

LORRAINE THOMSON



THE
NEW DAWN

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About the Book

Sorrel's search for her brother and her boyfriend takes her to Dinawl, a city ruled above-ground by the ruthless Monitors and below by the rebellious Metro. In a world where things are not always as they seem, where survival depends on the kindness of strangers, and close friends make the bitterest of enemies, how will Sorrel know who to trust?

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 DAWN



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Book Three



VENGEANCE

1.

Third Degree Burns

Every horror Sorrel had witnessed in her life was as nothing compared to the destruction of the Dregs.

The only thought in her head when Dwayne announced that the bailiffs were raiding the shanty town was to get to the surface and help. Now that she was there, she did not know what to do.

Einstein seemed at as much of a loss as he stared in horror at a mass of grimy, yellow flames billowing from burning shacks.

Smoke came and went on the breeze; light drifts followed by dense clouds, which left Sorrel's eyes streaming and her mouth filled with the acrid taste of scorched wood.

All around was chaos as the fire leapt from dwelling to dwelling. People fled from their homes, screeching the names of loved ones over the crackle of flames and the crunch and clatter of roofs falling in and flimsy walls collapsing.

Some carried a few possessions as they ran from the blaze, but most were empty-handed. A few did not run, but stood amid the devastation, their faces blank, as if, unable to cope with the loss, they had shut down.

"What can we do?"

Einstein opened his mouth, but no words were forthcoming. Instead he shook his head.

Suddenly, among the many unfamiliar faces, Sorrel saw one she recognised and, for a moment, she was engulfed in

silence, every sound of the Dregs blocked out. In those seconds, even her heart stopped beating.

She closed her eyes, thinking the vision a cruel trick, that the intense heat of the fire must be boiling her mind. She must be seeing things, but when she opened them again, he was still there.

David.

She wasn't sure if she said his name or just thought it. Even if she had spoken aloud, he would not be able to hear her above the chaotic noise. Yet he turned. Through the heat haze rising above the embers of what had once been someone's home, their eyes met.

He was thinner than when she had last seen him. Dark hollows bit into his cheeks and his eyes, underscored by the bruises of many restless nights, large in his gaunt face. A metal collar circled his neck, and even through the glare of the fire, she could see a red weal on his throat beneath it. The pain she felt was like a splinter in her heart.

David, what happened to you?

The sounds came back with a crushing abruptness. The crackle and spit and hiss of wood burning, voices wailing and screaming, her heart thundering as it sent blood coursing through her veins.

Sorrel stretched her hand towards him. David mirrored the action, neither of them smiling, each of them tumbling into the other's gaze. But separated by the ravening flames, their physical closeness was a callous joke.

"Come on." Einstein grabbed Sorrel's arm. "This place is about to go up."

She glanced at Einstein, "No - I -"

There came a huge groan as the wall of yet another hut collapsed onto the embers. Sparks swirled into the air followed by leaping flames. The heat from the blaze scorched her face as she peered through the inferno.

"*NOW.*" Einstein roared as he pulled her away, forcing her to run with him, leaving David behind.

An explosion billowed behind them as they fled, the blast sending a shrapnel of nails, lumps of wood and other debris through the air. But, though her body was in peril, Sorrel's mind was on David.

"Here, in here," Einstein yelled.

He pulled Sorrel behind one of the more substantially built cabins. She tried to gather her thoughts as screams cut through the smoke-filled air.

"I saw him," she told Einstein. "I saw David."

"Where?"

"Back there. He had a collar on his neck. He looked – I don't know – we need to go back and find him."

Einstein shook his head as she pointed towards the inferno.

"We can't go back. This whole area is going to burn. Anyone who does not get out now will never get out. We have to go."

A couple ran by, their bodies shadows against the flaming backdrop as they clutched onto each other.

"But –"

"No buts, Sorrel, we have to go. If David is smart, he won't be back there. He'll be trying to get out – just like us. Come on!"

Einstein pushed her ahead as they ran through a maze of lanes away from the blaze.

"Keep going, Sorrel, or the fire will outrun us."

She dodged around piles of scattered clothes and discarded utensils: belongings dropped by those driven from their homes.

The fire was well behind them when Sorrel abruptly stopped at a crossroads. There was an *oof* from Einstein as he ran into her back.

"Why-?" he gasped.

She held up her hand. "Listen."

Einstein frowned. "What are you –?" His expression changed.

