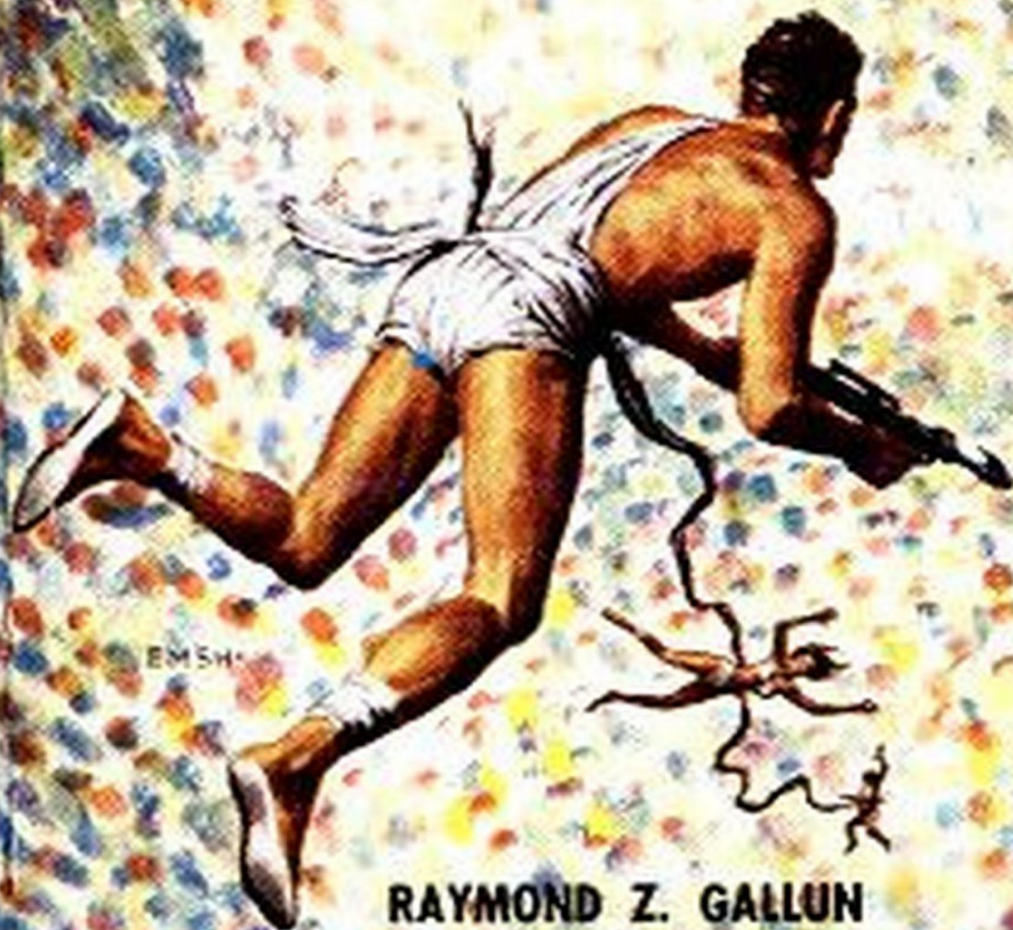


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PEOPLE MINUS X

**"PACKED
WITH
ACTION"**

— Detroit Times



EM5H

RAYMOND Z. GALLUN
Complete & Unabridged

PEOPLE MINUS X
RAYMOND Z. GALLUN

PEOPLE MINUS X
by **RAYMOND Z. GALLUN**

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I

Ed Dukas was writing letters. Someone or something was also writing—unseen but at his elbow. It was perhaps fifteen minutes before he noticed. Conspicuous at the center of the next blank sheet of paper he reached for, part of a word was already inscribed:

"*Nippe ...*"

The writing was faint and wavering but in the same shade of blue ink as that in his own pen.

Ed Dukas said "Hey?" to himself, mildly.

The frown creases between his hazel eyes deepened. They were evidence of strain that was not new. The stubby forefinger and thumb of his right hand rubbed their calloused whorls together. Surprise on his square face gave way to a cool watchfulness that, in the last ten years of guarded living, had been grimed into his nature. Ed Dukas was now twenty-two. This era was hurtling and troubled. Since his childhood, Ed had become acquainted with wonder, beauty, hate, opportunity and disaster on a cosmic level, luxury, adventure, love. Sometimes he had even found peace of mind.

He put down his pen, leaving the letter he had been writing suspended in mid-sentence:

... Pardon the preaching, Les. Human nature and everything else seems booby-trapped. They drummed the idea of courage and careful thinking into us at school. Because so much that is new and changing is a big thing to handle. Still, we'll have to stick to a course of action.

