Josh Reynolds

FOUR DAYS DEAD

FOR THE HOUR IS COMING WHEN THOSE WHO SLEEP
in the dust of the ground will awaken, and return to life once more.

The Book of Daniel

TRENCH CRUSADE™

Four Days Dead

Trench Crusade fiction
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Roland Azir awoke in stifling darkness, packed in amongst corpses. He knew they were corpses, because they didn't complain when he fumbled free of their slack embraces and fell, gagging and choking, to a hard metal floor. The echo of his escape did not go far, absorbed as it was by the great stacks of bodies. The gridded floor was slick with something he couldn't identify. A smell like that of the grave – or, rather, many graves – enveloped his dulled senses, and he feebly patted at his tattered uniform, looking for the matches he habitually carried, despite the fact he hadn't been able to find cigarettes in a month.

He shook his head, trying to clear the fug of unconsciousness. Nothing hurt; it never did. Not these days. He closed his eyes. The last thing he remembered was an explosion. He'd been with the others of his unit, moving through a quagmire of mud and blood, past the smoking ruins of ruptured tanks and piles of mangled stuff that had once been men – a familiar enough scene, in these sad times. In the distance, he'd heard a bell, a church bell, perhaps. There were some churches left, weren't there? It was hard to remember sometimes. It had been so long since he'd seen one, or at least one that was intact. So long since he'd knelt in prayer for anything more than a few desperate moments prior to – no.

No. Focus.

He pushed all thought of churches, intact or otherwise, aside with an ease born of experience. Instead, he focused on the tangibles. His

armour was gone, but that was to be expected. Weapons as well. And boots. At least they'd left his socks. But then, who would be desperate enough to steal a leper's socks?

Beggars can't be choosers, as they say, a voice murmured in his ear.

Roland found his matches and fumbled them free of his pocket. They at least had been left him. "Even lepers have standards, my friend," he said, aloud. The voice – the Voice, as he always thought of it – chuckled.

If you say so.

"I do. I speak from personal experience, as you well know." Roland took a shallow breath and lit a match. Dead faces stared at him from all sides, waxen in the weak light of the match; bloated, porous, ruined. Roland, who had seen worse in his service on the Carcass Front, instinctively tried to identify them. When he realised that none of them were familiar, he sighed in relief. "Well, that's something."

Something awful.

"Pish," Roland said, as he rose unsteadily to his feet. He still had some feeling in them, though he suspected a few of his toes were on the cusp of resigning from the body politic. Leprosy attacked the extremities first, or so he'd been told. Part of his morning routine was to count his fingers, to see if any had detached in the night. Thus far, he'd been lucky, at least in that regard.

Lucky, or blessed?

"Six of one, a dozen of the other," Roland muttered. He looked around. He was in a hollow of sorts, a bubble of space between wedged and stacked bodies, rising higher than he could see. Lucky for him, else he might have suffocated, none the wiser.

"Where am I?" he asked, aloud. Again, precious little echo. The match burnt down to his fingertips and he casually extinguished it. He rattled the matchbox speculatively. Only a few remaining; he would have to be careful. Glancing up, he saw that past a canopy of arms and legs, a faint glow filtered down. "Light," he said, aloud. "Not moonlight either."

Or sunlight. Electric.

"Hopefully. Electricity means people."

But which ones?

The Voice was almost teasing. Roland sighed. He still wasn't sure when he'd started hearing it, or why, though he knew he was the only one who could. At first, he'd thought it was a visitation: the voice of the Almighty, or one of his angels. Or worse, something from the opposite camp. But as the years had progressed, and it had become more familiar, he'd begun to believe it was neither. Rather, it was him, or some part of him at least, congealing in the soupy primeval morass of his subconscious.

In short, he was mad. Barmy. Doolally.

That realisation had brought an odd sort of comfort to him. If it was madness, it was at least a companionable form. He'd known a fellow who'd started eating himself, after enduring one too many artillery barrages. Better the Voice than that.

