



It was Jacques turn. "Yet the center between the farms is barren ground" He turned to Richard the Strong, "No, there are no farmers."

Richard the Strong whispered that it was more fort than farm and the others agreed. He went on to suggest that the tall grasses hid defensive stakes and before anyone could notice, Sir Niles had disappeared.

He returned that late afternoon, begrimed and stinking. "I found six pigs in the field of tall grass and followed them where I found entrenchments and defensive stakes."

Sir Richard asked "How come you to this foul estate?" and the response sent all three into bouts of suppressed laughter. "Try following six hungry pigs whilst on thy belly, tis a messy business."

As Sir Niles cleaned his clothing and then bathed in the cold waters of the river to rid himself of the filth, the other knights arrived having followed the signs left by Jacques de Rochefort.

All had found farms in full operation and the peasants happy to see the strangers riding across the prairie. As each visitor was singular to each farm, no alarm was made.

"Methinks we make our presence known and ask questions", said de Rochfort. "Good", said Sir Beaupain, "I do not like a cold camp in early spring." "Cold camp?" answered Richard the Strong shaking his head, "I made three fires before dawn, a fire for each farm, a crow and let them smolder and burn low. We have 8 pounds of potatoes buried in the embers and rashers of dried meat to eat and cold water besides."

"Were thee a woman", said Sir Beaupain, "I would kiss thee on thy scruffy cheek."

Jacques cleared his throat and they ate a marvelous hot meal and slept. They awoke with the dawn and dressed for battle. They rode out with Jacques acting as scout. Upon attaining the rise before the six farms, he hailed the Questors and they rode down to a near empty camp, populated by six females.

The women greeted the knights with fear in their eyes but after the usual pleasantries softened a bit. "Watch your backs" cautioned de Rochfort.

Within an hour they found what they were searching for, an armory, a treasure house and that the buildings were fortified. Questioning the females gained nothing, except that four of the six, made lewd suggestions and movements to their inquisitors.

The women found themselves in chains and put in a reinforced building.

As they screamed profanities at the Questors, de Rochfort found the trail and within a few moments all six were riding to the Seven farm settlement. "All farms are within a days ride of each other and I think we ride together striking at each enemy as we meet them."

That he was speaking militarily did not alarm the five Questors. By the afternoon a dark finger of smoke rose from the ground ahead. Automatically the six formed into a Lance and as they come out of the drift, they saw the fight and heard the sounds of conflict.

They struck the mounted warriors with such a force that knocked them down like duckpins. Whirling about they advanced on one cluster of spearmen and rode them down. The villagers responded with a will to win the battle. Men with wounds were striking out with cudgels, women were throwing rocks and sticks and children were resisting these hooligans by biting and screaming and kicking.

In less than two hours six of the mounted warriors were tied up and 5 of the spearmen still breathed. The rest were dead. Six villagers were wounded or sick. Two young men of the village volunteered to go to the remaining villages.

By nightfall all was good and the Questors ate well and slept well and in the morning the riders returned with others. The others were the leaders of each farm and they met under a makeshift awning. No one acknowledged the presence of the fortress farm. Quickly, Jacques de Rochfort identified himself and what must be done. All farms existing to be abandoned and all farm peasants to journey to the Fortressed Farm. The leaders left to make it so.

He sequestered a large cart and put the prisoners in it and told the driver to make haste to the Fortressed Farm. The Questors stayed long enough to tend to the wounded and organize the exodus. They quieted folk who were apprehensive, saying the large farm offered more protection.

When asked from what, Jacques said "Anything that would threaten good Bretonnians!"

That is when a bloodcurdling scream came from the southern end of the farm and Sir Robin the Brave rode up with the body of a Skaven across his saddle.

Scout said he and de Richfort responded Hawk and a captive Winterhawk was released with a brief message

By the end of the third day, the Fortressed Farm was filled with settlers. The tall grasses had been cleared, exposing the stakes and trenches. The entire dirt compound was searched for any sign of Skaven, from tunnels to tracks, but nothing was revealed.

The Questors all pitched in and had won the hearts of the commoners before the first day had ended. There were work groups for the clearing and tilling and seeding; Three groups made a barrier wall around the perimeter of buildings. Of the menfolk, all possessed Longbows and enough arrows for possibly three volleys. Sir Niles Beaupain established watches and provided some training. A marvelous tocsin was found in the Smithy's building and this was moved to the very center of the barren ground. By the 4th day a watch tower had been erected which commanded a full view of the lands surrounding the Fortress.

Of the prisoners they were resistant to cooperation, even after the lengthy explanation of a trial and the outcome was completed they kept their mouths shut.

The solemnity was broken by one of the children came forth to suggest that she had come up with a perfectly wonderful name for the new settlement and she suggested HandtoFist in honor of the current activity and the name stuck. She got to ride on Sir Richards destrier for an entire hour.

All settlers were accounted for including the wounded and sick. Foods were gathered and stored and makeshift weapons made under the guidance of Robin the Brave.

