

*The
Cantrill*

BOOK ONE

Beginnings

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The Cantrill Book One
Beginnings
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Outskirts Press, Inc.
<http://www.outskirtspress.com>

Paperback ISBN: 978-1-9772-3232-8
Hardback ISBN: 978-1-9772-4084-2

Cover image by Jason Desnoyers
Author image by Laura Smith (www.laurasmithphotos.com)

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PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

Dedicated to Mom and Dad

Chapter 1

*M*y name is Etob Sheerbain.
People say I write books.

I would rather be tending to my apple orchard, or spending time with friends in the village I grew up in. A village I love with all my being. But I do make it a point to educate our young as to how we came here, what we have sacrificed, and what we must guard against to live this wonderful life. So I guess I do write books. Trying to keep all this history in my head would not, could not, work at all. Why, every lesson would not be the same, and missing any part of this would not be fair. So I have put ink to paper to help me, help you to understand the past.

I set before you *The Cantrill*. It is an accounting of life. My life. The lives of the people I love from this little village of Trillo and those who live and share with everyone in the Freelands of Tymen.

The name of the first book of several is *Beginnings*.

I find that quite straightforward and understandable. And so, we shall start at the very beginning.

Tymen.

Everything you could ever want in a place to live was here. Lakes, rivers, forests, meadows, and rich farmlands. Steep bluffs to the east to protect and guard the coastline. Jagged snow-capped mountains on the

northern border limited entry by anyone to a small winding trail. Dense forest and mountains looked down from the west, and a long southern journey would take you to the marshes. At the base of the northern mountains lay the kingdom of Calendale. This peaceful kingdom was ruled by King Mandeer and Queen Petra. Three days ride to the south, you entered the kingdom of Harding. King Helting and Queen Hara welcomed all with grace and kindness. Tymen is such a wonderful and abundant land, it boasts two kingdoms and two kings. How this came about was to be my search for answers today.

Tall and skinny, I had to slow my walk by shortening my stride. It was my job watching my tag-along companion as we walked to the village. Hardo Smatters was only five years old to my eleven, but I took to him instantly. He wasn't troublesome, didn't whine about this and that. He seemed generally interested in everything I talked about and did. Whatever I learned that day, I repeated to Hardo, as this helped me, and I was hoping Hardo would remember some of the lessons also. His short and stubby legs were his only drawback in our pairing and if he ever grew tired of my investigations of the past, a promise of a biscuit smothered with jam always helped motivate him. The village of Trillo was an hour's walk from my family's apple orchard, a walk I made often. Sometimes it was quicker than an hour, but not with Hardo. Holding his hand and trying to pull him along faster only tired me out. The walk to and from the village would take longer today and the lesson shortened, but moving through the countryside was always beautiful and interesting.

Everyone always said, "That Etob Sheerbain sure asks a lot of questions." And I did. How else do you get answers? All the farmland I passed through on my journeys begged to be questioned about, and I would not let them down. "When will the wheat be ready for harvest? How did your pumpkins get so big this year? You have three new calves! How did that happen?" But everyone I questioned knew I genuinely wanted to know

the answers. I was always greeted with a smile, and regardless of the subject, it was explained to me in a simple way for me to understand, from the fletching on an arrow to how long to bake pies and tarts. When people take pride in what they are doing, it's easy to explain things to someone who wants to learn.

“Have you ever thought about the kings, Hardo?” Talking always made walking faster, even if it was to myself.

“No, Etob, not really. Do they come and visit ever?” Hardo shuffled faster down the road.

“That's a good question. I don't know. You should ask Mr. Foxwinkle.” Trillo was our destination, and Thaddeus Foxwinkle would hopefully have all the answers to our questions. Thaddeus was just a lad when he learned from his father how the kingdoms of Tymen came about and eventually the creation of The Freelands. He was the “unofficial” historian and wiseman of the village. He could always be found at the center of the village square, seated on a bench under the great oak tree. Whether he was holding court with one or ten, all were welcome to participate or just listen in. Some passersby would even contribute a bit of information or just smile and nod when remembering many good times.

“We're almost there, Hardo. Can you hear the River Iduk?”

As the road started sweeping around the trees to the right, I knew that Fallen Rock bridge would soon be in sight. This bridge crossed over the Iduk River and led the traveler straight into the village. The bridge, of course, got its name from its construction material; fallen rocks from the mountainside were dragged, pulled by cart, and expertly fashioned into a beautiful and sturdy structure. There were times when the spring thaw would swell the river to great volumes of water after an exceptionally snowy winter. But Fallen Rock bridge was always left standing, and why not? It was just a child from the mountains. Like the mountain, it remained strong and true.

Hardo reached for some wild raspberries along the edge of the road. As soon as he had his bounty stashed in his mouth, the bridge came into sight. The morning sun glistened on the river below, and sparkling points of reflected light danced on the cold stone.

