

Islamicates Volume I

Anthology of Science Fiction short stories inspired from Muslim Cultures



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Insha'Allah

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Author Bio: R.F. Dunham writes with one purpose: to take you places you've never been before. That might be a distant fantasy land, the far reaches of space, an alternate earth, or simply to an idea you've never encountered. A student of language and culture, Dunham's stories will pull you into complex worlds that challenge your perception of your own surroundings. R.F. lives in the foothills of Central Virginia with his wife, two cats, and a Newfoundland dog. If he's not writing, he's probably brushing that dog. Any remaining time is spent playing jazz trumpet and hiking in the Virginia countryside. You can learn more about R.F., get connected, and sign up for free books at DunhamWriter.com.

The teapot screamed for his attention as Khafid shuffled around his kitchen. The space was far too large for him and Aliyaa told him so every time she visited. Still, he refused to sell the apartment. It was home and it was where he would stay until he died, insha'Allah.

Khafid stooped to pull the pastries from the oven, ignoring the popping joints and creaking back that told him he was too old for such things. He couldn't afford to be slowed by his age, not today. Aliyya was coming to visit and he had to be ready.

The teapot's scream had become a frantic shriek by the time he switched it off. He reached for a cup so the tea would have time to steep before--

A crisp knock on the door announced Aliyya's arrival.

Khafid glanced at the clock. She wasn't due for another fifteen minutes. He still had to steep the tea, set out the pastries, prepare the

sitting room, and probably a few other things he was forgetting. He wasn't ready. He made his way to the front door, pausing to smile at the picture of Samraa that hung on the wall in the entryway. She always used to make this hosting business look so easy. Yet he couldn't even arrange a proper welcome for their own daughter.

He opened the door to see the top of a head thick with dark hair.

A moment later, Aliyya looked up from the screen of the *nabu'a* in her hands, bright smile lighting up her face. "Dad!" She stepped inside and threw her arms around Khafid's neck before he could even shut the door.

"You are early," he said, once she'd released him.

Aliyya laughed. "You would have known I was going to be a little early if you'd just use your *nabu'a* every once in a while."

"Bah." Khafid waved a hand to dismiss the notion. "I'm just making tea and getting ready to set out some snacks." He made his way back toward the kitchen, expecting Aliyya to turn toward the sitting room. But when he reached the kitchen, she was still behind him.

"I don't know why you refuse to use yours," she persisted. "You did invent the things. And they make life so much easier."

Khafid ignored her and began pouring two cups of tea.

Every visit always came to this. Though not usually so fast.

He handed Aliyya her cup. "If you'll make yourself comfortable in the sitting room, I'll be right in with--"

"I'm not a guest, Dad, I'm your daughter. You don't have to serve me."

"I insist." He smiled at her. "It's what your mother would do."

Aliyya returned the smile. She couldn't argue with that, and Khafid knew it. "Fine. But don't take too long, I've got something to tell you."

He joined her two minutes later, tray of pastries balanced delicately on his right hand while he carried his own cup of tea in his left.

"Dad, you should've let me get that." Aliyya jumped up and snatched the tray from his hand before he could protest.

Khafid sighed and sat down. "One day, you'll learn to let an old man have his way, insha'Allah."

Aliyya giggled as she set the tray on the floor table between them. "Why do you say things like that?"

"A man has to have dreams," Khafid answered. "Even an old man without much longer to live."

"Not that," she said with a shake of her head that sent black hair bouncing around her petite face. "The other thing. The 'if Allah wills' thing. And you've got plenty of time left to live, Dad. I checked."

"I say it to show respect for Allah," Khafid answered, ignoring her second statement. They both knew she could do no such thing. Not with the algorithms running the current versions of the *nabu'a*. "What is this news you have for me?" It was time for a change of topics.

Aliyya's face brightened right away. "I've got a job interview. To join Dr. Assad and his team in Europe."

"That would be an honor," Khafid said. And it would. Just not the kind of honor he wanted for his only daughter.

"It's super competitive and I know there's not much chance I'll get it, but--"

"Insha'Allah," Khafid said, "it will be yours."

"Dad, everybody knows it doesn't work like that now."

Khafid kept his breathing even and steady but he could feel his pulse accelerating. "Everybody knows no such thing."

She held up the *nabu'a*, affixed to her hand as it always was. "Yes, we do. *You* proved it."

Khafid sighed. He was doing a lot of that lately. "I proved nothing."

Aliyya was still waving the cursed device in his face. "You proved that we can take our fate into our own hands. You proved that life is the sum of our choices."

"Bah." He shooed the thing away. "Life is what Allah wills."

Aliyya lowered her *nabu'a* but did not set it down. Her eyes softened until they looked almost empathetic. "Did Allah will what happened to Mother?"

