Marred but Remade

by SpaceWall

Summary

Maedhros throws himself to his death, accepting that this will be his last action until the remaking of the world. Maedhros wakes up. The world is not remade, but it is far changed from the one he remembered. The Valar work in mysterious ways, but they are not so inattentive to ignore the rising threat of Sauron.

Notes

This volume borrows a couple of lines of dialogue verbatim from Lord of the Rings. I make no profit off this, and it falls well within the boundaries of fair use etc. etc.
Awaking

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Maedhros had three realizations very, very quickly. He was aware, first of all. Maybe more aware than he’d been in his entire life. His fëa felt connected, vibrant. Last time it had felt so whole, his grandfather had been alive, and he’d been unaware of all the pain that was about to befall him. His mental shielding too was perfect, effortless in a way it hadn’t been for years. That was when the second realization struck: he couldn’t see. When he reached out to feel where he was, panic flooding his body as he tried to discern whether it was very dark or he was missing his eyesight, he touched the solid stone of the floor with two hands. With this third realization, he stood up quickly, and hit his head on the roof of the cave. Everything swung wildly, and Maedhros fell over.

Well, if he was dead, he surely would not have hit his head. Surely, the halls would accommodate someone of his height. On the other hand, if he was alive, why did he have two hands? Had he fallen into the centre of the world, hit his head, and then… what? Regrown a limb? Perhaps this was what it was to be newly returned. But on the other hand, which was a phrase Maedhros could now use with no sense of irony, he was not grey-robed as one of the newly returned should have been. In fact, he seemed to be wearing more or less what he had been wearing when he’d died. Or failed to die. Boots, trousers, tunic, chainmail. No sword belt or blade though. But of course- he’d lost that in the fight, hadn’t he? Or maybe he’d never had a sword belt. What need does one have of sheathing a blade when they have no choice but to use it? And then there was the matter of the oath. It seemed to be gone now from his mind, but why? Was it considered fulfilled by his own actions, or had something more happened? Or was being reborn enough to unmake it? Certainly, that and the hand were proof enough that he’d been reborn, but that didn’t explain any of the rest of it.

“What in Arda?” Maedhros demanded, of nobody in particular. Or perhaps of someone very particular. “Námo? What is this meant to be?”

As if on cue, an all-consuming drumming sounded. Maedhros felt across the floor and the ceiling, and broke off a sharp-ish rock. He held it for a second in his left hand, and then switched it to his right hand, and then back. This was a problem he could solve later. Swallowing his emotions, he began to crawl towards the sound. There was something wrong about it. Something of the enemy. But it was the only guide he had, and since there was no Fingon out there to rescue him on eagle-back, Maedhros would have to be his own hero. Shortly enough, it became clear he was moving up. He slunk through the tunnels, unable to stand, and still carrying his sharp rock in his left hand. Then, something fundamental changed. A clicking noise rose under the drumming, like talons on stone, approaching Maedhros with exponential speed. He hit the ground, and a small army of orcs skittered over him. He tried not to breathe, not to smell them, and listened to the wave passing. Feet and claws dug into his back, and he didn’t move, didn’t flinch. Something must have truly frightened them, that not a one stopped to kill Maedhros.

Once the orcs had passed, Maedhros pulled himself to a half-stand, and stumbled on. There was light at the end of the tunnel, and space to stand too. Also, dead bodies. Dwarves, with signifiers of clan or house that Maedhros knew not. With a prayer to Aulë for forgiveness, he stole a sword from one of the dead dwarrows. It was short for Maedhros still, but it was a sight better than a sharp-ish rock.

At last, emerging from the tunnel into a wide cavern, spanned by a stone bridge, Maedhros had several more realizations in quick succession. There was a balrog right in front of him, standing on the bridge, there was a wizened man in grey robes about to fight the balrog, with a good half-dozen
more beings- an elf, a dwarf, two secondborn adults and four children- behind him. Maedhros hefted his sword, fully prepared to die, again, when he felt the encroaching wave of power, and the elderly secondborn revealed himself to be a maiar. He carried a sword of Noldo make, though Maedhros did not recognize the specific blade. Power, not just the wild gift of the Maiar, but also something more controlled, something more noldorin, drew itself around him like a cloak. He spoke to it, though the words were strange to Maedhros’s ears, and it took him some time to adjust to the tongue. The balrog drew itself its full height and, with a good bit more yelling, the two men raced forward to join the fray. But they had not yet reached the Maiar when he struck the bridge with his staff, breaking both. Maedhros, fearing for the lives of those left on the bridge, and indeed, for his own- a balrog being a creature with wings, albeit a heavy one- made an aborted motion towards the fight. But it seemed this balrog had less wits about it than most, for it did not endeavour to fly. Instead, it fell deep into the pits from which Maedhros had just escaped. At the last instant it displayed some brains, lashing out at the Maiar and dragging him down into the pits with it.

The survivors ran, but they were slow to do so. They tarried, and though one of them quickly seemed to establish himself as the leader, they were not making enough progress. For surely now that the balrog was gone, the orcs would return. Maedhros followed them, just out of sight and silent as the grave, through more tunnels, and then, finally, out into a great hall. There was no hiding here, and Maedhros might have very quickly become the next enemy, had there not indeed been a guard of orcs at the gate. The leader prepared to fight them, but Maedhros was faster, especially with a blade in hand. It took only one stroke to remove the first orc’s head, and the rest fled in terror. The party cast themselves out of the mountain, and then, once they had made it far enough down the steps to see any approaching orc, as one being, they all turned their weapons on Maedhros.

“I mean you no harm,” Maedhros told them, which was about at the point when he realized that he seemed to be speaking the Quenya of his younger days. Given that the elf had a more Teleri or Sinda look about him, that was unlikely to go well.

The elf looked at the leader, who shrugged vaguely and said, in faltering pre-shift Quenya, “I to speak Sindarin, with your knowing.”

Maedhros resisted the urge to give him a pithy comeback. He switched over to Sindarin. “Any speech other than the black speech is music to my ears. I mean you no harm.”

“I do not trust him.” The Sinda said, in Westron. Maedhros didn't know how he knew that tongue, but he did. And its name. When had he picked up such a thing? Then he switched back to Sindarin and said, “how are we to know that can be trusted?”

“Well, I speak Westron, first of all,” Maedhros told him, trying not to let his worry show. “And as to prove how I can be trusted, I do not know if I can do that. I know not how I got here, nor even where here is. I just awoke as the first elves a couple of hours ago.”

The Sinda and the leader looked at each other again. The leader made a couple vague hand gestures, and the Sinda nodded.

“Out and say it.” The dwarf snapped. “What are you thinking?”

“I can go stick my fingers in my ears and hum, if you’d like,” Maedhros offered.

“Would you all just stop talking?” One of the children snapped. Everyone turned to look down at him. “Gandalf’s dead, and you’re all standing here bickering like fauntlings.”

The leader knelt beside him. “I am sorry Frodo,” he began, and, with something like protectiveness, ushered the rest of the party away from Maedhros.
The other elf and the dwarf stayed, bow and axe solidly aimed at Maedhros. It would have been no hardship to disarm one or both. They seemed tired, and they didn’t seem like they’d fought with each other before. It would have been very easy to set them tripping over each other, but, as Maedhros realized with considerable glee, he didn’t have to do that. There was no force now in the world that could make him. His mind was his own.

“I’m going to put down this sword now.” Maedhros declared in Westron, and did so. The uneasy eyes of both his watchers followed his hand as it traced a sure path to the ground.

“Who are you?” The Sinda demanded. He had something familiar about him, in his conduct and cadence.

“Gaelon.” Maedhros replied. This was an entirely untruthful answer, but the joke in it amused him, and it had been a long time since he’d gained a new epessë

“That is by no means a Quenya name, nor ought it be yours.” The elf commented, with some suspicion.

“Yes, well, in my youth it was considered very bad form not to defer your name to the language of your hosts. Even Fëanor’s sons did it.” Maedhros said, taking some wicked pleasure from the situation.

The Sinda shook his head in irritation, and the dwarf asked, “what’s Gaelon mean that’s so inapt?”

“It means pale and glimmering, like the colour of moonlight. Unfortunately, it is not an especially apt description of my looks. It would better fit someone with fair hair, though I promise that when I am not covered in several tons of mine dust, I am fairer all about. A better name for me would likely refer to my hair.” Maedhros, demonstrating, waved a strand around in front of his face. The whole mess was unbound, but tidier than it had been in centuries. And it would stay that way. After all, Maedhros now had two hands to keep it.

“Though among his people,” the other elf said, “most names referring to red hair would have been taken by Maedhros the Kinslayer. So perhaps your inapt name is luckier.”

“I hope so,” Maedhros said, with a glimmer of mirth in him. “Now, your names, before I feel as though I’m the only named creature in all of Arda.”

“Gimli son of Gloín, at your service,” said the dwarf. In light of how he was still waving an axe at Maedhros, he didn’t bow.

“Gaelon, son-of-none, at yours and your family’s.” Maedhros bowed, as dwarves did, from the waist. They both turned to the Sinda.

“Legolas Thranduillion,” he said, rather as though he begrudged the name. The name Thranduil meant nothing to Maedhros, but the same could not be said of the dwarf, who grimaced.

“A son cannot be judged by his father.” Maedhros told them both. “Do not miss an opportunity to know each other before it even arises. Now, one of you go tell the young lord over there what, exactly, is going on.”

At some mute debate, Legolas was sent to report back. Maedhros and Gimli, for their parts, both sat, eyeing one another.

“Were those your people, in there?” Maedhros asked, but, by the sorrow on the dwarf’s face, he thought the answer already clear.
“Cousins and the like, aye. No siblings or sons, but I didn’t start with any of those so I had none to lose.”

“I would tell you that I felt your pain, but I doubt that anyone can, in this moment. So instead I will say that Mahal watches over all his children, and takes them into his halls when the time comes. And I tell you that I’ve lost cousins too, in my time. It still hurts.”

The dwarf murmured something in Khuzdul. A prayer, possibly. “Do elves count such relations closely?” He asked, after a breath. It seemed as if he wanted to be distracted, which was a feeling Maedhros knew well indeed.

“Some do. Large families were never common among my people, and grow less common every year. But when I was born, it was not too strange for a family to have three or four children. Of course, because we all live so long, everyone becomes connected to everyone, eventually. By now-“ a thought occurred to Maedhros. “When is now, exactly?”

Gimli gave him the year, polite as you like. But that did not soften the news any. By now, like as not, everyone Maedhros had ever cared for was dead. Or if they weren’t, then they were now older than him by millennia.

“Who is the king?” Maedhros asked, which was a subtle way of asking after his family.

“Thranduil.” The dwarf replied, which might be true enough, but wasn’t really the answer he was looking for. Though it did explain something of what was familiar about Legolas. He had something of that Sindar-Teleri royal look. Like Finrod had. Like those they’d slain in Doriath had.

“No, I mean the king of my people. The High King of the Noldor.”

“There hasn’t been a High King since the second age,” the leader told him, rejoining their two groups. Then, he turned to the dwarf. “I’m sorry Gimli, but we have to move on. It’ll be dark soon, and the orcs will not wait for us to mourn.”

“Where to then?” Gimli demanded.

The leader pointed towards a vast, golden forest at the end of Maedhros’s sight. “Lothlórien,” he said.


He stormed off, vaguely in the direction in which his commander had pointed.

“What happened to Gil-galad?” Maedhros asked the leader, as casual as he could manage.

“He died in battle against Sauron.” The leader informed him, and then, seeming to consider. “I’m sorry. Did you know him?”

“Something like that.” Maedhros murmured. “I knew his family. But if there’s no more High Kings, I suppose they must all be gone too.”

The leader passed Maedhros his sword. Having no belt in which to put it, Maedhros simply shifted it to his right hand. “They’re not all gone. Just- nobody left who wanted the crown. Lord Elrond and Lady Galadriel both trace their lineage back to Finwë.”

Maedhros resisted the urge to punch the air in glee. It was a sombre moment. But Elrond lived. Elrond Lived. It was news enough to make Maedhros want to cry out with joy. Instead, he asked,
“And your lineage. Where do you trace it to?” For it was sure that this mortal had some sort of title. Nobody had the innate leadership this man had without some kind of noble upbringing.

“Nowhere important.” The man said. “I’m called Aragorn, if it means anything to you.” The name meant nothing, but the lie was clear. Like Maedhros himself, he’d slipped right past the name of his father.

“It means as little to me as you knew it would, My Lord. Now, your companions. The young one is Frodo, I gather, and the Maia was called Gandalf. Who are the others?”

Aragorn, Son-of-Someone, deigned to name the rest of his companions, and explained what a Hobbit was. The one called Frodo seemed greatly distressed by the death of the Maia, and so did not speak to Maedhros. His kin gathered around him, and in time, drew Aragorn to them as well. This left Maedhros with the other man, Boromir, son of Denethor. He made not nearly so good an impression as his companions. He had the level of egotism that Maedhros despised in kings and lords, with less of the true nobility than Aragorn. That being said, he was a good deal more informative than his companions. So informative, in fact, that Legolas had to sneak in to shut him up more than once.

From all this misbegotten information, Maedhros gathered the purpose and the origins of this rag-tag party. They were on that most classic of quests: retrieve/destroy (Maedhros was not entirely sure which) some article of importance to the enemy. Elrond had sent them, and the Maia had been their leader.

They passed by something called the Mirrormere, at which they stopped, for some purpose of faith or devotion, so Gimli could pay his respects. The sight was beautiful, sure enough, and though Maedhros appreciated it, he could not but wish they would move a little faster. Gimli, for all his temper at their destination, took the lead. He seemed to know the area better than the rest, at least for its history. Certainly, of the bunch, he was the best company. And rightly so, for it seemed these lands to much of the history of his people, and this was the first time he’d seen them. To be in ill spirits at such a thing, one would have had to be made of stone.

When they finally reached the point at which the mortals could see the forest well, they stopped again. Lóthlorien, Legolas named it, though based on the reverence in which he held the name, his father was not the king that ruled there.

After a time, the conversation subsided utterly, and the party of nine marched on, wearily and in descending darkness. The hobbits began to lag behind, which was no surprise. They were almost taking three steps to every one of Maedhros’s, and they did not have the strength of elves. Aragorn, thinking on his feet, called for a halt.

“Come, Boromir. We will carry them,” he said, and made to do so, but Maedhros interrupted.

“That makes little sense. I am unarmed, more or less, and am carrying no weight whatsoever. With your permission, master hobbit, let me do the carrying. Or give me a proper sword. No offence to dwarven craftsmanship, but I am tall for my own people, and this blade is not the length of my forearm.”

There was some silent deliberation at this, and in the end, Maedhros ended up carrying the one called Sam, while Aragorn carried Frodo. There was, it seemed, something odd about their conduct concerning Frodo. But perhaps they merely worried for him. He did seem the most easily tired of the bunch, and not at all well. Maedhros’s suspicions only intensified when they stopped for a rest. Maedhros, having little skill as a healer or a cook, offered to do neither task. Instead, he preoccupied himself with trying to remove the dust and grime of both the road and the mines from his hair. Over
by the stream as he was, he caught little of the conversation. Until Aragorn held Frodo’s chainmail up to the light, and the whole party froze as if hypnotised. Maedhros gathered, from context, that the metal had taken a blow of extraordinary force and entirely protected its wearer. (Save from some bruising, but such things could hardly be helped.) Combining that and the beauty of the thing, he rather thought his father would have killed for a chance to work with it.

They shared their food with Maedhros, in the growing darkness, and hurried on. They were now so exhausted that there was little point in speaking. Frodo and Gimli fell to the back, while Legolas, still mesmerized by the woods, even in twilight, walked close to the front. Maedhros, though not consciously avoiding the Sindar, worried over him. If there was anyone who was liable to actually figure out Maedhros’s true identity, it would be Legolas. Or Aragorn, who seemed to know more about elven history than your average elf would. Maedhros respected that, but that lessened his worry not one whit.

Equally worried, though perhaps less reasonable than Maedhros, was Boromir. He was reluctant to enter the woods, and spoke, as Gimli had, of evil magics there. Maedhros, who could actually feel said magic, could not have disagreed more. He knew evil magics, and this was not one. If anything, it bore the most resemblance to Melian’s protections of Doriath, which, though stronger, were similarly fair. And, unlike Melian’s Wards, Maedhros was allowed to pass these. Though he had feared some when Aragorn had spoken of evil fearing Lóthlorien, no force seemed inclined to stop Maedhros, and he was allowed to carry on.

The magic was familiar, but wrong. Like a painting of someone you knew, but in that unfinished stage before features take on their true nature. Maedhros, with caution, reached out to touch it further with his mind. Whoever, whatever this force was, they felt a little like Celebrimbor. It wasn’t him, certainly. Celebrimbor was dead—must have been, not to make Aragorn’s list of remaining Finwëans—and this energy was more like an imitation of him than it was like the elf himself.

They moved into the woods in the darkness, Maedhros and Legolas using elven sight to guide themselves and their companions. Like Gimli at the Mirrormere, Legolas stopped and paid respects to a myth of some renown, and sang a song, though Maedhros did not know it. Maglor, he thought, would have been able to join in after a few verses, proud as a jaybird of his singing. But Maedhros was not his brother, and had no such skill.

After their stop, it was no more than a few minutes before Maedhros noticed they were being followed. Their trackers were very, very good, but Maedhros was used to being followed. The trackers moved above ground, in the trees, and were all carrying at least bows. Given their being out-armed, if not out-numbered, Maedhros thought it prudent to take this opportunity to pass his shortsword to Legolas. He’d regained the thing when they’d stopped to eat, but was relieved to once more have it out of his hands.

“They’re called the Galadhrim,” Legolas was saying, to the group at large, as he expounded once more on the virtues of Lóthlorien. For someone who’d never been there, he seemed terribly nostalgic about the whole thing. Maedhros, personally, felt that it was a step up from Himring. But at the moment, he would have settled for just about anywhere with good, Noldorin engineering. Walls. Beds. Hot water.

Gimli, Boromir, and the hobbits seemed resigned to the possibility of being forced to sleep in the trees that night. But then, they did not know how close their hosts truly were. Indeed, none of them did until Legolas leapt up to climb the tree, and one of their watchers shouted him down.

Maedhros, thinking on his feet, raised his hands in a gesture of surrender. Legolas, shrinking back against the tree, did the same. Their watcher looked from one to the other, and then offered address
in a heavily-accented dialect of Sindarin. There was a distinct Nandorin influence, perhaps, Maedhros thought. Maybe a sprinkling of Quenya too. It was not terribly hard to pick up. At least, not when you’d been raised by one of history’s greatest and most obsessive linguists.

“They breathe so loudly, we could have shot them in the dark,” The lead watcher said airily.

Maedhros, who had never taken well to threats, snapped back, “And if you had, we would have known you were cowards, unwilling to face weary travellers on level ground.”

He laughed. “I mean you no harm, nor your friends. We could tell, even from a distance that this one,” here, he gestured at Legolas, “was of our kin. Though it is plain that you are not.”

“In a common tongue, perhaps?” Maedhros ventured. In his experience, these sorts of elves often chose obscurer languages in front of strangers.

“Please,” the watcher said in an accented version of the common tongue, “if you two and the ringbearer could join me in the tree, I would much appreciate it.”

Maedhros, who was unsure of his welcome in the meeting, but too naturally curious to object, did as requested. With a rope ladder, and some help from him and Legolas, they got Frodo into the tree. Legolas thereafter merely swung up, while Maedhros, in a concession to his more Noldorin roots, required a hand. In fairness, he had not had the adequate number of hands for tree climbing in some centuries, and was still adjusting. Sam, who seemed distressed by the idea of being left on the ground, followed them as well, making for an awkward party of seven elves and hobbits perched on the branches.

Their main watcher, who seemed the only one in the bunch who was familiar with mortal tongues, introduced himself as Haldir, and the other two as his brothers, Orophin and Rúmil.

“Like the linguist,” Maedhros said at this, in Sindarin again for the benefit of Rúmil.

“Exactly!” Rúmil exclaimed and, having had the rare joy of actually meeting someone old enough to know his namesake, dragged Maedhros away to talk.

“So, a Sindarin-speaking Silvan with the name of a Quenya-speaking Noldo. Your parents must have quite a story.”

Rúmil, who probably rarely had the opportunity to actually speak to an outsider, launched into a very long story about a Teleri grandfather who’d worked closely with Rúmil, before following Finarfin’s army to Beleriand and falling in love with a Silvan warrior. Maedhros, who had a soft spot for battlefield romances, found the whole thing terribly sweet. Maedhros, in turn, told him a true story about Rúmil’s near-constant bickering with his father, though he left the name Fëanor out of it.

“If the dwarf is blindfolded,” Haldir was saying, “and the stranger Gaelon bound and blindfolded, then we can-“

“That seems monstrously unfair,” Frodo interrupted.

Maedhros, focusing back in, said, “Deal. Now, I assume we’ll be staying the night here, yes?”

Indeed, they were. The Galadhrim were very kind about the whole thing, providing food and blankets, and well as a hair-tie for Maedhros. Haldir quite plainly didn’t trust him, but, having struck up a friendship with Rúmil, Maedhros did not find himself unwelcome.

“So, you just woke up in the Mines, and… nothing?” Orophin asked, giving Maedhros a dubious
Maedhros snapped his right hand, a task he’d never mastered as well with the other. “Like that. One instant, I was surely about to die. The next, I was healed, Fëa and Hröa.”

“Bizarre,” Rúmil muttered. “The closest example I can think of is Glorfindel, and he actually sailed back from Aman.”

“Maybe you didn’t really die, and were just unconscious?” Orophin offered.

“For two ages, and also I move continents and regrew a limb?” Maedhros asked. The brothers shared a look. They reminded Maedhros of Curufin, Caranthir and Celegorm, in the way they interacted.

“The Valar work in strange ways,” Haldir said. He was looking out into the woods, and only half minding the conversation.

“Will the orcs follow us this close to your borders?” Maedhros asked him, for a change of topic.

Haldir shrugged. “Legolas told me you killed a captain. So, I suppose they might. But they would not dare pass the proper border. It was not so long ago that there would have been a thousand elves, finely armed, at even the hint of a trespass on the borders.”

“And now there’s you.” Maedhros said.

“And now there’s us, for all the good it does.” Haldir stood. “We should go, and lead them away from this place. I doubt they’ll make it here, but if they do—“ he cast a glance over to the mortals and Legolas. “Well, you’ve made it this far.”

“I could come with you,” Maedhros offered, but Rúmil shook his head.

“Take your rest, Gaelon. You may need your strength come the dawn.”

Maedhros, weary, did not rejoin his newfound companions. Instead, he curled up tightly in a blanket and slept deeply, for the first time since he had been a child.

Chapter End Notes

A note on names and language.
Names:
The joke about the name Gaelon is obscure, and definitely the kind of thing only the son of a linguist would think is funny. Maedhros is the sindarin version of Maitimo Russandol, but if his name was the Sindarin Maidhros, it would have a similar meaning to Gaelon (pale and shiny)
Languages:
Maedhros speaks Quenya and Sindarin both fluently, and has since his arrival in Beleriand. The change from the Sindarin of the first age to the third is largely one of pronunciation. He probably has a really weird accent, but who’s going to say something? Also, I high-key headcanon that Maedhros inherited some of his father’s gifts with languages, and probably spent a lot of time in Beleriand learning all sorts of weird dialects to try and negotiate.
I definitely deus-ex-machina-ed Maedhros into speaking Westron, because it makes my
life easier, and also for reasons that may or may not be revealed at a later date.
Maedhros’s dreams were wild, and uncontrolled. In them, a woman with stars for freckles waved him down a winding corridor, and then his father was shaking his hand, and Fingon was there. Then Fingon was gone, and everything was on fire, and Maedhros could feel his body regrowing his hand. In the other, the silmaril burned like fire, burned away the oath. It felt dangerously close to burning Maedhros away with it. He woke in a cold sweat, several hours later, but at least his Hröa was rested, and his mind remained clear.

“Bad dreams?” Rúmil asked, from where he was perched on a branch to Maedhros’s right.

Maedhros nodded. “Something like that.”

“No, thank Eru. Or at least, not usually. I do have family with that particular curse, but it skipped me.” Considering how much information was too much, Maedhros said, “It’s the same with most skills, actually. Music, archery, sculpture, architecture, linguistics, the arts of the forge - there were experts in just about everything in my family. I was simply never one of them.”

Rúmil said nothing, but the look he gave Haldir said more than enough.

“That doesn’t mean that I haven’t found gifts of my own,” Maedhros told him. “Not everything is about being the most obviously gifted. Diplomacy, resilience, kindness to strangers.” At this last, he gave Rúmil a meaningful look. “It’s not magic, but it’s just as important.”

Rúmil looked down at his hands. Once again, he reminded Maedhros a little of Caranthir. “The orcs did end up coming close to the border,” he said, clearly trying to distract. “But we led them away.”

“As if I had doubted it for a second.” Maedhros said. He moved to put a hand on Rúmil’s shoulder, but they were both distracted by Haldir swinging his sword at something in the tree.

“There’s something in this tree that I have not seen before,” he told Frodo. Maedhros translated for Rúmil, and the pair of them rejoined the rest of the group. Haldir then gave a report on the night’s events, which Maedhros didn’t bother to translate. Rúmil had been there, after all.

The party, now with eleven members (eight of the original fellowship, Maedhros, Rúmil, and Haldir), set off for the day. It seemed that they would not bother to blindfold Maedhros and Gimli yet, which Maedhros appreciated. Haldir led the main party, with Rúmil scouting around for danger. Orophin, it seemed, had gone ahead to alert the rest of the Galadhrim to both the strangers and the orcs at the border.

They moved south along the Silverlode river, the beauty of which was not lost of Maedhros, for a
few miles before they finally crossed. According to Haldir, entering the river to the north was
normally discouraged, and there were no bridges as a concession to the realm’s need for defence.
Maedhros, remembering Curufin’s plans for retractable bridges, wished that he had the skill to share
such ideas with these people. Though the Galadhrim and Legolas had no difficulty racing across the
river balanced on a single rope, helping the rest of the Company across was something of a
procedure.

In the end, it was Maedhros’s idea to use shorter lengths of rope to secure the hobbits and Gimli to
the main line. Boromir had the worst balance of the bunch, given his higher centre of gravity, but he
was also tall enough to not drown in the river, for the most part, which diminished the concern of his
falling in. Maedhros and Rúmil helped him over, while Legolas and Haldir secured everyone else.
Aragorn, with elf-like grace, had little trouble walking as long as he had something to hold onto.
Once again, Maedhros wondered about his lineage.

Once they were all across, and properly in Lóthlorien, Haldir finally revealed to poor Gimli that he
would have to be blindfolded. He didn’t take it well, and nor should he have. Unlike Maedhros, he
was a guest, one with the permission of an elven Lord, and with the fate of all Arda riding on him.
Also, unlike Maedhros, he wasn’t lying about his identity to cover up the fact that he was a three-
time kinslayer.

Aragorn, once again showing that he was a natural diplomat, offered that the whole company go
blindfolded. Gimli retorted with a demand that it only be Legolas, who reacted about as maturely as
one might have expected.

“I am an elf and a kinsman here,” Legolas said angrily.

Aragorn opened his mouth to give a no doubt pithy retort, but Maedhros beat him to it. “This is a
matter of internal security Legolas, we’re not here to sight-see. Your commander has ordered that we
should all be blindfolded, and until such a time as he changes that order, you’ll listen.”

Aragorn shot Maedhros a suspicious look, but said nothing. The description of him as their
commander was accurate enough, even if he refused to tell Maedhros his real title.

In the end, everyone was blindfolded, though only Maedhros had his hands bound. Haldir led from
the front, while Rúmil brought up the rear. A few minutes into their journey, he pulled Maedhros to
the back of the group, and slowed their pace almost to a crawl.

“What is it?” Maedhros whispered. He could hear the footsteps of the rest of the group fading into
the distance.

“I think I know who you are.” Rúmil whispered back. “I’m going to trace it onto your palm. Don’t
flinch.”

Carefully, Rúmil spelt out M-A-E-D-H-R-O-S, and then, slowly, removed his hand.

“How did you guess?” Maedhros asked. He didn’t have the heart to lie.

“Tall, red-hair, Valinorian Noldo, Years of the Trees, with a powerful family. And I think you
mentioned something about losing or regaining a limb at some point.”

“I’m sorry for lying to you.” Maedhros murmured. “Have you told your brother?”

“No.” Rúmil told him.

“Why not?”
“Well,” Rúmil seized Maedhros’s arm and started guiding him again. “There were two options. Either, I was wrong and if I’d told him, we’d have left an innocent defenceless in the path of orcs, or I was right, and my commander would have been very upset that I let a dangerous stranger run off unbound through our lands. Or Haldir would have taken the Doriath way. I couldn’t let him do that.”

This obscure euphemism for killing a kinslayer was something Maedhros had never heard before. But it got the idea across.

“You do me too great a kindness,” Maedhros told him. “I’d say it was a credit to you, but I’m not sure if saving someone like me is a credit to anyone.”

“I didn’t do it for you,” Rúmil murmured, and no, of course he didn’t.

“If I could have done the same for my brothers—” Maedhros cut himself off. There was nothing to be gained by such speculation.

“Does your father’s legacy still affect you? I mean, if there were something like that…” Rúmil asked. He meant the oath, presumably.

“I couldn’t say, really. My mind is clear, yes. Clearer than it’s been in centuries. But I had long clear-ish spots under… my father’s legacy, too. On the other hand, pun not intended, the Valar must have sent me here. I don’t believe they would do that if I was a threat. And, as long as you’re not hiding any… gifts from my father around here, it isn’t an immediate problem.”

There was a long, awkward pause before Rúmil whispered, “I’m nodding. Sorry.”

They marched on through that day, speaking little. There was something about Rúmil’s trust that restored Maedhros’s faith in goodness, just a little. It was one thing to go on a quest to save the world, and all the people you love in it. For though that was dangerous, for many it would come with high reward. Honor, glory, love, worship. But saving one kinslayer, to keep your brother from becoming the same—there was no glory there. Maedhros had once known someone who had saved a kinslayer, even at great personal cost. It had brought him little love, save Maedhros’s. Rúmil was that rarest of things: kind. Innately and personally kind.

Maedhros slept almost not at all, that night. He sat on watch with Rúmil, still blindfolded and bound. Haldir agreed to get some sleep, thank Eru, so they finally had some privacy.

“Will you tell me about it?” Rúmil asked, voice not much louder than the wind through the trees.

“Do you really want to know?” Maedhros returned. “It’s not an especially pleasant story.”

Rúmil, who was leaning up against Maedhros, shrugged. “Well, my mother always did want me to be a scholar. It would be a game changer. ‘The Real and True Story of Maedhros Fëanorion’, as chronicled by Rúmil the Younger.”

“I’m not sure if my perspective would be a popular one. Unless something has changed in the past few millennia.”

“Who cares if it’s a popular perspective? It still needs to be documented. Just— I don’t know. Tell me a secret.”

And so Maedhros did. “I was married. Did you know that?”

Rúmil leant over and pushed Maedhros’s blindfold up onto his forehead. “Seriously?”
The golden trees were extraordinary, this deep into the forest. It was like nothing Maedhros had ever seen. He blinked once or twice to adjust, and then met Rúmil’s eyes.

“Seriously. I guess it doesn’t really matter, now that we’re both dead.”

“How does a prince manage a secret marriage?”

Maedhros grinned. “Well, I abdicated the throne. How Fingon did it, I don’t know.”

Rúmil grabbed Maedhros by both shoulders. “You married Fingon? The Fingon?”

“Believe me, I was surprised too.” Maedhros joked.

Rúmil laughed. “What a scandal. You know, if you told me nothing else, I think my name might still go down in history as the Elf who Discovered Maedhros’s Marriage.”

Maedhros laughed too, and neither spoke for a long time. Rúmil gently replaced the blindfold, loosening it slightly so Maedhros could see flickers of gold at the corners of his vision. There was something powerful about telling secrets, about giving voice to something unknown. Now, if he died again, someone would remember the truth of his feelings. Even if Rúmil never spoke a word, the story would live on in him.

“Is your bond broken?” Rúmil asked. It was an insensitive question.

“Of course. It broke long before I died.” Maedhros did not choke on these words. But there was a time when he might have.

“No- I know that. I’m sorry. I mean- is it still broken? Because if you’re not dead, and Glorfindel’s not dead, and you both Noldorin, then maybe-“

In truth, the thought had never crossed Maedhros’s mind. He was used to the silence of a well-closed mind, and had been for many years. Even when Fingon had lived, that had been the only connection Maedhros had allowed to truly flourish. Anyone else would have been too much, after Thangorodrim. Then, after Fingon had died, Maedhros had shut his mind completely. That way, Maglor and the twins didn’t have any of his sorrows weighing on them. But that had been then, and this was now.

Maedhros dropped his shields, instantaneously and with little regard for the consequences. Several things happened at once. The magic guarding Lóthlorien flared dangerously, like a viper rearing to strike. The bond of his marriage snapped back to life, thin and tight as a thread pulled between two galloping horses. Maglor’s shielding, which was far stronger and more articulated than Maedhros’s had ever been, dug into the edges of Maedhros’s consciousness like badly fit armour. A third elf- not Maglor or Fingon- someone whose mind Maedhros had never touched before, said, in Quenya, “Impossible!” And Sauron, who Maedhros knew far, far, too well for comfort, turned his eye- when did he become just an eye?- towards Lóthlorien. His weakened magic met with the viper-like snapping wards, and they prepared for a fight. Maedhros slammed the shields up, as fast as he had dropped them, before he could cause more harm.

“Ai Elbereth!” Haldir cried. He was awake, apparently. “what was that?”

The sound of shuffling and groaning told Maedhros that everyone else was waking too.

“I felt it,” Frodo said, in Westron. Maedhros was too delirious, too giddy from joy and fear and hope and loss to translate for Rúmil.
“My fault,” Maedhros told the rest of the group. “I dropped my shields for a second, and it seems to have irritated the wards around this place. I am sorry.” Then, in Sindarin, he said, “my husband lives, Rúmil. Too far from here, but he lives.” Something occurred to him, and he switched back, “Wait, Frodo, how did you sense that?”

Frodo deflected. Under normal circumstance, Maedhros might have asked him more, but his body was pounding with adrenaline, and he felt like he could fly. Fingon was alive. Whoever ruled these woods was going to be furious with Maedhros. Fingon was alive. Maglor was so strongly shielded he would be impossible to reach, but he lived. And Fingon was alive. Someone who mind was unfamiliar to Maedhros had been so finely attuned to him that he had been able to deliver a full word in the first second of contact. Fingon was far too distant to communicate so. But he was alive. Sauron was immeasurably terrifying, and watching everything, but at least he wasn’t the only person from Maedhros’s past who was still here. Because Fingon was alive.

“Your husband?” Haldir snapped, clearly irritated.

“Well, yes. Married some two and a half ages now, I suppose. Though only a few centuries for me. I’m not a complete idiot who drops my shields in the middle of a strange forest for no good reason, you know.”

Be that as it were, there was no chance of anyone getting any sleep now. Aragorn was pacing nervously, which Maedhros knew because he kept walking into trees. Boromir and Gimli were each grumbling to themselves, while Frodo was whispering away to Sam. Whatever he had felt, it had clearly disturbed him greatly. And as for the elves, the woods were buzzing with energy. It was mentally loud, and Maedhros hoped he hadn’t woken every elf in Lóthlorien.

“We should go.” Haldir said, eventually. “It is a waste to sit here, doing nothing.”

And so the party marched on, weary but determined. Maedhros’s energy rush left him, slowly, but the joy at knowing that Fingon was alive, somewhere out there, did not. As they walked, Maedhros began the painstaking process of restructuring his shielding so Fingon was on the inside, rather than the outside. This was how it had been before Fingon’s death, and it was more like clearing out cobwebs from a place you had once lived than it was like building a whole new home.

This task was not yet complete, and it was not yet noon when they came to a sudden stop. They had met with a second party it seemed, for all around Maedhros could hear shifting fabric, clinking metal, and soft breathing. Haldir and Rúmil dropped to their knees.

“My lady,” Haldir said, in Sindarin. “Do you travel to the border? Is there to be war?”

The Lady of Lórien laughed, and Maedhros knew that voice. But that was impossible. These were Sindarin and Silvan elves, not- but then again, his cousin had always been extraordinary.

“No, Haldir. Not yet, at any rate. Though these troops go to the border to deal with the orcs, I am here on more personal business. Now I ask, where is Mithrandir?”

“Fallen.” This was Aragorn who spoke, and much grief was in his voice still.

“That is ill news indeed.” Artanis-Galadriel, for it was surely her, said. There was something of grief in her voice as well. “I beg you tell me from the beginning, what has happened? Remove their blindfolds, all of them. They come at the behest of Lord Elrond, and with my blessing into these woods.”

Maedhros, it appeared, was included in their number. Rúmil slipped his blindfold off again, and he
met Galadriel’s eyes. She was older than when they had last met, but had not lost any of her beauty nor grace. She was clearly still iron-willed, though time and duty had weighed heavily upon her. This was not a Princess of the Noldor. No. She was a great lady in her own right now. A general. No doubt, she was the force behind the magic of this place. How he had ever confused her for Celebrimbor, he knew not.

“I am sorry,” Maedhros told her, in Quenya. This caused some murmuring in the assembled audience, but he pressed on, dropping to his knees before her. “For all the grief I have caused you and your kin, I am sorry. For Ingoldo, I—"

Galadriel cut him off. “We will speak later. Now, Aragorn son of Arathorn. Tell me what has happened, in your own words, please.”

And so Aragorn did. With Galadriel’s permission, he spoke freely in front of Maedhros, of their mission, albeit in vague terms, and what had gone wrong.

“And it was a Balrog?” She asked, directing the question at Maedhros.

“Yes, my lady.” He deferred to her title. These were her lands, after all, and, given Gil-galad’s death, she was now the head of her house- possibly of their entire house- in all of Middle Earth.

She shook her head. “I should have known what the Khazad truly woke, all those years ago. Perhaps that knowledge could have prevented them from returning. Though perhaps not. Who would not wish to look upon the dark waters of the Kheled-Zâram, or the cold springs of Kibilnâla? The halls of Khazad-Dûm were fair indeed, as I remember them.”

Gimli, with a dwarvish charm that would have made Azaghal jealous, said, “Yet more fair is the living land of Lórien, and the Lady Galadriel is above all the jewels that lie beneath the earth.”

Galadriel honoured him with a bright smile. Then, she said, “You honour me, Gimli son of Gloín. Now, I bid you go. Haldir will guide you on, to the city of the Galadhrim, and to my husband their lord. He will be anxious to hear your tidings, good and ill. Trust him well, for he is among the wisest of elvenkind, and has dwelt long on these shores. I will join you, as soon as I may.”

Sensing the moment had passed, Haldir and Rúmil rallied the company, while the army, as much as it could be called that, moved on towards their enemy. Galadriel pulled Maedhros back up into a standing position.

“My lady,” Haldir began cautiously. “Are you sure—"

“Perfectly,” Galadriel said, the sweetness of her tone laced with iron. And then, as an afterthought, she said, “in fact, unbind him.”

If Haldir still had concern for his lady, he kept it to himself, as Rúmil cut the ropes that bound Maedhros’s hands.

“Thank you.” Maedhros said, though to Galadriel or Rúmil, he was not sure.

“Walk with me,” Galadriel half-ordered, and Maedhros did. Together, they passed into the trees, away from Rúmil, Haldir, and the fellowship.

Once he was quite sure they were alone, Maedhros said, once more in Quenya, “Artanis, by the Valar I am glad to see you.”

She punched him, hard in the face, with enough force to knock him off his feet and into a nearby
tree. With all the sense that hadn’t been knocked out of him, Maedhros elected to stay on the ground, looking up at his cousin. She was wearing a ring on her right hand, and it had taken a chunk out of Maedhros’s cheek.

“What was that trick with your shielding, Maitimo? I could have killed you. Or worse, Sauron could have seen you. He could have seen Frodo. Have the millennia made you stupider than usual?”

“Was the punch for that, or for everything else?” Maedhros asked, genuinely curious.

“Both.” Galadriel reached down to touch the cut on Maedhros’s cheek, but didn’t bother to heal it. It wasn’t deep, and wouldn’t scar, given care.

“I did not intend to upset your spells,” Maedhros apologised. “I just- I realized that my marriage bond might not be broken anymore, and I had to see. I was hardly thinking of finesse.”

This caught Galadriel off guard, and she knelt beside him. “Marriage?”

“Finno and I. It’s strained enough that I might have missed it, if it hadn’t been for the force of dropping all my shields at once. But it’s there.”

“Eru preserve us.” Galadriel muttered, long suffering. “I come from a family of fools.”

Maedhros could not help but grin. “And you did not already know that?”

Galadriel said nothing for a long moment, and took a seat on the ground, pulling her knees to her chest like the girl she had once been. “Why did you feel the need to apologise for Findaráto? You did nothing to him.”

“I could have done more, to keep my brothers in check. I should have. I was their lord.”

Galadriel shrugged evenly. “I did no more to save him than you did, and he was my brother. Maybe if I’d spent less of the first age hiding and more of it using my gifts, fewer people would have died.”

“You were very young,” Maedhros said, unthinkingly.

“We were all very young.” Galadriel snapped. “We were as children, unexperienced in the ways of the world.”

This was true enough, and Maedhros didn’t argue. After a while in the silence, he felt tendrils of Galadriel’s power reaching out to him. With more care this time, he opened a hole in his shields and reached out to meet her. Mentally and physically, they embraced.

“So, how did you come to be here?” Galadriel asked softly, when they’d both pulled back.

Maedhros told his story, from waking up in the mines to meeting Rúmil and his brothers. As he spoke, he realized that he was now on his third day in this strange new time. It was almost too much to understand.

“And so, am I to understand that of my realm’s guards, not a one correctly guessed your identity?”

Feeling a sense of indignation on Rúmil’s behalf, Maedhros said, “Perhaps one did, and simply didn’t think informing people that there was an undead kinslayer in their midst was the best course of action.”

Galadriel laughed brightly. “Rúmil then.” At a harsh look from Maedhros, she added, “Oh, I shan’t make trouble for him. He did exactly as I might have asked of him. But it shocks me little that Haldir
would not notice, as preoccupied as he always is, and Orophin was with me part of the time, and clearly didn’t know.”

“He is kinder than anyone I have known in a very long time. And more innocent.”

Something sad grew in Galadriel’s eyes. “Being raised in peacetime will do that.”

“We were raised in peacetime too,” Maedhros reminded her.

“No, we were raised before there’d been a war. It’s different. You cannot be raised in peacetime when there exists no condition other than peacetime. Our whole lives were just building to war, and then fighting it.”

“It seems,” Maedhros said, “as though you’re building to a war now.”

Galadriel shook her head, sending cascades of gold hair about. “Perhaps. But if we are, it is not a war for elvenkind. Win or lose, this is the end of our time on Middle Earth. Or, for most it will be. Not I, perhaps.”

The Doom. But that was impossible, surely. After all, there was no High King. That meant that there had to be no more Noldor left to rule here. “But surely- the people.”

“Oh, the people will be forgiven. Have been forgiven. But you forget. I was a ringleader of the revolution in my own right. How many of my father’s people might have been saved if I had turned away? I am unredeemed. What’s more, if we lose, my power here may be enough to contain Sauron, for a moment. Enough, perhaps, that I could buy my people time to flee.”

Maedhros felt pain for his cousin, but had his own concerns. “Elrond?”

“Elrond takes after his mother’s line. He shall sail, or I shall force him to. What is it to you?”

“Elrond is… something to me. You shall force him to? What is it to you?”

Galadriel stood, abruptly, and pulled Maedhros to his feet with her. “He married my daughter, and I will not see her widowed. Now come. I did promise the fellowship that I would see them again. And I believe you shall enjoy our city. It is a place of wonder still.” As she turned away, she added, “And I must join those grieving Gandalf the Grey. He was noble, and in these times especially shall be sorely missed.”

Maedhros followed, but could not help asking, “How did you come to befriend one of the Maiar? Knowing what I know of you, that seems… improbable.”

Galadriel didn’t even rise to the bait of this comment. Instead she stopped and bowed her head, golden hair falling around her face like a veil. When she finally spoke, her voice seemed laced with sorrow.

“Mithrandir, Gandalf, was one of the best people I have ever had the pleasure to know. Beyond who I was, beyond who he was, we became friends. Gandalf was never patronizing. Not to me, not to any mortals. If you’ve ever met other Maiar, they tend toward a certain level of ‘I-know-more-than-you’. Gandalf could no more say that to me than he could fly unaided. In Middle Earth, he deferred to its denizens. It does not surprise me at all that he would have been the first to fall on this quest. He would not have had it any other way.”

Maedhros, who had never known the Maiar, but had watched him die, bowed his head as well. People who had the sort of conscious grace Galadriel described were rare indeed. To lose one,
especially one so powerful, was a tragedy indeed. After a couple of breaths, Galadriel seemed to collect herself. Touching Maedhros’s arm, she brought him out of his trance, and they went together back into the present.

Chapter End Notes

It Galadriel! She lives, she rules (literally and figuratively). You’ve really got to hand it to here. She won’t take shit from nobody.
Chapter Summary

Conversations are had, questions are asked, and answers are given.

Chapter Notes

Both Maedhros and Celebrimbor’s traumatic pasts are discussed here. It’s not too graphic but if you think that’ll be a trigger you go to the end notes and I’ll tell you where to skip.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

They moved in silence through the woods, he and Galadriel, a process which Maedhros enjoyed much more now that he could actually see it. Unlike the forests of Beleriand, there were no spiders or orcs behind every tree. He didn’t have to worry about those in his charge being killed at any minute. He didn’t have to carry a sword. It was blissful. Even the wound on Maedhros’s cheek seemed to hurt less than it would have under normal circumstances. Their peaceful silence, however, was not to last.

“If I might ask,” Galadriel queried, “was Gil-galad Fingon’s? I had always wondered.”

Maedhros could not help but laugh. “With that hair? He looked no more Fingon’s son than mine. No, I had rather always thought—” Maedhros cut himself off, before he could say something likely to cause offense.

“Thought what, Russandol?” Galadriel hissed, with such venom it was clear she already knew what he had thought.

“I thought he was one of your brothers’.”

“I think I would have known of any children my brothers had.”

Maedhros cannot help but retort, “And I think I would know of any children my husband had.”

Galadriel gave an exceptionally unladylike growl. “Be that as it may, the crown belonged to the house of Fingolfin. For it to belong to the possibly-illegitimate child of one of my brothers—”

Oh, that made some sense. For the crown to pass into her family, and skip to someone whose true parentage was unknown, and for the legitimate daughter of Finarfin to be not merely skipped over but uninformed, would be a grave error indeed.

“You misunderstand, my lady. It was Fingon who conspired to make him heir, given that he himself would never have one by blood. For reasons that I am sure are obvious given the circumstances. I do not know to whom Gil-galad belonged, by blood. If Fingon knew, as I am sure he did, I was not told. It was he who chose the name Ereinion, after all.”
The fight went out of Galadriel some. “Of course Finno would do something like that. It takes someone with a remarkable heart to take a boy born on the wrong side of the bed and make him king.”

Maedhros could not help but smile. “Finno always had a great deal of love in his heart. Even for those of us who did not deserve it.” Maedhros had never deserved Fingon, but he had received his love none the less. It was one of the few true blessings of his life.

“You must miss him,” Galadriel said. Maedhros took it as the peace offering that it was meant to be.

“I do. But he lives, and at least I have that.” In his own offering, Maedhros said, “I do not know if Gil-galad was born on the wrong side of the bed, or if his father thought it would be better for him to have the protection that would be offered to Fingon’s son.”

Galadriel inclined her head at that, and then pointed with two fingers forward. “Look.”

It was the beginnings of a walled city, rising through the trees, pathways and dwellings tangling between their massive branches. There was a chaos to it that the well-planned cities of Valinor lacked, Tirion most of all, for the Noldor were nothing if not exceptionally organized. But it was also exceptionally clever. It must have taken dozens of engineers centuries to figure out ways to build in this manner without impeding the natural growth of the trees, and with the capacity to support large amounts of weight.

“Findaráto would have loved it,” he eventually managed, which was probably true. He’d had some of the classic Noldo passion for building.

The smile Galadriel gave him was genuine. Maedhros could tell because of the way her eyes seemed to glimmer with the residual light of the Trees. It had taken Maedhros years to figure out why all of the Noldor had glittering eyes, and none of the Avari seemed to. In fairness, he’d spent thirty or so of those years being tortured, and more than the next thirty in a state of mind so ill that he’d barely been able to get out of bed most days. Regardless of this, when he’d finally put it together, Fingon had laughed so hard he’d snorted wine out his nose. It was a good memory.

“Come,” Galadriel said, “the entrance to the city is on the other side.”

“Are you sure that bringing me into the city is a good idea?” Asked Maedhros, sure that it wasn’t.

“Oh, be assured that it is a bad idea. But leaving you alone out here is a worse idea, and at least with me, you can be relatively sure my husband will not have you executed.”

That was not reassuring in the slightest, and Maedhros said as much. They might have talked more, and in truth should have talked more, but they were rejoined by Galadriel’s guards, and lost their privacy. Not missing a beat, Galadriel introduced him as Gaelon, a great warrior and follower of Finrod, believed killed in the first age. Finrod was a good choice. It explained that Maedhros was a Noldo, but made him seem more trustworthy, and more closely associated with Galadriel than he really was. And, as Galadriel explained much later, it allowed him to have an explanation for knowing the broader events of the first age while being more generally isolated from the other survivors. Almost everyone from Nargothrond had either died in the first age, died in the years since, or sailed. Of those who remained, none lived in Lóthlorien to identify Maedhros.

Finally, they entered the city, and were rid of the guard. There were at least a thousand elves still in residence, probably more, though Maedhros could tell that the city had once been designed to house far more people. And there were no children. That, most of all, took Maedhros by surprise. It made sense, he supposed, that as the lives of elves in Middle Earth dwindled, they would have fewer
children. Still, it made him sad. Children had been one of the rare joys of Maedhros’s life, and to know that there were none among the Quendi made him sad indeed. Those adults who remained turned to stare at Maedhros as he passed. It must have been rare indeed for a guest to be personally escorted into the city by its queen, for even if Galadriel did not style herself a queen, she was certainly regarded as such. Probably, it was rarer still for that guest to be a notably tall, red-headed Noldo. If Maedhros hadn’t had two clearly visible hands and no clearly visible scars save the recent cut on his cheek, he was sure someone would have figured him out instantly.

Regardless of his number of hands, it didn’t take Celeborn long to catch on. When they entered the throne room, he immediately dismissed every guard and attendant. Then, like a predator, he stalked around Maedhros. They’d met before, possibly. Though Celeborn had very much the look of his kin, so perhaps it had been one of them instead. Clearly finishing his assessment, Celeborn drew a long dagger from the folds of his robes.

Maedhros made no move to defend himself, raising his hands in surrender. Galadriel was not nearly so sedate. She grabbed the knife out of her husband’s hand, kicking him in the shin as she did so.

“Are you mad enough to spill blood here?” She snapped. Celeborn simply glared at Maedhros. Silently, he and Galadriel had an argument that lasted for almost half-an-hour. Even though neither of them spoke a single word, the conflict was clear enough. Celeborn kept waving his hands in the air and pointing forcefully at Maedhros, while Galadriel paced the room, glaring at her husband.

Maedhros himself decided to take advantage of the break. About five minutes into the argument, when it became clear the whole process would be time consuming, he sat down on the floor and began working at his shielding again. Having already mapped out the expansion, and seen where the bond anchored, albeit just for a second, he could begin actually moving his shields. This last stage of the process took about twenty minutes. At the end of it, Maedhros’s connection to Fingon sang clear in his mind. Gathering the force of his bloodline, of his training, and of his love for Fingon, he passed a simple message through. The distance was too great, and the connection too strained for words. So instead, Maedhros passed an emotion. The easiest emotion to pass through a marriage bond: Love. There was a long pause, and then a response in kind, faint as an echo. Maedhros could not help but grin.

“This amuses you, kinslayer?” Celeborn choked out, voice strained with hidden rage.

“My lord,” Galadriel admonished.

Holding up his hands again, Maedhros said, “I have just successfully readjusted my shields to put my marriage bond inside them. I am sure you know how pleasant such a thing can be.”

This successfully trapped Celeborn in a diplomatic quandary. Maedhros hadn’t asked a question. He’d merely observed that Celeborn must enjoy his marriage. And any objection he had to Maedhros might be taken as an objection to that statement. Which was probably the wrong sort of objection to make in front of one’s wife. Once, Maedhros had been a master at this and similar forms of diplomacy, and had used it in arguments with his brothers.

Celeborn and Galadriel finished their debate, or perhaps this last stage had been more of a negotiation, and turned as one to look at Maedhros.

“You can stay, for now.” Celeborn told him grimly, “but you must leave when the fellowship does.”

“The Valar sent you to them for a reason.” Galadriel added, seamlessly picking up where her husband had left off. “Without Gandalf, they will need someone older, with more knowledge of the enemy, and more power at their disposal. Celeborn and I are needed here, which makes you the most
knowledgeable person at their disposal.”

“More to the point, the enemy does not know that you are here. He may suspect, but my lady wife was able to distract him last night. He will not yet be looking for you, the way he would for us or for Glorfindel. You shall be able to pass unseen.”

A part of Maedhros wanted to refuse. He’d been dead for a very long time. He had a brother to find, a son to find, an unidentified voice in his head to identify, and a husband across the boundaries of the world to reunite with. If he went after Sauron, he might lose all of that. If he was killed, the Valar might well wait another two ages to return him. Would Maglor survive another two ages alone? Would Elrond even remember Maedhros, if he left it so long? Fingon would wait, but at what cost? Could Maedhros impose that suffering on him?

On the other hand, there was this place, this here and now, and these people. The citizens of Lóthlórien, holding onto their love for this world even when darkness was descending around them. The fellowship, who were willing to give their lives, the only lives they would ever have, in defence of their home and their friends. Gimli and Legolas, with their history and their fascination with places they had never been. The hobbits, so ill-suited to adventure, and committed to it none the less. Boromir, who was the least innately good of all those on the fellowship, but had still been ready to charge a balrog for them. Aragorn, the reluctant (and therefore the best) leader, who understood his duty, and was ready to accept it in whatever form it might take. Haldir and Orophin, defending their people even when it seemed they were almost the only ones left to do so. Brothers in arms. And Rúmil. Rúmil, who had been willing to listen to a foolish old kinslayer. Rúmil, who had wanted to save his brother, not just from violence done to him, but from violence done by him. To let these people stand against the darkness alone would have been an act of tremendous cowardice.

On that same other hand- the right hand, possibly, the hand he hadn’t had a week ago, by his own reckoning- on that hand, he also considered Sauron. His master was dead, but the Lord of Wolves still hunted here. He’d killed Finrod. Killed Gil-galad. Had been one of Morgoth’s many servants, spending years torturing Maedhros himself. Maedhros wasn’t one for revenge. He’d seen what it had done to his father. But the chance to stop Sauron from ever doing such a thing again? It would be… tempting. To make vengeance his. To avenge Fingon’s son. To avenge what little had been left of his own innocence.

“I will do it, on one condition.” Maedhros said, finally. He met Galadriel’s eyes. “If I die out there, you have to find a way home. Someone needs to tell Fingon, tell my mother, that I loved them. Tell them that I died doing the right thing.”

Galadriel looked away. “I can swear to try, but no more.”

Maedhros stood, and offered her his hand. “I could ask no more of you.” They shook to seal the deal. Sensing himself dismissed, Maedhros moved to leave the room. Something stopped him at the door. “My lord Celeborn, for what little it is worth, you should know that I am sorry for the many, many sorrows my family has caused yours.”

Celeborn looked at Galadriel, and something in his eyes seemed to soften. “It is all my family, for what little that is worth. You must know that I can never forgive you the darkness between us. And yet, how can I hold you accountable for the enemy’s will?”

Maedhros fixed his eyes on his feet. “I ask myself that every day.”

“How I can hold you accountable?”

“How I can hold myself accountable.”
Maedhros took his leave, before Celeborn could say anything more. Outside the throne room, Rúmil was standing, hands behind his back in a nervous sort of stance. Seeing Maedhros, he reached out as if to touch his face, then pulled back at the last second, noticing the guards who were milling about.

“Please, follow me,” he said, all business, and led Maedhros down through the city, up into the tree tops, and finally, through a small door. “So, Haldir was going to put you with the Fellowship, but I thought you might appreciate some privacy, and I have more than enough space for a guest.”

Maedhros nodded. “Thank you Rúmil. You honor me with your kindness.”

The home was small, no more than a few rooms, and quite messy. Books were strewn across tables and shelves, and a spare bow was resting on the kitchen table along with some half-finished arrows. The light was mostly natural, streaming in through massive windows to dapple everything. What little wasn’t all came from lanterns or candles. None of that fancy, Nolodorin lighting. Maedhros’s father would have despaired at the sight. Maedhros, for his part, found it cozy.

Draping a curtain over the door behind them, Rúmil reached up to touch Maedhros’s cheek. “Let me get you something for that.” Moving over to rummage through some drawers, he asked, “did my lady hit you?”

“Yes,” Maedhros confessed.

“Did you deserve it?”

Considering this, Maedhros repeated, “yes.”

Rúmil filled a bowl with clean water, and brought Maedhros both it and a cloth. With some direction from Rúmil—“left, sorry, my left,” — he managed to wash any blood off his face.

“I am being sent back to the border tomorrow,” Rúmil told him. “Haldir too. They will not allow us to stay further.”

“I am sure you are needed there,” Maedhros murmured. Though he would miss Rúmil, would miss having someone to talk to. In these two short days, Rúmil had become the closest thing to a friend Maedhros had had since before he and Fingon fell in love.

“What was needed was for there to be more of a guard on the border so my brothers and I were not the only experienced people left,” Rúmil returned. He was angry, though not with Maedhros. Once again, the resemblance to Caranthir struck Maedhros. Though admittedly, Rúmil managed his anger much better.

Maedhros laid a hand on Rúmil’s. “You did your duty, above and beyond. But what point is there to borders if nobody is able to live a peaceful life behind them?”

This was the logic Maedhros had used on his own kin, in the years when they’d served as the first line of defence against Morgoth’s forces. It had always set them fuming that they had to fight day and night for their survival, while Thingol had sat behind his wife’s wards and done nothing, even for those of his people who were under Maedhros’s protection. Even for those of his people who were made thralls by his inaction.

Rúmil leant back in his chair with a heavy sigh. “You know, I love Lóthlorien, I truly do. I should not like to leave it. I should not like to sail away from here, and for this place to be ravaged by time.”

“Valinor is beautiful,” Maedhros said, thinking not particularly of white-walled cities, nor of miles and miles of free forests, nor of stars untouched by Morgoth’s smoke. Instead, he thought of a boy,
not yet touched by tragedy, gold braided into his dark hair and eyes filled with laughter.

“It’s not my home.”

And in truth, “nor mine. Not really. For all its horrors, Beleriand was where I was most myself. But in my experience, home is what we make of it. Take Himring, if you would. Coldest, most desolate nightmare of a castle. The winds whistled through the doors and windows half the year, and the other half it only stopped because ice had plugged all the gaps. But it was mine, the people who lived there were my people, and that was the important part.”

It was easier to love Himring in retrospect, when the ghosts that had haunted him in the early years had faded some, and the better memories had remained bright beacons. He and Fingon had fallen in love there, possibly. Or maybe they’d always been in love, and had learned to understand it there, over years of diplomatic visits and social calls. Maedhros’s best memories of Himring were always memories of it alive with people. Maglor, often, over from the gap with a bawdy song on his lips and harp in his lap. Caranthir, waving some report in his face with passion. Curufin and Celebrimbor, there in turns, notionally because one was always needed to home, and factually because they were trying to preserve their relationship through avoidance. In fact, that reminded him-

“Rúmil, please know that I am listening to your pain, and I understand what you are saying, but there’s something important I must ask.”

“What is it?”

Maedhros steeled himself against what he knew would be bad news. “Celebrimbor, my nephew. What happened to him? He seemed poised to outlive us all.”

The change in Rúmil was sudden and complete. He seemed to fold in on himself, collapsing utterly. “Oh Maedhros, would that I did not have to be the bearer of such news.” He stood and, going to the bookshelf, pulled a heavy volume off the top shelf. It was a biography, Celebrimbor’s name in neat Tengwar in the cover, along with the name of the biographer, Lírel Menoriel.

“I would rather have it from you than from her,” Maedhros told him. “Ill news is better heard from the mouth of a friend.”

Rúmil shook his head. “I was not there, I had not been born yet. You will want a better understanding of specific events than I can give you.”

“What you can tell me,” Maedhros near-begged, grasping at Rúmil’s hand, “please.”

Rúmil pulled away, though his hand remained in Maedhros’s and said, in a cold and clinical voice, “He was deceived, by Sauron. Celebrimbor allowed him into his city, into his home. Some would say into his bed, though those accusations are baseless, and any historian worth the air they breathe knows that. Sauron taught him the forging of magic rings. Celebrimbor made a total of nineteen, and gifted them away. Nine to the kings of men, seven to the kings of dwarves, and three to the elves, for what good that did. Sauron, in secret, forged a twentieth ring, which he used to corrupt the others, and imbued with his own power. But Celebrimbor alone knew the locations of all the rings. They say Sauron’s tortures lasted weeks without end. Men, he gave up, and they were made into wraiths. Dwarves, he gave up, though their fate is unknown. Elves—”

Rúmil stopped, voice breaking. This half story was unbearable, and Maedhros put a second, shaking hand atop the first. “Rúmil, what happened to the elves?”

Meeting his eyes, Rúmil half whispered, “he didn’t give them up. He stayed true, and died for it. The
Maedhros reached up, touching the cut on his cheek. He remembered, when he had first entered Lóthlorien, how strongly it had felt of Celebrimbor. Of course, Celebrimbor would be too trusting. He always had been, keeping faith with his father, with Maedhros, for far longer than was reasonable. Suddenly, all Maedhros could think of was Thangorodrim, but in his mind it was Celebrimbor, not he, who Sauron tormented. Bile rose in his throat, seeming to choke him.

“I think I’m going to be sick,” Maedhros announced, but he wasn’t, and the feeling of nausea subsided not at all. It rested just on the edge of being bearable, and if it had gotten even a whit worse, Maedhros would have been sick and at least it would have been over.

Rúmil help Maedhros down onto the floor, and lay there beside him. “I am sorry. For all his family’s sins, Celebrimbor did not deserve that.”

Maedhros, who could feel the ghosts of knives and whips and hot irons on his skin, rolled over and curled in on himself like a child. Nobody deserves that, he thought, rebelliously, my father doesn’t deserve it, Sauron doesn’t deserve it, Morgoth himself doesn’t deserve the way that it makes you feel, the way that it never really leaves you. Eru gave mortals the dignity of choosing their own ends for a reason. Being denied even that, even the dignity to kill you, is an act of unspeakable cruelty. That being said,

“I am going to kill Sauron. If it is the last thing I do, I will kill him.” It was no oath. Sworn to no higher power than himself and Rúmil, but still it seemed to cut through the room like a knife.

“I hope you can.” Rúmil muttered. “He killed my grandfather.”

“His master killed my grandfather,” Maedhros informed him, for no particular reason. It was a fact that one would have to have been a particularly poor student of history not to know.

“Mm,” Rúmil muttered, and leant his head up against Maedhros. They rested there for a long time, Maedhros running tentative fingers through Rúmil’s hair, and, eventually, braiding it into complicated patterns. His right hand was not as nimble as it had once been, but the left was far more skilled, which covered for the deficit.

As they rested there, Maedhros’s mind wandered until realization struck him. “That’s what they’re carrying, isn’t it? The fellowship. They’re carrying Sauron’s ring.”

Rúmil nodded. “They must mean to destroy it. His grip on this world is tenuous enough that such a thing would destroy him as well.”

No wonder nobody had wanted Maedhros to know the truth of the quest. An artifact of great power that had cost a member of his line their life? If Maedhros had been his father, he would have wanted to claim it, to make it his own. But Maedhros had felt a silmaril burning in his hand, and, with no oath to compel him, could not have been bribed nor coerced into taking an artifact of such power. They brought nothing but sorrow to those who carried them. Poor Frodo, who would now surely be in danger of the fate of Thingol and Dior and Elwing. But Maedhros, at least, would not be forced to harm him. He would stay well away from the ring, and all its charms.

“But still, your home would not be preserved from the ravages of time,” Maedhros murmured, reverting to the previous topic of conversation.

“It will fade, and we will have to leave or fade with it.”

It was a wicked thing, to lose your home with no hope of returning. Maedhros knew it well. Not
from the exile of the Noldor nor the loss of Beleriand. No, he knew it from every death he’d felt in Beleriand, for the Noldor had been doomed, and every loss might well have been forever. His father, Fingon, Curufin, Caranthir, Celegorm, Amrod, Amras. A thousand others besides, some of whom Maedhros did not even know by name. People who had died at his side in battle, or after, of the loss of those who had.

“Which will you choose?”

Rúmil put his head in his hands. “It will break my mother’s heart if I stay, but it will break my father’s heart if I go.”

Maedhros knew that feeling too. “Your brothers?”

“Haldir will follow the Lady where she wants to go. Orophin will not go, and will further break my mother’s heart.”

Maedhros pulled himself up to a fully seated position. “And what about you? What do you want? Assuming for a moment, that the people you loved would be happy, would you rather watch your home fade or leave it?”

“I do not know. Truly, I could not. I do not even know what Valinor would be like, let alone if I should like to go there.”

“I think,” said Maedhros, the beginnings of a plan beginning to form in his mind, “that I may have a solution to that.”

Rúmil twisted around to look at him. “What do you have in mind?”

Maedhros tapped the side of his head with one finger. “I have memories in my mind, Rúmil of Lóthlorien. And those will be certainly clear, untainted by my oath.”

This required no elaboration on his part. Rúmil understood perfectly what Maedhros was offering. He reached out his hand, and placed it in Maedhros’s. This was not altogether surprising, since he had been born so late and not to parents of powerful lines. He needed help to achieve psychic connections with people. In this case, physical contact with one more powerful. Maedhros had never required that kind of aid, but he suspected needing it was something Rúmil was shamed by. If only their abilities had been reversed, for Maedhros’s gifts were usually more of a curse in his mind, save for the connection they gave him with Fingon. And even that had been a curse, at times. For example, when it was severed, and the pain had been so debilitating Maedhros had thought himself back on Thangorodrim.

“Open your mind to me,” Maedhros instructed, and reached past his shields to make the connection. “Excellent form. Now look.”

