

THX 1138

by Ben Bova

Based on the Screenplay by George Lucas and Walter Murch

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Back Cover:

THE PERFECTLY CONTROLLED SOCIETY

Its citizens are conceived in test tubes, nourished in vats, educated intravenously, watched by monitors, made docile by drugs.

The Adam of this 25th century Eden is THX 1138; the Eve is his beautiful roommate LUH 3417. Having yielded to the temptation not to take her state-prescribed drugs, she lures THX into committing the same crime. How could anyone know? she argues.

But the electronic monitor is all-seeing; instead of arch-angels with flaming swords there are police robots with cattle prods -- and if there are any gates to this Eden, no one knows where. . .

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Chapter 1

"I need something stronger."

The observer frowned at his viewscreen picture. It was badly distorted. He could hardly make out the man's face.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"Nothing. . . nothing really. I just feel. . . I need something stronger."

There were fifty viewscreens on the observer's panel; all of them clamoring for attention. His head throbbed painfully. He said to this one:

"If you have a problem, don't hesitate to ask for assist-ance. Call 348-853." And get off my back.

..

"Yes. . . Thank you, I'll be all right. I'll be all right," said THX 1138.

He stood in front of the medicine cabinet and somehow knew that the observer was no longer paying attention to him. He took two pills from the nearest bottle and re-turned the bottle to the cabinet.

Popping the two pills into his mouth, THX 1138 made his way back to the hologram room. He curled up in the deep soft relaxer chair. He was dressed as always in loose-fitting white pajamas. His head, like everyone's, was shaved. He curled into a fetal position, thumb in mouth, eyes glazed, and watched.

Watched the three policemen beating the old man. Listened to the soft whistle of the long chrome nightsticks that ended in the solidthunk! of flesh being pounded, blood vessels bursting, skin ripping, bones shattering. The old man was still alive; he gave a sighing grunt with each impact.

THX 1138 watched the policemen beat the old man, and felt the soothing glow of the pills taking effect. Some-where he heard a female voice saying:

"For more rapid results use your new D code on your Mercicontrol card. Thank you."

He nodded and kept watching. The room was dimly lit in a sullen red glow that came from the walls. But the holopicture was bright and sharp. THX could see that the policemen were chrome, like their clubs. Robots. But the old man was real. He moaned. He bled.

The door to the holoroom opened. THX ignored it

"THX?"

"No. . . later. . ."

"But. . ."

He pulled tighter together, knees under chin.

She stood at the door and stared at him for a long empty moment With every thud of the nightsticks she winced. Slowly, she closed the door.

Her name -- in the style of the underground society -- was LUH 3417. She was twenty years old, slim and very lovely except for a barely noticeable small red "S" branded on her left cheek. Her shaved head gave her face a child-like, innocent appearance.

She stood in the little hallway outside the holoroom, under the flat glareless light of the overhead panels, wearing the standard white pajamas that everyone wore. It was a good apartment, three functional immaculate white rooms. And the holoroom. Down on the lowest level of the city, closest to the warmth of the Earth's core, safe and protected.

Protected from what?LUH wondered.

With a worried frown she walked the four steps from the holoroom's door to the sanitary. It was a gleaming chrome cubbyhole, with showerstall, depilatory mask, sink and medicine cabinet.

She stood in front of the cabinet, staring into its mirror. She didn't notice her expressive eyes, or the curve of her cheek. Only the "S." It was quite small now. Baby-sized.Will they give me another one when I turn twenty-one?

She opened the medicine cabinet, then hesitated.

"What's wrong?" asked a male observer's voice.

Impulsively, she took the bottle of pills that THX had used a few minutes earlier. "Never mind," she said to the unseen observer. "I'll. . . I'll replace these later." She slammed, the cabinet door shut.

She shook out a fistful of pills, put them to her lips, and held her hand frozen there for a frightening instant. Then she reached down and tossed the pills into the toilet. She shook the whole bottle's contents into the toilet and flushed all the pills down.

Ajter all,she thought to herself,how can they know? How can they find out? The medicines don't work as well on natural-borns anyway.

For a moment she felt elated, almost happy, with a delicious twinge of guilt(the pills are for your

own good, child). Then she left the sanitary and walked past the holoroom door again. She could still hear the thudding. But now there was a soft moaning sound, a crooning. Not from the old man in the holopicture. She knew that sound. It was THX.

Her elation vanished. She knew what he was doing.

Slowly, silently, reluctantly, LUH cracked open the door of the holoroom just wide enough to see THX. He was breathing hard, moaning softly, eyes fixed on the picture, body jerking spasmodically. LUH looked up at the picture. They were beating a naked girl now. She was silently begging them, but they kept on beating her. One of the chrome policemen hauled her up by the wrists to a kneeling position and the others kicked her abdomen, her ribs. All in slow-motion. Her breasts bounced with each blow. A chrome fist smashed into her face, spewing blood.

THX was masturbating. A smooth white plastic receptacle set into the chair caught his flow and ducted it off. Keep the apartment spotless. Save the sperm for the state.

LUH shut the door, her hands shaking. Why did it bother her so? Her own holopicture stimuli were so different. . . why did she want --

She realized she was crying. If anyone saw that! With an effort that made her shudder, she pulled herself under control. LUH went into the kitchen. She had to do something, busy herself. She touched the menu stud on the wall, and holopictures of acceptable meals flicked by in eyeblink succession where the cooker screen was. She touched the button again when she saw THX's favorite meal. It was all synthetics, of course, but the protein was done up to look like real meat. The wall button flashed blue, acknowledging her order.

Nodding to herself, LUH waited for the sound of the pre-packaged meal to arrive in the cooker. When it came, she stepped to the cooker and opened the door, bending over slightly, to look inside and make certain it was what she had ordered.

It wasn't. She must have been too slow with the selector button; or maybe the system was just fouled up again. Too late now, there was no way to return the food. It had to be consumed.

She let the cooker door snap shut and pressed the middle of three buttons alongside it. The button glowed red. The meal would be ready in five minutes.

LUH turned back toward the holoroom. For a moment she hesitated, then took a deep breath and started for THX.

He was sitting up now. A smooth-voiced newscaster was sitting across the room where the beatings had been going on.

". . . in the constant striving for perfection in the AIA PB 848's that have been built this year.

"Five felons have been caught fleeing Rehabilitation Center DD 2. All five had been undergoing treatment for drug offenses. Two of the felons were the products of the sexact, the other three. . ."

"What?" LUH asked involuntarily.

The holopicture flashed blindingly for an instant, then the newscaster repeated:

"Two of the felons were products of the sexact, the other three are from Reproclinic 19. The quintet escaped from Compound 545 and were destroyed upon recapture. Reports indicate. . ."

She touched THX's shoulder. "I started dinner for you."

"I'm not hungry," he said.

The newscaster's voice automatically dropped to sub-liminal level when they spoke. He sat there, smiling amiably, mouthing the day's events.

"Well, it's fixed. Come on out and eat it."

"I don't want to."

Impatiently, LUH said, "It's just going to go to waste if you don't eat it. Come on. . ."

He turned and looked up at her. "What's the matter with you?"

"Can't you come out of this room and spend some time with me?"

"I see you every day."

She started to reply, then suddenly turned and left the room. THX sat in the relaxer chair, half-turned to watch her as the door slid shut behind her. With a puzzled frown he got up and followed her out into the hall.

"What's the matter?" he asked.

She shook her head. "Nothing. Come on, I'll get your dinner from the cooker."

"Okay. Let's eat in the holeroom. The news will be finished soon and the comedy shows start next."

So she sat in the relaxer chair beside him, watching the flesh-colored mannequins cavorting to taped laughter. He looked rather puzzled when she insisted on sitting in the same chair with him, close enough so that their bodies actually touched.

She's a strange girl, he thought. He kept trying to concentrate on the holoshow, but his eyes drifted to her as she sat beside him, staring straight ahead at the holo-picture but obviously not looking at it, eating slowly, her thoughts. . . where? What was she thinking?

"LUH. . ."

She turned to face him. "Yes?"

Shaking his head, "Nothing." He went back to watch-ing the mannequins.

Control sat in his sculptured foamchair, a thin humor-less smile on his lips.

The far wall of his spacious office was a holoscreen. At the moment, it seemed as if there was no wall there at all, and the office appeared to look out on half a dozen horseshoe-shaped observer desks, each ringed with fifty monitoring screens and manned by an observer in skullcap and earphones.

"Well?" he asked one of the observers, through the intercom set into the surface of his synthetic wood desk. "What's your analysis?"

The holopicture zoomed in on one observer. Each of his fifty screens had the same picture of THX and LUH sitting together; the observer saw them the way a mantis must see its prey.

"She's trying to seduce him, obviously," said the ob-server.

"Obviously," Control agreed. "But is she aware of what she's doing or is she acting instinctively? That's the important question."

Without turning his head from the screens, the observer answered, "Her pulse rate, neutral activity, EEG, body temperature -- they all indicate that she's excited, but still at the subliminal level. She doesn't really know what's going on inside her own glands."

Control chuckled. "But her body knows. Look at the way she's rubbing against him. Disgusting."

"Yes, but she's not consciously trying to commit the crime. She's only responding to her own heredity."

Control muttered something to himself.

"He's starting to feel it," the observer noted. "All his indicators are. . . well, rising." He grinned, knowing that Control couldn't see his face.

"I don't doubt it," said Control.

"I should warn him," the observer said.

"No."

"At least suggest that he take the proper sedation."

"No!" Control snapped.

"But. . . I don't understand. If we allow her to con-tinue like this, then he'll commit the crime with her."

"Of course."

"But it won't really be his fault," the observer said.

"No? Whose fault will it be?"

The observer had heard that tone of voice from Control before. It was the last warning sound before an irrevocable trap was sprung.

"I mean to say, sir," the observer backtracked, "that. . . well, not every man could maintain his principles under. . . eh, that kind of treatment."

Control answered icily, "Either he maintains his principles or he falls. If he falls, it's his own will, his own volition that caused it."

The observer shook his head.

"You fail to understand," Control said, "that LUH 3417, as a natural-born, a product of the sexact, is an atavism, a dangerous anomaly, a living time bomb ticking away in our society. Sooner or later her genetic heritage will make itself felt and she will seduce some otherwise decent citizen into committing the same crime that spawned her."

"We could arrest her now," the observer said timidly. "On drug abuse. I saw her flush a whole bottle of pills down the toilet."

"No, I want to catch her in the sexact. The guiding principle of our society is not vengeance, but self-protection. Criminals commit crimes. You can't stop them from doing it, you can only delay the inevitable moment when they try to damage society and themselves. No matter what we do, LUH 3417 is intent on destroying herself. We merely have to wait until she takes the ultimate step, and then let society act in the legally prescribed manner."

"But -- the man. . ."

"If he has criminal instincts, then he will destroy himself, too. There's no way for us to prevent it. Our society will be healthier, stronger, safer, more stable with such criminals out of the way."

The observer decided not to answer. Control, as always, was right. No sense arguing.

Control watched THX and LUH on the observer's multiple screens for a few minutes longer, then pointed a lean finger at the special receptor atop his desk. The holopicture of the observer's warren disappeared with a silent flash, to be replaced by the solid wall of the office and its stylized portrait of the legendary First Control, with the mysterious clockwork numbers spiraling back-ward around his puffy, stern face.

Chapter 2

Frowning with concentration, beads of sweat on his face, THX manipulated the waldoes carefully.

This is the touchiest part of it. If the radioactives. . .

He was standing in front of the leaded window of Assembly Bay 17, hands gloved by the metal

manipulators, which felt clammy and slippery to him now. On either side of him, dozens of other men worked straining at identical stations, each identically uniformed in white with close-fitting cap and earphones. He held still for a moment, and inside the lead-shielded assembly bay, his remote mechanical counterpart hands -- the waldos -- stopped in mid-motion. They were holding a tiny capsule of radioactives that would activate the chrome robot lying inert beneath the skeletal metal arms of the waldos.

"What's the trouble?"

"Assembly Bay 17, are you all right?"

"Answer, 1138."

"I'm okay," THX said.

A million voices were buzzing in his earphones, orders, queries, conversations from all over the assembly center. His head throbbed.

"Please keep your trailing edge circuits from touching the floor. Do not present solid circuits for validation."

"If you have been issued circuit cards with the new D code function, make sure that the pin array is compatible with earlier models."

"Recycle the step sequencer, 2434. Repeat, recycle step sequencer."

"Multiphase analysis, please."

"You're in the green, station 6. Go ahead."

Another three hours, THX thought. Three more hours and I'll be home. And then he added, with LUH. He saw her face, felt the whisper of her breath on his cheek.

Assembly 17, what's the holdup?"

"Sorry," he muttered. Keep your mind on your work!

"Grid control, this is assembly central. Bay 17 initiating thermal transfer. Yellow alert."

"Read you, central. Yellow alert, thermal transfer. Blast and radiation procedures. Go ahead, bay 17."

In another part of the vast underground center, LUH sat at an observer's desk, eyes flickering over the fifty screens, fingers touching out an elaborate sonata of electronic responses to people's needs and fears.

But somehow she felt that the screens were watching her.

The observation room was dim and shadowy, lit mostly by the bluish-glowing screens. Hundreds

of observers sat at their stations, with supervisors pacing between them. LUH sat and listened to the great mindless buzz of millions of voices crackling eternally in her earphones.

"I'm going away on holiday. Should I continue to take pinural or should I switch to something else?"

"Congratulations on your access to holiday. Holi-day centers are equipped to maintain an agreeable sedation rate within certain limits. You do not need to take any special precautions."

"This is city probe scanner. We've run across some illegal sexual activity. It should be on your DTO screen right now. Transfer to Control, mode seven." "Thank you for assistance in crime prevention. Ap-proprate credits will be transferred to your account."

"JDC. . . pickup on three. . . VPT. . . please report to Intrinsic Interloop Station 5. . . sampling error. . ."

One of her central screens showed a tired-looking old man standing in a complaint booth in one of the com-mercial plazas. Shoppers hurried back and forth behind him. The picture was blurry; LUH tried to get it clear but couldn't.

"What's wrong?" she asked into her lip mike.

The old man held up something that looked like a shopping bag.

"I just bought these new kind yesterday. . ." he rum-maged through the shopping bag and pulled out a yellow plastic consumption hexagon. "And they don't fit in my consumall, and the store doesn't have any of the old ones." LUH tapped out a standard response code on her key-board. A taped voice, very feminine, warm, soothing, said:

"For more enjoyment and greater efficiency, con-sumption is being standardized. We are sorry if you have experienced any temporary inconvenience. Place your identification badge in the reader and we will have units transferred to your account as soon as possible."

Slightly dazed-looking, the man obediently undipped the badge from his lapel and slipped it into the reader. He waited patiently until the machine buzzed at him, then took the badge back.

"Thank you. And may we recommend an extra dosage of sedation? Etracene, enervol and pinural are compatible within group 3A." The old man nodded dumbly and shuffled off, to be swept up by the crowd streaming by. LUH cut the picture and turned her attention to a pair of children who, giggling, were peeking in at the edge of the screen and then ducking out of sight, to hide behind a plastisteel bench in the middle of their school plaza. LUH smiled as she pressed a series of keys on her panel. A kind but stern baritone voice said:

"This monitor is to be used for emergencies or special requests only. All routine information can be easily obtained through the bulletin panels installed at every intersection."

One little boy got up from behind the bench, stuck histongue out at the screen, and then ran off laughing. LUH watched him until he disappeared around the corner of a building.

Then another scene, in a screen far up in the left corner of her set, caught her eye. She transferred the picture to the four main screens directly in front of her.

"What's wrong?"

A man was screaming hysterically as he stood in a sanitary. There was no sound coming from him, though. Frantically, LUH worked the switched on her panel.

". . . me. . .help me. . ." the man was shrieking.

"What's wrong?"

The man thrust both hands into the medicine cabinet, knocking bottles everywhere. As they clattered to the floor, he dropped to his knees and started pouring out handfulls of pills and swallowing them madly.

LUH punched a single red button. A taped voice began saying:

"Take four red capsules, in ten minutes take two more. Help is on the way. Do not be afraid. . . Take four red capsules. . ."

She called Mercicontrol. "Okay, got it," said a brash young man's voice in her earphones. "You can let go now, we'll take care of him."

With a weary sigh, she acknowledged and let the screaming, pill-gobbling man's image return to its upper left screen. The central screens showed four different robot assembly bays now. THX sat at one of them. LUH stared at him. There was no sound from the screens, only the constant cacophony of voices in her earphones.

But she ignored them now. She watched THX as he worked, all concentration, all sinew and hard, steady nerves, manipulating the metal hands as they did their delicate work of breathing radioactive life into a new chrome robot. Like bringing a baby to life, she thought.

"Concourse 5. . . cross three monitor."

"Concourse 5. . . 3417-LUH. . . LUH."

"Are you there? Relate. Relate."

Suddenly realizing that they were talking to her, LUH snapped her attention to the frowning man whose image was now filling her right bottom main screen.

"LUH 3417," she said. "Go ahead."

"This is a control check," the man said. "Bracket all request limitations. One: Have you received your ratio of enervol? Check 643 grams?"

"Yes," she lied.

"Did you receive an etracene ration during your last work unit?"

She nodded.

"You're due for a medical check. All remote monitor findings are within low-normal range. Amina plus three was detected but it's not considered dangerous. Thank you."

The screen flashed and then showed a commercial shopping plaza once again.

The cacophony in her earphones became impersonal again, leaving LUH to worry about how long she could go without taking a medical check. How long would it be before they found out she was guilty of drug evasion?

The voice of her supervisor, SEN 5241, cut in: "Scan inspectors are on their way. Be on the lookout, check back."

"Yessir," she said.

But THX was still on her top left main screen, still working steadily, intently.

LUH never saw the explosion in the assembly bay on the screen next to THX's image. She never noticed the bay blow out in a shower of sparks and sudden choking billows of white smoke, men running, danger lights flash-ing balefully.

"Monitor concourse 5, cross three. . . 3417. . . emergency. . . emergency!"

She snapped out of her trance, eyes widening at the sight of the accident. Her hands worked the keyboard automatically and all four of her main screens showed the scene. LUH began frantically punching response keys.

A deep, calm, male voice said: "You are a true believer. Blessings of the State, Blessings of the masses. Thou art a subject of. . ."

Startled, she hit another sequence of keys. The screens showed men crawling through the smoke, others lying sprawled inert, broken. Flames licked evilly through the area. Still no sound. Then:

"Eject. . . eject. . . evacuate all personnel. . ."

"There's thirty-eight men trapped in there. . ."

"Seal all blast hatches! Mark!"

"Stay calm. Correct procedure is essential. Do not fail to remove auxiliary command circuits before evacuation. Vacuum detail. . ."

"Turn that damned tape off and get those men clear before the whole area goes up!"

"Mercicontrol! Emergency. . ."

LUH patched the pictures and sound directly to Merci-control. Involuntarily, she looked up at the screen where THX's image had been transferred. It was a small screen, up at the top row, but she could see him still working. In her earphones she heard what he was hearing:

"There has been an accident in Blue sector, 1-14. Do not abandon your post. Repeat, do not abandon your post. There is absolutely no danger of radiation leakage. Repeat ..."

LUH tapped another key and the radiation levels in THX's assembly bay area appeared on her main data screen: already four points above normal and rising.

"The accident in Blue sector destroyed another 63 personnel, giving them a total of 242 lost to our 195. Keep up the good work and prevent accidents."

"Are you all right?"

LUH turned and saw SEN 5241-middle aged, face starting to go into jowls and bags under the eyes.

"You should be at your post," she whispered. SEN's observation console was next to hers.

"You looked upset. . . not yourself." He reached into a pajama pocket and pulled out a tiny plastic envelope that held two yellow pills.

"Here. Try these, they'll help." He smiled at her.

"Thanks."

He stood there, watching her. LUH slowly tore the plastic open, shook the pills into her hand, and put them to her mouth.

"There. You'll feel better in no time. I use them all the time. Special issue. You can't get them in the regular stores and dispensers." He smiled again, toothily, and LUH shuddered.

"Uh, thank you."

"Think nothing of it. My pleasure to help you."

SEN blinked his watery eyes and then turned and went back to his own console. As he sat down he put on his earphones and began scanning the screens. LUH glanced down at the yellow pills still in her palm. Quickly she let them fall to the floor.

THX shuffled down the busy roaring pedestrian corridor, letting the crowd's mindless momentum carry him along.

"So he just jumped off the tram platform. Just like that," someone was shouting into the ear of his companion, a few bodies up ahead of THX. "Just like that. Fffft. Destroyed."

"You mean you haven't tried ekterol?" a woman beside him was saying to her friend. "It comes in blue capsules and it's just heaven."

And from the eternal overhead speakers, the announcements. Always the announcements:

"Please keep your causeways clean."

"Performance perfect is perfect performance."

"The level 6421 intermural stadium will have open day on series 621T."

"Central Plaza stay to right. Con 6 move to left."

THX battled his way through the surging crowd and stepped onto a slideway. Here at least he could standstill and let the conveyor do the work. But still, from overhead:

"Please hold handrail and stand on theright; if you wish to pass, pass on theleft . . . Please hold hand-rail. . ."

Up ahead he saw a vertitube that would carry him down to his apartment level. He edged to the side of the slideway and gingerly stepped off. A chrome police robot standing alongside the slideway curbing stepped politely aside to let him pass.

There was a prayer booth near the tube entrance. THX looked around, almost guiltily, then quickly stepped in and shut the plastic door. It didn't fit tightly enough to turn on the light, he had to tug on it. Finally the light went on, illuminating OMM's kindly face. A warm, taped voice said gently:

"My time is yours. Go ahead."

THX tried to remember the proper prayer. It had been so many years since. . .

"Very well, proceed," said OMM's voice.

"Well, . . . this morning I almost slipped on a radio-active transfer. It's never happened before. I wasn't concentrating enough. Things haven't been. . ."

"Yes," said the voice, expectantly.

"Everything's piling up on me," THX went on. "I don't understand what's happening to me. The medicines don't seem to be keeping me adjusted anymore. . ."

"Yes," said the voice, knowingly.

"And my roommate's been acting very strange. I can't explain it. . . I don't know, maybe it's me. I haven't been feeling very well lately. I feel jumpy all the time, as if something's going to happen. . . something. . ."

"Yes," said the voice, patiently.

"I can't understand it. The sedatives. . . I'm taking etracene but it doesn't seem strong enough anymore. I have a hard time concentrating. Please forgive me, I can't. . ."

"You are a true believer. Blessings of the State. Blessings of the masses. Thou art a subject of the divine. Created in the image of man, by the masses, for the masses. Let us be thankful we have an occupation to fill. Work hard; increase production; prevent accidents; and be happy."

THX slumped back on the bench of the booth. Be happy.

He was nearly home, almost at the door of the apartment. The crowds of the upper levels were thinned down now, quieter, slower. A man could stroll calmly here, or try to unwind after the noise and tension of the upper working and shopping levels.

The timebox was at the corner of the two main corridors. THX crossed over to it, took the badge from his lapel, and tried to insert it in the proper slot. It didn't fit. They've changed the mechanism again, he thought wearily. Nothing works the way it's supposed to. They keep changing things, but still nothing works right.

He struggled with the badge for a few moments, and finally it slipped into the slot. The mechanism rang dimly once. THX nodded. His working time was entered into the computer satisfactorily.

Turning as he clipped his badge back on, he saw LUH standing silently, holding a punch card in her hand.

"What is it?" he asked her.

She shook her head without replying. Her face looked troubled, and somehow this bothered him.

Glancing at the card in her hand, he asked, "What did you get?"

"I have to see SEN. I've just been given a shift change."

"When?"

"Now. . . Just now. SEN wants me to come to his quarters to talk about it."

THX felt his brows knitting into a scowl. "SEN can't change your shift. Shift changes have to come through the scheduling office."

She said nothing.

"Why does he want to see you?"

"I don't know."

"Don't go," THX said.

She looked up at him. "I have to. . . he's a G-34."

"You don't have to," he said, feeling more and more annoyed. "I don't trust him, and I don't want you to go."

But she only smiled. "No, don't make trouble. It's nothing."

"I ought to file a report against him. He can't change your shift and order you around."

"No, please. You'll only make trouble for yourself. I'll go see what he wants. . . I'll be back soon. It won't take long."

And she turned and left him standing there, tired and confused.

Chapter 3

THX sat alone in the holeroom, flipping channels at nearly eyeblink speed. A naked black mannequin dancing erotically, a newscaster rattling off the day's events, a shapeless matron discussing drugs, a chrome police robot beating a man to death, and finally two men sitting at a table locked deep in discussion:

". . . to stimulate the arithmetical and logical processes as an extension of the 5141. Never before have we been so contented, never before has life been so satisfying. A referendum of bliss, a gratification sustained by the benevolence of authority. . ."

Why can't I be happy, then? What's wrong with me?

He listened to the discussion for a few moments longer, then flicked back to the black dancer. But he felt nothing as she swung her rich shining body to the driving music. He flicked the hologram to the policeman, but the bloodied man crumpled on the floor and cried pitifully. Disgusted, THX turned off the hologram viewer completely. The picture vanished with a soundless bright flash.

He sat alone in the dark room. Then he heard some-thing.

Jumping up from the chair, he called out, "LUH?"

