

WITCH OF THE FOUR WINDS - Novel by John Jakes

# FANTASTIC

STORIES OF IMAGINATION

NOVEMBER

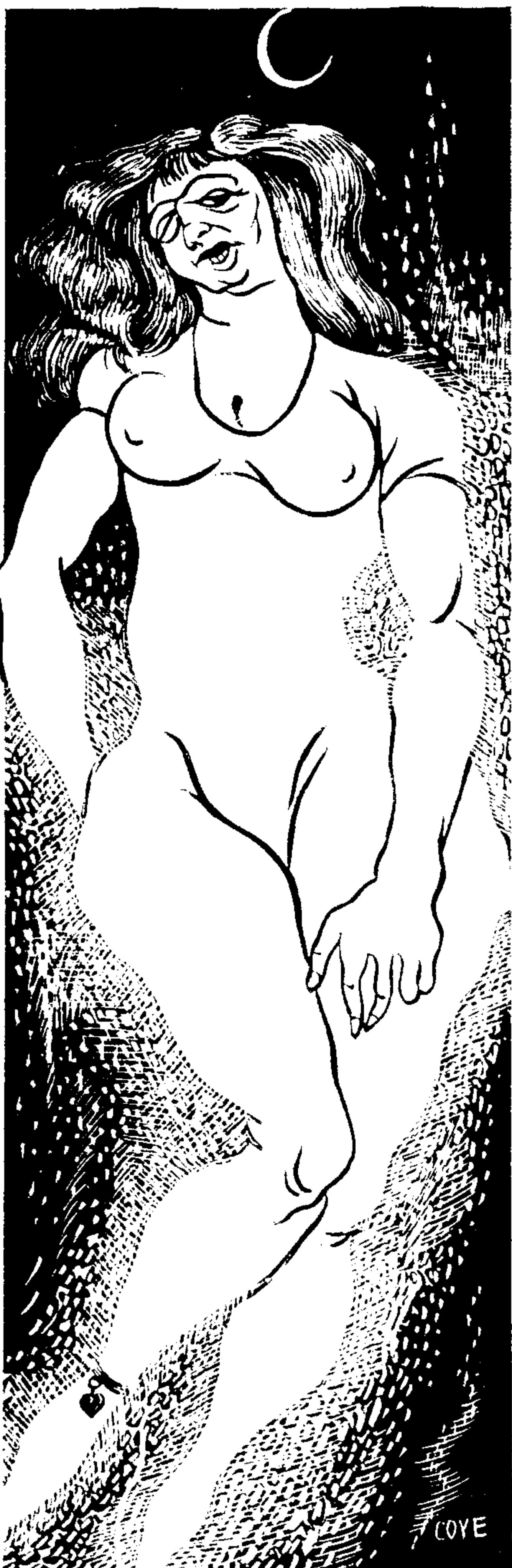
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THE AFTERTIME

by Jack Sharkey







*The tiny group of survivors quickly learned the perils of the blue pool. It took longer to learn the real lesson of . . .*

# THE BETTER TIME

By  
**JACK SHARKEY**

Illustrator COYE



RORY'S eyelids fluttered, then remained open. He stared for a long time at the ragged crack across the plaster ceiling of his room without recognition or awareness. It took him nearly a full minute before the significance of what he was seeing registered on his brain. Then he sat up swiftly, with a frantic thudding beginning in his chest as realization came.

"No!" he shuddered, fighting the truths told him by his eyes. "No, it didn't happen. It can't have!"

Memory returned slowly, belying his frightened denial.

His whirling thoughts began to conjure up a series of images, ghastly images. He'd been in bed, reading . . . there was light, terrible silent searing light flaring through his window, etching the silhouette of the window on the wall facing the foot of his bed . . . and then noise, loud and steadily louder noise that had struck him like a physical blow, stunned him into merciful unconsciousness.

Rory threw back the blankets, barely noticing their white-powdered surface where sundered plaster had fallen in thick white clouds. He saw the glinting spicules and shards of the shattered window just in time, and held his bare feet clear of the floor. With shaking fingers he reached into the relatively clear area beneath

the bed and found his shoes, slipped them onto his bare feet and laced them. Then he got up, his foot kicking aside the book that had fallen to the floor, and went to the window.

There was no glass left in it, not even around the rim. The sash was splintered as though struck by a piledriver. On the wall where he had first seen its silhouette, its shape remained, burnt brown and black into the blistered paint. And still he couldn't believe it had really happened. Not until he looked out the window.

Yellow sunlight spilled warmly over the crumbling bricks on the rubble-heap that had been a city. Only the buildings that—like his own—had stood in shielded sites, with other buildings fortunately arrayed between them and the blast area, other buildings that now lay in smoldering ruin, still stood. Nowhere could he see an unbroken window. His mind began to imagine the scene that no man could have actually witnessed and lived.

The wind ramming outward from the blast. Wind that had compressed the air into a dilating ring of concrete-hardness, snapping bridge-cables like scorched thread, lifting heavy trucks like a swirl of dead leaves, meeting steel-and-cement obstacles as a tidal wave meets a sand-castle.

Rory shivered and turned

away from the horrifying sight.

He belatedly began flexing fingers and toes, checking out his body for damage, seeing if he could breathe without pain. So far as he could determine, he was untouched by the catastrophe. That was something. Suddenly remembering, he crunched over the littered floor to his closet and found the radio on the shelf, the precious battery-powered radio that had somehow been spared, the radio that would let him know what had happened to the city. He clicked it on and waited.

AFTER a moment, it began to hum and crackle. Rory twirled the selector-knob, trying first the Conelrad bands. Hum and static. He turned the selector more slowly, then, trying every band on the dial. Hum and static. "It's broken," he lied to himself. "Someone must be left, somewhere."