It was something of a struggle to choose a memory for Rúmil. In the end, Maedhros took him on diversions through several before settling on the perfect one. Maglor and Finrod singing a duet, silhouetted by the light of the trees. A garden party in Tirion, with flowers as tall as Maedhros’s head, though he could not remember to whom the garden belonged. Noldorin architecture, towers that seemed to almost touch the stars, fountains that formed elaborate displays. A family trip to Valmar, just before Caranthir was born, where Celegorm had lost his pants and almost caused a diplomatic incident.

But in the final memory, it was just as the light of Telperion was beginning to fade into Laurelin, and he was sitting high on a cliff, overlooking the sea.
“What do you suppose is out there?” Findekáno asked. He was in that stage of late youth where one asked that question frequently.

“At the moment, I would be inclined to say a large swath of ocean, followed by Tol Eressëa, followed by another large swath of ocean.” Maitimo was in that later stage of youth where he found such things trite and irritating.

Findekáno swatted him on the arm. “Stop that, Russandol. You know that was not what I meant.”

They both looked back out to the sea, and in the back of his mind, Maedhros could hear Rúmil gasp at the sight of it all. The water, glimmering silver and gold with the light of the trees. Tol Eressëa rising in the distance like some monstrous sea serpent. In the foreground, a pair of Swan Ships, out early. Finno waved at the sailors, and one of them noticed and, elbowing her crewmate, waved back. Her long golden locks were piled atop her head, and she seemed a decade or two older than Maitimo. Findekáno, showing his youth, blushed and looked away.

“What, Finno, are you thinking of marrying young as your father did?” Maitimo joked, in a clear attempt to ruffle his young cousin’s feathers.

“Jealous?” Findekáno quipped.

Yes, Maedhros thought, with all the benefits of hindsight. Yes, he is. But he won’t admit it until he’s been so broken that he can never quite love you the way you deserve. He won’t admit it until he is me.

“Yes, heart-achingly jealous. Why, how could you break my heart so cruelly? I shall have to go sing sadly of it to soothe my aching heart.”

“You said aching heart twice,” Findekáno pointed out. “And please, I would prefer it if you did not sing.”

“I always knew that you liked Makalaurë better than me,” Maitimo cried, and threw himself melodramatically onto his back. But he could not maintain the façade, and erupted into laughter a half second later. The memory dissolved in a flash of golden light, and return Maedhros and Rúmil to their seats on the floor.

“It must look very different in the light of the sun,” Rúmil said, once he had his wits back about him.

Maedhros shrugged. That was a thing he had never seen. “But very beautiful still, I imagine.”

“Not so beautiful as the people who inhabit it perhaps?”

Ah yes, Rúmil would also have seen Findekáno. How he looked in those years, how Maitimo had loved him, even before either of them knew it.

“When did you know it?” Rúmil asked, the lingering connection providing him with far too much insight. Maedhros slowly withdrew, and returned his shields. It was quiet. Lonely. But he had Fingon, and at least this way, the enemy had no possible way of reaching him. Once, when Maedhros had had many ties, to friends and family and acquaintances, he had been vulnerable. How many of their deaths had he felt, trapped on Thangorodrim? How many of them had the enemy been able to use against him? No, such things were not safe, though in an Unmarred Arda, they would have been.

“I do not know, exactly. Hindsight tells me that I loved him for decades before Beleriand, but we did not speak of such things then. I remember that I told him I loved him when I thought I was going to
die on Thangorodrim, but I do not remember if it was meant as a romantic or platonic love. He thought I did not remember any of it, on account of the blood loss, and never asked. Then, when his father was king, he came to visit me often. More than was appropriate, really. Always, he would give some excuse about checking the fortifications or the morale of the soldiers. Nobody believed it for a second, for he never went to visit any of our other kin.

“Then, finally, more than a decade after construction on Himring was finished, he showed up again out of the blue. I asked him for his excuse that day, and he told me that he loved me, and so had no excuse. I did not believe him. I could not believe that someone like him could love someone like me. You must understand, in those early days, I was still in the enemy’s clutches more days than not. The men who served under me used to say that I was only their commander in direct sunlight; in the darkness, they could not tell me from a shade. Not that they ever said that to my face of course, but mortals have never really understood elven hearing. So, for Fingon to confess that he loved me then, when I had no indication he had before- it was a shock to say the least.

“We talked about it, for a long time before we wed. If anyone ever asked me for love advice, which they never do, I would tell them to talk to their love. It can only hurt to rush such things, even in desperate times. We had so much to learn. Sometimes, he would come for a week or for a month, and we would talk about the little things, or the big, all consuming ones that always stood between us. Our fathers. The enemy. Losgar. Our brothers and his sister. We talked until words were not enough, and then we wed. Alone and unblessed by his father or my father or any of the Valar. Just him, and me, and Eru as witness. In the manner of the first elves. And by then, I knew I would never love another. He was it.”

Rúmil hummed his understanding, and they both lay back on the floor. Embarrassingly, Maedhros fell asleep there. It was a kinder, safer place than Maedhros had slept in many years, and not nearly so lonely.

Chapter End Notes

Skip from
“We what you can tell me”... to “I am going to kill Sauron..”
Onwards

Chapter Summary

Maedhros waits, watches, learns and plots.

Chapter Notes

And so we return to this story, finally, with apologies from your humble-ish author for the delay.

Maedhros has something similar to a panic attack or flashback in the very last bit of this story, relating to Alqualondë. Just skip after the words

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

In Maedhros’s dreams, he was Fingon. Or possibly Fingon was him. Or maybe they were both simply a Fëa, as closely intertwined as to be indistinguishable from each other. They grieved each other, and rejoiced to see each other again. Mine, thought one of them. Yours, exclaimed the other. They repeated the refrain back and forth, alternating which said what. It was peaceful, calming. Maedhros was nothing and everything, but they were together and that was what mattered.

In waking life, he felt someone shaking him, and threw the culprit into the nearest wall. Haldir hit with a thump, and a couple of Rúmil’s books toppled down from the shelves, striking him on the head.

“Ow,” Haldir complained, rubbing his head and giving Maedhros an offended look.

“Fool. What were you thinking, shaking me awake like that?” Maedhros could have killed him. Arrogant, inelegant, uncontrolled moron.

“I was thinking to tell you that Rúmil had been called out early, and I brought you breakfast, you ungrateful Fëanorion.”

Ah yes, he was holding a linen sack wrapped around what might have been some fruit. That was a rather kind gesture. And wait-

Maedhros’s sleep-addled mind finally put two-and-two together to come up with the all-encompassing four. “Fëanorion?” he managed weakly.

“Do not deny it.” Haldir muttered harshly. “I well know it to be true.”

Maedhros hadn’t been planning to deny it. He would not, if challenged. “Then I admit that name as my own, and bear the consequences as your Lord and Lady see fit.” From what he knew of Haldir, the Silvan’s respect for his lord and lady was powerful indeed.

“They mean you to bear no consequences, and my brother means the same.” He pulled an apple from his sack and threw it at Maedhros, who snatched it out of the air with his left hand.
“Then accept my apologies for the deception. And for allowing Rúmil to play his part in it.”
Maedhros took a bite out of the apple, and pushed himself to a seated position.

For himself, Haldir withdrew a pear. “My brother has not the sense to even distrust a traitor. I do not hold you responsible for that.”

Maedhros could tell from his delivery that the only person Haldir held responsible for Rúmil’s wellbeing was Haldir. “You know that he only wanted to protect you. He worried for what you might do, if you knew.”

Haldir looked away. “He should not worry of such things.”

“Would that none of us had to worry the actions of our brothers.”

Haldir shot him a dirty look. Even the insinuation seemed an insult to him. “I am not anything like you.”

Maedhros raised an eyebrow. “So, you do not love your brothers? You would not do anything to protect them? You do not love your people and your home? You would not do anything to protect them?”

Haldir spluttered, unable to articulate an effective retort. He took a bite of the pear, which effectively gave him time to consider his answer. Finally, he managed, “Do not think to entrap me in your words.”

“Your brother says that even unpopular perspectives ought to be documented.”

“My brother brought not one but three mountain lion cubs home as a child. He doesn’t get an opinion on these matters.”

Maedhros had to cover his mouth with his hand to keep from spitting a mouthful of apple in laughter. “My brothers Amrod and Amras did the same, only with tigers instead of mountain lions.”

This anecdote required a diversion to explain what, exactly, a tiger was. In Valinor there lived many animals that existed only in some regions of Middle Earth, and others that existed nowhere else at all. Tigers, it appeared, live nowhere Haldir had ever been. This ended up segueing into a discussion of Rúmil’s youthful misdeeds, and then Ambarussa’s.

“I remember, my father would have been furious if he’d known, so we tried to keep it from him. But the problem was, Caranthir had been the first to discover the tigers, and one of them bit him. Celegorm spoke tiger, but he only had so many hands. There we were, Caranthir lying on the floor bleeding, Curufin standing over him offering advice, Maglor and Celegorm holding the tigers while Celegorm tried to explain the situation to them, and Amrod and Amras both holding onto me, begging me to allow them to keep the tigers. That was when my father and grandfather walked in, with Ingwë and Olwë both. In the surprise of the moment, Maglor’s grip slipped on his tiger, and it bit him too. I’ve never seen anyone as disappointed as my father looked in that moment.”

Haldir leant his head back against the wall with a thud. “I may never have been embarrassed by them in front of three kings, but I must admit that sounds an awful lot like my brothers.”

This brought them to a peace, of a sort, for Haldir would require great cause to go against his lady and lord, and he did not find such cause in Maedhros’s current conduct. In better circumstances, in an unmarred Arda, they might have become a sort of friends. But this was not that world, and so Maedhros and Haldir remained tentative allies, nothing more. He left two hours later, leaving Maedhros with little enough to occupy his time in Lóthlorien. Approaching more of the Galadhrim
would have risked his exposure, given that of the three he had met, two had guessed his identity with no prior knowledge. In addition, they were largely in mourning, for the Maiar who was slain by the balrog, Gandalf the Grey, so-called by mortals. Nobody seemed to know or care to his real name, which saddened Maedhros a little. With that knowledge, he might have known which of the Valar they ought to have been looking to, as the lord of the dead Maia. Galadriel thought he had served Nienna, or perhaps Lórien, but even she was not certain. Neither of them knew what happened to one of the Maiar if they died, or whose providence such things were.

In deference to the Silvan and Sindarin custom, Galadriel suggested he offer prayers to Varda-Elbereth, as they called her. The Queen of the Valar was held in the highest esteem among the peoples of starlight, just as extra honours were given to Ulmo by the Teleri. Maedhros did so, though he rather doubted that his concern would mean much to the Lady of Starlight, in comparison to the weeping cries of all the Galadhrim.

That conversation surrounding Gandalf was nearly the only time Maedhros spoke to his cousin during his stay in Lóthlorien. She was busy, with the death of Gandalf, with the orcs on the border, with the future of the fellowship, and had little enough time to spare for any of it. She only had bothered to speak to him at all to flesh out the details of their cover story. Gaelon of Nargothrond, bastard of an unknown father, slight Fëanorion accent all Celebrimbor’s fault. Married to someone who had died in the service of King Fingon during the Nírnaeth Arnoediad. It was better to sow falsehood with seeds of truth, Galadriel had said, with a rueful grin.

Besides this conversation, Maedhros occupied most of his days with Rúmil’s library. He read the biography of Celebrimbor, as well as one of Gil-galad, and skimmed through a history of Thranduil’s kingdom, which it seemed had been much troubled in recent years. Though it gave him certain thrills to thusly occupy his mind, it was simply not practical. Accordingly, he turned his focus instead to maps of the lands they would soon traverse, and military accountings of the armies contained therein. There appeared two main forces in opposition to the enemy. There was the horse-bound Rohirrim, who reminded him of Maglor’s riders in the Gap, and also the kingless kingdom of Gondor. It was the subject of this second kingdom that lead him to Boromir, who was the son of its steward. As Maedhros understood it, steward seemed to be a hereditary title, but one which occupied the same role as a regent might, in elven society. He had found no satisfactory Quenya or Sindarin translation, and most of Rúmil’s books simply wrote the Westron word in Tengwar and left the matter at that.

Boromir had been unwilling to discuss Gondor’s military capacities and strategies with Maedhros, which was reasonable enough. Instead, they ended up spending more than one afternoon sparring together, which was a useful pastime indeed. Maedhros had not sparred with his right hand in many years, and the chance to use it again was exhilarating. The first three bouts they fought, Boromir won handily. In the fourth, in a fit of pique, Maedhros shifted to his left hand partway through, and defeated Boromir in a single strike.

“Why did you not use your left hand sooner?” Boromir demanded, from where he lay on the ground, Maedhros’s blade at his throat. “Orcs do not mind especially which hand wields the blade that kills them.”

“My right hand is the foremost of the two, or it was when I was young. With time, it could surpass my left in skill again.”

Boromir shook his head, and, taking Maedhros’s offered hand, pulled himself to his feet. “Time, my friend, is the one thing we do not have.”

The next day, he brought Maedhros a long dagger, and suggested he practice fighting with it in his right hand, and a sword in his left. It was awkward to say the least, but there was promise in the idea.
The idea of being unable to be disarmed by a single action held some appeal for him. It might take some months to accrue the skill, but unlike returning to using a sword in his right hand, this plan didn’t require him to go defenceless in the interim. It was a gift both of them would come to benefit from.

As his days were occupied with books and Boromir, Maedhros found his nights occupied with dreams. Some were simple, normal. Others had a hint of something more about them. Not the future, nor the present. If they were the past, it was not one Maedhros remembered.

Maedhros dreamt that he was speaking to a man, in a long dark tunnel that seemed to stretch on beyond comprehension or belief. In the dream, he was in a linguistics lesson, and the man was his tutor. This was most bizarre since Maedhros had never actually had a tutor or attended a class for linguistics. It was a subject his father had taught most of his sons personally. All, in fact, save Celegorm who threatened to only memorize the rudest possible phrases from any language their father taught him, and repeat them in public until the lessons stopped. Celegorm had then proceeded to pursue the subject under Oromë’s tutelage, driving their father ever closer to the brink of madness as only Celegorm had been able to.

In the dream, he said, “Elros, is that you?”

“I wish,” the man said, with a laugh. Maedhros awoke before he could ask why.

In another dream, he was kneeling on the floor before someone.

“Please forgive me,” he was in the process of saying. He knew, in the dream, that forgiveness was crucial. “I will do anything. Please.”

As was the logic of dreams, the figure he was speaking to flickered and changed form. He knew that he was speaking to his father, for his failure not in the matter of the silmarils but in the matter of his brothers, and also to his brothers, for their losses, and to Fingon, for some wrong he could not identify. Even unyielding Námo seemed to be standing over him, rendering judgement. This dream dissolved in the everlasting darkness, consuming all, including Maedhros himself. This last had not the faintest hint of magic about it, and Maedhros suspected it was simply his fear, though the terror remained with him past the dream. Tendrils of the darkness seemed to caress him even in the sunlight for a whole day after.

He saw Galadriel again at the tail end of their time in Lóthlorien, and she was far different than their first two meetings. She appeared older, somehow. Sadder. It was early in the night or very late in the day, depending on your perspective. Maedhros hadn’t been asleep before Galadriel had knocked, but he almost wished he had. That would have been less embarrassing than the truth, which was that he was staring mournfully at a sketch of Fingon in a history textbook, and regretting agreeing to go on this mission to begin with.

“I shall deliver your message,” said Galadriel, with no context. Maedhros knew what she meant instantly. She would sail. She would tell Fingon he was loved, if Maedhros couldn’t be there to do it himself.

“What changed?” Maedhros asked. He was deeply grateful for the assurance. It was taking more out of him than he cared to admit to maintain some semblance of normalcy in his connection with Fingon, and outside of the bounds of Lóthlorien, under the stress of the mission, he increasingly suspected it would fade so that they could only tell if the other lived or died. No more. Fingon, who would not know what had changed, would surely be distressed. But such a thing was unavoidable, and if Maedhros lived, he could explain later. If Maedhros didn’t live, well, someone would have to. Galadriel was more qualified than most.
Galadriel sat across from Maedhros at the table, and clenched her hands tightly. She seemed almost small. “Frodo offered me the ring.”

“Oh.” Maedhros wondered what that had been like. To be offered a corrupted artifact of immense power. He wondered at the character of his cousin, who seemed to have the fortitude to deny such a thing.

“I said no, obviously. I think that was it. I think this shall be my redemption. I can look power in the face, and turn it down.”

Maedhros leant in close to her. That should have been a celebratory revelation, yet Galadriel looked grieved. “Then what upsets you?”

“I wanted it,” Galadriel confessed, “I wanted the power of it more than I have ever wanted anything in my entire life. I wanted to tear Sauron apart, the way he tore Finrod apart. I did not say no because I wanted to turn it down. I said no because I knew that everything anyone ever said about our family was true. There is too much darkness in my heart to be trusted with such power.”

“I understand,” said Maedhros, both because it was true and because she needed to hear it.

Galadriel gave him a mournful smile. “I knew you would.”

That, no doubt, was why she’d come to her kinslaying cousin for comfort instead of retreating into the arms of her flawless husband. Celeborn seemed a good sort. Unquestionably, he was more ‘good’ than Maedhros had ever been. But Maedhros had seen the darkness in the world. He had looked into the darkest parts of his own heart.

“But, Galadriel, you are wrong.” Before she could object, Maedhros rushed on. “If there was darkness in your heart, you would not have been able to deny the ring. You would have taken it, and wrought what you would. I know the compulsion to seize power, to seize beauty. Artificially instilled or not, if the darkness is strong, you cannot deny it. But you did.”

“Do you think so?” Galadriel asked. Her fair eyes met his, and for a second Maedhros contemplated giving her a hug. He rejected this plan soon enough, because she was unlikely to appreciate such a thing from him. If she’d wanted a hug, she would have gone to Celeborn.

“I know it to be true.”

She graced him with a fey smile. “And so the line of Finwë in Middle Earth ends. Galadriel submits to the grace of the Valar, Elrond rejoins his wife, Maedhros fights the honorable fight, to live or die in righteous glory.”

“And Maglor?” Maedhros continued for her, “what is to become of him?”

Her smile slipped away, quick as it had come. “And so the line of Finwë in Middle Earth ends. Galadriel submits to the grace of the Valar, Elrond rejoins his wife, Maedhros fights the honorable fight, to live or die in righteous glory.”

“Forges of Aulë,” Maedhros swore, in Quenya.

“Quite. Well, if you do not die against Sauron, perhaps you shall be able to find him someday.”

Perhaps. If he didn’t die. Not much, but enough to base a hope on. Defeat Sauron, don’t die, find
Maglor, sail, reunite with Fingon, live happily ever after. And, as a more realistic hope, Galadriel.

“And if I do, you will keep your promise.”

Galadriel nodded. “I will. Though I have to say, Fingon would not find me much of a comfort.”

“If Celeborn died, would you not want to know that he died with honour, and that he loved you?”

“If Celeborn died, I do not think I would care whether he had done it with honour or dishonour. If Sauron kills you, Fingon is going to feel it. There is nothing my words can do to change that.”

This had been a thought that troubled Maedhros of late. “I am not going to let him feel it. I will not let him suffer the way I suffered. If I am going to die, I will cut him out of my mind. That will hurt him, but it will be an easier pain to bear.”

Galadriel traced a meaningless pattern across Rúmil’s table. “And that would leave me to tell Fingon the truth of your demise.”

“If there were any better way-“

Galadriel cut him off. “I have never known you to be cruel, Maitimo. If there were a better way, you would take it. But right now, you have your duty, and I have mine. If you feel guilty, take this as payment. If I die here, in some strange twist of fate, you may tell my daughter, my parents, what has happened to me. I am sure Elrond would rather not be the sole bearer of bad news.”

“Celeborn?” Maedhros queried.

“If I die, he will remain in these woods until the sun fades from being, and neither Morgoth nor Manwë could stop him.”

Maedhros didn’t really have anything to say to that.

“If you die, and I live, I promise to tell them that you did the right thing, that you looked darkness in the face and turned away.”

Galadriel extended a single slender hand, and they shook to affirm the amendment to their bargain.

Taking a few minutes to compose themselves, Galadriel announced that the company was to leave in the morning, and a late-night meeting would be held to determine their course. Maedhros put away his book, taking one last look at the image of Fingon, and followed her out into the night. The air was a little brisk, but gentle as a kiss pressed to the forehead of a child. Maedhros breathed in deep, letting the cool breeze wash over him.

“Ready?” Galadriel asked. When Maedhros murmured an affirmative, she led him into a meeting with her husband and the fellowship. All nine of them looked up to stare at her and Maedhros.

“Gaelon will be joining those of you who journey on, in whichever capacities you may need him, for the duration of your journey.” Celeborn’s tone left no room for debate, though Aragorn made an effort none the less.

“My lord, in these troubled times, surely it would not be wise-“

Galadriel cut him off. “I have seen Gaelon’s mind and heart. You may trust him implicitly. He has lost more to Sauron and his master than any one of you, and he has witnessed also the havoc wrought by the Silmarils. He knows who his enemy is, and would no more take the ring than he
would take a blade to his own heart.”

In other words, improbable, but not impossible, with the awareness that such an act would be intensely self-destructive and immediately followed by death. A more accurate metaphor, perhaps, than Galadriel had intended.

“As you say, my lady,” Gimli acknowledged, more for Galadriel’s benefit than Maedhros’s. Still, he shot the dwarf an appropriately grateful glance.

“Gondor would more than welcome another defender,” announced Boromir, in a surprisingly diplomatic tone with unsurprisingly undiplomatic sentiments.

Galadriel examined him closely. “So, you intend to journey home. But will others journey with you? The western road to Gondor diverges from the eastern, which is the straighter path of the quest.”

Celeborn, the slightest mirth in his eyes, such that mortals would likely not have discerned it, said, “I see you do not yet know which road to take.”

He offered them supplies and boats, which was both truly generous and, for Maedhros, deeply surreal. In the right light, Galadriel looked not dissimilar to her grandfather Olwë, whose ships had been stolen at Alqualondë and burned at Losgar. She clearly saw the resemblance too, for there was a tough set to her mouth when she looked at him. As if daring, saying, ‘see what I may do’.

In the matter of who would steer the boats, trouble arose. Legolas, Aragorn and Boromir could all manage a boat well enough. This would have been enough people to divide fairly into three boats, if it weren’t for Maedhros. The boats were built properly for two grown elves or men, which meant they could carry a man or elf and two hobbits, or an elf and a dwarf, but they could not carry any assortment greater than this with supplies. Maedhros necessitated his own boat, and had not the skills to steer it. Fortunately, one of the hobbits also claimed some skill with a boat. The look Celeborn gave him was deeply sceptical, but it could not be helped. Maedhros had not been in a boat since they had landed at Losgar for anything longer than a river crossing, and did not intend to attempt to manage another one. Ever.

Seeing there would be no solution found tonight, Galadriel dismissed them all, to find their rest and choose their paths in time for the morning.

The next morning found Maedhros, who had slept dreamlessly, shoving his armor and an extra set of clothes into a bag. He had still no sheath for his pilfered dwarven weapon, which he wrapped in cloth in the end and shoved also into the bag. Boromir’s dagger, which had a sheath, he attached to his belt, and prayed to Manwë that he would not soon have need of it. Then, with a heavy heart, he closed up Rúmil’s home, which, for a short time, had offered him peace, and joined the Fellowship on the forest floor. Only Boromir seemed pleased to see him.

“Gaelon!” He called, and embraced Maedhros like a brother. “Your company much warms my heart. It has been decided that you shall accompany me, for this day at least, given your lack of knowledge of boats. Though I am sure a man of your wit could learn.”

Maedhros certainly could learn, though he was certainly not a man, and said as much. Boromir laughed at this and clapped him on the back. Before they could speak more, a group of Galadhrim emerged from around them, bringing supplies, food and water, as well as a handmade cloak for each of them, even Maedhros. It was of the best elven make, such a thing as Maedhros had not owned in many years. In fact, even in Valinor, Maedhros’s cloaks had almost always been made by an artisan rather than by someone of a powerful magic lineage like Galadriel and her associates. His mother had actively disliked weaving, which was an interesting peak into the psychology of his father that
Maedhros didn’t much like to think about.

“My thanks,” said Maedhros to the elleth who offered him his cloak, in Sindarin. She blushed scarlet and looked away. Boromir clapped him on the shoulder.

“I suppose they find you handsome, my friend.”

Maedhros shook his head at him. “You forget yourself, I am married.”

Boromir tapped his own hand. “No ring.”

Ah yes, that was true. “It was not returned with me, I am afraid.”

In truth, there was a perfectly logical explanation for this. Maedhros had only ever worn his wedding ring when he was alone or with Fingon. Never in public, and never to kill. Thus, he had died without it.

“Can you blame her for the mistake?” Boromir queried, giving Maedhros a side eye.

“I suppose not. But I am also at least twice her age and a-” Maedhros cut himself off before he could say ‘kinslayer’. “Uh, not interested in the feminine persuasion especially.”

The look Boromir gave at this told him that mortals had apparently not changed their views on the standards and conditions for marriage in the past two ages. Good information to know, but not good for Maedhros’s patience or sanity.

Aragorn cleared his throat, and the entire group looked up to see Haldir entering the clearing. He had returned, it seemed, to see them off. Rúmil was not with him. Maedhros hid his disappointment. Haldir led them all out of the city for some ten miles, through mallorn-trees and elanor and the various naturals beauties of Lóthlorien. Maedhros spent most of his walk accessing the odds of various members of their party travelling with Boromir or the ringbearer. The hobbits, he was sure, would stay together. Sam especially. Legolas too would be focused directly on the enemy. Though Gimli would, he thought, prefer a straightforward fight to a mission of stealth, anything Legolas could do he would endeavor to do better. Aragorn, as a leader, he would have assumed was destined for the main quest, save for the fact that he kept exchanging mournful looks with Boromir. Perhaps, as a man, he felt a duty to the men of Gondor. Or perhaps there was something more at play that Maedhros was missing. He thought, however, that it was likely as not that Aragorn would choose his duty to the fellowship over the bonds that would bring him to Gondor. That was a shame, but necessary. Nobody else had Aragorn’s skill at leadership. As for Maedhros himself, his duty as Galadriel had assigned it was to give council in the mission against Sauron. No matter what manner of friendship had grown between he and Boromir, he could not in good faith travel with him. That left Boromir and the men of Gondor to stand against the enemy alone, which seemed wrong, but there was nothing Maedhros could do about it.

They emerged from the forest where two rivers met- the Silverlode and the ‘Great River’, Maedhros thought they were called in Westron, though he had seen greater rivers in his time. There were many boats moored here, of many descriptions. Some were silver, gold or green, but the vast majority were the same white and grey Maedhros remembered from Alqualondë. They had been streaked with blood, then. So much blood. It had stained the white wood scarlet and had never come out, not until the boats had burned. There were bodies everywhere, Noldor and Teleri, on the sand and in the water and even in the boats themselves. Maedhros could already smell them rotting, could see the flesh beginning to drip from their bones. His throat grew tight, breathing became nearly impossible. He closed his eyes for a second, just so it would all go away, and tripped into Haldir.
“Easy,” Haldir muttered, though he seemed bitter about doing so. “You’re in Middle Earth.” He steadied Maedhros with a hand on his shoulder.

“Are you alright?” Aragorn asked, immediately.

What had Galadriel said about the truth within a lie? “It reminds me of Alqualondë. More than I thought it would. It is- I would prefer not to talk about it.”

“Ye look pale, lad,” Gimli told him, clearly failing to recognize the irony of him calling Maedhros a lad. “Perhaps y’ought to sit down.”

“I will be alright,” Maedhros muttered, but Aragorn cut him off.

“Take your time, Gaelon. We will get everything ready.”

There was some kind of flurry of movement that left Maedhros alone with Haldir.

“I had not thought-“ Haldir’s voice was little more than a whisper. The sound of rushing water was loud enough to almost give them privacy.

“You had not thought it would bother me. Most people do not. And they are right that when you have seen as much death as I have, it begins to bother you less. But you must remember how small the elven community in Valinor really was, excluding the Vanyar. The Noldor and Teleri royal families were married together. The people who died at Alqualondë were our people. And it was not even the oath that killed them, not really. We could have stopped in a way we could not have in the later kinslayings.”

Haldir rocked back and forth on the balls of his feet. “Most elves who experience things like what you have experienced sail.”

Maedhros took a second before he responded, “Not all. Your lord and lady stay. Despite it all.”

“They have a duty to be here. For us.”

“So do I.”

When Maedhros finally met Haldir’s eyes, he found him smiling wryly. “I do hope you succeed in your quest. For Rúmil’s sake, if nothing else.”

“If my time here makes Rúmil safer, it will be worth it. I am tired of not being able to save even one person.”

Haldir put a hand on his shoulder. “That, I think, I understand.”

Aragorn was back before Maedhros could say anything more. “Gaelon, we can leave now if you are ready.”

“I am. Thank you Haldir, for everything.”

Maedhros kept his eyes on the ground, and what was left of his pride buried deep, and allowed Aragorn to lead him to a small, grey boat, with Boromir already seated inside. They neither of them spoke, and Maedhros allowed Boromir to guide the boat away from this place of memory.

Chapter End Notes
Hope you liked it! Next week, I will definitely have a Series of Unfortunate Events oneshot happening, but IF I have a productive weekend, I will also upload another chapter of this. It’s May long though, so I’m a bit busy. We’ll see. Thanks for sticking with me.
Upstream and Down

Chapter Summary

Galadriel gives her gifts, Maedhros tells a story, and the long journey to Gondor begins.

Chapter Notes

Maedhros has another very minor, short Alqualondë flashback right at the beginning of this chapter, from ‘...were not of their lineage’ to ‘Celeborn gave him...’ He then discusses it until ‘Maedhros took about twenty...’ As always, look after you first and my story like at most third I’m sure you’ve got more important shit to worry about.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It took Maedhros only a couple of minutes to realize they were in fact going the wrong way, struggling upstream. He attempted to silently convey his confusion to Boromir, but the man wasn’t meeting his eyes. Poor Boromir. Maedhros almost pitied him, in as much as he pitied any from a culture where certain identities were repressed. Among the Quendi, it had never been impossible to marry anybody who consented (how could it be, when an oath to Eru was all it took to be truly bonded?), though some cultures, like the Vanyar and Noldor, regarded sex and gender in more repressive ways than others. But in Beleriand, with death around every corner, people made peace with their kin, despite any differences, for the enemy was the only enemy who mattered. As Lord of Himring, Maedhros had decreed that any in his service, man or elf, might marry any who consented. The men had thought him terribly strange, but it was hard to say no to the huge elf with the gruesome scars and the big army. And they had come to love him, in the end. Plainly, however, Boromir’s folk were not of their lineage.

They came around a bend in the river, at which point Maedhros, startled by the sight before him, flailed wildly and almost fell out of the boat. Only a quick save from Boromir caught him. What had shocked him so was Galadriel, in full regalia, standing on board a swan ship. She was the spitting image of Olwë, save for her decisive femininity. Celeborn, sitting at her feet, covered his face to hide his amusement. Galadriel, who had been smiling, let her face fall as she recognized Maedhros’s distress. She signalled for the two Galadhrim who were rowing to steer them to shore, where she stepped out, pulling Celeborn with her, and had the boat sent away.

“We have come to bid you our last farewell,” she called across the water. She was holding a harp, and had, perhaps, been intending to greet them with a song. Now, it hung uselessly at her side. For this, Maedhros was grateful. “and to speed you with blessings from this land.”

The four smaller boats came over to the shore as well, where Maedhros, feeling oddly seasick, leapt out as swiftly as his legs would carry him. His breath was catching in his throat, though he felt less badly than he had at the docks. He steadied himself, forced his breathing to slow for a second, until slowly, as the moment ended, he was able to stand properly and meet Celeborn’s eyes.

Celeborn gave him a dubious look. “You have been our guests, and yet you have not shared a meal
Galadriel extended a hand to Maedhros and said, “my lord, I may borrow Gaelon for some time, excuse us.”

She practically dragged Maedhros out of earshot.

“Alqualondë?” She demanded, voice soft but commanding.

Maedhros forced himself to nod, and then flinched when Galadriel, whose regalia reminded him so much more of the maiden she had once been than the general she now was, pulled him into a tight embrace. Feeling him recoil, Galadriel released him.

“I am sorry, Maedhros. Truly. I had not intended that message for you.” When Maedhros raised an eyebrow, she continued. “Maedhros, I play up my connections to Olwë every time Thranduil sends an ambassador our way. It makes him very uncomfortable to remember that I am both Noldor and Teleri. If I ever come up with a way to remind him of Indis’s Vanyar heritage, I shall incorporate that as well. Thranduil is always baffled by the idea that I might like to remember my varied lineages, flawed as all of the are in their own ways.”

“How were you going to incorporate the Noldorin heritage?” Maedhros asked, mostly to change the subject.

“I was going to sing in Quenya. I still may, if the mood strikes me.” Maedhros, imagining the heirs of Thingol sitting, listening to a woman who outranked them all sing in the language he had banned, could not help but grin.

Galadriel seemed determined not to let Maedhros’s change of topic stick. “Do you regularly have waking memories?” It was a new term for what they at Himring had called ‘Morgoth’s Dreams’

“Not about Alqualondë, not for many years. I have worse things in my memory. But now, with the oath gone, Alqualondë is the worst thing I have done that I cannot in substance or in sentiment blame on the enemy. I think that has made it come more clearly.”

Galadriel offered him another embrace. With warning this time, he accepted it. When they were holding each other, she whispered, “sometimes I still see Elenwë falling through the ice, and I can hear Turgon screaming, Idril crying, and even though with my powers now I could have saved her, I still cannot. I cannot move or think or even breathe.”

It had never occurred to Maedhros that such things might have remained in the hearts of others, rather than only those who had done terrible things. “Are these things common? Waking memories?”

Galadriel shrugged vaguely. “Not as common as they once were. I think that everybody had them by the end of the First Age. We worked very hard to develop systems, so those who needed help and support could receive it.”

“We?”

“The kings, Gil-galad, Celebrimbor, Círdan, Thranduil’s father Oropher, and my predecessor Amdír.” Maedhros wondered what it meant that all of the kings were dead, with the probable exception of Círdan. “And then of course, myself, Celeborn and Elrond. Gil-galad ceded the bulk of the work quickly to Elron and I when it became clear we were the most invested parties. Thranduil helped too, oddly enough. He was always sending letters full of clever ideas and interesting insights. This was before his father died, and he was not yet drinking to cope with the stresses of kingship.”
Maedhros could sympathise with that. “Elrond?”

“Oh, ask him yourself. I could analyse his reasons, but I would frankly rather not. Now, do you want to feast with our companions, or rest awhile?”

Maedhros took about twenty minutes, to reorder his thoughts and his breathing, and then rejoined the feast. They were as a group lively enough, given the circumstances, and Celeborn in particular was in an excellent mood. Maedhros thought it a mark of his own virtue that he did not hold this against Celeborn.

When the meal was ended and Celeborn had finished speaking with Boromir and Aragorn of the terrain that lay ahead, Galadriel led them all to drink from a ‘cup of parting’. Now that, Maedhros thought, could easily be replaced with the Vanya tradition of a farewell prayer, but he decided not to suggest as much to Galadriel. She was already having too much amusement with her diplomacy.

Then, when this was done, Galadriel announced the intention to give them all gifts. She started with Aragorn, who she gave an enchanted sheath for his excellent sword. Maedhros could see from the runes that the sword was called Andúril, but Aragorn quickly pulled the sheath away from his sight before he could read the rest of the words. Though the name Andúril was not familiar, and the craftsmanship was relatively new, Maedhros could not shake the feeling that he had seen the sword before. Dwarven work, like as not, with recent elven enhancement. Ah well, answers would come when they were needed, if not before.

The pair of them exchanged some banter that went over Maedhros’s head entirely, before Galadriel presented him with an extraordinary broach, silver and emerald, wrought in the likeness of an eagle, and named him ‘Elessar, the Elfstone, of the House of Elendil’. The name Elendil was familiar, but its provenance slipped Maedhros’s mind entirely. An ancestor, no doubt, and a noble one at that. All put together, the name had a fine ring to it, even if as epessës went, ‘the Elfstone’, was a particularly nonsensical one. Though being currently called Gaelon, Maedhros could not find the heart in him to judge.

Placing a hand to his temple in the universal gesture for mind-to-mind contact, Maedhros raised an eyebrow at Galadriel. Her response, genial if a little terse, was: He is courting my granddaughter. She wanted him to have it.

Boromir received a belt of gold, which pleased him greatly. Merry and Pippin each received a belt of silver, with a clasp of gold. All three belts were fine Noldorin-style craftsmanship. Legolas received a Galadhrim bow, which Maedhros could tell by his reaction was considered equally extraordinary craftsmanship. Sam received a single seed, which Galadriel suggested was only slightly enchanted, when in fact it radiated magic so strongly that Maedhros could almost taste it. But it was only the understatement that allowed the gift to be accepted, so Maedhros understood the lie.

Maedhros was so distracted by his slow probing of this magic that he only looked up when all the other elves in the party stilled. He looked at Galadriel and watched as she reached up, slowly unbraided some hair, plucked three strands, and handed them all to Gimli. Then, meeting Maedhros’s eyes, she actually smirked.

He could not help but break into laughter. It was absolutely perfect. Maedhros’s father would have been absolutely spitting with rage if he knew, and that only served to make it funnier. Poor Gimli, who did not understand the context, was terribly insulted, and only more so when Celeborn, being the only other person in on the joke, burst into laughter as well. Legolas and Aragorn attempted to piece together their knowledge of history enough to explain it to him, but they were continually distracted by the two giggling elven lords. It was only when Galadriel, long suffering, reached over and pulled out her gift for Maedhros that their laughter stopped.
It was a sword, of course. Maedhros had need of one still, so what other gift would Galadriel provide? That wasn’t the surprising part. The surprising part was the identity of the sword’s maker. For Maedhros’s memory was not poor enough to fail to recognize his own brother’s mark.

Maedhros, with a trembling, reached over to grasp the hilt. Galadriel let go so that he was holding the sword under his own power.

It could not have been meant for Galadriel, that was plain enough. It would have taken someone with more height and strength than she to wield it. So, for whom was this well made, well balanced sword intended? Maedhros walked away from the group, and spun the blade through the air, once with each hand, and then once with both, just to hear the metal sing.

“You will find that blade is the craftsmanship of my cousin, Curufinwë, son of Fëanor.” All the elves save Maedhros stared at her again. “It was likely meant originally for my brother, Finrod, but given his untimely death, it has never seen battle. I have been waiting for the right person to wield it, since I saw that it would be first used in vengeance against my brother’s killer.”

Maedhros, taking advantage of everyone else looking at Galadriel, placed the palm of his right hand to the blade, just hard enough to draw blood. It was very, very sharp, and took little force.

There, he thought at Galadriel, now your prophecy is fulfilled.

The curses Galadriel threw back at him were numerous and varied. They insulted his character, his appearance, his family, and his sense. Mostly they said, I did not mean you, you dim-witted self-centered arrogant incompetent. I have foreseen the blade in battle against the forces of Sauron, who killed my brother. Not against the fool whose brothers betrayed Finrod, against your command, I might add, in part or in whole because of a magically binding oath.

Still, despite Galadriel’s irritation, some force of the universe seemed to respond to Maedhros’s actions. He felt the magics shift, just slightly, and for a second he saw true. He saw Maglor, sitting on an unfamiliar beach, hands curled tightly in his lap. He was entirely too thin, and his eyes were unfocused. He looked up at someone, and recoiled in shock. Then the vision ended, and left Maedhros swaying on unsteady feet. He turned the blade over and checked the runes on the other side. ‘Siblings’, they said, ‘of blood and heart’. He cursed Curufin for a brilliant fool, and sheathed the blade in the plain leather that Galadriel had given it to him in.

I would not recommend trying to use the scrying spells Curufin imbedded in that. Galadriel advised, eyes twinkling with amusement. They can be very disconcerting, particularly for someone as unexperienced as you are. And miswritten. I think he meant for me to see the past or the present, but instead I always see very specific futures. Scrying was never Curufin’s forte. I doubt he could tell the difference.

Will it give me visions every time blood touches the blade?

Only if it is your blood. I have conducted some experiments. Curufin was no seer, but he was hardly stupid. What use would a sword be that gave the wielder debilitating visions of the siblings of the person they were killing?

As she said all this to Maedhros, she was also speaking aloud to Frodo, handing him a crystal phial which seemed to glow with familiar light. Maedhros, as he approached the circle, almost reached out to touch it before he caught himself. He hadn’t wanted to do that, had he? Why had he done that?

“… The light of Eärendil,” Galadriel was saying, and Maedhros understood in a flash of brilliance both why Galadriel had given Frodo such a gift and why Maedhros should never, under any circumstances, be allowed near it. For the light of Eärendil was the light of a silmaril, blessed yet
accursed. Bringing doom to the unworthy and the worthy alike.

Are you mad? He snapped at Galadriel, suddenly furious.

Her retort was pointed. Are you currently taking it? Did you reach out to take my ring? Frodo’s?

It’s different. The oath-

The oath is gone from your mind, clear as if it had been burned out. I can see the scar just looking at you. Celeborn can too.

Celeborn nodded sagely, as though he was agreeing with whatever the person speaking allowed was saying.

Maedhros, in frustration, thought irritably at the pair of them. You could have mentioned that earlier.

Maedhros gave the phial another critical look. Now that he knew what it was, he could easily recognize the attraction of the silmaril and push it down. It was no more difficult than pushing away the desire for sweet desserts or hot tea when there was none to be had. He could recognize it, clearly, as not the oath.

Who would have the power to do such a thing? Maedhros wondered at the rulers of Lóthlorien.

Based on it being burned away, not cut or torn, my immediate guesses would be either Varda or the silmaril itself. Or I suppose Morgoth might, but I have to admit that seems unlikely.

Maedhros was inclined to agree with her conclusion. Either the oath had been burnt away by the silmaril Maedhros had held, deemed fulfilled, or one of the Valar had done something to burn it from his mind entirely. Of them, Varda or Morgoth were the only two who seemed probable, and Morgoth was somewhat occupied with being imprisoned in the most secure place imaginable.

“Gaelon?” Maedhros, hearing his name, turned to look at Aragorn. “It’s time.”

Maedhros, feeling oddly sentimental, reached out and pulled Galadriel to him in a tight embrace. “Remember our deal.”

“Try not to die, and I will not be forced to.” Then, as the Vanyar did in farewells, he pressed a kiss to her cheek. Galadriel, recognizing the origins of the tradition, looked absolutely delighted. Celeborn looked a little concerned, but said nothing.

As they boarded their boats once more, Galadriel gave Maedhros a wicked smile, and opened her mouth to sing. She was no Maglor, but then, who was. Her voice was clear and fine, and the Quenya on her tongue filled Maedhros’s heart with glee as the boats pushed away from shore once more. It would be a long time before he heard song in that tongue once more.

They were on their way soon enough. Out of Lóthlorien, and into the unknown. Settled back in the boat, Maedhros and Boromir finally looked each other in the eyes. The silence of their boat, relative to their companions, was deafening. Over the rushing of the river, Maedhros could pick out Aragorn, advising Frodo in a steady tone, Gimli and Legolas, jesting, and Merry lecturing the other one-Pippin? – on how, exactly, boats worked.

“How much could you say you know about elven marriage customs?” Maedhros spoke so quietly that he was sure only Boromir and possibly Legolas could hear him over the water.

Boromir’s hands clenched on his oars. “Little enough, but not nothing. He who knew nothing of
foreign customs would be a poor Steward’s son.”

“And your knowledge suggests?” Maedhros pressed.

“Elves exchange rings, like we do. They have parents advise on or oversee the ceremony. Elves do not have relations outside the bonds of marriage.” Boromir recited as if from a lecture. Perhaps, in fact, it was from such a thing.

“Close, but wrong on all accounts. While most elves practice these customs, they are a later adaptation of our culture and practiced to varying degrees among the different elven peoples. In point of fact, an elven marriage is simply the combination of what you call relations and an oath taken. Though I have known elves to swear an oath and be married or in the eyes of the Valar with no relations as such. It is the swearing that is the important bit. That is the crux of the difference between the views of elves and men on this matter. My husband and I loved each other, deeply, and so we elected to swear vows to one another, with Eru as our witness. No parents or rings or relations were required, though we had two of those three things.”

Boromir flushed bright red. Maedhros, feeling the flow of his story, continued, “I imagine the oaths are less binding now than they once were, but I cannot imagine the nature of marriage has so changed as to remove them entirely.”

Boromir frowned as if deep in thought. “Why should marriage have become less binding?”

Maedhros had made a critical error, and tried to walk it back. “Because of Fëanor and his sons, and the faults they showed in the practice of magically binding oaths. I am sure you know the tale.”

Boromir shrugged, which was just Maedhros’s luck. “I am not sure to which tale you are referring.”

“Have you studied history?”

“From the founding of Numenor,” Boromir said, proudly.

“Well then, our areas of knowledge have no overlap whatsoever, save what I have learned these past few days, for that was after my time, unless I missed it.”

Boromir shook his head in disbelief. “That was six thousand years ago. What of import happened before?”

If only Maedhros could even begin to tell him. Even the history of Boromir’s own people would have taken years to teach with any accuracy. Centuries of alliances and marriages and battles compressed down into merely names and dates. People who Maedhros had known their entire lives, who had died at his side, less to Boromir’s mind than a single leaf to a forest. Kings and queens, generals and war heroes and farmers and architects and inventors. Forgotten. But if Maedhros was going to pass on one tale in the time he had, let it be his own.

“A great many things. Someday, I will try to tell you all of them. Or another elf would know much, I am sure, even if they were not there. And Aragorn, likely. I sense some of that knowledge in his conduct.” Boromir hummed some kind of answer. “But I suppose if you have so little knowledge of my people, I ought to begin by explaining that there are different kinds of elves.”

Boromir perked up. “That, at least, I know. There are what, three groups? Thranduil’s people—”

Here, he jerked his head at Legolas, “—Galadriel and Celeborn’s people, and Elrond’s.”

“Well, that’s a good start. There are a great deal of ways you can divide the Quendi— that’s a Quenya word which means speaking people, and it refers to any elf, as it originates from when elves were the
only beings in Arda to possess language. For example, you might divide us based on which of the first elves we are descended from, or you could use what later became prevalent among us, and divide us based on the decisions our ancestors made about travelling. For you see, Oromë, one of the Valar, once came to invite the elves to live in Valinor, far to the west. Some people stayed, some left, and some who left went further than others. The Silvan people, like Haldir, never desired to leave Middle Earth, or what was then part of the continent of Beleriand. The Sindarin people, like Legolas and Celeborn, went a ways, and then decided not to continue further, for a number of reasons. The Teleri people were Sindar who went, but remained seafaring, the Noldor went just a little further inland, and turned to craft, while the Vanyar went the furthest of all, and became deeply intertwined with the Valar.”

Boromir blinked slowly at him. “Is that the simplified version?” He inquired.

“Oh my friend, if only you knew. Those groups all subdivide into at least two, save the Vanyar. There’s also a great deal of intermarriage, and consolidation and various other things, which is how a Noldorin-Vanya-Teleri princess and a Sindarin lord can rule over a large number of Silvan elves. I imagine the history of Gondor would seem equally baffling if you explained it to me. I still do not understand how you can have a monarchy without either a king or a queen.”

Boromir laughed. “You have no idea how many kings and queens and stewards I had to memorize the names of.”

“Well, at least elves don’t have many rulers to memorize. Why, unless something has happened to Ingwë since I left, which I doubt, the Vanyar have only ever had a single king. Anyhow, I shan’t bother to name the rest, since for the purposes of this story, it is the Noldor you need to focus on. Their first king was named Finwê, and he was married to a female elf- forgive me if the Westron for that escapes me- called Míriel Þerinde. They had a son together, who was called Curufinwê Fëanáro in Quenya, or Fëanor in Sindarin. And then the unthinkable happened. Míriel became sick. Very sick. That should not happen to an elf, not without outside cause, but it did, and she died. Finwê remarried, and had four other children. Findis, Nolofinwê called Fingolfin, Irimë called Lalwen and Arafínwê called Finarfin- Galadriel’s father. Fingolfin and Fëanor saw themselves as the greatest of rivals, and acted accordingly. The enemy, Sauron’s master, sowed the seeds of discord and mistrust between them. But even before that, Fëanor was always troubled. He was the greatest, the most brilliant and powerful of all the Noldor, but he was also obsessive and suspicious and often faithless. He would have been great at his father’s right hand, but never should have been king. He was king anyway. A conspiracy of the enemy led to the death of Finwê and the theft of the silmarils, three magical jewels made by Fëanor, even more powerful than Sauron’s ring. Fëanor was furious, and he swore an oath, to Eru himself, that he would let nothing stop him from retrieving the silmarils. He made his sons swear it also, and that was the true problem, for Fëanor had seven sons, all of them skilled with a blade, and most skilled also with other weapons or magic. One mad, brilliant elf with an ill-worded magically binding oath is a problem. Seven is an army.”

“What happened?” Boromir queried, giving Maedhros a suspicious look.

“Bloodshed, kinslaying, terror, loss. Everyone- out of every ten Noldor who went to Beleriand, one probably survived to the end of the first age. Of the Sindar of Doriath, the number was probably around a quarter who survived. Nobody even has records of the deaths of the Silvan elves, to my knowledge. Barely even six hundred years. That is not long even from the point of view of a man. I lost everything. All of my siblings save one, my father as well as my uncle and aunt, my husband and all his siblings, all of my cousins save one. So many died. Much of that was the enemy, much of it was the Sons of Fëanor. Even when they did not intend harm, they did a great deal. One-handed Maedhros, the eldest of Fëanor’s sons, orchestrated the failed alliance that killed my husband. If it had succeeded, it might have saved us all. But the failure was ruinous.”
“I am sorry,” Boromir murmured, and his words seemed truly genuine. “I’ve no comprehension of the magnitude of such a thing.”

“I know. I am telling you anyhow. It is history that deserves to be remembered. Nobody should make the mistakes that the Sons of Fëanor made. Never take direction without question, even from your father, never swear an oath without reading over the wording twice, and never, ever, believe that great power belongs in your hands. Those who desire power are those who should have it the least.”

Boromir looked down, suddenly guilty. What Maedhros would give to know the cause of that guilt. What had Boromir done? What was he thinking of doing? Well, there was only one way to find out such things.

“What weighs on your mind, Boromir of Gondor?”

“Do you think that someone who does something like that, who seizes power even if they know the possible consequences, can be redeemed? Or are they already too far gone?”

Oh, if only he knew. “Well, I will not pretend to be an expert on men, but in the long lives of elves, we must all become better than we once were. I hope that the Sons of Fëanor can.”

Boromir nodded dutifully, and then changed the subject. Over the largely uneventful days they spent on the river, they would return to the topic of history often, but Boromir never again asked of the Sons of Fëanor. At least, not knowingly. He asked often of Maedhros’s personal history and even, tentatively, of his romantic life.

“Your husband, he was Noldorin as well?”

“Your husband, how did you meet?”

“Your husband, what was he like?”

“Your husband, will you ever see him again?”

For someone who had begun by being judgemental and silent, Boromir quickly was verging on nosy. In some ways, Maedhros feared the intrusion. Any question misanswered led him closer to being revealed. Yet, Maedhros was relieved on two fronts. Firstly, it relieved him to be able to speak to his new friend as honestly as he could. Secondly, he was relieved to see Boromir’s cold exterior crack open and a small, delicate blossom be revealed within. It was good that Boromir still had love and light in him.

On the eighth night on the river, Maedhros turned the tables and began to question Boromir. They spoke of Gondor and her people, and often of Boromir’s brother. Maedhros’s waved away questions about his own siblings, but he listened to tales of Faramir.

“My father never ceases to underestimate him, I believe,” Boromir told him, with a sad shake of his head. “And yet Faramir has a strong sword arm and a fine mind for command on and off the battlefield. If my father had wanted- if my father had wanted someone to truly bargain for aid to be sent to Gondor in this time of crisis, he would have sent Faramir instead of me.”

Maedhros did not ask what Boromir thought his father wanted instead, but with the long, covetous looks he shot at Frodo, Maedhros rather thought he knew. He might have queried had Sam, who was in the foremost boat, keeping watch, had not suddenly cried out in warning.

Ahead of them were swirling rapids, quick and ravenous. Boromir, seeing the danger as clearly as
Maedhros did, swore under his breath before crying out to Aragorn, “We cannot dare the rapids by night. But no boat can live in Sarn Gebir, be it night or day.”

Aragorn, ever the leader, was swift in ordering the retreat. Boromir shoved his oars into the water with determination, muttering all the while about how ‘Gaelon’ really needed to learn to row for himself. Maedhros, who thought he had the technique of it down from days of observation, did not offer to correct this assumption until it became clear that the two hobbits were having trouble overcoming the strength of the rapids. A dangerous exchange was organized by which elven grace and the lightness of hobbits allowed Maedhros and Pippin to switch places. Thus, Maedhros could row under Merry’s exacting directions. It was fortunate that he had studied under Fëanor, for he knew no other teacher so difficult to please on a first attempt.

Still, despite their efforts, the current was too much. Though they no longer moved downstream, Maedhros found himself being pulled towards the eastern bank. Boromir attempted to call him back over, and though Maedhros did change their direction, his efforts were quickly diverted by the twang of bowstrings. Forgetting himself, Maedhros cursed violently in Quenya. Dimly, he heard Legolas on the next boat doing the same in Sindarin, and felt a grim satisfaction, tempered quickly by a cataloguing of the damages. Frodo’s fantastic armour had once again saved his life, while Aragorn had a near miss hanging from his hood, and Pippin was nursing a grazed hand. Maedhros reached into his deepest strength, feeling the fabric of Arda humming all around, and rowed like he meant it. No other arrow even came close to striking one of the boats, though for that, only Oromë could be thanked.

After a seemingly interminable amount of rowing, they reached the far shore. Maedhros debated the merits of drawing his sword, but decided the shining metal would be an easy target. Legolas, for his part, leapt up to shore to get into position with his bow. Maedhros, remembering his childhood lessons, offered both thanks and a prayer to Oromë. Oromë had always been remarkably good to his family, after all, and it could hardly hurt.

Whether it was the craftsmanship of the Galadhrim, the blessings of Oromë, or the marksmanship of the archer himself, Legolas struck his mark. Not, as Maedhros had first thought, the orcs huddled on the far shore. Instead, Legolas shot straight up, and a dark, flying creature (blessedly neither dragon nor balrog, perhaps it was some new creation of Sauron himself), tumbled out of the sky, falling onto the orcs Maedhros had assumed to be the original target.

There was a moment of blessed silence, where Maedhros could hear every member of their company breathing heavily. Then Aragorn, voice steady despite their conflict, ordered Legolas back into his boat, and they rowed further still upstream, to rest and recuperate.

Chapter End Notes

Finally out of Lóthlorien! Next chapter, shit gets real! That was actually all supposed to be in this chapter but I forgot that Tolkien actually has a bunch of stuff happen on the river that isn’t in the movie because it isn’t important. Ah well, I picked my poison of the two. This is the price I pay to not kill Haldir.

Also friendly reminder that Fëanor had a weird accent and all his sons probably do too, but also like probably a lot of other people picked it up growing up around Fëanrions and Elrond almost certainly must have given his upbringing. Do you think that weirded people out a lot that this very proper half-Sindarin prince had a funny Fëanorean accent?
Because I bet everyone in the early second age was VERY confused about the whole thing and Elrond NEVER explained it. Like, ever. And now it’s like 6000 years later and everyone has forgotten and just thinks the Lord of Imladris has a funny lisp when speaking Quenya. (Except Thranduil Thranduil’s still mad probably)
Maedhros has some dreams, and sees some very large statues. Sometimes the actions of one person aren’t enough to change the world. Sometimes, they are.

Maedhros struck out from camp alone, before the sun rose, in search of privacy, though he made pretences at checking the perimeter. Aragorn seemed to understand his need to be alone, and did not press beyond ordering Maedhros to return in due course.

The reasons for his desire for privacy were simple, and all came down to Fingon, as everything usually did. His dreams of that past night worried him, for he had dreamt of their minds separated. So clear had the dream been that Maedhros remembered exactly the words they had exchanged, or, well, they had not so much been words as ideas, but Maedhros remembered them none the less.

“I worry that if you leave me now, you will never come back.” Fingon told him, as coldly as Fingon ever said anything.

Maedhros, in Fëa, had almost reached out to comfort him. “I will never leave you, not in my heart.”

“I know. It is rarely your heart that I am worried about.”

Maedhros pulled back. “I never meant to hurt you, you know that?”

Fingon moved closer, maintaining the distance between them. “I know that, Nelyo. I promise. But I do not believe I can bear to watch you leave me again.”

“Then it is fortunate that this time, it will be you doing the leaving,” dream-Maedhros had said. It was this incongruence that had Maedhros jerking from slumber. For he would have never said something like that to Fingon. Fingon had never left him of his own volition. It was Maedhros who had gone, to Formenos and Beleriand and Himring. It was Maedhros who had gone on, after Fingon had died. Going, without Fingon, was what Maedhros did.

“Oh Finno, what in Arda does it all mean?” Maedhros asked, for no particular reason. Fingon could hardly have answered, as far away as he was. Now, nine days from Galadriel’s realm, the bond between them was little more than a dream. It was there, certainly, but Maedhros thought that the magic required to send even an emotion down it would likely kill him. Poor Fingon, on far away shores, wondering why Maedhros was pulling away from him. Well, at least he probably wasn’t alone.
Maedhros had deduced from his earlier interactions with Galadriel that Finrod lived again as well, and if they two did, as well as Glorfindel, the other returnee, it seemed improbable that Turgon would not. Maedhros held no such hopes for his own siblings, but save Maedhros himself and occasionally Maglor, Fingon had rarely sought companionship from any of them anyhow. With his own brother returned, Fingon would be able to make some sort of a life, even without Maedhros there to share it. Maedhros hoped he was happy. Fingon deserved to be happy.

As had become his habit the past few days, Maedhros ran a series of drills with Finrod’s nameless sword in his left hand, and in his right, Boromir’s dagger, which the man had taken to calling ‘The Acceptable’, as a joke about Maedhros’s perhaps unrealistic standards for smiths. He was unable to keep his mind from wandering.

The sword should have a name, but it almost certainly didn’t. Curufin had barely been able to name his own son, let alone one of dozens of swords he must have made in Beleriand. Finrod would have named it, had the weapon ever reached his hand, but as it was, the duty fell to Maedhros. Maedhros had never liked naming his own weapons either, and as a part-time villain of history, he hadn’t always needed to. But heroes always named their weapons, and if Maedhros was going to be a hero now, then it was only proper that he do the same. It should probably be in Quenya, for traditions sake, but that was as far as he had gotten. A part of him, subconsciously, had started calling it ‘Gaëlon’, which certainly suited the sword better than it suited him. But that was still a terrible name for a sword, and in Sindarin besides. Well, he could always call it something awful like ‘Earth-shaker’ or ‘heart-destroyer’, and then nobody would ever take him seriously again. Actually, that wasn’t a terrible idea, necessarily.

Maedhros finished his drills, and returned to find the rest of the fellowship in the midst of the same debate they’d been having for more than a week. Walk south from here to Gondor, or continue on in the boats. Boromir, as usual, was for Gondor, and Aragorn, as usual, was for the boats. Maedhros, despite his closeness to Boromir, knew who had all the sense in this group, and it was not he.

“Boromir, need I remind you which of us is in charge here?” Maedhros quipped. He had entered the group from behind Frodo, which provided Aragorn with the opportunity to shoot him a grateful look. Boromir, despite his strong feelings on what course they should take, did not offer any challenge to Maedhros. He knew that under Maedhros’s gruff words, there were good reasons.

Aragorn and Legolas went out to search for a path by which they could carry the boats past the rapids. They were gone for three hours, give or take, the first of which Maedhros and Boromir spent training with each other, and the second of which they spent showing some blade skills to the hobbits. Gimli spent all three hours lounging by, watching the proceedings with an expression of great amusement.

Of the four, Frodo was far and away the least nervous with a blade, while Sam was the most. It was these two that Maedhros focused on, while Merry and Pippin traded quips with Boromir. As he always did teaching, Maedhros started by establishing a foundation of what they already knew. Both had survived months on the road, and not simply by chance as Sam suggested it might have been. No, nobody was that lucky.

“This all brings us to the question,” he said to them both, “What are your advantages in a fight?”

They exchanged a dubious look. “Speed.” Frodo suggested, eventually.

“Good answer. Yes, speed is always an advantage in a fight. Now, you shall never beat an elf in a footrace, but I imagine you would have a good advantage against Gimli or Boromir, especially in their armour. Your greatest advantage, and pardon me if I offend you, is that you are very small. Subtlety, stealth, trickery, oh, nobody will tell you such things are honourable, but it is better to be a
living sneak than a dead hero, especially with a journey such as yours ahead.”

There was a long pause before Sam said, “I think I like you.”

Maedhros grinned at him, “Excellent, now let me show you a few tricks.”

By the time Legolas and Aragorn returned, they were all lying on the ground. Maedhros was, notionally, discussing Noldorin forgery techniques with Gimli, but was in practicality half dozing off with his head on some moss while Gimli examined Finrod’s sword. The look that Aragorn gave them all was one of genuine disappointment. Legolas mostly seemed amused. The pair of them had found a route that had once been used for portage, and directed the boat carrying accordingly. The lightness of the wood surprised the non-elves in the group, and rendered what would otherwise have been an impossible task merely a time consuming one. By the time of their arrival back at the water, Aragorn and Boromir were both sweating profusely, and even Maedhros admitted to feeling winded.

“Well, here we are, and here we must pass another night,” Boromir said, gloomily. He was right. It was late already, the sun near to setting, and none of them were alert enough to continue on.

They set down their burdens, and Aragorn laid out the plan. They would stay the night, and trade off watch. Two together, three hours off and an hour on. Maedhros, who shared a watch in the middle of the night with Frodo, found himself engaged in quiet conversation, if for no reason other than to keep themselves awake.

“So, Galadriel said that you had witnessed the havoc wrought by the silmarils,” Frodo said, having exhausted a conversation about Frodo’s own origins. He was another fosterling, like Elrond, which seemed to be less common now than it had been in Beleriand. But of course, that was probably for good reasons. Less parents dying and such.

“I did. What surprises me is that you seem to have some knowledge of such things. Boromir does not.”

Frodo shrugged evenly. “Bilbo taught me a great deal about elvish culture and history. I can speak the language, and write in most modes of the Fëanorean script.”

Maedhros could not stop himself from saying. “The Tengwar, not the ‘Fëanorean script’.”

“I’m sorry?”

Maedhros elaborated. “Fëanor named them. Frankly I am surprised that he continues to be credited for the work, after all his legacy has become. Though of course, he would have found the failure to use the proper name a far greater insult.”

The conversation slowly changed to be about elven languages. Frodo’s spoken Sindarin was at least passable, which his written was quite good. What surprised Maedhros the most was that he also had some written Quenya. For historical reasons, he had explained. Apparently, Quenya had become an almost exclusively written language, at least in Middle Earth. Maedhros pitied those of the Sindar who sailed west to discover a land where, likely as not, Quenya was still the predominant tongue. They spoke of the differences between the Fëanorean accent and the more common Nolofinwëan or Arafînwëan accent, of Thingol’s ban and the shift to Sindarin as the primary tongue of the Noldor, of the linguistic differences between the three languages the two of them had in common, and the similarities. Maedhros had not felt so like he was having a conversation with his father in many years, a thought which amused him greatly.

When they traded off with Merry and Legolas on the next watch, Maedhros found that sleep came
with difficulty. He spent some time poking at Maglor’s shields, if for no other reason than that it was far easier than trying to communicate with Fingon, outside the magic of Lóthlorien. They were perfectly solid, and smooth. Something about them reminded Maedhros almost of an eggshell. It was far beyond his ability to crack them, but they still had some of Maglor’s usual mistakes. A few thousand years had not taught him to defend on the inside of his shields, it seemed. In other words, if Maedhros could find Maglor, could elicit a strong reaction, Maglor might break his own shielding. It was the area in which they two had always differed the most. Maglor was good at defending himself from other people, while Maedhros had excelled at defending other people from himself. It was, perhaps, a reflection of their fears most of all. After everything he had done, Maglor still feared harm to himself. After everything that had been done to him, Maedhros still feared harming others.

When he finally found sleep, Maedhros dreamed of his father. They were walking together, in darkness, but Fëanor seemed to burn with light. He was bright as a silmaril, and Maedhros had to squint to look at him.

“You know that if I could bear this burden for you—”

“You would. I know. It would be less difficult for you. That is why it is my burden, not yours.”

They stopped in place, and Fëanor turned to give him a sad smile. “And that you choose to bear it anyways is how I know you are more than capable of doing so. Your mother and I should have called you brave instead of beautiful.”

In the dream, Maedhros let out a burst of laughter. “The last thing I need is another epessë. Maedhros suits me fine. Besides, what would Fingon and I do if we shared a name? It would make marriage very awkward.”

This joke in front of his father was so shocking to Maedhros that it woke him entirely. In these dreams he had ever since his return, Maedhros never had any control over what he said, as if he was reciting a prewritten speech. But usually they were at least things he might say, save for this night and the last. His seeming cruelty to Fingon the night before and his joking revelation of his marriage this night worried him. For though they were no past of Maedhros’s, nor were they the present, they still had a sense of power about them. Maedhros increasingly worried they were the future, and a future where he was a person who could joke with his father but could not be kind to Fingon was no future at all.

It was in pursuit of knowledge of the future that Maedhros decided to spend most of their time on the river attempting to use the scrying spell attached to the sword. Galadriel was right about it having been ill designed, which was no surprise. If he put in no effort, or thought of Maglor when the first drop of blood touched the sword, he had the same vision as before. Thoughts of Celegorm and Curufin both revealed nothing at all, while Caranthir only said ‘promise me’, over and over again, standing in what looked to be someone’s living room. Whoever he was speaking to, like the person standing over Maglor, was not visible. Amras, in his vision, was dancing to music Maedhros could not hear, while Amrod was, incongruously, playing dice with Finrod. There seemed to be no logic to what the visions were of, though, according to Galadriel, they were the future. In her exact words ‘very specific futures’. Perhaps they were moments of great significance, but Maedhros thought it more likely that they were whatever the seer needed to see. And Maedhros had needed to see Amras and Amrod alive, and happy. More than he had realized. Though it gave him no insight into his own future, it was still a comfort.

Boromir looked suitably concerned by Maedhros’s dropping one drop of blood after another onto the blade of his sword, but he was even more concerned with whatever occupied his mind. They moved in silence, as the river grew faster and faster, Maedhros too occupied with his own future to consider
much of Boromir’s.

Then, they reached the Argonath, and each found themselves in awe. The statues were great, even in their state of disrepair.