“I hope Mr. Foxwinkle is alone this morning, Hardo.” Today I felt selfish and wanted Foxwinkle all to myself. Talking about kings and kingdoms would take up most of the day and might not be on anyone else’s mind. Normally if others had reached him first, I would politely wait my turn, but today was different. Even with me arriving later than normal, I did not want to wait. Walking across the bridge, I dropped Hardo’s hand and ran to the halfway point. Fallen Rock was wide enough to accommodate a cart in each direction, with room for walking travelers also. Standing in the middle enabled you to catch your first glimpse of Trillo. There in the distance, framed by the roofs of this busy little village, stood the old oak. At the base of the oak, one solitary figure could be seen wearing a bright red vest. Thaddeus Foxwinkle sat alone on this glorious morning, quietly waiting for someone to join him in conversation. I remember smiling a smile like I never smiled before.

“Hardo! Let’s run!”

I never enjoyed running; I actually hated it. But this was different, I could see my prize right in front of me. I searched for knowledge like a miner searched for precious gems, and this time Foxwinkle was mine and only mine.

“Good morning, sir! We have so much to talk to you about today!”

The words just gushed out of my mouth as I slid to the ground in front of my teacher. He just smiled and pointed behind me. “I assume Master Smatters is a part of your ‘we,’ Master Sheerbain?”

I turned around to see Hardo just leaving Fallen Rock and making his way toward us as fast as his short little legs would take him. I turned to Foxwinkle again and gave him a sheepish smile. “I think we should wait a

moment or two for Hardo.” Foxwinkle nodded in agreement and folded his arms on his chest. In what seemed like an eternity, a winded, red-faced Hardo took his seat on the ground next to me with a thump.

Foxwinkle smiled and leaned toward us. “What is so important that you race to see me today, my young sirs?”

A broad smile covered my face as I squirmed around on the ground to get comfortable. “Kings and kingdoms! Calendale and Harding! When did all of this start? Where did they come from, and why did they come? If you could tell me, sir, that would make me very happy!”

Foxwinkle’s eyes grew as big as saucers. He tugged on his vest, outstretched his legs, and crossed his feet at the ankles. Looking up at the canopy of leaves overhead, he paused for a moment in deep thought. His gaze then fell upon Hardo and myself.

“Kings and kingdoms? Well then, my fine gentlemen. I will try to tell you all I know. Most of that was handed down from my father and mother. I was not told everything about these events, because they themselves did not know everything, but I guess we knew enough to satisfy our curiosity. After all, a king does not have to explain anything to his subjects, but from what was brought out in conversation by our elders, young King Mandeer and King Helting were cut from the finest cloth around. Compassionate and fair, they equally divided this great land of Tymen. The word Tymen comes from the peoples of the far north. It means ‘not welcome.

“You see, Mandeer and Helting belonged to families that did not want to be ruled by tyrants. Their disapproval led to their banishment, but luckily, not their deaths. Looking for a new home, they traveled south through the mountains. No one at that time had ever traveled through the mountain pass. There was no reason to go there; no one lived there. But these two brave future kings had no choice. Accompanied by family, friends, and neighbors, they slowly moved through the mountains until they came upon this wonderful place. After setting up camp, the two

friends decided to name their new home Tymen. Where the word means 'not welcome' in the Northern Wilds, it shall mean 'welcome' from this day forward, south of the mountains."

This was a great introduction, but I wanted more, more detail, and it showed as I squirmed some more and let out a sigh. This prompted Foxwinkle to place his hands on his knees and bend forward to concentrate his stare into my eyes.

"You are stubborn today, Master Sheerbain. I was hoping for a simple story, but I see you are only going to be content with nothing but details."

My face flushed red as I searched for the appropriate apology. "Sorry... sir..."

Mr. Foxwinkle leaned back and clapped his hands twice. The loud cracks exploded from his palms and made me stop talking and Hardo jump! "Never, never, never stop asking questions. It is my fault that I tried to make this part of our history too simple. If anything, my lack of nourishment this morning may have something to do with it. Perhaps if Hardo would be a good lad and run over to Petwin's Bakery, we could solve this problem. Could I offer you boys some baked goods this morning?"

Hardo sprang to his feet in an instant. "A biscuit with raspberry jam would be lovely, sir."

Hardo was polite but direct and to the point. Foxwinkle laughed and said that he would want the same and then he turned to me. "And you, Etob? You being so skinny, you should think about two or more!"

I knew I was thin, because everyone told me so. "Thank you, sir. One biscuit with honey would be fine. Thank you for your generosity."

Foxwinkle smiled, "Then it is settled. Hardo please go to the baker and say this as sweetly as you can muster. 'My dear Mrs. Petwin, I would like three of your finest biscuits. Two shall have raspberry jam and the last with honey. This is the request of Thaddeus Foxwinkle, and all compensation shall be accounted for at the end of the day.'" Hardo stood dazed

with his eyes glazed over. He tried to move his mouth, but nothing came out. Foxwinkle shook his head and laughed. “Go get the biscuits, boy, and tell Mrs. Petwin I’ll pay her later.”

Hardo snapped out of his fog, let out a yell of “Yes sir,” and ran off in the direction of Petwin’s Bakery. Foxwinkle turned to me and folded his arms across his chest again. The lesson would wait, but this time he had questions for me.

