

Fear of the Sky Sample -  
Chapter 1  
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*For my children (when they are old enough)*



# Part One: Full Moon

*The One Who Speaks as Interpreted by the Silent  
Seer Velia Amenini*

I once held dominion over all the world's pleasures. At the behest of the intolerable Silent One, I brought joy to mortals beyond anything they deserved. They were comforted by me. They smiled, laughed, and cried out in ecstasy because of *me*. All the while I toiled in the empty prison of my charge, unacknowledged and unable to embrace the slightest caress of the wind. But then I found my way out—my dragons.

I forsook The Silent One's foolish designs, shattered the mortals' unwarranted hubris, and relegated them to suffer in the shadows as they should. Now I relish their desperate cries as my dragons burn and break them. Every moment of their terror is a joy for me beyond any satisfaction I ever gave them. I *feel* at last.

But a cancer has grown among the few mortals who still languish—a city rebuilt in which they smile and walk fearlessly in the sunlight. If its contentment festers, it could undermine my order and satisfaction. I must venture once more into the mortal realm, crush their uprising, and return them to their suffering in the shadows, where they belong. Nothing stands in my way.



# Chapter 1

Iko Phainor hadn't thought about the end of the world for hours. He'd been waiting all week to see his six-year-old daughter, Casiena, and now that his night with her was almost here, he could think of little else.

But he had promised her mother, Theia, that he would not arrive at the half-collapsed, overgrown cottage she called home until after sunset. He'd paced his cramped room for the last several hours, glancing out the window every few minutes to urge the sun to fall faster. Alas, it seemed to slow down just to spite him. The hours dragged on until the sun finally touched the tops of the trees on the horizon. Iko shouldered his smooth, hickory bow, hung his knife from his belt, and hurried down the nearby stairs. At a brisk pace, he would arrive at Cas's home just as darkness fell over the ruins of Jynsomn—the very first moment Theia would permit him.

Iko looked skyward as he emerged from his old lakeside watchtower and scanned for any sign of danger. He found only the night's first star, twinkling harmlessly against the darkening purple firmament. That was hardly a surprise. The people hadn't seen the dragon they'd named Mizur since the beginning of summer, nearly three months ago. That's when he'd picked up poor Nella Gunderson and taken her above the clouds to drop her screaming into Jynsomn's central plaza. A few of the others claimed to have seen him flying toward the mountains as they'd scraped what remained of the girl into a nearby canal. Other than that, there had been no trace of him.

Still, one could never be too careful with dragons. Iko hastened across the exposed grasslands on the eastern side of his home, slowing only after he reached the concealment of the forest and rubble that had once been the city of Jynsomn.

Jynsomn had been the crowning achievement of the Kingdom of Ekara before the dragons came. Hewn from the granite and pristine marble of the nearby Sepentrio Mountains, indulgent palaces, proud archways, and impossible, towering monuments had sprawled for miles. Water still gurgled through a labyrinthine network of aqueducts to once-luxurious bathhouses and the derelict waterwheels of millhouses and forges. An ingenious sewer system still flushed away filth so people could pretend they weren't people.

But despite Jynsomn's architects' beliefs and best efforts, the city had always been mortal. It had fared no better than anywhere else against the dragons. What little remained of its grandeur dissolved silently into the tangled wilderness.

Iko cut through the ruins with ease. He'd been taking the same path to Cas every Saturday evening for almost two years now. He knew the surest way to stay out of sight of the sky, depending on the season, and which structures were stable enough to travel through without risk of being buried alive. Most importantly, he knew the best ways to avoid any of the other survivors who lived there. Not counting Cas or Iko's friend, Elex, there were only twenty-nine of them. But most of them were drunkards and heathens, and Iko usually avoided unnecessary dealings with them.

Unfortunately for Iko, the others were as unpredictable as they were unpleasant. When he turned onto a street a half-mile east of Cas, the sight of three of them in his way stopped him in his tracks. A man and a woman reclined about twenty yards away against the trunk of an oak tree that grew where the sidewalk used to be. Another man stood before them, slurring through a story that had something to do with someone falling into a canal. Iko couldn't tell

who the two against the tree were, but the storyteller was Zander Keil.

