

# The Soul and the Seed

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FREE Sample Chapters

## Chapter 1: Aranka

**I**t's hard to remember how it was to be just a normal – well, at least relatively normal – high-school kid, who doesn't know the way things really are. Still, I have to try to tell this from the beginning. That's the only way to warn people who don't know yet.

For me, it started the day of the test. I was sixteen, and it was March of my sophomore year. Lots of people have heard of La Grande by now, but back then it was just a little town in the boondocks in Eastern Oregon. The high school is a low, sprawling complex of buildings and playing fields, and P.E. class was held in the gym.

I was almost late coming into the gym from the locker room that morning. Everyone else was there already. I had walked from English with Raylea, a pale blond girl whose big

glasses and small mouth made her look perpetually frightened. I wasn't friends with her exactly. I was more of an outdoors type and we didn't seem to have much in common, but we were sometimes lumped together because we were both shunned by the popular crowd.

She had a close friend in gym, so even though we came in sort-of together, she touched my hand lightly and murmured, "See ya, Aranka. I've got to talk to Dina." Then the two of them huddled together and whispered.

I didn't have anyone else to hang out with in that class. There were a few pairs of tight friends like Raylea and Dina and there was the big group of wannabes clustered around the popular girls near the bleachers. That left me doing warm-ups alone. Nothing new. Just another day in the high-school popularity contest that I was never going to win.

We had just started warming up when the school nurse and two other nurses came into the gym. They had a couple of men with them, who hung back against the door. It was girls' P.E. class after all. The gym teacher Ms. Mackintosh, smiled at the nurses and told us that we were going to have a "preventative health exam" instead of physical education class.

Some of the girls gave heavy sighs. Raylea's friend, Dina, asked why we hadn't had permission slips to take home. Ms. Mackintosh curled her lips up at the corners in almost a smirk and said this was covered by our general permission slip for the school nurse. Then I noticed Raylea. She had turned seriously as white as a sheet and her hands were locked into fists. Dina pulled her up and declared loudly, "Excuse me. We have to go to the bathroom!"

Ms. Mackintosh fixed them with her hard, mascara-encrusted eyes and said, "Sit down!"

The men who had come in with the nurses shifted toward us. Raylea and Dina sat back down on the floor and put their arms around each other. I wasn't all that surprised to see tears in Raylea's lashes, given her scared-rabbit persona. Most of the rest of the class was tittering and grinning sideways at the two of them.

One of the nurses went to stand over them and I could hear her murmur in an officious tone, "I hope you can remember your manners, girls. Otherwise, we'll have to take the issue up with your parents." Raylea hid her face against Dina's shirt, and Dina stared past the nurse at the men by the door. The skin around her eyes was all taut as if she was scared too.

The nurse's comment *was* strange - and unnecessarily mean - even if those two did seem to be freaking out over nothing. If I had only known the significance, Raylea's reaction to the test was the biggest warning I could have had. But how was I supposed to know she wasn't just squeamish about blood?

Certainly, no one else seemed concerned about a little medical check-up. Most of the kids would rather do anything than do aerobics or run laps in P.E. but I never minded that part of school. I was in good shape from helping my dad with building jobs and just from living out in the country and hiking all over the place. I wanted to train for the spring track season and I found the prospect of a medical check-up far more boring.

It was pretty routine. They tapped our knees for reflexes, made us read a bit off an eye chart and do an ultra simple hearing test. In retrospect, all that was probably for show. The real test was the blood test. We each got jabbed with a needle inside our elbow and a little vial of dark-red blood was

extracted and carefully labeled. They made us fill out a form with our address and phone number on it and how many siblings we had and of what ages. I filled it out alright. When you're in high school and you've always been used to following boring and seemingly mundane instructions like this, you just do.

When we were done and back in the locker room, Raylea radiated cold silence and wouldn't even look at me. While I was pulling on my shirt, I heard a venomous carrying whisper, directed into our aisle of lockers.

“At least we know *I* don't have that particular kind of cooties,” the all-too familiar voice said and several other girls erupted into a fit of giggles.

I popped my head out of my shirt. It was Atreyu. She laughed along with her friends and tossed her perfectly straight blond hair over one shoulder with a practiced gesture of superiority.

Just the sight of Atreyu made my stomach go sour. She had once been my best friend. She lived just a half mile down the road from us after all. My dad had worked with her dad for a while, but then her parents divorced and her dad moved away with her brother. Around the same time... No, just before that actually, Atreyu told me that she wasn't my friend any more. In fact, she said she had never been my friend but had just been so damn bored that she would hang out with anyone. She had acquired "real friends" and told me to get lost.

That had been four years ago. I didn't really believe her about never having been my friend. We had had so much fun together as kids, riding our bikes over the gravel roads skirting the base of Mount Emily, building tree houses in the big gnarly Douglas fir up the creek behind our trailer or reading

*Harry Potter* together on the bench swing behind her family's log house.

It didn't make sense. She had grown up fast, become a teenager with make-up and high heels almost overnight, and I was still a bit tomboyish even at sixteen.