No answer.

He walked into the main room, then to the bedroom, calling, "LUH, are you here?"

Standing alone in the empty bedroom, THX made a sudden decision. He left the apartment and headed for SEN's quarters.

Out in the corridors the loudspeakers still called out their constant urgings:

"Save time, save lives."

"Today only, blue dendrites are only forty-sevendcredits, buy now."

"The consumer has a factor of advantage."

"Did you repent today?"

THX tried to shut them out of his mind, but their voices -- gentle, demanding, soft, strident -- pried at his consciousness. He had heard them all his life and never really gotten accustomed to them. Maybe it was because the announcements were always being changed. All but:

"Did you repent today?"

By the time he reached SEN's apartment area, THX calculated he had heard that one twenty times, at least.

In the corridor outside SEN's apartment, a crew of men were piling multicolored packing boxes atop a power-cart. More men were inside, filling up more boxes with someone's personal belongings. A woman supervisor, burlier than the movingmen, was checking items off a clipboard list:

". . . sealed personal effects: three styrenes, an occu-pational syntax, a red magma base -- old style, a box of neons, twenty-three hunter portapods."

THX stepped past them to get through the front door-way of the apartment. The movers ignored him as they handled items and placed them in packing boxes.

"Where are the genotypes. Ahhh. . . could you come and look at this -- these have been improperly labeled!"

"No they haven't," said another movingman, in a high, excitable voice. "I placed these in the proper categories myself."

"But this isn't genotyped. . ."

The woman waved her clipboard at them. "Your identi-fication figures are all wrong. Get this mess straightened out or I'll shift you to manual dredging!"

The two men scuttled out of her way.

THX looked through the apartment, stepping over packing boxes and around scattered personal belongings that had been strewn across the floor. He found SEN sitting hunched in a corner of the bedroom, looking as if he was trying to pretend there was no noise or upset in his apartment.

"Well?" SEN said as THX entered the bedroom. Then, seeing who it was, the older man beamed up at him. "It's you. . . come in, come. . . You know, this is really odd. I was just thinking about you. What in the world are you doing here?"

THX didn't answer. He merely stood over the other man, his mind confused, trying to think of what he should say, where he should begin. The uproar of the movers jangled from the next room.

SEN flashed his toothy smile. "Sit down, why don't you. . . I must apologize for all this chaos. They ma-terialized this morning," gesturing toward the movers, "and it's been going on all day. Well, it's a cross I have to bear. My roommate was destroyed, you know."

THX didn't move.

"No. . . I guess you wouldn't know." He craned his neck for a glimpse of the female chief mover. "I can't understand why everything has to be packed and crated if it's going to be destroyed anyway. . . It's a strange life."

He shook his head, as if trying to puzzle out the meaning of it all. "You have to keep things in perspective. You know? Do what you can to make things. . . fit. Forget the rest. Why don't you sit down?"

SEN hauled himself to his feet and padded barefoot into the sanitary. THX watched him shake out a yellow pill from an unlabeled bottle and swallow it.

"You never answered my question," SEN called from the sanitary as he filled a cup with water.

What question? THX wondered. Slowly, he sank down on the bed and leaned his back tiredly against the wall.

SEN came back to the bedroom, and sat again on the bench in the corner. He hunched his shoulders slightly, as if trying to protect himself from unseen forces.

"I can accept things up to a point," he said, glancing around. Gesturing to the empty bed next to the one THX sat on, "My former roommate, for instance. Some people might wonder what he did, to be destroyed. Waste of time. He did something, obviously, and now he's gone. That's that."

THX wanted to reply, wanted to ask about LUH, but couldn't seem to get the words started.

Leaning forward to make his point, his voice intense with earnesty, SEN said, "But if you get a chance to make. . . adjustments. . . you'd be foolish to pass them up. You feel that way, don't you?" He stared intently at THX. "You're perspiring. It's not very hot in here. Are you sick?" SEN straightened up and looked around. "I'm sure it's warmer in here than outside, though. I haven't been outside yet, but it usually is. . . the control never works properly. . ."

Finally THX blurted, "Where is LUH?"

"What?"

The chief of the movers intruded her bulky form between them. "Count concluded."

Looking up at her almost fearfully, SEN handed her his badge. She slipped it into a slot underneath her clip-board, then returned it to SEN together with a piece of pink paper.

"You must keep this," she said.

"Yes, of course." She left. The apartment was quiet.

"They really smell," SEN said at last. "It's quite disgusting. Did you notice it?"

THX asked stubbornly, "Why did you have LUH come here?"

"Why are you so concerned?"

"What's going on?"

"I want you for my roommate."

Ignoring that, THX asked again, "Where's LUH?"

"It will be good for both of us," SEN explained. "I've got it all arranged."

THX finally realized what he was saying. "No. . . you can't do that. Living selection is computed. You can't. . . what have you done to LUH? She was here. . ."

Smiling, SEN said, "We had a long talk and she agreed that it would be a good idea for you to switch. She felt that you hadn't been accurately roommated with her in the first place. . . You're upsetting yourself. Would you like something to quiet your nerves?"

"You're in violation!" THX said.

"Don't say that," SEN answered amiably. "You look. . . you're not well."

"She didn't say that about me!"

Shrugging, SEN went on, "I know what you're thinking. . . but program shifting isn't that major a crime, is it? I know how to. . . arrange things like that. And LUH would only be a problem to you. I've watched her during work, and even for a birth-born she's been acting very strangely. I don't see how you can live with one of them."

Feeling almost groggy, THX got to his feet.

SEN was right beside him, nearly pleading, talking right into his ear, "I can't live alone, I must have another mate. You rate very high in sanitation. I've checked. In fact, I'm surprised that you were ever matched with LUH. Her ratings are very erratic -- you know what I mean. We'll be happy. Believe me, I'm trying to do you a favor!"

THX staggered toward the door. "I don't feel well." He fled from SEN's apartment, running blindly down the corridor.

He found himself in a prayer booth, stomach heaving, drenched with sweat.

"What's the matter with me? What am I to her or she to me? Nothing. She's an ordinary roommate. I. . . I share. . ."

"Yes," said OMM's voice, expectantly.

"I share rooms with her. Our relationship is normal, conforming. We share nothing but space. What is she doing?. . ."

"Yes," said the voice, knowingly.

". . . to me. I think I'm dying." He shuddered. His body was burning. His stomach twisting painfully.

"Yes," said the tape, patiently.

Suddenly THX was vomiting, spewing yellow-green corruption and bile over the pure white tile of the prayer booth.

"You are a true believer," OMM said serenely. "Bless-ings of the State. Blessings of the masses. Thou art a subject of the divine. Created in the image of man, by the masses, for the masses. Let us be thankful we have an occupation to fill. Work hard; increase production; prevent accidents; and be happy."

The light flicked off and OMM's picture disappeared. Absolutely empty and weak, THX clawed the door open and nearly fell as he tried to get out of the stinking booth. Another man pushed past him, started to enter the booth, then turned and looked sharply at THX.

After a stop at a Mercicontrol booth for cleaning up and a stimulant, THX felt better. I can make it home now. She'll be there, she'll be there.

Chapter 4

The fastest way back to his own apartment was the slideway that whisked through the main pedestrian cor-ridor. But the slideway was stopped, THX saw.

People were milling around in the corridor and on the stilled conveyor belt of the slideway itself, some patient, others obviously irritated.

"Fourth time it's broken down this month."

"Been out of service for an hour."

"An hour? I've been waiting for two hours!"

And purring from the overhead speakers:

"Please hold the handrail and stand to theright; if you wish to pass, pass on theleft . . . Please hold the handrail and stand on theright. If you. . ."

THX started shouldering his way through the crowd. But soon it got thicker and slower-moving as he worked down the corridor. Finally he reached a point where the throng wasn't moving at all, just shuffling, murmuring, complaining, buzzing like an immense clot of swarming insects. Jammed shoulder-to-shoulder with pill-nibbling strangers, THX couldn't move forward. Nor backward.

"Never seen a traffic jam like this one."

"Nah. . . last week, you should've seen that one. Lasted six hours. I fell asleep standing up!"

There were no police robots in sight. No repair crews. No orders or instructions or apologies from the overhead speakers. Nothing but the insane, "Please hold the hand-rail and stand to the right . . ."

Through a forest of heads, THX saw a lift tube entrance. He squeezed and pushed and elbowed his way through the mostly docile crowd and took the lift up one flight, to the shopping level.

I can get across up at this level, and then go back down.

It was crowded here, too. The people had a different attitude in the shopping plazas: more frenzied, eyes glittering, arms clutching packages, hands grabbing at displays. There were plenty of chrome robots here in police helmets and black leather uniforms.

The ubiquitous overhead speakers were saying in a friendly, smiling voice:

"Remember! Only two more days to fulfill Consumption Quota 88. Don't be caught underconsuming. Be the first in your unit to complete Consumption Quota 88. Buy now!"

I ought to, THX realized. He had underconsumed on his last quota, and didn't want to get docked for the same thing again.

The stores looked crowded. LUH. I want to get home to LUH.

But the overhead voices insisted:

"Only two more days to fulfill Consumption Quota 88. Don't be caught underconsuming. Be the first. . ."

Somehow it sounded almost like a command.

"Buy now!"

It'll only take a minute.

"Buy NOW!"

He stepped into the nearest store entrance and found a head-tall pyramid of bright orange plastic hexagons. Each one was stamped Consumption Quota 88.

He picked up one of the hexagons and walked over to the credit machine next to the display. Unclipping the badge from his lapel, he inserted it in the box-like machine.

Then he realized, "Wait. . . this is the old type. . ." An observer's voice, thin and metallic-sounding, came from the credit machine. "What's wrong?"

"This consumption unit. . . it's the old type. I just had my consummation changed last month to take the new type. This one won't fit."

There was a barely perceptible click from the machine and a warm, soothing feminine voice said:

"For more enjoyment and greater efficiency, consumption is being standardized. We are sorry if

you have experienced any temporary inconvenience. Place your identification badge in the reader and we will have units transferred to your account as soon as possible."

"No. . ." THX said. "You already have my badge. . . and this is the wrong hexa. . ."

"For more enjoyment and greater efficiency," the voice began repeating.

THX didn't feel warmed or soothed. "Wait! You have my badge in the reader already. I want it back."

The observer's voice came back, "The mechanism seems to be jammed. Stay where you are, and we will have a member of the store's staff assist you."

"But I'm in a hurry to get home!"

No answer.

Feeling foolish and angry at the same time, THX stood by the machine, orange hexagon in hand, waiting for someone to come and help him. Several shoppers stepped up to the machine, most of them women.

"It's. . . jammed," he told them each, lamely.

One old woman scowled at him and said, "I don't know what you're up to, but I'm going to get a policeman here."

She scuttled off.

"What seems to be the trouble?"

THX turned and saw a man of his own age, thin, polished-looking, smiling at him without feeling.

"My badge is stuck in the machine. . . and I picked up the wrong-sized consumption unit."

The store manager made atch! sound somewhere between his lips and teeth. Shaking his head, he muttered, "Something like this is always happening. Come back into the office with me and we'll make out a temporary badge for you. We'll send yours to you when the machine repair crew gets it out."

THX said, "But that'll take too long. Can't you get mine now? It's right here."

The manager shrugged. "Do I look like a mechanic? I can't get your badge out. It will only take a few minutes to make out a temporary badge for you."

By now a handful of shoppers had gathered around them. One of them, an elderly man, cackled, "I can get your badge back for you -- stand aside."

He pushed THX out of the way with a frail arm and then whacked the machine on its side with his closed fist. The machine seemed to shudder, click, and THX's badge popped out into the receiver slot.

"See?" The old man grinned, his mottled skin folding into accordion pleats. "You got to know

how to do it!" The store manager looked as if he was going to have a stroke.

"Uh. . . thank you," THX said.

"I'll exchange this unit for a proper-sized one," the manager said to THX, ignoring the old man.

A few minutes later, with a slightly smaller, yellow hexagon under his arm, THX left the store. But as he was leaving, another shopper -- a middle-aged man -- was banging on the same credit machine with his fists.

"Idiot machine! Someone ought to fix the machine! All the damned machines!"

A chrome police robot suddenly appeared at the man's side and grasped him by the arm. Looking badly surprised, the man was hauled away. THX felt his stomach beginning to churn again. He left the store and hurried homeward.

She'll be there. LUH will be there.

The apartment was dark.

THX stood by the front door as the overhead light panels automatically glowed to life. There was no sound in the apartment. Grim-faced, he went to the kitchen and popped the hexagon into the consumall. The bright plasticobligation disappeared with a hiss of suddenly released pressure.

He looked into the holeroom. She wasn't there. With a boiling mixture of anger and hurt and fear rising inside him, THX went to the sanitary. He reached for the medicine cabinet.

"No, don't."

He whirled and saw her standing in the doorway. Her face looked so concerned, so beautiful. Childlike. Yet. . .

"You don't need the drugs," she said, her voice an earnest whisper.

"But. . ."

"No." She stepped toward him and reached out to touch his shoulder. "Don't hide behind the pills. Face the world. . . the real world."

"I don't understand."

She was looking directly at him, her lovely eyes troubled and yet almost happy. "You don't need the drugs," she repeated.

"I. . . I was sick."

Nodding, she asked, "Would you like something to eat? Or do you want to rest?"

"No. . . no food. I think I'll lie down for a while. I'm tired. . ."

He leaned on her shoulder and together they went into the bedroom. He lay down and she sat on

the edge of the bed, next to him. He felt as if he was burning, his heart hammered. Yet he didn't feel sick. Something in him was elated, wildly happy.

With trembling hands, he reached out for LUH. She leaned forward and they kissed. His hands slid over her body, then they slipped inside her blouse, feeling her skin warm and soft and incredibly lovely. He felt her soft soft breasts and the erect little nipples and their mouths melted together and she was lying beside him.

Something far, far back in his mind was warning him of danger but he ignored it. She was beside him, holding him, bodies pressed together, wanting him as badly as she wanted her. For a ludicrous moment he fumbled her blouse off. She had to help him with her pants.

"What about you?" she whispered as he stared at her nude body.

For an agonizingly self-conscious moment he didn't know what to do. Then he sat up quickly and slipped off his clothes.

Her fingertips traced a design of pleasure across his chest. "You're beautiful," she said, smiling at him.

"You. . . no, you're the beautiful one," he replied. "You're. . ." And then he couldn't find the words he wanted so he pulled her against him and kissed her and felt the whole world disappear except for her. She was the whole world, all the warmth, all the beauty, all the incredible unbearable ferocious delight of it.

She was saying something to him, something urgent, her lips at his ear, but he couldn't hear her. He was holding her, seizing his world, the world they made together, hearing nothing and seeing nothing but feeling, feeling it all explode in a frenzy of joy.

When they lay side by side again, touching yet apart, the warning voice came back to him: What you've done is wrong! Immoral! Illegal! He turned his head and looked at her, drowsing warmly next to him, her eyes closed, her lips parted in the smallest of smiles. And he thought: To hell with them. To hell with everything. She's what I want. She makes me happy.

And then he added: Besides, how can they know? The chances that they're observing this apartment at this moment are infinitesimal. They'll never know.

He slept. When he awoke, she was in the kitchen. He padded in there, wearing only his pajama pants. She was fully dressed.

She turned from the cooker and said, "Hello," as if it was the first time they had seen each other in years.

Grinning, he went to her and started opening her blouse.

She reached up and took his face in her hands.

"Aren't you hungry?"

"Yes." He opened the blouse completely and circled her waist with his arms.

"For food?"

He laughed.

She reached over to the counter beside the cooker and took a squeeze tube of mock cheese and squirted it at him.

"Hey, no. . ." He flinched back. "Don't. . . don't. . . you'll get it on the floor."

LUH tossed a whole plastic pack of food pellets at him. He ducked instinctively, laughing. The pellets scat-tered all over the floor. Still laughing, he got down on his hands and knees and started picking them up. LUH dropped down too, and they met head to head beside the kitchen table. She was giggling at him.

With as much seriousness as he could muster, THX said, "I've never been under a table before."

She was giggling like someone who'd taken too many stimalls. "Look," she pointed to the underside of the gleaming white table. "Dirt."

THX stared at the smudge under there. "That's not dirt. . . can't be dirt. Dirt's a violation."

"Looks like dirt."

He thought a moment, then said, "I have something better." He held out his fist. Her tiny hand touched it and he opened, palm up, revealing the pellets. "Look,food."

She shook her head. "That's not food. . . can't be food."

THX sat on the floor next to her. "Looks like food." He put one of the pellets in his mouth. "Tastes like food."

She smacked the underside of his hand and the pellets flew into the air. Laughing, she scooped up a handful and tossed them into the consumall. "Produced to be consumed!"

THX sat there on the floor, laughing at her. She opened a cabinet door and pulled out more pellet packs.

Ripping them open, she tossed them into the hissing consumall.

"Hey, wait a minute!" He scrambled to his feet. "Not all of them. I'm hungry!"

She threw some of the pellets at him. He ducked and grabbed for her. They both went down and his hands were on her breasts again.

"Ow. . . you're hurting me!"

He let her go.

"Don't stop," she said.

"But. . ."

She took his hands in hers and put them back on her breasts. "Don't stop. Don't ever stop."

Chapter 5

They were lying in bed together, neither of them asleep.

THX's mind was telling him: You could lose every-thing. Everything.

"But I was unhappy before," he muttered to himself, so low that he couldn't hear it himself. "Everything was normal, but I was unhappy."

Unhappy. Do you think you're going to be happy now? If they find out, you'll be destroyed. And her too. And it will be your fault.

He turned his head to look at her. She was watching him, her face troubled, aware.

"I thought you wanted a new roommate," he said abruptly.

"What? Oh no. Who told you that?"

"SEN."

"That's not true," she said. "He was lying. That's not true. . . I need you so much!"

He slid his arm under her head and pulled her to him.

"I was so scared," LUH said. "So alone. I needed to touch you so badly. . . to have you touch me. After I started cutting down on your sedatives I was fright-ened. . . of what kind of a person you'd turn out to be."

"Turn out. . .?"

"Ohh. . . I'm sorry. . . I don't know what I've done. I should have left you alone."

Yes, his mind agreed. But he said, "No, don't say that."

The wake-up tone sounded.

THX started in surprise. "What time. . . what shift is it?"

"What. . . it's three, I think."

"Three! We'll be late!"

He got up out of bed and headed for the sanitary. "Come on, we'll be late."

LUH called to him, "Don't. . . don't take anything."

"What?" He was staring at his own face in the medicine cabinet mirror: puffy-eyed, tired-looking.

"Try not to take anything. . . please," her voice came to him.

"I'll try," he answered softly. "I'll try." But his hands were already shaking.

The shift was a nightmare. He couldn't concentrate. He kept thinking about LUH. Twice his supervisor had to warn him. THX knew that those warnings went into the permanent record for review by Control. Yet, despite the babble of voices in his earphones, despite the tension of the work, the exasperated looks of the supervisors, his own gut-turmoil and shaking hands, THX felt -- not happy, certainly, but different. These things, these people around him, they didn't touch him. And he realized that they never did. LUH was the one who counted. She was the only one that mattered to him.

He left the assembly center after his shift, walking tiredly through the homeward-bound workers.

"I've put in forty-three requests for a transfer," he heard someone in the crowd say, "but I haven't heard one word. DRG, my superior, agrees that I'm better suited to work in the fantasy bureau. . ."

"Please move briskly. Do not stop or block passage-ways."

"Please do not linger in module dispersal areas. The carbon monoxide rate is plus eight hundred." Abruptly, he saw LUH standing at the edge of the slideway, searching the crowd. For him. Then she saw him and pushed her way against the homebound pedestrians who were streaming up onto the slideway belt.

"What are you doing here?" he shouted at her, over the hubbub of the scurrying masses.

"I thought. . . THX, I'm afraid. . ."

He took her by the arm and guided her through the rushing pedestrian traffic. "You're not cleared for this precinct. They'll spot your badge. Let's get across the slideway and out of here."

They walked silently, swiftly, cutting across the main traffic flow and heading for the spiraling ramp that bridged the slideway. THX walked with his head down slightly, as if he didn't want anyone to recognize him. Up the ramp they went, around twice, and out across the spidery bridge. The slideway was below them, jammed with workers. The outer belts of the 'way moved slowly, about the pace of a leisurely walk. But the center strip was almost a blur of speed, with people covering every square inch of it. Just a continuous blur of standing bodies, heads shaved, sexless and isolated from each other as they stood packed like meat animals riding to the slaughterhouse.

An elderly woman stumbled and fell on the outermost, slow beltway. People stepped over her as she struggled to get up. Finally a chrome police robot took her arm and helped her to her feet.

"Old fool!" a man's voice grumbled up from the slideway. He kept on yammering but he was whisked away and his voice trailed off into the general din of the crowd.

THX and LUH didn't slow their pace until they reached a new, half-unfinished commercial shopping plaza. Even here, though, the crowds were milling brainlessly and the overhead speakers were hard at work:

"If you buy more than five dendrites at a time you get the sixth one with only three percent more credits. Buy in volume and save."

Slightly out of breath, LUH hung back on THX's arm and forced him to slow down.

He turned to look at her. Her face was grave.

"You slipped on a circuit transfer just before lunch, didn't you?" she asked. It wasn't really a question.

"You were watching?"

She nodded.

Nearly angry with her, he said, "You shouldn't be doing that! They'll get suspicious. Control watches you observers."

"But. . . I had to see you. . . I can't just sit there all day and know that by touching a key I can see you. . . and then not do it."

Shaking his head, "You're going to get us both arrested if you're not careful."

"I'm sorry," she said.

"So am I," he admitted. "Look. . . I can't work this way. I need something. I'm too tense on the job. . . can't concentrate. Got to shut out everything and concentrate."

"You can do it by yourself. I know you can."

"I can't. . . a human being can't do this kind of work unassisted. If I make a mistake, it's all over. You see it every day. Do you want to see me taken away in pieces?"

"I don't want to lose you," she said.

He didn't respond. They walked slowly, side by side. THX looked straight ahead, not at her, his face set in a bitter scowl.

LUH said, "If you. . . if you go back on sedation, you won't feel the same about me. You'll report me for drug evasion."

He stopped in his tracks. "No! I couldn't turn you in. . . not now. I. . . I know I couldn't!"

"You don't know. You don't. . ."

Shaking his head miserably, THX muttered, "If I take something, you suffer. If I don't, I suffer."

"You can live without sedation," she said firmly. "You can. I know you can."

He felt excited and afraid at the same time. "I've got a slip movement to install on my next shift. I'll never make it the way I am now. There've already been three ex-plosions this. . ."

"You can do it without etracene," she insisted.

People were drifting past them, staring at them as they just stood in the middle of the half-finished shoppingplaza, notgoing anywhere, notbuying anything, just standing there talking to each other. Relating. Not alone, not isolated. Together.

"Maybe I can do it without etracene," THX said. "But then what? It can't go on forever. You know it can't. People can't live without drugs."

"Yes they can! I have! Others have!"

"Natural-borns," he said, then seeing her face reacting to the way he said it, he wished his tongue had witheredfirst.

Very slowly, deliberately calm and precise, LUH said, "There's no difference between the physical makeup of a natural-born and a clinic-born. It's merely a matter of conditioning. You can overcome the conditioning -- if you want to."

"I want -- I want to be with you."

"Then let's leave," she said suddenly. "We can leave here, live in the superstructure. . ."

"The superstructure?" He felt shocked. "But nobody lives up there except the shelldwellers. It's all radioactive. The air's poisonous."

LUH shook her head, "No, I don't believe that. It's a lie."

It's too much, THX thought. Everything is upside down . . . so many new feelings, new ideas. I need time to think, to figure it all out.

LUH started walking toward the nearest vertitube en-trance. "My series is over. You only have one more shift left, don't you? We could be gone before our next series started."

Following her, catching up beside her, he answered, "Gone? But they'd never let us leave. They'd stop us, catch us. . ."

They walked to the vertitube and went down to their quarters. When they were safely inside, LUH turned to THX and put her arms around his neck. Looking up into his eyes, she said simply: "Don't let them separate us."

He held her, he clung to her, and there was no ques-tion of it. I can't lose her, I can't, I can't.

Much later, as they lay in bed together, half-drowsing, LUH murmured, "They know. They've

been watching us. I can feel it."

"No. . . they don't know."

"Control's watching us now," she said, her voice trem-bling.

"No one can see us here. We're alone." But he glanced around the room. There were a dozen places where a camera might be hidden.

Chapter 6

THX walked stolidly down the pedestrian corridor, following the directional signs that led to Mercicontrol Station 7B73.

"Help reduce critical noise levels in this area. Be sure to report all decibal surges in excess of one-point-five on the miura-wiegand scale."

The corridor was practically empty at this hour, and unusually quiet.

He reached the Mercicontrol station, with its symbol of a stylized marijuana leaf blazoned next to the station number. He hesitated before the door. Then, face grim with determination, he pushed through the black plastic door, which swung shut behind him.

He had expected something like a hospital, or at least an infirmary such as the one up by the assembly center. Instead it was little more than an oversized prayer booth. There was a comfortable-looking contour chair with head-rest and three viewscreens set into the otherwise blank wall in front of it. The other walls seemed bare. Every-thing was colored a cool pastel, and from the inevitable overhead speaker, a woman's voice was giving a lecture of some sort:

"Load alteration can be achieved only with adequate gating. High-speed gating is dangerous and may result in impaired unity gain. Reduce the setting time of the dosage by one-third. . ."