Mumbling other hollow encouragements to himself, he began to dress. It was late spring, but he carried a pile-lined jacket with him, just in case. As an afterthought, before he left the room, he rummaged in the splintered wreckage that had been his dresser and found his jackknife, the knife he hadn't carried with him since he'd been a young boy. It had, besides the blades, a can-opener, corkscrew, and screwdriver. It might, he realized num-

bly, be the last of its kind on Earth. He pocketed it very carefully.

Outside his room, he found stark sunlight illuminating only half a hallway. The angular brunt of the blast against his apartment house had blown away the rear corner of the building like an axe removing a wedge from a square cheese. If his bed had been just one room further toward the back—Rory didn't let himself complete the thought.

There was, luckily, enough of the staircase left to descend. Five floors down, on ground level, the entrance was deep in rubble. Rory had to scrunch across broken masonry and wood on his hands and knees to reach the street. The door had been mostly glass, so getting through it was no problem. On the street, the extent of the chaos was more sickeningly apparent. Off in a pile of bricks, a small grey body was hunched, its ugly matted fur glittering dully in the sunlight. He stooped by pure reflex and hurled a rock at it. The creature chittered angrily at him, but fled, its hairless tail vanishing after it through a hole in a building wall. Rory started to investigate, to see what it had been nibbling upon, then decided not to. In their own way, he realized sickly, the rats would be quite beneficial; enough of them could spare the city the final indignity of rot-

ting carrion, and its accompanying stench.

He started carefully up the street, his fingers—on the unopened knife in his pocket—perspiring stickily. The thing to do, he knew was find food, food untainted—if such a hope were possible—by radiation. Then a place to stay. His room, while he might return there for extra clothing and blankets, was in too perilous a locale to be very safe. His apartment building might, at any time, sigh dustily and topple over onto its already fallen section. Then, with a source of food, and a rat-proofed shelter, he could start to hunt for other survivors. He made himself believe he'd find them; he had to believe he wasn't alone or go crazy.

And even as he thought this, he heard the skittering of gravel down a brickpile, and looked up to see Anna. She stood nervously on a rise of buckled pavement, watching him as he advanced toward her, slowly, over the crushed facade of a grocery store. Her pose—hands open wide, not quite touching her thighs, and flexed knees rounding out the crease in her dark slacks—told him she was poised for instant flight if he showed any signs of menace.

"Don't run," he said simply, halting his advance and extending his hands toward her.

She looked at him, carefully, without moving, her eyes taking in his neat clothing, bluing jawline, and tangled mat of light brown hair. Catching her focal point, he grinned, suddenly, and ran a hand through his hair. "It won't stay down without water," he said. "I gave up trying to comb it dry. And," he added, rubbing the back of his hand against his bristling chin, "my electric razor didn't want to perform."

She laughed, abruptly, then halted, as if suddenly reminded that the two of them were at a wake. "My name's Anna," she said.

"Rory," he answered politely. Neither of them used surnames, without realizing this omission. Some unconscious instinct told them that this particular distinction of persons was no longer necessary; there was, so far as they knew, only the one Rory, the one Anna, on the planet.

**S**HE came down to him, then, smiling shyly. "I'm glad I'm not the only one," she said, "left alive in the city."

"Me, too," he answered. He stared at her, at her longish hair, the color of mink fur, at her slightly too-close-set grey eyes, and pale skin. She wasn't a heart-stopping beauty, but she wasn't the worst he'd ever seen, either. She blushed, all at once, and he realized he'd been looking long

enough to have taken written inventory. "Sorry," he said.

She shrugged briefly, but said nothing.

"I was just starting to hunt for food," he told her. "There's no way of telling what the radiation-count might be, but I figure if we stick to canned goods and unbroken bottles, we have a fighting chance of avoiding contamination."

"And then?" she said, after absorbing this.

"Shelter. A place to sleep. Preferably ringed with rat traps, if we can find a hardware store someplace."

Anna made a face and shuddered convulsively. "They're everywhere," she said tautly, her eyes flicking from building to building. "They must have been down in the sewers when—" As though it were taboo to mention the death of the city, she stopped short.

"The best place they could've been," Rory agreed. "We may yet find some people who were smart enough to join them."

"Let's look," she said suddenly, clutching his arm. "I think it'll help if there are more people. If we can find a radio, learn what's happened—" She saw something in his face. "You've tried?"

"Nothing but noise," he said. "If there are any stations still standing, no one's using them.

Unless FM. My radio doesn't play FM."

"It'd be nice," she said, in what sounded like a non sequitur until Rory recalled the mainstay of FM broadcasts, "to hear music again. I hope we can."

"There's a set of bongos on my closet shelf," he said. Anna laughed, then began to cry, and Rory held her in his arms till her spate of hysterical outletting passed.

"Feel better?"

"Much."

"Maybe if we build a fire, someone'll see the smoke—" he began, then looked around them and gave it up. The great re-entry of wind after the initial blast, rushing back to fill the void left after that massive flare of heat, seemed to have drawn the strength from whatever fires had started, but there were still black plumes and grey threads and blue clouds rising from scattered spots in the ruined city. One small fire's smoking would go quite unnoticed by other survivors. "Maybe we could start walking," he counter-suggested, "and give a shout every block or so."

"No," Anna said sharply. "I don't want just *any* people. There may be dangerous people about, too. I want to see who I'm joining with before I decide to join."

"Well, we can't just stand here in the street," said Rory, starting toward the open-faced grocery

store, or what was left of it. "Let's see what we can salvage."

**A**N hour later, they had found just seventeen safe-appearing cans. There had been no unbroken bottles in the store, and most of the cans had been burst—or cracked too deeply to be risked—by falling walls. There was one can of evaporated milk, a tiny can of Vienna sausages, one large can of apricot nectar, and fourteen others whose labels had been burned or ripped away. The first three Rory kept aside, since they knew the contents, and could save them for some future meal. They took potluck on three of the others, and found themselves with a strange repast of artichoke hearts, peach halves, and pink salmon before them. Then they realized that they had no utensils save Rory's knife-blades.

"There's a hardware store on the next block, I remember," said Rory. "There should be spoons, or something . . ."

