

LORRAINE THOMSON



THE
NEW DAY

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About the Book

With help from her mutant friend, Sorrel closes in on an emotional reunion with her brother Eli, but her boyfriend David's disappearance shatters her dream of them all being together. For now. In the riveting final instalment of the Dark Times trilogy, Sorrel must overcome her darkest fears and fight for everything she believes in if she is to salvage anything worth living for.

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 DAY



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Book Five



LOST

Prologue - Sixteen Years Previously

The tribe gathered at the mouth of the birthing cave. A successful birth was a rare event and it had been at least three summers since the last.

The mother lay on an altar of packed earth, two tribeswomen holding her down, a rag tied across her mouth. It would bring bad luck to the tribe if she screamed during labour.

The midwife stood between the mother's legs, knife held ready to mark the face of the new one. The same knife would be used to cut the cord, the placenta roasted and eaten; an offering from the new one to all, symbolising the strength the birth brought to the tribe.

The midwife bared her sharpened teeth as the new one's head crowned. It was the closest her kind came to a smile, but as the faceless child was delivered from its mother, the midwife's mouth gaped open. She dropped her knife, its clatter lost beneath the screech that erupted from the depths of her throat.

The tribeswomen fell back from the mother as the sound splintered their ears. The tribe elders rushed into the cave, their bulging eyes filled with fear as they gazed upon the faceless one. They looked to the midwife. She picked up her knife and cut the caul from the new one's face, but she did not mark it.

It would bring them bad fortune and empty bellies to harm one born without a face. They could not even mark her in the traditional way. Instead, the child, a girl, would

live among them, but she would not be one of them. She would forever be a shadow within her own people.

When the placenta was delivered, the midwife carried it out of the cave and took it to an unmarked, barren place, and buried it in the dirt.

1.

The Sawneys

David paced the pit. It was four strides at its longest stretch, three at its widest. It would have been triangular were it not for the fact that the wall bulged into the third side, narrowing the space in the middle.

If it had been an option, he would have worn his fingers to the bone digging himself out, but the walls and floor were solid rock, without any cracks or crevices he could work at. There was one way in and out, and that was through the hatch above his head.

He stared around the ill-lit confines of the pit, wondering if they'd discovered it already excavated, or if they'd cleared it of earth and gravel themselves.

Them. They were a people the likes of which David had never come across before. He had been able to make out enough words to ascertain that they could talk, but mostly they communicated in crude grunts and gestures. When they danced by the fire at night, they acted out scenes of death, and their songs were shrill and held the promise of pain to come. Ugly ran deep in their veins.

David walked the longest length from corner to corner – four paces, turn, four paces, turn – until he felt dizzy. He didn't go into the third corner when he was exercising. That was for his waste. The stench emanating from it when he'd first been dropped in the pit had been stale but potent. It told him that he was not the first person to be kept here. The thought did not bring him comfort.

As far as he could fathom, this was his third day. Though he suffered from bouts of exhaustion, his eyes scratchy with fatigue, sleep did not come easily. When he managed to doze off, he did so sitting up, waking with the chill from the stone wall eating into his back, his head lolling, and a screaming crick in his neck. He felt no less tired after sleeping than before, but at least it afforded him some respite from the fear gnawing at him from the inside out.

He looked up at the hatch. Very often, he'd glance up to see a row of bulging eyes staring at him, but there were none there now and so he jumped up and grabbed onto one of the wooden struts, pulling himself up so that he could peer through the gaps.

Two hags were sitting by the fire, the muscles flexing on their long, bony arms as they pounded pestles into mortars made of stone.

He'd been suspicious the first time they'd lowered the net containing a rudimentary bowl into the pit. There was a large dollop of paste in the bowl. They'd grunted and shouted at him, indicating that he should take it from the net, and when he did so, they mimed for him to eat the contents. When he refused, they poked at him with long spears. He ignored the torment until they drew blood and then he caved in and scooped up a little of the paste on his finger. They stopped jabbing him as he began to eat. The paste had a fibrous texture and tasted vaguely earthy and slightly sweet, but mostly of nothing at all. With a diet this bland, it was little wonder they salivated at the sight of him.

