

SOOLIE BEETCH AND THE DYING LIGHT (SAMPLE)

BOOK ONE OF THE WILLFUL INSTRUMENTS

SKELLY HARRINGTON



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FOREWORD

Dear Reader,

The woman who wrote this book was in a great deal of pain. Her world had become unlivable, so she tried to escape it by creating a new one. She told herself: *If I use the pain to create, it won't have been for nothing*, and Soolie Beetch was born.

But her story, alone, could not save her. Eventually, the woman lifted her tear-stained face to find that the world she had been hiding from was still there, was still unlivable, and that she would have to change in order to survive.

So they changed.

They left a god that had only ever done them harm and a marriage that god had approved of. They left a name that no longer fit them and a gender that had been used to enforce limits, service, and submission. They grew louder and larger, and they expanded their walls and their capacity to love and be loved. And as they evolved, their story also changed, so the author and the story grew up together.

Over the sixteen years it took to go from seeding the idea to

FOREWORD

revising a completed trilogy, the author forged themselves and set themselves free. Now, they are setting their story free.

They are very fond and proud of this dark little novel. It has a forever home in the bloody embrace of their heart. They truly hope you enjoy it.



Content warnings can be found at the back of the book.

Dear Me,

I hope when you look back and see all of our mistakes, you're still proud of what we created.

I love you.

Skel

*And you, my father, there on the sad height,
Curse, bless, me now with your fierce tears, I pray.
Do not go gentle into that good night.
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.*

— Dylan Thomas

CHAPTER 1

Punka hated the flies. They swarmed, buzzing in her ears and licking at the corners of her eyes, squirming under the iron collar and seeking out raw flesh. She could feel them laying maggots in her moist hollows, burrowing into the crusted sores that cracked and curdled yellow milk, flesh sticking to cloth sticking to crawling flesh. In the dark back of the wagon, they were the only motion, the only sound. Black bodies buzzing in her ears: *Feed us.*

“Adrana! Adrana, open this wagon. Adrana, your mother needs to breathe!”

Had she been heard?

“Adrana!” Punka rasped and coughed. Wetness dribbled out of her mouth, tasting of blood. “Adrana!”

Adrana didn’t care about her any more. No matter. Punka had her other Daughter.

“I heard you the first time. Stop yelling.”

The light of the evening sun spilled in as Adrana untied the canvas door flaps and began securing them to the side. With skin burnished bronze by the sun, hair that rippled like dark molasses, and kohl-painted amber eyes, it was no wonder her Southern name

was 'Rahka,' the lioness. She looked just like her mother did ten years ago. They both knew it, and they hated one another for it.

"I thought you preferred the dark, Punka," Adrana said, "where you can sleep all day and no one has to see you."

"I'm choking. This wagon is filthy. There are flies."

"Flies are attracted to *punka*."

"The collar hurts," Punka whined. "Take it off. I don't need it."

"You'll lose the collar when you're dead. Something we both can look forward to." Adrana folded her arms. "When we reach Ravus, maybe we can drop you in the square and wash you with the dogs."

"Why are you so unkind to me?"

"I'm just finishing what you started, Mother."

"At least bring me something to eat. I'm starving!"

Adrana didn't reply. She turned and glided away, her brown feet dancing, her skirts brushing the dry grass of the field, the warm evening light casting her shadow out behind her so it lingered on her mother's wagon just a moment, before it, too, left Punka alone.

'Punka.' It meant shit. That was what they called her: The Punka Bloodwitch. Come see the Punka Bloodwitch! Mistress to the Undergods, Skag of Rot and Famine, Cannibal Mother and Carver of Souls! Do not let your hearts be moved by her suffering, good people. This is a woman so *consumed* by evil, nothing can satisfy her except the blood of children. See how she wastes away! She'll nibble the meat from your fingers and pick her teeth with the bones. She'll slurp out your eyeballs and squish them between her teeth until they pop! Why, once! There was a boy just like you, young sir, who didn't listen and got a little too close, and—snap, snap, snap—she snatched him up and gobbled him down in three sharp bites before anyone could stop her. I tell the truth! Stare in awe, gawk in horror, and *don't forget* to come back for her feeding at sunset! She'll swallow anything in a desperate, futile attempt to

sate her hunger. Cooked or raw, fresh or rotten, from the biggest pumpkins to the rankest sow slop, you never thought a body so gaunt and wasted could hold so much, but she'll down it all and still be screaming for more. You don't want to miss it!

"The Punka Bloodwitch." The shit bloodwitch. Just another one of Adrana's funny jokes the Midlanders didn't understand.

"Let me sleep," she whispered.

Not yet, the Daughter said.

"You see how she treats me. Let me dream."

Not yet.

"You're just as bad to me as she is," Punka sulked. But she didn't mean it. The Daughter was sweet to her when Adrana was unkind. The Daughter was all she had, and she didn't want to anger it. If she made it angry, it would take the dreams away.

A wisp of camp smoke drifted across the rosy sky, and the lilting voice of the *vielle* reached her ear. There would be dancing tonight, and Adrana would be at the center, whirling in the embers and the smoke, twining her arms and twisting her hips. The people would clap and sing, and they would fill their bellies with hot stew, spongebread, and roasted nuts, and they would forget about Punka all alone, her body as meatless as the picked-over carcasses that littered the wagon interior, her belly empty and screaming.

It had been three moons since she'd had *real* food—something other than the refuse they fed her for the paying crowd that packed the tent, craning for a view, counting her ribs and watching her belly distend.

Punka licked lips rough with splits and scabs. Even slop was better than nothing.

No one *understood* her torment. Fear blighted their love, and they grew weary of her suffering, so they distanced themselves until they believed the hawkers yawling, until they forgot their beloved, beautiful Nadhi and saw only the Punka Bloodwitch eating and eating, always desperate, never satisfied. She tried to tell them, but they wouldn't listen. It wasn't her fault. It was the flies—the way

they burrowed where her skin stretched thin as birch paper and laid their hatchlings in her tender places, so she was feeding the flies, only the flies, and never herself, and she was always, always starving.

Chew less. Swallow more. *Feed us.*

Please, let me dream.

Not yet, the Daughter said.

A boy ran into view of the wagon doorway and pointed. "Ooooh! I found one! I think it's dead!"

Two others joined the first, perhaps fifteen or sixteen years. In the Southern Lands, they would be considered men, but Punka could tell by the way they jostled each other that these were only boys. Punka hated boys.