"Let's use our fingers," said Anna. "I'm too hungry to search." They did so, and even when the meal was done, they made no further move to hunt out spoons or forks. By tacit agreement, they didn't bother wasting the energy to seek out the habitual, but not really necessary, trimmings of a social civilization that didn't exist anymore.

Rory had just hurled one of the empty cans at a creeping grey form, and the empty container was clattering along the street, inches short of the unflinching whiskered nose of the rat, when they spotted the next survivor.

He'd come around the corner so silently that both Rory and Anna could have been attacked unawares if he presented a genuine menace. But the man was small, and old, and looked terribly hungry. Even as they scrambled to their feet at the shock of his sudden appearance so nearby, they lost the spark of fear that had sent nervous lightning through their muscles. The newcomer hesitated, watching them warily, but his eyes kept straying to the pile of yet-unopened tins at their feet. Seeing his thoughts on his face, Rory stooped, lifted the nearest can, and held it out in an unmistakable gesture of friendship.

The other rushed forward and grabbed it from him, then looked helplessly at the smooth metal surface.

"Here," said Rory, taking it from him and plying the can-opener attachment of his knife against the round top. It proved to be corn beef hash, a much more substantial foodstuff than either of them had had, but they stood by stolidly while the old man crammed his mouth full with handfuls of the stuff and

swallowed mostly without even chewing. "You'll be thirsty, after that," said Anna, picking up the apricot nectar can and handing it to Rory.

"Thanks," said the old man, as Rory punctured the top and handed it over. He drank nearly half the contents before wiping the back of his blue-veined hand across his lips and handing it back. "I've never been so hungry in my life." He smiled, then, and Anna felt a twinge of revulsion in her stomach when she saw he was quite toothless; the sight of the grinning pink gums and wet red tongue made her ill.

"I *beg* your pardon," he said sincerely, his smile vanishing at once. While his tongue probed swiftly between gums and cheeks to remove any unswallowed particles, he got a hand into the inside pocket of his shiny blue serge jacket and it came out clutching a small plastic jar in which they could see pink-and-white dentures. "Afraid to carry 'em in my mouth, in case I tripped or something," he apologized, carefully unscrewing the lid of the jar, removing the dentures, shaking excessive liquid off them, and wedging them in place.

**A** BRUPTLY, he looked a lot younger, and much less frail, as the concavities of his withered cheeks stretched firmly

over the porcelain surfaces in his mouth. "Are there any others in your group?" he asked.

His stress, Rory noted with relief, was on the penultimate word. "How many in *yours*?" he demanded of the man.

"Two besides myself," the man replied. "There's Mason, and Brita, and me." He remembered his manners, then. "I'm Newsome," he said.

Rory and Anna introduced themselves, and informed him regretfully that they were the sole members of their group.

"No matter," said Newsome. "It's a start, anyways. We may find more, yet."

The three of them divided the remaining thirteen cans equitably among themselves, six apiece for Rory and Newsome, and the opened apricot nectar can borne carefully by Anna, then set off to find Mason and Brita. Two days later, they found two more people, wandering alone through the shattered streets; a plump blonde woman named Sal, whose hair-roots were coming in dark grey, and a pimply-faced crewcut youth named Charlie. They found no others.

Charlie had a dog, named Scraps; part boxer, part indeterminate. Newsome's first comment when they'd found Charlie and his furry companion ("Looks too scrawny to make more'n one good meal.") had nearly alienat-

ed Charlie from the group, until Anna assured him that the dog was worth its weight in dubious nutrition as a rat-catcher and—alarm.

They made a camp partially out-of-doors, in a three-sided areaway between still-extant building walls. At the mouth of the niche, they kept a watchfire burning all night (wood pieces to feed it were sadly easy to come by), and Scraps sleeping just beyond that, inside the niche, in case some of the more fearless rats tried attacking from the upper edges of the walls. Food was still fairly plentiful, Mason having found a crumbling supermart where nearly fifty percent of the canned goods were still intact.

But after a week of sheer existing—scavenging, and eating, and sleeping, then scavenging some more—Rory decided they had better think further ahead than simply searching for another supermart when this one was depleted. He'd gone back to his room for the radio, and they turned it on every evening for fifteen minutes (conserving the irreplaceable batteries), hoping for some sign that the country was getting back on its feet. But there was never anything but humming and bursts of static.

"We've got to rebuild," he told the group, on their seventh night

in the dead city. "I can't see us going on as we've been for much longer. Maybe we could survive a year, or even two, on what we can dig from the rubble, but how are we going to get through a winter? We need a better shelter. We should build a sending-set, in case there are other survivors with working radios, in other cities. We need a source of fresh water; it's possible that the river, upstream of the city, at least, is unpolluted. There are a million-and-one things we'll have to do if we're to last beyond the supplies we manage to dig out."

"Why?" said Newsome, his wrinkled features lit by the orange firelight. "What's the good? Civilization is dead. Let it lie. The world will be a better place when we're all of us dead with our civilization."

**T**HERE was an uncomfortable silence, then Rory turned his head toward Charlie, whose pimples were greatly diminished on their commonly astringent diet. "Suppose we hear from someone whose life isn't mostly *behind* him," Rory said.

"What about sex?" said Charlie, so softly that Mason rolled onto his back and guffawed. "Well, what *about* it?!" Charlie demanded angrily. "We have only three women, and four men. Who's going to *live* in our rebuilt world?"

"I think," said Mason, recovering himself enough to force a solemn mien on his flattish, thick features, "the boy has a point. For myself, I've taken a liking to Sal, here—" (The greying blond woman giggled un prettily) "—and Rory and Anna seem content with each other. Why don't you stake a claim on Brita, son?"

Brita, who was at least three years Charlie's senior, said, sardonically, "How do you know I don't intend to start a convent?"

"You didn't," blurted a red-faced Newsome, "include *me* in your pairing-off, Mason."

"Why?" mocked the heavy-armed, stocky man beside Sal. "What's the good? You're nearly as dead as civilization, buddy-boy. I thought we might just let *you* lie."

