

The descent into the Siberian interior was masked by a calculated, clinical silence. The transport vessel, a sleek ketch-class atmospheric cruiser, hummed with a synthetic warmth that felt engineered to soothe. Soft, ambient light bathed the interior, and the holographic displays on the bulkheads cycled through images of the Onyakyom Institute: sprawling glass structures, lush interior arboretums, and smiling medical staff. The brochures tucked into the seat pockets spoke of "holistic rehabilitation," "restorative isolation," and a "caring environment tailored to the unique sensitivities of the individual."

For Skye, the steady thrum of the engines was the only thing keeping her tethered to reality. She watched the frost crystallize on the triple-paned viewport, turning the world outside into a jagged, monochromatic blur of white and iron-grey. The promise of safety was a heavy weight in her chest—a desperate hope that here, in the silent reaches of the north, the chaos of her past could be sterilized.

However, as the cruiser touched down on the reinforced landing pad, the synthetic warmth flickered and died. The hum of the engines was replaced by the grinding of rusted hydraulics. When the heavy pressurized doors hissed open, the air that rushed in wasn't the filtered, pine-scented breeze promised by the transport's climate control. It was a searing, oxygen-thin gale that tasted of diesel and ancient, unwashed stone.

The transition was violent. Uniformed guards—men with faces like scarred granite—did not offer the "compassionate reception" described in the intake files. They moved with a predatory efficiency, their heavy boots clattering against the metal gantry. Skye was ushered toward the main intake spire of Onyakyom, her footsteps echoing in a hollow, metallic rhythm. The moment she crossed the threshold of the primary holding block, the illusion of the institute shattered.

The air inside was thick, stagnant with the stench of sweat, tobacco, and something sharper—the metallic tang of fear. The "patients" were not the recovering souls the brochures had depicted. They were men, hundreds of them, clad in tattered grey fatigues, their eyes sunken and feral. As Skye moved through the central corridor, a wave of silence rippled through the mass of prisoners, followed immediately by a low, guttural cacophony of whistles, jeers, and threats that needed no translation.

She scanned the sea of faces, her breath hitching. In every direction, from the tiered catwalks to the shadows of the open cells, there were only men. The realization hit her with the force of a physical blow: she was the solitary female presence in a fortress of exile.

The environment was a hunting ground. The cruelty was not hidden; it was etched into the way the men lunged at the bars, the way they openly discussed their intentions with a terrifying, casual violence. The "safe" walls of Onyakyom were actually the boundaries of a pit. Skye felt her pulse hammering against her ribs like a trapped bird. Her confidence, once a shield she wore with pride, began to fray at the edges, dissolving into the sub-zero air. She stood her ground, forcing her spine to remain rigid even as the verbal abuse pelted her like

stones. She kept her gaze fixed straight ahead, refusing to let them see the way her hands trembled. She was an island of iron in a sea of ice, but the water was rising, and the shore was nowhere to be seen.

The Verification Center was a stark, windowless vault deep within the bowels of the institute. The transition from the chaotic roar of the cell blocks to the sterile, oppressive quiet of the medical wing was jarring. Here, the walls were a jaundiced yellow, stained by decades of nicotine and chemical spills. The light flickered with a high-pitched, electric whine that grated on the nerves.

Skye was forced into a high-backed chair of cold aluminum. Across from her sat a technician whose face was obscured by a cracked plexiglass visor. He didn't look at her as a person; he looked at her as a data point, a biological asset to be logged and processed. "Standard intake verification," the technician muttered, his voice muffled and devoid of empathy. "We need a sample. Just a prick to verify your genetic markers and health status. It's for your own safety."

The lie was delivered with a terrifying calmness. He reached for a tray of instruments, his movements slow and practiced. Skye stared at the tray, her mind racing. The promise of "safety" had already been proven a fiction, yet the professional veneer of the medical wing beckoned for her to trust, if only for a second. She offered her hand, her palm turned upward, a silent plea for the "caring environment" to finally manifest.