"I saw it blink!"

Too old, the Daughter said.

There must be a village nearby, and these three had snuck out to the carnival caravan to try to catch a glimpse of a jungle beast or maybe one of the freaks. Well, they'd found one. Maybe if she just didn't say anything, they'd go away.

"Skagging disgusting!"

"And it STINKS!"

"So *this* is a bloodwitch?" one scoffed. "I'm not afraid of some Southern skag."

"It's not doing *anything*," another one whined.

"I dare you to poke it!"

Poke it. Like an animal carcass. Punka closed her eyes and tried to block them out. This was all Adrana's fault. It was Adrana's job to keep the children away. She had known there was a village nearby and had left her all alone and vulnerable. Just let me dream now, she begged.

Not yet.

Why? She whined. You don't want them. They're too old for you. She knew this was true. Though lately she had been finding it difficult to remember why it was important.

“Poke it! Poke it! Poke it!”

Something jabbed her ribs. They had found a stick.

Please. Don’t make me take any more of this, she begged.

The Daughter was silent.

Jab. Jab.

“It’s not doing anything!”

“Say something, bloodwitch, say something!”

“Hey! Stop that! Stop that now!”

A different voice, an older voice. For a moment, Punka thought maybe one of the carnival members had come to defend her, but no, this voice had a Midland dialect.

“Hobby, Kip, Bernad! You need to head home now, or I’m telling your mothers. Get out of here, go on. Go.”

Open your eyes.

Without considering whether or not she wanted to, Punka obeyed. The boys had gone, laughing and mocking as they went, the adult still scolding after them, just out of sight. Straight ahead, where the boys had been moments before, stood a girl. She was slightly younger, with delicate tawny curls, a sharp face, and intelligent brown eyes that met Punka’s gaze unashamed and unafraid. Punka didn’t care for girls either.

“I’m sorry they were so mean to you. They’re bullies. That’s my Papa chasing them off.”

HER.

Punka cringed. The Daughter was shouting, and Punka didn’t know why. There was something she was supposed to remember. Something important. Something she had been holding on to for far too long that had been eaten by maggots and buried in dreams. How she needed to dream. To escape this fear, this ugliness. She was never confused in the dreams, never afraid. In the dreams she was always beautiful and the Daughter always adored her. Let me dream.

“Why is there a chain on your neck?”

“Come on, Soolie, leave her alone. It’s time to go.” A tall,

bearded man walked into view and put his arm around the girl's shoulders. "I'm sorry for the trouble, Miss. I hope you have a nice evening."

GET HER FOR ME. The Daughter's words hurt.

No. She wasn't supposed to. But the thought was more reflex than resolve.

DO YOU WANT TO DREAM?

She did. She needed the dreams.

GET HER FOR ME.

Why? What do you want with her? You have me.

DO NOT DISOBEY.

Punka winced. She didn't dare make the Daughter angry. It would hurt her and take the dreams away. The man and the girl were leaving.

"Wait!"

They paused.

"Do you have food? No one cares about me," Punka whined. "You see how they abuse me. They leave me here in the back of this wagon while they eat and sing and dance. And I'm starving."

The man hesitated. She could see his fear: They should keep their distance. Surely she'd been neglected for a reason. Who knew what strange Southern diseases she carried? But before he could respond, the girl tore away from her father and ran up to the edge of the wagon.

"I have cheese in my pocket from lunch. It's smushed, but still good."

"Soolie!" the man objected.

Bring her to me.

Perhaps it would be okay. Perhaps the girl was too old. Too old for what? Punka couldn't remember.

"Come up and give it to me. I can't reach down."

"Soolie, now."

"Just a moment, Papa. It'll only take a moment." The girl

grabbed hold of the canvas and lifted herself up into the mouth of the wagon.

Punka watched the girl's face as she took in the wagon's interior. Heaps of filthy cushions scattered with prairie-hen bones, and Punka: a corn-stalk husk wrapped in a soiled sheet.

"You're dying. I can tell."

"Just give me the cheese," Punka muttered. She didn't like this girl. She didn't understand what the Daughter wanted with her.

"I'm used to dying people. My Mama was dying for a really long time. She couldn't clean herself toward the end." The girl fished into her dress pocket and pulled out a lump wrapped in wax paper. "Papa had to wash her like she was a baby. And she smelled too, like you do. She said you can always tell when a sick person is nearing death, because they smell different. You smell really bad."

She is young enough. She will not be too easily broken.

"Soolie, come on. We have to go."

"I have to go." The girl held out the lump of cheese.

Punka reached for it, her shrunken skin stretching from the points of her fingers. She would take the cheese, and the girl would go away. The girl would go away, and then the Daughter would let her sleep and give her good dreams where there was no hunger and no pain, and no rot and no flies, where she was beautiful and the Daughter loved her, because she had done what it wanted. She had done everything it wanted, and everything was going to be okay.

As Punka's fingers touched the waxed paper, her hand moved suddenly on its own, grabbing the girl harshly by the wrist and pulling her close with a strength Punka did not have.

"What are you doing?" Punka squeaked.

"What are *you* doing?" The girl's eyes went wide.

Punka's muscles were burning. The girl's young frame was pressed against her body. The man had leaped up into the wagon and was trying to pull the girl away. What was happening? What had she done wrong? Why was the Daughter angry with her?

Dark clouds boiled over Punka's vision. Flies. They were

hatching. Hundreds. Thousands. Millions of buzzing bodies filling her throat and mouth, clogging her ears and eyes, squirming out of her heart and lungs, spooling from the sponge of her bones, breaking free from deep down—deeper than her body—from the very cracks of her being and ripping her apart.

The Daughter was before her, blazing merciless and white.

Punka screamed. *Don't leave me. Don't leave me, please.*

Adrana—

Now, said the Daughter, you rest.



THE WOMAN'S claw hand clamped on Soolie's wrist, pulling her close with sudden violence.

"What are you doing?" the woman screamed, bloody spittle hitting Soolie in the face.

"What are *you* doing?" she gasped.

"Soolie!" Papa's strong arms wrapped around her waist, but the dying woman was too strong.