Now Ed sat with his elbows on his table, that other, no longer quite blank, sheet of paper held lightly in his hands. He sat there, a stocky young man, his hair cut short like a hedge, the clues of his existence around him: student banners on the walls; a stereoptic picture of his track team—in color of

course; ditto for his astrophysics class; his bookcase; his tiny sensipsych set; and the delicate instruments that any guy who hoped to reach the next human goal, the nearer stars, had to learn about.

His girl's picture, part of any youth's pattern of life for the last three centuries, smiled from beside him on the table. Dark. Strong as girls were apt to be, these days. Beautiful in a rough-hewn way. But even with all that strength to rely on, he was worried about her more than ever now. Times were strange. He glanced at her likeness once. Then his gaze bounced back to the paper in his hands.

His nerves tingled at the eerie thing that was happening there. He didn't know whether to feel afraid of it or hopeful. Man was stumbling toward ultimate mastery of his own flesh and the forces of the universe. But the distance remained enormous, though technical science was moving forward, perhaps too swiftly, on all fronts. Part of Ed's fear before the unknown was like the stage fright of an inexperienced actor. You never quite knew what was ahead or how to judge anything strange that you saw.

"Nippe..."

At the end of the line which made the "e" there was a tiny speck of blue ink. Almost imperceptibly, like the minute hand of a clock, it crept on, curving and looping to form another letter.

"Nipper" the word was now.

This could be somebody's funny gag, Ed thought. Somebody with a gadget. The world is full of gadgets these days. Maybe too full.

It occurred to him that a pal might be playing a joke with some simple device bought in a novelty store. But probability leaned toward something deeper and more costly. Who knew? Someone might have invented a way to make a man invisible. You didn't deny that anything could be, any more.

"Speak up!" he ordered softly.

But no answer came, and his wondering gaze found nothing unusual in the room around him. He froze. *"Nipper."* It could be part of a message, an honest attempt to convey vitally important information. Or it could be the forerunner of violence aimed in his direction. Through no fault of his own, he had had enemies for ten years. Tonight they might really act. To die was still

possible. In spite of vitaplasm. Or the more tedious method that employed natural flesh. Or the tiny cylinders hidden away in vaults. Lives were now in danger again. Human, and almost human....

For a moment Ed wanted to give a warning and to call others into consultation. He wanted to shout, "Dad! Mom! Come here!"

He didn't do so. Between him and the precise, benign personality that he called Dad there was a gradually growing barrier. And for his mother, beautiful and young by art and science, he had that feeling of male protectiveness that takes the form of keeping possible dangers hidden.

Ed decided to work on his own. Being essentially careful and slow moving when it came to delicate processes, he had not touched that creeping droplet of ink. Its secret might thus be destroyed. No, he'd never do a thing so foolish.

Swiftly he folded the paper and fastened the writing under his microscope. The ink speck was almost dry now, and nothing was hidden in it. The line of the writing itself was odd under magnification. Here and there it showed tiny, irregular dots at spaced intervals, connected by fine, dragging marks. That was all.

Of course he realized that *Nipper* might be only the first cryptic word of a message and that he had only to wait and see what would follow.

Until he began to wait, however, the significance of the word itself eluded him. A child's nickname was all that it suggested.

But now his mind bore down on it. And he had the answer almost at once. A small boy climbing the wall of a pretty garden. And his casual christening by a pleasant stranger who met him thus for the first time. Among more vivid and significant details, the memory of the name itself had been mislaid. But Ed Dukas knew that in his boyhood one person had always called him Nipper: Uncle Mitch Prell, and nobody else. Now it seemed like a secret sign.

Ed gulped, his reaction suspended somewhere between shocked pleasure and a frosty sense of eeriness. To have a friend, whom he had loved as a child, vanish into space and into apparent nonexistence after becoming a fugitive, and then to have what *seemed* to be this friend try to communicate again after ten years, and in this weird manner—well—how would you say it? Ghosts, of

course, were pure superstition. But in this age one could still react as if to the supernatural—with tingling hide and quickened heartbeats. In fact, with the vast growth of technology, more than ever was such a feeling possible.

"Uncle Mitch!" Ed Dukas called quietly.

Again there was no reply. The name on the paper still could be somebody else's trick. Granger's, maybe. There were ways for him to have learned a nickname. Many people might admire Granger as much as others despised him. And it was hard to say what he might do, or when. Or how, for that matter. He was clever. And wrong.

