

## Chapter 1

**O**n a cloudless, still night made alive by a Ferral moon, an inhuman shriek broke the silence, echoing down the valley, causing a shiver for all those in earshot. The cry belonged to the beast from which the celestial sphere acquired its eponym: a Ferral.

A troop of young guards from the town of Athenia stood listening to the fading, dissonant torment, the moonlight exposing their wide-eyed fear. Although few in number, they enjoyed the protection of a fortified wall and superiority through their weapons. Each man clutched his gun, aware of their responsibility as protectors of a precious commodity: civilisation. To the people of Athenia, their community was the last bastion of civilisation in a wasteland of barbarity and hardship. Few understood how it had come to be thus. Like all before, they took for granted the world they were born in. But all understood their inheritance. Some 10,000 years ago, the world gave birth to civilisation amid a fertile crescent. Cities, kingdoms and empires rose and fell, but the flame of civilisation remained alight, passing from custodian to custodian: sometimes fading to a faint glow, sometimes lighting up the entire world. Now an isolated ember hung on, prized by a society of little more than 10,000, but its light still served as a beacon of hope and purpose.

In the uneasy stillness, as the guards dismissed their shivers of fear to the chilly air of night, a rifle shot sent roosting birds to flight, their panicked calls merging with the report of the gunfire.

“Who fired? No one fire! Who fired?” A bellow joined the broken silence.

“I hit them!” came a reply. “I got them!”

“You don’t fire unless you see them clearly!” The voice of authority quivered with anger. “You can’t see them clearly unless they’re in the perimeter.”

“But I got them! I saw them in the moonlight.”

“Finbarl! Is that Finbarl-apcula?” demanded the voice. “You know the rules: you know the reason for the rules. A wasted bullet is no good to anybody.”

“But I got it,” Finbarl mumbled to himself. “Yes, sir. It’s Finbarl-apcula.” He spoke with the respectful tone due his superior officer.

“Well hold your bloody fire until they get closer!” growled Officer Vassel. “We may regret not having that bullet if they get through the defences.”

“But I bloody got it!” mouthed Finbarl to himself again, crouching on the narrow walkway running along the back of the twelve-foot-high stone wall. No guard dared stand, exposing their head above the defences, an easy target for a Ferral stone.

Beneath Finbarl, beyond the wall, lay a dry moat, its depths filled with thorny scrub and stakes. The defences continued further outwards. Wicker barrels, filled with sand and stone, made three rows of shallow barriers, their tops covered with sharp flint to dissuade and slow down attacking Ferral. Yet, they kept trying.

## Liberty Bound

The Ferrals used the cover of the shadows. Every now and again the moonlight caught a darting movement, reflecting off naked skin, but with incredible agility these beasts shot between one spot of darkness to another, getting closer and closer.

They came forward in twos or threes, with more poised in the darkness, ready to exploit the fearless vanguard's successes. Tension saturated the air around the defenders. Inside, they fought the demons trying to undermine what common sense told them: they were the ones armed with guns, safe behind the lines of defence. The savages possessed nothing but stones, but what if one got through? What fate awaited them then? For all their bestial ways, and the sub-human contempt the citizens of Athenia held them in, the Ferrals *were* human. Physically they possessed all the traits of *Homo sapiens* but displayed none of the trappings of civilisation. Somewhere within, they were different – they had lost what it was, in the opinion of the Athenians, to be human: they had no souls. Where was their intellect, compassion or creativity? They wore no clothes, lived under the open sky, avoided washing, preferring instead to daub their bodies in mud. They couldn't even talk or make fire. What they did possess were the worst traits of humanity: the guile, cunning and cruelty. In the harsh and brutal world, with food and water sparse, they thrived, their numbers growing all the time, while the population of Athenia stagnated. However, for the Athenians, what set the Ferrals firmly amongst the beasts, and within their own nightmares, was their taste for human flesh. It was the source of many a tale told to the young of Athenia to ensure they behaved: for a hungry Ferral would surely take a naughty child in the night, stealing their soul!

