

LORRAINE THOMSON



THE
NEW DARK

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About the Book

She grew up knowing who she was and where she came from.

Then her home was destroyed, her brother's face now just a memory. She built her hopes on the love of a boy she'd barely kissed.

She owed her life to a mutant.

Sorrel's world would never be the same again.

The Before world has gone. Now there's no internet, no TV, no power grid. Food is scarce and the world's a hostile place. But Sorrel lives a quiet life in the tiny settlement of Amat. It's all she's ever known ...

Until a gang of marauding mutants destroys the village, snatching her brother and the boy she loves. Sorrel sets out after them, embarking on a journey that's fraught with danger. But she must survive. She has to believe that her little brother Eli and David, the boy she loves, will survive too. And that one day they will all be reunited.

About the Author

Lorraine Thomson was born in Glasgow. She won a UK writing competition and was short-listed for the Dundee Book Prize. She now lives in Ullapool on the rugged north-west coast of Scotland.

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THE NEW DARK



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Book One



THE FREE

1.

Dead Meat

Sorrel watched as David skinned the bats, enjoying the way the muscles in his arms flexed as he worked. She resisted the urge to lean over and run her fingers over his skin. It seemed like these days she was always trying not to touch him.

David had dark hair and was lean and sinewy, but he was broad across the shoulders and did not look as though he had any sickness lurking inside him. She wondered what it would be like to be held in his arms, to rest her head against his chest. To be kissed by him. Perhaps she would soon find out.

He worked steadily, dropping the bodies into a large pot and discarding the pelts in a pile at his feet. His discovery of the roosting colony had been a welcome find. The carcasses would be gutted and washed before being cooked in a stew, the fur and wings cured for clothing.

He peeled off a particularly large skin with the wings still attached and looked up, catching her staring at him. He smiled. Sorrel looked down at her boots, embarrassed at being caught, humiliated by the blush scalding her face. She had known David all her life, had run the hills and explored the Rotten Woods with him, but lately her feelings had changed. Her insides trembled when he looked at her, the quiver rippling outwards, infusing her body with heat.

Sorrel turned her attention back to sharpening her knife. Metal was hard to come by in Amat, knives from the Before times rarer still. Sorrel had inherited this one from

her grandmother. The blade had worn thin and she was careful not to over-sharpen it lest it chipped.

She willed the scarlet in her face to fade as she tried to concentrate on the knife and took her time folding it into its handle before stowing it in the pocket of her bat skin jacket. Only then did she risk another glance at him.

He looked up once again from his work. This time she held his gaze and allowed her lips to smile in return.

"Sweet Sorrel." David reached out and stroked her face. Her cheeks flamed at his touch.

"I'm sorry, my hands are dirty. You'll have to wash your face now."

She touched his hand. "I don't mind."

"We can go to the stream in the Rotten Woods when I'm done... that's if you want to?"

Want to? Sorrel wanted to shout with joy. He *did* like her. The truth of it was evident in his clear blue eyes. It was in the way he smiled at her. It was in his touch.

The sensation of his skin on hers made her feel as though she had the embers of a fire glowing in her body.

"Sorrel? Sorrel!"

She rolled her eyes at the sound of the familiar narking voice.

Sorrel's mother strode towards them, baby slung on her hip, toddler trailing behind. Her clothes, a mix of cured hides and woven fabric, had been expertly stitched to follow the form of her body, but lately her leggings seemed to hang loosely on her frame. David flashed his eyes at Sorrel, before diverting his attention back to the diminishing mound of bats.

Sorrel stood up.

"You're supposed to be helping me with your brother and sister, Sorrel."

"I'm busy."

"I can see that."

Her mother glanced at David. Though he must have been able to feel her hard gaze drilling through the top of his skull, David kept his eyes on his work. Sorrel couldn't blame him. She'd have done the same if she had a choice.