No one else was in the tiny room. Frowning with un-certainty, THX fidgeted by the door.

"Yes, what seems to be the trouble?" a man's voice said smoothly. It sounded like a tape.

"I. . . I need some advice. . . psychological advice. For a friend."

A click. Then, "Very well. Please sit down. A trained psychologist will be with you momentarily."

Uneasily, THX got into the chair. "This isn't for my-self, you understand. It's for a friend."

No answer.

Then a different voice, friendly, alive, asked, "What can we do for you today?"

The viewscreens were still blank, but at least the over-head lecture had been cut off.

THX answered nervously, "I . . . uh, I have a friend who's troubled. . ."

"Have you tried the prayer booths? Most problems can be handled by conventional prayer."

"It's not me!" THX repeated hastily. "I'm talking about. . . my friend. He. . . he's too upset to come to you himself. . ."

"I see."

Abruptly the central viewscreen lit up with the image of an intense, middle-aged man hunched forward in a chair identical to the one that THX sat in.

"A friend?" he said unbelievably.

THX nodded.

"All right, what's your. . . friend's problem?"

It's hot in here. "He -- eh, well, he's committed a crime. . ."

The psychologist's eyebrows raised the barest milli-meter.

"Oh? Then perhaps you should be talking to the po-lice."

"No. . . not yet. He needs help." A sudden fear flashed through THX. "These medical visits are private, aren't they? I mean, this conversation isn't being recorded or monitored?"

For the first time, the psychologist smiled. "All medical discussions are privileged. No records, no monitoring. The sacredness of the doctor-patient relationship is one of the cornerstones of our society."

THX tried to relax. But the fear was still there.

"Besides," the psychologist said, "if you're merely talking about your friend, there's no need for you to be afraid."

"Yes. . . but it's a serious matter. For him."

"I understand. Why don't you just tell me all about it?"

Nodding, THX answered, "I . . . don't know how to begin. . ."

"You said your friend committed a crime. Was it a serious crime?"

"Sexact." The word came out almost involuntarily, fast and clipped.

The psychologist looked impressed. "Ah-hah. I thought so. How did it happen?"

"W. . . with his roommate. A natural-born."

"Hmm. Male or female?"

"The roommate? Female."

Shaking his head, the psychologist muttered, "When will they learn? No matter what the conditioning, you can't put opposite sexes together without causing trouble. Especially if one of them's a natural-born."

"They've both stopped taking sedatives and everything else. . . no boosters, no tranquilizers. . . nothing!" THX blurted.

"I thought so. This is very serious, you know."

"I know."

The psychologist said, "If the police find out, and they will in time, your friend will be jailed. His roommate, being a natural-born, will undoubtedly be destroyed."

"No!"

"I'm afraid it's true. Society must protect itself. We can't allow indiscriminate procreation to pollute our gene pool. It's taken generations to bring society to its present high level of efficiency. If we let sex take over again -- start dropping genetically random babies everywhere -- where will we be?"

"But --" THX caught himself barely in time. "But. . . my friend is. . . so attracted to her. It seems so good to be with her -- he claims. Why is sex a crime?"

With a patient smile, the psychologist answered, "Sex isn't a crime. There are plenty of healthy, safe sexual outlets that society approves of. It's unregulated sex that's dangerous. There was a time when men and women just coupled together, driven by uncontrolled and unregulated sexual drives. The children they had were genetically inferior. And there were too many of them. The world suffered from a population explosion. It was so over-crowded that mankind permanently polluted the atmosphere and oceans up above. Why do you think we live safe and happy underground? Because indiscriminate, sex-driven, unthinking people wrecked the world up on the surface. They killed themselves off, while we disciplined ourselves and built a strong, stable society here below."

THX had learned all that in history class as a child. But now it sounded unreal, hollow.

"Sex is fine, and a natural thing," the psychologist went on. "But it was never meant to dominate human life. The trouble with unregulated sex is that it forces people to interrelate with other people. Whether it's best for them or not. In our society, we've learned how to channel the sex drive. You can have all the sex you want or need, without the messy business of getting a partner. You have your sacred privacy, your holy isolation."

THX thought of being in bed with LUH, of holding her, feeling her warmth, the softness of her body against his. He squeezed his eyes shut. I must be insane!

"And the children we produce in our clinics," the psychologist continued, "are genetically superior

in every way. Carefully matched, sperm and egg. Not dependent on who meets whom and where. Not dependent on the size of a woman's breast or a man's penis. All these trivial factors, all these emotional bits of nonsense, have been regulated out of the system. Do you understand?"

"Yes, yes, I know," THX agreed hastily.

"People don't realize how lucky they are. And we have a complete pharmacology of drugs to help overcome the primitive instincts that still threaten us every day." The psychologist shook his head sadly. "When I think of how diligently and patiently the biochemical engineers work every day to produce new drugs, new aids to keep people contented and happy -- the thought of a man or woman deliberately evading drug dosages is enough to make me angry."

THX nodded glumly.

"But -- that's exactly why we have drugs. To help us to avoid such emotional nonsense." The psychologist held up a yellow capsule. "Have you tried these yet? They're called neuracol. Very effective.

"Uh, no. . . I don't think they're on the market -- are they?"

Smiling as he popped the pill into his mouth, the psychologist mumbled, "No, suppose not yet." He took a large gulp of water.

"Well. . . I'd advise your friend to seek medical help in person. Naturally, since he's guilty of drug evasion and sexact we'd have to notify the police. But with proper medical attention, perhaps he could be cured. It would be a shame to have him jailed and consumed. Or de-stroyed."

"Yes. . . I'll have a talk with him. . ."

The psychologist nodded and smiled his cheeriest smile as he watched THX get up out of the contour chair. The man's face was a classic picture of guilt, fear and un-certainty.

Leaning back in his own chair, the psychologist touched a button on the control desk before him and re-ran the tape of THX's interview.

He almost laughed at the man's transparent lies. "THX 1138. Medical file, please," he said to the microphone set into the control desk.

Instantly the screens before him flashed THX's medical history. Nothing unusual.

"Roommate file."

One of the screens showed a photograph of LUH, with her record superimposed over it.

The psychologist glanced at the white lettering and symbols, then concentrated on her picture.

With a slow-grin, he thought, I can hardly blame him. If I were going to kill myself, that's as good a way to do it as any.

He reached into a pocket and took out two more pills, swallowing them without water. With his other hand, he flicked the switch that would send THX's inter-view to Control's attention.

Chapter 7

Tense, jaws aching and insides fluttering, THX entered the preparation chamber. He stripped slowly, let the cleansing fog settle over him. It felt warm and safe and good. From the speakers overhead, the preparatory ritual was being recited:

"This is a reminder of the precision which must be taken at this stage. Three operating cells have already been destroyed in this series. Mercicontrol is supervising all operations during this phase. Prevent accidents and be happy. . . This is a reminder of. . ." The fog evaporated, leaving his skin feeling chill and prickly. THX dressed quickly, but with careful attention to all the rituals of detail. Right sleeve first, right slipper first.

He was sitting on the bench, adjusting his cap's chin strap, when SEN entered.

"What are you doing here?" THX snapped, shaken. "You're not cleared for this area."

SEN smiled conspiratorially. "You know I have a way with the computers. I can clear myself for any area. . . almost. . ."

"I'll report you. It's. . ."

"Listen to me," SEN said, untroubled. "You have no need to distrust me. We're going. . ."

"Get out of here. Leave me alone. You're interrupting codified ritual!"

"I'll only be a moment," SEN said easily. "I wanted to tell you that I've taken care of LUH."

The skullcap slipped out of THX's hands. "Wh. . . what?"

"I've programmed her to level 5450. Her transfers should go through by the next series. You're going to need a new roommate."

The shift buzzer sounded. Automatically, like a chrome mannequin, THX stood up. Without a word, he headed for the assembly bay, leaving SEN standing in the preparation chamber alone.

Woodenly, THX headed for the assembly bay, walking slowly down the brightly lit corridor that linked it with the preparation chamber.

"Uniform check," said a voice from an overhead speaker. "Cap missing, 1138. Cannot be allowed into assembly bay area without a cap."

He blinked, shuffled to a stop, turned back toward the preparation chamber. If he's still there, he found himself thinking, I'll kill him. I'll put my hands around his throat and squeeze the life out of him. THX

could feel his heart pounding in his chest as he slid the door to the preparation chamber open.

But SEN had left. The cap was still on the floor where he had dropped it. Contaminated now. THX took a new one from the issue drawer, adjusted it and started back toward the assembly bay.

"Hurry it up, 1138," a different voice carped. "The shift's waiting."

He passed a report box and stopped. With trembling hands he took out a red punch card marked PERSONAL VIOLATION REPORT. With the stylus attached to the box he punched out SEN 5241. He traced the stylus down the many categories listed on the card until he came to Illegal Programming. With a violence born of anger, he punched that slot through, then jammed the card into the acceptor slot in the box.

Now he smiled as he headed for the assembly bay. A grim, tight smile of hatred.

It was incredibly difficult. THX stood in front of the leaded window and worked the manipulators as carefully as he could, while a thousand voices chattered incessantly in his earphones. He tried to concentrate on the half-assembled chrome-mannequin laying inside the assembly cell, but the flashing lights from his computer readout pried at his attention, the monitor viewscreen flickered at him, gages and dials all demanded his eyes.

The supervisor cut in on the background chatter: "Re-tract 1138. SB4 talmod contact. . . retract to 220."

Eyes stinging with sweat, THX tried to follow the supervisor's orders. If they'd only leave me alone and let me concentrate . . . I could do it if they'd let me work alone.

Control sat in his sculptured chair, stamping punch-cards with his personal stylus. The communicator buzzed. He flicked a lean finger at the actuator.

The whole-wall viewscreen glowed to life. An observer sitting at his horseshoe of monitoring screens reported:

"We are receiving an extreme respiratory count from a Magnum Manipulator in assembly cell 94107. Erratic visual behavior as well."

Control's eyes narrowed as he watched the scene on the observer's main screen. "Data file," he murmured.

Instantly, the other screens around the observer flashed THX's file: ID photos, vital statistics, present physical status.

There was something familiar about this one, Control thought. Then when he saw the listing under roommate he had it: LUH 3417, natural-born. Yes, he knew the man now.

The observer said, "THX 1138 filed a violation report on SEN 5241 immediately prior to his shift."

"Violation type?" Control asked.

"Illegal programming."

"Check into it. Stay with him. I'll return to you momentarily."

"Yessir."

Control's long fingers played with his desktop keyboard. The observer disappeared from the huge viewscreen, to be replaced by tapes of THX and LUH in their quarters.

Control leaned back in his soft comfortable chair and watched them playing, making love.

"Yes," he murmured to himself. "They did fall."

He did things to the keyboard again and the observer returned to the screen.

"Inform the supervisor of Magnum Manipulator 94107 of procedure to mindlock and make an arrest. Order mindlock for cell 94107; subject 1138 prefix THX."

The observer nodded obediently.

Every pore in THX's body was oozing sweat as he hunched forward, feet planted hard on the floor, hands locked inside the manipulators. He was squinting, frown-ing, ignoring the babble in his earphones, tunneling his vision to see only the mannequin inside the cell and the gleaming tiny cylinders of radioactives that had to be loaded carefully, so carefully, into the mannequin's power pile.

No slips now, he commanded himself. Nearly critical. You can do it. You are doing it.

He heard LUH's voice telling him, "You can live without sedation. You can. I know you can."

And then he realized that the babble of voices in his earphones was about him.

"Current brainwave confirmation on 1138. Adrenal off point seven-four, plus or minus six. Confirm sedation depletion -- analyze severe."

"Control requests mindlock for operating cell 94107; subject 1138 prefix THX."

"Magnum supervisor 94107 requests priority shift. Repeat -- priority shift. Situation in cell 94107 not conducive to mindlock procedure. Subject 1138 is involved in critical maneuver."

THX hung in space. His hands froze in the manipulators. A deadly shining cylinder hovered above the mannequin's inert body as the metal waldo hands froze in mid-maneuver.

Suddenly a blaring voice screamed shatteringly in his earphones:

"MAGNUM MANIPULATOR 1138 PREFIX THX, OPERATING CELL 94107, SUFFERING SEVERE DRUG VIOLATION. EXTENT PENDING. SUBJECT TO IMMEDIATE ARREST. MINDLOCK PENDING. MINDLOCK PENDING."

The supervisor's voice was frantically shouting back, "Priority shift. Repeat, priority shift! The situation here is dangerous! 1138's involved in a critical mass maneuver. Delay mindlock, delay mindlock. . . situation red; re-peat, situation red. Hold, hold, HOLD. . ."

A paralyzing whining shrilled through THX's ear-phones. He jerked spasmodically, and in that timeless mindless instant he saw that all the other operators in the assembly bay were also being frozen by the mindlock."

"Who permitted a mindlock priority in magnum cell 94107? Immediate transfer of disaster responsibility to Control."

"Checking request for mindlock on cell 94107. What is the time make on this?"

"Abort! Abort! All systems clear. Block it!"

THX fought against the mindlock. With the primal instinct of a terrified animal, he battled against the screaming brain-shattering whine that paralyzed his every nerve. With every ounce of strength in him, he tried to move, to blink his fear-frozen eyes, to clench his fists, to make his feet move. The deepest, most primitive part of his brain was shrieking at him:run, run!

And the gleaming cylinder of radioactives drifted, jerked, carried by the metal waldo hands that followed THX's spasmodic struggles, toward the neat row of cylinders lined up at the precisely proper and safe spacing next to the inert mannequin's head.

Through the skull-splitting shriek of the mindlock, THX thought he could hear the supervisor:

"Who authorized this priority? Clear the area, trans-fer disaster responsibility to Mercicontrol. Repeat, clear the area! Where the hell are those damned pills?"

THX was hanging by the manipulator grips trying to run away, to hide, but held in mindlock. He fought with every ounce of strength in him to release his hands from the manipulators.

And in the cell, the shining cylinder of radioactives fell with a soundless clatter into the row of its brother cylin-ders. They tumbled together, deadly little metallic chil-dren.

The mindlock whistle stopped. "Clear. . . clear. . . 4444, 4445, 4446. . . EJECT. . . EJECT. . . EJECT!"

Operators collapsed onto the floor. THX staggered backward, his hands suddenly free, his feet working from instinct, his ears still ringing painfully. He glimpsed a flash of sparks inside the assembly cell.

"Release mindlock!" a voice was shouting some-where.

"Release mindlock. Replace to command monitor. Transfer obligation for responsibility to central mon-itor 898. Control center 626 holds no responsi-bility. . ."

THX stumbled to his knees and began to crawl toward the safety door, where a baleful red light was flashing urgently at him.

OMM's voice flooded the assembly bay. "Everything is going to be all right. You are in my hands. I will pro-tect you. Everything is going to be all right. Cooperate and stay calm, I am here to help

you. Everything is going to be all right. . ."

And intertwined with the calm voice of OMM, some-one was screaming, "Get those men out of there! Where are the Mercicontrol units! Radiation alert, radiation alert!"

THX reached the door and grabbed at the handle, used it to pull himself up. Leaning against the door, he felt the emergency lock yield and the door swung open. He half-fell into the decontamination room as the door snapped shut behind him. Yellow lights blinked at him and a cleansing spray hissed out from the walls, hard enough to make his skin tingle, even under the clothing. His eyes stung momentarily and automatically, in response to preconditioning training, he stripped and stepped away from the contaminated clothes.

The outer door of the decontamination cell clicked open. THX pushed through and found fresh clothes and a shelf of sedation doses. He dressed, staring at the pills. Then he turned and activated the polarized window on the other side of the narrow locker. The supervisor's command post was still in chaos. Silently, because of the soundproof window, the workers of the assembly bay and a team of Mercicontrol people in radiation armor were rushing back and forth, dragging operators still un-conscious from the mindlock away from the cells and toward the shielded command post. No one paid the slightest attention to THX. The supervisor himself was standing at his console, earphones askew on his head, swallowing handfuls of pills.

The mindlock must work better if you're on sedation, THX realized as he watched his unconscious fellow-operators being dragged away from their manipulator stations. Then his eyes caught the emergency monitoring gauges on the supervisor's console and he saw why the man was taking pills by the bottle. All the gauges were way up in the red.

There could still be an explosion!

THX pushed through the outer door of the decontamination chamber. A chrome policeman, tall and firm, was standing out in the hallway waiting for him.

"THX 1138, you are under arrest for drug evasion."

For a flash of a second, THX sagged into defeat. Then, without his even thinking about it, he slammed both hands palms open into the police robot's chest. The machine staggered backward and then toppled, clattering noisily to the floor.

Top heavy, THX's memory told him. They're all built that way. Barely stable.

He was running down the corridor, running, not away from the police. Toward LUH. He had to find her, warn her. Maybe they could get away. Get to the superstructure. Find her. Maybe at least she could get away, even if they caught him.

No time for the corridors or even the slideways. He pounded down the corridor, into a main thoroughfare where the constant press of people swallowed him immediately. He rushed along, letting the crowd carry him toward the tramway.

Chapter 8

Running blindly, not even daring to look behind him to see if the police robot followed, THX bolted into the tramway and jumped into the first tram car on the plat-form. The door slid shut behind him and the motors hummed smoothly, accelerating the tram until the rapid transit tunnel outside was nothing but a blur of occasional lights streaking by the window.

The tram was sleek, glistening white, built to whisk silently from one end of the vast underground city to the other.

And it was impossibly crowded. THX was flattened against the door, barely able to breathe in the press of silent impassive people jammed against him.

"Approaching academy facilities 80A. Please remain seated until the tram has come to a complete stop."

Remain seated. Only fifty of the hundred-some people squeezed into the tram car had seats.

Then THX saw over the heads of the crowd the white helmet and chrome face of a police robot working slowly through the silent, uncomplaining, thoroughly sedated people. The robot was heading toward him.

He pushed away from the door, nudging people aside, worming through the crowd like a man in a nightmare trying to flee some unknown horror, and unable to run no matter how hard he tried. Run? THX could barely move in the crowd.

There was another door at the farther end of the tram car. THX made his way toward it, slowly, painfully, like a man swimming in quicksilver. Every time he glanced over his shoulder he saw the robot's white helmet heading inexorably for him.

"Academy facilities 80A. This is the termination of intra-urban link DD neck 08. This tram will return to the central web in five minutes."

The tram was slowing down. The blurred lights in the tunnel outside took shape, became round, single lights. Up ahead, through the forward window, THX could see the terminal platform.

And four police robots standing on it.

Desperately, he looked around for a way out. Any way. A red handle marked EMERGENCY EXIT. FOR USE IN EMERGENCY ONLY. He lunged at it, pushing aside a half-dozen people. He pulled the handle and a whole window section popped out.

The tunnel was roaring outside, the tram still hurtling along unbelievably fast now that the blast of its slip-stream wind shrilled at his face. The solid walls of the tunnel stared at him. A woman screamed. With a final look over his shoulder at the still-advancing robot, THX leaped out of the tram.

For an instant he was spinning, tumbling, wind ripping at him and noise blasting. He hit the very

solid wall, shoulder first, and fell to the tunnel floor, scraping face and hands against the rough wall surface.

For a moment he lay there dazed, ears ringing, face starting to burn where the skin had been scraped, shoulder throbbing. He looked up and saw that the tram had stopped at the terminal, several hundred yards down the tunnel. He was in darkness, a pool of shadow between two lights recessed in the tunnel walls.

"1138 prefix THX, on warrant. Drug evasion. Fled tram in transit. Presume destroyed. Investigate."

"Check 0463. Proceeding."

He could see two of the chrome police robots heading for the end of the platform. There were steps leading down to the tunnel floor. Between the steps and THX was nothing but darkness.

THX hauled himself painfully to his feet. Stumbling, holding his injured shoulder, he ran deeper into the tunnel.

They won't stop until they find me. Or my body.

He scuttled along the wall, trying to stay in the shadows. Then his hand felt a recess, an open hatchway. Blindly, he stepped into it and fell down a metallic chute. Despite himself, he screamed in surprise and fear.

He landed jarringly in a pile of refuse. It stank. It was churning, moiling, gurgling obscenely. Absolute darkness. But THX could feel the mass of evil-smelling garbage surging slowly, like a turgid river of rot. He floundered in it, tried to claw his way out. But he could find nothing to grasp, no walls, not even a solid footing, only a mushy, quicksand-like ooze beneath his frantically treading feet.

He was sinking in it. Deeper and deeper. And then his foot struck something. Metal, sharp, it cut into his heel with a nerve-searing pain. Blindly, THX pushed his way upward. This was another chute of some kind -- There's light up ahead!

The chute was narrowing. He could now see in the faint bluish glow up ahead that there were walls and a ceiling that necked down constantly, forcing the river of slime to move faster, faster, flow toward the light.

And then he knew what the light was. Fusion torch! This was a garbage incinerator, where the refuse of the city was burned by the star-hot tongue of fusion flame, purified into elemental atoms, for recycling as new raw material.

A billion-degree fusion plasma was waiting for him, so hot that it was nearly invisible. THX scrambled to one side of the chute, tried to stand against the flow that pushed him inevitably toward the fusion torch. Now he could hear its voice, the low steady roar of thermonuclear power, the throaty song of a man-made star that sang of death, not life.

The bluish glow was strong enough now to hurt his eyes. But in its fierce light, THX saw a single hand gripprojecting downward from the ceiling of the chute. He reached out for it, missed it once, tried again and grabbed it.

A hatch. Painfully, his injured shoulder shrieking along nerve paths, he held onto the grip and worked the release mechanism. The hatch creaked open.

THX pulled himself upward, an agony of exertion, and then lay exhausted, stinking, panting but alive on the metal flooring above the garbage chute.

LUH.

His body wanted to stay there, to sleep, to take time to heal and rest. But his mind repeated, LUH. Got to warn her. Get away . . .

He forced himself to his feet and staggered down the corridor in which he found himself. At the end of it was a sanitary station and locker room.

I'll never make it out in the open like this.

The sanitary station was empty. He stripped and show-ered, then put on a fresh set of clothes. There was a row of stimulants, bright little vials chock-full of pills, stand-big on one side of the locker area. THX shuddered looking at them. But he left them alone.

It seemed like a century before he got back to his own apartment. He was on the wrong side of the city, but he didn't dare try the tram again. He kept to the crowded shopping levels, stayed on the busiest pedestrian passage-ways, used the slideways as much as he could.

Every time he saw a chrome police robot his stomach twisted inside him, but the robots merely plodded stoically along, ignoring him.

He got to the apartment at last and flung the door open.

"LUH!"

He rushed in, looked frantically through each room, calling her name.

But she wasn't there. The apartment was empty.

He stood in the middle of the living room, turning in slow helpless circles. Where can she be? Does she know? Did they arrest her? Is she safe?

And then there were three chrome police robots stand-ing at the still-open door. They stepped inside. They were all carrying long chrome rods.

"THX 1138, you are under arrest for drug evasion and resisting arrest. Further resistance is useless."

Then from the same robot came OOM's voice: "I am here to help you. Relax. You have nothing to fear. I am here."

THX's shoulders slumped. There was no other place to run to.

From one of the robots he heard a faint human voice announcing:

"THX 1138 has been taken into custody at a minimal monetary expenditure. Total operation cost 3000 units under budget. Congratulations. Be efficient. Be happy."

The other chrome robot took a step forward and touched THX with his rod. Gently.

A searing bolt of electricity blazed through every nerve in his body. He collapsed into blackness.

Chapter 9

He was sitting up. It took a long time for his eyes to focus, and then he realized it was because there was nothing for them to focus on.

He was clean, freshly dressed, sitting alone in an end-less, featureless expanse of white. Clinical white, sound-less, odorless, no shadows, no horizon. Nothing but himself and a perfect endless limbo of pure white.

Suddenly he was shivering uncontrollably. He pulled himself together into a fetal ball, trying to protect himself against the nothingness that surrounded him. Gradually he grew tired. His eyes closed. He slept.

Voices awakened him. He couldn't tell where they were coming from. There was still absolutely nothing to be seen. He couldn't make out what they were saying, but the chatter was like the continuous babble of instructions and commands that filled the working and living areas of the city. Somehow THX felt reassured. This at least was familiar.

He slept again.

This time he was awakened by footsteps. THX got to his feet and looked around to see where they were coming from. Nothing. But the steps were getting louder. Firm, heavy, even strides. He turned and there was a police robot with an electric rod in one hand.

THX backed away. But another police robot appeared, and another. He tried to move away from them, out of reach of those rods. He had felt what they could do.

They circled him, three police robots, identical and identically armed. THX ran, ran in circles while they stood around him, shuffling sideways slightly to make certain he couldn't break between them. He ran like a caged animal looking for a way out of an endless treadmill; ran until his legs were fluttering with exhaustion, his eyes blurred and stinging, his lungs raw.

As he collapsed to the blank white floor the police robots disappeared with a bluish flash.

Chest heaving, drenched with sweat, THX stared around himself. He was alone again, alone in this white void. Which is worse? he wondered.

Then the voices came back, and he could hear them this time.

