

"I know, I know, no boundary crossing, ethics code, blah blah blah. I understand," William said as he stood up and walked towards the exit. "And please, call me William."

Azal smiled, "Ok. Have a good day, William."

\* \* \*

Instead of taking her lunch break at the counseling center, Azal went out for a drive. She recalled how her psychology professor used to tell the class to never drive when you're stressed. Azal could think of many reasons why driving wasn't a healthy way to calm one's senses, but it worked for her. But she was still troubled by the way she lost focus with her client. It wasn't like she just stopped paying attention. She did not recall greeting William or anything earlier in their session.

Back in her office, Azal finished eating her sandwich and closed her eyes for a few minutes. She needed to stop thinking about the previous session. She had received her counseling license less than a year ago and was often worried about losing her job.

Suddenly, there was a knock at the door and she heard the voice of the office manager, Emma. "Azal, your 3 o'clock appointment is here."

Azal opened her eyes and promptly opened the door. This time, she saw Emma, an older White woman standing in the doorway.

"Emma," Azal said, though she was unsure if she was relieved to see her or further confused. "Were you here earlier?"

"Well, of course, I've been here since 7 in the morning," Emma answered with a cheerful smile.

"No, I mean, did you knock on my door about an hour ago?"

"I don't think I did, no. Not since Mr. Extenkamper arrived. Why?"

"It's weird, I could have sworn..." Azal started to say, but then shook her head. "It's nothing, never mind. I thought I didn't have a 3 o'clock appointment?"

"Oh, you didn't, but this a new client. She put in an urgent request for you, so I put her on your schedule."

"She won't mind," a young voice said. Walking past Emma and into Azal's office was a South Asian teenager. She was wearing a dark green jacket, a black top, and blue jeans. Her sneakers were terribly worn and stained with dried mud.

Emma looked at Azal and smiled, "You know I hate scheduling last minute, but you're the only therapist today with an open slot for 3 pm. She really looked like she needed someone to talk to. I hope you don't mind."

In Yardley, Pennsylvania, there weren't many people of color, let alone South Asians. Azal was not oblivious to the countless stories of people of color being misunderstood, misdiagnosed, and mistreated by White counselors. Azal was not sure whether the teenager was Pakistani, Indian, Bangladeshi, or of another background, but she wouldn't have been surprised if the young woman actively sought out a non-White counselor.

"No," Azal said, "Not all." She thanked Emma and walked back into her office to greet the teenager.

"My name is Quratulain," she said before Azal could introduce herself. "I'm 19 years-old, and yes, I agree to all the terms in the informed consent."

Azal was not only caught off guard by Quratulain's spontaneity, but also by the way the 19 year-old navigated through her office. Quratulain opened Azal's drawer and knew exactly where to find the informed consent form.

"I understand that my confidentiality privileges end if I disclose serious intentions to kill myself or others," she said while signing the document.

Azal smiled and watched Quratulain flop onto the sofa. "Well, you seem to know about your rights in therapy."

"Yeah, well..." Quratulain replied with a shrug. She abruptly got out of the sofa and walked to one of the corners in the office. She reached behind the bookshelf and pulled out a plastic water bottle from the case that Azal had stored there.

"How did you..." Azal began to ask in bewilderment.

"Can we just skip past all of the boring stuff?" Quratulain asked, returning to the sofa. What 'brings me in today' – that's going to be your first question, right?"

Azal was still trying to keep up with Quratulain's pace. "Well, um, yeah, it actually is."

Quratulain let out a sigh and took a big sip from her water bottle. Azal leaned against her desk and observed the exhaustion in the teenager's eyes. It looked as if she had been deprived of sleep for days. Her black hair rested on her shoulders and her skin was brown like Azal's, but slightly darker. After she finished her sip, she sat quiet for nearly a minute.

"So, what is that brings you in today, Quratulain?" Azal asked in her warm counseling voice.

Quratulain sighed again. She looked scared, but also irritated. “I’m trapped,” she said finally.

“Trapped?” Azal asked. “How do you mean?”

“I’m trapped in a time loop.”

“Ok,” Azal said, nodding. “How so? Experiencing the same pattern of events in your life?”

“No, I mean I’m stuck in a *time loop*,” she answered, annoyed. “I try leaving, but I keep getting transported back to this exact moment in time.”

Quratulain’s response took Azal some time to process. *She must mean this figuratively*, she thought.

