

THOMAS F. MONTELEONE

Breath's a Ware That Will Not Keep

Thomas F. Monteleone is a newer writer of the hard working school to which Charles Grant also belongs. He is also an extremely sensitive writer, as he has been proving since 1972, when he sold his first story to AMAZING SCIENCE FICTION, and with his first novel in 1974. In person, he is a deceptively quiet man with an amazingly quick perception that tends to be obscured by the gentleness of his speech. The story that follows, "Breath's a Ware That Will Not Keep," takes its title from a poem called "Rebellion" by A. E. Houseman, and it has a poetry of its own. The story is part of Tom Monteleone's "Chicago" series, which will be published later this year as a novel, THE TIME SWEPT CITY, by Popular Library.

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Benjamin Cipriano sat down at his console, casting a quick glance outward to the Breeder Tank below him. He switched his attention to the controls and opened up a communications channel to the Tank. He pulled the psi-helmet over his head and pressed the throat mike close to his larynx. "Good morning, Feraxya. Feeling okay today?"

His scalp tingled as invisible fingers slipped into his skull to massage his brain. The helmet fed her psiwords into him: "Good morning to you, too, Benjamin." The "voice" sounded just vaguely feminine to him, and his imagination reinforced the conceptualization. "I'm feeling fine. Everything is normal. You know I always feel comfortable when you are on the console."

"Thank you," said Cipriano, pausing for a moment. "Now, I have some tests to run this morning, so we'd better get started." He flipped several toggles as he continued speaking to her. "It's all routine stuff . . . blood sugar, enzyme scans, placental balance quotients . . . things like that. Nothing to worry about." There was a short silence before she touched his mind again: "I never worry when you're on. Perhaps we'll have time to talk, later on?"

"If you want to. I'll have some time in a few minutes. Bye now." He switched off the communications channel and stared at the protoplasmic nightmare on the other side of his console-booth window. Stretched out before him were all the Breeder Tanks for his Sector of the City. They were Chicago's symbols of deliverance from misery and deprivation for all the City's members. Except, perhaps, the Host-Mothers themselves. Cipriano wondered about them in general, Feraxya in particular, and what their lives must be like.

Technically speaking, Feraxya was human. Visually, however, she was an amorphous, slithering, amoeba-like thing. She was tons of genetically cultured flesh, a human body inflated and stretched and distended until it was many times its normal size. Lost beneath her abundant flesh was a vestigial skeleton which floated disconnected and unmoving in a gelatinous sea. Her bioneered organs were swollen to immense proportions and hundreds of liters of blood pumped through her extensive circulatory system.

Yet he knew, even as he activated the probes that plunged into her soft flesh, that she was still a woman to him. A very special kind of woman. From her earliest moments of consciousness, she had spent her life contained within the glassteel walls of the Breeder Tank. It was an immense cube, ten meters on each side, the back wall covered with connecting cables and tubes which carried her life

support systems, monitoring devices, and biomedical elements that were necessary for her continued maintenance.

To Cipriano, she was the glassteel tube. Feraxya had no face, no arms, no legs; all those things were buried beneath the folds of swollen flesh that rippled with life fluids. And yet she was a person, a Citizen of Chicago, who had received the standard education by means of special input programs piped through her sensory nerves and into her brain, bypassing her useless eyes and ears. She also represented several basic changes from previous Host Mothers. Feraxya was a third-generation mutant; careful genetic selection and programming had given her primary-level psi-powers, which were used in communication and eventually for education. Chicago's Central Computers postulated that the quiet, undisturbed environment of the Breeder Tank would be an ideal atmosphere for the development of psi.

Ben looked away from the giant Tank, leaned back in his chair, and watched the monitoring data come clicking into the tapes at his console. As he waited for the data to accumulate, his gaze wandered down the long row of other consoles like his own, where many other Breeder Monitors sat reading their indicators and print-outs. Each Monitor was charged with his own Host-Mother; each Host Mother held within her an enlarged uterus that was filled with thirty human fetuses.