“So tell me, Etob, how did you get so tall?”

I quickly replied, “My father is tall and his father also. My mother thinks it has something to do with the apples we grow. It’s much easier picking them when you’re tall. And we eat a very hearty dinner every night.”

Foxwinkle laughed but countered with another question. “How much of this ‘hearty dinner’ do you eat? You’re as skinny as a bean.”

“Oh, I eat quite a bit. Mother says I’m so skinny because of all the walking and talking I do.”

Foxwinkle looked puzzled. “Walking I understand, but talking?”

I smiled back but was quite truthful with my answer. “Mother says with my mouth open so much, it’s a wonder anything can stay in me at all.”

Foxwinkle let out a belly laugh and patted me on the head. He took his thumb and rubbed it in a circular motion at my front hairline. “Now my young sir, how did you get this fan of hair on your head? Your hair is straight and in one direction, yet you seem to have a peacock perched on your forehead for all to see.”

I sighed, knowing full well what he was asking about; every time I could see the reflection of myself, whether it be in glass or water, it reminded me. It was something many people would always point out when my hair was short during the hot summer months. It was much easier to hide with longer hair.

“My mother tells me when I was a babe she carried me over to our neighbor’s barn to visit. Supposedly she brought me too close to the cow and she licked me, causing this thing with my hair. She still calls this my ‘Cow Lick.’”

Foxwinkle belly laughed again. “Never be ashamed of who you are and what you look like. You are one of a kind; no one anywhere will ever be like you. Rejoice in who you are and remind others of how wonderful they are also. Now, no more questions from me—here comes breakfast.”

Hardo carefully walked our way, making sure nothing dropped out of the small woven basket from Petwin’s. Serving Foxwinkle first and then myself, he happily took his place beside me and with a big smile took a huge bite out of his prize, making sure his had extra jam, globs of delicious red squeezed out of the side of his mouth. After every bite and swallow, his tongue would dart to the corners of his mouth as to not let one bit of goodness escape. If knowledge was my first love, a biscuit with honey drizzled on it was my undivided second. All three of us would take a bite and smile as if we were sent to a very special place and time. Upon the last swallow, and lick of our sticky fingers, our lesson would continue.

“If there is one name that you should always remember other than your own, it is Altrumont. We people of Tymen refer to the lands north of the mountains as the Northern Wilds, but in reality, it is the land of Altrumont, named after the family that has ruled it since time began. This place we call home in Tymen, ‘The Freelands,’ were given to us by our kings, and we are known to all as ‘Freelanders’ no matter what village we come from. Those under the rule of the Altrumont family were simply the king’s subjects, not even worthy of having a name given to them with any connection to Altrumont.”

Foxwinkle took his hands and ran his bony fingers through his shoulder-length gray hair. He sighed deeply and looked down upon our young faces. The moment he cleared his throat, I knew I was about to hear the

truth, and a painful truth about our past. “Alzar Altrumont, king and ruler of the North as we know it. Alzar was, at the beginning, a great king, I am told. All peoples under his rule worked hard but were treated with respect. His wife, Queen Fairvelt, was pregnant with their first child and all were excited with the coming royal birth. Alzar adored Fairvelt and was certain she would give him a son to carry on his family name

“When the big day came, there was a buzz about the kingdom. It was a beautiful, sunny, warm spring day. Fairvelt had told Alzar the time had come, and a multitude of midwives were summoned to assist in this wonderful event. The morning crept slowly by and no news came yet. Then, by midafternoon, it was announced the king indeed had a new son. All gathered around the great hall, looking up at the circular parapet wall that enabled Alzar to look down upon his subjects. At last, Alzar came out to greet his people. He placed his hands on top of the wall and looked around the square. His voice was loud and forceful.

“My people, today will live in my heart forever. Today, the family of Altrumont, this land of Altrumont, have gained a son. Your king has gained an heir.’

“Cheers erupted at his message and grew louder as he picked up the babe, held him out and above his head for all to see. He then pulled him close to his chest and kissed him softly on the forehead. He again addressed the crowd. “This is my son, your prince. He is from my inner being, my strength. He is also filled with everything his mother, my wife, your Queen Fairvelt could give. Your queen, my queen, is gone.’

“Not a sound could be heard; no one moved. The news was like a cold winter’s blast that froze everyone in their tracks. ‘She gave her life, to give me my son. She gave her life to give you a future king. Her sacrifice will not be in vain. As the child grows, he will take the best from his father and his mother. He will get stronger and wiser and be a true leader amongst men. His actions will not be questioned. To do so would be considered an

act of aggression against the family of Altrumont. Let us mourn Fairvelt, let us honor our new son, let us nurture and strengthen your future king.”

Foxwinkle’s voice trailed off as he looked right through us. He paused and repeated “future king” very softly. The thought of not having a mother help raise me was something I found very unsettling.

“Did the king take another wife to be his queen and the babe’s mother?”

Foxwinkle returned his gaze to us upon hearing my question. He rubbed his palms on his knees and interlocked his fingers. Palms out, he pushed his fingers toward us, making a low snapping and popping sound before resting them together in his lap.