“Um, could you elaborate—”

“I’m not from here. Not from this time, I mean. I’m from the future.” Quratulain said. Her voice carried a tone of desperation, one that was desperate to be believed.

Azal felt her heart sink. She immediately felt sorry for Quratulain. *Such a young age for someone to suffer from mental illness*. It especially bothered her when she saw young girls of color suffering due to lack of access and proper treatment from the mental health field in general.

“Look, I know you don’t believe me and you think I’m delusional, but I’m not,” Quratulain said sternly. “I traveled back in time because I needed to escape and now I’m stuck here.”

Azal nodded again, “Ok.” She remembered her training about person-centered therapy and showing unconditional positive regard to clients; about working within the inner world of the client to avoid harming them or dismissing their reality. She recalled case studies where highly religious clients claimed to be possessed by spirits, and

how culturally sensitive clinicians chose to “dialogue” with the spirits instead of pathologizing their clients. *Maybe I should apply the same logic here*, Azal contemplated.

“So, you traveled back in time to escape. Escape from what?” Azal asked, careful to keep her tone neutral.

“Here we go again,” Quratulain said. Azal wasn’t sure what Quratulain meant, but let her to continue. “In the future, I was detained by the U.S. government in one of their secret prisons. This one must have been somewhere in Afghanistan, Pakistan, or India because I was in Pakistan at the time I was captured.”

“That’s terrible. Why were you detained?” she asked.

“My grandmother worked with survivors of drone attacks in Waziristan because, you know, nobody gives a shit about them. Years later, my parents followed in her footsteps after the U.S. began using Enhanced Drones throughout the rest of the region. People were meant to believe that self-aware machines were more ethical because they could differentiate between civilians and combatants. But that was all bullshit. Combatants, non-combatants, it didn’t matter – people still died. And Muslim blood is cheap; no one cares if it’s one dead Muslim versus a thousand of us.”

“Aside from the advanced technology you described, it doesn’t sound too different than today,” Azal said. She also made note of Quratulain’s imagination. *Possibly augmented by the trauma*, she thought.

“It’s only different in that things get worse,” Quratulain said while taking off her jacket. “I spent the last six years living in Pakistan with my parents and grandmother. They were trying to collect testimonies of the survivors and help them press charges against both

the U.S. government and the Pakistani government for their complicity in authorizing these weapons. And then one night, our house in Lahore was raided by soldiers who were part of a covert military group. They called themselves Guardians. They functioned like machines and were extremely precise in everything they did. Rumors exist about them being prototypes for some cyborg soldier project that the government was testing. But I didn't need proof to know that they were inhuman."

Quratulain paused for a moment. This seemed to be difficult for her to share.

"We were blind-folded, drugged, and thrown into separate cells. My grandmother was in the cell next to me. She had trouble breathing and I cried out to one of the Guardians, but those stone-faced bastards didn't do anything. I pulled at the prison bars until I could feel the bones in my arms cracking, until I could feel the bars digging into my palms. There was nothing I could do. She died right in front of me."

"I am so sorry," Azal said, horrified at Quratulain's experiences. "That's terrifying, I can't even begin to imagine...It sounds like you and your grandmother were really close," Azal made an attempt to focus on anything positive.

"She taught me everything: Islam, how to speak Urdu, how to keep strong, how to hold my head up high, no matter what the odds were," Quratulain said. "When my parents were caught up in their work, my grandmother was there. I just don't know how to get home without her."

"You've made it this far," Azal said encouragingly. "All of the strength it took you to get here – it's a testament to you, as much as it is to her. I'm sure she would have been proud of you. Not to mention, you managed to escape, obviously. How were you able to do that?"

Quratulain's answer came slowly: "I... I summoned a portal in my cell."

"A portal?"

"It's a wormhole. It connects two distant points in space and time. I can generate one and pass through it, but I don't have control over where it takes me."

"And when you traveled through... the wormhole, you ended up here?" Azal asked. Quratulain nodded.

"How are you able to summon it?" Azal followed up.

"It's activated through a stone. It's called a turbah, it's what many Shia Muslims use in their prayers. But this one is different."

"Oh ok, I'm not familiar with that," Azal said. Having been raised Sunni, she didn't know too much about Shia beliefs and practices.

"It's a small clay stone that worshippers touch their foreheads upon when making *sajdah*, or prostrating in prayer. It's believed to be a practice of the Prophet."

"Oh, I didn't know that before," Azal said. "And is there something unique or special about this particular turbah?"

