

Progression Zero

The Prime

“Initial reports indicate that the global death toll may be in the millions. Some of those suffering from this unexplained plague are emerging from the worst symptoms alive and healthy. What cannot be accounted for are the outrageous claims of dragon sightings, nor can anyone explain the way in which many survivors have changed ...”

Weitere Götterdämmerung News, die “**Märchenpest**” weiter randalieren in der ganzen Welt, zu töten oder verändert sich die er berührt. Kein Wort noch nicht auf ...

... cannot contain the number of victims in the mounting death toll ...

“... suggesting that many of those who are unaccounted for might have changed and might not be among the dead or missing as initially presumed by the Ministry ...”



The Dream

Once again, the dreamer stood in a lush garden blooming in shades of hyacinth, alabaster, and buttercup. Flowering vines wrapped around columns supporting a verdant canopy above her head. The Council, standing like a Fairy Host in a ring about her in their court finery, appeared too serene for the punishment they meted out.

They projected living horrors into the dreamer’s mind. No matter where she looked, no matter whether she closed her eyes or not, she saw the world torn apart. Millions of lives twisted and reshaped into something unrecognizable. Lives ended. Continents moved. Oceans seethed and churned.

The destruction left only the remnants of the previous world—an Earth now distorted beyond the dreamer’s wildest dreams.

I am responsible.

Children left without the parents they knew; parents losing the children they loved. Families destroyed. Friends perished. Cities razed. Lands sunken. Nations divided.

It’s all my fault.

The aelven Council of Elders surrounding her ensured she witnessed every death, felt every pain, and viscerally comprehended the torment her actions wrought. The fears of an entire world washed through her, surging with every desperate breath and shared loss.

The dreamer could neither escape it nor hide from it. From what she did to them. Billions of lives altered.

By my choices.

This experience was her punishment.

When, finally, she lay alone in the garden, having purged the last of the bile in her stomach until her coughs came hoarse and dry, she was ready to give up her life in atonement.

A dragon arrived—a black spot over the sun—ready to blot out her existence.

But he spared her.

The dragon spoke to the dreamer alone. He gave her purpose. Commanded her to live. She was not permitted the death she sought and deserved.

But it’s all my fault.



Kinnelith

Llewellyn reviewed the daily reports, while pacing Kinnelith's study.

Through the days, Eila stared unfocused at a point on the wall or out the window, blinking seldom and unwilling or unable to respond to any stimuli.

She wouldn't wash, so they bathed her.

She wouldn't drink to end her thirst, so they dripped water between her lips.

She wouldn't rise, so they carried her three times a day between bed and bathroom.

She wouldn't eat, so they used magic to slip food into her stomach.

She would, however, awaken from her stupor once in a while and gnaw her fingernails until they bled. She wouldn't stop, so they bound her hands in thick cloth as though she were an infant unable to stop scratching a rash.

At night, she lay awake until exhaustion claimed her, and when she slept, she screamed. Nightmares barred the way to her usual escape.

The master of Merzai, Kinnelith Argent'claire—or Silver Light, depending on who was speaking—would not allow Eila's frantic lover in to see her.

"It is not wise at this juncture, nor is it permitted. The Council requires those receiving punishment to decide for themselves whether to live or pass on."

"Pass on?!" Llewellyn shot forward, challenging the Elder. "It's unconscionable she lies there—*has been lying there*—for weeks without a familiar face or voice. I have waited, I have been patient, but she will never come out of this without a guide."

Kinnelith allowed the *Durzen* his outburst and waited for the eddies of his squall to pass. Despite his position seated on the floor, he turned his head at a slant and fixed his blue gaze upon Llewellyn. "Do you think so little of her?"

"No! I—" Llewellyn cut himself off. When he spoke again, his voice was soft and reverent. "I hold her in the highest esteem."

"Then allow her to prove herself in this challenge." Kinnelith stood. "I trust in her strength and believe she will find her way once more to the world."

Llewellyn did not ask if she was well tended, it was a given. He bowed his head to the Elder. "Forgive my impatience."

Kinnelith brushed the air with his fingers.

Nothing to forgive.

His actions were understandable, even anticipated.



Eila

The same dream every night; a memory I relived as long as my life continued.

It's all my fault.

The world drained of color that day.