It was in this way that the Host-Mothers provided the City with every desired type of Citizen. There were no outcasts, no misfits, now that society, was shaped by the benevolent but highly efficient Central Computers of Chicago. An entire hierarchy was cybernetically conceived and programmed, then handed down through the bureaucratic chain until it reached the Bioneers and Eugenicists. In Chicago's massive Eugenic Complex, hundreds of Host-Mothers like Feraxya carried the fetuses of the next generation of Citizens. Laborers, artists, scientists, bureaucrats, and technicians—all pre-coded and expected.

A message suddenly flashed on Cipriano's console which reminded him to check the night-shift Monitor's report. He did so and found it satisfactory. Feraxya had only recently received her first uterine implant and there was little for him to do at this point except routine systems-checks. Later when her brood of fetuses grew and began to crowd her great womb, Cipriano's tasks would also grow. A Host-Mother nearing the end of gestation required much attention.

He replaced the psi-helmet on his head and signaled to her. A tingling sensation touched his mind as she was raised from her inner thoughts: "Yes, Ben?"

"The databanks are still filling," he said "I've some free time. Thought you might want to talk for a little while."

"Yes, I would., Thank you. I wanted to tell you about the dream I had.' . ."

"A dream?" he asked. "About what?"

"About you. I think about you a lot."

"I didn't know that," said Ben, smiling self-consciously. His words were only a half-truth.

"Yes, it's true . . ." She paused and his mind leapt at the emptiness she created there. "Ben?" she began again.

"Yes?"

"Do you ever think about me? When you're not here, working?"

"Well, yes. I guess I do. Sometimes."

"I'm glad," she said. "You're different from my other Monitors. Of course I'm sleeping most of that time, anyway."

"Different?" The word did not sit well in his mind. The Monitors were planned to be quite similar. "How do you mean?"

"You're kinder," she said. "More understanding, I think. It's just easier to talk with you."

"Thank you, Feraxya. I'm just trying to be myself, though."

"Your mate is very lucky to have someone like you," she said candidly. "I guess I should tell you that I've thought about having you myself. Even though I know it's impossible."

Ben paused for a moment, stirred and somewhat shaken by the mental image her suggestion brought to mind. "You could use your Id Tapes if you really wanted-" He tried to be helpful but she interrupted him.

"That's little more than masturbation."

"I'm sorry," he said. "I was just trying to suggest something that might help, that's all."

"You're sweet. But that's not what I want from you. If I could have it my way it would be like the dream. I had a real body, like you, and we were going through the City at night. It was bright and beautiful. Sometimes I wish it could have been like that."

She paused, and Cipriano searched for any subliminal meaning in her words. There were people who would interpret them as dangerous. He wondered what she meant by them. "It wasn't meant to be," he said finally, shallowly.

"I know. And the Host-Mothers are needed. Someone must serve," she said slowly, as if she were contemplating the implications of what she was saying.

"That's true," he said. "Besides-"

Cipriano was interrupted by the chatter of his console. The results from the morning's test began to flash upon his grid. A large graph appeared and flickered violently superimposed over the graph was a one word message: CRITICAL.

"Just a minute, Feraxya," he said, staring at the alarm signal in semi shock. "Uh, . . . some of then results have just come in and I've got to check them; out. I'll get back to you as soon as I can, okay?"

"All right, Ben. We can talk later."

He threw off the helmet and depressed several digital, keys, requesting clarification of the warning signal.

Cipriano read through the figures, double-checked them, and started an entire new series of tests to, ensure against errors.

As the console began to click and chatter with the new instructions, he called his Superior, Faro Barstowe. Several seconds passed before the man's lean, fox like face appeared on the screen: "Yes, what is it?"

"Cipriano here. Breeder Tank 0078-D. Generic' name: Feraxya. My routine monitoring has picked up; what looks like a nucleotide dysfunction. Probable cause' is an inadequate enzyme transfer. Too early

to tell yet. Just calling to let you know that I'm running a double check."

Barstowe's face seemed tense. "Let's see . . . You've got a litter of thirty. RNA Code 45a7c. Superior Range., Administrator Class. That sound right?"

"Yes, sir. That's right," said Cipriano, watching the man's small shining eyes burn into him, even through the screen.

"All right, Cipriano. It's been sixty-four days since implantation. That makes it too late for an in vitro injection to change or rectify the enzyme transfer. Collect all the data you can from the second scan. I'll call Bioneering and send some men over there to see what's up. That's all for now." The screen blacked out, leaving Ben with the cool sounds of the console.