Her mother hissed her words through tight lips. Thin, deep lines radiated from her eyes and mouth, a process which had begun when Sorrel's father failed to return from a solitary hunting trip. The harsh lines had continued their unforgiving journey ever since.

"I was sharpening my knife."

"It's your wits that need sharpening."

Sorrel scowled. She did not need her mother venting like this in front of David. It was almost as though she was doing it deliberately.

The baby cooed at Sorrel. Sorrel stroked her sister's head. The baby was blonde like her mother and brother, her hair as fine and soft as a dandelion clock. Around her neck, a small sparkling star hung from a delicate silver chain.

The necklace had been one of the gifts left to Sorrel by her grandmother. One of a few rare items she owned from the Before times, it had been handed down through the generations until it reached Sorrel. Her grandmother had weaved stories around it, telling Sorrel that the five points of the star represented the traits she would need to survive: strength, vitality, courage, wisdom and perseverance.

On holding her tiny baby sister for the first time, and seeing how small and defenceless she seemed, Sorrel had gifted her the necklace, hoping it would bestow on her all the traits their grandmother had spoken of.

"Bella." Sorrel whispered the name she had given her sister.

"No, Sorrel - you mustn't." Her mother, always with rules, always ready to say *no, don't, you can't*.

“Up, up.” Sorrel’s brother tugged at her jacket. She glanced down at the toddler. Encouraged by the attention, Eli raised his arms and jumped. “Up.”

Sorrel dandled his fingers but ignored his pleas.

“Why not? It’s her name.”

Her mother’s brow furled into a frown. Eli jumped for attention as she spoke.

“You know why. It’s too soon – we don’t know yet if she’s viable.”

Sorrel shook her head. “Of course she’s viable – look at her! Besides, it’s not as if names can be worn out or used up. Why can’t she have one? I’m sick of this stupid place and its stupid laws. And I’m sick of you. No wonder Dad didn’t come back.”

The words were out before she could stop them. Even before the hurt registered on her mother’s face, Sorrel knew she had gone too far.

Ashamed of her outburst, still angry at her mother and utterly humiliated that the entire scene had played out in front of David, she turned and ran.

She’d barely taken a couple of strides before catching sight of a figure lurking by the nearest hut. By the smirk on Mara’s face, it was clear she had witnessed the exchange. Mara, of all people, with her red curls, knowing green eyes, and sharp little smile.

Tears stung Sorrel’s eyes as she darted between the wooden dwellings until she came to the back gate in the boundary fence. She could visualise Mara sidling up to David, laughing with him about Sorrel as she tossed her hair and simpered at him.

Outside the fence, Sorrel continued running. She skirted the Rotten Woods, striding out over the moor by the peat banks and scrambled up the hill. Her reckless speed was exhilarating and she paid no heed to the threat of a turned ankle or twisted knee as she ran out her anger. The higher she climbed, the freer she felt of Amat and its stupid rules

and dull chores. Her tears dried as she cast off her mother's hurt and anger, and Mara's mocking looks. She kept going until, breathless, she reached a flat rock.

She stripped off her jacket and lay on the stone, heart slowing, breathing steadying as she gazed at the hazy sky.

Sorrel's legs were tired, her belly empty, but there was warmth in the filtered sun, comfort to be found in her surroundings and her memories.

This was her special place. It was where she had come with her grandmother. The two of them would sit up here, looking over Amat, over their small patch of the world, her grandmother talking, Sorrel listening as she was told the tales her grandmother had heard of what life was like Before. Even though she did not believe all, or even most of them, Sorrel had enjoyed hearing Grandmother Bella's stories.

Her grandmother had told her about places called Bigshops. Inside these vast shops were rows upon rows of food, stacked from floor to ceiling. She had heard about the shops in the city of Dinawl, but they were as nothing when compared to the Before time, when people lived without hunting or foraging. Back then, they simply went into Bigshops and filled barrows with all they wanted and took it home to eat. Fruits from all over the world were brought to the Bigshops in metal machines which flew in the sky like bats, and on vast ships which sailed the oceans. The Before world had been joined up like a spider's web, but the web had been broken, the strands snapped. Now they lived in isolation, only rarely connecting with other settlements.

