

THE FALL OF TRUTH

BOOK 1 OF THE SEASONS OF ZHARENGARD

Chapter 1

15th Flumenellis, 734 S.E.

The children were knotted around one desk in the classroom, their heads bowed together, whispering to one another. The many rich hues of their cloaks making them appear to be a giant flower with each petal a different color. There were only eight of them. This was an exclusive school, after all.

As Kioran stood in the doorway she scrutinized the colorful knot. Cloaks had been fading out among the younger generation and weren't often seen out in society. But here at Aevum Academy, as with other social institutions that leaned heavy on formality, cloaks were a necessity.

They really weren't children, they were teenagers, almost to adulthood. On the verge of embarking on new lives in a world their parents paid good money to shield them from. And she was here to teach them.

She would much rather be at her Stanchar-Ectra, in the library among the old books and their sweet, earthy scent. Even though she'd only been gone a few weeks, she already missed the days filled with silence and only the susurrations of books sliding in and out of shelves and the rustle of turning of pages. She imagined the crinkling of the turning pages and the sharp acidic odor that wafted with each turn. She wondered if she would ever again have evenings spent in the company of fellow Stancharis, sharing communal meals and contemplative, pleasant conversation.

The students' whispers weren't so low that she couldn't hear what they were saying. No surprise, they were talking about her. She crept closer to the huddle. The students were so absorbed in their conjecture, they didn't notice she had come up behind them.

"I heard they all live in one room and there are no beds."

"I heard they only eat raw meat."

"I heard they can read your thoughts."

"I heard they can turn into the first animal they kill."

"I heard when they sleep they float above the covers."

"I heard they can fly during the dark phase of the moon."

"I heard they eat nothing but oats and river fish."

"I heard this one has the tattoo where, uh, only lovers can see it."

At that, Kioran pushed up her sleeve and shoved her left arm, palm up, through an open spot between two of the students' heads.

There was a collective gasp, and the tangle of students stumbled back, and all of their eyes turned to Kioran. Some jaws hung open, some bottom lips were grasped tightly between teeth, all eyes were the size of a five mark coin.

"As you can see," Kioran said as she pulled up the sleeve of her white silk shirt, "I have the tattoo of The Order of Zorayah on the inside of my *wrist*, as all members do," she directed her eyes to the the black lines of the symbol on her left wrist.

Kioran slowly waved her arm from side to side, ensuring that the students all got a good look at it.

"And," she said as she rolled her sleeve back down, "It is the only tattoo I have."

She walked to the front of the classroom, where the teacher's desk was placed in a corner, a podium next to it. The wall behind the podium was a large slate board for writing on. The room was a small one, paneled entirely in a rich golden wood, with a set of windows on one wall that let in the crisp light of the fall morning, and just a few more desks than there were students, from days when the school had little competition and drew a larger student body.

Kioran took her place behind the desk and placed her bag on the chair and removed the class textbook, opening it to the page with the story they were supposed to be studying. The students quietly, if a little slowly, settled into their seats.

They were stunned, partly from her abrupt entrance, but also because Kioran Virada had a presence about her that most people noticed, something that seemed to exist in her wake. It was a strange kind of magnetism, something that drew your attention but made you feel like you had a secret that you'd forgotten.

The students sat and stared at her.

She thought they might be slightly unnerved to see a woman dressed as she was. Stancharis of any order were not very populous in Grand Aevum these days, and certainly not one of the

Order of Zorayah. She might be anathema to them dressed as she was in her black high-waisted pants that cinched around her midsection and were held up by a pair of black suspenders with silver clasps. She wore the black band of office around her neck. A thin leather strap with a gold medallion pressed with the same insignia as her tattoo, that denoted her place in the order as a Stancharel, the band hung somewhat loosely around her neck and the medallion rested just at the top of the unbuttoned collar of her shirt.

"My name is Kioran Virada, and I am your new literature teacher," there was silence. Kioran scanned the faces before her, a slight smile on her lips.

"Normally, I would want to know your names and a little about you, but," she sighed, "I feel that you probably have more questions about me. And, if we don't settle those it seems you'll be unable to focus on *The Knights of the Errant Gods*, or any other stories because you'll be busy concocting your own stories about me," She gently closed the textbook.