One of the women glanced over. Catching sight of him, she nudged her companion who also turned around to stare. The pair of them grinned, revealing incisors sharpened to points. When they licked their lips, a tremble ran through David's arms, weakening his grip. He dropped back into the pit, but not before he caught sight of something that left him quaking when he landed.

The fire had been low, and with no flames to veil the way, David had been able to gaze through the heat haze of the glowing embers at what lay beyond. On the other side, neatly stacked on a stone ledge, sat a pyramid of human skulls.

The sight of the white, gleaming bones brought his own mortality home to him, and the thought of his own skull sitting atop the pile filled him with fear and outrage.

He paced the pit once more. The movement was more than a distraction, it was a way to keep his body working, his muscles strong. No matter what, he would fight to the end, and if he was going to his death, he'd be sure to take some of *them* with him.

If only there was a way out.

He stopped pacing and gazed up at the hatch again. The bindings on it were strong for sure – too strong for him to undo with one hand while dangling from the other. But if he could somehow get up to it and use both hands, it wouldn't be a problem. David stared at the stone walls of the pit. There were only two of *them* up there at the moment – if he was going to try anything, now was the time.

He braced his back against one wall, pressed one foot against the opposite, then brought up the other foot and began to slowly work his way up. He took tiny steps, wriggling his back up the rough surface, the small, intense movements causing sweat to bead on his brow.

It was only a short distance, but his legs ached with the effort of keeping his body tensed between the two walls of the pit, and the rock dug furrows in his back. Still, he persevered, edging up until the hatch was within reach of his fingertips. A little higher and he'd be able to undo the bindings. He'd have to be careful and make sure the bony hags weren't watching. Once he was high enough, he would lock his legs in position then it wouldn't take him long to undo the straps and he'd pull himself out of the pit and be gone.

In his mind, he was already free, his feet pounding the earth as he ran, cool breeze in his face, the taste of freedom on his lips.

“DOWN! DOWN! DOWN!”

The sudden yammering of voices from above was accompanied by the jabbing of spears through the slats of the hatch.

David cried out as sharp points drove into his shoulders and legs. He grabbed one of the spears and got into a tug-of-war with its owner, but the others stabbed at him, until he let go. When he fell, he fell hard, jarring his body as he landed on the base of his spine.

The savages opened the hatch and filled the space where it had been with their gruesome faces. They quarrelled with each other, fighting for the best viewing spot. The raucous sound of their voices clanged against rock, the terrible sound reverberating through the pit, filling David's head until he thought it would split in two.

Words the colour of nightmares flew into the pit and buzzed around him like switch flies. *Feast. Meat. Slaughter. Kill.*

They lowered the rope ladder into the pit and three of them descended it, as quick and agile as the monkeys in the Wild Woods, but unlike the monkeys, the scar-faced savages were armed with spears and knives. They filled the space, giving him no room to lash out.

They pulled David to his feet and ran their fingers over him, pinching his muscles, tweaking his flesh. Their nails, sharpened to points to match their teeth, clawed at his skin. There was laughter from above as they mimed eating him and then he was pushed to the ladder and forced to climb.

It felt as though the muscles in his arms and legs had melted like spring snow and he could barely hold onto the rope. His feet refused to move until he was jabbed and pushed into doing so. Before, he'd been trying to escape

the pit but now that he was being forced out of it to face his fate, fear weighted his body and the fight had gone out of him. He wanted to curl up in the corner and cry like a baby, but that was not an option.

Slowly, he climbed the ladder, and with each rung an eon passed. Their voices poured over him from above, making his stomach curdle and his hands slick. And then finally, inevitably, he reached the top.

The ones waiting for him there fell back into a wide circle as he emerged. By the time he was on his feet before them they had stopped yabbering and were staring at him in silence. The three who had forced him from the pit climbed out and stood behind him. David glanced at them and looked around the circle.

They all stared back at him. Though their scarred faces were as frightening as ever to look at, there was no hostility in their bulging eyes. In fact, they had about them a look of deep contentment.