When he read through the second test results, he knew that they only confirmed what he had first imagined. There was indeed a dysfunction in Feraxya's system; but he could do nothing until the Bioneers arrived. His first thought was to contact her, so that she would be aware of what was happening inside her great body. But he knew that would not be possible until he received word from Barstowe.

It was several minutes before the white uniformed specialists from Bioneering entered his booth. One of them read over the data collected from his console while the other two adjusted their white, antiseptic, helmeted suits as they prepared to enter the Breeder Tank Area itself. Cipriano looked past them, through the glass window to Feraxya, who floated within her prison still ignorant of her problems.

Later, as he watched the Bioneers scurrying about Feraxya's Tank, he wondered if she could, somehow, sense their nearness, their insensitive prying into the secrets of her grotesque body. He wanted to talk to her, and he entertained the notion of contact as his eyes fell upon the psi-helmet by the console.

One of the Bioneers returned to the booth, quickly removing his helmet and wiping some perspiration from his forehead. He looked at Cipriano and shook his head.

"What's that mean?" said Ben.

"Not good," said the man in white. "There hasn't been any reaction between the DNA/enzyme interface. The `blueprint injections' didn't copy at all. That's why you were getting the alarms."

"Which means . . ." asked Cipriano.

"Which means her fetuses would be completely variable if we brought them to term." The man paused and gestured out towards Feraxya's Tank. "Randoms -that's what we're growing in that one."

"What do we do now?"

"You'd better call Barstowe," said the Bioneer. "My men'll be making an official .report, but I think he'd appreciate knowing about it now."

Cipriano knew what Barstowe would say: they would have to remove her brood. He wondered what Feraxya's reaction to the decision would be. Remembering how pleased she had been to receive her first implantation, Cipriano did not look forward to the moment when he would have to confront her with the news.

After he had contacted Barstowe and relayed the results of the Bioneers' inspection, the Superior shook his head, grimacing. "That's too bad. Going to throw us off schedule. I'll arrange for Stander to prepare for a scrape as soon as possible. Tomorrow morning, hope fully."

"I was wondering when I should tell Feraxya about it," said Cipriano.

The foxlike features stared at him for a moment. "You'll have plenty of time in the morning. Don't worry about it. You really don't have anything else to do today; why don't you get out of here?"

"All right," said Cipriano. "But I hope she understands why." Barstowe didn't answer; the screen had already blacked. Ben shook his head slowly and shut down his console. He left the Eugenic Complex and took the Rapids home to his con-apt; hoping that the following day would be less difficult than this one.

That night, Jennifer wanted him.

She was warm and young and fashionably lean; and he wanted her, too. He always did. She was something of a romantic, since she always used candles to illuminate their lovemaking, but Cipriano didn't mind.

Jennifer helped him attach the electrodes to his forehead; she had already hooked herself into the machine. They lay side by side, naked, in the candlelight as the machine beneath their bed hummed and touched their pleasure centers. Physiological feedback was encoded from each of them, amplified, and routed into each other as mutual Stimuli. Their orgasms were reached simultaneously with the aid of the machine. Never touching each other, not needing to do so, there was no chance of a nonapproved conception. Afterwards, they lay in silence, smiling from the rush of moist satisfaction. Jennifer arose in the semi-darkness and unhooked the electrodes. Cipriano was asleep before she even turned off the machine.

When he reached his console the next morning, he sensed there was something different about the Eugenic Complex. He hoped that it was merely his imagination. Through the glass, he could see several technicians and a Bioneer working on Feraxya's Tank.

Cipriano placed the psi-helmet on his head and flipped the transmission switch. "I've been expecting you," said Feraxya, instantly crowding his mind; the transmission was almost aggressive.

"What do you mean?" he said quickly.

"When you never came back yesterday, I began to worry about you. Then I felt them fumbling around my Tank. I knew something was wrong."

"I'm sorry," he said. "I was very busy yesterday. I didn't have time to-"

"Don't try to explain. I already know what they're getting ready to do."

"What? What're you talking about. How?" He looked out at the great mass of flesh, seeing it for the first time as something that could be very different from what he had always imagined.

