

## How to forge good steel

Sunday, 18 December 2005

Last Updated Monday, 19 December 2005

Dwarves use magic and the dust of white granite to forge their steel and the smiths of Bretonnia have refined smelting to a fine art whilst the smiths of Cathay fold the metal upon itself.

But what if the steel is flesh and blood and very young?

A questing Knight at 17 years of age.

While at tournament, the Marquis had been approached by a young knight, Jacques de Rochfort, son of Sir Etien de Rochfort. The young knight announced that he had recently begun his Quest to find the Grail and as the Marquis stood there, stunned at the information, provided proof of what he had said. The Marquis smiled broadly, invited the young knight to dinner that evening and sent Etien de Rochfort a quick letter.

Over dinner that evening Young Jacques de Rochfort learned that the Marquis d'Ascoyne, gregarious to a fault, was the very spirit of hospitality. Lady d'Ascoyne was a fine woman of Bretonnia and the only daughter of Baron Borvil. The Marquis's oldest daughter was with her consort, the elf warrior Taurengataur and that Cobina Stryker was a force to be reckoned with.

For the youngest daughter of the d'Ascocytes engaged him in conversation at every turn and had opinions on everything. As Cobina paused to take breath, Lady Donda Bromeliad Gandolfyn smiled to intercede on his behalf with a terse "Fair Cobina cease the assault on our guest! I do not want him to change his mind about coming to the Tract."

And he came to the tract. Upon his arrival his weaponry, tabard, surcoat and all many of previous identity were taken from him, washed and cleaned, then meticulously and put away. He was provided a small sparse apartment and met with the Marquis the morning after arriving.

The Marquis made no inquiry, but provided explanations aplenty. "Thy personal effects have been cleansed and stored. Whilst thou art in service to the Sentinel ye shall wear the colors befitting your Rank. In this way you gain more humility, for Pride is the enemy of all good Bretonnian Knights. I have spoken to the staff of training officers and old Parsifal, Mentor to both Questing Knights and Knights of the Grail stepped up and volunteered his services for the first month or so of thy training.

"Training?" asked young de Rochfort and the Marquis nodded. "We have much to do to you." The words hung in the air and surrounded Jacques de Rochfort like birds of carrion.

"After fittings for your sand suit and the resultant donning of same, a brief tour of the Sentinel and a well earned sleep, You awake at 6 of the morning and have a good meal to break your fast of sleeping. You begin with some exercises to warm your blood and then off you go to run 3 kilometers, study with Parsifal and practice thy martial skills, then a good supper and more studying and to bed by 9 of the clock." He paused, noting the poleaxed look on the young knight's face.

“This is for the first ten days only.”

“Just what is a sand suit?” asked the young knight. Again the Marquis was a font of information. “Something I learned during the Storm of Chaos from a dying beastman, ‘Tis a suit filled with 7 kilos of fine sand. It is sewn to allow freedom of movement and should thy training cause a rip in one of the triple stitched seams it will be repaired before any training continues.”

“Why?” and for the first time the Marquis made a terse reply “Because you need it and it is a part of your training.” de Rochefort bowed.

The first ten days were grueling and he oft fell onto his cot and was asleep quickly. He did not complain to the Marquis, nor to his instructors™ However the cramps in his muscles offered complaints aplenty. The mornings came much too early, but he stayed with his program of training and when a rip was detected along three seams, he walked into the seamstress room and had the repairs made without telling anyone.

By the end of the second week he had begun to smell badly. The screaming cramps continued, sometimes causing him to leap from his bed in agony and then walking about his room to be rid of them. There were benefits. He looked forward to his times of study with Sir Parcifal. That Grail Knight knew more than anyone he had ever met. His specialty was battle medicines and tactics.

On Day 24, more rips were discovered and repaired, He had gained time in his running, so the Marquis ordered him into full armor and reduced his running to 2 kilometers only

Each morning after completing his running, he would walk off the pain in his body, thanking the Lady for delivering him into the hands of so good a man as the Marquis d’Ascoyne. Of Course he added, it was better than being delivered into the hands of a Sadistic Lichmeister, naked and weaponless, but the difference was scant.