Yet for all the stories of horror, no one knew what drove the Ferrals to regularly attack the walls of Athenia. It usually brought only death to the raiders, never a meal. A priest declared barbarity and civilisation fought an eternal battle: civilisation's duty to bring light into every corner, the barbarians to bring darkness. Like most people in Athenia, Finbarl paid little heed to the words of a priest and gave little thought to why the Ferrals attacked. As vermin, they deserved a vermin's fate, a belief drummed into him since his days as a cadet. He would have loved to fire his rifle all night, slaughtering every one of the abominations. He was only prevented by the shortage of bullets, rationed as precious commodities in a world where natural resources were rare and the knowledge and skills to do anything with them still rarer. Unless you hit with every shot, you left yourself exposed to a potentially gruesome death. Finbarl understood why Officer Vassel chided him for shooting so early, even if he knew he had hit his mark.

Another screech. Finbarl peered over the rampart, his eye looking down the sight of his rifle. A stone rapped against the wall to his left, making him start. They were in throwing distance! Finbarl made out a limp Ferral body, prostrate upon a wicker barrel in the second row of defences. *How have they got past the first line without me seeing?* thought Finbarl in alarm. Then, to his horror, he saw the motion of two other Ferrals leaping over the second line, using the dead body as protection against the sharp flint.

"They're in perimeter three!" he yelled. "Two at least. Maybe more."

"I see them!" Vassel shouted back. "Ready lads. Permission to fire if you're sure of a hit." No sooner had the words left his

## Liberty Bound

mouth than two rifle shots exploded along the wall, the puffs of smoke glowing in the moonlight.

Amidst the commotion Finbarl heard Vassel continuing to bark out orders. “Cannon readied?”

“Yes, sir!” came the nervous reply from the crew manning the crude, bulbous-shaped mortar. Their rarely used weapon loaded with stone, primed to spray a barrage of indiscriminate death.

As the drama heightened, Finbarl felt his heartbeat quicken, his palms sweat. *How many are there?* he asked himself, peering into the charcoal distance. So far, he counted three. One probably dead upon the wicker barrel, but the other two vanished since the first shots, back within the safety of the shadows. Were more following from behind? Dead or injured Ferral were easier to see than a live one. Finbarl’s eyes felt strained staring into the darkness, and he blinked, screwing them up to relieve the discomfort. As his sight readjusted to the nightscape, a movement caught his attention. A figure crossed over the last line of barrels, weaving through a sentry of thorny branches, looking pitiful in their defensive role, the moat now within reach. Finbarl aimed his gun and pulled the trigger, sending a bullet towards the shadowed outline.

“Cronax!” he cursed, as the Ferral’s left arm whipped back. The bullet hit its target, but only the upper limb. The creature’s forward momentum continued, now only ten yards from the moat. *Surely it can’t get across?* Other guards assumed the challenge, firing with a rare abandon. Ghost-like, the Ferral evaded all attempts to stop it. Five yards closer.

At this range, Finbarl clearly made out its appearance. Male, with a wild mane of hair swept back at the front by the mud layering its face. A thick, matted beard framed the bottom half

of the face, with ferocious eyes staring out above a wide-open mouth.

“Aaallkkkaaarr!”

As Finbarl flinched at the scream, he noticed two stripes of blue painted upon the Ferral’s cheeks, while other colours appeared dappled upon the chest. As his senses heightened amid the danger, the world slowed down, intricate details coming into clear focus. Blood from the bullet wound streamed down the Ferral’s left arm, droplets hanging in the air as the fiend ran onwards. Those childhood stories of monsters and magic flashed through Finbarl’s mind as he wondered what creature could ignore such an injury. *Did they feel pain like normal humans? Would the Ferral have the power to leap the eight-yard-wide moat and make the top of the wall?*

With a graceful motion, the Ferral sank to a squat position on the rim of the moat and pushed off, soaring through the air. Finbarl scrambled to reload, watching in horror, while his brain calculated whether the Ferral’s trajectory would carry it across.

“Cannon, fire!” Officer Vassel cried.

As the boom announced the command fulfilled, the Ferral’s body came to a mid-air halt, stones ripping through its body. Finbarl looked away in disgust as the tangled remains slumped to the bottom of the moat.