The humming started low, so low that at first David wasn't sure that he was hearing it at all, but gradually it built in intensity until the air in the middle of the circle vibrated with their ghastly droning. It was this more than anything that sent waves of fear roiling through David's limbs. Hands caught him as his legs gave way.

They guided him or carried him – fear had taken over his senses and David couldn't tell which – and sat him on a stone throne. The tribe was still humming, the sound pulsating, rising and falling so that sometimes it was barely there at all, and then it would build into a painful crescendo before falling away again.

He caught sight of the pyramid of gleaming white skulls and tried to break free but many hands held him in place. Bony fingers as strong as manacles circled his arms and legs. It was hopeless. They were so many and he was only one.

David knew in his heart that death was coming to him. All he could do was hope that when it came, it would be quick and merciful.

The two females he'd seen sitting by the fire earlier approached. One of them carried a stone bowl. It contained a paste, but unlike the grey, fibrous sludge they'd fed to him before, this paste was the colour of soil.

The second female scooped her finger into the mix and held it out to David. He sealed his lips tight and turned his head away. Hands circled his head, squeezing so tightly he feared his skull would implode with the pressure, and forced him to face forward. Insistent fingers pinched at his nose so that he had to open his mouth to breathe. As soon as he gasped for a breath, they prised his jaws open wide. The woman grinned, revealing the jagged edges of her sharpened incisors. She inserted her paste-coated finger into David's mouth and rubbed it all around his gums and the inside of his cheeks and then she scooped up another finger-load and spread it on his tongue. When he began to gag and choke, they released his head. David spat out what he could, but most of the earth-paste stuck to his mouth and he could not help but swallow. When they saw that he had ingested it, the tribe swayed in time to a low hum.

The earth-paste broke into strands and dried his mouth. The filaments wrapped around his tongue and caught in his teeth. David tried to spit them out, but could not summon the saliva.

As if sensing his sudden, deep thirst, one of *them* pulled back his head and poured water into his mouth. It flowed out over his lips, sending rivulets down his cheeks and chin. He felt it trickle under his clothes and down his chest. By the time they let go of his head, the filaments had gone, either swallowed or washed away. Had he swallowed? He couldn't remember. His thoughts were hazy.

Two women approached. At first, he thought they were the same two from before, but as they swam into focus he

saw that they were younger, though no less bony, than the paste-grinding hags. They smiled with closed lips and nodded at him. David could feel something strange happening to his face. His muscles seemed to flow like thick liquid and he realised that he was smiling in return.

They set a bowl of water before him. There were flowers floating in it. Herbs he recognised but could not name. Sorrel would know what they were. *Sorrel. Sweet Sorrel. Where was she? Where was his Sorrel?*

One of the women knelt before the bowl and removed a cloth from it. She squeezed it out and looked up at him. It was Sorrel, there before him.

He felt bad for not recognising her. Wishing to make amends, to let her know how much he cared and how sorry he was, he reached out to touch her. Realising he could now move his arm, he looked down at his body. The hands that had gripped him so tightly no longer held him. He was free to move, to stand, to flee. But he didn't want to flee, not now that Sorrel was with him.

He looked back at her. She'd changed. Her face was longer, thinner, and her eyes were much larger than before. There were scars on her cheeks – where had they come from? She smiled and this time her lips parted, revealing the pointed tips of her teeth. David raised his hand to caress her face. She took it and held it. Her nails were as pointed as her teeth. David stared at her nails. Sorrel didn't have pointed nails, or pointed teeth. She had a sharp tongue though. He giggled at the thought. The woman wiped his face with the cloth. She wasn't Sorrel after all. That was good because Sorrel didn't have scars on her face. He could smell the herbs on the cloth, and with the scent came their names: rosemary, sage and thyme. The herbs they used in Amat to sweeten badger meat.

As Not-Sorrel washed his face and his neck, the other woman cut at David's clothes with a thin blade. The hum of the tribe increased as she peeled the material away to

reveal his bare skin. He looked at them watching him. He could see the sounds they made rolling through the air towards him in circles of purple and orange.