A high-pitched squeal filled the air.

"I hear it – move now." He pushed Sorrel back along the lane. The first of the animals flowed across the junction. The forerunners were followed by a vast stream of the creatures. They ran low to the ground, their small sturdy bodies covered in coarse brown fur, except for their tails, which were long and hairless.

Sorrel stepped further back.

"What are they?" She whispered the question, fearing the creatures would flow in her direction if they heard her.

"Rats," Einstein said. "There are plenty of them around Dinawl. Some of them with two legs."

Sorrel looked at him, but there was no time to ask what he meant for the stream of rats had thinned out, leaving only a few stragglers behind.

When the last of them had passed, Sorrel and Einstein crossed the road. One dying rat lay in the middle of the lane.

Sorrel stopped to look at it. Its body was about as long as her shin, with the tail being the same again. Close up, the tail was pink and scaly, thick at the root and tapering off to a point. Yellow incisors poked from its mouth as the creature gasped its last breath.

She screwed up her face. "I don't like rats."

"They are tasty enough when cooked well."

Sorrel looked at him askance. "They don't look appetising."

"Do bats?"

She glanced down at her jacket. She had never thought about how appetising or otherwise bats looked. They were simply bats and a good source of food and skin.

"Maybe not, but rats just look wrong."

Einstein grinned. "Is it the tail?"

She looked at the dead rat. "Maybe."

The tail was nauseating, but from its yellow teeth to its sharp claws, nothing about the creature endeared itself to

her.

"Nobody likes rat-tails. Come on, time we got going."

As they progressed, the streets grew thick with people. A throng had gathered in front of the North Gate.

"What is going on?" Einstein asked someone in the crowd.

"Bailiffs won't let anyone into the city."

Sorrel scanned faces in the crowd, looking for David, but there was no sign of him.

There was only the occasional whiff of smoke here, but the atmosphere was charged. Sorrel glanced at Einstein. His face was grim – he could sense it too. She stuck close by his side as they made their way through the throng into the area of the Dregs to the east of the Gate. The lanes here were filled with the dispossessed. As they milled around, angry, frustrated and frightened, some of them tried to gain access to the homes around them.

"Let us in, please!"

"My wife is injured."

"We've lost everything!"

"It's all right for you – you still have a home!"

"I know you – I did you a favour once – let me in!"

People wept for their lost loved ones. Arguments and fights broke out all around.

"We have to get out of here before it gets nasty," Einstein muttered in Sorrel's ear.

"Wait – look there."

Sorrel pointed to a shack with a ragged curtain for a door. A woman had pulled the curtain aside and was yelling inside.

"Get out – this place doesn't belong to you!"

Beyond the grubby curtain, a group of children huddled in the dim interior of the shack.

"There is nothing we can do here," Einstein said. "We have to get back to the Metro before a riot erupts."

"We have to do something!" Sorrel snapped. "They're just children - we have to help them."

The children cowered as the woman screamed at them again. "This is my place. Get out!"

They recoiled as she swiped at them.

"We can't leave them," Sorrel said. She was at the woman's side before Einstein could hold her back. "Stop - they're only small. What are you doing?"

There was murder in the woman's eyes as she swung around to face Sorrel, but when she saw who it was, she laughed, revealing a mouth full of black stumps and broken teeth.

It was Sadie - the woman from the hanging.

"Well, well - if it isn't the New Girl." Sadie pushed her face into Sorrel's, her breath sour enough to make the acrid smoke fumes seem sweet. "I told you something bad was going to happen. I could feel it in my bones."

Sorrel pulled back from the woman. "Who are they?"

Sadie sneered as she glanced at the children. "Empty bellies and hungry mouths is what they are."

"You can't just throw them out - where are their families?"

Sadie's eyes glinted as she shook her head. "You really don't know a thing, New Girl, do you? Families, ha! Best this lot of vermin can hope for is they get caught by the bailiffs and sold to someone in the Thrall Market who won't beat them to death. The mutant with you?"

Sadie jerked her head at Einstein. He looked past Sadie into the shack.

"Yes," Sorrel said, "he's with me."

"Make yourself useful, mutant. Get that vermin out of my place."

Einstein glanced at Sorrel.

"What are you looking at her for?"

Einstein snarled at her. "Because I do not want to burn my eyes by looking at you."

