

Progression Zero

Eildaichen,

I'm writing this with still-living components. It should survive the transition with you.

With this letter, you should find a ruby and an ear cuff. The jewelry is a fetish made from hair caught in the fibers of your old robe. Wear the ear cuff, and you will look like your old self. The ruby should NEVER be more than a few feet from you. Try to keep it from others. It is your life-mana source. Do NOT waste it. It should last a week. Use the time wisely.

There is little I can say on one page.

Seek the Argent family farm south of Bannonshire in the Kingdoms United region. Ask for Claire. Keep asking until directed to a gazebo in the glen. The future is a dream—you know how to handle those.

The boatman will take you Home.

K.



CLEO

The champagne tasted too heavily of yeast for Cleo's palate, but she refused to set her glass down until she had what she required. Over three hundred people attended the gala, but only a few dozen possessed private invitations to the real event in the east wing of the museum.

Though a live orchestra played Handel's "Sarabande," the chatter of patrons drowned out the finer subtleties of the piece, and she didn't have time to be caught up in the music. Cleo kept her eyes on wallets, purses, and what flit between the fingers of people engaging in performative social dances.

Sometimes she despised their pretenses to understanding the art before them, the false laughter, but these pleasantries worked to her advantage—her own performance wouldn't seem out of place, and no one seemed surprised when her hand slipped along their arms while they spoke. No one questioned the too-loud laugh at a mediocre joke, but no one had yet shown promise where it counted.

A third pass at the bar, and she caught sight of a gilded card within the billfold of a man's wallet before he secreted it back into a pocket within his jacket. He seemed mildly out of place—his turtleneck and jacket appeared too informal for the gathering—yet he must be wealthy and connected enough to have received an invitation.

Cleo slipped up on his left and leaned on the bar. "*Bitte,*" she began, "*sprichst du Englisch?*"

The bartender nodded, "What would you like?"

Cleo pushed the half-drunk champagne over to her and glanced at the mark. "What are you drinking?" she asked him.

The orchestra played "La Follia" and his dark eyes fixed on hers. "A local beer," he answered.

Cleo said, “That sounds delightful. I’ll have one, too.”

“You are American?” he asked. She admired his smooth, brown skin, the shape of his jawline. If he weren’t a mark, he could be a good distraction for an evening.

“Yes, from Seattle,” she said with a slight cough. *What the hell?* That wasn’t her alias’ cover story. The bartender pushed a beer toward her, and she took a sip. “Sorry, I’m out of sorts tonight,” she admitted, with a light caress of his jacket’s lapel.

He turned to study her.

“I’ve misplaced—that is—” She struggled to speak. Her throat closed over every lie. “I don’t have—”

She whipped about, knocking into the man, trying to continue with her story, but every time she attempted, the words came out all wrong. The truth kept trying to push its way out of her mouth, so she pressed her lips fast together, and let her fingers do the work.

It lacked her usual elegance, but she managed a quick, “Excuse me, I don’t feel well,” and jogged in the general direction of the bathrooms, nearly twisting her ankle in her heels.

The further she retreated from her mark, the better she felt. In an empty, darkened hall near the bathrooms, she paused to catch her breath and sort through what had happened. She checked her sleeve and felt the rough edges of the invitation’s cardstock hidden beneath the fabric. In the bathroom, she redid her hair and makeup, and reshaped the drape of her outfit before heading to the east wing.

Though the dark-eyed man never appeared at the auction, she sat in a corner where she could keep an eye on the door. The unsettling sense of being stripped of her disguises and seen fully for what she was lingered long after their brief encounter, and she couldn’t shake the fear she was caught in her lies.

A man in a grey suit bid on an engraved stone shield and she recognized him as a CEO from a British company, which didn’t usually deal in antiquities of this sort. *Personal collection?* she wondered. She stood before the auction ended, borrowing a coat and mop bucket from the maintenance closet, and worked her way toward the storage room where the shield would be packaged.

Twelve minutes later, she exited the gala in her original top and skirt, heading down the front steps of the museum. A gentle evening breeze cooled the sweat on her scalp, and she paused to enjoy the perfect May weather. The cab she’d requested before readdressing the shield’s crate to a small warehouse in Kavala awaited her on the corner. She slipped into the seat and told the driver her destination.

