

Chapter 1 The Request



Aulë was sitting in his study. There was a knock on the door, although it was already open.

Aulë looked up and saw Mairon, the most senior of his apprentices, and Aulë's favorite.

"May I come in?" Mairon asked shyly.

That was odd. Mairon was many things: self-assured, industrious, and responsible, but never shy.

"Come in. Have a seat."

Mairon closed the door behind him before slipping into the chair in front of Aulë's desk. Shutting the door; that was unusual, too.

Aulë studied him carefully, trying to assess his mood. Mairon looked nervous, but he was excited and hopeful, too. Aulë had seen the look before, and it always meant the same thing. I've met someone and I want to get married. But Aulë didn't allow his apprentices to marry. He always said no.

Aulë steeled himself for what was sure to be an unpleasant conversation.

"So what's on your mind?" he asked as pleasantly as possible.

"Melkor asked me to join his household. I came to ask your blessing before I gave him my answer."

Aulë leaned back in his chair, surprised.

He knew that Melkor had been sniffing around every household in Ea, trying to find people to join him in his revolt against the Valar. But he never thought Melkor would be able

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to recruit Mairon, who was just too sensible to be lured away by promises of excitement and power.

"This is very sudden," said Aulë.

"Not really. I've been thinking about it since before the Ainulindalë," he said. "And I don't want you to think I'm leaving you entirely. Lots of Maiar serve two Valar."

Aulë knew Mairon had hero-worshipped Melkor since he'd first heard of him, but Aulë never worried about it much. It wasn't unusual for someone as steady and reliable as Mairon to become infatuated with someone wild and dangerous. But hero-worship usually involved admiration from a distance. Not abandoning a well-ordered life to follow someone on a doomed adventure.

"Well, let's think about this," said Aulë.

"You're First Maia in my household. You're my second-in-command and aide de camp. The others look up to you. If you changed households, you would lose a lot of privileges, things you take for granted now.

"Let's say you became a member of Melkor's household. What would your place be then?

"Melkor already has a First Maia, Gothmog. And let's say he's successful in recruiting Ossë, Ulmo's First Maia. That would make you Third Maia. Unless someone else came in ahead of you, in which case you'd be pushed even lower.

"Also consider this. His original Maiar are all Fire spirits. You're an Earth spirit. You'll be different, and different is usually not good. As a member of the 'wrong' ethnicity, you might mistakenly start to feel like you weren't as good as they were."

"And do you know what kind of people have been accepting Melkor's offers? They're mostly the ones who are always in trouble, who can't follow rules. You like order, but you'd be surrounded by chaos. You'd hate that. And other than Melkor himself, no one in his household is as smart as you are. You'd have no one to talk to."

"There's something else you need to know about Melkor." Aulë chose his words carefully.

"He's not a good person. He uses people. If something

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happened to you, he'd just replace you with someone else and never think of you again.

"He doesn't care about you."

Mairon listened in silence. Aulë couldn't tell how he was reacting, because his hair covered his face. Then he brushed his cheek, and tried to make it look like he was just pushing back his hair.

"Look, I understand the lure of a charismatic leader and a life that's dangerous and exciting, but that's not your life. Your place is here. I know you're sensible enough to understand."

Mairon's shoulders sagged with disappointment. He nodded and got up to leave.

Aulë watched him go.

That was every bit as bad as telling someone they can't get married.

Aulë sighed. He wasn't looking forward to the next few weeks, the inevitable bad temper and sullen silences, before things got back to normal.

Chapter 2 The Courtship



Mairon sat at a small table in the tavern with his girlfriend. Tankards of ale sat in front of them. He held her hand and looked around the room. There was a fireplace tall enough to walk into, made of river stones. A small peat fire provided some light, as well as a pleasant aroma.

The tavern, the front room of a house on the village green, was the most popular nightspot in the village of Valmar. Tonight it was completely full. Every table in the room was occupied, and people stood two deep at the bar.

She and Mairon talked about minor things, as well as important ones. Over time, Mairon told her all his secrets. How he longed to finish his apprenticeship and become independent. How he wanted to work in his own smithy, and live in his own cottage. How he wanted to share it with a wife. Nothing was agreed yet, but they had begun to talk about it.

It grew late, and they got up to go.

"Let me walk you home," he said.



They walked toward the other side of town, hand in hand. Just before reaching her front door, he stopped. This was usually where he kissed her goodnight. Instead, he looked toward the barn.

"Is anyone in there at this hour?"

"No, why would they be? The milking's finished, and no one

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would take the horses out this late. Why?"

"I want to try something. Are you game?"

"Depends on what it is."

He walked toward the barn. He was pleased that she followed him. The barn doors were unlocked. Once they were inside, he asked,

"Where's the hayloft?"