The fire had been built up and sparks spiralled into the dark velvet of the night sky. Night already. When had that happened? The woman washed his chest with the cloth. Rosemary, sage and thyme.

He was the meat. He was the badger. He smiled at the thought of them eating him. Everything ate everything else. Badger, wood prawn, rat. What did it matter? The circles popped when they floated over the fire.

David did not resist when they made him stand. The humming increased in intensity, vibrating through his body. The end was coming soon but he felt strangely relaxed.

The circles of purple and orange shrivelled as a scream the colour of spilled blood slashed through the air. At first, David thought the scream had come from himself, that they had cut him and some part of him had felt the pain, but when he looked down his body was whole.

David stood still as the circle erupted into chaos. More bloody screams shot across the circle. The humming was replaced by harsh cries and terse commands. Dark clouds appeared and scattered the bony frames of the savages before them. The savages howled as the clouds whirled in their midst. As they drew near, David saw that they were not clouds, but cloaked figures armed with glinting blades and heavy truncheons.

He watched the scene from outside himself, wondering how it was possible to be in two places at one time. Two of the cloaked figures broke jaws and spilled blood as they swept towards him. So, this was to be his death, not bulging-eyed and sharp of tooth, but shrouded in dark clouds and armed with bludgeons. But the figures did not bludgeon him. Instead one grabbed him by the arm. The rough, physical contact pulled David back into himself.

"We don't have much time. Come with me."

David stared at the hooded figure. He'd felt good before. At peace with himself. Now this dark swirl of violence was giving him orders he didn't feel like obeying. He pulled his arm free.

The hood called to the other. "Mason, he's totally stoned. Give me a hand to get him out of here."

Stoned? The word escaped the hood's mouth in a swirl of dandelion yellow. David had no idea what it meant, but when *Mason* grabbed his arm he didn't like it.

He tried to tell them to leave him be, but he couldn't make his tongue work and he couldn't shake off Mason's grasp. Big hands, Mason had big hands. Like a mutant. David tried to peer into Mason's hood, but the other hood had a hold of him again and they were running. The three of them were running. David couldn't understand it. He didn't want to run but his legs didn't listen to him. They listened to the hoods.

David didn't understand what was going on. One minute he was with the bony tribe, the next they were gone, a scream in the night he wasn't sure he'd heard or dreamed. The fire was gone, left behind. Perhaps it had fallen into the pit.

Beneath him, his legs ran and his feet pounded the earth. He'd thought about this moment when he'd tried to escape the pit. He licked his lips to see if they tasted of freedom and in the process bit his tongue. His mouth filled with the metallic tang of blood and made him think of eating himself, which in turn made him feel sick. His legs stopped running. The two hoods – Mason and the other one – crowded in on him, asking him questions. They talked about the *Sawneys*. David watched their words ballooning out of their mouths in yellow bubbles and had no idea what any of it meant.

"He's completely out of it," the other one said to Mason.

They cared so much it was funny. David laughed and then he laughed some more, and he kept on laughing until

he was crying and all he could see were razor sharp teeth and gleaming skulls, and a scar-faced woman with bony arms who wasn't Sorrel.



He woke up in a wooden shack. Dust motes swirled in thin beams of light shining through knot-holes and gaps in the walls. He didn't know where he was or how he'd got there.

He pushed back the rough blanket covering him. He was naked from the waist up. His arms and torso were covered in nicks and bruises - a flashback of bulging eyes and sharpened teeth was accompanied by a quiver of fear.

His boots had been set neatly by the bed. He sat up and pulled them on. There was a shiver inside him that had nothing to do with the temperature, and so he pulled the blanket around himself and went to the door. He had no idea what kind of scrape he was in and was surprised to find the door wasn't locked. It opened onto a whole new world.

2.

Lost

Sorrel and Einstein walked the length of the valley in silence, their shadows stretching before them. Sorrel had plenty of thoughts in her head, but they caught in her throat, unuttered, stifled there by a choking mix of excitement and dread. Excitement at being finally reunited with her little brother, dread at how she might find him.