I was going to just turn away but then I saw Dina glaring at Atreyu with such hatred that I expected to see her perfect hair singe around the edges. Instead Atreyu soaked it up. She gave a strange sort of smile and took one step toward Dina. Raylea whimpered and grabbed Dina's arm, pulling her around the end of the lockers. Their running footsteps echoed off the cement walls as they fled.

Atreyu and her friends left without even looking at me. That's how I was at school mostly. Just invisible.

At lunch, I sat with my friends Cindy and Lissa. They were juniors, so we didn't share many classes but we hung out at lunch and at school events. We had fun together, even if we were about as different from one another as it is possible to be.

I knew Cindy from a few years back, because her dad coached my brother's soccer team. She was incredibly short and wore her hair in long brown braids down her back. She was too much of a loud-mouth for some people but I got a kick out of her shrewd, occasionally sarcastic comments. Even though she was smarter than almost everyone in the whole school, some kids called her "retard". Most of the teachers weren't that crazy about her either, because she asked too many questions and told things as she saw them, regardless of the diplomatic niceties.

Lissa was a foster kid, a little plain with light brown hair and too much make-up. She was kind of a mother hen type, always looking out for the underdog. I didn't know her as well

as I knew Cindy, partly because she rarely talked about herself. Okay, that was my fault too. I never drew her out. She was kind and dependable, and I was too focused on getting through high school and on to college or some other form of “real life” to pay much attention.

We could have called our little threesome The Outcasts United. We were all pretty much equally doomed when it came to the social scene and we were lucky to have each other. I've been told that three like us hanging out together wasn't entirely a coincidence. There are theories that we were specifically attracted to one another. On the other hand, there were all the groups in school that wouldn't accept anyone who wasn't in their clique. Even Raylea and her group of friends, who never bothered anyone, were not open to anyone else hanging out with them. If you weren't in one of the groups, you were just lost and we outsiders naturally banded together.

Lissa and Cindy told me that their P.E. class had had the same medical exam later in the morning. Two girls in their class tried to escape from the blood test. They had argued a bit like Dina but they seemed to give in until it came time for one of them to be stuck with the needle. Then they gave each other some sort of signal and ran in different directions. They found out the hard way that the doors out of the gym had been locked. We thought that was odd. Cindy wondered aloud if it was even legal to lock the emergency exit door during classes.

The rest of the day was just regular-old boring. I slogged through algebra II, Spanish and world history and at last it was time to go home. That night the only important thing that happened was that Lissa called me and said that Cindy had to get a week off of school because her grandma in Wisconsin was in the hospital with heart failure and everyone in the family was supposed to go and see her one last time.

Cindy told me later that her grandma died. I wish her grandma could have known that she probably saved Cindy's life by having that crisis just then.

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The next morning I woke up a few minutes earlier than usual. I was lying there in bed still half asleep, looking out at the pale blue sky and the tops of some pine trees through my tiny window. My room was on the west side of our trailer, so the morning sun didn't blast me out of bed.

Gradually I heard an odd rushing sound grow around me. I turned my head to look at the clock, thinking someone might have beaten me to the shower, but it was still too early and it wasn't the right sound for a shower anyway, more like rain on the roof but not that either. And it seemed to be right around me, in the air.

Out of the blue, the sound coalesced, closing in on me from all sides like something solid. A weight pressed on my chest and I couldn't get a breath. The light from the window went dim and sparks flashed across my vision.

*Run. Get away. Run!*

My mind screamed at my body to move but I couldn't. My muscles didn't react at all. For a second, I thought I was going to suffocate. My heart was pounding like a jackhammer.

As suddenly as the feeling had come, it was gone and my muscles released with a painful jerk. I sat up, staring around, even looking over my shoulder - like an idiot - as if something would really be behind my head on the bed. My fear ebbed away. I felt a little shaky but I brushed it off as the remnants of a dream. And it might well have been nothing more than that. I'm sure I only remember it because it was *that* morning.

I got up as quietly as I could with the sliding door to my room scraping because it was a bit crooked. My dad had the main bedroom at the front of the trailer and my older brother had the cubbyhole across from mine. I don't know how I ended up with the larger room - not that it had any extra room in it even so - but Elias's room was just a bed with a window at the head of it and some closed-in shelves on the walls. He didn't seem to mind. He spent most of his time outside or on his geocaching trips anyway.

Our trailer was tucked off a little gravel track that led up toward Mount Emily from Hunter Road north of La Grande. You could see a slice of the Grand Ronde Valley from our kitchen window, through the tops of two big fir trees. That morning the sun came in the same way and lit up the main part of the trailer with a golden glow.

I put on water for coffee and tea. Elias had been kind of a nut about plants ever since I could remember and he wouldn't drink coffee, even at twenty. He was always drinking some tea made with herbs that he grew himself. He asked me to start the tea water when I got up so that it would boil and then cool off part-way before he woke up. That's how you make herbal tea "the right way," according to my egg-head brother.

I did get my shower first, while the water was still hot. Served the guys right for laying in bed late. Then I brushed my hair, which was shoulder-length at that point, and far too curly for the current fashion. I never was much into dying my hair different colors and it wasn't a bad color for high school anyway, a deep brown with a sheen of something reddish like cinnamon on the surface.