"Keep still," the technician commanded.

He didn't reach for a lancet or a butterfly needle. Instead, he gripped her wrist with a strength that felt like a vise. In one swift, brutal motion, he drove a heavy, wide-bore sampling spike directly into the meat of her hand.

The scream that tore from Skye's throat was swallowed by the soundproofed walls. This wasn't a prick; it was an extraction. The pain was white-hot, a jagged lightning bolt that radiated from her palm up to her shoulder. She watched, blurred by sudden tears, as the clear tubing attached to the spike filled with a dark, rhythmic pulse of red.

The technician didn't flinch at her agony. He watched the vials fill with the same clinical indifference one might show a dripping faucet. Skye sobbed, her body convulsing with the shock of the betrayal. She had been promised a sanctuary, and instead, her first interaction with "care" was a calculated act of mutilation.

When the vials were full, the technician didn't offer a bandage or a word of comfort. He ripped the spike out with a callous jerk, leaving a jagged, weeping puncture. He nodded to the guards standing by the door.

"Processed," he said flatly.

Skye was hauled to her feet, her legs feeling like lead. She couldn't see through the veil of tears, her vision swimming in the yellow light. She was dragged down a secondary corridor, the friction of her boots on the concrete the only sound alongside her hitching breaths.

They reached a heavy, reinforced door—her assigned bunk. The guards didn't open it; they threw her inside. Skye collapsed onto the thin, mildewed mattress of the cot, the impact jarring her injured hand. The door slammed shut with a final, heavy thud, the bolt sliding home with the sound of a guillotine.

Curled in a fetal position, she cradled her bleeding hand against her chest, the darkness of the cell closing in. The "ultra-safe" Onyakyom Institute had claimed its first piece of her, and the long, Siberian night had only just begun.

The transition from the sterile trauma of the verification center to the communal hygiene block was a descent into a different kind of purgatory. The guards didn't offer a private stall or a moment of sanctuary; they simply pointed a gloved finger toward a set of heavy, rusted double doors that exhaled a thick, humid fog. The air inside was a suffocating mix of industrial bleach and the salt-heavy scent of overcrowded bodies.

When Skye pushed through the doors, the wet slap of her boots on the cracked tile echoed like a gunshot.

The showers were not the partitioned, individual units promised in the orientation brochures. It was a singular, cavernous hall of exposed pipes and overhead nozzles that wept lukewarm, copper-tasting water. And it was full.

The low hum of conversation among the prisoners died instantly. The silence that followed was heavy, a physical weight that pressed against Skye's lungs. Dozens of men, their bodies a map of scars, prison ink, and the grime of the Siberian wastes, turned as one. They didn't just look; they stared with a predatory, unblinking intensity that made the humid air feel freezing.

Skye's hand, still throbbing from the jagged puncture of the sampling spike, felt suddenly leaden at her side. She stood at the threshold, the only female silhouette in a room defined by aggressive masculinity. The looks she received weren't merely curious; they were "weird"—a disturbing blend of confused disbelief and a dark, calculating hunger. It was as if they were looking at a ghost, or perhaps, more accurately, a piece of meat dropped into a starving kennel. She kept her chin up, a reflex of the confidence that was rapidly eroding, and moved toward an open nozzle near the far wall. Every step felt like a mile. The men didn't move out of her way; they forced her to navigate the narrow gaps between them, their damp skin nearly brushing against her as she passed. She could hear the rhythmic drip of the water and the sudden, synchronized intake of breath from the crowd.

As she reached the iron pull-chain of the shower, she felt the heat of their collective gaze burning into the back of her neck. One man, his chest a tapestry of faded Cyrillic symbols, leaned against a support pillar, his eyes tracking the movement of her injured hand. He didn't

speak, but the corners of his mouth twisted into a slow, grotesque smirk that sent a chill straight to Skye's marrow.

