MYM LITERATURE

Khawlah & the Newbie: Part 2

by Faeza Ashraf

Where Muslims come home to reflect

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This entry is part 2 of 2 in the series Khawlah & the Newbie

That's my cue. Tucking my gum into the corner of my mouth to save for later, I step out of the shadows and bolt. Racing past the two surprised henchmen shouting warnings, I thrust myself at Blondie as he turns, too late, to face his new threat. He topples over at my sudden force, but springs back up just as easily as me. *Fast,* I think smugly to myself. *But not fast enough.* I leap sideways to where the gun had fallen, pick it up, and slam it against the wall. It shatters, the pieces flying around me.

"Leave her alone," I rasp in a poor attempt to disguise my voice. He stumbles back a few paces, shock coursing through his face. I'm almost half his size and have just materialized from the dark depths of nowhere, courtesy of my love for black. Newbie might be annoying, loud and colorful for my liking, but this guy is taking it too far. Besides, this is what normal people do, right? Help each other? He regains his composure, regarding me with a cool look.

"I think you should worry more about the trouble you just put yourself in," he says. From the corner of my eyes, I see Hulk slowly edge towards my way, trying to trap me between the two men. Redbeard stays in place, guarding Newbie and watching me with a bored expression. *Right. These guys would totally underestimate a lone girl.* I lock eyes with Blondie, my body tense for action. *The first sign*

of attack always comes in their eyes.

"Leave and I won't hurt you." I rasp in warning. *There's no way I can fight them all without revealing my secret.*

He looks at me hard, as if trying to figure out something. "Well, missy," he says, talking to Afra but looking at me. "I didn't know you had a friend lurking nearby." I watch him warily as he gestures across his face. "We don't see that here often, girl and for a reason too." He takes a step forward threateningly. "Ya wanna know why?"

And then the glint in his eyes comes. He springs towards me, swiftly bringing up his fists to connect with my jaw. But one step ahead of him, I've already flipped forward in the air, and come crashing down on top of him. Heavy footsteps from behind warn me of Hulk, racing to his ringleader's defense. Pinning Blondie face down with my foot on his back, I grab his arm and twist. He cries out involuntarily as I apply more pressure.

"Stop!" I yell over my shoulder to Hulk, never turning to look at him. "Stop exactly where you are or I'll break it!" Blondie groans, closing his eyes. I look down at him in disgust. *So he's just all bark and no bite. Coward.* Hulk skids to a clumsy stop somewhere behind me. I turn my body slightly to pinpoint his location, a crucial mistake. Blondie's body lurches suddenly as he tries to pull his hand free. Losing my temper, I deliver a lightning punch to his head and he falls back, moaning.

Why am I doing this, again? I wonder to myself.

Because of the whole new "supporting each other in a time of need" trend, the ever-so-helpful voice pipes up sarcastically in my head.

Right...And why does Newbie have a personal miniature mafia gang after her in the first place?

I can't help you with that, it answers back.

Leaping off of his back, I turn to face the raging, bald hulk-man as

he comes thundering towards me. Locking my eyes with his, I begin racing towards him, my abaya splaying through the air. His steps falter in confusion, but soon he regains his speed, determined to put an end to the tricks I've been playing.

But I'm not done yet. I send him a wide, grim smile, waiting for him to see the corners of my eyes crinkling underneath my hood. He never does. With one last skip, I surge upwards over the man, flipping once, and bring my heeled boots down on his hairless head, using it to spring again into the air. Caught off guard, he falls, groaning. I do a series of flips in the air and twist myself to land upright. My feet tingle from the impact, but I take off running full speed to where Redbeard is standing in front of Newbie with his mouth agape.

Upon realizing my intention, he sets his jaw and takes a protective stance in front of Newbie, his face alight with determination. I glance at her, and she nervously meets my eyes before fingering her necklace. *It's alright,* I want to reassure her, when Redbeard suddenly attempts a punch.

I block it effortlessly. "What, you too?" I taunt him. "Don't you know punches are thrown with your hips?" He only regards me with confident eyes, his anxious demeanor suddenly gone. *What is –*

"Look out!" Newbie yells, and I whirl to find Hulk swinging his meaty paws towards my face.

"Oh," I mutter. It had been a distraction. *Stupid, stupid.*

As Hulk's body twists in time with his fist, time slows and I follow my instincts. Crouching down, I throw my leg out, spinning rapidly in a circle, and drop him to the ground. I quickly shoot my hands forward, springing his nerves, and he passes out. About to comment on the large bruise on his head from my feet, I look up only to find Blondie glaring at me with fierce hatred. I groan inwardly. *These guys don't know the meaning of quitting while they're ahead. They're lucky I*

broke the gun.

Shocked to see a girl of my size take down a giant with such ease, Redbeard backs off a little from where I am and both men advance cautiously. "C'mon Damius, we can't beat 'er!" Redbeard pleads over from behind me. I stand between them, turning myself sideways so I can keep my eyes on both of them. "She took Giant down inna 'eartbeat!"

I look towards the unconscious man for a second, debating. "Hulk's a better name," I say to Redbeard.

He blinks in response. "Ye ain't normal," he says.

"Thank you," I smile winningly.

"What's a Mozlem doing saving a Jew, anyway?" Blondie spits out. "Don't you see the Star around her neck?" His twisted arm dangles at an awkward angle from his side, while the other is hidden in his coat.

"I see a girl twice the human you'll ever be."

He gives a short, harsh laugh. "Your friendship with her is one heck of a joke."

"To ignorant people like you, yes. It is."