Khafid would have stood to his feet and walked out but he'd only just sat down and he'd been standing for so long already. Instead, he held Aliyya's gaze, keeping his jaw firmly set to prevent his lip from quivering. When he couldn't formulate a suitable response, he forced a smile, hoping to end this line of conversation for good. "You will do great with Dr. Assad."

A frown flickered across Aliyya's face at the deflection but it was replaced by a smile a breath later. "Thank you, Daddy."

Their conversation wandered in more pleasant directions from there. Aliyya's friends, her recently completed studies, how she was spending her time now that those studies weren't around to demand so much of it.

When the time came for her to go, Khafid was resolved to make their parting as smooth as possible. But the words came to his lips so naturally, he didn't have a chance to stop them.

"If you get the job, then tomorrow we will celebrate, insha'Allah." He winced, bracing for Aliyya's inevitable protest.

But she only laughed. "I've run a ton of scenarios, Dad," she told him. "My chances aren't very good."

Then she was out the door before he could offer any additional fatherly encouragement.

Khafid's head jerked up from his tea at the sound of a sharp knock on the apartment door. He didn't have to wonder who it was. He didn't get many visitors, and he would recognize that crisp rap in any instant even if he did.

Sure enough, when he opened the door, Aliyya's smiling face was there to meet him.

"You should have let me know you were coming," he said.

"So you could exhaust yourself preparing for me again?" She gave him a quick hug as she slid into the apartment. "Not a chance."

Khafid frowned at her even though he knew that he couldn't have handled another afternoon of hospitality preparation. He might know that, but he wasn't going to admit it to his daughter. "Tell me next time," he said.

"Dad."

"I insist."

Aliyya shook her head but she was still smiling. "Fine. I promise to give you some warning."

"And don't come early," Khafid added with a smile of his own.

"No promises there." She took another two steps farther inside then stopped and turned back to face him. She was bouncing lightly on the balls of her feet, smile splitting her face from ear to ear.

"You got the job?" Khafid asked, doing his best to infuse his voice with excitement he didn't feel.

Aliyya clapped and gave a rapid series of nods. "Yes!"

Fate or no fate, Khafid had known, with confidence only a father can possess, that Aliyya would get the job. He could think of any number of better uses for her skills than working with Dr. Assad to extend the reach of the *nabu'a* devices beyond a mere three choices into the future, but there was no denying that she was perfect for the job.

He took the fact that Aliyya's *nabu'a* had given her such slim chances of securing the position as proof that the devices were not as accurate as the world wanted to believe. Proof that man's destiny was shaped by forces beyond his understanding. Not so many years ago, he would have interpreted the mistake as a flaw in his algorithms. Funny how he was relieved to find an error in his work now. There was a time when the very idea would have launched him into a frenzied, all night effort to fix it.

If only he could take back a few such nights. Then maybe the *nabu'a* project never would have reached such heights of success. Or inspired such depths of blasphemy.

Once they were sitting and Aliyya had a cup of tea for herself, she told him everything she knew about her new job. The lab where she'd be working in France and the few details she knew about the project ahead of time. Khafid listened, doing his best to appear as enthusiastic as she was about the whole thing.

In truth, he'd never cared about predicting the future, not even in a limited way. The whole thing was just a project to him, an exploration of the relationship between math and human decision making. It started with the realization that there were only so many choices a person could make. From there, quantifying them and extending a few choices down the path was just a matter of getting a powerful enough processor. Now that such processors could fit in the palm of a child's hand, the technology was everywhere.

Khafid had walked away from the project years ago, when Samraa first got sick, and long after it had been concluded that going beyond three choices into the future wasn't possible. He'd always thought the ongoing research was focused on nothing more than packaging the technology for the public but, based on what Aliyya was telling him, his former student had far more ambitious plans than any Khafid had ever dreamed of. Dr. Assad was now the foremost researcher in the field and he wanted to expand the algorithm to predict global events and the outcome of political campaigns.

Khafid doubted he would succeed, but what did he know anymore?

He might be the man who gave the world the ability to predict the future but his own foresight had proven inadequate countless times. He never began to anticipate how his invention would affect the world, how it would shake people's faith in Allah himself. He certainly never imagined his own daughter would be among those to so casually dismiss Allah's hand in her life. Or that his wife would die in such a slow, agonizing manner.

Khafid gave a quick shake of his head to stir himself from the somber reflections and focus on his daughter.

"It's going to be amazing, Dad," Aliyya finished. "Wait until you see what we accomplish."

"I'm sure you will do many wonderful things, insha'Allah."

Aliyya rolled her eyes, not much, but enough. "Dad, we will do wonderful things because we do them, not because Allah wills it."

Khafid held in a sigh and raised his hand. "Enough. Not tonight. Tonight, I will enjoy what time I have left with my daughter."