The woman began to shake. Her eyes rolled. Her head wrap slipped sideways, revealing patches of white hair clinging to a scaly gray scalp. Blood frothed over chattering teeth. Papa was calling her name. The woman's head snapped back. The foul smell of rot and disease was replaced by the smell of fierce heat like melting iron, and Soolie felt numbness travel like a shock up her arm from the woman's grip, stopping her heart, stilling her lungs, filling her ears with deafness, her body so suddenly overtaken that it forgot how to feel, and she could neither move nor cry out, but only stare into the two great eyes that filled her vision as glaring white and cold as clear day snow.

Then, it stopped.

Soolie was out of the wagon. Papa had caught her up in his arms and was holding her close, carrying her away from the carnival camp.

“Don’t ever do that again, Soolie,” he was saying. “Don’t ever do that again.”

Looking back over Papa’s shoulder, Soolie saw the encampment of carnival wagons and carts clustered around a fire and, off by itself, one lone wagon facing into the setting sun. Its sides were painted in scrolling red and gold script that read, “THE PUNKA BLOODWITCH,” and in the back lay a withered carcass that looked like it had been dead for a very long time.

CHAPTER 2

“Silas Beetch, you sit right back down in that chair!”

“I just wanted to—”

“Sit.” Evaline pointed with her ladle. “I bring the dinner. I make the rules.”

“If I had known there was going to be such a fuss, I would have had us meet at your house,” Silas grumbled.

Evaline hadn’t just brought dinner. She had also brought matching bowls, utensils and napkins, a table cloth, and a little vase of frilly red field flowers. Since the Beetch house didn’t have a dining table, she had cleared off Silas’ work table, dragged the two rocking chairs up beside his stool, folded the embroidered table cloth in half so it didn’t pile on the floor, arranged the place settings and flowers, and ordered Silas and Soolie to their seats. Evaline didn’t just visit, she invaded.

Silas leaned back in the rocker, watching the top of the table get farther and farther away. From her perch on his work stool, Soolie looked down at him and giggled.

“Start eating before it gets cold.” Evaline set her soup down and pulled a rocking chair as close to the table as it would go. “And, Silas, you can tell me why your face looks like it was left out

in the rain. Don't tell me this is about Soolie going to school tomorrow."

"He's mad because I jumped in a wagon with a *bloodwitch* and she died." Soolie ripped off a large hunk of bread and began sopping it in her soup.

"Soolie!" Silas chided, "Wait until everyone has been served, don't dunk your bread, and don't call people witches. And as far as we know, she may be fine."

"She is *sooo* dead," Soolie whispered to Evaline.

"Land's sake, someone died?" Evaline leaned forward. "What happened? Silas? Why is this the first I'm hearing about this?"

Silas sighed. Soolie was always highly excitable when her Aunt Evaline was around, and Evaline loved to encourage her. Any other night it would have been a minor inconvenience, but after today's fright, Silas desperately wanted a quiet evening home alone with his daughter. Maybe if he was concise, this would end quickly.

"On our way back from Malswood pond, I saw a caravan camped in a field beside the Eastern Road."

"Not just any caravan," Soolie chimed in around a mouthful of soggy bread, "a carnival from the Southern Lands! They had giant carts and wagons. Huge covered cages. Can you imagine what might be under there? Maybe serpents. Or talking birds. Or hound cats!" She paused to swallow. "Evaline, this soup is the best."

"Soolie. Slow down and don't speak with your mouth full."

"I'm sorry, I'm just so hungry. I'm starving!"

"You're not starving."

"I *feel* like I'm starving."

"For land's sake!" Evaline cut in. "What happened?"

Silas didn't want to think about what happened. He didn't want to remember the woman lying in the back of the wagon, so grotesque and alone. There had been something about her, beyond her shrunken sickly flesh. More than a sight, more than a smell, there had been a sense he didn't understand. All

together, it had frightened him badly. Tell truth, it still frightened him.

Soolie, on the other hand, seemed obnoxiously fine. She was cramming her mouth like a squirrel moving its larder.

“Well?” Evaline prodded.

“I saw Hobby, Kip, and Bernad heading towards the caravan, and when I got closer, they were tormenting a sideshow performer.”

“She was *so gross*, Evaline!” Soolie interjected. “She looked like that goat that we didn’t find until after the snow melted, except she was *still alive*.” Soolie sucked in her cheeks and crossed her eyes.

“Did you want to finish telling the story, Soolie?” Silas asked.

“No, that’s okay. You go ahead.”

“So,” he took a calming breath, “after I sent the boys home, Soolie jumped into the wagon, even though I told her not to, and the woman grabbed her and started shaking, and I had to get up in the wagon to pull them apart. That was the end. That’s all that happened.”

“It was very exciting,” Soolie added, scraping the bottom of her bowl with her spoon.

“That sounds awful,” Evaline said. “Is she okay?”

“She certainly seems okay,” Silas muttered. “Her appetite hasn’t suffered any.”

“Not Soolie, the woman. You said she had spasms. Is she okay?”

“I . . . don’t know,” Silas admitted.

“You didn’t tell anyone?”

“I was so concerned for Soolie.”

“Silas, what if she needed help?”

Silas sat back in the rocker slowly. “I hadn’t thought of that.”

Soolie gasped. “Should we go back?”

“The time to have done something was when it happened,” Evaline said. “We can only hope she’s all right.”

Silas studied the edge of the table, and Soolie slowed her chewing, looking back and forth between them.

At last, Evaline shot Silas a look to let him know this wasn't over, then winked at Soolie. "You just want to go back to try and see a monster from the Southern Lands, don't you?"

Soolie brightened. "Man-eating goats, flying serpents, whole forests that spring up in the night and are gone by dawn!"

"The animals from the Southern Lands aren't monsters," Silas objected, "they're just animals."

Evaline leaned forward. "I heard there is a tower in the Southern Lands, where a dark mirror is kept that captures the souls of all who look upon themselves in its depths."

"Ooooh," Soolie's eyes glittered. "Please say we have time for a story tonight, Evaline, please!"

"Well . . ." Evaline glanced at Silas.

"Maybe some other night. When there isn't school in the morning."

"I'll go to bed right after!" Soolie clasped her hands. "I'll wash all the dishes?"

"We've had enough excitement for one day," Silas said firmly. He knew he'd had.

Soolie scowled. "You never like the stories."

"Silas," Evaline winked, "can school girls have dessert on a school night? I brought blackberry tarts."

Soolie bounded from her stool and threw her arms around her aunt. "Evaline's the best!"



