

The Fourteenth Adjustment

Chapter 1 - Rise

In which the Magus tries not to stop

“Sorry, mate, you can’t park there.”

The Magus climbed out of the driving seat of his converted *Hynishota Unimaginative* and regarded the parking attendant with his calculated private investigator stare. His hand hovered over the pistol in his back pocket, that wasn’t there. It was his day off, and these were not his private investigator’s trousers.

“I’m only leaving my lady-friend to catch her flight. I won’t be long.”

“I suggest you get back in your vehicle, mate, and do not menace me as I perform my officious tasks. Didn’t you see the signs?”

“The large one that said, ‘Kanye West Airport, Premium Parking Only. Drop-offs will be charged extra?’”

“That one, yes.”

“The one that directed me towards the place I always dropped off guests for free in the past?”

“That one. There are other free locations though. By law we had to give you a choice, mate.”

“I didn’t see any signs.”

“If you’d been paying attention at the last roundabout, you’d have seen we pinned a piece of card to the back of the ‘No Blinking While Driving’ sign. We gave you the choice. Your particular choice was to drive into the premium drop-off zone, and therefore you have to pay.”

“I’ve always been able to drive straight up to the terminal building before. I’m not stopping.”

“You’ve stopped now, mate.”

“I know that. How do you expect me to let my passenger get out of the car if it’s still moving?”

“Not my problem. The rules is the rules.”

“When did they change? Last month, when I collected my friend, I simply drove in.”

“That’s very true,” said his companion, Rannie Dearheat—slim, attractive, short brown hair, long black revolver, which she was idly spinning around her index finger. “Get back in the car, Moggy Dear. I’ll deal with this.”

“But...”

“Leave it with me. I’m sure the gentleman will be reasonable.” Rannie heaved a suitcase out of the back. “Parking has always been free,” she said to the attendant, as the Magus steamed his way back into the driver’s seat. “Otherwise I would have flown via the alternative airports, Pittsburgh Slim or Jay Park. I think I’ll be glad to leave this dump, by any means. Things aren’t that great here since you cut down all the trees to make the planet spin faster.”

“According to the papers, that’s a good thing,” said the attendant slowly. “Faster spin, lesser gravity, people are lighter.”

“Carry on believing it,” said Rannie, patting his arm. “It’s not the place it used to be.”

They gazed upwards as the buzz of a delivery drone filled the sky. It passed over a development of secure anti-social housing. There was the report of a shotgun and the craft plummeted in flames into the complex.

“What’s all that about?” said the Magus, leaning out of the car window to watch.

“New laws on Sapristi,” said the attendant, “where all policing is now done by email. That meant only honest criminals gave themselves up, so it was decided that people who were determined to pursue a life of crime and derring-do would all be confined inside new, cramped housing estates. The houses were offered with a cash incentive, thus luring the greedy and stupid.”

The Magus nodded. “I was going to buy a place there... as an investment, you understand.”

“You needed to move in to complete the purchase, after which, a huge fence would be raised, sealing you all off from polite society. Apparently this enclave is one of many. I’ve heard that a knock-on effect is that the penal system has recovered. Now, only law-abiding citizens are incarcerated, for such crimes as driving without thinking, receiving phone calls while walking, and sitting with their knees apart.”

“Bugger,” said the Magus, looking down.

“I’m never going to use drones in my organisation,” said Rannie. “The sort of clients I have would not be pleased receiving scuffed merchandise.”

“Can you *scuff* class ‘A’ drugs and contraband doughnuts?” said the Magus.

“I guess not, but you can fail to deliver, which is worse. I’d best be going. I don’t want to lose my flight.”

“Do you really have to leave me? I’m going to miss you badly.”

“I’d rather you missed me well—you’ll get it with practice—but I have to get back, to make sure everything is running smoothly with my business interests.”

Rannie walked round to the driver’s side of the car and leaned in.

The Magus frowned thoughtfully. “We’ve had a good time here these last few weeks, haven’t we, and you haven’t simply been hiding to avoid those tax demands?”

“Of course not.” She smiled back, the old Rannie smile that always sent goose-bumps down one of the Magus’ spines, and pecked him on the cheek. “It’s been a wonderful break, but my operations are now demanding attention again. Big Three-Fingered Luigi is having a bit of a problem with the rabbit farm...”

“What, a shed full of buzzing objects for ladies?” The Magus shook his head. “Have I missed something?”

“No.” Rannie grinned. “We had to give the bees away, after some of our customers got stung...”

“With your devious pricing models?”

“You have a low opinion of my business dealings,” said Rannie. “I’ve never had any complaints... from people that matter, anyway. I’m talking about real rabbits. The original idea was for meat production, feeding starving, out-of-work immigration officers, but Luigi stopped that. He’s started picking the animals up, cuddling them, and talking in silly voices...”

“I can see how you would need to respond to that.” The Magus did not sound convinced.

“Are you going to pay?” The attendant drew himself upright.

“Parking was always free. It’s in the Statute: the Third Adjustment,” said Rannie.

“Isn’t that the one prohibiting the billeting of ladies of the night in your home during the time your wife is away?”

“All right, the Eighth then, forbidding cruel or unusual punishment for parking.”

“Ah, there’s been a complete rewrite of the Charter,” said the official, “now that we have a new minister for vehicle marshalling, road signage and outsourced spaceport parking. This one puts full control in the hands of my organisation, to administer as we see fit.”

“How many alterations to the Charter is that now?”