I had started putting on a touch of makeup when I was fifteen but I was mostly pretty self-conscious about that. I knew I was never going to be one of the perfect girls. My

complexion, which our dad called "old Balkan" - whatever that meant - was much more olive than most of the kids at our school. As a result, I didn't have many good models for make-up around in Eastern Oregon. Aside from that, my eyes didn't match my face, because they're blue, not the clear blue of blonds, but an odd dark blue that people tend to comment on.

By the time I was done in the bathroom, Adrian - our dad - was bumbling around, clanking the coffee pot and cussing a little under his breath. We had called him Adrian ever since I was about five, when he ended up alone with us after Momma died. He had told us not to call him "dad" anymore because we all needed to act grown up and pull together.

It's kind of eerie how ordinary that morning was, considering what happened. I poured myself a bowl of the generic cereal Adrian always bought and had my coffee. I glanced at my homework but decided to finish it on the bus. Adrian was pretty cool about that sort of thing too, never in your face.

Elias got up and went outside to check his plants before breakfast, hauling two reference books with him. He already had new starts in his green house, which was naturally four times the size of his bedroom. He wasn't really going to college. Instead he took whichever free botany classes he could find online.

I finished my cereal, while Adrian read *The Ruralite* and drank several cups of coffee. Then I put my stuff into my backpack and headed out to the bus.

I generally sat alone on the bus. A couple of weird freshman boys and a senior who didn't talk to anyone sat near the front with me. Most of the rest were clustered around Atreyu and Janie in the back. I may have been the most

“normal” person in my family, but that didn’t mean I was welcome in that little clique.

You see what I mean about not being at the pinnacle of the social scene. I wasn't really a loner. I always wanted more friends than I had but I'll admit that I didn't want them badly enough to follow fashion trends or make brainless small talk. And that was mostly what was going on in the fan club at the back of the bus.

I indulged in a moment of fruitless spite and silently dubbed them the "McDonald's Employees-in-Training Club". I wasn't a major nerd like Cindy but Atreyu and her bunch never seemed to do any homework and yet the teachers passed them every term anyway.

I couldn't hear much of their discussion beyond the occasional shouted name and high-pitched shrieking laughter. Well, I could hear Atreyu’s distinctive friendly chortle too. That stung. I missed the friend Atreyu had once been with an ache that lived somewhere right next to the hole left by Momma.

The bus stopped outside the main building of the high school and I got off without looking back at them. As we filed into school, I noticed two men holding clipboards and wearing suits talking to the principal, Mrs. Cohen, outside the office. I wondered if there was some sort of school inspection going on. It would make sense with the medical test the day before.

I went to my locker to drop off books and headed up the side stairs on the north side of the cafeteria to Home Room. Mrs. Kent, my least favorite teacher, took my Home Room that year and we had English first period. I never could believe how she could make good books sound so boring. I sat in the back left-hand corner, so that the boys in the back row couldn't

put spit wads in my hair. Can you believe they still did that as sophomores? Actually, they didn't do it to all the girls, mostly just to me and Raylea.

That day, Mrs. Kent lectured us on her version of literature. I normally wouldn't remember the details, but that whole day is etched on my mind like something written with fire. She was going on and on about the motivations of characters and how good literature always portrays characters propelled by "real human desires". She kept repeating that phrase. Then she asked the class what motivates people. She claimed there were only three basic things and that all other motivations could be assigned to those three categories.

Some show-off raised his hand and yelled, "Money!"

Mrs. Kent smiled at him and wrote, "1. Wealth," up on the board.

For a long time, no one else would offer anything until she started calling on people at random and then a girl named Amy giggled, "Love?" from behind her fidgeting hands, while the kids all around her snickered. Mrs. Kent said that that was more or less true but not exactly because humans are motivated by more primal things and that the real motivation behind the idea of love is sex. So, she wrote, "2. Sex," up on the board.

Then she said she would give extra credit to anyone who could guess the third motivation and most of the kids started calling out random things. I stared out the window, thinking of Elias back home with his plants. I guess my brain was actually trying to find the answer to the question but I didn't really believe that any answer of mine would be a correct answer in Mrs. Kent's book.

Finally Dan, a kid from up on "Snob Hill", suggested something along the lines of "Everyone wants to be the top dog" and he got the extra credit. Mrs. Kent put, "3. Power," up on the board and continued with her lecture, which mainly implied that literature which claimed that characters or people could be truly motivated by anything beyond wealth, sex or power was cheap, overly sentimental and dishonest. I didn't need the extra reminder to avoid books that she recommended.

We still had fifteen minutes of first period left when there was a knock at the door. We all looked up to see Mrs. Cohen and the men with clipboards standing in the doorway. Instead of being nervous about an inspection, Mrs. Kent beamed at them and invited them in.

"I'm sorry to interrupt, Mrs. Kent," the principal said, also smiling with her thin, bright pink lips, "but we need a few of your students for a bit."

"Certainly. Who is it then?" Mrs. Kent asked.

