
Job Interview

At first, the knights of the Holy Order had been recruited from among His Highness and Sir Terence's social circle. All those young men had been known to each other: they were the shining stars of His Radiance's armies, or the brave souls who stayed behind after an imperial function to debate military strategy with His Highness. They had been recommended personally, at first by Prince Dion and his confidant, and then by those knights they had first chosen, and the circle had begun to expand.

Times had changed, though, and the Order had fast gained fame among the ordinary men and women of Sanbreque, mostly thanks to His Highness' achievements on the battlefield. Young men from all corners of the imperial territory had begun to present themselves to the forces, sometimes at the most inopportune of times, and attempted to pledge their service. More often than not, they had lacked the strong limbs

and quick mind required of a dragoon, and it had been easy to send them back to their homes. Sometimes, though, these boys had shown promise, and so a small committee had been set up to assess their combat skills, their commitment to His Radiance, and their faith in Greagor.

Sir Gauthier Dupont was the de facto leader of this committee. A schoolmate of His Highness and Sir Terence, he had once shown great skill with the lance and had become one of the first men to join the Holy Order, but a battlefield injury in those early days had since ensured his duties tended more towards the administrative. He was, at present, conducting the formal interview of one Marcel Briand, a young man who had presented himself at the garrison and expressed his desire to join the forces. The previous day they had gone through the physical assessment; Gauthier had been amazed by the young Briand's aptitude, and even more so when he discovered he came from a family of humble artichoke farmers. Nothing that had yet come up during the interview was any less of a point in his favour. The boy was clearly both devout and loyal to Sanbreque; he understood the duties of the Holy Knights, and the sacrifices demanded by the military lifestyle. He seemed entirely unfazed, even enthusiastic, when Gauthier noted that joining the Holy Order would in all likelihood preclude him from spending much time among women.

It was tempting to allow Briand to join the forces then and there, even to allow him to choose his own specialism. But

Gauthier had forbidden himself from making such a hasty decision: for this was an unusual day. His Highness himself had made it known that he would be sitting in on part of the interview. Not because of the strengths of this particular candidate – he was as yet unaware of those – but merely because he wished to have oversight of all the Order’s operations, even those that seemed the most mundane. When they were not actively engaged in combat and he was not needed at his father’s side, he made a point of spending time among the victuallers, the physickers, even the washerwomen.

Gauthier had almost run out of ways of prolonging the conversation when His Highness made his entrance; he nodded a greeting, took a seat by his side, and reached for the paper on which Gauthier had been making notes. Briand was clearly taken aback at the sight of the man who now sat before him, but he regained his composure with impressive rapidity, and said, “Your Highness. It is a great honour.”

Briand’s rustic origins were betrayed by his accent – the lack of *h* on *Highness* being the biggest clue – but Gauthier was relieved to be able to present His Highness with a candidate of such calibre. Had the young man been a weak fighter or a half-hearted believer, it would have been an embarrassment for them all.

“These are some impressive credentials,” said Dion as he read through Gauthier’s notes. “Were you not complaining just last week, Sir Gauthier, about the quality of the men pre-

senting themselves for these fitness tests?”

“I was, sire,” Gauthier admitted.

“And yet this appears to be an almost perfect score,” His Highness continued, before turning to the page on which Gauthier had made some notes about Briand’s background and convictions. “And ... I see. You are not from a military background?”

“No, Your Highness,” said the boy.

“You acquired these skills independently?”

“I did, Your Highness, sir,” said Briand. “Taught myself swordcraft to start with, then I moved on to the lance. Took me a while, but I was keen to practise.”

“And equally gifted in strategy, it seems,” Dion mused, looking over Gauthier’s more recent notes again. “Is this true, Sir Gauthier? *Sharper-minded than most of our men* – you would stand by those words?”

Gauthier had hoped not to hear his uncharacteristically fulsome notes repeated aloud, but he nodded nonetheless. “I would.”

“Splendid,” said Dion. “Then there is but one obvious question to ask.” He laid the papers aside and fixed his gaze on Briand. “It would seem you can turn your hand to anything required of you. A useful asset – but I find myself wondering – what brings you to our order? A man of your talents could make a small fortune in mercantilism, or join the Kanverian professoriate, or do any manner of things far less likely to lead

to an early death than enlisting in our forces. We are frequently called to the front lines, and while I do my best to protect my men, I cannot prevent every casualty. Surely a safer life appeals to you more than the uncertainty of military service, where you would always be mere paces away from death?”

“I take your point, Your Highness,” said Briand. “To tell Your Highness the truth – I was inspired, you see. By one of your senior officers. I’ve seen him during the campaigns, leading the armies – I asked around, and I heard he wasn’t from an army background either, not really. But he had a – I don’t know how I can explain. A *presence*. It’s foolish, maybe – but my dream is to fight alongside him one day.”

“I see,” said Dion. “And who among my knights is so fortunate as to have captured your attention?”

Briand shifted a little in his seat, seeming almost bashful for the first time, and said, “Sir Terence, I believe he’s called.”

Gauthier gasped out loud; fortunately, the sound of it was drowned as Dion repositioned himself, leaning forward and resting his chin on one hand. “Is that so?” he said, rather loudly. “Well – this is most interesting. Pray tell me, what is it that *attracts* you to Sir Terence?”

“I don’t really know,” Briand admitted. “Like I said, Your Highness – it’s his *presence*. The way he commands respect from his men; and I’ve heard he fights like none other.” He bowed his head. “I honestly can’t explain, sire.”

“No matter,” said Dion; “you have explained quite enough.

I understand how you ... feel.”

He turned back to Gauthier, and added, “Well, Sir Gauthier? What say you – do you recommend this young man for enlistment in my forces?”

“It is not for me to say, sire,” Gauthier succeeded in replying. “I daresay you have gained sufficient insight into his position from your own cross-examination.”

Dion paused, holding his gaze without amusement, and then said, “That I have.” Then he turned back towards young Briand, and said, “I suppose we should thank you for your interest. You are dismissed.”

Briand suddenly looked very confused. “Then – I am not accepted?”

“Does it sound as if you are accepted?” Dion replied. “Go on, then – off with you.”

“Perhaps the infantry of the imperial legion would be more receptive to your petition,” Gauthier couldn’t help suggesting. “I hear they sometimes struggle to recruit. You have considerable talent.”

Briand left without another word; when he was gone, Dion said, “Where *do* you find these boys, Sir Gauthier? I hope we do not encounter another with the same worrying obsession with Sir Terence. Must unbecoming.”

“Right you are, Your Highness,” said Gauthier, tactfully declining to mention the distinct shade of pink that had risen in

His Highness' cheeks. "Such things have no place among our men." Their commander, however, was a special case.