She walked over to the ladder, and he followed. She looked at him. "Now what?"

"Let's go up."

She climbed the ladder first, and he followed. She turned and looked at him, waiting for an explanation.

"I want to kiss you, but I want to do it skin against skin," he said.

"Oh? What would that accomplish?"

"I don't know. It's an experiment."

Since they'd both lived half their lives before clothing was invented, they were used to nudity and attached almost no importance to it. Mairon watched as she lifted her dress above her head and tossed it aside.

"Your turn," she said.

He dropped his clothes near hers.

"Come here and kiss me," she said.

He put his hands on her shoulders and bent down to put his mouth on hers, but stopped after a minute.

"What's wrong? Why did you stop?" she asked.

"I have a cramp in my neck. Shall we lie down? Then it won't matter that I'm taller."

She lay down in the straw, and he held his weight on his elbows so he wouldn't crush her. He kissed her hard, and quickly became caught up in the moment. She must have been too, because her knees fell open, and then ..

"Ouch! What are you doing with your hand?"

"My hands are tangled in your hair," he told her.

"Then what ... Oww!"

"I'm sorry. Do you want me to stop?" he asked.

"Just be careful. What are you doing, anyway?"

"I have no idea," he said.

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A noise made him freeze. She lay absolutely still in his arms, her head turned toward the sound.

"What was that?" he asked.

"It sounded like something fell, or was knocked over."

"It's probably just one of the animals."

"No, it sounded like a person. What if we were seen?"

"Then we'll get teased about it" he said. "and we'll die of embarrassment. It's manageable."

He kissed her and rocked back on his heels. He saw blood on the inside of her thighs.

"You're hurt!"

"Just a little."

"I would never have hurt you on purpose. I'm sorry."

Later, after they'd dressed and climbed down from the hayloft, he gave her a chaste kiss outside her front door.

"If you're willing, let's get serious about becoming espoused. If Aulë gives me permission to marry, we can do it. Even if he doesn't, we can elope. Ossë and Uinen did. They got into a lot of trouble, but it was nothing she couldn't handle. What do you say?"

"I need time to think about it. And I need to ask permission too. Give me a few days."



He felt too agitated to go home afterwards. He didn't know what he felt, embarrassed and happy and scared all at the same time. He didn't want to deal with his brother apprentices back at the dormitory until he'd had some time to sort out his feelings, so he returned to the tavern and sat by himself in a quiet corner until closing time.

He couldn't have known it at the time, but he would never see her again.

Chapter 3 The Separation



Mairon pumped the bellows hard. Flames jumped up from the dark red coals. For a moment, he could see the far corners of the workshop. He was working with carbon steel and had to judge its color with great precision, so he'd closed the shutters to block out all light.

He watched the color of the piece as it crept from deep red to orange. When he judged the color to be right, he pulled it out of the fire and laid it on the anvil. He picked up a hammer without having to look for it, and stuck the first blow.

The door opened, and he was momentarily blinded.

"Mairon, Aulë wants to see you in his study."

"I need to finish this first." He struck another half-dozen blows. He would have liked to put the piece back onto the coals and keep working. Instead, he plunged it into the water bucket and waited until it stopped hissing, then put his tools away."

"Mairon, Aulë wanted to see you right away. Get moving."



Mairon knocked on the door of Aulë's study and came in.

"Shut the door, please," Aulë told him. "Sit down."

Aulë got right to the point.

"I understand that you came home after curfew yesterday, knee-walking drunk. Would you like to tell me about it?"

No, I wouldn't.

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"I left the tavern late yesterday evening, when they closed. I had been drinking, but not excessively."

"Do you have anything else you'd like to tell me?"

"No, not that I can think of."

"Irmo spoke to me today. He's concerned by the attention you've been paying to one of his Maia. Can you tell me about that?"

No, it's not something I care to discuss.

"Why was he concerned?" asked Mairon.

"She came to him to ask for permission to marry you."

She wants to marry me!

"He told her no. Furthermore, he's forbidden her to see you again. And he sent her away where you won't be able to find her." Aulë looked directly at him. "Don't even try. As of today, I forbid you to see her."

Just kill me now.

"There's one more thing. Look at me. Did you lay with her?"

He lifted his head and looked Aulë right in the eye.

"No."

"He had her examined by a physician."

Oh shit.

"Mairon. You lied to me." His face was as hard as iron.

He immediately recognized the tactical error he just made. It wasn't the deed that was so bad, it was lying about it and getting caught. If he's told the truth, he would have been in trouble, but not that badly. But he'd looked Aulë right in the face and told him a barefaced lie. Aulë looked like he'd just been slapped. The color drained out of Mairon's face as he came to understand the magnitude of the offense he'd just committed.

Mairon opened his mouth, and closed again. Embellishing the original lie a new one wasn't going to make the situation better.