“Isildur and Anárion,” Boromir murmured for Maedhros’s benefit, nodding to one and then the other. “They founded Gondor after the destruction of Numenor. Then Isildur went off to be king of Arnor after their father died, and left Anárion’s line in charge of Gondor.”

The faces were worn, by years of sun and rain and any other kinds of inclement weather. But against all odds, the statues remained standing. Aragorn bowed his head in respect as they passed, as did the rest of the fellowship. Maedhros found himself unable to tear his eyes away, but he did murmur a sort of thanks to Aulë, for with craft as fine as this, it was not improbable that Aulë himself had been watching. It was polite, if nothing else. Maedhros would have done the same for any craft as extraordinary as this, if not wrought by the hands of the doomed. Aulë did not answer, but then again, in this time, the Valar rarely seemed to. Not like when Maedhros was young, and Manwë himself might intercede on the behalf of two frightened, doomed, Noldor, who were in a situation deadlier than either was prepared to survive.

Aragorn raised his head slowly, and sat tall. He looked for all the world to see, as a man with the strength of a warrior and the dignity of a king. What Maedhros would give to know the origins of such a man, who walked with just a hint of elven grace, and who was wise far beyond what appeared to be his age. The kind of man who Galadriel was prepared to allow to court her granddaughter.

He moved as if to give some great speech, but turning back to glance at Maedhros, he only murmured under his breath to Frodo and Sam, “I wish Gandalf were here.”

The river emptied into a lake, surrounded on all sides by hills. Excepting a brief stop for dinner, they journeyed well past dusk without incident, and settled themselves at the foot of one of the hills that surrounded the lake to rest. They were close now, to their parting. Boromir would go south to Gondor, and Maedhros, with a heavy heart, would send him on his way alone. He knew that his friend needed council, and more, that Gondor needed help, but there was no two ways about it. Should worst come to worst, Maedhros could stand against Sauron, at least for long enough to buy Frodo his life. He was the only elf left in Middle Earth with the strength to do so, save Maglor, who would have been far more qualified at such a task. Maedhros reasoned that if Finrod could make a stand against Sauron and, by popular reckoning, almost win, then he, who had survived all the torments of Morgoth and Sauron together, could at least lose in a time consuming and power draining fashion. Moreover, Sauron was now without a body. He was weakened. Maedhros could do something against that.

Maedhros did not dream that night, a relief that allowed him to rest better than he otherwise might have. He had first watch, with Gimli, and last watch, with Pippin. They spoke little, mostly to discuss matters of practicality, the maintenance of the fire and whether they should wake the rest of the company in the morning. They were all contemplating the decision that lay before them, and none of them felt like talking.

In the morning, after breakfast, Aragorn called the company to order, and they all stood or sat in a circle, looking at each other. Maedhros sat, leaning up against a tree. He knew that if he stood, it would send a signal that he believed he had authority in the situation, when it should all have been Aragorn’s. Aragorn spoke compellingly of the choice, in terms that none of them could have disagree with. To Gondor, or straight on to Mordor? Simple, in the end. Yet none of them knew which choice was right. So, it was to Frodo they turned the choice. He bore the ring, after all, and
where he went, they were all, save Boromir, honour-bound to follow.

“I know that haste is needed,” Frodo said slowly, “yet I cannot choose. The burden is heavy. Give me an hour longer, and I will speak. Let me be alone!”

And so they did. Frodo went off, though not far enough, he assured them, that Legolas or Maedhros would not hear him if he screamed for help. Boromir pled a need for privacy as well, which none of them could begrudge him. After all, it was his fate they were ruminating on, and his people who required aid. They spent the first half hour or so in their own minds. Maedhros ran drills, with sword and dagger both, and then sparred a match with Gimli. His sword glowed just a little, but like as not, the orcs were on the other side of the lake. Perhaps even the same party who had shot at them a couple days earlier. He stayed focused, and mentioned it to the others, but the orcs didn’t seem to be getting nearer, so there was no harm to be done in giving Frodo some privacy.

“He is debating which course is the most desperate, I think,” Aragorn told them. In the second half of Frodo’s private time, they had gravitated back into a circle, where they now sat and debated the same topic as Frodo did.

“Of course he is,” Maedhros replied evenly. “It would be a difficult choice for any one of us, but most of all for Frodo, whose choice determines the rest of our actions.”

“We should call him back and vote,” muttered Legolas. “I should vote for Minas Tirith.”

“And so should I,” said Gimli.

Maedhros shook his head. “And yet if Frodo goes there, we lose our chance to destroy the ring. Such forces cannot be reliably controlled, not by Eru’s children. Look at the path of destruction that followed the silmarils, even separated from Morgoth’s crown.”

“That was the sons of Fëanor,” Legolas muttered, more to himself than to Maedhros.

“And they themselves were destroyed just as thoroughly, in the end. If we took the ring to Gondor, only sorrow would follow.”

Aragorn sighed. “If it were up to me to choose, I would appoint three companions, and send the rest to Gondor. Sam, of course, Gimli, and myself, perhaps. Gaelon or Legolas as well, if either of you felt a duty to continue this path. At the very least, I would send Merry and Pippin to Gondor.”

Pippin opened his mouth to object, but Maedhros beat him to it. “It is a sound plan. A small group is invariably better for missions of stealth. Five would be a better group, assuredly, than nine.”

“Do you suppose Frodo would be safer, that way?” Pippin asked.

Maedhros shrugged, and looked to Aragorn. They spoke on in this manner, coming to no real conclusion save that finding a conclusion was difficult, until Aragorn suggested they summon Frodo to make his decision known.

“I shall fetch him,” said Maedhros, “and Boromir too. He will need to hear the verdict.”

No sooner had Maedhros spoken than Boromir crashed through the trees and threw himself bodily at Maedhros’s feet.

“Gaelon. You need to help me. Stop me. Please. I tried-”

Maedhros knelt and grabbed Boromir by the shoulders. “Calm yourself. It will be alright. I promise.
Tell me what happened.”

“I tried.” Boromir repeated, and looked down at his own hands with abject horror. “I tried to take the ring from Frodo.”

The others all leapt to their feet, appalled to various degrees. None of them were as appalled with Boromir as he seemed to be with himself. Maedhros yearned to embrace his friend, but knew that Aragorn would mistrust him if he did so.

“Is he hurt?” Maedhros asked, as gentle as he could.

Boromir shook his head. “Not by my hand. But I lost him, and I do not trust myself not to do it again. I just- I needed it. Gondor needs it. The ring wants-”

Maedhros slapped him across the face. “Pull yourself together. You are being manipulated, clear as day. Aragorn, orders?”

He looked up at Aragorn, who shrugged. “I should like to give orders, if any remained to hear them.”

Looking around, Maedhros discovered that the rest of the company had slipped off while he was focused on Boromir. “Well, you may order us two, for what good it does you.”

Aragorn pinched the bridge of his nose, in a way that reminded Maedhros very much of Elrond. “Boromir, go after Merry and Pippin. Guard them at the least. If you find Frodo, send him back here, and walk yourself in an opposite direction. Gaelon, stay here in case he returns.”

Maedhros pulled Boromir to his feet, and gave him a slight push in the direction Aragorn pointed. “Redemption, Boromir of Gondor. If for the Sons of Fëanor, then assuredly for you.”

Aragorn looked like he wanted to argue, but didn’t. Instead, he headed off on his own. Maedhros, sensing something of power in the air, pulled a leaf out of the Sindarin handbook, so to speak, and climbed a tree. He had not been up it for more than a couple minutes before one of the boats started to move of its own accord.

“Take the ring off, Frodo,” he said, jumping to the ground. The boat lurched, and stopped moving. “Oh, calm yourself, I mean you no harm. I will not even stop you, not if you believe your journey will go better alone. Though I will tell you that I have been tormented by Sauron, and I would not choose to face the darkness alone. Such things are always better with a friend.”

Frodo appeared beside the boat, ring clutched tightly in his hand. “Who are you, really? I can see you, in the ring. You… glow.”

If Frodo could see him, in the ring, then Sauron could too. That made secrecy rather pointless. Maedhros, checking over his shoulder for eavesdroppers, elected to reply honestly, “I am, and have always been, Nelyafinwë Maitimo, Russandol, Maedhros Fëanorion, the one-handed and the tall, and, yes, the kinslayer.”

“And always remember that, fail or succeed, you are well loved, and none of us will judge you. Those called great
and powerful have done worse.”

Frodo looked down at the ring. “Boromir didn’t mean to do it, I think. Even as he was saying it, he looked so guilty, so afraid.”

That was the point at which Sam came barrelling out of the trees towards Frodo. It took him a few seconds to even notice Maedhros was there.

“You two should go.” Maedhros said. “Before any of the others think to come back here.”

He would have helped them pack, perhaps even attempted to convince Frodo to bring him along, but not much sooner had he spoken than he heard yelling, and a scream. Drawing Finrod’s sword, he discovered that the blade was now far, far brighter than it had previously been.

“The orcs are on this side of the river, like as not,” he told Frodo and Sam. “You will be safer if you go. May Varda light your path, and Tulkas give you the strength to follow it.”

Then, without waiting for either of them to speak, he turned, and ran towards the sounds of fighting. It became obvious quickly enough that it was Boromir who was in danger. By the time Maedhros arrived, half a dozen orcs lay scattered at Boromir’s feet, but he had been shot in turn, in the shoulder. There were still at least a score of orcs still standing, with another party of them moving away, carrying what seemed to be two small, angry passengers. Boromir, despite his injuries, launched himself at one of the nearest orcs, running it through. The archer fired another arrow, which struck him in the stomach.

Maedhros, weighing his options, threw Boromir’s knife, ‘The Acceptable’. It struck the archer in the arm, which was not exactly what Maedhros was aiming for, but at least it knocked the bow from its hands. In the moment of confusion, Maedhros raised Finrod’s sword and ran. He hadn’t had a fight like this in years. It was almost calming, the weight of the sword in his hand, the motions that had been drilled into his body. It was righteous, to be defending his friend. The blade cut through orc flesh like it was butter, so well-made it was. Boromir gave Maedhros a look of awe. In mortal eyes, he was nothing less than awestriking, of true beauty, tall and powerful and graceful. As Galadriel had awed the fellowship in Lóthlorien, so Maedhros awed Boromir now. He was, after all, the first son of Fëanor, greatest of the Noldor. It would take more than a few orcs to stop him, or even to slow him down.

The orcs rallied their defence against Maedhros after the initial surprise, but it only felt like seconds before Aragorn was joining the fray. He was a brilliant fighter, moving with elven grace and mannish strength. His blade was of almost as fine a make as Maedhros’s- seriously, where had he seen that sword before? – and it flashed through both air and flesh with deadly accuracy

Even Boromir, who was by now bleeding quite badly, managed to swing his sword enough to keep the orcs at a distance. He backed up slowly until he was leaning against a tree, swinging his blade in wide circles. He made as valiant an effort as Maedhros had ever seen, but by the time the orcs were all slain, he was slouched against the tree, sword on the ground beside him and head drooping. Maedhros rushed to him, catching Boromir before he fell over completely. The arrow in the shoulder had gone clean through, while the one in the stomach remained lodged. Not fatal, yet, but they would be.

Aragorn almost pushed Maedhros out of the way, “I need-” he managed to snap at nobody in particular, before Boromir cut him off.

“The hobbits, they took- Merry and Pippin- you have to-”
“Not now.” Maedhros ordered, and, pulling off his cloak, pressed it to the wound on Boromir’s stomach. Boromir gasped in pain, but at least he stopped talking.

“This may be beyond my skill to heal,” Aragorn muttered to himself, stating the obvious. It was painfully clear to Maedhros that he was afraid. Well, Maedhros had been afraid most of his life, so he could hardly start judging for it now.

“I can try,” Maedhros offered, but neither of them paid him any mind. Legolas and Gimli, who were a little late to the battle, burst in at almost the same moment, but were equally ignored.

Boromir was grinning up at Aragorn. “There’s a saying in Gondor. The hands of the king are the hands of a healer. Something like that.”

“It’s supposed to be about Athelas,” Aragorn corrected, which made absolutely no sense. Honestly, if these two idiots were going to chat about colloquialisms from Gondor, they’d never get anywhere.

“Well, if you want the hands of a king, mine will have to do,” snapped Maedhros. Everyone turned to stare at him. It was so quiet that you could have heard a mouse breathing.

“King of what?” Asked Gimli, his tone as sceptical as Maedhros had ever heard.

“High King of the Noldor in Middle Earth,” Legolas muttered, which was astonishingly correct.

“How?” Aragorn demanded, of whom, Maedhros was not sure.

Legolas answered for the both of them. “He called Míriel Serinde ‘Míriel þerinde’, in conversation with Boromir. I thought it merely a manifestation of a Fëanorean accent, like Elrond’s, but-”

“Maedhros Fëanorion,” Aragorn cursed, wide eyed. Maedhros, hoping to divert the conversation, spoke next.

“Well, yes, but that is irrelevant. Aragorn, I am no healer, but I can probably keep him alive long enough to get him back to Lóthlorien, and Galadriel is far better at this sort of thing than I am.”

“Irrelevant!” Cried Legolas, genuine anger in his voice, “how can you term such a thing irrelevant?”

Maedhros glanced back at him and Gimli. The dwarf’s face was an array of confusion. Likely, he was not versed enough in elven history to know of Maedhros’s actions. Legolas, in contrast, looked grieved, and for that, Maedhros felt truly guilty. It was a lie that had been justified initially, but sustaining it, even to those who had become his friends, had been willfully cruel.

Weighing his options, Maedhros said something he never liked to say. “I swear to Manwë and Varda-” Careful now, use the right words. “I mean none of you any harm. I do not know why I am here, or who sent me, but I intend to do my piece against the enemy. One last time.”

Pressing both his hands to Boromir’s stomach, Maedhros allowed all those around him to slip away. He had never had Maglor or Finrod’s gift for spur of the moment song-craft. For him, channeling power through song was difficult, but not impossible. It was easier than simply healing directly with his Fëa, as some could, which Maedhros would have found impossible. He used a tune Maglor had written for this exact purpose, a simple children’s rhyme designed to teach two young half-elves the basics of the craft. One of them had shown interest in it, and had gotten the song stuck in Maedhros’s head for years to come. But it served its purpose now. It would have been imprudent for Maedhros to try and remove the arrows and knit flesh back together. He had not the skill or accuracy. Instead, he used only the verses for stopping infection, slowing blood loss, and sleep. It would have to do, until he could get Boromir back to Galadriel. The second the spell was finished, Boromir slumped against
the tree in a dead faint, while Maedhros, feeling more drained than he had in many years, slumped against Aragorn. Aragorn flinched, but didn’t push him away.

“Forges of Mahal,” Gimli muttered, as Maedhros focused back in on the world around him. “I did not know ye could do that.”

“Most elves cannot,” Legolas returned, tone bitter and impressed in turn.

Maedhros, who was not especially in the mood for a history lesson, said, “it used to be more common, but magic is fading from these lands and has been since I first lived in them. That is why so many elves wanted to live in Valinor in the first place. We are all more powerful there. Here, it is all about bloodlines and date of birth. I imagine, Legolas, that your father has at least some spellcraft. I know for a fact that Galadriel, Celeborn and Elrond all do, though Elrond has Lúthien’s blood also, of course.”

“You know Lord Elrond?” Aragorn asked, giving Maedhros an odd look.

“Help me,” demanded Maedhros, and together they lifted Boromir as gently as they could. Maedhros, weakened, could not lift him alone. “Yes, I knew Elrond. He was born in Sirion, where the third kinslaying happened. If he has not told you more than that, it is hardly my place.”

Aragorn almost dropped Boromir. “You were his foster father.”

Maedhros almost dropped Boromir. “Of a sort. Myself or my brother Maglor could be termed that. Why?”

Aragorn looked away. “Lord Elrond might once have been termed my foster father. Of a sort.”

And oh, that was finally what allowed Maedhros to piece it all together. Aragorn’s natural leadership, his uncanny grace, for a mortal, his loyalty to Gondor, Boromir’s words about the king being a healer, and that sword, which Maedhros had long ago received as gift from Azaghâl, and had given in turn to Elros at his coming of age. He had learned from his research in Lóthlorien that the kings of Gondor were of Elros’s line, distantly. And Aragorn was as well. He was the last of Elros’s line, likely. And Elrond had taken him in. Of course he had. Elrond, who could call a three-time kinslayer his foster father, would never leave a boy of his blood alone in a dangerous world.

They carried Boromir back down to where three of the four boats remained. Frodo and Sam were well away, so far, in fact, that Aragorn’s mortal eyes likely could not see them.

“They went, then,” Aragorn muttered, mostly to himself.

Maedhros set Boromir down as gently as he could in the boat Boromir had guided all the way here. “You three are now left with a choice to make. I am taking Boromir back to Lóthlorien. It is the best chance he has. You must decide which hobbits to chase after. Or you may accompany me I suppose, but I advise against that.”

Aragorn laid down his ruling as swiftly as he could. “We will go after Merry and Pippin.”

Maedhros did not allow him to elaborate. “So be it. At your command, would you have me try and track Sam and Frodo after I finish in Lóthlorien, or should I follow you?”

Aragorn, with royal grace, said, “choose the path where you can do the most good. I wish you great fortune.”

Maedhros weighed his words carefully. “Aragorn, son of Arathorn, if we do not meet again, know
that in my life, I have known few with the true gift for leadership that you possess. If you choose the duty of the crown, I think you will bear that burden with honour. Legolas, of all Eru’s children, the Sindar of Doriath probably have the most to be grieved by. It is a testament to your honour that neither Gimli nor I have felt the kiss of your arrows. A lesser elf would have held past grievances against us. Gimli- Azaghâl was for a time one of my greatest friends, and in your determination and loyalty, you do his legacy proud. The Children of Aulë have always been among the strongest defenders of Arda, and it is good someone is reminding the people in this time of that.”

Aragorn leant down, and wordlessly pushed the boat out into open water. Maedhros, regaining his senses, began to row. It was up to Ulmo, now, whether he would make it to Galadriel in time.

Chapter End Notes

Ehhh! I am officially into The Two Towers. I’m going to post one more chapter in this work. (the contents of which may surprise you), before making this a series and adding a volume two. (current probable title, The High King. Make of that what you will.) I realized after one of y’all pointed it out that making this into one story would make the one story Very Long. Also, I think you’ll find the next chapter a nice note to end on, for now.
Weeks Earlier (Interlude I)

Chapter Summary

Our second storyline begins, as we jump back to Maedhros’s first visit to Lóthlorien, a continent away from the events we witnessed the first time.

Chapter Notes

Remember how Two Towers and Return of the King both have duel perspective happening at the same time, but instead of jumping between the perspectives chapter to chapter, it goes all the way forwards, and then all the way again but from a different perspective? Aragorn and crew, and Frodo and Sam. Well, I’m not doing that because it’s obnoxious, and it makes half of Two Towers literally just a really long walk, but I am adding a second perspective. You guys have been asking for weeks. I hope you’re ready.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Sometimes, we must go backwards before we can go forward. Back to Lóthlorien, or, in this case, back in time to provide context for future events.

When it happened, Fingon was heading out stargazing with Turgon and Finrod. They didn’t really want him there, and Fingon knew it. Equally, all three of them knew that without Turgon watching over him, Fingon would have been a hermit since he returned from Mandos, some decades earlier. Therefore, they had all gone stargazing together, riding out from Tirion, west into Valinor. Fingon had been riding out ahead, wishing that they’d brought Elenwë and Amarië with them, and then he was falling, the world shifting around him.

It was his connection to Maedhros. Returned and glorious. It struck him like a ten-foot wave, more surprising than hitting the ground a second later. One moment, he was controlled, alone, disciplined. The next, he was screaming, grabbing his head. It was too much. It wasn’t enough. Maedhros was there, but he was so far away, too far away. Fingon couldn’t touch him. And then, just as fast as he had come, Maedhros was gone again, and Fingon was lying on the ground. He was dimly aware that his head was bleeding, and the world was spinning in lazy circles around him.

“Fingon!” Turgon and Finrod shouted, at almost the same moment. They always had moved with an odd symmetry. Both were dismounting from their horses, Finrod with uncoordinated speed, Turgon with steady grace.

“I’m fine,” Fingon promised, and then promptly threw up. Though it burned his throat, the nausea that had been drowning him lessened with it, and thus, he was grateful.

“Oh, how reassuring,” muttered Turgon, under his breath. It was his way of expressing his genuine concern for Fingon’s wellbeing.

“Turno,” Finrod scolded, “don’t.”
He knelt at Fingon’s side, and helped him into a half-seated position, masking his concern with his usual dopey smile. Turgon, for his part, schooled his face into passive ignorance, but a slight tremor in his hands betrayed him as an absolute nervous wreck. There was only so much one could hide from their own brother.

Fingon grasped Finrod on the shoulder in a silent gesture of thanks. Finrod increased the brightness of his smile, and placed a hand on Fingon’s head wound. That hurt, and Fingon told him as much. Finrod, unperturbed, hummed his way through a basic healing spell. He didn’t really need the help, with his power, but music was how Finrod had always worked the fabric of Arda, since they were children.

When he was done, Turgon snapped, “What in all of Arda is happening?” Turgon always pretended at hardness to hide the softness of his heart. He had watched too much violence in his life, had lost too much, to ever be truly unperturbed by the suffering of one he loved.

Reaching a crossroads, Fingon chose the harder path. He hoped Maedhros would forgive him. “Well, it is a long story, and I only intend to tell it once. If you want to hear, you shall have to come with me.”

“Where to?” Asked Finrod, undeterred.

“To the home of Nerdanel,” Fingon decreed, and refused to say any more. Explaining that would require an explanation of everything else, which would defeat the purpose of going entirely.

Finrod and Turgon, to their credit, made no remark on this decidedly odd behaviour. They simply helped Fingon back on his horse, and turned their path south.

Fingon’s mind was a tangle of worry and vicious thoughts as they rode in silence. There were primarily two: Firstly, if Maedhros was alive, why wasn’t he here, with Fingon? Was it because the Valar were meddling, or was it because he didn’t want to be? Because Maedhros had loved him. Did love him, surely. You didn’t swear the oaths of marriage just to stop loving someone. Fingon pushed thoughts of his own sister out of his mind. Maedhros was nothing like Eöl, and those thoughts did nothing but torture him. The second major thought that gave Fingon pause was, if Maedhros was going to be returned only a few decades later, why did Fingon agree to leave him? Like the vast majority of elves, Fingon remembered no interactions from his time in Mandos, but, like an increasing number, he suspected they did occur. It was his own father who had popularized the belief, citing the fact that he had gone in hating Fëanor, and had left habitually calling him by a nickname nobody else used, ‘Náro. And if Fingon could have chosen anyone to see in Mandos, he would have chosen Maedhros. He had believed that his choice to leave Mandos was motivated by the fact Maedhros was slated to never return, like his father. So why, if it was only a few decades more, after centuries already spent in Mandos, had Fingon chosen to leave him? The idea that Fingon had left Maedhros, that Maedhros had left him in turn, haunted him.

It took them several hours to reach the home of Nerdanel, by which point the sun was beginning to rise. She sat in her garden, carving a small wooden object with an even smaller knife. Her robes were black with golden embroidery, and though she no longer wore the small gold and ruby coronet she had as wife of the prince, she was no less regal. When she saw their party approaching, she summoned Amrod and Amras to stable the horses, and led the three of them inside. In classic Nerdanel fashion, she asked not a single question as to what they were doing there or why. Amrod and Amras, for their parts, were distinctly more perplexed, but their mother did not allow them to question Fingon either, a fact for which he was grateful.

Fingon had not seen Nerdanel since his return. He didn’t think he could have borne it, knowing Maedhros was gone. Knowing that he might always be gone. Though she shared his grief, her
presence could have done nothing to lessen. It. Seeing her now, he was shocked by the difference in
her. In the years since Nerdanel had lost everything, she had aged greatly. Her face was lined with
grief and stress, as a mortal’s might have been from age. But that was not what gave Fingon pause
while looking at her. It was the similarities to Maedhros. Maedhros, who had been so greatly aged by
his struggles in Beleriand, and had become no less beautiful, in Fingon’s eyes. Maedhros, who had
always taken after his mother’s spirit. Maedhros, who was called a son of Fëanor but was truly a son
of Nerdanel in every way that counted. Maedhros, who had said, on the occasion of their marriage,
that his mother was the only person who he truly believed would have supported and loved them
through it all.

“Maedhros and I are married,” Fingon announced, once Nerdanel had banished Amrod and Amras.
Better to push an arrow through quickly than cut it out.

The meeting dissolved instantly into chaos. Everyone started talking at once, and it was Finrod’s
voice who rang out clearest above the rest. “You said you were telling a story?”

“If everyone will kindly be quiet,” Fingon retorted, projecting his voice in a way he had learned to
from Maedhros, who had learned it from speaking over all of his brothers. They all shut up. “We got
married in Beleriand, during the Siege of Angband. We told nobody. Technically, however, the story
starts long before that.

“I have been in love with Maitimo since I first really understood that love existed. Who could have
not loved him, in those days? But I was almost certain my feelings were not returned, and we had
some silent agreement to never talk about such things, save in jest. Maedhros said later that he could
hardly have identified his own feelings in those years, so deeply had he buried them. I knew well
what mine were, however, and every year that Maitimo staunchly refused to marry, my hope grew.
That phase lasted all the way to Thangorodrim.”

Nerdanel, who had been paying close attention, flinched. Fingon reached out a hand, to offer what
comfort he could. Nerdanel gave his hand a single, tight squeeze before he let go and continued. “A
lot of this part of the story is better told by him than me. Accordingly, I shall keep to what I know,
and you can fill in the gaps at some later date. When I rescued Maedhros, he told me that he loved
me. ‘Fingon, I love you,’ he said, and gave me that awful smile he did for years after. You recall,
with the teeth and the tongue?”

Finrod alone nodded. It was difficult to demonstrate, if you weren’t missing the teeth Maedhros had
been missing. Somehow, the missing teeth had not been all that unattractive, especially when he
wore the false set Curvo had made, as Maedhros usually had done. The problem was a motion
Maedhros made where he stuck his tongue through the gap. Fingon was more than half sure he did it
to watch people flinch. He didn’t bother to try and explain any of this to Nerdanel or Turgon.

“Anyhow, he only said it because he thought he was going to die. I never brought it up after,
because Maedhros does not remember roughly half of his rescue, and was very, very delirious
throughout. He also sang me half of one of Maglor’s rude ballads, and almost fell off the eagle three
times trying to pat it on the shoulder. He does not remember either of those things, but he does
remember the love confession. He never said anything after because he thought himself unloveable.
Idiot. As though it was his pretty face I cared for. That phase, where we both knew but neither of us
said anything lasted years. He gave Atar the crown, rallied the troops, and departed for Himring
without so much as a ‘how have you been?’ I was never going to let that stand, so I-“

Turgon cut him off, with grim amusement in his voice. “So, you started coming up with all these
excuses to run off and visit. I remember. Me and Aredhel were doing half your job, and me trying to
build Gondolin on the side. What a mess.”
Finrod laughed into his hand, and Fingon continued with a pointed glare at his brother. “I doubt either of you really remember what he was like in those days. His followers used to call him the Shade of Himring behind his back. Even with Maglor up from the Gap every other week, and all the rest of his brothers there when they could be, it was never enough. He needed me, and I came. Over those first few years, I am a little ashamed to admit that I only fell more deeply in love. Maitimo was young and fey at heart. Maedhros is so much more. He has the heart of a lion with a core of steel. Falling in love with him was like falling in love with an avalanche, or a thunderstorm. Only, Maedhros could love me back. Even when he was drowning in it all, he was so much stronger than he knew. I really have no idea what he saw in me, but I knew I had to say something. The excuses were wearing off, so one day, I just stopped making them. I told Atar I was taking a personal trip, and then I told Maedhros why I was really there. Because I loved him.”

“And so you married?” Nerdanel asked.

“Oh, not for many more years. I was happy just to love and be loved in return. We had so much we needed to discuss, and so little free time. By the time we married, we knew each other better than most married couples do. I was beginning to think we would never marry. Oaths make Maedhros uncomfortable, for obvious reasons. But then one day, we just sort of did? In the manner of the first elves. He and I, with Eru our only witness, and love the only wedding gift. Later, I realized Maedhros had been planning it, maybe for years. He knew I wanted the marriage, and so he designed oaths to work for us, every word hand picked to never force us into any compulsion. We were happy. Even when the world was falling apart around us, we found what happiness we could, and gave it to each other. I adopted Gil-galad, after Atar died, so nobody would ever ask me why I had no heir. Inexplicably, they all thought he was my bastard, and I never corrected them. I called him Ereinion because he was our son, mine and Maedhros’s. We worked together well, we built our alliance, for even though he gets all the blame, it was at least half my bad idea. And then I did the one thing that was the worst I could do for Maedhros.”

“You died.” Turgon finished. If only that was all.

“Worse. As I was dying, I was afraid. I did what I have always done when I am afraid. I reached out to Maedhros. I- if I was a better person than I am, I would have done something different. I would have closed the link. That is what Maedhros would have done, if our positions were reversed, without hesitation. But I did not have the strength. He felt the whole thing.”

His entire audience looked distinctly green. Turgon actually covered his mouth with one hand in nausea or shock. Of course he did. Turgon was the only one of the three who had felt a spouse die, and though Elenwë has shielded, he had still been in horrible pain and barely responsive for days after. If Idril hadn’t needed him, he would probably have died. The idea of something worse than that was unthinkable. Fingon felt the same.

“All of this is to say, of course, that I have not shared a bond with Maedhros since. Until I fell off my horse a few hours ago because he reconnected with me.”

“What?” Nerdanel demanded. She leapt up to grasp Fingon’s shoulders. He nodded helplessly, reaching up to place his hands on her shoulders. “Maedhros is alive. He is not anywhere in Valinor, but he is alive. I felt it.”

“May I feel?” Nerdanel went to press her hand to Fingon’s forehead. He pulled away.

“He’s shielding again now. Based on how the reconnection felt for me, I cannot imagine what it was like for him. It seemed like he dropped all his shields at once, so who knows who else he sensed over there. Maglor, Artanis, Glorfindel maybe? Círdan? Whoever is king of the Sindar now? Your great-
grandson, Turno, remind me of his name?”

“El-” Turgon managed, before he was interrupted.

“Wait just a minute,” Finrod said, “If he is nowhere in Valinor, and he lives, where is he? Are you saying he is in Middle Earth?”

“He must be,” Fingon told him. His healed head-wound was throbbing again, and his mouth felt awfully dry from all the talking.

Finrod shook his head. “Impossible. Even a marriage bond could not stretch that far.”

“Oh, and which of you would know?” Fingon snapped. This was harsh, and he realized it the second he’d said it. If he could have taken it back, he would have.

There had been nobody like them in history. Those couples who were separated by one going to Beleriand and one staying were parted by severe ideological differences. Those couples where both went and one died were very unlikely to have one return while the other remained in Beleriand, though a few had. They had almost all closed their bonds, for one reason or another. Usually to prevent the other person the pain of an unfulfilling bond reaching off into nothingness. And those few who hadn’t were not nearly as powerful as Maedhros and Fingon. Fingon was more powerful than your average elf, and Maedhros, Maedhros was extraordinary. He had no sense of his own power, but it was there. Fingon had always seen it. It was only by comparison to the greatest of elvenkind- like, Fingon thought bitterly, his father- that Maedhros could ever have been called weak. Not that Maedhros had ever believed that, but there it was. To add to that, they had, in Fingon’s eyes, an uncommonly close relationship. That made any marriage bond stronger. Curufin, for example, had always had a weak marriage bond despite his individual power. Aredhel was the same.

“And so, perhaps you have the strongest recorded marriage bond in history. Perhaps. But that still leaves a bigger question. How did he get there?” Turgon demanded.

Fingon shrugged helplessly. “I know as much as you do.”

“Could he have returned here and sailed back?” This interruption was the courtesy of Finrod who no doubt did not intend the implications of the question.

“And never in that time spoken to me, offered me the most meager hint of his existence? I do not think Maedhros would treat me so cruelly.”

“You know what Maedhros is capable of.” Turgon, no doubt, fully understood the implications of what he was saying. Nerdanel paled in reaction, looking down. The insult to himself, to Maedhros, Fingon to bear. Harm to Nerdanel- that was unforgivable.

“No Turgon, I have no conception of what you are implying about my husband. Please, explain it to me.”

Turgon flustered his way to being deep purple. Finally he managed, “you know exactly what he did.”

Fingon considered engaging in some physical combat with his younger brother. “I know that he has always loved me, and treated me with nothing but respect and affection.”

“He burned the ships,” Turgon half-shouted. Turgon had likely chosen this example because it was the burning of the ships that had taken his own spouse from him, indirectly. Ironically, this was the one crime Turgon could have picked of which Maedhros was innocent. It was not common
knowledge, but Maedhros had stood aside at Losgar. His one true act of defiance against his father. He had not wanted to leave Fingon behind.

“He did not,” Finrod, Fingon and Nerdanel all corrected in near perfect unison.

This forced each of them to explain how they knew. Turgon found the whole idea implausible, and didn’t trust any account related to Fingon by Maedhros, nor related to Finrod by Curufin and to Nerdanel by Caranthir.

Finally, Turgon snapped. “Regardless, it matters not. Maedhros is amoral and murderous and your cousin, and I doubt he has the affection for you that you have for him.”

It was all entirely too much. Fighting with Turgon was always awful, and the dryness in his mouth was awful, and the throbbing in his head was awful, and being alone was awful. The uncertainty of Maedhros was like drowning. Fingon was just so tired. He could feel himself falling apart at the seams. The tears started, and he found himself suddenly unable to stop crying. Nerdanel came to Fingon and pulled him into a hug. Her hair was just as red as Maedhros’s, though Fingon was taller than her and so hugging her was not nearly as comforting as being held by Maedhros.

“I am sorry,” Turgon muttered, half-sincere. His anger still boiled near the surface, and Finrod actually hit him to shut him up.

“Would you like to be alone for a while?” Nerdanel offered. When Fingon nodded, she led him out of the sitting room, up a flight of stairs, and into an unused bedroom.

This was not the home in which Maedhros had been raised, where Fingon had mastered the ability to sneak in and out of windows, where he had first begun to want Maedhros. But this room was clearly designed after Maedhros’s original room. The walls were the same pale green, and there was a sculpture Fingon had given Maedhros as a child on one of the bookshelves. The books were similarly tailored to Maedhros’s passions, some biographies and histories, political treatises, some of Rúmil’s early work, a book of poetry Finrod had given to Maedhros only a few years before the banishment to Formenos, and a small collection of historical romance novels. These last had always been Maedhros’s guilty pleasure.

Nerdanel left him there to calm himself, gently closing the door. Fingon threw himself on the bed and allowed the tears to flow freely into the pillow. His heart was tired, from Maedhros but also from the thought of telling everyone else about their relationship. If Finrod and Turgon were a proportionate sample, half of his family was going to hate him. His mother would forgive him, eventually, but would his father? Aredhel would, but would Argon? Gil-galad didn’t even know. How would he react? Would Elenwë or Idril have more patience than Turgon did? He suspected not.

It could not have been there more than ten minutes before the door swung quietly open. Fingon did not turn to look at the intruder. If it was Nerdanel, she wouldn’t care, and he wasn’t sure he wanted any of the others to see him weep.

“‘Who could possibly be in Maedhros’s room?’ I asked myself. Should have known it would be you. Always was before.”

Caranthir. The third of Nerdanel’s sons to return, and until Maedhros, the last. In essence, the worst possible person to be comforting. “Leave me be.”

Caranthir crossed the room, and sat on the bed at Fingon’s head. When he spoke again, his usual sarcastic overtones were gone. “I overheard you and Turgon fighting. Thank you, for defending him.”
“It was not for you that I did it.” Fingon twisted over to look up at Caranthir. He had never been a pretty crier, and knew that at this moment, his face was red and splotchy. But, well, someone with a name like Morifinwë could hardly judge him.

“No, you did it so my mother would be able to think better of us. I would not be thanking you if you did it for me.”

Caranthir was full of surprises. “She is better than any of you deserve.”

Caranthir actually laughed at this, throwing back his head. “Undoubtedly. But I imagine in Turgon’s eyes, you are better than Maedhros deserves as well.”

Ah, so Caranthir has heard that as well. Evidently, he had not lost the habit of eavesdropping in the intervening years. “Caranthir, please.” He half sat up, preparing to defend Turgon as well.

“He loved you, you know. He never said as much, but we could tell. Or I could, anyhow. Celegorm and Amras probably could too. And Maglor almost definitely. Maedhros was always obvious to those who knew him best. Curufin and Amrod would have figured it out as well if the pair of them were not utterly oblivious to the mechanics of social interaction.”

“Oh.” Fingon muttered, and laid his head down on the bed again. Caranthir stroked a hand across his hair, almost gently. He was not someone Fingon had ever before thought of as gentle. But if one thing could be said about the Fëanorion brothers, it was that they loved each other well and deeply. And in this moment, Fingon was one of them. The closest thing they had to the brother who had almost raised them, who would have died for any one of them, happily.

“Turgon will come to terms with it, as we all have.”

Whatever Fingon might have said in reply was interrupted by his bond clicking back into place again. Faint as a whisper, almost as intangible as a dream, but there. Real, permanent. Maedhros had always imagined the bond as string, part of some great tapestry of a thousand, thousand relationships. For Fingon, it had always been like a hum in his mind, a note in the music of Arda, and the reassuring background noise was as soothing as a cold compress, as soft as a new lamb.

Something on his face must have told Caranthir what was happening. “Is that him?”

Fingon nodded. Then, the note changed just a little. Fingon knew what that tone meant. Love. It was weak, but it was a further reflection of Maedhros’s power that he could do such a thing. Fingon could not have. Not alone, at any rate.

“Help me,” he demanded.

Caranthir snapped to. He offered Fingon his hands, palms up. He had not Maedhros’s strength, but together, the two of them might have matched him. They both joined hands and minds, reached out to Maedhros, and Fingon returned his affection. The effort seemed to take something out of them both, with Caranthir slumping against the headboard as soon as they were done, but Fingon was sure it reached Maedhros.

“You really love him, do you?” Caranthir rubbed his thumb across Fingon’s hand. It was so slow and soft, he wondered if it was even a conscious motion.

Fingon nodded. He slowly pushed himself into a seated position and said, “I have to know how he got to Middle Earth, and then I need dispensation to go after him.

Caranthir pulled away slowly. “Well, you shall need someone in better standing with the Valar than I
Fingon mulled that over for a second, swore, and then in perfect unison they said, “Turgon.”

They both stood, and Caranthir placed a hand on Fingon’s shoulder. “You will find each other again. After everything, I am more than convinced that Eru himself could not keep you two apart.”

Fingon, impulsively, pulled Caranthir into a hug. “I hope so. I find that most days, I miss him more than there are words for.”

“Do not bother with hope. Find him, and bring him home. For all of us.” Caranthir gave Fingon a tight squeeze, and let him go.

Fingon said nothing in turn. Caranthir knew that he was committed to finding Maedhros, to bringing him home safely, if it was the last thing he did.

They slunk downstairs to find Nerdanel and the Ambarussa on one sofa, Finrod lounging on another, and Turgon sitting slumped in a chair, head in his hands. When Fingon entered with Caranthir at his side, they all five looked up.

“Were you two listening at keyholes too?” Fingon asked of Ambarussa.

Amras answered with a sly grin, “if we did, we only picked up the habit from our dear brothers.”

Cranthir gave him a murderous look. “Traitor.”

Turgon took his head out of his hands. He looked miserable, and when he spoke, it was only Fingon he addressed. “Fingon, I- I am sorry for what I said. Perhaps in hindsight, I should have always known that your feelings for Maedhros ran deeper than you let on. But regardless, you told me something deeply personal, and I reacted with immediate judgement. I should not have done so.”

Finrod always had been a good influence on Turno. Fingon, in a far better mood with Maedhros in his mind, said, “I forgive you. I do not think I would have reacted well either, were our situations reversed.”

Finrod snorted. “Oh, please. If you said half of what Turgon has said about Maedhros over the years about Elenwë, he would have put a sword through you years ago.”

It was, probably, true. “Luckily for Turgon, Maedhros has always been a calming influence on me, and he finally remembered to drop his thrice-cursed shielding.”

Nerdanel leapt to her feet, and Fingon placed her hands on his temples, covering them with his own. She only looked, gently, not touching like Caranthir had. Silent tears rolled down her face. In all the ways Fingon was not a good crier, loud and blotchy and sniffling, Nerdanel was the opposite. She wept silently, almost gracefully. Amras stood, and pulled her into a close hug. His brothers were there a second later, and one of them pulled Fingon into the embrace as well.

When they pulled away, Fingon met Turgon’s eyes once more, and discovered that his brother was actually smiling. It was small, just a quirk of his lips and a crinkle at the corner of his eyes, but it was there

“So, what now?” Amras asked, grinning at Fingon.

“Now, I go get him back. Morgoth could not stop me, and neither shall anybody else.”
“Is there anything we can do?” Asked Amrod, solemnly.

Fingon thought for a second. “I need Turgon, Eärendil, audiences with Olwë and Uncle Arfin, someone to help me compose a letter to Celebrimbor, a boat, a map, a harp, someone who speaks the new mortal language, and a prayer.”

Turgon muttered something under his breath that sounded suspiciously like ‘not again.’

Chapter End Notes

Everyone who was stressed about Boromir: I’m sorry. We’ll get there next week.
Everyone who has been bugging me about where Fingon is for the past 6 weeks, here he is. Our boy. Sweet Finno. (Also, the Aman gang). And I want credit for finally writing a story with Ambarussa where they both have speaking lines.

Okay, so, other note. Last week, I said I was going to split this story in two. Well, three people wrote comments with convincing arguments not to. If you want me to split it, you have the next week to convince me. If this story has 8+ chapters when you read it, you’ve missed your window (sorry mate).
Maedhros remembered his return to Lóthlorien as if from a dream. Galadriel would tell him, after, that he’d actually given her almost a day’s notice by tripping the wards from a distance, and she had come out on a boat herself to meet him. He remembered being hauled ashore by grasping hands, and standing before Galadriel. He remembered them taking Boromir away, but could not remember any of the words he must have spoken to his welcoming party. And then he remembered collapsing face first onto the dock, and nothing.

Awaking in an unfamiliar bed, he was greeted by Rúmil’s familiar face. The Quenya-named Silvan was sitting at his bedside, peering down at a book, deep in thought.

“Rúmil?” Maedhros tried to ask, but he found his throat almost too dry for words. Rúmil found a jug of water on the bedside table, and poured some for Maedhros.

“Easy, Maedhros. You have slept for the past two days. We were all worried you would die, and the Lady would have to tell Fingon that you, and I use her words here, ‘perished in a foolish attempt to save one idiot mortal who brought all his misfortunes on himself.’”

That did sound remarkably like something Galadriel would say. “Boromir, did he?”

Rúmil helped Maedhros up to a seated position. “He survived. Nobody is quite sure how, but he did. Whether he will ever make a full recovery is still up in the air, though he was awake before you were by a whole day.”

And if that was not a weight off Maedhros’s shoulders, would anything ever really be? As he had said to Haldir some weeks earlier, Maedhros was tired of not even being able to save one person. If saving Boromir was all he could do to stop the encroaching darkness, then it was still one person who would have been dead without Maedhros there.

Galadriel stuck her head through the open door. She was wearing simple white robes, and she looked tired. Her hair was tied back in a working braid. When she saw Maedhros sitting up, she gave him a gentle smile.

“Have I ever mentioned that you, my dearest cousin, have the worst possible timing?”

Maedhros gave her a grin. “Am I your dearest cousin? Why Artanis, you honour me.”
Galadriel shook her head at him. “Dearest on these shores, Maedhros, dearest on these shores. And anyhow, you shall not continue to even be that if you do not cease to drop in at the worst possible times.”

“You know, I was not aware that bad timing was especially something I was known for.”

Rúmil looked down. “Well, you have certainly shown it recently, for you have now managed to miss Gandalf by a matter of minutes not once but twice.”

It took some time for he and Galadriel to explain to Maedhros that Gandalf, the Maiar who had been assumed dead in the fight with the Balrog, was actually not. Or, well, it seemed that he had been, but was no longer. The implications of this were baffling.

“Is not-dead catching? Has Námo deserted his post? Are those caverns cursed?” Maedhros demanded, when it was finally his turn to talk.

Galadriel and Rúmil both laughed. “I think not,” she said, “Gandalf had no idea you were even returned. It was as surprising to him as his return is to you, if not more so.”

Probably more so. Maiar did improbable things for a living, while Maedhros was doomed to fail in all his endeavours. They continued this conversation for a few more minutes, Rúmil slowly slumping further and further over in his seat as they did so.

Galadriel placed a hand on Rúmil’s shoulder, and told him, “go get a couple hours’ sleep, Rúmil. You have done more than your share, these past two days.”

Unable to disobey a command from his lady and, frankly, looking in need of some rest, Rúmil obeyed. Once he was gone, and Galadriel had taken his seat, Maedhros asked, “what has he done, these past two days?”

“Well, in all Lóthlorien, it was only he and I who had any meaningful connection to you, on the fëa level. With us worrying you might be dying, it required more than a little effort on his part. Especially for someone with little to no natural ability.”

That was reasonable enough, though Maedhros wished such a thing had not been necessary. “Thank you, for saving my life.”

“No need. Thank you, for saving Boromir’s. If nothing else, it vindicates my belief that under all your murderous trappings, you, dear cousin, are soft of heart.”

Maedhros, oddly touched, gave Galadriel a smile. “I am just glad to have made it here in time for you to save him.”

“Soft-hearted Maitimo,” she teased, with a grin. Maedhros suspected she wasn’t going to forget that any time soon. Ah well, he’d been called worse things.

“I saw Finrod,” he confessed. “In a vision from the sword.”

“Does it only show my siblings then?” Galadriel asked, more to herself than to Maedhros.

“No, I saw him in a vision of one of my brothers. I’ve seen Maglor, Caranthir, and Ambarussa. Maglor excepted, they looked… well.”

Galadriel half-smiled. “I am glad to hear that. I always liked Amras the best of the lot of you.”
“Funnily enough, I would have said the same of Finrod.” They shared a laugh that subsided into easy silence. Maedhros didn’t ask if Galadriel was relieved that Curufin and Celegorm were not apparently returned. He didn’t want to know.

Galadriel looked down at her hands for a long moment before returning her gaze to Maedhros again. “Do you mind if I ask you something I should already know?” Maedhros shrugged, and she continued. “What is your craft?”

“Pardon me?”

“Your craft. When you channel magics, what do you do, practically? Like Míriel wove and Celebrimbor worked metals and Finrod sang.”

Maedhros blinked at her for a long moment. “I sing.”

“You sing?” The look on Galadriel’s face was priceless. Genuine astonishment, quickly melting into something almost like fury. “Maedhros, I have heard you sing. No offence meant, but there has never been anybody less suited to songcraft.”

And didn’t Maedhros know it? In his youth, he had tried his hand at a hundred different fields. Every conceivable medium. Wood and metal and stone, song and dance, painting and drawing and, at his father’s request, weaving. None of it had stuck. Even in the fields where he hadn’t been horrifyingly incompetent, like linguistics, he’d had little aptitude for working the magics in the way his parents and brothers did. Even the less obvious ones, like Celegorm’s mastery of the languages of animals, and Caranthir’s living paintings and Amras’s dance, were all far greater than anything Maedhros could manage. He was a true jack of all trades, but also the master of none. In most, he was barely even a suitable apprentice. Songcraft had been his choice because it was also Maglor and Fingon’s. No reason more or less.

“Well, what else would I do?”

The emotion on Galadriel’s face resolved itself into true fury, and Maedhros flinched away. Perhaps sensing how intimidating she had become, Galadriel pulled back, and when she spoke again, her tone was far softer.

“I studied under Melian. You know this. What you evidently do not know is that elven magic is all about connection between the Fëa and their craft. Or between the Fëa and the Hroä, or the Fëa of another, or directly to the magic of Arda itself for the select few.”

Maedhros shook his head. “I know that, Galadriel, every elf in Arda knows that.”

“Well, evidently not, or you would not have spent all your life struggling with an ill-suited craft to which you shared little or no connection. Those who are connected to their songcraft might be great in its magics, but you are not.”

“I am not great in any magic, Galadriel. I never have been.”

She carefully schooled her face back from the brink of rage again, and changed rhetorical tactics. “How did you get here, Maedhros?”

He blinked at her. “I don’t understand the question.”

“If Boromir’s timeline is correct, and we have no reason to believe it would not be, you made it back upstream in almost half the time you went down. Even if you rowed day and night, with elven strength, that should not have been possible. You must have crossed up the rapids, somehow. So, my
question, how did you get here, because I am more than willing to bet that you were not singing.”

Maedhros racked his mind for details of the past few days. He remembered his farewells to the rest of
the fellowship, and then after that, rowing, rowing, and rowing. There must have been a slight
portage back around the rapids, but that was nowhere in Maedhros’s memory now. Though, also
nowhere in Maedhros’s memory: singing.

“I find that I do not now remember. Sorry.”

“But you were not singing?”

Maedhros shook his head. “No. No, I was not singing. But Galadriel, regardless, I have little to no
magical aptitude. If I made it here, it must simply have been the will of the valar. Perhaps Ulmo?”

Galadriel stood, carefully paced the room from end to end twice, growled in a truly unladylike
fashion, and then kicked a wall. “Maedhros, do not take this the wrong way, but I hate your father
more than I have ever hated anyone, and I hate a surprising number of people.” She kicked the wall
again, but more forcefully, as if to drive her point home.

Maedhros watched her rub the foot she’d just kicked the wall with, and then limp back to her seat
before he asked, “I can hardly fault you, but it also seems irrelevant at the moment.”

Galadriel put her head in her hands and muttered, through gritted teeth. “You are one of the most
powerful people I have ever met. Anybody with the barest connection to their fëa could see it. You
can connect to your husband across continents. Nobody can do that. Nobody. Maglor cannot, Elrond
cannot, even with Vilya, Finrod could not, and I am sure that if he was married to anybody other
than you, Fingon could not either. You have the mental fortitude to survive losses that would kill,
that have killed, even some of the strongest elves. -If I lost my father and Celeborn in addition to
those I have lost already- And yet you are completely and utterly untrained. It is unthinkable.”

Maedhros considered this. He looked down at his hands. Galadriel’s premise was not as
inconceivable as it should have been. If anybody was going to underestimate the powers of a relative
dramatically, it would be Maedhros’s father, who had centuries of experience in asserting that
Fingolfin was a brainless idiot. On the other hand, he had never been anything but encouraging of
Maedhros’s pursuits, even as one after the other had failed. Finally, when Maedhros had decided to
quit, to accept that no craft was his calling, his father had started insisting Finwë take him to
meetings, to diplomatic functions, so Maedhros could learn those skills instead. It was there from his
grandfather that Maedhros had learned most of the skills that had really mattered, in the end.

“If I have those abilities, I still have no way to channel them, no craft connected to my Fëa.”

Galadriel stood again, apparently unable to keep still. “Well, we have only a little time before you
should leave again, but let me teach you what I can, in that time. I did not study under Melian to sit
here and watch all your abilities go to waste.”

And, well, what could it hurt? “So, what shall we do, sing, cook, weave? I can promise that I am bad
at all of it.”

“What are you good at?”


Galadriel ignored him. Instead, she paced the room again, then, suddenly, excused herself. She was
gone for almost half an hour, during which Maedhros managed to stand, found his boots tucked
under the bed, and put them on. He also, remembering his sudden change in location, reached out to
Fingon. The bond seemed stronger than he was first in Lóthlorien, or perhaps that was only his perception of such things. Yet no, it must have become stronger, because Maedhros could feel concern radiating off Fingon’s side of the bond. Strange. Concerning in itself. Though probably, it was Maedhros’s own near death experience that had caused Fingon’s worry. He sent his love, with far less difficulty than he had the last time, and received Fingon’s relief and love in return.

When Galadriel returned, shaking water off her hands, she looked positively triumphant.

“Words.”

“Excuse me?” Maedhros did another sweep under the bed, where he found Finrod’s sword, still attached to his belt, and buckled it back in place.

“Your greatest gift. It must be something about what you say. The words you use. Somewhere between music and linguistics, more or less.”

Maedhros gave her an even shrug because, well, his words were probably his greatest asset, but also, and more importantly, Galadriel was a very difficult person to say no to. They spent the next hour trying different potential tactics, writing things out, giving commands, telling tall tales, all entirely in vain. Galadriel, pinching her nose in frustration, eventually gave up and told Maedhros where he could go find Boromir.

It was not a terrible surprise to Maedhros that none of their efforts had garnered any success. After all, he had spent more time trying to find his own abilities than any other person ever could have. Was it disappointing to have that idea, the idea that he had remarkable magical capacities and none of them had ever been realized and probably would never be, drilled into his skull? Yes, of course. But surprising? No. No, it was not surprising, and Maedhros wasn’t sure who the person that made him hate the most was. His father, Galadriel, or himself.

Maybe the only person Maedhros felt no malice towards, at that particular moment, was Boromir, who he discovered lying flat on his back, and- wait.

“Are you two flirting?” Maedhros demanded. Haldir jumped like he’d been burned, while Boromir blushed as red as a tomato. Neither of them answered Maedhros’s question. When Maedhros didn’t leave, and instead leant casually against the doorframe, Haldir made what Maedhros could extrapolate from context was a very rude gesture, and left. Maedhros took his place at Boromir’s bedside.

“Sorry for interrupting. If it is any particular consolation, he will probably come back. It is more me he finds upsetting than you.”

Boromir shook his head, slowly. “No- I mean- we weren’t – well we were, but-”

Maedhros held up his hand. “I would be a bit of a hypocrite to judge you, would I not?”

Boromir shrugged. “Maybe. It was more, well, I could, couldn’t I? I think Haldir feels much the same. You would be amazed by how little time one apparently has as one of the chief wardens of Lóthlorien and the older brother of two infamous troublemakers.”

“No, I really would not. Six younger brothers and the first line of defense against Morgoth.”

Boromir shot him something like a grin. “And I thought Faramir and Sauron were trouble enough.”

Maedhros, reading a change in the tone of the conversation, changed topics. “I am sorry, for lying to you, I mean.”
“I understand why you did it.” Boromir said. It wasn’t forgiveness, but Maedhros didn’t really deserve forgiveness. “And I understand now why you were being so vague about your past. Your majesty.”

Maedhros shook his head. “I mostly said that so you and Aragorn would be quiet and let me work. I abdicated in favour of the house of Fingolfin. Technically, that gives Elrond the best claim on the title in Middle Earth. Though I suppose I never abdicated as Fingon’s husband, which makes me-dowager queen? Prince regent? Unless Gil-galad standardized the inheritance and titles system while I was dead, I could probably call myself anything I wanted.”

He was rambling, for no good reason other than it was something to say and that Boromir was listening. When Boromir cut him off, Maedhros’s primary feeling was gratitude. That changed after he heard Boromir’s words.

“When you were Gaelon, you told me that you blamed Maedhros for the death of your husband. Fingon, apparently. Do you really blame yourself?”

Maedhros tangled his fingers together, a nervous habit he’d lost many, many years ago, and avoided meeting Boromir’s eyes. “It is less a question of blame and more a question of cause and effect. It was my idea, my hubris, and in the end, my people who betrayed us. Or, well, my brother’s, but I was the one who allowed my brothers free reign to choose their own men.”

“That,” said Boromir, with all the knowledge of his what, thirty, years, “is the most patently ridiculous thing I have ever heard.”

“Excuse me?”

Boromir rolled his eyes. “Strategies fail. Even the greatest military tacticians in history lose, sometimes. And they sometimes against far more even odds than anything you have described to me about the first age. At least as described to me, you single-handedly, pun not intended, created the best conditions for victory possible, and it still didn’t work. Because you were fighting a deity. If every commander took on personal blame for every death under their command, they would never even get out of bed in the morning. War kills people. Even if you win. Battles kill people. Sometimes, all we can do is try to live.”

It was a speech Maedhros had given about a hundred times, to other people. “When did you get wise?”

“Well, this old elf came along and started spouting historical anecdotes at me, and it was all downhill from there.”

Maedhros made the same hand gesture Haldir had made earlier, and then changed the topic again. “Do you have any other questions?”

“No. Or, nothing important anyways. Gaelon- Maedhros, thank you. Not just for saving my life, but for, for- I believe that if I ever make it back to Gondor, I will be a far better person than I left it. For making me see the complexities of life even when I could not see the complexities in myself.”

Maedhros leant in so they could embrace, cradling Boromir’s head to his chest. “Thank you. For being brave where I was not, for offering me comfort when I feared I was alone. For listening, and learning. Weaker men and elves alike would not have been able to.”

Boromir choked out a sob. Maedhros ran a hand through his short hair, and sat on the edge of the bed so he could hold Boromir close.
“I thought- I thought I was going to die and all I could think about was how I was going to leave Faramir, and how my father- Faramir is a far, far greater man than either of us, and my father will crush the spirit out of him, without me there.”

And if Maedhros hadn’t known that feeling all his life, watching after brother after brother who couldn’t meet Fëanor’s expectations, from himself all the way up until Curufin, who finally had done it. But there was a difference between Maedhros’s father and Boromir’s. Maedhros’s father had, ultimately, believed that his sons would be brilliant at any pursuit they loved, even if their passions did not match his own. Though he had held Curufin closest, his support of Maglor’s music, Maedhros’s politics and even, begrudgingly, Celegorm’s hunting, was equally fierce. Boromir’s father seemed less generous. To be less generous in love than one as covetous as Fëanor was a high bar indeed.

“You will be there,” Maedhros promised.

Boromir reached a hand up to tangle his fingers in Maedhros’s hair. “He will hate me, my father. For failing him. Not taking it. And for, well, everything else. I will be disinherited, probably. Though I suppose that will not matter if Aragorn takes the throne. He could choose his own steward.”

“You?”

“I would tell him to choose Faramir. He has a head for such things. I- I have no idea what to do, if I survive this.”

Maedhros’s next words were spoken on impulse, but he did not regret them at all. “Come help me find my brother. If we win, if I survive, you should come with me.”

Boromir looked up at him with a grin. “Maglor, right? The second one.”

Maedhros nodded. “I think he would like you. And then, in the long term, well, I know you can figure something out.”

“If we survive.”

“If we survive.”

They stayed in silence for a few minutes, holding each other. Maedhros wondered when the last time was that Boromir had been held, with no expectation of anything. No demands of sex or loyalty. Maedhros, for all the doom that had plagued him, had been surrounded by a remarkably loving group of individuals. Fingon and Maglor most of all, but also his other brothers, and, later, Elrond and Elros. The longest he had ever gone without someone who loved him was the thirty years he’d spent on Thangorodrim, and then the first while after, where everybody treated him like glass until he had snapped and shouted at Maglor to stop looking at him like he was a stranger. Poor Maglor, who had found the stress of the crown, and the death of their father, and the strategy he had never, ever been trained, for entirely too much, had thrown himself into Maedhros’s arms. It had been deeply awkward. They had both cried hysterically. Maglor from exhaustion, more than anything else, and Maedhros because he didn’t know what to do with his right arm in a hug, now that there wasn’t a hand at the end of it.

“May I ask you a slightly personal question?”

Boromir shrugged, and pulled away. “I may not answer, but you can always ask.”

They were still close, pressed together hip to hip, but Boromir lay down, and Maedhros removed his hand from Boromir’s hair to hold Boromir’s hand instead. “If you could marry another man, would
“Until a few days ago, I didn’t even know there were other people like me. It- I have no idea what to
do with that information, now that I have it.”

Maedhros realized he was squeezing Boromir’s hand very hard, and loosened his grip. “What I
would give to strangle the king or queen who changed that law.”

Boromir blinked at him. “I rather think the law in that regard has not changed since the founding of
Numenor.”

“I certainly hope it has. I would like to think I raised Elros better than that. And him courting men
and women and ellons and ellyths across Beleriand in every spare moment too, the great hypocrite.”

“The history books never-”

“The history books never mention anything of real interest. You should have heard what my
grandfather used to tell us about the earliest elven histories. The stories I could tell about Elros and
Elrond’s misspent youth, and none of it ever taken note of. Why, I doubt most men even know that
they were brothers.”

Boromir’s expression at that told Maedhros everything he needed to know. He gawped, a look of
ture shock.

“My, my, Maitimo, what would Fingon think?” Galadriel, perfectly mirroring Maedhros’s earlier
position, leant against the door frame. Unlike Haldir, Maedhros didn’t flinch.

“Hopefully, ‘my, I am so grateful that my dear, sweet Maedhros has found a friend who supports
him in this time of crisis.’” Maedhros had developed an excellent impersonation of Fingon’s accent
over the years, which he employed now to Galadriel’s great amusement.

“Well, be that as it may, I came to ask you about your plans. I thought about coming up with some
new strategies for you to try, but if nobody found one that worked for you in the last few hundred
years of your life, I doubt even someone with my training could do it before this war comes to its
next peak.”

Maedhros ran this sentence over in his head, agreeing with all of it save for “Next?”

“That would be the other news I came to bring. I have seen the beginnings of a long battle happening
now, between the forces of Saruman and the King of Rohan. Aragorn is there, along with Legolas
and Gimli. The situation seems grim, but I have faith that Gandalf will see them through. What I do
not have faith in, is the ability of any of them to defeat this army and make it to Gondor with due
haste. And from what I see, or rather, am unable to see, in Gondor, I fear more haste is due than
ever.”

Maedhros, with this in mind, needed no time to think at all. “Then to Gondor I will go, and quickly.
Alone, I will be able to make far better time than with the hobbits.”

“Alone?” Galadriel demanded, with a funny quirk of her head, “who said anything about alone?”

Chapter End Notes
Okay, so, for those of you who have been heckling me about the upload schedule- this story is sticking to friday updates for the foreseeable future. However, over the next few weeks, I have more Scenes from the Dawn verse, as well as a prequel to this (Himring Era), which I will be posting on an essentially random schedule so stay tuned!
**Friends and Family (Interlude II)**

**Chapter Summary**

Still in Valinor, Fingon learns Westron, appeals the Valar, has some important conversations, and makes a promise.

**Chapter Notes**

There’s a bit of this chapter in which Fingon has a fairly bad time. It’s his half of what Maedhros experienced arriving back in Lóthlorien. I don’t think it’s triggering but it is kinda emotionally draining. So heads up. Starts after the paragraph ending with 'She was not, evidently, on their side of the family divide.’

Aredhel, Celebrimbor and Celebrían also appear here, and their past traumas are mentioned but not explicitly discussed.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Fingon sat back in his seat, and watched Amrod and Finrod play dice, as inevitably seemed to happen whenever they were together long enough. They were the last two standing, with Amrod having trounced his own twin, Fingon himself, and Gil-galad, while Finrod had beaten Nerdanel, Caranthir and young Celebrían, who had fallen haphazardly into their circle by speaking the best Westron in the house of Finwë. Aredhel might have beaten either of them, if she had been playing instead of standing at the window, watching for Turgon. Since her return, Aredhel had been a far more nervous sort than when Fingon had seen her last. People wondered what had motivated her to leave, without her son or Celegorm, her oldest friend. Fingon suspected he knew. For Turgon had little other than guilt in his heart, concerning the fate of Maeglin and the fall of Gondolin, and Aredhel’s forgiveness had allowed him to live his new life.

“Someone is coming.” Aredhel muttered. Her voice was nearly drowned out by Amrod crowing in victory, while Finrod accused him of being a dirty cheat.

“Turno?” Fingon asked. He stood to go open the door, for even if it was Caranthir’s home- the most even point between Tirion and Nerdanel’s home in the south- it was Fingon’s gathering.

“I think not,” Aredhel returned, just as Fingon swung the door open to discover a travel-worn Celebrimbor, carrying two saddlebags and a package wrapped in tarp, and wearing a long cloak.

Celebrimbor seemed different than when Fingon had seen him last, which had to have been in Beleriand. Probably when Fingon’s father was king, in fact. Certainly, before the Lúthien fiasco. Then, Celebrimbor had seemed very young. Exuberant, almost. Now, he was sombre. He wore his hair unconventionally short, in tiny braids that only reached to his shoulders. Also, sometime since Fingon had seen him last, he had grown a short beard, also with beads braided in, dwarven style.

Celebrimbor pushed passed Fingon without saying a word, placed his bags on the table, gave Nerdanel a hug, kissed Gil-galad on the cheek, and then turned and said, “Aulë’s forge, Fingon,
have you always been mad?"

Fingon opened his mouth to say ‘no’, considered the implications of that answer, and closed it again.

“It is good to see you, Celebrimbor,” Gil-galad said, with a genuine smile. Fingon’s son possessed certain diplomatic gifts, as Maedhros did, and it was always a pleasure to watch someone with those talents work.

“And you, Gil-galad.”

They exchanged a few more pleasantries before Celebrimbor did a second sweep of the room and cried, “Celebrían, I did not know you had sailed! When did you arrive? Why did you come? How is your mother? Do you have tidings of Durin’s line?” Evidently, he still had some of the exuberance that had been characteristic of his youth.

Celebrían looked down. She didn’t speak of what had caused her to leave Middle Earth, and everybody else was under strict orders from Finrod not to ask.

“Celebrimbor,” Gil-galad admonished. The change in Celebrimbor was immediate. He reassessed the situation, taking in the various concerned looks around the room, along with Celebrían’s deflated posture, and something in him seemed to snap.

He dropped to his knees beside Celebrían, and said something in a language Fingon had never heard before. It sounded not unlike Westron, as Celebrían had been teaching him, but the accent was very different, some sounds rougher, some smoother. It was akin to the difference between Quenya and Sindarin. Celebrían stared at him, shocked and then responded in kind. Whatever she said must have struck a chord in Celebrimbor, who threw his arms around her. Celebrían, unsurprised, hugged him back.

Gil-galad, who was like as not the only person in the room who spoke the same language, had been avertin g his eyes to stare blankly at the ground. When Celebrían saw him over Celebrimbor’s shoulder, she called him over, and he joined the awkward hug. It made sense, in a way, these three. The kings and lady of the Noldor in the Second Age. Celebrían would have grown up under Gil-galad’s rule, with Celebrimbor and Gil-galad as some of her closest remaining family. Now, they were also her closest connection to that world, mother, father and husband alike all remaining over the seas.

“He’s here,” Aredhel announced, from her spot at the window.

‘He’ proved to be both Turgon and Eärendil. Fingon had initially been hoping for Eärendil’s help only as an informant about the state of Middle Earth, but Turgon’s grandson had proved far more invested in the whole affair. Apparently, when Eärendil had illicitly met with his son Elros, the boy had asked his father to intercede on Maglor and Maedhros’s behalves with the Valar. Eärendil had done so, seemingly to no avail, but when presented with an opportunity to fulfil the spirit of one son’s request, while perhaps offering aid to the other in a time of war, he could not turn it down. He had gone with Turgon to plead Fingon’s case to Ulmo. The pair of them had been working on their efforts for almost a month now, and the understanding was that the Valar would reach a verdict today.