"My grandmother gave it to me," Quratulain replied. "She said Hazrat Fatima gave it to her in a dream...."

"And what does this wormhole look like?" Azal asked.

"Beautiful," Quratulain answered simply. "But frightening at the same time. It's like when you look at a solar eclipse: you're astonished by its beauty, but also scared because it reminds you how small we are in the universe."

Azal nodded as she thought about her next question.

"It's exhausting having to explain this over and over again," Quratulain said while pressing her hand against her forehead.

"I'm sorry," Azal said. "That must be draining. How many people have you told this to?"

Quratulain lifted her head and locked her gaze on Azal. The troubled look in her eyes unsettled Azal unexpectedly.

"Just you," Quratulain said.

"Ok, so you didn't tell any friends or—"

"This is the thirteenth time I've met you." Quratulain interrupted. "The thirteenth time I'm having this same exact conversation with you in your office. The thirteenth time I'm telling you my story. It's an endless loop."

Azal felt a shiver run down her back. For a second, she felt terrified – terrified that Quratulain might be telling the truth. She thought back to the knock at her door and the way Quratulain knew her way around the office. It was as if she had been here before.

*Nonsense. That's impossible.* Azal tried to force herself to block out the irrational thoughts.

"It wasn't *déjà vu* you experienced earlier," Quratulain said. "It was your mind seeing the future because I had already been here. Then the day got reset and I repeated it with you."

Azal felt stunned.

"Time doesn't travel in a straight line," Quratulain explained. "It curves, like a giant circle. Thanks to this loop I'm stuck in, the people I come in contact with also get affected in some way or another. In this case, since I've been interacting with you, your mind temporarily went in circles and you saw bits of the future."

Azal's mind was bombarded by a flood of conflicting thoughts, but she also noticed her own curiosity growing – a curiosity that disturbed her because it implied some part of her believed Quratulain.

"So, you're saying that we've spoken before, on this same day, Thursday, October 6th, 2016," Azal said.

"Yes, and I stay in this time until tomorrow because, for whatever reason, the wormhole doesn't generate until then. But when I walk through it, it doesn't take me home. It brings me back to today, right outside this counseling center at around 3 pm. Everything resets and no one remembers me, as if I had never been here before. Yet I remember everything.

"And... when you and I speak, what happens in those conversations?"

"I ask you a lot of questions, about who you are and your life in general. You're resistant at first and tell me that this session is supposed to be about me. But you finally open up."

"And what do I say?" Azal asked hesitantly.

Quratulain ducked her eyes and responded, "I know that you're 32 years-old, you just received your counseling license... and that you're afraid of failure. You worry about losing your job, but more than anything, you're afraid of letting people down, especially those close to you."

Azal felt like her mind was being read. *No, this could apply to anyone*, she thought.

"You hate living in this town. You hate always being the only Muslim and person of color wherever you study and work. At the same time, you fear that this place is part of you and that you can't really let go. You have a boyfriend, but you don't like calling him that because you're not sure where the relationship is going."

Azal stepped away from her desk and turned her head to hide her alarmed state. "Ok, just stop..."

Quratulain continued. "You're ashamed you can't speak Urdu and feel out of touch with your community. You want to reconnect with your roots, but you don't know how—"

"How do you—?"

"You wish you could believe in God because you often feel alone and death frightens you—"

"Ok, that's enough!" Azal shouted. "Let's um..." She tried to retain her professional counselor voice, but she was shaken by the details Quratulain knew about her.

"Don't worry, I'm not here to preach to you," Quratulain said.

"How do you know so much about me? I've never shared those thoughts with anyone."

"I told you," Quratulain said. "I've been here before."

Azal was still recovering from how startled she felt. Quratulain stood up and threw her jacket on.

"I have to go now."

"Where are you going?" Azal asked.

"There's something I have to do. If it doesn't work, then I'll be here in the morning."

"I'm actually not in the office tomorrow," Azal said. "Fridays are my day off."

Quratulain stopped at the doorway and faced Azal before exiting.

"Trust me. You'll want to see me tomorrow."

\* \* \*

"She's obviously delusional," Khurram said.

Azal was slightly slouched on a beige leather couch in Khurram's fancy apartment and listened to him express his blunt opinions about Quratulain. She knew she wasn't supposed to share details about client sessions with unauthorized individuals due to confidentiality agreements, but Azal made an exception for Quratulain's case. She also trusted Khurram, whom she had been dating for over a year. He was a professor of Islamic Studies at a prestigious university about an hour away from Azal.

