

# Fall of the Western Kings

By

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## Chapter 2

Gant ran until he reached the junction with the main east-west road. He checked left and right for the king's soldiers. Nothing. He turned east toward Blasseldune and settled into a pace that avoided bringing attention to him. There were few travelers and he continued steadily down the rutted dirt road. Periodically Gant glanced over his shoulder for pursuing soldiers. None materialized.

The air was hot with summer's breath and sweat ran down Gant's cheeks even as the sun sank behind the towering treetops. The road ahead lay shaded, empty and dusty. His sword pressed into his shoulder blades. His pack straps cut into his back. The realization that he'd never see his family and friends again was depressing and his steps dragged.

The forest became wilder, closing in around the road. Thickets of briars and thorns grew under the overhanging canopy of trees. Occasionally Gant passed an isolated farm carved out of the forest. They were surrounded by thick stone walls and locked gates. No soldiers would come to their aid if attacked.

Gant turned at the sound of shouts behind him. A lone wiry figure ran over a distant rise, waving frantically. Gant smiled as he recognized the voice and silhouette of his life-long friend, Chamz.

"Gant, Gant," Chamz yelled, "wait for me."

Chamz sprinted down the gentle slope that separated them, still waving his arms. In a moment he caught up with Gant. He was slightly taller than Gant and much thinner. He wore soft deerskin leggings and a thin leather vest. A heavy pack swung from his back and he had a water skin and hunting knife on his belt.

Gant grinned, both happy and surprised. "What are you doing here? And how'd you know where I was going?"

"Gwen told me what happened," said Chamz, clapping Gant on the back. "You didn't think you were going without me, did you?"

"What do you mean?"

"I'm going with you that's what I mean."

"How can you go with me? Your parents need you in Netherdorf."

Chamz started walking again pulling Gant along by the sleeve.

"I told my father I was going with you to Blasseldune. We both know that's where you're going. You've been dreaming of it forever because of your Uncle Jarlz's stories about the place."

"What did your father say?"

"Well, he didn't say anything. I sort of -- I left him a note."

"Left him a note? You can't write."

"Okay, I told Gwen and she's going to tell her father tonight and then he'll tell my father but by then we'll be halfway to Blasseldune and no one will come after us, least of all my father."

What was Chamz going to do in Blasseldune? Wondered Gant. For that matter, what was Gant going to do? Yes, his Uncle Jarlz had filled their young minds with yarns about the world outside Netherdorf. Many of those stories were about Blasseldune, a free city located between the Kingdoms of Netherdorf, Mulldain, and the Eastern Empire. It was ruled by a loose group of merchants called the City Council. For centuries they had successfully played one power against the other and remained neutral and free. It was a free city without a conscience where anything could be bought or sold. Including a man's life.

Gant had dreamed of going to Blasseldune as a warrior, a swordsman. Now, he was an outlaw in Netherdorf and going to Blasseldune was a necessity. He had no idea what he would do once he got there.

Gant looked up and realized Chamz had continued walking and was now some distance ahead. Shrugging his shoulders to resettle his pack, Gant grabbed the sheathed end of his sword to keep it from bouncing, and sprinted to catch up.

"Chamz," he said regaining his friend's side and slowing to a walk, "what are we going to do in Blasseldune? I've only got a few coins and they won't last long."

"You get a job as a guard. I'll load wagons, or something."

Chamz made it sound so easy. Gant doubted it would be. He thought of suggesting Chamz go home but the truth was Gant was glad to have him along.

They walked in silence for a while. Gradually their steps grew longer as the daylight dwindled. Signs of civilization disappeared. There were no more fortified farms. A single merchant's wagon surrounded by guards passed them headed toward Netherdorf. The guards eyed Gant and Chamz with suspicion as they passed. The merchant remained hidden inside the covered wagon.

Gant and Chamz continued eastward through the old forest. The sun dropped lower and the day's heat waned. Slanting flickers of sunlight barely penetrated the fluttering leaves.

Chamz finally broke the silence. "I think the King should rethink the law when it comes to you."

