

Prelude

A new world stretched out under a rich blue sky, then vanished behind descending clouds. Three figures, deprived of the sun's pitiful warmth, staggered on. A freezing fire filled their lungs, replacing precious, thin mountain air, hard fought for with each breath. The lead, Finbarl, called out, his words lost to the roaring wind.

As Aminatra and Karlmon faded in the fog, Finbarl reached back to clasp each by the hand. He held without feeling, his rag-bound, frozen fingers bringing their bodies towards his own. Huddled together, unmoving, bombarding snow reduced their visibility to zero. Fatigue muddled thought; sleep beckoned with a promise of peace and warmth. Finbarl fought the urge, aware death lay on the other side.

Where had luck, their fourth companion across the roof of the world, gone? Each complacent step risked death, every mountain a test of strength and will. Yet there they were, so close to their final descent, the benign-looking foothills below. Benevolent weather had deserted them. Luck's wick burnt down, snuffing out light and hope.

Cocooned within this torturous white world, Finbarl wondered if death offered the freedom they sought. He had never known such pain. Every nerve screamed, invaded by the unrelenting cold. Finbarl tightened a blanket around Karlmon, his tiny body already suffering withdrawal from the drug Jumblar. The layers of clothes and material covering their bodies seemed pitiful. How could the cold burn so or the white maelstrom appear so dark?

And then it was over as quickly as it had started. The pain remained, but the sun tickled on dry, burning cheeks. Finbarl sniffed at a fragrance of air, pushing out his chest, drawing it in. To his side Aminatra stirred, her head buried within his beard.

"Are you all right?" Finbarl asked, rubbing his hands up and down Aminatra's and Karlmon's backs, brushing off snow, trying to warm them.

Aminatra turned her head upwards, slow and deliberate. With the same strenuous effort, she forced a smile.

"We had better keep moving," urged Finbarl. "We won't survive another storm, nor staying still."

"I'm not sure I can move," whispered Aminatra, reaching out to squeeze her family closer together.

Finbarl nodded, ruffling his face into the warmth of her hair. "We must. Come on! You help me up and I'll help you. Use your staff."

"I never thought ... I would miss ... the heat of Athenia," Aminatra said between ragged breaths, pushing against Finbarl as he creaked to his feet.

"The quicker we climb down, the sooner we'll be warm. Come on, Karlmon! Grab your staff. Help your mother up. Karlmon?"

Silence.

"He's not moving!" A mother's scream morphed to a croak in the thin air.
"Finbarl! He's not moving."

PART ONE

Chapter 1

A curling flame leapt in the darkness, escaping the campfire chorus line. Above, a skinned, spit-tied rodent dripped fat, hissing, whipping the flames into their dancing frenzy. Elsewhere, serenity pervaded. Sounds of nature escaped from the surrounding forest, adding a soothing, rhythmic soundtrack. Around the fire four huddled figures bathed in its warmth and faint glow. At the prompting of the excitable blaze, Finbarl shuffled forward, flicking a forefinger, rotating their dinner. Aminatra, readjusting her legs, angled a book to capture the light. Snug between the two adults, Karlmon opened his eyes to discover why his mother paused her reading. To the other side of the fire another pair of eyes struggled to stay open.

"A few more minutes," said Finbarl, licking his finger for a tantalising sample of the meal to come. He glanced towards their new companion, who'd lost the battle to keep his eyelids from closing. "He's asleep."

"His mumbling didn't help my reading," remarked Aminatra, examining the great mane of hair circling the man's face.

"That's what going without Jumblar does to you," said Finbarl, grateful his mother's wisdom aided in their own safe withdrawal off the drug. "And being alone all this time. He retained wit enough to make it over the mountains and survive this long."

"I wonder how long he's been here," mused Aminatra. "From the state of his thawb and hair, I would say a long time. He looks old. I don't recognise him from Athenia."

"Could just be worn down." Finbarl rotated the spit once more. "Hard to get info out of him. Seems to have lucid moments but most of the time ..." He shook his head. "Having company will help. It's a miracle our paths crossed. Almost feels like he was waiting for someone else to cross the mountains before going further."

"I don't like him," said Karlmon, blushing at the confession.

"We hardly know him." Aminatra checked the man still slept. "Two weeks is no time at all to form an opinion of a person. He is strange but so was Johansson."

Finbarl acknowledged mention of their old friend from the prison with a smile.

"You didn't get to know him, but you would have liked each other," continued Aminatra. "No, give our new friend time."