“No, he did not take a wife. Instead he had several women take care of and watch over the young prince. But no one was there to be a true mother to the child. Alzar changed greatly after that day. He insisted that his son be nothing but the strongest, both in mind and body.”

I did not want to interrupt, but my curiosity got the better of me. “Sorry. Mr. Foxwinkle, but what is the child’s name?”

Foxwinkle straightened up with a surprised look. “No need for you to be sorry, Etob; silly of me to have left that out. Baldor, the child’s name is Baldor. Baldor Altrumont.” I nodded a thank you and readjusted my sitting position. “As soon as the young prince could walk and talk, the king would take him everywhere. It was important to show him his future lands, his subjects, how to hunt, and also the power and the might of the king’s army. Young Baldor was fascinated with the army; as he grew, he would always be found around the barracks or the training fields—talking with the guards, getting lessons on using a sword and a bow. He hunted with them, but saved his first deer kill to be done with his father. This first kill with his father bonded the two to an extreme. Having the power to do as he pleased, the admiration of his father and his father’s army and the ability to take a life had a great impact on his future days.”

A small stone became dislodged as Foxwinkle pulled back his feet under the bench. He stopped talking for a moment to bend over and pick up the stone. This gave me a chance to ask some questions.

“Every family in Trillo hunts deer—why would this make Baldor different from the rest of us? Hunting with his father should be a happy thing. I’m happy when I do things with my father.”

Foxwinkle looked at the stone in his hand and then looked at me. He began tossing the stone gently from his right hand and then to his left, back and forth, back and forth. I didn’t know whether to look at him for a reply or stay fixed on his antics with the stone. I wanted to say something but wasn’t sure if my timing was right. I just looked at Hardo as he looked at me. Suddenly, as the stone rolled into his right hand, he sent it flying off to the left of us.

“Yes, Etob, everyone here in Trillo does hunt deer. But Baldor changed. There is a story told of when he was a lad of about eleven.”

“That’s how old I am,” I interrupted.

“Then you will be able to understand this story quite easily. Baldor was only your age when he was on a hunt with the captain of the guard and three other guardsmen. While walking through an open meadow, they came across a father and son pulling out a large buck. Baldor called out to them to stop and approached the pair. ‘Let me see your kill,’ he demanded. Of course, the stunned pair of hunters let the prince examine their bounty. Baldor looked at the buck, looked back at the captain, and exclaimed what a magnificent beast was before them. He then informed them that the buck was his.

“Now, this had never happened before. The king would never interfere with a man trying to feed his family. When asked why this was happening, Baldor replied simply, ‘Because I want it, because everything you see, everything you can touch or smell is mine.’

“The captain then stepped up and ordered the two to leave their kill

and go home as the prince commanded. Baldor shouted back at them as they were leaving, ‘Yes, leave now or my arrows will find you both.’”

I could feel my jaw drop as I listened to this. A boy my age, demanding, threatening, and stealing from his own people? How could the king allow such behavior from his only son?

“I can see it in your eyes, my young friends. Alzar had created a beast. Whether by design or by accident, the only person at this time that could control him was his father, the king.”

Foxwinkle shook his head, looked off to the right and then to the left before continuing with a smile. “You cannot change the past, my young friends; you can only deal with the present and hope to make the future a brighter place. Now, back to Baldor. The prince grew into a huge force in the kingdom. He became larger and stronger and looked quite intimidating and also very cruel and demanding. Adding to the fact that his father was king, he could do no wrong. He truly terrified the whole kingdom. At the age of twenty, he was put in charge of leading the king’s army, a dream that had finally come true. But instead of protecting his subjects, he often abused and took advantage of them. King Alzar was aware of this but did nothing to prevent it. Not having his mother around to soften his heart only made him colder and harder.

“Baldor did take a liking to Cree, the daughter of one of the midwives that was with his mother that fateful day. Cree was beautiful, but sweet though she looked on the outside, she was just as cold and demanding on the inside. She would stroke Baldor’s ego by telling him there was no one greater than he, except for his father, and when the time came, Baldor would be the greatest and strongest man standing. Baldor wanted to take her as his bride, but she refused him, saying she would only marry a king, not a prince, and he would have to wait.”

Hardo began to bounce with energy as he sat, getting Foxwinkle’s attention. Thaddeus smiled, recognizing that even the younger Smatters was listening to him, not just hearing his words.

“Do you have a question, Hardo?”

“Well, sort of, sir. When does King Helting and King Mandeer come into the story? You haven’t mentioned them yet. This is about them, right?”

Foxwinkle laughed as he replied, “Yes, Hardo, it is, and I have just reached that point. But my fine sir, you must realize you have to understand what leads up to an event to fully appreciate it. Isn’t that right, Etob?”

Remembering it was my request for details that brought on this lengthy story, I nodded yes, nudged Hardo, and gave him that *We need to know this* look. Hardo stopped bouncing, folded his hands in his lap, and waited for this tale to continue.