"Increase."

"No. . . here. . . hold this down."

"Audio."

"Audio's already on."

"I can't hear him."

They're talking about me!

". . . cortex bonding, probably temporary. Before you report a possible equipment malfunction, don't you check the subject?"

"Stress category."

"Correct. . . Origin?"

"Birth born? Sexact? Not on his record."

"Violation?"

"Drug evasion with. . ."

"Triple three, triple three! Hey, easy there!"

THX sat on the bare floor, hearing them, involuntarily looking for someone or something. But there was nothing except the voices.

"A sinex drop reading of less than 2000 with an ac-companying loss of greater than 350 since admission may indicate. . .?"

"Permanent cortex bond."

"Correct."

"This really isn't a very good subject. . . limited. All this over here is wasted on him. Hey. . . watch!"

"H'mmm. . . What do you think?"

"Can't tell. Let's get him into organalysis."

"Shifting."

The voices faded off. Blinking, THX sat there totally alone. Then there was another sound, a tone, a soft rich single note that thrummed just barely at the threshold of audibility. THX listened to it, cocked

his head to hear it better. His eyelids, for some reason, were getting very heavy. He could hardly keep his eyes open. It was. . . was. . . He was asleep.

He awoke and tried to scream. But he couldn't open his mouth. Couldn't move. Not even his eyes. He was totally paralyzed, laid out straight on something hard with a huge glaring white light staring down at him like a pitiless eye.

He could see, he could feel, he could hear his own pulse throbbing in his ears. But he couldn't voluntarily move a single muscle. Not twitch or blink or even make his tongue work.

His mouth was completely dry. He lay there for an age, straining to hear something besides his own heartbeat And then he did. A tiny, annoying electrical hum.

Into his line of vision came a shining mechanical arm tipped with a cotton pad. He felt something soft and cold rub on his biceps. The first mechanical arm retracted and another -- or maybe the same one -- came at him, with a hypodermic syringe at its business end. THX felt the needle slip into him. Then more needles along both arms.

The whirring sounds of electrical motors were all he could hear, busy mechanical insects that flitted around him without pause. A tube was inserted into one nostril, a soft, surgical-green plastic clamp sealed his mouth shut. He watched as a pink fluid gurgled through the tube and into him.

The fluid stopped and a little clamp sealed off THX's other nostril. Air pumped through the tube now, distending THX's chest, bigger, bigger, more, more. Panic raced through him and then the pump stopped, the mouth clamp flipped back, and THX expelled breath with an explosive painful sigh. Then it all started over again.

It went on for hours. Wires into his chest. Pinpricks in strange patterns across his abdomen. Pain, lights, injections, blood sucked out of him by mechanical vampires, nerves triggered by electrical impulses. Querying photo-cells on the ends of fiberoptic stalks staring into his eyes from a few millimeters away. They made his heart race, slowed it down, contracted his leg muscles in painful spasms, sampled his urine, masturbated him and sampled that.

Somewhere in the vast underground city a computer typed:

1138, THX

Diagnosis: COMPATIBLE, TYPE A-5

Rate: EXCELLENT

Exceptions: LEFT KIDNEY (See detailed index 24-921)

He awoke in the featureless white limbo again. Awoke with the sound of footsteps, jumped to his feet. But these weren't the hard steady beats of a chrome robot. They were soft, hesitant pads of

slipperd feet.

Against the blank unmarked background it was im-possible to judge distances. A figure was out there, hard to make out because it was wearing standard white pa-jamas. THX watched the figure approaching. It looked like LUH!

It can't be,he told himself.Don't . . .

But he wanted it to be her. Then he realized that if it was, she would be a prisoner too, and they must have done the same things to her that they did to him. So he raged within himself: wanting her and hoping it wasn't her.

"LUH?" he heard his own voice calling, pleading.

She rushed toward him and into his arms.

"Are you real. . . is it really you?"

They kissed and clung to each other.

"Are you all right?" she asked, gazing up at him worriedly.

He asked, "What did they do to you?"

For a long moment she didn't answer, then she said, "I'm going to have a baby."

He felt as if they'd electric-shocked him again. "No, no, no. . ."

"Hold me," LUH begged. "Hold me."

His arms wrapped protectively about her while his mind went spuming into wild, guilt-ridden gulfs. "It's the end. . . what have I done?"

"I'm not afraid," she said firmly. "I'm not afraid."

"But it's wrong. So wrong. What we've done. . ."

His strength seemed to ebb away. He let go of her and sank to the floor, sobbing. "I didn't want this. How did it happen? I love you, and now I've done this to you. . ."

She knelt beside him, embraced him. "You have to be strong. . . You're going to have a son."

Control steepled his fingertips as he watched THX and LUH embracing, shedding their clothes, making love. His huge viewscreen showed them larger than life, and his safe, quiet, comfortable office was filled with the sounds of their murmurings, their breathing, their passion.

When at last they lay still, side by side, wet and spent, Control took two orange pills and touched a switch on his communicator panel. Instantly, his viewscreen showed an observer's cell, with THX and LUH on the observer's main screens.

"You see?" Control asked academically. "Even in prison, where they know they're under observation, they grapple like animals. Disgusting, isn't it?"

The observer nodded, his throat too dry to trust his voice just yet.

"They've had their chance. It's obviously a hopeless case. Organ banks for him. Destruction for her. If the courts concur, I hope someone is intelligent enough to mark his glands as nonconsumables."

THX awoke again to the sound of footsteps. But this time they were the heavy, measured treads of robots. He leaped up to his feet. LUH stirred and sat up. They were still naked, both of them.

Two robot policemen and a man dressed in yellow pajamas were coming toward him. LUH got to her feet and THX circled an arm around her protectively.

The police and the man stopped a few meters in front of them. The police robots both had electric rods.

The man recited tonelessly, "No person held to service in one section under the laws thereof, escaping into another, shall, in consequence of any law or regulation therein, be discharged from such service, but shall be delivered up on claim of the party to whom such service may be due."

One of the robots reached out and took LUH by the arm. He pulled her from THX's grasp.

"No. . . please. . ." She screamed and reached for THX, eyes wide with terror.

THX jumped at the robot but its partner stepped in the way, clubbed him to his knees and then touched him on the neck with the stunner. The world exploded into flaming pain and THX blacked out

Chapter 10

To THX the courtroom looked like chaos multiplied. He sat in a glassed-in cubicle, limp, exhausted, with a pair of earphones jabbering endless babble into his head.

He had no idea of how long it had been since they'd taken LUH away. Nor where she was. He knew they had been sedating him; most of the time in his sensory-less prison limbo he had slept. Without dreaming. Without really resting.

Now he sat in a high-backed chair with two robot policemen gleaming on either side of him. His own defense counsel, a stubby little man who had identified himself to THX for the first time a few minutes earlier, was standing in front of him, listening intently to the gibberish of the court, hand pressed

to one earphone, eyes fixed on the proctor who stood in front of the judge's bench.

There seemed to be a dozen cases being tried at once. The proctor was reading off computer cards as fast as he could, and THX's earphones shrilled a cacophony of prosecutors and defense counsels shouting phrases that were mostly meaningless to him. But they shouted them with great vehemence, as if they really believed in what they were doing.

The judge (was he the one they kept referring to as Pontifex? THX wondered) sat high above everyone else at a sort of control booth, with a computer console flash-ing its lights behind him. He also had earphones clapped on his head, but his eyes seemed sleepy, bored -- except that every once in a while, he snapped awake to say something. It always sounded like something harsh to THX, although he couldn't understand most of the terms that the judge used.

Then he heard the proctor's voice rattling off his ownname: "Charge: 1138 prefix THX charged with violation " index 3278.927, appendix 445-60-613. Drug evasion, malicious sexual perversions, unconditional response and transgression. Justice proceed. Pontifex 606 presiding."

A waspish little evil-faced man got to his feet and bowed to the judge. "Mercicontrol prosecutor 727, if it please the court. Mercicontrol respectfully places its evi-dence before you. . ." The computer began flashing madly and the judge seemed to be looking down into a view-screen that was set into his booth. Or was he merely dozing?

"Tapes 9198, 5116, and 1477," the prosecutor said. "These negative documents are certified by AN-OTO and registered at files, tomb 34."

THX's defense counsel raised a stubby finger. "Non-drug, nondrug total excuse. Defendant in unstable condi-tion, not responsible. Nondrug asylum. . . precedent. . ."

But the prosecutor continued without pause, "Merci-control respectfully submits a 5254, immediate destruction, on the basis of an ECO TR-X 314; totally incurable chemical imbalance with socially deteriorating conse-quences."

The defense counsel wagged his head. "Reject, reject. Inefficient unwarranted destruction. Must be saved. . . mass is one. . . can be productive. Name of economics; cure this soul. . . malignant cure. There is a heritage of good and economic efficiency. . . net gain."

"Insane," said the prosecutor.

"Granted," said the judge, nodding.

The prosecutor went on, "Immediate destruction is the only efficiency. The crimes are of secondary importance. The issue is one of genetic inferiority. This man is of the womb. . ."

"Reject, reject!" shouted the defense counsel.

"He is the product of an illegal sexual perversion," the prosecutor said to the judge, still ignoring the defense counsel, "and should have been destroyed at the moment of conception. What is in question here is a concept of economic efficiency and procedure that has allowed these erotics to exist and dilute this great society."

"Reject, reject," squawked the defense counsel. "The defendant is known to be of clinical origin,

not of the womb. . . his records. . ."

"The services performed by these erotics must be automated. If sexual perversion is to be stamped out, the products of these perversions must. . ."

"Insane. . . insane. . . What's the prosecutor trying to do here? All records pertaining to the defendant affirm his clinical origin." The defense counsel reached down for a stack of computer cards and shuffled through them, reading, "The Office of Opportunity, the Festival of the Rings, employment and living selection, depositions made and submitted by the arresting officers. . . there is abso-lutely no precedent for the allegations made by the prosecution regarding the defendant's origin."

The prosecutor grimaced. "The defendant has com-mitted crimes of perversion and corruption that are in-compatible with clinical origin. . . There can be no doubt in anyone's mind that he is an erotic type. Records that are even remotely subject to error or possible alteration must not stand in the way if society is to defend itself from these perversions."

"This is not a race issue!" The defense counsel shifted tack. "Not here. . . remember sanctity of the individual regardless of race or origin. Econ equilibrium status 542 through 691 apply to this case. . . The defendant was a roommate of an erotic type. . . crime of persuasion and influence. . . Loss of innocence. . . but, examined and proven physically compatible. Crimes not relevant. De-fendant used, not destroyed. Case rest."

The defense counsel slammed his computer cards back on the little table from which he'd taken them, then turned to THX and smiled.

But the prosecutor summarized: "The perversions committed by this obsolete race have a definite corrosive effect on our society. If he is not destroyed, his deviate characteristics will be transmitted to others. We must not continue to consume these erotics. We must exterminate the source of sin. Economics must not dictate situa-tions which are obviously religious."

The judge sighed and stirred in his high seat. "Con-clude," he murmured.

"If 1138 is consumed and not destroyed, this perver-sion will spread. He must be destroyed. It is the only logical, efficient, and righteous verdict that can be reached."

The proctor looked up from his desk. "Concluded?"

Both the prosecutor and defense counsel nodded.

The judge said, "Next case."

The proctor began reading another charge. The prose-cutor returned to his desk and began leafing through cards. In THX's cubicle, the defense counsel stacked his own cards neatly and took off his earphones.

"You're going?" THX asked, yanking his own ear-phones from his head.

"Of course. Your case is finished now. I've got hun-dreds of others waiting."

"But what? . . ."

"The computer is analyzing your case. The proctor will inform you of its outcome."

"But. . . wait. . ."

With a final smile, the defense counsel hurried out of the cubicle. THX started to get up from his chair, but one of the chrome police robots laid a heavy hand on his shoulder, forcing him back down.

The other robot picked THX's earphones off the floor and wordlessly handed it to him. He noticed that the proctor was looking his way and slipped the earphones on.

The proctor was reading from a computer tape: ". . . 1138 prefix THX is deemed clinic-born of certified origin. Stands convicted of index 3278.927 appendix 445 through 613: drug evasion 321, 399, and malicious sexual per-version. Deemed organically invaluable. Subject shall be consumed as economics dictate."

THX sat there, dazed. Consumed? Does that mean not destroyed? The police robots took his arms and guided him out of the chair, past a new defendant entering the cubicle, and out into the busy hallway.

The courtroom continued to buzz with dozens of simultaneous cases being argued at once. THX never saw LUH enter a defendant's cubicle, far on the other side of the noise-filled courtroom. Strictly by coincidence, her defense counsel was the same as his.

Chapter 11

The chrome police robot was carrying a long pole as he led THX through the endless white emptiness of prison. The pole was electrified; THX knew it instinctively. He walked grudgingly, sullenly, without hope -- but strangely also without fear.

"They're going to kill me, aren't they? Destroy me?"

Without slacking pace, the robot answered in the voice of OMM, "It's all right. I am with you. Blessings of the State. Blessings of the masses. You will be consumed, and in consumption there is expiation for your wrongs. Transgression is atoned for. Consumption is economically and ethically efficient. Be glad of your chance to cleanse your soul by serving the masses. Meditate and be happy."

THX stopped dead. "Be happy? When they're going to kill me?"

The robot walked on a few paces before noticing that its prisoner was no longer keeping pace beside it. It turned slowly, fixed its electro-optical eyes on THX and advanced toward him. The pole lowered and pointed straight at his face.

"Keep moving," the robot said, in a policeman's voice, not OMM's.

THX glared at the robot. It took another step toward him, and the pole weaved slowly in front of THX's eyes. Stay alive, said a silent voice in his mind. Stay alive.

THX let his head slump forward a little, and the pole moved away from him. The robot turned and resumed walking; THX followed, head still down.

After what seemed like hours he saw a speck of color, a solid shape, far far off in the distance. The robot was walking toward it. THX moved up alongside the policeman, straining his eyes for a better look at whatever it was.

It was a group of people, clustered around what looked like oblong boxes. As they got nearer, THX recognized that the boxes were actually bunks, set atop blue plastic structures that seemed to have drawers and doors in them, under the sleeping mattress. Ten bed modules, nine people -- all dressed in rumpled white pajamas.

THX realized the tenth bed-module was for him.

The robot advanced as far as the edge of the little group, pounded his pole on the floor, and announced simply:

"THX 1138."

The people -- one of them was a woman -- looked at him for a moment from where they stood or sat or lay. Then they turned away. All but one -- SEN 5241.

THX recognized him as the police robot walked off, pacing the moments with his firm, steady tread. SEN smiled quizzically at THX, then made his way around one of the bed modules toward him.

SEN said quietly, "I know you turned me in."

THX said nothing.

With a shrug and an aimless gesture that took in the tiny universe of beds and people, SEN added, "I'm doing quite well here, anyway."

THX looked at the others. One was obviously blind, sitting on the edge of his bed module staring at the world with blank eyes. Near him sat an old man with a kindly face, talking to a pimply youngster. The woman was sitting alone, she seemed to be sulking about something. Or maybe she's mentally defective, THX thought, looking harder into her burning, hate/fear haunted eyes. Off to one side of the cluster was a giant of a man who was clearly insane: he giggled and jibbered, drool spilling down his chin, huge apelike hands clapping clumsily over something no one else could see.

With a shudder, THX realized that these would be his companions for the rest of his life.

"I'm setting some things up," SEN was babbling on, "but it's not easy. . . a very difficult balance."

He took THX by the arm and led him to an empty blue bed module. "Here, this is yours." THX sank down onto the mattress. It was spongy, almost comfortable.

SEN sat down beside him, keeping his voice low while his eyes darted around as if searching for

danger. "Let's get some things straight right from the start. It's going to take some time for you to see my over-all plan, so until then, stay out of things that you don't understand, all right? You'd just be making it more difficult for me. . . It's the least you can do. Right?"

We're trapped in this hell and he's making plans? THX wanted to scream.

"What's wrong with you? Why don't you answer me? Don't be like that. . ."

The old man with the kind face, a wrinkled, withered face with watery blue eyes and sunken cheeks, came up and bent close to THX.

"It's all right," he said. "You're safe now. You're with friends, comrade. My name is PTO 0340."

THX turned away from him. PTO shrugged, glanced at SEN, then shuffled away shaking his head.

SEN whispered to THX, "You're a stupid man." Then, still smiling amiably and watching to see who was watch-ing him, SEN got up and went to his own bed module.

THX sat immobile on his bed. One of the younger prisoners was doing sitting-up exercises on the floor next to his module. The retarded woman was sitting huddled on her bed, in a trance, mumbling incoherently. THX saw now that her clothes were torn in many places. A thin, delicate-looking man knelt on the floor, well away from the beds, painting huge lopsided red designs on the smooth, bare floor.

The big man, the idiot, was bouncing up and down on the edge of his bed, chuckling insanely and uttering aft ear-shattering whoop every few minutes.

And SEN was sitting on his own bed, counting stacks of food cubes that he had amassed. Part of his plan, THX thought disgustedly. Without a word, he stretched out on his own bunk and went to sleep.

Time lost all meaning. THX slept and ate, listened to the other inmates, watched them carry out their lives around the ten blue bed modules. Food arrived in their receptor bins when a musical tone sounded and a blue light flashed. SEN always managed to get at least one extra food cube from somebody. Many of them came from THX, who had no more hunger.

Several times THX awoke from sleep with a start, and found the idiot giant, TRG 3442, staring at him.

Through it all, THX did not speak. Words were completely useless, inadequate, meaningless. The others talked, though. They talked without end.

PTO and SEN argued over invisible points of logic all the time. Often DWY 1519, a thin, nervous man, stood between them and kept the discussion going when other-wise it would have wound down.

"Why are they holding us here?" PTO once asked, rhetorically. "Why don't they destroy us right away? Economically, it's not sound at all. Very much unlike. . ."

SEN broke hi, with a patient smile, "I've said many times before, and I suppose I'll have to repeat it again for your. . ."

"Economically. . ." DWY began.

But PTO kept right on, "It is incalculably more de-structive for you to believe you are about to be destroyed than if you actually were destroyed. We've got many residents on the verge of hysteria. It's got to stop."

"What are you talking about?" demanded SEN. "When did you sleep last? Do you know what your trouble is? You're blind. You've been here so long you can't see what is happening. We must unite." He clenched his hand. "We need unity. We need action. We have come to a time when we must. . ."

"Unite!" DWY said.

SEN turned toward him, beckoned to him, and DWY bent his ear close to SEN. "Listen," SEN told him, "why don't you go over and give a hand to TWA? He's really much more interesting than either of us."

DWY straightened up, his face at first surprised, then depressed by his erstwhile leader's rejection. He slowly backed away, then turned and went toward TWA, the blind man, who was pacing between the beds, hands extended outward like an insect's antennae.

PTO watched the younger man leave them, his face a study of grandfatherly concern. Then, turning back to SEN, he plunged back into the debate:

"Grasping the essential nature of our situation here is not an act of intuition, but a subtle process of the intellect. Intuition is the state of mind most susceptible to fear and terror, intellect the most removed."

THX watched them from his bed. SEN looked exasperated, the old man seemed to be enjoying himself.

SEN was saying, "I have always sensed qualities in people that set them apart, qualities of personality and sensibility, qualities that become doubly valuable when the individual is placed in an environment of stress such as the one we are in now."

PTO: "If anything is to be learned, it must be learned in an atmosphere of clarity and precision, free from the debilitating and enervating intrusions of irrationality."

Propping himself up on his elbows, THX began to realize, They're not debating. They're having two separate monologues!

"From the first moment I met you," SEN went on, "I sensed a deep-going quality that would be meaningful to you and to the rest of us. . . But at the same time, I was disturbed because I could not identify exactly what that quality was."

"Intuition may seem more tempting because it is inherently more dramatic," said PTO.

"I can see now that for some reason, perhaps you don't even know this yourself. . ."

"Intuition does not force the mind. . ."

"Now, I don't believe for a moment. . ."

As they talked, THX slowly became aware that TRG was staring at him. He turned and looked straight at the maniac, who stood not far from his bed, towering like a grinning mountain. TRG giggled and wiped spittle from his chin with the back of his hand. THX stared at him, unable to turn away.

"You always manage to avoid the issue," PTO was saying, his voice rising. "What's wrong with our present condition? We're comfortable and we have plenty of food. I feel absolutely no threat because there is no threat. Why incite trouble? You should examine your emotions. It is senseless. . ."

A scream shattered the moment

TRG jerked backward a step and turned his head to see where the scream came from. THX twisted on his bed to look in the same direction.

One of the men was huddled over IMM with his hand over her mouth. Her blouse had been pulled down off her shoulders, revealing small breasts that were crossed by a livid scar. TRG started toward the man, who released IMM and scuttled away backwards, stumbling in his haste. The girl pulled the blouse up and held it tightly around herself. TRG stopped in front of her, but she wouldn't look up at him, just sat there on her bed, holding herself and rocking back and forth silently.

THX lay back on his bed, his head aching horribly. PTO and SEN resumed their talking, as if nothing had happened. They talked on. And on. And on.

The food chime sounded. THX ignored it. He tried to sleep but only found himself staring into the endless white void overhead, bright without glare, endless and imprisoning.

He heard the heavy tread of a robot policeman, and then the triple thump of his pole beating the floor.

"CAM 5254," said the police robot.

THX turned and saw a boy of fourteen or so standing there, looking bewildered and very afraid.

TRG bumbled up to the boy, looked him up and down, and began laughing. The boy was visibly trembling. The chrome robot stepped between them and grasped the idiot by the scruff of his neck. TRG seemed to collapse like a rag doll. The robot walked off with the silent TRG, dwindling into the distance.

Of course, THX thought as he watched them disappear, only ten people can occupy ten modules. For every new one they bring in, one must go.

Chapter 12

For LUH it was different.

She sat alone in a completely dark compartment, too small to stand in. She could only sit with her knees up under her chin. She lost track of time. At first she couldn't sleep, she was too terrified to even close her eyes. Then came hunger and finally exhaustion. She slept.

Hunger woke her. She felt weak, cramped. Her back ached horribly. Her arms and legs were tingling from lack of blood circulation.

A sound.

No, it was only the scrabbling of her own feet against the metal floor of the cell.

Destroyed. They were going to destroy her. She remembered the defense counsel, his flushed face, his slightly embarrassed expression when the Pontifex said, "De-destroyed."

The counsel had shrugged. "I did the best I could," he had said.

Just like that. The best he could. Her life was going to be ended. It embarrassed him.

It was a sound. From outside. Shuffling. . . footsteps. A muffled voice. A laugh.

Suddenly light streamed down on her from overhead. Her eyes squinted and watered involuntarily.

"Come on now," a man's voice called down to her. "Don't be bashful."

She looked up, still squinting. She could barely make out his bulky outline against the unaccustomed light.

"Here, reach up. Don't make me do all the work."

Obediently she reached up, and a pair of strong hands grasped her arms and pulled her up out of the cell. It looked like a narrow hallway. The floor was studded with small, square hatches. Hers was the only open one.

"This way."

The man gestured with one hand and nudged her shoulder in the direction he was pointing. She walked slowly, stumblingly, her legs aflame suddenly from the long cramped idleness.

She tripped on one of the hatch edges and nearly fell. But his strong arm circled her waist and held her up.

"That feel better?"

He was big, a tall thickset man with heavy features and stumpy teeth with spaces between them. He was grinning at her now, his face close enough for her to smell his breath.

"Th. . . thank you. . ."

He laughed and held her as they walked down the length of the hallway. He pushed a door open

and LUH saw a small room, white and lit glarelessly from ceiling panels. No furniture except a single straight-backed chair in the middle of the room. No doors other than the one they came through.

"Sit," the man commanded.

She went slowly to the chair and sat in it. It felt hard and cold. It faced away from the door.

Turning back toward him, she asked, "What. . . what's going to happen?"

"You'll see."

Shaking inside, LUH sat there. She concentrated on trying to look unafraid. She forced herself to sit quietly, to keep her head erect and not turn around. But her hands, gripping the chair's arms, were trembling.

She stared straight ahead. There was a viewscreen on the wall, she noticed for the first time.

Destroyed! The word kept ringing in her mind. When? How? Would it be here, in this room? Was he the executioner?

The door clicked open. Involuntarily, she turned in the chair and saw a second man step in -- tall, hard-looking. Eyes directly on her.

She turned away from them and stared back at the viewscreen.

"That's her?" asked the newcomer.

The first man must have nodded.

"Okay."

The door opened again. Footsteps, and then the sound of the door closing. Then nothing. Biting her lips, LUH sat there unmoving. No sound at all except her own breathing, her own pulse hammering in her ears.

When she couldn't stand it any more, she turned around again. The room was empty. She was alone.

She didn't know whether to remain sitting there or not. She started to get up, but the door opened again and the men came back in, wheeling a holocamera on its dolly. Behind them were three robot policemen.

They set up the camera while she sat, terrified, watching them.

"Okay, we're ready."

The first man came up to her and gently pulled her by the arm out of the chair. "You won't need this any more, pretty." He grinned again and her knees almost gave way under her.

The sudden realization was like a flame in her innards. The holoshows he watched. . . the girl wasn't a mannequin!

"Camera set?"

"Yeah."

"Okay, pretty, here's your big chance in show business."