"Listen—!" snarled Newsome, getting to his feet with angry effort, and grabbing up a flaming fragment of wainscot from the fire. He raised this sharp-tipped firebrand like a spear, glaring across the campfire at Mason, who hadn't moved a muscle.

"Don't try it," he said flatly. "You're not too scrawny to make a meal of." Mason's eyes slid down Newsome's body and paused when they were staring into the crackling flames of the campfire. He sat there, waiting. No one spoke. Then Newsome thrust the burning splint back

into the flames and sat down, avoiding everyone's eyes.

"I think," said Rory, in the silence that followed, "we ought to have a leader. This squabbling, I'm afraid, is going to be unavoidable. There'll have to be some kind of authority in the group; some kind of judge, or policy-maker."

"Then I nominate you," said Anna.

Rory looked around the circle of firelit faces. "I can't second my own nomination," he said shortly.

"I second it," said Charlie.

"Okay by me," shrugged Mason. "I'd just as soon not have the responsibility."

"My vote's with Mason's," said Sal, leaning back until the nape of her neck rested snugly against the big man's shoulder. His arm slid affectionately around her plump waist.

"Five to two, already, doesn't leave me much choice," said Brita, yawning. "Looks like you're it, Rory."

The six voters turned simultaneously to see what Newsome would say, but the old man simply spat into the fire and got up from his place, all in cold silence. He glowered at them a moment, then shuffled back toward his blanket, against the rear wall of the niche. Then Mason smiled just a bit cruelly, and turned his face toward the darkness there.

"I take it this means you intend to find your own shelter?" he said softly. "Dig for your own food? Fight off your own rats?"

There came a rustle of blanket, then a harsh, bitter voice, close to tears. "*Damn* you, Mason!" it said helplessly.

Mason turned back to the group. "I think that makes the vote unanimous." He leaned a hand back toward his blanket and withdrew a tall amber-colored can from under it, then solemnly borrowed Rory's knife and used it to puncture the lid. A jet of spume sizzled as it hit the campfire. "A toast to our new leader," said Mason. Then added, ruefully, "In warm beer." The can circulated around the group like a sloshing peacepipe, and was then handed back through the darkness to Newsome, who finished it gratefully.

"So," said Rory, "now we make some plans."

THE next day, in the ruins of a stationery store, they got an unscorched block of paper, some new ballpoint pens, and a sturdy clipboard for their leader. Rory duly set down in firm block letters what they had discovered and discussed the night before:

*Mason:* Little education. Strong body and willingness to use it. Hauling and construction.

*Brita:* A former practical nurse. Group physician.

*Sal:* Widow and gourmand. Cook.

*Anna:* Psychology major, studying for her doctorate. Morale officer. (Teacher, when the children came?)

*Charlie:* High school graduate, no specialties, good with a rifle. Sentry and rat-killer, if a rifle could be found.

*Newsome:* A surprisingly good whittler and sketcher. Group artist, designer. (And *buffer*, Rory added mentally; the group could use a common focal point of dislike, to better unite them with each other.)

*Rory:* Group coordinator.

It wasn't too impressive, but it was all they had to work with. Naturally, there would be considerable overlapping. While each was a specialist of sorts, there would be no reason why Anna and Brita, for instance, could not assist Sal with preparing meals, or the men could not help Mason in his building and transporting goods, or any of them take turns doing sentry duty, although Scraps seemed to be a one-man dog, and would not patrol with anyone except Charlie.

"It's a start," Rory told the group. "For a start, I think we should find a clear place, one not in danger of eventually toppling buildings, and build a dwelling of some kind. There are plenty of bricks and wood and nails. I

think the first room constructed should be the kitchen. Until that's done, we can all sleep as we have been. But the bedrooms ought to be completed before the end of summer."

Newsome cheerfully offered to draw a set of plans, and he and Mason went into conference immediately. Charlie and Scraps went off to see if a rifle couldn't be found someplace in the city, Brita and Sal started planning a noon meal, and Rory and Anna set off with a sort of rudimentary sled (made from some carefully bent iron curtain-rods and an inverted tabletop which gave the carrying surface a handy restraining lip) to bring back as much food as they could drag behind them.

Everyone, no matter where they were going or where they remained, kept at hand or carried a heavy club to ward off rat-attacks. The creatures were growing bolder, day by day. Scraps had a raw spot on one foreleg where the teeth of a rodent had met under the fur before the dog was able to break its back with his jaws and shake the remaining life out of it. He licked and bit at the raw spot at irregular intervals, and tended to favor that foreleg when he walked. Everyone else was doubly on guard after his injury. They were determined to protect themselves.

SO it was with a mingled emotion of relief and uneasiness that Charlie remarked, on the day the kitchen was completed, "How long since anyone saw a rat?"

Brita looked up from the table, where she was slicing a loaf of date-nut bread, the only kind they could find in cans. "It can't be too long for me!" she said, shuddering.

"Hell," muttered Charlie, "I know that! I mean—I haven't seen one in a week, now. I was just looking to see how Scraps' leg was doing, and I remembered about the rats."

Mason, who had just finished hammering the last shingle onto the roof, entered the single room as Charlie spoke, and paused just inside the doorway with a scowl. "Damned if you're not right!" he said. "You don't think we scared them off?"

"Hungry rats don't scare easily," Charlie retorted.

"What's all this?" asked Rory, coming inside behind Mason. They told him. Rory scowled as Mason had. "Maybe the pool of radiation—" he said, looking around the group for some corroboration. The very center of the city, where the blast had originated, had been off-limits from the outset. There, where the heat had been greatest, a vast concavity lay, its sides steep and glassy, formed of new-cooled riv-

ers of molten brick, mortar and steel. In this mile-wide pit, a blue glow could be seen at night, filling the hollow from rim to rim like faintly seen underlit waters. It was an evil-looking spot, even from three city blocks away, the nearest any of the group dared approach. On a really dark night, the blue pool of witch-fires heaved and pulsed like a sluggish tidal basin, and its surface was alive with twinkling white sparks. Rory knew, even as he advanced his theory, that it was a futile one. The rats were never seen to go anywhere near the pit, as though instinctively equating those unnatural lights with death.