At the Bremen Airport, Cleo sat near the gate to await her flight to Greece. She idly thumbed her locket before hanging the chain around her neck. In a few weeks, she’d return to see her son, though she never could be certain what to expect. Would he ever forgive her for leaving?

A newspaper rustled from the man sitting across from her, and she glanced up. She almost looked away, but his manicured fingers seemed familiar. He folded down the corner of his paper and smiled. “Ms. Shay,” he said, straightening.

Cleo shot to her feet. “You—How?”

“Please do not be alarmed,” he said. “I have a business proposition for you.”

She didn’t sit, but she didn’t run. “Well?”

“You have a good eye; the shield was also what I would have chosen.”

Cleo shrugged. “I didn’t bid on the shield.”

“True, but it will be delivered to your warehouse, is that not true?” His mouth curled into a smile, and his eyes danced with reflected light.

Her mind raced trying to discern how he knew what she’d done and how he found her. No one had ever tracked her this well, even her husband hadn’t known all her tricks, and it

had been his job to know where people would be and when. *Gods, this is so much harder without you.*

“I need to hire someone with your skills, and I am willing to buy your discretion.”

Cleo slowly sat back in her chair. “How much?”

“Thirteen K a month, whether you work or not ... and that stone shield rerouted to my farm in Chicago.”

She frowned. “The shield’s mine,” she said. “I have a buyer waiting.”

He chuckled. “They are no longer buying; and no, the shield will not be waiting in Kavala when you arrive.”

“You—”

“Call me Allan Richfield,” he said, standing. He extended an envelope to her across the row. “I have heard you like to work with the best.”

She took the envelope warily, feeling the dense packet within. “What’s in here?”

“The next step up, Ms. Shay.” Allan bowed to her, then walked out of sight blending in with the crowd passing by the terminal.



EILA

The old, green Rover bounced over unpaved roads along the English countryside, past verdant fields and golden rows where a month before farmers harvested waving wheat and stalwart quinoa.

Without warning, the car squeaked to a halt, and I was unsure if this was my destination, or the vehicle had finally given up. Nothing lay before us but the greens and golds of a farm at work, and a white house in the distance beyond the twisted wood gate outside the windows.

The grizzled driver waited expectantly. “Here you are, then,” he said, flashing me a winsome smile. He believed Barbara Streisand possessed the most beautiful voice and played a collection of her works for the whole ride from the train station. He’d encouraged me to sing with him during his favorite songs. “Woman in Love” was played more than once before we’d pulled up to the farm.

“Thanks,” I said, handing him the fare, plus a large tip. “I’m guessing this is a bit far from your usual route?”

“Nothing to it. Have a good day, miss, and watch your step. It rained last night.”

I thanked him once more, minding where I placed my feet. There was more than mud to slip on in the grass. Even from the car, the bleating of sheep carried on the bracing wind. I tightly gripped my backpack, clinging to it as a lifeline, and exited the car. With a quick wave to the driver, the Rover made a sickening grinding sound before lurching forward and churning clumps of wet earth into the air.

Outside the gate, I paused to survey the scene. Prominent white and gold signs declared the property to be the Argent Family Farm and Antique Shoppe. How had I missed them from the car?

Mindful of the terrain, I walked down the path made of parallel, gravel-filled grooves in the grass. *Well, I made it this far.*

Khraesch sprang to mind—that aging orc who sent me on this quest—and I wondered what awaited me. He had a knack for knowing more than most around; I prayed someone here had answers and help.

The power of the ruby waned, and each day left me weaker. After the changes the future had wrought on my body, I needed a source of magic—of mana or *fwaenshe*—soon, or I would perish. The modern world’s dearth of magic was a desert, and I needed to find an oasis. Unfortunately, Khraesch proved unreliable in the details, and sent me on a chase to find a place that no longer existed.

A long night of research had turned up an archaic name for a county in the United Kingdom, and a single mention of where an Argent Family Farm once stood. It took some arrangement with a travel agent, who insisted no such farm existed. I implored her, “Please get me to London, and I’ll figure out the rest.”

She had done that and more. Once she had the coordinates, she booked the best possible route of planes and buses. I had only needed to call to a local cab service willing to make the long drive into the countryside.

Now I stood facing the gate—someone’s handiwork made from fallen branches cut lengthwise and affixed into a fence with dried grass hinges—thirty-two hours after booking the flight. I’d need to worry about paying my parents back for the trip’s cost *after* I found a way to survive in this world.

