

TEST OF LOYALTY



hut the door." Lord Melkor told him. He held himself stiffly, and didn't make eye contact.

Mairon did as his new Master asked. The door latched with a click. He noticed the iron mechanism had been made by someone other than himself. It was one more reminder that he was an outsider here, without a secure position or a well-defined role.

He turned around. Melkor was staring at him, his eyes flat and unblinking. Mairon waited, uneasy.

"You didn't renounce your allegiance to Aulë when you entered my service. Your loyalties are divided."

"Many Maiar serve two Valar." said Mairon.

"Not on opposite sides in the Rebellion, they don't." said Melkor.

Mairon suddenly felt cold. The hair stood up on his arms. "What? No! I am loyal to you. I can prove it." he said.

"Do so. I want you to renounce Aulë." said Melkor.

"I won't do that. I'm loyal to you, I give you my oath."

Mairon was feeling close to panic.

"Not good enough. You have to prove it." Melkor said. He inclined his head toward the bed. Mairon didn't get it at first. Then he did, and his jaw hung open.

"You've got to be kidding." Mairon finally said. He waited for Melkor to grin, revealing the joke. He didn't.

"I'm serious. That's the test." Melkor said.

"I won't do it." Mairon was furious Melkor would even suggest such a thing. He started to say something sarcastic, but Melkor backhanded him across the face. Mairon clutched his nose, which had gone numb. He glanced down and saw blood dripping onto the front of his shirt.

He looked up again and met Melkor's eyes. They were as flat as a predator's. Melkor jerked his chin upward, like a man being hanged. He took a step toward Mairon, who yanked open the door and ran.

Mairon reached the safety of his room and leaned against the door, breathing hard. He was furious and frightened at the same time, and so disillusioned he was ready to abandon the Rebellion and its charismatic leader right then.

He started to fold the gore-spattered shirt before putting it aside for the laundry, but balled it up and flung it into a corner instead.

He grabbed the canvas bag from under his bed and started to shove in the few possessions he'd brought with him from Valinor, his clothes, his tools, and the bundle of letters Melkor wrote to him when Mairon was working for Melkor in secret. Mairon kept the letters at great personal risk; being caught with them would mean prison or worse, but they had been too precious to burn.

He started to put the letters in his bag, being careful not to bend the corners, but instead, he flung them against the wall as hard as he could. Sheets of paper fluttered around the room, and when one came to rest near his foot, he ground it under his heel.

He grabbed the strap of his bag and hoisted it over his shoulder. He headed for the door, but when he put his hand on the latch, he hesitated. He didn't really want to leave here.

And the truth was, he had nowhere else to go. He couldn't return to Valinor now. Early on, the Valar suspected Melkor knew everything they were doing, but they didn't know how he was getting his information. When Mairon left, they must have noticed the leaks stopped.

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And even if he could have gone back, he didn't want to. He worshiped Melkor. He'd longed to come to Utumno and gave up a great deal to be here. Mairon stood in the middle of the room, trying to decide what to do. Finally he dropped the bag on his bed and sat down beside it.

If you stay, you can't get out of it, Mairon thought.

But maybe he could control the situation. He had something to sell, and he could get something for it in return.

Melkor will confide in me. He'll listen to my advice, and my influence will be great, he thought.

He considered his options, weighing gain against cost. It would be a transaction, nothing more. He felt like he was watching himself from a distance, but had little compassion for the figure who sat hunched on the bed, his nose running and his breath coming in hiccupping gasps.

There was a tap on the door. "Lord Melkor asked you a question. How do you answer?" said a muffled voice on the other side of the door. Mairon sat stock still, wanting to run, wanting to fight. His mouth was dry.

You've never been a coward, just get it over with. He mopped his face with his sleeve, then stood up and opened the door.

"Please tell Lord Melkor I accept his terms."