"Yeah," said Charlie, more from compassion than conviction. "Yeah, Rory, that must be it."

The subject was dropped, then, and no one brought it up again until supper that night, when a still-uneasy Charlie put his query to Anna. Newsome and Sal, who had also been away in the afternoon, looked up in interest to hear what she'd answer. But Anna, without getting the least excited, dismissed Charlie's worries with a shrug.

"Poisoned, probably," she said. "Even if their teeth *can* bite through unspoiled tins of food, I've noticed that they don't bother when there are already-sundered tins around. They're prob-

ably dying off of contamination, is all."

"Why didn't I think of that!" Rory mumbled. "My imagination must be going to my head!"

"Where did you *used* to keep it?" asked Brita, and the topic was dropped amid the general laughter at Rory's expense.

The next morning, Sal announced that if nobody was planning to go on an inadvertent diet, some more food must be brought back to the kitchen. Rory and Anna, needed to assist with the raising of the heavy timbers that would support the ceiling of the first bedroom, stayed with the group and sent Newsome and Charlie—the two puniest members of the group—with the sled to scavenge the supermarket ruins. By noon, six of the timbers had been raised, and a skeleton roof hammered into place, and the two of them had not returned. An hour before nightfall, Rory was becoming afraid, and could see that the others felt the same. No one had mentioned their fears aloud, as yet, but when Rory suggested they all go look, everyone agreed with alacrity.

Scraps, luckily, had been left behind, tethered whining to a post as his master and Newsome had gone off. Rory took a few turns of the rope-leash around his wrist, and let the big dog lead them away from the construction site toward the heart of the

city. When they reached the rubble that had been a supermarket, no sign of the two was found. But there was something else missing, too.

"Look!" shouted Mason, pointing into the wreckage. "Not a can, anyplace!"

THE others drew together behind him and looked, then spread out, needing no command from Rory, to investigate. After ten minutes, it was a certainty. Except for those cans already burst apart, their contents spoiled and dessicated upon the bricks, no foodstuffs were to be found.

"They can't have loaded *everything* on the sled!?" said Brita, almost babbling.

"Let's find them, now!" said Rory. "We can figure this out later." He gave Scraps his head, then, and the dog, beginning to whimper piteously, started forward again into the city, the group clambering after him over the gritty mounded rubble in the streets. Half a mile from the edge of the center of the blast area, they found the sled, empty, the towline lying limp on the street.

"Careful," said Rory, taking a firmer grip on Scraps' leash. "We're getting near the three-block limit."

"But what if they're beyond it?" said Sal, frightened.

"If—" Anna said slowly, "If

we don't remain more than ten minutes, I don't think it will do us much harm to go a little farther inward . . ." She looked at Rory, waiting.

"Okay," he said, letting Scraps pull him forward again.

One block from the lip of the pit, they found one of Charlie's shoes. Scraps lay down with his nose against it, and began to whine and moan, remaining where he was, though Rory tugged hard on the leash. A few yards beyond the shoe, Brita found the sleeve of Newsome's shirt. It was burnt off at the shoulder, and speckled with circles of scorched brown. Sal's gasp of alarm drew their attention with a jerk from a perusal of these terrifying objects.

Down at the end of the street, where the pit began, something was moving, something that twinkled like a cloud of stardust, something that floated between the leveled buildings toward where the group stood. Without knowing why, Rory shouted, "Run!", and the group turned about and fled up the streets, no one stopping until they reached their camp-site again. The sun was just setting, but the blue brightness in the center of the city did not die.

"Where's Scraps?" said Anna, suddenly.

Rory stared stupidly at his empty right palm. "I must've

dropped the leash, when—" he said, shaken.

They never saw the dog again.

**A**ND the glow in the center of the city grew, day by day, in intensity. The same almost-perfect circle of desolation would, as the sun set, become a luminous field of light, pulsating beneath starlit black skies. "It's burning itself out," Mason theorized. "This is like a sort of last-ditch stand for the radiation, just like a lightbulb flares brighter than ever before the filament melts." No one disputed him. Everyone hoped he was correct.

Then, after they'd watched and hoped for three nearly foodless days, they knew the theory was fruitless. Even in daylight, the glow could be seen; a definite circular surface, flowing in slow eddies, heaving like a miniature ocean of pure energy, bluish and deadly.

The white sparks were clearer, now. The very sight of them dazzled the eye, even at midday. Yet, although the group shared a fear of unknown things, they did not think of the sparks as a menace until the day Sal went too near the area of the glowing blue pool.

She'd been out with Mason, Anna and Rory, foraging for the length of a hungry morning, and having no luck. Later, no one blamed her, her insides torn with empty churning, for edging away

from them, starting to search the forbidden area. Even Rory, the group leader, admitted he'd been more and more tempted to lift his ban, as food grew more and more undetectable. So they were not really surprised when Anna's shout called their attention to the plump, grey-blonde woman a few hundred yards off, risking the invisible poisons of that seething pool in the center of the dead city.

They started after her, though, lest her dread of starvation lead her to a worse fate; Rory had decreed that anyone who lingered in the radiation zone must be cast out from the group, less their own contamination poison the rest. Sal was two blocks from center, and then one block, where her soft pink flesh must have been feeling the physical heat of the pool, when the horror had happened.

Tiny white-hot sparks, ceasing their random flicker over the surface of the pool, suddenly coalesced into a swarm. The sparks began to float, like some weird slow comet, toward the spot where Sal scrabbled in the ruins. Mason cried out a warning. Sal, hearing him, straightened up and looked toward him, her back to the danger. And on came the floating swarm of sparks, each like an iridescent pearl with a core of white flame. "Behind you!" Anna shrieked, and Sal

pivoted on fat legs to see the incredible things that were seeking her out.