Aliyya frowned and her eyes narrowed. "Time you have left? Did you use your *nabu'a*?"

Khafid's laugh deteriorated into a hacking cough. "There are some things you don't need a *nabu'a* to predict."

She relaxed somewhat but continued to watch him. "Will you use it while I'm gone?"

"Aliyya, I--"

"I know, I know, you never use it. But please, just to make sure you're still..." She let her voice trail off but Khafid knew what she'd been about to say.

"Insha'Allah, I will be here when you return."

She shook her head. "That's not good enough for me and you know it. We make our own fate, Dad. So just make sure yours is to be alive when this job is over. Please?"

Khafid nodded. What else could he do in the face of a such a request from his daughter?

The subdued beeping of his phone stirred Khafid from his nap but not in time for him to answer the call. By the time he came fully alert and snatched the phone off the table next to his chair, the tone had fallen silent and the screen was flashing Aliyya's name.

"Bah," Khafid grunted as he pushed himself to an upright position and jabbed at the screen the call Aliyya back.

She answered on the second ring. "I didn't wake you up, did I?" Aliyya asked, her voice dancing with the hint of a teasing edge.

"Of course not," Khafid said, knowing she would see through the fib. "You know how slow I am these days. Couldn't get to the phone in time."

"Whatever you say, Dad." He could hear the smile in her voice and it made him smile as well.

"It's good to hear your voice," he said warmly. And it was. She'd been gone for six months and this was only the second time she'd been permitted to call him. Assad seemed to have put a whole mountain of security protocols in place. It hadn't been like that when Khafid was running the project. Then again, the stakes were much higher now.

"Yours, too. I miss you, Dad."

He started to reciprocate but Aliyya moved on before he could.

"I've got incredible news." Her voice was excited but it dropped down to a low whisper. So low, it made it difficult for Khafid to understand her.

He covered his exposed ear and hunched over to block out any extraneous sounds. "Why are you whispering?"

"I don't have time to explain, but we had a major breakthrough."

That explained the hushed tones. "Are you authorized to tell--?"

"Just listen, Dad," Aliyya insisted. "We can go beyond three choices now."

Khafid blinked, torn between shock, pride in his daughter, and fear at what this might mean. "How far?" he managed to ask.

"We're not really sure," she admitted. "But I tested it and I had to share the results with you."

He had to smile. He might not approve of the work Assad was doing anymore, but he had to admit it felt good that his daughter was so eager to tell him what was happening.

The smile was chased away a moment later as the implications of what he was hearing settled in on him. People were already convinced they held their fate in their own hands after gaining the ability to predict the future in a limited degree. If the capabilities of the technology were extended even farther, Khafid couldn't begin to imagine the consequences. Would people even bother to attend mosque anymore? Would they pick up the holy Koran? Would--?

"Don't you want to hear the results?"

Khafid blinked and focused his attention back on Aliyya's voice. "I thought you just told me?"

"No, that was the news. The results are what my test told me about the future."

He did not want to hear the results. Meddling in the future had been a mistake, still was a mistake, and he wanted no part in it. Better that he not know what harm the arrogance of his youth would give birth to next.

But Aliyya was already going on. "You're going to be just fine when I come home at the end of the year."

A faint hint of the smile returned to Khafid's face. Aliyya had a chance to look into the future and see whatever she wanted and she'd chosen to check up on him. Meddling in the affairs of Allah or not, the gesture was a sweet one. "Then we will have a grand celebration when you return." He paused a beat, then added. "Insha'Allah."

He could hear Aliyya's eyes rolling. "Dad!"

Khafid was awakened that night by the sound of his own coughing as smoke filled his lungs. Flames licked at the walls of his bedroom, curling around the door and dancing on the ceiling. They were blazing hot and roaring so loud he had to wonder why he hadn't heard them sooner.

The panic that swelled in his chest lasted only an instant before it was replaced by a deep peace. He lifted himself to a sitting position with the same slow, deliberate motions he always used, and watched as fate came for him. His body would perish but he now knew to be true what he'd believed all along.

Not that his faith had ever been shaken. No matter how firm a grip the world thought they had on the future, he'd always known it was more complicated than it appeared. Still, after standing his ground on that belief for so long and watching as the faith of entire nations crumbled, the reassurance was welcome. So welcome, that he wasn't bothered by the fact that it would cost him his life.

A brief pang of sorrow disturbed his peace when he thought of Aliyya. She'd already lost one parent to tragedy and now fate had conspired to take another from her. But his concern evaporated in the next heartbeat. This was best for her. She would see now. All was as Allah willed. And only as Allah willed.

Khafid closed his eyes as the flames reached his bed, comforted by the knowledge that his future, and more importantly, Aliyya's future, rested in the hands of Allah.