"Why is that?"

"Why? Because he'll need every warrior he has including you. With Barlon taking the Mountain Castle, it's only a matter of time before Netherdorf will be at war. He'll attack us next."

"And for that you think King Tirmus should ignore the law that outlaws swords from commoners. A law that's a hundred years old?"

"Yes. A law that never should have applied to you. I mean, your mom's related to the King. How much more noble do you have to be?"

Gant didn't have an answer. What if this went badly for his mother and father? He couldn't change what he'd done. All he could do was hope his

parents were all right and make the best of things. Maybe he'd see his parents again someday.

"I'm telling you he'll call you back with a full pardon," said Chamz, carrying on the conversation without Gant. "Your mother's a noble. You're half noble. The king's made a mistake. And he'll see that when he's under attack."

Gant shook his head. "The king will do what he has to do. Stability within the kingdom is more important than I am. I'm sure there are plenty of nobles crying for my head right now."

Chamz laughed. "Mark my words those same nobles will be crying a different tune when Barlon comes down out of the mountains."

"And exactly what makes you think Barlon is going to attack Netherdorf?"

"Don't you ever go to the pub? Almost everyone there says it's just a matter of time. Barlon is power hungry and we're next. That's what they say."

"Pub talk," scoffed Gant and shifted the sword on his back to alleviate the irritation.

They walked on. Gant thought again about his fight with Wendler. He had violated the law. What was he supposed to do? He couldn't let Gwen be raped. Could he have done something different to stop Wendler? Nothing came to mind.

And what about Gwen? She'd been Gant's friend since they were toddlers. They'd played together in the fields, behind the smithy, around the

chicken coups at her house. Gant was going to miss her. Maybe one day, they'd see each other again.

Chamz rattled on. "Wendler deserved it," he said with conviction. "He's been trying to pick a fight with you for years and now he got one. I think he hated you because the king allowed you to attend Uric's classes in the castle. And for knowing the answers when he didn't."

Gant stopped, grabbing his friend by the sleeve. "How would you know who knew what in Uric's classes? You weren't there."

"I hear things," said Chamz laughing. "There are plenty of commoners working in the King's castle and we aren't blind or deaf. Come on, start walking or we'll never get to Blasseldune."

Gant started forward, thinking about the times Wendler had tried to goad him into a fight. Mostly in the schoolyard. And how Uric, the schoolmaster, had always been there to stop it before it got started. "So what if Wendler did try to get me to fight him? It doesn't change my crime."

"Crime! If there's been any real crime Wendler's done it. He's one sorry excuse for a man. They say he's forced himself on every peasant girl working in the castle. He's sick, I tell you. There are more than a few who wish you'd killed him instead of just putting a knot on his head."

"Enough. Commoners do not kill nobles."

"Then we ought to do away with nobility," mumbled Chamz.

Gant let it go. Instead he turned his thoughts to the coming night. Where were they going to sleep? There was a single inn on the road halfway

between Netherdorf and Blasseldune. Soldiers would look for him there so better to camp in the woods. The old forest grew up so thick and close to the road that the thick trunks presented an impenetrable barrier. If they found any break in the trees, Gant decided they would stop.

Twilight fell. Rustling noises in the leaves followed them as they walked along the now deserted road. Other travelers had found shelter. Gant wondered where. They continued steadily east looking for anything that resembled a campsite. A light fog filtered onto the road. Eerie shadows played tricks with their eyes. Gant and Chamz moved more cautiously remembering stories about bandits on the road. There were no patrols here, which meant no soldiers to arrest Gant but no protection against thieves either.

From behind them they heard the growing sound of hoof beats. Gant turned. The riders were out of sight behind a bend in the road.

"Behind us," said Gant. "Soldiers, maybe."

"No, it's a lone rider," said Chamz peering back into the fog.