Sorrel wished she could ask her grandmother more about Before, but the chance was long gone. She sat up and ran her fingers over the birthmark on her wrist, tracing the three interconnecting circles. Her grandmother had told her the mark was special, that she, Sorrel, was special, but she didn't feel special; she felt ordinary.

She put her jacket on, pulling the sleeve down so that the mark was covered. It was good to think about Grandmother Bella, but not too often and not for too long. Not when there was, as she had often said, plenty of living to be done.

Grandmother Bella was dead, but Sorrel was alive. She had her mother, she had Eli, and she had her baby sister, *whisper her name*, Bella. And she had David. Where there was life, there was hope; sometimes there was nothing else. *Often* there was nothing else, particularly during the long dark months of winter. But today there was hope and more besides.

She stood up on the rock and looked down on Amat. Smoke from peat fires rose from the ramshackle collection of huts, the earthy aroma carried to her on a light breeze. Time to return and make peace. She flushed as she thought about her earlier behaviour but she would make it up to her mother. She would carry out her chores without question and help with the little ones. She would tease Eli and mollycoddle baby Bella, and then she would seek out David and suggest a walk through the Rotten Woods. They could forage for mushrooms and hunt for wood prawns. The extra food would help ease her mother's mood and perhaps smooth some of the lines etched so deeply in her face.

She felt a flash of anger as an image of Mara rose from the shadows in her mind. They had once been friends, but now Mara was a stone in Sorrel's boot, and try though she might, Sorrel could not shake her out. She was always there, smirking, niggling, passing comment, and always, always trying to get David's attention.

Most of the young men in Amat were in thrall to Mara. She could have taken her pick of any one of them. A stupid look passed over their faces whenever she was around. Hemp, in particular, suffered from an absence of mind in her presence, but David seemed to be immune to her charms. For all of Mara's quick wit, fine looks and shining

red hair, David had chosen Sorrel and Mara hated her for it.

She took a deep breath and held her head high as she gazed out over the horizon. She and David should leave Amat and venture out to the world beyond. They could visit Dinawl. Perhaps the shops there were not as impressive as the Bigshops from Before, but they would still be something to behold. And she would like to see that great body of water called the sea. That would be something. She pictured them setting off together, the vision much enhanced by the look on Mara's face as the two of them left Amat without a backwards glance.

She was enjoying this vision when a movement to the south of Amat snagged her gaze, pulling her back from dreams of tomorrow to the reality of the present. Roamers? She felt a momentary flutter of excitement. No Roamers had stopped by in almost two summers. They wandered the country in small groups, trading news and artefacts from Before in exchange for food, shelter and a parcel of dried meat to see them on their way. Badger if they were lucky, dried mole if hunting was poor. They brought with them stories from other settlements, including tales of Dinawl. They told of travellers they had met and the strange sights they had seen, and were a welcome diversion from the relentless pursuit of keeping everyone fed, sheltered and clothed. But, as she watched their progress, Sorrel's smile faltered. Roamers did not travel in such large packs as this, nor move in such stealthy ways...

As the group advanced on Amat, reality slapped Sorrel in the face. She hurtled down the hillside, slipping and stumbling, almost tumbling headfirst. Her throat was on fire by the time she arrived at the main gate.

She grabbed hold of the first person she saw, a stooped elder by the name of Tom. He frowned as she clawed at his jerkin.

"What's wrong, Sorrel?"

She pointed south as she gasped the words. "We're under attack."

"Attack? Who would attack us?"

But the aggressive notes of the horde's calls were already on the wind. Close to the settlement, they no longer moved with stealth but with open hostility.