AFTER DESSERT, they washed the bowls and utensils. There were no leftovers. (Soolie would have licked the dishes clean if Silas had let her.) The two rocking chairs were moved back by the fireplace. The table cloth was carefully shaken out, folded up, and placed back in Evaline's basket with the other dinner things, and soon

Evaline's makeshift dining room had disappeared, and the house was back to normal.

The little home had exactly everything they needed: a fireplace, two beds (Silas' tucked behind the ladder and Soolie's in the loft), and just enough space for Silas' shoemaking—tidy shelves full of wood and leather, dyes, paints, trays of hooks, buttons and spools of thread, and the tools of his trade hung high on the walls where he had strapped them years ago, safe out of baby Soolie's reach. The only visible feminine touches were the patchwork bedspread, the rag rug by the fireplace, and the blue ruffled curtains that Tera had fashioned from the dress she wore on their wedding day. Anything Evaline brought when she visited, she took with her when she left.

Soolie washed up and said goodnight. Evaline made her promise to stop by the bakery after school to tell her about her first day and take some rolls home, which Silas insisted they would pay for. When, at last, the excited girl had hugged them both good-night and scurried up the ladder into her loft, Silas took the kettle off the fire and poured Evaline and himself a cup of tea. They sat across from one another, gazing into the low flames and sharing a moment before Evaline headed back home.

"I'm sorry," Silas said, keeping his voice low so as not to wake Soolie. "I don't know what had her tonight."

"She was fine," Evaline said. "I'm more concerned about you."

Of course she was. Ever since Tera had died, Evaline had been there for the husband and daughter her sister had left behind. Sometimes Silas wished Evaline would be just a little less involved and a little less opinionated, but he could see how much she cared for Soolie, and Soolie absolutely adored her Aunt Evaline. If he had to put up with a few lectures, it was worth it.

Evaline studied him, and for a moment, the only sound between them was the soft hiss of the logs and occasional snap pop of the fire. The tight bun that she had twisted her hair into had grown frizzy and disheveled throughout the day. Now, in the

evening firelight, her hair settled about her face in a soft halo. Silas willed her not to say anything. If she could be just *a little less* once in a while, perhaps he could stand to have her around a little more.

“How are you doing?”

“Well,” he started deliberately, “business is decent. I’m receiving a growing number of orders from Ravus. Soolie and I are helping the Cornells build a garden out behind their home. In exchange, they’re giving us use of one of the levels to grow our own vegetables. I’m looking forward to butter squash. How are you?”

She wasn’t so easily deterred. “You were frightened today. Are you okay?”

“I’m fine.”

“You ran away from a woman who was in trouble.”

“She grabbed Soolie. You didn’t see it.”

“She might have been dying, Silas.”

Silas looked away. “Soolie has seen enough death already.”

Evaline closed her eyes the way she did when preparing to say something she thought he needed to hear. “Tera taught Soolie to face her fears. Don’t take that away from her.”

He bristled. “You have no right to criticize me for how I raise—”

“Oh, Silas, that’s not what I meant.”

“She’s only a child.”

“Yes,” Evaline murmured. “Which is all the more reason for her to be fearless. You do enough worrying for all of us. Just . . .” she searched for the right words. “She’s a strong, beautiful girl with a father who loves her very much. You don’t have to be afraid for her all the time.”

“Hmm.” Silas took a sip of tea. He had heard these words before. Maybe one day, they’d live in a world where it was safe to believe them.

After that, they talked of little things.

Evaline was helping organize the harvest festival. Silas was

worried it was going to be a long winter. Rod Cornell's wife Brinne was looking very pregnant, and Mrs. Svenson had told Evaline that Mergo Pelig, the store owner's wife, was having an affair, which both Silas and Evaline agreed was an ugly rumor and probably true. Eventually, they ran out of things to say and sat in silence, listening to the fire and letting time roll languid.

When Evaline finally stood, the flames had burned down to red black embers, and the tea at the bottom of their mugs was cold. She placed her mug on his work table, pulled on her boots—ones he had made—and laced them up. She wrapped a shawl around her shoulders and hefted her basket of dinner things.

Evaline walked over to where he sat still holding his mug and staring into the embers. She placed one hand to his bearded cheek, gently turned his head, and kissed him on the forehead.

“Good night, Silas.”

“Good night, Evaline.”

Then she opened the front door, stepped out into the dark, and closed the door behind her.



IN THE LOFT, Soolie listened to Aunt Evaline leave. She lay awake, thinking about the strange woman in the carnival caravan and wondering if she had imagined the invading numbness and fierce glowing eyes. Wondering, too, what it would be like to go to school in the morning and be around other people her own age. She practiced conversations in her mind. “The buttons? They’re turquoise.” “You like to embroider? I paint! We should make something together.” “Let’s have a picnic. I’ll show you my favorite climbing tree by Malswood Pond.”

When Soolie finally did drift off to sleep, a dark shadow was cast over her dreams. She dreamt of going to school, not in Hob Glen, but to a carnival school at the center of Ravus, full of colorful acrobats, talking serpents, and singing fish with wings. She

dreamt her mother was there, and Evaline was there, sometimes one, sometimes the other, and sometimes it seemed they were one and the same. She dreamt that she danced and her father was happy. That he lifted her over his head like when she was small and swung her around and around until they were breathless laughing. That he whispered in her ear, "*There is no time. The Dead Man is rising.*"

When she awoke the next morning, the dream was gone. The shadow was all she remembered.

CHAPTER 3

Soolie got up early. She unwrapped the rope securing the roof hatch, pushed it up with both hands, and peered out over the shingles. Sometimes, she liked to stand on her tiptoes and imagine she could just make out the tips of the buildings of Ravus poking up from the horizon like new grass, and sometimes in the evening, when the sun was setting splendidly, she would sneak Papa's stool up to the loft and strain to try to catch a glimpse of the sun being pierced by the Regent's tower, bleeding out, drenching the sky in amethyst and coral light. But no matter how tall she stretched, the city was always just out of sight, and right now it was too dark to see much of anything.

Papa was already up and making breakfast, but the firelight didn't reach into the loft, so Soolie dressed in the dark. She had set out her favorite dress the night before, the cranberry wool with turquoise buttons, and her newest pair of stockings. As she fumbled in the dimness, she noticed the skin on her wrist where the woman had grabbed her felt strange, thin and papery, like an old burn. She pinched it and felt nothing. It didn't matter. She wasn't going to let anything stop her today. Still, it was probably

for the best that the dress had long sleeves. No sense worrying Papa.