Zander was about Iko's age, thirty or so, but acted as if he were less than half that. He had a long red beard that was never quite clean and was particularly fond of his home-brewed moonshine. Given his current hand-waving and inordinate volume, Iko suspected he'd been too fond of it this evening. The man and woman leaning against the tree laughed as the story reached its climax. They were drunk too.

Iko sighed. The only thing worse than idle talk was forced idle talk with drunks. He opted to go around to avoid them altogether. Several alleyways led to a parallel street that could get him to Cas almost as quickly. He stepped lightly toward the nearest alleyway while staying in the shadows.

Zander called out, "Oi! That you, Kruick?"

"No. Just me." Iko tried to keep moving.

Zander brought his hand to his ear. "What's that?"

Iko continued across the dark road without responding.

That seemed to bother the woman beneath the tree. "It's none of the others," she said. "I think it's a wretcher! Zander, where's your knife?"

Iko spun toward the trio, worried the drunk imbecile would charge him. "I'm not a wretcher," he said, louder than he would have liked.

"Then who are you, and what's your business?" Zander said. He stepped cautiously toward Iko. One hand held a filthy bottle of moonshine, and the other touched the knife on his belt.

Being that most of the others rarely left central Jynsomn, Zander was probably as surprised as Iko was to run into someone else near the city's periphery. He shouldn't have been worried, of course. Zander knew everyone else in Jynsomn, and there had been no new human faces there in years. Iko stepped out of the shadows to save him from any more angst.

Zander breathed a sigh of relief. “Iko.” He took a swig from the bottle and spun around. “Just the hermit!” he said to the others.

“Must you be so loud?” Iko asked.

Zander either didn’t hear the question or didn’t think it was important enough to answer. “I thought she might have been right about you being a wretcher,” he said. “Some of them can talk human, you know. Heard it myself when I was a boy.” As was usually the case with others, he didn’t know what else to say to Iko, so he offered the moonshine.

Iko declined with a headshake.

The third person on the street, a man, shouted, “He don’t drink nothing strong, Zanny!”

Iko begged Zander, “Can you please tell him to lower his voice?”

Zander straightened as if he’d just realized the danger his loud friend posed. He turned and shouted, “Quieter, eh?” He gulped the moonshine, then beheld Iko as if he were a riddle. “You really don’t drink moonshine? What else is there to do all alone at the lake?”

“No, I drink it,” Iko said. He wrinkled his nose at Zander’s unwashed stench. “But I prefer temperance.”

“Temperance?” Zander asked. “How do you make that?”

The woman beneath the tree shouted, “Hey, get him to tell us what this says!”

Zander lit up. “That’s right. You can read, can’t you?” he asked Iko.

“I can, but I really must be going. I’m supposed to be—”

Zander put his arm around Iko’s shoulder and guided him toward the others. “We found this picture a while ago, and we can’t seem to agree on what it means. Lucky for us, there are words on it.” He took another swig, then poked Iko’s chest with the bottle still in his hand. “That’s where you come in.”

“You need me to read the words on a picture?”

“That’s right.”

Iko and the others had never understood each other very well. They constantly questioned his interest in books, religion, and big words. *He* could not grasp how they were content to waste so much of their lives on gossip and trivial pastimes without consideration for the most important things—the things beyond their world. Thus, most of their interactions were strictly business. Iko wasn't used to anyone asking for anything except the potatoes he grew. But since none of them could read, he wondered whether his help in this instance could bolster their appreciation of the skill—and their appreciation of Iko. "I suppose I can do that. If we can be quick," he said.

They gathered around a piece of a wall a few steps off the street. Vines and weeds covered most of it, except where Zander and his friends had cleared them near the wall's center to reveal a large, elaborate mosaic.

Iko could just make out the image in the fading light. It depicted all kinds of chaos in a jungle—predators killing prey, a great flood, and a fire among them. On the edge of the chaos, a human form peered longingly toward a barren mountaintop. Iko's eyes widened. Not only was the mosaic quite beautiful, but it was almost certainly a religious work associated with Iko's god, The Silent One. He'd thought he knew where most of those mosaics were.

"Well?" Zander asked impatiently.

Then Iko saw the inscription on the bottom and read it aloud. "House of the Family Akyla."

The drunks let out a collective groan.

"That doesn't help at all," the woman said.

"Are you sure?" Zander asked. "Read it again."

Iko read it again.