There was still another thing to remember. Ed did not altogether love the memory of his uncle, Dr. Mitchell Prell. For this famous scientist was marked with the stigma of responsibility for a terrific mishap. No, Prell did not bear the burden alone. There were other scientists, it was said, who had poked too roughly, and with too sharp a stick, into Nature's deepest lair. Nature had snarled back. Ed had grown up with the public hate that had resulted. He had fought against it, yet he had felt it, until sometimes he did not know where he himself stood.

Now he waited for more writing to be traced on the paper under the microscope. A minute passed, but there was nothing more. He did notice, however, that the letters of that one word matched roughly the austere handwriting of his uncle.

Once he glanced toward the window with some nervousness. Outside, the night was glorious. Never again would nights be hideous as they once had been. He saw lush gardens under silver light. If any devilish thing not known until recent months slithered through the shadows, it kept hidden. Ed saw other neighboring houses. New trees had grown to fair size in ten years. Older and larger trees remained lopsided and gnarled. But their burn scars had healed.

Otherwise there was nothing left to monument the past—except, perhaps, the sullen mutter of voices in nearby streets.

But Ed Dukas's mind, triggered by the name *Nipper* and by awareness of Mitchell Prell, slipped briefly away from the present. He had often explored memory to find understanding. At school, after the catastrophe, psychiatrists

had made every kid do that. So that neuroses might be broken or lessened or avoided. So that animal terror would not draw a curtain over a mental record of an interlude. So that memory might not be lodged, like a red coal of hysteria, in the subconscious.

Like a trained dog leaping through a flaming hoop, Ed Dukas's thoughts plunged back to that zone where his earliest memories faded into the mists of infancy:

A birthday cake with two candles. A fountain splashing in the patio of this same house. A dachshund, Schnitz, which a little boy put in almost the same category as the flat, rubber-tired robots that cleaned the rooms. Where was the distinction between machines and animals?

Flowers, hummingbirds, and butterflies in the garden. The echoes of footsteps on stone floors. Toy space ships and star ships at Christmas. The star ships were things yet to become real... There was endless interest in life then. But even in those days there were signs of cautious and puzzled guidance.

There was the sensipsych, of course. It was a wonderful box of dark wood in the living room. A soft couch folded down from it. There you lay, and for a moment strange golden light flickered into your eyes. You went to sleep, but you did not really go to sleep. For you became someone else. Maybe a cartoon character in a world where everything looked different. Funny things happened to you that frightened you at first; but then you laughed when you found that there was no harm in them.

Or, instead of being in such a crazy fairyland, you might be a real boy in space armor jumping across the surface of a huge chunk of rock called an asteroid, while stars and a blazing white sun stared at you from blackness. You were very busy helping others to roof the asteroid with crystal, and to put air underneath, and to build houses and factories where people might live and work. Always more and more people spreading out and out to populate the empty worlds of space.

But you were never on that sensipsych couch for very long, or too often. You would wake up, and there was Mom saying, "Enough, fella. A little of that sort of thing goes a great way, even when the experiences are rugged and

educational and not just whimsical nonsense."

Ed Dukas would be angry and puzzled. For it had seemed that those visions, going on without end, could bring joy forever.

"You'll understand sometime, Eddie," his mother would say, consoling him. "What happens to you by sensipsych is just make-believe. What we call recorded sensory experience. Some of it really happened to other people. Some of it is just made up. It can teach you things. But too much is very bad. Not so long ago folks found out."

There was something tender and hard and even scared in his mother's words.

Ed's dad also had his comments. Dad was something called a minerals expert.

"Come on, Eddie, let's rassle," he'd say. "Stick your chin out, boy. Let's see how tough you can look. No, not mean-tough.... That's better. We've got to lick the times we live in. And something in ourselves. With machines doing so much for us, life can be soft. And sensipsych dreams are soft. Everything in moderation. Dreams can make you feel as helpless as an oyster. Until you despise yourself and the whole race. Yes, people found out. They were always meant to feel strong and proud, and they must have tasks equal to their increasing powers. Otherwise there's spiritual rot. We've got to be ready for anything, feel our way, try to be ready to keep our balance for whatever comes. Because life could be terrible, too, if the wonderful forces we control got out of hand. We've got to go on progressing—moving out to the planets, and then maybe the stars. Got to go either ahead or backward. Can't stand still. And it's easy to go backward nowadays. Got to fight that, Eddie, or else there might be a kind of death."

"What is death, Dad?"

Ed's father would answer his son's serious expression with a gay grin. "A kind of myth, now, boy. Just going to sleep and never waking up. We hope it's mostly finished, for everybody. Even the disease of old age turned out to be something like rust gathering in a pipe. Simple. It can be fixed up. Some people even let themselves get old. But they can be made young again. Always."

Eddie had other questions.