“Slowly,” Papa cautioned as she swung over the edge of the loft to scurry down the ladder.



THE SCHOOLHOUSE WAS a single room shack on the other side of Hob Glen. Its walls were thin, but freshly painted a light blue and kept in good repair. The students sat on long narrow benches in front of long narrow tables facing Miss Felice Pont’s desk and blackboard, younger children towards the front, older children towards the back. School days were four hours, and homework depended greatly on whether or not the child’s parents could afford books. Everyone under sixteen years in Hob Glen, whose parents could spare them, went to Miss Pont’s little school fall through spring. Everyone, that is, except Soolie, who had been removed from the school by her father when she was nine and taught at home ever since until today.

In the gray morning light, Soolie skipped down Main Street, eating the lunch Papa had packed for her, past Evaline’s Bakery, through the central square with the old oak tree, past the Pelig’s house, which was the largest in Hob Glen, and out to the edge of the town. There, at the end of a side road, sat the little schoolhouse. And there, just now turning the key in the front door, was Miss Felice Pont.

“Good morning, Miss Pont!” Soolie shouted, waving her free arm.

Miss Pont turned, thin eyebrows raised. “Miss Beetch. Will you be joining us today? Is your father ill?”

“Not at all!” Soolie scurried forward, clutching her books and satchel to her chest. “Papa is letting me attend school now that I am thirteen.” She curtsied brightly. “Actually, I’m thirteen-and-a-

half, but you don't teach school in the summer like my papa does, or else I could have come sooner."

"I see," said Miss Pont. "I'm glad he has decided my teaching is good enough to allow his daughter to sit in on class."

"Oh, I don't think your teaching has anything to do with it," Soolie assured, following close on the older woman's heels.

Miss Pont turned, causing Soolie to step back and bump into the door frame. "I see you brought books, Miss Beetch."

"Yes." Soolie held them up. "I brought three: 'The Complete History of Ravus City,' by Mikus Orlin. 'Horticulture of the—'"

"Put them under your seat," the teacher said, hanging her cloak by the door. "You shouldn't flaunt having books in front of the other children. You may sit in the back, Miss Beetch."

Soolie was disappointed. She had wanted to like Miss Pont, and it looked like she wasn't going to like her at all. Nevertheless, Mama had taught her to embrace new experiences, and school was a new experience. Who knew what might happen? She might even make a friend.

Soon the other students arrived, some shepherding younger siblings, others arm-in-arm with friends. A shapely girl with bright straw curls flounced through the door, giggling ferociously and swishing thick petticoats that were the latest style from the city. Soolie recognized her as Winny Baldrick. Winny considered herself the most popular girl in school, but this was Hob Glen, and there wasn't much competition.

There weren't many children older than Soolie this year. Winny and two other girls sat a couple of benches up, whispering, giggling, and glancing back at her. It was nearly time for school to start, and no one had joined Soolie in the back two rows. She was beginning to consider this might be Miss Pont's way of punishing her for not having been around for the last several years. Just when she concluded this must indeed be the case, Hobby, Kip, and Bernad arrived and headed straight for the back. Hobby plopped himself right next to Soolie, pinched her arm hard and

grinned wickedly. Soolie realized she had underestimated Miss Pont.

“Now that we’re all here,” Miss Pont announced, “let us begin.”

Today, Miss Pont was teaching letters, drawing them one by one on the blackboard and having everyone say them out loud. Soolie already knew her letters, but she understood the younger children needed to learn them as well. What made the lesson truly dismal was that every time Miss Pont turned her back on the classroom to write on the blackboard, Hobby’s thick, vicious hands would dart in to torment her. He poked her ribs, pinched her arm, and pulled her hair: anything to elicit a yelp or a squeal. Soolie, however, was stone. Hobby could poke, prod, and pinch all he wanted: she wouldn’t even flinch. Mama never flinched. Mama made peace with pain. Soolie wasn’t always good at making peace, but she was very good at not flinching.

Then Hobby wiggled a wet slobbery finger in her ear, and Kip let out a snort.

Miss Pont turned. “Is everything all right, Miss Beetch?”

“Quite all right, Miss Pont,” Soolie said.

Hobby tucked his hands under the table. Kip was still choking back giggles.

“Perhaps letters are boring you, Miss Beetch. Perhaps you would rather be reading those books you brought?”

Soolie was quite certain now that she did not like Miss Pont at all. Miss Pont was a small, ugly person just like Hobby, Kip, and Bernad—except Miss Pont was a teacher and should know better. Well, if Soolie was going to be punished, it was about time she did something to deserve it.

Everyone was turned around in their benches, waiting to hear what she would say. Soolie folded her hands on the table in front of her.

“Actually, Miss Pont, you have no idea what a relief it is to have escaped my father’s intellectually stimulating instruction for such a

restful learning environment. And one that has such a lovely blackboard.”

Silence. The students looked back at Miss Pont to see if this had been received as an insult.

“Since you are our guest, Miss Beetch,” said Miss Pont, “what would you *prefer* to be learning today?”

“I’m sure I would be most delighted with whatever you might know, Miss Pont.”

“The Southern Lands!” one of the young ones piped up from the front.

“Not now, Luka,” Miss Pont said, not taking her eyes off Soolie.

“Actually, that sounds like a lovely idea.” Soolie waved a gracious hand. “I would love to learn about the Southern Lands, if it is not beyond your curriculum, of course, Miss Pont.”

They were saying each other’s names an awful lot, but that was something adults did to put starch in their words.

“Very well,” the teacher said. “Miss Beetch, you will assist me with the lesson.”

Of course I will, Soolie thought as she slid out from the bench and began walking to the front of the classroom. What did she know about the Southern Lands? Nothing more than Evaline’s stories and fantasy tales. At least she didn’t have to deal anymore with the back bench trolls.

“Miss Beetch, you will clean the blackboard. Since you are so fond of it.” Miss Pont turned her back on Soolie and addressed the class. “Now, the Southern Lands are uncivilized lands. We are privileged to live in the Midlands only a few days from the largest city in all of the known world. Can anyone in the front row tell me the name of that city?”

Soolie found the dust cloth and began wiping the letters off the board, reducing the lines to a chalky haze.

“That’s right, Ravus,” Miss Pont was saying. “Ravus is the pinnacle of modern civilization, full of commerce and laws, great

businesses and universities. It is the center of art, fashion, and modern thought throughout the known world.”