"You can't jump to that conclusion," Azal said with a note of defensiveness in her voice. She watched him in the kitchen as he opened the refrigerator. The quiet night sky was visible from the window beside him.

"Like, it doesn't make sense," he said. "If she's from the future, then why come to you? Wouldn't she try to find some astrophysicist or some Doc Brown-type guy to help her?"

"What, you don't think I'm well versed on the science of time travel?" Azal said playfully.

Khurram smiled as he poured himself a glass of juice. Her gaze remained on his smile, a sight that she loved seeing, especially after the distress she experienced in her counseling sessions. He wore thick-framed glasses that matched handsomely with his brown skin and neatly trimmed beard. His blue checkered dress shirt had been unbuttoned and was worn over a plain white t-shirt.

"Hmm, well for all I know, with all the information you can't tell me about your clients, maybe you *are*," Khurram said, returning the playful tone.

"Yep, it's one of my secret talents," Azal said.

"Oh yeah? What other hidden talents do you have that I don't know about?"

"If you stop wasting your time in the kitchen and come over here, maybe I'll tell you," she said.

"Yes, ma'am," Khurram replied, quickly making his way to the couch. Azal wrapped her arms around his stomach and rested her head against his chest. She let out a sigh and tried to shut off her mind. She just wanted to rest and forget everything she experienced earlier in the day.

"Thanks for asking me if I wanted something to drink, by the way," Azal said, continuing to tease Khurram.

"Ah, I'm so sorry. It's cranberry juice, you want some?" Khurram said

"Yes, please."

"Sorry, I wasn't thinking," Khurram said while walking back to the kitchen.

"Yeah, not with your brain anyway," Azal said with a laugh.

"Ha ha, L-O-L," Khurram replied sarcastically.

Azal sighed and looked out the window, at the seemingly empty night.

"You know, it was like she read my mind. I had this weird *déjà vu* before the session started, but it felt so real. It was like a vision, I've never experienced anything like that before."

"It's just your mind playing tricks on you," Khurram said from the kitchen.

"But she knew exactly what I saw in my mind. How could she have known that?"

"A lucky guess maybe?"

Azal shook her head. *It was too accurate to be a guess.* Her eyes were still looking out the window.

"In graduate school, my theory of choice was person-centered therapy," she said. "It states that one of the most important and basic principles for counseling is *congruence* – that counselors should be their authentic selves, not assume 'expert' roles or carry a façade of professionalism. The goal is that it is genuinely *you* in the session, connecting with someone on the most basic human level."

Khurram walked back to the couch and handed Azal her drink. He sat a few spaces away from her and listened.

"Throughout my work, I try to be *real* with my clients, so that they experience me as I really am," she continued. "Not as someone who is going to dictate what she feels is 'best' for them. But today, with Quratulain, I realized that my real self surfaced for the first time in a session. I didn't have the answers. All of the confusion and uncertainty I had, all of my concern for her, and even the anger I directed at her – things that clients are not supposed to see – she *saw* all of it."

After speaking, Azal took pause. A question crept into her mind, one that she didn't feel comfortable sharing with Khurram, even though she wanted to. *The things Quratulain shared with me, the impossible things*, Azal thought. *Are you still congruent when you start to believe the impossible?* Azal quickly pushed the question out of her head.

"Yeah, but Azal, I'm sure that approach has its limitations," Khurram said. "I understand not wanting to take a more directive role as a counselor, but some people need direction. Some people need real medical treatment and you need to ask yourself: are you withholding Quratulain from that?"

Azal knew that there was some truth to Khurram's words. He continued, "I know you don't like diagnosing people, but why don't you refer her out to someone else? Let her be someone else's headache. Maybe send her to one of the psychiatrists at the agency."

Azal sat up straighter on the couch and faced Khurram. "Are you kidding? Do you know what they'll do to her? They'll institutionalize her—"

"No, they won't," Khurram said, trying to be reassuring.

"She's a Pakistani Muslim girl who escaped violence perpetrated by the U.S. government. They already think something is wrong with her before she opens her mouth. If she was attacked by the Taliban, we'd see politicians and women's rights organizations lining up to support her with all the medical and mental health services she needs, but she was the 'wrong' type of victim. She survived a raid from American soldiers."