"You were born in the old way, Eddie," his mother said. "But *so many* people

are needed now to populate the solar system. So everybody can't be born from his mother's body. There's another way; almost the same, really. Babies are born—they're made, really—in a laboratory. Then they live in a youth center, like the one on the hill."

Eddie saw its great white spire looming among the trees. Often he could hear voices in the gardens and playgrounds on the terraced setbacks of its many levels. The voices seemed mysterious somehow.

Even then Eddie sensed the groping and confusion that was in his parents' minds. Sometimes his mother would speak fervently to his father: "Jack, I'd never choose to live in another age. I love it. Because it's rich, endlessly varied, exciting. Is that why I'm often scared out of my wits? Even disgusted often enough with my selfish self and all the automatic devices? I love my work, the planning of pleasant interiors. I'm so busy there doesn't even seem to be time for another child. Yet maybe there are centuries ahead, Jack. How does one fill centuries without getting fed up? And are we supposed to be something superhuman in the end? Or do we wind up like the ancient Martians and the beings of the Asteroid Planet, before it was blown to millions of pieces? Wiped out in super-conflict, before they could progress very much further than we are now?"

Most of this went over Eddie's head. But it left a smoky tension to lurk in his mind behind the peaceful presence of sun and trees. People had made their world more beautiful for their own relaxed enjoyment. Yet even in those days Eddie sensed the turbulent undercurrent deep inside them.

Once his father expressed a vagrant thought: "Maybe we should go out to Venus sometime, Eileen. Start life over more simply in an uncrowded planet that's being conditioned to receive our ancient race. Maybe we'll do it in just a few years." He grinned.

"Yes," Eddie's mother replied. "If being indefinitely young and alive doesn't fool us before then. If our complicated civilization doesn't crack open and spit fire, and vaporize everybody. Death by violence is still definitely possible. You know, lots of our friends are getting their bodies and minds recorded so that they can be restored in case of serious injury. Maybe we should have done it long ago."

Jack Dukas met her concern with a light tease: "A woman's worry matched

against the stubbornness of a man—eh, Eileen? There's something unnatural about being recorded that I rebel against. Don't be too troubled, though. The centuries won't slip from our fingers so immediately. I hardly ever touch a dangerous thing in my work. Besides, safety devices are almost perfect."

Such serious, troubled thoughts did not dim the optimism and eagerness of young Ed Dukas. His private dreams soared into the thrills of Someday. His small hands were impatient to grasp the shadowy shapes of the future, more legendary than the not-distant past with its still-living heroes: Roland, who was largely responsible for the rejuvenation process; Schaeffer, who developed the sensipsych, brought on the dream-world period of decay, and in the end helped Harwell defeat the trap of emasculating visions by urging mankind back toward a vigorous grip on reality; and the hundreds of others who had taken part.

But the first visit of Mitchell Prell, when Ed Dukas was five, was, to the boy, like acquaintance with a legend. "Hi, Nipper!" were the first words his uncle had spoken to Eddie. Dr. Mitchell Prell was his mother's brother. He was a much smaller man than Eddie's dad, and dark instead of blond. He was famous. And he brought gifts.

"A piece of the Moon, Nipper," he said. "An opal imbedded naturally in gold. For your mom. And this case of instruments dug up in Martian ruins, for your dad. Fifty million years old but better than anything designed by human beings for locating ores far underground. And this for you—also from Mars. I haven't been there for a long time. But I got an old friend to send me the stuff—to the labs on the Moon."

Maybe Eddie's gift had once been a toy for the off-spring of extinct Martian monsters. It was triangular like a kite, metallic, with a faint lavender sheen. When you whistled a certain way, a jet of air made it rise high in the sky. But it always came back. Atomic power was in it somewhere. For it never ran out of energy.

Uncle Mitch never seemed to say much. He didn't get deep into philosophy. He set up queer apparatus in his room, and a kid could look at it if he didn't touch. And to one of Dad's questions he answered briefly, "Yes, we're making headway in the labs on the Moon. There'll be a motor for star ships. If, in our experiments, hyperspace itself doesn't burst at the seams under that

level of power. No, we're not yet trying for speeds of more than a fraction of that of light. A trip to a star will take a long time."

It soon came out that Uncle Mitch had another interest. He kept in a glass tube something that squirmed and wriggled, and felt like warm flesh though its natural form, when at rest, was a slender cylinder of pencil size.

About that he would only say, "Call it alive if you want to. But not like us. Invented and artificial, and far more rugged than our flesh. For the rest, wait and see if anything comes of it. Maybe it'll become the clay of the superman. Schaeffer, here on Earth, is working on it, too."