She pulled the chain. The water hit her—not with a cleansing rush, but with a weak, erratic spray that smelled of sulfur. She closed her eyes, trying to drown out the sensation of a hundred pairs of eyes dissecting her. The steam rose around her, but it offered no camouflage. In the Onyakyom Institute, even the act of washing was a public execution of privacy, a reminder that here, she was not a patient—she was a target.

The heavy iron door of the cell didn't just close; it sealed with a finality that felt like being buried alive. The darkness in the intake block was absolute, save for a sliver of flickering sodium light that bled through the small, reinforced viewing slit high above. The air was frigid, smelling of wet concrete and the metallic tang of the blood still sluggishly drying on Skye's hand.

She lay on the thin, stained mattress, her body trembling with a rhythmic, uncontrollable chill. The trauma of the day—the betrayal of the transport, the predatory silence of the shower block, and the clinical violation at the verification center—coalesced into a suffocating weight on her chest. Every time she closed her eyes, she saw the technician's visor and the jagged flash of the sampling spike. Every time she breathed, she felt the phantom heat of a hundred staring eyes.

Her confidence, once her greatest armor, lay in shards on the floor of the Onyakyom Institute. As the hours crawled by, the sounds of the prison began to bleed through the ventilation shafts. There were muffled shouts, the rhythmic thud of boots on the catwalks above, and the low, guttural laughter of the men in the adjacent wing—a sound that made her skin crawl. She was alone in a fortress of monsters, a girl trapped in a machine designed to grind the human spirit into dust

In the depths of her exhaustion, the line between reality and memory began to blur. The cold of the Siberian cell started to feel like the cold of a distant childhood winter. She reached out with her uninjured hand, grasping at the air as if trying to catch a fading coat-sleeve.

The transition into sleep wasn't a peaceful descent; it was a violent collapse. As her consciousness fractured, the terror she had suppressed all day finally broke its banks. She didn't slip into dreams; she fell into a void.

"Marshall!"

The name tore from her throat, raw and jagged, echoing off the stone walls. It wasn't a whisper or a plea; it was a visceral, soul-deep scream. In the pitch-black silence of the ward, the name of her brother was the only anchor she had left. She screamed it again, her voice cracking under the strain of a grief she couldn't name, a desperate call for the only person who might have been able to pull her from this nightmare.

"Marshall! Marshall, please!"

She thrashed against the thin blanket, her heels drumming against the metal frame of the cot. The screams continued even as her eyes remained shut, a primal venting of the insanity that was already beginning to claw at the edges of her mind. Outside in the corridor, a guard struck the door with a heavy baton to quiet her, the metallic clang punctuating her cries, but she didn't hear it.

She was no longer in Siberia. She was lost in the dark, calling out for a brother who couldn't hear her, until her voice finally gave out into a ragged, sobbing wheeze. Eventually, the sheer physiological toll of the terror forced her into a heavy, twitching stupor. Skye fell into a deep, hollow sleep, her face tear-streaked and pressed against the cold wall, still whispering his name into the shadows.

The "wake-up call" at the Onyakyom Institute was not a bell or a soft chime; it was the violent vibration of a high-frequency acoustic pulse that rattled Skye's teeth in her skull. The heavy iron door was kicked open by a guard whose breath smelled of cheap synthetic tobacco and stale coffee. He didn't speak; he simply hooked his baton under the frame of her cot and flipped it, sending Skye sprawling onto the frigid concrete floor.

Her hand, the puncture wound now a blackened, angry knot of inflammation, throbbed with a rhythmic heat. She was hauled to her feet by her collar and shoved toward the exterior gates. The Siberian morning was a brutal, blinding white. The sun offered no warmth, only a glare that turned the snow into shards of glass. In the center of the yard stood the wood-processing station—a primitive, grueling operation designed to fuel the institute's ancient boilers. The hierarchy of the yard was immediately, sickeningly clear.