Some 90 meters to the east of the settlement was the Abergavenie river and when the cry of Boats in the Water! was heard, Jacques rode out to the river to see a flotilla of ten round bull boats approaching up river. There were little people in the boats and they were solemn.

Jacques remembered the story about the Halflings of the river, what the Lady called Her children. He dismounted and greeted them. The little people unloaded eight of the boats with dried fruits, berries, breads, two large barrels of oil and smoked fish.

Also blankets, but what made Jacques thankful, were medicines carried by four women. They went into the village and went straight to work attending to the wounded and sick. Many of the villagers tried to talk to them and thank them, but the tiny folk were like automatons and nothing deterred them from their rounds. When their labors were done, the wee folk climbed back into their boats and returned from wherever they came.

The villagers were overjoyed at their good fortune. They had to be. An enemy was approaching from the south.

The noon of the 5th day and the cluster of buildings now resembled a true fort than a cluster of farms. An outrider came in at the gallop on a palfrey. An arrow was stuck in his back. He was in the throes of delirium as the arrow was poisoned. He was taken to the hospice building and some of the Halfling medicine given to him.. He immediately collapsed into a deep sleep.

Jacques asked for a telling of how many fighters were within the fort and the answer was grim. Six Knights, 14 men angry enough to fight and some archers.

“Some Archers?” asked the Paragon and the reply was 8 with adults, 18 if you add the youngsters strong enough to pull a bow.

He asked who was the best Archer and Sir Richard the Strong offered a worthy named Jonathan Day. Jonathan Day was just two years older than Jacques de Rochefort. He entered the room carrying a well crafted long bow.

“Are ye any good with that thing?” inquired the Paragon.

The young Archer said “Yes” and stood at attention.

“How good?”

“Well, out to 136 paces I can hit the mark that were it living, it would be dead.”

“How came you to this knack?”

My family be hunters sir, my grandfather was a bowyer and made this fine bow.”

“Hunters?” asked Jacques and the young man answered readily, “yes, sir knight one arrow one antelope or deer. For Carcassone Bull we were allowed three arrows.”

“You hunted the Carcassonne Bull with but three arrows?” The disbelief was in each word.

“Aye Sir, three arrows, You have to hit the great vein that runs in the throat of the beast. Once pierced it dies quickly. The spot is about as big as the palm of yer hand.” All of these words were spoken matter of fact, without pretense.

“Sir Brian!” and a tall knight entered. “I have found thee thy marksman.” The peasant left with the knight.

He stretched and went to the Strong house, so named as the floor was slate and a wall of stones had been laid around all sides. The roof was not thatched, but timbered. Large enough to hold all the peasants, it would be the last bastion of protection.

He took note of the Smithy. Stone walled to the tiled roof, but small by half when compared to the Strong House.

His strategy was simple enough, the upper entrenchments were filled with straw and the topmost held a huge barrel of oils. The lower entrenchments were filled with that noxious weed called Scottish Broom, with its greasy stalks and bright yellow flowers. The archers would fire one volley of flaming arrows into the lower entrenchments. Then they would fall back and fire into the upper entrenchments while the Marksman would try to kill enemy leaders. He and the Knights would ride out at dusk, taking a position along the banks of the river to the Southeast.

When the time came they would charge to the fort, slaying as many of the enemy as possible. He would be last man inside and would tip the large container of oil which would fuel the flames.

All the peasants would go into the Strong House as he and the knights defended them in the open yard.

At dusk, the six knights left the fort to take up position and by ten of the clock that night they were in place. They slept in the saddle with Jacques at guard. Just after first cock crow he heard the soft voice of Brian the Good. “What is that stench floating on the air?”

“Skaven” came the short reply and de Rochfort pointed out across the flatland. The Ratmen advanced boldly and so focused on their target, they did not see the Questors in the tall wet grasses by the river.

“By the Lady, I count six regiments.” Said Niles Beaupain and he took his position behind Robin the Brave and Sir Brian at his right with Richard the Strong in front next to de Rochefort. The remaining questors took up the rearmost positions.

“Will somebody sound the alarum in the fort?” Hissed one of the rearmost Questors and as if in response the clanging could be heard. Jacques turned his head “Gentlemen, do not dally. Kill or cripple as many as you can as you ride to the fort. He unfurled his talisman of the Purebred and they broke into a trot emerging from the grasses. At twenty yards the horses broke into a full gallop and they rushed into the first regiment from the rear.

The regiment died to the last and as the Questors hacked their way through another regiment only eight of the ratmen died and they were slowed by the vermin. The battle spent its first hour. Jacques noted a Plague Priest transfixed

with a clothyard shaft through its neck and by the third round of combat since the start they were free of the second regiment and facing the remaining four. The fourth hour was gone.

The four regiments of Skaven did not turn to meet the threat from behind. The Questors advanced across the lower entrenchments while ratmen scampered over the defensive stakes easily and suddenly Jacques knew why the ratmen were so determined to assault the fortress. He screamed “To the Fort, Hasten Forward Quickly Brothers!” and again he sped into the lines of the vermin hewing his way through and the Questors were with him. One and two volleys of flaming arrows were loosed from behind the low walls of the fort and fires were started.