Uncle Mitch stayed for a week. Then he was gone, rocketing out to the labs, isolated for safety at the center of a *mare* on the always hidden hemisphere of the Moon.

"Mitch knows what he wants and is direct about it," was Jack Dukas's comment. "Simple. No conflicts. The scientist's approach. Wise or stupid? Who knows?"

Eddie was six, and then seven. The years moved slowly, but he grew and hardened with them. By the time he was twelve, sports and study and awareness of realities had toughened his body and matured his soul considerably. That was fortunate, for this was his and mankind's fateful year. The day came when the household robots were fixing up the guestroom specially for Uncle Mitch again. Dad was afield, a hundred miles away, to look over a vein of quartz crystal that was to be shipped to the lunar laboratories. At 9:00 P.M. Eddie's father had not yet returned.

Eddie was sprawled on his bed looking lazily at the translucent blue font of the lamp beside it. The color was rich and beautiful, the carvings snaky and odd. Here was another gift, ordered by Uncle Mitch from a friend in the region of the Asteroids. The font was an artifact of a race contemporary with the Martians who had also lost their fight to master nature and themselves through knowledge. The font had been found floating free in space, among the wreckage of a planet blown to pieces ages back.

Eddie was thinking of such things. He was also thinking of neighborhood pals, to whom he had bragged about his uncle and his expected arrival.

As for what happened at that moment: there *was* transpatial warning, radioed

out fifteen seconds ahead, telling of forces gone hopelessly out of control in the lunar laboratories. But Eddie's set was not functioning, and he did not hear it.

Beyond the windows of his room there was just calm, pale moonlight. The Moon looked little different than it always looked, except for the blue spots of the atmosphere domes of the great mining centers.

But then came the intolerable blue-white light. Perhaps, somewhere, exposed instruments measured its intensity. On the roofs of meteorological stations, maybe. Say conservatively that, for the space of a few seconds, it was five hundred times as strong as full sunshine.

Night was broken off. But there was no day like this. For one fragment of a second Eddie glanced at the window. Shadows seemed gone, utterly. Even dark things like tree trunks reflected so much light that they all but vanished in the shimmering glare. As yet, it was a soundless phenomenon.

Eddie shut his eyes and buried his face in his pillow. This reflex action, partly as natural as terror and partly the result of training for emergencies at school, saved his vision. He might have screamed, had he been able to find his voice. Distantly, he heard human sounds that increased the sickness in his stomach. A gentle scene and mood, product of science, had been utterly shattered by forces of the same origin.

He did not see the fuzzy blob of incandescence that bloomed in the sky and expanded slowly for many seconds. In fact, no one saw it; only cameras, fitted with special dark filters, would have been able to do so. For living eyes would have been charred by that splendor.

He heard his mother calling his name. Keeping his eyelids tightly closed and an elbow bent over them, he fumbled his way to the hall, and to her. They dropped to the floor and huddled there.

Outside, voices died away. By then the devilish glory in the sky was fading a little, too, at the edges. Only the heart of the great blob still blazed supernally, with its millions of degrees of heat. Around it was a cooling fog of dust and gases that masked the hell within it.

The world grew still for a few moments, as it does at the center of a typhoon. Then there was a great, soft roaring. The shock wave of expanded, rarefied

gases, speeding at many hundreds of miles per second, striking the upper terrestrial atmosphere, and pressing down. Eddie could feel the pressure of it, transmitted by the air—a light but definite punching inward of his flesh, from all sides.

Then there was a distant sighing of wind—air, super-heated and compressed, being forced outward. Next came the resurgence of human sounds, if they were truly that any more.

Someone was yelling, "Oh, God ... Oh, God ... Oh, God...." There was a crackle and smell of fire. Something blew up far off.

Then the earthquakes began. With a sharp snap, rock strata far underground broke. Then came a jolt. Eddie Dukas and his mother, huddled on the floor, were engulfed in a swaying sensation, smooth and vibrationless. Then the ground quivered softly. After that, there was a pause, as of something hanging precariously for a moment at the jagged lip of a chasm. Suddenly the pathetic hold seemed to be broken, and the whole world was seized by a tooth-cracking chatter. A pause.... Then it began again.

For a second Eddie's mother almost lost her control. She tried to rise. "The house!" she stammered. "It'll fall on us."

Panic and reason fought inside Eddie. "No, Mom," he gasped. "The house has a steel frame. It'll probably hold together. Outside, we don't know what would happen to us."

They both braced themselves for the next seismic burst. They were both creatures of luxury, science-made. But planning, training, psychology—science it all was, too—had given them ruggedness and courage, a reserve of strength against hysteria—while the earth rattled again and again.