How complimentary. Better than auto-cannibalism. I'm touched.

Roland snorted. "No, I'm touched. In the head. Now make yourself useful and help me figure out where we are."

First you insult me, then you demand my help.

"You do carry on so," Roland muttered, squinting at his surroundings. "Need I remind you, I'm the one whose body loses chunks when he sneezes? I – ah. There we are." He had spied a natural corridor through the towers of bodies – stacked, he noted, with as much neatness as possible – and started along it, mostly for lack of a better idea.

First rule of the front: when in doubt, march.

He lit another match as he went, and the pallid glow painted the way ahead in sickly hues. It was a tight squeeze. Limp fingers tangled in his uniform and bent heads thumped against his shoulders and shins. More than once, he trod on something that squelched unpleasantly. The stench was worse in amongst them, thick and cloying. It stuck to the air and coated the back of his throat. He was certain he'd smelled worse, but he couldn't recall where.

I could tell you, if you like, the Voice said.

"I prefer ignorance, thank you," Roland replied. He thought, perhaps, that he'd been taken to a depository, a body dump. The corpses of the dead were reclaimed from the field of battle if at all possible and stored somewhere safe, ready for transport away from the front at the most convenient opportunity. Warehouses – depositories – had been built to hold them in the meantime, to protect them from the machinations of the enemy.

He supposed he should be grateful. Better a dump than a shallow grave. But it was hard to be grateful when you were walking over a carpet of effluvia in nothing but a pair of woollen regulation-issue socks. Worse, as he walked, he could hear the faint hiss of gases escaping the corpses, and other sounds of quiet entropy.

Contrary to popular imagination, death was neither dignified nor silent. Bodies dripped, burped and popped. Gasses built up in dead systems, swelling internal organs until they ruptured in messy fashion. He'd seen all manner of bodies at all stages of corruption during his time on the front. He'd seen more than he had ever wished to see.

More than any man ought to, the Voice said.

"Ah, but I am not just any man, am I? I am a knight of Saint Lazarus." He said it with a smirk, for he could no longer smile. The nerves in his face were in a losing battle with his affliction. Hs face was – well, why depress himself thinking of that?

A sign of God's favour, the Voice said piously. *You bear the holy affliction, and your body has become as a citadel, impregnable and inviolate.*

"Except for the parts that fall off," Roland said, with a phlegmy chuckle. It was hard to breathe, and he wondered if he was, in fact, injured. It was hard to tell. His body kept secrets now. In his time, he'd been stabbed, shot and set on fire, yet he couldn't recall the last time he'd felt something more than a dull ache. He knew that once you reached that point, it was only a matter of time before the Almighty called you home.

Afraid of the final judgement, are we?

Roland grimaced as he stepped in something sticky. "Not afraid. Merely in no great rush to receive my final reward."

As he spoke, he heard a soft sound – a scuttling, of sorts. Of something moving quickly over bare flesh. He stopped and turned, searching the charnel stacks for any sign of movement. "Did you hear that?"

Hear what?

"Something," Roland murmured. The light of the match wavered. There was a damp breeze. His heart quickened as he followed it through another contorted passage of dead flesh. He followed the breeze until the passage widened into another gap similar to the one in which he'd awoken, but far larger. He stepped out into the open, and saw that he stood at the edge of a gantry platform. A faintly iridescent rain fell in intermittent showers from somewhere above. It smelled of – what was it?

Myrrh, the Voice said, helpfully.

The bodies were stacked precariously right up against the safety rail, and the uppermost reaches of said stacks were pressed up against the bottoms of further gantries, higher and higher still. The metal creaked unsettlingly beneath his feet as he stepped carefully to the edge and peered down. More gantries, more bodies. Descending down into darkness, broken only by the haphazard illumination of a few, sputtering safety lights. An eternity of dead flesh, packed and waiting to be shipped off to Crete for final disposal.

