

The Magi

A Sci-Fi Novel

By

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Author's Advisory

I have always admired the work of Douglas Adams, author of "The Hitchhiker's Guide To The Galaxy" and its several sequels.

In particular I liked the way he used "the voice of the book" to add snippets of additional information (and humour) to his work. It would have been wrong of me to copy that device, so I have come up with my own, which is to include a glossary to explain the terms I have (and in some cases have not) made up.

Some readers may find this annoying. That's fine. I have placed this advisory early in the book so that you know what to expect, so if you don't like this idea, don't buy the book.

But you will be forever wondering if you might have enjoyed reading it anyway!

Oh, apparently it is now fashionable to provide trigger warnings, so please be advised that this book may cause you to use your imagination. Sorry about that.

Oh, and some of the made up beings in this book die, get born, get hurt, have dinner, have sex, say things and do things that some other beings may or may not find offensive, but none of it is real so you really don't have to worry about any of it.

One - The Out of Place Android

The door of the shuttle craft hissed downwards and An Kohli stepped out along the ramp it formed. Two younglings stared at her with interest, but when they saw that she wasn't carrying goods to barter or sell they lost interest and scuttled off about their own business.

Such was the nature of the galaxy these days; not even the arrival of a shuttle craft attracted any interest. She doubted that the younglings would even mention her arrival to their parents. That suited her for the time being. She wanted to find the one she was looking for and then get off this useless lump of rock and never see it again.

Dust swirled around her and she wrapped her neck-cloth around her face in a vain attempt to keep the dust from entering her mouth and nose. Already she could feel the grit between her teeth. She looked at the hand held tracker. The steady pulse indicated that her target was about one hundred li to the north, if this lump of rock actually had a north. OK, she admitted to herself, north was a concept not an actuality; her target was about one hundred li diagonally to her left. It would feel like double that in the heat and dust of this shitty rock. She wished she'd landed the shuttle a little closer but she hadn't wanted to let him know she was coming. He was the type who always ran first and asked questions afterwards.

An Kohli took a deep breath, regretting it at once as she inhaled a mouthful of dust, and strode forward, skirting past some mud built houses. She passed the same two younglings struggling to pull a bucket of water from a well and then pour it into a small tank mounted on wheels. When the tank was full it would need both of them to drag it home. Again she puzzled at the nature of a galaxy where the arrival of a shuttle craft from an orbiting space ship could attract so little attention, but where the inhabitants of the planet still drew their water from wells. She gave a mental shrug. The galaxy was a big place and she had encountered stranger things than younglings at a well.

The dust continued to torment her as she crossed the open ground. Across the rock strewn plain she could see the building she was heading for. There were draft animals tethered outside and a crude neon sign announced its purpose, though she couldn't read the alien script. She corrected herself angrily. Here it was she who was the alien.

She pushed open the door and ducked under the low lintel into the dim room. Bars across the galaxy all seemed to conform to a type, she mused. The darker the interior the more shady its clientele and there was no one shadier than the one she was looking for. Now for the fun part.

He was a shape shifter, which meant that he could be any one of the occupants of the bar. There was a trick to identifying a shape shifter, though. Stare at him, or her, for ten seconds or more and he, or she, was bound to reveal themselves. They hated being stared at. The problem was that if you stared at people in this sort of bar you were likely to start a fight, which was why shape shifters liked bars like this one.

Her arrival had caused heads to turn. Her tall, slender figure always attracted attention. One look at the powerful Menafield Pulsar holstered on her hip suggested that there was nothing to look at here and that it was a good idea for people to just go about their business. She stomped her way to the bar, her thick soled boots making the floor vibrate. Sly looks still

came her way, admiring her good looks and the waves of glossy purple hair that framed her face perfectly. She ignored them and focused on the task at hand.

An ancient droid bartender creaked towards her and offered her a drinks menu. She knew that this was a pretension and that whatever she ordered would numb her taste buds for days, but she made a show of looking at it before pointing to the glass of the man standing nearest to her and saying "I'll have one of those."

The droid creaked away to get the drink and she scanned the room quickly, not allowing her eyes to rest on any individual for more than a few seconds. Those that been watching her covertly looked away quickly, but not quickly enough for her not to notice.