One of the men read from his clipboard, "Evan Cote, Janie Kimberly, Dan Masters and Aranka Miko."

I stood up automatically. Again, you just do things like that in high school. You get so used to following orders that you rarely ask why. Evan, a good-natured computer geek, stood up too and we moved toward the front. I passed Raylea's desk and, strangely, her hand drifted out as if to grasp at me, but she just brushed my hip and put her hand down. Her face was all washed out again. I had to wonder what her problem was.

Dan and Janie, who were sitting with Atreyu at the front, leapt up to join us. I was bemused by the whole thing but I did notice Atreyu. For once she was off her game. She was staring right at me with a look of utter shock on her face. Now that

was weird. Did she know something about us being pulled out of class?

The four of us walked obediently out into the hallway with Mrs. Cohen chatting brightly and the men following right behind. "So, what's up?" Evan asked after a few minutes.

"Oh, it's nothing really," Mrs. Cohen said. "After the medical exam yesterday there are a few things we have to double check. This is Dr. Haymes and his assistant Bill Smiley. They are going to take you up to the hospital for some further checks, just to be on the safe side."

"To the hospital?" Evan's voice rose sharply and I felt a ripple of unease run through me. I have never liked hospitals or medical stuff. We had mostly been fortunate and avoided major medical problems in my family. For me, hospitals evoked dim memories of the terrifying months before Momma died.

"It's more effective to do the tests on premises and we'll have the results without delay," the doctor's assistant said, smiling slightly as he ran his eyes over us.

Dan and Janie were already fooling around and acting like this was a great excuse to miss English class. I swallowed my anxiety. This was just going to be another boring public health screening. We walked straight to the front of the school and out into the parking lot.

My uneasiness returned with a jolt when I saw that there was an ambulance parked close to the front doors. Several more of the suited, clip-board toting men and a few students from other grades, including Lissa, were already waiting near it.

"Any idea what's going on?" I asked as I stepped up to Lissa. The back of my neck prickled and I was starting to feel closed in again, despite the open parking lot around us.

"Not a clue but I'd just as soon not do math first thing in the morning," she said with an infectious grin.

"Load up," one of the suits said and started herding us into the back of the ambulance. Inside it didn't look too intimidating. There were seats around the walls and some equipment in boxes toward the front. I was climbing in behind the others when I heard a commotion inside the school.

Someone was yelling. "Let me go! Take your hands off me, you bastards!"

Two of the suited men were practically carrying a lanky kid between them. It was a senior named Cory Mitchell, who I had secretly had a crush on the year before, and he was fighting them and howling for all he was worth. Back in the hallway I could hear shouts from other students and someone was crying. Several of the men stepped inside and started bellowing, "You are in violation..."

The men who had led us out slammed the doors of the school, cutting off the rest of what was said. The one Mrs. Cohen said was a doctor produced a needle from his briefcase and tried to stick it into Cory's arm. He cursed and missed as Cory thrashed in protest. The doctor irritably directed two more men to help hold Cory and he finally got the needle in. Then they dragged Cory forward and pushed him up into the ambulance, roughly shoving me further in as they went.

Cory's already dazed eyes latched onto us and he let out a cry, "No! Shit! Please, this can't be happening."

He struggled to sit up but he had become uncoordinated and he fell back. His words slurred and his eyes glazed over. Then his head drooped and the men laid him out on the floor.

When Lissa asked what had happened, the doctor snapped, "All of you had better just keep it buttoned or you can join him down there."

The atmosphere had changed drastically. No one was bored any more, and I noticed that the eleven kids in the ambulance van had quickly divided into two groups. Lissa, Evan and I sat huddled with a freshman girl I knew by sight toward the front. The others, Dan and Janie, two juniors and two seniors sat with three of the doctor's assistants at the back. That group seemed to be in a good mood, punching each other on the shoulders and mocking Cory's struggles. I realized that those kids knew each other well. They were all part of the inner circle of the popular crowd at school. They were only missing Atreyu.

After a bit, one of the men cut his hand down between them and hissed, "That's enough, kids." He jerked his head in our direction and they all shut up instantly. The way they looked at the man and obeyed him, I could have sworn they knew him too. A chill crept over my back.

Lissa bent down to stroke Cory's forehead and peel back one of his eyelids. "I think he's all right," she whispered. "I don't know what got into him. He's always been a really nice guy, even if he is a total medieval-history junkie. He never gets into major trouble."

The other seniors snickered and nudged each other. It was obvious that they didn't like Cory and they were just as happy to see him in hot water. But I had never seen anyone use a tranquilizer on a kid in school before, and I was pretty sure

that Cory's parents were going to be upset. I remembered them vaguely from some of the old-time square dances Adrian sometimes took us to. Cory's dad was a caller and pretty well known in La Grande. These doctors had better have all their paperwork straight.

We pulled up to the hospital, which is really close to the high school, and drove around to a side entrance. There were even more people there waiting for us, several doctors in white and even three policemen. The doors opened and the kids at the back jumped down. I started to follow them but Lissa called out, "What about Cory?"

