

JOHN MORRESSY

RIMRUNNER'S HOME

Rimrunner six touched down softly as a snowflake on a cat's back. The lock-jockeys and groundbugs took less than a minute to scramble back to cover, then the port swung out and Vanderhorst started down the ramp. Lights were everywhere. Off to his left, a picket ship in a trim new design was poised on her ring, vehicles darting about in her shadow like ants around a fencepost. Vanderhorst liked the look of her, but he could spare the ship no more than a glance. All his attention was on getting down the ramp and into POP Headquarters without stumbling. Downside gravity had him feeling like a drunken elephant on greased glass. It made no difference to him that there was no one to see him fall.

That was the standing rule: no one sees a rimrunner until he's been to POP for debriefing. Other rules changed, but that one appeared to have remained.

Vanderhorst hated debriefings. They were foolish and unnecessary and long. POP ground control had monitored and recorded every instant from liftoff to lock-in, but they wanted a verbal account, even though Vanderhorst had nothing to report from this trip but his dreams.

He wondered if anyone in POP actually expected a human to spot something the instruments had missed. Each time back, heading for debriefing, Vanderhorst fantasized about reporting something twice the size of the big rock of '06 heading straight for Washington. But he could not hope to get away with a trick like that. The instruments knew better. Even joking about it could cost his job, and he was not ready to give up rimrunning.

Doors loomed before him bearing the interlaced silver rings of the Perimeter Orbiting Patrol. He walked on without pausing and they purred apart to admit him. He passed through three more sets of doors and arrived at last in the debriefing room. Steadier on his feet now, but tired by the walk, he settled heavily in the oversized soft chair that awaited.

The room was dull white, illuminated in such a way as to minimize the sensation of enclosure. Vanderhorst breathed deeply and allowed himself to relax a little.

When the debriefer entered, Vanderhorst raised a hand in greeting and remained seated. He studied the newcomer. The man looked like the father of someone he knew.

"Remember me, Van?"

He had to think for a moment. "Bob Watts?"

"That's right. Last time you saw me, I wasn't even showing a gray hair."

"It's only twenty-one months ago for me. How long have I been out Earthtime?"

"Nineteen years, five months, twenty-four days. Your health reads perfect, Van. You can skip the medics, if you like."

"I'll skip them."

"We have a new model picket ship. She's on North Ring Four."

"I had a quick look at her."

"She's a beauty, Van. Roomier than Six, and about one-third Earth gravity shipboard."

"Why the extra room? Do I toss in my sleep?"

"Wait till you see, Van. She's got a new type of --"

"Hold all that," Vanderhorst broke in. "Right now, I want to get this over with and see what the world looks like this time around."

Watts raised a hand. "Anything you say, Van. Unless you have something unusual to report, you can go direct to Reacculturation."

"No formal debriefing?"

"Not for the last fourteen years. No point to them."

"I told the smart boys that sixty years ago," Vanderhorst said. "Any other changes I should know about?"

"Nothing major. Reacculturation can tell you better than I can."

"You tell me. If I've come back to trouble, I want to know."

"Nothing serious, Van. You've seen it all before. POP isn't the people's favorite these days, that's all."

"Why not? Did something get by?"

"Nothing gets by POP. It's the old problems: money and politics. That new model cost ninety-four billion. It's one of four. Some people say that's too expensive."

"Asteroid hits are expensive, too," Vanderhorst said. "The one in '06 cost a couple of trillion, and that one landed in the ocean. What if the next one knocks California into the Pacific?"

"That's what we tell them, Van. But '06 was eighty years ago for downsiders. No

one remembers it."

"Do they remember the ones we took out before they hit?"

Watts shook his head. "Nobody remembers what didn't happen, Van."

"So now there's talk of cutting the program. Is that it?"

"Not from anyone who matters."

"Sometimes you don't know who matters until it's too late."

"POP has friends, Van. You picked up a high-probable on this run, and we'll use that against the jokers who tell people that the odds against another big hit are a million to one. The program is safe."

Vanderhorst pushed himself up out of the chair. For an instant he was unsteady. Watts started to assist him, but checked himself.

"I'm doing just fine, Bob," Vanderhorst said. "Is Reacculturation in the same place as before?"

Watts nodded. "Second door on the left. Good to have you back, Van."

This was the best debriefing yet. Watts had kept it short and spoken straight. Vanderhorst detested the assault of carefully researched obsolete terms that some POP staffers memorized to put rimrunners at their ease. The artificial speech was nothing more than a buffer, placing the staffers at a safe remove from real contact.

Was it insensitivity, he wondered, or ignorance? Was it fear? Perhaps none of the downsiders in POP really wanted to know how it felt to be out there alone, ringing the solar system at half of lightspeed on a sixty-billion-mile circuit; or what it was like to come back to new words, new ideas, a new society on each return and never know what the reception was going to be.