“Is it good news or bad?” Amras asked, with a grimace. He seemed already prepared for the worst.

Turgon sighed. “Both and neither. Fingon, if you sail for Middle Earth, neither Ulmo nor his kin shall stop you.” He paused for a moment when Amrod whooped, punching the air in triumph. “But- if you would listen to me, you would hear the bad news- but, you must sail alone.”
Caranthir threw his metal goblet at the wall. It struck with a clang, and wine splattered everywhere. He stormed away, his mother following after half a second later. Caranthir had wanted to go most of any of Fingon’s compatriots, both out of his love for Maedhros and Maglor, and out of his compassion for the secondborn. Éärendil, who had watched silently as dismay flooded the room, slipped away to return seconds later with a cloth for the spilled wine. It was oddly considerate, and made Fingon like Éärendil a great deal more.

“We can work with this,” Celebrían said, calmly and slowly. “I will teach you as much Westron as I can, and once you arrive, I am sure Círdan would help you. He was a good friend to Elrond and me.”

“It will hardly be the first time you have done something like this alone.” That was Aredhel. She drifted over from the window to stand at Fingon’s side.

Celebrimbor stood, unfastened his cloak, draped it over the back of a chair, and moved over to where he’d left the rest of his things. “Funnily enough, I assumed you might be heading at this alone, which is why I only took the liberty of preparing for one.”

He opened the saddle bags first, pulling out a bag of arrowheads, a fletching knife, a boot knife, and a chainmail tunic, as well as a few of what looked to be Celebrimbor’s own outfits for the week. From the very bottom of the second bag, he pulled out another, smaller bag, which he handed to Fingon.

“I never make rings.” He said to Fingon, by way of explanation. This statement didn’t make any particular sense until he opened the bag to discover several pieces of jewellery. Two necklaces, six bracelets, four hair clips, a bag of jewelled beads, like the kind Celebrimbor wore in his hair, and, bafflingly, two coronets, one gold and the other, even more bafflingly, iron.

When Fingon withdrew these last two items, and gave Celebrimbor a look to express all his confusion, Celebrimbor added, “I thought not to let the first sons of the houses of Fëanor and Fingolfin go out unarrayed in finery. And if you are as married as your letter informed me you were, then Maedhros will need a coronet also. He told me once that if he were a king, he would never want the crown to be the important bit. So, I thought nothing flashy, but in my experience, a statement is important. Hence the iron. I think it suits his character, and, well, I think the irony of the thing will amuse him. They entire set has all my usual enchantments of course, to enhance your own power, to alert you in the presence of evil, and so on. One of the bracelets also does some slight hypnosis so use it sparingly.”

Fingon turned Maedhros’s coronet over and over in his hands. The work was almost delicate, thin and smooth, twisting over and over in unknowable waves and patterns. He was right that a soft metal like gold would not have suited Maedhros in the same way the plain iron did. It was also a highly political move. Among the Noldor, for whom finery and status were synonymous, a crown made of iron was to reject those fundamental ideas. To say, I am so above these petty squabbles, I need no finery at all. That was to say, very Maedhros. Then there was the second layer of symbolism, what Celebrimbor thought of as ‘ironic’ and Fingon found to be further defiance. For Morgoth had worn an iron crown, decorated with Fëanor’s silmarils, when he had been Maedhros’s tormentor, Maedhros’s captor. And now, it would be Maedhros wearing the crown. Maedhros, ruler of his own destiny. Fingon liked it.

This left only the package left unopened, but given the theme of the earlier gifts, Fingon already had a sense of what was inside. It was a sword, as he has suspected, fine as any Fingon had ever seen, if not finer.

“It has all the usual features, of course. It won’t break, but it will warn you when enemies are near. I
also worked in some new complex protection spells— you know, compelling people not to want to
steal it, that sort of thing—, and I added some tracking spells. You may have a connection to
Maedhros, but I took the liberty of allowing you to track any living member of the house of Finwë.
Might be useful."

In Middle Earth, there was one person who could motivated Celebrimbor to make this feature.
Maglor. Fingon had been wondering over the matter of the last Fëanorion since he had realized he
was going to be going to Middle Earth. Of all Maedhros’s brothers, Fingon had spent the most time
with, and been closest in age to, Maglor. However, Maglor, like Curufin, had always possessed an
arrogance, a confidence in his own abilities, that had rubbed Fingon the wrong way. Certainly, he
would not have gone all that way, would not have fought the Valar, for Maglor alone. Perhaps he
should have. Because despite all about him Fingon did not like, Maglor had always been there for
Maedhros, had borne all the burdens Maedhros had lacked the strength to bear, and had treated
Fingon with the most respect of any of the Fëanorions, save Maedhros himself. And nobody
deserved to be abandoned as Maglor had been abandoned. Fingon had quietly probed around for
word of Maglor, and save for his writing of the Noldolantë, nobody had seen or heard from him
since the end of the first age. Gil-galad said he had looked, as had his friend Elrond, to no avail.
Celebrian, who had married Elrond in the third age, reported no more luck. If those people couldn’t
find him, Fingon had reasoned, how long might it take Fingon and Maedhros, who knew none of the
territory? This gift changed things.

Fingon looked around the room at numerous and various members of the House of Finwë. “Should
we try it?”

Celebrimbor shrugged evenly. “We should go outside. I suspect Caranthir would not appreciate us
swinging a sword around his living room.”

The entire group filed out into the woods behind Caranthir’s house, at which point Fingon was
blindfolded with a sock, courtesy of Aredhel, and had to plug his ears and hum while everybody hid.
The sword basically worked on the principle that it would track whoever you were thinking of.
Fingon tracked Turgon first, since he hadn’t actually hidden out of Fingon’s line of sight, and then
tracked down the others. The only people he had meaningful trouble finding were Eärendil and
Celebrian, who he knew the least well of the group, and Aredhel, who had ‘pranked’ Fingon by
climbing a tree and jumping on him while he was still tracking Celebrian. Gil-galad had abstained, to
‘preserve to enduring mystery of his biological parentage’. It was not a mystery for Fingon nor Gil-
galad himself, but it was not their secret alone to tell.

Later, when the rest of the group had trickled away, to rest and plan for the days ahead, Gil-galad
and Fingon rode home together.

“Do you know that it does not bother me, your marriage to Maedhros?” Gil-galad said, once they were
alone. He and Fingon had not spoken much about such things, save for the initial confession.

“I think you may be the only one in my line who is not at least a little bothered,” Fingon muttered,
thinking of his father’s oddly horrified expression, and his mother’s weeping as she understood.
Though his father had attained some odd kinship with Fëanor in the halls, he did not seem to have
gained much understanding of Maedhros. Or if he had, it had not carried over.

“Maybe that is because I am the only one who has never met Maedhros,” Gil-galad quipped. It was
clear he was joking, but it bothered Fingon none the less.

“But you have met Maedhros,” Fingon corrected, “even if you do not remember. I took you up to
Himring more than once as a boy, and Maedhros made time to come visit, while we began planning
our alliance. You met perhaps eight or nine times over the years, which was more than any other
Fëanorian saw him. We only sent you to Círdan after it became clear that Maedhros could not be a reliable guardian for you in the event of my death. Or, rather, after we saw what the oath could drive them to, manifested in Curufin and Celegorm. If that had not happened, the plan had been for Maedhros, as my legal husband, to raise you in the event of my death. Turgon would still have been regent, but, well, the safety of his people was his first priority, and he already had a ward.”

Gil-galad took a minute before he next spoke. “Now there’s an odd thought. I think of Círdan so often as a father, I find it hard to believe that our relationship was not set in stone. I wonder what kind of person I would have been, raised by Maedhros.”

“I imagine you would have still been a very good kind of person,” Fingon said, perhaps a little hotly. Gil-galad didn’t seem to notice. His train of thought was carrying him far away. “Elrond and I would have been like brothers. Imagine that.”

What? “What?”

“My apologies,” Gil-galad said, seeming to shake himself back to reality. “I sometimes forget that you do not know all that I learned in the second age. You still seem very much to me as all-knowing as I, as a child, imagined you to be.”

“I am very far from all knowing,” Fingon muttered, thinking of how his bond to Maedhros had become more and more faded, these past couple days. What he would give to understand why.

“Well, certainly you have never met Elrond, given that you died before he was born, which is the relevant knowledge here. You may remember that in addition to being Eärendil’s surviving son and Celebrían’s husband, Elrond was my herald and dearest friend. Despite that, I almost never heard of his time being raised by Maglor and Maedhros. He would not speak of it, for on the rare occasion that he did, people inevitably spoke ill of them, and that, Elrond could not bear. What little I came to understand, he asked me not to repeat. I do so now only because you are my father, and Maedhros’s husband, and I trust that you will in turn respect the trust Elrond placed in me.

“As you may have guessed from Eärendil’s tale of Elros’s request, the relationship between the Peredhel and the Fëanorions was not as clear-cut as stories would have you believe. By the end of the second age, Elrond was the only person I knew who still spoke with a clear Fëanorean accent. In speaking to me of them, he staunchly refused to call them anything other than his foster fathers. He credited Maglor with teaching him courtesy and charisma, and Maedhros with teaching him duty and defiance. When I died fighting beside the descendants of Elros, the sword that avenged me was the same one gifted by Maedhros to Elros an age earlier, when they were sent away to join me in the war. Elrond got a gift from Maglor at the same time. Perhaps this will give you some sense of the regard in which the Peredhel held their fathers and the regard in which they were held in return. Maglor gave Elrond the last texts they had written by Fëanor himself, in all of Beleriand. You asked about Maglor, earlier, and I did not say it then but I will say it now. If I ever meet Maglor, I may be tempted to wring his neck for breaking that boy’s heart. If he had come out of his exile, had wanted to come home, Elrond would have fought like a wild thing for us to welcome him. Every year that he stayed away was a weight on the shoulders of my friend, because he had already lost two fathers, and every day he stayed away, Maglor forced him to lose a third. And because they were his fathers, or as much his fathers as you are mine, at any rate, if I had been raised by Maedhros, Elrond would have been my brother.”

Fingon was still turning this information over in his head the next day, when Celebrían dropped in for another Westron lesson. She was taking an immersion approach, which was how Fingon had first learned Sindarin. Accordingly, they were having a very simple conversation over tea.
“Spouse, being yours, spouse, being mine, father?” Fingon managed.

“What?” Celebrían said, in Sindarin. Despite her part-Noldorin heritage, she still spoke far better Sindarin than Quenya.

“Is it true that your husband views my husband as a father figure?” Fingon asked, switching languages with her.

Celebrían repeated his question in Westron, with the correct grammar, and then said, in Sindarin, “this may be a conversation better had in a language where all parties understand exactly what they are saying. Your grammar, or absence thereof, made it seem like you were asking if Elrond was Maedhros’s father, as opposed to the other way around.”

“Oh,” said Fingon, dumbly.

Celebrían leant back in her chair and sipped her tea. “The answer, I suppose, would be yes. He never spoke of it in public, that I knew of. In the beginning, I think he was deeply concerned my mother would call off the wedding if she knew. Not that it would have stopped me, but Elrond cared about that sort of thing. I knew him to speak more of Maglor. It was me-and-Maglor, Elros-and-Maedhros, whenever he told stories of the four of them. He spoke of them both more after we had Elrohir and Elladan- those are my sons. I think he wanted our children to know where they came from. And then of course there were the books. Féanor’s books. That was the biggest tipoff that they all loved each other. People thought it very odd that Elrond kept the books in the main library in Imladris, given their value, but there was a good reason for it. Maedhros once told him that it was being covetous of the silmarils that had made Fëanor mad enough to sacrifice his own children for the love of them. He begged Elrond to place value on people, not on things. And so, Elrond kept the books in the public library, because they were more valuable read than not.”

They continued with this every day for over a week. Celebrían, who usually lived with her maternal grandparents, came to stay in one of Fingon’s spare rooms, as did Caranthir. Celebrimbor stayed with Gil-galad. Fingon was afraid to ask if Celebrían was staying with him because she felt a need to be there, or because of the ever-growing divide within Finwë’s house. Fingon’s parents had barely spoken to him since the revelation, Argon was furious, and Eärendil and Elwing were barely talking to each other, just to begin with. Aegnor and Angrod, perhaps fortunately, were too dead to weigh in. Findis never had opinions on anything, while Lalwen had written Fingon a very terse letter calling him a ‘lovable idiot’, which he took to be her tacit support. Finrod was embroiled in a bitter argument with his maternal grandparents, while their shared grandmother had given up on speaking to anyone at all. The Aрафinwêans were the calmest bunch, but in Finwë’s line, that was a low bar. Only Orodreth seemed to have maintained an air of calm and stability amongst all the chaos. He owed Fingon an unpayable debt, but Fingon did not intend to try and collect on it today. Orodreth was doing the best he could without Fingon’s input. For Gil-galad’s sake more than anything, Orodreth worked to rebuild the ties between the two factions. Perhaps, when Fingon was out of the picture, he would succeed.

While Celebrían taught him Westron, Finrod and, in his time off, Eärendil, taught Fingon how to sail. Fingon had known a little, once, but it had never been an interest, nor a skill that had been needed in either Tirion or Beleriand. Fingon was fine, at best. Once they got him to the point where they were reasonably sure he wouldn’t get himself killed in the crossing, it was time. Finrod and Idril- the third living biological member of Finwë’s house who was competent in a boat- would take him from mainland Valinor out past Tol Eressëa. Turgon must have bribed her into it, and she seemed quite bitter to be helping Maedhros and Fingon. She was not, evidently, on their side of the family divide.

The day he left for Middle Earth was among the most unpleasant and stressful of Fingon’s life. At
about three in the morning, he awoke in a cold sweat, knowing, without knowing how he knew, that Maedhros was dying. He had been planning to wake and leave early that morning, but those plans were quickly derailed by the violent shaking that was manifesting as Maedhros’s end of the bond snapped in and out of existence. It was his falling out of bed that woke Celebrián, and it was she who woke Caranthir, to come sit with him and offer what comfort he could. Caranthir half-carried Fingon down to the sitting room, where he could receive any other visitors without inviting them into his bedroom. Someone seemed to be helping steady Maedhros’s end of the bond, but it still flickered in and out.

“We could sever it,” Caranthir said, almost clinically. He’d just finished pulling on a tunic and a pair of pants.

“I would die first.”

Caranthir, in a return to his historical snarl, snapped, “No, Maedhros will. You would die second.”

Fingon shook his head, along with the rest of him. “If we did that, he would think I was dead. That would kill him just as surely as whatever this is will.”

Caranthir laughed bitterly at him. “Surprise you as it may, you are not in fact Maedhros’s one reason for living. He survived without you the first time. He could do it again.”

Now that was unfair to Maedhros and Fingon both. “He survived the first time because he had six brothers to look after. For all he knows, the lot of you save Maglor are dead never to return.”

Caranthir sighed and gave up the argument. “At least allow me to try and numb it, even for a moment. I have no doubt Finrod could do a better job, and will when Celebrián fetches him, but Maedhros would not want you to be in pain in the interim.”

Fingon consented, reluctantly, and allowed Caranthir to mark his skin with paints, drawing detailed symbols of calm and protection. He’d never experienced the full scope of Caranthir’s skill, though he’d seen it done often enough to Maedhros, especially after Thangorodrim, when he’d need the protection offered by the delicate paintings more than most. The paints came off easily—Caranthir had never figured out a way to use his abilities with a dye— but for the time they remained, the effect was significant. Fingon felt his breathing slow to normal, and his pounding heart calm.

“Maedhros is a survivor,” Caranthir comforted, from where he stood behind Fingon, still doing finishing touches with a very small brush. “He would never die at a time like this.”

Fingon, thinking of what that statement meant about the conditions of Maedhros’s death, shuddered involuntarily, causing Caranthir to tsk irritably at him.

“I need you to promise me something,” said Caranthir, abruptly changing topics. Seemingly finished with his work, he walked back around to face Fingon.

“I will not give up on him,” Fingon promised.

Caranthir shook his head. “I know you will never give up on him. That is the one thing I am sure of. I need you to promise that you shall give up on Maglor.”

“Excuse me?”

“Maedhros is in danger. Immediate danger, evidently. From what Celebrián says, I understand that Sauron is still very much a threat in Middle Earth. Her husband had one of Celebrimbor’s rings, and she still was not safe. You know how Sauron tormented Maedhros. Probably better than any of us,
you know what was done to him. Knowing Maedhros, knowing Sauron, do you believe either of them will pass up the chance for a rematch if the opportunity occurs? If you get distracted looking for Maglor, Maedhros will inevitably manage to walk himself into some sort of horrifying danger.

Maglor decided not to come home. He avoided Gil-galad, and Elrond, and even Celebrimbor. He can avoid Sauron just fine. Maedhros will never walk away from the good fight. You know how he was with Himring, with the Alliance. For Elrond and Artanis, if nothing else, he would stand against Sauron. If he finds out what Sauron did to Celebrimbor... I need you to promise me that you will get him out. No distractions. Not even for Maglor.”

Fingon could not promise that. Maedhros would never forgive him. It was a horrible thing to suggest. “Caranthir, I know you’re upset—”

Caranthir cut him off. “My mother cannot take another heartbreak, Fingon. If she loses Maedhros again, it will kill her. I mean that without any hyperbole. She is strong, yes, but not invincible. Knowing that the Valar are just throwing her sons back to Middle Earth to die will destroy her spirit. Maglor is already lost to us. If I had been there, or Finrod, perhaps we could have done both. But you alone? You cannot save everyone, Fingon. I would know. I have tried, for all the good it did me.”

Poor Caranthir, who, Fingon was given to understand, had tried again and again to convince Curufin and Celegorm to see sense, to no avail. Caranthir, betrayed by those he had fought to protect. Still, it did not convince Fingon any.

“I cannot promise you that. Maglor was a friend to me before you were born.”

Caranthir’s hands were shaking. “Please, Fingon. Save Maedhros first.”

“That, perhaps, I can do.”

“Promise me you will get him to safety. No matter what.”

“I—”

“Promise me.” The pleading in Caranthir’s voice, asking for so horrible a thing was enough to break Fingon’s heart. “I shan’t make you swear to Eru or the Valar. I am not my father. But swear it to me at least.”

What harm could it do? “Caranthir, I promise to get Maedhros to safety, to the best of my abilities.”

Caranthir hugged him, getting paint in his hair, but Fingon found he didn’t care.

“It will be alright, Caranthir. In the end. Look at you and Amrod and Amras and Celebrimbor. The doom is lifted, and the House of Fëanor rises. Slowly, aye, but the other houses are doing little better. Why, you’ve outnumbered the Golden House of Finarfin.”

Caranthir choked out a laugh, and then abruptly he was crying. Fingon, exhausted and still slightly shaking, wept with him. For everything they had lost and everything they had left to lose.

“We do not outnumber them if you count Gil-galad,” Caranthir whispered conspiratorially. Fingon stiffened.

“How did you guess?”

“I did not. I still have no idea which one of them he belongs to. It could be any of them, save Finarfin himself. But he is clearly of their line. The hair gives it away. Not that you could have done anything
about that. You did your best to convince people he was your bastard. And with Indis’s blood in
you, it was not impossible. But as he ages, he looks more and more like Orodreth.”

Fingon pulled away to pinch the bridge of his nose. “You know that I cannot tell you who his
biological father was. Even Maedhros does not know.”

“So, it was the father then,” Caranthir said wickedly, and then laughed at the face Fingon made. “Oh
please, it had to be one of the boys. Who else was it going to be? Artanis? Thingol would never have
let her have such a secret. Finduilas? She was a child herself.”

In point of fact, Finduilas had been old enough to have been courting and engaged when Gil-galad
was conceived, but, well, she was not his mother so the argument was irrelevant.

It was roughly at that point Celebrían returned with Finrod, Idril, Turgon, Gil-galad and
Celebrimbor, and the house took a turn for the chaotic. Celebrían slipped away almost as soon as she
returned, and Fingon didn’t blame her. After all, if what had happened to Maedhros was more
widespread, her husband might be affected too. She didn’t need the pain nor the worry pressing
down upon her.

Turgon stalked and planned, as was his way.

“Is there anything we can do for Maedhros from here?” He asked the room at large, not ceasing his
pacing.

Finrod answered for Fingon. “Not at this distance, Caranthir and I are barely keeping Fingon from
suffering as it is. It’s gotten worse since this morning. We think Maedhros had a moment of recovery,
but whatever’s happening now will have to be dealt with on their end. All we can do is wait and
pray.”

“What if we got less distance?” Idril asked. Everyone turned to stare at her. Her help was
unexpected, to say the least. “What? Is it that bad an idea?”

Turgon finally stood still. “No, Idril. It is not a bad idea at all.” Everyone turned to look at him again.
“Well, what are you all standing around for? We should get down to the docks.”

They all leapt into motion. Turgon fetched Fingon’s bag from upstairs and helped pack the rest of it.
Finrod and Idril went down to check on the boats- one for Fingon and one for the pair of them to
turn back in- and Celebrimbor compulsively went over everything he’d given Fingon three time with
all the paranoia and fear of failure Fëanor could have asked for in a grandchild.

Celebrían returned just as they were leaving, looking like she’d been running. Fingon’s parents were
with her. They stared at the assorted Finwëans, reacting with the most surprise to Celebrimbor, who
rarely came into the city, but currently was standing at Gil-galad’s right hand as if he was born to it.
And in a sense, perhaps he was. They were the first two grand-heirs of the first two houses, after all.

“Finno,” Fingon’s mother said, sadly. She was holding his father’s hand.

Taking charge again, Turgon said, “Gil-galad, Celebrimbor, Caranthir, would you take the supplies
down to the docks? Everybody else, please go back inside.”

This left Fingon and his parents standing outside alone. It was still quite early in the morning, and
Fingon’s father wore none of his finery yet. A little unsteady, Fingon sat down on the doorstep.

“You cannot convince me to stay,” he told them, fighting to keep the hurt from his voice. “Nor can
you convince me not to love Maedhros.”
“Why?” His father asked, almost plaintively.

Wasn’t that the question? “I doubt you would find that question any easier to answer than I do, if asked about each other. Such things are not always quantifiable.”

Fingon’s mother went to place a calming hand on his father’s shoulder. “You know that we always love you, yes? Even if we do not agree with what you choose, we love you.”

“I know. You know that I will always make the choices that are right for the person who I love, even if you do not always agree with what I choose?”

Fingon’s father nodded. “I know. I just wish you had loved someone easier.”

It was an odd way to put it. In Fingon’s mind, loving Maedhros was the easiest thing in the world. “Easier?”

“Someone who caused you less pain, yonya.”

Fingon tried to stand, but his legs were weak and his balance was wrong enough to leave him leaning against the door.

“There is nobody in all Arda who has given me more joy than Maedhros,” he told them, with half a smile. “Nobody who has made me laugh so often. Nobody who has held me at my worst moments the way he has.”

Fingon’s mother pulled him into an unsteady embrace. “Please, stay safe out there.”

His father placed a steady hand on his shoulder. “Come back to us, when this is all over.”

“I will. With Maedhros too.” Fingon considered what more he could say in the little time he had without starting a fight. “Nobody knew, before he returned. I never wanted to hide it from you, but I could not bear people looking at me the way they look at Aredhel- all that pity without any compassion or understanding. At least if you knew nothing, you would not be so ashamed.”

Fingon’s mother pulled back to look him dead in the eyes. “We are not ashamed. Never ashamed of you. You have been brave and loyal and kind, and I am proud of you. Do not for an instant believe that you could disappoint me by doing something so small as marrying your best friend.”

Fingon’s father said nothing, averting his eyes. In a way, that said more than enough. Fingon pulled his mother in for one last hug before he said, “I love you, but I have to go, while there is still time. Give all my love to Aredhel and Argon. Tell Argon that I am neither sorry nor ashamed, but my loving Maedhros does not in any way diminish my love for him. And perhaps tell him that Maedhros alone of all Fëanor’s sons took no part in burning the ships to Alqualondë.”

They let him go, and Turgon and Celebrían half carried him down to the docks. To the ships and then to Middle Earth, and Maedhros.

Chapter End Notes

And the two bits are almost caught up! Fingon is on his way (alone), Meadhros and someone are on their way, and elsewhere, the rest of the fellowship are on their way to various places.
Okay so I have a pitch for a story idea and I have no idea if I’m gonna write it I just want someone to talk to: a canon-era AU in which Turgon doesn’t actually stick around after the founding of Gondolin, and just leaves Idril in charge while he goes around and does other stuff. It ends up being just like a buddy comedy where him and Celegorm have to solve various first age problems (you can’t tell me that Celegorm and Turgon aren’t the ultimate good/lawful and bad/chaotic cops). Like, they have to go find Aredhel and Turgon has to stop Celegorm from fucking everything up with Lúthien and Finrod. There’s a lot of first age chaos they could deal with I think. The problem is just that I don’t have like a good ending for the story? Someone help me. And also come up with more events they could deal with. And tell me if any of this is a good idea. Please.
Less than an hour after heartfelt farewells to both Boromir and Rúmil, Maedhros and Haldir were sitting back in the small boat, floating down river. Haldir had the oars, and he didn’t look happy about it.

“I would like you to know that I blame you personally for this,” he told Maedhros, with a grimace.

“Well, I suppose it is your own fault for not ensuring that anybody else spoke Westron. They could hardly send an ambassador to Gondor who spoke not a word of the local tongue, now could they?”

They were silent for the next four hours. The shores they passed verged almost on the edge of familiar, the landmarks sometimes reminding Maedhros of his time doing the same with Boromir. It was perhaps for this reason that Maedhros finally spoke again.

“Do you know, that if you hurt Boromir, I will be forced to kill you?”

To Haldir’s credit, he only jumped slightly, and did not drop the oars. “Please. Neither of us are focused on any sort of romance. I intend to sail after the war, if Lady Galadriel will have me. Boromir seems to me rather loyal to his own king, and to his brother. I doubt he would want to come, even if such a thing were possible. And I have no desire to suffer Lúthien’s fate. I like the gift of elves.”

“He could always be a second Tuor,” Maedhros offered neutrally, carefully examining Haldir’s face to gage his reaction.

“He could never,” Haldir corrected, a little sadly, “Tuor never had any real human attachments. Boromir has many. He would never want to leave them all for something as trivial as romance.”

Maedhros rather fancied Haldir had an accurate read on the situation, though neither of them much liked it. From what he had said to Maedhros, Boromir loved his brother more than he could ever love any romantic partner. Maedhros understood that. He would have died for Fingon, but he had lived for his brothers.

They made better time together then Maedhros would have alone, or than they had with the hobbits. Eating mostly waybread, they did not stop to rest. Haldir took his turn at the oars all of the first day, and then slept in the boat while Maedhros took his turn. Elves could really sleep anywhere, with
practice, and they didn’t need much sleep to begin with. Maedhros had known elves who could literally sleep in armor, and others who could sleep on horseback. Maglor, in fact, was one of the latter. Maedhros himself had slept on Thangorodrim, if usually more from exhaustion than anything else.

“I am not going to kill you,” he told Haldir, a little irritably, when Haldir was reluctant to sleep on the first night. “If I wanted you dead, you would already be long dead. And I am just fine with the oars. Really. Boromir taught me plenty.”

Haldir, as if in protest, rolled over and watched the shoreline for a long while before dozing off.

As they progressed, Maedhros could feel his bond to Fingon growing stronger and stronger. He knew, with a dread that almost sickened him, that Fingon must have been passing close to the edges of the plane in which Valinor existed, and into the sphere of this realm. The dread had grown over a few days, as Fingon had gotten closer and closer, and Maedhros began to consider what could happen if Fingon was successful in returning here. His own death, Maedhros had considered often enough, but Fingon’s? That was unthinkable. Unbearable. Yet of course, Maedhros had borne it, once. He might be able to again, if only so he could tear Sauron and his legacy apart with his bare hands.

That was not the only thing about Fingon’s return that troubled him. For if Fingon returned, then it might have been possible for Maedhros to go home. It was a chance he had never meaningfully considered, but not by any stretch impossible. He was in a boat, on a river. Such things go eventually, Maedhros knew, to the ocean. If Fingon was sailing to him, they would be going towards the same place. They could meet. And yet to do so, Maedhros would have to abandon Gondor. Abandon the fellowship, and all the other friends he had made here. Though he rather thought none of them would begrudge him his joy, it would still be an unspeakable betrayal. Of Boromir. Of Frodo and Aragorn. Of Haldir and Rúmil. Of Galadriel, who perhaps alone of all of them would understand why Maedhros had to go. And yet, she herself had not fled. It would be a betrayal of Elrond, who had been fighting Sauron all his life. Worst of all, though, it would be a betrayal of himself. Maedhros had wanted to save people all his life, and though he had failed again, and again, and again, with Boromir he had finally succeeded. If he could save Boromir, perhaps he could do more. Could be better. Could be the person he had always wanted to be.

“Why do you fight Sauron?” He asked Haldir, on the fifth day on the river. By his estimation, Fingon would come into word-based contact range sometime in the next couple days, but until then, Haldir was the person he had to talk to.

Haldir shrugged noncommittally. “Because I do. He is the enemy of elvenkind, and a threat to my people. And if I do not stand up and fight for my kin, then who will?”

Maedhros, who had the oars, steered them a little to the left and then said, “I do not believe I could explain why I fought Morgoth. I hated him. He killed my grandfather and my father, and he tortured me for thirty years. But that was not why I fought him. If it was, I would have challenged him with way Fingolfin did. He was a danger to those I loved, true, but I could have protected them better by hiding like Turgon did than by making a stand. I chose Himring because I wanted Morgoth to see me. I wanted to be able to get up every morning and have him know that I was not his creature. It was not only hate because it was not about him. It was about me. My survival. My defiance. I never wanted him to break me. And yet, I think I would have fought him even if there had been no danger of that.”

“It seems to me,” Haldir said, “that you may have fought him because he was evil.”

Maedhros laughed. Not a real laugh, more like the sarcastic laughs that had become a trademark of
some of his brothers. “If I fought things that were evil, I would have been better positioned to fight myself.”

“Did you not fight yourself?” Haldir asked. Maedhros had nothing to say to that.

They stopped to make the portage around the rapids, and slept after on the bank of the river for the first time since leaving Lóthlorien. Maedhros had rarely dreamt on the river, sleeping lightly and for short times, but he dreamt there, and it was not one of his strange half-truth dreams either. This was instead a bond dream. Maedhros hadn’t had one since the night before the Nírnaeth, when he’d dreamt himself into Fingon’s tent, and they’d made tentative plans for the future that never came to pass.

Fingon remained awake, seemingly. There was still light in the sky where he was, and in point of fact, he seemed to be eating a late dinner. When Maedhros arrived, he jumped, almost throwing his waybread into the ocean. Not a sacrifice Ulmo might have appreciated, though perhaps some fish or gulls would have been happy.

For a second, neither of them spoke. Instead, they took each other in. Fingon was so beautiful, even salt kissed and unwashed from days at sea. Maedhros felt as though he was seeing him again for the first time, and he yearned to be there in person. To reach out and touch. Fingon’s hair was braided, loosely, and Maedhros’s fingers yearned to run through it. His eyes captured the starlight, and his sharp features were just as elegant as they had ever been.

“We should not be able to project at this distance,” Maedhros said, trying to be calm. Fingon, staring open mouthed, burst into tears.

“That is what you have to say to me?” He demanded, tears streaming down his face. “You get yourself somehow to Middle Earth, you almost die, and your opening line is ‘We should not be able to project at this distance’? I hope Námo takes you!”

He didn’t mean it, but he was right too. “I am sorry, Fingon. Let me start again. I love you. I have no idea how I came to be here. I did not mean to put myself in as much danger as I did, but my friend was dying and I needed Galadriel’s help to save him. She believes I pushed my hröa and my fëa to their limits. Her and another friend of mine saved my life. I am alright now, and I am sorry to have scared you as I did.”

Though he was not really there, he sent Fingon the fëa equivalent of a kiss, which Fingon returned in kind. “I thought I was never going to see you again,” he whispered. Given that the kiss was incorporeal, Fingon could talk as they did so.

“I thought the same,” Maedhros confessed. If he had really been there, he would have been crying too.

“Where are you?” Fingon asked, “I will be there soon and we ought to go as quickly as possible. Your mother will be worried.”

This was the choice Maedhros had been dreading since he’d realized Fingon was on his way. “Fingon, I do not know if I can leave. I have a responsibility here. There is a war on.”

“You have a responsibility there too, Maedhros. Amrod and Amras are there. Your mother is there. Caranthir is there.”

There was something in Fingon’s mention of Caranthir that struck him as odd. He shoved that aside, for now. “Maglor is here. As are many other people who need my help. And what’s more, so is
Sauron. Do you know what he did to Celebrimbor?"

Fingon sighed, and pulled away from their kiss. “I do. Or at least, I have an idea. But Celebrimbor is alright, Maedhros. He lives. As does Gil-galad, who Sauron also killed. If you want to help them, there is no need to fight here.”

Fingon was acting strange. “Why are you so opposed to this? Is it not a good thing that I am finally able to help people?”

“It is not our fight,” Fingon told him. It was clear that he was trying to be diplomatic and failing. “We did our part against his master. This is a time for men now. Let them fight this fight.”

“Not our fight?” Maedhros half-shouted, and then immediately pulled back at the look on Fingon’s face. “Sauron tortured me, Fingon. Morgoth may have been the master, but it was Sauron’s hands and claws more often than not. He tortured Celebrimbor to death. He may seem fine to you, but I know how that feels. There are some scars that never really fade. Sauron killed Finrod. He ripped him apart. And you just want me to leave my friends at his mercy? Where is the Fingon who walked into Angband because he could not fathom leaving me there? Why do you cower now?”

“I do not want you to leave your friends,” Fingon snapped. He was angry too now. “I want you to remember your family.” Maedhros caught a glimpse, just for a second, of Caranthir. He changed tactics.

“Tell me what happened, Fingon. Everything. From the moment you found out I was alive. Omit no detail.”

Fingon, to his credit, did. Even during what must have been one of their only real fights, he told Maedhros everything. With no detail omitted, Maedhros smiled over the descriptions of his mother and brothers, laughed at Turgon’s strange reactions to everything, and wept with Fingon over the rift between him and his parents.

“I wish that I could be good enough for you,” Maedhros said, when told about Fingon’s confession to his parents. About their reactions.

Fingon touched his fëa again, tentatively. “You are good enough for me now, and always have been. You have never treated me with anything less than love and respect, and I love you more than any words could suffice to say.”

“I love you,” Maedhros told him, because it bore repeating. “I love you always and completely.”

That was when Fingon took the opportunity to confess the promise he had made to Caranthir, and Maedhros was so disturbed that he almost woke up.

“You promised him what?” Maedhros demanded.

“I promised to get you to safety, to the best of my abilities.”

Well, at least he hadn’t sworn it to Eru or the Valar. “And did it never occur to you that I might not want to be gotten to safety?”

Fingon shook his head. “It occurred to both of us. That is why he made me promise. Because he knows that you would rather be a martyr than choose to come home.”

“And you were both willing to sacrifice Maglor to the cause of keeping me safe? How could you? Caranthir, I understand. He feels tired and alone and betrayed. But you, Fingon? I thought you were
“Maglor made his choice,” Fingon said slowly, though it seemed as though he was quoting someone. Caranthir, probably. “We cannot lose you again, Maedhros. Please, come home with me.”

Later, Maedhros would never admit that the choice he made at that moment was as much out of obstinacy as it was out of days of self-reflection. “Well, if you are determined to keep that promise, then know this. I will not be ‘gotten to safety’ until Maglor is found and Sauron is defeated. If you want to save me to the ‘best of your abilities’, you can start by saving Maglor, since I refuse to go anywhere without him. After that, then maybe we can talk about the war, and what part, if any, you should play in it.”

“The war?” Fingon demanded, voice tinged with more fear than anger. It broke Maedhros’s heart, but he knew, deep down, that his choice was the right one. He might have explained more, about Boromir, and Elros, and Aragorn, and why the people of Gondor needed him, but at that moment, the stress of it all, the anger, was finally too much for the bond, and he found himself sitting up in his own body, heaving for air. It was far more difficult to keep a bond in anger than in love, and for the first time in his memory, the anger between them had been enough to make communication by bond nearly impossible.

When Maedhros sat up, shocked and suddenly weeping, Haldir, who was supposed to be on watch, screamed and dropped Maedhros’s sword. They stared at each other in confusion.

“Trying to see your brothers?” Maedhros asked.

Haldir nodded. “What happened to you? You look awful.” His concern was shockingly genuine. Maedhros wondered when they’d started caring about each other.

“I think I may have just imploded my marriage,” Maedhros told him. To his own ears, his voice was oddly dissonant. Haldir sheathed Finrod’s sword and moved over to wrap an arm around Maedhros’s shoulder.

“How?” When Maedhros said nothing, he added, “Not that you are under any obligation to tell me.”

Maedhros buried his head in his hands and mumbled, “I told him that I was staying here until we defeated Sauron. I- I think I was cruel about it. I should have explained to him why, but I was just angry. He promised my brother that he would ‘get me to safety’. And he is right that I have needed him to save me. I needed him on Thangorodrim. I needed him at Himring, often. But there are also people who need me and I refuse to turn my back on that. I have already watched far too many people die because I could not protect them. If I have the chance to protect them, I have to do so. And if I get to take a piece out of that wolf-faced freak, then that is an added bonus.”

“For what it is worth,” Haldir murmured comfortingly after a moment, “I think you are making the right choice. I wish you did not have to lose your husband for it, but it matters to Rúmil and Boromir that you are choosing this. And I am sure that he will come to understand, in time. From what I remember of Rúmil’s history rants, Fingon does not seem one to step away from the good fight either. Right now, he is afraid for you. As he should be. You seem to want to fight Sauron, and the prospect of anybody doing that makes me concerned for their safety and survival, let alone someone with as much darkness in their past as you have in yours.”

Wiping away his tears on his sleeves, Maedhros said, “If it were not for Fingon, I would have died. Not just on Thangorodrim. After. Living with that, with the things they did to me, was impossibly difficult. Fingon’s support kept me going when even my own spirit was failing. To lose him, the one time in my entire life that I am doing something right is the worst thing I could have imagined. If he
had not come, and I had died, at least I would not have had to know that he hates me.”

“If he hates you for wanting to stand against Sauron,” Haldir snapped, “then he is a supreme fool who deserves less than a glance in his direction so afflicted is he with lack of empathy.”

This characterization of Fingon was so preposterous that Maedhros actually stopped crying to stare at Haldir. “What? That is hardly accurate.”

“Well if it is not true, then he will not hate you. He may hate the fact that you are being forced into this choice- Elbereth knows I hate making it for myself- but he cannot hate that you are doing what is right.”

Haldir lifted Maedhros by his shoulders to a standing position, and marched him back to the boat. They moved downriver in silence most of the day, Maedhros obsessing over the numbness in the bond. After a few hours, Haldir stopped steering for a second to hand Maedhros Finrod’s sword.

“Take a look at your brothers. Give yourself something else to worry about.”

Maedhros, numbly, did as asked. The visions for three of them were the same, while Caranthir’s had changed. Now, instead of asking Fingon to keep impossible promises, Caranthir was painting. It was the beginnings of a portrait of two people, by the looks of it. A couple, probably. Whoever they were, Caranthir kept sneaking glances outside of Maedhros’s range of vision to get references on their pose. The other major difference was that where before there had been no vision for Celegorm, now there was. It was him and Aredhel, of course, holding each other in a wild embrace while they both wept. Maedhros yearned to tell Fingon, who worried so for Aredhel, of this unexpected turn of events. Or at least, a turn of events yet to come. Given how quick Caranthir’s was to pass, this was likely not far in the future.

A day later, just before they were to stop and begin travelling on foot, it was Fingon’s turn to have a bond dream. Maedhros, who had been missing him, was shocked enough that he almost woke Haldir by shrieking. Fingon tried to put a hand over his mouth, but given that he wasn’t actually there, it didn’t work very well.

“There could be orcs!”

“There could,” Maedhros agreed, but nudged Finrod’s sword out of its sheath with his foot, showing the blade to be unlit, “I doubt it though.”

Fingon seemed to relax. “Maedhros, I have two things to say. Firstly, I am fairly certain Irmo has a hand in this, and for that I thank him, because secondly, I am sorry. You were right that what I promised Caranthir was unfair to you. I know that you have the strength to save yourself. In a sense, you always have saved yourself. After all, I was not the one who kept your fëa tied to your hröa all those years. You alone did that. If you need to stay, then I could never turn away. I will fulfil my promise in spirit by being here to support you, whatever you choose.”

“I accept your apology and I am sorry,” Maedhros said in return, “for scaring you and hurting you and shutting you out. Your fears are legitimate, and I treated them as if they were nothing. They are not nothing. I am scared too. I fear losing you. I fear dying without seeing you again. But I will be honest with you, more than anything I fear being the kind of person who can turn my back on my friends after I have offered them my aid.”

Fingon’s touch, even merely in fëa, felt like benediction. For a second, their bodies occupied the same space, and in understanding, they forgave each other. Through listening and respect, their relationship had always been able to grow and evolve. Perhaps they had merely been out of practice.
“Beleriand is almost all gone now,” Fingon said. Despite all the pain that had befallen them there, he seemed sad about it.

“Almost?” Maedhros asked, quietly.

Fingon shifted awkwardly. “Himring is still above water. I saw it. A couple parts of the castle still stand.”

Thinking back to his first visit to Lóthlorien and the conversation he had had with Rúmil there, Maedhros said, “I do not know when I started thinking of that as home instead of Formenos or Tirion. But I do. In a metaphorical sense, I was reborn at Himring. I made myself anew.”

Fingon sent him genuine understanding. He had seen Maedhros’s transformation, from the easy ways of his youth to the broken aftermath of Thangorodrim to the warrior-lord of Himring. He knew what it meant to Maedhros to have walked through the fire and emerged as both less and more.

“Would you tell me about why you want to fight this war?” Fingon asked, when the natural pause had ended. He seemed genuinely interested.

“I would.” Maedhros considered where to start, and felt his eyes and Fingon’s alike drawn to Haldir’s sleeping form. “This is Haldir. Against all odds, he does not hate me and neither does his brother.”

From there, he told Fingon of Rúmil, of Galadriel as she was in this time, of the fellowship as a whole and Boromir in particular. Fingon smiled at Rúmil’s kindness, and was proud of how far Galadriel had come. He was shocked by this new branch of people, ‘hobbits’, and surprised to learn of Aragorn’s heritage. He was shocked that men had so thoroughly erased the cultural practices of elves, and even of many of their own ancestors. Maedhros told Fingon also of his raising of Elrond and Elros, filling in the gaps in what Fingon had heard from Celebrían and Gil-galad.

They spoke almost until the sun rose, and by the end, understood each other far better. Maedhros could tell that Fingon was close to waking, and, rushed his way through an explanation of the sword’s powers to say, “Celegorm is coming back. Soon. If he is not back already. I have never seen Aredhel smile so widely.”

And then, because their bond was healed and Irmo was helping- Maedhros was going to address all his thanks and prayers to Irmo from now on- and Fingon was closer than ever, Maedhros pushed to show him the memory. It was only a couple of seconds, and the effort left him drained, but the feeling of Fingon’s joy was so pure and right that it left Maedhros smiling dopily as well.

Haldir, waking, took one look at him, said, “Well, I suppose that is solved then,” and unceremoniously took his oars back from Maedhros.

“I suppose it is,” Maedhros muttered. Fingon was close enough now that they could have talked with some effort, but like Maedhros, he simply seemed to be reveling in the light of the bond.

“Did he apologize?” Haldir asked. When Maedhros nodded, he added. “Good. Maybe now you can actually get some sleep instead of fretting over this.”

Maedhros, feeling oddly scolded, draped his cloak over his head to block out the sun and did as Haldir had asked. It was a new cloak, the previous one having been stained with Boromir’s blood, but again the fabric had a distinctly elven feel. Whoever had made it certainly had possessed a gift for
such things.

In his dream, Maedhros was surrounded by all his brothers save Maglor. They were arranged like in a painting, Curufin holding close to Celegorm, Amras and Amrod wrapped in each other, with Caranthir sitting in the middle of them, alone and not.

“I have missed all of you more than there are words for,” he told them, sorrow weighing on him like lead.

“You should not have come,” Caranthir snapped. “Maglor needed you.”

Maedhros, having just decided to not abandon Maglor, against Caranthir’s wishes, flinched. Dream-Maedhros said, “I could only have done him more harm. And I do not believe our children will give up on him.”

“Our children!” Curufin shouted, which was odd because Maedhros had surely meant Elrond, not Celebrimbor, who was long gone from these shores. Celegorm gave Curufin’s shoulder a rough squeeze to shut him up, and the dream dissolved.

In the next part of the dream, Celebrimbor was there. He said nothing, not even when Maedhros spoke to him, calling out his name. In the dream, Maedhros reached out to him, and gave what comfort he could. Curufin was there also, though the rest of their brothers were gone. He said nothing to Maedhros either, simply wrapping his fëa around his son and holding him tight. Maedhros hoped this dream, at least, was real and not symbolic. If what had happened to Celebrimbor was as Maedhros imagined it, then he would need all the love and support Curufin could give him.

Maedhros woke wanting to talk, but really not knowing what to say. “What are elven marriages like, in this time?”

Haldir shrugged. “Oaths to Eru, usually written ahead of time or following a very specific formula. The bond is less commonly strong than it used to be, I think. We also tend to marry later. I mean, neither of my brothers are married, I am not, Legolas is not, the children of Elrond are not, though I am given to understand that Lady Arwen will be married at the end of this, if she has her way. Why do you ask?”

“The way Boromir talks about it, it is like elves have forgotten how to marry entirely. I am glad the oaths custom has changed. Or, rather, that the changes stuck. Maglor once wrote treatises against using magically binding oaths for marriage without giving it proper thought. Anonymously, of course. In retrospect, I do wonder if he was trying to give me a very unsubtle hint as well. Regardless, he was right, and I am glad that nobody will be so tightly bound again. My father would hate that, but what does he know? He was a true traditionalist in terms of marriage.”

Haldir made an odd face. “If you told people your father hated it, they would rush to do exactly the opposite of what he wanted.”

That made Maedhros laugh. Some things never changed. “I wish I had thought of that years ago. I could have effected much good by telling people how much my father was a traditionalist.”

Haldir laughed too. “Another wicked scheme from the sons of Fëanor!”

They were silent for a long time before Maedhros asked, “have you ever seen an unhealthy bond?”

Haldir looked at him pensively. “Are you trying to ask if I think your marriage is sick? Because, honestly, I do not believe I know a single couple who would not find the situation you are in stressful.”
Maedhros shook his head vigorously. “No. I know my marriage is healthy. I mean, I can feel Fingon from here to Valinor. If we did not have a high level of trust and a deep love for each other, that would be impossible. Even if we are not always perfect, we never try to hurt or undermine or control each other. And even if we did, my oaths to him are not binding. I know what a binding oath feels like. But I have seen in my time marriages ill-suited enough that the bond became toxic, but the oaths made it impossible for the participants to back away.”

“Well, that is rarely seen now, if ever. Because people take longer to marry, they are often more certain in themselves and their relationships when they do. And of course, if you do not love the person you have married, most of the oaths would not be binding enough to keep you from leaving them.”

That was a change for the better, and Maedhros was glad. “Curufinwë- my brother not my father- and his wife hated each other. I do not know if that was ever common knowledge, even within the family, but it is true. They married very young. Curufin mostly because our parents did and Liltallë-well, honestly, there was no good reason to marry Curufin. He was young and in those days smart in inverse proportions to how smart he thought he was. Not that Curufin did not have his virtues, but if he was immature in Beleriand, then that alone was the result of some centuries of self-improvement. They were quite in love in the beginning, of course, but then, they were barely even of age. Remember, Celebrimbor was of age when we left for Beleriand, and consider how young his father must have married for that math to work. “

“What happened?” Haldir asked. Like Rúmil, he seemed oddly pleased by learning old gossip.

“They never had anything in common or respected each other’s wishes. Curufin wanted to work the forges at my father’s side like he was a growth instead of his own person. Liltallë wanted him to stay home and teach Celebrimbor while she continued her life as it had been before they married. Remember, she was very young and neither of them were really ready for the duties of parenthood. We tried to help them. My mother especially almost raised Celebrimbor as an eighth son in the end. And then my father got himself banished to Formenos when Celebrimbor was about fifteen in sun years. Well, that was the excuse Liltallë and Curufin had been looking for all their marriage, to break apart without disappointing our father or her parents. While my father and mother were having the first half of their massive fight, Liltallë and Curufin mirrored them in the background. It was just like Curufin to be just like father, save for this: My parents, despite all their ethical and philosophical differences, always ultimately treated each other as entities with dignity. Of course they did. My father truly believed that in life, each elf was destined to love the one they married, always and eternally and without restraint. So, when he and my mother faced irreconcilable differences, he treated her fairly, as one would their only love. Curufin and Liltallë were different in two key aspects, in addition to their lack of mutual respect. Firstly, they never attempted to mend the rift between them. My parents corresponded until we left for Beleriand. Secondly, their son was not grown. Even Amrod and Amras were of age before Formenos. Celebrimbor found himself abandoned with his father at the age of fifteen. Not that we did not all try our best to help. We did. But the fact she never so much as wrote him a letter was cruel in the extreme and Curufin never forgave her for that.”

Haldir shook his head. “That is unconscionable.”

“It was. If my mother had abandoned me, I would have grown into a far less empathetic and kind person. Yet Celebrimbor, despite everything, was the best of us. He and Curufin loved each other very much, even if they could not always express it. It was not what I would have wanted for any child of mine, but with Curufin’s love and support from the rest of us, Celebrimbor somehow became one of the most generous, upstanding and brave people I have ever known. When I heard that he had renounced us, I remember that I was so glad. Curufin never said as much, but I know he
was glad too. Unlike my father, Curufin did not want his son to die for a shiny rock.”

“Are you alright?” Haldir asked. Maedhros belatedly realized that he had been crying.

He tried to steady his voice. “No, Hadir, I am not alright. I am perhaps angry is not the right word, but it is the best word I have. I am angry. I am angry that Boromir’s father has so robustly failed his children. I am angry at my father, who loved us so fiercely that he destroyed us, and yet sacrificed us for his own selfishness, at the end. I am angry at Fingon’s father, who has apparently forgiven my father and not me. Or at least, not me enough to allow our marriage to stand. I am furious that Curufin has to languish in Mandos when I know he does not want to be there. He deserves this second chance just as much as I do. If not more. Curufin apologized to Lady Galadriel after helping kill her brother. I never did as much for any I wronged. I know Celegorm did not either, and yet he gets a second chance because Aredhel needs him. Based on Fingon’s description of the situation anyways, I am sure that is why. It makes me wonder if I am here on my merit or on Fingon’s. Celebrimbor needs his father too, but he is not as ‘good’ as a Nolofinwiel so he cannot have what he needs. Why? Celebrimbor was in a situation where all those who loved him were monsters and he chose to be honest and true. Sauron took advantage of that. Aredhel had good, honest people who loved her and had difficulty making the same choices Celebrimbor did. Celebrimbor was a good person who did not deserve any of this.”

Haldir took all this in stride. “Rúmil would be better able to help you here than I.”

Maedhros gave him a grin through his tears. “Rúmil does not know what it is like to be responsible for protecting his family every single day.”

Haldir grinned back. “And thank Eru for that.”

They left their boat that night, and began the long walk to Minas Tirith. They crossed over the many tiny streams that led the Entwash into the Anduin, and then they reached Gondor proper, and were met with fields and hills and farmland, far as the eye could see. Something terrible had happened here, or perhaps many small, terrible things. It reminded Maedhros a little of Beleriand, the downtrodden people who hid for fear that every stranger might be a servant of the enemy. There were still people living in those farms, Maedhros suspected, despite the burnt-out buildings and the ravaged fields. They were likely hiding because Maedhros and Haldir were strangers, and could theoretically serve any master. It certainly was possible that they had all left, but where had they to go? As for those who were burning farms and fields, Maedhros saw none either. A few times, he or Haldir spotted smoke on the horizon, but they gave it a wide berth. If Gondor was already ravaged, then their mission to Minas Tirith was all the more urgent.

Where are you now? Maedhros asked, after a couple of days of walking. Most places, he reckoned, were better than the misery that his present location held.

Fingon sent him a little amusement. With Círdan. He is both perplexed and pleased by my presence, though pleased mostly I think by receiving word of Gil-galad. He has had word of your return, apparently, though says it has been kept fairly secret. Just the key strategic players of this time. People like Círdan himself, and Elrond.

It had honestly never occurred to Maedhros that Elrond would have known about his return. Of course Galadriel would have told him. Maedhros almost felt guilty for not giving her any messages to pass on. But all of that would have been so insufficient. It would have been meaningless in the face of all that had passed between Maedhros and Elrond. He communicated all of this to Fingon.

Why do you not reach out to him with your mind? Fingon asked. I think he would want to speak to you. Celebrían and Gil-galad both seem to think that he loves you.
Maedhros sent him a feeling of shame before he thought, I don’t know what his mind feels like. When we were raising them, I had shut myself off completely from any input. I was afraid to make new connections. If I looked for him, I would not reliably be able to identify him. And at a time like this, experimentation is too dangerous to risk.

Fingon sent him understanding and changed the topic.

Chapter End Notes

Fingon and Maedhros have a fight in this chapter. It isn’t very nice, and it’s also, like, most of the plot. Sorry. They make up after, but it’s still not fun. There’s also some discussion of Curufin’s unhealthy marriage and Celebrimbor’s kinda shitty childhood. It’s all fairly critical to the plot of the chapter, so I wouldn’t skip but if you know that’ll trigger you, I’d just wait ’til next week. You won’t be missing much beyond character stuff.

On the subject of updates: Sunday morning (hopefully), I’ll finally be posting that prequel fic for this story. An apology for this chapter, if you will. Then next Friday is one of the chapters I’ve been wanting to write since the start of this story so get hype for that!
Haradrim, Fëanorions and Other Monsters

Chapter Summary

Maedhros arrives in Gondor, makes some new friends, and changes the world.

Chapter Notes

This is important to say before we start: I know people fall into two camps on this subject, but I fully believe that Tolkien’s portrayal of non-white men (Haradrim, Easterlings and Variags), is both based in real-world racism, and wrong. This is not to say that you can’t like Lord of The Rings (I’m writing Lord of the Rings fan fiction, I fucking LOVE Lord of the Rings), but I do think it is important to acknowledge that they do not exist in a vacuum, and there are real world consequences to the consistent failure of fiction authors to portray POC in a sympathetic light.

That’s all I have to say for the intro, other than that this is one of my favourite chapters so far, and something I’ve been looking forward to writing since this story started.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Maedhros’s first thought, looking down on the forces of Sauron surrounding Minas Tirith was, “well, where is the rest of the army?”

Haldir looked slowly from Maedhros to the legions of orcs, and then back. His expression was utterly unbelieving. “Gondor’s forces are inside the city walls, if that’s what you mean. Any external aid they called for is too late.”

To Haldir, the magnitude of the forces Sauron has conjured were massive. Since there were no dragons or balrogs or giant spiders, Maedhros was unimpressed. There were the Nazgûl circling in the sky above certainly, but save that and the orcs, there were no monsters present on the field of battle.

On Haldir’s suggestion, they had climbed into the mountains behind Minas Tirith. It proved to be a good one, for it had given them a vantage point from which they could see the orcs, but the orcs could not see them. The situation seemed grim. The forces of the enemy had already entrenched themselves to a degree, and were building siege engines.

“We could probably find a way into the city,” Haldir said, though he did not seem sure. “We might not do much good, but I am a fair shot and I know you would be useful with that sword.”

Maedhros ignored him. Instead, he briefly consulted his own memory of tactics employed by either Sauron or Morgoth, and then consulted Fingon’s.

“Where are the men?” He asked Haldir. “Sauron has a history of seducing men to his side. Are there any in this time who would join him?”
Haldir pointed. “Those are the Haradrim, men from the south who are enemies of Gondor. With them are some of the Variags and the Easterlings. The Haradrim, we have had some communication with. We know almost nothing of the Variags, save that they do not like us, nor our allies. Rúmil has posited that the Easterlings are in fact related to the First Age group of the same name, but there has been so little non-violent contact between our peoples that we have little to no evidence of that. Thranduil trades with them, when we are not at war, but inevitably the trade leads to disputes, which lead us back to war again.”

If Haldir had wanted Maedhros to choose to simply fight with his sword, he should not have reminded Maedhros of Bór, who had been a friend until the end. For even if some of the Easterlings had betrayed Caranthir, they had not directly betrayed Maedhros. Bór had died for his alliance, honorably as any of Eru’s children might have. Maedhros, seeing a new path to victory, began to smile.

“No,” Haldir said. “You are not thinking what I think you are thinking.”

“Blessings of the Valar lay upon the Lord of the Men of the East,” Maedhros said, in the language he had learned to speak for Bór’s sake.

“I absolutely hate you,” Haldir said in Sindarin, with feeling.

The thing about massive armies of orcs is that they do not expect one person to walk towards them alone and unarmed. Maedhros, against Haldir’s wishes, had turned over his sword and wrapped his cloak tightly around his person to blend in. It was very dark, Sauron’s doing no doubt, and thus, he was able to walk into the middle of the mannish encampment almost unnoticed. Then, because he had a show to put on, he threw his cloak off and let his hair shine free. Thirty men drew their swords all at once.

“Great warriors, show me where to find your lord,” Maedhros said, hopefully. This plan relied fully on the languages of the east not having changed as much as the languages of the west had.

“See,” one of the men said to the man beside him, “I told you that ancient languages class would be useful.”

“Who are you, elf?” The other man said. The first man translated for the rest of the group.

Weighing his options, Maedhros prayed to Irmo, his new favourite Vala, for luck. “I am Maedhros, Son of Fëanor, King of the Noldor and Lord of Himring.”

This sent a murmur through the crowd. “Liar,” said the first man, “Maedhros only had one hand.”

“I died. I have since returned. Elves do that. Now, I am sure you have commanders who would take offence to not being introduced to a potential ally on the eve of battle.”

As with every army in history, they did. Maedhros was taken to another campfire, where three men and a woman in heavy robes sat in the circle. The woman was evidently the young mother or older sister of one of the men. They looked very much alike. Each man seemed to be the commander of a different force. The Lord of the Haradrim had the largest force, and thus took the lead. The other two, who were introduced as the General of the Easterlings and the Chieftain of the Variags, reluctantly accepted positions of less authority. The two men he had spoken to were both Easterlings, and at the command of their general, they translated Maedhros’s speech into the modern version of their language.

“Lords of Eru’s Children, I come to you at this late hour both as King of the Noldor and as a Servant
of Manwë. As king, I offer you a proposition and information. As servant, I offer you a warning. For in my life, I have seen the Valar at their harshest and at their kindest.”

The first man translated, and the Lord of the Haradrim asked a question, which was repeated back. “The Lord of the Haradrim sends you greetings, and asks how we can know your identity to be true?”

“I thank the Lord of the Haradrim for his question,” Maedhros said, with a small bow in his direction. “In times like this, he is wise to question all. He may know that I am Maedhros by my hair, which has always been red, and by my face, which was said to be fair before Morgoth’s torments and is fair again now. He may know I am king because I wear no crown. What fool of a false king would walk among strangers and wear no crown? I go crownless because I know I have no need of a crown to prove I am king. You may know that I am a diplomat because I bear no arms. I do not need a sword to defend myself; my words are enough. You may know that I am the son of Fëanor because, even now, his greatest works still call to me.”

This last was a blatant lie, merely a setup for some theatrics. According to Fingon, Eärendil was a more than willing participant in aiding Maedhros, and perhaps he would be a more than willing participant in this game. As his words were translated, Maedhros looked up to the clouded sky, and, at nobody he could sense, Vala, Maia or elf, he thought, please. Better people than I always believed that your star stood for hope. These men need hope now more than any others. They need the hope to believe they can stand away from Sauron. To believe that my words are true. If you let your light shine, it might save them all. They are children of Eru, just as we are, and they deserve that chance. Just for a second, the clouds parted, and all could see a faint light shining through. The grin on Maedhros’s face was quite genuine, as was the awe in the faces of his audience. Silently, he thanked Varda, Eärendil, and any others who might have been listening. The light disappeared just as fast, but this was more than enough.

The General of the Easterlings spoke to his companions, in words that were not translated for Maedhros’s ears, though he caught elvish imports such as ‘Fëanor’ ‘Elbereth’ ‘Eärendil’ ‘Himring’ and ‘Silmaril’. Eventually, he gave a command to his men.

“His Eminence the General sends greetings to the High King of the Noldor. Many centuries ago, our kin fought against Morgoth at your side. We have not forgotten, unlike the foolish men of Gondor who do not even remember their own king. We would hear now the words of a king and servant, as all men are kings and servants.”

Maedhros offered him a bow as well. “My greetings in turn to the General. Bór, who fought at my side, was a man of true bravery, who stood against evil and injustice with unparalleled honour. He taught me this tongue, and I am relieved that I may now use it again to communicate with his kinsmen. The warnings and tidings I bring are entwined, and the proposition I offer based on them. I warn of the treachery of Sauron. I have known many who called the Lord of Wolves a friend, a servant, or a master. He has forsaken them all. The son-of-my-brother once called him friend, and he was betrayed and tortured until dead, his body desecrated after. Not even Morgoth nor Aulë, great Valar each, could hold his loyalty. In opposition, I bring tidings of the victory of Rohan over the forces of Saruman, and of the return of the true King of Gondor. Denethor is an arrogant fool, who does not remember the old ways, but his king is not. Instead, he is a wise commander trained at the side of Lord Elrond himself, as I once trained Elrond in turn.”

In point of fact, Maedhros had no idea if Rohan had won or lost, or if Aragorn lived or had died, or if Elrond had ever trained him in strategy. But his words sent the commanders all tittering again.

It was the lady who spoke, the sister, probably, of the Chieftain of the Variags. She spoke in Bór’s
“And your proposition, King Maedhros? What could you possibly offer us that Sauron cannot?”

“Victory,” Maedhros told her. “Sauron has the disfavour of the Valar. I was brought to life to bring him down. Elves have been returned from Valinor to bring him down. Morgoth, the mightiest of them all, was brought to his knees in the end by his kin, and Sauron is not half as powerful. With the free peoples allied against him, and the Valar themselves taking action, he has no chance of victory. If you fight with him today, your people will either die when you lose, or be slaughtered by orcs when Sauron wins. He has no love for the freedom of Eru’s children. I would not ask you to fight for a fool like Denethor. All I ask is that you leave this battlefield and do not look back. In exchange, here is what I have to offer. For one hundred years, no soul of Gondor, Rohan or any elven kingdom will set foot on your lands, save by invitation. Myself, Lord Elrond, King Thranduil, King Aragorn, and the Lord and Lady of Lóthlorien will personally recognize the validity of all territorial claims currently held by your people, save those taken in this war, to never be challenged as long as our lines may reign. I will also make a speech and write a treatise reminding all those who have forgotten of the true glory of your peoples. For the crimes of the Númenóreans against the Haradrim—Haldir had told him about this—Gondor will make reparations. So, as you can see, you have little to lose and much to gain. My lady?”

“Your Majesty,” corrected the apparent Queen of the Variags. Whoops. “Why would one such as Thranduil, with his arrogance and greed, agree to such a thing?”

Maedhros, who knew virtually nothing about Thranduil, thought on his feet. “I derive my authority in this matter from his son, Prince Legolas. Unlike his father, Legolas has learned to accept much difference and change. You may remember the feud between Thranduil’s line and the dwarves of Erebor. I have seen Legolas overcome that hatred to respect and understand dwarves and their culture. Thranduil lost many kin to my kin at the destruction of Doriath, yet Legolas has given me this authority. As he gains power, their kingdom will change for the better.”

While the Easterlings relayed this conversation to the other men, the Queen continued to negotiate. “I want to meet this ‘Prince Legolas’. As will the General. The men of Rhûn have known often the Elvenking, and would like to know also if the son is greater than the father.”

“He will be on his way here now with King Aragorn. I am sure he would be honored to meet you both, your majesty.”

The Queen stood, and offered Maedhros her hand. He kissed the ring on it. “The Variags,” she said, with an air of dignity, “will not go to war today.”

She repeated her words to her counterparts. The Lord of the Haradrim began to object, but the General of the Easterlings got down on his knees before Maedhros. Through his translators, he said, “Bór, with whom I share a name, once swore his allegiance to the High King. By my honor, we shall not go to war against him today. Let us fight once more by the side of Maedhros the Tall!”

The two translators dropped to their knees also, following his lead. The Queen of the Variags, with an air of pride, said, “my men are no more cowardly than their brothers. If the Easterlings march to war, then so too shall we.”

To Maedhros’s shock, she knelt also, as did her brother and many of the men who surrounded them. This left only the Haradrim and their lord standing. Using the translators, he said, “The Haradrim have long been crushed between Sauron and his allies and the northerners and theirs. I say, no more! The Sons of Fëanor were once crushed between Morgoth and the Lesser Elves.” Lesser Elves would have been an imported term, Maedhros guessed, likely referring to the People of Starlight. As the clear victors of most of the First Age, Maedhros would have hardly termed them ‘lesser’, but he did
not state this aloud. “If they can stand against their tormentors, why not us? Let the Haradrim become rulers of their own destiny, say I.”

And then, with nobility, he too dropped to his knees before Maedhros. Suddenly, Maedhros was in command of fighting force of eighteen thousand men in the middle of tens of thousands of orcs, and he had no idea what to do with them.

The first order he gave was to sabotage the siege engines and delay the attack on Gondor as long as possible. Their best chance of survival was to, as the Lord of the Haradrim said, ‘crush’ the orcs between their own forces and those of their new allies. For that, they first needed allies, which meant a delay. Next, he ordered their deal to be written out, and copies of the treaty be given to each of the commanders. This way, if any of them died, the others would have signed copies of the treaty. Fingon, he hoped, would keep up Maedhros’s end of the bargain in the worst case scenario.

While the treaty was being written up, Maedhros sat cross-legged on the ground and reached out with his mind. He spoke to Fingon first, explaining what he had done, and what was about to happen. Fingon was not happy. His fear for Maedhros on the battlefield, unarmed, tinged his thoughts. There was no meaningful comfort Maedhros could give him, which broke his heart. With Fingon’s reluctant acceptance, he mostly closed the bond so Fingon would not feel much from him until the battle was over. That way, neither of them could become distracted, and the odds of Fingon fading if Maedhros died were far less. That done, Maedhros reached out to Haldir. He was marginally less magically null than Rúmil, perhaps by virtue of being older, and with a great deal of effort, Maedhros was able to send him a signal to sneak out and return Finrod’s sword. Lastly, Maedhros brought down most of his shields to look for someone to warn about their change in allegiance.