I opened the gate and latched the jute rope behind me. Down the makeshift road toward the house, a heavy fog surrounded much of the farm, despite the late morning sun almost reaching its apex. The distinct figures of people, not previously seen from the road, emerged in the fog. A man, with a bald patch and a face that hinted at future jowls, marched up the makeshift road ready to intercept me.

“You seem lost,” he growled the words. “May I direct you?”

His clipped accent offered no welcome or warmth to his words. Despite the exhaustion of a long trip, the lack of sleep, and now this man trying to usher me away from my destination, I managed a smile. “I was told to ask for Claire when I arrived here,” I said. I’d memorized every line of the letter Khraesch sent home with me and, I would ask for Claire until someone helped me.

The man rubbed at his chin thoughtfully and gestured toward a fork further down the path. “Follow the road to the left past the gazebo,” he said. “At the lakeside, ring the bell three times before crossing the bridge.”

With a wave of dismissal, he walked back toward the fields. He didn’t turn or acknowledge me when I thanked him. A wave of sleepiness muddled my thoughts, but I held fast to the simple instructions, and focused on the changing path. Round slices from cut tree trunks replaced the twin furrows in the grass. At the fork, they appeared a brighter amber and were laid in a broken spiral pattern.

The closer I came to the fog-draped lake, the more familiar the landscape became. Near its edge, I steadied myself against a wave of shock. *I know this lake*. In a dream experienced in the future, I had danced on its glittering waters with a wingless dragon who undulated above the water, white over gray. No twisting white serpent appeared in the sky, but I stood for several breaths remembering what the dream taught me.

Must move on, I told myself.

I willed my feet to continue toward the gazebo. Across from it stood a weathered foot-bridge, which crossed the narrow neck of a stream feeding into the lake, although the blanket of fog prevented me from seeing the other side.

A brass bell and chain hung from a short wooden post driven into the ground and steadied with large rocks. Not certain if the rod hanging from the chain was made with iron, I pulled a glove from my pocket to protect my hand. With gloved hand, I lifted the rod and struck the bell three times.

The sound resonated across the water and echoed back from the bank of fog.

I took a deep breath, placed the glove back into my jacket pocket, and set my right foot on the bridge. The wood remained solid and sturdy beneath me. It neither creaked nor wavered as I settled my weight onto it. Another intake of breath, and I set forward across the bridge into the thick cloud obscuring my vision. Walking in the mist, the sounds of lapping water recalled visions of my lake dream.

The bridge dipped downward. When my feet stepped clear of the wood at the other end of the stream, dark shapes emerged behind the fog. A diminutive building stood in dark contrast to the perpetual white surrounding me. I hadn't stepped across a narrow stream, but onto a tiny island in the lake.

A sign greeted me on the other sign, and I paused to read it. Half a dozen languages were burnt into the wood. I gasped in delight to see one of them was *Aelethe*, the common language of the aelves. Sounds of movement on the water drew my attention to a far bank of the island, and I walked around the building.

A boat landed on the shore, and a young man, tall and lithe with chestnut hair, hopped from the craft onto the sand. He tugged a rope from the boat, planted his feet, and dragged the boat out of the lake. With a quick dusting of his hands, he assisted an older man onto the island.

I walked onto a path of garden stones toward the pair and was met with a surge of energy. It rippled through me, like a cool glass of life-saving water after an extended trek through a desert. The sensation momentarily blotted out my senses; I stood silent and relieved, as the older man approached the building.

The distinct clink of a key sliding into a lock woke me from my reverie. "Hello," I called to the man at the door and swiftly closed the distance between us.

The man stood inside the doorway with his back to me. He hung his jacket and hat on a coatrack. His smooth, blonde hair appeared white at the temples. "Good morning," he offered in an elegant tenor. There was a smile in his voice. "How may I help you, dear?"

He turned to face me, and my prepared speech died on my tongue. He stared at me. I staggered. Though his smiling, blue eyes were lined with the mirth and laughter of years, they were the same shade and shape as Aithne's.

He gestured for me to enter the building: a shop filled with antiques laid out with care.

I stammered out a reply, as I entered. "Good morning. My name is Eila—Eila Corbin—I was sent to this farm by a friend who said to seek someone named Claire. Can you help me?"