“The Calendale family worked a very prosperous farm, as did the Harding family. Mandeer Calendale and Helting Harding were both eighteen years old and the eldest of each family with six siblings. These families worked hard, loved each other, loved the land, and had great respect for family, friends and neighbors. They had heard some of the tales about Prince Baldor, but neither had experienced anything first hand. Mytel Calendale would always tell Mandeer, “Listening to other people’s stories usually means pulling out some of the truth and throwing away the lies, too much trouble for my taste. Learn from your experiences and people you can trust and respect.”

“Hartwig Harding could have been Mytel’s brother. The two acted the same, worked the same, and thought the same. The Calendales and Hardings had an incredibly strong bond that could not be broken. Then one day that bond was put to the test.”

Thaddeus Foxwinkle stood up, stretched, and sat back down to continue. As he looked up, several other children had joined the group and three older villagers were standing by. “Ah—welcome, friends. I shall continue. On one beautiful sunny spring day, Prince Baldor and Cree rode the countryside, accompanied by four of the Royal Guard. They came upon

the house of Hartwig Harding. There in the side yard hung a beautiful blanket drying in the wind. Cree stopped her horse immediately. Baldor trotted several feet beyond her, turned, and asked what was wrong. She responded that nothing was wrong, all the world was the way it should be because of that blanket.

“Baldor looked at the brightly colored blanket. The center was a circle of bright yellow like the sun, with triangular leaves of every color imaginable darting at different lengths surrounding it. At that moment, Hartwig came out of his house to greet the Prince. Baldor called out from his horse, ‘You there, what is your name?’

“Just then, Helting and two of his sisters came out to join their father. ‘My name is Hartwig Harding, Prince Baldor. Welcome to my home, and how can I help you?’

“Baldor stood up in the stirrups of his saddle and looked about the farm. ‘No need to welcome me to what I already own. But my lady here fancies your blanket. If it is dry enough, fold it and give it to one of my men to carry back with us.’

“The Hardings stood stunned at the request. Cree smiled and cooed back to Baldor, ‘Thank you, my love, this makes me most happy.’

“Baldor turned back to Hartwig. ‘Didn’t you hear me, old man?’

“Hartwig took a step closer to Baldor. ‘But Prince, this blanket was a wedding gift to me and my late wife, a gift made by our dear friends the Calendales. Surely you can understand my feeling toward it.’

“Cree walked her horse right up to Hartwig. ‘Do you know who you are talking to? The prince owns everything, the ground you stand on and the air you breathe. He even owns that blanket hanging in your yard, but today he chooses to give this blanket to me.’

“Hartwig took a step back and turned to his two daughters. ‘Check the blanket, fold it carefully, and hand it over.’

“Helting looked puzzled and hurt at his father, who slowly walked

toward his son with his finger to his mouth to keep him silent. The girls slowly folded the blanket and walked it over to one of the horsemen. Tears streamed down their faces with each step.

“Cree looked down upon them, ‘Don’t cry on my blanket, and why are you crying? Your mother is dead and has no use for it. Your father is nothing but a dirt farmer and does not deserve something this beautiful to sleep with. This blanket deserves to be with royalty; this blanket deserves to be with me.’ The guard scooped up the blanket and was ordered by Cree to ride in front of the Prince and herself. ‘No dust from the road should touch this blanket. It is destined for royalty; it is destined for a king.’ Baldor liked this comment and waved his arm to the horseman to lead the way.”

Foxwinkle paused as the number of children doubled and several more townsfolk gathered. He cleared his throat and announced to all: “This, my friends, was the beginning of the end, but also an end to result in a new beginning.”

Thaddeus continued, “Helting was furious at what happened. He turned to his father and said, ‘The king has never shown such behavior. Has never treated his people this way. These tales about Baldor are obviously true. Does the king know what his son is doing? Are these kingly qualities?’

“Hartwig looked at his son and responded softly, ‘My first concern as a father is for the safety of my family—getting us jailed or even worse by refusing the prince because of hurt feelings would not be wise.’

“Helting grew even more frustrated. ‘I understand you, Father, but there has to be a place and time to go to the real power of the land, the king himself.’

“Hartwig put his hand on Helting’s shoulder. ‘Let us calm your sisters and tell your brothers working the fields what has been done.’

“That evening, the families of Harding and Calendale came together

to discuss not just what happened to Hartwig, but the rumors and stories swirling around their countryside. It was decided on that fateful night that the heads of the two families and their eldest sons would seek council with the king about the growing concern and dissent for Baldor's deeds against the people."

Hardo and I and the other children turned our heads as calls from the group behind us shouted out. "Bravest families I've ever known!" was one. "We are all blessed for their courage!" was another.

Foxwinkle raised his hands and smiled, "Yes, yes my friends, but let me continue to educate our young folk gathered here. As I was saying, Hartwig Harding and Helting Harding, along with Mytel Calendale and Mandeer Calendale decided the following morning that they would set out and try to meet with the king. Their families were cautioned that they might not return and be vigilant that soldiers might come after them too. A hiding place with provisions in the forest should be considered with a lookout for their return or retaliation from Baldor. The whole day was unsettling for all involved—not knowing what you're walking into always is.