"Oh bother," Roland said, softly. Not a body dump, then. Too big for that.

Figured it out, then?

"To my embarrassment. I'm in the bloody Body Barn." Or, to use its proper name, the Domus Demetrius. The place where all the dead – the dead of the Faithful at least – wound up, if they were fortunate. Built over ancient ruins in the Amanus Mountains, the Domus Demetrius was a storehouse and a processing facility all in one. Larger than any silo, larger than some fortresses. A city of the dead, built by the chosen to protect the mortal remains of those fallen in God's service from the depredations of the Pit.

He'd never seen it himself, though he'd loaded enough bodies for transport. It was also situated a good few days behind their lines. How long had he been senseless?

Four days dead, Lazarist. Rise up, dead man, rise up.

He ignored the mocking tone of the Voice. Four days. Hadn't that been a name for the saint, in olden days? Lazarus the Four Days Dead. Four days before the Lord had raised him up and returned him to the Earth to – what? Few stories elaborated on that, or on who Lazarus had been prior to his death and miraculous return.

Just a man, the Voice whispered. *Like you.*

"A good man, one hopes," Roland said. He smelled burning meat and saw that the match had burnt down low enough to scorch his fingers. He flicked it away. "Well, this is a low point and no mistake. And my entire life has been low points, so I know whereof I speak."

Now who's carrying on?

"Don't be petulant," Roland admonished, but without heat. The Voice was right. But it wasn't every day a fellow found himself inhumed in the Domus Demetrius while still breathing. He lit another match, taking some small satisfaction from the act.

A light in the darkness, the Voice said.

Roland grunted. It was not the first time that he had been left for dead. When one resembled a corpse, one could not blame others for thinking the obvious. It was however, the first time he had not awakened prior to being loaded onto a train by the gentle hands of the Demetrian Order attendants and carried away along the Corpse Rails. This was a new experience, and it wasn't one he was overly fond of, thus far. He knew next to nothing about the day-to-day function of the Body Barn, but what he did know didn't give him much confidence. He needed to get out. Was there a door? There had to be.

There isn't, save possibly at the very top.

Roland grunted. "Oh be quiet, you don't know any more than I do."

I know many things you don't know.

"Name one."

How to get to the top.

Roland paused. "Do tell."

Isn't it obvious? Climb.

Roland blinked and looked up. "Climb what? The corpses?"

There are no stairs. They use cranes to lower the bodies down.

Roland hesitated. "Maybe if I yell very loudly…"

Up is always better than down, Roland.

Roland frowned. It was hard to argue with that sort of logic. And it wasn't as if he had a better idea. He took a deep breath, sought out likely handholds, and started to climb.

As he did so, he wondered, and not for the first time, if the Voice was a manifestation of his common sense. Not that he had ever had much. If he had, he'd never have joined the Knights of Lazarus. He'd never have tried to ease the burden of those suffering from the Blessed Affliction. No, he would have stayed safe behind the walls of New Antioch and taken up a trade, as his father had so often prayed. Become a grocer, sold cabbages.

And would that have been so bad?

"No, but it is not a calling, is it?"

Some grocers might disagree.

"It was not my calling," Roland clarified. "This is. For better or worse."

I am glad you think so. Then, after a pause: *It makes things easier.*

The Voice fell silent; Roland climbed. It was unpleasant, but easier than he'd first assumed. There were gantry ledges at regular intervals, and a spider's web of struts that held back the full weight of the grisly stacks. He stopped to rest regularly, all too aware that one slip would send him tumbling down into the dark. Sputtering electric lights which hung from the struts or dangled from the undersides of the gantries painted everything in hues of red and silver, and their incessant hum made his teeth itch and his eyes water.

As he climbed, he could hear the rumbling grind of machinery, coming from somewhere far above. Every so often, the steel frames that held the stacks upright would tremble, and a deluge of

myrrh-scented rain would cascade down in a torrent that plastered his ruined uniform to his bedraggled body.