He sensed no other elves in proximity, save Haldir. His connection to Legolas was not strong enough to serve at distance. He was about to give up, fearing Sauron’s noticing, when he remembered Gandalf the Maia. Maedhros scanned again, with a focus on Maiar, finding two in proximity, one of whom was obviously Sauron. This meant that the other had to be this ‘Gandalf’. Or he could be Saruman, but that seemed unlikely given that he seemed to be in Minas Tirith.

Are you Gandalf? He asked, praying he was right.

The Maia reacted with a great deal of suspicion. He only calmed when Maedhros identified himself.

Son of Fëanor. Long years has it been since I met one of your kin.

Maedhros sent him amusement. On the contrary. You have seen both my cousin and my son quite recently, I recall. It has been long years since one of the Maiar addressed me with kindness. Now, we have not much time before the battle starts, and I should not like to be caught off guard when it does. I have just convinced the men who were to follow Sauron in this battle to change their allegiances. Please be advised that we will be attempting to slow this army, but we are in a poor strategic position to attack it alone, and I will not throw my men into a massacre.

Gandalf seemed genuinely pleased by the news. You will not have to fight alone, if you can delay long enough. We have called for aid from Théoden of Rohan. I have no reason to believe he shall forsake us. Now, tell me, have you word of Boromir?

He lives, in Lóthlorien. Lady Galadriel and her people shall care for him, and he shall live.

My thanks.

Maedhros acknowledged his words, and then closed off his mind from Gandalf and the rest.
Haldir arrived just as the chaos from the sabotaged siege engines began to take hold. Ropes and weights from catapults were missing. Some had mysteriously caught fire, and there had been a delay in the Haradrim who were supposed to be transporting the remaining weapons. Their beasts were being ‘disobedient and disorderly to the extreme’, apparently. This bought Maedhros and Haldir time to change into spare uniforms, Haldir from one of the Haradrim, Maedhros from the Easterlings. Maedhros was far too tall to conceivably be an Easterling, who were usually closer to dwarven in stature, but orcs were stupid, and this way, his hair and ears were covered. There was still a chance of them being smelled out, so Maedhros convinced Haldir to allow him to rub mûkmahil droppings on both of their armor to confuse the smell. Once this was done, Maedhros signed all the copies of the treaties- left handed, which seemed to please their new allies- and Haldir signed also as a representative of Lóthlorien. Then, the Chieftain of the Variags and two Easterling and Haradrim officers snuck away to relay the new plan to Sauron’s reserves, which were, luckily, composed entirely of men.

In the end, they managed to delay the start of the battle by what Maedhros would estimate was almost an hour and a half before Sauron’s chief commander, who Haldir identified as someone called ‘The Witch-King of Angmar’, came around to see what was going on. Maedhros had considered often what to do at this point, but he knew that if they were identified as traitors too soon before Rohan arrived, all their men would die. On the other hand, if the Rohirrim could not tell that they were allies, they would be trapped between two armies who both identified them as enemies and all their men would die. In the end, with a heavy heart, he decided that the commanders should bow and scrape before the Witch-King, and then begin with the attack on Minas Tirith. Indeed, they should beg to be the first through the gate. If they failed, then, well, it seemed like they were keen. If they succeeded, then once through, they could change sides.

The Witch-King was so shrouded in dark magic he made Maedhros yearn for the light of the trees in a way he hadn’t since Thangorodrim. Maedhros could sense the unnatural workings making him immortal, running against the grain of Arda itself. But under all of that, he could also sense Celebrimbor. Just a hint, the bedrock under a mountain of ash, but it was there. Maedhros wanted, as much as he had ever wanted anything, to extract some measure of revenge for what had been done to Celebrimbor by ending the legacy of his rings upon this former man. To right the wrong that had been done to both him and his craft. But he resisted, instead fading into the background and watching. He bent down on the pretence of being subservient to the Witch-King, but really to hide his height.

It was one of the tensest moments of Maedhros’s life, as the Witch-King stalked, shouted, and almost impaled the Lord of the Haradrim. But at the last moment, he seemed to remember his need of these men’s allegiance, and climbed back on his beast. He left an orc in charge, who Maedhros beheaded as soon as the Witch-King was out of sight. It was one orc in an army, and orcs killed each other all the time. Nobody would notice.

They did, however, notice Maedhros’s sword. “What is that?” One of the translators asked. Maedhros explained a little about Noldorin sword craft.

“Does it have a name?” Asked the other.

Maedhros opened his mouth to say that it didn’t, but what came out instead was, “Cánë. It means valour in the tongue of my youth.”

“We will all need valour today,” said the Queen. She had taken off her robes to reveal armor underneath.

“Yes,” Maedhros agreed, “we will.”
In the end, they maintained the charade for more than a full day. It had been night when Maedhros had arrived in camp, though Sauron’s darkness made it difficult to tell the difference. The enemy’s plan seemed to have been to assail the city meaninglessly all day to bring fear. Maedhros’s intervention had caused significant trouble on that front, and it was almost noon by the time every siege engine—save those that had mysteriously caught fire—was running again. That next night, the Witch-King summoned the Haradrim with their mükmahil to the gate. Maedhros followed them meekly. This was the moment of reckoning. Maedhros allowed them to use Grond—what a stupid name for a battering ram—to break the gate. Then, when the orcs and their leader were distracted by their attack on Minas Tirith, he gave the command to change allegiances. From there, the battle could only be described as sheer, unrepentant chaos.

The strange thing was, when Maedhros drew his sword and revealed himself to the orcs, he was almost relieved. In fact, it was the most danger he had been in all day, but it felt almost safer. At least this way, he knew who his enemies were. There was shouting and screams, from both sides, and Maedhros could feel both Gandalf and the Witch-King drawing on the power of Arda. That was when the horns blew. Maedhros did not allow himself to react, did not allow himself to look at what would later be described to him as a ‘glorious’ cavalry charge. By this description, Maedhros came to picture it as the Riders of the Gap, though he knew in actuality the Riders of Rohan were very different from their elven counterparts. As they charged from one side of the field, the cavalry loyal to Maedhros took some initiative and charged from the other. The sun was rising as well, and this Maedhros could not help but notice, for it was as wondrous to him as when he had first witnessed it rise, and he loved it. At the Nirnaeth, Fingon was always said to have had a similar moment of great hope, so Maedhros took his own with a degree of suspicion, as was probably appropriate given that the enemy still outnumbered them.

Maedhros attempted to fight his way towards the Rohirrim. Someone, after all, had to tell them of the latest developments, and as an elf, Maedhros would be immediately assumed to be against Sauron. In aid of this, he took off his helm. This increased his personal danger, but as the Haradrim saw him fighting among them, they let out a great cheer.

That was about the moment when Maedhros realized that he had lost the Witch-King. He did not know how he would fare in a fight against the corrupted man, but Haldir had informed him that Glorfindel had prophesised that no man could kill him. As it was, that left Maedhros, Haldir, and Gandalf as the only three non-men on the battlefield. Assuming of course that Glorfindel had meant the race of man, not males of any race or even sentient beings in general. Prophecies were funny like that. Very difficult to translate.

A scan of the skies discovered the Witch-King atop one of the flying steeds. Several of his brethren also swooped about. They divided their efforts, the Witch-King diving towards the Rohirrim while all the rest save one—Maedhros found it too difficult to count them in motion while fighting—moved against the city defences. If the orcs could take the city, then they would have a position of strength from which to fight the Rohirrim and Maedhros’s forces. The last Nazgûl took it upon himself to land in front of Maedhros, his beast screeching as the nearby forces, orcs and men alike, fled. Maedhros tried not to flinch.

“I pity you,” he told the former man, and took the head off of the beast with a single stroke. It was easier than dragon slaying, with no nigh-impenetrable scales in his way.

The Nazgûl, blade raised, leapt for him. Their fight was slow and brutal, ending not with Maedhros’s blade in the heart of the Nazgûl, but instead with him catching its blade with his own and then an arrow of the Galadhrim piercing it through the neck. Maedhros took the head clean off for good measure, feeling its foul magic burning at him. He searched the man, finding no ring on his body—well, it was more a shell than a body—and looked up just in time to miss the death of the Witch-King
of Angmar. He only knew what happened because the rest of the Nazgûl all fled the field of battle at once. Later, the whole series of events would be explained to him, but in that moment, he was simply relieved.

“Let Mandos judge them fairly,” he said, mostly to himself, and redoubled his efforts to reach the Rohirrim.

By the time Maedhros actually arrived at the site where the Witch-King had fallen, the battle was essentially over. More reinforcements from Gondor had arrived by boat, as had the additional Easterlings and Variags. At the loss of their commander- Maedhros would later learn that he had killed the second in command before the battle had even begun- the orcs had begun to scatter.

Thusly, when Maedhros arrived where the Witch-King’s body had fallen, and noted, in quick succession, a young woman lying half-dead on the ground, Merry the hobbit, also lying half-dead on the ground, and a man who looked to be the King of Rohan- Théoden, Maedhros thought- lying perhaps two-thirds dead on the ground, he was actually able to stop and help.

Of the three, only Théoden was coherent. “Who are you?” He asked, trying to sit up. Maedhros counted multiple broken bones. Arms, legs. The man had been nearly flattened. It was a miracle his skull hadn’t been crushed too.

“King Maedhros of the Noldor, if it pleases your majesty. I convinced the Haradrim, the Easterlings and the Variags to switch sides today. I also intend to save your life, if you will allow me.”

“Help them,” Théoden ordered, but, well, Maedhros has not truly taken an order from his king since he swore the oath, let alone from some foreign king he met seconds ago. The others could wait. Maedhros needed the Rohirrim to have a king, and this is the only one he knew of. A change in leadership at a time like this could spell disaster. It might not, but it could.

Maedhros had not, however, learned anything of healing magic or his own connection to Arda these past weeks, and was sure he did not have the skill to heal this king.

Since the battle was mostly done, he opened his bond with Fingon. After a moment of shared relief he asked, how are your skills with healing magic?

If you have lost another hand-

Maedhros, amused, cut him off with an image of Théoden. This man is the King of Rohan, and I would prefer if he did not die on my watch.

I could guide you through it, Fingon offered.

Maedhros sent a negative response. Honestly, it will be more efficient if you work the magic through me. My connection to you is stronger than any other conduit I have to Arda.

And so Fingon, alone on a beach though not alone in his mind, sat down, pulled out his harp, and began to sing. As he worked his healing, he passed the energy through his bond to Maedhros, and Maedhros passed it in turn to Théoden. For a blissful moment, they were one. Maedhros was himself, hands on Théoden’s broken legs and Fingon, strings beneath his fingertips. He was wearing bloody mannish armor and soft elven fabrics. He was surrounded by a crowd of men, assembled to watch him work, and also alone, praying and hoping that Maglor would hear him and come running. He was exhausted and well rested. Red hair fell in his face and black hair was braided back with beads from Celebrimbor in it. He carried swords made by father and son. And then, slowly, Fingon’s hands raised from the strings, and Maedhros’s from the king, and it was over.
The crowd that had surrounded Maedhros had departed with the woman and Merry, leaving only the Queen of the Variags and a very familiar looking elf.

Fingon, Maedhros thought, what are the names of Elrond’s sons? After receiving the answer, he said aloud, “Elladan or Elrohir?”

“Oh, Elrohir,” he said, with a half-bow. “You must be Lord Maedhros? King Maedhros? Commander?”

Maedhros kind of liked being called commander, but this was a special case. Hedging his bets, he switched to speaking Quenya. “For the sons of Elrond, Maedhros will do just fine. For the rest of them, it will be king though. Not high king either, just king. It has occurred to me that as the husband of the high king, I might call myself a king at least.”

Elrohir took the information in stride. His Quenya was flawless, save for a distinctly Fëanorean lilt. “My father sent Elladan and I with a message for you, among other things. Aragorn would also like to speak to you at your earliest convenience concerning the exact terms of this alliance. We killed some corsairs on our way here and we need to know if we breached the agreement we did not know we were making.”

“We lit the lower levels of Minas Tirith on fire and, as I understand it, terrorized the southern half of the country. If any of my men object to your killing the corsairs, remind them that their actions against Gondor were just as bad if not worse. I look forward to hearing your father’s message. For now, though, there is still work to be done here. I will be with you, and Aragorn, as soon as I may. Would you be so good as to find someone to carry King Théoden off the battlefield?”

Elrohir offered him another almost playful bow. “Yes grandfather.” He absconded, carrying Théoden all by himself, before Maedhros could say anything more.

He turned his attention to the Queen. “Your majesty, I am impressed by the might of the Variags today.”

“And I by the courage of elves. I had not imagined you on the ground with the rest of us.”

“People probably say the same of you,” Maedhros replied. Her expression told him he was right. “Now, I believe Legolas is somewhere around here, but I have not seen him. I am sure we can find time to sit down together in the next couple days, if you are able to wait. Is there anything else you need?”

She nodded thoughtfully. “the Lord of the Haradrim is dead. His people are awaiting orders, as are my own. General Bór is speaking to Incánus, which leaves me to command all three forces in their place. What are your orders?”

“Do the Haradrim burn their dead or bury them?”

“The Haradrim burn them. We bury ours. The Easterlings do either depending on circumstances.”

Maedhros considered this. “Then we may begin by giving the Lord of the Haradrim and his fallen men the greatest pyre Gondor has ever seen. Tell the living Haradrim that they may burn their own dead, any orcs if they so choose, and any the siege engines that could not be repurposed, but to leave anything else. I believe the men of Gondor and Rohan bury their dead as well.”

They exchanged bows, and Maedhros found himself left alone on the battlefield.

Chapter End Notes

Three minor notes:

1) I think everybody forgets that some of the Easterlings (Bór and his sons) were loyal, but they were, and they died at the Nirnaeth with all Maedhros’s other friends.
2) I know that Merry actually is fully conscious until after the end of the battle, but he also sticks around with Théoden for a while, and since this battle is much shorter than in text, he’s still around when Mae gets there. And all his dialogue with Pippin in the text suggests he’s like really out of it, which is why Mae is ignoring him.
3) Everybody forgets, but the ghost army does not come to Gondor in the book which is why it does not appear here.
Tol Himling and Other Islands (Interlude III)

Chapter Summary

Fingon, from Valinor to Mithlond, with a few stops before and after.

Chapter Notes

So, the only warning that might be relevant here is a major fucking spoiler so I’ll put it in the end note. It’s about some trauma. First age stuff. Yup.

Also, a fact note: Tol Himling is in fact Himring, but at the point when LOTR was published, it was still being called Himling, and the map in LOTR labels it as such. I referenced this because I like to imagine that it’s an in-universe mistake instead of an authorial change.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

For reasons Fingon would never fully understand- though he would always blame Ulmo’s meddling ways- he ended up approaching Middle Earth very far to the north. He had not thought that he had left Valinor from particularly far to the north, but well, what did he know? The magics between the two worlds made concepts like space and geography fuzzy at best. Fingon would not have recognized the strangeness of his approach, if it had not been for two things. His map, and the island. According to the map he had, he had somehow passed Tol Morwen and Tol Fuin, which should have been in his path but had not been, and instead arrived at the bafflingly mislabelled ‘Tol Himling’. He would have assumed it was one of the other two islands, had there not still been the remains of a castle perched atop it. Not much was left standing, the stones worn away by sun and sea and time, but the base of a watchtower and the main forge were still recognizable.

Fingon stumbled upon it perhaps an hour or two after his fight with Maedhros, still feeling empty.

“Are you trying to tell me something?” He asked the waves, praying for some response from Ulmo or one of his Maiar. None of them answered.

Hoping for comfort, if not enlightenment, he found a cove, around where the guard’s barracks had once been, and left on foot.

With so many buildings fallen, the cold wind had far easier access to the rest of the island than it once had. Yet something about it still warmed Fingon’s heart.

“You and your stupid war,” Fingon told Maedhros, when he was standing in the ruins of the entrance hall, “Is it too much to ask that you decide to stay safe for once in your life?”

Maedhros, of course, said nothing. Fingon’s mind said, it was your war too, once. You were brave, once.

Standing at the top of stairs that had once been thrice as tall, Fingon said, “I suppose you were
always braver than I was. Not that everyone else saw it that way, but it was true. I was brave for you, and you were brave for everybody else.”

Even if Maedhros had been there, he would not have taken the compliment.

“I did not even take the time to talk to you about why you want to fight this war,” he told the collapsed entrance to the cellar. “You must have your reasons. I swore an oath to you once. Or, rather, to Eru about you. I still remember it. ‘I swear that I shall listen to his council, respect his wishes, and trust his judgement.’ I did not respect your wishes today. Or trust your judgement. But I suppose I did not swear to do it ‘always’. You wrote the oaths intentionally so we could fight. You always wanted me to be free. Even if that meant I was free to leave you. You did not want me bound the way you were bound.”

Looking north, to where he would once have been able to see Angband, Fingon said, “I did not even think to ask if the oath still affected you, so consumed was I by my fear. What a fool I am. Of course, I know that it does not. I would be able to feel it, if it did. I always thought I could before. Just a little hum in the back of your mind in all the worst possible moments. But I never thought to ask how it made you feel. That it was gone. I wonder if you feel free now. You never did, before. I wonder if that is why you fight Sauron. Because for once in your life, you can choose it. Not for me or your father or your brothers or because you were compelled to. Just for yourself. Your own fight.”

On the southern tip of the island, looking down what had once been the path by which he approached Himring, he added, “Of course, it is also the right thing to do. What sort of coward am I, to try and force you to sacrifice your own brother so I could have you all to myself? And if what Gil-galad and Celegarion say is true, and you are as a father to Elrond, I would be asking you to leave him to fight this war without you. Would I even want to be married to someone who could give up on the people they loved just like that? Though some of your family may need you in Valinor, Maglor was always the brother you loved best and who loved you best in turn. And if the stories are true and he has been alone all this time, he needs you. How could I have ever asked you to turn your back on him?”

He walked back to his boat, and set sail south, towards the main coast of Lindon. He had not enough supplies to spend what could be weeks tracking Maglor, and so he plotted a course for Mithlond instead. Círdan, he knew, he could rely on.

Even if his anger at Maedhros had greatly abated since their fight, Fingon remained angry on two counts. He was angry at himself, for his failure and his cowardice, and he was angry at a world that could take Maedhros from him again and again. In anger, his bond to Maedhros remained cold and impassable, or Fingon might have shown him that parts of Himring still stood. He might have thought, we were happy here. In stolen moments, few and far between, we were happy. As it was, he stored those conversations for a later date.

When Irmo blessed him with a bond dream, despite their coldness, at such distance, Fingon’s relief was like the comfort of a warm hearth and the familiarity of Maedhros’s body against his. He apologized for all his wrongdoings, and was blessedly forgiven. This time, he remembered the oaths they had once sworn to each other, and asked, like Maedhros had in their first talk, to hear the story to their reunion.

Maedhros’s story, for once in his life, was not a tragedy. It always had been, before. For all Maedhros’s love of romances, his life had been dominated by their darker cousin. Now, he had been able to do what he had always been made for. To find friends and create a family without losing them. And Fingon was not part of it. But he would be, because despite all of this, Maedhros still, for some incomprehensible and marvelous reason, wanted Fingon. He wanted their family too. All of its
shattered pieces. What better sign of that than his vision of Celegorm and Aredhel? Their stupid, hopeless siblings, putting themselves back together in the way Maedhros had, so long ago. It filled Fingon with joy.

The feeling of joy lingered as Fingon navigated his way to Mithlond. The stars and the sea were his only company, fine though they were, but now that he was within speaking distance of Maedhros, and the passing of emotions was easy as waving at someone, he did not feel alone.

In hröa, he did not cease being alone until he landed at Mithlond. It was very much a city of the Teleri, with its pale buildings jutting out over the water. It had not been built entirely for war, as the cities of Beleriand had been, but it was not quite like anything in Valinor either. There was far too much mixing of styles for that. The cities of Valinor were clean and evenly built. Noldo, Vanya, Teleri, and very little in between. Though it had Teleri stylings predominantly, there were also Noldorin influences, gravity defying arches, columns and towers. And indeed, when Fingon stepped off his ship, the people who greeted him were from many walks of life.

Círdan, like Maedhros, had always had an easy way of leadership about him. People liked him and followed him accordingly. He was perplexed by Fingon’s arrival, but happy to receive him. It was just like Círdan, to take such a strange thing with easy grace. Fingon remembered giving Gil-galad over to him for the first time; how instead of questioning Fingon’s reasons, he had sat on the floor and played with Gil-galad, asking questions of him, what sort of games he liked (kings and spiders) and what his favourite story was (Oromë finding the elves). He was one of the only people who had never tried to ask Fingon who Gil-galad’s real parents were. The other was Maedhros, who had never asked not because he did not care, but because he knew that Fingon viewed Gil-galad as a son, and that was enough for him. Círdan genuinely didn’t seem to care who Gil-galad was, as long as he was well looked after. Indeed, his first words to Fingon indicated as much.

“Fingon,” he cried, quite excitedly, “long years it has been since we have had a visitor from the far shore. Tell me, have you any word of Gil-galad? Is he released from the care of Mandos?”

Fingon ended up spending almost half-an-hour regaling Círdan with tales of Gil-galad before his second in command, a half-sinda half-noldo called Galdor, interrupted.

“Pardon me my lords, but I must ask as to the reason for Lord Fingon’s return. Rumor will already be spreading.”

The switch from pleasure to business was almost instantaneous. Fingon was still saying, “actually, technically I’m the king-” when Círdan ordered the room emptied. Even Galdor left, with a little complaining.

“This is about Maedhros, I presume,” Círdan said, without preamble, once they were alone. “It usually seems to be, with you.”

Fingon nodded, choosing to ignore Círdan’s sass. “He-”

“Has returned. I know. I had word from Galadriel on the matter. The lady took the time to inform all of us who still stand against Sauron. That would be me, Thranduil, and Lord Elrond, predominantly. She said secrecy was of the utmost importance, as he has become involved with another matter of great secrecy, and any who were shocked by Maedhros’s return might inadvertently reveal other details.”

It was sound logic, and based on Maedhros’s description of Galadriel in this age, Fingon found it horrifyingly plausible that she would be so calculating with her secrets.
“I am here to help,” was the awkward excuse Fingon ultimately settled on.

Círdan gave him a piercing look. “To help us, to help Maedhros, or to help yourself?”

“Why not all three?”

“Some,” Círdan said, “would find helping Maedhros and helping the people a contradiction.”

“Some,” Fingon retorted tersely, “would be wrong.”

Círdan leant back in his seat. “You always did have an odd attachment to Maedhros.”

“It is hardly considered odd to be attached to one’s husband,” Fingon snapped, before he could think better of it.

Círdan smirked. “I had wondered if the two of you had ever figured out that there was attraction there. It is nice to know that you did. Of course, it also explains how you knew to come here, and how you knew that Maedhros was alive before I told you. Very helpful, that. So, you are here for your husband, but wanting to do more good than that. What is your plan, exactly?”

“I am looking for Maglor,” he told Círdan, trying for a tone that brokered no argument, “then, Maedhros and I will discuss what part I play in the war.”

Oddly enough, Círdan did not seem displeased. “Long has it been since Gold-voiced Maglor walked among his own kind. Your timing is fortunate. He is in Lindon, I have reason to believe. He walks up and down the shores, singing the Noldolantë. Mortals are more likely to see him than elves. He hides from elves, but even I have heard his voice. Normally, you would find him far south, in Gondor or more likely Harad, where there are more men to whom he can try and spread the tale, but as Sauron gathers forces, I suspect even our wanderer has noticed the dangers of the south. I myself heard him, only a few months ago on a voyage. He was not far south then.”

“Do you think I am right to try and bring him among elves again?”

Círdan shrugged evenly. “I cannot answer you with any certainty. I knew Maglor best when he was king in his brother’s stead, afraid and uncertain of himself. At the end of the first age, I would have said that Maglor had been nothing special before, and a kinslayer after. But my position has changed over the years. I served with Elrond for most of the second age, and I count him as a friend. Even now, he asks me to always send word if anyone hears or sees Maglor. If the son of Elwing and Eärendil can find no fury in his heart for Maglor, who am I to say that he is unworthy?” Círdan paused for a moment. There was grief in his voice when he next spoke. “We all know that Elrond loses his daughter when the war is done. He ought to have his father to console him in his grief.”

Círdan volunteered no more thoughts on the matter, and Fingon did not ask. He stayed for the rest of the day and that night, walking the mostly empty streets of Mithlond and listening to the gulls cry overhead. It was a dying city, that much was clear. Himring, a stone’s throw from Angband, had been livelier. Those who remained were mostly Sindarin, though some Noldor and Silvans also moved around. A few were travellers, from other elven kingdoms. No matter their origins, they all stared at Fingon. A few of the older elves among them came to shake Fingon’s hand and welcome him back. He recognized none of them, but a few mentioned ties to his family, to Gondolin or Nargothrond. They all seemed lonely, tired. Their smiles as they greeted him were genuine, but they had none of them the easy joy that seemed to flow through Tirion these days. If these weary people were what remained of Gil-galad’s great kingdom, then Fingon knew that the time of elves in Middle Earth was truly over. It made retrieving Maglor seem all the more urgent.
He left the next morning, with additional supplies Círdan had given him. Círdan had offered him a horse too, but Fingon had declined. Stealth, at this juncture, was paramount. He could not have Maglor fleeing, and an elven horse would catch more notice than one hooded traveller on foot.

He walked south and west, in accordance with the sword, though more west than south. Maglor was moving around, not staying in the same place from day to day. Though fortunately, he did not seem to be walking straight away from Fingon, and he mostly seemed to stay on the beach. By the time Maedhros had cut off their connection for his ordeal in Minas Tirith, Fingon had found a campfire, only a couple of days old, and knew that he was not far.

The fear ate at him all of that day, as he walked, knowing that Maedhros was in danger. He offered prayers to Tulkas for strength, and to Oromë, to guide the arrows of Maedhros’s allies. To Ulmo, the patron of his family and the closest Valar, he offered thanks, for allowing him passage. At least this way, Maedhros did not have to go through such an ordeal alone. He found another campfire that night, and knew he was going the right way. He hoped that Maedhros would survive to see his brother found. They both deserved that much.

When Maedhros lowered his shields, having survived the battle, it was the greatest feeling in all Arda. In the aftermath, he shone, not with joy in his situation, but with the power of his command and his gift as a warrior. If only Maedhros could see himself like this, radiant, powerful, graceful. Maedhros always saw himself as things that were wrong, things that were broken. Maedhros saw these men following him, and assumed it was out of some historical loyalty or self-interest. He didn’t understand that he made people want to follow him, with his easy command and his genuine care for those who served with him. Those who had served him at Himring would have walked into Angband and dueled Morgoth for the silmarils one by one if Maedhros had asked them to. Maedhros, of course, would never have asked them to, which was why he was a better leader than his father ever could have dreamed of.

Then, as they healed Théoden together, Fingon saw a second side to Maedhros’s power. Maedhros had never been as successful in the magical arts as Fingon had, for all his obvious strength. Maedhros was like a sword with no hilt. Power that could not be wielded. When he suggested channeling through Fingon, it had been difficult not to allow his scepticism through the bond. Across such distance, healing should have been impossible. Yet, it worked. Fingon worked the healing, while Maedhros used his considerable strength to make it as though Fingon was right there, kneeling over Théoden, instead of hundreds of miles away on a beach in Lindon. It was one of the most incredible things Fingon had ever witnessed Maedhros do, and he had seen Maedhros do many impossible things.

As he sang the healing, he wondered if Maglor could hear him. Sound traveled well over water, and it was not impossible that Maglor, if he was close, could hear Fingon’s singing. Fingon, half dreaming, mind merged with Maedhros’s, prayed that he could. That he would turn around and walk towards Fingon and be saved. Like most dreams, it was not to pass.

Instead, Fingon found Maglor two days later, and it was not nearly so kind as he had dreamed it. The first thing Fingon noted was his unnatural thinness. He wondered when the last time Maglor sat down for a full meal was, and hoped that it had not been when Maedhros was still around to see it. Prepared for the chance that Maglor would run as soon as he realized an elf had found him, he walked silently until he was standing right in front of Maglor. He didn’t look up, instead rocking back and forth slightly, hands cradled in his lap.

“Maglor,” Fingon said, softly. The waves crashed behind him, almost drowning out his whispered words.
Maglor finally looked up, and his haunted eyes met Fingon’s. He recoiled in shock or fear, and several things happened all at once.

Maglor was a flawed builder of mental shields. He always had been. He felt just a little too strongly for his own self-control, and had always been known to drop his shields at a large emotional reaction. Evidently, he had not learned better since. As he understood Fingon’s presence, his shields fell, and Fingon, who had been in the process of reaching his mind out to Maglor’s, found himself swept up in the tide.

Maglor, like Maedhros, was exceptionally mentally powerful. Thus, when his shields dropped, Fingon found his mind overwhelming. His panic and fear and sorrow were all consuming, and Fingon dropped to his knees to keep himself from falling. Through Maglor, he could feel Maedhros, all the way in Gondor, slamming up his shields hard in self-defence, Galadriel, wrapping her wards around herself and her people in Lóthlorien, Glorfindel and Elrond—must have been—in Imladris pushing back, trying to keep Maglor contained, Círdan and his people, close to the epicenter, bracing against the waves. That was more than Fingon could do. Fingon, mind washed away in Maglor’s panic, reached for Maedhros. Maedhros, who was shielding very strongly, pushed him gently away. That left Fingon with limited options, and he reacted without thinking.

He slapped Maglor hard across the face. While he rolled in the sand, mind momentarily reeling, Fingon rummaged through his pack, pulled out Celebrimbor’s hypnosis bracelet, and waved it in Maglor’s face.

“Calm down,” he ordered. “Raise your shields.”

Maglor, by instinct or reflex or hypnosis, slammed his shields back in full force. Fingon, feeling incredibly dizzy and exhausted, lay down on the sand beside him.

“You are not real,” Maglor told him, very seriously, “but you certainly are not holding back, either.” He rubbed his cheek.

“If I was a hallucination,” Fingon retorted, “I would not feel so nauseous right now.”

Maglor ignored him. “I have never had such a vivid dream before, and certainly not one of you, Fingon. Your death does not usually weigh on my conscience. Though I have been sensing a lot of Maedhros lately, so perhaps the two are related.”

Fingon pushed himself up to look down at Maglor. “Maglor, Maedhros is alive. You have been sensing him because he is within range for you to sense him.”

Maglor rolled over to face away from Fingon. “Leave me be.”

“Shan’t,” Fingon said petulantly. “Maedhros would never let me.”

“Maedhros is dead too. I doubt he cares.”

Maedhros, Fingon thought, knowing full well that Maedhros had been silently watching since Maglor had dropped his shields, what do we do?

Give me a second, Maedhros thought, and then, a second later, he added, may I take a go?

Be my guest.

With some effort on both of their parts, Fingon gave control of his words over to Maedhros.
“Maedhros and I are married, Maglor. He is alive, and we are married, and I am going to let him speak to you now.”

It was something that Maglor, as the son of a tightly bonded couple, would have seen before. “Maglor, I need you to listen to me. I need you to restructure your shields so that only I can hear you and you can only hear me. Can you do that for me?”

Maglor shook his head.

Maedhros, undeterred, continued. “Alright. In that case, I need you to come with Fingon. Just for a couple of days. If you feel uncomfortable, you can turn around, and we will not stop you. I promise.” Maglor shrugged in what Fingon took to be acceptance.

Maedhros pulled back, and left Fingon in control. He said, I have to go. You will hear from me again soon, but for now, know that I love you, and I am so grateful that I am almost crying, right here and now, in front of all these people. Thank you. Thank you for finding him for me.

Fingon sent Maedhros his love in return, and pulled Maglor to his feet. “Come on, Makalaurë. Let us find somewhere secluded where I can start a fire and get some food into you. You look terrible.”

“You have seen worse,” Maglor muttered. It was good to know that there was a little of his old fire left in him.

“Yes,” Fingon said, thinking of Maedhros, gaunt and scarred and covered in his own blood, “I certainly have.”

Chapter End Notes

Maglor, it’s Maglor he’s not very happy.

So. This. Yep. We’ll be back in Gondor next week, if I get a chapter out. I’m away, and IDK what my Wi-fi access is gonna be like, or if I’ll have time to edit a currently 6000+ word monster chapter. But on the off chance I have the time, that’ll be out. If I don’t have the time to edit, you’ll probably get a Dawn short sometime instead, I’ve got 2 completed and 2 more half done.
Maedhros has some important conversations, personal and professional, and spends a lot of time running up and down the levels of Gondor.

What they spoke of less was seconds later... ---- Maedhros bowed his head.

and again from

“Why were you not?” ---- He paused for breath before continuing.

That should be all for this chapter. I think.

Maedhros walked the battlefield the rest of the day. His healing energy was spent, but he was still able to carry and serve. He carried his men to their pyres or, for the more fortunate, to the healers. The healing arts seemed to have been largely forgotten in the south, but among the men of Gondor, they endured. Begrudgingly, healers from Gondor were despatched to treat Maedhros’s men. Those who were the closest to death were taken to the healing houses of Gondor itself, and tended to by Aragorn and the Sons of Elrond. When it became too dark for Maedhros to continue his walking, he too went to the Houses of Healing. He was better versed in the healing arts than many men, and would carry tools and water and bandage wounds. They spoke very little, the elves and the ranger, yet there is a kinship forged in flame and loss, and such kinship was forged that night.

It was the injury of Faramir, Son of Denethor, that worried Maedhros the most. Not because it was the most severe- the Lady Éowyn held that honor- but because Maedhros knew it would terrify Boromir to learn how close he had come to losing his brother. The news only became worse the next morning when, after a couple hours’ sleep, he discovered that Denethor standing in chains, under the guard of Haldir and a pair of men who served Prince Imrahil.

“Why, by all the Valar, is Lord Denethor under arrest?” Maedhros demanded of Gandalf, who was in the unfortunate position of informing him of the event.

The expression on the Maia’s old face was unreadable. “He denied Faramir treatment by healers, and then became increasingly erratic as the siege progressed. He did not believe me when I told him that Boromir lived, and attempted to send himself and Faramir to Mandos as well. We were forced to chain him for his own safety.”
Before Maedhros could think better of it, he found his sword pointed at the throat of the Steward. It was only his love for Boromir that stayed his hand.

“You smell of manure,” Denethor said, scornfully. He held his chin high, as Maedhros’s father often had, a foolish, pointless arrogance.

Maedhros laughed in his best impression of Curufin. “You smell of fear.”

Word passed quickly around the camp of the Haradrim that Maedhros had threatened their old enemy at sword point. Though none of them knew what he said, they admired greatly the action itself. They believed that he had stood up for them against one who had long sought to eradicate their people, and they took pride in calling him their commander.

What they spoke of less was seconds later, when Maedhros sheathed his sword and said, “what cause had you for this act of madness?”

“My sons are dead. The rest of us will be soon. I know what is coming. Why wait?”

That made some sense to Maedhros. He imagined how he would feel, believing his war, his foolishness, had taken Elrond and Elros from him. He knew what it was to believe death was better than another day of loss. It gave him some sympathy for the mad lord.

“Our sons live, both of them. Boromir, my friend, rests in Lóthlorien under the care of Lady Galadriel herself. He fought his own corruption as few mortals may. He has been stronger than I was, in his place. As for Faramir, by the grace of the Valar and the dedication of healers, he endures. If he takes a turn for the worse, I shall heal him as I healed Théoden of Rohan.” This was followed by an awkward silence where Maedhros realized everyone was waiting for someone to give orders. “Haldir, take Lord Denethor to see his son. Then go get some rest. You look dead on your feet.”

“I am surprised you let him go,” Gandalf said, when Haldir did as Maedhros asked.

Maedhros bowed his head. “I know what it is to lose your father, or your lord, to the influences of the enemy. For the sake of his sons, Denethor deserves pity, not scorn.”

Afterwards, Gandalf lead Maedhros up the levels of Minas Tirith, to a small room which contained nothing save a stone table and a palantír.

“As a Son of Fëanor,” Gandalf said, “I hoped you might have some sense of what we should do with this. Sauron has at least one of the others, and we believe he has been using this one to influence Denethor’s mind.”

Bless Maedhros’s father for his paranoia. “Then it is fortunate I am here. My father always looked for enemies around any corner, and planned for such an outcome. These plans were shared only with those of us most loyal, but I am his heir, and my hands should suffice for such a task.”

He placed both hands on the palantír and told it that he was Maitimo, son of Fëanáro. It awakened at his touch, and he wrenched control of the network away from Sauron’s grasping claws. He would not have been able to maintain such control for more than a few seconds, but that was enough to activate the emergency protocol, and shut down the entire network. No palantír would see now, until Fëanor or one of his sons commanded it to.

He explained to Gandalf what he had done, which caused the Maia to give him a pensive look. “I did not know such a thing was possible.”

“You should not,” Maedhros told him. “I am sure you remember what my father was like. Trust no
one, not even your own brother, and always be prepared for the worst. Covet all things, especially secrets. He would never have allowed a scrying glass in the house of any sort, unless he could control it.”

Gandalf shook his head. “Alas that you were not here earlier, if only to save the people of Gondor from the corruption of their lord.”

Maedhros gave him a grin. “You may be the only Maia to ever wish the presence of a Fëanorion.”

“There is always Sauron,” replied Gandalf, dryly.

Maedhros could not help but laugh. He liked the Maia, oddly enough. He was, for one of his kind, very mannish.

Their task done, they two went back down the many levels of Minas Tirith, out of the city entirely. In daylight, Maedhros could fully appreciate this city of men. Even now, battered and burnt, it had certain charms. Flaws in the stonework would have had Turgon and Curufin wringing their hands, but other parts would have impressed both. Any elf save a Noldo would have bemoaned the lack of growing things, but Maedhros did not mind overmuch. It reminded him of home. Perhaps, after the war, the stone work could be fixed, now that time would be dedicated to it, and it the fields where the battle had been fought, there could be new growth. Aragorn, he thought, would want to dedicate time and resources to such things.

Tents had been set up all around the city. On the southern half of the plain, Maedhros’s men had conglomerated, Haradrim mostly in the center, with Variags and Easterlings on the sides. The pyres were between them and the tents of the Dúnedain, still smoking. Maedhros could see a few of the Haradrim kneeling before the fires. Whether they were mourning or praying, he knew not. It was to the Dúnedain they walked, but as Maedhros stopped to survey his surroundings, Gandalf spoke.

“I had not thought it possible, that in so short a time, one might make friends of enemies.”

Maedhros inclined his head in acknowledgement. “The logical flaw comes from thinking them enemies. There is only one enemy, in all Arda. Any other is merely a passing fancy. I saw my father look for enemies around every corner. I gave the crown to Fingolfin because even though he does not like me, he was not the enemy and never will be. I want Denethor to see his son, because even though he is wrong, he is not the enemy either. Even Sauron is only a servant. I am perhaps the only elf who has ever felt Morgoth’s touch, his hands, his breath, and lived to speak of it. I know evil. No man has it in them. Not really.”

Gandalf gave him a curious look. “What would you say of your own bloodline? Does the house of Fëanor have evil in it?”

Maedhros fixed his eyes on the pyres. “We have evil in our pasts, Mithrandir. We had compulsion in our minds. Did it make us evil? I do not know. Thingol’s kin, I am sure, would say it did and does. But I love my brothers. I cannot pass judgement on them, for all that I have my beliefs. For now, let me only say that I know that Celebrimbor was good. His heart was kind, his mind was clear, and he was brave. And I know that he has been called just as wicked as those men have. If it is not true of him, why must it be true of them?”

Gandalf inclined his head, and said nothing. Maedhros’s remaining allies joined them, after a time. General Bór and the Queen, along with one of the Easterling translators and a newly promoted officer from Far Harad. He looked nervous.

“Where is your brother?” Maedhros asked the Queen. She had not mentioned him in their only
conversation since the end of the battle.

She pointed towards the pyres. “If fire is good enough for the Haradrim, then it is good enough for us. Besides, he shall not be able to return to our homeland, and I would not have him buried here, in foreign soil, where the wrong sort of trees grow. If we survive, I will build him a great monument, and inter his sword there, and it will be as good as any burial mound or tomb.”

“I am sorry,” Maedhros said, knowing the words were insufficient. Nothing in any tongue could describe losing a brother who you loved. “I will offer prayers to the Valar, for what little my prayers may be worth.”

The Queen looked down. “It has been a very long time since any of our peoples have been able to pray to any other than Sauron.”

Maedhros turned to look at Gandalf, and said in Sindarin, “do you suppose that the Valar would listen to the prayers of a people they have so summarily ignored these last centuries?”

Gandalf considered, and then spoke to Maedhros’s people in their own tongue, words of which Maedhros only caught ‘Oromë’. They spoke to each other contemplatively for a while, and then General Bór ordered the translator away, to carry a message back to their camp.

After, as they five walked to Aragorn’s camp, Maedhros asked, “what said you to them?”

“I told them that long ago, before Sauron ruled them, the Variags had been great followers of Oromë and Vána, while the Easterlings primarily followed Aulë, though they called him by a different name. The Haradrim followed many of the Valar, and it will take all three peoples time to rediscover their own ways.”

Maedhros nodded. “They will learn, in time. They have better memories of their history than their western counterparts seem to. Boromir did not even know who my father was. Not that I think him a scholar, but-”

“I understand. Faramir, I think you will find, is more the scholarly type. Perhaps in peacetime, he and Aragorn shall bring about an age of knowledge in Gondor again.”

They were silent for the rest of their walk, passing by rangers and other soldiers who stared at the mismatched party.

Just before they entered the tent, Gandalf added, “we did not abandon them. Not completely. I had two other kinsmen who went east to try and right Sauron’s wrongs, though no word have I had of any success. But we did try. It was not right for any of Eru’s children to be made slaves, and robbed of their destinies. Perhaps, now, we can finally correct that course.”

Maedhros bowed his head in acknowledgement, and pushed his way inside.

The group Aragorn had assembled consisted of himself, Prince Imrahil, Éomer of Rohan, Gandalf, Elladan and Elrohir, and Maedhros and his associates. It was an odd group, to say the least. Imrahil—who Maedhros thought compelling, though he couldn’t put his figure on why- and Éomer stared at their counterparts. Maedhros pulled out his copy of the treaty, and laid it on the table. All the others had already had opportunities to read it, but Maedhros thought the reminder was important.

“I understand that my steward is under arrest,” Aragorn said, as an odd conversation starter.

Maedhros gave him a look. “I did not arrest him. Gandalf did, for his own safety and that of his people. He cannot remain as the steward regardless. Not if you want to create long lasting and
effective change. Boromir believes his brother would be the best adviser you could have, once Faramir is fit to take the post.”

Prince Imrahil nodded. “I am inclined to agree with King Maedhros. There is no need for the old ways to continue, now that the king has returned. Let Denethor stay in the city until Faramir heals, then give him an estate, somewhere out of the way, and allow him to retire in peace. I know he once enjoyed a more peaceful existence, when my sister still lived.”

Aragorn nodded. “I shall heed your council in this matter, my friends. But let there be only one king of Gondor. You have already signed one treaty in my name.”

Having said that, he reached out, picked up a quill, dipped it in ink, and signed the bottom of Maedhros’s treaty. All Maedhros’s followers stared. Gandalf, who was translating, stopped for a moment to speak in Westron.

“In such times as these, better to cultivate allies than enemies.”

Imrahil seemed less certain. “They almost killed Faramir.”

Maedhros snorted. “So did Denethor, and we already decided to allow him his freedom.”

Éomer finally spoke up. “After all the bad blood between our people over the years, it may be hard to change their minds about this. Certainly, it will not happen overnight. But the case remains that Rohan owes you a great debt. Obviously, we cannot sign on until my uncle wakes, but thanks to you, he will wake. I cannot express enough my gratitude for that.”

“But just thanks to me,” Maedhros said, “for I would not have been able to help without my path cleared to arrive in time, and all our myriad peoples together did that. Your sister most of all, from what I understand.”

Gandalf cleared his throat. “We have more pressing matters to discuss, I believe. Denethor told me that he had seen visions in the palantír of greater armies amassing in Mordor. Now here I defer to Maedhros as an expert, though I doubt Sauron could show false visions through one.”

Maedhros shook his head. “He could twist visions, remove context. He might turn sex into assault by removing the vision of consent, turn an army of good into evil by juxtaposing them with unrelated images of evil things. But if Denethor saw armies of orcs amassing in Mordor, specifically, then there are armies of orcs amassing in Mordor.”

His piece said, Maedhros sat back, and let the debate wash over him. Their priorities were simple. Destroy Sauron. This was best achieved still by destroying the ring, and according to new information, courtesy of Faramir, Frodo was still alive, or had been some days past. Gandalf did not specify where they had gone, but his tone did not suggest it was pleasant.

The strategy that developed was clear enough. If the forces of Sauron were in Frodo’s way, then they needed to be moved, and Sauron would only do so if he were at an advantage. So, they had to give him one. The combined forces of the west would march knowingly into Sauron’s open jaws, and pray that Frodo would be able to save them in time. As for those forces not of the west, that was another matter. With their lord dead, nobody in the Haradrim army had the authority to order them to battle at Gondor’s side. They would need further instruction from their king, and many would want to return home without the Lord to command them to stay. The Easterlings, who retained their commander and most of their forces, would fight, and the Variags with them. That left only Maedhros himself undecided.
“Sauron will send forces out to face you,” Aragorn said. “He tried to have you killed not a day ago. He cares about your death.”

Maedhros nodded. Aragorn was right, but something was nagging at him. “He will. We are old enemies, he and I. But I cannot help but think that throwing all our strength at one trick is not wise. Sauron is quite the strategist; surely, he will have more wisdom than to fall for it.”

“He is desperate,” said Gandalf, “he knows what your return means. He knows the Valar are taking action against him.”

Maedhros tapped his fingers on his knee. “You say that Sauron will send great numbers out against Aragorn, and against me. What would he do if we were not in the same place?”

“Divide his forces, I suppose,” Imrahil said, tentatively. “Or he might decide to throw all of them at one of you, and wipe you out.”

“We would probably be wiped out even with his forces divided,” Aragorn pointed out. “Our odds of defeating Sauron without destroying the ring are infinitesimal.”

“But we can minimize the casualties in the event the ring is destroyed,” said Maedhros. “If we have that capacity, it is our duty to do so.”

This was generally agreed upon. “So,” Aragorn said, “If we march North to the Morannon, where will your force go? And who will it consist of?”

Maedhros considered for a second. “The forces that attacked Gondor would have come from Minas Morgul, yes? That means that they will be likely depleted there. It is only logical we attack where Sauron is weakest.”

“Yet to attack there might draw Sauron’s attention closer to Frodo,” Gandalf pointed out.

Maedhros grinned. “I believe that my disabling of the Palantíri will distract Sauron quite adequately for some time, and allow Frodo to move with far more liberty. He, after all, had no reason to know that I could do such a thing. As for the orcs, well, they will be out of Frodo’s way if they are drawn out of Mordor entirely. I propose that we strike at Minas Morgul, make it seem as though we may push our way into Mordor itself, and then retreat to a second force in Osgiliath. A few days’ time, with all the equipment the enemy has left behind, will be enough to fortify the city well enough.”

“And you will lead this force?” Éomer asked.

Maedhros nodded. “I will.”

The meeting slowly broke up from there. Éomer and Imrahil went to go count their troops, while Aragorn left to take command of the forces that had served Denethor, leaving only Maedhros’s people, Gandalf, and Elladan and Elrohir. Maedhros wanted desperately to slip away and receive his message from Elrond, but duty mattered still, and he had one to fulfil.

“Elladan, Elrohir, do you mind giving us a minute? I will be with you once we are done here.”

The Queen of the Variags had two thousand troops fit to march, none on horses, and an additional two hundred archers who had never even been sent out onto the fields because of an error in the chain of command. General Bór had two thousand five hundred men fit to march, and fifty chariots with crew and horses, plus an additional hundred charioteers with either no chariot or no horses. There were almost nine thousand Haradrim who could conceivably have marched into battle. This made them the single largest fighting force by far save Sauron’s, despite their far higher casualty rate.
than the other men. Unfortunately, nobody was able to lead them. Their highest-ranking living officer, the man from Far Harad, was, as Gandalf translated, a commoner. It was unlawful for him to assume a position of authority over more than a thousand men.

“A thousand plagues upon those who insist upon bloodlines as a basis for succession,” Maedhros snapped, when he had heard the news. “In an unmarred Arda, no fool would have thought of such a mad thing. And I say that as a king’s son, a king’s husband, and a king in my own right.”

“I think I shall not translate that for our resident Queen,” Gandalf said, and then said something else in their tongue. The commander from Far Harad- Amnus- nodded grimly, and made remarks in return.

“Amnus says that he agrees that the system is outdated and foolish, but he has not the authority to change it. He can still command the thousand men directly under his control, but none of the others could be sent into battle. Not without a higher order. They would likely obey, but if Amnus ordered them to battle, he would be tried for treason on his return home, and he would rather not be.”

Maedhros considered the puzzle. “What if they were attacked? Could he order them to defend themselves?” The answer was yes. “Could he order them to go somewhere that was on the route home?” Yes. “Could he order them to make camp in Osgiliath for a few days to rest and recover?”

At that point, Amnus realized what Maedhros was implying, and laughed heartily. He liked the plan, and said it had character. Maedhros asked him a few more personal questions, to get a sense of his character. Amnus had been conscripted at sixteen to fight a civil war, had served twenty-five years, beginning as a mûkmahil rider, and now was one of the most important military figures in all of Harad, despite his parents both being farmers. He was working to petition the king to change the law relating to commoners who received military command, but the petition was slow in going through. It was an impressive story.

After a few more questions, Amnus even beginning to tentatively ask Maedhros some, he begged his leave. “My good peoples, I must beg your pardons, for though these words give me much to think on, there is also much to be done. I must speak to the sons of Elrond, and I see no reason that we ought not send out scouts to determine if there are orcs remaining still on this side of the river. Your majesty?”

She agreed to send out a party of scouts, and went to do so, dragging her counterparts along by their ears, metaphorically speaking. Gandalf waved a hand excusing Maedhros, and made his way in the opposite direction, humming.

Maedhros turned to Elladan and Elrohir, who must have been waiting for quite some time. He spoke in Quenya, since it seemed appropriate. “Shall we begin?”

“Certainly,” Elrohir said decisively. “There are questions we two have had for a very, very long time. We have waited plenty.”

“Very well, walk with me.”

Maedhros walked them out of the Dúnedain camp, and around the perimeter of the city. His nerves were somewhat getting the better of him.

“Let us start with what you already know, and the message your father has sent for me,” he said, all in a rush.

“Our father says that he is relieved by the news of your return, and wishes you safe travels. What he
means is that he loves you, and was so shocked and grateful at your return that he wept inconsiderably
for hours. Poor Arwen has been the one dealing with all that, of course, being as how she is there
and we are here. We all have known about Sirion since we were old enough to understand it, and we
knew that you and Maglor raised him. On the occasions my father spoke of his upbringing, it was
always positive, but they were few and far between, and never, ever, in front of company. I do not
think any of us realized until now exactly how much he cared for you both.” Elladan spoke all in a
rush, and only stopped when his brother placed a hand on his shoulder.

Maedhros turned the information over in his head. “I am sure that whatever your father told you
about Sirion is true. We really did destroy the city for the silmarils, Elwing really did throw herself
out a window to escape from us, and she was turned into a bird. With the silmaril out of our reach,
we regained some freedom from the oath. Amras and Amrod were already dead by that stage, and so
it was only Maglor and I. We found Elrond and Elros hiding in a closet in the nursery. Someone,
maybe Elwing, thought to leave them there and come back. The oath was particular, and
troublesome, but I swore to myself after Doriath that I would never let it claim a single life more than
it forced me to. So, we took them in. What you must understand is that we should have sent them to
Gil-galad or Círdan. Then they would have been raised by someone who deserved their love. Do not
mistake my words. I love your father as much as I would love any child of my blood. I love him
much as I loved Celebrimbor who was my blood and Gil-galad who was my son by law. But I
recognize what my legacy left him with. I left him alone, parentless, the son of kinslayers and their
victims both. And for that, I can never ask forgiveness.”

They were all three silent for a moment. Elrohir looked down at his shoes, while Elladan fiddled with
a ring and said, “you gave my father a book, Fëanor’s book.”

“Technically, that was a gift from Maglor. I did not manage to preserve anything of my father’s. My
gift was a sword, forged by Telchar. I gave it to Elros.”

Elrohir looked up. “The sword Aragorn now carries?”

Maedhros gave him a rueful smile. “The very same. Elros- if I maybe speak for a second of him-
Elros was my son also. I wish I had been able to see him grow into the king I always knew he would
be. And I wish that I had been able to be there for them both, when they were forced to choose.”

Elladan scuffed his foot on the ground. “Why were you not?”

“Excuse me?”

Elrohir gave Elladan a brotherly glare, but it did not stop his words. “Why did you leave?”

And if that was not the greatest question of Maedhros’s life. “A hundred reasons, none of them good,
but all of them real for me. Because Fingon, and my father, and Celegorm and Caranthir, and
Curufin, and Amrod and Amras were dead. Because I was a danger to everyone left who I loved.
Because the silmaril burnt away my only remaining hand. Because I was sick. The oath was like an
infected wound, ragged and oozing, and in time the rest of my mind became infected too. There were
a thousand- what did Galadriel call them? ‘Waking memories?’ – there were a thousand memories in
my mind of wicked things, that returned to the forefront at impossible times and haunted my every
hour.”

Elladan nodded seriously, as if he understood. Maedhros hoped that he did not. Elrohir took a turn
speaking. “Our father has always taken great pride in his work towards healing the survivors of the
first age. I now wonder if this is why.”

“And that is not impossible. But I hope he does not believe it was his responsibility to heal me, or his
failure that I died. It was not.”

Elladan reached up to fidget with his hair. Maedhros wondered if he had chosen a path yet, the mortal or the immortal. He seemed unsure of himself, perhaps a little unsteady. Neither Elrond nor Elros had ever been thus. They had both been determined children, simply in opposite ways.

“I think he knows,” Elrohir said, “he has always said that no healing of the mind can truly be done by one person or in a day. It takes time, and the support of many.”

“Not that it helped us all in the end,” muttered Elladan. Maedhros wondered if he was referring to his mother’s fate.

“It is good that such wisdom has grown, over time.” It took Maedhros a minute to find the words for what he was trying to say. “You must understand, when I was young, in Tirion, there was no place for sorrow, no words to explain the nuances of pain. Mortals often accuse the Quendi of acting like children. And if they had known us then, they would have been quite right. We were children, so innocent that we hurt each other without understanding how or why. It left our people unable to deal with the traumas as they came to us. I am glad that someone has worked to change that. Even if it has not been able to heal everyone, I am glad some have been able to benefit.”

He paused for breath before continuing. “I have news, from Valinor. Or, rather, I suppose Fingon does. That is the first news. Fingon, who is my husband, is returned from Valinor. He is in Lindon as we speak. He brings news and well wishes from multiple people. Your mother included. She is with the family, and has their support, but she misses you, of course.”

“That is good to hear.” Elrohir said so much and so little with those words.

Maedhros considered his boundaries, and decided that he was prone to saying too much anyhow, and spoke his piece. “You still miss her. I understand. My mother- well, I have not seen her since before I had seen the sun, and yet I miss her still.”

There was an awkward pause before Elrohir said, “is there anything else we have to discuss?”

Maedhros nodded. “The treaty. Do the pair of you have the authority to negotiate on your father’s behalf?”

Elladan nodded in return. “We do. Or, at least, enough that I doubt we will be executed for our indiscretions, unlike your poor Haradrim friend.” Of course, with elven hearing, they would have been able to listen in through the tent’s thin walls.

“I think you could sell us all over to Sauron and Elrond would still not take up arms against you,” Maedhros felt compelled to point out. “He has adopted his mother’s murderers, after all.”

Elrohir acknowledged his words, and the pair of them agreed to meet with Maedhros’s people sometime in the next couple of days to work over the deal. They were the three of them busy, and so they parted ways. They would meet when time permitted, to speak and listen to each other.

Maedhros followed the curve of the wall back to the city, and moved on with his day.

Maedhros slipped back into the Houses of Healing as silently as he could. After the rush of yesterday, everything seemed glacial in comparison. The healers on duty greeted him with whispers and waves, as did a couple of the healthier patients. They were mostly men of Gondor, but Théoden and Éowyn were not the only Rohirrim, and there were people from all of Maedhros’s various groups as well. Haldir, in true elvish fashion, was asleep leaning against a wall. Maedhros would wake him, at some point, find a bed for him to sleep in, but for now, he had other business to deal
Imrahil’s two followers were still watching Denethor, but when Maedhros made his intention to speak clear, they each took a few steps back, in the name of privacy.

“He’s well out danger,” Maedhros said. He leant against the wall at Faramir’s head, and pushed a strand of hair out of his face. He was handsomer than Boromir, by elvish standards, lighter and slimmer. He reminded Maedhros a little of Amras, which made him smile.

Denethor ignored this remark. “I saw in the palantír, what you are. Do not try to deceive me, I know it to be true.”

If this was how they were going to speak, then so be it. “It was a palantír. Of course it was true- not, of course, contextualized. But true.”

“What do you know of such things?”

Maedhros tapped his fingers on the hilt of his sword. “My father made the palantíri. Fëanor.” The name meant more to Denethor than it had to his son. He stared. “I loved my father, you know. I still do, after everything he made me do. But it’s hard now, loving him, in a way that it wasn’t always. Do not make the mistakes my father made. Do not push your sons away because you believe you know best.”

Denethor bowed his head. He looked at Faramir, not at Maedhros, when he spoke. “You people take my children away from me, with the words of wizards, into the realms of witches, and you accuse me of driving them away? What do you know of being a father?”

Maedhros pitied him. “I had two sons. One is dead. He was mortal, I am not. I knew I would lose him, but that does not make it easier. He did not even know I thought of him as a son, and now he will never know how much I loved him. Your sons are alive. Both of them. Tell them. Tell them every single day. There is nothing those boys could do to deserve the indifference and the callousness you have shown them.”

Maedhros turned, and left. Faramir would survive. That was what mattered, in the end.

He was almost gone before he heard one of the other patients say, “It is not worth losing a son, Denethor. I would know.”

Maedhros turned around to see Théoden of Rohan, a few beds over, pushing himself up on one arm to look at Denethor. He suppressed a smile. It was good to see him awake. Éomer would be happy about it.

“Théoden-King, what a set the three of us make. Kings and lords, yet none of us able to tell our children that they are the world to us.”

Maedhros walked back to kneel at his side. Théoden turned his head to look at Maedhros.

“You saved my life.”

Maedhros nodded. “I did. Aragorn saved your niece and Merry- the hobbit. It is apparently a common saying that one shall know the King of Gondor by his skill as a healer, and so the King has been known today. It is a good thing we elves do not have such a convention, or my son would have usurped me before he was six.”

From Théoden’s perspective of course, Maedhros was a great healer. He did not know that Fingon
had done the healing, nor that the effort of passing the energy had taken more out of both of them than Elrond would have required to do the healing himself. Once Maedhros explained enough to give context for the joke, he laughed, though it sounded painful. Denethor had gone back to staring at his son’s body, watching.

Maedhros left them both behind, and went to shake Haldir awake. He guided a still groggy Haldir down the levels of the city, and once in their camp, requisitioned a tent for the both of them from the Haradrim. He fell asleep again almost instantly once he was lying down, and Maedhros covered him with his cloak.

The Variag scouts had returned. A small company of orcs remained in Osgiliath. Maedhros walked back to the Dúnedain camp to pass the news on to Aragorn’s friends. They sent out some rangers with more Variags and some Easterlings to go kill the orcs. It was a pleasure to watch the groups coordinate, even though they spoke radically different tongues. Soldiers were soldiers, and orcs were orcs, and so they would get by.

No sooner than Maedhros had finished that, he was roped into supervising a meeting between Legolas, the Variag queen and General Bór. By this point, it was well into the evening, Maedhros had not eaten all day, and had only slept a total of perhaps seven hours in the past three days. This didn’t meaningfully impair his translations, but it did lead to him falling asleep at the table and being carried to bed by Legolas.

“How do you think the negotiations went?”

“Better before our translator fell asleep,” Legolas muttered. And then, more seriously, he added, “she’s smart. Smarter than anyone I have ever negotiated with before. My father never let me negotiate against the clever ones. He kept his own council in such things.”

Maedhros gave him a smile. “I will not let her run roughshod over you, never fear. I have sat around a few negotiating tables before. We can meet again tomorrow to work out the finer details, now the three of you have met. For now, she knows that you are loyal, fair, and true, and you know in turn that she is brave and clever and experienced.”

Legolas nodded thoughtfully. “I cannot help but wonder how much has been lost by our failure to negotiate with them before.”

“We may never know. I wonder often how much would have been saved if I had negotiated well with Thingol. I cannot say if that would have made things better or worse.”

Legolas made a strange noise. “The way my father tells it, Thingol would never have let the Noldor anywhere near Doriath.”

Maedhros shook his head. “There were always negotiations and contact. It is important to remember that Galadriel and her brothers were both his kin and ours. Galadriel lived in Doriath for many years, but she was still doomed as any Noldo. More than some, having helped convince others across the ice. My brothers and I had Sindarin followers in turn. No matter how Thingol wanted it, it would have been impossible to keep our two peoples separate. For all my gripes with him, Thingol wanted what was best for his people and his family. Like my father, he simply did not know what that was, and let greed get the better of him once too often. In a kinder world, we would have been allies, against the evils that destroyed us all, in the end.”

“Well, let us be allies now, in spite of our history,” Legolas said. He stopped. They had reached Maedhros’s tent.
“No,” Maedhros corrected, before ducking inside, “let us be allies now, because of it.”

Chapter End Notes

I hate this chapter SO MUCH. I’ve deleted entire paragraphs and it’s still so long and yet nothing happens??????? Man. I promise something happens next chapter. Thank y’all for sticking with it and for giving me the break I needed to wrestle with this chapter. <3
Maedhros found himself awoken that morning by Elladan, and by the dawn. Elladan was the more persistent of the two.

“Is it answers you are wanting, or questions?” He asked, rubbing at his eyes. He had managed to find some mannish clothes that, while still too short, were cleaner than anything he had travelled in. He pulled them on. “I have answers, but I admit I am a little short of requests this early in the morning.”

Elladan shrugged. “Neither, I suppose. I came with a request, if you will hear it out.”

Maedhros pulled on a tunic, and motioned for Elladan to continue.

“I would like to come with you,” he said, all in one breath.

Maedhros raised an eyebrow at him. “Where, exactly, would you like to go? This morning, I had meant to search out company and breakfast, though it appears I already have half of that. Unless you meant in an existential sense you wish to follow my path, which I cannot in good conscience recommend.”

Elladan rolled his eyes. “I mean with your army. To defend Osgiliath.”

“Is this a request from your brother as well, or just from you?”

Elladan reached up to play with his hair. “Just me. Elrohir is a fair rider, as his name would suggest, and will do well with the Rohirrim. We are two separate people, you know, for all we look alike.”

“You are not my first set of twins,” Maedhros reminded him. “But I would have had to pull Amrod and Amras apart by their hair to get them fighting in different battles at the same time. Is there something else on your mind?”

Elladan looked away, as if embarrassed. Maedhros, with a feeling of oncoming dread, realized what
he was going to say a second before he said it. “I am considering taking the mortal path.”

Part of Maedhros wanted to scream at him not to do it. “Why?”

Elladan shrugged. “I get bored. I fidget. I do not have the calm that elves have. What place is there for me among that part of my kin?

Thank the Valar for problems that Maedhros could fix. “Elladan, have you ever met a Valinor-born Noldorin elf? I do not mean a part Noldorin, like Glorfindel and Galadriel. I mean someone full-blooded, like me and my brothers.” Elladan thought about it, and shrugged. “Well, therein lies your problem. The Noldor in Valinor were the least restful and calm group of people I have ever met. I am sure that, reborn, they are no calmer. Anyways, I believe for the half elves it is the opposite of what you are assuming. It is the choice that effects who you become, not that you choose because of what you seem to be. Take Eärendil. He never wanted to be an elf, but I have no reason to believe he does not fit now. Or Elrond! Elrond had his mannish years, certainly. Never as much as Elros, but more mannish than any of my brothers ever was. Do not worry about fitting in- worry about what you want. Do you want more of this world? Or do you want something… different.”

Elladan sighed. “Would that I knew! And then there is ‘love’. Everyone always says to ‘choose for love’. Arwen is choosing for love, Lúthien and Tuor and Dior and Eärendil all chose for love, and then I say, well what about Elwing and Elros and my father, how did they chose? And nobody knows except my father, and I cannot ask him because I know it will break his heart if I go too, and-”

Maedhros cut him off with nothing but a raised hand. “Speak to your father. I regret that Elros did not have the opportunity to speak to me about his choice, and to know that I loved him no matter which path he chose to walk. You have some time to think about what you want. Whichever path you walk, you shall not walk it alone. Aragorn and Arwen shall travel one way, with or without you, and in Valinor, you would have a hundred or so of the maddest and most esoteric family members a person could dream up, in addition to the parents and grandparents you already know. Is one choice better than the other? I would not know. This is the only path given to me.”

“Do you truly think there would be a place for me in Valinor?” Elladan asked, reverting the topic. He seemed uncomfortable with Maedhros’s suggestion that he should speak to Elrond about the choice.

“Is there a place for me in Valinor?” Maedhros asked, rhetorically, and then continued, “you are not wrong that there are parts of Valinor that are full of prayer and peace and devotion. Yet my father called it home also, for centuries, and so did all my kin. You are a bastion of collected calm compared to, say, my brother Celegorm. Despite that, Celegorm was probably most suited to Valinor of the lot of us. He rode in Oromë’s train, and loved hunting in the woods there. Nothing in Beleriand ever suited him as well.”

Elladan tried to straighten out the neckline of his tunic. “So, you think I should go?”

“Do not put words in my mouth. I think you are a half-elf. I think you can be either, and that there is no wrong choice, only different choices. I think you have to pick the choice that will make you feel like you are what you were born to be. Remember, Elros was raised entirely among and by elves. He never really got to know mannish society until he had already made the choice. But he learned, and you could do the same in Valinor, if that was your path.”

Elladan said nothing, and allowed Maedhros to lead him out of the tent. He tracked down food, and with it company. Legolas and his negotiating opponents, again. Elladan was a good addition to the group. He was a better negotiator than Legolas, which made sense. He was older, and Elrond would
not have shied away from teaching his sons the basics of lordship. There would be little inhabitation in Rivendell after the war, he said, but he thought that there would still be enough people that trade would not go amiss. They negotiated over breakfast, and then summoned Éomer to talk horses. The Haradrim and Easterlings both had some interest in Rohan’s steeds, and had their own to offer. Maedhros spoke little for himself, occupied by his translating. It was good to see the parties all working together, and it made him more confident in what was to come.