Eddie's mom kept saying things, and it was all something like a formula that had been learned, a rote, a parroted incantation: "You're right, Eddie. We've got to think before we do anything. They always tell us that life is an adventure. We've got to meet a bigger future or be destroyed, Eddie. Everything takes nerve."

At last the earthquake shocks lessened both in intensity and frequency. Maybe the worst was over.

Eddie risked an eye, and then nudged his mother.

Beyond the undamaged flexoglass of the windows night had returned, red-lit from both sky and ground. The firmament was smeared with a ruddy glow extending in a great curve, beaded with more intense blobs at several points. Dust of the Moon, it had to be. Of its rock and pumice shell. And of its core of meteoric iron. But that sullen effulgence was fading now, as matter cooled and began simply to reflect solar light back to this dark side of Earth.

Yet everywhere outside there was fire. The towering glow in the east—that would be the City, fifty miles away. Destruction and confusion there would be unimaginable. Nearer at hand, trees were aflame—leaves and branches that minutes ago had been cool with greenness now blazed wildly. Mixed with the tumult of voices was the clang of robot fire units.

Eddie rushed to the radio and turned it on, as he had been taught to do in emergencies. You listened; you obeyed directions. "... lunar blowup," someone was saying. "Follow the usual precautions and measures for radioactive contamination and flesh burns. Rescue and relief units are already in action. Fortunately most of our buildings are not made of combustible materials...."

For minutes Eddie was furiously busy, rubbing special salves and lotions into the skin of his entire body. Then, dressed in fresh clothes, he and his mother just stared out of the windows for a while. Outside, metal shapes were at work. Science and civilization were working efficiently to recapture their balance after an upset that might have been the end.

Eddie and his mother explored the house and found it mostly intact. Then incident piled on incident in quick succession. The first of these began with a whimper at the door. Masked with respirators against possible radioactive taints in the outside air, they opened it. A blackened thing without eyes dragged itself inside, quivered once, and lay still. It was death among supposed immortals. The passing of a dachshund called Schnitz.

Eddie was dazed. Child-grief or man-grief had no chance to come to him then. Events moved too fast. There was too much to be done.

A half-dozen people in radiation armor came into the house. At once it was converted into a first-aid station. Hard law and hard drills, blueprinted long before for disaster, came into play. Eddie's mother joined the crew. Nor was

he left out of it. There was coffee for him to prepare in the kitchen, and rugs and furniture to be cleared away, and equipment to be set up.

He saw blood and death, and hysteria-twisted faces. He saw glinting, complex instruments and apparatus, as the therapeutic methods of the age were applied. There were blood pumps that could serve as hearts and machines to duplicate the functions of kidneys and lungs. There were devices to teleport scattered body cells from a dozen healthy individuals, converting them briefly into mobile energy, and then back into living tissue in the body of an injured person.

Mostly the maimed and burned remained stolid and calm. Luxury had not weakened them. They, too, had known their era and had had some preparation.

Eddie recognized a child of his own age among those who came into his own house: a neighbor boy named Les Payten, the son of a noted biologist. He had big ears and a freckled nose. He wasn't hurt badly. His eyes were inflamed. He hadn't shut them quite quickly enough. He had turned sullen, and his lip trembled a bit. Otherwise he was still full of pepper.

"Braggin' about your Uncle Mitch *now*, Eddie?" he taunted. "Great stuff, that guy! He and his pal scientists nearly got us all. Better luck next time, huh?"

Young Ed Dukas might have growled back but he did not. As if he too carried a burden of responsibility, his jaw hardened and his cheeks hollowed. His back stiffened, as if to bear the load. He returned to the kitchen. He had not yet noticed any other signs of blame. It was too soon. The shock of cosmic catastrophe had deadened minds. Sometimes prejudice and hatred need a certain leisurely brooding to build them up.

But another raw realization had come to Eddie. As soon as there was a moment to speak to his mother he said, "Uncle Mitch was supposed to land in the City spaceport tonight. It's a six-hour run from the Moon. But now he'll never get here."

She shook her head. And in her expression there was fury mixed with her sadness.

He didn't think about that very long as he helped carry a stretcher. His mind was on Mitchell Prell—grinning, setting up a lab in the room upstairs, even

modeling wax with his swift fingers. He had once molded little heads of Mom and Dad. A lump gathered in Eddie's throat for someone who would never be back. Mitchell Prell. Even the name sounded nice.

Then slowly another question came into his mind. *Where was Dad?* He'd gone out to that quartz lode and hadn't come back! Funny, thought Eddie, I hadn't even thought about that. Well, it came from taking Dad for granted. Someone never to worry about. Someone always around, like the hills. Eddie clenched his fists to steady himself. No use worrying yet.

