

# Fall of the Western Kings

By

J. Drew Brumbaugh

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(Co-authored with C. B. Berg)

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**[www.jdrewbrumbaugh.com](http://www.jdrewbrumbaugh.com)**

## Chapter 1

Gant's long strides carried him swiftly along the animal trail through the old forest. The cool shade under the leafy canopy was a welcome relief after the hot, sunny meadow where he'd secretly trained in swordsmanship with his uncle. The sweat dried slowly on Gant's sinewy body, muscles developed by swinging a forge hammer in his father's smithy. He had grown into a tall, muscular young man. His light brown hair fell loosely around his ears and his hazel eyes sparkled with enthusiasm.

He enjoyed the walk home almost as much as the sword practice. The solitude gave him time to reflect on his uncle's criticism and advice. Certainly he had improved over the years but he still had lots to learn and doing it in secret limited his practice time.

A warm breeze fluttered the leaves, sending flickering shadows dancing among the roots and ruts at his feet. As he walked along, Gant snapped his wooden practice sword in vicious arcs, visualizing specific moves, defending against imaginary attacks. One day, he thought, he would carry the real sword he'd made that lay hidden under his bed. For now he had to be content to train with his wooden sword in secret and pray for the day that would change.

Voices drifted to Gant from over a slight rise in the trail ahead. Who could it be? What if he was seen? As a commoner sword practice

was forbidden for him. Maybe he should hide or throw away his practice sword. The sounds grew louder, yells for help, sounds of a struggle. He recognized Gwen's voice, his neighbor and friend. The other voice was Wendler, a nobleman's son with a nasty reputation for deflowering peasant girls.

Gant sprinted to the top of the hill. Below he saw Wendler wrestling with Gwen, twisting her by the shoulders, trying to force her down. Gwen staggered but fought back.

"What are you doing," demanded Gant, rushing down the slope toward them.

Over his shoulder Wendler snarled, "I'm about to take this wench. Go away."

Wendler slammed her against a tree trunk. Her breath burst from her body in a single gasp. And then he flung her to the ground like a rag doll and leaped on top, his hands clawing furiously at her dress, ripping away bits of the fabric.

Gant ran up behind Wendler and grabbed him by the collar. He yanked the nobleman to his feet, spun him around and shoved him back away from Gwen.

Wendler staggered for a step and then caught his balance. In one smooth motion he had his sword out. The long, shiny blade flashed in the flickering sunlight. Wendler's eyes flared.

“You’ve struck a nobleman. For that I am going to kill you. Then I shall finish with the wench.”

For an instant, Gant panicked. The sight of sharp steel in Wendler’s hand sent shivers down his spine. That lasted only a split second as Gant’s training took over. He cleared his mind, concentrated on controlling his breathing and shifted into a defensive posture with the wooden practice sword ready.

“Let her go,” Gant said.

Wendler’s dark eyes filled with contempt, a sly smile curled his lips. “I shall enjoy killing you.”

“We’ll see about that.”

Wendler poked his sword menacingly in Gant’s direction. “Attacking a noble is punishable by death so killing you will not even raise an eyebrow.”

Gwen jumped to her feet, stumbled slightly, regained her balance, and screamed, “Gant. No. If he doesn’t kill you here they’ll execute you for fighting him.”

Gant ignored her plea and inched closer, wooden sword ready, intent on drawing Wendler away from Gwen. “Run,” Gant shouted, “run home.”

“No,” she said firmly, “not unless you go with me.”

“Too late for both of you,” snarled Wendler and advanced past the girl. “This useless son of a blacksmith has drawn a weapon on me and I shall kill him for his insolence.”

Gwen grabbed Wendler’s arm from behind. “No. There’s been no harm. Let us both go home and nobody need mention it again.”

With hardly more than a shrug, Wendler cast Gwen off and closed in on Gant. He beamed with sadistic satisfaction. Lowering his sword tip he lunged in, the point aimed straight at Gant’s heart.

Gant could hardly believe Wendler’s foolishness. He swept Wendler’s sword up and out of the way and danced backward.

“Want to reconsider?” asked Gant. “We could go home and forget this ever happened.”

Wendler lunged in again. This time Gant swept the attack aside and smashed down on Wendler’s forearm. Wendler’s smile turned to a grimace. His sword fell uselessly into the dead leaves at his feet.

“You hit me,” screeched Wendler. “I’ll have you beheaded.”

“No doubt,” said Gant, surprised at how easily he’d dispatched his first real opponent.

Wendler picked up his sword with his off hand but made no move to attack.

“Never learned to use your other hand?” said Gant. “Too bad. Even I’ve been taught that.”

Gant turned to Gwen who stood petrified near the edge of the trail holding her tattered dress together with both hands. He stepped toward her.

“Look out,” she shrieked.

Gant whirled as Wendler rushed at him with his sword raised overhead. Gant parried the weak blow, twisting his wooden sword to deflect Wendler’s blade and in one continuous arc brought his practice sword down solidly on the side of Wendler’s knee. Crack! And Wendler toppled to the ground.

Gant grabbed Gwen by the hand and ran up the trail dragging her along. “You’re coming with me,” he said. “Mother will make sure you don’t get blamed for this.”

Gwen twisted free and ran on her own. “What will you do? They’ll execute you.”