Khurram chuckled, "Didn't she say robot soldiers?"

Azal was appalled at Khurram's reaction. "Khurram, she was severely traumatized. Not to mention, she watched her grandmother die in front of her. Her mind is just trying to make sense of what happened to her and her family."

"But do you really believe her?" he asked.

Azal paused. Again her mind wrestled with questions.

"I don't believe she traveled from the future," Azal said. "But I definitely believe she survived an attack."

"Yeah, but then she said she was taken to a secret prison. These places are insanely guarded. How could she have escaped? Think about that for a second, when was the last time you heard of someone escaping Guantanamo Bay?"

Azal went quiet.

"Besides Harold and Kumar," Khurram said and laughed. Azal didn't find it funny.

"So, what are you saying?" Azal asked.

"I think she made it up," Khurram said, pleading his case. "She sounds like one of those radical anti-American leftists who just wants attention."

"What?" Azal was infuriated. "The U.S military attacks her and you're going to label her 'anti-American'?"

"Come on, you've never heard of people with persecution fantasies? How can you rule that out when she's talking about AI robots and time travel?" Khurram said defensively.

"I told you, she's traumatized—"

"Or, she's making up the story to get famous on the internet."

Azal scoffed. "I can't believe what you're saying. She's a teenager, she's a victim of—"

"Yes, exactly! She's a teenager. And you *know* how teenage girls can be."

The conversation came to a halt as Azal looked at Khurram with disdain. She grabbed her jacket and started to walk towards the door.

"Azal, wait!" Khurram rushed to follow her. "I didn't mean it like that. I'm not singling girls out; teenage boys can make up stories, too."

"I need to go," Azal said as calmly as she possibly could.

"No, please don't. You're an hour away, come on, why are you being like this?"

"Because you're being an asshole," Azal said.

"I'm sorry, I know," Khurram said while gently holding Azal's hands. "Everything was going so well tonight. Let's just sit down and watch a movie."

Azal missed the feeling of his hands locking into hers, but she didn't want it. Not tonight.

"Khurram, no..." She said while pulling her hands away from him. She gently, but firmly pushed him away.

"I was just worried about you," he said. "You worked so hard to get your license and I don't want to see you jeopardize losing it."

Azal wanted to push Khurram harder, irritated by his condescending concern. She felt her teeth grinding. "No, I don't need you worrying about me like that," she said sternly.

"I'm just looking out for you—"

"Can you just stop saying—" Azal cut herself off before she got angrier than she wanted to be. "Ok, look, I need to go. I just... I need to be alone right now." She turned around and exited the apartment. Khurram didn't follow.

\* \* \*

The next morning, Azal shot straight up in bed and screamed. She had a nightmare, but could not remember what it was. She looked at the clock on her side table. It was a little past 6 AM. She sighed and fell back on her pillow, frustrated. She was relieved that she was off today.

A few hours later, she woke up and walked to the kitchen. She noticed there were over 20 missed calls from Khurram. She turned on the TV and, to her horror, she realized that something terrible had happened: the local news was reporting about an attack on a mosque.

Azal had been familiar with the mosque, but it was over an hour away and she didn't frequently attend it. The victims included men, women, and children. The perpetrator was identified as a 43 year-old White male: William Extenkamper.

"No," Azal struggled to say. She felt suffocated by the sorrow and rage that swelled inside her. *This is my fault. How could I have not seen the signs?* She knew there was only one person with answers.

\* \* \*

"You knew this was going to happen!" Azal shouted at Quratulain in the counseling office. Azal's rage and grief cried out of her. Quratulain sat quietly, disturbed by the events.

"You must have known him," Azal said, trying to make sense of it all. "That's why you told me that I would want to see you today."

Quratulain shouted back, "What, you think I planned this? Why would I attack a mosque!?"

Azal took a moment to calm herself.

"You still don't believe me, do you?" Quratulain said.

"It doesn't make sense! You can't be from the future. It's impossible! If you're from the future, then why didn't you do anything to stop this? If you *knew* if it was going to happen, couldn't you have saved those people?"

"You don't understand," Quratulain responded. "Every day, I try to prevent it from happening, but there's always something that stops me."

"What do you mean? What are you talking about?"

"This attack is well known in the future by the Muslim community. When I first came here and recognized the date, I tried telling you about it, but you reported it to the police. You weren't sure if you believed me, but you also didn't want to jeopardize losing your job knowing that there would be a potential attack. The cops took Extenkamper into custody, but they released him after concluding that he wasn't a threat. I tried to stop him myself, but I couldn't reach him in time. The murders still happened."