Now the torrential rains began. Steam had been boiled out of the ground by heat. Now it was condensing. Helping, maybe, as the radio said, to wash away the poison of the radioactive meteorites and dust that were falling to Earth—wreckage that hours before had been part of the Moon.

Somewhere out in the moaning storm a bell chimed out ten o'clock very calmly. It must have been about then that what was left of Jack Dukas was brought home in a truck. Eddie didn't see this happen. He was helping again with the injured. And later, when Les Payten told him, Mom wouldn't let him go into the locked room where his dad had been taken. He almost told her that he had a right. But he did not want to disturb her further.

Eddie was up till 4:00 A.M. By then the rescue crew had left the house and a tentative calm had been restored in the world. The injured were in hospitals, rigged in tents and public buildings. But there were far more dead. Anyone caught more than a step from shelter when the catastrophe had occurred was apt to belong to that endless list. Half a planet had been scorched by heat and radiation.

While the guard-robots rumbled through the rain on their caterpillar treads, Eddie simply passed out from weariness on the floor of the living room. His mother managed to arouse him a little but not enough to send him to bed. Rather, she folded down the twin couches from the sensipsych set. She made her husky young son climb up onto one of them and took the other for herself.

He slept, and his body was refreshed. And he had dreams—not dreams in which he was an imaginary cartoon character; nor was he toiling to make dead asteroids habitable; nor was he enjoying an adventure on some imaginary planet among the stars. No, for the present he had had enough of

strain. Instead he lay in grass by a little lake. The sun was bright. There were boats with colored sails, and blue flamingos flying, and odd, elfin music. The sensipsych was not an opiate to fill the emptiness of soft lives now. It was rest; it was honest, relieving therapy.

Young Ed Dukas didn't see the mud-spattered truck arrive, to be parked some distance from the house. He did not see the figure moving in the dense shadows. It knocked cautiously at the front door, waited for a reasonable time, and then went around to the porch in the rear. There skillful fingers worked carefully to release the lock. Massive luggage was lifted without sound inside the door.

Eddie awoke with a small, hard hand shaking his shoulder. His mother was already awake. The light was on. At first only with simple unbelief, they beheld a slight, disheveled figure.

Uncle Mitch's cheek was scraped. His hands were filthy. His recently neat business suit was torn. An old jauntiness about his eyes fought with worry, regret and wariness.

"Hello, Eileen," he said. "Hi, Nipper."

He received no answer. Somehow even Eddie felt compelled to silence. So his uncle shifted to what was a rarity with him—a kind of historical or philosophical summary.

"Progress," he said with a forced laugh. "The world government answering the threat of atomic war, years ago. Then the greatest boon of the human race: eternal youth, and death's defeat except by violence, producing the problem of overpopulation, to be relieved by the colonization of the solar system. Then peace and boredom and the sensipsych dreams leading to decadence, loss of pride in self and even rebellious violence; then the solution of vigorous, realistic action, more and more people to enjoy life, more and more colonies. Then, as we reach out for the stars, this. Life. The great adventure that can't be stopped. The rise from barbarism. Is it even well begun?"

His words, half appropriate and half in supremely bad taste now, as Mitchell Prell well knew—though he had to say them because of the need to say something—still fell into a void of silence and echoed through the house like a cheap speech.

Sighing raggedly, he tried again: "Yes, I'm alive, Eileen. The ship from the Moon was in space before the blowup happened. We rode ahead of the main shock wave at high speed. So we won through. From the final warning message from the Moon, I gather that trouble started in the warp chambers. The heat and pressure were restrained by the tight space warp for a while, until inter-dimensional barriers ripped wide open. The whole mass of the Moon was in the way. By old standards it couldn't happen; but a lot of lunar atoms went all to pieces in a flare of high energy. The tough part is that we achieved a workable motor principle for stellar ships weeks ago. The blowup came from side line testing."

Once more no words answered Mitchell Prell when he stopped talking. He waited, but his sister's eyes remained cold.

"All right, Eileen," he went on at last. "You're thinking that I am one of the specialists who is responsible for this. Surely I'm the only survivor among those research men who were on the Moon. But remember this: we weren't working on our own. We were hired, under a democratic system, and told what to hunt for. It was the best that could be done, except that the lab should have been put farther away, on some lonely asteroid. Logically, then, we are not solely to blame for what has happened. But it doesn't work that way, Eileen. Under grief and hysteria logic still collapses, even in our time. In a real crisis there continue to be many people who need scapegoats. A collective mishap, the result of a mass desire for more knowledge, then becomes a personal guilt. So I'm a fugitive, Eileen."