LUH wanted to faint, to run, to scream. But she couldn't move. She couldn't make a sound.

The three robots circled around her. They each had chrome nightsticks in the belts of their uniforms. She felt, rather than saw, the cameramen grinning.

One of the robots grabbed her arms from behind her. She whimpered as another ripped her blouse open. They pulled the blouse off her shoulders, then tore off her pants and slippers. She stood there, naked, cowering, wanting to be dead.

"It's all right, pretty. Don't be afraid," one of the cameramen said.

She turned toward the voice, and a robot slapped her in the face. Hard. She tasted blood. Her eyes stung and watered.

Then the beating began.

Control was reviewing data, coldly watching the results of the day's work: economic indices, accident reports, arrests, awards, new production highs, consumption curves, graphs, charts, tables of numbers and cryptic symbols raced across his viewscreen wall faster than most eyes could follow.

He nodded as the data sped by.

The amber light on his desk communicator began flashing. He touched the BUSY indicator, but the light persisted.

Something important. Not red-alert, but someone had an urgent desire to speak to him.

It had better be truly urgent, he told himself as he interrupted the data flow.

A Mercicontrol doctor's face appeared on the screen, much larger than life, frowning with professional concern.

"Sir, I'm terribly sorry to interrupt you. . ."

"Don't waste my time," Control snapped testily. "What is it? Speak."

"I just received a laboratory report on a condemned felon, sir. Apparently the report was misfiled and it didn't get to this station until. . ."

Huffing with impatience, Control said, "What is it?"

"The prisoner 3417, prefix LUN. . . no, sorry, it's LUH. She was sentenced to be destroyed. . ."

sexact, drug evasion, natural-born. . ."

"Yes?"

"Well, sir, the laboratory report indicates that. . . well. . . she's, um, pregnant, sir." The doctor pronounced the repugnant word softly.

Control leaned back in his sculptured chair. "You're certain of this?"

"Yes sir. No doubt about it. The fetus is at a very early stage, of course. . . but it's definite."

"Very well," said Control. "Place the report in the proper file."

"Yes sir. I. . . uh, I thought you'd want to know first-hand, sir."

"Quite right." Control cut the connection and the doctor's face vanished from the viewscreen.

For a long moment Control sat staring at the wall, at the face of the First Control. Then he reached for the communicator switch again.

LUH lay in a pool of her own blood. She couldn't see out of one eye, her lips felt numb, her whole mouth raw. The pain in her body had reached the point where it slid into numbness. She felt them kicking her, but the shock was gone. Agony had reached its maximum, her nerves couldn't carry any greater intensity of pain.

"That's enough," a voice said. A sharp voice, accus-tomed to giving orders and having them obeyed instantly.

"Clean her up and deliver her back to Mercicontrol," the voice said.

LUH looked up too late to see who had spoken. The viewscreen on the wall was fading into darkness.

"Cut the camera," one of the men said.

"Whew. . . these damned lights are hot."

She felt one of them hauling her up and depositing her onto the chair again. She was dizzy, everything was blurring out of focus.

A man's face swam into view, very close to her. "That wasn't so bad, was it?" He laughed.

"Clean her up, is it?"

"Plenty of time for that later. Mercicontrol won't be in any hurry to get her."

"Give her a whiff of this."

Something pungent exploded in her face. She snapped her head back. They pressed a cold

compress against her face.

"Not too bad. . . you still look kind of pretty."

"Here. . ." A pair of pills were pushed past her swollen lips. "Swallow."

She had to try several times before she could get them down. Almost instantly, though, the pain seemed to fade slightly. The room, the men, slid into reasonably sharp focus. Against one wall the robots stood deactivated, smeared with her blood.

"See, she's coming around."

"Ready to watch yourself on the viewscreen? Look!"

The screen brightened, and she saw herself -- with THX. Sitting next to him on the contour seat in the holoroom. And then in bed with him.

"Look at that," one of the men said.

"Really going at it."

She tried to turn her face away, but they held her head. "Watch it! You enjoyed doing it then, why don't you want to watch it?"

"No. . ." Her own voice sounded strange, strangled.

She tried to get out of the chair, but all she could do was slide to her knees. One of them pulled her head up, and she saw a man standing in front of her, naked, swollen, bestial.

"Try this one," he said.

Control worked his communicator again and saw the room with LUH and her three jailors. She was slumped against the metal chair, gagging.

One of the jailors pulled her up and draped her across the arms of the chair.

Control shuddered. Why are the jailors worse than the criminals? If we didn't need them . . . He sensed his pulse quickening as he watched. Well . . . as long as we can preserve the fetus, what difference how she's destroyed? And he rocked back and forth, awash with pleasure, watching them.

Chapter 13

THX opened his eyes and saw that PTO was standing beside his bed.

"You're frightened, aren't you?" the old man asked quietly. "Just as frightened as the boy the policeman brought in."

THX said nothing.

Sitting on the edge of the bed, PTO smiled warmly and continued, "You're frightened that at any moment you'll be taken away, to be consumed, to have your organs used for other people's bodies. I know, I've felt the same way. I couldn't eat. I still have trouble sometimes. . . some-times it's difficult to keep one's balance. Even at my age."

He looked up, scanned the little group of them, then said, "But how is this place different from anywhere else? We all die sooner or later. None of us knows when it will come, or how. At least, here our death serves the masses. Your heart will help someone to live. Your eyes can give sight to a blind man."

LUH's eyes in someone else's head. Her hands, her voice. . . our baby . . . What are they doing to her? To them?

"I know how you feel," PTO was saying gently. "Why, when I first came here -- oh, ages ago -- I was intent on escaping. But. . . escape to where? That's the problem. You see -- there is no other place."

THX looked up at him. There is no other place! The enormity of it began to sink into his consciousness. There is no other place. Everyplace in the vast city is a prison. Everyplace.

"No place at all," PTO continued. "The city is more or less like this, isn't it? And where else can you go? The superstructure, up above? It's radioactive from all the power units that've been there for so long. No one there except monsters. Yes, actual monsters. . . muta-tions, horrible creatures, all twisted and insane from the radiations."

The old man made a helpless gesture. "And beyond that is the outside. Poisonous. Air too foul to breathe, sulfurous rains, germs and filth. The water is undrinkable and the whole place smells of corruption. Do you know the legend about the outside?"

"I know, I know. . ." It was DWY, anxious to join the conversation -- or monologue.

"Men used to live outside, up on the actual surface, where there was cold and extreme heat and something called snow -- like powder that fell down on them from the overhead."

PTO nodded benignly. "Yes. Once men lived in the open, in a paradise. Oh, there was heat and cold, but OMM provided everything that men needed to deal with it and survive. Men lived in splendor and never had to work. Everyone was happy, and there was no need of medicines or sedations, for no one ever got sick or even tired."

"But someone ruined everything," DWY put in, his eyes glittering.

"Yes," said PTO. "Some men were not content with OMM's paradise. They wanted more -- they wanted to breed their own children, to populate the world without control, without planning."

DWY said, "OMM's Law was: Increase and multiply only within the limits of society's plan. But

some people wanted to forget the plan and increase at random."

THX's head was beginning to throb. Stop it, he demanded silently. Stop it!

"Well, you can see what happened. With uncontrolled breeding, the outside world eventually became over-crowded, and filthy. Pollution and sickness and starvation were everywhere. Thanks to a few far-sighted, saintly men, the underground cities were built. . ."

"And men have lived in them safely and cleanly ever since."

"And those up on the outside have long since died in their own filth," PTO said with great finality.

"And good riddance to them!" DWY added.

"So you see," PTO concluded, "this is the best place to be. We're safe and warm and comfortable. Don't be afraid. There's no other place to go to."

The pounding of a police robot's pole on the floor startled the three of them. THX hadn't noticed the robot approaching.

"OUE 6662," announced the robot. A blank-faced middle-aged man stood there, seemingly in a trance.

The robot left him there, circled the cluster of beds, and reached for the wiry little man who had once attacked IMM. He slapped at the robot's extended hand, pushed into its chest and the robot toppled backward and fell with a hollow metallic thud. Laughing hysterically, the man jumped up and down on the robot's face. The chrome, which looked so solid, gave way like a fender crumpling. With a triumphant shriek, the little man ran off into the distance.

They all watched him getting smaller and smaller against the featureless white expanse. Then he screamed horribly and disappeared altogether. THX turned back and looked at PTO, who was shaking his head sadly.

"Violence," he said, like a physician identifying a fatal disease. "Violence."

Just after the next food arrived, with its musical tone and blue flash of light, two more robots came to take their battered colleague away.

It's all insane, THX knew. They're killing us in our minds, because they want to save our organs for themselves.

Don't let them do it to you, he heard LUH's voice urging him. Be strong. You can win over them.

He ached when he thought of her. LUH. Where is she? How can I find her?

PTO was walking slowly around the bed modules with the teen-aged boy, CAM 5254, beside him.

"Yes, your point is well taken, my boy," the old man was saying, "but it lacks the balance that a

broader and deeper range of experience can lend it. When I first arrived here, I saw things as perhaps you do now. I was confused about my predicament. . ."

THX shook his head. Nothing ever changes here. New people come and old ones go but nothing changes.

PTO and CAM circled the modules and came back within hearing range:

"Listen to the mumblings of an old man and bank those flames of violence with earnest inquiry and honest observation. . ."

From his own bed, SEN broke in, "Mumblings!"

PTO stopped in midsentence. SEN wagged a finger at CAM.

"Do you know," he shouted, "how many times we've had to listen to that speech?"

The boy, confused, looked from SEN to PTO and back again.

"Do you have any idea," SEN demanded, rising from his bed, "how many times. . . we've had to listen to that identical speech? He thinks everyone's as blind as he is!"

PTO tried to smile but his face wouldn't do it. He almost looked angry.

"You know what you are?" SEN snapped at him. "You make me sick. If we all thought like you. . ."

IMM screamed from across the cluster of beds, a single sharp howl of terror. Everyone turned to her. She was sitting alone, no one within ten meters of her.

SEN dismissed her with a wave of his hand. "You know what I want?" he said to the rest of the group. "Ideas. . . One idea. One idea could get us out of here if it was the right idea. You know what I mean?"

His eyes wide with fervor, SEN called out, "Not a bunch of facts! Who even knows if they're facts? He probably makes them up in his sleep. The time has come to act!"

THX sat on the edge of his bed. His stomach felt fluttery.

"We've just got to be sure it's the right idea," SEN went on. "But we'll find it. We'll know it when we see it. I'll know it when I see it. Clear and straight and forward and plain as the nose on your face."

The new inmate, OUE, suddenly stepped up to SEN and punched him directly on the nose. SEN staggered back painfully, holding his nose. OUE walked away laugh-ing.

PTO turned back to CAM as if nothing had happened. "In the years to come you will be grateful for what may now seem like senseless sacrifices. With a passion such as yours. . ."

SEN, more intense than ever, rushed over to them and shook his fist in PTO's face. "Sooner or later you'll be taken away and destroyed like the others."

"Not destroyed," PTO corrected calmly. "Consumed. And so will you be."

THX stood up. His knees felt weak. He began to slowly walk away from his bed, slowly, slowly.

He heard PTO saying, "Of course it is true that no one really knows what happens when one is taken away, history tells us that, but it is idle to speculate about it. SEN has destroyed himself with worry many times over. LOO 3122, who was taken away long before you arrived, believed that he was going to a wonderful place where he would be supremely happy. . ."

His voice was getting fainter, THX kept walking. He was well away from the beds now, walking steadily. Away.

A chrome police robot passed him, heading in the other direction, toward the beds. The policeman didn't even seem to notice THX. After a while, far in the distance, he heard one of the inmates shouting:

"No. . . not me. . . take her. . . no, no!"

THX kept walking.

Chapter 14

Blankness. No horizon, no walls, no glare and no shadow, no sound except the soft padding of his own slippered feet against the slightly resilient floor. Neither heat nor cold. Like a vast white womb the prison enclosed THX, huge yet suffocating.

On he walked.

It might have been hours or days, his only clock was the growling pain of his empty stomach.

When he got too tired to move, he lay down and slept. When he awoke, he started moving again. Once, far off in the distance, he thought he saw a cluster of modules and people standing nearby. But it wavered out of sight as he walked; he couldn't find it again.

Maybe it's my own cluster, with SEN and PTO and the others, he thought. Maybe I've been walking in a circle.

There was no way to tell. As closely as he could, he kept to a straight line. Even when he lay down, he tried to make certain that he kept his body pointed in the direction in which he was moving. But usually he was sprawled in a completely different posture when he woke up again.

The hunger was getting bad. THX felt a constant, burning ache in his middle. His legs were getting fluttery. And he was seeing things.

Off in the corner of his eye, strange lights nickered at him. When he turned to look directly at them, the lights disappeared.

Does hunger cause hallucinations?he wondered.

Then the voice of OMM came to him from out of the nowhere: "Blessings on you. Even here, in the realm of confessed and condemned felons, I am with you. Do not try to evade your fate. Rest. Surrender your will to the necessities of reality. I will provide. Rest and sleep. Sleep."

The taped voice was supposed to be hypnotic, but hot anger kept THX going.

"You let this happen to me," he shouted into the nothingness. "I was your faithful follower and you led me into this. You let them do this to me. And to her."

OMM's taped voice serenely ignored his words. "Even here, in the realm. . . Rest. . . Surrender. . . Rest and sleep."

When he finally did sleep, his dreams were filled with OMM's voice, but now it was a fierce demanding voice telling him:

"Thou hast sinned greatly and must suffer for it. The masses will not rest until you have payed for your sins."

And he saw himself back at his job in the assembly bay, standing on aching rubbery legs, hands trembling as he worked the remote manipulators. But inside the assembly area, on the other side of the leaded window, there was not a robot. LUH lay there, her body open and shining metal organs gleaming in the overhead lights. And THX saw that he wasn't assembling her, he was taking her apart.

He awoke screaming.

At his feet were four brown food cubes. His scream choked off as he stared at them. He reached out and touched them. They were real.

"Even here, I provide," said OMM's lofty voice.

Why?he wondered as he slowly picked up one of the cubes. Why feed a condemned man, a man they're going to kill?

The answer came easily. "Because they want my body to be in good health when they kill me. They want my organs."

The food was at his lips when he told himself that truth. Far off in the distance, he saw the blinking lights again. This time they remained even when he stared right at them. Blinking red and blue lights, going on and off in sequence, like a signal.

His stomach was wrenching, his mouth dry and caked. He held the food cubes before his face, a brown gritty lump that contained nourishment without taste.

No, he told himself. Starve yourself. Let your body shrivel and die. Don't give them what they want.

But his body answered, "If they can bring you food, they can make you eat it. Don't be a fool. Eat now, or they'll make you eat later. They're not going to let a valuable collection of organs destroy its usefulness to them."

Be strong, he said. Don't give in to them. Even if they can overpower you, don't go along with them. Fight!

But it was a losing argument. He held the food cube in his shaking hands for a few moments longer, then took a bite of it, then wolfed down all four of them.

The blinking signal lights disappeared.

Slowly, his stomach rumbling with unaccustomed full-ness, he got to his feet and resumed walking.

No voices now, no lights. But far off in the distance he saw something -- a dark blob that grew and took shape, a human shape, a man, approaching him.

THX quickened his pace. The man was heading straight for him, tall and purposeful. Then THX saw that it was a chrome robot.

But not a police robot. The same size and model, but this one wore the pastel green uniform of Mercicontrol.

THX stopped as the robot came up to him.

"Don't you think you've gone far enough?" asked a human voice from the robot's mouth grill.

"No. I want to get out."

"There is no way for you. Why don't you let me lead you back to your compound?" The robot extended one gloved hand.

THX backed away. "I'm going to find a way out. I'm not going to stay here and wait for you to kill me."

"Kill you?"

"Consume me. . . it's the same thing."

If a robot could look confused, this one would have.

"Who are you? Identify yourself."

THX glared at the robot's impassive face and said nothing.

"Wait. . . wait. . ." the human voice said. "I have your picture file. . . you're a felon. How did you get into the hospital area?"

"Hospital area?"

"You're trespassing. Felon 1138, prefix THX. You belong back in the prison area. You're trespassing!"

THX laughed. "Then arrest me."

"Don't move. I'm calling the police. They'll pick you up and return you to your proper area."

Still laughing, THX started to walk past the robot.

"I said don't move! You're not allowed here. . ."

Shaking his head, THX answered, "You're crazy -- why should I wait here for the police?"

The robot started walking with him. "Very well, I'll just have to keep you in sight until the police arrive. You can't get away, you know."

Shrugging, THX asked, "This is a hospital area? Where are the patients?"

"Can't you see. . ." the voice hesitated. "Oh, of course not, the food conditioning. Well, the patients are here. Most of them in cryosleepers, in stasis."

"What?"

"Never mind. Two police robots are heading toward us. They'll have you in custody in a few minutes."

THX looked around. In every direction, nothing but white nothingness.

"Don't be alarmed," the robot said. "The police won't hurt you if you don't resist."

"No, they'll just take me out one time to be con-sumed."

The voice from the robot said, "Well, if it's any consolation, that's what happens to everybody here."

Puzzled, THX said, "You told me this was a hospital."

"Yes," the voice explained pleasantly, "we take in the people who are incurably ill and put them into cryogenic stasis. If we can cure them, we do. If we decide they can't be cured, then we consume them for their organs. Sooner or later, everyone who comes here is consumed. It's economically efficient."

The police robots came into view. THX said, "Every-body is consumed."

"Yes," the Mercicontrol robot said. "So don't feel bad about it. We all have to go sooner or later."

"Thanks," said THX as the police robots came up and silently stood before him.

They walked him in an amazingly short time back to a point where he could just barely make out a dark fleck in the middle of the white nothingness.

One of the police robots pointed to it. "That is your area. Go to it and stay there until sent for. This is your final warning."

THX felt an urge to spit at them, but he did nothing. The robots stood there and watched as he walked toward the modules.

After a long time walking he could make out the flat bed modules and the standing, gesticulating people. One of them -- the boy, perhaps -- climbed up on a bed and began waving to him.

THX walked steadily. Their voices began drifting toward him:

"I can just barely see him. . ."

"He's free! Can't you see, he's free!"

"No. I think he's coming back."

"I don't see anything. . . I can't see him at all. I think he's been destroyed."

"I can see him. He's coming back. There."

Finally he was close enough for even old PTO to see him. "Fool!" the old man called out "Completely reckless behavior. I'm not responsible."

Finally he was close enough for a few of them to run out to him.

"What stopped you?"

"How cold was it?"

THX said nothing, simply kept walking. SEN was standing by the edge of the nearest bed, legs straddled like an emperor surveying his domain.

"Wait," he said. "Let me talk to him. I know how to handle these things."

THX walked right past him, toward his own bed.

PTO eyed him narrowly, "You have nothing to fear. . . you're safe again."

DWY went to SEN and clutched at his arm. "Ask him about the air. He sounds out of breath."

SEN nodded and went to THX's bed. Sitting beside him, SEN said, "We have to face the facts. . . you know? We have come down to practical reality. I'm a practical man. Forget the personal side of things."

Hovering behind SEN, DWY nodded eagerly. THX, bone-tired, so tired his hunger had gone, wordlessly stretched out on the bed.

"I think he's deficient," DWY snapped.

Annoyed, SEN snapped back, "Why don't you go find something else to do?"

"Why doesn't he speak? Can't he hear?" DWY edged away from the bed. "I don't think he knows."

THX closed his eyes and tried to sleep. But he felt SEN still sitting alongside him. He heard PTO droning a history lesson at CAM. His legs ached, his head was buzzing.

"I want to help you," SEN said, so low it was almost a whisper. "You can help me. Here, take some food."

THX looked at him. SEN was holding out one of the food cubes that he had been hoarding. THX frowned at him.

"You understand," SEN went on, "we're all in this together. You want to leave. You're not like the rest of them. What did you see out there?"

THX turned his head away.

"As soon as you give me a detailed description of the barrier, I can begin delegating responsibility. I'll see to it that we all get out of here safely."

The barrier, THX thought. The only barrier is your own blindness. Then LUH's face filled his memory and he added bitterly, And mine.

Suddenly there was a loud yell, scuffling, shouting and cursing. THX looked over his shoulder and saw DWY and CAM fighting on the floor near the bed where TWA lay. They banged into the bed, jarring TWA so hard that he nearly fell on top of them. Swearing angrily, he swung his legs down over them, stood up, and pulled the boy away from DWY.

"He took my food!" CAM yelled, struggling to get past TWA. "He stole it!"

DWY was holding a single brown cube. It was cracked and its edges rubbed raw. Crumbs from it were scattered on the floor around them.

TWA turned toward DWY. "Well?" he asked, menacingly, as he released his hold on CAM.

"I . . . I thought it was mine," DWY said lamely. "I couldn't tell."

SEN shook his head and said to THX, "Look at them. . . it's pitiful. They've even begun to go into my module and look for things. My things. It's all for them anyway. . . it's all for their own good. . . After all my saving. . . starving. . ." He shook his head like a disappointed savior.

With a loud sigh, he added, "You can't really blame them, though, can you? But we've got to find something to give them motivation. Mold them into a working team."

Words, THX thought. Meaningless, stupid words. He just talks to hear himself sound important.

"Information is the key," SEN was saying to him. "We must concentrate on gaining information."

You're with me now, I know. I have a contract."

Amazingly, he took a piece of paper from the pocket of his blouse. "Here." He proffered it to THX. "All it says is that you're with me. We can only make it together. We must convince the others."

THX wanted to laugh at him, but he was too serious to laugh at.

SEN's hand, holding the paper toward THX, was trembling. Abruptly, he took the paper back, stuffed it in his pocket again.

"Well," he said, with a forced smile, "later then."

Chapter 15

A chrome robot took IMM. It grabbed for the collar of her blouse, as usual, but the torn garment came off in its hands. She stood there sullenly, the scar jagged across her tight, firm breasts. For a ludicrous instant, THX thought the robot was going to walk off with the empty blouse. But then it dropped the blouse and took IMM by the arm. She went, eyes still smoking as she looked back at them all for the last time.

THX slept. When the musical tone started and the blue light flashed, he reached into the dispenser bin under his mattress and ate the food cubes that had arrived there. Ate all of them, left none for SEN. Sometimes there were two or three, usually only one. Several times the tone and light came, but the bin remained empty. It never works the same way twice. Do they do that to relieve our boredom? Or their own?

DWY took to sharpening a spoon by scraping it against the edge of his bed module. Where he got the spoon, he refused to tell. But he kept sharpening it, a little each day. The rest of the time he talked about how he was going to fight his way to freedom. With a sharp-ened spoon. Against chrome robots.

Immediately after one of their meals, SEN began giving a speech. He stood in the middle of the little cluster of beds and raised his voice:

"Without most of us realizing it, a 'new alignment' has been formed, and it is an exciting, healthy development. . . This alignment is already a new majority; it will affect the future of us all. We need a new unity, but not a unity that discourages dissent. We need dissent." He pointed straight at PTO to make his meaning absolutely clear.

When everyone had turned to PTO, SEN added, "But we need creative dissent. Our voices are not joined in any harmonious chorus, but the differences are differences of emphasis, not of fundamentals."

I've heard this before, THX realized. It was on tape, an ancient political speech . . . He's

memorized it word for word!

"Now, the new alignment's greatest need," SEN continued, "is to communicate with all its elements, rather than march along in parallel lines that never converge. Tomorrow as we focus on the new movement more clearly, we will gain a new unity."

"What was that?" PTO said.

"Look!" shouted CAM.

They all turned to see where he was pointing. A police robot was bringing in a new prisoner. But this one was as small as a child, dangling feet off the ground in the police-man's grip.

"A child!"

"No, a shelldweller."

It was horribly ugly. Hairy, long matted hair all over its head and face. Stumpy twisted arms and legs. Teeth flashing in the midst of all that filthy hair. Even its clothing looked like hair or hide of some long-extinct animal. Its eyes were sunken and dark.

The policeman dropped the freak unceremoniously on the floor. Stamping his pole three times, it announced:

"A nondescript: designation 643-1399284."

SEN stared at it, goggle-eyed. For once his smug self-assurance seemed shattered.

PTO was explaining to young CAM, "A shelldweller. They live in the superstructure, the outer shell. Deformed, you see. Rather unique; there have only been two others here before. They smell, don't they?" The old man seemed quite proud of his knowledge.

TWA cautiously edged toward it. The shelldweller bared its teeth at him and growled. But TWA slowly stepped closer, closer -- and then he kicked it. The shelldweller screeched and jumped back, then hopped with lightning speed away from TWA. It jumped up into DWY's lap.

DWY screamed in terror. "Get away! Get away!" He became a blurred frenzy of flailing arms and legs.

Screeching shrilly, the shelldweller jumped from one bed to the next until he found one on the edge of the cluster, several meters away from any of the people who were standing watching it, shocked and afraid.

The little twisted man huddled on the bed, pulled himself into a furry ball, quaking and whimpering.

He's more afraid than we are, THX realized.

Slowly, they all returned to normal. PTO began his pedagogical ritual with CAM again, SEN returned to making political commentary and hoarding food. But THX watched the shelldweller. He looked so small and so afraid. Except when he bared those teeth.