So which one was he? Not the two men sat at the back of the room. They were clearly having an argument, perhaps over the rather frightened looking female that sat between them. It wasn't the female either. Shape shifters can't change sex, though they can make themselves appear in female form if you don't get close enough to find out which bits haven't been changed. She was showing plenty of the bits that a male shape shifter would have to simulate by stuffing a bra with socks.

Not the two men sitting opposite each other in silence, staring into their drinks. They were the defeated, worn down by years of scratching a living out of land that was only fit for growing rocks. Scattered around the room were half a dozen more men, drinking by themselves, each with an attitude that suggested it wasn't worth bothering to talk to them. Two more of them she dismissed as being in the same defeated category, which left four that might be her quarry. The droid returned and placed a foaming glass in front of her.

An Kohli took a tentative sip and narrowly resisted spitting the liquid out. She was not the sort of person who spat in public. The liquid was a sour tasting beer. The man whose drink she had copied raised his glass and took a large mouthful. An acquired taste, An Kohli concluded. She returned her attention to the four men she thought might be him and tried to stare at them without appearing as if she was staring. A difficult task as any lovelorn teenager who has ever tried staring at a pretty girl would be able to testify.

The first one was easy enough. He was the one further along the bar, standing with his back to her, though the way he twitched his head suggested he sensed he was being watched. Just as he started to turn An Kohli switched her attention to another man on the far side of the room. He was sat sideways on but the glazed look in his eyes suggested he wouldn't notice if the roof fell on him. She counted off ten seconds; nothing. She shifted her gaze again, across the room. A young man in dirty work clothes. Not likely, the one she was looking for had never done a day's manual work in his life, but a disguise is a disguise. Nothing.

The final possibility suggested someone from off-planet. He was well dressed in a modern style which she recognised but couldn't quite place. Not local, she concluded. He met her gaze directly but didn't react to it. Again, nothing. She checked her tracker. The light pulsed steadily and indicated she was standing within a few metts of him. She heard the droid creak towards her again and then it hit her. She turned and levelled her gaze at it.

After ten seconds the droid slammed it's fist onto the bar in frustration, making heads turn. Yes, she was right. A backward planet like this wouldn't have the technology to build droids. This one was old and badly maintained and the know-how to maintain it wouldn't exist here either. She doubted that they had even developed as far as steam power.

"Fuck you." The droid said, its voice wheezy and crackling.

“You can drop the disguise, Den.”

“Not in front of the natives.” he wheezed. “Don’t want to scare anyone. How did you find me?”

“Female intuition.” She smiled a mischievous smile.

“You bitch. You planted a tracker on me, didn’t you?”

“That would be telling.” She continued to grin broadly.

The droid figure let out a wheeze of anger, like a hiss of steam from a leaking pipe. “Well, now you’re here you better tell me what you want.”

“How do you know that I’m not just looking for a bit of company?”

“Quit fooling around. We both know you didn’t cross a hundred parsecs of space just for the pleasure of my company, so spit it out.”

“I’ve found them.” She whispered.

“Found what?” His jaw dropped with a clang as he realised what she was talking about.

“Oh. *Them*. So where are they?”

“Well, when I say I’ve found them I really mean I know who has them and I have a rough idea of where she may be.”

“Oh, so you haven’t found them then. Not really.”

“OK, Mr Pedantic, maybe not *found* found, but at least I know where to start looking.”

“So who has them?”

“Su Mali.”

The droid figure nodded its head, making a noise like fingernails on a blackboard. “Makes sense. She could crack the vault of the Bank Of The Universe if she could get past the guards. So why do you need me?”

“One person alone couldn’t take on Su Mali, she’s too clever and too good a shot. Beside, she’s one of yours. Only a Gau can recognise another Gau at first sight.”

“You know, An Kohli, I have a long lived desire to die peacefully in my bed surrounded by a bevy of Sutran beauties. If I go with you the chances of that happening are reduced to about zero. Not only would Su Mali be out for my blood, our blood, but the Fell would send every dishonest bounty hunter in the galaxy, and a few other galaxies, to track us down and kill us. That’s not a job you would apply for if you saw it on the galactic vacancies board.”