Under a makeshift corrugated lean-to, a group of the men prisoners lounged on crates and overturned barrels. They were laughing, their voices booming over the whistling wind. In their hands were frosted cans of industrial-grade beer, smuggled in or distributed as "incentives" by the guards. They leaned back, some of them shirtless despite the sub-zero temperatures, their muscles rippling with a lazy, unearned arrogance.

Skye, however, was pushed toward the chopping blocks. A heavy, rusted felling axe was thrust into her hands. The weight of it nearly pulled her forward, its handle rough and splintered, biting into the raw skin of her injured palm. A guard stood over her, his hand resting on the holster of his sidearm.

"Move," he barked, a plume of frozen breath exploding from his mouth. "The boilers don't feed themselves."

For hours, the rhythmic thwack of steel hitting frozen larch echoed through the yard. Skye's breath came in ragged, burning gasps. Every swing was an agony that radiated from her hand to her spine. The wood was dense, infused with ice, resisting every strike. She had to swing twice, three times, four times just to split a single log, her vision blurring as the sweat on her forehead froze into a salty crust.

The abuse was not just physical; it was the psychological weight of the audience. The men under the lean-to watched her with a mocking, voyeuristic glee. They shouted insults, making crude bets on how many swings it would take for her to collapse. When a guard walked by, the men would point to the growing pile of split wood behind Skye.

"Good haul we're making today, boss," one of the men yelled, tipping his beer can toward the guard.

"Yeah," another chimed in, leaning back and wiping foam from his lip. "We're really putting in the work. Keep 'em coming, girl. We need a bigger pile before lunch."

The guards nodded in approval, recording the "production quotas" in their ledgers under the names of the men's work-gang. All the credit, all the "labor points," and all the rations were credited to the men who sat in the shade, drinking and watching. To the records of Onyakyom, Skye didn't exist as a worker; she was merely a tool, a biological engine being run until it seized. By midday, Skye's hands were slick with a mixture of melted frost and fresh blood. Her confidence was no longer a shield; it was a memory. She looked at the pile of wood she had built with her own shattered strength, then at the men laughing as they claimed her sweat as their own. The insanity she had felt the night before—the screaming need for Marshall—began to settle into a cold, hard knot in her gut. She wasn't just being broken; she was being erased.

The midday whistle didn't signal a reprieve; it was a high-pitched, mechanical scream that cut through the frozen air of the yard like a rusted blade. For Skye, it was the only thing that kept her upright. Her muscles were no longer firing; they were seizing in a rhythmic, agonizing pulse. Her palms were a map of raw, weeping blisters, the wood-grain of the axe handle having practically fused with her skin through a mixture of sweat and freezing blood. She dropped the axe into the crimson-stained snow. It felt like shedding a leaden limb. The guards began herding the prisoners toward the Mess Hall—a low-slung, concrete bunker that hummed with the vibration of subterranean generators. As Skye stumbled toward the entrance, her legs felt like hollow glass. She was hollower still. She hadn't eaten since the transport ship, and the caloric tax of swinging a felling axe for six hours in sub-zero temperatures was starting to pull at the very fabric of her consciousness.

As she entered the hall, the sensory contrast was enough to make her head spin. The room was divided by a heavy, floor-to-ceiling iron grate. On the far side, the "Rehabilitation Wing" was set up like a high-end gala. The lighting was warm, amber-hued, and soft. White linen cloths covered long mahogany tables. The air there didn't smell of bleach or despair; it smelled of seared duck breast, truffle-infused reductions, and the buttery aroma of fresh brioche.

The men—the same men who had spent the morning drinking beer and mocking her from the shade—were seated there. They were being served by silent, white-gloved orderlies. Plate after plate of Michelin-star quality food was laid before them: Wagyu beef glistening in its own juices,

vibrant micro-greens, and delicate pastries that looked like works of art. They laughed, their voices booming in the acoustic tiles, clinking crystal glasses filled with amber liquids.