"The foursome reached Altrumont Castle. The main gate was open to all, but guards were posted at the entry to the great hall. Leading the way, Hartwig walked up to the guards and asked if an audience with the king would be possible.

"And what business should I tell King Alzar this is about?" asked a guard. Hartwig summoned all of his courage and announced that thieves roamed his countryside and they had their identity. The guard agreed that this would be a job for his army and that the king only had the power to have these people captured and punished.

"Wait here while I advise the king of your situation."

"The group stood looking at each other while waiting for the guard to return. 'This will be the moment for truth and respect,' Mytel offered. 'Let Hartwig and myself do all of the talking.'

“Hartwig cautioned Helting and Mandeer. ‘Speak only if questioned directly by the king himself. Answer no one else.’

“After what seemed like forever the main door opened and the guard stood before them, saying, ‘Come with me.’ “

Foxwinkle paused and looked about. His audience had now doubled again, yet all you could hear was everyone’s breathing while they waited to hear more. “As grand as Altrumont Castle looked on the outside, the cold stone hallways they were led down were less inviting. Finally, they reached the great hall with King Alzar seated at the far end. He was surrounded by advisors, and two guards. They stopped at the door as the guard asked them for their names. The guard then announced them to the king: ‘From the family of Harding, Hartwig and Helting and from the Family of Calendale, Mytel and Mandeer.’

“The king motioned for them to come forward, as the four felt every eye in the room on them. Mytel stood on the left and Hartwig on the right, their sons behind them. Hartwig took the lead. Having the most to lose, he started: ‘Thank you for this audience, King Alzar.’

“The King waved off this greeting. ‘What is this about thieves stealing from my subjects, in my lands.’

“Hartwig answered, ‘Yes, my king. At first I heard stories of this happening but did not believe it until it happened to me yesterday, in broad daylight.’

“The king interrupted, ‘A thief prowling under the cover of night is one thing, but one who boldly loots my land during the day challenges my authority and must be dealt with quickly. I am told you know the identity of the thief? Who is it?’

“Just then, a rattle of footsteps came ringing down a side hallway. The king turned to his right. ‘Ah, just in time. The commander of my army is here; you can tell us both the identity of this thief.’

“Entering the hall with Cree by his side was Baldor. Meeting his

father's gaze, he quickly asked: 'Thieves in our kingdom? While I am leader of your army? Where did you hear this?'

"Alzar pointed at the four men before him. Baldor looked at the four. Mytel and Mandeer were close to him but he had never met them. But his eyes narrowed as he looked at Hartwig and then Helting. 'You!' was all he said."

All the children gasped and squirmed in their place. The elder folks knew this was the moment of truth. Power against power. Right against wrong. Father against son. Compromise, winning everything or losing everything.

"Alzar looked at his son. 'You know these men?'

"Baldor walked to his father's side and stood before them. 'These two, no,' he said, pointing to Mytel and Mandeer. 'I have seen these two. What was your name?'

"Cree stepped out of the shadows and whispered, 'Harding.'

"Ah yes, Harding.'

"The king leaned over and asked Baldor where and when he had met them. 'I do not recall; perhaps the Hardings may remember.' He placed his hand on the hilt of his sword.

"The king turned to Hartwig. 'Can you tell me when you met my son?'

"Hartwig stood as straight and tall as he could before answering. 'Yes, my king, it was yesterday. Baldor, his lady, and four horsemen came by my home.'

"The king looked puzzled. 'If the two of you met yesterday, why don't you remember him, Baldor, and why didn't you report the fact to my son that there are thieves running about my land?'

"Baldor cocked his head to the right and glared at Hartwig. 'Perhaps this old man has made a mistake or heard too many wild stories.'

"Hartwig's face flushed red with anger. 'I may be old, but I am not blind, nor stupid. You mock me, Prince Baldor, and give me no choice but

to tell the truth. King Alzar, please forgive me, but the thieves are your son and this woman.’

“The king’s advisors gasped, Cree screamed ‘Liars!’ and Baldor drew his sword

“‘You dare accuse me?’

“The king leaped to his feet and shouted at Baldor, ‘You do not draw a sword in my hall unless I tell you to.’ He turned to his advisors and demanded silence. Cree was still screaming insults until the king turned to Baldor. ‘Have your woman shut her mouth in my hall, or I shall have her removed.’

“Baldor grabbed Cree by the arm and shook her. ‘Quiet yourself, quiet yourself now.’

“King Alzar stepped up to Hartwig. ‘You dare come into my house and accuse my son of being a thief? Are you mad?’ The king then turned again to Baldor. ‘Are you a thief, my son?’

“Baldor screamed, ‘Never.’

“Alzar questioned Hartwig again. ‘What was stolen? What was it that a Prince would steal that he doesn’t have already?’

“Hartwig looked down at his shoes and then returned to the king. ‘A blanket.’

“Alzar turned and walked back to his throne. ‘A blanket? You risk death over a blanket? Why would he want to steal your blanket?’

“At this time, Mytel Calendale spoke up. ‘My King, the blanket was a wedding present made by my wife for the Hardings.’