She hasn’t said much about the Southern Lands, Soolie thought.

“I said *clean* the chalkboard, Miss Beetch, not ‘smudge it around.’”

Soolie looked back to see that Miss Pont had her hands on her hips.

“I expect you to clean the chalk off, not redistribute it.”

Someone giggled. It sounded like Winny Baldrick. Miss Pont turned back to the class again.

Soolie went back to wiping the chalkboard. Show no weakness. Win.

“Does anyone have any questions? Yes, Luka.”

“Are there monsters in the Southern Lands?”

“No, Luka. Only untamed animals and savages. Any other questions?”

“I have a question,” Soolie said.

Miss Pont turned. “You can ask questions, Miss Beetch, when you learn how to properly clean a chalkboard.”

Soolie curtsied. “I’m afraid my father was too busy instructing me in philosophy and arithmetic to show me how to use a chalkboard. Perhaps *you* could show me, Miss Pont? My Papa warned me that I *ought* keep my expectations low—and I know I should—but it would be so *very* exciting to get to go home and tell him that I *learned* something today.”

“Miss Beetch!” She had struck the right nerve. “What your father has clearly failed to teach you is *respect*. You will bend yourself over that desk this very moment!”

Soolie didn’t move. “Are you sure you wouldn’t rather have Hobby do your hitting for you?”

Miss Pont slapped her hard across the face. Soolie did not flinch. It stung, but it didn’t matter. Miss Pont could hit Soolie as often as she wanted; Soolie had won.

“Get out of my schoolhouse! Get out!”

Soolie had forgotten for a moment that Miss Pont could do that. Miss Pont could kick her out of school. Even though Soolie hadn’t even attended a full day, hadn’t made a single friend, hadn’t spoken a single word to someone her own age . . . Miss Pont could make sure she never got the chance. Well, so be it.

Miss Pont’s face was blotchy with fury. Soolie lifted her chin and prepared herself for the slow march out of the schoolhouse, but a faraway voice stopped her.

“*Lak nunn masli ko pan daruka.*”

It spoke strange sorbile syllables that lilted like verse. Miss Pont’s face drained to white.

“What did you say?”

Soolie realized the voice was hers.

“It’s a saying in the Southern Lands. It means, ‘The Northern man uses violence when he should use manners.’”

“Out!” Miss Pont screeched. “Everyone out! And Miss Beetch?”

Soolie heard something creep into the teacher’s voice. Something not unlike fear.

“Don’t *ever* come back.”



THE STUDENTS FILED out around the schoolhouse, chattering and whispering, glancing sideways at Soolie. They were still an hour early to head home. Soolie kept her eyes forward and her head high.

Where had she heard those strange words before? Perhaps she had read them in a book. She had spoken them awfully clearly for something she had only seen with her eyes and never heard with her ears. Not that it mattered. She had bested her opponent, and that was what mattered most.

Wasn’t it?

Soolie bit her lip, blinking back bitter disappointment. Four years of waiting to go back to school, and it had only taken her one day to ruin it.

It wasn't that she didn't love Papa, and Evaline was so wonderful, it didn't even matter that she was an adult . . . but Soolie'd only had one chance to prove to the other students she was worth getting to know. Instead they'd laughed at her, and she'd shown herself to be a complete freak. What for? To humiliate a teacher who meant nothing. Yes, she'd won, all right.

Oh, what did she care. It didn't matter. Not really.

Papa was going to be furious.

"Wow, you really messed her."

Soolie spun, startled. It was Bernad, the Pelig boy. He had followed her.

"What do you want?"

He grinned. Bernad was a few years older than Soolie, with dark hair, pink cheeks and funny round ears that reminded her of dried apricots.

"I mean, I've seen her messed before, but never that messed. What did you say to her at the end? You were so quiet, none of us could make it out."

By 'none of us' he meant Hobby and Kip. Soolie shrugged and kept walking. "I told her she wasn't a very nice person."

"Is that all?" He fell in step beside her. "She acted like you cursed her grave. You're kind of rot bones."

"Rot bones?" He said it like it was a good thing. "Is that a good thing?"

"Yeah." He hooked his thumbs in his pockets. "It's good."

Apparently he was walking with her. Soolie held on to her books more tightly and tried to walk at a casual pace, though she wasn't entirely sure what that was. She didn't trust him. But he was being nice, and she was just a little bit flattered.

"I saw you yesterday. When your dad started yelling at us."

"You mongrels," she tossed her head, "tormenting that poor

woman.”

“Hardly a woman.”

“Just like you were tormenting me in the schoolhouse.”

“I had nothing to do with that! Though I am sorry about it.”

He tousled his hair and grinned. He didn’t seem very sorry. “Hobby and Kip are sucks. Total rot. You were right ballard, though, not letting them get to you.”

“They didn’t get to me.”

“Do I get to you?”

Soolie wasn’t sure if he was threatening or flirting, and thought those two things shouldn’t be so easily confused. They were almost at Main Street. When they reached Main Street, she would have to turn left towards the square, out of sight of the other students still lingering around the schoolhouse. Out of sight of Hobby and Kip. Would he keep walking with her or would he turn back?

Soolie realized he had asked a question that she hadn’t answered, and she left it that way.

“You know,” he jogged up in front, trying to get her to look at him, “I’m not really like those two. I just hang with them because there’s no one else.”

“No one else?” Soolie could think of plenty of other people in Hob Glen besides Hobby and Kip.

“No other guys my age,” Bernad shrugged, “in this small suck town.”

“That’s a skag’s reason,” Soolie cussed bluntly.

Bernad threw back his head and howled. “I guess it is! A skag’s reason.”

They had reached Main Street, and Soolie hesitated for a moment to see what he would do.

“See you around, Beetch. You’re not half skagging bad.”

Bernad turned and jogged back towards the schoolhouse where Hobby and Kip were taking turns knuckling one another in the arm. It looked like Hobby was winning.

Soolie turned down Main Street. ‘Not half skagging bad.’

CHAPTER 4

Soolie stepped into Evaline's Bakery, the little brass doorbell jingling and clanking. A stray leaf of mottled green and yellow snuck in on her skirt hem, and she picked it up and tucked it in her hair. She breathed deep, inhaling the smells of warm vanilla, sweet cinnamon and cloves, roasted onion and toasted nuts, shiny dark egg braids and feathery soft sourdoughs encased in crunchy crusts, thick like tree bark.