"The night-shift Monitor told me what had happened. I forced him to do it. I wanted to know why they were tampering with me. And when he told me, I was hurt by it. Why couldn't you tell me, Benjamin? I didn't want that other man to tell me, but I had no choice."

"I'm sorry," was all he could manage to say.

"It hurt to know that you had run out of the Complex without telling me, Benjamin."

"Please," he said. "I understand what you're saying. And I'm sorry. I shouldn't have done it."

"Why do they call it a `scrape'?"

"It's just slang, that's all. It doesn't mean anything. They don't do abortions that way anymore."

"Will they be coming soon?" she asked.

"I think so. Don't worry. It won't take long. You won't even feel-"

"No, Benjamin. I don't want them to do it. You've got to tell them not to do it."

Cipriano suppressed a laugh, although it was more from anxiety than from humor. "You don't want it? There isn't anything you can do about it. It's the law, Feraxya! Chicago doesn't allow random births. You know that."

"The only thing I know is that they want to destroy my brood. They want to cut me open and rip them from my flesh. It is wrong," she said slowly.

"There was a mistake in the gene-printing," said Cipriano, trying to explain things in the only way he understood. "Your fetuses aren't perfect constructs."

"But they're human beings, Benjamin. They want to murder them. I can't let them do it."

Cipriano tried to understand her feelings, her reasons for talking such nonsense to him. He began to fear that maybe she was losing control of her senses. "Why are you telling me this?" he asked finally. "You know there isn't anything I can do about it."

"You can tell them not to try. I want to give them a chance."

"They won't listen to me, Feraxya. Barstowe's already scheduled the surgery for this morning. There's nothing you can do but accept what's happening. Face the truth: you're getting an abortion." He regretted the last sentence as soon as he had said it. He could almost feel the pain he was inflicting in her.

"I can't believe that's really you talking. I always thought you were different from the rest of them. You acted like you had more understanding, more compassion . . ."

"You make it sound like I'm against you," he said defensively.

"Perhaps you're not. But you've got to tell them that I'll stop anybody who tries to get near me. Even kill them if necessary." Feraxya's voice in his mind was sharp, cutting deeply into his skull like a bright razor.

"And you're telling me about understanding, about compassion? Feraxya, what's happening to you?" Inwardly, he reviewed her last words. What was this talk about killing? If her mind was going, Barstowe would have to know about it.

"I can't help it, Benjamin. It's something that I feel deep inside. Something that we've almost forgotten about. The instincts, the drive that a mother feels to protect her children."

"They're not your children," he said vindictively.

"They were given to me. They're mine." There was a long pause. "I don't want to argue with you. Please, go tell them what I've said."

Cipriano exhaled slowly. "All right. I'll see Barstowe, but I don't think it'll do any good."

He waited for her to reply, but when she didn't, he switched off the communications channel and pulled the helmet from his head. He keyed in Barstowe's office, but the lines were all jammed with other calls. Wanting to get the matter finished as quickly as possible, he left the booth and walked to the elevators that would take him to Barstowe's office level.

After the Superior was given a reconstruction of the conversation, he shook his head as if in disbelief. "Nothing like this has ever happened before," the man said.

"Well, what do we do about it?" asked Cipriano.

"Do!" cried Barstowe. "We don't have to do anything about it. We just ignore that crap and go on with the operation. You can tell her she'll be getting a new implantation as soon as possible."

Cipriano paused, still thinking about what she had said to him. He looked at Barstowe and spoke again: "What about that bit about 'killing' people?"

Barstowe laughed. "Just a threat . . . a very stupid one at that."

"You don't think she's more powerful than we've imagined, do you?"

"What're you getting at?" Barstowe stared at him with cold, penetrating eyes that looked like oiled ball bearings.

"I don't know," said Cipriano. "I just can't figure out why she'd talk like that. It's not like her."

"Well, we don't have time to worry about it. For now-" Barstowe was interrupted by the buzzer on his communicator. He answered it, and saw a white helmeted Bioneer on the screen. They spoke for several seconds, then the screen darkened out. "That was Stander. They're about ready to get started. I want you down there. You can tell her what was said up here."