“No reason to stop, you Ferral-whack sons of whores!” screamed Vassel. “There’s at least one more out there!”

Finbarl recovered from his sickened stupor and finished loading his rifle. Below, the cannon crew rushed to cool down the turret with a bucket of water, bringing up replacement stones to re-arm their weapon.

Another rifle shot sounded. “I got it!” came a cry from down the wall. Several heads peered over the barricade. Far to the

## Liberty Bound

left, protruding out of a bush, a limp, lifeless arm confirmed the claim.

“Good shot, guard!” yelled Vassel. “We stay alert until we’re sure there are no more!” His tone conveyed some relief, suggesting he believed the attack at an end.

\*

“Stand down, guard!” ordered Officer Vassel to Finbarl. “You’ve had a long day and your Jumblar levels are low. I don’t want any more bullets wasted to the night. You can return to barracks. We’ll talk in the morning!”

Finbarl opened his mouth to protest but thought better of it. “Yes, sir,” he snapped, turning under the gaze of the other guards. A couple smirked in appreciation of a colleague’s shaming, while others offered sympathy. Under the glare of Officer Vassel, all quickly returned their attention to the perimeter stone wall and the barbed wire divide separating them from the wild country beyond.

Finbarl endured a lonely trek back. The wall lay at the far end of Eden Valley, stretching a couple of miles to the north-west, with dominating hills guarding either side. At the valley’s other end lay the town of Athenia, a carbuncle adjoining the verdant, cultivated land.

Moonlit plants swayed in a gentle breeze, while the serenity of night distracted Finbarl from his anger and frustration. He never tired of this beauty. You only needed to travel beyond the hills to see the contrasting barren world of scrubland and sand. The imposing mountains to the east kept the rain away, but also provided the precious glacial meltwater that found its way into Eden Valley. Finbarl skirted right to avoid the irrigation ditches, finding the path running down the side of the Jumblar

crop. Brushing his hand through the wispy heads, he considered how long since his last dose of Jumblar. Officer Vassel was right on that. Perhaps twenty hours; maybe more. He felt the strange effects of it leaving his system: an odd bedfellow of tiredness and nervous energy, known to everyone as Jumblar's vengeance. He rubbed his arms in a futile effort to satisfy a compulsion to do something with them. Sleep usually provided the bridge to the morning's Jumblar ritual, but the Ferral moon meant an extra shift. The discomfort of a guard missing his Jumblar fix was as nothing to the risk of a breach in the walls by the Ferrals. Those walls meant everything to Athenia.

A fog shrouded much of history. Only an awareness of a huge loss and gratitude for what remained survived. From the apogee of civilisation, some 5,000 years ago, the pressures of population growth and climate change triggered wars for resources, while societies succumbed to an uncontrollable rise in crime. National governments collapsed, trade declined, and local communities sought sanctuary from the anarchy behind impregnable walls. The more fundamental needs of local particularism soon replaced national loyalties, shrinking and shrinking until the focal point of life became the fortified town. How Athenia came to be the only community to survive, no one knew. Legends talked of others beyond the desert and mountains, but who took such things seriously when legends also talked about man travelling to the moon? This version of history explained everything for the Athenians. They understood their blessed position, chosen to guard civilisation until it could grow again; they accepted the hardships they faced, the walls keeping them in but keeping them safe, and they understood the Ferrals. What else could these savage beasts be other than the natural result of breeding by those



## Liberty Bound

criminal, anarchic elements responsible for the death of the old world, generations of corrupt genes mutating and evolving into something sub-human? Protecting society from them was vital to save civilisation.

Running along the top of the valley's hills, Finbarl looked upon the regularly spaced watchtowers with their burning beacons, the flames occasionally glinting off the barbed wire. Defences ran the full length of the ridges. The watchtowers were, in turn, dominated by the occasional windmill, whose sails provided the power to pump water across the farmland, into the town and to grind the grain for bread. *A magnificent human achievement*, considered Finbarl. In their vantage point atop the hills, they sent an unmistakeable message to anything beyond of Athenia's superiority.