Skye was ushered to the "Intake Scour" side of the grate.

She stood in a line of one. The server behind the rusted stainless-steel counter didn't look at her. He wore a stained apron and a mask that muffled his heavy breathing. Without a word, he picked up a dented tin tray and depressed a lever on a large, overhead vat.

A thick, grey-green glob of viscous sludge hit the tray with a wet, heavy thud.

It was a synthetic protein mash, recycled and re-processed until all texture and flavor had been stripped away. It smelled of wet cardboard and chemical preservatives. A single, stale crust of black bread was dropped on top of the heap.

"Next," the server grunted, though there was no one behind her.

Skye took the tray to a bolted-down metal stool near the iron grate. Her hands shook so violently she could barely hold the plastic spoon. She looked at the sludge, then through the bars at a man less than five feet away who was currently slicing into perfectly seared scallops. The injustice wasn't just a concept; it was a physical wall between them.

She forced a spoonful of the grit into her mouth. It was cold, oily, and tasted of nothing but salt and chalk. She choked it down, her stomach cramping in protest. It was the first "meal" she had been given, and it felt like a final insult to her humanity.

But the humiliation wasn't finished.

As the men on the other side finished their decadent feast, the guards opened a small, waist-high hatch in the iron grate.

"Clean up, girl," a guard commanded, tapping the bars with his baton.

One by one, the men stood up. They didn't just pass their dishes through; they made a sport of it. They scraped the remains of their gourmet meals—the bones, the rinds, the discarded sauces—directly onto Skye's tray, burying her sludge under a mountain of their refuse.

The man with the Cyrillic tattoos walked over last. He held a heavy porcelain plate smeared with red wine reduction. He looked Skye dead in the eyes, his expression one of bored, casual cruelty. He tilted the plate, letting the greasy remnants drip onto her sleeve before slamming the heavy dish down onto her pile.

"Make sure you get the spots off, sweetheart," he sneered, his breath smelling of expensive brandy. "I like to see my reflection when I eat."

The stack of dishes grew until it was a precarious, heavy tower of ceramic and silver. Skye sat there, staring at the debris of a feast she would never taste, her own meager portion of sludge now contaminated by the scraps of her tormentors. She was the maid, the laborer, and the waste-disposal unit all at once.

The confidence that had once defined her was a ghost now. In the reflection of a polished silver spoon resting atop the pile of dirty plates, she saw a girl she didn't recognize—eyes sunken, face smeared with soot, and the first true sparks of a quiet, terrifying insanity beginning to flicker in her pupils.

She didn't cry. She just picked up the first plate and began to scrub, her mind echoing with the phantom sound of Marshall's name, a name that felt further away with every dish she cleaned.

The sun did not rise over Onyakyom the next morning; it merely bled a bruised, sickly purple light through the ice-caked clerestory windows. The temperature inside the intake block had plummeted to the point where Skye's breath hung in the air like a ghostly shroud, a physical manifestation of her remaining life force being siphoned away by the stone walls.

She had spent the night in a state of semi-conscious delirium, her body twitching with the phantom rhythm of the felling axe. Her hand had swollen into a purple, angry knot, the puncture from the verification spike now radiating a heat that felt like a localized sun. She hadn't slept so much as she had drowned in a sea of Grey-scale memories.

When the acoustic pulse vibrated through the floorboards at 0400 hours, something inside Skye finally snapped. It wasn't a clean break; it was a slow-motion shattering, the sound of glass under a hydraulic press.

As the heavy iron door groaned open, and the same guard with the coffee-stained teeth stepped in to flip her cot, Skye didn't wait for the impact. She rolled off the mattress before his boot could connect, standing on legs that felt like they were made of rusted rebar.

She followed the guard out into the central yard, but she didn't head for the woodpile. She stopped in the center of the slush-filled courtyard, right in front of the "Rehabilitation Wing" windows—where the heat was currently blasting and the scent of fresh-ground Arabica beans was beginning to waft through the vents.