The people of Amat occasionally drilled in anticipation of such an emergency, but did so with the complacency and lack of fervour that came with many years of uninterrupted peaceful subsistence. Their fight had been with the earth, their battle with the elements. Though familiar with death, they were strangers to bloodlust and were ill-prepared for the storm about to descend.

As the first warning cries rang out, everyone ran in circles, herding infants to safety as they armed themselves with a misshapen artillery of slings, axes and cudgels. Amid the chaos, they took their places on the inadequate battlements and, with shaking legs and stout hearts, they prepared to defend themselves.

Just in time, Sorrel helped to close and reinforce the main gate, but flimsy timbers from the Rotten Woods were no match for the onslaught. The attackers burst through as though there was no more in their way than morning mist on the moor.

Sorrel fell back as they swept into Amat, bringing with them a foul stench of putrefying meat and festering wounds, and fear such as she had never known. Mutants! One of them, perhaps hearing the catch of her breath, turned his huge head and cast his gaze upon her. He was human, but only just.

The mutant's small, deep-set eyes were separated by an expanse of forehead as wide as a peat bog. He had barely a nose, his nostrils sitting flat against his face as though clawed from his flesh. He was dressed in animal hides, from which the claws and tails of the original owners dangled.

Sorrel shrank against the fence as he advanced towards her. The mutant snorted at the sight of her quaking before him. She commanded her legs to run, but they trembled as though the bones had been sucked from them and refused to obey.

The mole-eyed mutant glanced away as a full-throated scream ripped through the air. It was all the diversion Sorrel needed. She found her strength and fled before the mutant realised she'd gone. She took her knife from her pocket as she ran and opened the blade.

The mutants were fewer in number by far than the members of the settlement, but they had weapons, many of them made of metal. They bludgeoned skulls and slit throats as though doing nothing more than skinning bats for the pot.

Sorrel dodged through the melee towards her home. She had to get to her family. All around there was chaos. Cries of terror rang out over the crunch of bone and the raw laughter of the invaders as they carried out their brutal slaughter.

Sorrel ran through the lanes between huts, chancing upon David fighting alongside his father. The mutant they battled was an enormous female with the rumped skin of a pale toad. Sorrel hesitated a moment before jabbing her knife into the pallid monster. David yelled at Sorrel as the mutant howled.

"Your mother – go!"

Sorrel pulled the blade from the mutant's flesh and ran for home, coming to a sudden halt in the narrow alley between neighbouring abodes as her mother emerged from their hut, eyes glazed as she clutched the baby to her body. There was red, lots of red, and Bella wasn't moving. The sight of the agony etched on her mother's face ruptured Sorrel's heart. For the briefest of moments their gazes met. Her mother mouthed the word *run*, but Sorrel couldn't move. Rooted to the spot, she watched helplessly as a

thickset mutant appeared from behind and snapped her mother's neck as easily as a twig from the Rotten Woods.

As her mother dropped to the ground, a cry arose in Sorrel's throat. She clamped her hand over her mouth, muzzling her rage and suppressing her fear, instinctively understanding that if she was to survive she had to be silent, be small, when all she wanted to do was scream loud enough to tear the sky in two. She slunk into the shadows, trembling there for no longer than the time it took to draw two breaths before Eli came toddling out of the hut wailing, *Mama*. The mutant swung around. Eli looked up at the monster, his unseeing eyes puffed with tears, his tiny face flushed from crying. Sorrel watched in horror as her brother raised his arms.

"Up."

The brawny mutant stared down at the child. Eli jumped.

"Up, up." His pleas urgent.

The monster laughed before scooping him up and carrying him out of sight.

Sorrel slumped. Why hadn't she helped Eli? She could have attacked the mutant, stabbed him in the throat, plucked out his eyes, anything. But she had done nothing.

A fresh torrent of screams lashed through the air. This was not the time for regret. She could beat herself up later, but now she had to move before her body became another corpse.