Down in the valley, the imposing walls of Athenia sliced across the valley floor, green turning to the harsher tones of stone and wood. A stream, dancing in the moonlight, guided Finbarl to the single-entry point, a pair of heavy wooden doors. The water vanished down a small brick tunnel, carrying it under the town, its departure accompanied by a familiar gurgle. A shallow ditch, filled with stakes rather than water, ran parallel to the walls, and Finbarl crossed the simple bridge leading to the doors.

"Finbarl-apcula reporting back!" shouted Finbarl, thumping his rifle butt against the wood.

"You're back early," came a muffled reply, accompanied by the movement of rusty bolts. "Is the Ferral threat over?" As the door slowly opened, Finbarl found Strathbol-apcula peering at him, holding a lighted torch. He was one of the youngest guards, barely sixteen, and his smooth skin glowed in the light.

“Something like that,” replied Finbarl. “A dead Ferral ain’t much threat!”

“Cronax!” cursed Strathbol, wide-eyed. “They got that close?”

“Close enough for me!”

Strathbol tilted his head, pondering Finbarl’s response before nodding an understanding. Whether the reaction was in recognition of seeing through the bravado or not, Finbarl couldn’t tell.

“I heard gunshots at the east side too,” commented Strathbol. “That’s a true Ferral moon out there tonight. Reminds me of the time ...”. Before he finished his sentence, Finbarl brushed past and beyond earshot.

Finbarl liked Strathbol but was in no mood to stop and chat. Finding solace under his bedsheets in the barracks dominated Finbarl’s thoughts. How much sleep he would get while his body craved Jumblar, he didn’t know, but at least he would be alone with his thoughts.

## Chapter 2

The background noises of the barracks and town tormented Finbarl as he lay wide awake in bed. The snoring and heavy breathing of guards in adjacent beds, a distant shout from the street or a grating sound from a passing cart, pierced his thoughts with an uncomfortable intensity. A gruelling day of work usually brought a deep, restful sleep, but his lack of Jumblar, coupled with the evening's drama bouncing around his head, prevented the welcome escape into slumber. The humiliation meted out by Vassel grew to a level where it overwhelmed and fuelled his every thought.

Having reconciled himself to a night without sleep, Finbarl's conscious thoughts slipped into the subconscious world of dreams. He stood on parade, surrounded by his peers, all to attention, rifles resting upon shoulders. A voice addressed them. The words were incomprehensible, but belonged to the Governor of Athenia, their leader. Finbarl towered over those around him, the Governor's eyes and words directed at him. He felt proud. Then the pitch changed, becoming more strained. A click of heels indicated a section of the aligned guards turning left and marching away. Finbarl felt confused, looking around. Those leaving were the Familos; those who remained the Orphos. His parents were by his side, dressed in the guards' uniform: why was he left with the orphaned guards, those they informally called Orphos, when it was clear for all to see he had

parents? Surely that made him a Familo! Then another command from the Governor, a click of heels and everyone around him marched away, leaving Finbarl alone. He called after his parents, but no sound emerged from his mouth. They turned but with featureless faces. Finbarl looked to the Governor for help but the great man now stood far in the distance, addressing a different parade, full of Familos and Orphos. Despite willing his legs to move, Finbarl remained stuck. All eyes of the parade turned to look upon him. Panic welled up, turning to terror as he realised Ferrals surrounded him. The beasts circled, moving closer, fanciful fangs and claws dripping with blood. Finbarl tried to grab his gun but found he had no arms. Now the Ferrals towered over him, getting closer and closer. Finbarl opened his mouth to scream.

“You all right there?”

Finbarl opened his eyes, conscious of his blood pumping fast, the noise of the barracks and a face above him. It was Strathbol. “I’m fine,” said Finbarl, relieved the nightmare was over. A film of sweat coated his body, while a lingering shadow haunted his memory. It was not the encroaching Ferral, but his long dead parents. They regularly appeared in his dreams, but only ever as precursors to something darker. His young companion remained standing over him, and Finbarl lay still, waiting for him to move on.

“You were making all sorts of strange noises,” commented Strathbol, as he adjusted his uniform.

“I was dreaming.”

“Really? What about?”

“Killing Ferrals,” answered Finbarl.

“You sounded a bit like a Ferral,” quipped Strathbol, walking away chuckling to himself.