The windows were open to let in the cool autumn air, but the oven heat prevailed, and soon she wished she was wearing a linen dress instead of a wool one with long sleeves. Soolie ducked around the counter to stash her books and satchel under the corner stool. A tray of honey twists were cooling on a nearby rack, and she snagged one and took a big bite of the soft sticky morsel, chewing with her mouth open to cool it down. Evaline must be around somewhere, or she would have locked up.

The bakery was a second home for Soolie. She loved it from the weathered floorboards, to the giant oven, to the pantry full of possibilities. Most of all, she loved the paintings on the wall.

The first painting had been done by Evaline in stripes of red, slashes of purple, and zig-zags of yellow. Papa said it didn't look

like much of anything, but Soolie said it made her think of a far-off exotic land, which made Papa say it was better to appreciate home and that you had one, but Papa was always saying things like that.

The second picture had been painted by Soolie. Evaline had mixed the base with boiling water, clay, and flour, and colored it with cherries, beets, carrot, spinach leaves, and iris root that she had to order special so Soolie could have black. Soolie used it to paint a swirling black and purple sky above a field of large red flowers. Evaline said she showed talent, and even Papa said it was nice to look at.

The third painting was Soolie's favorite. Papa had made the wood frames and stretched the canvas, but hadn't wanted any part in the actual artwork, so Evaline and Soolie had decided to paint the last one together. It was the smallest, shaped long and thin. There were three vaguely human figures standing on a tall hill, staring up at a large, wobbly lavender moon. (Soolie'd had trouble getting it entirely round.) Down near the bottom of the painting was a flock of white birds circling the top of a tree. The painting reminded Soolie of Mama, because it seemed like it meant something very deep, but she couldn't quite grasp what it was. When she thought of Mama, she often felt that way. The only thing about the painting that bothered Soolie, was that there were only three people on the hill. Sometimes she would study it, trying to figure out if the three people were her, Papa, and Mama, or her, Papa, and Evaline, but it was a mystery she wasn't going to solve today.

"Soolie!" Evaline was coming down the stairs carrying her shawl and a shopping sack. "You're early. I was just about to run to the grocer's for cinnamon. School doesn't let out for another hour or so. Did something happen?"

Soolie wiped her mouth with the back of her sleeve and rubbed her fingers on her skirts. "Oh, nothing much. I just got kicked out of school."

“What? Well, that sounds like a story.” Evaline set the shawl and sack down. “First thing’s first. Come give me a hug.”

Soolie ran across the bakery and wrapped her arms around her aunt. As far as she was concerned, Evaline was the most wonderful person in the whole world. She smelled of baked wheat and sugar, and had eyes that said, ‘I know how to keep secrets,’ and she lived up to them.

“Now,” Evaline kissed her on the forehead. “Have a seat. Kettle’s already on the stove, and I just made honey twists. Start telling me what happened.”

Soolie took a perch on the stool in the corner and kicked her feet against the bottom rung. “I don’t think Miss Pont cares for me very much.”

“Not surprising. Miss Pont has always taken it personally when a parent thinks they know how to raise their own children better than she does.”

Soolie grinned. Evaline was always on her side.

“So,” Evaline poured tea into Soolie’s favorite mug, placed the kettle back on the stove, and delivered the mug to Soolie. “I know you, Soolie Beetch. You did something. What was it?”

She sipped her tea: not too cold, not too hot. It tasted like raspberry leaf and orange peel.

“Miss Pont said that the residents of the Southern Lands are savages. I said that maybe Southerners think that *we* are the savages.”

“That does sound like a fair point.” Evaline slipped a twist on a plate and set it next to Soolie. “Is that exactly how you phrased it?”

“Pretty close.” Soolie grinned and took a large bite of the sweet roll. It was just as delicious as the first.

The shop bell rang. Instinctively, Soolie ducked below the counter before she could be seen.

“Whooo! Evy, it’s warm in here! You should leave the door open! Lands alive! Did you hear about the schoolhouse?”

“Mrs. Svenson. How are you today?”

Mrs. Svenson had a territorial voice and a plump-cushion body stuffed into dresses so tight, you could hear the threads creak. Evaline once said that it was almost as difficult for Mrs. Svenson's clothes to contain Mrs. Svenson as it was for Mrs. Svenson to contain a delicious piece of gossip—which wasn't a very nice thing to say, and made it just the sort of thing Mrs. Svenson would have loved to tell the whole town about somebody else.

"Did you hear that little Beetch girl went to the schoolhouse today? Mrs. Baldrick told me. I know you're partial to that family, Evy, you have to be, but lands-all knows that child is strange—two of my regular, Evy dear, the freshest ones you have—now, Winny told her mother that niece of yours marched right into that classroom, bold as you please, and called poor Felice a string of naughty words, bold as you please! Just like that! Now I don't abide language, Evy, you know me. Children need to be taught to keep civil tongues in their heads—are those fresh? Well, I trust you—now, I'm telling you, poor Felice was shocked right out of her wits! Of course, dear thing had to call the whole day to a close and send those children home. Told that wild child to never show her face there again, and rightly so. I tell you, it isn't right the way that man has isolated that child. She's turned into a little wild thing. No manners, no respect. . ."

Soolie stayed crouched on the floor, munching the last of her twist and licking her fingers. Evaline hadn't said a word yet. Soolie listened to the crinkle of paper as her aunt wrapped up the two loaves that Mrs. Svenson got for herself and Mr. Svenson twice a week. If it wasn't for those two loaves, Soolie would have been glad to stand up and give Mrs. Svenson a sassing, but she didn't want to harm her aunt's business. It was a small town, and Mrs. Svenson had a big mouth.

"Soolie is a lovely young woman," Evaline said. "I'm sure there is more to the story than we know."

"Children are fragile, Evy," Mrs. Svenson said. "Especially the frail ones. Frail body, frail mind, and what with her mother's

death, and then all cooped up with that man all these years. You know what they say . . .” Mrs. Svenson trailed off as if implying something too dreadful to clarify.

“Why, no, I do not.” Evaline’s voice was cold. “What do they say?”

Mrs. Svenson’s voice got lower and closer to the counter. “That sister of yours, praise lands she wasn’t your blood, always wrapped in bandages, hiding her face. Surely you know, Evy. They say she was a bloodwitch, one of the undergod’s wives.”