Cipriano nodded and left the office. When he returned to his console, he could see the surgical team approaching Feraxya's Tank. He put on the helmet and opened the channel to her mind. "They wouldn't listen," he said. "They're coming now. Pretty soon you'll be going under anesthesia. I'm sorry, Feraxya."

"Don't be sorry, Benjamin," was all she said. There was something chilling in the way she had touched his mind. The familiar warmth had vanished, and Cipriano felt the first twinges of terror icing in his spinal cord.

A Bioneer approached the console and prepared to administer the anesthesia. Outside the booth, Cipriano could see the surgical team as they reached the glassteel wall of the Tank. Suddenly the man next to him threw back his head and uttered a brief scream. The man tried to press his hands to his head just as blood began to stream from his nose and the corners of his mouth; his eyes bulged out, unseeing, and he slumped over the console, dead from a massive cerebral hemorrhage. Cipriano rushed over to him, but there was nothing that could be done.

Next to the Breeder Tank, the three men of the surgical team were waiting for the anesthesia to take effect. One of them had begun scaling the wall of the

Tank, but he never made it. Falling backward, the man landed on his back as he struggled with his suit's helmet, he convulsed for several seconds and then lay still. The remaining two surgeons rushed to his aid, but had taken only a few steps before they too were struck down by some unseen, killing force.

Cipriano watched their death throes as alarms wailed through the corridors. Suddenly people were scrambling all around him. Two parameds ran into the Breeder Tank Area and were also brought down

screaming and convulsing. Benjamin stepped back from the booth window, feeling a pit form at the base of his stomach. He flipped on the screen and punched for Barstowe's office. "Something's happened to the team!" he yelled before the picture materialized. "Barstowe! Can you hear me?"

The Superior's face appeared on the screen. "I know! What's going on down there? The intercom's going crazy!"

"I don't know," said Cipriano. "I don't know!"

"Who's in there with you?"

"I'm not sure. There's a lot of noise . . . confusion. Some technicians, a medic."

"Put one of the techs on," said Barstowe, regaining some of his usual composure.

Cipriano called the closest man over to the communicator. Barstowe said something to the technician, who nodded and reached for the anesthesia switch. Before he threw it, blood spurted from his nose and ears, and he fell away from the console. He was dead before he hit the floor.

Backing away from the console, Benjamin looked out to the Tank of pink flesh. Now the massiveness of the thing took on a new meaning. Within its walls lurked a powerful and angry Intelligence.

The screen was signaling, but there was no one close enough to answer it. Wiping the perspiration from his face, Cipriano edged close to the screen and saw Barstowe's searching eyes. "Get out of there!" the Superior screamed. "I'm calling back all the emergency units. Get up here right now." The screen blacked out.

Quickly, Cipriano shouldered his way through the crowd of Complex guards and Bioneers and headed for the nearest elevator. When he reached Barstowe's office, he found the man in animated conversation in front of his communicator. Seeing Cipriano, the Superior flicked off the screen and spoke to him: "Chicago Central Computer postulates some kind of limited-range telekinetic power an unexpected variable of the psitraining."

"I thought it would be something like that," said Benjamin. "What do you want with me?"

"You seem to have gotten along with her reasonably well in the past," said Barstowe, pausing for dramatic effect. "And she seemed to leave you alone down there just now."

"And . . . ?"

"Get in touch with her again. Try to reason with her. Calm her down. Tell her anything. Tell her that we've capitulated, that we won't abort her brood. Anything, I don't care what."

"I don't understand," said Cipriano.

"You don't have to understand it. Just do what you're told." Barstowe stood up from his desk and faced him squarely. "We want you to divert her attention, keep her occupied until we can rig up a bypass away from your console to the Breeder Tank."

"A bypass? What're you talking about?" Cipriano asked, although he already had an idea of what Barstowe intended.

"We're going to try and shut her down from outside the Complex. Shunt from the Central Computer."

"You mean you're going to kill her?"

"You're goddamn right we are!" Barstowe screamed "Listen, Chicago has postulated what would happen if that thing downstairs could somehow communicate with the other Host-Mothers. If the combined psi-powers of the entire Breeder Tank Area could be coordinated. their power would be awesome. We can't let some kind of matrix like that materialize. Now get out of here."

