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JUNE 2022



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A Marvelous Opportunity

Newcomer Iman Vellani stars as Marvel's first Muslim superhero

By Sahar Khan • Photography by Irvin Rivera

Origin Story

Growing up in the Toronto suburbs, Iman Vellani always wanted to be in the movies. At her performing arts high school, she studied theater and made short films with friends, and during her senior year she was one of 12 high schoolers chosen to help organize the Toronto International Film Festival's Next Wave, a fest aimed at younger audiences. "It's, like, the coolest job," says Vellani, 19. "You sit in a room with a bunch of other cinephiles watching movies all day." When applying to university, Vellani decided to explore how entertainment works behind the scenes by studying media production—but the (Marvel Cinematic) universe had something bigger in store.

Discovering Her Powers

In February 2020, Vellani's aunt forwarded her a "really sketchy" WhatsApp message announcing a casting call for a Disney+ series focused on Ms. Marvel, aka Kamala Khan, Marvel Studios' first Muslim superhero. "When I got the scripts, I literally knew exactly which comic book they pulled from, because I read them all in high school," Vellani says. Convinced the call was real but feeling intimidated, she decided not to pursue the opportunity, but at 3 a.m. on the day screen tests were due she recorded the requested scenes, because if she didn't do it, "my 10-year-old self was going to hate me." She landed the role on the final day of her senior year: "The perfect graduation gift."

Shared Identity

The six-episode series, *Ms. Marvel*, which debuts June 8, introduces viewers to Khan, a 16-year-old New Jerseyite who discovers she has superpowers. Vellani first encountered the character on the cover of an *Ironheart* comic, and she felt an instant connection. "Kamala and I are essentially the same person," she says, noting how both are brown teenagers raised by Pakistani immigrants, both juggle relationships and the expectations of a Muslim family, and both are comic book nerds: Khan idolizes Captain Marvel, while Vellani reveres Ironman. "Not only can little brown girls see themselves in her," Vellani says, "but every nerd on the planet can relate to her."

The Legend Continues

Ms. Marvel serves as the precursor to Khan's debut in the film *The Marvels*, which comes out in 2023. In the series, Vellani is surrounded by a diverse cast of newcomers like herself, "whereas in the movie you're, like, standing next to Brie Larson and trying to keep your cool at all times," she says. For now, the young actress continues to live with her parents in her hometown, where her friends keep her grounded—mostly, she says, because they "don't really care about Marvel." Vellani, however, is excited to finally share her character with the legions of Marvel fans who do care: "Kamala's going to mean a lot to a lot of people."

Hair and Makeup:
Crystal Tran