Sadie chortled, the sound rattling in her mouth like dry bones. "Quite the pair, aren't you? Smart-mouthed mutant and New Girl. I wonder how long you'll last." She pulled a rusting blade from her cloak. "Get them out or I'll cut their throats and use their bodies for my bed."

Einstein grabbed her by the wrist. "Try it and see what happens."

"Don't waste your time on her," Sorrel said.

The children, who had been watching the exchange, regarded her with wary eyes as she entered the shack.

"Don't be afraid. I can take you somewhere safe."

As her eyes became accustomed to the dim light, Sorrel realised how filthy and bedraggled they were, even by the low standards set by the Dregs.

There were seven of them. Though they were small in stature, no doubt due to malnourishment, they looked to range in age from between six and ten summers.

"You can't stay here - do you understand? But we - my friend and I - we can help."

Sadie's voice rose as she argued with Einstein outside.

"Are you frightened because he's a mutant? It's okay - you can trust him - and me." She stretched her hand out to the nearest child. "Please, come with me."

The child shrank back, but one of the others leaned forward and stared at Sorrel's wrist.

Sorrel glanced at her birthmark and back at the child.

"Do you recognise this? Have you seen it painted in Dinawl?"

The child gave the smallest of nods.

"Then you know you can trust me."

"Get them out of there, New Girl," Sadie screeched.

"Give the word, Sorrel and I will gladly break the woman's neck," Einstein growled.

"Don't waste your time on her, Einstein," Sorrel called. "We're leaving." She looked at the children. "Aren't we?"

The child who had spotted her birthmark glanced at the others. A round of nods followed.

"Okay," Sorrel said. "Let's go."

Einstein looked them over as they trooped out of the shack. "I guess we are doing something after all."

Sorrel grinned at him.

"Good luck, New Girl," Sadie sneered, before disappearing into her home. "You'll need it."

Sorrel rolled her eyes at Einstein. "I really don't like that woman."

"She speaks very highly of you." Einstein winked. "So, what are we going to do with this lot?"

Sorrel looked at the children. "Do any of you have homes to go to - or friends or family?"

She got a couple of shakes of the head, but most of them simply stared at her.

"That's okay - you can come with us."

"Niven will not like it," Einstein said.

Sorrel shrugged. "He doesn't have to."

A new cry arose around them. "The bailiffs are coming!"

Judging by the alarm calls, the bailiffs were coming into the Dregs from the North Gate and fires were still raging in the western quarter. The only other way Sorrel knew to get into the Metro was via the shaft.

"Towards the midden," Sorrel said.

"The way Yolanda sent you?"

Sorrel nodded.

"Can you find it again?"

She glanced at the children. "I'll have to."



It was a task easier said than done. The glow from the blazing west quarter lit the darkening sky, but the smell of

burning was distant and the fire did not appear to be coming any closer.

"They must have made a fire break," Einstein said.

He said a lot of things, keeping up a constant narrative as they walked. At first, Sorrel wasn't sure whether he was talking to her, himself, or the children, and she didn't much care - her mind was on finding the shack - and on David. But as she led them along wrong route after wrong route, panic pressed in, driving David from her mind. As she fought to concentrate, the drone of Einstein's voice began to irritate her.

His words buzzed around her head like fat, persistent switch flies. She wanted him to be quiet so that she could try to remember where the shack was, but when she glanced round at the children, she realised that Einstein was not talking for its own sake, but that his narrative was creating a bond between them and weaving a reassuring blanket around them. Though terrors filled the air, they were in this together.

She gulped a breath as tears threatened her eyes. It was here somewhere, she knew it. But where?

"Sorrel?" Einstein whispered. "Do you know where we are going?"

Panic fluttered in her chest as she looked at him - and then there - behind him - she saw it - a shelter looking as though it was on the point of collapse.

"Over there."

She brushed past Einstein as he turned to look. "Come on."

The rough pallet bed was still inside the shack, but the lantern was gone. No matter, there was enough light to work by, though only just.

Einstein ushered the children in as Sorrel pulled aside the sacking mat and cleared away the debris beneath to reveal the metal hatch.

"Give me a hand."

"Stand back, I will get it."

An alarm flash ran through her as he pulled at the looped handles on the hatch - *he shouldn't be out here, he's still recovering* - but one grunt and the lid was off.

He glanced at her, catching the concern on her face.

"I am fine, Sorrel. The poison is out of my system."

"You sure?"

"I am sure. We need to get going."