It was a strange, bitter thing for Eddie Dukas to watch—his mother and uncle facing each other, not friends, his mother's face a hard mask of coldness.

Then, all at once, her icy poise crumbled. "Jack isn't alive any more," she said. "My husband. That's the fact that I know best. You with your glib talk, my brother, are one person directly in the chain of events that caused Jack's death. I don't accuse you, Mitch. I just say that I can't look on you now with any pleasure. That's all."

Then, sitting there on the sensipsych couch, she began to cry. It was painful for Eddie to watch. He had never seen her do that before.

But Mitchell Prell chuckled. He sat beside his sister and put his arm around her. "Are things so bad?" he chided. "Look, Eileen. People used to consider

biological life the deepest secret of nature. Because he was at the top of his local life scale, man would not have been flattered to know that the vital force in him wasn't the greatest, the most indecipherable of enigmas. But it's true, Eileen. Year after year we've learned more about cell function, genes, chromosomes, the natural molding of living things, and the final process in protoplasm, which is the spark itself. Men like Schaeffer have been making simple life for years, while they traced out more complex riddles. For a long time they've been replacing diseased or damaged organs from scattered cells drawn from the bodies of many donors. Now they've gone further and have grown such organs in a culture fluid, from a microscopic bit of tissue. It is already theoretically possible to re-create an entire man, provided there is a pattern. It was for repair purposes, after possible accidents, that everyone was urged to have his body structure recorded—especially that of his brain. All you have to do, Eileen, is have Jack's record turned over to the same laboratories that do rejuvenation. In two or three years he'll come back to you just as he was. Soon there might even be a simpler, better way."

Eileen Dukas's laugh was brittle and bitter. "A roll of fine, sensitized wire," she said. "Kept in a box no bigger than the first joint of a finger. Supposed to be safe in a vault. The pattern of a human being. Well, Mitch, there just isn't any such box for Jack. Or for Eddie or me either, for that matter. We just didn't get around to it. Jack was somehow half against it."

Again there was a silence. For Eddie it seemed to have the quiet of forever in it. No whistling of Dad's tunes. No sly winks, or play at being tough. Just memory.

"All bodies that are being picked up are being sent through the recorder," Uncle Mitch offered at last. "Refined radar does the trick. The finest variations of even brain structure—the mold of mind, personality, and memory—are found and recorded. Wasn't that done for Jack?"

Eddie's mother nodded. "Only," she stammered, "the whole top of his head was charred. There wasn't enough of him left. Oh, you and your damned science, Mitch."

She was weeping again. Mitchell Prell became either cruel or perhaps he spoke in self-defense.

"The people that used to neglect things like insurance," he remarked, "are still

plentiful, aren't they? Oh, well, maybe there's still a sort of way. A makeshift. People are bound to think of it. Let it go for now. I've got lots to worry about, sister of mine."

"Your own skin, for instance?" she challenged him. "Why did you come here at all, Mitch? The scapegoat-seekers will certainly look for you here first."

"My own skin," Mitchell Prell agreed. "Maybe yours, since you are a relative of mine, responsible for my sins. That is an ancient defect of logic among certain types of people still in existence, I'm afraid—if the provocation becomes great enough. The skins of the three of us, my most prized treasures."

He smiled slightly then, and his blue eyes were gentle. "Don't worry too much, though," he went on. "I'll be gone sooner than most people will even think of looking for me. I'll keep out of sight, not even leaving the house, except after dark. I have some things to deliver to Schaeffer. Then I've got to get away. Because life goes on, in spite of everything. I'm still curious about nature, the stars and some other things. I remain eager for some vast freedom, Eileen—for you and your son, and the rest of the cursed race, whose errant qualities and usually good intentions I share. I see no good in becoming the offering of expiation for an accident that came out of a general human urge to learn that can't and won't be downed."

Something like a truce came then. Eddie Dukas could feel it. Family loyalty was in it and a little of understanding and contrition.

"All right, Mitch," was all that Eddie's mother said. She kissed his uncle's cheek. Eddie knew that it was a woman's gesture of armistice.

Fires had died down. Dawn was beginning to show in the patio. The rain had stopped long ago. For no reason Eddie's eyes sought out a pool of muddy water in a crack in the flagging. The water was clay colored, as it might have been after any shower. A robin, which had somehow escaped death, was scolding angrily.

Breakfast was eaten listlessly. There were radio reports and orders. "Able persons must report to their municipal centers...."

"That's for you, Eddie," Mitchell Prell said ruefully. "And your mother. While I play hiding rat."