“It’s worth a lot of money.”

“If I was interested in money I wouldn’t be working here for 10 nuks a day. After the last caper, I decided that there was more to life than the pursuit of money.”

“Wow, you’ve changed Den. I never thought I would hear you say you weren’t interested in money.”

“When you’ve had your genitals held in the very tight grip of a Norian warrior you start to re-evaluate your life a little. You can’t make love to a Sutran beauty if you don’t have any genitals.”

An Kohli spotted her opportunity. “OK, how about the women. There’ll be plenty of those if we recover them. They’ll be throwing themselves at you.”

“Will you be one of them?”

“Only in your dreams.”

“That’s what I thought. I’ll stick with the Sutrans. No deal.”

Once she might have considered a relationship with Den Gau, but not after coming back on board her own ship to find him in a very compromising position with her co-pilot, Gala. An Kohli had forgiven Gala but kicked Den Gau off the ship. She had been sorely tempted to eject him from the airlock without a space suit but had relented when Gala had pointed out that Den Gau still owed her money. While An Kohli might be prepared to forego any debts Gala would rather be repaid in full. Some chance of that, An Kohli had thought at the time.

“OK, There’s fame and glory.” That would surely appeal.

“You remember Malik?”

“The Sentinel who rescued Gib Dander?”

“That’s him. Well that rescue got him fame and glory. He’s dead now. His body is spread across three star systems. That’s what fame and glory gets you. No deal.”

That was a bitter blow. She had liked Malik. He was one of the good guys. If Den Gau turned her down she had been going to go to Malik next. Sentinels were expensive, but they were the best. To be honest Den Gau was far from her first choice but he had the dual advantages of being both a Gau and available; if he could be persuaded.

“What about Bubar?”

“In hospital last I heard. Lost an arm. It’s taking time to grow back”

“Linder?”

“On permanent retainer to Gib Dander now, along with Harker and Elway. You won’t find any other Sentinels willing to take on the job, not for what you can afford to pay and not on this side of the galaxy.

She chewed the inside of her cheek, a habit she had when she was deep in thought. “Ok.” She said, finally. “What will it take to get you on board.”

He was about to reply that wild Fiju couldn’t get him to take the job, but then he had an idea of his own.

“Get me into the Guild”.

An Kohli’s eyes opened wide with surprise. She hadn’t expected that. With Den Gau’s reputation it was unthinkable.

“You have to be joking.” She struggled to keep the scorn from her voice. She couldn’t afford to upset him, at least not at the moment.

“Never been more serious.”

“But they’d never take you.”

“With you recommending me they might.”

“Flattering, but I think you over estimate my influence within the Guild.

“Not if you recover the Magi.”

She shushed him and quickly scanned the room to see if anyone had heard him use the M word. “Careful what you say. If anyone gets wind of this we could be screwed before we even start.”

“But you see what I mean.” Den Gau continued, knowing he had the advantage. “If finding the...them can make me rich, get me women and get me fame and glory, surely it can get me into the Guild, especially if you were the one who recovered them and I was the one helping you.”

He had a point, An Kohli had to concede. But the Guild set high standards and they didn't, ever, work on the wrong side of the law which was more, much more, than could be said for Den Gau.

"Look, I can't make any promises...."

"But you can promise to try. Put in a good word for me. For crying out loud if we pull this off then we've...."

She cut him off again before he could blurt out what the effects might be. Who knew who was listening.

"OK, OK. I give in. If we succeed I'll do whatever I can to get you into the Guild, but I can't make any promises that they'll accept you."

"You're a Guild member. Your word is your bond so I trust you. Besides, if we don't succeed it won't matter anyway because we'll probably be dead."

"Good point." She extended her hand and the droid figure shook it, letting out another shriek of tortured metal that made the bar's occupants turn to look once again.

With her business complete An Kohli let her natural curiosity get the better of her. "How did you get the job here anyway? This planet doesn't have the technology for droids."