"Introducing himself by rushing at us with a machete shouting 'Ferral' wasn't an endearing start," said Finbarl. "Lucky I didn't shoot him."

"No, knocking him out was far more welcoming," quipped Aminatra. "What's wrong with a simple 'hello'."

"Sorry I saved you." Finbarl winked at Karlmon.

"Why won't he tell us his name?" asked the boy.

Finbarl shrugged, while prodding the rodent with the tip of his knife. "Not right in the head."

"Oh, Finbarl!" chastised his wife.

"Hang on. I was going to add, but it's good to have another pair of eyes and hands in this place. From his mumbling, sounds like the Ferrals have spread across the mountains too."

"I've seen no sign of them or anyone else," said Aminatra, reopening the book, trying to ignore the shiver flushing through her. She had no desire to think about the wild humans known as Ferrals: the plagued of Athenia. Their life in that unforgiving land was now a hundred miles behind; a soaring range of conquered mountains separating them. "No more talk of our guest. It's not polite. I want to find out what happens next to Snowy and Napoleon."

Karlmon giggled, aware his mother knew the full plot to *Animal Farm*, having practised her new reading skills on it several times.

With her deliberate, plodding style, Aminatra worked her tongue round a less familiar word, continuing the ancient fable rescued from Athenia's library as the flames approached.

Karlmon closed his eyes again, content to listen to his favourite book as he recovered his strength, unaware how close *Animal Farm* and the other two books Finbarl rescued from the rubble of Athenia had come to being sacrificed to the mountains. As Karlmon lay lifeless, sucked dry by the blizzard, what did the heavy books matter? With a mother's crazed devotion, Aminatra carried Karlmon down the mountain at a reckless pace, feet slipping and stumbling, death beckoning an inch either way. But she never let go or fell. Aghast at his wife's nerveless descent, Finbarl followed, ready to forego his load to keep pace. He hung on, Karlmon came to in the thicker air and warming embrace, and Aminatra sobbed in relief. They all cried when the rocks transformed to grass, the land levelled out and a lush, strange world welcomed all three and their precious cargo.

With the mountains behind them, Mandelaton, the place of hope and security they sought, felt closer. The city's precise location, and what awaited them if found, remained a mystery. A simple letter seeking friendship, discovered in Athenia's archives, written by unseen ambassadors from Mandelaton, was their only breadcrumb. Its words gave little away, its existence offered so

much. Against the insular, corrupt and paranoid qualities of Athenia, a city reaching out appealed to Finbarl and Aminatra. So, ignorance and optimism fuelled their journey, with the wish to be anywhere other than Athenia. They hadn't expected to bump into a fellow Athenian, but such was the nature of adventure.

Recognising a favourite line, Aminatra looked up, quoting the book from memory, joined by Finbarl and Karlmon on the last sentence "Long live *Animal Farm!*" Aminatra closed the book. "A suitable place to stop."

The chorus woke the stranger. "Ferrals!" His hand grabbed at his machete's hilt, eyes wide in terror before a calming wave brought him back to reality. "Is that rat ready yet? Penela, don't forget the Jumblar. I can't feel my toes. Do you want a toku?"

Karlmon shrank, moving closer to his mother.

"The meat is ready," confirmed Finbarl, wondering if anything else within the man's odd rambling was aimed at him.

"Can you read some more after we've eaten?" Karlmon's imploring eyes pressed his mother.

"No, it'll be too dark."

Karlmon straightened up, fighting off his fatigue. "But I like you reading." He smiled. It was his way to encourage his mother in her lessons. That brief period of education as an Athenian cadet cultivated a liking as both tutor and superior to his parent.

"Well, if you don't behave, I'll read you *Hamner's Definitive Medical Guide* tomorrow!"

As expected, the threat elicited a giggle from Karlmon.

A turgid book with unfathomable words, Aminatra often wondered why Dul-biblex, Athenia's wise old librarian, gifted it as one of his essential three books. Sometimes Aminatra read it alone as the others slept, stretching her newfound literacy skills, equally confused and in wonder at the authors and their past world. It stirred memories of Maddy, Finbarl's deceased mother. As a doctor, she would have understood the medical guide. Aminatra missed her.

"Here, pull off a leg each!" Finbarl removed the rodent from the fire, motioning the steaming carcass towards Aminatra and Karlmon.

The man scurried round, eager to claim his piece. "Thank you, Wardyn. Yes, sir. I promise. Not more than you can spare." He retreated to his spot, continuing a one-sided conversation.

"It's hot!" cautioned Aminatra, as her son ripped off his portion.