Certain I'd found the right person, I removed the cuff from my ear. My appearance shifted from a large human woman to a plump aelf. The man registered the change but showed no outward signs of surprise. The gentle smile never wavered from his lips.

"Sir, I didn't know precisely who I would meet when I came here," I said, "but I am certain that I know ... your son?" I removed the thick, crimson envelope that held Khraesch's letter from my backpack. As I held it out to the man, I said, "It doesn't explain much, but it's a start."

The man, who had yet to introduce himself, guided me to a table where he kept an oil lamp, and invited me to sit. "It would help if you could tell me which son."

"Aithne." I breathed the name like a prayer.

His father's eyebrow lifted in curiosity, and a note of disapproval marred his smile.

He rummaged for matches in the drawer beneath the lamp, and I glanced around the well-organized shop. Shelves lined the walls and glass cases formed islands in the center of the single room. In each case, I made out small details of their contents: the porcelain hand of a doll, the ruffle on a handkerchief, an optical lens that captured a ray of light from the window. With a little focus, different colors of dancing lights emanated from them,

revealing their magical auras, much like Aithne's own collection of artifacts.

The man struck a match and lit the lamp and sat at the shop's counter. He pulled the skin-sheet from its envelope and his eyes widened. The quirk of his thin mouth appeared such a familiar gesture, I ached for the loss of Aithne. In a short time, he'd come to mean a great deal to me, *and I left him behind*. I wanted to laugh at the absurdity of the phrase and the situation. More accurately, I left him *forward* several decades in the future.

His demeanor shifted as he read the letter, scrutinizing it as he held it near the lamp. The vellum-like translucence of the letter hinted at markings along the edges only seen when light passed through. I'd failed to notice them the dozens of times I'd read it.

Aithne's father closed his eyes, breathing as if in meditation.

Finally, he lowered the letter and regarded me. Though his smile slowly returned, concern lay in the corners of his eyes. "You have been honored to receive guidance from the Khraesch line. That line has served my family well for generations." He paused, glancing once more at the parchment. "The author of this missive left a message for me as well. I will heed the wisdom as if from his own mouth. I suggest you do the same."

"What did your message say?" I asked, fighting the urge to snatch the letter from him.

He held it to the light, showing the series of symbols that I'd missed. With his index finger, he tracked the symbols as he read, "Do not tip the vessel of knowledge lest you follow in the steps of Pandora."

His lips sealed together in a line as he pondered. Aithne had adopted this same expression when in thought. "You must demonstrate forethought and restraint, Eildaichen." He pronounced each vowel in the last word, that strange elongation of my name that had befuddled me. The last syllable more of a "sh" than a "ch."

"That's what Khraesch called me, but it's not really my name," I explained. "Please say it again. I've puzzled over it since I first read the letter."

"*Eil-dye-shen*. That will be your name among us," he said. "Forgive my failing manners, please." He rose smoothly to his feet and removed a jeweled ring. His illusory appearance faded. His body stretched to a greater height and his shoulders narrowed. His former clothing was replaced with robes and a tunic of white leather and gossamer. Everything he wore emitted a faint light. Over his left shoulder, a buttercup yellow sash covered in embroidered symbols hung down much of his body. The lines in his face smoothed away, and he looked as young as his son, though his blonde hair paled to white.

"I am Kinnelith Argent'claire, the patron representing my family."

Our eyes met, and I closed mine to keep from crying.

"I will take you to become registered among our kind, but you must use absolute care in every moment. Your recent *past* should remain unknown to all until such a time has passed."

His secret message must have said more than he shared. "Even to you? Aithne said he hadn't found me in the Registries."

"Even to me," he affirmed. "I do not know why my son would not find your name, Eildaichen. If he asked the Registrars, he would have received confirmation." Kinnelith refolded the letter and slipped it back into the envelope, handing both back to me.

My face flushed with heat. "Then maybe"

Oh gods, I don't make it back to him!

I held still, hoping the shaken feeling didn't translate to trembling limbs.

"Maybe," he said. "Who knows what the future holds?" He tilted his head.

"Mr. Argent'claire," I began, "as Aithne's father, I'll need your help to make certain he and I don't meet again for many years." *Though it's certain I'll die before we reconnect*. The tears came then, and I turned away so he wouldn't see.

He put a reassuring hand on my shoulder, his slender fingers warm and firm steadied me. “We must remain diligent to ensure the stability of the days to come.” I wiped away errant tears and centered myself. “Knowing what you do, you have great responsibility.”