"Don't worry. We'll get him," one of the suits said and Lissa hesitantly followed me and Evan. We were led inside the building and into a waiting room. Once all of us, except Cory, were there and sitting in chairs around the walls a woman in a doctor's coat came in and smiled at us, her mouth stretching into a strained grin.

"Well, here we all are," she said in a falsely sympathetic tone that forced her voice too high at the end of each sentence. "I have something important to tell you. There is a dangerous new viral infection that has shown up in our area. It was probably originally contracted by hunters in contact with wild animals, but we still haven't identified the source. In any event, you were all found to be infected with the virus during the test yesterday, so we're going to have to check you into the hospital."

There was almost silence, except for Lissa's tiny gasp of shock. I gripped the armrests of my chair as the room tilted around me. My thoughts raced. *I'm not sick. I can't be.* Besides, nobody in my family hunted. How could this happen?

"What about the extra testing?" Evan burst out. "They said we were just coming here for follow up testing."

"Oh, you will be tested again to make sure, of course," the woman doctor said. "But we really don't doubt the accuracy of the test. Our primary responsibility is to ensure that no one else is infected and to prevent public panic. You know, safety first, as always."

Her tone was sickeningly sweet, cloying. I wanted to scream at her. All at once I did feel sick. My stomach was roiling with dread.

One of the seniors spoke up in a tone that seemed way too calm, "So, is it dangerous, this new disease we've got?"

"I'm afraid so," the doctor said. Her mouth turned down mechanically, as if it were made of clay. "It is a hemorrhagic fever, believed to be related to the Ebola virus, and it is highly drug resistant. It's thought to be particularly dangerous to children and young people. You'll have to stay in quarantine for some time and undergo intensive treatment."

Janie started sniffing. "I want to go home if I'm going to be sick," she whined. Lissa wasn't exactly crying but her hard breaths sounded almost like sobs.

"Everything will be all right, dear, if you just do as the doctors say and take full advantage of the treatment available," the clay-faced woman said, looking down at Janie.

"Our parents will visit us, won't they?" Janie asked, wiping her face but sounding a bit steadier.

The doctor shook her head slowly. "I'm sorry but this is extremely dangerous and no one who has not been tested positive or recovered from the virus already will be able to have any contact with you. People have died from it, you

know. You probably don't even feel any symptoms yet. We are trying to catch the infection early but it is a matter of days."

We stayed in the waiting room while she and another doctor took us into a small examination room one by one. I tried to call Adrian and Elias but neither of them picked up. My hands were shaking so hard that I could barely make the two calls anyway.

Once it was my turn in the small windowless examination room, I was told to take off all of my outside clothes and these were bundled into plastic bags and put into an unmarked bin. A nurse handed me a skimpy white hospital gown to wear. It smelled strongly of antiseptic detergent and itched.

They stuck me with needles a few more times, taking blood samples and giving me two shots that no one ever explained. A third doctor looked in my eyes, mouth and ears. Then a nurse led me down a windowless hallway lit by glaring fluorescent lights and into an equally windowless room with five beds and no other furniture. Janie was already there, propped up in one of the beds, watching TV on a monitor mounted under the ceiling.

"Hey," she said, as I sat down on the edge of a bed with my knees shaking. She didn't usually speak to me, so I looked up at her in surprise.

"I don't feel sick," I said. Ever since that woman doctor had said that about a terrible disease I had been internally inspecting my entire body. I knew what it felt like to be fighting off the beginning of an infection and I didn't feel anything like it. Surely the doctors knew best about this sort of thing but still...

"I don't feel sick either," Janie said absently, still staring at the TV. "Not really. But I have been feeling really tired for the last few days. The doctor said that was a symptom. But she also said I've got a good chance to get over it soon."

After a bit Lissa joined us, along with the freshman girl named Bright and the only girl among the seniors, who Janie introduced as Rose.

Within an hour, I did start to feel heavy, like I do before the flu, and my muscles seemed to cramp a little. I said nothing about it though. A nurse came in and asked how we were feeling. Lissa, Bright and I shrugged and mumbled noncommittally, but Janie said she didn't feel good. Rose spoke up last, saying she felt fine. The nurse told Janie to stay in bed and directed the rest of us to put on cheap plastic slippers and follow her to lunch.

A small cafeteria with only two tables was just a few steps down the windowless hallway, which was painted a nauseating pale green. The boys were already there. I was glad to see Cory sitting at one of the tables, even if he was staring morosely at a plastic placemat with his head in his hands. I hung back a little, waiting to see how the scene would settle out. Lissa hesitated only a minute and headed for the table where Evan and Cory sat. Rose went to the table with the other senior and the juniors. Bright glanced at me and then shrugged and slid in next to Evan, leaving the place by Lissa for me.

Some sort of hospital employees came in with food trays on a cart and placed them in front of us with cheerful - if indifferent - comments. Cory didn't even move over to let them put his tray down; he just sat rigid as a stone, staring at the table. The other table got down to eating and joking

around but, at our table, all was quiet, cowed by Cory's charged silence.