## Liberty Bound

Finbarl sat up, ruffling his hair, aware of the dawn chorus mingling with the sounds of the awakening town. Thoughts of the dream lingered, clashing with the reality absorbed through his eyes, as he watched Strathbol's back disappear into the washroom. The young lad was a Familo, sponsored by his family to be a guard, but he was all right. As an Orpho, Finbarl got on with lots of Familos. When a young cadet, the social divide dominated the barracks. He remembered the bullying and fights; the insults thrown the way of the disadvantaged Orphos. But, now grown-up, the discipline, strength and bravado were all that mattered in the guards' petty hierarchy, as far as Finbarl was concerned.

Despite some sleep, Finbarl's body felt exhausted. Torn between a desire to stay in bed and rest or rise for his usual scheduled activities, the ringing of the duty bell settled Finbarl's dilemma. He swung himself off his bed, as those around him did the same. Memories of the nightmare faded, as the duties of the day beckoned.

Standing with bare feet upon the chilled, stone floor of the washroom was a familiar hardship. Icy water stung Finbarl's face as he splashed from the communal bowl. He let the water drip back to the washbowl, blowing out his lips as though trying to expel the demons. His body still cried out for Jumblar. He splashed more water over his face, hoping it would numb the sensation. It didn't.

Having dressed in his ragged, light green thawb, the loose, airy uniform of the guards, Finbarl followed his companions out of the barracks, they with idle chatter, he in sour silence. A hotchpotch of muddled buildings, crammed into limited space, made up Athenia. Narrow streets, shaded by overhanging structures, twisted their way across the town. They

followed no regimented pattern, going this way and that to accommodate the need to squeeze in another house, stable or workshed. Had Athenia the knowledge, technology and materials to build upwards, they surely would have, but two stories were all the largely wooden edifices supported. Most accommodated some fragment of scrap, scavenged from the past and found in the wilderness. Only the windmills, looking down upon the town, and the central cooling tower, funnelling fresh air down to the town square, built with precious stone, dared reach to a grand height.

Finbarl breathed in the chilled morning air, rubbing his hands for warmth, vaguely noticing the familiar and unpleasant stink of the streets. A trickle of green-brown sludge wormed its way along a worn channel in the middle of the walkway. Before the heat of the day permeated these claustrophobic alleys, the residents of the neighbourhood brushed the waste towards the few drain holes and into the cesspits; water too valuable to spare for such a task. A permanent stain coloured the channel, dappling the flat surface. In the cesspits, the mix of human waste, camel dung, bones and other rubbish festered in the heat, until transported to the fields as fertiliser. Hollowed tree trunks covered the drains, helping carry the overpowering smell upwards but, unless the wind blew in the right direction, the foul air found its way back to the street.

A clucking chicken scurried past Finbarl, escaped from its pen, a desperate keeper somewhere no doubt seeking their escapee. Finbarl contemplated ringing its neck, smuggling it back to the barracks and feasting on its delicious, tender meat, but his need for Jumblar superseded the temptation. He expected someone to follow his initial instinct; some fool willing to risk a life sentence in the Prison for theft. Instead,

## Liberty Bound

Finbarl kicked a pile of camel dung past the fowl and into the waste channel, making the bird leap and squawk in indignation. Increasing his pace, Finbarl caught up with a loose column of guards heading in the direction of the town square. Their green uniforms soon diluted in the dull beige and white clothes worn by the ordinary townsfolk, emerging from their shacks to join the procession.

The town square was the largest open space within Athenia. A few Chitalpa trees populated its outer edges, providing a little shade. The sun, still absent in the sheltered streets, warmed the exposed, hard, sandy surface and air. A faint wind, generated by the cooling tower looming to the right and by the variable temperatures of the side lanes, felt nice upon Finbarl's face. It also brought to his hearing the undulating chants of the priests. Their voices rose and fell in beautiful harmony as they delivered their traditional call to prayer, standing in an ordered line in their blue robes. Ever since a young child, Finbarl recalled listening to the enticing sound of their song. Then, the priests appeared fascinating, magical and important, but now in adulthood, beyond their role handing out Jumblar, Finbarl saw no purpose for them other than their singing. He considered them parasites, kept around by tradition and fear of change. No one knew what to believe in anymore, not even the priests. Who could believe in a benevolent, all-powerful being when mankind had suffered and lost so much? What faith did an unreliable deity deserve? Yet at the same time, the Athenians needed hope more than ever. As such, few possessed bravery enough to discard the ritual of religion and hope in God, but neither would they invest their lives in it. Jumblar, that gift from God, provided the one certainty.

