

Terry Pratchett "The Long Mars"

They stepped into hell.

Ash and pumice pounded their shoulders, their heads, the ash like diabolic snow, grey, heavy and hot, the pumice coming in frothy pebble-sized chunks. The falling rocks hammered on a car in front of them, a mound already heaped up with ash. The background noise was a steady dull roar that drowned out their speech. The sky, under Yellowstone ash and gas and smoke from a plume that by now climbed twenty miles into the air, was virtually black.

And it was *hot*, hot as a pioneer town's forge. It was hard to believe the caldera itself was all of fifty miles away. Even out as far as this, some said, the falling ash could melt again and flow as lava.

But the property they'd come to check out was right before them, as in the Guard's plan, a one-storey house with a porch that had collapsed under the weight of the ash.

Sally led the way forward, around the buried car. They had to wade through an ash fall that was feet deep in places, like a heavy, hot, hard snowfall. Its sheer weight was only the beginning of the problems the ash caused. If it got the chance the stuff would abrade your skin, turn your eyes into itching pockets of pain, and scrape your lungs to mincemeat. Give it a few months and it could kill you, even if it didn't just crush you first.

The front door seemed to be locked. Sally didn't waste time; she raised a booted leg and kicked in the door.

Wreckage clogged the room within. Joshua saw in the light of his lamp that the load of pumice and ash had long overwhelmed this wooden-framed structure, and the roof and loft space had fallen in through the ceiling. This living room was cluttered with debris, as well as with grey drifts of ash. At first glance it seemed impossible that anybody could be left alive in here. But Sally, always quick to assess a new and confusing situation, pointed at one corner where a dining table stood, square and stout and resistant, despite a thick layer of ash on its own upper surface.

They pushed their way through. Where their booted feet scraped away the debris, Joshua glimpsed a crimson carpet.

The table was shrouded with curtains. When they pulled these aside they found three adults. They were just mounds of ash-grey clothing, their heads and faces swathed with towels. But Joshua soon identified a man and a woman, middle-aged, maybe fifties, and one woman who looked much older, frailer, maybe eighty years old; slumped in a corner, she seemed to be asleep. From the toilet stink that came out of this little shelter, Joshua guessed they'd been here some time, days perhaps.

Startled by Joshua and Sally in their nuclear-alert-type masks, the middle-aged couple quailed back. But then the man pulled away a towel to reveal an ash-stained mouth, red-rimmed eyes. 'Thank God.'

'Mr Brewer? My name's Joshua. This is Sally. We've come to get you out of here.'