After a few minutes, he looked up and I had to put my hand up to my mouth to hide my shock. His eyes were hollow as if he had been sick for weeks. He looked first at the other table and then slowly at each of us in turn. "I see," he said dully. "I guess this is really the way it has always been, isn't it? The cliques. We're almost no better than they are. Everyone else is just out in the cold, including all of you.... Oh, gods... all of us. To think it has come... but like this?" This last was whispered under his breath.

He fixed his gaze on Bright and hissed, so that we could all hear. "Bright, you know me a bit. Will you at least believe me? We're not sick."

She just sat there with her mouth slightly open, looking put upon. Cory scanned over me and Lissa. "This is insane. How am I supposed to explain? We're not sick. It's not a disease."

Rose got up from the other table abruptly and marched to the door. She didn't even try the handle but just banged on the small window at the top. A face immediately appeared there and the door opened. She didn't say a word but pointed at Cory, who had stopped whispering. He stood up and looked down at us.

His jaw was clenched and his lips were pinched white. My body responded instinctively with a sudden stab of adrenalin even before my mind understood. He was really scared, not just afraid but terrified to the point of desperation.

"Why do you think it is so important to them that I don't speak?" he said, dropping all pretense of whispering. Then his voice quivered and broke into a half sob. "It doesn't matter

anyway. What good will it do for you to know? What good will anything do?"

The hospital orderlies reached him and one of them spoke coolly. "You either come with us quietly, young man, or we knock you out again. It's your choice."

He turned as if to follow them but then he swiftly drew back his shoulder and delivered a punch that knocked the first orderly to the floor. The other one was on him in a split second and shouting for help. In a flash, Bright and Evan were up on either side of him, grabbing the large white-clad man from behind. Rose, who had never returned to her seat, was shouting for help through the doorway and the senior from the other table barreled into the fight.

Two more orderlies and two doctors dashed into the room, hauling Evan and Bright away. They forced Cory out of the little cafeteria with his arms behind his back, while one of the doctors brandished another needle.

The whole thing only took seconds and Lissa and I, trapped on the other side of the table, couldn't have done anything except back up, even if we had wanted to get involved. But it looked to me like the other senior was fighting with the orderlies, not with us. He had grabbed Bright's arm and yanked at her before the other orderlies were there.

My mouth suddenly tasted like one of Elias's incredibly bitter plant concoctions. "What in the hell is going on?" Lissa hissed at me.

She obviously didn't expect an answer, which was good since I didn't have a clue. I only knew I wanted out of there. I wanted to go home, no matter what those creepy doctors said.

## Chapter 2: Aranka

**T**hat afternoon, while the others were watching TV, Lissa got up and headed for the door, giving me a look as she went, just like she did in class when she wanted to talk in the bathroom. I was supposed to wait and then follow in a little bit, so that it wouldn't be obvious.

When I got into the bathroom, she was washing off the last vestiges of her make-up and making frustrated noises because she didn't have any more to replace it with. "What do you think?" I asked.

"I think it's seriously screwy," she said. "First, Cory is raving and they keep putting him to sleep and then Dave jumps in on their side."

"I thought that was what I saw too," I mumbled through a face full of water.

"Do you think Cory's really a nut case?" she asked.

"He sure sounded nuts," I admitted. "But he's a really cool guy. If I were a junior, like you, I'd be all over him."

"Yeah, right," she rolled her eyes. "I would really be in the running for one of the hottest seniors in school, even if he isn't popular with everybody. Did you hear him mention 'Gods' like more than one?"

I thought back, sifting words. "I think you're right. Maybe he's one of those Wiki-whatever-they-are."

"Wiccans," she said, thoughtfully chewing on a nail. "I don't think so. My mom is Wiccan and I think I know about every Wiccan in La Grande by now."

We heard a rustle in the hall and then the door opened and Janie looked in at us. She gave a, "humph" and went into one of the stalls. We both knew she wouldn't be leaving any time soon, so Lissa went back to the room and I followed a few minutes later.

The bathroom was across the hall from our room, the cafeteria was the next door down and it looked as if the boys room was just beyond that. I could see a heavy exit door at the end of the hallway in the dim light. It had red and white warning stripes on it and I didn't have to be told that it was locked. None of our rooms had windows.

Stranger than that, they had taken away all the cell phones and other wireless devices we had on us. Evan and I had tried to argue but the hospital staff said our stuff would be returned to us the next day after it was disinfected. Evan said he thought it much more likely that they didn't want us talking to people outside because they were afraid of people getting upset over this new "super virus".

I thought of Elias and Adrian at home, how worried they must be without any contact from me. Now I was beyond homesick. The old ache that I associated with memories of Momma was back. I could just barely remember her, more like a smell and a sensation than a picture, although I knew what she looked like from pictures. At times like this, when I was sick or scared, I missed her so bad that my stomach hurt.

Still, it hadn't fully dawned on me that I might never see Adrian and Elias again either.

Cory was right about one thing. It didn't matter if we knew what was happening or not. We never saw anyone from outside. Cory never came back to our group. We were together with the rest of the boys for dinner that day but by the next morning most of us were sicker than dogs and could barely stand for the cramping in our muscles. They didn't give our phones back but by then we were too miserable to complain about that.