By early February and the middle of Winter in the Carcassone, young Rochfort was nearing completion of his fourth month when Parsifal took him before the Marquis d’Ascoyne following a morning of exhaustive running. Parcifal had a pleased look upon his face and after presenting the new knight, thumped him on the back turned and left. Their meeting took place outside the Bath House and Jacques noted the Marquis grinning.

“I have some answers for you, good knight.” And they entered the Bath House together.

The difference in temperature was alarming as the heat from the Baths sapped some of his remaining strength. He was ordered to remove his armor and weaponry. The Marquis advised him what would follow, a sound scrubbing of

soap and hot water, a quick rinse and good rub down. "But first let us free you of the Suit of Sand", It was cut and the sand drained away. Surprisingly his body reacted uncontrollably by straining forward almost knocking him off balance. He looked at the pile of sand on the floor, there was more than 7 kilos of sand, more like 10.

"Not to worry, you have lost 16 kilos of sand and over 19 kilos of extra weight" The Marquis confided, "Had to get your shape quickly youngster, for it has been eight years since we had Questors in the Sentinel"

"All will wear the suit of sand?" de Rochfort asked and the Marquis replied "No, only you, you lucky lad!"

"A puzzlement" said de Rochfort. Hiding his anger quite well, thought the Marquis. He was led to the Lathering place and from there to the baths where he soaked for 40 minutes and then out of that, through the rinsing sprays, onto a table where he was rubbed down. His anger assuaged by this wonderful treatment, Jacques de Rochfort began to think of the Marquis in kinder and gentler terms. His affable jailor appeared behind a tall screen.

"It seems we have Five candidates, all Questors, coming to spend time at the Sentinel. They are older than you, one is nearing 40. They have quested much longer than you and their speed and skills and stamina would surpass you. I want you to be better than they." He spoke from the front of a screen as de Rochfort dressed. You came here weighing 14 stone, now you weigh between 11 and 12 stone.

All muscle and sinew and speed and stamina. Now clothed, de Rochfort emerged from behind the screen and they walked down a long hallway, stooping in front of a mounted great weapon far up the wall out of reach.

"Get thy weapon Sir Knight" said the Marquis casually. De Rochfort immediately jumped from the floor and only ended standing atop the long chest below the weapon.. He did not attain the weapon, but noted he had jumped a meter and a half straight up. He hopped down without effect and paced off 15 paces. He turned, ran to the chest and sprang to the top continuing with another leap up from the chest top. His momentum carried him well for when he landed on the floor, the Great weapon was in his hands.

He studied the weapon closely and it was as fine a weapon as he had ever held. "This is my own?" and the Marquis nodded, but there was nothing laughing in his eyes, "Tis a simple hand and a half sword", he said as they continued their walk down the long hallway. He informed the young knight that now he would train en restraint and de Rochfort soon found what that meant.

What sets thy weapon apart from the mundane is the blade. Most heavy weapons are brutal crushing devices, capable of crushing through armor and flesh and bone.

Young de Rochfort studied the blade. "This is thin and the sword light enough to be held with one hand" The Marquis raised his hand with a singular cautionary finger pointing to the ceiling. "Never make that mistake, young de Rochfort. That weapon is to be held as any other great weapon, with both hands, used with both hands."

As they walked along a suit of armor was placed in the middle of the hallway, It was commonstock metal, crafted well and hung on a large wooden rack. The Marquis gestured to the armor. I want to make a point to thee which is trust in me and my staff, we will not lead you astray. Neither would we abuse you for base pleasures. My only criticism is thy youth. Frankly speaking you will be here for some time possibly as long as a decade. Or two.

"Milord d'Ascoyne, I know my youth and my accomplishment caused a stir when I approached you at the Tourney, but my devotion to the Lady of the Lake is real. I know I have pride and other qualities I must rid myself and with thy guidance and that of Parcifal I shall attain humility, strength of arms and hopefully the Grail."