In her mind, Eli was the same child she had last seen in Amat, always ready to laugh and eager to please, but on that devastating day, he had lost his mother, his sister, his home. He had lost everything he had known. They all had. The events of that day alone could not have failed to make an impact on Eli. She could not bring herself to think about what might have happened to him in the intervening time, and in what ways it might have changed him, as changed he must surely be.

She had changed, she knew that, as had David. Once so easy going, anger had eroded him and clouded his judgement. He had become jealous and irrational. He shouldn't have made her choose between him and Einstein. If her feelings at being reunited with Eli were shaped by a combination of excitement and dread, her feelings for David were tempered by anger and loss. All she wanted was for them all to be together. It didn't seem so much to ask.

By the time they reached the impressive Before building that Brig had claimed as his home, the last light of day was a fading memory.

"Are you ready?" Einstein asked.

Even Einstein had changed in the time she had known him. Being shackled in the mine had sucked something from him and seeing him reduced scared her.

"Not really."

"You will be fine."

Sorrel took a deep breath and walked up the wide shallow steps to the door. It opened before she could knock.

A mutant with closely-shorn black hair and no discernible neck appeared. The light from the lantern he held cast deep shadows across the far side of his face. "We've been waiting for you."

His words alarmed Sorrel. *What did he mean, "waiting"? Had they known all along she was searching for Eli?* She glanced at Einstein.

"I think what Olaf is saying is that they have been watching us since we arrived in the valley."

Olaf snickered. "Long time no see, Einstein." He ushered them inside to a reception hall illuminated by a few candles. Paintings hung on the walls, and though the light was too dim to reveal much detail, there was enough for Sorrel to see that the canvases depicted strange beasts and wild landscapes.

"Who's your friend?" Olaf's words were addressed to Einstein, but it was Sorrel he looked at.

"My name is Sorrel."

"Sour Sabs." Olaf snickered again.

Sorrel bridled at the words. The last time she'd been called that, she'd been locked up in Dinawl's prison.

"Leave your weapons here." He nodded to a sideboard.

Einstein laid down his spear. Sorrel's hand hesitated as it went to her knife.

"Don't make me take it from you, Sabs," Olaf said.

"Put it down," Einstein said.

Sorrel paused for a moment before laying down her knife.

"Do I have to search you for more?" Olaf asked.

"That is all we have," Einstein said.

Olaf smirked at the spear and knife. "Surprised you got this far. Come this way. Brig is waiting for you."

Sorrel's heart pounded as Olaf led them to a room where several lamps had been lit and a lively fire burned in the grate. She'd been focused on Eli, but finally it dawned on her that she was about to come face-to-face with the monster who had not only taken her brother, but who was responsible for killing her mother and sister.

She looked around, but Brig was not there.

"He'll be with you presently." Olaf dipped his head and left the room.

There were rugs on the floor and cushions on the upholstered sofas. Flowers had been placed in a vase on a table, and the fire burned bright and warm. Care had been taken to make it a room of comfort. Einstein watched as she wandered around, touching and looking.

"Not what you expected?"

She shook her head, not sure what to make of it.

"He is a complex character."

"I'll take that as a compliment."

Sorrel jumped at the sudden growling voice. She turned around and found herself staring at the shaven-headed mutant who had murdered her mother and sister.

Mutants tended to the brawny by nature, but even by those standards, Brig was powerfully built. His piercing blue eyes pinned Sorrel to the spot and set her blood running cold.

"I know who he is, but who are you?"

Sorrel almost laughed, though had she done so, it would have tasted bitter and curdled on her lips. Brig was the harbinger of all the misery in her life and he did not even know that she existed. Shame, hot and full of misery, swept through her body at the thought of how she had crawled into Amat's shadows to hide from him. But that was not

something she was willing to give up to Brig, and so she pulled back her shoulders, raised her chin and looked him square in the eye when she spoke.

"I am Sorrel - Eli's sister - and I have come to claim him."

If Brig noticed the quiver in her voice, he did not comment on it. Instead he narrowed his eyes and turned to Einstein.

"And why are you here? What have you come to claim?"