By that evening, I was out of it enough that I don't know how many days or weeks passed before I could notice things like that again. I slept most of the time and only woke up occasionally to see doctors or nurses hooking up IV bags or washing me. I felt awful in general, and my facial bones, ribs, shoulders and hips hurt as if they were being crushed by some gigantic machine. I cried from the pain when I was awake and dreamed some pretty miserable stuff when I was asleep.

One of the first things I remember after the worst of it was over was the face of one of the doctors swimming in and out of focus. He was younger than most with curly black hair and light olive skin, almost like my family except with bold, big-boned features.

Even when I was still fading in and out of consciousness, I decided I liked him. Maybe it was that his expression was usually somber. It definitely struck me as weird that most of the doctors seemed to be grinning and sometimes even laughing when they looked at us. Even in the fog of sickness, I remember thinking that if they were trying to cheer me up, they were failing utterly. Instead it made me feel like they were glad to see me suffer.

When I came out of the delirium, everything around me had changed. At first, I wasn't even scared. Just disoriented. It took a few minutes for everything to hit home.

First of all, it was nearly completely dark and I was stark naked under a rough scratchy blanket. Even the hospital gown was gone.

Aside from that, the bed I was in was a cage. When I moved my arms at my sides, I could feel heavy wire mesh all around me. I lay still but all I could hear was the distant hum of machinery. My cage was in a large cavernous room, judging from the echoes. It smelled of bare cement, like an abandoned warehouse or storeroom.

Surely this was not the hospital in La Grande. My skin crawled with shock and fear. I hugged my own chest, trying futilely to shield myself from my own naked helplessness. My breath made a sobbing rasp in the darkness. I'm no cry baby but this was too much. *A cage! Where in the hell...? And why?*

There had been times before, like when the hospital orderlies tackled Cory, when I was afraid something was wrong. But now I *knew* someone had lied to us. *They don't put sick people in cages... do they?*

Tears overflowed from my eyes and trickled down my temples and into my ears. My nose felt hot even though I wasn't crying out loud. I felt like such a weakling.

I saw that I could theoretically sit up in the cage if only I had the strength, but that would be about it. There was the blanket, a hard foam pillow and a round plastic cover that I would later learn was meant to be my toilet.

I struggled into a sitting position. Crying while lying flat on your back makes it hard to breathe. I reached out and felt the wire bars of the cage again. Slowly I used both hands and

felt all the way around. I could see the dim shadows of other cage beds hooked to the head and foot of mine and more across an aisle. Far away on the side where I hazily remembered a door opening to admit the doctors, I could see several small green electronic lights and a blinking red light, like that on the front of a video camera. I thought I could hear soft breathing now, so I was pretty sure someone else was sleeping nearby.

“Hey, anybody there?” I called out and waited. But nobody answered.

A long time later, a harsh light flickered on in the aisle to my right. It came from a bare bulb hanging down on a chain with a metal shade around it to direct the light. I heard slow footsteps and the young, somber doctor who I remembered from before came through the door at the end of a long aisle of the cage beds. He came level with me and peered in through the wires. I clutched my blanket to my chest and stared back.

"You're really waking up, I see," he said. "How do you feel?"

I tried to take inventory but my insides were so tied up in confusion that all I could do was shake my head. He gave a little shake of his own head and a half smile. He was pushing a small metal cart and he took a tray from it and inserted it into a slot in the cage, so that it slid across my lap. He then opened a panel of the cage with a key and put a bowl of some sort of soup that was pretty much just broth on my tray.

"Try a few spoonfuls of that," he said. "It might make you feel better. If it doesn't agree with you, don't push it though. Your stomach has been through more than stomachs were generally meant to handle."

Hope flickered inside of me. His dark-brown eyes were kind and reassuring. Maybe there was a reason for all of this. Maybe we had thrashed around in the delirium of fever and the cages were there to protect us from getting hurt. There had to be an explanation.

"Am I going to get better now?" I asked. Elias used to say that he felt like he got run over by a truck when he was sick. I never thought you could really feel like that and still be alive but that was an excellent description of my sensations right then. I felt like every part of my body was bruised and useless.

The young doctor didn't answer immediately. He pulled the cart back a little and then stopped. "You have been through that and now you're on the other side. What happens next isn't up to either me or you," he said and left before I could answer.

Exhausted by the monotonous undertow of fear, I dozed off again. A few hours later, I awoke to the sound of muffled sobs.

"Who's that?" I whispered.

The sobs stopped with a gulp and for a moment there was no reply, then finally, "It's Bright. Is that you, Aranka?"

"Yeah, are you okay?" I called. She seemed to be across a narrow aisle from me but a bit closer to the green and red electronic lights.

"I don't know," she said. "What is this place? I'm in, like, a cage. And I'm starving."

I realized that I was hungry too. I had managed to drink the broth bit by bit and now my stomach felt hollow. "There's this one doctor who's kind of nice. He brought me some soup but he didn't say much else," I explained.

She was quiet then until I asked, "Have you seen anything of the others?"

"I thought I did," she said, "but it might have been a dream or something. My memory is all broken up and nothing makes sense."