“Hartwig continued: ‘ This blanket has remained in my family for many years, even after my wife passed. I’m sure you can relate to my attachment to this, having lost your queen. I can tell you this, it was not Baldor’s intention to take this blanket from me. He was just passing by my home when his lady made him stop and demanded my property be hers.’

“Cree screamed ‘Liar’ again and had to be grabbed by Baldor.

“Silence, or I will cut out your tongue myself,” screamed Alzar and then asked Hartwig what proof he had.

“At this point Helting pleaded with the king, ‘Ask one of your advisors to go up to her chambers and bring it here. He will find a white blanket with a bright yellow sun in the middle, surrounded by many points of colors. She said only royalty should have such a blanket, that she should have it, and demanded Baldor to give it to her.’

“Baldor took two steps toward Helting, but the king stopped him. Alzar then commanded his most trusted advisor to go to Cree’s chamber and retrieve the blanket, if it did exist. Baldor stood stone still, looking at neither his father nor Cree, but straight ahead at his four accusers.”

Foxwinkle paused for a moment and took notice that the crowd around him had swelled once again. He looked at the eager faces of the children and the twinkle of pride in the eyes of the older folk. He raised his right hand, palm out, and said, “Baldor raised his hand like this and said, ‘Wait.’ The king turned to his son, and before he could question why he would go against his father’s command, Baldor replied: ‘The blanket you seek is not in Cree’s chamber. It is in mine.’

“The king sat back on his throne, eyes darting in every direction, searching for the right words. He looked again at his advisor. ‘Make way to Baldor’s chamber and bring it here.’ Not a sound could be heard in the Great Hall. Everyone waited for footsteps to come echoing down the hall and to look upon this blanket. Questions about what would happen next raced through everyone’s mind, especially King Alzar’s. Cree was most uncomfortable, looking up at Baldor, but her gaze was not returned. Furious at this situation, she concentrated all her silent rage and hatred at the ‘lowly dirt farmers.’ Her heart began to race as the first click, click, click of heels could be heard approaching. She grabbed Baldor’s hand, but he still did not look at her.

“Then into the hall it came. Everyone’s eyes were upon it. A beautiful

yet simple blanket had made this kingdom stop, and a decision by the king had to be made that would shape the lives of all in that room. One simple blanket would change the lives of many, on that day and many more to follow. The blanket was placed in the hands of the king. All eyes were on him now. He ran his hand over the fabric and looked at the bright colors. At the very bottom corner were a red H and green C that caught his eye.

“He looked at Hartwig. ‘Harding?’ Hartwig answered yes. He then turned to Mytel. ‘Calendale?’ And Mytel answered yes. The king sat silent for several agonizing minutes. He looked around the hall and spoke: ‘I have made my decisions. First, this blanket must be returned to the rightful owner, Hartwig Harding.’ Baldor turned to face his father and take the blanket from him, but the king stopped him. ‘The person that has brought shame upon my family shall hand it back.’

“Cree looked stunned and started to shake. She took the blanket from Alzar with hands trembling, not uttering a word. She then turned to Hartwig, walked up to him, and handed over the blanket. Before turning away, she looked around Hartwig and glared at Helting. Her eyes burned holes into his very soul. She returned to Baldor’s side and the king continued: ‘Second, upon my son’s birth and the death of his mother, my queen, all my subjects were cautioned not to question my son’s authority because to do so would be considered an act of aggression against the Altrumont family.’ A smile sprang up on Cree’s face and she squeezed Baldor’s hand with delightful anticipation. ‘The House of Harding stands in violation of my decree. The House of Calendale, confronting my son with Hartwig and Helting Harding, are guilty of the same aggression. My law is the law of the land. What you are accused of is punishable by death.’

“These four brave souls have gone from accusers to accused. ‘My son the prince will in fact be ruler and owner of everything Altrumont has to offer, when he becomes king. He is not the king yet and has much to learn about ruling. If he himself demanded your property, I would rule in

favor of him. But having him do the bidding of a commoner upon other commoners is not royal behavior at all. You should be put to death, but his weak decision-making because of a woman, a woman that is not his princess nor queen, could save you from the executioner. The actions of my son, his woman, and you four have given me much unneeded stress this day.'

"The king rose and handed out his sentence, 'Hartwig and Helting Harding, as well as Mytel and Mandeer Calendale and both your families are found guilty of aggression against the Family of Altrumont, but considering the facts and admissions of this act, you are hereby banished from Altrumont and forfeit your land to Prince Baldor. Do you have anything else to say?'

"Mandeer stepped forward. 'King Alzar, there are more folk afraid to step forward, what of them?'

"The king folded his arms across his chest. 'More blankets? Most likely friends of yours, no doubt. I refuse to listen to this banter anymore in the future, because heads will roll.' Alzar placed his hands on his hips and declared, 'You have two weeks from this day forward to gather all belongings and provisions and make your way through the mountains to the south. Take with you all malcontent friends and family. Make sure they know what they are giving up. I will guarantee safe passage and no harm from my son and my army. You will not be pursued once past the mountains as long as I am king. You are now considered Tymen in Altrumont.'"