Sorrel looked into the dark hole. "There's a ladder there, see? It doesn't go all the way down - there's a drop at the bottom, but it's not far. If you go down first, you'll be able to lift the children off. Then follow the passage - there's only one way you can go. It will take you to the Metro."

Einstein's heavy brow furled. "Why the directions - you are coming with us, surely?"

"Somebody has to hide the entrance behind you."

"I can do that and you can take the children."

"No, you need to go."

"Sorrel, what are you up to?"

"I'm going to look for David."

Einstein sighed. "Listen to me. I know what this means to you, but now is not the time. The Dregs is a dangerous place to be at the best of times, and this is not the best of times. Besides, looking for David will be like searching for a shell on a beach."

Einstein's words immediately brought Ulbroom to mind; the only beach Sorrel had ever been on was there. It angered her that no matter how hard she tried to shake the place off, it was still there, haunting and taunting her. She would not have it.

She stood tall and faced Einstein. "I came here to find Eli and David, and now that I've finally caught sight of one of them, I'm not about to give up."

"I will look for him."

Sorrel rolled her eyes. "How can you look for him – you don't even know what he looks like. I'm going to look for him, okay?"

A rueful smile crept across Einstein's face. "You will do what you have to do, Sorrel, no matter what I say. Let us save time by not arguing over it, but only if you let me help you."

Sorrel glanced at the children. "But first you need to help them."

"I will take them to the Metro and then come back for you, but with no-one to conceal the way behind us, we will not be able to go in from here. The west entrance is blocked by the fire. Do you know any other ways in from the Dregs?"

Sorrel shook her head. "I know there's at least one other, but every time I asked Niven about it, something seemed to distract him before he could answer."

"I have noticed that quality in him, but I will make sure he is not distracted when I speak to him and then I will come back for you – and David, if you find him. Agreed?"

"I will find him, but yes, I agree."

"Then we are settled."

Sorrel was suddenly overwhelmed with affection for Einstein. She threw her arms around him, squeezing her eyes shut against threatening tears, and as she did so, she saw David as he had appeared on the other side of the blaze, a metal collar around his neck and a stunned look on his face. *What had happened to him?*

"Einstein, the collar on David's neck – what does it mean?"

"It is a thrall-band, Sorrel. It means that someone owns him."

"Owns him?"

Einstein nodded. "I am sorry to tell you this, but yes, he has been bought for coin. Traded as if he were meat or skins."

Sorrel could not take it in. How could this be? She shook away the thought. He was alive, and for now that was enough.

"How will you find us?" she asked Einstein.

"I am sure there is at least one more entrance to the west. Meet me by the Hanging Tree at dawn and I will lead you back."

The sound of screaming followed by angry shouting came from outside, the voices close to the shack. Too close.

Sorrel looked at Einstein. "You need to leave - now."

Einstein addressed the children. "I will go down first and help you off at the bottom, do you understand?"

Five nods and two hollow stares came in reply.

"It's going to be very dark," Sorrel said, "but it will lead you to a safe place. Hold hands when you get to the bottom and stay together."

Einstein climbed down the first few rungs of the ladder then stopped and looked up at her. "I am sorry about back there. You were right - we had to do something."

Sorrel smiled. "See you soon."

"And you."

She watched as he descended into darkness, then sent the first of the children down after him.

"It's okay, just take your time. Einstein will be at the bottom."

The first child went down, then the second. The third balked.

"Come on," Sorrel coaxed. "It'll be okay."

The child shook its head. "I want Nora."

Sorrel looked at the others. "Who's Nora?"

"She's dead." The words were flat.

"She burned," said another.

Sorrel crouched down in front of the child. "I'm sorry about Nora, but she would want you to be safe. You have to go down."

"No."

Sorrel looked at the others for help. They stared back, their eyes, dark in the gloom, giving nothing away.

"We have to help each other. It's important." She showed them the birthmark. "Remember this?"

A couple of nods came in response.

"It means that we have to work together and help each other. That's where our strength will come from. Do you understand?"

One of the other children pushed in front. "I'll go."

"Good. You next," Sorrel said to the reluctant boy.

He did not resist as she lifted him onto the ladder. "Hold on tight and you'll be fine. One step at a time and you'll get there."

There was the slightest nod of the child's head and then he slowly moved down onto the next rung.

Sorrel sighed with relief. "That's it, just keep going."