"What did you see?" I asked.

"I woke up when they were rolling one of the beds by. I think it was Lissa on it. She had this breathing mask on her face," Bright said, but the way she stopped with a hard swallow I could tell there was more.

"What?" I demanded, unable to bear it. "Is she alive?"

"I don't know," Bright said. "But I saw Cory too, at least I think it was him. He was all covered with blood. The whole bed was covered with it. It looked like they had tried to operate on him because his chest was cut open. But I'm sure he was dead. Nothing was moving in his chest and they were just pushing him past me." She sucked in another breath shakily as if she was trying not to cry more.

Just then the door whooshed open and several pair of feet entered, clicking on the cement floor. The light blazed in the aisle between us, hurting my eyes. I pulled my blanket up to cover my naked chest again. Then I looked over at Bright. I couldn't see the men from where I was, but I thought she might. I could see the back of her head, her once long lustrous brown hair cropped short and sticking out in all directions. Something seemed wrong with her but I couldn't place what.

Then four men - the young doctor, another doctor in white and two men in business suits - stepped between us and I couldn't see Bright anymore. They stood looking down at Bright for a moment and then two of them turned to look at me. They didn't say anything for a long minute, until one of

the men in suits gave a low whistle as if he was commenting on someone's cool race car.

"You've really done it, gentlemen," he said with evident delight. "And you don't think the Meikan kid muddied the situation any?"

The older doctor shook his head. "Not in any significant way. They're disoriented certainly but that is to be expected."

"How many are there?" asked the second businesslike man. His gray suit had the look of real money.

"Four," the older doctor said. "Two are still out cold. It may not seem like much but we're still stuck working in small towns to avoid public panic. This is actually amazing, considering the population of the place where we got them. Our studies suggested it was a high concentration area, but still it's more than we expected."

"Let's see one of them without the blankets," the first man - larger and in a black suit - said.

"I don't know if I would recommend that," the older doctor said. "You do want to gain a certain rapport, don't you?"

"Nonsense," the man in gray snapped. "It should be simple. They are afraid and helpless and we can help them. No one else can. A little humility won't hurt to break down any residual resistance."

The older doctor shrugged, clearly giving way to a superior and not much caring what the result would be. He motioned toward me and the younger doctor came forward to unlock a larger panel in the cage. His back was to them and his face toward me. I saw his lips silently form, "I'm sorry," as he opened the door and reached inside.

He yanked at the blanket I had clutched over my chest. I gripped it harder but I was still weak as a three-day-old kitten and he managed to tear it away. I put my hands up covering my face and folding my elbows over my breasts. A hot wave of humiliation rolled over me and left me unable to take more than shallow gasping breaths.

"Have her stand up," the man in gray said.

I heard more keys and metal clanking and then the young doctor's hands were on my shoulders, pulling my hands from my face and maneuvering me so that my feet and legs swung over the edge of the now-open bed. He drew me forward and easily lifted my bare feet to the cement floor. Once outside the cage, I was uncomfortably aware of how much larger than me he was. He hadn't looked that big but I felt strangely like a child in his hands.

"Now listen, girl," the first man, who was grinning widely, said in a fake consoling tone. "No one will hurt you as long as you do as you're told. The whole point here is going to be, like they say in school, becoming a good listener."

His hands gripped my arms and pried them away from my chest, exposing me entirely to their eyes. I couldn't believe this was happening. These men might be doctors but still there were four of them and I was stark naked and they were just looking at me.

I couldn't bear to look at them so I looked down. My skin was kind of wrinkly looking and pink, like a newborn baby, I figured that was from being sick for so long, but there was something stranger still, almost as if someone had taken me apart and put me back together differently. My curves seemed different and my arms and legs stuck out like some sort of

stick figure. My breasts, which were normally a bit small, poked out of my skinny chest comically.

Both of the men in suits were chuckling with evident enjoyment, walking around me. The larger one snickered under his breath, "Now this is going to be fun."

I felt the sting of vomit at the back of my parched mouth. My humiliation was quickly giving way to pure terror. *What in the world were these people doing with us?*

Once the men moved, I heard a small shriek and I blinked at Bright, who was staring at me from inside her cage bed. Now that I was standing at a different angle I could see what she looked like and I was shaken again.

Her face was still hers. You could still tell it was Bright, except it was as if one of those computer programs that draws caricatures had done something to her. Her cheeks had sharp angles around them, almost making her face triangular. Her limbs were thin and almost too straight. There were no bulging knees and elbows the way there would be if she were merely starving. Her whole body seemed smaller.

But her eyes! They were almost too big for the rest of her and they were slanted, not just almond shaped but actually tilted. She had her hands up on either side of her head, clutching at her ears or temples and she was staring at me like I was something out of a horror movie.

I realized, I must look like that too, at least a bit. I looked at the men, who were now watching us with smirks on their faces and I was struck again by their size. Even the young doctor, who I hadn't thought was very tall, towered over me and looking at Bright, I could see that she was smaller, not just thinner but actually smaller than she had been.

"Aranka!" she gasped, finally able to say something. "Do I look like that?"

**To be continued...**

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