THX was walking around the cluster of beds, pacing slowly. TWA and DWY were standing together at the edge of the cluster. The blind TWA was pointing out into the nothingness, and DWY was squinting in the direction of his aim.

"There?" asked TWA,

"No, nothing."

"You're sure?"

"Certainly."

TWA shook his head. "I wish I could see."

"It's got to be out there somewhere."

"I know."

"SEN claims that if we can spot the barrier, actually see it, we can begin to figure out how to get past it. Do you believe that?"

Shrugging, TWA said, "Let's look over in that direc-tion."

SEN was saying to PTO, "I think that a leader must, whenever he possibly can, make the decision formore knowledge rather than less. But he must also have thewisdom to limit freedom so as to insure freedom. That is what will keep us strong and give us direction."

PTO threw up his hands in helpless protest against SEN.

TWA and DWY trooped over and stood before SEN.

"Well?" SEN asked eagerly.

"We made one hundred and fifty sightings, randomly located, just as you said," DWY reported.

"And. . . and?"

"There were one hundred and forty-six absolute nega-tives and four conditionals, most of which occurred in the early familiarization stages of the project and can probably be discounted."

PTO chuckled. "Not very encouraging."

"On the contrary!" DWY retorted. "It absolutely proves what I've always suspected. We're located in a uniform space with no visible limits. . ."

Cutting him short, SEN said, "Yes, yes, fine. But we must find the barrier. We can do nothing until it's been located."

THX walked away from them. They were all insane. Then he heard a policeman approaching, and the triple thud of his pole against the floor. "LUH 9998."

Before the robot could finish the new prisoner's number, THX had whirled around and called, "LUH. . ."

But the newcomer was a quiet-looking man of middle years, still blinking and stunned-looking, surprised and scared at being here.

"He can speak!" DWY marveled. They were all staring at THX.

"Of course he can," SEN said. "I knew it all along. I told you so."

But THX didn't hear them, didn't see them. For a flash of a second he had felt hope, even happiness. Now he walked dejectedly back to his bed, slumped onto it, rubbed his face tiredly.

And SEN sat down beside him. "Are you all right? What's wrong?"

"Go away," THX said. "I'm tired."

The chrome robot hadn't left. He advanced on DWY, who had turned his back to the policeman and was eating a few hoarded crumbs of food. The police robot picked him up by the collar.

DWY looked up in terror. "What are you going to do?" he squeaked.

The robot said nothing, began hauling him away, his legs dangling limp and useless, feet dragging on the floor. A wet stain sprouted in the crotch of DWY's pants and trickled down his trouser leg to the floor, leaving a trail behind him while he whimpered, "Uhhh. . . uhhhn. . ."

The shelldweller hopped off his bed, scampered to the wet trail, dabbed a finger in the urine and tasted it. It was impossible to tell, behind all that hair, whether he frowned or smiled.

The musical tone and blue flash of food arrival broke their mood. Everyone went to his bed and reached into the dispenser bins. Conditioned reflex. But the bins were empty.

"Empty again," TWA raged.

"What are we going to do? They're empty more than they're full anymore. They're going to starve us to death!"

But THX thought he heard someone laughing, someone who was watching them all on observation screens.

"Be calm," SEN was saying. "Remain calm above all else. This elemental crisis is one that makes us feel endangered. But so-called bravery is not as useful in these situations as the ability to eliminate any elements of individual fear by thinking selflessly. . ."

TWA interrupted, "You've got food hidden away. It's easy for you to talk!"

"Yeah!"

SEN raised his hands for quiet. "Now, now. Selfishness won't help the situation. We must all. . ."

"Search his module!"

Five of the men started toward SEN.

"Wait," he said, smiling hugely. "Of course I have been storing food away. For just such an emergency as this! What kind of a leader would I be if I didn't prepare for emergencies?"

They stopped and watched him as SEN reached well down under his mattress and pulled out a handful of food cubes.

"All in line now, share and share alike."

They lined up obediently.

"No pushing, no jostling," SEN called out. "There's enough here for everybody."

He handed each man a food cube in turn, while he muttered, "Discipline and order, the basic ingredients of true freedom. Discipline and order."

THX watched from his bed. He wasn't hungry; they had been fed only a little while ago. At least, it seemed like only a little while ago to him. But the others seemed to think they were starving. Even old PTO was standing in line. SEN absolutely beamed when he handed the old man a food cube.

PTO accepted the cube, then said, "Our life is brief and powerless. On all of us, the slow, sure doom falls pitiless and dark. Blind to good and evil, reckless of destruction, omnipotent authority rolls on its relentless way."

SEN turned to THX with a look of absolute disgust on his face.

As if in anger, the musical tone sounded again and the blue food light flashed. There was the unmistakable clunk! of arrival in the dispenser bins. Everyone rushed to his module and opened the bins. Four cubes in each one!

"We're saved!" CAM shouted, his boyish voice crack-ing.

"Friends, friends," SEN called, his arms outstretched, his smile beatific, "we have survived the crisis. But, as your duly elected leader, I must point out that we never know when another emergency will descend upon us. Let us prepare now. Store half your food with mine, share and share alike, one and all."

So now the line formed again and reversed itself, each man dumping two food cubes on SEN's bed. The pile became quite respectable.

Through it all THX remained on his own bed. Finally, when everyone was busily eating and SEN had finished tucking the last of the hoard in the crannies inside his module, SEN walked smilingly over to THX.

"Everyone is sharing his good fortune," he said softly. "From each for each, that's how we

survive. As your leader, I must ask you to do your share, too."

THX looked at his round smiling face and thought for a moment how pleasant it would be to smash a fist through it. But instead he reached down and opened his dispenser bin. Pulling out four brown food cubes, he handed them all to SEN.

"All of them?" SEN seemed overwhelmed.

THX got up from the bed. "Yes. Enjoy them all."

"But what are you going to do? Where are you going?"

Without looking back, THX said, "I'm leaving."

"Leaving! Leaving what?" Then, "Yes, I see! Wait a minute!"

Clutching the four food cubes to his chest with one arm, SEN ran after THX and grabbed at his arm. "Wait! Just for a moment. . . wait."

THX stopped. SEN turned to the other prisoners.

"After long deliberation, I have decided to go out and personally examine the barrier. To see first-hand what difficulties are involved and decide how to overcome them. I realize that there is an element of risk, even danger, but moments such as this require that a choice be made and action taken regardless of the danger involved. We will return soon, but we will be gone long enough to form an accurate and functional plan of escape, and I will have an honest idea of how best to organize us into a working unit."

After the first half-dozen words of SEN's speech, THX began walking slowly outward, away from the beds. In the direction opposite the one he had taken last time.

SEN finally noticed that THX was leaving, cut his speech short, and hurried after him. But after only a few steps he dashed back to his bed, tore off the mattress, pulled out a double armful of food cubes and started after THX, he raised one hand in a victory sign to the other prisoners, dropping some food cubes in the process. He nearly tripped over them.

"The new alignment!" he shouted, and then ran after THX.

"Incredible," said PTO.

Chapter 16

Hurrying as fast as he could, food cubes slipping out from his arms and leaving a Hansel-Gretel

trail behind him, SEN called after THX:

"Wait! Hold up. . . give me a chance. . ."

THX looked back and slowed slightly so that SEN could catch up with him.

"Just the thing to put them on their feet," SEN chortled. "Show them who their leaders are. When we go back, they'll be right there!" He held out the palm of his right hand, dropping three more cubes.

"There's no question about it," he said. "Even old PTO was taken aback." He turned and looked back. "How long before they can't see us anymore?"

THX didn't answer. He merely kept walking.

SEN began to stuff his remaining food cubes into the pockets and waistband of his clothes.

"You're sure this isn't far enough? Maybe we'd better stop here and rest a minute."

But THX kept right on. They walked in silence for quite a while. At last SEN stopped and looked back in the direction they had come in. He raised a hand to shade his eyes from the glareless, even light.

"I can't see them anymore. . . all we have to do is wait here for a while and then head back."

SEN looked backward again, and suddenly realized that he wasn't sure of their direction back. There was nothing to be seen.

"Back," he muttered. Then, to THX, "Did. . . did you come this far last time?"

THX didn't answer. He started walking again. With eyes widening in sudden understanding, SEN scrambled after him and asked, "You didn't believe all that nonsense about escaping, did you? You can't escape. No one can escape."

"We can try."

"No! No, don't you see? The authorities. . . the State. . . they wouldn't permit it. They wouldn't have built this elaborate prison in such a way that it could be escaped from. Escape is just a hope, a carrot dangling before the fools back there, to keep them in line."

THX said, "The State doesn't always do things right. Machines don't work, computers break down. Maybe this prison isn't escape-proof. We'll never know if we don't try."

With mounting fear, SEN babbled, "You'll be killed! You'll be stopped. Why do you think no one has ever done it? There's no place to go. . ."

"How do you know no one's ever done it? Do you think they'd tell you about it?"

"But. . . but. . . but. . . we don't have enough food."

THX shook his head and kept walking.

"Here. . . stop." SEN rummaged through his pockets and came up with a brown food cube. He trotted up to THX, who had kept going at his steady pace, and offered the food to him.

THX refused it with a brisk wave of his hand. SEN gnawed on it himself for a while. Then he realized something.

"LUH!"

That stopped THX.

"You're going after LUH, aren't you?" He saw the answer in THX's pain-filled eyes. "That's ridiculous."

"Be careful what you say," THX told him severely. He resumed walking.

SEN had to hurry to keep pace beside him. "Listen, stop. I knew there was something I'd been meaning to tell you. Stop, will you? LUH, the other LUH, the one who came to our group. . . he said he saw her!"

THX looked at him without slowing down.

A little breathless, SEN went on, "Yes. He saw her before he came to our group. She's going to be coming here, too. Yes."

"How is she?" THX asked.

"Fine, fine. Very good health. Just as you left her."

"You're lying."

"No, I'm not. I'm not. . ."

THX pushed him away and kept walking. Staggering slightly, SEN called, "You're a fool. You'll never find her and you'll never know. . ."

SEN stood there, alone, watching THX plod onward. He turned back, but could see nothing. Spinning around, looking in every direction, he could see nothing but whiteness. Except for the dwindling figure of THX.

"You can't. . ." he shouted. "You can't do it!"

THX's figure was getting smaller and smaller. Soon it would disappear altogether.

"Wait!" SEN screamed. "Don't leave me alone! Wait for me!"

They walked, with SEN usually trailing THX. Most of the time they were both silent. Occasionally they rested, and SEN would pull out a food cube and share it with THX, wordlessly. SEN seemed stunned, morose, afraid. THX didn't know what he felt -- he thought about LUH but realized that probably SEN was right. He'd never see her again, never know. But I'll never go back to their prison,

he told himself. Never!

When they walked, SEN's comments grew rarer and rarer. But he was trying different tactics now.

"The air is getting thinner," he said at one point. "Or the pressure's getting greater. It's the pressure. How do you feel?"

"Fine."

"My ears feel funny. . . Are you sure this is the right direction?"

"No one's stopped us yet."

They kept walking, but SEN dragged farther and farther behind. Finally he sank to his knees and just fell over on his side. He gasped out, "Uhh. . ."

THX stopped and looked back, then went to him.

"It's the air," SEN said weakly as THX bent over him. "It's closing in. I can't stand it any longer. There's no room. . . no air."

Squatting beside him, THX felt like an impatient teacher with a balky child. "I haven't got time. You can stay here if you want."

He got up and started off again.

"No!"

SEN scrambled to his feet. He ran, stumbling slightly, after THX.

Hours later, SEN was mumbling, "It shouldn't be this far."

But he walked alongside THX. Suddenly THX stopped short.

"What? What is it?"

"Look!" THX said.

There was something out there in the white blankness. A spot, a pinpoint, a landmark against the emptiness.

"Oh, no," SEN murmured.

THX squinted hard, trying to make it out.

"It doesn't seem to be moving," he said.

"It's an optical illusion," SEN said.

"Or maybe a policeman."

SEN's eyes went round with fright. "You don't think. . ."

THX laughed at him. "What can they do to us? Put us in prison? Kill us?"

They started out in the direction of the spot. After a long while, it began to take on dimensions. It was a human form.

"Look. . . he's waving. It's a man and he's waving to us. A police robot wouldn't wave, would it?"

THX didn't answer. Soon they were close enough to see that it was a black man, tall and muscular, with thick arms and a strong handsome face.

"Hello, hello. . ." he called to them. "I'm SRT 5555."

"THX 1138," THX answered, "and this is SEN 5241."

They were close enough to grasp hands now. SEN hung back a little, though.

"Hey, where'd you come from?" SRT asked.

"Back there. . . someplace."

"Prison? Doesn't make any difference, I guess. Do you have any food? I'm starving."

THX turned to SEN, who said nothing. He took a step toward SEN. "Give him some."

SEN looked from THX's face to SRT's, then reached into a trouser pocket and pulled out a small piece of a food cube. SRT reached for it.

"Thanks. Thanks a lot. I haven't had anything to eat for. . . well, it's been a long time."

As the black man gobbled at the brown cube, THX asked, "What are you doing here?"

"I was lost," he said through the food, showing lots of teeth.

"You're not lost now?"

"No, I. . ."

"You know the way out?" SEN asked, brightening.

Chewing, SRT nodded vigorously. "Um hmm."

"Which way?" THX asked.

"It's around here somewhere."

"What is? What?" SEN demanded.

Swallowing the last of the cube, SRT said, "The entrance. I came through it a couple days ago. . . flashing lights around it."

THX said, "Then you're not a prisoner. . . a convict?"

"Me? Naw. . . I'm a hologram. . . an actor. You must've seen me on the Mannequin Hour -- most popular holoshow in the city, according to last month's polls."

"He's lying," SEN whispered to THX. "Or insane."

SRT heard him and laughed. "No, I'm not either. My show was dropped. Canceled. Damned computer made an error and placed the Mannequin Hour last on the ratings instead of first. Moved all the other shows up another notch. So everybody on the show was told not to come in till they got the mess straightened out. I was just walking around the city when I stumbled in here."

"Impossible!" SEN snapped.

Shaking his head, SRT said, "Well, there's a doorway with flashing lights all around it somewhere around here. You can believe it or not, take your pick. But I'm looking for it. Thanks for the food."

He started walking away.

"Wait," THX called out. "Let's go together. Maybe the three of us can find it together."

SRT shrugged. "Okay."

"But he's going back the way we came," SEN complained.

"Maybe you were traveling in circles. I'm pretty sure that's the way to the door."

SEN grabbed THX's arm and stood tiptoe to whisper into his ear, "He's a spy. From the police. He's trying to lead us away from the barrier and back to the others. It's a trap."

THX kept his eyes on the black man. He looked friendly enough, although he seemed a little impatient to get going and slightly exasperated at SEN's behavior.

"Look, if you don't want to come with me, I'll go by myself. It's okay."

"No," THX said, more on instinct than anything else. "We'll go with you."

SEN mumbled to himself and glared at the two of them as they walked through the empty whiteness.

Within an hour, SRT stopped short and pointed. "There it is!" he shouted.

THX strained his eyes peering in the direction that the black man's hand pointed. He saw nothing.

"There's nothing there," SEN said matter-of-factly. "He's insane."

But SRT was already loping ahead, as if he really saw something worth running toward. THX hesitated a moment.

"Come on, here it is!" SRT called out.

Though he tried as hard as he knew how, THX saw nothing. Hewanted to see a door with flashing lights. But nothing was there.

"It's a trap, I tell you," SEN muttered.

"Maybe," THX said. Then, with a shrug, he started toward SRT, off in the distance.If its a trap, that's the end of it, he thoughtAt least it will be over.

Chapter 17

Something funny was happening to his eyes. As THX approached the black man, saw him looming larger, grinning, hands on hips, the whiteness seemed to fray, to wrinkle and fade and turn gray.

The whole blank background of nothingness seemed to change as a camera changes focus, bringing objects that were blurred into invisibility suddenly into clear, sharp view.

Therewas a door, flanked on both sides by flashing varicolored lights! And it was set into a metal bulkhead, with steel ribs protruding from it and rivets in the ribs. THX put out a hand to feel its reality.

"What . . . what . . . how can it be?" He heard SEN breathless behind him.

"They must have done something to the way we see," THX said uncertainly. "They did something to our eyes. . ."

"Or maybe the food cubes were drugged," SEN sug-gested.

"Or hypnosis."

SRT was grinning hugely. "I told you there was a door. Come on, let's get out of here."

He yanked the door open and an explosion of noise staggered THX. On the other side of the door was a main pedestrian thoroughfare, with torrents of people racing by on slideways or walking, scurrying like mice through an experimenter's cage.

"Please move briskly. Do not stop or block the pas-sageway."

"Please hold the handrail and stand on theright; if you wish to pass, pass on theleft ."

"Save time, save lives."

"The level 6421 intermural stadium will have an open day on series 621TD."

"Today only, hypo-credit may be transferred with a green optimal card."

After the quiet and vastness of the prison, this pounding noise and rushing mass of faceless humanity was over-powering. . . frightening. SEN covered his face with his hands. THX hung on to the edge of the hatch, sway-ing weak-kneed, almost tempted to retreat back to the placidity of prison.

Where am I going, anyway?he asked himself. And the answer came back immediately. He knew. He was surprised that he had needed to ask.

"All right," he shouted over the deafening roar of the masses, "let's head for that door, across the corridor."

He saw that SEN was standing rock-still, wide-eyed with terror. THX shook him. "Come on, we're out of it."

"No. . . we shouldn't. . ."

Putting his mouth next to SEN's ear, he shouted, "Do you want to stay in prison until the policemen come for you?"

SEN jerked once, involuntarily, then bolted through the hatchway with a keening, whimpering shriek in his throat. Immediately the crowd swallowed him up, bore him away like a scrap of paper in a flood tide.

THX jumped into the crowd after him, with SRT right behind.

"We've lost him!" THX yelled over his shoulder.

"What?"

A million voices were babbling, cackling, jabbering over theirs. The loudspeakers were droning their endless orders and instructions.

"Help reduce critical noise levels in this area. Be sure to report all decibel surges in excess of one point five."

"Control twelve please."

"Cybers call in; 6442 gate five, pick up on fourteen."

"Agency for internal development moves forward two malthusian units. This is a new high for this series."

The tide of humanity was sweeping THX and SRT along, pushing, elbowing, carrying them down the cor-ridor. Like a mindless panicked stampede, the people who were so silent and obedient in tram cars, so docile and sedated on their jobs, so glazed and passive in their apartments, were snarling wild-eyed frenzied herd animals here in the high density pedestrian corridors of the shop-ping level. Shopping in the commercial plazas was their one true sport; stampeding through the corridors their only adventure.

"Lost SEN!" THX hollered to SRT. "He'll never find us!"

SRT yelled back, "Too late. . . stay close."

They struggled and battled sideways along the crowd's main flow and made their way to the side wall of the corridor, hundreds of meters downstream from where they had entered the corridor. Panting, bruised, head aching from the noise, THX flattened himself along the corridor's metal wall. It was warm from the reflected heat of surging human bodies. SRT lounged beside him, look-ing just as tired but less frightened.

After a few minutes, THX craned his neck for a look at where they were. No direction signs were in sight, and the color markers in this corridor were strange to him.

But there was a lift tube entrance down the wall a few meters, flanked by prayer booths. THX nodded toward the tube.

"Where you going?" SRT shouted.

Without answering, THX started for the tube.

The observer sat at his post, watching his fifty view-screens, earphones buzzing with the normal traffic of the busy city.

"I have a seal break. Vacuum debris repectacle 444. Entrance on con 65. Send investigator. Subject ap-pears to be suicide victim."

"Two inmates have fled detention block R, Habot 92. Missing since 3:32.16. 1138 prefix THX and 5241 prefix SEN. Recovery operation budgeted and scheduled. Report to Control when felons are in custody."

"We have an accident in module dispersal center. . ."

The observer's trained eye flicked to a viewscreen far up to his right. The interior of a lift tube cell. Numbers flashed across the screen showed it was heading upward from the commercial level toward the main computer filing center.

He transferred the picture to one of his four main screens. Yes, one of the two men in the lift cell wasn't wearing a badge!

"I have a violation here," the observer said crisply into his lip mike. "Lift tube cell 0848, heading for level four. Badgeless male Caucasian. Trespassing."

"Checking."

"Reference police records on badgeless individual."

The observer ticked out a police query on his key-board. Instantly, THX's picture and record appeared on a viewscreen at his elbow.

"Criminal record indicated."

But the observer squinted hard at the picture of THX and SRT in the lift cell. The cameras in those little cells were especially bad, the picture was distorted severely. The computer might have made a mismatch.

With a shrug, he muttered, "Not my decision to make. If the computer says it's the felon THX 1138, it's Mercicontrol's fault if there's a mistake."

The observer touched the special stud on his keyboard that linked him with Control.

"Felon 1138 prefix THX identified and located."

THX and SRT left the lift tube at the fourth level. The corridor here was practically empty. Quiet. The lighting was soft and restful.

A glowing sign on the wall opposite the tube entrance said:COMPUTER CENTRAL FILES.

Overhead, a lovely woman's voice said gently, "Access to Computer Central Files is restricted to authorized per-sonnel only. If you do not have a 5401 green badge, kindly step into the visitor's registration area at the end of the corridor and apply for entrance to Computer Central Files. Thank you. . . Access to Computer Central Files is. . ."

"We can't get in," THX said, pulling up to a stop.

SRT tapped his bright green badge. "What do you mean we can't get in? Where do you think holoshow actors get personal ratings and job assignments?"

"But. . . I can't get in."

Winking with such exaggeration that half his face seemed to fold over, SRT said, "Trust me, friend."

The black man headed toward the end of the corridor, where an impressive pair of bronze doors stood firmly closed. THX jogged up alongside him.

"Why are you doing this for me? Why do you trust me? I was a prisoner. . . I might be a murderer. . ."

SRT grinned. "I was hungry and you gave me some of your food."

"But -- it was SEN. He was carrying the food."

"Yeah, but he wasn't going to give me any until you told him to. And besides, I know you're not a murderer. . . you would never have been in jail. You'd have been destroyed, or put to work for the State."

THX stared at him.

They came to the bronze doors, smooth gleaming metal stamped with the words COMPUTER CENTRAL FILES in sculptured letters. Above the doors was engraved the motto of the Computer Center: THINK.

Off to the left of the impressive bronze doors was a smaller, ordinary plastic door marked: VISITOR REGISTRATION.

SRT went to this door, pushed it open and looked cautiously inside. Over his shoulder, THX could see that there was a small anteroom in there. A single camera eye was set into one wall, with a speaker grill under it. Alongside the staring lens a tiny red light glowed dutifully to show that the camera was working. There were no people in the anteroom, but an overhead speaker was droning an econometrics lecture:

"Beyond this is the fact that the didactic design always states conclusions which allow the contrary-minded to build resistance. All in all, a fair-minded judge would conclude. . ."

THX automatically shut the woman's near-hypnotic voice out of his consciousness.

Surprised that the anteroom was empty, he said to SRT, "where are the people?"

The black man grinned. "Hardly ever any people around here. The computer runs everything by itself, for itself. I get the feeling it doesn't like having people around, bothering it."

"But. . . they couldn't leave it totally alone? Could they?"

"Pretty much. Oh, they got observers watching every-thing, but the computer runs itself. No people. Just visitors once in a while, like us."

"Observers. . ."

Nodding, SRT said, "Now just keep quiet when we go in, stay still and do what I tell you. Got to sneak you past the observer."

He edged the door open wider and stepped into the anteroom softly. THX followed right behind him. Holding a finger to his lips for silence, SRT nudged THX with his other hand so that THX stood plastered against the closed door, well out of range of the observer's camera. SRT stepped in front of the camera. "Yes?" came a voice from the grill. "What is it?" Holding his badge very close to the camera lens and quickly stepping past the camera, he said, "SRT 5555, visitor permit 2892."

The observer's voice made no comment. Suppressing a laugh, SRT tossed his badge to THX in a high arc, over the field of view of the camera. THX caught it, held it in his hand so that his fingers partially covered the name on it, and imitated the black man's maneuver.

"SDS 5153, permit 2886," he said as he whisked past the camera, close enough to the lens so that his clothing brushed it.

"See?" SRT said as he took his badge back. "We made it with no sweat."

THX grinned back at him, as they pushed through the plastiglass doors of the registration office and into the main room of the computer files.

"Where did you learn that trick?" he asked.

"Actors learn lots of tricks," SRT said. "Somebody thought that one up for a detective story I played in. I was the murder victim."

Now that they were in the files, THX hardly knew what to do. The files were enormous, seemingly endless rows of computer consoles, memory banks, with little desks spaced every twenty consoles. There were readout screens on the desks and keyboards for querying the computer.

LUH's records are in here someplace, he knew.

"Now that we're in," SRT asked, "mind telling me what we're looking for?"

"Records. . . personnel file for my. . . my roommate. She was sent to prison too, I think. I have to find out."

SRT walked down one of the narrow aisles between computer modules. The bulky electronics cabinets seemed to stretch on for kilometers, humming to themselves, lights winking at some inside joke, long long rows of electronic memories and data processing constantly at work, sleep-less, emotionless, vibrating constantly with the console modules that stood bulky and taller than a man.

From some of the modules, voices flickered at them:

"Relay to analysis. Backlog on case 6178821. We've lost contact with both of them. . ."