First checking the way was clear, she ducked into her hut. Her home had been wrecked. Furniture had been broken and overturned, earthenware smashed, clothes scattered. Sorrel picked her way through the destruction to what had been her parents' bedroom.

Bedroom was a grand description for a space separated from the rest of the hut by a rough curtain. The curtain had been slashed to ribbons. Sorrel pushed the tattered material aside to reveal the chaos beyond. The bedclothes

had been ripped from the bed and the mattress hacked open to reveal the heather stuffing. Mere wanton destruction, or had the mutants been looking for hidden items? Sorrel's heart pounded as she pulled a heap of discarded bedclothes aside. If the mutants had discovered the kist, she would have nothing but the clothes she stood in and her knife.

The heavy wooden chest lay untouched beneath the discarded blankets. The wood was dark, the bedroom dimly lit; perhaps they had not noticed it or had been distracted. Either way, Sorrel was relieved to discover that the clasps fastening the lid were intact. She undid them and took out the backpack which had been bequeathed to her by her grandmother. Beneath it lay her mother's folded wedding dress. A sob caught in Sorrel's throat, but from outside came the guttural sounds of mutants roaring and yelling. It was time to go.

Sorrel wiped the back of her hand across her eyes and went to the door. She peered through a crack, but even from this narrow aspect, it was clear that she could not leave this way without being seen – there were too many mutants. She tightened her fingers around the sheath of her knife. She would slit her own throat before giving them the pleasure of killing her. There had to be a way out, and if none existed, she would make one.

She picked up a piece of broken earthenware and took it to the back wall of the hut where she pulled back the mat covering the packed-earth floor and began digging. When the hole was large enough, she dropped down on her belly and peered outside. She could see little more than the ground before her, but the way seemed clear.

A little more work and the gap was wide enough to wriggle through. Sorrel listened carefully for a moment before sticking her head outside for a look. The commotion was behind her but here all was quiet. She could do it.

Sorrel ducked back into the hut and grabbed the bag. She was about to leave when her gaze fell on the upturned larder. The wood had splintered but it was intact, the door snibbed shut. Sorrel unlatched it and looked inside. Her family had no more use for the small store of dried food kept there and so she emptied the packages into her bag. She went back to the hole and lay down on her belly and looked through the gap. All clear.

The lower edge of the wall scraped and dug at her shoulders as she squirmed her way outside, but her jacket protected her skin and a few bruises were a light price to pay for her life.

Once her shoulders were through, the rest was easy.

She pulled herself free and reached in for the bag, but as she stretched out her arm a shadow fell over her.

Sorrel froze as two massive feet stepped into view. The callused skin creeping up from the soles was deeply ingrained with dirt, the wide spaces between the toes densely packed with putrefying matter. There were six toes on the left foot, three of them tiny nubs, two grotesquely large, four on the right and each toe was topped with a thick, yellow nail, broken and rimmed with dark filth.

Sorrel raised her head. Looking up the length of the body standing before her, she discovered she was staring at the same mole-eyed mutant who had trapped her by the fence. Her heart thundered in her chest as he squinted down at her, feeling as though it was going to explode out of her rib-cage and into the earth beneath her. When he parted his lips, revealing teeth sharpened to fine points, her heart stopped.

She was dead meat.

2.

Mouth Parts

A rasping laugh escaped through the gaps between the mutant's pointed teeth. In the moment he took to enjoy her predicament, Sorrel slashed her knife across the back of his leg. She only had one shot at this and she made it count, slicing through skin and tendon right down to the bone.

The mutant howled and dropped like a felled tree. He writhed on the ground, snatching and swiping at her as she pulled her bag free. She scrambled to her feet, desperate to get away before his cries alerted his kin, but he caught hold of her foot, sending her sprawling. The bag and knife flew from her grasp. Sorrel twisted, kicking at him with her other foot but the mutant held fast. There was froth on his lips and murder in his eyes as he crawled towards her.