She froze in fear, then, and the glowing menace halted, bobbing in midair, surveying her. Then she turned and ran, and the spark-comet matched her pace—surpassed it—and enveloped her. Mason screamed heartbrokenly, and the others turned away, sick. Sal's body became a white-hot travesty of itself, a crystal statue of incredible brightness, a blindingly beautiful thing that screamed and fell writhing to the street.

Then it was over. The spark-thing floated lazily back toward the pool in the center of the city.

**WHEN**—after many cautious minutes of watching the pool—they finally nerved themselves enough to creep up to the spot, there was nothing left to bury. A charred black mound of dust, sifting and fluttering on the air-streams their approach had created, blew away even as they arrived, mingling forever with the ashes of the dead city.

And then, of course, they knew what had happened to Charlie, and Newsome, and Scraps.

Rory held a desperate council when they returned to the camp-site and told a shocked Brita the news. There had to be a rigid rule, from then on: Hunting in pairs only. One to watch, one to

search the ruins. Never less than two. For infracting this rule, he had to append no penalty. The penalty would come of itself.

In their haste to return, however, they'd come without the sled. Brita, unwilling to remain alone in the camp, now, went out with them to retrieve it. And it was gone.

"We can easily build another—" Mason said lamely.

No one commented on the futility of such a move. If one sled had been taken, another could be taken. It would be wasted effort.

So, at the site of the vanished sled, they split into two groups, Mason going off with Brita, and Rory with Anna. Food would have to be hand-carried from now on.

Rory and Anna, with five puny cans of anchovies—all they could garner in three hours—were back at camp a long time before Mason came back, alone, his eyes wild with shock and grief. But his news, gruesome as it was, was not all bad.

In the death of Brita he had learned a defense against the death-sparks, by the merest accident.

She had turned a corner, a few steps ahead of him, and had walked, without a chance of escape, straight into a waiting cloud of sparks. For a foolhardy moment, Mason recounted, he

thought of springing to her defense, but then, realizing the hopelessness of this, had turned and fled up the street. The swarm, leaving the scorched dustpile that had been Brita, swooped after him. In despair, he'd turned to face this certain death, his back braced against a pile of rubble, his limbs stiff with fear.

The sparks had passed him by.

Every last one of them had passed the place where he crouched awaiting death. Slowly, he told Rory and Anna, he'd started to lift himself— And the swarm, in cold white silence, had veered, turned, and come back toward him. He'd lain still against the rubble at once, forced himself to quiescence in his sudden flash of insight. And as he lay there rigid, barely breathing, the sparks drifted idly by him, as though blind, bobbing here and there, but luckily not finding him, not three feet away from their passage.

"Motion," he finished. "That's how they know there's a living thing in the vicinity. By its movement. That's why that swarm paused a moment before Sal. She'd have been safe if she hadn't run. And now, I think, we know what's happened to the rats."

"I—I don't think I could do it!" declared Anna.

"It takes courage, I know,"

said Mason. "But it's our sole defense."

Anna shivered. "Will they die out, eventually, do you think? If we can avoid them—and they eventually destroy what animal life still lives in the ruins, will they starve?"

"We can only hope so," said Mason, not knowing he was four days from his own death.

ON that day, just at sunset, the sparks came to the campsite. (Work on the bedrooms had ceased on the day Charlie and Newsome had vanished.) Their only comfort against the chilly edge growing nightly in the air was the campfire, around which they huddled in their blankets, trying to strike a comfortable medium between the warmth of the embers and the cooking sting of the smoke, edging nearer or farther away, as the breeze dictated.

Anna, the first to see the approaching glitter in the dark streets, whispered a warning to the two men, and then all three lay rock-still, trying not to tremble. The sparks hovered on the fringe of the camp, like a thousand disembodied eyes, seeking, hungering . . . But still uncertain.

Rory was the first to see Mason's danger. A trailing edge of the big man's blanket was smoking where a spurting

ember of wood had fallen. Then a circlet of orange appeared around the charred area, and a dusting of flame licked at the woolen fibers. "Mason—" Rory risked a shout. "Get rid of the blanket!"

As though feeling the sound-waves, the sparks drifted closer, moving swiftly.

Mason gave a gasp of horror as he felt the tingle of the biting heat against his ankle, but foolishly ignored Rory's shout and tried to remain motionless. The smoldering corner of the blanket burst into dancing flame, suddenly, singeing the hair on his leg, searing the flesh. With a cry of helpless rage against the creeping fire, Mason leaped up and threw the blanket into the darkness, beat at the burgeoning aurora of relentless fires that spiraled up his legs, bit away trousers and shirt with invincible teeth of fire. He was still slapping at his garments when the white cloud of sparks engulfed him.

Anna and Rory had to force themselves to remain rigid despite his shriek of despair. He was a toppling column of white fires, and then a drifting plume of dust in the cold black night air. The group was now at its irreducible minimum. One to watch, one to search.

The next day, despite what had happened, Rory and Anna went

out to find food. She stood keeping nervous watch as he pawed through the crushed masonry and shattered wood of a small delicatessen. His toughening, scarred hands found but three unbroken containers beneath the blistered bricks, after two hours' delving.

"Three," he murmured to Anna, sagging in the debris on his hands and knees, suddenly too weary even to look her way.

"Let it be, then," she said, leaving her post at last, and climbing over the glass-strewn wreckage toward him. "Take what you have, and let's go!"

SHE pulled him to his feet, shivering despite the warm sunlight. Her eyes barely glanced at him as he straightened and began to dust the powdery pink brick-dust from his knees. He carried the precious canned goods toward the path, the narrow lane that lay like a serpent's tail through the chaos of shattered city.

Anna's eyes flickered nervously from left to right as she preceded Rory down this tortuous path, carpeted with broken stone, toward the camp.

"We shouldn't have come this near the pit," she said. "I'm afraid, Rory."