The attendant counted on his fingers. “Last report was over two thousand, according to the *Daily Outrage*. The latest was rushed through by Pietro Fairway, our new minister. He said it would make more money for the government if they outsourced traffic storage, rather than letting individuals flatten ghettos so that they could use the space for car parking. You see, people like ghettos; that’s why so many live there.”

“Is that the same Pietro Fairway who runs the news channel, ‘Lies of the Planet’, and the ‘Ministry for Holes in the Road’?”

“No relation, according to the newspaper—a coincidence. By law, you now have to pay.”

“Not from this delivery,” said Rannie. She cocked her revolver, and waved it at the man.

He backed off, holding his hands up. “Don’t shoot me; I’m only the messenger. Anyway, even if you do, you won’t get through the barriers, and the longer you stay, the more it costs.” He pressed a button on his combined watch and ticket machine. “You already owe twenty drachmae for the drop-off and another fifty for halting in a restricted zone.”

“Restricted? How can you tell?” The Magus glanced around, checking for any indication that he should have parked elsewhere.

“Everywhere’s restricted, mate,” said the man. “See that spot over there with the big queue of cars trying to get into it. That’s where you should be. Take your place in the line.”

“But there’s nothing in the way, right here. We aren’t blocking access or anything.”

“Security, mate.”

“Nothing to do with making money then?”

“I wouldn’t know, mate. Pay up or push off.”

“Who is this company doing the parking?” Rannie smiled sweetly and put her hand on the Magus’ shoulder as he started to get out of the car again.

“TBP Carparks.” The attendant pointed to the letters on his cap.

“And what does that stand for?”

The man looked taken aback. “You’ve never heard of us?”

“Humour me.”

“Total Bastard Parking, for accommodating everyone, including the rich bastards, the poor bastards and the bastards who knock your bin over in the night...”

“Total Bastard Parking Carparks?” Rannie gave him that expression people do when they want to appear incredulous. “Duh, that sounds as though it’s not been thought through... like saying ‘ISBN Book Number’...”

“ISBN?”

“I think it stands for ‘Impossible to Sell Brilliant Novels’. So, ‘Total Bastard’... isn’t that giving the game away?”

“It used to be ‘Totally Brilliant Parking’, but had to be changed because of the new Transparency Laws, where everything should be labelled descriptively. We did apply for a name change to ‘Value Overlook and Movement in Transportation’, but the courts denied us after we booked the magistrate for leaving his car in his named spot without a ticket. He still owes us for that. Interest is at 50 percent per day.”

“What you are saying is that I can’t get out of this zone if I don’t pay?” The Magus was steaming slightly under his Investigator’s Fedora. “Have you seen what I’m driving?”

“Yes, it’s the *Hynishota Unimaginative GC*. I’ve got the economy model at home. I’d have liked your version.”

“Is that why you’re being mean to us, because you’ve got the *Unimaginative* base model?”

“You flash bastards really get to me, mate.”

“But the only difference is that I’ve got a cup-holder, whereas you’ve got a blanking plate. GC stands for ‘Got Cup-holder’, you know.”

“Yes, I’ve got a blanking plate; a cheap plastic blanking plate that broke and fell out. It would cost me five-hundred drachmae if the dealer was to ship a replacement over from Musoketeba. You know that’s nearly a day’s parking charge, don’t you?”

“I didn’t, but I do know the Nishant Corporation who make them,” said the Magus. “The head, Mr Nishi, and my boss, Two-Dan \$mith (sic) are business associates.”

“You work for SCT?”

“Can’t you tell?”

“Then your car...”

“Flies, yes. I developed the *Doku Drive*, which provides almost infinite power for free, and has annoyed the hell out of the energy companies...”

“He’s a marked man,” added Rannie, proudly. “He’s dangerous.”

“I got 8 out of 10 on their ‘People to get rid of’ scale,” said the Magus, so I am not paying you, because I will be flying out of here.”

“You will pay,” said the man. “Flying or not, I’ve got your number.”

“I’ve got no number. SCT has its own registration authority.”

“Then I’ve got your bumper sticker: ‘Private Dicks do it without removing their trousers’. You will have to pay.”

“Ignore him, Moggy,” said Rannie. “We can’t stand here all day. I’ve got to catch my flying machine.”

“You didn’t need to book a flight. I could have taken you all the way in one of our long-range Hynishota Cashcows.”

“You have already, darling,” she said, removing his hat and placing a kiss on the top of his sweaty bald head. “It was fun, but I really must go.”

“When will I see you again?” The Magus had a tear in his eye. It had been an unexpected surprise when Rannie, the love of his life, had turned up unannounced. He had never envisioned seeing her again, after she spiked his drink to disrupt his investigations into her business dealings. She had made up for her absence, and even forgave him for his references to ‘Open Bay Doors’ and ‘Prepare to engage tractor beam’ as they were getting intimate. She did gently point out that the reason he couldn’t hold on to relationships was for precisely that sort of dialogue during coitus, and that most attractive young ladies didn’t like science fiction.

“I will return for more precious moments,” she said. “I promise.” She gave him a lingering hug and mopped his tears with a lace handkerchief. He blew his nose on it, and handed it over to the attendant who was also blubbing.

The man tried to dry his eyes, and succeeded in sticking his eyelashes together. “That’s the trouble with airports, mate.” He sniffed. “I love the happiness as people meet their recently-absent adored ones, but can’t stand the sorrow as they have to part again, not knowing if their lovers will have to wait forever for the traffic controllers to let them take off, or when they do, if they are going to die horribly in one of those freak accidents in space.” He brightened up at Rannie’s bemused expression. “Don’t worry,” he said. “I don’t expect there will be any more freak accidents... not so soon after our last fatal disaster, that is.”