He shouted to the men in the barren ground. “Empty out the Strong House, get the women and children to the Smithy.” He wheeled to six young men with Bows.

“Take yonder barrel of oil and place inside the strong room” The lads did what they were told and within moments the huge barrel was atop the slate floor.. He rode into the Strong House shouting for the second barrel and it arrived within seconds as well. He dismounted, his eyes searching the floor and he focused on a pile of hay.

The young men thought him mad as he kicked the straw across the floor and thrusting with his great sword. Only when the sound of metal on metal was heard, did they understand and the hay was quickly swept away.

To reveal a large metal grate 4' x 8 foot and Skaven trying to push the grate to one side which was made difficult by the weight of de Rochfort's destrier and the flashing of his blade. Both barrels were rolled over the grating as well and with two bold strokes the tops were broken and the viscous liquid filled the steep sloping tunnel below the floor.

One of the young men went to the door and shouted "Jonathon, we need fire here!" and in response a flaming arrow flew through the doorway and the grate. The destrier left quickly as did the young men with de Rochfort the last one out.

In combat, time can seem to stand still as was the case with the flaming arrow into the grate and the flammable oils. An illusion, but one to worry the stoutest of heart.

The arrow struck an oil soaked ratman and ignited him. He ran, still afire, down the runway and into the tunnel igniting all who were oil-touched. Then came the explosion which sent flames through all the windows of the Strong House and down the tunnel.

The men of the villages rushed in with their flails, scythes and axes as the smoke was clearing. They surrounded the grate, threw it back and any skaven who emerged died swiftly.

De Rochfort was a horse once again and saw Robin the Brave with a bolt in his shoulder. As he rode to the wounded knight Robin cried out cheerfully, "Tis not my sword arm, sire!" as he took his place in the lance formation.

The bowmen were standing behind the low wall, bows drawn and shooting at the Skaven emerging from the fires. They were near out of arrows, but they kept shooting.

Two children rolled a barrel out from one structure and they were laughing. "Look what we found in Mosshart's shed!"

As they had rolled the barrel to the archers, Jonathon hacked the lid open and it was packed with arrows.

"Praise the Lady!" said Robin the Brave looking up and smiling at Jacques de Rochfort, "she does not abandon the brave."

Suddenly a Skaven entered the compound and rushed to the children, dagger drawn. He struck the nearest child down and was dispatched by Robin the Brave's great weapon. The other children did not run away but methodically issued arrows to the archers.

Sir Beaupain scooped the wounded child up. Looking into the calm features of the Questing Knight, the youngster smiled and said "we did a good thing, didn't we?" then fainted. Beaupain took him to where he could get attention and when he returned was grim of face.



By now it was late and darkness was falling. The Ratmen drums began beating the death march.

Jacques gave the signal for the remaining oil barrels to be turned over and the rush of the liquid ran down the entrenchments. He noticed the lead elements of the Skaven were close enough to see their faces. He watched many Skaven lose their footing as the oil ran down the inclines. Had it been a pantomime he would have laughed.

A long whistle from Jonathon and all the archers put their arrow tips into the brazier and as one loosed the flaming projectiles out into the entrenchments. The explosion surprised the defenders and threw many of the ratmen skywards on fire!

Within moments the camp was surrounded by tall curtains of flame. Like a living thing, the flames leapt here and there moving along the ground with amazing speed. "To the Smithy!" ordered Jacques de Rochfort. "Everyone to the Smithy!"

All were inside, warriors, women, knights and horses, children all packed together. Soon the smoke seeped in and the red glow of the firestorm was seen through the cracks in the doors. Screams of dying Skaven deafened many.

Jacques de Rocheforet began to sing. A song from his childhood. He was soon joined by every human voice inside the Smithy and the death cries of the Skaven were but forgotten. Time ceased to exist as the humans sang or prayed or calmed their horses. Some of the more exhausted fell asleep as the clocks ran down. Hours vanished in the waiting and the lack of Skaven presence at the doors sparked a small hope.

It was time to find out. Jacques said "Birkenhead Drill" and as the peasants pressed to the edges, the knights gathered their Great Weapons and lined up in a double column a-pied. The door was thrown back to reveal the terrifying form of a monstrous rat ogre! Instinctively Jacques swung and struck the creature splitting its face in two. It was very dead, the back burned to the bones. The dawn's early light revealed the smoldering bodies of Skaven piled like cordwood throughout the camp and onto the flatlands. They fell where the flames caught them and the smoke hung low to the ground.

The survivors emerged cautiously, with the Questors mounting up and riding in ever widening circles out from the camp. One of the children pointed to the heavens and shouted, "It's going to start raining!" Following the child's words the people noticed the rain clouds coming in from the east.

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That evening all survivors slept deeply. And what of our youngest hero who took the blow from the Skaven's knife? He became Squire in Training to the Questors. An honorarium to be sure, but that did not stop the grin from spreading

across his eight year old face every morning.