"The stores near the camp are depleted," he said wearily. "It's come this far or starve."

"I think I'd rather," she said suddenly. Then, "Here, let me carry those."

She tried not to show her panic as she took the three tiny cans from him, and took a quick look at his bony, hollow-eyed face. Rory was getting sick. Worry and hunger were taking their toll of his once-strong body. If he got worse— She'd be *alone*. Alone with the sparks.

"Almost there, Rory," she said encouragingly, as they forged their way through the nearly impassable path between the smashed walls of once-tall buildings. They were a few yards from the place where the street widened when she saw the drifting cloud that glittered in the sunlight before them. "Don't move!" she whispered, halting.

Rory, sick and weak, staggered against her, and one of the cans clattered onto the ground. The hovering cloud, sensing recent motion, began to glide down the gap toward them.

"Rory—" Anna whispered urgently, "there's no room for them to pass!" She didn't have to explain further. If even *one* spark-thing came in contact with them, and bit deep with its hot energies, the victim would be unable to refrain from a convulsive reaction. And that would attract the rest of the swarm.

There was a tilted facade to one side of them, a truncated

building-front with a sagging door still somehow in its frame, the roof and remaining walls lying in shards. "Anna," he said as the cloud drifted nearer, "to our left—!"

"We can't. We can't make it!"

"We've got to. And right now. *Move!*"

In desperation, Anna hurled the two cans she had left toward the cloud. They were engulfed in midair, and bore the gleaming swarm to earth. The spark-things clung tightly as the cans struck the surface of the path, rebounded, then rolled, even as Anna and Rory ducked into the doorway to their left.

An instant later, the swarm left the glinting tins they'd mistaken for living creatures. The induced motion had passed, and they knew there was no life to suck from the barren metal surfaces.

RORY and Anna, huddled against the inner wall of the roofless building, drew agonized breaths into their lungs, not daring to speak, nor even to tremble. Hot sunlight beat down upon them there, and then over the broken rim of the wall a spark drifted, then another and another.

Soon the broken surfaces of the building were coruscating with reflected gleams from the pearl-fire cloud that hung over

the fugitives. The sparks seemed to sense some sort of motion-potential in the two rigid shapes against the wall beneath them, and they were waiting.

A muscle in Rory's leg twitched, tightened, and cramped. He held steady. Sticky perspiration trickled down his back beneath his torn shirt, and began to generate a burning, maddening itch.

"Rory—" Anna whimpered. "They're going to get us!"

"Shut up!" he snapped. "They'll hear!"

A spark dipped lower than the rest of the cloud, on a slow, but steep, angle that would end against her face.

"Rory!" she screamed. The cloud began to follow the first spark down toward her lips.

Anna shrieked his name once more, then threw a hand before her eyes and fell forward into the debris, sobbing in anticipated agony even before the swarm descended on her like a silent avalanche of luminous hailstones.

Rory didn't even let himself blink an eye to block off the sight, a sight like having a gigantic flare go off right in one's face. Then the sparks, having fed, trickled upward into the air, glowing more gently now they were sated, leaving a blackened thing that collapsed with a quiet puffing sound into the broken stonework.

Apparently sated, the cloud drifted slowly away over the wall, and Rory was alone in the city. He turned, stumbling, and made his way like an automaton through the little swirls of dust that had been, a moment before, a young woman. He lurched through the littered streets, moving faster and faster, toward the outskirts of the city. He passed the campsite, the half-finished shelter they'd been constructing, the niche where they'd slept so many nights, and didn't even turn his head.

He was near the city limits, now. He was approaching the crest of a circular rise of ground that surrounded the city. Then he was moving down the other side, down a dirt road that led toward a group of men a few hundred yards away. A tall, grey-ing man with gaunt cheeks was the first to see him. This man rushed up the road to him, reached out and clasped his hand.

"Congratulations, Captain," the man said. "You've done it! You've come through!"

Rory stared blankly at the other, at his sharp blue eyes, at the golden eagles on his shoulders. Then it was as if a door had been opened upon a hidden section of his mind.

"Colonel Garth!" he gasped. Then he fainted into the other man's arms.

MUCH later, Captain Roderick McKay, neatly dressed in lightweight khakis, sipped a cup of coffee across the table from the Colonel in the mess tent. They were ten miles beyond the place of their abrupt meeting, in the center of a small encampment of selected personnel.

"It's still coming in fuzzy, sir," Roy grinned, his face smarting pleasantly from the effects of a new razor and icy aftershave lotion. His hair was still an unmilitary tangle, but a barber was being sent to the camp. And all the weeks' accumulation of dust and filth had been scrubbed away. "I can remember bits and pieces, now, but there are still some blank spots in the sequence."

"It's nothing to worry about," the other man said, positively. "You'll remember everything as soon as some of the shock wears off. It's a jolt, coming back from enforced amnesia."

"What brought me back?" Roy asked abruptly. "Why did I suddenly turn about and leave the city?"

"Orders, deep in your subconscious mind, planted there under deep hypnosis," said Garth. "No one was to leave the city until the group had either revitalized itself into a well-functioning community, or until just one survivor remained. In the latter case, of course, we hoped at least

to profit by a knowledge of what mistakes were made. But don't try dredging up the facts for me; the psych-boys will be picking your brains soon enough."

"If only—" Rory said somberly, "The others—"

"Don't concern yourself with that," said Garth. "They had as much chance as you. All volunteers. You were just the lucky one. Like yourself, they had no family. It will spare us the ordeal of falsifying death certificates, making up a lot of stories to tell the relatives. They wagered their lives, and lost. When this experiment is made public someday, their names will be permanently inscribed on the country's roll of honor."

"Sir—" Rory began, "I'm afraid I'm bursting with questions . . ."

"That's to be expected," said the Colonel. "I'll give you the answers, if I have them."

"Well—about the radio . . .?"

"Jammed. We simply bombarded the area with powerful signals to blanket everything else. One radio program reaching you would have shattered the hypnosis and ruined the project. Of course, the radiation created scramble-waves of its own."