Sorrel inched towards her knife, her muscles stretching as she reached towards it, but there was too much drag from the mutant. He squirmed towards her, leaving a trail of blood behind him. So much blood loss, he would be weakening, surely he was weakening, but there was no sign of it on his face. His grin reappeared as he closed the gap between them, bearing down on her like a spider on a trapped fly.

Sorrel stopped wriggling, holding steady until the mutant was in range, then kicked with her free foot. She put everything she had into it. The sole of her boot caught him full in the face. His hand sprung open and Sorrel was on her feet as he started howling. Barely pausing to snatch

up her knife and bag, she ran with the certain knowledge that her life depended on it.

She was deep in the Rotten Woods before she stopped. At first, all she could hear was herself gasping for breath, but as she recovered, the hum of the woods reasserted itself. The buzz and click of insects, the rustling of leaves, the creak of branches, the whirr of wings. There was even a little birdsong in the distance. The sounds circled all around and came back to where she was sobbing into the mulch of the forest floor.

Her mother gone, Bella gone. Her home wrecked. And what about Eli and David? She should go back and find out. But when she thought of the mutant grasping hold of her, bearing down on her with his pointed teeth and foul breath, her body refused to move. Instead, she lay on the ground, her fingers clawing into damp earth as she breathed in the rich scent of rotting vegetation. When a mob of wood prawns cluttered by, she lay still, not moving even when one passed close enough for the edges of its segmented body to skim her cheek.

Wood prawns, she had been going to hunt them for her mother. There would be no conciliation now.

The weight of grief was too much. She felt herself shutting down. Numbness seeped into her limbs.

The moon was out when she awoke. The earth had sucked the warmth from her body, leaving Sorrel shivering. She had barely gathered her wits when a twig snapped nearby. She sat up. Something rustled in the undergrowth. It was close, coming closer. The mutants, hunting her down!

She felt for her knife, but her fingers were too numb to work properly. More rustling. She caught her breath, but as she listened she realised that this was no mutant. The creature grunted as it rooted at the forest floor. A badger most likely.

Sorrel's relief was short-lived. Better a badger than a mutant, but not by much. They were aggressive creatures and unpredictable. It would be a foolish person who took one on by themselves, besides which she was numb with cold, it was dark and her small knife was no match for a badger.

As quietly as she could, she gathered her things and moved quickly in the opposite direction. She stopped after a while and listened to make sure that the creature was not following her, but the sounds she heard were small and gave her no cause for concern. Continuing on, she walked until her body was loose and her blood flowing freely again. With the return of feeling came deep pangs of hunger. She had not eaten for a long time. Not since the breakfast of roasted nuts and mushroom porridge she had shared with her mother and Eli. The thought of that simple family scene brought her crashing to her knees.

Why hadn't she helped her mother? Why hadn't she killed the mutant who destroyed her family? Why had she run? Why had she abandoned Eli and David? Why, why, why? She gazed up through the straggly forest canopy at the moon, staring long and hard at its blank expression. The moon had no answer, but another voice arose in her head. Strong and sure, it belonged to her grandmother. *Don't give up Sorrel, there's plenty of living to be done yet.*

She thought about it for a moment. Yes, there was living to be done, but there was dying to be done too. She would eat and rest, and in the pale light of the pre-dawn she would begin her hunt for the mutants who had taken so much from her. She would find them and cut their throats every one. And if Eli and David were still alive, she'd find them too and they could do their living together.

And if not? She couldn't stand to think about that. They were alive. They had to be. Eli and David were alive... She clung to the thought all through the bitter, lonely night.



Sorrel's fear-fuelled flight from the mutants had taken her much further into the Rotten Woods than she realised and so the return journey to Amat was a longer trek than she anticipated. The sun was already over the horizon when she emerged from the forest. She could smell Amat long before catching sight of the settlement. This time around it was not the sweet scent of burning peat drifting on the breeze, but the stinking char of smouldering homes.

No sounds came from the desolate village as she picked her way through the ruins. No voices hailed her, no children called. She would have wept, but she had no tears left to shed.