Nothing remains but this bleak vision of endless imprisonment, haunted until I die by the screams of the people I murdered.

I lay in a large bed housed in a wing of the immense palace, Merzai.

An exquisite prison; a gilded cage.

I took no joy in its luxuries. Each night, the torture returned in nightmares; I slept little. During the day I stared at the ceiling or walls or window, but nowhere did I see anything but suffering. Nothing did I hear but screams.

This is the punishment of the Council. Whatever a person's crime, they experience the horrors they wrought upon others. My mistakes opened the Seals and unleashed mana back to the Prime—the world humans call home—and caused the deaths of millions.

Those of Merzai whispered around me; no one expected me to live long. Few subjected to the Council's punishments survived long after the experience. My victims were too numerous to name.

Even my mother's final moments rang in my ears—screams of agony—when her body tried to reshape itself.

I refused food and water, but they found other methods to nourish me. Their insistence a nuisance, prolonging a life that was forfeit.

Not long left.

Only one thing kept me tethered to the world: the words of the black dragon after the Council left. The command to live blotted out any ideas of suicide. He also left a puzzle to worry my brain: *The Last will return to Dream.*

The servants removed all potential weapons from my room. Kinnelith must have ordered them to do it, despite the Council's edict to allow me to choose. He also must be the reason I was force fed through magical means. I was, after all, rare. The only known living *Amakai*. The secret was known by enough of the aelven Elders to warrant not destroying me outright.

The sun moved across the horizon, ticking away each day in the shadows on the floor.

How long does a day here compare to the human world? *Not so human now.*

How long is my sentence? *It doesn't matter.*

No matter how long my confinement, by whatever measure of time, the pain was a life sentence. Knowledge as punishment. I could've laughed at the irony, but joy was a remote memory.

One morning, gray in the summer sun, a note was left by my bedside in an odd scrawl. Inside, there was only one word: "Focus."

I crumpled it and tossed it in a corner.

A servant entered with a glass of nectar. She sat next to me, but my eyes remained fixed on the arched window in the corner and I wondered at the words of the dragon. "*The Last returns to Dream.*" An Elder had fainted when I repeated it.

The cool lip of a glass pressed to my mouth, and I yielded to the slide of its tang along my tongue. I took the three, requisite sips and refused the rest.

A small voice hissed. "Eila. Drink the rest. You're too pale!"

My eyes slid away from the arch and focused on the worried smile of the aelf, then to her eyes.

For the first time in weeks, I saw a single color again: amber.

"WildFeather," I rasped through a dry throat. "Back from the dead?" I patted her hand to prove she wasn't another vision of grief.

"Aeri, and you know it. Now sit up and drink the rest of this, then come have food." Her melodic speaking voice pushed aside the screaming in my head. "I paid favors to get in here, so you'd better show some gratitude."

Her smile was mischief, but her eyes held concern.

The withered muscles of my arms shook with the effort to sit up. Aeryelle set the glass down and lifted me, pushing bundles of pillows and furs behind my back. "Please, Eila. Stop this. There is little of you left!"

I glanced down. My body still appeared fatter than any aelf I'd met. "I've still got plenty left," I rasped again.

"You should see your face." She brushed the hair from my forehead. Aeryelle stood and set a breakfast tray before me.

"I can't, Aeri," I said in English. She didn't understand the words but recognized the resistance.

“No. You *will* eat.” She took her finger and dipped it in honey. First, she licked the honey from her own finger, giving me a playful glance, then dipped her finger in again and placed it against my lips.

The honey dripped down my chin, and her beautiful smile slid away. Concern settled into temporary lines between her eyebrows.

I hated to see her unhappy, so I parted my lips and sucked the honey from her finger as requested. She cleaned the drips from my chin and grinned again.

“I can’t stay long, but I’ll not leave until you eat some food, and if you’re feeling brave, let me help you dress.”

When she lifted a slice of melon to my mouth, I bit and chewed it dutifully. The room brightened after it hit my stomach. A brief flash of the bright green and purple energy of her aura pushed out the gray all around me—the first time I’d sensed magic in weeks.

“You’re beautiful, and some day you’ll be a powerful enchanter,” I told her.