Purification, the Voice said. *Until the bodies can be transferred to the crematoriums. You are lucky you awoke when you did.*

"I suppose so," Roland muttered. "If you can call this – *eh?*" He froze, feet braced on an incense-slick strut, one hand clutching the scalp of someone who could no longer complain, and the other just about to grab a handful of something he didn't want to look at too closely. For a moment, he couldn't say what had alerted him. Something–

There. The bodies were... moving. Wait – no. No, it wasn't them. It was something beneath them. He could feel the vibrations through the pallid flesh beneath his hands. He hung from his perch for what felt like an eternity, feeling the corpses twitch and tremble, until they finally ceased. As if whatever it was, had passed on.

Someone might be trapped, the Voice whispered.

"If so, I don't see how I can help them," Roland replied with equal softness.

Better not to even try then?

Was that disappointment he heard? "What do you want me to do?"

Keep climbing, Roland.

He began to scrabble up once more, annoyed both with the Voice and himself. It was harder going, this high. The flesh beneath his hands was slick with condensation and the corpses were fresher, more prone to shifting beneath his weight. He tried to think of other things, so as not to be tempted to look down. He thought back to the day he'd joined the Lazarite order. There'd been no pride in it, only a sort of dogged satisfaction. The sense that he was, at last, doing something worthwhile.

That you were at last doing what you were meant to do.

Roland paused. "Is that what it was? I wish someone had told me earlier."

Silence. Roland snorted, and reached for the strut above him. As he caught it, another pulsation ran through the corpses before him.

A fiercer one than before, as if whatever it was causing it was closer, or larger. Or both.

Roland.

He stopped. He could hear something new, now. A distant murmur of – what? Voices, he thought. Somewhere above him. He leaned back as far as he dared and shouted. "Hello!" he cried. "I need help, if you wouldn't mind!"

Roland!

Roland blinked. There was a face among the dead before him, staring at him. Glassy-eyed and slack. As he watched, the flaccid features twitched – stiffened – *swelled*. As if suddenly afflicted by a great internal pressure.

He froze, watching in stupefaction as the bloodless flesh split and tore – and something sleek and black and awful erupted from the wide-stretched corpse's mouth. For a moment, all he saw was hair, slick with blood and other bodily excretions, and a mouthful of teeth. It slammed into him and he lost his grip and then – down.

Down and down and down, the world spinning about him as he fought to keep the teeth from his throat. Whatever it was, it was hungry and strong and it screeched fit to split his skull as it thrashed in his grip. He had it by the throat, he thought, but there was no way to tell. They struck a stack of corpses; bodies slid and rolled with an ugly wet sound.

The thing was on top of him, claws scrabbling into his abdomen. Something that might have been a tail struck his legs like a leathery club. In the faint glow of the distant lights, he could make out the narrow shape of its skull – like that of an oversized weasel or rat. It snapped and snarled at him, trying to bury its yellow incisors in his flesh.

They rolled across the top of the stack, and were at the edge before Roland could process what was happening. Desperate not to go over, he began to twist and jerk the thing's neck, trying his best to break it. It screeched and redoubled its attempts to get free, pummelling him with the entirety of its weight. He closed his eyes and tightened his grip, as prayers flew from his lips. Prayers for salvation, for rescue, for

strength. And something somewhere answered. Lazarus, perhaps, or maybe even Demetrius himself.

Regardless of the source, Roland felt unnatural bone begin to give way beneath his hands until finally there was a sharp snap, like a splintering branch, and the weight on top of him sagged in defeat.

Well done.

"Shut up," he wheezed. He rolled the twitching thing off him and crawled away from the edge of the stack. He gave himself a hasty once-over, searching for injuries but found none, save a few new abrasions. Even those would need watching; anything that damaged the skin needed watching. When he'd composed himself, he rose unsteadily to his feet and went to the thing, lighting a match as he went.