The square filled as men, women and children trickled in from all directions. The irony of a world with so few people, cohabiting in such crowded circumstances, remained lost on a people obsessed with their preservation. The dangers beyond the walls defined them all.

By the time the priests' mantra reached an impressive crescendo, the scrum of people had formed into orderly queues. The familiarity of the weekly ritual, known as the Jumblar uchaist, allowed for this controlled spectacle. Everyone waited patiently in their designated lines, symbolising the strict strata of society. Across the town, smaller, similar events took place in several districts. At the main square, only one priest continued his incantation, his brothers preparing for the distribution of the Jumblar. The rumble of the waiting masses drowned out his voice, as they passed the time catching up on the week's gossip; even the other priests chatted amongst themselves, insensible to any spiritual solemnity. The formal meaning of the ritualised exchange of Jumblar for obedience and devotion, was trivialised and irrelevant to most now. They needed their Jumblar, to surrender to its calming embrace and uplifting intoxication, helping them overcome the fears and mire of their lives.

Finbarl joined his queue, designated for guards alone. The green line looked incredibly long to a man twenty-four hours without Jumblar. He shuffled testily, conscious his peers no doubt talked about him and his impending fate with Officer Vassel. A mumbled curse escaped his lips as the queue appeared unmoving. The man in front gave him a momentary glance, turning away on recognising his neighbour. Finbarl ignored him, looking towards the other queues. To his left, a line of the common citizens, the Gulas, edged their skinny



## Liberty Bound

frames forward; to his right a line of Moralistas, the civic equivalent of the guards, its numbers largely made up of women, with the occasional ex-guard no longer fit for active duties. The women of the Moralistas, nearly always orphaned, were supported and moulded from a tender age to manage and deliver the will of the Wardyns and uphold the values of civilisation. Finbarl felt envy at the shortness of their queue. He couldn't even bring himself to look over at the Alci line, where the professionals and higher social strata of Athenia waited. Their queue always moved with speed. *Bloody typical!* This time Finbarl managed to keep his profanities to himself. What idiot's handing out our Jumblar?

At the front of each line, a table, manned by a priest provided the objective for everyone and the target for Finbarl's stare. With a blessing, a vow and an exchange of Jumblar for a token, the ritual was complete: what was there in that to hold them up? As a sudden urge to yell out his frustrations built in Finbarl, the man in front took a step forward. The urge subsided and Finbarl quickly followed with his own stride, aware his tormented nerves could not take much more. *Discipline*, Finbarl, instructed himself. *You're a guard, so behave like one!*

He turned his attention back to the adjacent queue of Gulas. Assessing and belittling the plebs offered one way to occupy himself. His training as a guard made him feel apart, suspicious of those threatening Athenia's stability, nurturing disdain and snobbery. On another day, he would focus his condescension towards the Moralistas: a collection of unwanted women and weak and damaged guards. Good families didn't place their daughters in the Moralistas. A suitable social marriage was their fate, and no guard desired to end their days amongst them.

Finbarl's admiration and loyalty pointed one way, towards his superiors in the guard and the Wardyns, the ruling class. The latter didn't frequent the common uchaist, which was fine by Finbarl. He had no desire to be under their gaze. No such concerns afflicted him in the presence of farmers, shopkeepers, dung-shovellers and other workers. Even the Alci held no real power over the guards. Without him and his kind, those helpless saps would be long dead. The arrogance allowed for no appreciation of how much his life depended on them: for the food, the building, the cleaning. Guards possessed guns and the authority; the Wardyns owned the guards and the power. Each cowed head in the Gulas' queue reinforced Finbarl's opinion: they had their place but not his respect.