"After that, I activated the wormhole, but like I said, instead of taking me home, it brought me back to your office a day before the attack," Quratulain said.

"Why didn't you just drug him and lock him somewhere?" Azal asked.

"I tried that on my second cycle here. But somehow, the drug doesn't work properly and someone always finds him – either a cop or someone in the neighborhood. I tried killing him too, but it's like, I don't know, some supernatural force protects him."

"Where did you go last night?"

Quratulain looked at Azal, "I wired a bomb to his car. I waited until he got in, but it never went off."

Azal shook her head in disbelief. "Why would he do this?"

"Before the attack, he was outed as being an FBI informant," Quratulain said. "He infiltrated the Muslim community here, pretended to be a convert, and eventually married a Muslim woman. He spent years in the community, creating profiles of everyone in the mosque and reported it back to his superiors. One day, his wife Hadiya grew suspicious of him randomly walking out of the house on certain nights. She followed him to a bar where he was meeting with some other

agents. She confronted him there and she found out everything. It devastated her, that everything was a lie and that the person she loved saw her as a target, a mission. She left him and moved out with their daughter Nina. They planned on leaving the country after today, but..."

Azal felt a weight of guilt on her. If only she had been listening to him.

"It's not your fault," Quratulain said to her. "I know you feel responsible, but there was nothing you could have done. He never gave you any clues about what he was going to do. It's like... the past cannot be changed. But I refuse to believe that."

"Maybe it can't be though. Maybe this is how it's meant to be," Azal said hopelessly.

"No, I can't believe that," Quratulain said. "Remember how I told you that the wormhole doesn't open until today? Well, it only opens after the attack has happened. It's like I'm being told that I *can* change it, that I just need to try again."

"But I don't understand. Why waste your time telling me everything yesterday? You could have used that time to find other ways to stop him," Azal asked.

"Because I decided to try something different this time and find someone else to go through the wormhole," Quratulain said, looking directly at Azal. "And in order for that to happen, I needed someone who believed me. Someone who would listen to me without judgment and would make every effort to understand, even if it meant considering the impossible."

Azal began putting the pieces in her head. On Quratulain's thirteenth cycle in the past, she planned on using a bomb to kill

Extenkamper. Since that didn't work, she relied on her backup plan: to convince Azal to travel into the past.

Quratulain said, "Maybe *you're* the one who's supposed to go through the wormhole. Maybe you're the one who can stop it, not me."

Azal's response came impulsively.

"I'll do it."

\* \* \*

In order to activate the wormhole, Azal needed to face Mecca and pray. Quratulain and Azal had cleared space in the office to make room for prayer. Quratulain had placed the turbah at the top of a prayer rug – it glistened like a gem. Azal also noted the inscription on the turbah, reading "*Ya Fatima*" in Arabic. It had been a long time since Azal prayed, but she was amazed at how the verses came back to her so fluently. After the prayer finished, the turbah glowed like a lantern, shining a beam of light against the wall. An ethereal, round shaped 'window' with misty edges emerged. Inside the window was what appeared to be an endless field – filled with brown barley gently blowing with the wind. The mystical landscape was softly lit by a blue-violet evening sky. *Quratulain was right, she thought. It is beautiful.*

"I don't know what will happen when you pass through. You could get lost in time, for all I know," Quratulain said.

"Well that's comforting," Azal said.

"But hopefully you'll be in that field. Now, this is really important: once you're there, you need to keep running. Don't get distracted by what happens around you and don't change direction; just keep going forward until you're taken back in time. You should end up at your office, yesterday. *Insha'Allah.*"

*"Insha'Allah,"* Azal repeated.

Quratulain smiled briefly and then hugged Azal. Azal was caught off guard, but she embraced her back. The last time Azal had hugged someone so close was when she moved away from home.

"I'll be alright, ok?"

Azal walked closer to the shining portal.

"Come back for me," Quratulain said to her. "Come back for all of us."

Azal nodded, took a deep breath, and stepped into the light.

In an instant, she was in the field. She was startled by how quickly it happened. She looked around and saw nothing but endless fields of barley. *Damn, which way is forward?* The long grass started to shake and she heard a low, menacing growl. It sounded like an animal, but an animal unlike Azal had heard before. The ruffling of the grass crept closer, reminding her to run.