That afternoon, they received word that Osgiliath was empty of orcs, and began moving troops there. On Maedhros’s suggestion, all five armies and the Dúnedain sent forces out together to begin with the work of both fortifying the fortress and fixing the transports the orcs had left to ferry soldiers across the river. Haldir, General Bór, Prince Imrahil, and Éomer all went with them.

As for Maedhros himself, he went to the library, to research the defences of both Minas Morgul and Osgiliath, and to look at maps. With him were all the best and brightest of Gondor’s scholars, as well as advisors to the Queen of the Variags and General Bór, and a close personal friend of Amnus’s who had the unique qualification of reading Sindarin, though he did not speak it. They were still there, pouring over history tomes and piles of maps dating back over a century, when it happened. It was Maglor, of course. Maedhros was certain there was nobody else in Middle Earth who could have surprised him like that. It was Maglor, and it was so much pain. It cut and scratched and burned at his mind. He slammed his shields up almost reflexively, just to stop the hurt. Dimly, Maedhros could hear conversations and page flipping grind to a halt as people realized something was wrong with him.

He had known, intellectually, that Maglor would likely be unwell. Elves were social, by nature, and Maglor had never been alone in all his life. He had always been surrounded by brothers and cousins and friends. Even at the end, he had still had Maedhros. Now, he had been alone for so long. Alone, with the oath and the kinslayings still weighing on him. Maedhros wanted to reach back in time to the version of himself who had encouraged Maglor to make one last attempt at the silmarils, and up a knife in his heart. Maglor’s mind, once light and joyful despite every horrible thing that had weighed on him, was now shattered as Maedhros’s own had been, then.

Fingon, who must have caused this incident by finding Maglor, reached at Maedhros’s shields. He was in pain also, Maglor’s pain, but Maedhros knew that joining their minds at that instant would only spread the pain, not end it. He pushed Fingon away, hoping he would understand.

A second later, the pain ended, and Maedhros lowered his shields. He reached out to Fingon, and watched, silently, as Fingon initiated contact with Maglor. He looked so sick. Maedhros wanted nothing in the world more than to wrap his arms around his little brother and hold him tight. Fingon, beautiful, brilliant Fingon, was doing his best. Maedhros could tell. But he couldn’t offer the comfort Maedhros could have. Maedhros, through Fingon, did what he could, taking a second to order those around him back to their work.

It was always strange, to feel his mind in Fingon’s body. The only thing stranger feeling in all Arda was the opposite, the rare occasion where he had allowed Fingon to take control of his body. Maedhros did not like that feeling, not one bit. Or rather, he had not liked it. He wondered if he might feel differently now he had put more time and healing between himself and Thangorodrim. His parents had certainly never minded. It had been awful as a child. You would be speaking to Nerdanel, who would be calm and comforting, and the next second, Fëanor would be watching you owlishly from Nerdanel’s sweet face, wanting a full report on how you were feeling.

Once Maglor had been convinced to go with Fingon, Maedhros recused himself from the research and went back outside. He was not in a place for careful thinking. Instead, he went to seek out a horse. The horses of the easterlings were mostly stout and short, not for a rider with Maedhros’s
height, and they had not many to spare. The Variags had few horses to begin with, and fewer now, while the Haradrim were rowdy enough as it was without Maedhros stealing one of their steeds. In the end, Maedhros was forced to beg a horse from the Rohirrim. It was humiliating, but the mare he ended up on was worth a little pride. Maedhros had never been the connoisseur of horse flesh that his brothers- all of them, save Curufin- were. But despite that, he could tell that this was a fine steed. A bit fancier than Maedhros would have chosen himself, perhaps, but he would need to be a little flashy to remain the commander of his army. In that same vein, he found someone to polish his chainmail until it shone in the sunlight, and washed his hair out. It was as he was washing his hair that he heard again from Fingon and Maglor.

Maedhros was more coherent, now, more aware. Maedhros wondered if he was simply becoming more aware of his new reality, or if his awareness came and went. He prayed it was the former. This time, Fingon allowed him to influence his movements, reaching deep into the bond to hold Maedhros close. With this power, they were together able to embrace Maglor. Maedhros loved them both more than words, and hoped his mind to Fingon’s and his embrace of Maglor showed it enough. For now, anyways. The distance prevented Maedhros from holding them both himself, from kissing Fingon and holding Maglor steady. He wanted to stay, to hold them tight, but as they were still speaking, Maedhros found his own body calling him. He returned to find someone shaking him, and barely stopped himself from throwing Aragorn over his shoulder.

“What is it?” Maedhros demanded. He was not going to stab Elros’s last descendent, but it was a close thing.

Aragorn actually had the nerve to look convincingly guilty. “We lost Denethor.”

That got Maedhros’s attention. “What do you mean you lost him? Where did he go?”

“Knowing that rather defeats the purpose of lost, does it not?”

Maedhros considered another kinslaying. “Can your own people not find him? I was doing something very important. Did Elrond never teach you not to interrupt someone who is working through their fëa?”

“I understand that. I apologize. But it really is important. We have searched the city from top to bottom. Théoden of Rohan told us that you had spoken to him yesterday. We thought you might know something.”

Maedhros sighed, and pushed himself to his feet, hair still dripping wet. He wrung it out like a dishcloth, and did not tie it back. He followed Aragorn out of the tent, and joined the search. For Boromir, he reminded himself. Because Boromir does not deserve to lose his father the way you did.

He found Denethor standing at the very edge of the highest level of the city. Maedhros stared at him. Denethor stared back.

“How did everybody in the search miss you?” Maedhros asked.

Denethor scoffed. “I knew the guards who searched this level from when they were boys. They would never betray me.”

“But they would betray their king in your name?”

He scoffed again, louder, in case Maedhros had missed it the first time. “It is not nearly so simple.”

Maedhros shook his head, more disappointed than anything, and went to lean on the edge of the wall beside Denethor. He had elven grace, and would not slip or fall. Not unless Denethor pushed him,
anyways. But he did not think it would come to that.

“I lived through something not dissimilar, when I abdicated in favour of Fingolfin. A goodly percentage of our troops, my brothers not least among them, had sworn loyalty to me and to my father before me. Never to Indis’s line. If I had wanted to undermine his authority, I could have, at any time. But, despite having been raised to rule, like yourself- after all, who would have predicted that the king would return in your lifetime, when he did not return in your father’s or your grandfather’s or his father’s before him- I was not the best choice for the throne. I had been taken by the enemy and broken in his hands. Fingolfin, despite all his quarrels with me, was a good and capable king. I think from what I have seen of Aragorn as king that he may be one of the greatest I have ever had the privilege to know. You should not fear for your people nor your sons, as long as he reigns.”

Denethor surveyed the city, not meeting Maedhros’s eyes. “He will not reign long. Sauron is coming, and there is nothing you can do about it.”

“I disagree,” Maedhros told him. “To begin with, I can fight. I contended with Morgoth for an age. Sauron is not his master. For all that he is craftier, he has not the raw strength. It is on the power of my nephew that Sauron bases his might. My fight is worth something. I can bring you allies, such as turn the tide of battle. And I saved Boromir. In the darkness I have seen, that is light enough. There were so many I could not save. Boromir- Boromir deserves this chance. He is brave and kind, and he listens to strange old elves who tell stories, if for no other reason than because he might learn something. That is worth fighting for, I think.”

Denethor dropped his eyes to his feet. Maedhros checked that Fingon was not paying attention, and added. “Worst comes to worst, I will die for this cause, I believe. After all I have done, this is a better cause than I have ever fought for.”

“And you would stop me from dying for it also?”

“I would stop you from dying for the sake of dying, or for dying for some idea of pride or glory. There is nothing glorious about death. Death is bloody and dirty and damp, most of the time. In my case, it was ashy and sulfurous and boiling. Glorious in neither case. The people who die for this cause, doing what is right, will die covered in sweat and dirt. They will die wishing for their mothers or fathers, their husbands or wives. They will die screaming, crying, trying to hold their intestines in. We will die, and we can only hope that when we are gone, Sauron will fall into everlasting darkness cursing our names.”

Denethor walked away. Maedhros let him go. There was nothing more he could do. Denethor was a lord in his own right, forged in a time of war just as Maedhros had been. Nobody could choose his path for him.

His task done, Maedhros finished brushing out his hair, and took pleasure in braiding it finely. Even after a month and more reborn, there was still great novelty in having two hands to work with. He loved the independence of being able to do it all by himself. Even more, he loved keeping half an eye on his bond to Fingon, who seemed to be preoccupied with something. It was good to know that he and Maglor were together, no matter how bad the circumstances, and that they were safe.

That night, he dreamt of his father. Fëanor was shouting. Maedhros cringed. It was always a bad day when his father was really, genuinely angry.

“And that you would have the audacity to sit there and make them pay this price, you absolute -”

It quickly became clear that Maedhros was not the target of the yelling, for which he was grateful,
but still he worried for his father, who was not able to calm his temper, in ways that always brought 
ruin, in the end. He hoped that his father had not spent his death yelling at grim Námo, but thought it 
as likely as not that he had. That, surely, was unlikely to convince him to take pity on the house of 
Fëanor.

The armies, in their entirety, marched out early the next morning. Behind they left Théoden and 
Éowyn of Rohan, Denethor, Faramir, and Merry. Denethor had agreed to cede the stewardship to 
Faramir once he was well enough, under some threats from Aragorn and Imrahil to remove the 
stewardship from their half of the family entirely. With them, they took almost every man who was 
fit to fight, several of the Haradrim who were not, two large cavalries, as many siege engines as 
remained, and those mûhmahil who had not already gone to Osgiliath. The progress that had already 
been made in Gondor’s former capital was impressive. There was a system already for ferrying 
people and horses across the river, and the beginnings of a deep trench were being dug on the far 
side of the river. Most of the previous fortifications had been destroyed when the city was overrun, 
but there was more than enough stone lying around to begin building them again.

Osgiliath was, from Maedhros’s early observations, a stupid and indefensible city. It was not 
designed, of course, as a fortress, and that showed clearly. It could have been defended, in theory, 
but not by a force as small as the one that had been garrisoned there. Frankly, Maedhros thought that 
the entire army of Gondor, as it currently stood, would have been insufficient to defend this city. 
Thus, it was fortunate that Maedhros’s party was larger. They would be able to effectively use the 
city to strengthen their own position against Sauron.

Aragorn took himself and his vanguard across the river soon after they arrived, and marched on. 
Maedhros remained in Osgiliath with his own forces, advising on the construction of the defences 
and helping where he could. It was then that Gandalf came, to caution him against being too strong 
in his actions against Minas Morgul.

“The darkness there may turn the minds of mortal men to madness,” he warned. Maedhros did not 
bother asking why he had not gone with Aragorn. With his quick steed, he would surely be able to 
catch up.

Maedhros considered the proposition. “Such are the magics of the enemy. I will take no man closer 
until I am certain they will not be harmed. With Sauron living, it is impossible to cleanse such magics 
entirely, but we might set up our catapults, and fire from a distance. The evil will have attached itself 
to the very stone of the place, to the song and the craftsmanship. We might do a little damage. And I 
will grab Sauron’s attention. Have no doubt of that.”

“Oh, your ability to grab attention was not a concern,” Gandalf said, and from the folds of his robes 
he withdrew a palantír. “Just in case.”

Maedhros took it carefully, though he did not intend to use it.

“Do you think we are doing the right thing?” Maedhros asked, though he was not sure why.

The Maia shrugged. “We are doing what we can, in the face of terrible evil. We can only hope that it 
will be enough.”

“Do you think we are putting Frodo in more danger, by choosing this risky course?”

Gandalf met his eyes, and just for a second, Maedhros thought he caught a flash of the terrible power 
of the mair. “You say that you have effectively blinded Sauron, and will continue to distract him. I 
trust that. And I trust that Námo knew what he was doing, by sending you here. He is not, of all the 
Ainur, the least cautious.”
That was an understatement. “No, that he is not. But you may be, trusting in kinslayers and hobbits and other strange things.”

He laughed. “Perhaps. We shall see where it takes us.”

He returned to Aragorn not long after, leaving Maedhros, Elladan, Haldir, Bór, Amnus, and The Queen undisputedly in charge. Maedhros took the opportunity provided by the reunification of his forces to send out an order searching the troops for anyone who spoke a language that might be useful. Anyone who did was ordered to report themselves to Maedhros and Haldir before the end of day that day. The search was surprisingly fruitful, producing almost fifty westron speakers- more than half of whom, Maedhros was reasonably certain, were spies- three more speakers of Ancient Easterling, four of a dialect of Nandorin, six of Sindarin, and, bafflingly, eighteen Haradrim who said they spoke ‘elvish’, but in fact spoke a hodgepodge of Fëanorean Quenya and Northern-accented Sindarin. It was perfectly intelligible to Maedhros, but incomprehensible to everyone else.

“Why?” Maedhros demanded of them, using the Sindarin word, and when this garnered no response, repeated the question in Quenya.

“We are all from the ocean,” one of them informed him, as if this explained everything.

“What?” Maedhros asked, feeling himself reduced to one-word questions.

“The sea speaks to the Haradrim,” answered another, looking aggrieved that Maedhros didn’t know.

Maedhros opened his mouth to ask, ‘who?’ Because there was no chance that Ulmo, Uinien or Ossë were speaking to men in Fëanorean Quenya, when he realized who was responsible.

“Kánafínwë Makalaurë,” Maedhros muttered, under his breath, “you stubborn, incorrigible bastard.”

For Círdan had said that Maglor had wandered south, to sing his songs where men could hear them. Evidently, men had been listening. Maedhros assigned the Nandorin speakers to Haldir’s direct command, the Sindarin speakers to Elladan’s and took the speakers of Ancient Easterling and ‘Elvish’ to form the basis of his own guard. This way, all three of them would be able to communicate with those around them.

That night, Maedhros dreamed himself to Fingon’s side, where he stoked the embers of a fire, and kept watch. Here, he could see Maglor, curled up under all Fingon’s blankets, and someone else asleep across the fire. It was a young elleth, dark-haired and pale-skinned. She seemed to be sleeping deeply, her head pillowed on her arms.

“Meet Arwen Undómiel,” Fingon said, with something like an eye roll. “Apparently, she has run off to find Maglor. Half the family does not know where she is, and the other half do not even know she’s missing.”

Maedhros buried his head in his hands. “Elrond is going to kill me.”

“What did you do? Elrond is going to kill Círdan. He has been aiding and abetting. At this point, we shall do all we can to keep her safe. What more can we do?”

Fingon was right, of course. Maedhros, in fëa, leant into him, feeling Fingon’s mind strong and warm against his. “Why did she decide to come looking?”

Fingon leant closer in turn, lips brushing Maedhros’s. “She plans to choose the mortal path. I think she feels guilty, for leaving her parents behind. Elrond would not give her a part in the war, but this she knew she had the skill to do, and the fortitude to keep trying. She knows that her father loves
Maglor. This might be the one thing she can give him that, in her mind, makes up for her choosing mortality."

“It does not work quite like that.”

“No,” Fingon agreed, “but I too am here trying to save Maglor in place of someone who loves him better than I. So, how can I judge?”

Maedhros looked at Maglor more closely, seeing his sharp cheekbones rendered bladelike and his hands curled tightly. “Some of my men speak Quenya and Sindarin because of his wandering. They say that it has been a part of their culture as long as they can remember, that those out at sea or on the shores might hear a voice, singing to them of ancient times. He has been doing it for so, so long. We all left him. I left him.”

“You left him, and I left you, and our fathers left both of us, and their father left them. According to Maglor, in words he spoke yesterday, he believes he left you also, to die alone. But we three are here now, and together. Surely, that counts for something.”

Maedhros loved him so much. “I chose to… to do what I did. It is different.”

“You were sick,” Fingon muttered, pressing a kiss to Maedhros’s cheek instead. “It is, to my mind, no different than the fate of your grandmother.”

It was a perspective new to Maedhros. Not the sickness as much as the comparison to Míriel. “What makes you think that she was… like me?”

“I think that elves can die of illnesses of the fëa, and Míriel’s only was the more traditional way to do it.”

Maedhros had no response to that, and so he, with some maneuvering, curled long limbs around Fingon, to hold him tight and safe from the coming darkness. It was what he had the power to do, and he could only hope it was enough.

Chapter End Notes

Languages- I think it’s ludicrous that none of these people would have any languages in common given that they live fairly close together and have for thousands of years, so they do and here they are. Elvish is not a language, obviously, but mortals including some members of the fellowship do refer to it as such suggesting a common misconception that there is only one elvish tongue when there in fact are many. Haldir speaks some dialects of Nandorin because of course he does because that would probably be useful for a Lóthlorien border guard.

So, yeah, this chapter. If I don’t reply to your comment right away that’s because it’s the long weekend.
Three Singers (Interlude IV)

Chapter Summary

Fingon makes soup, gives hugs, and is ambushed in the woods

Chapter Notes

Maglor has some fairly serious mental health issues (as you should already know from reading this story). It’s not his POV, but, you know, he’s not in a great place so heads up.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Fingon wasn’t sure what to do with Maglor once he’d found him. His immediate instinct was to get him somewhere warm and cram food into him so he wouldn’t look so thin, but he doubted Maglor’s stomach could take it. In lieu of that, he started a fire, and left Maglor behind to go kill a rabbit. He worried that Maglor would leave while he was hunting, but he didn’t. Instead, he sat silently, staring into the fire, and rocked back and forth. Fingon figured that a nice broth would be a good place to start, but he had never been much of a cook, and Maedhros was worse. Maglor didn’t seem to care, though he would have mocked them for it once. As it was, Fingon managed to convince him to drink half a cup of broth before he finally spoke.

“You are here, really,” Maglor whispered.

Fingon nodded. “Yes, I am.”

“Maedhros is real too.”

“Yes.”

Maglor’s hands started shaking so badly that he had to put down his cup. Fingon, who wished more than anything that Maedhros could have been here in his place, opened his arms in the universal gesture for offering a hug. Maglor seemed uncertain, at first, but when Fingon didn’t either move towards him or lower his arms, Maglor slid towards him and allowed Fingon to hold him. He smelled terrible, but Maedhros had been worse after Thangorodrim, and Fingon could fault neither of them for it. Not least because at that moment, he felt great guilt in relation to Maglor. He had almost chosen to leave Maglor like this. He had wanted to abandon Maglor. Forever.

“I have you,” he told Maglor, “I am real, and he is real, and you are real.”

“I left him to die alone,” Maglor confessed, as though Fingon had not done the same. “I took the silmaril and I ran and I left him to die alone.”

Fingon squeezed Maglor tighter to his chest. “He does not blame you. I do not blame you. Not ever.”

They held each other for a long moment, Maglor weeping into Fingon’s shoulder, and Fingon
grasping tightly to his knotted hair.

Maedhros, Fingon called, do you have a moment?

Maedhros did.

"'Laurë, do you want to speak to Maedhros?"

Maglor pulled away, and wiped tears and snot on the back of his hand. “I do not trust my own mind not to hurt him.”

“Through me? I know it gives you little privacy, but—”

“Yes,” interrupted Maglor.

Fingon let Maedhros in, guided the bond to the forefront of his mind and allowed Maedhros to influence his actions.

“Hello,” Maedhros said aloud, once he had settled. In Fingon’s body, he carried himself differently than Fingon did. Their postures were different, and even with Fingon’s tongue, he instinctively positioned it so his accent remained the same. Fingon could do the same in Maedhros’s body, though he knew the loss of control bothered Maedhros far more than it did him. Fingon did not mind letting Maedhros take control, for a minute or two. Especially for something like this. Maedhros could have, under duress, done the same, but he hated feeling that his body was not his own, and Fingon never made him.

Maglor could clearly tell the difference. He covered his mouth with his hand. “So, you finally convinced him to marry you?”

Maedhros nodded. His amusement and joy shone bright in Fingon’s mind. “You knew for years, did you not? You and the rest of the scheming vagabonds.”

“I knew before you did,” Maglor whispered, voice breaking, “I knew in Tirion, and Formenos, and at Alqualondë. I knew that he would save you on Thangorodrim or more likely die trying, and I knew that you needed each other at Himring. I knew when you spent days after the Nirmaeth in a stupor and I never said a word to offer you comfort.”

Maedhros pulled his brother close, the embrace far more natural than when Fingon had done it. “There were no words you could have said to offer me comfort then. You were there for me, and I have not been there for you, and for that, I am sorry.”

“I forgive you.”

Fingon could feel Maedhros’s relief singing in his mind. “You deserve more than this. Better. You have more than paid the price for what we did.”

“I cannot go back, Nelyo, I am not ready.”

I am not ready either, Maedhros thought. “Then do not go back. Go forward.”

Maglor laughed, bitterly. “Who but our mother would have me?”

“I would,” Fingon replied, and then had to stop to realize that he’d spoken aloud. “Sorry, I just lost Maedhros. I think he might be talking to someone.”

Maglor blinked slowly at him, and said, “were we ever friends?”
Fingon shrugged. “I honestly do not know. But I can tell you that you always loved Maedhros well, and treated me better than his other brothers over the fact that I loved him also.”

Maglor bowed his head. “That is not saying much. You treated us with nothing but respect, and we scorned you.”

“Nothing but respect may be giving me too much credit,” Fingon replied, thinking of a thousand petty quarrels and rude comments made behind his cousins’ backs.

Maglor snorted. “Well, more respect than we gave you, at the least, and that after you had risked your life to save our brother from unimaginable torments. I think Curufin actually got ruder after, somehow.”

That was almost certainly true. “It was Curufin. To ask him to follow normal social conventions would be like asking Aulë to stop forging.”

Maglor almost laughed, and just for a second, Fingon saw Kánafinwë, bright and gleeful as he had been that last night in Tirion, before the beginning of the end.

“Well, be that as it may, let me congratulate you on your marriage. Eru knows I am the only one now who can.”

Of course. Maglor did not know. How could he? “Maglor- Caranthir, Amrod, and Amras are all alive. Most of the family is.”

There was an excruciatingly long silence. Maglor looked down at his hands, which were curled on his lap, not quite fists. Fingon thought there might be something wrong with them, but this did not seem like something to harass Maglor over at the moment. One thing at a time.

“Caranthir wanted to come along. He did his usual routine when we had the verdict from the valar that it was to only be me.” He left out the part where Caranthir had ordered him to leave Maglor behind. “They all miss you, you know. Even some of the more surprising ones. Finrod always thought you were better to make music with than me. He says I do not ‘harmonize well’.”

Maglor almost cracked a smile at that. “You could be better.”

Maglor did not have Maedhros’s beauty or Celegorm’s impeccable features, but as the corner of his mouth quirked up, Fingon remembered that he too had once been lovely. It was his eyes- the same as Maedhros’s- and the way he could light up a room- like Maedhros- but more than that also. He had an openness, an ability to be genuine, that made everything he did seem almost magnetic. It had also made him something of an egotistical bastard who loved controlling the room, but Fingon saw none of that in him now. Instead, he was broken, and exhausted, and sickly, but something of his heart was unchanged.

That was the moment at which Fingon realized, “wait, you have hardly been eating. Surely you have not been setting campfires. Who-”

There was a rustling in the trees. Fingon grabbed his sword. The blade was not glowing, but he swung it around none the less.

“Who goes there?” He demanded in Westron, and then, as a Sindarin aside to Maglor, “get down on the ground.”

Maglor obeyed, as, more surprisingly, did the intruder. She dropped out of a tree, and stepped forward into the light of the fire. She looked enough like her mother that Fingon knew to drop his
sword the instant he saw her.

“Arwen?” He demanded. Arwen blinked at him.

“Who, if I may ask, are you?”

Fingon introduced himself and then asked, “What are you doing here? And why were you in that tree?”

Arwen rubbed the back of her neck awkwardly. “It is a long story. May I?”

Fingon gestured for her to take a seat, and added as an aside to Maglor, “this is Elrond’s daughter.”

Arwen nodded. “I am. That answers also in part your previous question.”

“Did your father send you?”

Fingon knew the answer to his question before she even opened her mouth. It was Galadriel’s guilty look to the finest detail. The same as when she’d dyed Finrod’s hair and he hadn’t noticed because he was so excited for his first date with Amarië.

“No. He did not, though I am here on his behalf. When Maedhros returned, my father was very much disturbed. He sensed Maedhros, from very far away, and it upset him greatly. I was worried for him. And so, the next day, I begged my father to tell me everything. Perhaps because he was so rattled, he finally did. My brothers and I knew already that he did not consider the Sons of Fëanor his kidnappers, and that he had many happy memories of his childhood, but until that day, I did not grasp the magnitude of it. He told me of the years he had spent looking for you, Lord Maglor, and of how he had grieved to lose Maedhros when he was so young. I- my father has lost far too much in his life. He would not send me to war with Aragorn, which was fair, but I was just as well trained a tracker as my brothers, and if I can perhaps do something-”

Fingon cut her off. “You wanted to find Maglor as an apology to your father for choosing a mortal path.”

Arwen opened her mouth to reply, but stopped as Maglor spoke in a very small voice. “He was looking for me?”

Arwen nodded, and Fingon said, “all the long years. Did you not know? We thought you were hiding on purpose.”

“Yes,” Maglor replied immediately, “and no. I hid from Gil-galad and his people. And Cirdan and his. And I hid from Galadriel and Celebrimbor. They did not need me to bring any more pain down upon them. But Elrond-”

He interrupted himself, and subsided into silence. Arwen reached out one slender hand, and grasped his fingers. Maglor regarded her with some shock. Fingon wondered when the last time someone had greeted him in kindness was.

“Come back to Imladris with me?” She almost whispered the words. Maglor shook his head.

“Please? All travelers are welcome there. Elves and men, dwarves and hobbits and wizards. Give my father the traveler he has been waiting for since before I was born.”

The smile she gave him was sweet enough to flavour every cake in Tirion.

“I cannot do that,” Maglor muttered, looking down to avoid meeting her eyes.
Arwen reached out her other hand so two of hers clasped one of Maglor’s tightly. “The war shall be done ’ere we get so far as Imladris, grandfather. Win or lose, the end comes. If we win, I shall not force you on. For there shall be peace in these lands, and you would be safe, but if we lose-”

“That does not bear thinking about,” Fingon snapped, too harshly. He regretted it almost immediately.

Arwen met his eyes. “For me no more than you. Yet we must. I must consider that I will never be able to wed he who I love, for as surely as your Maedhros would fall before Sauron, doing what is right, my Aragorn would do the same, and we would have to survive. More than. It would be our turn to fight or flee. If Aragorn dies there, and my brothers at his side, someone will have to ensure my father does not try to take on Sauron on his own. Yet, someone will have to buy time so we can try and evacuate all the elven realms to safety. As best we can, at any rate. With his son dead, Thranduil will be difficult to bring back into the fold. Considering all of this and a thousand other unpleasant details is our duty.”

She was right, of course. Fingon bowed his head in agreement. “We will not be much good here, but I will not leave Maglor. My conscience will not allow it any more than it will allow me to leave you to travel in these dangerous times alone.”

“And that may be right and just, but what I am trying to tell Lord Maglor is that if we lose, I will need his help. I cannot look after my father, and my mother’s parents, and Imladris, alone. I need your help. Both of you.”

Maglor whispered, “my punishment is not done.”

Arwen, clearly to some degree a descendent of logical Turgon, said, “then let me make you a deal. If we win, you may return without ever seeing Imladris. You will miss in all likelihood less than a month of your torment, and give that time to comforting a twice-over heir of Doriath and once-over heir of Sirion. If we lose- if we lose, I think that will be torment enough for all of us. Does that seem fair?”

“Dear lady-”

“Please, grandfather.” She leant in and put a hand on his shoulder. Maglor slumped like rag doll.

“Very well, to Imladris and on my head be it.”

Despite the declaration, they did not leave with any haste. Fingon convinced Maglor to drink another cup of broth, while he and Arwen shared some of their rations and what was left of Fingon’s rabbit also. Then, Arwen insisted that Maglor sit still while she, in a frivolous use of her elven heritage, worked the tangles out of his hair with only her fingers and a little humming.

“So,” Maglor said as she worked, “that makes all three of us musicians then.”

Arwen paused a second, though her fingers continued their work. “For fun, yes. As my primary channel for the energy of my fëa? No. It is a common mistake, given the association with Lúthien, but no. I can sing other things, but my natural inclination is to seeing work, insight and foresight, though I am not a third so powerful as my grandmother.”

Maglor winced. Fingon remembered that Nerdanel, though she favoured craft, had been afflicted with strange flashes of insight and foresight all her life. That was a curse neither of them would have wished on anyone.

“Do you see anything for us?” Fingon asked.
Arwen took her hands out of Maglor’s hair and folded them in front of her. A second later, she resumed her work. “It is all too muddled. There is beauty and pain ahead of both of you. How much of either, I know not, nor would say if I did. A long road, but that only tells me that you are elves, really. For you, High King, I see a crown of iron, ringed in flames, and for you, Grandfather, a clouded night sky. I’ll give my views on neither, lest I influence the outcome.”

It was impolite to ask a seer to explain their visions, and so neither Fingon nor Maglor did. Arwen resumed her humming, and Fingon took out his harp to play along. Seeing the thinly veiled longing on Maglor’s face, he intentionally missed a couple notes, and allowed his tempo to decrease until he was just a little slower than Arwen. The look switched from longing to pained.

“Fingon,” Maglor complained. It was the opportunity Fingon had been waiting for.

“If you want to complain about my playing, do it yourself.” He handed Maglor the harp.

Maglor shook his head. “I cannot do it.”

Fingon almost asked for clarification, but before he could do so, Maglor opened his hand to show Fingon the mass of scar tissue that covered his right palm, and then did the same with the left, which was better, though not by much. Fingon dug his fingernails hard into his own palms. Arwen winced sympathetically.

“Have you ever consulted a healer about those?” Arwen asked, adding, as an afterthought, “may I braid your hair?”

“You may,” Maglor said, and inclined his head to make her work easier. “And no, I have never seen a healer. I tended the initial wounds just fine, but beyond that, I would have needed another elf.”

He left unsaid that he would not have sought the help of another elf. Arwen pulled a comb out of her pack, which lay at her feet, and set to dividing Maglor’s hair into three. She worked quickly and efficiently, moving towards braiding in no time. Fingon reached out, setting his harp on the ground, and took Maglor’s hands in his own. The scars were rough, and likely there was a not insignificant amount of nerve damage. Certainly, they restricted the movements of his fingers.

“I am no healer,” Fingon told him, “but I imagine I am a sight better than you are without an instrument to play. Would you let me do something? And do not begin to say it is a part of your punishment. You would do better by the men you serve if you could play for them also.”

Maglor did not say yes, but he did not say no either, and of course, he could not simply accept the gift for what it was. He had that old Fëanorion pride, but none of the power that had once backed it. Fingon picked up his harp, and played the healing. It was not the same one he had worked for Théoden of Rohan. That had been designed for fresh wounds. Instead, he used the same spell he had once used to treat Maedhros’s wounds, in the decades after Thangorodrim, with a specific modifier for burns. It was designed to be sung in a round by multiple healers, and after the second or third rotation, Arwen joined in, a verse behind Fingon, and they sung together. She had a fine voice, soaring above in wonderful harmony. Maglor never could resist a chance to sing with someone who could match his skills. He joined too, a verse after Arwen, and they three sung through the song twice more before all sagging from exhaustion.

The difference to Maglor’s hands was minimal, outwardly. The scars were still large and ugly. Since they had been inflicted in punishment by Varda herself, Fingon rather suspected they might always remain so. Yet, there must have been some forgiveness in the heart of the Lady of Starlight, for when Maglor slowly flexed his fingers, his face broke out in an expression of true glee.
“Fingon,” Maglor whispered, voice raw, “Fingon, I think I can play.”

Fingon passed back the harp, and though he only played a single chord, it rung true and clear through the air. Maglor laughed until he wept, and then wept until he could laugh again. Arwen rubbed circles on his back, and moved his single braid to lie over his right shoulder.

They remained in tableau until Maglor was neither laughing nor crying. Then, Arwen packed their bags while Fingon hid the fire as best he could. It would be for the best to try and prevent any from tracking them, though it would likely be impossible if the tracker were truly determined, given that they were three moving through otherwise uninhabited country.

Surprisingly, they were swifter in their return towards Mithlond than Fingon had been leaving it, if only by a couple days. This was with more frequent and longer rests, for Maglor knew many shortcuts and secret paths that had stumped Fingon and Arwen both. Arwen confessed, rather shame faced, that she had in fact utterly failed in tracking Maglor. It was only pure luck and a little advice from Círdan that had sent her in the right direction. She had been able to find their campsite by doubling back, for she had realized she was being followed, and had begun tracking Fingon. Fingon was a little ashamed at being worse at hiding his tracks than Maglor, though he pretended at being more ashamed than he was to make Maglor smile.

In this time, Fingon found opportunities to speak to Maedhros, though they were few and far between. Maedhros and he both were busy, Fingon with his two companions, Maedhros with his army and his grandson and Sauron. He had promised that they would speak before the end, though Fingon would not hold him to that. Such fights were easy to have run away on you, and Fingon would rather Maedhros was safe and not in constant communication than not safe at all.

As they traveled, Maglor got both better and worse, though it was never as bad as it had been that first day. Sometimes, he still did not trust that Fingon was truly there, but Arwen helped. Maglor had no memories related to her, and so always assumed she was not drawn from memory. As the days passed, they fell into easy routine. If Maglor had one of Morgoth’s dreams, Arwen would talk him round to their reality, and once he was convinced, Fingon would hold him and forgive him. Despite these setbacks, Maglor was often better each day than the last. His music was a great gift, and Fingon could tell that it calmed fëa and hröa both to be able to work again.

“I wonder at what he might do, if he let down some of his walls,” Arwen said to Fingon, one day, while Maglor slept. He needed more than most elves, and more frequent meals also.

Fingon remembered fire called from the sky and shaking earth and armies stopped in their tracks. “I do not.”

“I wish he was at least able to let us in.”

Fingon did too.

Arwen went to speak to Círdan alone. Fingon tried to convince Maglor to come along, but he was insistent on staying away from elven society. So, in some ways, it was only predictable that Círdan himself returned with Arwen, looking regal upon a tall dappled stallion. Arwen, with her own elvish steed returned to her, led the third horse, a white mare, not by any rope but only with a gentle hand on her shoulder every so often.

When Círdan saw Maglor, he slid slowly off his horse and walked on his own two feet until they were but an arm’s length from each other.

“Your kin saved my life once,” Círdan said, his voice careful.
“I remember. I also remember blood on the quays of Alqualondë, staining the beauty of Doriath and the peace of Sirion.”

Círdan inclined his head. “I remember that also, yet I cannot help but be glad to see someone who remembers the days before the sun. We are so few, now. Five, in fact, if we exclude the ainur and these two newly returned, but include Glorfindel.”

Maglor shook his head sadly. “They forget so quickly. I try my best, but it is so hard.”

Círdan pulled him into a gentle hug. “I know, my friend. I know.”

Maglor let Círdan hold him close for a long second. Then, the shipwright extended an arm and allowed Fingon into the hug also. He reminded Fingon of Maedhros’s grandfather, Mahtan, with his beard and his confidence and his easy demeanor.

“Look after yourselves out there,” Círdan murmured. “It may not be Beleriand, but it is not Valinor either.”

“I will,” Fingon promised, for the both of them.

“Look after her too.”

Maglor’s voice was rough. “We will.”

Círdan released them both, but not before giving each a kiss on the forehead. He gave Arwen a kiss on the hand before he walked, humming, back towards Mithond.

“He reminds me of my grandfather,” Maglor whispered.

Fingon smiled at him. “He reminds me of your grandfather too. I think it is the beard.”

Maglor shrugged. “Yes and no. I think it is his unassuming confidence, and also the way that he is a master of his craft without arrogance.”

Arwen led her horses over to them, and Círdan’s horse followed also, like a lost puppy. “Mount up, my lords. It is a long road to Imladris, though as fair as any now, in these last days of darkness, and indeed fairer than those walked by our brothers and loves.”

Maglor chose the horse Círdan had ridden, and whispered to him secret things until the fine beast leant down to nuzzle softly at him. That made Maglor smile, and with the horse’s consent, he mounted easily.

This left Fingon with the last horse, and he went to her, introducing himself by name and asking hers in turn. He did not speak the tongues of beasts- that gift was squarely the talent of stranger cousins than he- but he was alright at puzzling out the names of horses, strange though they were. His was called something like The-Female-One-Born-Third-In-The-Year-Spring-Came-Late, but they both agreed he could simplify that to Late-Spring. She allowed him to mount up, and as he did so, their journey had officially begun, just as Maedhros’s was reaching its close.

Chapter End Notes

The end is NIGH- AGH. I’m so scared/excited/happy/sad. This is the last Fingon
chapter before the final battle, so say goodbye to him for a while, and get ready for Minas Morgul with Maedhros next week (a chapter I’m very happy with, so far.)

By-the by, I noticed that this story now has more comments than almost anything else in this Fandom, especially by recentness, which is CRAZY, and I know half of those are me (and another quarter at least are Aetherio and FactorialRabbits (yeah I’m calling you out by name now ’sup), but STILL. THANK YOU ALL
Maedhros, Elladan and some friends visit Minas Morgul. In terms of the twin guardian cities of Gondor, it ranks second. In terms of Finwëan expeditions to towers controlled by Sauron, it ranks first.

Maedhros’s forces followed Aragorn’s at dawn the next day. They consisted mostly of Amsus and the thousand men he had the power to command— a group which fortuitously included all of the mûkmahil riders and a large cavalry. This was rounded out by the Easterling charioteers and cavalry, under the command of the living Ancient Easterling translator, who had received a battlefield promotion to the post, the small Variag cavalry, who had been ordered by their Queen to take Maedhros’s commands directly, and the ‘Elvish’ and Sindarin speakers from the previous day. With them also went Elladan, though Maedhros ordered Haldir to remain behind. As an archer, he was of more use to them inside the walls than on the run.

Maedhros had selected the group entirely for speed, save the mûkmahil, who were of greatest use pulling the siege engines and catapults. The entire strategy relied on them being able to escape from the approaching orc army while keeping close enough to draw them in. Though Sauron would be unlikely to want to send them away from Mordor, orcs were not known for their ability to take orders. When faced with prey and temptation, nothing would keep them from the hunt.

It took them two days to get to Minas Morgul, more or less. They took their time, since arriving too early would have disrupted Aragorn’s plans. They saw no one and nothing on the road, save for some soldiers Aragorn had left to guard his rear. Maedhros had ordered them to do this from a couple miles further north, so they would not be slaughtered by the large army of orcs he intended to march back that way a couple days later. These men were largely of Faramir’s original followers, so they knew how to avoid large numbers of orcs in that terrain well. They were a little wary of the Haradrim, but by and large were courteous to Maedhros. He bid them the best of fortune, and carried on.

They reached Minas Morgul at nightfall, and Maedhros ordered his men to rest. They would have a long few days ahead of them, and their attack would benefit not one wit from beginning a second before dawn. They obeyed, and separated, to reconvene as the sun rose. Maedhros slept fitfully, and dreamt neither with his bond nor strange magics.

They spaced the catapults evenly, as close as they could get to Minas Morgul without putting the men in danger of having their minds corrupted. The challenge for Maedhros now would be to find ways to weaken or bend the corruption on this place enough that there might be some real threat to
Sauron of his forces pushing through. The catapults were a good first step. Sauron, apprentice to Aulë that he had once been, connected well to forms and patterns. It was likely why Finrod had not been able to mobilize his own connection to Minas Tirith- the first one- to defeat Sauron when he was still a follower. Therefore, damage to Minas Morgul would likely weaken Sauron’s grip on the place some. But that was not the only problem. The evil had seeped into the very ground and water of this place. Even if they brought the entirety of Minas Morgul down, by some miracle, it might take years to clear, unaided.

In Maedhros’s ideal world, he would have brought a half-dozen elves- Galadriel, Círdan, Elrond, Celeborn, Glorfindel, Fingon- and they would have together worked the magic to unmake this place. As it was, there was only Maedhros himself, who had no grasp on his powers, and Elladan, who was late born to bear such gifts. It would likely not even be within their capacity to weaken it, much.

“Give the order to begin firing whenever ready,” Maedhros told one of his ‘Elvish’ speakers. “Tell them not to bother with the walls, and to try and bring down the towers, if they can.”

The order was passed on. One of the other ‘Elvish’ speakers said, “what should the rest of us do, your majesty?”

“For now, nothing. Rest. But tell every commanding officer that they must report to me sometime before the sun sets. It matters not when.”

They fired on the city for the rest of the day. As the sun was first beginning to touch the horizon, a stone struck one of the smaller guard towers right in the centre. It began to fall, collapsing in on itself, stone after stone, and falling on the rest of the city. Maedhros could feel the spells tied to the place ripple. Not weakened enough to make a difference to their effect on a man, but it was something.

In speaking to the commanding officers, Maedhros’s aim was simple. He wanted to know who, if anybody, had Númenórean blood, and whether they felt the magic of this place less than their non-Númenórean counterparts. It seemed, to a degree, that they did, at which point Maedhros demanded from Amnus - who commanded all of the Númenóreans in the group, save one lone Variag- a list of all those among them who were the best and brightest. The most determined, loyal, and brave. Maedhros needed people who would be least effected by the dark magics. Of all their forces, he found nine who met his satisfaction. Five northern Haradrim, three southern, and the Variag. One of the northern Haradrim, who was pale for his kin, happened to be one of their likely-spy Westron speakers, a fact which did not escape Maedhros’s notice. It was no coincidence that he passed as a man of Gondor. Also not escaping Maedhros’s notice was the fact that they, with Elladan, made an inauspicious ten followers, the same number with which Finrod had faced Sauron.

“It feels like being in a story,” Elladan said, when the ten and Maedhros were assembled the next morning. “I half believe Manwë’s Eagles are going to swoop down and tear chunks off of the tower themselves.”

Maedhros shuddered involuntarily. “I hope it does not come to that. The eagles do not always care if they bring you back alive or dead.”

“They brought you back alive.”

“And,” Maedhros told him, “they brought Fingon’s father back dead. That rather put me off of them, to be honest. If nothing else, it showed that they were poor judges of character. They ought to have brought me back dead and Fingolfin back alive, rather than the other way around.”

Elladan raised an eyebrow in a way that could have meant a hundred things, but said nothing.
“I agree with the half-elf,” the Spy said. Maedhros thought he had introduced himself as Halon, which was probably a false name, but with spies, that was as good as you could do, sometimes.

“Call me Elladan,” the half-elf in question said, magnanimously. “If we’re all going to walk into a potentially horrible fate together, we might as well know each other’s names.”

The rest of the group, with Halon acting as translator, introduced themselves. Maedhros tracked their names. Calnus, Aron, Taron, Petrys, Ty, Maltar, Coryl, and the Variag, who turned out to be a woman who would only allow them to call her Canadiel. Apparently, the Variags had a culture that held personal names to be a matter of great significance, hence why their ruler was only referred to as the Queen.

“So,” Halon said, when the introductions were done, “what are we doing?”

Maedhros prepared himself to slip back into his role as an authority figure. “We are going to go in, now that the magic is a little weakened, and I am going to try and weaken it further from the inside. Elladan will be assisting me in the matter. I need the nine of you to make sure we are not killed by orcs as we work.”

“Are they going to keep firing while we go?” Halon asked, translating for Canadiel.

Maedhros winced at the sound of stone smashing together, and stood to go give the order to cease firing.

“What do we do in the meantime?” Amnus asked, through another Westron translator. “I cannot just order my men to sit here and watch.”

It was Fingon who came to him with the answer. Maedhros had asked him the night before if he’d had any ideas, and the one Fingon had given was so simple that it might actually work. “Do you have any songs that everybody knows?”

Amnus said there were some, and then turned around to shout orders over his shoulder. Men clambered up the mûkmahil to retrieve their drum and horns. From sleeves and packs they pulled out flutes, and lyres, and even some strange instruments Maedhros had never seen before, made of everything from finely carved wood and even ivory to what looked like a dead goose with sticks in it. Knowing this would be the last calm before the storm, he clapped Amnus on the shoulder, and rushed back to his ten friends.

“Are you ready?” Maedhros asked Elladan.

He shrugged. “Well, I suppose I shan’t be getting more so.” He walked first onto the field, tensing as he felt the wave of dark magic wash over him. Maedhros followed a second behind, and did the same.

Elladan reached out, and pulled each one of their friends over the border by their hands. He was, as he had informed Maedhros on their ride over, one of the rare few elves who channeled their strength from fëa to fëa almost exclusively. He had no need of any skill to work through, but he could rarely work on anything that was not another living being, ideally a child of Eru or Aulë or Yavanna. It was an invaluable skill to have, if a rather rare one to be your greatest gift. The only others Maedhros could think of off the top of his head were Glorfindel and his uncle Arafinwë.

“Tulkas grant us strength, and Nessa swiftness,” Maedhros muttered, and set off. He drew Cánë, allowing the elven steel to shine brightly against the dark magic. Elladan did the same. His blade, Maedhros thought, was Gondolin-forged. That made sense, given Elrond’s lineage. Likely, much of
what had come from Gondolin had ended up in his household, in the end.

“That is a fine blade indeed,” Halon said, his face contorted into a grimace. “would that we all had such fine things to protect us.”

He drew his own shortsword, and swung it once so quickly it sang. Maedhros, without thinking, reached up and blocked the blade with his own. “Now is not the time to be cocky. And yes, it is a fine blade, made by my brother Curufin for Finrod of Nargothrond, and gifted to me by his sister, the Lady Galadriel.”

Elladan gave it a thoughtful look. “Well, that makes it a blade with pedigree indeed. Now, are we going to talk swords, or swing them?”

“I rather hope neither, but I do agree we should move on.”

They eleven moved slowly across the waste. A part of Maedhros wanted to simply set the lot alight and go join Aragorn in fighting a proper fight, but he knew that was not to be. It would be best for Aragorn and the hobbits both if Sauron’s forces and intellect were divided.

The music started when they were a good distance from the army, perhaps a third of a mile, but it was very noticeable. Low drums and brassy horns echoed off the imposing mountains, and Maedhros heard one of the men breathe a sigh of relief. Music was the fabric of Arda, after all, and even if no man had the strength to manipulate it in the way elves could, that was not to say that they could not oppose the manipulations of others. In asserting their own music, they defied the spells that Sauron had placed here. One man would not do much. Even a thousand and more, singing and playing, made not the difference that Fingon, Finrod or Maglor alone would have. And that was not even to begin to speak of Lúthien, who could have ground Minas Morgul into so much dust on her own, or Maedhros’s father, who would no doubt have invented some horrifying contraption to affect much the same end.

Yet, it did make some difference, lightening the burden on Elladan to bring their companions along safely, and lightening the burden of Maedhros himself, of fear and angry magic. As Elladan found his strength waning, later in the day, Maedhros reached out, and allowed Elladan to take his strength for his own. It was not near so efficient as doing the same with Fingon, but Elladan was family, of a sort, and family had the ability to take and give power better than most.

“Taking power from you,” Elladan told him, hands braced on his knees as he caught his breath, “is a bit like trying to drink a river.”

Maedhros offered him a sip of water from his canteen. “If it makes you feel better, your grandmother tells me I am one of the most powerful she has ever encountered. Probably the most powerful who cannot channel their own strength through craft or fëa.”

Elladan gave him a look, and grabbed the canteen. “One of?”

“If you come to Valinor, you can meet the rest. Save Lúthien and my father, of course.”

Elladan shuddered. “You say that as though it would make me want to sail.”

“Curiosity is a bigger motivator than you might think.”

They walked on. The singing faded into so much drums echoing off the mountains, and by the time they reached the gates, they could have been alone in all the world. A large stone had taken a chunk out of one of the massive gates, but they remained standing. “We should have brought that stupid battering ram,” Maedhros muttered.
Halon shook his head. “The mûkmahil would not have come within a mile of this place, not with a thousand wraiths driving them.”

He was probably right. Still, with no defenders in the place, it was not all that difficult to get inside, even with a gate. Maedhros, with a hand from Elladan and a shoulder from Petrys, was able to scale the wall. No man could have done so, but Maedhros did, though he had to explain something of the limits of elven grace for Halon to believe him before he did it.

The orcs had entirely abandoned the city, Maedhros was relieved to see. Nothing greeted him on the other side of the wall, even when he moved the heavy bolt on the gate to let his friends through.

Minas Morgul was roughly the same dimensions as Minas Tirith, but they eleven seemed the only living creatures in it. Maedhros did not even see a rat scurrying around it. They would start their work to draw Sauron in soon, but Maedhros wanted to give Sauron time to assemble his army first. It would not do to have him leaving any part of it behind. Having Maedhros inside the wards was a fraction of the draw that disassembling them would be, but it was still draw enough, as, no doubt, was the force of over a thousand men assembled on the border. Thus, with the time they had to spare, Maedhros ordered Elladan to rest, with Tys as his guard, while the rest of the men paired off to begin a search of the premises. In particular, Maedhros ordered them to destroy any orcish taints on the place, and any supplies or stores of weapons.

Being an odd number meant that Maedhros himself partnered with nobody, though he did not find the strain of the empty city too arduous. He tracked the darkness as best he could, setting fire to a store of rotted meat that he found, as well as smashing some runes etched on a wall in Sauron’s own tongue to bits with a hammer he stole. But still, neither was the source of darkness he was tracking, which he found in a small house. That proved to be something rather craftier, with more legs.

The daughter of Ungoliant hissed at him, barring her fangs. Maedhros, who was startled but not overly surprised, hefted his sword and hissed back. She was big, but not undefeatable so, and more relevantly, she seemed injured. Any uninjured creature of darkness would have either launched itself at Maedhros or fled. She did neither. Maedhros could see some dark blood pooled beneath her.

“He told me you would come,” she hissed, her words almost directly into his mind. She was an ancient thing, after all, and of great power. “Son of Fëanor. I had to see it for myself.”

With that many eyes, Maedhros imagined she had seen plenty. There was something uncanny and unfocussed about them. “Well, I hope the sight was worth it, but I am afraid it must now come to an end.”

That was when she leapt. Maedhros ducked back through the doorway, and slammed the door in her face.

“Giant spider!” he yelled, knowing that the proper term would have no meaning for Halon anyways.

“Giant spider?” Halon demanded, from somewhere in the distance. The spider in question smashed through the wooden door. Maedhros swung his sword, cutting clean through one of the forelegs, and ran before the spider could impale him on the other.

“Giant spider, run!” Maedhros specified.

He didn’t need to repeat it a second time. There was a flash of mail and then Halon and Calnus were running away down the street. The spider, just behind Maedhros, launched herself again. This time, he stopped and hit the ground. She overshot by just a couple inches, screaming. She tried to wheel around to face him, but with her balance off, she stumbled on the cobblestones, overshooting and
spinning so she faced nothing. Calnus stopped at the end of the street, trying to string his bow. Maedhros could see his hands shaking even at this distance. He hoped Oromë was looking favourably on them both.

“Take the shot!” He ordered, so Calnus would not hesitate for fear of hitting him.

The spider spun back, and tried to strike Maedhros with her remaining foreleg. Her balance must have been off, for she missed, striking just beside his head. Maedhros tried to slide away, and when she missed again, realized what was happening. He reached down, unbuckled his scabbard from his belt, and threw it off to the side. The spider leapt in pursuit.

This gave Maedhros time to scrambled to his feet and call to Calnus and Halon, “she’s blind!”

The spider spun back around at the sound of his voice, but turned away again when Halon screamed at her. The distraction allowed Maedhros to strike at one of her back legs. It did not shear off clean, but it did enough damage that the leg collapsed beneath her weight. She rolled over, almost landing on Maedhros, who was forced to once again throw himself out of the way.

“Spider!” Halon yelled, and when she paused, just for a second, Calnus fired his first shot. It stuck her clean and true, between some of her unseeing eyes, though it did not kill. Calnus fired twice more, and when the spider made to flee, Maedhros swung his sword clean through another leg, finally bringing her down. Calnus fired one more shot, and it was done.

Maedhros felt her death, felt a little of the evil on this place begin to give way and recede. She was an ancient, horrible thing, and yet in killing her, he almost felt guilt. She had been blinded, and wounded. An inglorious death for a thing so fierce as she.

“Allan!” Halon said, coming up to Maedhros, “I thought he was having me on.”

He repeated his words in his own tongue, for Calnus’s benefit. Maedhros said, “no, alas, they are real, though few and fewer in numbers these days, I imagine. They and worse creatures than this also. Be thankful she is the only such thing you have ever seen.”

This too was repeated for Calnus, while Maedhros retrieved his scabbard and went through his pockets searching for flint.

“Bring me what wood you can. I want to burn her.”

They all three dispersed, bringing back a broken door, and some old furniture. Maedhros cut what of the wood was dry into kindling, and lit it as best he could.

“Burn, and wash the taint from this place,” he told the fire, or, more accurately, himself. “Burn, and bring calm and peace, for a moment. Burn and cleanse. This creature was ancient, crawling from darkness. Let her end in pure light.”

The fire roared up, and consumed her. Maedhros stumbled back, in something like shock. He had not thought one of Ungoliant’s spawn would be so flammable. Though his words had mostly been nonsense, the air did feel cleaner as she burned, and lighter, even, Maedhros thought. He wiped ash and spider blood onto his trousers, and turned to face the men and half-man assembled behind him.

“It is time,” he told them. “If this has not alerted Sauron, nothing will.”

The mortals formed a circle around the immortal and the undecided, swords and bows drawn. Maedhros, for his part, sat cross legged on the stones, and offered his hands, palms up, to Elladan.
He took them, looking closely at Maedhros.

“Are you sure about this?” Elladan asked, quietly. He had switched over to Quenya for privacy’s sake.

Maedhros wrapped his fingers tight around Elladan’s hands. “Not likely to get more so. Are you sure?”

Elladan shrugged. “No, but we are going forward regardless.”

Then, without waiting for a response, he opened the connection between them. Before, Elladan had been trying to drink a cup of water from the river. Now, he leapt straight in. Maedhros gave him all the strength he had, except for that which supported his bond with Fingon, and together, they surveyed their surroundings, with the eyes of their fëar. They could see each other’s bonds, Maedhros’s with Fingon, open, and lines connecting him to others, closed. Maedhros could hear the drumming of Elrohir’s heart, the steady beat to time all the music of Elladan’s life. He could hear the spaces where there should have been other instruments, Arwen, Celebrían and Elrond, too distant to hear.

They soared above Minas Morgul, in fëa. Maedhros could see everything, sparkling rivers stretching out to the sea, the white towers of Minas Tirith and the Black Gates towards which Aragorn and his army marched. He could see Aragorn and Elrohir and Gandalf, riding. He could see Haldir in Osgiliath, and, for some obscure reason, he caught glimpses of both Faramir and Imrahil. Someday, after the war was over, if he survived, he was going to ask Imrahil what was so strange about him. Only, perhaps not phrased like that.

I think he is part elf, Elladan advised. His mind was awash with awe. He had never before seen anything like this. Maedhros, who had only done so rarely, and mostly in lessons with his father, was marginally less impressed, but only marginally.

How?

I have no idea. But, well, I recognize something of what is in me in him and Boromir. And their line is supposed to live uncommonly long. Did you not notice it in Boromir also?

Maedhros was required to admit his obliviousness, but deflected the conversation. We must begin.

Maedhros directed Elladan to look back down, and together, they focused in on Minas Morgul, and the dark magic that resided there. The thing about evil was that it could be a living, breathing thing. Morgoth and Sauron and the spawn of Ungolient. Werewolves and balrogs and dragons. Here, the evil had been living in the Nazgûl, but it also had developed a life of its own, weaving into the stones and the music of Arda. Elladan dealt in the art that life itself was made of. He could feel it, in a way that even Maedhros struggled to do.

It is so cold, Elladan thought. I did not expect it to be so cold.

It is rather subjective, really. I have it from rather reliable sources that the Ice was coldly evil, and yet Himring was cold also, and I the greatest evil that resided there. I always found the cold rather comforting, after that. It is a strange thing, perhaps. Evil seems what we make it. To me, it will always be the feeling of standing on a precipice, looking down.

My mother could not stop shivering, Elladan thought. Maedhros did not think he had intended to share this.

Maedhros carefully pushed Elladan until he could feel the foundations of the evil, the heart of the
thing. Then, he guided him to look back out again, this time up, at the sun and the stars, and the
infinity of space. It was an exercise he had done with his father, more than once, though usually
under less grim circumstances. Then, they had focused in on some minutia of the forge rather than on
a place of true evil, and out on the trees, rather than the sun and the stars, though neither was without
that light.

Listen. Maedhros ordered. Listen to this, all of it. Listen to the tiniest pebbles, and the brightest of
stars. Listen to the stone beneath you and the wind around you. Listen to your hröa. Listen to the
water in the rivers and the shifting plates of the world. Listen to the fire at the heart of it. This is the
music of Arda, no part greater, no part lesser. Listen to the first children of Eru. This is the music of
Arda, all of it awful, all of it true, all of it great. Hear it, and sing!

They were old words. So old, in fact, that Maedhros said them in his father’s Quenya. He
remembered so well how his father had guided him to see Arda, to truly see it, the first time. He had
always wanted to give those lessons himself, someday, but he could not have done so for Elrond and
Elros. Trust was required, for it to work, and Elros at that age had trusted Maedhros only slightly
more than Maedhros trusted himself. Fingon might have had him teach Gil-galad, but he suspected
that duty had in the end fallen to Círdan. He wondered why Elladan had never done it before.
Perhaps, Maedhros wondered, privately, it would have been his mother’s duty. Or perhaps, his
indecision has made it difficult for any to be able to do such a thing.

He could feel the instant Elladan really listened. The reverberations in his mind were like the music
of crystal.

I understand. I understand so much.

Do you think you understand enough to use it?

Elladan, ever his father’s son, thought, do you?

No, Elladan, that is rather the point. I see, I feel, I cannot touch. But I rather imagine you do, with
just your fëa. So, reach into the music, let it become part of you, and then let this place into the
music. Think of it as though there is an orchestra, and one player is playing too slowly. You are
going to kick him. Proverbially speaking.

Maedhros gave Elladan much of what he had left, keeping a small reserve for himself and the
maintenance of his bond. At the same instant, he pushed Elladan to dip his fingers into the music
itself. He shook with the power of it, but pushed on, reaching out towards the wicked thing.

This place is not his/yours, Maedhros and Elladan said, together. This place is
mine/ours/Aragorn’s/Gondor’s/nobody’s.

They fell deeper into the magic, burning away the darkness. Maedhros stopped Elladan just before
he cast the last of their energy into it.

Wait.

Sauron had caught on. He rushed at them, a wall of teeth and eyes and fire.

Run!

Maedhros pulled Elladan awake, and reached as fast as he could for Cánë. The blade glowed bright.
He sheathed it.

“Run!” Maedhros ordered. Halon did not even need to repeat the order. They all ran, as fast as their
feet would carry them, out of Minas Morgul, through the gates, and across the fields. The ground burned less with evil, which was fortunate. They had no time to spare.

They were all out of breath by the time the first arrow whirled past them. Even Maedhros found himself strained. Elladan, who had given much to threatening Sauron, stumbled. Maedhros grabbed his hand, and pulled him along. In the distance, he could see the cavalry scrambling into formation, dousing fires and stringing bows. Maedhros had ordered them not to fire at the orcs unless all his party were dead, or behind the archers. It was a selfish order, but the husband of a king was allowed to do that sort of thing. Besides, it would deter the orcs, and they were trying not to deter them.

They ran for minutes more before the first arrow struck. It hit Calnus in the back. Maedhros knew he was dead before he hit the ground. If they left him, the orcs would desecrate the body. That was what orcs did. They were gaining ground now, and fast. Maedhros stopped, letting go of Elladan, and, hoping to have luck for the second time that day, remembered the Haradrim pyres at Minas Tirith, the history and dedication of the people there, exemplified by Calnus, who had been brave and brilliant.

“Please,” he said. He did not even have to pull out his flint. The body lit like a torch. Another arrow landed just beside him, and Maedhros turned and ran.

The rest of their party made it back behind the lines, scrambling up mûkmahil and onto horses. Their archers, liberated, fired a couple of volleys into the swiftly approaching crowd of orcs. This part of the plan, at least, was well rehearsed. The cavalry moved as though they were about to charge. The orcs, well aware what a cavalry charge of this magnitude could do to their lines, stopped in their tracks. Those with shields and pikes were shoved to the front, archers back. Maedhros let them. He had no intention to charge their line. Instead, he ordered the mûkmahil to move. They had not the speed of horses, and would need all the head start they could get.

It would have still been a close call, if not for an extension of their good fortune. The fire Maedhros had lit for Calnus was catching. Minas Morgul was surrounded by dry grass. It required little to go up. The orcs were forced to scatter, and Amnus, taking advantage, ordered the Haradrim cavalry to make a quick pass at the broken line. They cut through it like butter, and wheeled around just as smoothly to flee. They might have made a second pass, if Maedhros had not heard the sound of beating wings. Just one pair, but one too many. He ordered a return to the original plan, and all wheeled around to begin their race to Osgiliath.

Chapter End Notes

Okay so A BUNCH of notes here.

Maedhros thinks Halon is a fake name because it can mean either tall or a hidden/shadowed male, which really seems like spy stuff to him. Canadiel just means fourth-daughter, which isn’t much of a name.

Shelob in the book disappears after the Sam confrontation, presumed to die later given how she’s wounded and blind. Gollum seems to have some way to communicate with her, since she didn’t eat him, as does Sauron, who trusts her to watch the pass and feeds her orcs.

Glorfindel, despite doing prophecies, has some other ability which he uses to help heal Frodo in fellowship. I just think Arafínwë seems like a soul magic person.
I’m gonna release something stand alone sometime next week, (bonus not instead of this), about which I will say only, Elrond and Fëanor.
Love and Pity

Chapter Summary

Maedhros makes a deal and a sacrifice.

Chapter Notes

AAAAAHRRHHH
Next chapter is the climax of the story and these two chapters together is literally what I have been waiting to write since I started. I wrote 80 000 words to get to this point and I am so excited and also nervous and I really hope you like it.

Warnings. Right. So, major spoilers in some of the warnings so they’re all going in the end notes. I honestly don’t think it’s possible to read the story with some of these triggers, but I also think none of them are especially graphic or intense. So if you’re having a rough time, I would take the time you need and come back later. The story ain’t going anywhere and you owe it to yourself more than you owe anything to me.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

They made it back to Osgiliath by the skin of their teeth. Those who made it back, that is. Not all did. Many died, from orc arrows and the sharp teeth of wargs. Maedhros grieved all of them, particularly Maltar, who had walked with him into Minas Morgul, and yet, when he crossed through their improvised walls and saw Haldir, General Bór and the Queen waiting for him, he could feel nothing but relief.

“Go get some rest,” the Queen said, her tone not one for argument. “We can more than hold our positions for a few hours.”

Maedhros, incorrigible, slept for only four of the hours he was given. He had slept a little on horseback as they had rode, and, as an elf, could survive on less sleep. He needed the extra hour, to speak to Fingon, and to use Cánë for what might be the last time as a scrying device. He looked to the sword, first.

Maglor, in his vision, was little more than dark hair draped over fine features, and the sound of a beautiful song Maedhros had never heard before. His fingers danced freely across the strings of a harp. Caranthir’s vision did not seem to have changed. He was still painting a portrait, though whether it was a different couple, Maedhros could not tell. Amrod and Celegorm’s visions had changed also, though Amras’s had not, and Curufin’s was still blank entirely. Amrod was now standing in an empty field, glancing up at the sun to check the time. He seemed bored, but otherwise well. Celegorm was on his knees, hands clasped in his lap and head bowed. His silver-white hair lay in two braids over his shoulders. Maedhros wished it had been another vision of him and Aredhel. That, at least, would have given him good news for Fingon.

Maglor was in a bad place when Maedhros reached out, so Fingon was not able to take much time. Arwen, he thought at Maedhros, only half focused, can probably handle it, but I would rather be here
than not, and I think you would be too much right now. He needs peace, such as we can give it to him.

That made sense. He told Fingon, I don’t know how much time I have. I will have to close the bond.

I know, but I am- he showed Maedhros his emotions, and there was love and fear and a little stinging tinge of resentment. But mostly, love and fear.

I love you. I love you, I love you, and I would rather throw myself into the heart of the earth a thousand times than allow harm to come to a single hair on your head.

I know. That’s what scares me.

Maedhros considered this. I think that grief can also qualify as harm. He added, privately, that he would still rather give Fingon grief than death.

Good. Keep that in mind. Fingon’s thoughts flashed with distraction. Maglor- Oromë’s furry boots! I love you. I- there was distraction, worry and the chaos that inevitably came with quick and reactionary problem solving. Maedhros got the distinct sense that Fingon was trying to hide from him the truth of Maglor’s condition, which, given what Fingon had already allowed Maedhros to see, must have been bad indeed. Maedhros wished he was there, with them, but since he was instead on the field of battle, he closed down the part of him that wanted love in place of war. Sauron was coming. War was what they would get, regardless of Maedhros’s wants.

Maedhros closed the bond, and had no more than buckled his belt before Haldir was skidding into the room.

“There is a Nazgûl here,” Haldir reported, a look of bewilderment on his face. “He says he wants a parley with you.”

It was absolutely typical of Sauron. Pompous, arrogant, cunning thing. “Well, at least that is one less Nazgûl for Aragorn and Frodo to worry about.”

Haldir was forced to acknowledge that this was true. “I think I would rather he was fighting us than trying to talk. We killed one, but talking to them is rather different.”

Maedhros nodded. “Well, my first parley with the enemy ended with thirty sun-years of torture and me losing my hand. So that sets a rather low standard, I think.”

He only said this to make Haldir roll his eyes, which he did. “I really do hate you, you know.”

Maedhros clapped him on the back. “I am sure you do, Haldir. Come, let us go parley with the undead.”

The noise of discontent Haldir made rather effectively expressed how he was feeling. Similarly expressive was the Nazgûl. Maedhros refused to come out past the wall and the trench, but he did climb up the wall so they could see each other. He had flown in, clearly, and the monster clawed uneasily at the ground behind its rider. Behind them, the orcs were arrayed in the thousands, and wargs paced back and forth. They had no siege engines, which Maedhros was prepared to call lucky. Osgiliath could never have held long against the sort of bombardment Minas Tirith had been subjected to.

“What words does a servant’s slave have for me?” Maedhros called down. The Nazgûl wasted no time with words, instead throwing a small shiny metal tunic to the ground.
“We have captured your spy,” he said, voice grating in Quenya. Maedhros suspected the language had been Sauron’s choice, meant to unsettle. It would have unsettled in any tongue. Elladan swore, vehemently. He had climbed up beside Maedhros, against orders.