Cipriano rode down to his level and returned once more to the console. The entire area was deserted and his footsteps echoed down the corridor adjoining his booth. Barstowe's words were also echoing through his mind. Thought of Feraxya, of the other Host-Mothers, of the men who'd been killed, of the entire nightmarish scene all swarmed through his mind like a cloud of devouring insects. He felt helplessly trapped in the middle of a conflict that he wanted no part of.

He sat down and put on the helmet. As he threw on the proper switch, he could feel her mind lurking nearby, waiting for him to speak. "You've changed, Feraxya," he said finally.

"Why did you come back?" she said.

"I don't know," he lied. "There was nothing else to do."

"What are they going to do with me, Benjamin?"

"I . . . don't know." Again, he lied. And this time it was painful. Adrenaline pumped through him; his hands were trembling. He was glad that she could not see him.

"Do you understand why I had to do it?" she asked. "You know I didn't want it this way."

"No, I don't understand. You've become a murderer, Feraxya."

"I didn't want to do it. I just wanted to protect my brood. They have as much right to live as you or me. I won't let them be killed." Her voice in his mind seemed strained, tense. Perhaps her mind was going. He shuddered as he thought of what an insane horror she could become.

"What are you going to do now?" he asked. "They've evacuated the entire Complex. But they'll be back. You can't hold out like this forever, you know."

"I don't know, Benjamin. I'm scared. You know I'm scared. If they would promise to leave me alone, to leave my brood alone, I won't hurt them. My duty

to the Society is to produce new Citizens. That's what I

I want to do. That's all. You believe me, don't you?" "Yes, I believe you," said Cipriano just as he was distracted by several flashing lights on his console. He hadn't touched any of the switches; the technicians must be activating the controls through the recently rigged bypass circuits. He knew what was going to happen.

"Benjamin, are you still there . . . ? What's wrong?"

"I'm sorry," he said quickly, while his mind raced ahead, envisioning what would come next. He was of two minds, one of which wanted to cry out, to warn her of what was planned, the other that was content to sit back and witness her execution. He heard himself talking: ". . . and you've got to trust us, Feraxya. You can't keep killing everybody. There would be no one to maintain your systems. Everyone would lose in the end." Watching the console, Cipriano recognized the symbols that now blazed in bright scarlet on the message grid. They were planning to terminate.

"All right, Benjamin . . ." Feraxya's words were echoing through his brain. "I'll-

Her words were cut short. Cipriano jumped up from the chair, his eyes on the great Breeder Tank. The console chattered and flickered as it processed the remote commands being fed into it. "Feraxya!" he screamed as he realized what was happening, what she must now know. A life-support systems graph appeared on the grid; the plot lines all began dropping towards the y-coordinate. His mind was flooded with her last thoughts surprise, panic, loathing, and pain. For a moment he thought he felt her icy, telekinetic grip reaching out to him, enclosing cold fingers about his brain. The seconds ticked by with glacier like slowness. His mind lay in a

dark pit of fear as he awaited her retribution.

The life-fluids and the oxygen were cut off, and the great amorphous body convulsed within the Breeder Tank. She reached out and touched his mind for the last time, but in fear rather than anger or hate. She forced him to experience death. Cipriano closed his eyes against this vicarious pain, unable to wrench the helmet from his head.

Then suddenly it was over. A gathering darkness filled him. The console had begun force-feeding acid through her circulatory system, bubbling away the flesh, insuring that she was gone.

The communicator screen grew into brightness and Barstowe's face appeared there. The Superior was smiling, but Benjamin ripped off the helmet and left the console before the man spoke. The corridor outside his booth was again filled with people, their voices loud with celebration and relief. He ignored their backslapping and shouldered past them to the descent elevators.

He kept wondering why she had touched him like that, at the end. Had she known? Did she think it was he that was killing her?

He left the Complex under the weight of his thoughts. Outside, Chicago sparkled under the night sky. Its sidewalks and transit systems were filling up with work-wearied crowds who sought entertainment in the City. Cipriano stepped onto a slidewalk that carried him through the midsection of the urban Complex. He was in no hurry to go home now.