"Which reminds me," he says, the vein in his neck bulging. He draws a knife from the folds of his long coat and shouts in rage as he springs towards me, "You don't belong here!" *Seriously? That again? And he loses his temper after being calm for so long. Rookie mistake.*

His hand shoots out to stab me, but mine is faster. I grab his wrist and kick both his legs, one after the other, my strength temporarily numbing them. He lets out a cry of surprise, but leaps forward anyway to try again. I dodge his rapid stabbing motions from his good hand easily, my smirking eyes locked on his the whole time. The movement of my loose abaya makes it harder for him to aim while I ghost his moves.

"You try hard," I say graciously. "In the wrong things, but you try

nevertheless. A plus!"

Anger flashes through his face, and with a sudden burst of speed, he pulls at the covering of my face. My head jerks forward for a moment, and its tie snaps. I stumble backwards, surprised, but he already has the knife pressing under the bare skin of my chin.

Ya Allah, let my face be hidden to him. Ya Arham Ar-Rahimin, I need a way out. I call out, panic rising in my chest.

My gum slips from above my teeth, where I had tucked it away. Thinking fast, I roll the piece into a ball with my tongue, and before he can press the knife any harder, I spit it out, hard, in his face. It hits his open eye with a popping sound and he screeches, his grip loosening for a second. That is all I need. I push him with more strength than necessary, tearing the niqab away from his fist. I walk backwards, tying it back on my face firmly and pull my hood back up.

Rage at his audacity of pulling it away rises in me, but I suppress it. I refuse to give in to the destructive anger. I stride towards his fallen figure and wrestle the knife away from his hand easily. "Look at what you've done. That gum was still sweet, *and* my last piece! You made me throw it away. Shame on you!"

My small, quick-moving hands working like magic, I hold the knife to his chest, poised to stab him if the need arises. He isn't going to get away so easily this time.

None of us speak, but I can tell that now that *I* have the knife, and am not making to break it against the wall anytime soon, they are terrified. *It's about time,* I think.

I hold out my hand. "Her *valuables, please,*" I can't help but mock. Blondie grinds his teeth as he reaches into his coat and throws them at me with malice in his eyes. I catch both before they hit my face.

My taunting demeanor is suddenly gone. "Don't even *think* about coming near her again, Blondie."

Eyes wide with fear, Redbeard backs away slowly, and Blondie follows suit with a sneer. I glare at them, taking a menacing step forward, and they break into a sprint away from the alley. Their pounding footsteps reverberate into the alley as I watch their figures shrink swiftly into the distance. I look over to where Hulk lies unconscious and shrug. He'll wake up after a few hours if the police don't find him first. Turning, I stride to the place I had stashed her backpack. I walk to the annoying girl, nonchalantly tossing it to her, and turn to leave.

"Wait, Khawlah." She says softly. I slowly turn towards her.

"Yeah?" I ask, suddenly nervous. I throw back my hood, running my fingers through the familiar folds of my niqab.

"Thank you."

"Right. Bye." I manage to say and turn to go before this gets even more awkward.

"Wait!"

I stop in my tracks again and force myself to look at her.

"I uh... I'm sorry. I shouldn't have worried over something that didn't concern me. But promise me you'll consider my offer?" She smiles genuinely at me, all traces of the anger and pain before gone from her face, and a sudden rush of guilt overwhelms me.

Her offer of friendship. I feel my face heat up from embarrassment and I know that though she can't see my face, she senses my unease.

"Whatever you'd like," she says.

I search my thoughts frantically for a reply and say the first thing that comes to my head. "Blondie said our friendship was a joke,"

She raises an eyebrow. "My would be-thief? You believe him?"

"Look who's talking!" I protest. "You thought he'd actually let you go!"

She sighs, crossing her arms. "Don't ever trust a thief, Khawlah.

Believe me, I learned the hard way."

"Yeah, I wonder how you lived to tell the tale," I mutter, unsure if she's serious or joking.

"Oh, that," she says waving a hand. "I have my ways. But listen to the life advice I give you, child." And that's when I know she's teasing. *I guess it wouldn't hurt to play along a bit.*

"What if he's an *honest* thief?" I ask innocently.

"Don't you mock me!" But she smiles. "Think about it if you want, and tell me later."

"I'd worry about myself more, if – if I were you." I say hesitantly, shifting my weight on one heel uncomfortably. "And I... it was my fault. But alright." I finish lamely. I mentally yell at myself for this awkward situation. I can taunt potential murderers, no problem, but making small talk with a potential friend? That, apparently, is my nightmare.

I break the silence with a sudden thought. "Oh, and you need to keep this to yourself," I look her in the eye, daring her to contradict me.

She meets my gaze and says, "I already knew, remember?"

"Whatever, Newbie," I say, spinning on my heel and turning to go for good this time.

"It's Afra," she calls back, and for some reason I laugh lightly.

Unable to hide my smile anymore, I beam brightly as I walk away. I can feel her staring at me again. For some reason, she seems slightly less annoying. Slipping out from the dark alley, I stop to take in everything that had happened. *Maybe Afra's right. Maybe I shouldn't hide myself.*

I continue walking, deep in contemplation, weighing the situations of my life at school. *I guess it wouldn't hurt to stand up for myself sometime, just enough to make them back away.* My heart alight

with pride, I return to my place in the grass and pick up my pencil once more.

Writer's Note: This piece was inspired by Khawlah bint al-Azwar, who was a Taabi'ah – one who learned from the Companions of the Prophet peace be upon him – and was a talented warrior. When she heard that her brother, Dhirar ibn al-Azwar was taken captive in a battle, she put on armor and fought until she freed him and the other prisoners.

The name 'Afra' is a Jewish name with Hebrew origins, and means doe. As for the Islamic terminologies used, 'niqab' means veil, 'abaya' means a long dress, and 'Ya Arham Ar-Rahimin' means 'Oh The Most Merciful of Merciful Ones', which is a way of calling God that Muslims often invoke while praying.