“That is Bilbo’s mithril mail,” Elladan said, when he was done swearing. “Mithril is far too rare and difficult to work for it to be a forgery.”

Maedhros nodded, doing his best to seem calm for Elladan. “Sauron is an artist of lies. All his have truth in them.”

“Does that mean you believe he does not have Frodo?”

Maedhros gave the Nazgûl a look, and covered his mouth so it could not read his lips. ‘Frodo? Maybe. The ring? No. If he had the ring, we would know. Either he has Frodo, and Sam has the ring, or vice versa, or he has both and the ring is hidden somewhere, or neither, and this is purely a bluff.”

Elladan mimicked the gesture. “What do we do?”

Maedhros looked down, and thought of the stupidest choice he had ever made, and remembered some choices that were worse. He turned back to face the Nazgûl.

“What does your master want, in exchange for the hobbit’s life?” He kept his words to the singular, on the chance that one had escaped.

The thing hissed. “He wants what is his, no more and no less.”

“He will not have the ring from me while I have breath left in my body, and only I know the truth of its location.” A bluff for a bluff.

“Then your breath for the spy’s, and let the deal be done. My master is merciful enough to release one spy if another submits to him.”

Elladan’s gasp was loud enough Maedhros was sure they could hear it in Minas Tirith. “Grandfather-”

“Your master is a liar. How will I know that he keeps his word?”

“He will show you-”

Maedhros interrupted. ‘He will swear an oath to Eru that if I surrender, no harm shall come to any Hobbit by his will. Those words. Exactly. He will say, ‘I swear that if Maedhros, Son of Fëanor, surrenders, no harm shall come to any hobbit by my will, including physical or psychological harm.’ I will watch through the palantír. In exchange, I will come with you, unarmed. You may tie my hands behind my back, with ropes, no iron.’”

Some conference between Sauron and his minion was required. As soon as the Nazgûl turned away, Elladan grabbed Maedhros by the shoulder.

“What are you thinking? You fool!”

Maedhros put a hand on his. “I am thinking that oaths may not bind the Ainur so well as they do the Quendi, but they still bind them well enough. If Frodo is free, Sauron will have sworn to allow him to swan through Mordor unimpeded. If Frodo is not- then at least I will have secured freedom for my friend, at least for a little while. And, even with my hands tied, I will not be defenceless against
Sauron. A sword is hardly the best defence against an incorporeal Maia anyways.”

Elladan pulled his hand away. “He will kill you. You must know that. What would Fingon think?”

Maedhros did not, could not, offer this a response. He knew exactly what Fingon would think. He had heard it after getting himself captured the first time, and then again about Finrod after the Lúthien Incident. But something in his heart told him this was different. Something said, you cannot stand down now, you cannot shy away, no matter how you would like to. Better to die so Frodo and Aragorn can survive, so Boromir and Rúmil can live in peace, so Amnus and Bór and the Queen can have the right to lead their people free of shackles. Maedhros heeded these words, and pushed his own fear.

“Elladan, there may come a time in all our lives when we must choose between evils. If I ignore this, and we lose because Frodo is killed, what good am I?”

“And if Sauron is bluffing, and you die for nothing? What then?”

Maedhros unbuckled his sword belt. “Then, hopefully Námo releases me more quickly the second time around. The sword is yours, if I die. Your grandmother can explain the magic, or Haldir, come to that.”

Elladan’s eyes seemed to be welling with tears. “Please.”

Maedhros wanted so badly to give in, to give Elladan what he wanted. Yet, he could not. It would be wrong, to leave someone to be tortured, when he knew what it was like. Sauron would have no mercy for hobbits any more than he did for elves.

“Wait!” Haldir scrambled up the wall, and almost hit Maedhros with the palantír in his rush to press it into his hands. “You can check—see if he really has been captured.”

One of the elvish speakers must have sold them out. No other would have understood enough Quenya. Maedhros placed his right hand on the palantír, and guided it. Show me the captured hobbit, he thought. There were dual flashes. One, Frodo lying alone, motionless, in a cell. The other, a strange, twisted thing, no creature he had seen before, screaming and weeping in pain. He pulled his hand away.

“It is, was, or may be real. I think the magic may have worn over the years, or Sauron’s taint may lay upon it still. Galadriel could give you a better opinion than I, being a seer.”

Elladan and Haldir swore in unison. “Let me try,” Elladan offered. Maedhros pulled the palantír away.

“Absolutely not. I am going, and that is final.”

The Nazgûl finished talking to himself, and returned to the parley.

“We accept. But you must come now. You may witness the swearing in person.”

Elladan shook his head. “That is a terrible deal. He will kill you the second you touch the ground, if he does not just shoot you as soon as you are out in the open.”

Maedhros’s hands were trembling, and he folded them tight to hide it. “I know, Elladan. And yet, I am out in the open, and not dead. Given all I know, can I refuse to try and help Frodo?”

“What about Fingon?” Haldir asked, unknowingly echoing Elladan’s question from earlier.
“He walked into Angband to save me once. I have to believe that he will understand me doing the same for another.”

“Talk to him,” Elladan said, “let him say his piece.”

Maedhros knew, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that if he spoke to Fingon, he would never go through with this. Even if Fingon told him to do it, just the touch of his mind would rob Maedhros of all his courage in the face of death.

“Now,” the Nazgûl hissed, “or never.”

“Please,” Elladan whispered.

“I will be down in a second,” Maedhros called. To Elladan, he said, “the command is yours. Keep them alive as best you can. If I do not survive, tell your father that I love him, very much. And, please, talk to him and Elrohir. Whatever you choose, I am proud of you.” He turned to Haldir. “Haldir, it has been an honour to serve at your side. Tell Rûmil I am grateful for the friendship and kindness he has shown me. And Boromir- I do not know what lies ahead for you both, but regardless, please stop him from being ashamed of who he is. He deserves better than that. We all do. If Aragorn does not revert to the old laws on that, kick him. Tell Galadriel I hold all and any debts between us paid in full. Oh, and both of you, thank Arwen for me. I owe her a great deal.”

“I ought to take notes,” Haldir mumbled, some affection in his voice.

“What did Arwen do?” Elladan asked. He was crying. Maedhros leant in, and hugged him tight.

“Let Eärendil light your way,” he advised, since it seemed right, and then, pressing Cánë into Elladan’s hand, he pulled back, took a running leap, and jumped off the wall, over the trench, and rolled to standing in front of the Nazgûl.

An orc tied his hands tightly, behind his back. Clinically, Maedhros thought that if he scraped off some flesh and dislocated his shoulder, he would be able to get them free. But, well, even with his hands free, he could only have done so much against the army. They threw him over the back of the fell beast like a trussed turkey, and the Nazgûl climbed up after.

“What kind of king are you?” He asked, laughter in his voice.

Maedhros grinned his worst grin. “The kind who is not a slave to some half-formed Maiar.”

The Nagûl kneed him in the face, and he thought he felt his nose break. It bled a great deal, as they flew. In terms of experiences flying, it ranked second both as the second worst and second best in Maedhros’s life. The first time had been more painful, but at least Fingon had been there, and that had been comfort enough. Laying as he was over the back of the beast, he saw little but grey-black wings, like those of a bat, and the periodic flash of misused and empty land. From what little he remembered of his time upon the eagle, Beleriand had been beautiful from above, save for Angband. This was not, save for an instant where he thought he caught a glimpse of the sea in the furthest distance. For though such a thing might easily have been a trick of the mind, it also reminded him that across those waters, much of his family lived, and were safe from Sauron regardless of whether Maedhros lived or died that day.

They set down some hours later, inside the walls of the black lands. Maedhros’s nose had stopped bleeding, but he was acutely aware that it was crooked and throbbing, his face covered in drying blood.

The Nazgûl set him on his feet, and a party of orcs surrounded him. Their leader took something
from a bloody sack, and threw it at Maedhros’s feet. He bit down hard on his tongue to keep from reacting. It was a severed hand, the right hand, curled tight, and no larger than a child’s. It was not freshly cut, but it was more than obvious who it had belonged to.

“I thought we had a deal,” Maedhros said, looking anywhere but down. The sky was black with smoke, and the air stifling. The smell, of blood and ash and sulfur, took him right back to Angband, and he fought back a wave of panic.

“My master has sworn nothing yet,” the Nazgûl hissed.

“I was not talking to you,” Maedhros snapped, directing all the anger in his heart towards the presence at the edge of his mind. “I was talking to him.”

You said nothing about previous actions, Sauron retorted. Maedhros had given him a tiny opening, just enough to speak.

Maedhros clenched his hands, feeling the ropes tearing at his skin. “Swear it. You are the most truthful liar I have ever met. I have no doubt you will find some way around these words much as you have all other vows you ever swore.”

Sauron, sarcastically, repeated the oath as Maedhros had specified it. The ground shook, and the mountain at the centre of it all seemed to light, just for a second. Apprentice like master, Maedhros supposed.

Trying not to overplay his hand, Maedhros added, “and are all these guards really necessary? You know me. I am an elf of my word, if nothing else. Prisoner I said I would be, and prisoner I am. Unless you are afraid. Have you finally decided you need to rely on others to do your dirty work?”

Whatever Sauron said in response, it was not for Maedhros’s ears. The flying beast raised up to its full height, and, in two bites, consumed its master. The wraith, in his shock, had not even time to turn before it was down the gullet. The orcs scattered. The thing belched.

I fear nothing, and rely on nobody, Sauron snapped. His mind was colder than steel at Himring. He is replaceable, with my ring-

“But you do not have the ring, do you?” Maedhros asked, rhetorically. “I do. I know where to find it, but I will never tell you.”

That was what Celebrimbor said.

“And he never did. The three remain safe, even now. Their power stands against yours.”

And I own the men and his dear little dwarves. Weak. All of them, weak.

Maedhros knelt carefully in the ash and dirt. “Stronger still than you, Lord of Wolves. Celebrimbor was stronger than all of us. Is stronger than all of us. He lives again, where you cannot touch him, in peace and harmony with all of Arda. That is more than you will ever have. And he was ceaselessly kind, moral, and brave. That is more than you will ever be.”

Celebrimbor is nothing more than a grovelling slut, Sauron snapped, with an attached memory of him naked, and, in Maedhros’s moment of defenceless shock, Sauron rushed at him. Maedhros tried to block, but it was too much, Sauron was everywhere in his mind, reaching at memories, trying to hurt. Maedhros could not think, could not see, and then, in a moment of clarity, he saw Sauron reaching for his bond with Fingon.
He shoved Sauron back with the mental image of a silmaril, the memory of it burning in his palm. Like it would have any creature of darkness, it burned Sauron too. He screamed, and then realizing it was but a thought, redoubled his efforts, this time leaving Maedhros be, and focusing everything at the bond. Fingon was unprepared for an attack, least of all from this direction. The bond was closed, but only from Maedhros’s side, and that would not stop Sauron. It would not even impede him. Sauron would inflict on Fingon all the mental torments he had on Maedhros. That was unacceptable. Maedhros could not, would not, allow it. The damage Sauron could do, fully inside Fingon’s mind, might have been irreversible. So, Maedhros headed him off at the pass. He envisioned a sword, and brought it up, slashing through the bond like it was nothing more than a thread.

No!

The thought could have been anyone’s, Sauron, impeded, Maedhros, who doubled over in pain, Fingon, who would now think Maedhros was dead. For what else could, would, sever their ties. Tears ran through the blood that already streaked Maedhros’s face. It hurt. More and less than it had hurt when Fingon had died, for at least then, he had not intentionally hurt Fingon. It was one of the worst things he had ever done. But at least Fingon was safe. At least, he was not alone.

Weak, Sauron chided at him. His mind was laughter. Weak, to rely on one like him. I almost thought there was strength in you, once, but you have never really been able to stand on your own. Without him, you are broken.

Stronger than you. You never loved anything at all.

Is that what you think? Sauron pushed back into his mind, and showed him. Aulë, at the very beginning of time, before such a word had ever been thought of, shaping the world with his hands, Yavanna at his left, Mairon at his right. Aulë, telling him he was loved, and perfect. Remembering that they were never the ones who were wanted, that this place had been designed for Eru’s true children, not for them. Loving Aulë, who was his- there were no words in this or any tongue for what Mairon felt. Watching Aulë find others to love, broken stunted things, but not Mairon, never Mairon, who he had named himself, once. Who he had thought precious, once.

I’m sorry, Maedhros said, and gave Sauron all his pity. Nothing could have hurt him more than to be pitied.

You still trust them, Sauron said, almost in awe. You fool. You still trust them, after everything they did to your family. You thought you were loved too, once, and look what they did to you.

After everything you did to my family. You and your master.

Let me show you the truth, Sauron whispered, a mockery of kindness. Even now, you are deceived. They hide your memories from you.

He plunged deep into the depths of Maedhros’s memory, and something snapped, like glass shattering at the core of his being. Maedhros screamed, and the world dissolved into fractals.

Chapter End Notes

Maglor has a panic attack/flashback, (mentioned not seen), not gonna give the time code
because the sentence it starts with and the sentence it ends are in fact the only ones that really reference what’s happening.

There’s a lot of generally abusive and conflictual language throughout, so you really can’t skip it because (spoilers ahead) Sauron is here and if you want to read their fight you’re going to have to read that language. Some of this language is sexual, most of it is not (actually, really, it’s only sexual once and this is not directed towards Maedhros).

Anyways, time for the post-chapter scream of stress and pre back-to-school anxiety.

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Chapter Summary

Memories, a duel to the death, and a chapter ending to make Tolkien proud.

Chapter Notes

Mentions of suicide, suicidal thoughts, depression, etc. right off the top. Usual Maedhros-associated triggers, including trauma, torture and suicide. Please do not read if discussion of suicide will trigger you. It should be fine after the line beginning 'They were on their knees...'

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Maedhros was dead. He had thrown himself into a fire, and he was dead. His father embraced him, held his broken, ragged fëa together. Nothing else was keeping Maedhros from fading away entirely. He was so tired, more than anything. The darkness called to him. The idea of emptiness seemed appealing. Mortals have the right of it, he thought. Lúthien had the right of it.

"Stay with me, yonya. You have been so brave, but you need to hold on tight now, yonya. Please. Stay with me."

"Let me through." That was Fingon’s voice, and no, Fingon could not be here, in the darkness, was supposed to be alive, and free, and happy. He did not deserve to bear witness to the broken creature Maedhros had become.

"Findekáno." That Fingolfin, his voice scolding. "Give them some space."

"Please," Fingon whispered. "I need- please." He started to cry, and Maedhros did not want that. He did not want Fingon to be sad. He tried to reach out, but stopped at the sight of his own fëa, which was as a pile of dust, barely in the shape of an elf at all.

"Let him through," Celegorm said, voice coming from somewhere. Was that him, just behind their father? Or was he the one to the left? There were figures all around. "You did not see what he did for Maedhros, before. We did. Let him through."

And then Fingon was holding him too, and the second their fëar touched, the bond sprang back, strong as it had ever been, and Maedhros, dead, suddenly felt more alive than he had in a hundred years. His father flinched, for a second, and then held him closer.

"I am sorry," he whispered, to both and neither of them. "I am so, so, sorry."

And Fingon said, "you do not owe me any apology," and Fēanor said, "it is my fault. Not yours, never yours."

Not this, Sauron snapped, and the memory dissolved away.
Now, it was Celebrimbor at the centre of their circle instead, and he was quivering, shaking in Curufin’s arms. Fëanor stood close, but did not try to interfere. The white-hot anger of his soul kept others well away. Tyelpe was not fading, like Maedhros had been, but they could all hear the screams in his heart echoing through the stone halls of Mandos. The smoothed tunnels channeled sound very well, and it seemed to have been all anyone could hear for hours, or had it been longer? Days or weeks or even years that sweet Celebrimbor had been in the clutches of the enemy. How could they let this happen? Maedhros thought. It was supposed to be over, he was supposed to be free.

In a world ruled by the Valar, Sauron said, no one is ever free.

“I want out,” Maedhros was saying to Fingon. “I want to go back to Middle Earth. I want to finish what I started.”

Fingon sighed, and kicked at the slate-grey surface that qualified for ground in Mandos. “They will not even allow you back to Valinor, Nelyo. What would you have to do to be allowed back to a world where there was war and temptation? Námo does not believe in pity. Not for us.”

See, even that one agrees with me.

And then it was their son, quivering, on the stone floors of Mandos, and he did not even know either of them well enough to allow them to offer him comfort. Angrod was there, and Maedhros knew with startling clarity that Gil-galad was his son, but he knew Angrod no more than he knew them. It was Celebrimbor who went to him, and dried his tears, or the fëa equivalent of such. They were neither of them well, and it was Sauron’s fault, and Maedhros had never felt more powerless.

They were on their knees, before Námo, Maedhros and his father, and they were being resoundingly denied, and Fëanor was losing his temper. Maedhros too was shaking with anger, but he held it in. There was no way he could make Námo understand. He was no Lúthien. There was a part of him that wanted to unleash his gifts in the face of death, as Lúthien had done. To try and make him understand. It would be so easy to-

Sauron shut that thought down with a burning slap like a whip across Maedhros’s mind.

More and more were free now, but not them. Fingon could have been free, years earlier, but they all knew he stayed because Maedhros was not free. A kinslayer, a self-slayer. He might never be free.

His love for you trapped him, caged him, longer than I ever caged anyone.

Word came to Mandos slowly, from those who died in Middle Earth, of Sauron rebuilding forces, of Celebrían, wife of Elrond, wounded, it not known if she would live or die, and only the fact that nobody had seen her in Mandos as testament to the fact that she had not. Maedhros was angry, and powerless, as ever.

Curufin was front and centre again, seeing his son off through the gates, and coming to Maedhros. “I have an idea,” he said, “and you are not going to like it.”

Maedhros did not like the idea, the first or second time he heard it. “You want to use yourself as a bargaining chip for my freedom- are you insane?”

“I think Námo will allow it. Myself and Celegorm, as insurance against your good behaviour. He may be released if you do a little good, I shall be released if you defeat Sauron, justly and rightly.”

In Maedhros’s mind, Sauron said, that will never happen. In the memory, Maedhros himself said, “What about Celebrimbor? He needs his father.”
Curufin shook his head. “Celebrimbor needs to know that he did not destroy the world. You need to stop Sauron, so he can be freed from his guilt. It is not right, but I know that is what he fears.”

Sauron, voice sharp as a hundred knives, whispered, Celebrimbor should be proud of what we did together. It is the only thing of real worth he ever did.

Shut up! Maedhros tried to push back, but he was powerless against the force of the maia and his own memories.

“And why Celegorm released before you?”

“Aredhel. He has been trying to convince her to return to life, and she will never do it if she knows he might be trapped here, and he will never agree to this plan if it might hurt her. This is the only way, and I am willing to take the risk.”

Maedhros considered. “That is very mature of you. Too mature, in fact. Are you sure you are my brother?”

Curufin laughed. “I try. Just- promise me that you will fight with everything you have, alright?”

“I do not know if that will be enough.” Maedhros was weak, compared to his brothers. He always had been. He could not-

Curufin grabbed him by the wrist. “Look at me, Maedhros. Look at me. I have seen you talk men who were falling over dead on their feet into fighting for another twelve hours. I have seen you turn the worst building I have ever designed or seen designed into a home with nothing but a few men and the strength of your character. Wherever you go, you shape the world around you. You change the story. I have seen it. It is the story, for you. Past, shaping the future. All you need to do is-”

Sauron whisked him away again before Curufin could finish the thought, but it did not matter. Maedhros had gleaned all the information he need, and stored it for later, in a corner of his consciousness where Sauron was not looking, the corner that contained all his bright and happy memories of early childhood.

He was kneeling before five of the Valar: Námo, Varda, Nienna, Irmo and Vairë.

“You are determined in this course of action?” Námo asked. He sat in his throne, massive presence dominating the dark room. The other Valar stood around him in a semicircle, Vairë at his left hand, Nienna at his right.

“I am.”

Nienna’s voice seemed to come from all around. Her lips did not move, and silent tears ran across them, leaving shining tears across her marbled skin. “You understand that you will have no conscious memory of what has passed here?”

“I understand. I do not think I will need these memories to know what I must do.”

Irmo turned an hourglass over and over in his hands. The glass was dissolving away as he worked until nothing but sand ran through his fingers. He was the very image of his brother, but where Námo’s greys were imposing as a mountain, Irmo’s were soft as dove’s wings, tinged with a hint of gold. “I do not think we ought to leave him helpless.” He was not addressing Maedhros.

Varda stepped forward from where she had been leaning against the wall furthest to Maedhros’s left. Even in the darkness of Mandos, she radiated light. Stars were scattered across her indigo body like
freckles, running through her deep-sea hair like beads, and her eyes quite literally lit up the room. It was only by her that Maedhros could see any of the Valar at all.

“No, we will not leave him helpless. But I am not convinced as to the safety of his release. There is something he must do, first.”

“Anything, oh Queen of the Valar.” Maedhros swore the words like a vow.

“It may cause you pain.”

“I know pain. Anything.”

“It may give you cause to hate us.” Varda was honest, if nothing else.

“I hate you now, in some parts of my heart. Anything.”

The memory faded into another, and Maedhros knew what was happening in a clinical, detached way. Varda had hallowed the Silmarils. She had more power over them than any who did not wield one. She had her hands on Maedhros’s head, in his head, in his fëa, and she was burning the oath away with the same righteous fire that had once driven him to suicide. It hurt. There were no embellishments to the concept of hurting that suited. It burned, and cut, and hacked away. It hurt, in the most fundamental sense of the word.

“This could destroy him,” Nienna muttered, reaching out to wipe away his tears. “He might be for the darkness, with this thing you do.”

“It does not matter,” Varda returned, and pushed harder. “He swore for the darkness, this way or the other.”

See, Sauron said, see what they do to you. See how little care they have. This is how they feel about all your kind. I care. I have always cared. When I do harm, I know it.

And he was right, but he was also wrong, because Varda had asked for his consent. Varda had done what he had asked of her. Sauron and Morgoth never had. Not that it had hurt any less, but then, it was not Sauron who had cut off his hand, and that had hurt as much as anything. Sometimes, the pain itself was not what left the worst scars. It was the loss of autonomy, of identity.

They left you to languish as fëar.

They left us so we and our victims could have time to heal. I was angry, but now, I find I am not. Maedhros was shocked to find that his words were true. He was not angry with the Valar. He was not angry at all. They had done wrong and right, same as Maedhros had. They had made mistakes, and wanted love and forgiveness for their own kin. How could he fault them for that? If they had learned the wrong lessons from their mistakes, had Maedhros not done the same? Shutting people out over and over again, as loss had weighed on him.

Sauron scoffed. You are a fool.

Maedhros grinned, showing Sauron the memory of his cracked teeth and their jagged smile. Perhaps.

Tell me where it is, Maitimo. The pain she gave you, I can give you a thousand-fold. I will find that husband of yours, and rip him to pieces while you watch.

No. He did not shout. The words were not a battle cry, they were a promise. He would never give Sauron what he wanted, not with his dying breath.
Maedhros pushed himself to his feet, and thought of what Curufin had said, of what he had never known in life, but had finally come to understand in death.

“Let me tell you of the music of Arda,” Maedhros said. His voice was dry, and his mouth tasted of copper.

It did not work for Finrod, Maitimo, and it will not work for you.

Sauron skipped the pleasantries. He dug into Maedhros, showed him Alqualondë and Sirion, Doriath and Losgar. Finrod, long ago, confronted with his wrongs, had failed. He had ever believed in the innate goodness of all, and his faith had failed him. Maedhros had lost that faith before a drop of blood had even been shed at Alqualondë. Fortunately, he did not need to believe in the purity of the Noldor to defend himself. The truth he knew was greater still.

Yes, he thought at Sauron. Yes, we did that.

He grabbed the Maia, and pulled him in. He showed Sauron the arrogance of the Noldor, and their foolishness. He showed Sauron rage, and betrayal, and everything that had been wrong with his people before they even left the blessed shores. He showed his father, and his brothers, and himself. He told him the story of the Noldor, all of it, mistake after mistake, tragedy after tragedy. Some that even Sauron did not name. He showed the Nirnaeth, and the Fall of Gondolin and the treachery at Nargothrond. He showed his own suicide, and all the desperation and hopelessness and pain that had come before it.

You think to win by showing me evil? Sauron laughed.

I think to win by showing you truth. Because we were not evil. Even at our worst, we were never evil.

He showed Curufin pulling Celebrimbor away from the fighting at Alqualondë, trying to shield his son from the violence his own hands wrought. He showed himself, standing back at Losgar. He showed the aftermath of his torture, the kindness and love shown by all his kin. He showed his wedding to Fingon, practically at the gates of Angband. He showed his father-in-law, who had never loved him, and also never treated him with anything less than respect. He showed Fingolfin’s courage, in the face of certain death. He showed Finrod, hopeful despite the recent loss of his brothers, promising to keep Maedhros’s safe. He showed Maglor at the Nirnaeth, fighting for the both of them, protecting Maedhros with everything he had as Maedhros felt his very heart ripped away. He showed Celegorm, dead in Doriath, holding Curufin cradled tightly to his chest, more peaceful than either had ever been in life. He showed Curufin sending Galadriel an apology for the death of her brother. He showed himself at Sirion, holding Amrod’s hand as he died. He showed Elrond and Elros, who were kind, and good, better than any of their forefathers, and Gil-galad and Celebrimbor, better than theirs also. He showed Eönwë, at the very end, letting them go. He showed his death, a product not of some internal evil but of tragedy and illness beyond his control.

You lie to yourself. Sauron seemed pained.

I tell my own story. I write my own destiny. I see the good and the evil in us. I see the mistakes we have made, yet I choose not to let them destroy me. I remember, and I live on. This is my place in Arda. This is the song in my heart. My gift is that of memory, and of the story. I am powerful today, because unlike you, I remember that I am wicked, and I remember that I am good. I remember that I am loved and love in turn. I remember loses and victories, and I say that today shall be a victory for courage, and justice, and honour. For all that has been lost, by all the children of Aulë, of Yavanna, and of Eru who is your father as he is ours. A victory for all we have lost, and all we have yet to lose.
As he had spoken, Maedhros had been gathering strength, had been using the memory and tradition and words that he now knew were his power, and he threw it at Sauron, grasping at him. Sauron bit at his mind, and Maedhros gave the last of what he had to bind him. His very fëa was empty, and he knew he had not much longer, but just for a moment, he ruled over Sauron, perfectly in control, and perfectly at peace. If he was to die, this was a better death than he could have hoped for. The fingers of his fëa tightened around Sauron’s throat.

That was around the time when, presumably, the hobbits threw the ring into the fires of the earth. Several things seemed to Maedhros to happen at once, though it might have been minutes, or even hours. First, Sauron screamed, in pain. Second, he grasped at Maedhros, tearing his mind with sharp claws, trying to tie what remained of his consciousness to Maedhros’s, but he was weakened, and bound, and Maedhros was able to push him away. Third, the world shook, and stone and fire rained from the sky.

Maedhros tried to walk, and fell over, flat on his bloodied face. His hands were still bound, and he was so unimaginably tired. No bonds, nothing the hold on to, no strength left in hröa or fëa. It would have been so easy to let go, but Maedhros could not, would not. Fingon was still on these shores. Fingon and Maglor. They needed him. Elrond and Elladan needed him. Boromir and Rúmil needed him. The treaty needed him. He held on to his body, even as he knew it was about to die. He heaved himself over, trying to catch one last glimpse of the stars through the smoke.

The last thought Maedhros had before he lost consciousness was, “Oh, not the eagles again.”

Then, like the light of the two trees, he went out.

Chapter End Notes

I think this is what Tolkien would have wanted. I’m back at school next week, so contact will probably be limited as I settle back in to the flow of things. I hope you have enjoyed getting here with me, and I hope you’ll enjoy the rest of this journey with me too.
Chains of Music (Interlude V)

Chapter Summary

Fingon and Maglor, on the worst day. Arwen, on the best.

Chapter Notes

TW depression, self harm, suicidal thoughts.

THIS CHAPTER IS UPSETTING. VERY UPSETTING. I'll go into more spoiler-y detail in the end notes.

Maglor’s health was the worst Fingon had seen him since their first day together. It had started in the early morning, and gotten worse throughout the day. At first, since he had been convinced Fingon was a hallucination, Arwen had taken the lead, but as Maedhros contacted them, Maglor took a turn for violence. He was weak, but with his years of skill as a fighter, Arwen was no match for him. Or, rather, no match for him without fear of one of them getting hurt. Fingon brushed Maedhros off with less consideration than he should have, and spent almost an hour convincing Maglor not to tear the scars on his hands open with his fingernails. In the end, the whole day was a loss, for by the time Maglor was aware that the First Age was over, and had been for centuries, it was too late for them to both travel and hunt before the night set in.

“Arwen, could you hunt today?” Fingon wanted to give her the time to recover from their morning. And what was more, he needed to try and salvage his relationship with Maglor. His worry for Maedhros had coloured his treatment of his brother, and Maglor he understood why Fingon had acted the way he had, that did not mean an apology was unnecessary.

She gathered bow and arrows, and slipped away, still with the elven grace that she intended to lose someday.

“I am sorry, Maglor. I should not have tried to hold you down. It was an unacceptable reaction, and I knew better than to do such a thing. It is only that I have not heard from Maedhros in hours, and I am too afraid to think clearly.”

Maglor’s hands were on his lap, bandaged across the palms as an idea of Arwen’s, to give him something to focus on other than the scars. “I understand. I would have done the same, if our situations were reversed.”

“Maybe, but that does not mean I do not owe you an apology.”

Maglor shrugged. “I accept your apology. Can we talk about something else now?”

Fingon opened his mouth, and got as far as, “Anything you-” before his entire body seized with shock.
It was quiet, and it did not hurt. The way Maedhros had described feeling Fingon’s death, the pain of
the thing, was nothing like what Fingon felt. But then again, Fingon, in his last moments, had
grabbed Maedhros as hard as he could. He had forced Maedhros to live his death from the inside, in
seething, screaming pain. Maedhros did not scream. There was the bond, closed but thrumming, and
then there was nothing, not even a final echo of reverberation. All the love and magic that had been
between them was gone, and in its place was absence. Fingon did not remember a time where
Maedhros had not been in his head, even to the faintest degree, save for those empty years in Valinor
after his rebirth. Even on the Helcaraxë, Fingon had known he was alive. When they had been told
Maedhros was lost forever, Fingon had known he was alive. But now he was not, and there was
nothing. Not so much as a dream of a hint of a whisper. He lost feeling in his hands first, as the
numbness set in, his fëa relaxing control on his hröa as he tried to follow where Maedhros had gone.
He needed to be with Maedhros. He needed to feel him. They could not live their whole second lives
without ever even touching. That was impossible. He needed to go. The numbness spread, up his
arms and towards his heart.

And then the fading stopped. Fingon tried to pull against whatever was holding him back, straining
against the bonds that held his fëa to his hröa, but they were too strong. Chains of silver, of gold, of
iron and copper and adamant held him down. But no, they were not chains of any mineral. These
were chains of music.

Fingon surged back to his body with such fury that he scared even himself. “Let me go, Kanafinwë.
I need to go.”

Maglor didn’t even look at him. He’d torn the bandages off his hands, and his fingers flew across the
harp with a speed that even Fingon, with his uninjured hands, could not have matched. The wounds
inflicted earlier by his fingernails bled, but Maglor either didn’t notice or didn’t care.

“Oh, Fingon,” Maglor whispered, relying on Maglor’s pity after his command was ignored. “Do not
make me lose him again. I have lived already years without Maedhros. I am tired of it. Please.”

Maglor spoke over his own music. “You are in shock, and have just suffered a traumatic event. I
cannot let you make this choice under these circumstances. I refuse to do it.”

“This morning, you were trying to tear your own palms off with your fingernails, and now you are
lecturing me about good decision making?” Fingon demanded, allowing the anger to surge again,
feeling the thrum of it in his veins.

Maglor still did not look at him. “I sometimes wonder what Maedhros sees in you, since you are both
cruel and a coward.”

Fingon pulled himself into a shaky crouch and leapt at Maglor. Maglor jumped back and whipped
something off his wrist. Fingon knew it instantly.

“Do not make me use this. I would rather this be your own choice than something I compelled you
to.”

“Nothing you can say or do could make me choose to lose him again.”

Maglor bowed his head. Even when making his threat, he had not been able to look at Fingon. “I
know. Believe me, I know more about loss than I hope you ever will. I hope you live a long and
happy life, with Maedhros in it, in Valinor, under the light of sun and stars. But please, Findekáno,
take the long way there. You know Maedhros would not want you to die.”

“I am too tired. I cannot bear it. You are right that I am a coward. I am not strong without Maedhros.
Maybe I never have been. Please, just let me go to him.”

“I think Maedhros would say the exact same thing about you. He believes in you, as do I.”

Maglor had gotten Fingon off the ground by saying something cruel. It seemed only right to say something cruel in return. “You know, Caranthir told me not to come and get you. He thought it was not worth it, that I should just get Maedhros and return to Valinor. I think he was right. I should have been at Maedhros’s side, not on some beach in Lindon!”

Maglor finally looked at him, and Fingon understood why he had not before. His eyes were red from weeping. He raised the bracelet very clearly, swung it back and forth right in Fingon’s face and whispered, “sleep.”

Fingon felt it coming, opened his mouth to tell Maglor to stop, and instead dropped into his arms in a boneless heap. The artificial sleep was dreamless.

He next woke to a hand on his shoulder, shaking him. He grabbed it, realized it was not Maglor’s hand, for there were no scars, and opened his eyes to see Arwen staring down at him. Joy and pity warred on her face.

“What?” He demanded. “Has Maglor decided to release me, or will we be fighting all the way to Imladris?”

Pity won. “Fingon, I- I just wanted to tell you that we won. Sauron is gone. Even I felt it. Whatever Maedhros did, he won. My brothers, my Aragorn, survived, and I do not know if they would have without him. I know it cannot mean anything to you now, but I- thank you. And I know now that I will never meet Maedhros, so when you see him again, in life or death, you must promise to thank him for me. Alright?”

Maedhros had wanted so badly to save people, in this new life. He had wanted to save all the things he had lost the first time around. And he had. He had saved his friends and his kin. He had saved Fingon. How cruel would it be, to undermine that success by fading anyways.

“I will; I promise you that.”

Arwen pulled him into a hug. Fingon buried his face in her shoulder, and allowed sobs to wrack his body, shaking against her.

“Please, stay with us,” she whispered. “Finish this journey with us.”

And Fingon had made promises. He had promised Círdan that he and Maglor would look after themselves, and after Arwen. He had promised to Maedhros that he would look after Maglor, and he had promised Caranthir that he would bring his brother home. There was only one person left who he could bring, now.

“Is he still here?” The understanding had been that Maglor would leave them if the war was won. But of course, they had assumed that winning would have meant Maedhros surviving. The fact that they had lost him didn’t necessarily mean Maglor had stayed, but it might.

“No. He said he would come back, but he asked to be left alone for a while. I could not begrudge him the time to grieve.”

Maglor did come back, a couple hours later. His hands were bandaged again, and his face streaked with tears. He carried with him a bag of root vegetables.
“I ran into a small farmer on the main road,” he told them. “I traded him a song for some of what he was intending to sell. I speak not this tongue, but from what I could discern, he told me that we are not far now from the ‘Brandywine River’, whatever that is.”

“Baranduin,” Arwen muttered, under her breath. She pulled away from where she had been sitting beside Fingon, straightening to her full height. “That means we are in friendly country again. For now, anyways.”

Fingon looked Maglor right in the eyes. “I do not forgive you,” he said, voice as hard as he could make it.

Maglor bowed his head. “I know. I did not expect you to.”

He and Arwen cooked together, while Fingon sat in his shocked silence. It was so familiar, the same as it had been for more than a week, and yet it was also wrong. The emptiness at Fingon’s very heart shocked him. He ate almost nothing, and sat awake long after Arwen had drifted off to sleep. Maglor sat with him, silent and almost still as stone. He watched Fingon out of the corner of his eye.

“Are you trying to look after me?” Fingon asked him, after they had sat together for almost an hour.

Maglor looked up at the stars. “That is what Maedhros would have wanted. Are you trying to look after me?”

Fingon followed his gaze to where the stars were carpeting the sky. “He would never forgive me if I left you behind.”

The stars were unchanged from the night before. Eärendil still traced across the sky among all the others. The only difference was, Maedhros was not there to see them.

“You forgave him, even after what we did at Losgar. And besides, it is my choice. It has always been my choice. That is something nobody can take away from me.”

And maybe Maglor was right. He had been there too, after all. He had known and loved Maedhros better than anyone, save Fingon himself.

“I miss him so much, ‘Laurë. It feels like there is no joy in this world, without him in it.”

They did not look at each other, but Maglor’s hand did reach over to entwine with his. Fingon’s palm pressed against new bandages and old callouses. “I was there, when he lost you. He said almost the same thing. I believe he only stayed for us, because he knew that we would be lost without him. He stayed right until the point when he believed I would be safer with him dead than alive.”

It was very much like Maedhros. “He was good. Even with nothing left to hope for, he was good.”

They were silent, for a long while, before Maglor said, “there is always hope. Maedhros could not see it, not at the end, when everything was dark. That was a way in which his sickness truly did make him weak. But there was always hope. There were the Peredhel, and there was your Gil-galad, and Eärendil too. That is hope. That Morgoth shall never again lay hands on my father’s creation, that there is light in the darkness, that Varda is still watching over us. I may be no Sinda, but that gives me hope.”

It was easy to forget that Maglor had been as bright and unbreakable as any silmaril, once. But in that instant, Fingon could see it. He wished Maedhros could have too.

“My hope is gone. The dream I had is dead.”
“A cloud does not mean that there are no stars,” Maglor snapped. His hand was tight on Fingon’s.
“You told me that my family had earned the right to be reborn in Valinor. Was that true?”

“I told no lie,” Fingon muttered.

“Then Maedhros should be reborn there a hero!”

It was sound logic as any, but right then, it did not alleviate the silence that weighed on Fingon’s heart like stone. He needed to talk about something else. Anything else.

“You do know that Gil-galad was not by birth my son, do you not?”

Maglor gave a snort of laughter, but acquiesced to the change of topic. “No, really? Tell me another one. Of course I know that, idiot. Funnily enough, I think I would have noticed if Maedhros had bourne any golden-haired babes in the middle of the Dagor Bragollach.”

“I mean-”

Maglor laughed again. “I know, but funnily enough, I had rather assumed that since the two of you were so madly in love with each other, you had not run off to have a babe with some Sindarin elleth.”

Fingon blinked. “How did you know that his mother was Sindarin?”

“He had that look about him. And what’s more, there were few enough Noldor that I think someone would have noticed a missing babe and mother, even during the Dagor Bragollach. Someone who I knew would have known them.”

Fingon shook his head ruefully. “You know, if you and Caranthir had put your heads together, the two of you might have had a real chance of figuring it out. Each of you seems to have worked at half of the puzzle.”

There was a long, awkward silence. Fingon realized his mistake a second too late for it to be a natural change of topic.

“What I said about Caranthir- it was as much out of malice as it was truth. It is true that he did not want me to try and rescue you, but that was when Maedhros was doing something very dangerous that we feared was killing him. Caranthir thought that unless I hurried him back to Valinor, Maedhros would get himself killed. He was very, very afraid- for both of you- and I imagine he regrets saying it. He has ever let emotion rule him more than it ought.”

Maglor sighed. “I know, but it still hurts. Now, tell me the piece of the puzzle he had figured out. See if the two of us with our heads together could have puzzled it through.”

“He worked out that Gil-galad’s father is of Arafínwë’s line, but could not figure out who.”

Maglor ran a thumb absentmindedly over Fingon’s hand. “Well, that leaves four candidates. The three original siblings, and Orodreth. Now, Orodreth was married then, and already had had a child on these shores. Nargothrond had not fallen, and Finrod was still lord there, which means Orodreth had no reason to not acknowledge or raise Gil-galad himself. Especially since they were grieving great loses around that time. Why give up a child? Now, Finrod seems an obvious candidate. He had a very good reason to want a bastard hidden, for he ever loved Amarië, but I wonder at the idea that he would maintain such a malicious deception, and that you would help him do so. Finrod was your cousin, aye, but he was ever a friend to other more conniving family members also, and I cannot think Celegorm would not have been readily believed to have fathered a bastard. Or Curufin, come
to that, though he had enough of our father’s look that any child of his would have been distinctive. So, I think Finrod is out. That leaves Aegnor and Angrod, both of whom would have died soon after or even before Gil-galad was born. Now, Eldalótë cannot have been his mother, which seems to disqualify Angrod, but Aegnor was as good as wed, even if he never vowed it in as many words. Would he have been ready to leave behind his mortal flame? Having known them both, I cannot think that faithlessness of either. And yet, one of them must be the culprit. Since both were dead by your adoption of Gil-galad, neither could have acknowledged the boy as their own. So, I must ask you two questions. First, has either returned to life in Valinor? And second, did Gil-galad’s mother?”

The second question was almost certainly cheating, but Fingon allowed it. “No, none of them are there.”

“Then it must be Angrod, though I know not how or why.”

He was right. “You must not tell anyone. Only Gil-galad, Orodreth, myself, and their parents know.”

Maglor finally turned to stare at him. “Are you telling me that you never told Maedhros? You just showed up with Gil-galad and said ‘good news, we have a baby’?”

Fingon rolled his eyes. “I did talk to him before making the final decision about adopting a child. But Maedhros knew I was not at liberty to say where he came from, and he never pushed those boundaries.”

“So, if I tell nobody, will you at least tell me the rest of the story? Do I need to break Angrod’s nose on Eldalótë’s behalf? Because Eldalótë was always very brave and kind, as I knew her. She was one of the few who ever made the time to visit me at the Gap.”

Fingon slipped out of Maglor’s grasp for a second to throw some more wood on the fire. It sent up a puff of ash and he sneezed once, violently, before settling back at Maglor’s side. This time, Maglor threw an arm around him and pulled him close.

“When we were on the ice, Aegnor had this idea- it was a stupid idea, really, in retrospect, but one always has a clearer sense of these things in retrospect. He got it in his head that we cousins should all together swear an oath- no, stop looking at me like that, Maglor, it seemed like a good idea at the time. Anyways, we were going to swear to follow the old rules about war, like in stories, that we would dedicate ourselves to the battle, and that we would not marry in a time of war. Well, Angrod and Turgon were both already married, so they saw no problem with it, and Finrod knew he was leaving the only person he wanted to marry behind. At that point, I had no reason to believe Maedhros reciprocated my feelings, so I had no objection. It was all Aegnor’s idea, so he was behind it, and anything her brothers did, Galadriel wanted to do better, so she agreed, and they talked Aredhel and Argon around. So, anyways, we were planning to swear this oath when we stopped next, but instead we lost Elenwë that very night. Or day. It was sometimes hard to tell. She fell through a weak spot on the ice, and the current underneath must have been very strong. We never even found a body. That gave all of us second thoughts. Turgon had forgotten the idea entirely, of course, and I think Aredhel and I both realized how quickly it could all be taken away. Obviously, neither of us swore it. I cannot remember who did of the rest. Certainly, all the Arafínwions did, but I believe Galadriel, who was closest to Elenwë when she fell, was likely too distraught to go through with it. Either that, or she used some sort of loophole to marry Celebron, likely by arguing that Doriath was not really at war, since Thingol had not declared such. And Argon died not long after of course, so it does not really matter what he chose.”

“So,” Maglor mused softly, “that was why Aegnor always acted so oddly when he was trying to court that woman. I had wondered.”
“I think everyone did. Well, he was greatly grieved by his inability to wed, and he was not the only one. You see- and I must admit that the rest of this story I only have second hand- when Angrod and Eldalótë were in Beleriand, they too- they two- fell in love, with a Sindarin elleth who fought with them in Dorthonion. She went by Galabes, as I recall, which I think was Eldalótë’s name for her. It seems like something she would have said.”

Maglor buried his head in Fingon’s shoulder. “Unluckier than a treeful of spiders, the three of them. What are the odds that two of us would marry each other, and then both fall in love with another one of us?”

It was a badly hidden family secret that Maglor was one of the somewhat rare elves who experienced romantic and sexual attraction to multiple people over the course of a lifetime, even though he had only married once. This secret was particularly badly hidden from people who had regularly lived in the head of the brother who was his closest confidante.

“Well, luckier than some, to have loved and been loved in turn, at least for the time they had.” Maglor sighed. “See, hope. I told you.” Fingon fancied he was falling asleep.

“Well, when Angrod and Eldalótë were killed in the Dagor Bragollach, Galabes survived. She went to Orodreth for help, with their newborn son in her arms. He was the only other person who knew about the three of them. Angrod was ashamed that he could not at least endeavour to treat Galabes as wife, though she and Eldalótë were at least able to marry in the mortal sense. And then, with him dead, suddenly Gil-galad could not be legitimately raised by anybody. For anything Galabes said might be called into question as a lie, and she could not protect her son from both the enemy and fundamentalist elves. If Orodreth had adopted Gil-galad, as he offered to do, it would have been the subject of much rumour, and the family resemblance easily noted. Galabes refused. So, Orodreth looked to the rest of the family. There was only one person who, as far as Orodreth knew, was unmarried, never in Nargothrond where Gil might have been recognized, and relatively safe to be around. Me. Well, and Idril, but nobody had seen her for years. He asked me to raise Gil-galad as my own son, and I agreed. Galabes knew that if she stayed, they would soon know her as Gil-galad’s mother. That would reveal him definitively as a bastard, and through her revelation could have revealed her partners, and she would not allow that. She was a kinswoman to Círdan, distantly and through his mother’s line, and thus she went to try and seek asylum with him, with the intention to someday return and be a part of Gil-galad’s life, perhaps even take him away with her. I never saw her again. When I gave Gil-galad to Círdan’s custody, it was in part because I hoped she would be there, but she was not. I have no idea if she died before me, or after me, or at all. But like as not, they three are in some marriage-related trouble with Námo, now that the doom is over and he is taking an interest in the Noldor again. What do you think?”

Maglor had not yet fallen asleep, but only his soft crying told Fingon as much. Fingon reached up to wrap an arm around his waist. “‘Laurë?”

“I cannot believe he is gone. I never even felt him, and he is gone again already.”

Fingon could say nothing to that. He wept also, still leaning against Maglor, and in time Irmo came for them both, to carry their minds to a place where they could have a peace that only he and his brother could provide.

Fingon walked through a palace of white marble. The sky above was azure, with not a cloud, though Fingon found he could not see the sun. He started as someone came up behind him, old reflexes reaching for a sword he did not carry. It was Maedhros, and he did carry a sword, a wicked sharp blade that Fingon knew, without knowing how he knew, was the same as that which Maedhros had carried to the Nimaeth.
“Is this Mandos?” Fingon asked. He had not thought it would be so beautiful. He thought he would have remembered such a thing.

Maedhros jumped, as if noticing Fingon for the first time. He let go of the sword, and it dissolved into mist.

“No, this is Lórien, and prettier for it.”

Fingon sagged. “Oh, I see. You are not really here.”

Maedhros cocked his head, as if confused. “Only as much as anyone is ever really anywhere in a dream, I suppose.”

“Yes, but this is my dream, not yours. The dead do not dream, Maedhros. Otherwise, we would have seen each other far more often in Beleriand and Valinor.”

The confusion resolved into concern. “Oh Finno. Lord Irmo is giving us a gift. You chastised me once for questioning something not altogether different from this. I promise, in sleep and as you wake, I am with you. My heart is yours, always, sleeping, waking, in life and death. I promise you that.”

Fingon, knowing this was nothing more than a specter of his husband, leant his head upon Maedhros’s breast and wept. In the dream he was warm, and the white-grey fabric of his tunic was soft to the touch. Maedhros stroked long fingers through his hair, and kissed the top of his head with all the gentle grace of his elven heart.

“I love you,” Fingon whispered, against his chest. “I would come to you, but I know it would not be right to leave Maglor and Arwen.”

Maedhros pulled away, and leant back in to kiss Fingon on the lips. “I will see you soon, my love. I promise.”

The dream slipped away as the sun rose, and the scurrying prey and swooping predators of the night were replaced by the chirping songbirds of the day. Fingon woke in silence, and realized with a shock that Maglor was not cadging him any longer, perhaps had not been cadging him since those first desperate minutes. Though he could have gone, slipped back into sleep and soon from there unto the black halls of Mandos, Fingon found with something like shock that the need to do so had left him. Neither sorrow nor grief had faded, but whatever had been telling him that death was all that lay ahead had melted before the new day’s sunlight like so much frost.

Maglor, who in the night had managed to position himself mostly on top of Fingon, groaned and pushed himself over to the side.

“How are you?” Arwen asked, from where she was sharpening a knife on the other side of their long-dead campfire.

Maglor groaned again, and covered his eyes with one arm. Fingon said, “I think we will survive. Not happily, at least, not right now, but we will survive.”

It was not enough, but it would have to be.
So, basically, this chapter contains some self-harm from Maglor, and depression, grief and suicidal thoughts, including what would ARGUABLY (this is sketchy shit, given, you know, ELVES) constitute a suicide attempt from Fingon. Honestly, I would skip right from the top to the line that starts “he next woke” to avoid the worst of it, which I will now summarize as follows:

Maglor has a relapse and self-harms. Fingon perceives what he believes to be Maedhros’s death. As elves are won’t to do, he almost dies from grief. Maglor stops him, which Fingon perceives to be unfair and cruel. Maglor knocks him out using the hypnosis bracelet that Fingon used on HIM earlier.

If this is really going to be traumatic for you, and you don’t want to skip to “he next woke”, then you can just get the arguably fun part of the chapter by skipping to the dialogue line “You do know that Gil-galad was not by birth my son, do you not?”

For those of you that did read the chapter, hey. Sorry I’ve been on a sad chapter kick lately. I promise we get back to the fun stuff next week? ALSO, I’m going to be releasing some shorts from other POVs, possibly as fillers while I get my life together (we’ll see, classes are still getting into gear), so subscribe to this series if you want to read that. It so far is going to definitely include Elladan and Boromir, and possibly also some other people (Faramir? The Variag Queen? I’ll never tell.”
Maedhros blinked awake to find himself standing in a large workshop. The walls and floor were made of cherry wood, and light streamed from somewhere Maedhros could not see. A tall, grey-robed figure was standing at one of the workbenches. Maedhros knew that form.

“Am I dead?” He asked. For indeed, he was only a fëa, no hröa attached.

The figure turned around, and it was not Námo at all. “I would not pretend to know. You would have to ask my brother.” The smile on Irmo’s face was gentle, and when Maedhros looked at the work behind him, he saw a perfect replica of Tirion upon Túna in miniature, tiny people moving on tiny streets.

“Is this a dream?”

Irmo set down the tools in his hands, a tiny chisel and hammer, and moved to stand closer to Maedhros. “As much a dream as anything, and more a dream than some things, but less still a dream than death, I think.”

And mortals accused elves of speaking in riddles. “My lord, if I am not dead, why am I here?”

Irmo gave him a quizzical look, and placed the back of his hand on Maedhros’s forehead. “How do you feel, Son of Fëanor?”

Maedhros, suddenly seeming to wake just a little, became aware enough of his own exhaustion that he sagged into the Vala’s arms. Irmo wrapped Maedhros’s arm around his shoulder, and lifted him like he was no more than a child. They walked out of the workshop and down a long, winding hallway into a marble courtyard. A fountain bubbled merrily in the centre, and there were several lounges around, one of which Irmo lay Maedhros upon.
“My wife believes,” Irmo told Maedhros, “that there is a reason the Ainur configure as we do, with kin and friends and spouses. If Eru gave us these relationships, there must be a reason for each to be as it is. It makes sense for me and my siblings, given our areas, but why Oromë and Nessa? What is the reasoning?”

“I have a brother like Oromë and a brother like Nessa. I do not know if there is reasoning for such things.”

Irmo shook his head. “But there is for your people. You share blood, you share parents. We all have the same parent, but we are not all siblings. Estë believes that we each have something to learn from those we are matched with, something to gain. From me, she says, she learned possibility, and the power of the mind over the body. She tells me that she thinks that what I have to learn from her is healing, that together, we would be complimentary, a healer of the ills of the body, and a healer of the ills of the mind. What do you think?”

“Is that not already Lady Nienna’s task in life?” Maedhros asked, feeling a strong sense of wrongness in the situation. The Valar should not be asking his input on any such matter.

“Maybe. But in your experience, has it served you well to feel pitied?” It was a rhetorical question, they both knew the answer. “Nienna is our conscience. She is the only one of us who is always able to stand in opposition to cruelty and vengeance. Námo and I both have much to learn from that. And perhaps, in defending the dead from our brother’s cold wrath, she does allow them to heal. But they must heal themselves, in Mandos.”

“Is that why I am here then? Because you want to try and fix me?”

Irmo shook his head. “I think it is a little late for that. You are here now because I want to recruit you.”

What? “What?”

“Aulë, Oromë, Nessa, Vairë- many of my peers work with the Quendi to better their craft. You have the strength to work with any one of us- why not me?”

Traditionally, only seers called themselves followers of Irmo. “I see no futures. I would do better to learn to weave and join my grandmother.”

Irmo shook his head. “So what, if you do not see the future. Your strength lies in influencing the future through understanding, through remembering and speaking of the past. That is how dreams are made, in the influence of the past on the future. I think we could learn from each other.”

“Perhaps we could, but I really must go. I have someone to whom I owe a very important apology.”

“In that case,” Irmo said, “all you have to do is wake up.”

Maedhros tried to wake from the dream, but the closer he came, the weaker he felt. His body seemed to weigh as much as a mountain, and it was crushing his very spirit. He opened his eyes back with Irmo again.

“I cannot wake.”

Irmo stood, and, offering Maedhros a hand, helped him to his feet. “You expended a great deal of psychic energy, doing what you did. Your body will need much time to recover.”

Maedhros found himself almost more physically present than in his first experience with Irmo. He
could not tell if that was a good thing or not. “Does that mean I am trapped in this place for however long it takes?”

Irmo met his eyes, and in the Vala’s pupils, ringed by irises of slate, Maedhros could see whole worlds created and destroyed in a breath. He looked away. “This is a dream, Maedhros. Your dream, if you want it to be. Try not to think of it as a prison, or it may become one.”

Maedhros stayed for what might have been a matter of minutes or years. Irmo was the only one of the Valar with a semblance of control over time, for time in dreams was only as real as the rest of the dream. Maedhros cooked, until he realized he did not need to eat, and then he simply wandered from room to room. It was difficult not to feel trapped, and even harder not to blame Irmo. It happened as a memory, as dreams often did, where Maedhros would not so much do something as remember doing it. Once, he thought he spoke to Fingon, but then again, he also thought he might have fought another giant spider, so perhaps some parts of the dream were just that. Dreams.

The second he was able to wake in the real world, he felt it, like a door opening in front of him. Irmo appeared at his side.

“Will I see you again?” Maedhros asked. Despite the predicament he had placed Maedhros in, there was still a great debt between them. Maedhros suspected that all the dreams that had prepared him for knowledge of his existence in Mandos had been Irmo’s doing, as had his easy bond dreams.

Irmo smiled. “I am always and never with you. And if you want me, well, my home is hardly a matter of secrecy.” He dissolved into butterflies, and Maedhros crossed the threshold alone.

He surged awake like a drowning man coming up for air. The young woman who was opening the window shrieked and stared at him. The night sky behind her was bright with stars, and free of either clouds or smoke. The white walls and the mortal woman placed him in Gondor, which meant he should have been able to feel Elladan or Elrohir, except his mind felt as if it was wrapped in wool. He reached out and touched nothing. Not only was his bond with Fingon missing, but all his other bonds also. He could not feel Maglor, or Galadriel, or even the strange presence that he rather suspected was Elrond. For a wild moment, he thought they were all dead and he was in some strange prison, before he realized he could feel none of the Ainur either.

He tried to ask the woman where everyone was, but his throat was so dry that he could not speak. Fortunately, she managed to gather her wits about her, and run to fetch a healer. The mortal healer could do little but offer him water, and do a cursory examination. Elladan arrived minutes later and, letting out a great cry, grasped Maedhros’s hands in his own.

“You great fool- I ought to strangle you where you lie! You have had me worrying away for weeks, and the rest of the city also. Why, if not for Gandalf’s confirmation that you still could wake, we would have buried you long ago!”

Maedhros squeezed Elladan’s hands as tight as he could, which was not very tight. “Peace, Elladan. I had only gone to Irmo. His brother stayed well away.”

Elladan buried his face in Maedhros’s shoulder, breathing deeply. “I hate being the primary healer in the room. I am never going far enough from my father for this to be my job ever again.” He pulled back. “There are others who will want to see you, if you are able. But first I must ask- what happened? My grandparents said they felt the magical discharge all the way in Lóthlorien.”

Maedhros gently pushed Elladan away. “Help me sit up. I will explain what happened, but no more times than I need to, so I suggest you fetch anyone who wants to hear it. And perhaps someone to write it down.”
Elladan fetched Boromir first, and the joy at seeing him well and home was enough to warm Maedhros’s lonely heart. Boromir, who walked with a cane- fine wood, courtesy of Galadriel- still had difficulty standing for long periods, and he sat on Maedhros’s bed while Elladan fetched a chair and more friends.

“I had thought you would never wake,” Boromir whispered, “I did not want to lose you already. I know you wanted Elladan and Haldir to look out for me, but it is no substitute. There is no substitute for you, my friend. I am going to yell at you later for thinking you were replaceable.”

Maedhros blinked away the tears that threatened to choke him. “Enough of me. How fares Boromir? Is your brother well?”

Boromir smiled slyly. “Boromir fares well enough, as does his brother. I have it on good authority that they are both recently entered into courtships.”

“Does either court an elf?”

Boromir blushed to the roots of his hair. “No. But I also have it on good authority that Elladan Elrondion does.”

Well, that was news. Elladan, who had been halfway into the room with his chair as Boromir spoke, almost dropped it. “Boromir!” He set the chair down at Maedhros’s bedside, and Boromir slid into it.

“Well, it is true! And if he hurts Rúmil, I am going to kill him, and you are going to help me.”

And that was more interesting news again. “Alas, I am no partisan in that courtship- for Rúmil may be a friend, but Elladan is my grandson, and killing him would be rather rude.”

Elladan laughed. “Grandfather, if I mistreat Rúmil, you have my permission to kill me. He is kinder than Estë. I would have to be the spawn of Morgoth himself to do such a person harm.”

Maedhros had done Fingon, who was kind and good above all else, the worst harm imaginable to an elf. The guilt and fear rose up to choke him, but he pushed it down.

“Has there been any word of Fingon?”

Elladan and Boromir exchanged a look. “Less than nothing. Though I did receive word that my sister is missing, so I can only extrapolate from your strange direction to thank Arwen that wherever they are, they are together. Thank you for saying that, by the way. It was a relief to my grandmother. She says Fingon is a responsible one, for a Finwëan, and even if he does walk into danger the same as you, all will probably be well with him in charge.”

Maedhros could only hope so. “Elladan, I have done a horrible thing.”

He was interrupted before he could explain by the arrival of Haldir and Rúmil both. Elrohir joined them not long after, and more and more people trickled in, too quickly for Maedhros to ever really speak to any one of them, though he did at least manage to tease Rúmil a little over his new relationship. Denethor arrived before Halon, robbing Maedhros of his opportunity to tease Boromir in the same way over the truly love-struck look he gave the former spy.

The fellowship was the main body of the group, all the original nine who had gone together out of Rivendell. Boromir of course, but also Frodo, quiet and subdued, the right sleeve of his tunic pinned closed at the wrist, Sam standing at his shoulder, and Merry and Pippin, side by side. Aragorn, carrying himself like the king he was, Legolas, princely but grinning, and Gimli, lordly and laughing with relief. Gandalf arrived last of them, and the look he gave Maedhros was one of sorrow. He must
have known the truth of what had happened.

The group was rounded out by Canadiel, Amnus, the Variag Queen, the royal family of Rohan, and Faramir. Faramir, Rúmil and Halon were relegated to taking notes for their respective people, though Faramir seemed to take a sort of bemused pleasure in it, and Rúmil was quite outwardly gleeful. They three had all arrayed themselves around Boromir, forming a barrier between him and his father, intentionally or not.

Elladan got Maedhros some more water, and rearranged his pillows.

“Elladan and Haldir will have told you by now of the deal I made with Sauron and my subsequent surrender. Well, once I was taken to Mordor, I managed to convince Sauron both to go through with his side of the deal, and to face me without any swords at my throat. We fought with our minds, and he came close to hurting Fingon, my husband, through me. Oh, all you men, wipe those looks of vague horror off your faces. That is the part of all this that deserves them the least. Anyhow, in an effort to protect him, I severed the ties of our marriage.”

All the elves in the room looked distinctly green. Elrohir swore. Legolas covered his mouth with one hand. Boromir whispered, “oh, Maedhros,” under his breath. Aragorn schooled his expression into a blank mask, but Maedhros could well read his disgust. It was the same as it would have been on Elrond’s face.

Maedhros knew that if he stopped to contemplate his actions, he would not be able to begin again for some time. “I know. That, Denethor, is the part of the story that merits abject horror. It is the single worst thing an elf could do to someone they love, and I did it. There is no justification for what I have done. Sauron moved next to an attack on my memory. Like all reborn elves, I remembered nothing of being dead. Well, I have access to those memories now. That might have destroyed me. The way Nienna speaks of it, it seems that remembering death can make losing one’s grip on life easier. Yes, Olórin?”

He remembered now, seeing the Maia on more than one occasion in the halls of Mandos. He had walked at Nienna’s side, speaking in soft tones to the Vala and her patients alike. No wonder he had trusted Maedhros quickly. They knew each other.

The Maia nodded. “Quite, old friend. That the combination of that and losing your bond did not kill you…”

“I was lucky. I had Fingon here to anchor me, even if I could not reach him. And more, Sauron was very unlucky. In those memories was the secret to powers I had never before grasped in waking life. I know now that the secret to my gifts is that of bringing wisdom of the past to fruition in the future, of remembering horrors and stopping them from reoccurring, and of speaking the truth of the story of Arda, as it is and as it ought to be. We fought, and as I held him, well, I suppose that all of you know that part of the story better than I do. Frodo?”

Everyone turned to look at him. Maedhros almost regretted shifting their attention, for Frodo seemed to shrink under their eyes. “Whatever you did, it weakened him. The ring- it felt- well, I went to throw it into the fire, and Smeagol- that is another story. He went for me, and remembering your training, I used the force of his own weight to fling him into the fire. It was only by Sam’s aid that I did not fall in myself. I was sick, and had lost much blood. I fainted. Sam tells me the eagles came for us not long after, but I do not remember such a thing. I woke up here.”

He looked down at his hand. Maedhros, feeling a strong urge to make him less uncomfortable, said, “Well, I fainted just the same, from exhaustion of the body and mind, and presumably was also saved by the eagles, at least in my body. As for my mind, Lord Irmo helped me. He has been helping me
all along, sending me dreams to help me adjust to the new world, and to process events that had happened to me in Mandos. I believe he may be attempting to recruit me, but I suppose that will have to wait for now. Does anyone have any questions? I can answer them together, or individually, as you all prefer.”

Haldir looked down at his hands, and then up at Maedhros. “If you remember being dead, then do you know now how you came to be here?”

“I remember much, and more as the memories settle in. There are thousands of years’ worth to process, after all, but fortunately those are the most recent. Many of the Valar conspired to send me here, but chief among them was Varda. It was she who purged the oath from my mind so completely, in a way that it will never fully be gone from my brothers. It was she who guided me back to this world, and chose where I would wake. Lady Nienna found me instructors in modern tongues, among newly dead mortals over the years, and Lord Námo gave his consent for it all. I wanted to be here because I wanted vengeance, and also because I wanted to do good. I still want to do good. I have failed to save many people in my time in Arda. Far too many people. With my skills, my experience, I was qualified to save people now. And I think I have.”

“Yes,” Aragorn muttered; they all turned to look at him. “I rather think you have.”

Nobody else had a question they were willing to ask publically. Maedhros might have been bedridden, but he was still a commander, and gave orders accordingly. “Very well then, anyone who has nothing to ask can go. I will see you later. Frodo, you first. You ought to go get some sleep. Denethor, you second. Do not pretend you are not dying to ask. Everyone else, decide amongst yourselves.”

They all filed out of the room, Frodo looking oddly displeased to have been singled out. “I don’t have any questions, you know.”

“No, but there are things you need to know. I may look fine now, but you know the stories of the first age. You have some idea of what happened to me, rumor or legend. I was captured by Melkor, and Sauron was his torturer then as always. I was rescued by Fingon who became my husband, but they had driven a metal bar through my hand, connecting it to the mountain. He cut it off to save my life. It would have taken too long to file through the metal, and anyways, it was more than half an inch in diameter. Many of the nerves in my hand had been severed, and all the bones shattered. It would have been useless even if he had saved it. Unlike most elves, I am not, nor have I ever been, ambidextrous. I favoured my right hand in my first life, and I favour my left in my second. It took me years to learn to adjust. But it is possible to learn. It is not easy, and the process is long, and there are many things you will never be able to do with one hand so well as two, but there are ways. And, in addition, there are ways to correct for the absence. I never much liked prosthetics when I could help it, but my brother Curufin was a brilliant engineer, and I remember many of his designs. I will see what I can speak about to smiths and engineers of this day.”

Frodo did not meet his eyes. “If you hadn’t held him back, I would never have been able to go through with it. I would have kept the ring, even knowing of the havoc wrought by the silmarils. Without Sam, I never even would have lived to make it there. I am not the hero of this story.”

And Maedhros knew that misery well. It had taken him centuries to learn to live with it, and it had never really gone away in his first life. Only by Fingon had it been tempered, for a short time, and only through millennia of recovery had it left him entirely. “There is no weakness in needing help. There is no hero in all of history who has not had any. Fingon had the Eagles. Beren and Lúthien and Finrod had each other. Tuor had Voronwë and Idril, Elwing had Ulmo. Even when he slew Ancalagon, Eärendil carried the strength and light of my father’s craft, which in turn was hallowed
by Varda. Did that make any of them weak? No, it did not. We all need to rely on the strength of others sometimes. Do you know any great feat ever accomplished alone?"

“Lúthien rescued Beren alone.”

“And yet,” Maedhros retorted, “what was she doing if not asking Námo for help?”

Frodo had no response to this. His silence was deafening. Eventually, he managed to meet Maedhros’s eyes and mutter, “I don’t know.”

“Nothing. Lúthien needed his help. She moved Grim Námo himself, with the strength of her love for Beren, and asked for his help. What could be more heroic? I know not. Even I would not be here now without help a thousand times over. Haldir shot the Nazgûl I was fighting, Galadriel and Rúmil healed me in Lóthlorien, Elladan healed me here, my ten fought with me in Minas Morgul, the Eagles and Irmo rescued me in body and soul, and when I was dead, my brother Curufin gave his own freedom for mine, even though I was the scourge of Sirion, their blood and my own staining my hands in a way that even his never had been stained. I would never have been a hero to you without any of them. I would never have been anything if Fingon had not saved me, if my mother had not raised me to kindness, and my father to nobility. I would be nothing without that, without all of them.”