I nodded in agreement.

“I will ask few questions, as Khraesch requests, but I will tell you what I have learned.” Kinnelith strode to the coat rack by the door, where the jacket and hat he previously wore had been replaced by a cloak trimmed in white fur. He lifted it and swung it over his shoulders. “You have been to a place where all domains meet. You have been there during a time of strong magic. You were not born of that place; thus, you must become registered.”

With a flourishing arch of movement, he laid the cloak across his shoulders and fastened a silver stag-shaped frog at his throat.

When he returned to my side, he added, “I grant you the Privilege of Silence, to be used at any time you believe a response would be a danger to all we hold dear. You may refrain from reply to any, save the Queen.” He smiled once more, appearing more bemused than beatific. “I trust you will not abuse the Privilege.”

“Thank you,” I said, and stood, still wrestling with these new revelations. “Which Queen, exactly?”

Kinnelith chuckled. “She who governs Aelona’ti.”

We exited the shop, and he locked the door once again. He located a small willow branch on the ground, picked it up, and pressed it upright into the mud at the waterline. When he caught my eye, he gave a subtle wink, and walked toward the boat where it remained on the edge of the shore, where the young man’s hands effortlessly held fast to the rope.

The man attending the boat no longer appeared clad in the drab, earth-toned human clothing from before. He, too, wore white gossamer and leather, with silver armor plates reflecting what little light shone through the fog. The two aelves spoke to one another in their own language, the Aelethe that Aithne had begun teaching me in our lessons together.

The words flowed smoothly, sounding more like a lilting, rosy song than a conversation. What little I could discern told me Kinnelith spoke to the other man as a lesser, called me Eildaichen, and referred to me in a phrase Aithne had taught me: Lost Child.

They continued to speak as Kinnelith stepped once more into the boat, settling delicately upon the seat near the prow. The younger aelf extended a hand to me, helping guide me into the boat. There was incredible strength in his sinewy arms. As I smiled at him in gratitude, I found myself staring. Though the young man’s hair was a deep chestnut tied with a brown ribbon at the back of his neck, his eyes shared the same rich, blue of Persian tiles that Kinnelith and Aithne’s contained.

Is this Aithne’s brother?

No introductions were made between us, as I took my seat. Kinnelith ignored my questioning look and turned his attention to the lake. The boatman pushed his craft out into the water and hopped in, missing the water entirely. His robust arms lifted a pole from the side of the boat, and he pushed us across the lake. Kinnelith avoided my gaze, and I stared instead at the fog and the water ahead of us.

“My dear,” Kinnelith said, “you will be under some restrictions while staying in our lands. I apologize for the inconvenience, but since your visit will be brief, you will be kept in the periphery. We shall meet several times during your stay.”

The boat emerged from the fog bank into sunset and joy. Goosebumps broke out over my arms as my eyes took in the mingling of crimson and tea rose, plum and peach, and slivers of indigo outlining the clouds. The water possessed a striking clarity, reflecting the sky in ripples, yet permitted glimpses of the waving green fronds below its surface.

In the distance, rows of arrow-straight trees and a series of glimmering towers stood

sentry on either side of a wooden gate with bronze banding. The family crest on both halves of the door became clear as we drew nearer: a rearing golden stag carving over azure cinquefoil on a field of white. The same crest, or at least the colors, repeated on banners along the tree line bordering the lake.

Kinnelith said, “The Argent’claire name has protected this passage for ages.”

I glanced at him. “I’m curious. Argent’claire sounds more French than Aelethe. Does it mean ‘silver light?’”

He smiled, his eyes flicking once to his son behind me, and returned his gaze to mine. “That is a good interpretation of the name.”

He chose not to elaborate on the name’s origin, and I didn’t have a chance to ask. His dark-haired son launched himself from the boat onto the dock nearest the gate, tying it to the piling.

Once more, he assisted Kinnelith from the boat, and then lifted me with the same ease with which he pulled his vessel. Our eyes met. He held his gaze steady with mine—and my hand—longer than necessary. Although they were of the same shade as Aithne’s, his eyes held a steely hunger that unsettled me. I slid my hand free of his and thanked him. He remained silent as I walked to Kinnelith, who awaited us further ashore.

I kept abreast of the father, with his son following behind. We approached a spacious, round-roofed cottage to the right of the enormous gate. The arched windows reflected the colors of sunset. A widow’s watch above the front door faced the water.