The men were there, peering through the glass, holding their porcelain mugs, watching her like a specimen in a jar. The guards converged on her, batons drawn, their faces twisted in a mixture of confusion and irritation.

"Back to the block, 402," the lead guard growled, his hand hovering over his belt. "You haven't been cleared for the yard yet."

Skye didn't move. She felt the cold seeping through her thin, regulation-issue boots, but she didn't care. The insanity that had been brewing since she first saw the transport's deceptive brochures finally found its voice. It started as a low tremor in her chest and erupted into a scream that silenced the wind itself. It was a sound born of pure, unadulterated exhaustion and the wreckage of her dignity.

"I WEAR THE PROPER UNIFORM!" she shrieked, her voice cracking and echoing off the jagged concrete spires of the institute. She gripped the collar of her tattered, ill-fitting grey fatigues, shaking the fabric until it threatened to tear. "I DO ALL THE SHIT YOU MAKE ME DO! EVERY FILTHY, DEGRADING, SOUL-CRUSHING TASK YOU THROW AT ME WITHOUT A SECOND THOUGHT!"

The men behind the glass stopped laughing. Some of them lowered their mugs, their expressions shifting from mockery to a wary, narrow-eyed curiosity. The guards stepped closer, but Skye didn't flinch. She was beyond the reach of their physical threats; the psychological damage had already reached the bone.

"I WORK LIKE A DOG!" she continued, her lungs burning with the intake of the sub-zero air. "DAY AND NIGHT! I SLAVE OVER YOUR WOODPILES WHILE YOU SIT IN THE WARMTH! I SCRUB YOUR DISHES UNTIL MY FINGERS BLEED! AND FOR WHAT?"

She pointed a trembling, scarred finger toward the guard's station, where a communal pot of "Intake Grade" liquid sat on a heating element—a black, oily sludge that smelled of burnt rubber and chemicals, the only "sustenance" she had been offered since the previous night's tray of grey mash.

"I AM WORKING OFF A CUP OF COFFEE FROM A POT NONE OF YOU WOULD TOUCH!" Her voice rose to a fever pitch, a jagged, raw sound that seemed to vibrate the very frost on the wire fences. "YOU SIT THERE IN YOUR LINENS AND YOUR SILKS, DRINKING VINTAGES AND EATING THE WORLD, WHILE I AM DRIVEN INTO THE DIRT FOR THE PRICE OF STAGNANT WATER AND BITTER ASH! I HAVE DONE EVERYTHING! I HAVE BROKEN EVERY BONE IN MY WILL TO FIT INTO THIS HELL YOU'VE BUILT, AND STILL, YOU TREAT ME LIKE THE WASTE YOU SCRAPE OFF YOUR BOOTS!"

The guards moved in then, their patience evaporated. A heavy blow from a baton caught her across the ribs, folding her mid-sentence, but the scream didn't die. It turned into a wheezing, defiant laugh as she hit the slush. Even as they dragged her across the courtyard, her heels carving twin furrows in the grey snow, she kept her eyes locked on the men behind the glass.

She looked at them not with fear, but with a terrifying, wide-eyed clarity. The confidence was gone, replaced by something much more dangerous: the cold, incandescent rage of someone who has seen the bottom of the abyss and realized there is nothing left to lose.

As they threw her back into the darkness of the intake cell, the silence that followed her outburst was louder than the scream itself. For the first time, the men of Onyakyom weren't just looking at her "weirdly." They were looking at the crack they had made in her soul, and for the first time, they seemed to realize that when a spirit like Skye's breaks, it doesn't just shatter—it explodes.

The silence that followed Skye's outburst didn't last. It was a pressurized pocket of air right before a storm broke, and when it broke, it did so with a tectonic force.