"Now then," She came around to the front of the desk, sat on the edge, stretched out her long legs and crossed them and her arms, "who would like to go first?"

Eight pairs of eyes darted silently back and forth, each quietly urging the others to ask the first question through various maneuverings of eyelids and purposeful squints. Finally, a hand tentatively went up.

It belonged to a girl with glistening black hair and the purple cloak of a banker family. Kioran acknowledged her with a nod.

"My name-" her voice cracked, she cleared her throat, "My name is Elara, and I heard you have to cut off your big toes to join the order."

No emotion was betrayed on Kioran's face. Glad she hadn't worn her usual boots that morning, it was a mild fall day, warmer than it had been in the last few weeks. Kioran first toed off her right moccasin with her left foot, then her left moccasin with her right foot. In turn she held up each bare foot and wiggled five toes a side - a complete set.

The purple cloaked girl blushed and sat down.

"Next question."

The next hand shot up faster this time, "I heard you have to take a drug that makes you lose all your hair. So...so, you're...bald."

Kioran beckoned the boy forward with a finger. He slid out from behind the desk and approached her. He wouldn't meet Kioran's eyes, he trembled slightly under his green agricultural guild cloak.

"What's your name?"

"Torvin," his voice was strong, but he still looked down.

"Torvin," she smiled, "why don't you give it a good yank?"

Torvin's head snapped up, he met her gaze now, "What? Are you serious?"

She nodded, warm smile widening, "Just grab a handful and pull," Kioran tilted her head toward him expectantly, "you won't hurt me, or get in trouble," she offered, anticipating reluctance.

She heard him take a deep breath, then felt his hand grasp a hunk in the corona of her black and gray curls near the crown. Then he pulled. It was slow, but then followed by two more quick and sharp pulls.

Kioran raised her head as Torvin disentangled his hand, a look of shock on his face. He turned to his classmates, who all looked horrified, and said, "It's real!" he said with a relieved smile.

Kioran started to laugh, a higher brighter laugh than one might expect from her sturdy frame. Her laugh was the only sound for a few seconds. But it seemed to relax the students, and soon everyone was laughing and the tightness that had been in the air melted away.

That seemed to be the key to unlock the students from their initial shock. All at once several students started peppering Kioran with questions.

"One at a time, I will answer all of your questions. But, one at a time."

A boy in a blue cloak, indicating his heritage in a bankers family, asked, "I heard you were kicked out of the order and that's why you're here teaching us. Oh and my name is Brennir."

Kioran shook her head, "If I was kicked out, they would have taken their brand back," she indicated her tattoo.

"How would they do that?" Brennir asked.

"They would cut off my hand," Kioran said, indicating it with a chopping motion, "No I was not kicked out, I was just asked to leave."

"What's the difference?" Brennir asked

"Well, the biggest difference is one hand," she said waving her left hand in the air, "But, in this case the Seer asked me to leave."

"You *met* the Seer?" Elara choked out.

"All members meet the Seer. It's the first thing you do to join the order. But, yes, the Seer asked me to leave, telling me my work was in the world."

"What work?" A student she didn't have a name for yet.

"Well, that," Kioran clenched her teeth, "The Seer doesn't tell you. You have to figure it out."

"That sounds dumb." Torvin said.

"It is frustrating, to be sure," Kioran nodded, "But I am still considered a member of the order. Still a Stancharel. But now I'm...here. Waiting for A Truth."

The room seemed to settle a bit, and then someone asked, "Is it true they drug you and leave you in the woods to die as a test?"

"No, that's not true."

The student who asked the question stuck her tongue out at boy who turned to look at her when she'd asked the question, "See, I told you-"

"But," Kioran held up a finger, the girl's tongue went back in her mouth, the boy turned around, "there is a test. It's called The Darkness, The Path, and The Aching."

The students sat in rapt attention.

"When you decide to join the order of Zorayah, you meet with the Seer. The Seer delves into your mind, and if the Seer sees what they're looking for in you - and it's different for everyone - then you are allowed to take the test. For two days you are put, completely naked, into a totally dark room made entirely of cement, and nothing in it. You are allowed no food or water, or contact with other people. You have nothing with you. After the three days in the room, you're moved to a smaller chamber. The chamber is filled with salt water, and you float in it for a full day. Still no clothes, no food, no water."