Cutback talk was nothing new. On Vanderhorst's first return, there had been riots and an attack on the launch complex, but all that frenzy had passed with recovery from the depression of 2028. When he came back for the second time, in '48, all was calm. The last time back, in '67, rimrunners were folk heroes. He had been on the hollies every night for two weeks running. All three major parties had approached him to stand for office in the '68 elections.

If he had stayed downside that last time, he would now be almost as old as Watts. No, correct that. He would look almost as old. In fact he would be much older. That was the unsettling part, that sight of an old acquaintance aged a score of years to his two. It made all the differences manifest and undeniable. Rimrunners cheated time and clocks and calendars, those universal tyrants: that was what people thought, and why everyone envied them, and some resented them, and a few hated them, despite the surface show of admiration. But the price of

those stolen years was high, and few could pay it. One rimrunner out of a hundred did a second circuit. So far, only Vanderhorst had returned for a third and a fourth.

Even in the stasis tank, isolation was a palpable presence. Careful screening training, and conditioning all helped make it more bearable, but it was always there, enclosing a man like his own skin. It did things to people.

When he passed through the last door, Vanderhorst stopped and looked around in mild surprise. Reacculturation had a different look. The impersonal office he recalled from his last visit had been turned into a comfortable homelike setting of the kind he had longed for in childhood. Windows admitting sunlight and fresh air, curtains blowing in a gentle breeze, doors all standing ajar; nothing here to confine him. A young couple, slim and clean-featured, both of them smiling in welcome, rose from chairs to greet him.

"Welcome back, Captain Vanderhorst. It's an honor to have you here," the man said, extending a hand. "I'm Korry Long."

"I'm Jemma Tulio," the woman said.

"Jemma and I are a registered couple. We're under a two-year option agreement," Korry said. "I daresay that doesn't mean much to you, Captain."

"Not a thing."

Jemma took Vanderhorst's hand and led him to a chair. "There's been considerable change in the structuring of social relations. That's probably the most significant alteration in the cultural pattern since your departure, so we thought we'd begin your reacculturation with that aspect."

The chair was set out from a corner, with plenty of space before and on both sides. Vanderhorst seated himself gingerly. "Is this reacculturation? No more talkdowns? No cramming?"

"This is the talkdown. Sleep-cram will be administered only when you feel ready," she said.

"So we just sit here and chat?"

"Exactly. We find that it facilitates reintegration."

"Choppy down with me, runklers," Vanderhorst said, folding his hands behind his head. When they both turned vague, cautious smiles on him, he said, "Sorry. That's from before your time. I thought you'd have the old expressions down pat."

"We avoid conscious anachronisms now, Captain," Korry said.

"Call me Van. And tell me more about social relations."

"There's been a strong resurgence of traditional attitudes in the last fifteen years. Apparently things were quite uninhibited when you were home last."

"You make it sound as if I've been away to camp."

"I hope we haven't offended --"

"Never mind. Yes, things were uninhibited," Vanderhorst said, smiling faintly, remembering the days of anything anyone wanted, anywhere, anytime, with anyone at all, until there was nothing left to want. The 2060s had been prosperous years, and people had lived them to the burnt-out end.

"So we've heard. It's different now."

"I expected something like that. How different are they?"

Jemma responded. "Many things that were acceptable during your last stay downside are now under social sanction."

Her explanation was unnecessary. The information was there for Vanderhorst to see. Jemma was pretty, and doing her best to conceal it. Makeup that gave her a sallow coloration, close-cropped hair, a dingy sack of a dress that concealed her figure: here were the signs that he had come back to leaner times. He recalled the depression years of his first return. No wonder the people are screaming about POP's budget, he thought. They don't want rimrunners, they want bread and circuses and sex. It's all they ever wanted.

"What's legal these days?" he asked.

"The government hasn't made life impossible, Van," Korry began with a show of joviality. "Times may be less free-wheeling, but --"

"Stop hedging. I've just spent nearly two years in space. I may want company once I've settled in, and I don't want to be arrested for saying 'Hello' to a woman."

Jemma laid her hand on his. "The government recognizes special circumstances, Van."

Vanderhorst looked from one to the other, then laughed. They did not join in. Still grinning, he said, "The new morality sounds like old-fashioned scolding around, only with government approval."

Jemma looked uncomfortable, "It's a very special privilege, Van."

He raised a conciliatory hand. "I'll be grateful. And serious. Tell me more."

They went on, speaking in turn, a well-rehearsed routine, and Vanderhorst listened with a solemn look on his sharp features. He nodded weightily from time

to time to demonstrate attention, but his mind was only half on their words. They had little to teach him.