"But what does it mean?" the other man asked.

"I'm telling you," Zander said. He pointed toward the human on the edge of the wilderness. "He's bringing all them animals to the mountain."

“Why would anyone make a picture about that?” the woman asked.

Zander shrugged.

“I’m not sure that’s it,” Iko said. He pointed toward the mountain, eager to illuminate the mosaic’s meaning. After all, it wasn’t all that different from the other mosaics he’d studied. “It’s allegorical.”

Zander cocked his head. “Alle-what?”

Iko clarified. “It’s not about what it looks like it’s about. The mountain and its peak probably represent the challenge of finding Silence, and—”

The woman snickered. “There he goes again.” She shook her head. “Forget your fairy tales. It’s obviously a volcano.”

Iko straightened, unsure of how to respond.

“It’s not a volcano,” Zander said. “There’s no lava.”

“There’s fire!”

Iko’s shock and embarrassment after being dismissed turned to anger, and he bit his tongue to keep from saying something he’d regret. He decided it would be best to leave the others to their debate. He was already behind schedule. “I really must be going,” he said, backing away from the quarrel.

The other three didn’t react to Iko slipping off quietly toward the parallel street. They kept fighting and cursing. He entered the nearest alleyway, and Zander and his friends’ bickering faded beneath the chirping of crickets and the trilling of a nightingale.

The street on the other side of the alleyway was one of Iko’s favorite spots in Jynsomn. Water flowing from fractures in nearby aqueducts had flooded the street and transformed it into an idyllic stream. A pair of waterfowl floated a few steps away, unbothered as Iko came near, and a snake slithered from thick grass on the water’s edge. Thankfully, the mud alongside the stream wasn’t as sticky as usual. Iko would make better time than he’d anticipated. His mood brightened considerably, and within a few steps, he’d almost forgotten all about Zander and his friends. Then, much to

his chagrin, the argument about the mosaic turned into a very loud shouting match.

“It’s not a volcano!” Zander yelled.

“It is! What do you know about art, anyway?”

Iko couldn’t believe it. Mizur had been gone a few months, and the pair were acting as if the dragon didn’t even exist.

“More than you!”

“I’ll have you know I’m something of an artist myself,” the woman said.

Zander laughed.

Iko considered returning to the street to tell them to quiet down—for everyone’s sake.

“You talking about those rotting flowers that—?”

A startling hush came over Jynsomn. The insects stopped buzzing and chirping. The nightingale stopped trilling, and the waterfowl leaped from the water.

Iko froze. He knew exactly what the silence meant. His heart pounded, and he broke into a cold sweat. He scanned the twilight canopy overhead.

The world shook so violently that he nearly fell into the water. Bits of stone and brick crumbled into the stream, sending frogs hopping into the grass. Unintelligible screams rang out, and a deep growl followed. It was as Iko had feared. Mizur had returned to Jynsomn at last, and he had found the drunken heathens.

The dragon wasted no time. Iko heard the spattering of the beast’s fire venom—the stinking, flammable liquid would carry fire to everything it touched. Then Mizur started clicking the igniter gland in his throat.

*Click, click, click...*

The resulting explosion shook the world again. When the rumbling flames dissipated, the screams had ceased. Fire crackled, and Mizur snorted.

More people screamed from farther down the road, and Iko realized that Zander and the drunks hadn't been alone.

Feet scraped over cobblestone behind Iko, and he turned around. A person on fire stumbled out of an alleyway and collapsed. He knew it was Zander as soon as he saw the filthy glass bottle in his hand.

Iko ran to him and grabbed his left foot—the only part of him that wasn't aflame—and started dragging him toward the stream's cool water. The glass bottle rolled into the slow-moving current. When he got Zander into the stream, the water extinguished the flames with a sharp, crackling hiss. Steam rose.

A guttural bellow echoed through Jynsomin. The ground shook as Mizur approached.

Zander was a mass of charred clothing and raw flesh, but he was still breathing. Iko grabbed his wrists and pulled him out of the water and toward a nearby doorway. His legs ached from exertion as he reached a dark, damp room. Iko carefully positioned Zander in the corner so he wasn't visible from outside. The world quaked again. Then silence.