Finally, the last child climbed onto the ladder and went down a couple of rungs before stopping to look up at Sorrel.

"Are you okay?" Sorrel asked.

"Thank you."

Sorrel attempted a smile, but she wasn't sure how it came out. "Look after the others."

When the child had been swallowed by the dark, Sorrel dragged the hatch into place and covered it up. Now she had to find David.

2.

Red Raw

As soon as David saw the three circles painted on the wall, he knew they had to be connected to Sorrel, and when he heard the rumours muttered from the sides of mouths in the markets and vittle houses, he knew where to look. No-one understood exactly what the circles meant, but the consensus was that they could only have come from one place: the open sewer outside the city wall that was the Dregs.

Finally, he had something to go on.

He left the city straight away, but though his instinct was that she was there somewhere, his search was fruitless. As before, no-one would speak to him. On his return, he was once again stopped at the entrance to the city by the Gatekeeper with the sloping shoulders and drooping face.

"Papers?"

"You saw them this morning."

"Maybe I did, and maybe I didn't. You mangy thralls all look the same to me. Besides, who's to say you didn't sell them in the Dregs?"

The Gatekeeper's burly guard loomed at his shoulder as he spoke. David handed over the papers.

The gatekeeper glanced at them. "Enter."

David took his papers back and returned to the city. As long as he wore the thrall-band, no-one in the Dregs would acknowledge him, let alone talk to him. All they saw when

they looked at him was a thrall, a slave to the city, probably a spy. He had to get rid of it.

The smell of cooking permeated the air, as he walked the streets. The aroma of stew, laden with the sweet bouquet of fresh carrots and wild garlic, described a feast he could only dream of sitting down to. His pangs of hunger increased as he caught occasional whiffs of meat frying in skillets alongside fat slices of glistening onions.

As he walked, he caught glimpses through open doors and windows of families gathered at tables for their evening meal. He had no such luxury to look forward to. Grilled rat was proving too expensive. He would be reduced to a hunk of hard bread and a bowl of thin broth for his supper. His lodgings had been similarly downgraded. Coin slipped through the fingers easily in Dinawl and he could no longer even afford to share a bed. Tonight, he would be sleeping on the floor of the lodging house, and tomorrow, it would be back to the Dregs to look for Sorrel.

His wandering feet took him to the street where the blacksmith, Quirke, lived with his wife, Goneril. Peter could not have the only key; Quirke had made the thrall-band, he must surely have another.

David walked past the shop front and saw Quirke working at his forge. Of Goneril, there was no sight. It may be that she was somewhere inside, but he did not want to risk being seen by Quirke, a man whose face looked as though it had been recently boiled and peeled. Goneril, on the other hand, had been all smiles. *If you're ever in need of a friend, you know where to find me.*

Well, he needed a friend now, and no mistake.

David lingered on the street, wandering slowly from one end to the other, stopping to look at shop displays, as if he was on an errand for his master. The thought riled him, as it did every time he pondered on the notion of one person being owned by another, as though they were no more than a jerkin or a bag.

At the thought, his hand went unconsciously to Sorrel's backpack. He carried it everywhere, and slept with it under his head at night, partly to keep it safe from his light-fingered room-mates, partly to keep something of her close to him. He'd breathed in deeply that first night, thinking perhaps that there would be a trace of her still on it, a random scent that would bring her closer to him, but if there ever was, it had long gone.

The raw wound on his neck began throbbing as though awoken by his thoughts of Sorrel. He could have wrapped pieces of cloth around the metal collar to stop it rubbing at his skin, as the waitress at the Three Rats vittle house had shown him, but he wanted it to hurt, he wanted the wound kept open so that his anger would be equally as inflamed. He never wanted to forget the injustice that had been done to him – at least, not until he'd had his revenge.

He walked faster as his thoughts became more agitated and was in danger of disappearing out of sight of the blacksmith's when he caught onto himself. He forced himself to wander back along the street. Quirke was still working at the forge when he passed, and of Goneril there was still no sign. If she didn't show face soon, he would have to leave or risk forfeiting his spot on the lodging-house floor for the night. He stopped in front of a confectioner's shop. The shutters were still open, the shopkeeper hoping for late trade. Trays of honey-coated fried ants and caterpillars rolled in crushed cobnuts were lit by lamp-light.

"Feeling peckish, my love?"

David jumped as Goneril's voice oozed into his ear.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to give you a fright."