Looking into those deep colored eyes softened the Marquis. The young man was not lying, "Rise good Jacques de Rochfort and strike down thy hollow enemy as you would in combat."

He rose and faced the empty suit of armor. He gave a ceremonial challenge in earnest and brought the weapon up, charged in and made two strong attacks with little result. He brought up to attack anew when the Marquis commanded him to stop. It was the power in his voice that stopped his attack. He looked at the Marquis who walked over to the suit of mundane armor, pulled six nails out from the metal surface and the armor fell away in two halves.

"The weapon was in a shipment of silks from Cathay. Many years ago. Those mysterious folk fold their steel over and over again to gain a toughness and the ability to hold a cutting edge for near a lifetime. The handle is Ivory, the Jeweled orb in the butt an emerald of some worth from Lustria."

"I do not deserve such a great thing"

"Nonsense. Of course you do. Parcifal tells me you have advanced years in training and knowledge. This sword is NOT a reward for I will send you into my domaine and beyond to perform deeds of honor and ye need something to ransom yourself should ye be captured."

Jacques noticed the Marquis said captured and not failed, They came to a large oaken double door and when it was opened they were in the Great Hall. Seated at a table was another knight, a Paladin.

"Hellooo, old friend", shouted the Marquis as ther Paladin stood up. Jacques de Rochfort recognized the warrior. He

bowed

Gui de Maupassant returned the gesture and with a gleam in his eye announced to young de Rochfort had he ever heard of the Carcassone Spider.. The young knight could not. De Maupassant laughed in a way that made de Rochfort quite uncomfortable. "We begin on the morrow after breakfast, training with the Carcassonne Spider for three hours and then Studying with Sister Rowena as to Court Etiquette and some cooking lessons, then over to Parcifal and back to me for 2 more hours of training with the Spider."

"I am gleeful in anticipation." Said the young knight in a monotone which prompted both senior knights to smile and look very happy.

Now the Carcassone spider was a device whereby he would gain strength and speed in combat. It consisted of a series of lightly weighted gauntlets worn at the wrist, elbow, shoulder, back, hips and knees. Affixed to ropes and gears and pulleys, all well oiled and near silent which added resistance to his combat moves. Surprisingly, he found it comfortable and without cumbersome entanglements. . By the end of his tenth week he was faster, more accurate and able to make decisions more quickly.

For Parsifal and de Maupassant had trained him well and good, not only in moves, but in the philosophy of combat. To be focused on the entire combat and to defend from any quarter should thy adversary gain reinforcements. The studying was equally telling for he learned the fighting styles of Beastmen and Undead and Skaven and Estalians and Lizardmen. Every three days of training and a new technique was learned Even Empirical warriors were studied at length and so were Bretonnians. Bretonnians? Yes, Bretonnians for the Marquis had learned that there were traitors to the Lady of the Lake in her very Lands.

He now sported a beard and noticed there was no extra weight on his frame. During his 20th week at the Sentinel his father arrived and walked right past his son without recognition which prompted the Marquis to laugh out loud.

Upon a well phrased introduction Etien embraced his son and Jacques was allowed the rest of the day to spend with his father. That night, over a marvelous dinner [Mrs. Muggins cooked three of the ladâ€™s favorite foods] the Marquis unfurled his plans. "Young Jacques de Rochfort, having trained long and hard to finesse his skills and speed and knowledge, will become the Paragon of the Questors when they arrive next week" Young Jacques was awestruck by the appellation. His father was so happy he seemed to burst with pride, "He has earned that title by training with Sir Parcifal and De Maupassant, the Carcassone Angel. It was they who had awarded him the honor

He went to bed at 8 of the clock. Try as he would young de Rochfort could not find sleep easily. His riding of the dâ€™Ascoyne Whirlwind had increased his senses, his skills and other qualities. He rolled out of his bed and knelt in prayer to the Lady.

Suddenly he began yawning. He continued his prayers. A feeling of fatigue cloaked him like a thick blanket, but he continued his prayers. He stood up completing his prayers and then fell face forward onto his cot asleep