A few buildings had been left standing, but the mutants had burnt or destroyed most of Amat. Why would they do such a thing? The people of Amat may have fought and bickered among themselves, but they were kind to strangers and did not seek trouble. Why then had the mutants descended upon them? What had they done to deserve this?

The worst of the destruction was near the centre of the village, close to where she had sat with David only the day before. It was hard to picture them now, smiling at each other, with no bigger problem than putting up with her mother's narking. Her mother had come from the direction of the herb garden, while Mara had watched her from behind a building that no longer existed. What Sorrel would give to have any of them here with her now. Even Mara.

This place Sorrel had known all her life was almost unrecognisable. Bodies lay strewn all around, left to rot where they had fallen. Glazed eyes stared unseeing as the sun sailed over a day they would never know, while silent lips were parted as if still forming their final utterances.

At first she tried not to look at the fallen, and then realised that she must. She had to know who was among the dead. She closed their eyes as she passed among the corpses of friends and neighbours. She wished them peace in death as she wound her way through the place which had once been Amat. She found David's father. He had been slain near where she had last seen him, but of David, there was no sign.

She wound her way reluctantly to where she had last seen her family. Her mother's body lay where it had fallen, her head twisted at an unnatural angle, her mouth a shocked circle. Sorrel knelt by her side. Bella lay cocooned beneath and for that Sorrel was grateful. She closed her mother's eyes then stood up. It was their custom to bury their dead, but they were so many and she was only one. The earth would reclaim them soon enough.

She was walking away when a glint on the ground caught her eye. Bella's necklace. Sorrel picked it out of the dirt and let the fine chain run through her fingers, dropping the silver star into her palm.

She had dragged her feet through Amat, her body heavy with sorrow, but as she studied the charm a great bubble of rage arose within her. It ousted the grief, saturating her heart, radiating fury to her body's extremities, filling every fibre of her being as it went.

Newly energised, she tucked Bella's necklace into her pocket before opening her mouth and roaring into the silence.

"ELI! DAVID!"

She ran through the ransacked village calling their names over and over. There was no answer, but still she called. She finally came to a halt near the herb garden, pausing to catch her breath and rest her throat. As she recovered, a sound came from behind. A sound she had heard before. She whirled around, her skin already prickling.

The mole-eyed mutant was slumped against the wall of a ruined shack, his wounded leg bound in rags. A flash of fear exploded in Sorrel, but despite his coarse laughter, the mutant had a listless look about him as though his life force had drained away. He was going nowhere.

She hated this loathsome creature and all of his kind, and was overcome by a great desire to do him harm. She would show him as little mercy as he had shown the people of Amat. Sorrel pulled out her knife, intent on stabbing the monster in the heart. She was within grabbing distance when she caught the cunning glint in his eye. She leapt back as he made a futile swipe. He tried to cover his disappointment with more rasping laughter but she knew his game. She stepped back and regarded him with a cold gaze. The mutant stared right back at her, his sneer revealing the pointed tips of his teeth.

"Your friends didn't think much of you, mutant. They left you behind to die on your own."

The mutant took a sideways glance, before catching onto himself and shrugging.

Sorrel circled him. There were several pots by the wall along with several packages roughly wrapped in skins. "What's that you've got there, mutant? Did your friends leave you food and water?"

Sorrel smiled at him. The mutant narrowed his tiny eyes, trying to figure out what she was up to. He wouldn't have to figure for long. She turned her back on him and went to the herb garden. The plants had been ripped out and trampled, which came as no surprise, but Sorrel wasn't looking for herbs to pick. Instead she pulled out a sturdy switch. It was one of the growing rods used to train long tendrils of creeping pudding grass.

By the time she returned to the mutant, his sneer had turned to a scowl. When she overturned the first of his precious pots of water he snarled and grabbed at the stick, but she was too quick for him. She jabbed at the second