"Group unit forty-one report to correlation center. Group unit four one, repeat four one. . ."

"If the loan runs for thirty-seven unearned increments or more. . ."

Bewildered by the enormity and complexity of the computer files, THX wandered down one row after another, not knowing what to do next.

SRT was right beside him.

"What they put you in jail for?" he asked idly.

THX stammered, "Uh. . . drug evasion. . . and, eh, well -- my roommate, she. . ."

"Oh." SRT shrugged. "Hell, if they jailed everybody who did that . . . why'd they pick on you?"

Shaking his head, "I don't know."

"Well, come on, we can't stay here forever. Ask the computer what you want to know."

THX mumbled, "I'm. . . I'm afraid."

"What?" Then realization dawned on SRT's face. "Ohh. . . you're afraid that if you ask about her, they'll spot you here. That's smart thinking."

"No --" That thought had never occurred to THX. "Afraid. . . of finding out. . . what they did to

her." Before SRT could reply, a voice boomed from the overhead speakers:

"Warning! Warning! Hear This! Hear This! Escaped felon. THX 1138 and an unidentified accomplice have been observed on the fourth level, Computer Central Files area. All citizens be on the alert. The escaped felon THX 1138 may be dangerous. Police are converging on the area. Report any suspicious person to Mercicontrol at once!"

"Oh-oh," said SRT, glancing ceilingward.

"You'd better get away while you can," THX said.

The black man shook his head. "Won't do any good. They must have my picture by now. Only a matter of time before they find out who I am."

"No!" THX shouted, and he bolted down the nearest aisle, across several rows of modules, running at full speed, down a row that stretched on endlessly. They said he's unidentified; he can still stay out of trouble if they don't find us together.

He ran for what seemed like kilometers, flashing past the massive, stoic computer modules. Finally he stopped and leaned against a warm, humming console, breathing hard. SRT was nowhere in sight. THX listened for foot-steps. None. But from somewhere he could hear:

"Assistance request from officers 1999, 2187. Search-ing in restricted computer files area. Request three additional officers."

"Mindlock impossible. Computer file area sensitive to electric fields. Proceed with search."

Far, far down the row of modules he saw a chrome police robot step out, so distant and small that it looked like a toy. But it made his heart flame with fear. Slowly, quietly, THX edged down to the nearest aisle that cut across the module rows and ducked around its protective corner. He looked around carefully for more chrome faces and white hardhats. None in sight. Then he ran, hard as he could, away from the police robots.

He stopped finally, lungs raw with exertion, legs rubbery, and half-collapsed against a little desk set into the end of a row of computer modules. There was a viewscreen and keyboard on the desk. THX recognized it as an interrogation station, for asking the computer for information, data.

"LUH," he gasped raggedly to himself. "Got to. . . find her. . ."

But if you ask the computer about her, they'll get a fix on your exact location. The police will get you.

Still breathless, he answered himself, "They know. . . I'm here. . . anyway. . . Only a matter of. . . time. . ."

For an agonized time he stood at the little desk, leaning hard on it, catching his breath and struggling in his mind for a decision. Then, abruptly, he slammed down into the tiny plastic chair next to the desk and typed out:

LUH 3417. PRESENT LOCATION.

The letters and number appeared on the screen as he typed them.

He wiped a bead of sweat from his eyes as the com-puter viewscreen flashed:WORKING.

"I need her," he muttered. "She needs me. I'vegot to get to her. Save her." He wiped his eyes again. "This whole thing is crazy. . . I must be insane. . . What am I doing? Everything's so mixed up. . . If only. . ."

Control saw THX from above, through the fisheye lens of a camera set into the Computer Central Files ceiling.

"He's shown you exactly where he is," Control said mildly to his desk communicator. "Take him."

A deep, harsh voice answered, "Yessir."

The computer screen showed THX a view of a Repro-duction Center Clinic. Row upon row of fetuses in their clear plastic wombs, heads down, arms and legs curled, umbilical cords connected to nourishment tubes running above the racks on which the plastic jars sat.

The screen zoomed in on one container. It was labeled LUH 3417.

THX gnashed his teeth in fury.Stupid! Stupid, stupid system! He pounded on the keyboard:

LUH 3417 IS A 20-YEAR-OLD WOMAN. OB-SERVER CATEGORY.

REPROCENTER IS GUILTY OF MISLABELING.

The computer screen went blank for a moment, then the picture of the fetus with her name on its container flashed on again. Typed alongside it appeared the words:

FELON LUH 3417, GUILTY OF SEXACT AND DRUG EVASION,

DESTROYED PER EXECU-TION ORDER 9374911. FETUS REMOVED

AT AUTOPSY. NAME LUH 3417 TRANSFERRED TO FETUS IN

INTEREST OF ECONOMY AND ACCURATE RECORD-KEEPING.

FETUS TO BE USED FOR EXPERIMENTAL PURPOSES.

With a scream of purest agony, THX collapsed on the computer keyboard.

Chapter 18

The cathedral was vast and dark, as black as prison had been white. And it was nearly empty. SEN clung to the shadows, trembled in them, tried to wrap them around himself protectively while he looked everywhere for danger.

Dimly, off in the distant far end of the cathedral, holocameras stood on dollies, outlined by a glow of light that came from a huge glowing picture of OMM, atop a yellow figure eight. Thick cables crisscrossed the floor, SEN could see, and a tiny knot of cameramen and technicians clustered around the cameras.

Standing directly in front of OMM's portrait, bathed in yellowish light, wearing a saffron robe, was a tall, gaunt monk with deepset, glittering eyes. He was saying into the cameras:

"And it all happened so slowly that most men failed to realize that anything had happened at all.

"They had never known what all know within, that to know is not to know; not to know, is to be known. To change is to circle without end."

SEN crouched in the deepest shadows, watching the monk deliver his holosermon. Along these sacred walls, he knew, were paintings and sculptures and metal constructs of the rarest art, treasures to be revered and enjoyed by the masses. But the treasures of the masses were not for him. SEN knew he was a hunted man. But still. . . perhaps. . . perhaps something could be worked out. . .

"To remain still is to flow with the will of OMM," the monk droned on. "The breath of OMM is infinitely slow, yet he breathes. Avail thyself. Let us pray:

"Unify of mind, unit of thought, unity of behavior. Blessings of the masses. Thou art subjects of the divine."

Suddenly the light flicked off, leaving nothing but a residual fluorescence from OMM's gentle face. The monk and camera crews seemed to disappear. Somewhere off in that distance SEN saw a door flung open, letting in a shaft of dust-filled light. The door slammed shut again, echoing. SEN flinched at the sound.

After a long time in silence and darkness, he began to creep along the wall, staying to the deepest shadows, but edging toward the still-radiating portrait of OMM.

Finally he was there, standing before the sad-eyed, bearded face that loomed five stories above him. The holocameras were clustered around him, their cables littering the floor. Stacked against the pulpit that the monk had used for his sermon were giant cards with huge letters stencilled on them:

BEFORE OMM WAS OMM

AFTER OMM WILL BE OMM

SEN stood trembling before the portrait.

"I've always done what I knew was best -- for every-body. I haven't been like the rest of them: lazy, unthink-ing, thieves and liars. I've used the skills you gave me to lead other men, to make them better, to bring them closer to your perfection. . .

"I . . I've just tried to make things easier -- notchange anything. . . or hurt you. That's right, isn't it? You never said it was wrong. . . Things don't seem to make sense."

Sinking to his knees, "Sometimes things get left out, or they don't seem to fit. . . most people can't see them, or they don't know what to do. Sometimes just little adjust-ments can make all the difference."

The portrait of OMM looked down on him placidly.

"I want to do the right things. . . I want to go back. . . I can start again. I can help. I just need to rest for a while."

A door opened somewhere and footsteps clicked hur-riedly on the hard plastistone flooring. Panicky, saucer-eyed, SEN jerked around to see who was coming. Dimly visible in the shadowy cathedral, a chubby little white-robed monk was coming toward him. SEN got to his feet, shaking all over, as the monk approached.

The monk called out, "You there! This is not the place for prayer." His voice echoed sepulchrally.

"If you want to speak with OMM you must go to a prayer booth, or a unichurch. You know that. We've got to tape another holosermon here in fifteen minutes --"

"But I --"

"No, no. The camera crews will be back in a few minutes. Go pray at the proper stations."

"Yes," SEN muttered.

"What?" The monk was close enough now for SEN to see his eyes peering at him from under the white cowl. "Are you in any trouble?"

"No, no ... I'm all right," SEN answered hurriedly. "I'm going now."

The monk put out a hand to stop him. "Where's your badge? What's your number and prefix. I'm going to have to put this in your record."

"No, I'll just leave."

Holding him by the shoulder, the monk insisted, "I'm sorry, I have to report all intruders. Where is your identi-fication badge?"

SEN glanced down at his empty lapel. "I lost it."

"But that's a violation. I'm going to notify the authori-ties. This is beyond my jurisdiction."

The monk turned to head back toward wherever he came from. Frenzied with fear, SEN pounced on his back, knocked the white-robed figure to the floor.

"No! Give. . . give me time!"

The monk began shouting, struggling. SEN kicked at him, dropped to all fours on top of him and grabbed at his cowl.

"Time!" he snapped, his voice hoarse with violence and terror. "Time! Time! Time!" And with each word he pounded the monk's head against the plastistone flooring.

When he stopped, the monk's white robe was splattered with red and his eyes were staring up sightlessly at OMM's benign face.

SEN rocked back on his heels, staring in horror at the monk. Slowly he looked up at the portrait.

"OMM. . . OMM. . . what have I done?"

He looked back at the body. In the struggle, some pills had spilled from the pocket of the monk's robe. They were scattered around the floor now, red pills and blue, yellow and white. SEN scooped a handful of them indiscriminately and swallowed them with a huge, hard gulp.

THX sat slumped across the computer desk's keyboard. He wanted to be dead, but he wasn't even unconscious.. He just stayed there, without the strength or will to move. Destroyed, she was destroyed. And the baby . . . they're going to . . .

Suddenly a hand grabbed his shoulder.

He wheeled around. It was SRT, his black face very serious now. "Come on," he said, "there must be a hundred police robots prowling around here. We've got to get out."

"What difference does it make?"

SRT eyed him. "You want to get caught? Destroyed, maybe?"

Shakily, THX got to his feet. "No. . . not yet. I have to do something first."

The Mercicontrol police dispatcher was sitting at a bank of viewscreens very similar to the station of an observer. But his screens showed what a platoon of police robots were seeing. Except that, in the main screen, directly in front of him, he had patched in the observer's overhead view through the fisheye lens of THX and SRT.

His earphones were alive with calls:

"Both felons located in Computer Central Files, are 621B, Row 44-8-9. Apprehension pending."

"I have a nonaccidental death in Cathedral 090, Con F. Are there any felons reported in that area?"

"Budget control, we need a cost analysis on the THX 1138 account. Include all interest and

inflation per-centages."

"Monetary unit total: 649 and rising."

"Mercicontrol dispatch, budget control reports ex-penditure on 1138 prefix THX is 649 and rising."

The dispatcher nodded absent-mindedly. He was manipulating control switches madly, fingers flying over his keyboard as he tried to coordinate the actions of a full platoon of police robots.

The two fugitives were standing now, starting to move off.

"No, no," he shouted into his lip mike. "Take the central aisle, 04; 07 take the main left. I want you to make a net. Cover every aisle, surround station 4350. . ."

The dispatcher was sweating hard.

"They're heading down the left central aisle in the northward direction. Who's closest? Take 34, units 09 through 17. . . cover all the north exits. Full speed!"

"Monetary unit total: 1000 and rising."

Suddenly Control's knife-edged voice said in his ear-phones, "Do you realize that the man with THX 1138 is not SEN 5241?"

"Yessir!" the dispatcher replied instantaneously. "We're running an identification check on him, sir."

"Where is SEN 5241?"

"We. . . we. . . lost track of him, sir. All observers have been alerted to report his location as soon as he's spotted, sir."

"I see." Control's voice was like icewater being poured over the dispatcher. Or molten lead.

"Sir?" the dispatcher called, trembling. "Sir, we could use another two platoons of police officers. The Com-puter Central File area is so big. . . as you know, sir. And the robots are very slow. But one man can't handle more than a single platoon, so we'd need at least two more dispatchers. . ."

"Economically unfeasible within the allotted budget for apprehension of these felons," Control answered. "You'll have to get them with the one platoon assigned."

"But sir. . ."

"The responsibility is yours," said Control, with finality.

The dispatcher shivered. "Yessir."

With SRT leading them, they got to an exit door at the far end of the vast computer area. A

speaker over the metal door blared:

"Stand where you are. This is a restricted area. This exit is for emergency use only. Stay calm and await instructions. Help is on the way."

Grinning, SRT said, "If this isn't an emergency, what is?"

THX looked back down the aisle they had come through. A pair of chrome police robots were lumbering their way.

"Let's go!"

SRT put his shoulder to the door and it popped open, with a gust of air blowing in their faces from the corridor outside. The passageway looked deserted.

Overhead, OMM's reassuring voice said:

"Everything will be all right. You are in my hands. You have nowhere to go. I am here to protect you. Cooperate with the authorities, they only want to help you. You have nowhere to go."

"Which way?" SRT asked.

"Up to the third level," THX said unhesitatingly. "To the Reproclinic."

They pounded down the corridor, looking for a lift tube. Behind them, they heard a robot's voice calling:

"We only want to help you. You have nothing to be afraid of. Please come back. We won't harm you."

But THX and SRT ran on, ignoring the taped voice of the robot, outdistancing the machines with their human, fear-driven legs.

"Monetary unit total: 1240 and rising."

"Visual contact with felon 5241 prefix SEN. Hobot 25, Con H DS 947."

"Proceed to pickup."

"Felon 1138 prefix THX. Visual contact, level four, area CCF-N-228. Apprehension pending."

They found a lift tube, but THX suddenly pushed SRT away from its entrance hatch.

"No! We can't use it."

"You wanted to go up to the next level. We can't go back the way we came. The robots --"

"But they're watching for us now. They can trap us in the lift tube. Stop the cell. . . or drop it down to the bottom. . ."

"Hey, yeah. But where do we go now?"

Looking around at the bare metal walls of the passage-way, THX said, "There must be an access stairway some-where along here. For maintenance on the tube."

"Okay. You go that way and I'll go this. If you find something, yell out."

Chapter 19

SEN wandered through the crowded corridors, lost in the ever-stampeding masses of people who made the shopping levels a chaos of frenzied bodies rushing, rushing in response to the goadings from overhead:

"Today only, red dendrites are only fifty credits. Buy now."

"The consumer has the factor of advantage."

"Did you repent today?"

SEN let the torrent of rushing bodies carry him along wherever it wanted to. He had no place to go. Once in a while he would see the shining white helmet of a police robot standing well above the heads of the masses. But the robots never came after him. In these pell-mell mobs, the robots couldn't even see him, SEN knew.

At Mercicontrol, another dispatcher -- different from the one who was following THX and SRT and yet very much the same -- received an analysis on his main viewscreen. "On the monk found dead in Cathedral 090. Statis-tical analysis shows the only known felon observed within reasonable range of that location/time com-plex is 5241 prefix SEN. Presume guilty unless other-wise proven."

The dispatcher nodded agreement and tapped out a bul-letin on his keyboard that would add the murder to SEN's record.

"What are the latest reports on 5241 prefix SEN?"

"Visual contact at Habot 25, Con H DS 947. Con-tact broken at 1438."

"Tracking information doesn't match Harris profile of 5241 prefix SEN. Are you sure you're following the right man?"

"Computer correlation to point eight."

"Okay, okay. Keep all observers looking for him. Mark him dangerous."

The dispatcher nodded again and resumed working his keyboard.

SEN drifted aimlessly in the busy roaring crowd. If only there were time. . . time to think. . . to rest. . . When he thought his head would split from the noise and bruising of the crowd, he tried to edge his way out of the main flow of the pedestrian thoroughfare, toward a prayer booth or a rest area -- anything, as long as there was some quiet and rest.

He found an open corridor entrance along the edge of the main thoroughfare wall and, pushing himself free of the rushing crowd, staggered out into the empty corridor. It led to a school plaza -- a restful little plaza with space to spare, a bench to sit on, and no taped announcements or glitter-eyed shoppers.

The school itself was half a level above, connected to the plaza by moving stairways. Children were scattered all around the plaza, playing intensely at quiet, ordered, meaningful games. No teacher or supervisor was in sight, but still the children didn't raise their voices or run or get themselves dirty.

Taped to each child's arm was a plastic vial filled with a yellowish fluid. A connector tube fed the fluid into the main vein of the forearm.

SEN sat, exhausted, on a bench off to one side of the plaza. He watched the children playing their solemn little games, his mind a blank. When there is too much to think on, too much to remember, it feels good to blank it all out, to pretend none of it exists. For a while, at least.

His body began to relax. Cramped tense muscles were easing, the fluttering in his stomach was fading away. SEN almost felt as if he wanted to smile.

One of the children approached him, his face very grave.

"My inducer fell off."

SEN blinked at him. "What?"

The boy held out his left arm. The plastic vial was gone. SEN could see the outlines of where the tape had held it on.

"Oh, I see. . ."

The boy had the vial in his other hand. The tape was still connected to it, but torn raggedly along one edge.

"OPA 3114 knocked it off," the boy said.

"Really?"

"He didn't mean to."

SEN took the vial from the boy's hand. It was marked Advanced Primary Economics 5867H. A drop of the yellow liquid trickled out of the dangling connector tube.

"Look out!" the boy snapped, and reached for the tube to pinch it shut.

"Oh. . . I'm sorry. . . here, let me get it back on for you."

He taped the vial onto the boy's arm and plugged the connector into the acceptor tube that poked out from the skin of his forearm.

"There, that should do it. You'll have the whole course digested by sleep time." SEN smiled at the boy like an indulgent uncle.

A bigger, older boy came trotting over. "Come on, we're going to play stochastics. . ." He eyed SEN. "What are you doing here? Where's your badge?"

SEN shrugged. "I'm. . . I'm an escaped felon."

The two boys' eyes bugged wide.

"You're not! Why aren't you arrested?"

Another shrug. "I will be. . . sooner or later."

They didn't know whether to believe him or not, but they were plainly fascinated.

"What did you do? How did you escape?"

SEN chuckled at them. "Now, now. . . it's nothing for your tender ears to listen to." He tapped the vial on the first boy's arm. "When I was in school it was all different. We had to lie in bed all the time. Advanced primary economics was a bottle about this big --" He spread his hands about the width of his shoulders. "It took a week to digest it!"

"Wow!"

An observer, making a routine scan of the school plaza, spotted him. In his earphones he was hearing a police dispatcher saying:

"Lost contact with 1138. An unidentified felon is traveling with him. Will transfer further information when available."

The observer ran a crosscheck on all known fugitives. The man in the school plaza was without a badge. When SEN's picture turned up on one of the screens, the observer dialed a closeup of the man in the plaza.

"Visual contact with 5241 prefix SEN," he spoke into his lip mike. "Hobot 25 Con H, PS947."

Voices crackled in his earphones.

"PS947? Is he molesting the children?"

"Not yet."

"Request PB 848: officer 1088 proceed with recovery of felon 5241 SEN. Use caution, protect children. Current position Habot 25, Con H, PS947."

"Negative sweep of Con J, Section H."

"If 5241SEN is not the unidentified felon traveling with 1138THX, then who the hell is he?"

"Better get analysis to worry that one."

"Will comply."

SEN had attracted most of the children in the plaza by now. They were clustered around him. The first boy was reciting from his lessons, but the older boy corrected:

"No. . . impresses on each of us."

"That's not how it goes."

"Yes it is," the older boy said, drawing himself up to dominate the younger child physically.

"Now, now," said SEN. "Don't argue. Go on, continue the lesson."

The younger boy singsonged, "There are no other rational alternatives in this way. We eliminate the eco-nomic function generated by the contrast of separate but compatible energies. . ."

"Elements! Compatible elements," the older boy said.

"Energies!"

"There, there," SEN soothed.

"I know the whole text by heart," the younger boy said proudly. "I got a perfect mark on my test. . ." Then, a little wistfully, "I wish I knew what it meant. All those words. . ."

A chrome robot came down the moving staircase. SEN saw it and stood up. The children, turning to follow his gaze, flowed back away from him silently as the robot approached.

"SEN 5241," the robot said.

"Yes."

Smoothly, almost gently, the robot turned SEN around and pulled his arms behind his back. He taped SEN'S hands together at the wrists, then taped his mouth and eyes and led him off. The children stood there for a long, long moment and watched SEN being led off by the policeman, back up the escalator.

"See?" said the younger boy. "I told you he really was a felon."

Chapter 20

THX hurried up the winding metal stairway with SRT a few steps behind him. In the steel-walled shaft of the maintenance well their slippered feet made odd shushing sounds that echoed and amplified wierdly.

The third level was also practically deserted. Most of the area was taken up by reproclinics and laboratories, singleshift installations where automated machines did most of the work.

As they stepped out of the maintenance stairwell and into the corridor, a taped voice from overhead told them:

"This is a restricted area. Authorized personnel only."

THX ignored the warning and went to the directory map on the opposite wall of the white, glarelessly lit corridor. The directory showed that the reproclinics were all neatly arranged in alphanumerical order. LUH 3417 would be in the three-dimensional matrix of clinic 12, row 21, file 8. He glanced down the deserted corridor, then motioned to SRT to follow him.

"You are engaged in an unauthorized action. Check procedure manual F-45. This is a double-A re-stricted area. Remain where you are."

The corridor emptied into a vast open area filled with rows of slabs that bore dead bodies. Everything was bathed in a cold, eery bluish light.

"Antibacterial," SRT murmured.

"Violation! Unauthorized personnel are not allowed in this area. Stand where you are. Mercicontrol of-ficers are on the way."

"We don't have much time," SRT said.

"I know." THX started moving between the slabs, heading in the direction of clinic 12.

SRT's eyes widened as he looked at the corpses they were passing.

"All the insides are gone!"

THX nodded.

"Look at that one," SRT pointed to a body with an oversized head. "He must have been a genius!"

What if you find LUH's body here?THX asked himself.

Another part of his mind answered coldly, She's been destroyed. They're not using her organs. Destroyed, not consumed.

But still he shuddered and forced himself to look straight ahead, not at the bodies.

Destroyed. Destroyed.

How?

What did they do to her? What were her last moments like. How could they. . .

"Hey, here's one with eyes! Why would they leave the eyes?"

Despite himself, THX turned to look at the body SRT was jabbering about.

"Oh no. . ." He sank to the edge of the slab on which the body rested. His legs seemed too weak to move.

"Are you all right?" SRT bent over him. "Want some-thing to eat? I bet we could find food around here some-place."

His stomach churning, THX could only shake his head.

"Well, what's the matter? What's wrong?"

Forcing himself to speak, "I. . . knew him. TWA -- he was a prisoner with me. . . He was blind. That's why they left the eyes. . . They're useless."

SRT straightened up. "Oh."

The black man glanced around. Faintly, from far away, they heard the inevitable voices of Mercicontrol:

"Both felons observed entering Reproduction Center Complex. Second felon now positively identified as 5555 prefix SRT. Apprehension pending."

"Monetary unit total: 1810 and rising."

"Escaped felon 5241 prefix SEN apprehended and 140 now in custody. Total expenditure 4377 units under budget. Congratulations! Be efficient. Be happy."

SRT grimaced. "Hey, they're coming closer. Look. . . if there's something you want to do in here, we'd better do it and get out. We've still got to figure out a place where we can hide -- can't keep running forever."

Nodding, THX forced himself to stand up.

"I knew him," he mumbled again. "In prison."

"Well, at least this troubles are over. Soon he'll be a plastic hexagon, just like the rest of them."

"What?"

"That's what they do with the bodies. . . didn't you know that? Make them into the consumption units for the consumalls. Neat, huh? Nothing's wasted."

Suddenly a door banged open noisily somewhere up ahead of them and someone entered the clinic, whistling atrociously.

For a panicked instant, THX didn't know what to do. He froze in terror. Behind them were the police robots. Up ahead was -- what?

He saw SRT quickly move to an unoccupied slab and lay down on it. After a split-second's revulsion, THX did the same.

Be still! Be absolutely still, THX commanded himself. Eyes closed. No blinking. Shallow breathing, don't let him see your chest move.

He tried to make himself believe that he was frozen, he was paralyzed, he was truly dead. The whistling came closer, a raucous, horrible noise, punctuated by the slap-ping sounds of slippered feet against the tile flooring of the clinic. Then there was an odd clicking sound, like a staple gun working. The whistling was awful, tuneless, shrill and loud. Pad, pad, pad -- click-click! Pad, pad, pad -- click-click!

The sounds were getting closer. THX wanted to steal a glimpse at what was going on, but he didn't dare move.

Then the footsteps came so close that he knew the whistler was right next to him. He could smell the anti-septic on him, even feel his breath. . .

Something cool and hard touched his left ear and then PAIN exploded there, seared through him like a white-hot iron. He leaped off the slab and his roar of pain was accompanied by the shriek of the registration clerk who had been tagging the corpses.