"Let's go to the barn."

What's in the barn? Whenever you've used your belt on me, it's always been in the woodshed.



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He stayed in bed for two days. Finally, he decided it would do him good to get up and wash off the dried blood and grime. He walked down the hall to the lavatory, moving like one who is very old. He turned the tap, and when the washtub was full, he put a toe in the hot water and let the towel fall to the floor. He had stripes from neck to ankle.

When he stepped in, and blood mixed with the water, turning it pink. He stepped in and slid down until it reached his neck. It stung, but it still relaxed him. He closed his eyes and breathed the steam, sighing with pleasure.

The door behind him opened. He didn't turn around.

"I heard you were up," said Aulë. "I came to check on you." Mairon ignored him.

"You've always been my favorite. But recently, you've done things I consider unworthy of you. The sarcasm. The lying. And worse, you're no longer chaste. It's not like you to be delinquent, and I don't want you going any further down that path. But it's so hard to get through to you. The last time I took you to the woodshed, I beat you until my arm ached and you just laughed at me," said Aulë. "Which is why, two days ago, I took you to the barn and horsewhipped you until you fainted."

"I'm tough. I can take it," Mairon said evenly.

"I was hard on you," said Aulë.

No shit.

Aulë assumed Mairon was taking it hard. But actually, he wasn't all that upset. No one else had ever been beaten unconscious before, and the other Maiar talked of nothing else. It made him feel unique and important, which he liked.

"Talk tome," asked Aulë.

"I'll try to say this in the nicest possible way. Would you please go away? I just lost my future wife and all the years we would have had together. I want to be left alone."

Chapter 4 The Talent Scout



Mairon sat at a table in back of the tavern, opposite one of Oromë's Maiar. He knew the young man's name, but nothing of his character or interests. His companion believed this was a chance encounter. Actually, Mairon had been stalking him for days, trying to manufacture an excuse to spend time with him.

Today, the noontime crush in this popular tavern gave him an opportunity. When he spotted his target sitting alone at a small table, he squeezed through the crowd and deliberately bumped the table hard enough to knock over the young man's tankard. Ale spilled across the surface, narrowly missing his lap.

"I'm so sorry. Please let me buy you another drink."

Without waiting for an answer, he called out,

"Barmaid, bring us two tankards of your best ale."

He pulled over a chair from another table and sat down, uninvited.

"Have you ordered lunch yet? It's on me."

An hour later, Mairon was leaning forward, feigning interest while his new friend talked about bird watching.

"I like birds, too."

Except that I can't tell a nuthatch from a sparrow. Where's Aiwendil when you need him?

He'd have to learn the names of common birds before their next meeting, if this scheme was going to work.

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Mairon crossed his arms when the young man crossed his, and tapped his toe with the same rhythm as the man tapped his. Mirroring was a powerful tool. It could make the other person feel like they'd known you all their life.

He touched the letter in his pocket. He hadn't told anyone else about it. It was his secret, and it made him feel powerful and important. It was a personal note from someone he cared about deeply, ending with a simple request. "Identify the dissatisfied ones, and in them, plant the seeds of Rebellion."

Mairon realized that what he was doing was dangerous. If he got caught, he could go to prison. But he was being careful. *And besides, I'm too smart to get caught.*

When the noontime meal came to an end, Mairon picked up the tab. "You can get it next time," he told the young man. It created an obligation on his new friend that there would be a next time. After all, it takes time and repeated contact to build trust.

When the young man had left, he pulled out a small notebook and wrote down everything he could remember.

Name - Roch.

Affiliation - Oromë.

Interests - bird watching, cares especially about the kind of house sparrows that build mud nests.

He wrote down every trivial thing he could remember about the man, left handed, medium height and slender, preferences in food and drink, where he lives, who his friends are.

He'd made no attempt to find out whether his target was dissatisfied with his life in Valinor, even though that was the piece of information he was after. Pressing him for confidences too early would just scare him off. He knew from experience it would come out naturally over time.



He met one of Vairë's Maiar for dinner at another tavern that evening. They'd built a close friendship over many meetings. At the last one, Mairon judged him nearly ready to hear about the Rebellion.

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When he arrived, the man was waiting for him at a booth in the back.

Good, they could speak privately.

"What are you having?" asked his friend.

"Have you ordered already? I'll have the same," said Mairon.

"And what are you having to drink? I'll have that too."

Mirroring also works with food and drink. The downside was having to eat a meal he didn't like, when he was the one paying.

Mairon leaned forward and listened with all his attention as his target vented about being a servant in Vairë's household.

"I hear you," said Mairon, nodding sympathetically.

Normally he would have said 'I see', but he was mirroring his target's speech patterns.