Vanderhorst had passed his youth in the shrill and angry years that bracketed the millennium, a time when half the world looked to the turn of the century as an end and the other half saw it as a beginning. Those who proclaimed Armageddon felt that their prophecy was fulfilled, albeit belatedly, when in 2006 a giant meteorite plunged into the Indian Ocean.

For Vanderhorst, the calamity meant deliverance. Within months the Perimeter Orbiting Patrol had been organized. Staffed and supported by most of the nations of the world, its mission was to serve as first line of defense: to detect and destroy any incoming object that threatened Earth or the lunar colonies. Its budget was unlimited.

Volunteers were many; the qualified were very few. For that fortunate handful, POP offered the honor of being a "defender of the farthest frontier," as its promoters said. It also promised an extended lifespan and a chance to amass enormous wealth. To Vanderhorst, it afforded escape from the daily round of hardship and indignity compounded by growing hatred for the generations that had left their children a drained and dirty world to live on. He knew that regeneration would come, but no one then alive could hope to see it -- except by cheating time.

POP offered the cheater. In return, it required two years of one's life, nearly twenty of objective time, spent farther out in space than any human had ever ventured; alone, encapsulated, beyond all hope of help from Earth, beyond all contact with one's native world.

Vanderhorst considered it a fair exchange. An only child, orphaned while young, instinctively mistrustful of groups and more independent than was socially permissible, he seemed the ideal rimrunner: a loner by nature and by choice. In 2008, he became the sixth to lift off.

He returned to Earth in 2028 with vague memories of smothering blackness; of hideous nightmares, of helplessness crushing him like a weight. Nothing was clear in his memory but the sensation of being utterly alone. He vowed never to go up again.

After three months downside, he reconsidered his vow. Four more trips and he could retire, an immensely rich man still physically in his thirties, though Earth calculations would make him more than a century and a quarter old. He debated, weighed the alternatives, changed his mind half a dozen times, and then went up again.

"Are you listening, Van?" Jemma's voice broke into his reverie.

"It sounds as if I can be arrested for doing anything that looks like I might enjoy it."

"No one's arrested anymore, Van. Offenders are offered social assistance."

"Offered? Then that means I can turn it down, doesn't it?" They looked at him, faces bland as wax. "All right, forget that remark. Just run a summary of behavior expectations into my cram. It's simpler that way," he said, yawning. "Put the update on POP status with government and public on the cram, too. I want all that clear in my mind by morning."

"Are you sure you don't want to talk any longer? Personal contact is an important part of reacculturation," Korry said.

"So is sleep. I've been awake for most of the last three days. And I haven't weighed a hundred kilos for a long time."

"If you'd like companionship, Van, we're authorized..." Jemma smiled and let her voice trail into silence.

"Won't I need a permit?" Vanderhorst said, rising. "Thanks for the kind offer, but I'll take care of my personal relations all by myself."

He left them with a definite feeling that there were a great many things about the world of 2087 that he was not going to like.

He awoke to bright sunlight, his head bursting with information. The integration of old and new was, as always, a confusing process. He felt blurry and out of focus. Shutting his eyes tightly, he turned to the darker wall. After a time, he rolled over on his back and propped himself on his elbows. He yawned luxuriously and looked over the room. Like the Reacculturation Office, it was a turn of the century setting. They were bringing him down gently this time.

He swung his legs over the side of the bed and rose cautiously. He felt more at ease with normal gravity now than he had upon landing.

The apartment had a shower with a strong flow. The water was clear and free of the stale reek of shipboard water. As he dried in the heat bay, soft notes announced a call. He switched on the speaker.

"Did you enjoy the shower, Van? We tried to get one like the ones you had before you went up."

"You don't have to recreate the world of my youth for me, Jemma. I can adjust. I've done it before."

"We're only trying to make things as easy as we can."

"How about just letting me alone? I'm as updated as I want to be."

"You have press conferences today."

"They're never a problem. All I do is read the script POP has written for me."

"Tomorrow you meet with your financial advisors. It may take some time. Your investments have grown complicated over the years."

"Anything else?"

"There's a party."

"If I want a party, I'll throw my own."

"This is important, Van, for you and for the program. Government people will be there. They're interested in meeting you."

"I'm not interested in meeting them."

"Please, Van. It's really important." When he did not respond, Jemma went on, "Other people will be there, too. You'll enjoy it. And after that you'll be on leave. No more interruptions."

The formal attire of this time was simple in cut and subdued in color. In full dress uniform, Vanderhorst was the instantaneous center of attention when he, Jemma, and Korry entered.

"That's Senator Dalton. She's Chairman of the Space Ops Committee," Korry said.

Vanderhorst followed Korry's sightline and saw a tall, slim woman with silver hair standing with a younger man and a woman. As soon as Dalton noticed them she raised a hand in greeting. Korry steered Vanderhorst toward the threesome.