We came to a stop at the door, and I felt the presence of the boatman behind me like a firebrand. It had to be my imagination, so I shook the sensation clear. It was merely his silence and Kinnelith’s choice not to introduce us that unsettled me. That they stared at me with the same eyes out of different faces had nothing at all to do with it. *Nope. Not a thing. Stop thinking of Aithne for a minute, would you?*

A young woman stepped through the front door and curtsied to us. She had oat-colored hair in a braid down her broad, well-muscled back. She wore a muslin blouse, bound at the waist, and embroidered, green wool bands over her upper arms. A matching green skirt flared over her wide hips. Only the curl of thick, twisting bone protruding from either temple behind each ear revealed her to be something other than a plump aelf.

Kinnelith introduced us. “Eildaichen, this is Bryjan; she will act as your handmaiden while you remain our guest.” The young woman straightened and smiled politely. Her round cheeks stood high and rosy in the fading sunlight.

“Thank you, Kinnelith, but I don’t need servants. I can manage on my own.”

He chuckled. “Nonsense,” he said. “Bryjan will provide you with the assistance you need.” He placed a tender hand on my shoulder. “I must advise the Registrars of your arrival. It was a joy to meet you. I look forward to speaking with you again soon.”

“You’re leaving?”

“I shall return again soon. Enjoy your time while you wait.” With that, he turned and walked away with his silent son. As an afterthought, I shouted hasty, “Thank you!” to their retreating forms. Kinnelith waved in my direction.

I shut the door and turned to find Bryjan awaiting me. She dipped a slight curtsy once more. Through a thick accent, she said, “My Lady, welcome. Would you care to meet the rest of the staff?”

“There are others?” I asked. When she nodded her head, I glanced at one of the curved horns at her temple, realized how impolite I was being, and met her eyes instead. “Please, call me Eila—or Eildaichen, I suppose. I’m not entirely familiar with this situation; maybe you could show me the cottage, and you could tell me what’s expected of me here?”

“Whatever my Lady Eildaichen wishes,” she said with an eagerness that made me blush.



KINNELITH

A lithe figure entered a chamber of bronze and shadow.

“Father!” he called out to the man seated in repose by the window, who did not turn. A woman in white stirred from her reading. The young Lord spoke in English, “The guards refused me access to the gates and portals. Is this your doing?”

The response came gently, dismissing both the accusatory tone and the volume of the disruption. “Yes, my son,” Kinnelith replied, in the same human tongue. He faced his youngest child with smoothed features and calm. “Why do you insist upon this language, of all you know?”

“In its own right, it can be as complex and subtle as our own,” Aithne said, bringing his voice to a reasonable volume. “Yet it can be raw and impassioned, as well.” His emphasis on the last word mirrored his pacing of the room. He gave his mother a short nod as she set her book aside and regarded him. “It has defined rules.”

Kinnelith picked up his son’s thoughts. “Those same rules can be broken with malice or ignorance without meaning being lost.” A twitch at the corner of his mouth belied his amusement.

Aithne stopped and leveled his gaze at his father. Two sets of blue eyes met across the expanse of the study. “Why do you insist upon asking questions for which you already know the answer?”

“To ensure *you* know the answer, of course.” Kinnelith paused to reflect. “Why, dear boy, are you keen to depart so soon? You should take time to meet and align with your new advisor.”

“They are all the same, every time,” he answered curtly. “I have a task to complete. If too much time is lost, then opportunities will be missed.”

Kinnelith weighed his son’s words and nodded at the wisdom. “*Ka lon’ti.*” Go in perfection. Aithne bowed and turned, but his father added, “... but use the portal to Greece.” Kinnelith held up an open hand and gestured in the direction of the portal.

Pivoting, Aithne faced his father once more. “The lakeside gate will save me a day’s travel, *Bata.*”

“That gate is forbidden. For two years you may not pass.” Kinnelith turned his face away. No discussion permitted.

Without further argument, Aithne departed from the library, destined for the portal to Greece. His frustration lingered in the library, even in his absence.

“Why do you hide things from our son, Kinnelith?” Dianthe asked.

With a smile, Kinnelith turned and knelt at his wife’s side. He took up her fingers in his hands. “I shall explain when the time allows it to be spoken.” He kissed her palms in apology.