He stopped and looked down. "Oh my."

Indeed. Not what one expects to see, is it?

"No," Roland said, softly. There had always been stories about rats or other vermin, creeping up out of the dark beneath the Domus Demetrius to feed on the sainted dead. He hadn't believed it, though he knew from experience that rats got in everywhere and ate whatever they could get their teeth into, especially when it couldn't fight back. But this wasn't a rat. Maybe it had been, at some point, but now it was something else entirely.

It resembled a rat, yes, but only in the vaguest sense of the word. Because – and this was the awful thing – there was something human about it as well. Were those the hands of a man? Was that malformed skull that of a human, if greatly bent out of shape?

Roland ignored the flutter of nausea at the back of his throat and continued his examination. He had seen what the poisons of the enemy could do to those unlucky enough to be caught by them; had seen the broken, diseased husks left behind in the field hospitals. The tortured monstrosities whipped into battle by the foe. Was this any different? Was this…

You see it, then?

Roland crept in a crouch around the body until he reached its hind quarter. The thing he'd thought was a tail, wasn't. It was thin

and veiny, almost translucent in places and as he watched, it twitched slightly, as if still filled with life. By the light of his guttering match, he saw that it extended back and up – up – up, into the darkness. Up and back the way they'd come. He stared, unable to tell what it was – until he could. He rose to his feet with a hiss of disgust. "Saint Lazarus preserve me," he muttered.

He has. He will. Follow it, Roland.

Roland hesitated, and then traced the tendril – for that was how he wanted to think of it – back and began to climb, following its wriggling length across the struts and gantries. Contrary to his assumption, they hadn't fallen all that far. Or maybe he simply hadn't climbed as high as he'd believed. He found the spot where the beast had emerged easily enough. It had seemingly bored through the packed bodies like a mole through earth, leaving behind a raw, red tunnel.

Roland stared into the dripping darkness. "This is a bad idea."

Yes. Go.

Roland hauled himself into the dripping tunnel, following the twitching tendril. He crept along, feeling the weight of the bodies pressing down above him. "Why am I doing this, again? There might be more of these things lurking about."

Exactly. Now be quick. The stack is unstable.

Roland knew the Voice was correct. He could sense that it was about to give way, and spotted the other end of the tunnel with some relief. He managed to squeeze out moments before the bodies shifted again and the tunnel vanished with a thunderous squelch. He lay for a moment, panting. He was in another dimly outlined gap, much like the one in which he'd woken up. The tendril was nearby, still wriggling. It stretched off into the dark, going... where?

Only one way to find out, the Voice said.

"Yes, I suppose so." Again, Roland hesitated. "This is not my duty."

No.

"Really, I should find a way out, and report it to someone. Anyone. Let the Demetrian Order handle it. This is their responsibility, after all."

Yes. But you are here.

Roland closed his eyes and let the myrrh-scented condensation splash across his face. He would take whatever purification he could get. "I need a weapon," he said, after a moment. Only there were no weapons here. He opened his eyes and looked around. Anything of use would have been stripped from the dead before they were moved.

Waste not, want not.

Roland grunted. He would have to improvise. He studied the surrounding corpses for a moment, then sank to his haunches. He inspected the bottom of the stack, where the bodies became gelatinous from the pressure and the liquid spillage, and spied a faint pale gleam. "There we are," he said. Grimacing, he thrust a mottled hand into the soggy mass and rooted around until he found something of sufficient heft.

He grunted with effort to pry the thing loose of its housing. It resisted him and he found it difficult to keep a grip on it, slimy as it was. He finally worked it loose and nearly fell on his rear as the bone sluiced free with a wet, sucking sound.

Lovely.

"What was it you said? Oh yes, beggars can't be choosers." It was a femur, he thought. He slapped the rounded end into his palm and nodded. "Good enough. Now… let's go hunting, what?"