"It's good of you to come, Captain Vanderhorst," Dalton said. "This is Doree and Jake Fosset. Jake is my senior advisor. I must say, we're all proud of the rimrunners. You're brave people doing a hard, lonely job."

"We're paid for it."

"There's more to it than the pay, Captain. I'm sure of that."

"I think mostly about the pay," Vanderhorst said, edging around so that his back was to the window. He glanced at Korry, who appeared ready to burst into tears. Jemma forced a smile.

Dalton said, "You're an honest man, Captain. Whatever POP offered, you'd never get me to circle the solar system for a twenty-year hitch."

"It doesn't feel like twenty. Doesn't feel like much of anything, to tell the truth."

"You spend most of your time sleeping, isn't that right? There are people who accuse us in Washington of doing much the same."

"I get my rest, Senator."

"From what I've read, you were born a century ago. You certainly don't look a century old."

Vanderhorst emptied his glass. "I may in the morning."

Dalton burst into laughter. "You say exactly what you think, Captain. I admire that."

"Good," Vanderhorst said. His expression did not change. He felt the crowd pressing in on him, and stepped back to distance himself. His jaw was set tight.

"Tell me, Captain, is it difficult out there?" Doree Fosset asked.

"Is what difficult?"

"The work. The mission."

"Easiest job I ever had. The machines do all the work. Even the thinking."

"I didn't mean difficult in that sense. I was thinking of the isolation. It must be terrible. All that time, and so far from home. Confined in a small space, no outlet. ..." Doree looked at him innocently and made a vague gesture with her hand.

Vanderhorst looked her up and down slowly, appraisingly, and said nothing. The silence drew to an uncomfortable length. Korry leaned forward and said, "Van has four circuits to his credit. He knows how --"

"Mostly, you're asleep," Vanderhorst broke in. His voice was bland, almost clinical, as if he were lecturing to an academy. "It's bad when you're awakened, because that means there's trouble. You hope it's not something that's sent you shooting out into the universe with the sleep tank out of commission. That's big trouble. You hope it's something you can fix pretty damned fast. Once you're awake, you can't wait to go back in the tank, because you don't like what you're thinking. You curse yourself for being fool enough to go up, and you begin to hate the people who sent you. You think of letting a big one slip by and give them a good scare. Then you hate yourself for thinking that way, and wonder if you're going crazy. But you make the repairs and get back into the tank and hope for sweet dreams. That's how the time passes."

Jake Fosset asked, "Why send people out at all?"

"Can't trust the machines."

"Then why use machines?"

"Can't trust people, either. You need both."

"Do we, really? A lot of people question the rimrunner program. From what you say, they may have a point," Fosset said.

Long periods of isolation had sharpened Vanderhorst's receptiveness to unspoken communication; he sometimes felt that he could read people as easily as he read an instrument screen. Fosset was not very subtly probing for reactions while his wife assisted and his boss observed. Vanderhorst had encountered their types in every generation.

"And what's their point?" Vanderhorst asked.

"POP is a costly program, and costs keep rising. We have no way of knowing whether or not it's effective. A lot of people think there may be a better way of protecting ourselves."

"What do they suggest?"

"Nothing specific. It's all very tentative, you understand. It may turn out that rimrunners are the best solution."

Vanderhorst turned to Dalton. "Has anything hit Earth since '06?"

"Nothing big enough to frighten anyone, Captain."

"Then maybe we're effective."

"Are you saying that the rimrunners deserve credit for the absence of asteroid strikes?" Fosset said. "Well, really, Captain, I find that --"

"Who the hell else can claim credit? You? I didn't see anybody else out there, Fosset. Not you, not the Senator, not anybody. I was alone, protecting your ass."

Vanderhorst's eyes remained on Fosset. Others glanced at them, but kept a safe distance. Fosset backed away and Dalton said mildly, "Jake's not trying to deny rimrunners the recognition and gratitude they've earned, Captain. He's only making the reasonable point that we can't be absolutely certain that our safety is the direct result of your efforts."

"So all you want is absolute certainty, and you'll be satisfied."

"Obviously that's impossible."

"It always was, and everybody knows it. POP is cheap insurance, Senator, nothing more. You stake a few billion a year against the chance of losing a thousand times as much."

"It's rather more than a few billion."

"Even if we never spotted anything bigger than a snowball, we pay our way ten

times over."

"Very possibly. I must point out, though, that the country is currently experiencing economic difficulties," Dalton said.

"Maybe that's because lobies like this one are yapping about cutting the only government program that does what it's supposed to do."

"I confess I've never looked at it that way," Dalton said. Vanderhorst felt a nudge in his ribs and turned to see Korry, looking agonized, close at his side. "It's unfair for me to monopolize the guest of honor. We'll talk again, Captain," Dalton said, moving off smoothly, the Fossets in her wake.