"You know me. I can sell snow on an ice planet. I turned up as myself and offered the owner a droid bartender for 10 nuks a day. All it would need is a storeroom at night where it could recharge. He said yes so the next day I turned up looking like this. Not only do I get a roof over my head I get 10 nuks a day and all the blash that I can drink. Not that any sane person would want to drink more than a glass of that stuff." He indicated the glass that sat untouched in front of An Kohli.

"What about food?"

"They sell food here as well. Well, food of sorts. I get the leftovers and with food of the quality they serve here there's always plenty of leftovers."

"I suppose you know all the regulars."

"We don't get many regulars. This is a drovers and traders bar. Most of the customers come in for a few drinks and are then back on the road as soon as they sober up. We get a few in from the village, but not many. They don't have a lot of cash round here for drinking."

"What about him? The one behind me with the smart cloths."

"I've been wondering about him myself. He turned up a couple of days back and has been in and out a few times. Looks like he's waiting for someone."

"Is there any reason that he might be looking for you?"

"You know me. It's more than a possibility. If he is then he hasn't made any attempt to make me show myself, which anyone who knew me would do straight away. Are there any other ships in orbit?"

"The ship's sensors didn't show any. I didn't see any shuttles parked close by either."

"Well, he pays cash and he's not caused any trouble, which around here is always a good sign. Who knows, he might be hiding out here as well."

"If he was then he'd dress down a bit. Make more of an effort to fit in. He doesn't fit and that bothers me."

"You're paranoid, Kohli"

"An Kohli. You know I hate it when people don't use my full name."

"Whatever. So, what do we do now?"

“When does your shift end?”

“When we close tonight.”

“Any reason why you can’t leave then?”

“No. I’ll leave a note for the owner of this dump to say the droid’s broken down and has to go off planet for repairs. He’ll have to manage by himself till this is over.”

“You’d come back to this arsehole of a place?” An Kohli found the idea ludicrous.

“Believe me, if we pull this off we’re going to need some out of the way place like this to hide for a while, or we’ll end up spread across star systems just like Malik.”

He was right. This job would make them some powerful enemies.

“So where is Su Mali?” Den asked.

“Not now. I’ll give you the low down when you join me tonight. My shuttle is on the other side of the village. Meet me there when you’ve finished here.”

With that she stood up and walked out of the bar. Several pairs of eyes followed her. Most were for the traditional reasons that men’s eyes follow the swaying rear view of an attractive woman, but the well-dressed man appeared to have less salacious motives. He watched the empty door frame for several seconds after An Kohli had disappeared, before returning once more to his waiting.

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Glossary

Gau	A shape shifting species from the Flage star system. They have a telepathic bond with each other which means they can sense the presence of another Gau in the vicinity and they can identify each other by sight.
Li	A unit of measurement of distance roughly equivalent to 5 Earth metres.
Menafield	The Menafield Arms Corporation (part of the Gargantua Enterprises Corporation) produces a wide range of pulsar and projectile weapons for military, business and family use. The Menafield Pulsar, as used by An Kohli, is reputed to be the most powerful hand held weapon in the galaxy and can punch a hole through ¼ inch steel plate.
Met	A unit of measurement of distance. Plural Mett. 5 Mett = 1 li.
Nuk	A unit of currency that is exchangeable throughout the galaxy. One nuk is sufficient to buy two Big Macs on any planet except Earth, where they cost 5 nuks each, but that’s Earth for you.

- Parsec An astronomical unit of length used to measure the distance of objects in space when viewed from the surface of a planet. It was developed by astrophysicists on planet Earth and is one of the few astronomical developments from that planet that have made it into the galactic system of measurement. One parsec is approximately 3.26 light years or 3.0857×10^{16} metres. The term was misused as a measurement of time in the film Star Wars Episode IV: A New Hope and then misused again, this time ironically (maybe), in Episode VII: The Force Awakens.
- Pulsar A weapon that uses high energy pulses to destroy its target. Smaller versions are hand held and larger versions can be fitted to mounts for use on vehicles and space craft. Has an advantage over projectile weapons because it can be used under water with only minor loss of efficiency.
- Sentinels An Inter-galactic sect of mercenary warriors with very high entry standards. You don't apply to join the sentinels, you are invited.

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