He started along the gantry. In several places he was forced to duck beneath a body that dangled loose. It was like walking through a jungle of meat. The air was humid and sticky. There was some light, but not much. Not enough to see much beyond the end of his – well, not really a nose any more, but close enough. But it was enough to see the other holes, the other tendrils. Dozens of them, burrowing through the dead like grave worms. How many of these things were there? And where did they–

Stop. Listen.

Roland did. He could hear it: a wet, breathy whine. It rose and fell arrhythmically, and his skin crawled to think what might be making it. The sound emanated from between two stacks, as did the tendrils,

which were all close together now and starting to tangle, as if the rat-things had poured out in a frenzied mass. He shook his head, banishing the image, and squeezed on between the stacks.

The heat was far worse here. Gas build-up from the dead, he thought, or maybe just the unbearable warmth of decomposition. The longer the bodies sat, the more liquid they became. The ones on the bottom were likely nothing more than flat bags of juice at this point. As if to prove this theory, he realised something wet was swirling about his ankles, and there was the sound of persistent dripping, beneath the growing whine.

There were other sounds as well now – gnawing sounds, shrieks and squeals. The stacks to either side of him were swaying slightly, and he knew that the rat-things were on the move. The thought that they might be coming for him put some vim in his step.

Ahead of him, he could just make out another gap in the stacks. A place where the bodies sagged down inwards, forming a concave area. What had caused it, he couldn't say, though he had an unpleasant suspicion. There was something splashing there, a vague bulk, but he couldn't make it out in the gloom. He tucked the femur under his arm and dared to light a match with shaking fingers.

In the light, he saw it. It was bigger than the others, and fat; horribly, hideously fat, nestled in a scum of bodily fluids, clutching the dead as if seeking their support. Its head was reminiscent of a vast rat's skull, the flesh long-since peeled away in papery curls. A mane of tangled, greasy hair spilled over its narrow shoulders and down a row of pendulous dugs to a belly that gaped like an open wound. Something small and slick and black squirmed out of the vile slit and fell into the slurry at its feet.

The rat-thing surfaced with a painful squeal and immediately launched itself at the nearest body where it set to feasting with a desperate hunger. It wasn't as large as the one he'd killed. Maybe that would come in time. As it ate, its awful mother shuddered in a paroxysm of what might have been ecstasy. And as it – *she?* – shuddered, he could see that the tendril, the umbilical, that connected them

together was pulsing. All of them were pulsing. Dozens, many more, so many that he couldn't count them all.

The femur slipped from under his arm and splashed into the murk. The mother-rat stiffened and looked up. Witch-lights gleamed in the bony sockets of its skull as they fixed on him, illuminated by his match.

"Oh bugger," he said.

He dropped the match and went for the femur even as it lunged. The small rat-thing got to him first, biting furiously at his hands. He snatched the tiny creature up and dashed out its brains against a protruding scapula even as he grabbed the femur with his other hand. The rat-mother was dragging itself out of its nest, using nearby corpses as handholds to propel its obscene bulk. Upright and in the gloom, it almost resembled a human.

Roland hesitated. Every instinct screamed at him to run, but there was nowhere to go. A fact echoed by the Voice. *Here is where you are, and where you must be*, the Voice said. *Now raise your holy sword and strike!*

Roland spat a curse and swung his femur as if it were a mighty blade. It struck the rat-mother across the skull, sending her crashing against the stack. The pile of cadavers wobbled, and some slid out of place and crashed down, momentarily separating Roland from his attacker. But the rain of corpses only lasted a moment before the creature was coming at him again. Clawed hands groped for him as yellowed teeth snapped hungrily. Roland set his feet and raised the femur again. "For Saint Lazarus and New Antioch!" he bellowed.

He span and swung the bone as hard as he could. He didn't catch the impact, but he felt it. It shivered up through his arms and threw him off balance. The femur snapped in two and he nearly fell on his face as the rat-mother crashed back against the stack again. More bodies fell, too many to avoid them all. One struck him a glancing blow and he staggered back.