Karlmon passed the leg from one hand to the other as fingers reached their pain threshold. He blew, then took a satisfying bite out of the thigh. "I prefer deer," he mumbled through a full mouth.

Aminatra clipped his ear, angry and disappointed. "Be grateful for what we can find!"

"He meant nothing by it," said Finbarl. "I prefer your stewed Yucca." His reference to their days in the prison prompted the sought-after reaction, as Aminatra's scowl turned to a smile.

Karlmon appeared unaffected, intent on teasing the meat from the bone.

"I suppose cheekiness is a good sign," sighed Aminatra. "Proves you're back to normal."

Karlmon nodded his bulging cheeks, his brush with death forgotten.

A private smile stole on to Finbarl's lips. His dreams, scarred for months by Karlmon's terrified face, now found a new image of a happy family. That guilt, from the moment he'd ripped the boy from his mother's clasp at her arrest, dissipated when the boy's life hung in the balance and Finbarl felt a father's love for him. He reached across and ruffled Karlmon's hair.

With appetites sated, sleep beckoned as the only choice. Karlmon and the stranger dropped off in no time, exhausted and ready to dream.

Aminatra followed not long after. Despite worries, a tired body dragged her into a deep slumber. For Finbarl, trained as an Athenian guard, he remained vigilant, alert to every nocturnal sound. He sat awake, thinking, his mind alive with this new world, their new home and strange companion.

On descending to the foothills, the fertility of the land announced itself. Rain fell more often, and the countryside, though still hostage to a ferocious sun, looked luscious under its green blanket. Why so different this side of the mountains? The clouds appeared to queue at the mountains' summits, lacking the nerve to go beyond and drop their rain on Athenia. It felt cruel but ordained.

And an absence of people confused Finbarl. The early encounter with their fellow Athenian exile lulled him into believing more would follow. Not travellers from Athenia, such as themselves and the stranger, but indigenous folk. If humanity hung on in the barren wasteland around Athenia, why was this fertile and pleasant land so devoid of humanity? Their companion's ravings fuelled his insomnia. Soon, he expected to encounter a Ferral.

These humans, once a noble and civilised people but now primitive and crazed, tormented Athenia's citizens. They lived among the foothills on the Athenian

side of the mountains, roaming the plain for food, attacking any fool caught out there. It took no stretch of the imagination to think their territory extended here. Would freezing summits perturb these naked beasts who showed no fear? Finbarl's body wanted to believe they might, and the stranger's warnings stemmed from Jumblar damage, not experience. Then he might drift off to sleep, but his mind hung on to every possibility, until, after a few more hours, exhaustion overtook him.

Time passed, as it does during the fitful domain of sleep: the mind flitting awake, lamenting the burden of time, until, without awareness, sleep reclaimed. During one such semi-conscious flirt, Finbarl sensed a vague notion of movement. He pondered the motions in a dream-like context. Faces from the past appeared in this newfound world of forests, brushing through the verdant leaves, appearing, then disappearing. Gauret, his lamented friend in the guards, hovered and vanished; Crixus, a traitorous prisoner, materialised in his final, deathly state. Governor Elbar, the epitome of power in Finbarl's old life, lurched towards him as an ogre, before morphing into a camel.

A timid yelp pierced the subconscious, dragging Finbarl from his fanciful world. He sprang upright to find Karlmon awake, staring through the darkness into the trees, his body rigid with fear. Sleep and memories of abstract thoughts clung to Finbarl as he tried to understand the information his brain absorbed. Finally, his eyes adapted to the sparse moonlight. Aminatra groaned to his right, still deep asleep. He gently shook her, while focussing his attention on where Karlmon stared. The stranger snored across the clearing, too far away to awake in silence. Finbarl's first attempt to stir Aminatra elicited a contented moan. He shook harder. She fidgeted, one eye opening, assessing her disturber.

"What?" she mumbled.

"Wake up!" whispered Finbarl. "There's something out there."

Aminatra sat upright in a flash, looking around for her son. "Karlmon!"

"Quiet!" hissed Finbarl. "We're being watched." His hand searched for the pistol on the ground. In the first weeks of their journey, with food scarce, he used it to kill prey. On discovering only three bullets remained, they rationed those for emergencies. This seemed like one. The trio stared into the dark forest, a waft of smoke blowing up from the burnt-out fire, smudging the view. Silence compounded their fear. Framed in a cluster of shimmering leaves, the moonlight caught the stationary features of a face staring back. Piercing eyes, wild hair and snarling mouth identified their watcher: a female Ferral.