When they were out of earshot, Jemma said in a low, furious voice, "Are you trying to destroy the program?"

"You wanted me to talk to Dalton. I talked."

"Yes, but the way you talked. ..."

"I don't like her. Or her lapdog. They're posturing frauds. If anyone in any government dared to cut the program and an asteroid the size of a golfball landed in the middle of the Gobi Desert, they'd be lynched. They know it, you know it, I know it. But they play at being important and I hate them for it."

"Van, you mustn't --"

"I told you I'm not good at this."

"What was it you called Fosset?" Korry asked.

"Lobie. You called him a lobie. What's that?" Jemma demanded.

"Before your time. Forget it."

She frowned and looked at Korry. He raised his brows and shook his head. Abruptly, Jemma's eyes widened. She looked at Vanderhorst in horror and said, "That's what they used to call lobotomized social offenders! And the kids who imitated them, the lobie gangs. Vandals and criminals!"

"It fits Fosset. Maybe Dalton, too. Now let's drop it. I've done my part and I want a drink." He walked away and left them standing by themselves.

The lodge at Silverhill offered a prospect that Vanderhorst had dreamed of as he rode beyond the farthest orbit of the solar system. Soft hills, flower-carpeted, fell away to a crystal lake. Beyond them rose the mountains, green-skirted and crowned in white. The skies were clean. No cities, no houses, no other works of man were to be seen. This was the Earth he dreamed of in the black void beyond Pluto, the planet he feared for and considered worth the risk of his life and his sanity.

Popular belief had downside rimrunners abandoning themselves to debauchery; and indeed, while aloft Vanderhorst sometimes spun lurid fantasies of his coming Earthtime. But on his last two returns, he found that what he wanted most was time to sit back and look, to walk without boundaries and breathe unrecycled air. Thanks to eighty years' accumulated wealth, he could patronize one of the few unspoiled areas in North America.

Vanderhorst had learned of Silverhill on his last return, and found that it offered a better method of reacculturation than POP had yet devised. Here one could see others and yet remain apart. Companionship could be had when it was desired and endured no longer than it pleased.

Open spaces brimming with the sounds and smells of life drew Vanderhorst on long solitary walks. He sat for hours on a hillside, or under a tree, his back against the rough bark, absorbing his surroundings. One entire morning he passed listening to birdsong, and once he glimpsed a hawk. He spent his days out of doors regardless of the weather. The warmth of sun or the cool touch of rain on his upturned face were equally welcome. The nightly return of familiar stars was assurance.

He dined elaborately with a companion engaged for the evening. There was no talk of social relations or government approval. Sometimes he chose to end the day alone.

Silverhill offered an oversized circumferential hollie unit for each lodge. The hollies had made great advances since his last time downside, and Vanderhorst found the sensation fascinating. Not long before, he had been wrapped in the vast emptiness of the fringes of interstellar space. Now he could immerse himself in a simulacrum of life. At the center of a swarm of humans that appeared as real as himself, he could participate in the intrigues and assignments of the mighty, be a witness to famous events, a partner to history and romance; he could enjoy any experience he could conceive. And all came and went at his will, for the touching of a button.

One crisp and cloudless night he returned to his lodge and found the message light flashing. His first reaction was surprise, which turned almost at once to anger. He pressed the transmit plate. A smiling face appeared on the small screen.

"My message signal is on. Is it a mistake?"

"No, sir. The message was received at 21:27."

"Who was it?"

"The caller left no name, sir. It was voice only, no visual."

"Are you sure it was for me?"

"It was for the gentleman in Frostwood Lodge, sir. The caller left a number for you to call."

"I don't want any messages. Don't connect anybody, understand?"

"You will not be disturbed, sir."

Vanderhorst was at Silverhill under a carefully maintained false identity, using a supposedly untraceable credit line. Damn POP and their meddling, he thought. I'm done with them until briefing time, and I want their claws out of my hide. He wondered whether Watts had called, or Korry, or Jemma, or some officious underling running errands for his chief; and he wondered why there had been only a call, and no one had come bursting in on him, and how long it would be before they dared that.

After a simple dinner, he settled in the middle of the hollie and sampled the offerings. For lack of anything more interesting, he selected "Evening on the Town (Comedy)."

A crowded room phased into existence around him, filled with the low murmur of muted conversations, the muffled clink and clatter of dining and drinking, occasional distant laughter, unobtrusive music in the background. A light blazed some five meters ahead and a young man in a gaudy cloak, leaning heavily on a long staff, limped into sight.

From his updating, Vanderhorst recognized the man as an eccentric, one of the popular entertainers of the period. Eccentrics were story-tellers, descendants of the old standup comics and flatscreeners. By convention, they all affected a minor physical disability and pretended to great earnestness in their delivery.