David smiled. "That's all right."

Goneril smiled in return, her yellow curls glowing under the street lights. "How are you keeping, my love?"

David touched the thrall-band.

"Aww, that's a nasty sore you have there. Bothering you, is it?"

David glanced around before answering. "You said... if I ever needed a friend..."

"I remember - what can I do for you?"

"This," David tugged at the thrall-band, "can you unlock it?"

Goneril's eyes flashed. "I can't do that."

"Please - you must have a key."

"Now where would my Quirke be if I went around unlocking all his beautifully crafted thrall-bands? We wouldn't be in business very long, would we now?"

"Please, Goneril - I shouldn't even have it on me."

Goneril tutted. "They all say that, my love. All what I can do is give you some salve to aid your poor neck. How would that be?"

A hardness had set in under the pink fleshiness of her face. David was going to get no further with her than if he'd gone directly to Quirke.

"Don't trouble yourself."

The confectioner's door opened and a fair-haired man with a round face stepped out. He wore a leather apron over his robes.

"Is this thrall bothering you, Goneril?"

"Not at all, Hector. How's business?"

Hector glowered at David from the doorway. "Fair to middling, Goneril. And yourself?" He finally tore his gaze away from David and looked at the blacksmith's wife.

"Can't complain, Hector."

Hector looked up and down the street. "Quiet night. Can't see much trade coming my way. If you ask me, all that Dregs nonsense with circles and whatnot has put the wind up decent folk."

"You could be right at that, Hector."

"I daresay. That place should have been dealt with a long time ago. It's trouble waiting to happen... Well, if

you're sure you're okay, I think I'll shut up shop."

"I'm fine, Hector. You just tootle on with your business."

The confectioner shot another look at David before retreating into his shop.

"I'm sorry," David said to Goneril. "I shouldn't have troubled you."

"Don't worry about it, my love. I'd like to help - but I can't. It's a matter of reputation you see, but come back to the shop and I'll fetch you that salve."

David was already turning away as he replied. "It's all right, thanks all the same."

Goneril caught him by the arm and peered at him. "Suit yourself, but take the advice of a friend and don't try any funny stuff with that band. My sweetheart, he has a way with locks. Try to get into it yourself and you'll do more damage to your neck than to Quirke's band. You hear me?"

David pulled his arm away. "I hear you."

"Good." A fat smile broke out on Goneril's face. "You go carefully, my love."



The next morning, David felt the weight of the band heavy on his neck as he passed three scrawny thralls working under the stern gaze of a bailiff.

The thralls were scrubbing three newly painted circles from a wall. The bailiff caught David looking and demanded to see his papers. This was happening more frequently since the appearance of the circles.

He had to show his papers again at the North Gate before he was permitted to leave the city.

On entering the Dregs that morning, David sensed a different atmosphere. The glances sent in his direction were no friendlier than usual, but now they were accompanied by smirks rather than grimly set mouths.

No-one spoke to him as he passed through the narrow lanes between the shacks; they turned their backs if he attempted conversation, and hushed their mouths as he passed, but even so, he picked up whispers on the wind. One word in particular drifted on the breeze, following him as he roamed. That word was *rebellion*.

David's heart beat a little faster as the air crackled around him. The three circles, Sorrel, rebellion – they were all linked. Something was going to happen. He could feel it in his gut. What's more, he wanted it to happen. If there was a chance of destroying the Thrall Market and all those who supported it – the guards, Black Angus and his ilk, the bailiffs, the Free – he wanted to be part of it.

The deeper into the Dregs he wandered, the more intense the atmosphere became. Finally, he found a woman who would talk to him.

Though her face was as wrinkled as a withered crab apple, a bright youthfulness shone from the woman's face, as though the young girl she had once been could barely be contained by the passing years or her grim surroundings.

She was sitting on a crate in front of a small hut, boiling a pot on a stove, from which a salty tang arose. When she did not look away as he approached, he spoke to her.

"That looks to be a tasty meal."

"Indeed. Would you like some, *thrall*?"

Deep lines radiated out from eyes the colour of midwinter clouds.

"I won't deprive you."

"For once, there's plenty. Have a morsel."

He watched as she ladled a pile of large, blue-black shells onto a dish. "Go on, take one."

She smiled when David hesitated.

"Like this." She picked up one of the shells, opened it up and scooped the flesh inside into her mouth, making appreciative noises as she chewed.