Foxwinkle looked around at an even larger group of children. Some of them looked puzzled about the name Tymen and he would have to explain to them that in Altrumont, Tymen means "not welcomed"—the complete opposite of what it meant to the people of this land now.

Foxwinkle smiled and continued his story. "Hartwig thanked the king, turned and left the great hall without another word spoken. Whatever was said by Alzar to Baldor and Cree will not be known. The uncomfortable

situation they put him in I'm sure was discussed at length. The king's guard led the four to the courtyard. He turned and faced them one last time. 'Remember, you have two weeks to leave. Whoever goes with you, tell them to place a red cloth nailed to the front door. Prince Baldor will then know who has stayed and who has betrayed him. You will not be harmed nor hunted as long as Alzar is king. You still have your lives, make the best of it.'

"Hartwig nodded and quickened his pace toward the front gate. 'What becomes of us now?' questioned Mandeer.

'We tell all friends and family. We have no choice, but they do. A meeting will be set up for tonight; at dawn we will have much to do.'

"Helting started to turn his head as his father spoke, to look back, perhaps to see Baldor staring back at them. Hartwig cautioned his son, 'Do not look back. There is nothing there for you; there never was. Each step we take is a step into our new lives. What it brings, only tomorrow knows. Right now, we live for the present and must get back to our homes...'
Hartwig's voice trailed off as he came to a dead stop. He wiped a tear from his eye, clutched his blanket, and declared that no matter where they laid their heads to rest, it would be their home.

"Suddenly a voice called out: 'Hartwig! Mytel!' As the group looked, up ahead sat Calder Armchest on his wagon. Waving them on, the Hardings and Calendales climbed into the wagon. Calder called to his horses and the wagon jumped forward. 'I see you have your blanket and all of your heads are still on your shoulders,' chuckled Calder.

"Hartwig patted Calder on the back. 'Blanket and heads and a ride from a very dear friend, but nothing else.'

"Calder looked into their eyes and saw fear, fear of the unknown, the worst kind of fear. Calder called out to his horses to pick up the pace. 'I will take you to my home. Both of your families are there. I stopped by your house, Mytel. Emlee told me of your business with the king and your concerns for both families. How safe are you?'

“Hartwig explained every detail to Calder. Calder sat silent for a moment. ‘Well, you’re going to need some good, sturdy wagons. And you’re going to need someone to fix and repair them, am I right? So it looks like you have some company!’

“Hartwig did not expect this offer at all. ‘What will your family say about this? You will be leaving so much behind.’

“Calder just let out a chuckle. ‘We all are family; besides, why work all day to have the boy prince come and take my handiwork? We deserve the finest wagons, not these mean and nasty folk. It’s bad now with Alzar; I do not want to be around when Baldor becomes king. And Cree as queen? Just the thought of it will bring many sleepless nights.’

“The rest of the way, the five friends sat in silence. Their audience with the king came early, and they had much of the afternoon to get back and spread the word. Hartwig looked out across golden meadows—meadows he ran through as a child, free and happy. The wagon creaked along as they came upon Tines Lake. It was here Hartwig saw Salway for the first time. More beautiful than a summer day, soft as a spring rain, and eyes that twinkled brighter than the stars. They knew they would be together from that day forward. He clutched the blanket even tighter as his hands began to shake. Mytel smiled as he looked at the lake also. He was there fishing with Hartwig that day. He knew his friend was smitten with Salway and made sure to tell Emlee that their friend would be getting married soon.

“That night, Emlee began making them a wedding gift. How could anyone think that a handmade piece of cloth could bring so much happiness and so much sadness? Helting and Mandeer sat shoulder to shoulder. Helting looked at his friend. ‘We are strong, we are strong enough together to make this work.’

“Mandeer nodded. ‘Strong enough to make our own kingdom.’

“Helting laughed. ‘Strong enough to have two kingdoms.’

“Calder looked back at the two. ‘Let’s get out of here alive first, your majesties; then we’ll have your coronation.’ “

Foxwinkle smiled as his older audience chuckled. “My voice grows weak and is in need of a rest. I will continue tomorrow morning for those of you who are interested.” His eyes fell upon Hardo and myself as he winked. I could have stayed for hours and hours more, but the shadows were getting longer and my companion would be getting hungrier and hungrier with each step.

“Thank you so much, Mr. Foxwinkle. I have learned so much today, and I am looking forward to tomorrow’s story. Thank you again.”

Foxwinkle stood up and stretched. He put his hands on his hips and patted us on our backs. “Thank you, Etob, for wanting to know all the facts. I haven’t talked that long in quite a while. It felt good. With my mouth open most of the day and yours closed, maybe I’ll get skinnier and you’ll get fatter! Now run along, lads. Have a good meal, plenty of sleep, and I’ll see you in the morning. Tomorrow will be another long lesson.”

I grabbed Hardo’s hand and set off for Fallen Rock. Today was wonderful and tomorrow promised to be just as grand. Thaddeus Foxwinkle had a way of painting a picture with his words. Today was just the backdrop; tomorrow would bring more life to this masterpiece we called Tymen.