Ahead of him, the walk snaked through a kaleidoscopic forest of color and light, through the pleasure-center of the City-Xanadu. The crowds were heavy here, each seeking the mindless relief that was always to be found in this Sector. Cipriano studied them as he threaded his way through the mobs. They were all born of Host Mothers, like Feraxya, all laughing and playing their games of escape, oblivious to their grotesque origins. He passed a series of Fantasy Parlors, where the lines were already long. The patrons were mostly lower-level Citizens-nontechs, laborers, and drones that filled this Sector. They were all eager to use the City's computers to immerse themselves in imaginary worlds. Sexual fantasies were a major part of the catalog. Cipriano knew this as he passed the other opiate dispensing centers: the mind-shops, elec-drug centers, and other pleasure domes. The brightness of the lights assaulted him with their vulgar screams, the polished steel and reflecting glass shimmered with a special kind of tawdriness. For the first time, perhaps, Cipriano realized a terrible truth: the City was unable to provide for all of man's needs. There was something missing, something primal and liberating, something that was now only a desiccated memory out of man's dark history.

Perhaps Feraxya, too, was aware -of the deficiency, he thought. Perhaps that would help to explain what he had first thought to be her irrational action. He closed his eyes against the argon-brightness, frustrated because his questions would forever be unanswered.

The slidewalk moved on, taking him away from the entertainment Sector. He entered a corridor of glassteel spires-Chicago's con-apt Sectors. Cipriano untangled the matrix of walks and ramps and lifts which led to his building, and reluctantly ascended to his con-apt level. Before he could palm the

homeostatic lock, Jennifer was at the door, her face a portrait of concern. All the media had been blurting out the news of the near-catastrophe at the Eugenic Complex; she already knew what he had been forced to do.

During dinner she pressed him for details, which he produced grudgingly in short clipped sentences. Even Jennifer could perceive his lack of enthusiasm. "Perhaps I can help," she said.

At first he did not understand, for his mind was not really listening to her. Only after she stood up from the table and took a few steps towards the bedroom did he fully comprehend: she wished to console him in the only manner that she knew.

He felt cold. The memory of Feraxya's last moments of life passed through him like winter's breath. He could feel her reaching through the darkness, trying until the very end to make him know her, choosing him to be cursed with her memory.

Jennifer called his name.

Feraxya's image shattered like broken glass, and he felt himself rising from his chair, entering the bedroom.

A solitary candle burned there, where Jennifer sat making cursory adjustments on the machine. Turning, she reached out and began to undress him. Mechanically, he did the same for her.

As her clothes fell away, revealing her warm, silky flesh, he suddenly saw her differently. Instead of reaching for the wired bands and electrodes, Cipriano extended his hand and touched one of her breasts. For a moment, she was transfixed, frozen by his action. His hand slowly moved, cupping the fullness in his hand, brushing her nipple with his fingers.

He felt it swell and become rigid as she spoke: "No . . . no! Oh, please Benjamin . . . don't. Please. . ."

"But why?" he asked as he removed his hand. Inwardly he was still marvelling at the softness of her.

"Not like that," she was saying. "The machine. We can't. Not without the machine."

Something dark and ugly roiled inside his mind. He wanted to challenge her, to break through her defenses with his reckless anomie. But when he looked into her haunted eyes and saw the fear and disbelief that lay there, he knew that he could not. She could not be touched. In either sense.

Lying down, he let her attach the electrodes, felt her recline beside him. The humming of the machine rose in intensity, crowding out his thoughts. Sensations seeped into him, sending slivers of pleasures into the maelstrom of his mind's center. Vaguely, he was aware of Jennifer writhing beside him, arching her body upwards as the simulations increased. His own desires, finally awakened, snaked through him, radiating out from his groin, threatening to strangle him with their grasp. He resisted the electronic impulses, and focused his mind's eye upon the Breeder Tank where Feraxya floated in the jellied sea, where she had been able to touch him, perhaps even love him, like no one had ever done before.

Jennifer increased the accentuator, forcing the machine to drive them to unusual, even for her, frenzy. The energy-burst overwhelmed him as he finally succumbed to the wave of pleasure collapsing over him.

Feraxya faded from his consciousness as he tripped through a series of orgasms.