Azal charged forward, away from the noise. She heard more sounds of creatures around her. Her feet raced through the barley and then heard sounds of human voices whispering, talking, shouting, screaming. There were too many of them to hear anything coherent. She continued to run, her feet pounding on the dry soil below. She heard swords clashing, horses neighing, gunfire, distant explosions, cars driving by, planes taking off – the sounds of different time periods throughout history. Azal couldn't help but scan her surroundings to find the origin of the sounds, but she saw nothing except the swaying barley. She looked to the sky and saw a flock of birds soaring. As the birds flew closer to the earth, her eyes widened when she realized what they really were: a swarm of arrows raining in her direction! She frantically ran

diagonally, towards open space. The arrows stabbed into the ground one by one, the last of which nearly piercing through her foot.

*Would have been nice if you prepared me for that, Quratulain,* Azal thought. She continued to run, but was worried that her direction changed. She noticed that the sounds were slowly fading. Everything became eerily silent. Suddenly, her foot fell through air and she stumbled forward. The earth beneath her had vanished.

The ground was gone. The field was gone.

She spiraled into a vacuum of nothingness, her cries silenced by the void and her hands reaching for anything to grab a hold of.

She continued to fall into mystery.

\* \* \*

A radiant sun forced Azal's eyes open. She lay on her back and slowly sat up. She noticed bits of sand scattered on her shirt and pants. She observed her surroundings and found herself lying on a flat desert plain. A few feet away from her was a lake of clear water, glistening in the sunlight. She climbed to her feet while turning to view the vacant landscape around her. *Am I dead? Is this the past?*

When she turned around to look at the lake again, she was startled by a green-clothed figure sitting on a horse. The horse was so luminous that it took a moment for Azal to see that it had wings! She remembered stories her mother used to tell her, about a majestic horse with wings that flew the Prophet to the seven heavens. *Could this be...?*

The person wearing the green hooded robes was difficult to see, but then Azal saw the person gesture to her, inviting her closer. Azal was hesitant at first, but she walked towards the lake. She saw that the person in green was a woman with dark skin and black hair. She smiled

at Azal and climbed off the horse. The woman held her hand out to Azal, asking her to follow her closer to the lake. "Who are you?" Azal asked.

"A Friend of God." The woman replied in Arabic, but somehow, in this place, Azal understood her. Azal touched the woman's hand and felt a wave of warmth fill through her arm. She followed the woman and watched her kneel by the lake. The woman touched the pool of water and, unexplainably, the entire lake rippled softly. Soon, a vision appeared.

In the lake, Azal saw an image of an older woman. She must have been at least 70 years-old. She was seated against a wall and looked to be in immense pain. She looked familiar to Azal.

"Wait, that's me," Azal said, turning to the woman in green. The woman nodded and looked back into the water. Azal couldn't believe she was seeing her future self. Then she heard someone screaming – a familiar voice. It was Quratulain!

The vision revealed that the older woman was in a prison cell, gasping for air. Quratulain was calling out to her and shouting at the guards to help.

The woman in green spoke to Azal: "She is your granddaughter." The realization overwhelmed her. She continued to watch and listen.

"Open the gate! Can't you see!? She can't breathe!" Quratulain was shouting.

The older Azal of the future called out to Quratulain, "Quratulain, listen to me! Forget them, listen to my voice! You know how to escape. Remember how I showed you."

"But we tried it before, *Nani jaan*. It doesn't work—"

"It will work this time, trust me," Azal's older self replied, struggling to breathe. "Come back for me. Come back for all of us."

Before the vision in the lake faded, it showed Quratulain using the turbah to activate the portal. Azal turned to face the woman in green.

“She knew I was her grandmother, didn’t she?”

“Yes,” the woman in green said. “That is why she came to you.”

“She has been through so much,” Azal said. “Not just her. So many people have suffered.”

“People like you can change that,” the woman said. “If you believe you can.”

“But Quratulain tried to change things – numerous times. Nothing happened.”

“Because you needed to come here first,” the woman said, placing something in Azal’s palm. “Nothing happens except that which Allah has ordained for us.”

Azal opened her hand and saw the turbah that they used to travel through time.

“You know whom to give this to,” the woman in green said, before turning away and walking back to the horse.

A bright light emanated from the horse’s expanded wings and shone into Azal’s eyes.

“Wait!” she cried out.

She had so many questions. But it was too late, the light engulfed her.