The barmaid cleared away the dishes, and Mairon picked up the tab. He waited until she was out of earshot. Then, with studied casualness, he asked,

"I hear that Melkor's people have built a fortress, the largest in Arda."

"Wouldn't that be something?" the man sighed.

"What do you mean?" asked Mairon.

"It seems so brave and desperate of them, that's all. It's kind of exciting, really."

"I thought so, too," agreed Mairon. "I hear that, as Maiar, they have a lot more freedom than we do. That they live like adults, the way the Valar do here."

The other man looked off into the distance. "I'm sorry I didn't go, when the others left."

After his friend left, Mairon stayed behind for a few minutes, writing up his notes. The man had sung Melkor's discordant theme in the Music, at least for a little while. Mairon felt sure he would join the Rebellion. All he needed was a little push.



A few evenings later, Mairon met with yet another target. At the end of the evening, they picked a time for their next

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meeting and said goodnight. Ten minutes later, he closed his notebook and got up to go home.

The tavern was packed. There was a crowd near the door so thick, he had to turn sideways and push his way through it. In the press of bodies, someone put a folded piece of paper in his hand and closed his fingers over it. He shoved it in his pocket before anybody saw.



Back at home in the Mansions of Aulë, he sat on his bed and pulled out the letter. The seal was Melkor's.

*Melkor. The most beautiful creature in Ea, and the mightiest.
Black hair, high cheekbones, laughing eyes ..*

He smiled, savoring the moment before he broke the seal and unfolded the paper.

Chapter 5 The Offer



Mairon was walking back from a distant farmhouse, where he'd delivered a bag of nails. He earned pocket money by making nails or simple tools in his free time and selling them to neighbors. All the tabs he was picking up for his recruitments were beginning to add up, so he was making a lot more nails than usual.

It was getting late, but even so, it seemed dark and oppressive. The clouds were low and moving fast. He watched them darken from greenish grey to pitch black. They weren't clouds, they were Vala. Who took form and stood beside Mairon.

Melkor.

Mairon thought about Melkor all the time and longed to be near him. But when Melkor appeared unexpectedly, Mairon fell silent, suddenly shy.

"When we spoke last, I offered you a position as one of my Captains," said Melkor. "I've come to make the offer again."

"You offered me power. I'm not interested in power," said Mairon.

"You would be, if you'd ever had it," said Melkor.

Mairon was silent. Melkor lured most of his followers with the promises of power, but Mairon didn't find it very tempting.

"I can't believe it doesn't interest you. Tell me then, what's your dream? What would you wish for if you could have anything you wanted?"

"I want my own smithy with my own cottage nearby, and a wife to share it with."

"And if you stay here, what are your chances of getting those things?"

The Offer

Just about zero, as you well know.

"Why are you interested in me, anyway? I didn't even sing your themes in the Music," said Mairon.

"You're different from the rest of my people. You're responsible. You work hard. You're someone I can rely on. I see in you all the same things that Aulë does. And more. I see in you the seeds of Greatness."

Mairon raised his head, looking for signs that Melkor was teasing. He wasn't.

"I need someone who will complete the things I conceive. Who will cover my back. Who's intelligent enough to 'get' me," said Melkor.

Mairon was silent, trying to absorb the things he'd just heard.

"One more thing. You're a craftsman. I offer you the liberty to conceive your own designs, and the resources to affect them quickly.

Melkor waited. He didn't appear to be in any hurry. He watched while Mairon struggled to decide.

Finally, Melkor reached out his hand. After a moment's hesitation, Mairon took it.

Chapter 6 The Departure



Mairon knocked on Aulë's door and came in. He was dressed for traveling. He set his canvas bag on the floor and took a seat in front of Aulë's desk.

Aulë didn't need to ask what this was about, based on the fact that his luggage appeared to contain everything he owned. He also knew that that, this time, nothing he could say would change his mind.

"I've come to say goodbye."

"I didn't give you permission to go," said Aulë.

"I didn't ask," said Mairon.

"I think you're making a mistake. Will you reconsider?" asked Aulë.

"I've been reconsidering since the first time we talked. I should have gone then. Instead, I watched the Rebellion from the sidelines, and I missed most of it. It's one of the biggest regret of my life."

"Are you sure you know what you're doing?"

"No, I'm not. But I still want to try."

Chapter 8 The Aftermath



Aulë was the last one downstairs for dinner. He sat down at the head of the table beside Yavanna. Although there were thirty or more people present, many of whom were teenagers, the group was unusually quiet.

At Aulë's left, Mairon's place was empty.

"Shall we rearrange the place settings and chairs, so there isn't a gap?" asked Curumo. "And the same in the dormitory? I could take his bed. It would be a shame to let his spot by the window go unused."

"No." said Aulë. "Just leave everything the way it is, for now. It doesn't seem real to me that he's gone."