"Here's the latest from the colonies," the limping man said, clasping both hands around his staff and thrusting his head forward. "Sixty-three lunies have kidnapped the Vice President of Terralune Gravitronics. One did the actual kidnapping. The other sixty-two are still trying to write the ransom note."

Laughter rose around Vanderhorst. He did not join in. The eccentric brandished his staff and the laughter died.

"The lunies complain that everything we send up costs too much. They say we're getting rich off them down here," he said, looking about with a challenging glare. "What do they expect? Every tube of soap has to come with an instruction program."

The laughter began again. Vanderhorst cut it short with a jab of his finger. The crowd vanished, and he was alone in the circular room, in silence and faint light.

He admired the lunar colonists and did not enjoy jokes that belittled them. The worst things never change, he reflected. The staybehinds send others out to do their sweatwork and watch over their cozy world, and begrudge them so much as a

"Thanks." His father had told him how the staybehinds had treated veterans of his own long-forgotten war. It was no different then. But lunies and rimrunners had a deadlier enemy, and no hope of victory. Space always won in the end. Downsiders could not understand them, so they derided them.

Vanderhorst's mood grew sour. The humor of this age angered him. He had heard those jokes before; they were undying, and he despised those who laughed at mockery of better men and women. In the sixties the butt was the shackers, the swarms of poor that encircled every urban complex. Shackers were fair game for scorn: the methmen who recycled human waste were called "Shackie chefs" by urbanites whose chief concern in the sanctuary of their towers was overeating. The targets back in the forties were the lobies. Before that, there were other out-of-favor groups.

But never before had these jokes been public fare. He wondered what the lunar settlers had done -- or achieved -- to turn downsiders so openly against them. His sleep-cram had not been helpful on that subject. One day, he thought, it will be rimrunners.

Two days later, Senator Dalton came to Silverhill. She was seated on the deck of Frostwood Lodge when Vanderhorst returned at dusk from a day of solitary walking.

"What the hell are you doing here?" Vanderhorst demanded.

"I had to see you, Captain."

"I don't want to see anybody."

"Please, Captain. I have an important matter to discuss with you."

"You tried to reach me the other night, didn't you?"

"Yes. I've tried several times since then. They refused to put me through, so I came myself. It's important."

"Not to me."

"To you and to the program. Give me a few minutes. If I can't persuade you to listen on, I'll leave."

Vanderhorst hesitated for a moment, frowning. "All right. We'll talk out here. What do you want?"

"To hear about POP's work from someone who actually does it."

"I told you the other night. The machines do the work. I'm along in case they need a kick. On four runs I've spent a total of fewer than a hundred hours awake."

"How do you perceive the rimrunners' mission?"

"We're the forward observers. We register incoming objects above a given mass, compute their trajectories, and send the data in to the Solomons. If the Solomons decide that an object is a danger to Earth or the colonies, they alert the Paladins. The Paladins take appropriate action. The system works. Forty-seven alerts and twenty-two takeouts since POP began."

"Was each of those takeouts a serious threat?"

"The Solomons thought so. I won't argue."

Dalton was silent for a time, then she said, "The Solomons and Paladins are unmanned. Do you have as much confidence in the unmanned satellites as you do in the Rimrunners?"

"Why not? They're simpler. Less to go wrong. And they're closer in, and moving slower, so they can be monitored from Earth."

"What if you had a malfunction and couldn't repair it?"

"Depends on the malfunction. If it was in the instruments, no problem. The Solomons would pick up anything that got past a rimrunner. They'd have less time and less data to work with, though. The odds in favor of the asteroid would improve."

"And if the Solomons failed, too?"

"The Paladins automatically destroy anything that reaches lunar orbit without clearance." Vanderhorst gave a little humorless laugh. "Tough if it happened to be a friendly alien."

"What if all three systems failed?"

Vanderhorst shrugged. "You could pray. That's what they did in the old days, isn't it?"

"Do you believe in prayer?"

"Under those conditions, I'd pray whether I believed in it or not."

"Suppose there was another kind of malfunction, something in the ship itself?"

"Then I'd be the farthest traveler in the history of the human race."

Dalton nodded. "And what if Rimrunner Vanderhorst malfunctioned?"

"What are you reaching for, Senator?"

"Just suppose a rimrunner was awakened for an emergency and broke under the

stress. What damage could he do? Could he reroute his ship, or relay false data?"

"Rimrunners don't break."

"Equipment does. Backup systems fail. So do people, more often than we like to admit. What's the worst possible damage a rimrunner could do? I want to know. I have to make decisions and recommendations, and I need data, not blind faith." When Vanderhorst did not reply, she went on, "Did you know that during your last circuit, two downside rimrunners committed crimes of violence and one tried to kill herself? The public hears these things and fears you."