“Only if I’m around to be caught,” he said between rasping breaths. “I’ll have to leave Netherdorf, but that’s better than letting scum like Wendler have his way with you.”

“I’ll go with you, help you escape,” she said with a weak smile.

“No. Just stay with my mother. Stay safe or this has all been for nothing.”

As they ran Gwen asked, “How could you best Wendler? He’s a trained swordsman.”

Gant glanced at her. “I am too.”

“You can’t be. Commoners aren’t even allowed to own swords.”

“True,” said Gant and slowed to a walk. “It’s my Uncle Jarlz. You know my mother is the king’s cousin.”

“And your father is a commoner which makes you a commoner. He may be the King’s sword maker but that doesn’t allow you to be a swordsman.”

Gant nodded. “Yes, but Uncle Jarlz happens to be the best swordsman in the kingdom and he decided that I should be a swordsman, illegal or not. So, he’s been teaching me.”

“They’ll kill you if they find out.”

“And now they’ll know. Which is why I’ve got to get out of Netherdorf.”

They crested the last rise into the clearing behind Gant’s home. Smoke rose from the smithy’s forge fires. The clang of hot metal rang like harsh music. They passed the shed next to the corral where his father kept horses waiting to be shod, rounded the corner of the house and went in through the front door.

Once inside, Gant lurched to a stop. The adrenaline drained away and his hands shook. Seeing his mother busy cooking made the battle in the woods seem unreal.

His mother turned, took in Gant’s face, noticed Gwen’s torn dress, and a piercing glare crystallized in her eyes. “Gant,” she demanded, “what is going on?”

Gwen stepped in front of him. "It's my fault, really," she started.

"He can speak for himself," ordered Gant's mother. "Now what is going on? Have you two been up to something?"

"No," said Gant. "It's Wendler. I caught him with Gwen in the woods. Trying to force himself on her."

"So you brought her here," said his mother, her mood transforming to serious concern. "Good for you."

"Not exactly," replied Gant. "We got in a bit of a fight. I think I broke his arm." After a moment's pause, he added, "Maybe his leg, too."

Gant's mother's face darkened. "That will mean trouble." She stood silently for a moment, unconsciously stirring the stew. Finally she said, "Come along. I'll take you to the King and we'll get this cleared up."

"No, you won't," said Gant's father who had entered unnoticed through the side door. "The King will have him executed. He can do no less. It's the law."

"But the king is my cousin. He can't execute my only son."

Gant's father shook his head sadly. "Second cousins really and cousin or not, he'll have Gant executed because the rest of the nobles, especially Wendler's father, will give him no choice. We are near enough to a civil war over the way the king has treated commoners. Letting Gant off after attacking Wendler would be all the excuse they need to rally against the king. And with Barlon massing troops in the mountain castle

the king cannot allow civil strife. No matter how much he'd rather let Gant off, he won't risk the kingdom over one person."

Even as he spoke, Gant's father gathered up a side of meat, a loaf of bread, a skin filled with well water, and finally, from the crock beside the fire pit, a few silver coins. He slid the coins into a tattered, leather purse and drew the drawstring shut.

"Well get moving," he roared at Gant. "The King's men will be here soon enough and you'd better be far down the road by then. Get a bedroll, clothes, whatever you think you'll need and can carry. You won't be coming back."

Gant studied the room, his parents' faces, memorizing each facet, knowing he'd never see them again. And then Gwen hugged him.

"Thanks," she mumbled into his tunic.

Gant hugged her back, wondering why he'd never hugged her before. "Tell Chamz I said goodbye," he whispered in her ear.

"Come on, son. Get moving," rasped his father, pushing Gant along.

Gant gathered up his hiking pack, extra clothes, boots, a cloak, hat, socks. Finally he pulled out the sword he'd made from under his bed. He withdrew it from the plain leather scabbard and admired the craftsmanship. It was a good sword sharpened under his father's guidance. Would it be good enough? He'd soon find out. Outside of

Netherdorf he could legally carry it, a day he'd dreamed of. But it never occurred to him that he'd have to leave home to do it.

Within minutes he had all he could carry strapped around his waist, slung over a shoulder or packed into his backpack. His mother hugged him fiercely, kissed him three times and said, "Stay well, my son. Someday you'll be able to return. I'll see to it. I love you."

"I love you, too," was all Gant could manage. His world had come apart. He had no plan, no idea where he would go. He only knew that his life depended on escaping right now.

His father wrapped Gant in a mighty bear hug, almost crushing Gant's ribs. "I love you, too, son. Take care of yourself. Go to Blasseldune. It isn't the safest town, but you'll be safe there from Netherdorf's soldiers. We'll see that your Uncle Jarlz meets you there as soon as he can."

Gant wished he wasn't leaving. Strange how in a crisis people did things they wouldn't otherwise. Gant's father hadn't hugged him in a long time. It felt both good and strange. His mother was crying. Gant hated that. Still, what was done was done. He had to go.

"I love you both," he said, whirling around and dashing out the door.

Tears streamed down his cheeks clouding his vision as he jogged back down the forest trail. He hurried, knowing the trail so well he could navigate it safely even when he could barely see. At least Gwen was safe.

A few yards up the trail Gant broke into a dead run. Blindly he dashed through the woods toward the place where the forest trail connected with the road to Blasseldune. He ran, and ran, trying to blot out the heartache.