The lines of worry receded on her face, until she smiled as exuberantly as I remembered her. Once she was satisfied that I’d eaten enough, she set the tray aside and helped me stand. Anticipating my obedience, she’d brought a cane for me to use. I teetered on weak legs but managed to make it to the bathroom with her guidance. She dressed me and showed me a mirror. She was right: my cheeks appeared sunken; my skin as wan as whey; my whole face aged, beyond my years.

“You will never marry with that face,” she teased.

I looked like cottage cheese in a linen sack. “I’m not likely to survive long enough to marry.”

I thought of Aithne. What would he think of me now? Would he see me for the monster I’d become? Waiting for him now seemed impossible. Slipping from the world would be a kindness to us both.

“Oh no, Eila, don’t cry!” Her arms came around me. “I only meant it in jest.”

I pulled free from her and trusted my weight to the cane. “No worries. See? No tears.”

She smoothed my hair back once more. “I need to go, but I will visit again as soon as I can.” Aeri kissed me and her doe-brown hair brushed against my cheek. The world turned from grays to pastels, and the sweet smell of her breath lingered on my lips.

Our foreheads pressed together before she whirled around and took the tray from the room. I stood alone and unsteady. What use was it to dress me? What could I do?

I always think better when I’m walking.

Without a plan, I shuffled out of the room.

It was not my first visit to this particular Argent’claire home. I had convalesced here after a near-fatal stab wound, but I had never ventured far from my room that time. Except with Aeri.

Kinnelith placed me in the lapis wing again.

I hadn’t noticed until Aeri’s kiss. The tiny gold-veined lapis lazuli tiles felt cool beneath my bare feet. I entered a stone hallway that twisted in various directions.

Walking proved more difficult than expected. The beautifully crafted cane—carved into an artistic representation of a rearing stag—was thick and took most of my weight. My feet shuffled instead of stepping, but with determination, I made progress, wandering first left, then right, until I found another person.

A shaft of sunlight illuminated the white blouse of a familiar aelf. He appeared cut from stone, his features sharp as mountain peaks. His chest was broad and expansive, a range of cliffs threatening to throw anyone off who attempted to climb him. His hair, pulled back in a caramel ribbon, shone like lustrous, brown sable fur and coiled on his broad shoulders.

I didn't know his name, but I was certain he was one of Kinnelith's sons. The blue eyes as rich and changeable as the ocean, lifted from the book he read. They were Aithne's eyes, Argent'claire eyes. Every man in the family had them, I'd been told.

I greeted him as an equal. He remained silent but watchful. Unlike most people, I couldn't read his expression. "We were not properly introduced before," I said to him. "My name is Eila Corbin."

I shuffled forward, cane clicking on smooth, cream stone.

He stood and clasped my forearm. He had a sturdy, intimidating grip and spoke with a deep timbre, "I am Bruomiel C'rezhen Lomilith Vaedran Argent'claire, sixth-born and eldest unmarried child of His Lordship, C'rezhe Kinnelith Sr'aevi Argent'claire and The Esteemed Tirna, C'rezhelth Dianthe Merzai Argent'claire. My paternal grandfather is the illustrious C'rezhelmata Phraelith ..."

My mind drifted. Most of the titles and awards he mentioned exceeded my comprehension of Aelethe; everything beyond his first two titles eluded me. Bruomiel was the captain of a House's guard. With his large frame, he easily overpowered any opponent who threatened the House. C'rezhen, like Aithne's own title, was equivalent to a Count's child.

When he finished, he released my arm, and I bowed my head.

"A pleasure to meet you. What might I call you in less formal circumstances?"

He continued to display a neutral mask. "I am called Bruomiel Argent'claire by the Guard, C'rezhen Silver Light by visiting delegates, and C'rezhen Lomilith by the staff. Family members call me Lomil."

He studied me.

"Since you are a guest of my father, and will be staying with us for an indefinite period, you may address me by my first name."

"Lomilith?" I asked.

He tipped his head.

"Thank you. The Registrars know me as Eildaichen, but please call me Eila."

With a courteous bow, he awaited me to take my leave.

I ambled toward the sunlight and stumbled into a garden.

One thing Lomilith said rang in my ears: *an indefinite period*.

Lomilith's cool demeanor must have been his polite way of showing me he despised me for what I'd done. What did I expect?

The sun chilled and the world's color once more faded to gray.