"For a picked crew," Rory said sadly, "we sure botched the job. We never did get around to planting, trying to raise our own food—"

"That's why my men cleaned out the supermart," said Garth, "and swiped the sled. You people were depending too much on scavenging. In due time, of course, you would have been forced to start farming; we left a city park untouched, for that purpose, but you people ignored it, so we had to—well—accelerate the petering-out of ready supplies."

"We never suspected—"

"More orders, pre-planted in your minds," said Garth. "We only entered a few times, and at night, when you were all quite unwakeable, thanks to the hypnosis. I'm surprised none of you wondered over your well-rested sleeps out in the open, on the hard earth." The Colonel stretched and yawned. He looked at his watch, then, and sighed. "Getting late. You'd better hit the sack. A jeep will take you to the airport, first thing in the morning, where a plane will take you to Washington, and eager-beaver scientists will proceed to milk you dry. Any more questions before we call it a day?" he said, turning back the tent-flap and staring out into the dark, moonless night.

"What are those spark-things?" asked Rory.

"Atomic energy," said the Colonel, grimly, "in its purest form. Somehow, in the sundering of the atoms in any given blast, a num-

ber of atomic nuclei are destroyed without a concurrent disruption of their electron-rings. These rings persist, insofar as we can determine, out of sheer blind habit, even though there is no longer a core about which they must revolve. It's as though they're too 'stunned', if I may, by the explosion to know that they're free. Much as a man whose wife has suddenly died might continue to go through the motions of everyday life he has done so many times before, though no further need exists for them. And, just as this man, slightly maddened by shock, might halt strange women upon the street, mistaking them for his vanished wife, so these 'bereft' electrons seek out stability in the form of nuclei of other whole atoms. When they find such atoms, a 'fight' results between them and the electron-rings which 'belong'. The result is a pair of weak-cored atoms, along with a resultant emission of energy. The intense flare of heat produced destroys the victim."

**B**UT why do they attack only living creatures, or organic matter?" Rory asked. "There are atoms just as available in the bricks and metal and glass back there in the city."

"We don't know," the Colonel said helplessly. "That's why we

organized your group, left it in the city to try to cope with those things. We hoped to glean a shred, even, of more practical knowledge of the things, some defense against them. Or, by a miraculous stroke of luck on the part of the group, an *offense!* However, I can see that our latter hope was foolish; if you'd had an offense, there'd have been more survivors."

"I'm afraid," said Rory, "that the only defense we came up with was to remain motionless; they didn't seem able to recognize living things except by motion. It may be *my* fault, for not organizing things better. Who knows?"

The Colonel stiffened, then turned to face him. "I didn't follow that last bit, Captain . . . What do you mean, organizing things?"

"I mean," Rory said unhappily, "that I wasn't much of a leader. I tried working out abilities, assigning tasks—" One look at the Colonel's face stoppered his mouth like a cork. Rory began to feel decidedly uncomfortable, suddenly.

"But Major Mason was to have headed the group!" said Garth, angrily bewildered. "You were slated as his *aide*!"

"Sir—" said Rory, recovering the use of his voice. "Tell me about the others. Anna and Newsome and the rest. What were *they* supposed to do?"

"Wait here," the Colonel said sternly. "I have a list back in my quarters." He hurried out into the night, leaving Rory to stare dizzily into the empty depths of his coffee cup. It took only a few moments, on the Colonel's return, to see all the things that had gone unaccountably wrong.

Corporal Charles Crew, Charlie, had taken a college degree in metallurgy before being drafted. His assignment had been the casting of metals into tools and weapons.

WAC Captain Sally Marcus, with a doctorate in biochemistry, was to have organized a food-synthesizing plant, to assist in survival until the first harvest, at which time she would take charge of the group's agricultural development.

Anna and Brita Kempler, sisters who merely ranked as privates in the WAC, were to do the menial work, the cooking, cleaning, sewing.

"But *nothing* worked out as it should, then!" said Rory. "The entire group was turned topsy-turvy, the wrong people in charge, the leaders trailing the followers—!" He smashed a fist into the opposing palm. "It's all coming back to me, now! If only we could have been sent to the city, with our memories intact—"

"Impossible," said the Colonel. "You couldn't have remained to

face the dangers there if you'd been allowed to know that the world outside the city was still alive and unharmed. But we were so *certain* that the inter-group relationships hadn't been erased along with the memory of the hypnosis!"

"So," said Rory, abruptly, "what happens to your analogy of the man in shock, behaving according to pattern? Not *one* of us acted habitually, when the group formed in the city! Yet we were *all* stunned by what we believed to be the aftermath of an atomic bombing of the city. Why didn't we conform to the pattern?"

"Because," said the Colonel wearily, "there is one *random* factor in dealing with people that cannot ever be foretold with any accuracy, I guess, Rory: Volition.

"Put a hungry dog into a cage with a porkchop, and you can predict it will eat. Do the same with a hungry man, and all you can predict is that he'll *want* to eat that porkchop; there's no certainty, however, that he will. There is no known way accurately to foretell human behavior no matter what the circumstances."

"That's it, sir!" said Rory. "That's our solution to the problem of those spark-things!"

"What is?!" demanded the Colonel.

"The fact that a human being can ignore his natural instincts, of course!" said Rory. "These spark-things are acting blindly. If you run, they give chase. If you remain still, they bob aimlessly. What if you ran *at* them, instead of *away*?"

"Who would be brave enough to take such a risk?" said Garth.

"I would," said Rory. "I owe that much to Anna and the others."

\* \* \*

An hour later, Rory—with Colonel Garth standing not far behind him in the littered streets—encountered a cloud of the spark-things. He stood, nerving himself, while the sparkling spherical monsters hovered before him over the narrow pathway. Then he dashed straight for them with a shout, and the entire whirl of white energy spun madly in the air, then arrowed before him, at twice his pace, back into the glowing blue pit from which they'd come.

They did not emerge again.

THE END

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