His tone was mocking, but Einstein did not rise to the bait.

"I am here as Sorrel's friend."

"*Friend?*" Brig looked back at Sorrel. "This is a word he has little understanding of. You'd do well not to trust him."

The tension Brig had brought to the room increased tenfold. Sorrel felt that an eruption was imminent, but from what direction, she could not tell.

"You sold me, Brig. You sold me to the Free!" The words, held back for so long, exploded from Einstein's mouth.

"You betrayed me!" Brig roared back.

"Betrayed you? We were friends. You turned on me for no reason."

Sorrel's gaze went from one to the other as Einstein and Brig hurled words at each other. She moved towards the door as the two mutants drew closer. If the worst came to the worst, she'd go to the hall and grab her knife and stick it in Brig's neck, then they could find Eli and flee this place.

As though reading her thoughts, Brig rounded on her. "You! Get over where I can see you."

Sorrel hesitated, but when Einstein gave a curt nod, she moved away from the door. Just at that moment, it opened and Olaf appeared. He looked at Sorrel and Einstein and then at Brig, a question on his face.

"Leave us," Brig said.

"As you wish." Olaf nodded, drawing a sly look at Sorrel and Einstein before withdrawing.

"Neither of you is to be trusted," Brig growled. "As for you, Einstein – I knew you would survive. My conscience is clear."

"You do not have a conscience."

Brig drew him a contemptuous look. "You're so smart, but you don't know a thing. I feel as much as anyone, Einstein. I hurt, I bleed. When you betrayed me, it was like a stab in the heart."

"I was loyal to you from the moment you took me in – so tell me, how did I betray you, Brig?"

"Don't play mind games with me, Einstein. You know what you and Clovis did."

"Clovis? Is that what this is about? That was –"

"That was what, Einstein?"

There was a pause before Einstein answered and Sorrel jumped right into it.

"Can you stop? Please? I came here to find my brother. Brig – you claim you feel and you hurt like anyone else – but you came to my home and you destroyed it. You murdered my baby sister and I watched you kill my mother. I saw you do it. Then you took Eli and I've been looking for him ever since. If – as you claim – you have a conscience, you'll give him back to me."

This time her voice did not quaver, but when Brig looked at her, the muscles in his face twitching, she thought he was going to bite her head clean off her shoulders and a tremble ran through her so deep it almost turned her bones to soup.

Though she feared she'd collapse in the hard glare of his eyes, Sorrel remained standing. After a few long moments, Brig's face calmed and when it did, he seemed to regard her with new interest.

"You were there?"

Sorrel nodded.

"Hiding?"

She nodded again, this time with a glower in her eyes and the flame of scarlet in her face.

"Then there is something you should know. I killed your mother to put her out of her misery."

Anger, sudden and fierce, blazed its way across Sorrel's face, but before she could say anything, Brig held his hand up and told her to listen.

"I didn't kill the baby, Sorrel." A shiver ran through her at the sound of her name on his lips. "Someone in my crew did that, and when your mother tried to protect the child, he stabbed her in the stomach."

Sorrel thought back to that dreadful day in Amat. Her mother tumbling out of their home, clutching Bella to her. There had been red, lots of red. She'd assumed it had come from Bella, but it could have come from her mother, or both.

"She was going to die, slowly and painfully, and fretting for her child. I put a quick end to it."

"If that is true, what became of the one who stabbed her?" this from Einstein.

"He was injured," Brig looked at Sorrel, "by a girl. We gave him food and water and left him behind."

"I threw his food on the fire and knocked over his water." Drained by what she had heard, Sorrel's voice was flat, though inside she felt sick at the thought of the mole-eyed mutant. "I hope his death was long and painful."

Brig shrugged. "There is not a soul alive who would shed a tear over Turk."

"I want to see my brother."

After a moment, Brig nodded. "Come with me." He walked to a door in the corner of the room. Sorrel's heart pounded as she followed. She glanced at Einstein. He nodded. Finally, she would be reunited with Eli.

The door led to a short corridor, at the end of which was another door. Brig opened it. Beyond him, in a room lit by