A small gap opened in the Gula line, leaving one man with room to stretch his arms and yawn. *That's right*, opined Finbarl to himself, *pretend you're tired and not a dung-shoveller who no one wants to stand near!* He laughed out loud, earning another uneasy look from the man in front. "Dung-shoveller," said Finbarl to the fellow guard, nodding to the source of his mirth. The guard remained straight-faced, turning away with a whisper to the man in front of him. "Dung-shoveller," said Finbarl again, this time to the back of the oblivious guard's head.

As his own line took a few more steps forward, a short, pretty woman, with long, jet-black hair, caught Finbarl's attention. She stood about ten feet in front, in the adjacent Gula queue, her hands gently resting upon the shoulders of a young boy of about five. Finbarl smiled as the boy waved a whittled, wooden animal in his hand. For a change he didn't feel the need to condescend or judge. The boy stirred thoughts of his own childhood, a vague notion of uninhibited playing and

## Liberty Bound

innocence. Did his own parents hold him like that before their death, leaving him alone in the world? The woman looked over, catching Finbarl's eye. He smiled: she quickly turned away.

"Keep moving!" said an anonymous voice from behind. With the distraction, the queue moved forward and Finbarl advanced to close the gap, turning again to look at the woman and child in gratitude. *Did she have a small smile?* wondered Finbarl, as their own turn to receive Jumblar came up. It wouldn't be long until Finbarl reached the front of his queue. He noticed the priest distributing to the guards displayed a bored expression, blessing with more haste and less sincerity. All the better, thought Finbarl.

A tiny yelp caught Finbarl's attention. Heads all around turned to the source. A guard stood towering over the boy and mother. Finbarl recognised him. It was Audlech, a sickly-looking man who compensated for his light frame by bullying anyone weaker. He gripped the wooden animal in his hand, teasing the boy, who tried to retrieve it. The mother showed no signs of fear, standing up to the guard.

"Give it back!" she snapped.

"Or what?" replied Audlech.

"Or what nothing!" shouted the woman. "You don't take a toy from a child!"

A few of the younger watching guards laughed at the confrontation, the mature ones looking less amused, but all did nothing. Something in Finbarl, perhaps the lack of Jumblar, stirred him to intervene. He stepped forward, pushing Audlech forcibly away from the woman. "Nothing better to do than steal a kid's toy?"

"Mind your own business, Orpho!" growled back Audlech, trying to regain his composure.

“It’s my business to deal with thieves.” Finbarl squared up to the other guard. “That’s what we have the Prison for.”

Audlech laughed nervously. “This ain’t feft. Just some Ferral-whack fun.”

“Well, I get my fun from beating guys like you to pulp!” Finbarl now smiled as his superior height and build became apparent.

“Finbarl-apcula!” A new voice sounded from behind.

Finbarl turned to see Officer Vassel not ten places back in the queue, his face red with anger. Why did it have to be him?

“Get back in line, guard! We don’t fight our own.”

Finbarl skulked back to his line, leaving his eyes to linger upon Audlech in a last vestige of a threat.

“And as for you, Audlech-apcula,” continued Vassel, “Grow up! Give the boy his toy back and go and take your bloody Jumblar. I want all my guards fit for duty today.”

Audlech paused for a second, shocked at his public humiliation, unsure how to react. Left with no choice, he thrust the wooden toy back into the boy’s hands and stormed away. The child smiled in glee, his tears gone in a flash, and showed his retrieved treasure to his mother. She ruffled his hair before guiding him forward as their turn came to collect their Jumblar. Finbarl looked on with a sense of satisfaction.

The boy went over to Finbarl, waving what turned out to be a misshaped wooden dog. “Thank you,” said the boy.

Finbarl smiled broadly. “Some things are worth fighting for,” he replied, bending down to examine the toy. The mother caught up with her son, carrying their Jumblar doses. She looked at Finbarl without emotion.

“I’m Finbarl-apcula.”

## Liberty Bound

She continued to assess Finbarl more with suspicion than gratitude, before saying, “Aminatra-gula,” and then gently pushed the boy on his way.

“Next!”

Finbarl turned to see a priest beckoning him to the table. He rummaged in his pocket and pulled out a small, blue stone token, etched with the town's symbol of a windmill.