The clerk went over backwards and hit the floor with his rump, screaming and goggle-eyed, as THX and SRT dashed headlong away from the slabs, down a long row of corpses all bearing bright metal tags on their left ears. Up ahead loomed the many-tiered storage racks of Repro-clinic 12. The two men raced toward them and didn't stop until they were well inside the dimly lit incubation racks.

They stopped at last, surrounded by twenty-tiered rows of plastic wombs bearing tiny inverted fetuses that were fed by plastic tubes. The light here was a sullen red, and the whole area seemed to be pulsating with millions of tiny heartbeats that throbbed just below the level of actual audibility.

The overhead speakers suddenly blared:

"Stop where you are. You cannot escape. All exits have been sealed shut. Give yourself up. We are here to help you. Relax. You have nothing to fear but fear itself."

THX headed down the row until he came to a blank wall. He turned and looked helplessly at SRT. Trapped.

Then he noticed that SRT had a metal clip stapled to his left ear. He felt his own ear; he had one,

too.

"How'd you. . . keep from screaming?"

SRT grinned. "I peeked. Saw what he was doing. . . and I sort of steeled myself for it."

Far down the row, they saw the gleaming face of a chrome robot drift by, blood red in the incubation lights.

"Didn't see us," SRT whispered. "Maybe they can't see so good in this light."

"They'll find us."

They began to move slowly, cautiously back up the row. The fetuses seemed to be watching them with solemn unblinking eyes.

"Got to find LUH," THX muttered.

SRT shook his head. "We're in the wrong end of the clinic. Everything here's labeled with LS's or LD's."

"Got to get her."

"She's dead," SRT told him in a harsh whisper. "For-get her!"

"The baby. . . her baby. . . mine. . ."

"There's no way," SRT insisted. "No way."

THX froze. Through the row of plastic wombs he could see a chrome police robot pacing slowly on the other side, heading in the opposite direction.

"Can you pick him up on electroscan? We've lost him."

SRT pulled him down to a stooping position and to-gether they edged down the row, doubled over, hunching along on toes and fingertips, away from the police robot. Then they saw a door set into a recess between incubator rows. SRT looked around to see if anyone was watching, then very carefully inched the door open a crack. He peered in.

Crouched behind him, THX could see nothing. Then SRT turned to him, grinning. "Come on."

They crawled silently into a monitor room and stood up. The overhead lights went on automatically when they entered. The walls of the little room were covered with screens that showed row after row of fetuses in various stages of maturity.

THX looked around. The room was less than ten paces wide. "There's no other exit. We're trapped in here."

With a shrug, SRT answered, "We're safe for the time being. . ."

"If there's no camera in here watching us."

"Hmm." SRT turned around, looking for a camera lens. Finding none, he said, "Guess they only watch in here when somebody plugs into the monitor controls."

THX looked at the control desk. There was only one chair, one set of earphones and a lip mike resting on the desk's keyboard.

He plopped down in the chair, utterly weary. All the screens were staring at him accusingly. Thousands of unborn children -- and one of them was his.

SRT hunched down in the corner next to the control desk and pulled a covering panel loose, revealing a complex maze of electronic circuitry. He let the plastic panel clatter to the floor.

"Hmm," he said again. He jiggled one of the circuit boards and all the screens in the room crackled with snowy static.

"Looks like a series of relays in here." He reached a hand into the wiring.

"Don't, you'll get --"

The voice of OMM came through a speaker in the ceiling:

"Everything is fine. You are in my hands. I will pro-tect you. Cooperate with Mercicontrol. They only want to help you. Everything is going to be all right."

With a glance ceilingward, SRT said, "Maybe I shouldn't have tinkered with it."

"They know where we are now."

"Sorry."

Sitting at the control desk, THX knew it was almost over. Almost over, and they were going to get him and destroy him. His body would be turned into a consumable hexagon. His innards would be distributed among the masses. And his child. . .

He reached for the earphones sitting on the desktop and pulled them on.

"What are you doing?"

Without answering, THX plugged in the earphones and began fiddling with the control switches on the keyboard. Images flitted across the screens: the slabs of corpses; jammed pedestrian corridors in their perpetual uproar; trams in transit; factories grinding away on the second level; shopping plazas; the Computer Center. . .

He stopped when the screen showed the Computer Center. He grabbed the lip mike from the desktop, plugged it in and fitted it in front of his mouth.

"File on LUH 3417."

Instantly a voice responded, "Who is this? Identify please."

"Reproclinic 12," THX answered as he scanned the desktop for an identification symbol. "Station DBR 2618."

"Okay, 2618. . . file on LUH 3417."

The main screen in front of him immediately showed a fetus, so young that it didn't yet look remotely human. Typed in the lower right corner of the screen was:

LUH 3417. SEXACT. STATE WARD.

MAIN-TAIN FOR EXPERIMENTAL PURPOSES.

As firmly as he could, THX said into the mike, "Amendment to file on LUH 3417."

The flat voice of the computer memory control re-sponded: "Recording. Proceed with amendment."

It was all automatic now, THX knew. Reproclinics were always updating files. If he could make the change in LUH's file now, no one would check again for years. By then the danger would be long past, no one would remember. Or care. The baby would be safe.

Keeping the tremble of excitement out of his voice, THX said, "Present file in error due to faulty program-ming at Reproclinic 12. Erase present file and amend to read: LUH 3417. Natural. Full citizen. Condition Nor-mal."

The typed words on the screen disappeared, to be replaced an instant later by his own words.

"File amendment completed," the computer said.

THX nodded. "Completed."

Now it doesn't matter. They'll get me, but they won't get her.

He unplugged the lip mike and earphones, let them fall to the floor, and slumped back in the chair. Then he realized:

Her? Maybe it's a boy. A, son.

"We ought to try to get out of here," SRT said to him.

THX shrugged.

"We should try."

With a shake of his head, THX answered, "You go. Save yourself. It's me they're really looking for."

SRT looked at him closely. "Don't you want to live?"

"I don't care. Not now."

"Hmp. You're just like the embryos in those bottles out there. You've never lived. You're alive, but you've never lived."

THX said, "It doesn't matter."

As if in answer, a strong calm robot's voice came from the other side of the door:

"You have nothing to fear. Remain calm and co-operate with the authorities. Everything is going to be all right."

Chapter 21

SRT glanced at THX and then at the door. It was shut. Impulsively, THX jumped up and slid his chair against the door, wedging it firmly.

SRT grinned at him. "It doesn't matter, huh?"

The door jiggled slightly, but the chair held it shut.

"I guess it does matter," THX said, surprised to hear himself saying it. "It still does."

The robot's voice, unruffled, unhurried, the perfect public servant, said, "Remain calm. The door seems to be jammed or locked. Please check the lock on your side. We are not going to hurt you. Everything will be all right."

They heard a faint buzzing sound, and the acrid smell of something burning. A tiny glowing spot appeared on the door just below the latch.

Not going to hurt us!

THX spun around and plugged in the earphones and mike again.

"Emergency!" he called. "Emergency! Fire in Station DBR 2618, Reproclinic 12. Repeat. Emergency. Fire in Station DBR 2618, Reproclinic 12. Top priority. Con-dition red!"

He turned to SRT. "Get ready to run."

An automatic tape blared from the ceiling:

"EMERGENCY! EMERGENCY! HEAR THIS! HEAR THIS! Fire in Station DBR 2618, Reproclinic 12. Discontinue all operations until. . ."

"Now!" THX yelled.

SRT whisked the chair away, THX yanked the door open, and they bolted past the police robots, which were standing dumbly listening to the instructions from the overhead speakers. Before the robots could react, the two men were out of the clinic and pounding madly down a main corridor.

"Upstairs to the factories!" THX gasped as they ran. "More people, easier to hide. . ."

Control was truly agitated. He swallowed another sedative and listened to the reports on his communicator.

"Monetary unit total: 5000 and rising. Account on 1138 prefix THX has just exceeded primary budget."

"Have you seen them? They must be somewhere in corridor 3-L73."

"Analysis indicates they are heading up toward the next level. Possibly arming for the superstructure."

The chief of Mercicontrol police appeared on Control's giant viewscreen. His puffy face and beady little eyes made him look almost like the legendary First Control. He looked flushed, though, and apprehensive.

"We almost had them," he said to Control. Speaking first to Control, before you were spoken to, was a privi-lege that only a very few had.

"They've been very clever." Control maintained his outward calm only with an enormous exertion of self-control. "But one would imagine that with a city full of police robots, observers, remote cameras, and such -- you could apprehend two simple fugitives."

"We got SEN 5241," the chief said defensively.

Control said, "It's the two fugitives I'm interested in. They must be caught! It's uneconomic to allow them to remain free. The costs of apprehending them are already unbalancing the economic forecast for the month! If you don't get them soon the entire year's forecast will have to be redone!"

The police chief blanched. For Control to raise his voice, to show worry or anger -- the chief began to tremble.

"We're trying. This has been a severe test of our equipment and procedures. In. . . uh, in my last annual report I pointed out the need for an improved-model robot. Our present Mark XV's are just too slow to keepup with an adrenalin-drenched adult male. And we need long-distance weapons. The electric rods are no good when the fugitive's half a corridor length ahead of you."

Holding his aching head in his hands, Control snarled, "Find them and bring them to justice. Quickly!"

THX and SRT pounded up another spiraling metal stairwell, heading for the second level. Far

below them they could hear echoing:

"Yes, we hear them. Attempting sonic localization."

"Connect me with Mercicontrol Dispatch, operation 1138 prefix THX."

"Monetary unit total: 5750 and rising."

This time the corridor they stepped into was alive with people. Not the frenetic bedlamites of the shopping levels, but the solid, quiet, serious-faced factory workers who had just put in a tiring four-hour shift and were plodding homeward.

The workers were pouring out of the huge yawning entryways all along the corridor and shuffling wearily toward the transport terminal a few hundred meters from the hatchway that THX and SRT stepped through.

THX could see the terminal. A long line of tram cars stood there, being obediently filled, one at a time, by the workers. Every few seconds a tram would start up, its electric engine whining. Men and women would back out of the way as the tram car lurched forward and then sped smoothly off into the distance, accelerating as it went.

Despite the fact that the workers were mostly quiet and sedated, their sheer numbers caused a constant up-roar of voices and sounds in the corridor. After the quiet of the computer and clinic levels, the noise here was a shock to THX.

But the crowds meant camouflage, protection and safety, and THX laughed as he joined the jumble and uproar, with SRT right beside him. They let the crowd push them toward the tram cars.

For a flash of a second, as they were climbing into the tram, THX remembered his last ride in one. Suddenly he wanted to back away, to run from the tram, but it was too late. The crowd surged on and pushed him and SRT on board.

There was no room to sit, so they stood jammed against other people as the car lurched, shuddered, then slid away, swaying around a curve. The rapid transit tunnel outside turned into a meaningless blur of speed.

The tram whizzed past several stations, then slowed to a stop. There was a station platform outside, but the doors did not open. The jam-packed crowd began to mutter. An old woman pounded on the door with her fist.

Outside on the platform, other workers were milling around, looking either curious or angry at the foul-up.

Then the ever-present loudspeakers said:

"Two fugitives from justice are somewhere on this tram car. The entire station has been sealed off and police are on their way here to make an arrest. Please remain calm."

"I want to get off!" a man shouted.

The crowd in the tram car roared its agreement.

"I don't want to be involved in any police arrests!" the old lady at the doors said.

"C'mon, force the doors open!"

The tram rocked dangerously as the crowd surged against the folding doors in the center of the car. The old woman screamed with pain and then the doors buckled and sprang open. The crowd spilled out onto the platform.

THX and SRT jumped onto the platform, pushed by those behind them.

"Look!" SRT called.

Down a flight of moving stairs, a long file of black-jacketed chrome police robots was gliding toward them. Everyone on the platform froze into obedient stillness.

Except THX.

He bolted toward the other end of the platform.

After an instant's hesitation, SRT raced along behind him.

"Autos!" THX called out. There were a few jetcars parked at the end of the station platform. An overhead speaker was saying:

"Do not park in yellow-zoned sections for longer than three minutes. Jet acceleration must not exceed two percent in the dispersal area. To avoid being singed by jet exhaust, please exit your vehicle on the right and walk through the blue zone on the left."

THX jumped off the end of the platform and sprinted for the nearest jetcar.

"Can you drive?" SRT shouted as they ran.

Nodding, THX wrenched open the hatch on the nearest car and slid in behind the wheel. He slammed the door shut, looked over the control panel briefly, found the starter switch. Thumbing it, he saw all the control indicators flash green. The turbine engine growled to life, then howled into such a high range that it passed human hearing. He only felt its thrilling vibration, heard the faintest bone-shivering whine.

He looked up and saw SRT climbing into the car parked next to his own.

Quickly slipping on the earphones that rested on the console beside his seat, THX heard a robot's tape voice commanding:

"Stop where you are. You have nothing to be afraid of. Cooperate with the authorities."

THX grabbed the wheel firmly and nudged the throttle forward. The jetcar purred smoothly out onto the thoroughfare. He floored it and the car zoomed away, down the traffic corridor, rushing toward an immense sign that said XWAY AHEAD. The engine exhaust roared and echoed through the

cavernous corridor.

He looked in the rearview for SRT. Nowhere. He checked the radar screen on the control panel. SRT wasn't anywhere around.

Can he drive? THX wondered. I just left him there!

For an agonizing moment, he bit his lip in indecision. Then he slowed the jetcar, swung it around across eight lanes of highway, and headed down the other side of the corridor, back toward the transport station.

It seemed incredible, but less than a minute had passed since they had left the tram. The crowd was still milling confusedly around the platform. The police robots were working their way through the crowd, looking into each person's face and checking their badges.

And SRT's blazing red jetcar was still sitting at the end of the platform, in the parking area. THX could see the black man in it, frowning over the controls, pushing buttons. No grin on him now. SRT glanced over his shoulder and THX followed his gaze. Two chrome police robots were approaching the parking area. THX, his car idling in the far lane, thumbed the window control.

He was about to yell for SRT to jump out and run to his own auto, when the red car's engine roared to life with a puff of sooty exhaust. The big grin came back to the black man's face. He looked up, recognized THX and waved, then slammed the red car into gear and shot ahead.

Into a concrete pillar. The car was instantly demolished in a thundering explosion.

THX felt the shock wave hit him and rattle the car. He sat there, immobile, unbelieving. A life had been snuffed out in an eyeblink. A friend -- his only friend -- the first and last friend he had in the world. Dead.

"We have an accident in Module Dispersal Center 21. Stolen vehicle into 3T support. Felon killed instantly. Car totaled."

"Monetary unit total: 15,500 and rising."

Now the chrome robots turned toward THX. For a frozen instant he couldn't move. Then, like the breaking of a spell, he slammed the jetcar's throttle and felt the blast of acceleration snap his head back against the rest.

The engine thundered and the station, the robots, the wreckage of SRT all disappeared into the distance.

The guidance screen on his control panel showed that he was approaching an express tunnel. THX swerved the car onto the appropriately marked lane as his earphones buzzed:

"I have a vehicle entering a restricted access expressway. Vehicle checks with stolen jetcar, Samos model, registration number 327115."

"Escaped felon 1138 prefix THX believed operating stolen Samos 327115. Apprehend at once. Proceed with caution."

"Monetary unit total: 19,000 and rising. Please re-view all unfunded obligations."

THX gunned the jetcar onto the expressway, howling down the huge tunnel to. . . where? Upward. Up to the first level, where the powerplants rumbled and the radio-activity level was high enough to be lethal if you stayed for more than a few hours.

And beyond that?

The traffic monitor grimaced and shook his head as he watched the huge electronic map spread out on the wall display in front of him. One yellow blip -- THX's car -- was the center of his attention.

"Expressway 291," he said into his lip mike. "Clear all traffic. Mercicontrol police request full clearance in apprehension procedure. Divert all traffic to link 4833 -- cross to web 2."

THX heard the monitor's commands. His radar screen chimed. Glancing down at it, he saw two blips far to the rear of him.

"Electrocycles 1048 and 1050 dispatched to apprehend fugitive 1138 prefix THX."

"Predicted route of flight will be transferred to web 3 at 3:47."

"Proceed. Execute."

Electrocycles couldn't catch a turbine-driven jetcar, THX knew. But as if in answer to his thought, the car began to make strange noises. The engine was thumping, clunking. Indicators on the control panel began flashing red. The engine's overheating. Automatically, the car slowed down.

THX frantically scanned the panel. There must be some way . . .

"Radar fix on stolen Samos 327115. Range, five kilometers."

He tried every knob and switch on the control panel, but the overheat indicator stayed stubbornly red. The engine whined down. The car glided to a stop.

"Subject vehicle appears to have stopped in express-way 291. Subject has ceased flight. Report when fugitive is in custody."

The two yellow blips on the radar screen were drawing steadily closer. It would only be a matter of minutes before they were on top of him.

There was a switch marked Cool, but whenever THX hit it, freezing air swirled around him and the engine temperature indicator stayed firmly in the danger zone, glaring balefully at him. His hand touched the switch marked Fuel Recirc, and the red lights on the panel suddenly began winking off. The engine growled again, then steadied to a sweet purring. The last red light turned green, and THX hit the throttle. The car leaped forward.

"Subject jetcar Samos 327115 appears to be moving again. Range increasing."

The radar dots fell behind him again as he zoomed through the express tunnel and up the rampway that led to the first level. A warning sounded in his earphones.

"You are approaching a restricted area. Danger of radioactivity extreme. Turn back at the next interloop."

THX ignored the warning. He glanced at the radar screen. The electrocycles stayed firmly behind him. Robots didn't fear radioactivity. Or did they?

Where to? Where to? THX asked himself. There's nothing left for me in this world. Nothing at all. Can't stay on Level One. Can't live in the superstructure. Can't return below.

"Subject vehicle is entering construction area 36J. Passage through this expressway section is closed. Contact operator at once."

"Alert construction personnel. Samos 327115 approaching. Evacuate area."

"Attention Samos 327115. Stop your vehicle. Warn-ing! Warning! Stop your vehicle. You are approaching a work area. Do you read? Respond."

Is it a trick?

Suddenly there was a barrier up ahead with construction equipment strewn across the roadway behind it. OMM's voice broke in.

"Everything will be all right. You are in my hands. You have nowhere to go. I am here to protect you. You have nowhere to go. Nowhere. . ."

The radar bonged emergency, red lights flashed on the control panel, and the car's collision avoidance system automatically cut the engine and fired the retrobrakes.

The jetcar skidded sideways, bounced off one wall of the tunnel and screeched to a stop against the barrier.

Before THX stopped rattling in his seat harness, the first police cycle hummed around the slight curve of the tunnel, tried to stop, and slid sideways into the wall. The robot went over backwards with the cycle on top of him. The second cycle came an instant later, it the wreckage of the first. The robot went flying through the air and slammed into the side of THX's car.

Control was absolutely livid.

"Morons!" he spat. "Absolute idiots! To let one frightened man consistently wriggle out of your grasp. . . the cost of apprehending one man. . . and it's still not accomplished. . ." He became incoherent.

On the giant wall screen, he watched -- speechlessly -- as THX emerged from the ruined jetcar, looked around shakily. One of the robots, the one that had been on the first bike, was getting to its feet. It looked dusty and crumpled, but it was still functioning.

THX hopped over the barrier and sprinted past the abandoned construction equipment. Another camera, farther down the expressway tunnel, picked him up run-ning toward it. Control dialed for a close-up of the fugitive's face, and the camera obediently zoomed in on THX. He looked weary, out of breath, close to exhaustion. But not afraid. No longer afraid. Determined.

Control shook his head and reached for the sedatives lined up in gaudy plastic vials behind his desk. Why can't men with that much strength work for us?

The robot was trailing him. Looking over his shoulder, THX could see that now both robots were hobbling after him. One of them was limping noticeably and clanking with a grating, grinding noise; the other was missing an arm. But both of them doggedly pursued him like some inevitable fate.

"We only want to help you. You have nothing to be afraid of. Please come back. We won't harm you." There was a ladder up ahead, steel rungs projecting from the metal wall. It stretched up so far that THX couldn't tell where it ended. But it went up. With another glance at his pursuers, he grabbed the rungs and started climbing.

So did the robots.

"You cannot survive in the superstructure. You will destroy yourself if you continue. Come back with us."

THX kept climbing.

"Monetary unit total: 25,000 and rising, please place a priority transfer of assessment."

"Surrender to the authorities. You have nothing to fear but fear itself."

"Attention. All operations on fugitive 1138 prefix THX are cancelled. Subject operations have been declared economically inefficient. Unlimited liability. All annuities are to be written off. The account on 1138 prefix THX is closed. Transfer officers tooperation 327."

THX hearing the command voice from the robots themselves, stopped climbing and hung on the ladder, panting and sweat-drenched. He looked down and saw that the robots had stopped, too.

"We have to go back. This is your last chance to return with us. You have nowhere to go."

"You cannot survive outside the city. Come back with us."

For an answer, THX resumed climbing. He didn't even hesitate. He continued upward, rung by painful rung. If he was headed toward death, then so what? Nothing but death awaited him below -- even if he should live a thousand years in that inferno below him.

For a long time he heard nothing except his own labored breathing, felt only the gritty metal rungs in his hands, smelled his own sweat. He kept climbing, climbing.

Toward self-destruction.

Chapter 22

It was dirty up in the superstructure. Dirty, hot and muggy. There were no corridors, only a vast open area crisscrossed with structural beams and low overhangs of metal or stone. Dust and grime covered everything.

THX stumbled over something half-buried in filth. Bones. . . a human ribcage. He backed away.

The light up here was strange. Shafts of weird, concentrated light seemed to slant through the superstructure here and there, filled with dust motes that danced and nickered. In between there were pools of shadow.

And the light was fading, weakening noticeably. The shadows were getting darker, deeper, encompassing every-thing.

THX was hungry. And so tired. With a shudder of distaste, he sat down in a dust-covered nook made by the angle of a heavy steel I-beam. Despite the heat, he was trembling. He leaned his head back against the grimy beam and was almost instantly asleep.

Scrabbling noises woke him.

It was dark! Absolutely black, no lights at all. THX had never seen such darkness before.

Something was out there. He could hear something moving around, softly, snuffling in the blackness. More than one of them. He stayed absolutely still, listening, wishing his heart wouldn't pound so hard.

Something touched his outstretched foot. With an in-voluntary yell, THX yanked his foot back and swung out at the darkness. His hand hit something soft and furry. A throaty yelp and scampering sounds skittering away from him.

Shelldwellers! he realized.

Gradually, as his eyes became accustomed to the dark, he could make out the faintest glints of them. Their eyes watching him.

He pushed himself to a standing position, being careful to remain within the slight protection of the I-beam's shape. And there he stood, for hours, warily watching the shelldwellers who snuffled and padded around him uncertainly.

Why don't they do something? he wondered. And then he realized that they were doing something: they were waiting. Waiting for exhaustion or hunger to do their work for them. Why fight a giant when the giant will soon enough collapse?

The darkness seemed to be not so bad now. After a long time, it definitely appeared to be getting brighter all through the superstructure. Not truly light, nothing like the glareless eternal light of the lower levels or even the strong shafts of odd light that had spotted the super-structure hours earlier. It was grayish faint half-light, cold and somehow damp-feeling.

But it was enough to see the shelldwellers. Four of them were squatting, hairy and wild, a dozen meters from THX. They carried no weapons. They were small and gnarled-looking.

"Go away!" THX shouted at them. "Leave me alone."

They didn't move.

Only four of them, he thought. If I don't chase them, they'll wait for me to fall asleep or collapse from hunger.

With a deep intake of breath, he gathered his strength and rushed at them. They scattered, shrieking.

He laughed and watched them disappear into the distance. Then something fell on his back from above and hot teeth bit into his shoulder. Something else dropped on him and he went down.

They were all over him, biting and tearing at him with their nails. THX roared and pulled one of them off, flailed at the others, fought his way to his knees. The shelldwellers swarmed over him -- six, eight, he couldn't tell how many.

They had tricked him into coming out into the open where they could attack him. The back of his mind raged at his own stupidity, and his fury carried over into his fighting. He bowled them over, got to his feet and picked two of them up, one in each hand, and hurled them away. He kicked and swung and slapped at them. He used one of them as a club to split the skull of another. He roared and snapped and fought like any jungle beast.

They fled. They dragged one of their members with them, leaving two others laying inertly on the filth-strewn floor. THX stood there trembling, feeling trickles of blood on his shoulder, his face, his legs. His hands were bruised and raw.

They'll be back, he knew.

The light was stronger now, almost the way it was when he had first come up to the superstructure. But the light seemed to be falling in a different way, opposite the direction it had been slanting in before.

THX shook his head. Can't stay here, he realized, thinking of the shelldwellers. Might as well make an end of it and go Outside.

He walked shakily, still bleeding, toward the nearest shaft of light. Looking up, he saw an access tunnel with a ladder built into its side. Through some sort of grill-work at the top he could see a grayish blue color.

Probably one breath of the poisonous air Outside and it'll be all over, he thought. But what else is there? Better that than being eaten by the shelldwellers.

He climbed the ladder slowly, though, almost reluctantly. The grillwork was rusted shut and he almost felt relieved. But with grim stubbornness he pushed against it, first with one hand, then both, then with his back wedged against it, straining sweatily against the gritty bars.

Scan Notes, v3.0:Proofed carefully, italics intact.