"Then let the public go out there."

"Open up, Captain. You scorn the human race, and yet you go out time after time and risk your life to keep us safe." Dalton raised a hand to forestall objection. "Don't tell me you're doing it for the money. You're already one of the richest men in the world."

"I go out for Earth's sake. It's a beautiful planet, and I want it to be here when the human race has slobbered its way into extinction."

"There's rather less chance of that than there was a few generations ago. Things have improved."

"I haven't noticed. Every time I come down I'm disappointed. I keep telling myself I'll do one more run, and things will be better. They never are."

"The others feel almost exactly as you do. Every rimrunner spoke of loving the world and despising the people on it," Dalton said.

"That's what makes us good rimrunners. We're not selected for our warm hearts. What difference does it make how we feel?"

"It makes a great difference. There's an unbridgeable gulf between the protectors and those they protect."

"There always has been, Senator. All the way back to my father's time, and probably a long time before that." They sat enshrouded in darkness and silence. Dalton made no reply. At last Vanderhorst stood and said, "Come inside. We can talk better if we can see each other."

Their footsteps resounded on the wooden deck. Vanderhorst entered the lodge, turned on the lights, and waved Dalton to a seat. "Tell me more about the others," he said.

"I should think you'd know them better than I do."

Vanderhorst shook his head. "We don't socialize, not even with other rimrunners. It's not in our natures. I knew only one rimrunner well. Moira trained with me."

We planned to go out for three runs each, then settle down to enjoy our fortunes. She walked out on me and POP first time downside. If Moira's still alive, she's a hundred and two years old. And I'm thirty-four. Or a hundred and five, depending on how you calculate. Not your typical couple."

"Rimrunners aren't typical. That's why they make the public uneasy."

"The average citizen couldn't last ten days on a picket ship. That doesn't mean that those who can are freaks."

"I'm not saying you're freaks, Vanderhorst. I'm saying that you're different in a way that scares people. Take yourself, for example: born in a time of social unrest, your father a decorated hero in a war that many Americans condemned. Orphaned at seven and bounced around a dozen foster homes. Because of your work, you've become a man without roots. Except for a score of rimrunners, everyone else born in your time is dead."

"All true. But so what?"

"You're the living embodiment of two things the people of this time fear: violence and alienation. All our social analysts consider them the besetting sicknesses of the twentieth century and warn us that we've survived only because we've overcome them."

"You haven't overcome them. You've just learned to cover them over."

"It may look that way to you, but violence is rare these days, and alienation afflicts only a small number. Yet the rimrunners -- people we need, people we trust to be our first line of planetary defense -- are living examples of these very ills."

"Why don't you just put us in quarantine? Send us up, but don't let us land."

"That's been suggested."

"This is the first I've heard. Spell it out for me."

"This is confidential, Captain. Understood? Absolutely confidential."

"Understood."

"Three years ago, a special commission recommended that rimrunner operations be moved to Luna IV and consolidated with the Solomon and Paladin complexes. A settlement was to be built especially for rimrunner personnel --"

"The ungrateful gutless bastards," Vanderhorst said, rising.

"The recommendation was soundly rejected. It's never come up again. I mention it only as a sign of the fears in some minds."

"Some minds. Descendants of the sons of bitches who spat at my father when he came back from a war they dodged." Vanderhorst sank back into his chair. He stared blankly ahead, his breathing audible in the silence. "I think you'd be smart to leave now," he said at last.

"I fought the recommendation, and helped defeat it. I'll fight it again, i(it comes up."

Without moving, Vanderhorst said, "When I lock in from my next circuit, it will be 2107. You'll be in your eighties. Maybe you'll be dead. Which way will the vote go then?"

"You could stay down and work for the program."

"Surrounded by lobies who think I'm crazy? I'll go up, Senator."

"I'm sorry," Dalton said. She rose and left the lodge. A few minutes after her departure, Vanderhorst, in a hushed voice, said, "Thanks." He drew himself up out of the chair and poured himself a drink.

Shortly after one o'clock, bottle in hand, he made his way to the communications panel and punched in Korry and Jemma's personal code. The signal rang softly on, and he waited, and at last the screen glowed to life to reveal a sleepy Jemma.

"Van! Are you all right?"

"You told Dalton. Let us think we're being left alone, but you're always looking, keeping an eye on us so we don't screw up your handout."

"Tell us where you are, Van, so we can help you."

"I don't want your help. I don't want anything to do with any of you."

Jemma's voice was low, taut with controlled urgency. "Van, tell us where you are. We'll come to you, and we'll work this out together. It's better that way. Trust us, Van."

Vanderhorst rubbed his eyes. When he looked again, he glimpsed Jemma's gesture to someone beyond screen range. At the sight of him, she reached out imploringly and said, "Please tell us, Van. Let us help you."