As the guards closed in, their heavy black boots crunching through the frozen slush, Skye didn't retreat. She lunged forward, her fingers hooking into the chain-link mesh that separated the yard from the "Rehabilitation" walkway. The metal groaned under her grip, the frost biting into her raw, open blisters, but she didn't feel the cold anymore. She felt like she was composed entirely of white phosphorus and jagged glass.

"LOOK AT ME!" she shrieked, her voice reaching a frequency that seemed to make the very windowpanes of the cafeteria vibrate. "YOU SIT THERE BEHIND YOUR LUXURY! YOU SIP YOUR BRANDY AND YOUR BOURBON WHILE I TASTE THE COPPER OF MY OWN LUNGS EVERY TIME I BREATHE THIS FROZEN HELL!"

The men in the cafeteria—the same men who had mocked her in the showers, the same men who had piled their greasy, half-eaten scraps onto her tray just hours before—began to pull back. The casual, predatory arrogance that had defined their faces was being replaced by a stark, visceral unease. They weren't looking at a "girl" anymore; they were looking at a breakdown so absolute it felt contagious.

One man, the one with the Cyrillic tattoos who had demanded she "clean the spots off" his plate, actually tripped over his own mahogany chair as he scrambled away from the window. His expensive silk shirt was stained with spilled wine, his hands trembling as he stared at the specter on the other side of the glass.

"YOU THINK I'M AFRAID?" Skye's laughter was a jagged, rhythmic sound, more terrifying than the screaming. It was the sound of a mind that had finally uncoupled from the tracks of reality. "I HAVE BEEN HOLLOWED OUT! I HAVE BEEN STABBED AND WORKED AND STARVED UNTIL THERE IS NOTHING LEFT BUT THIS! I AM THE DOG YOU BRED! I AM THE ANIMAL YOU MADE!"

She slammed her forehead against the reinforced glass of the cafeteria window. The thud was sickening, a dull, heavy sound that left a smear of blood on the pane. Inside, the men flinched as one, some of them dropping their crystal glasses, the sound of shattering shards punctuating her tirade.

"DO YOU LIKE THE VIEW?" she roared, her face pressed against the glass, her eyes wide and bloodshot, fixed on the man who had given her the sludge. "DOES IT TASTE BETTER KNOWING I'M OUT HERE CHOKING ON THE ASHES OF YOUR COFFEE? DOES THE STEAK GO DOWN SMOOTHER KNOWING I'M BLEEDING INTO THE WOODPILE?"

The guards finally reached her, four of them grappling with her thin frame. It should have been easy to subdue her, but Skye fought with a feral, hysterical strength. She thrashed, her boots kicking up sprays of grey sleet, her voice never wavering in its volume.

"GO AHEAD! LOCK ME AWAY!" she screamed as they forced her knees into the ice. "PUT ME IN THE DARK! I'VE ALREADY BEEN THERE! I SCREAM FOR MY BROTHER UNTIL MY

THROAT BLEEDS, AND HE ISN'T COMING! NO ONE IS COMING! BUT I WILL BE THE GHOST IN YOUR MEALS! I WILL BE THE BITTERNESS IN EVERY DROP YOU DRINK!"

The men in the cafeteria were standing now, huddled in the center of the room, away from the windows. The " Michelin-star" atmosphere had evaporated, replaced by a cold, stifling fear. They looked at the girl in the tattered uniform, being dragged away by four grown men, and for the first time in the history of the Onyakyom Institute, the predators felt like the prey.

As the guards hauled her toward the heavy steel doors of the "Deep Freeze" solitary units, her voice continued to echo through the ventilation shafts, a haunting, rhythmic chant that stayed in the ears of every man in that hall:

"YOU WOULDN'T TOUCH THE POT! YOU WOULDN'T TOUCH THE POT! YOU WOULDN'T TOUCH THE POT!"

The doors slammed shut, cutting off the sound, but the image remained: Skye, covered in soot and blood, screaming the truth into a room full of cowards. The silence that returned to the cafeteria was no longer comfortable. It was the silence of a tomb.