Around the bend came a single shadowy figure on horseback. As the rider thundered steadily closer Gant's hand went to his sword. A horseman at this time of night was unlikely to be an innocent traveler. The figure moved closer and Gant recognized Wendler's shadowy outline. Approaching cautiously, Wendler slowed his gray warhorse and set it prancing sideways toward the pair. A great shield painted with King Tirmus' emblem hung from a loop at the rear of the saddle protecting Wendler's side. One arm was in a sling. The other held a heavy sword, one Gant recognized as his father's work.

Wendler wore chain mail armor that was serviceable but showed signs of use. Wendler wasn't wearing a helm and Gant wondered if he would risk combat without it.

Nonetheless, Gant had his sword out. "Stay behind me," he whispered and shoved Chamz back with his free hand.

"Hey Wendler," shouted Chamz over Gant's shoulder, "come for the rest of the beating you should have gotten before?"

"Chamz, shut up," hissed Gant, staying focused on the advancing swordsman. "What do you want," he demanded, warily eyeing the horse. Fighting Wendler was one thing, bringing down a horse to do it another.

"Your head on a pike. The King's a gutless excuse for a ruler. His soldiers are slower than dead men. They should have run you down at a full gallop. And then beheaded you in front of your less-than noble mother and father."

"You think you can do it for him?" Adrenaline rushed through Gant until his fingers shook.

Chamz stepped back. Good, thought Gant, glad Chamz wouldn't get caught in the middle.

"Maybe. Maybe I just wanted to make sure you left town like a good little boy."

That stung. Wendler was two years older and had always gotten away with calling Gant "little boy" in Uric's classroom, though not when Uric could



hear. Rage burned in Gant demanding an attack. He controlled it. Being an outlaw was bad enough. He did not want to add murder to the charges.

"I broke your arm with a stick and this isn't a stick," said Gant pointing his sword at Wendler.

"No, but it doesn't really matter. Netherdorf will soon have a new king and I'll be a knight. You'll be an outlaw with a price on your head and I'll come to collect."

With that Wendler reined his horse closer. He leaned forward and spit at Gant. Gant dodged it easily. Wendler circled quickly, dug his spurs into his horse's flanks and galloped back toward Netherdorf.

Gant and Chamz watched him disappear into the swirling fog.

Chamz turned toward Gant. "What do you think he meant?"

"I don't know unless his father is stirring up the nobles against the King."

"Do you think he could get enough support to depose King Tirmus?"

Gant thought about it. "I don't know," he said.

"Between your uncle and mother, don't they have enough noble friends to stop Wendler's father? I think the King should just recognize your nobility and be done with it."

"It's not that easy. There would be plenty of opposition to allowing every half-noble kid to have nobility status. Think about it."

A look of mischief crossed Chamz's face. "Yeah, every bastard in the castle is probably half noble. Too many of the nobles can't keep their hands off the maids."

"I hope this doesn't bring on a civil war," added Gant. The thought of the King replaced worried him. Not for his own sake but for what would happen to his parents, to his uncle.

They shuffled on in darkness. Without a torch they couldn't see their way but carrying one would be a beacon inviting bandits to attack. Gant touched Chamz' shoulder bringing them to a halt.

"Let's camp here," said Gant.

"Where? I can't see a thing."

"Me either, just push through the underbrush and we'll get under the big trees. Roll out your blanket on the first soft spot you find and we'll sleep right here."

"Aren't you going to build a fire?"

It would be easy for Gant to build a fire. He'd spent years starting forge fires for his father who had taught him all the tricks. But a fire was not a good idea.

"No fire."

"Okay," said Chamz glumly.

The two of them pushed through the roadside bushes, thorns stinging and pricking exposed skin. Once through the thicket, they found themselves in the old forest. Dead leaves cushioned their footsteps and they both managed to find an area free from sticks to spread out their bedrolls. Gant shared his food with Chamz and they both drank some water. They rolled up in their bedrolls and just before falling asleep they heard horses' hooves pound

past at a full gallop. Soldiers, thought Gant. It's a good thing we got off the road. In the quiet that followed they both fell asleep.

Gant dreamed of sword fights with Wendler, of the King's armies in battle and Gant a knight like his uncle. Overshadowing it all, he dreamed of an evil that pervaded everything.