Iko tried to control his panting and came to the edge of the door to peek outside. Mizur stood with one foot on each side of the stream, thirty or forty yards away, surveying the scene. He was an old, haggard dragon with grey-green skin that sagged on his seventy-foot-long form. Pointy spines ran down his back, past his folded wings, and to the very end of his whipping tail. Out of his eight-foot-long skull, two ram-like horns protruded from behind his large, black eyes. He came to all fours, brought his long, bony snout to the ground, and growled. Iko wondered if he smelled Zander. The dragon stepped toward the men's hiding spot and looked into one of the other doorways. When he found nothing, he moved to the next.

Iko knew that the dragon would eventually find him if he stayed there.

There was a mostly intact three-story home a couple of doors down. If Iko could get there, he could hide there. But the only way

out of the room was the way he'd come in, and leaving that way would mean stepping in front of Mizur. Iko may have been able to dash out while Mizur wasn't looking, but if he tried to drag Zander, the dragon would certainly see them and kill them both.

Mizur came several steps closer, and an odor akin to a rotting corpse filled the air. The dragon must have been right outside the room.

A primitive desire to survive urged Iko to flee—to run as fast as he could to the three-story home, despite what he knew would happen if he did.

Then he noticed Zander's moonshine bottle, stuck against a chunk of a wall in the stream roughly thirty yards away. He unshouldered his bow, nocked an arrow, and looked to Zander. The man was still breathing but unconscious.

Iko raised his bow. The weapon's familiar weight calmed him, as did its creak as he drew its bowstring. He aimed, exhaled, and sent an arrow into the bottle. The glass exploded.

Mizur roared and whipped toward the sound. Iko dashed out of the room toward the three-story home and through its open doorway. He pressed himself against the wall and tried to catch his breath. After a few seconds of silence from Mizur, he knew the dragon hadn't seen him.

He carefully climbed the stairs. He'd spent more time in this home than almost anywhere else in town, so he didn't have trouble navigating in the dark. That made it easier to stay quiet.

When he reached the small room on the third floor where he had spent so much time, he reclined against the wall and peered out over the darkening ruins through a hole in the wall. A little less than a half-mile away was a small, tree-covered hill. Cas lived there. Seeing her hill unscathed comforted him, and he wouldn't let it out of sight until the dragon left for good.

Over the next hour, as Iko listened to Mizur search the area, he grew uneasy. The dragon was being particularly diligent—more

diligent than he'd ever been before. He searched calmly and quietly, only letting out the occasional snort or growl when he thought he'd found something. As far as Iko could tell, he never found Zander. But he ignited his flame once more, and twice Iko heard human screams. He wondered if the unusual diligence was because the dragon seldom found so many people in one spot. If Mizur suspected more people were hiding nearby, he probably wouldn't leave until he thought he'd killed all of them.

No one had ever figured out *why* dragons hated people so much. But from the moment they'd landed in the eastern kingdom of Valcharon from somewhere beyond the Endless Sea five decades earlier, it had been clear that they harbored an inexplicable hatred for every tribe, race, and kingdom. They hadn't killed for food, as other beasts did. In fact, they rarely ate their human victims, preferring to eat deer, bears, and trolls. The witnesses of their arrival had alleged that the dragons did not sleep, eat, or mate during their initial assault. Instead, they devoted all their time to finding and killing every person they could. The hundreds of beasts had worked together to destroy one kingdom at a time without discernible reason. Even the grandest human armies stood no chance against them. Allegedly, they failed to kill even a single dragon as they tried to defend their homelands.

After bringing civilization to ruin, the dragons divided all the Northernlands and Southernlands among themselves. Now, each one seldom left its territory of a few hundred square miles unless it was mating season. Iko didn't think that any hunted with quite the ferocity as during their initial onslaught—which made sense considering there was almost no one left alive to hunt—but no dragon ever overlooked the chance to kill someone they came across. It had always made Iko feel something like a cockroach.

Iko listened for hours more as Mizur's hunt grew unsettlingly quiet. He was only sure the dragon remained close since he still couldn't hear any insects, owls, or other night creatures. He heard

the faint trickle of water and the occasional heavy footfalls. The tranquility caused his eyelids to grow heavy. He was determined to keep watch over Cas, but the longer the dragon searched without incident, the harder it was to stay awake. A couple of hours before sunrise, the night got the better of him, and he fell asleep to the sound of Mizur purring contentedly on the road beneath him.