The rat-mother lunged through the piles, tearing apart the dead in its fury. Its skull was cracked, and something black and treacly

gushed from the bone. Its scrabbling claws tore strips from his uniform and only luck kept him from being ripped open. Its momentum carried them both back against the opposite stack. Teeth bit down on his shoulder and he felt something give. Worse, he felt something emerge from its gaping womb to rip at his legs. A panic rose within him, unfamiliar and unpleasant.

This is the moment – strike! the Voice roared. *STRIKE!*

Roland stabbed the broken end of his femur into the wound on the beast's skull with all his strength. The rat-mother reared back with a marrow-freezing shriek, releasing him. He lost his grip on the bone and fell, kicking and failing wildly at the smaller rat-things clinging to him.

The rat-mother clutched at its head and flailed about, dislodging more corpses. The two stacks swayed – bent – collapsed. Roland curled into a ball, hoping, praying, but knowing it wasn't enough.

You did well, Roland, the Voice murmured. Quietly. Gently.

Then, at last, there was only silence.

Roland gasped and fumbled free of the fallen corpses. He felt as if he'd been beaten black and blue, not that anyone would be able to tell. Panting, he dragged himself loose. "Still alive," he said.

Still alive, the Voice agreed. Was that a note surprise in its tone? Roland was about to reply when the nearby bodies began to twitch and shift.

"Looks like I'm not the only one," he said, casting about for another bone. A moment later, the rat-mother exploded upwards, casting the dead aside as if they were no heavier than leaves. Roland watched it clamber towards him, dragging its dead offspring in its wake. The Voice was silent. Roland wanted to close his eyes, but didn't.

The rat-mother reared up over him, jaws wide.

"Get down!" a voice commanded. Not the Voice, a human one. A jet of searing fire cut the air above his head and struck the monstrosity full in its chest. A second whoosh of flame spilled over the bodies and cascaded down across the screaming rat-mother from the other side. The thing reared again, clawing blindly at the air, and

Roland scrambled hastily out of the way as yet another stream of fire struck the creature. Then more, a fourth, a fifth, until the beast was nothing more than a thrashing torch, its shrill death-cries echoing from innumerable different directions, as if its foul children could feel its pain.

Roland dragged himself backwards, unable to look away from the sight. Hands seized him, and he only struggled for a moment before they hauled him to his feet. Roland batted the hands away and the pair of Demetrian brothers who had helped him leapt back, as they suddenly realised who, and what, they'd had their hands on.

"You… you..." one began, his face pale in the firelight. Behind him, more monks carrying flamethrowers advanced on the now-still shape of the rat-mother. "We– we heard you crying out. You… We came as soon as we could."

"I think I might be missing a finger," Roland complained, looking at his hands. "Wait, no, there it is. Lucky, that." He wagged his fingers at them. "Excellent timing, chaps. Another few moments and I'd have been conversing with Saint Lazarus in person."

"You're a leper," said the other monk, an older man with a face prematurely lined by worry. "That explains it."

Roland glanced at the burning pyre of the rat-mother. "Does it?"

"Not that. That is something out of the dark," the monk said, tiredly. "The roots of this place go far deeper than we know. It is all our order can do to patrol the upper levels." He offered Roland a canteen. "You have our thanks, brother – and, I suppose, an apology."

Roland took a swig from the canteen, rinsed out his mouth and spat. "An apology for what? You're the ones who saved me."

The monk grimaced. "Well, for packing you with the corpses in the first place."

As I said, you are where you were meant to be, the Voice said – somewhat smugly, Roland thought. He didn't bother to reply. The brothers looked scandalised enough.

"Yes, well, maybe it was for the best, what?" Roland took another swig from the canteen then offered it back to the monk, who waved

it away with a faintly nauseated look on his face. Roland laughed sourly.

"We'll just call it even, shall we?"