The students looked mesmerized, their attention was rapt. Kioran let the silence hang in the air as she suppressed a shudder at the visceral memory of coldness of the cement and the sting of the water.

"Now, at this point, many are so crazed from hunger and so wracked by thirst that they attempt to drink the salt water. Of course, if they do, it just makes them ill. They vomit, their test is over. They have failed. They are not admitted to the order."

The students grimaced at this description.

"Those who pass this phase, The Darkness, are then given linen pants, a tunic, and leather moccasins and are left in the desert with only a mountain ram's horn of water. Where you are left is always more than a three-day journey to the temple, but you don't know in which direction. And you only have seven days to find the Desert Temple - this is The Path. Some die, some don't. Some are never seen again."

Some of the students shifted uncomfortably in their seats, looks of disgust clouding their faces. Others seemed to lean in.

“The very last part of the test is The Aching. When an applicant has completed The Darkness and The Path, and has found their way to the temple, before they are given food or water, or a bath, there is another meeting with the Seer. It can take anywhere from one to three days. Just the two of you. And the Seer delves again into your mind to see the truths you have learned about yourself from the tests. The Seer determines, from what they see in your mind, if you are fit for admission to The Order of Zorayah.” Kioran concluded here, leaning back against the desk, waiting to see if there were any other questions.

Torvin scrunched his face, and tilted his head, “But why is it called ‘The Aching’?”

Kioran stood up from the desk and rolled her shoulders and tilted her head to one side eliciting a small cracking noise, “Because it hurts.”

The room was silent for a while. Then, a girl with red hair and a red cloak, a clash that did her no favors, asked exasperatedly to no one in particular, “Why do our parents lie to us about this order when the truth is bad enough?” There was a general murmur of agreement among the students.

“Well, I suppose - what’s your name?”

“It’s Lyran.”

“Well, Lyran, I suppose it’s because they are spending heaps and heaps of money to prepare you for a life in your families businesses,” Kioran gestured generally at the classroom, “and they don’t want you throwing that all away and running off to join some religious order on a romantic whim.”

Brennir mumbled, “Makes you wonder what else they lie to us about.”

“Most parents tell their children, un-truths to keep them safe or help them shape their world in a way the parents are best equipped to handle. They don’t mean harm by it, they’re trying to protect you. Even if it’s misguided. It can be difficult for parents to have children that show different inclinations than they themselves have. Most parents don’t want their children joining Orders, especially if they aren’t adherents themselves. And many orders can seem mysterious and fanciful, a tempting lure to many children and adults alike. So, I imagine there are many things parents say about a variety of things that are lacking in veracity. But, as a member of The Order of Zorayah, I will tell you the truth, as Zorayah is the God of Truth.”

The students sat with this for a little while, mulling it over. Likely trying to sift out other lies their parents had likely told them.

Lyran asked, “Your parents didn’t mind you joining then?”

“Ah,” Kioran shook her head and her cloud of curls bounced and in the quiet of the room, they rasped against her shirt. She walked behind the desk and gazed down at its scarred surface, from years of teachers before her scratching out notes and lessons with quills and nibs. There was a generous inkblot that she rubbed her index finger over. She was stalling.

Finally, Kioran placed her palms on the desk, stiffened her arm and looked up at her small class.

“My parents sold me to The Order of Zorayah shortly after I was born.”

Their faces were stunned. A few students started to wipe away tears, many avoided her gaze.

“I’m sure they were good people, just hungry. As you know, it’s a common practice in the East for lesser families to sell children to Orders as Helpers until they come of age or their parents purchase their return,” Kioran smiled grimly, “My parents never purchased my return. I was told I was a very unexpected tenth child, several years gap between me and the ninth.”

The room remained silent. A gust of wind rushed through the trees outside rattling the jewel-leafed branches against the windows.

Kioran opened the textbook, “I will answer your questions, if you have more, but I think this might be a good time to get to the lesson today. Please open your books to *The Knights of the Errant Gods*.”

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