Soolie couldn’t help it. It was the most ridiculous thing she had ever heard. She laughed. And once she had started laughing, she couldn’t stop. She sat on the floor, threw back her head, and cackled.

“Soolie.” Evaline was looking down at her.

Soolie stifled her mirth with her hands.

“Would you like to come up and say hello to Mrs. Svenson?”

There was nothing for it now. Soolie popped to her feet and tried to look serious. Mrs. Svenson was gaping at her like she had sprung up bare naked with the wrong number of parts.

“Mrs. Svenson. So good to see you. If you see Miss Pont, please tell her that I do hope I didn’t agitate her nerves with my savage speech. I am, after all, fragile minded and poorly educated. I just don’t know any better.”

Mrs. Svenson clutched her loaves to her ample bosom. “Well! I am appalled, Evy, that you have taken to harboring delinquents beneath your counters to mock and assault patrons!”

“Of course, Mrs. Svenson. Thank you for stopping by,” Evaline said dryly. “Do say hello to Mr. Svenson for me, won’t you?”

“If he is in a humor to hear me, after all, his joints have been causing him a great deal of pain lately. Good day!” With a bustle and a jingle of the front door, Mrs. Svenson was gone.

“Soolie!” Evaline scolded, “did you really call Miss Pont a bad name?”

“No,” Soolie protested, “I just quoted something.”

“Well, what was it?”

“I . . .” She had absolutely no idea. “I don’t remember.”

“You don’t remember?” Evaline folded her arms.

“Honestly, I really don’t.”

“Are you *quite* certain?”

“Absolutely.”

“Hmmm,” Evaline said, unconvinced.

Soolie shrugged. She didn’t know what else to tell Evaline. Whatever words she had said to Miss Pont were gone.

“Well, whether or not you do remember,” Evaline said, “if you ever want to make friends in this town, upsetting people like Mrs. Svenson and Miss Pont won’t help you.”

“Maybe I don’t want friends like them.” Soolie thought about how gleeful Bernad had been at the way she had upset Miss Pont. “Maybe I want friends who like me for who I am, like you do.”

Evaline sighed. “That’s very sweet of you to say, but you may feel differently some day.”

Soolie doubted it.

“Well,” Evaline said, “since your father isn’t expecting you for another hour, how about you come with me to the grocer’s. Then we can come back and pick out a few rolls for you to take home for dinner, and you can tell your father they were day-olds, so I couldn’t accept a coin.”

In answer, Soolie dashed over, scooped up the shopping sack, and handed Evaline her shawl.

“So,” Evaline wrapped her shawl around her shoulders, “other than terrorizing poor Miss Pont, how was your first day of school?”

“Unremarkable. A boy talked to me.”

“And you lead with ‘I got kicked out of school?’ Come on. Spill.”

As Evaline locked up the shop, a light breeze lifted a leaf from

Soolie's hair. It was brown and fragile, and when Soolie turned it beneath her boot, it crumbled to dust.



SOOLIE TOOK her time getting home. When she arrived, Papa was furious. Mrs. Svenson had traveled straight up the street from the bakery to tell him how his daughter had been kicked out on the first day and guffawed in her face when she so much as suggested Soolie behave like a young lady. Papa was embarrassed and he was angry. It didn't matter if the teacher had been unfair; a student must show her teacher respect. It didn't matter if Mrs. Svenson hadn't told the whole truth, the fact that it was even a part truth was enough. He didn't want to hear any excuses, and he talked for a long time.

Tomorrow, Papa told her, Soolie would go back to school, and he would go with her. She would apologize to Miss Pont, she would promise to only speak when addressed, and maybe Miss Pont would be kind enough to allow her back into the classroom. Tonight, Soolie would go to bed with no supper.

Soolie didn't cry. She'd had all the time with Evaline to prepare herself. If Papa had been there in the classroom and heard Miss Pont, if he had been in the bakery and heard Miss Svenson, then perhaps, he might have taken Soolie's side. But he hadn't been there. It had been her responsibility to handle on her own, and she had shamed him.

In the morning things would be better. He might even apologize for being harsh with her, though he would still take her to school to ask forgiveness of Felice Pont. Soolie didn't mind. She had seen the look on Miss Pont's face, and no apology was going to take that away.

In the loft, Soolie finished the last of the rolls (she had eaten half of them on the way home) and changed into her nightgown. Her fingers traced the strange papery skin on her wrist. It felt

sunken and squishy. It didn't hurt, and it wasn't wet or oozing. When she sniffed at it, it didn't smell like much of anything. Maybe she'd tell Papa about it tomorrow.

She quietly stacked three books on the floor, stepped up on tip toe, and lifted the hatch to look out in the direction of Ravus. The sun was setting pale blue and gold with only a scatter of ash-feather clouds. The idea of that distant city seemed so full of wonder and promise after a day like today. Full of vibrant and strange people with all sorts of opinions and thoughts, who weren't afraid to question and be. So many people that a boy—no, young man, she told herself—like Bernad would never have to be friends with idiot rots like Hobby and Kip in a city like that.

Soolie quietly lowered the hatch and curled up on top of her bed in the dark.

It didn't seem right. Papa loved her. Evaline loved her. Why did she feel so alone? And she wasn't the only one. Everyone was alone. That was what was so wrong about it. Papa downstairs, worrying, fretting. Evaline too, all by herself in that big room above the bakery. And Soolie. Soolie imagined she was the most alone of all. How could people all love each other and still somehow, at the end of the day, end up in their own dark little rooms with their dark little thoughts, and no one to hold them and say 'I understand.' It didn't seem right.

You are not alone.

Soolie's eyes flew open.

A tiny white star appeared in the center of the loft. It began to grow and spread, fiery tendrils shooting out and licking the rafters, ripples and splashes swirling the shadows out of the corners. Soolie expected Papa to come running up the ladder, but the downstairs was silent, and still the light grew until it engulfed the room, eating away the defining edges with unbearable brightness, and just when Soolie thought she might go blind, it softened to an ethereal glow, and Soolie saw her.

Long chestnut hair settling in delicate ringlets around her pale

SOOLIE BEETCH AND THE DYING LIGHT (SAMPLE)

face, thin arms reaching out, large enigmatic hazel eyes, the serene smile that turned up just a little bit more at one corner than the other.

“Mama?”

Hello, Soolie. I've missed you.

THANKS FOR READING

Soolie Beetch and the Dying Light continues!

Get the book at <https://www.sooliebeetch.com/>