The priest took the token and mumbled, “Bless thy soul for through God we seek sanctuary.” His mundane task complete, the priest waited for Finbarl to complete his side of the ritual.

“I thank the Lord for what I am about to receive and promise to honour his name.”

With the vow completed, the priest passed across a bundle of folded Jumblar leaves, enough to last Finbarl the week. A bucket of green balls stood on the table and Finbarl reached in, took one, showed it to the priest and hurried on his way, desperate to start chewing on the fibrous leaf of the Jumblar plant.

## Chapter 3

“I can’t make you out, guard,” said Officer Vassel, as Finbarl stood to attention before him. “You either have something about you, or you’re lucky.”

“Sir?” Finbarl hadn’t expected the dressing down to go this way when playing it over in his mind.

“We found a dead Ferral this morning, 200 yards from the barricade. Had your bullet in it! That was either a fine shot or an unlucky beast.”

“As I said, sir, I could see what I was shooting at.”

“It was still a mighty risk to shoot at that distance. Should have waited, as trained to do. A kill is just as good at 100 yards.”

An hour earlier, Finbarl would have struggled to contain his anger, but the Jumblar worked immediately. Its bitter taste left the tongue tingling but also brought an instant internal peace. Finbarl compartmentalised Vassel’s provocative attitude behind a mild feeling of contentment and well-being. The muscles, previously crying out for release, relaxed, sated through the intoxicating infusion, Finbarl remaining calmly to attention as the words washed through him.

“I don’t mind luck,” continued Vassel. “Just like talent, it shows you’re blessed, but the difference is, you can’t rely on

## Liberty Bound

luck every time. I don't want to be the one exposed because your luck runs out. But that dead Ferral's bought you a reprieve. All I'm going to say is you make sure any future shots hit with certainty, not with the hope of success. Am I clear?"

"Yes, sir!" snapped Finbarl. A warm, elated sensation washed through him. With his fix of Jumblar, the world started to feel in balance.

Vassel's brow furrowed with frustration, indicating the dressing down was not over. "Killing Ferrals is one thing," said the officer, "bringing the guards into disrepute in front of the town is another matter. I do hope it wasn't an Orpho-Familo thing. I don't care the provocation; you do not challenge another guard like you did this morning! Understand?"

"Yes, sir! Sorry, sir! It was Jumblar's vengeance making me irritable. Won't happen again."

"I've had my Jumblar and you're still making me irritable, guard." Despite his words, Vassel's tone changed to a more paternal nature. Poised to speak again, something over Finbarl's shoulder caught his attention. His facial muscles tensed.

"Don't let me stop you," said a voice, instantly making Vassel straighten.

Finbarl turned his head to see the source of the interruption. Despite the Jumblar, sight of the owner of the voice caused him a shock.

Wardyn Torbald-eltar, son of the Governor, stood casually against the doorframe, a broad smile across his chubby face. "I've heard about the little drama in the main square. Sounds to me like you should have knocked his block off, Finbarl-apcula."

Finbarl looked to Vassel's eyes for a reaction. They remained calm, appearing to examine Finbarl with the same purpose.

"Of course," continued Torbald, "that would have got you sent to the Prison, but at least you'd have caused some entertainment."

Should he reply or keep silent? Finbarl remained undecided, confused by the presence of this powerful individual. Wardyns rarely made such informal interventions in the lives of others.

Vassel broke the silence. "Is there anything I can help you with, Eltar?"

An uncomfortable pause followed and Finbarl felt the eyes of the Wardyn on his back.

"No, I just wanted to meet the guard willing to risk his freedom for the sake of a child's toy."

Vassel's face relaxed, indicating the departure of their guest. He shuffled in his seat, resetting his thoughts. "Now, we've two prisoners to transport to the Prison today," began Vassel. "I want you and Gauret to undertake the task and lead on Jumblar distribution at Bruuk's Point. You'll have F Section to support you with security. Understood?"

"Yes, Vassel-apculex. Thank you, sir."

"Dismissed!"

Finbarl turned to leave, paused, thought about asking Vassel what had just happened, before thinking better of it.