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Azal eyes shot open in her bedroom. She was sitting up in bed and saw the morning light come through the window. *I’m back*, she thought. She looked at the clock on the side table reading 6:00 AM. *It must be Friday again*. Azal threw off the blanket, grabbed her car keys and rushed outside the house.

She quickly started her car, slammed the gear into reverse and sped out of the driveway. Cars were lining up at a traffic light ahead, but Azal turned onto the shoulder lane, desperately racing past traffic. On the next road, she pressed down on the accelerator, switched lanes, and drove onto an exit ramp. She tried her hardest to remember the directions to the mosque. Her foot felt locked on the pedal, speeding past cars in the lanes next to her. 70 mph...75 mph... 80 mph... She had never driven so fast in her life.

When she finally reached the mosque, Azal sped into the parking lot. It was too early for Friday prayers, but classes were about to start at the Islamic school attached to the mosque. She rushed through the prayer spaces and hallways, searching for any sign of Extenkamper or Hadiya. Suddenly, one of the doors near the parking lot burst open and Azal saw Hadiya trying to exit the building. Extenkamper followed with a gun raised and pointed. "Don't make me shoot you!"

Azal stood in front of Hadiya. "Stop! William, what are you doing?"

"Azal?" Extenkamper said, confused. He started to lower the gun.

"Just put the gun down," Azal said, calmly. "You don't want to do this."

"How do you know what I want? You can't even help me get back with my wife!" he shouted while sobbing at the same time.

Hadiya shouted, "You're a liar! Your whole life is a lie."

Behind Extenkamper, at the opposite end of the hall, Azal saw a few Muslim teenagers cautiously walking closer to apprehend Extenkamper.

Azal wanted to motion them to get back inside their classroom, but she didn't want Extenkamper to notice.

"Listen, I know things have been difficult for you—" Azal started to say.

"I said I was sorry!" Extenkamper interrupted. "Isn't that enough? It was wrong of me to spy on everyone here. But I'm a different man now."

"And maybe you are, but that doesn't mean she's obligated to be with you. That's up to her," Azal said.

"Well, she doesn't know any better! She's my wife!"

Hadiya stepped in again, "You threaten to kill me and then expect that I come back to you? I'll never be your wife."

"Move aside or I'll shoot you both." Extenkamper said to Azal. "You can't change what's going to happen."

"You're wrong about that," Azal responded. She discreetly pressed the panic button on her car keys and heard the alarm go off. Extenkamper was startled by the sound and turned his head briefly. It was enough for the distraction she needed.

She charged forward and drove her shoulder into Extenkamper's midsection, knocking him hard onto the marble floor. Hadiya rushed to help Azal and tore the gun out of Extenkamper's hand. He tried to get back to his feet, but Hadiya swung the weapon and smashed it against the side of Extenkamper's head. He fell to the floor, unconscious. The children standing by the classroom door cheered.

Azal scanned the halls of the mosque, making sure everyone was clear of danger. She worried that something would still go wrong, but nothing did. Everyone was safe. The past had changed.

*"Alhamdullilah,"* Azal said.

\* \* \*

After Extenkamper was taken into custody and the mosque was secured, Azal returned to her office. She saw Emma sitting at the front desk.

"Azal, thank God!" she said. "I heard what happened, I was so worried about you—"

"I'm fine, Emma. Listen, did you hear from Quratulain?"

"I'm sorry, Qur...who?" Emma asked, confused.

"My 3 o'clock from yesterday. Pakistani girl, long black hair, a little shorter than me?"

"But you had no 3 o'clock appointment yesterday," Emma said.

Azal nodded.

"Of course not," she said out loud. *She hasn't been born yet.*

As Azal made her way home, she thought about the frightening future Quratulain described. If stopping the attack on the mosque was possible, then maybe there were ways to prevent the world from going down a destructive path. Azal remembered what Quratulain said about the future getting worse without dismissing the reality that violence against Muslims, Black people, people of color, and other marginalized groups existed in Azal's present. Azal wanted to be committed to working towards a better world. Not just for the people of today, but for the children of tomorrow. *All of us can make a difference*, Azal thought.

She walked into her bedroom and saw something shining on the floor. She reached down and picked it up. It was the turbah that the woman in green had given her, the same one that Azal would give to Quratulain many years from now. Azal held the clay stone next to her

window, watching it glisten in the sunlight. The Arabic inscription "Ya Fatima" shined. She smiled.