Without a word, he drew back his arm and with all his strength flung the bottle squarely into the screened image. He stood for a few minutes before the shattered panel, feeling a great satisfaction, then he turned and quickly gathered his few possessions.

Except for the pale green carpet, everything in the room was a cool restful blue. The colors, Vanderhorst had been told by smiling, earnest social assistants, would help him relax. He did not relax. They looked at him ruefully, spoke to him gently, and never stopped smiling.

On his second morning in the Assistance House, he began to wonder how long he would be staying. Unfailing smiles and bland words did not deceive him. He was a prisoner and he knew it. If alienation and violence were crimes in 2087, then he was a criminal. If they were illnesses, he was a patient. Whatever they chose to consider him, he was not free.

For the moment, he was content to leave the next move to his keepers. His lip was cut and swollen, and there was a painful lump on his temple. Whatever the authorities might think, there were still a few violent people left out there. His knuckles were heavily coated with curafilm, and he found it awkward and uncomfortable to flex his fingers. His memory was jumbled. He had drunk a great deal, roared against the human race, struck out at everyone who came within reach; that much he could remember. And now he was thoroughly disgusted with himself. He did not belong to this time, and never would.

A soft tone announced his morning meal. He rose from his bed, stretched, and went to the serving slot. The screen above the opening brightened at his approach, and a smiling young woman appeared, greeting him, "Good morning, Captain Vanderhorst. Did you sleep well?"

"I always sleep very well. It's a big part of my job."

"We want you to get back into proper condition. You've placed quite a strain on your body these past --"

"How about breakfast?" he broke in.

"Certainly, Captain. Do you feel more like talking with us today? We're very fortunate. The senior counselor is free all afternoon, and he's personally interested in offering you --"

"All I want from anyone here is breakfast. Do I get it?"

She took on the expression of a mother whose child has misbehaved and now revels in his misbehavior. "Captain Vanderhorst, if you tried to understand what we want to do for you, I'm sure you'd be glad to cooperate with us."

"I never cooperate on an empty stomach."

Each meal on that and the following days was served to a similar accompaniment of cajolery and gently expressed concern. Early in the evening of the fifth day, as Vanderhorst sat at his pale blue table, playing solitaire, his door opened. A husky junior social assistant stood in the opening. In one hand he held a small travel case.

"Will you come with me, please, Captain Vanderhorst?"

"Where are we going?"

"You've been cleared for re-entry in the mainstream. For your own sake, Captain, you ought to --"

"Just show me the way out."

To his surprise, the young man did so at once. Vanderhorst had anticipated a marathon of interviews and a final outpouring of solicitude by the entire staff of the Assistance House. Instead, he was led through pale blue corridors and down gentle ramps to a plain door. The junior social assistant handed him his travel case, opened the door, and said, "It was our pleasure to offer assistance, Captain Vanderhorst."

Vanderhorst did not reply. He was too surprised by the sight of Senator Dalton, standing by a private landroller.

"Did you get me out?" he asked.

"I spoke to a few people. Are you ready to go up again?"

"Will I be allowed to land on Earth?"

"As long as I have any influence, you've got a home here. I hope you'll make less trouble next time, though," she said.

"I'll be a hundred and twenty-five when I get back. Maybe I'll be wiser."

"And I'll be eighty-one, as you reminded me. I'll be supporting you, but my support may not be as effective as it is now. Things could go against you and the program. You must know that."

Vanderhorst shrugged. "I wouldn't help the cause much if I stayed down. I'm not a good politician."

Dalton laughed. "That may be the greatest understatement I've ever heard. I guess we're all better off sticking with what we do best."

Vanderhorst settled into the comfort of the landroller. It left the Assistance Compound slowly, then dipped and locked into the exurban track and accelerated to cruising speed. Embankments rose on either side, blocking out the manmade world. The evening sky unrolled above, unobstructed and undefiled.

He believed that Dalton would keep her word and do her best, but he had no illusions and to his surprise, felt no concern. A home on Earth might be his by right, but Dalton's success or failure in assuring it hardly mattered now. There was no place here for Vanderhorst.

He loved the sight of this world, so bright against the blackness, so much easier to look at than to live on. On Luna, he could have the view without the complications. Gravity would be easier, too, and require no adjusting. He might even meet people he could talk to, and like, and live with in peace. He could be

happy there.

He burst into sudden laughter, and Dalton looked at him curiously.

Grinning, he said, "I was thinking what my father would say if he knew that I was trusting my future to a politician."

He threw his head back and laughed for pure joy, feeling the tension and anger of downside drop away like a cast-off garment. The sky was a deeper blue now, and the first stars were out. Vanderhorst looked up and sighed with satisfaction. It was good to be heading home.