Frodo bowed his head, and Maedhros thought his shoulders shook with silent tears. “I do not know if I can ever come home from this.”

“Neither do I. Home is people interacting, and Maitimo cannot go home to Valinor. He died on the quays of Alqualondë. But I can do my best here, and that is enough. You will learn to do the same, in time.”

Frodo left him. There was nothing more to say. He would find his path in time, but this moment, the feeling of weakness and uselessness, was something he could only war with alone.

Denethor stood awkwardly in the doorway for many long seconds as he and Maedhros eyed each other. He must have known something about Boromir, Maedhros decided. His reactions and actions were too strange for it to have been otherwise.

“Peace,” Maedhros said, after a time, “this is a conversation, not a battle. If I am angry, it is with the system that created you, not with you yourself.”

He awkwardly slid into the room, and let the door swing shut behind him. “I think I should start by thanking you. Boromir told me what you did for him, and I think I have much misjudged you. I- it was hard for me to believe that his survival was real, and even now, I find the thought of losing him- of losing them- hard to bear.”

“It is an impossible thing to bear, and yet we bear it anyways.”

The sorrow that flashed across Denethor’s face was an odd mirror to Maedhros’s own. “You told me that you lost a son?”

Sweet, dear Elros, who had according to Lady Nienna, thanked her for her gifts on his way through to the other side. The grief was more distant, with years of memory, and yet somehow greater, as Maedhros remembered learning of his death not long after it had occurred, and weeping over it for the first time.

“I did. History remembers him better as Elros Tar-Minyataur, but to me he was always just Elros Peredhel, an angry, clever, brave half-mannish child who loved his brother more than anything in the
“Oh,” Denethor muttered. He knew the name, of course.

Maedhros made his best attempt at a wry smile. “Yes, quite. I remember the founder of Númenór as an awkward gangly thing who could not swing a sword straight. I also remember him as generous even when we were struggling, loyal with his last breath, and sweet with all his lovers. Those are virtues, I believe.”

Denethor rested a hand uneasily on his belt, where his sword had once been. “I believe so. Yet I believe also I could say the same of my sons.”

“Given what I know of Boromir, and how highly he thinks of his brother—yes, you probably could."

There was a long, awkward pause, during which Denethor examined his hands, and did not look at Maedhros. Had Boromir seemed uncomfortable earlier? He had been safe between Faramir and Halon, and had offered Maedhros both remarkable affection and his undivided attention. Had he reacted in any way to his father’s presence? Did Denethor know?

“I have been very proud of my sons,” Denethor muttered, after a minute.

“What are you trying to say, Denethor?”

They each examined the other, trying to determine what their opponent already knew. That Denethor was even making the assessment told Maedhros more than half of what he needed to know.

“I think my son is making a choice that could ruin his life.”

This was a political dance, with high stakes for Boromir. Maedhros weighed his words carefully. “My father made the choice that ruined my life for me. He worded the oath that made me a murderer. When I became a parent, my only hope for Elros and Elrond was that I would not do the same to them. What I learned in my fear is that we can advise our children, guide them and teach them our ways, but we can never choose their fates. We cannot choose if they live or die, we cannot choose who they love or hate, what they fight for, or when they choose to lay down the fight.”

Denethor leant up against the door, fake casual. “You already know.”

Maedhros met his eyes. “I know many things, Son of Ecthelion. I knew the first Ecthelion, for example. He was an excellent musician, and my brother Maglor thought him very handsome, in voice and form. I never knew the first Denethor, but I am given to understand that he was a fine king, even if the etymological incoherence of his name would have left my father tearing his hair out.”

“That is not what I mean.”

“No, I know. But I think it is odd that your people seem to hold such reverence for old elves, and yet know so little about us. You were truly genuinely shocked that I had a husband, but no elf of my generation would have been, beyond the shock of his identity. Even the most traditionalist of elves would have accepted the oaths we swore in Eru’s name as legally binding. When I was young, I loved the great romance stories. My brothers ever teased me for it, but could resist tales of the first oaths? Elves whose love was so strong, they found a way to enshrine it for ever after. NThey say the first oaths were sworn by two elleths, and they did not even know Eru’s name to speak, but the power of their love was so great that he witnessed it anyways.”

Denethor’s right hand clenched into a fist. “Stop trying to be deliberately obtuse.”
“Would you hit me flat on my back?” Maedhros asked. The fist unclenched. “I did not think so. Change is hard. Sometimes impossible. But this is the start of a new age, in Gondor and all the world. If there is ever a time to forge a new and better path forward, now is that time. Blaze a better trail, so your sons’ lives can be happier than yours has been. That is our duty, as parents. Let them make their mistakes, and catch them when they fall. Listen to their words, and help them when they need it. That is all there is."

It was a dismissal, and Denethor showed himself out. Maedhros could only pray that his words had been enough. For Boromir, for Gondor, for Denethor himself. For he did not deserve to lose his son because of history’s mistakes. Nobody did.

The rest of those who came to speak were Maedhros’s friends, and they were furious and righteous and he loved them. They spoke little of themselves and the myriad changes in their lives since the end of the war, instead offering Maedhros comfort over his lost bonds, and caring for him as he had so much wanted and tried to care for them. When he finally went to sleep after his last visitor—Boromir, who was reluctant to leave his side— the feeling of being loved was strong as if it had been his brothers surrounding him. But it was not the connection his fēa yearned for. He lay in bed, feeling as cared for as he ever had, and wept from loneliness. There was not even the calming pressure of his shields. What need had he for shields when there was nothing but silence to hide from?

Chapter End Notes

Has everyone in Minas Tirith hooked up while Maedhros was unconscious? What drama happened in that missing month? Well, I have good news- I’m writing a BUNCH of shorts about what happened in Minas Tirith during that time. (The only couple who isn’t going to get at least one is Faramir&Eowyn because if you want that short you can just go open your copy of ROTK. Also I can’t write Éowyn for shit.) Next week is another interlude, but I will probably start with the shorts sometimes in the next couple weeks. Depending on how busy I am. I’ll keep y’all posted.
Fingon drifts, some old friends reappear, and there is a ring involved.

Hey, so this is a warning for just general depression because Fingon is not in a great place in this chapter, but is not suicidal as in last chapter. So, like, that.

ALSO, y’all know I never promote shit, but my friend wrote a podcast which is out now on iTunes and Soundcloud. It’s called They Say a Lot of Things on iTunes and TSALOT on Soundcloud. If you like friendly ghosts, slow-burn mysteries and supporting amateur podcasts, you will probably like TSALOT. Also this is the friend who dared me to write the TNG fanfic that got this whole thing started so I think we owe her a collective blood debt probably

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

They crossed the Brandywine- Baranduin?- the next day, and rode hard, with little rest, until they reached the first settlement of men Fingon had seen in his whole time in Middle Earth, an odd little place called ‘Bree’. Elves seemed to be unusual visitors there, but Arwen mentioned a couple of names to the innkeeper, and secured much favour with him. Maglor and Fingon spoke perhaps a third of the Westron tongue between the two of them, but Maglor had always done well enough at making himself understood in any language, so long as he had his harp, and the people of Bree much enjoyed his fair playing. Mostly, he played old songs, ones Fingon knew, but on one occasion, Fingon walked in on Maglor playing a piece that was foreign to his ears. It had the taste of Maglor’s own work. There were no words, and Maglor changed it as soon as Fingon had walked in, a strange look on his face. Fingon was so relieved to hear him composing that he did not begrudge the secrecy overmuch. It would have made Maedhros happy.

After Bree, it was country and empty roads for more than a week, as they traveled through mostly abandoned lands. Fingon dreamt of marble halls, and privately grieved. Maglor, he knew, dreamt of fire in the skies and screaming. He grieved also. Arwen was joyous and free, but kept such light feelings to herself.

On the two week anniversary of Maedhros’s death, they were alone no longer, for a party of three elves from Rivendell met them; all were armed to the teeth and looking for their wayward lady. Fingon recognized one of their number.

“Glorfindel!”

The Golden Flower of Gondolin stared at him, eyes wide. “Should I know you?”

Fingon couldn’t decide if he should be insulted or not, but the point was rendered moot by the second member of Glorfindel’s party spotting Arwen. The lecture he burst into was long and
multifaceted, addressing Arwen’s reckless disregard for her own safety, her people, and her father’s heart. The four additional members of the group looked back and forth at one another, unsure of their role in all that. Maglor tried to hide his face in his hair, to no avail.

Fingon saw the exact moment Glorfindel recognized Maglor. The fact that he- Glorfindel’s king, the elder brother of his childhood friend, who had known Glorfindel as a pudgy, awkward youth a full foot shorter than Turgon, and had crossed the Ice at his side- did not get a glimmer of recognition, but Maglor, who Glorfindel could not have seen more than once or twice in Beleriand, was recognized quick as you like. He guided his horse over to Maglor’s side.

“Elrond did not want us to know what Arwen was looking for, save that he thought she would fail. Now I suppose I know, and she has succeeded. Hello, Maglor.”

“Hello, Glorfindel,” Maglor muttered, in a low voice.

Glorfindel looked over his shoulder at where Arwen was trading words with her lecturer. “Erestor, leave her be. Elrond never said she was looking for a person.”

Erestor, presumably, stopped in the middle of a sentence. He scanned the group as if seeing them for the first time, and his jaw dropped.

“Your Majesty?” He asked, eyes wide. The third member of their party, a curly-haired Sindarin elleth with a bow strapped to her back, covered her mouth with one hand.

“Oh,” Glorfindel said, finally looking at Fingon with recognition. “Findekáno, you look terrible for one recently returned from Valinor. Has something happened?”

Fingon and Maglor exchanged a look. “My husband just died. It has been a bad month. Eru, it has been a bad rebirth. But Turgon sends you his love, of course.”

“I had not even known you were married.”

“It was a secret. Nobody knew.”

Glorfindel looked down. “My condolences. Are you three alright to continue riding for the day? Lord Elrond has been very worried, and it would much ease his mind if we were to return.”

That night, Glorfindel pulled Fingon away from the group, and walked him into the woods. They both knew why they were there.

“You would probably do better to use your gifts on Maglor,” Fingon told him. “There is nothing wrong with me that you could heal.”

Glorfindel sighed and tucked his hair behind an ear. “Please, let me help.”

“Then help Maglor, and that will do as much good for my health as anything your gifts can do for me.” Fingon did not want Glorfindel digging around at the edges of his consciousness. Telling the family about their relationship had been one thing. Telling someone like Glorfindel was another.

“Indulge an old friend. I swear, I will not look to any details of your relationship with him if you do not want me to. Envision a small shield in front of anything too private, and I will not pry.”

Fingon’s odds of returning to camp without indulging Glorfindel were slim to none. He could be overly persistent when he wanted to be.
“Very well, but I would ask that you do not press overmuch, the wound is still very fresh.”

Glorfindel did not bother to sit. Instead, he reached up one hand, and pressed his fingertips to Fingon’s forehead. He listened for a second to the natural rhythm of Fingon’s mind, and then grazed fingers over where the bond had been. His confusion was so strong that Fingon felt it.

“What?” He demanded, as Glorfindel pulled back.

Glorfindel shook his head in disbelief. “That is the cleanest bond break I have ever felt, and I have made a not-insubstantial study of such things. Someday, I could write a book on the subject.”

“What do they usually feel like?” Glorfindel twiddled his fingers suggestively, and Fingon leant into the touch.

Fingon guessed that the bond Glorfindel was showing him was Turgon’s. That made sense, in a way. They two had been close, once, and Glorfindel would have been a person who Turgon might have trusted in his grief. Certainly, the mind felt like Turgon’s. It was very linear, ridgid, with connections like hallways to different rooms in a home, only one, the brightest and biggest, had caved in, and cracks stretched across the rest of the ceiling, and even over the walls, as if it might all come crumbling down at any moment. Glorfindel pulled his hand back, and the memory faded.

“Do not think I mean to lessen what you are going through, but either you or Maedhros must have done something extraordinary as the bond was breaking. Even a shield would not have this kind of effect, I do not believe. Probably just as well. Losing a bond as strong as yours was in the traditional way would probably have killed you instantly.”

“It must have been Maedhros,” Fingon replied, automatically. It took him a second to catch what was strange. “I thought you promised not to pry?”

Glorfindel gave him a wry smile. “As if it required any prying. You, secret marriage, male- I mentioned that earlier and you did not deny it- someone who is on these shores, but dates to the first age, and of course the fact that Maglor is here and quite clearly alive. It was either him, Maedhros, me, Thranduil, Celeborn or Círdan, and three of us are married. Well, four, I suppose, counting Maedhros.”

“How did you know Maedhros was here?”

“I am the only person on these shores who has had the pleasure to be reborn. Elrond consulted my expertise. I had not heard he had died again. I grieve with you, for I find that I hold little anger in my heart for my kinslaying kin, and I have ever held love and loyalty for Turgon and his family.”

They returned to the group. Arwen and the elleth- Faervel, Fingon recalled- were speaking quietly, cooking. Maglor leant against a tree, and only his slow breathing would have betrayed to anyone that he was asleep. Erestor looked up at them.

“My lords,” he greeted, very formally. Glorfindel shook his head, some amusement in his eyes.

“Do not stand on ceremony for me,” Fingon told him. “We are among friends here, and kin. I could tell you stories about Glorfindel that would have him flushing redder than a new-cut rose, and Maglor could no doubt do the same for me without blinking twice.”

Glorfindel laughed. “Fingon, meet my husband Erestor. Erestor, meet Fingon, High King of the Noldor in Middle Earth and a person who I once saw running through the halls half-naked and being chased by his little sister.”
Fingon had blocked that memory from his mind, and would continue to do so for the foreseeable future. “Turgon told me about the cabbage incident, you know.”

“I have never seen any member of any royal family naked in my entire life,” Glorfindel deadpanned.

Maglor, who must have awoken as silently as he slept, deadpanned his return, “and of course, none of us have ever seen you naked either, Laurëfindel. Why, I doubt you have ever been naked, noble and great Lord of Gondolin.”

Faervel snorted with laughter. “Watch it you two, or poor Erestor here will think you are flirting in front of his face.”

“Please,” Glorfindel scoffed. “Erestor knows I have better taste.”

Fingon could not help but laugh. It was an involuntary reaction, and yet as he realized what he was doing, the darkness crept back in. Maedhros was dead, and there he was, jesting like nothing had happened. What kind of husband was he?

“Ecthelion is deathly afraid of bees,” Maglor announced, loudly. Everyone turned to look at him. “I swear it! We were to play a duet once, and he had to flee because it turned out our host was a beekeeper. I played the duet with the bees instead.”

It was such a bizarre non-sequitur that it changed Fingon’s train of thought utterly. It was only later that he would realize such a thing had been Maglor’s intent.

“Maglor,” Glorfindel said, awkwardly, “could I speak to you in private, for a moment or two?”

Maglor knew well that Glorfindel was an expert at the fëa, just as Fingon did. He knew what was coming. The expression on his face could just as easily have belonged to an elf going into battle. Perhaps, in a sense, he was doing such a thing. Few things were harder than the battle ahead of Maglor. Ahead of them both.

Fingon sat across from Erestor. “So, husband to Glorfindel, you have me at a disadvantage. You know a great deal about me, and I know almost nothing about you. What should I know?”

Erestor seemed shy to introduce himself, but Arwen and Faervel were not shy to do it for him. He was Elrond’s chief counselor, hailing from Sirion originally, as Elrond did, but unlike Elrond, he had been much involved in founding Eregion, before joining him in Gil-galad’s service. It was odd to think of a child from Sirion becoming an ally to Fëanor’s house, but since Elrond himself seemed to have done so, by all accounts, Fingon supposed a friend of his might well have been the sort to do the same.

With the larger group, travel was easier and more comfortable. Maglor’s attacks, which had become less frequent over time, were far easier to manage with Glorfindel there, and all three of their new friends were better cooks than any of they three. Still, with no struggle left in it all, Fingon found himself drifting into the doldrums. He felt less grief, and more absence of enjoyment. There were good moments, certainly, but the overwhelming feeling of those days was greyness and absence.

When Imladris came into sight, even Fingon had to smile. It was solid Noldorin architecture. Turgon would happily have called any who had orchestrated it a grandson, whether or not they shared blood. Tactically, it was dubious, but with the river and the mountains, there were few directions of approach that would have been tactical anyhow. Lord Elrond met them on the path. Arwen threw herself from her horse with a cry, and into her father’s waiting arms. They embraced and laughed,
with the pure open joy of those who had looked true danger in the face and won. Glorfindel, Erestor and Faervel all dismounted also. This was their home, and they knew the routines, where to stable their horses, where to report to when they were finished. Maglor tried very hard to sink low on his horse, as if he hoped to become invisible.

“I do not deserve to be here,” Maglor muttered.

“Shut up. Maedhros is dead. I need you here.” Fingon snapped louder than Maglor deserved, and regretted it a second later.

Elrond and Arwen both turned to look at them. Elrond did not look particularly like either of his parents, which Fingon supposed really meant he looked like both of them. He was kingly, though not a king; this was a way in which he looked like Maedhros. He was smiling, joyous at Arwen’s return, at Maglor’s arrival, yet there was something also that was sad in his eyes, a place the smile did not reach.

“I am reasonably certain he is not,” Elrond said, after a long and awkward pause.

“Elrond,” Maglor said, very softly, a father to his son, “I think we have some bad news for you.”

Elrond’s face turned stony. “What is it?”

Arwen put her hand on her father’s shoulder. “‘Taryo, this is Fingon, Maedhros’s husband. He tells us that Maedhros was killed during the final assault on Mordor.’”

Elrond opened his mouth, closed it, and looked from Fingon to Arwen in confusion. He did not look particularly upset, Fingon thought. He wondered if Celebrían and Arwen had been wrong about his affection for Maedhros.

“When was this?” Elrond asked, eventually, a pained note in his voice.

“Not long before we felt the change in Arda that coincided with Sauron’s defeat,” Maglor muttered. “An hour, maybe more or less.”

“Elbereth,” Elrond whispered. Louder, he said, “I had word from Lady Galadriel earlier today. She had direct communication from Elladan and Elrohir- my sons,” he added for Maglor and Fingon’s benefit. “Maedhros fought Sauron and, by all reports, won. He was in a psychic-trauma and fëa-exhaustion induced coma for a month. Galadriel contacted me to say that he is awake. How that could have disrupted your bond…”

He trailed off, making a vague, helpless gesture with his hands. Arwen took a step away, eyes rolling back in her head as she looked to the future. Her father, with a practiced hand, reached out and caught her as she stumbled.

“He has a future,” she whispered, more to herself than to any of them. “Mandos take me for a fool. Why did I not check?” She was being too hard on herself. How could she have known when Fingon had not?

Fingon watched and listened with a carefully curated numbness. It could not be true. Must not be true. For Fingon was sure no Ainu could sever a bond witnessed by Eru, which meant that only one person could have done so. Maedhros himself. Oh, Eru. How had he known such a thing was even possible? It certainly had not been for Finwë. What did that mean about their relationship? Had their bond been real? Had Maedhros ever loved him at all?

“Fingon.” Maglor walked his horse up close, and put a hand on his shoulder. “This is good news.”
It was good news. It was wonderful news. Maedhros was alive. He had fought Sauron, and lived to
tell of it- if Fëanor heard about it, he would be insufferable. He had every right to be, about that. It
was something never achieved by any elf. Sauron had killed Finrod, had killed Celebrimbor, had
killed Gil-galad, but not Maedhros. And yet, something in Fingon’s heart could not take it.

“I need to go.” He slipped off his horse, and ran.

It was Elrond who found him, half an hour later, hiding down by the bottom of the waterfall, where
the spray obscured his tears, and soaked his clothes through. Well, it did not matter. Everything had
been dirty anyways.

“I hope you will be able to forgive him, in time,” he said, taking a seat at Fingon’s side.

Fingon shrugged, and tossed a small rock into the pool. “I am not angry, not really. Only, I felt like I
was beginning to make a sort of progress with my grief, and now I am not even supposed to be
grieving, and I do not know what to do with all that hidden sorrow.”

“I grieved Celebrian, even though I never really thought her dead. I grieved the time we lost, the
chance we had to be a family. That is as good a thing to grieve as any, I think.”

Fingon picked up another rock, running his thumb along the smooth surface. “We have not even lost
a month. I would have died of grief, if not for Maglor. He held me down, made me stay. I was so
angry with him for that. I was needlessly cruel to him, in ways he did not deserve. Maedhros was-
his brother too.”

Elrond picked up a rock, and skipped it across the side of the pool away from the waterfall. “He
understands why you were upset, though I suspect another apology would not go amiss.” He was
silent for a long time. “There are no words for my gratitude to you for bringing Maglor back to me.
He and Arwen both said they would never have made it here without you. Since those are two of the
people I love most in this world, I feel I owe you a great debt.”

“You owe Maedhros. He is the one who asked me to help.”

Elrond took a small velvet bag from his pocket and ran his fingers over the material for a second. “I
owe you something, unless I should give it to Maedhros.” He passed the bag to Fingon.

Fingon untied the string that held the bag closed, and dumped the contents into his hand. It was a
single gold ring, with an amethyst and two tiny black diamonds set in. It was old and worn, but
Fingon knew it instantly.

“This is his wedding ring. Celebrimbor made it. Where did you get it?”

“Neither of them ever made it back to the last camp they set up. After I heard what happened, I
convinced Elros to come find it with me. We knew that if someone else beat us there, they might
destroy it all in anger. And maybe a part of me hoped that one of them might still come back. I found
the ring hidden in among Maedhros’s things. I had seen him wear it when he expected not to see
anyone, and I knew it was important to him. Mostly we took things that only really had value to us- a
gift Elros had once made for Maglor, a book of childhood writing. And then of course we took
Maglor’s instruments and I took a cavalry sword for my own use. Everything else, we either took to
be distributed among the refugees and thralls who were escaping Angband, or burned. I thought that
might be a wedding ring, but Maedhros never made mention of being married himself, so I had
wondered if it had belonged to someone else. His father, maybe.”

Fingon shook his head. “Fëanor’s wedding ring was plain gold. Not what you would expect from
him, and indeed Nerdanel’s was very elaborate. My understanding is that she made his, and unnecessary pomp was never her style. Still, in a way it suited him. Fëanor would have seemed strange dripping in jewels, capitulating to custom. He used to show up at council meetings straight from the forge, wearing a leather apron and all. My father hated that, thought it was entirely an act to remind everyone that he was the true Noldorin craftsman among them.”

Elrond gave a dry laugh. “Well, that explains a great deal about Fëanor I never thought I would know.”

There was another long pause. “Celebrían sends her love.”

“How is she?”

“Generous, helpful. Finrod keeps a fairly close eye on her, I think. But if you are going to have a grandson of Finwë looking after you, Finrod is probably the best choice. Protective, but very kind. Celebrían mostly lives alone, but my understanding is that she is fairly close with the whole family, Gil-galad, Celebrimbor.”

Elrond clasped his hands in his lap. “That seems like her. And how is Gil-galad?”

That was a topic about which Fingon had far more knowledge. “Well. I do not think he found adjusting to Valinor the easiest thing in the world, but I, at least, have enjoyed finally being able to form a relationship with him as an adult, and I know Orodreth has enjoyed the same.”

Elrond nodded. “As I knew him, he would have been very happy about that. I think a part of him always worried that maybe the reason he had been sent away- twice- was that nobody wanted him.”

It was something Fingon had already known, but it made him sad. He shook his head. “We all wanted the best for him, and sometimes the best thing you can do for someone you love is to let them go.”

He had meant it as a remark about Arwen, but it was only at Elrond’s raised eyebrow that he realized the applicability to his own situation. Because Maedhros was not a monster. He would never hurt anyone he loved if it was not the only choice left to him. What Sauron could have done to make this Maedhros’s best option, Fingon did not even want to contemplate, but he did, staring into the water for a long time. Eventually, Elrond broke his concentration by standing.

“I am going back to Maglor and Arwen. With one, I have lost so much time, and with the other, I have not much time left to lose. We are leaving tomorrow for Gondor, for that is where all those who we love that live on this shore are to be found. I hope you will come with us, but if you do not, I will tell Maedhros that you are safe. You know how he worries.”

“Why would I not go? Do we leave early?”

“Not too early. Maglor looks like he could use some sleep in an actual bed. But after he wakes? Yes, as soon as possible. But I was thinking you might not want to see him.”

And there was a part of Fingon that was angry at Maedhros. Very, very angry. But how cruel to refuse to see him, to engage with him, to fix the problem, because Maedhros had caused it. Maedhros would not do it to him.

“I will be there. But give me some time first. I need time to grieve for my grief, if that makes sense?”

Elrond placed a hand on his shoulder. “I understand. I will see you tomorrow. Alright?”
“Alright.”

Chapter End Notes

Which lords of Gondolin has Maglor slept with? I'll never tell. Also, next week is going to be me posting some stories about what happened in Gondor during the intervening month between beating Sauron and Mae waking, so keep an eye out for that if you like Elladan, Rúmil, Boromir, Aragorn, or love stories.
Aragorn had somehow not managed to get himself crowned in the month Maedhros had been unconscious. Maedhros, who had crowned Fingolfin before he could even sleep lying down, found the lack of action baffling.

“Is he insane?” Maedhros demanded of Boromir. “There has not been a king in lifetimes. People have no expectation. All he needs is a fancy circlet and someone to put it on his head while saying important sounding words.”

Boromir shook his head. “Try telling that to Faramir. He and my father have been pouring over the records for weeks, trying to figure out how it ought to go. The precedent goes all the way back to Númenor, and there is the divergence between Gondor and Arnor, of which Aragorn is king of both. They both seem to think it is hideously complicated.”

Maedhros threw up his hands. “How hard is it to set a new precedent? What does Faramir think he is doing- arranging a marriage?”

Boromir’s face fell abruptly, and Maedhros tracked back his misstep. It had been a stupid, tactless thing to say.

“Oh Boromir, I am sorry. It must be hard, seeing Faramir and Éowyn so acknowledged while you and Halon hide away.”

Boromir laughed at him. “Oh, no, it is not that at all. I do not envy Faramir the watchful eyes of Théoden and Éomer. I can imagine few things worse. No, I was thinking of my father and the Queen. Halon thinks they are arranging their own marriage for the sake of the alliance, and I am inclined to agree.”

Maedhros’s mouth dropped open. “They are doing what?”

“Arranging a marriage to secure their places in the alliance. Well, and to secure other things. From what I have seen, they are enjoying each other’s company immensely, and my father fears nothing so much as being rendered obsolete.”

Maedhros, who knew what Denethor’s greatest fear was, doubted this to be true. “And how do you feel about that? My father was never happy with his father’s remarriage, but you are older than he
was when Finwë married Indis, in years as well as maturity, and less emotionally reliant on your father than my father was on his.”

Boromir shrugged vaguely. “The remarriage is the least of my concerns. I remember my mother, but I was always closer to my father, and after she died, I… forgive me if this is callous, but children’s logic can be frightfully so sometimes. I was mostly glad to still have him with me. I am glad that he has finally found someone other than me who can make him happy in his later years. He does not deserve to spend this time alone.”

“And what is your greatest concern, if that is the least?”

Boromir’s response was immediate. “My father knows. Faramir does not. It is only a matter of time before one of us lets something slip. I am terrible at secrets, they make me jumpy. I cannot even sit in a meeting with Halon or Haldir without worrying that someone is going to figure out the nature of our relationships. I keep having this recurring nightmare where he walks in on Halon and I in bed together.”

Maedhros covered his mouth with his hand to hide his smile. All he could think of was Fingon falling out of the window of his bedroom when they were young. It had all been perfectly innocent, but Maglor had teased him as though he had caught them with their pants around their ankles.

“Stop laughing,” Boromir complained.

Maedhros explained the joke, and Boromir laughed too. “I know your situation is not funny,” Maedhros told him, “but I do think it might serve you well to think of it as less monumental. Faramir is your brother. He loves you. Even your father, who is far more judgemental, has, beyond his initial reaction, done little other than try to take time to process it. My father is still not over my marriage with Fingon, save for that he knows objecting would make me unhappy, and he does not want to make me unhappy.”

Mentioning Fingon still hurt, but there was nothing Maedhros could do until Elladan had word back from Galadriel and she from Elrond. Boromir was trying valiantly to offer distraction.

“I know. I know, and it is still the most terrifying prospect I have ever faced. His judgement means more to me than our father’s does. I know our father is wrong. Often. Faramir rarely is. You know, he was able to resist the temptation of the ring. Even with how much it would have pleased our father, and how hard he always has been on Faramir, Faramir did not take it. If someone like him hates me, I would deserve it.”

Maedhros sighed. “Faramir is a product of his upbringing, Boromir. Same as everyone else. If he did not get his virtue from your father, he probably got it from you.”

Boromir looked down at his hands. “I have only directly told three people. Aragorn, because I knew he was raised by Elrond, and Elrond was raised by you. My father, as a sort of reflex, and Haldir, but technically all I did there was ask him to kiss me. Everyone else, you included, either saw something that told them the whole story, or heard it second-hand.”

“Is there anything I can do to help?” Maedhros asked him. Boromir shook his head.

“For the moment, all I need is time. To steel my nerves, to try and relax, to be with Halon. Maybe after the coronation.”

The coronation marched forward, and the rest of time with it. Despite Maedhros’s objections to the pomposity and the slowness, Aragorn was crowned three days after Maedhros woke, in a ceremony
witnessed by thousands, by Dúnedain from the north and Haradrim from the farthest south. By an elf from Valinor, and soldiers from Rhûn and Khand. By citizens, and visitors, by allies new and old. Maedhros was not well enough to stand, and neither were Frodo nor Boromir, for the duration of the ceremony, and so Aragorn made a point to have the whole fellowship sit. Maedhros found his inclusion in their number oddly comforting.

The ceremony Faramir and Denethor had devised was a simple one, after all their research. The relinquishing of power by the stewards to the king, and the coronation by a ‘neutral’ party, Gandalf—though as any Haradrim would tell you, Gandalf was neutral in nothing. The time delay had largely been a product of the desire to go and fetch the old crown. That, and Faramir’s worrying tendencies. He had allowed Maedhros to make one modification—out of the half-dozen Maedhros had suggested—to the proceedings, which was this: Aragorn did not officially end the role of the steward’s house. Instead, they only gave up their final say. Faramir had wanted it ended, and even Denethor had begrudgingly admitted it was appropriate. But Maedhros thought an instant change of power was too much, and Faramir and Boromir were both so popular that they would have had power with or without titles.

The ceremony went off without a hitch. Despite some worry about Frodo’s ability to carry the crown, he was absolutely fine—not that Maedhros had predicted any less, for as he had said to Aragorn, “I do not think it will be as heavy as all that, though heavier perhaps on your head than in his hand.” Aragorn wore the crown well, despite its weight.

Afterwards, they celebrated, in the streets and the palace. Aragorn walked among his people, and Faramir and Boromir went with him. Maedhros stayed where he was, and celebrated only the word Elladan gave him: Fingon was with Elrond, Maglor and Arwen, and all four were making the trip to Gondor. It was as good a cause for celebration as any.

Boromir came to him the next day and said, “I want you to tell Faramir for me.”

Maedhros, who had been sitting up in bed eating breakfast, choked on a bit of potato, and coughed hard for a few seconds. “You want what?”

Boromir made a vague hand-gesture. “Faramir has always been better at listening to people he views as independent narrators, ideally those with first-hand experience. That is why he likes Gandalf so much. I want you to tell him what you told me, about Númenor, and Tar-Minyataur, and elven marriage law.”

“Well, I have nothing if not first-hand experience, but what makes you think it would do any good?”

Boromir groaned at the pun. “That was terrible. And as for the question, I think it will help because it helped me and my father. Not that he likes listening to anyone much, but he came to me last night and told me that he loves me. We have not spoken in over a week, and the first thing he said to me after all this time was that he thinks there is nothing in the world worse, morally, than failing your children, and that he has failed us both, but also that he loves us both more than anything.”

“He would have done that with or without me,” Maedhros told his friend, “he really does love you. I saw his distress when Sauron had convinced him you were dead, and he thought his own inaction might have killed Faramir.”

“Well, that was fairly incontrovertible evidence. And yet, Maedhros thought that Denethor would
have come through in time, even without the added push. The desire to speak of such things to Maedhros was enough. Nobody wanted to ask those sorts of questions if their heart of heart didn’t want the right answer.

“But why have me tell him, when I could simply give him the information and then you tell him yourself?”

Boromir shook his head. “I cannot bear to see it on his face, Maedhros. Even knowing he is being told takes all the bravery I have left. I cannot have him look at me in shame.”

“Well then,” Maedhros said, mind already searching for schemes and strategies, “why not go to Faramir, and tell him that I would like to speak to him at his earliest convenience.”

Faramir presented himself that afternoon, in Maedhros’s sitting room. They’d given him a set of rooms in the old royal wing, which, since Aragorn was the only actual member of the royal family, had taken a few liberties. The sons of the Elrond, the Variag queen, the royal family of Rohan, and the diplomats from Rhûn and Harad were all there, and the Steward’s family only next door, still sharing many of the same luxuries and conveniences. Though Maedhros’s physical function was slow to return, he was by that point able to meet Faramir seated in a chair, not in a bed or lying on a sofa, which he counted as an improvement. Faramir sat across the small table from him, and met his eyes carefully. They two had never spoken privately before.

“Is this the same talk you called my father in to have the day you woke?” Faramir was blunt, and astute to have drawn the connection.

“If you want it to be,” Maedhros offered, drawing on the elven mysticism that most mortals took as par for the course.

Faramir was a scholar though, and he raised an eyebrow in return. “I want it to be what it needs to be.”

“Well then,” Maedhros mused, “shall we begin?”

“I suppose so. Where are we to begin?”

Maedhros grinned. “Wherever you would like.”

Faramir folded his hands carefully on his lap. “You know whatever it is that has been occupying Boromir’s mind of late. I want you to tell me what it is, and why he hasn’t told me.”

Interesting. There was nothing quite like tactics with someone who was your equal in intellect, not just in sheer force of will.

“Maybe that is a question you should be asking him.”

“Perhaps,” Faramir said, “but perhaps the reason he wanted me to see you today is so that I would not have to. Because maybe he is afraid. And I do not like the idea of something that makes Boromir too afraid to talk to me. Not at all.”

How to segue this back to his own plan in such a way that Faramir suspected nothing. “I would not like something that scared my brother in that way either. I was always the confidante of most of my brothers, for deeply personal matters, though Maglor most of all, since we were closest. But the others sometimes came to me too, when they wanted the wisdom of an elder, but not to have our parents know. And by our parents, I mean our father. Well, you are a scholar, you know what kind of person my father was. Anyhow, they confided in me, always, but I sometimes found it difficult to
confide in them. They were younger, they looked up to me, and I wanted to protect them from the things that troubled me. I regret that now. Particularly with Maglor. I thought he was bad at keeping secrets, and did not trust him with my marriage, only now to discover that he has known all along, and kept that secret even from me.”

“Are you saying that Boromir isn’t telling me because he is trying to protect me?” He demanded, leaning in closer. Maedhros shrugged vaguely. “Idiot! I do not want to be protected. I came too close to losing him already.”

His anger was not for Maedhros. “I know. Believe me, I know. But do you not have any secrets that you are scared to share with those you love? With those who love you? A secret fear, perhaps? A secret hope, easily crushed like a flower rising too early? A secret lover?”

Faramir looked down at his hands. Maedhros tried to read him. He was more like Denethor than Boromir, in his looks, but there was something more elven to him also, a delicateness of his features. Boromir was mannish, even if they two had the same blood.

“You do have secret fears, of course. We all do. Until my fight with Sauron, I had never consciously used my greatest magical skill. I feared that I did not have one. That I was a failure, a mistake. That I was the least of my family, even though I was the eldest son. My father was one of the most powerful elves ever born, and I felt like nothing. I never told him that. Not even in death, that I remember. He still does not know how afraid I was of disappointing him.”

This tactic almost always worked. When he showed this sort of vulnerability, others felt compelled to match him. “I have always thought my father was disappointed in me. Not for any particular reason. Just, well, for being born. Boromir doesn’t know that. He may have guessed, but I never told him in as many words.”

Based on how much Boromir had worried about Denethor’s treatment of Faramir in his absence, Maedhros thought it was likely that he, like Maglor before him, had always known more than he let on.

“In part, would I be right in thinking that you do not tell him because you worry about how he would react, given the relationship he has with your father? That he might disbelieve you, or, failing that, be very upset by the revelation of your father’s misdeeds?”

Faramir shrugged. “I suppose. But I have let you lead me off track. Regardless of what it is, Boromir is wrong in not telling me. I love him, and he should not feel the need to protect me from the truth.”

Maedhros weighed his options. “What if I tell you and it does upset you? Would you go take it out on Boromir?”

Faramir shook his head. “He has been through more than enough, these past months. It would depend what it was, I suppose. I assume my father already knows. I might speak to him. Or to Éowyn or Gandalf. Does Gandalf already know?”

Now there was a question Maedhros had to considered. “I have no idea. Aragorn knows, but to my knowledge, none of the rest of the fellowship does. Though with Maiar, it can be hard to tell. Certainly, he will not be shocked. In fact, he might do you good.”

“Will you tell me now?”

“Boromir is sexually and romantically attracted to men,” Maedhros rushed out. Faramir sagged back with relief on his face.
“I thought you were trying to tell me he was dying!”

Maedhros found this inexplicably hilarious, and he laughed aloud. Faramir laughed too, almost ironically. After they subsided into silence, Faramir spoke again.

“I think I understand now why he wanted me to speak to you. Because you are the same. At least I assume so, with your husband. Are many elves thus?”

In their banter, Maedhros had missed the point entirely. The one thing Boromir had specifically asked him to discuss. He resisted the urge to bury his head in his hands. “Most elves love only one in their lives. Gender, sex, these things are irrelevant to the base concept of an elven marriage, which is little more than an oath of love sworn between two people in Eru’s name. But that was not all of why Boromir wanted me to talk to you. I remember also many historical men and women who were thus. In Himring and Himlad it was always legal for any consenting and informed adults to marry, and the law passed through me to my son, becoming the law of the land in early Númenor. When the law changed, I do not know, but I have my ideas as to why.”

Sauron had ever liked sowing the seeds of division among men. This was as insidious a seed as any.

“You son?” Faramir asked.

“Elros Tar-Minyataur, my foster son. He was always interested in both. Some people are.”

Faramir nodded thoughtfully. “There are some copies of Númenórean legal texts in the library. I could look at those. Mind you, I am busy, and having a native Quenya speaker look over them might be faster and more accurate.”

Maedhros waved a hand at him. “Yes, yes, I will take a look at any texts you bring to me. Now get yourself to your brother. He will surely be worrying away about the consequences of our talk.”

Faramir stood, but as he made to leave, he stopped. “Will he be alright, do you think? Boromir, I mean. Can he be happy in a place like this?”

Maedhros considered the question. “I have been happier in worse places, because the people I loved and who loved me in turn were there. You are here, your father is still here, somehow, all Boromir’s new friends, many of whom know the truth and love him, are here. But honestly, I think he could take or leave the rest of us. You are here, alive and happy. That is what Boromir really cares about. Same as he always has.”

Faramir nodded solemnly. “I will do my best to treat him with all the love and kindness he has shown me.”

If Faramir could do that, Maedhros knew, it would be all the happiness Boromir truly valued. He went to find his brother, leaving Maedhros alone. It was stifling and dull, and so Maedhros hauled himself to his feet. If he stayed, his thoughts would surely spiral towards his missing bonds, and no good could come of that. He thought about leaving his quarters, trying to explore the palace, but his legs were too weak for that, and instead, a wave of inspiration struck.

Elladan had returned Cànë, quite forcefully, insisting that he never wanted the responsibility to carry Maedhros’s blade ever again. Maedhros carefully unsheathed it, lying back on his bed so he wouldn’t fall over if the visions became too intense, and pressed tip of his thumb slowly against the blade until it drew a single drop of blood. He focused on Maglor first.

Maglor in the vision was asleep sitting against a tree, his head lolling over to rest on Elrond’s shoulder. Maedhros guessed it was no more than a few days or weeks in the future, since he still had
some of that weary thinness about him, and he could not imagine Elrond allowing that to persist for
long. They both seemed happy, Maglor peaceful and Elrond weary but with a fond smile on his face.
He drew his hand back, and tried again, moving on to Celegorm. Celegorm was standing at a
palantir, likely mending it from the damage Maedhros had done to the network. Whatever he saw
cauised him to draw his hand back, and run as fast as he could from the tower, not even pausing to
close the door behind him. Maedhros watched this vision twice more, trying to get a glimpse of what
Celegorm was seeing in the glass, but noticed little other than his own reflection. It would take him
some hours to realize that a reflection of Maedhros would be enough to cause Celegorm to flee from
the room.

Caranthir was next, and he was at a party. Others all around him were celebrating, but Caranthir
himself was staring morosely into a glass of wine, and the hand holding it shook. Maedhros could
not bear to watch, but he could not try Curufin either. He was too afraid of what he might not find.
So instead, he skipped to Ambarussa. Both of their visions seemed to be of the same party as
Caranthir’s. Amras’s vision was very specific, the feeling of his feet moving quickly through the
steps of a dance, which Amrod’s was very general, as he and Amarië sat in a corner, drinking
vanyarin spirits and watching the party unfold. From this angle, he could see Caranthir again, still
morose, and also Finrod, moving to speak to him.

All these visions done, Maedhros had no choice but to place his thumb to the blade one last time, and
focus on Curufin. For a horrible second, he thought that all he could see was darkness, but then there
was a torchlight at the corner of his vision, and he realized Curufin was not dead, merely
underground. The torchbearer came around the corner, and Curufin swung a light of his own up to
meet him, and then he and Celebontir, who was dressed for mining, both dropped their lights
entirely as they embraced.

Maedhros pulled his hand clear and wept with relief. He had feared, on a near-consuming level, that
what he had done against Sauron had not been good enough. But it had been. It had been enough to
save Curufin, to pay him back for all he had given so Maedhros could be happy. That meant they
were all safe. It was more important to Maedhros than he could ever have expressed with words.
Once he was out of tears, he laughed in his relief. It was more than he could have dreamed of, when
he had set out on his mission.

When Faramir’s courier finally arrived with piles of Númenórean law books, Maedhros sent him
away again, with a very important message.

“The messenger said you needed my help.” Frodo said, raising his voice as though it was a question.
Maybe to him, it was.

Maedhros gestured to the piles of paper in front of him. “I do.”

Frodo looked meaningfully at his right arm, and back at Maedhros. Maedhros crossed his arms in
front of him, and raised an eyebrow.

“Last I checked, your eyes were just fine, and you read Quenya. I do not need anything in depth. All
I need is for you to sort these papers into two piles: those that could conceivably have anything to do
with laws on marriage, and those that could not. Does that sound within your capacity?”

Frodo was forced to admit that yes, he could read that much Quenya, and eventually, in the face of
Maedhros’s unrelenting stare, he picked up a stack titled ‘Changes under Tar-Minastir, 1733 S.E.’,
and started leafing through it. Periodically, he dropped a sheet or two, having trouble balancing them
on his knee and flipping the pages. Maedhros made a point to say nothing of it. Frodo needed to
learn to do it on his own. Better for him to hate Maedhros for making him do it than to hate himself.
They gleaned nothing meaningful from the research. No text was dated much earlier than Frodo’s amendments under Tar-Minastir, and those that were the most thorough were later again, and often from colonies of Númenor rather than the kingdom itself. This done, Maedhros dismissed Frodo, who seemed relieved to rid himself of mad elves, and started on the texts Frodo had sorted as having little or nothing to do with marriage law. And Frodo was right, they were mostly useless, but two documents stood out. One was the record of a number of executions under Ar-Gimilzôr, one of which was for following ‘elvish perversions’, and the other was a family tree of a judge dating to Tar-Elendil, which featured two feminine-suffixed Quenya names joined in what appeared to be marriage. So, evidently, whatever had happened had happened in the two-thousand and more years between those two points. But beyond that, Maedhros knew little and less. He copied down his findings for Faramir, and then made copies for Aragorn and Denethor. Denethor could still use some perspective, after all, and this was as good as Maedhros could give him.

The work would achieve little, perhaps. Aragorn would still be faced with overhauling almost every law and system of Gondor, and founding Arnor again from scratch. But it was also important to never forget their history. Good and terrible, there was much still to be learned and understood. Especially among these people, who had forgotten so much. That was when inspiration struck. Maedhros picked up his quill, and wrote his own name at the top of one sheet. After that, the words came easy.

*I am the son of Nerdanel and Fëanor.*

*I remained there 30 years.*

*The fortress at Himring was built in such a way…*

*And that was when I first understood that he loved me.*

*The men and women who followed me at Himring came from a thousand walks of life, and shared between them one attribute and one attribute only: courage.*

*… but Bór and his sons were faithful.*

Maedhros ran out of paper before he even came close to running out of words.

Chapter End Notes

I’m not sure yet what next week is going to entail, because I have more of The Cruelest Month written, and nothing more of this. Also, I’m very busy because school. I had 3 essays due this week so this chapter existing is a fucking miracle. We might be moving to a long chapter-short chapter alternating weeks kind of thing. I’m working on it, I promise. Check out both chapters of The Cruelest Month if you haven’t already. It’s actually a fairly cheerful story despite the title.
Time Passes

Chapter Summary

Maedhros, waiting, healing, through May and June.

Chapter Notes

CWs
Frodo and Maedhros discuss their respective traumas here, and Maedhros describes his experiences with a flashback. It’s also never implicitly stated but he implies experiencing some feelings of dysmorphia associated with being called Maitimo after Thangorodrim. If you want to skip that whole conversation, just from when Frodo says “No” to the line that begins with “In the end...”

Look after yourself folks.

Elladan had him write out his messages for Fingon, Elrond, and Maglor, so they could be delivered word-perfect through the grapevine that included he and Elrohir, Galadriel and Celeborn, and Elrond himself. Maedhros knew they would be public, and therefore kept each as brief as he could. He started with Elrond, since that message would have to be received first.

I am sorry for failing to reach out to you earlier. I should have. I have always deeply valued the relationship I shared with you and Elros, and I am hopeful I may still share it with you. Thank you for your ceaseless dedication to Maglor, and for the kindness you have shown me.

He could not bear to end it with, ‘I love you’. He had never said that before to Elrond, and when he did, he wanted it to be in person. He moved on to Maglor before he could dwell.

Kanafinwë, I am sorry for being a fool, and an idiot, and putting you through this at least three times now. If our positions were reversed, I would have chewed your ear off by now with my scolding, and I suspect I have earned a taste of my own medicine, so to speak. I love you, and I miss you, and I’m sorry.

And then if he didn’t spend hours agonizing over a letter that was no longer than the others.

I love you, and I am sorry. I love you, and I am sorry. I love you, and there is no apology for what I did to us. To you. I would not hold it against you if you did not forgive me- I do not think Míriel has forgiven the same. Being married to you was the greatest joy of my life. And I am sorry.

He gave the letters over to Elladan, and waited for a response. It came, three days later, and Elladan wrote them all out and handed them over.

Elrond wrote: I understand, and I forgive you. For everything in my power to forgive. Thank you, for looking after my sons. All of them.
He was a better son than Maedhros deserved, and Maedhros was ceaselessly grateful that their relationship, at least, might leave this storm stronger than it had entered. For they had never consciously shared a bond. Maedhros had always shielded away that connection. This was not so different save that Maedhros now knew what opportunity he was missing. Even with no magic, they could build a relationship, as family. Maedhros was unreservedly happy about that.

Maglor wrote: *I hate you. I hate you. I truly do. Honestly. Never, ever do that again, or I will bite you, and not just with my biting quips. Just you wait. It shall happen when you least expect it.*

Maedhros could read his worry under the text, but there was also a wry humour. It was good to feel laughter in Maglor’s words again.

Fingon wrote: *I love you, but I do not know how we can ever come back from this. I want to try, but I cannot fathom out how.*

Elladan seemed almost guilty to deliver the message, and much more so to deliver the no less than three addendums that went with it, one from each of the transmitters.

Elrond: *He spent a month grieving as if you were dead. He needs time to adjust.*

Galadriel: *Finno is loyal to the point of stupidity. I refuse to believe that this is his breaking point.*

Celeborn: *Please stop meddling, dearest.*

Maedhros crushed the note in his hand, a sudden, unexpected fear driving quick into anger. He pressed his closed fist to his forehead, and wept, grateful for the privacy that the thick walls of his room and the dull hearing of men afforded him. It was terrifying, to imagine that they might not be able to fix it even if they both wanted to. His hand shook, and he wished he was strong enough to rage and throw things. The hopelessness made him want to break something, to fight against the unfairness of it all.

When he finally pulled himself back together, he unfolded the note and read it again. Then, he made himself be grateful for everything he still had. A brother who worried but also laughed at the madness of it all. A son, who forgave him. A meddling little cousin. A husband- former husband- who was willing to try again. That was enough to fight for. Maedhros had fought worse odds for less.

Maedhros kept going. His body healed, and he went from lying mostly, to seated mostly, to standing mostly. His mind was slower to recover. The fog seemed to clear, but none of his bonds from before the fight reappeared. Not only Fingon’s, but also Maglor’s and Elrond’s and even Galadriel’s were cut off entirely. Elladan fussed constantly, to little effect. Rúmil seemed worried too, but the worry of an informed friend, not a healer. Of all Maedhros’s friends, he was the one with the most free time to dedicate to simple conversation, and he did so. They spoke for long hours of history and future and knowledge. He was the first to read what Maedhros had written, thus far, and the first to comment on it.

“I think you need a translator,” Rúmil told him.

Maedhros crooked his head. “I speak and write Sindarin and Westron, in addition to Quenya. Why would I need a translator? Aside from for modern Easterling and Haradic tongues. Obviously. But I want an actual scholar for that, if possible, not a soldier or a spy.”

Rúmil crooked his head to match. “Do you have the time to write this out in Westron too?”

He was right. For simplicity’s sake, Maedhros had already been writing in Sindarin. There were few
enough readers of Quenya in this place for that to have been practical. So, it was not a particular hardship to find someone who could translate into Westron.

“No,” Frodo told him.

Maedhros had convinced people to come around to worse ideas. “Try it.”

“No.”

Force was off the table. Perhaps bribery. “If you do it, I will draw by hand the schematics for every augmentation and prosthetic Curufin ever thought of, which was not an insignificant number, since he had a few centuries to go about it.”

Frodo shook his head again. “You would do that anyway. You are too nice by half to do anything else.”

“I have killed a great many people,” Maedhros pointed out, half-confused.

“You raised Elrond,” Frodo corrected, as though that had ever prohibited anybody from killing. But then, well, it did undermine his ability to be intimidating a little.

Maedhros folded his arms across his chest. “Frodo, if anyone in this city has an idea how hard this is for you, I am that person. I went through this. The muscles in my shoulder were so damaged, I could barely hold a quill in the hand I still had. It hurt. I hurt. I changed my name because every time they called me ‘Maitimo’, they looked at where my hand used to be. I thought it was clever. Half-Maitimo, half-Russandol- I was also missing a significant amount of hair- all Sindarin, so it would not remind me of the past. For everything they can see is missing, there are a thousand things that they will never understand.”

He was leaning forward by the end, not yelling, but certainly animated. Maedhros had not meant to be so forceful. He leant back, and folded his arms tight across his chest. Frodo, looking cowed, bowed his head. Maedhros opened his mouth to apologize, but Frodo spoke first.

“I killed someone. His name was Smeagol, but after he became a kinslayer, they called him Gollum. He was a hobbit, once, I think. I- the ring changed him. It made him into a thing, its creature. I wanted to help him. I thought I could help him, but it was his betrayal that cost me this.” Frodo held up his right arm, where the sleeve was tied closed. “Sam thinks I had to do what I did, and that killing him was an accidental but necessary consequence. And maybe I did. But the truth is that in that moment, I was so angry at what he had cost me, I think I wanted him to fall. I hated him, right up until the moment I became him.”

And Maedhros knew that, too. He reached out and placed a hand- left- on Frodo’s knee. “That you feel guilt now, for acting in defense against one who did you great harm, tells me that you have not become whatever you think you are. But that does not mean the feeling is not real. In retrospect, I do not count Alqualondë the same as the other kinslayings. Doriath and Sirion were intentional slaughters. Driven by the oath, aye, but we knew what we were doing. Yet those are not what I now find most likely to haunt me. In Lóthlorien, ruled by the last Lord of Doriath, I remembered Alqualondë. We did not know what we were doing, there. We were afraid. I remember being afraid, thinking I was going to die. Thinking my brothers were going to die. I can smell it, on my worst days, the saltwater and fish and blood. These things are complicated. Deeply complicated. You should find someone better to talk to than me or Sam, for he is too inclined to excuse murder and I too inclined to assume everyone good in spite of their violence.”

Frodo reached over beside him, and opened the drawer, fumbling around inside for a minute before
he seized upon a piece of paper.

“I would translate it for you, but I do not think anyone could read it.”

It was Frodo’s name, perhaps a hundred times, over and over and over again, in shaky, smudged, slanted writing. Maedhros crumpled the paper and threw it away. Frodo reached out to try and catch it left-handed, and missed. It flew neatly out an open window.

“That was mine,” Frodo complained.

Maedhros stood, went to the desk, and fetched him a new piece of paper, a quill, and some ink.

“Show me.”

Frodo only had to write one character before Maedhros noticed the first problem. “No, hold it like this. See? Otherwise, the ink will smudge when you move past it. And relax your grip. Better.”

“Why are you doing this?” Frodo asked him, after a long silence.

“There is no going back. Not for any of us. All we can do now is help each other learn to find new ways to be.”

“And you want to help me?”

If only that was all. “I think we all need help. Me no less than you. Just differently.”

Frodo looked up at him. “I hope you get it.”

Maedhros offered him a half smile. “And you.”

In the end, Frodo agreed to translate, but made no promises about the legibility of his writing. And, he said, he would only make a copy for the Shire. If Rohan or Gondor wanted one, they would have to make their own translation or recopy his. Maedhros, who needed a translator less than he needed to help his friend, did not mind.

The days bled together. Maedhros walked better, day by day. He worked hard to keep his mind busy. He used a hundred sheets of drafting paper, wracking his brain for every memory of Curu芬’s work, and Celebrimbor’s too. And then he gave them all over to Gimli. With the Noldor on these shores so depleted, there were no craftsmen so reliable as dwarves. He had private dinners in his quarters, with those of the ten who remained in Gondor. They seemed to have collectively decided to become political entities and do-gooders, a fact that Maedhros was proud of. He wished them great success. He went out and walked the city with Boromir, speaking to people and seeing it from the perspective of a local. He negotiated for an exchange of scholars between the Easterling capital and Minas Tirith. He dined at the king’s table. He sat in on plans for the wedding, and also to organize aid to Nurn. When he heard that Sauron had been keeping thralls and slaves just as Morgoth had, it made his blood boil.

“Did anybody know?” Maedhros demanded of the room at large.

“No,” Boromir said, confidently.

“Yes,” corrected Halon. He did not even bother to translate the question.

They both knew Boromir was well-meaning, but not informed. Maedhros looked directly to Halon.

“Did anyone care?”
Halon looked down at his hands, which was answer enough.

They coordinated responses between Harad and Khand, with the other nations agreeing to provide support for those efforts. The trick was to ensure that neither country made a power grab in the region. In the increasingly complex knot of potential marriages and trade deals that were resulting from the treaty, only Harad and Khand had not solidified ties with each other. Though Harad seemed poised to make efforts to solidify their position against Khand, sending no less than three princesses and a prince up for the wedding, in hopes of an alliance with Gondor. They still lost that race to Khand. The Queen had quietly married Denethor, in a logic she elaborated on to Maedhros after some pressing.

“He and I have already been married to someone we loved once. Our children deserve the same. If those matches are prudent, as Faramir’s is, then it is lucky, not necessary. And to be married to someone I even liked the second time is more than I could have dreamed. The ruler of the Variags always needs a partner, an ally. I was my mother’s, for the first three years of my reign, and then my husband and brother were mine. If I remarried to a Variag man, they would expect to assume that title in place of my children. A man from Gondor cannot, but he will still be able to support our power as I transition my First-Heir into their position as Chieftain of the Variags. And it keeps Harad out of my bedchamber. Of our three nations, they always conformed to Sauron’s manipulations the most easily. Sometimes at great cost to the Variags. My people do not trust them.”

Maedhros folded his hands on his lap. “And you believe they will trust Denethor?”

She shrugged. “From the common Variag perspective, Denethor’s actions in repulsing years of Haradrim incursion were perfectly reasonable. I have had to do the same, in my reign. But maybe without the fear of Sauron over their heads, Harad can change. Amnus is already a better man than the last six Northern Kings.” She had explained the government of Harad to him. It was very complicated, and involved many kings. “At least this way, they will be forced to strengthen ties with Gondor in other ways. Though I do pity the princesses. With Faramir as good as married off and Boromir courting a commoner, they will be very shamed by their inability to achieve an alliance.”

The princesses and prince arrived just as Elladan and Elrohir left to go fetch their sister, accompanying the army of Rohan as it returned home. They were from a number of backgrounds, with Princess Lystara all the way from Far Harad, and Princess Celva a corsair by birth. The last two were both from the northernmost haradic kingdom, and were brother and sister. They did not seem particularly enthused by the idea of marrying some northerner, and Princess Celva was certainly not, since many of her people had been wiped out by Aragorn when he had seized their ships. But Princess Lystara was different. She seemed to realize quickly that she would have no luck with a marriage to a steward’s son of Gondor and refocused her attentions on Lothíriel of Dol Amroth. Boromir, who was Lothíriel’s cousin, thought the whole thing was hilarious.

“It is a shame that she and Éomer were halfway through a courtship when he left,” Maedhros said, “elsewise, we might have settled this whole matter of alliances with one exactly to each nation. As it is, we may yet have to rope one of Lothíriel’s brothers into this mess.”

Boromir shook his head. “Then it would have been two for Harad and only one for Rohan, which hardly seems fair.”

He was clearly thinking of his own relationship with Halon. “If who you are marrying is not nobility, Boromir, it hardly counts.”

Boromir gave Maedhros a smirk worthy of Curufin. “Not yet.”

Just because he was the least sneaky member of his family did not mean that Boromir never had
plans. “What are you thinking?”

“Haradic nobility can be elevated. It is rare, but it can be done. Likely, that is what they will do to keep Anmus in charge of the army. For acts in service of the crown, or ceaseless bravery. Given what Halon did, in going into Minas Morgul, it would not be difficult to see him qualifying. And I asked Princess Lystara- in Harad, a marriage alliance sealed by two men would be unusual, but not unheard of. Two women would generally be preferred, but, she says, ‘men will do’.”

Maedhros tapped his fingers on the arm of his chair. “And what does Halon think of all this?”

“Well,” Boromir said, smiling, “he said his mother would be very proud to have her son elevated, but she would probably like to be there for any wedding he gets himself into.”

“There is no rush to wed.” Maedhros was an expert in not rushing to wed. Though once he had finally managed to propose, they had been very prompt about it.

Boromir’s smile faded, and he looked down. “There is some rush. I want everyone important to be there too.”

“I am sure your father has many good years yet, and would not mind coming back from Khand to see you wed.”

Boromir looked back up at him, confused. “Have your plans changed? Do you not mean to rush back to Valinor now this is over?”

Maedhros’s plans for the future ended and began with a single event. He had not even considered anything before nor after that. But now that Boromir suggested it, he imagined, for a minute, staying on these shores. Though it had been overwhelmed by the oath, there was a time where he had wanted to leave Valinor, to see the earliest homes of the elves and explore the world. He could have that, now. But not without Fingon. If Fingon wanted to return to Valinor, Maedhros would be on the very first ship they could find. He owed him that much.

Finally, Maedhros said, quite truthfully, “I do not know.”

Boromir reached over to put a hand on his knee. “I hope you can be there. Everything you have done for me means more than you can ever know.”

Maedhros took Boromir’s hand in his. “You deserve to be loved, Boromir. I will be there if I can.”

Boromir shook his head. “You deserve to be loved too. If you have to leave, for your family, I will understand.”

It was good to have friends like Boromir.

Maedhros woke, a few days later, to a knocking at his door. He opened it to a hooded stranger. There was a long, awkward pause before she threw her hood back.

“Does Aragorn know you have arrived?” Maedhros asked, leaning against the doorframe. Arwen rolled her eyes at him.

“Please- who do you think told me where to find you?”

It was a good point. “Are the others-”

Arwen cut him off. “Oh, a day or two off yet. Maglor does not travel so fast, and my father worries.
Not to mention that he and Fingon are both worried about what meeting you will bring, despite what you said in your messages to them.”

Maedhros let her into the sitting room, since it was clear she did not intend to leave any time soon. Arwen took off her cloak, and folded it over the back of a chair, displaying a dove-grey riding dress.

“So, they are not far behind. But why are you ahead?”

Arwen sat, folding her hands demurely in her lap. Maedhros thought it was the performance of meekness, rather than meekness itself. “Maglor asked me to go ahead. He thought someone who was there should come and speak honestly to you about what Fingon has been through in the time since your bond was lost. I was there, and I could ride away and have everyone think I only wanted to see Aragorn. It was the perfect excuse.”

Maedhros felt fear rising in his throat, but he pressed it back. “Well then, best give the message and have it over with.”

Arwen met his eyes, and spoke clearly and slowly. There was empathy in her words, and anger too, but she was like a soldier offering a report. She did not let her feelings colour it overmuch.

“Fingon’s fëa almost fled his body when he felt whatever it was you did. It was only Maglor’s quick thinking that kept him with us. Afterwards, he spent a long time coming to terms with your death. I think he only stayed because he felt a duty to me and Maglor. Even though he knows now you are alive, it remains difficult for him to come to terms with it all. My father says that even when things have changed, the memory of pain can be just as strong as pain itself. It may take him a long time to learn to live with what happened. I think- I think you should be braced for this to be a slow transition.”

Maedhros braced his head between his knees. “Will we be able to recover from this, in your opinion?”

Arwen stood. “In my opinion? Time is precious. Elves never value it enough. You have all the time in the world to figure out new, better ways to be, but that does not mean you should be wasting a second of it.”

She swept out of the room, a force of nature.

Maedhros considered all the healing he had done, the strict directions Elladan had given him not to exert himself, and some general moral principles. Then he snuck down to the stables and stole his own horse. The guards, though they would surely inform Faramir the second he had gone, allowed him past, and, pushing the horse from a walk straight into a canter, he sped away from the city.

Chapter End Notes

(Please read in the voice of Farnsworth from Futurama) Good news everyone! I’ve written this chapter and the next chapter back-to-back. You know what that means- Next week. IT. THE T H I N G. Get Hype.

Also, just for clarifying purposes, I’m imagining the Haradic government as sort of a feudal system, but like every other Tolkien nation, they don’t use titles the way we use titles (lookin’ at you, Lords of Gondolin), and so they refer to what we might call
‘Princes’ or ‘Grand Dukes’ or ‘Electors’ or whatever as kings.
Maedhros’s wound would only allow him to canter for so long, and soon, he relaxed to walking the horse so neither of them would become over-exerted. The sun rose slow over Sauron’s mountains. Maedhros wondered if they would crumble in time, or if they would forever remain as a reminder of what had happened here. He wondered if it would be possible to bring them down. At least some. To create better paths. To tear away some of the corruption. But they were not so hideous, in direct sunlight, with the smoke long cleared and the sky turning from black to orange and then a fine, clear blue. He wondered if there would be trees on them, someday. Fine white snow at the very tips, and streams running down them in summer to join the Anduin on its long trek to the sea. That would be beautiful, in a way. And what a triumph over Sauron, to make his creations beautiful in that greatest and oldest elven tradition. Harmony. Natural and right.

He had a vague sense that Elladan was somewhere ahead by mid-day. Since his connection with Elladan was almost the only one he had, it was not so hard to focus on it. No communication, but at least there was a general awareness of his presence. Maedhros tried to pass at least news of his approach, some sentiment, along, but nothing worked. Instead, it seemed to only weaken him. He pressed on, in spite of his exhaustion, or perhaps because of it.

“Halt there!” Someone called, in Sindarin. Maedhros gave his horse a soft tap on the shoulder- they were still working on communicating- and halted. He was wearing his hood pulled up over his hair and ears, and wondered how they had known to call in Sindarin before seeing him. He looked up, to try and see who it was, and pushed his hood back and down.

“Well,” someone else said gloomily, “that is definitely not Arwen.”

And they were not who he had been looking for either, but Maedhros knew one of their faces. “Glorfindel! Still not as fair as Ecthelion, but I suppose you will have to do.”

Glorfindel made a very crude gesture. “Just because you were born pretty, does not mean you have to be so rude about it.”

It was part of a long, old joke, about how Maedhros and Celegorm were the prettiest of the House of Finwë and Turgon was compensating by surrounding himself with pretty friends- Finrod included. It had become markedly less funny later, after everything. But when they had been dead, the last time Maedhros had spoken to Glorfindel, he had mentioned it. Not that Glorfindel remembered of course,
but the imprint of the memory was buried in there somewhere.

“Arwen went to go see Aragorn,” Maedhros told them, walking his horse closer. The other elf rolled his eyes.

“And after all that time we spent planning how we would organize the ceremony too.”

Glorfindel reached over, and, very intimately, tweaked his ear. “She can always sneak out again and meet us. Besides, they have not seen each other for months. If it were not for Elrond’s fussing, we would have been there already.”

They seemed perfectly poised to carry on their conversation, but Maedhros cleared his throat. “Can you take me to them?”

Glorfindel grinned. “I can do you one better.” He put his fingers to his mouth and whistled, loudly. A minute later, someone whistled back, and there was the sound of approaching hooves. “It was not so disorganized a search as all that. Especially with renegade bands of orcs still about.”

They must have been in pairs, and they seemed to have kept Arwen’s disappearance in the family too, for the other search party that honed in on their location was just as much above the task as Glorfindel and his partner were. As soon as they two were in sight, Glorfindel and the other one both turned and rode away, leaving Maedhros alone. He trusted Glorfindel, but it was all a bit much, right until the second when the riders both stopped, one after the other, and stared at him in disbelief.

“I am going to kill you,” Maglor told him, false-calm. “I hate you so much that there are not even words for it. Elladan told us you had been so ill, it was a miracle you were already up and walking around. What do you think you are doing?”

“Not wasting time,” Maedhros told him, trying to keep his voice as calm as Maglor’s. “I am very tired of wasting time.”

“Good!” Maglor snapped. He dismounted, gracefully. He was still so thin, but his face seemed to have filled out, and there was a light in his eyes. He was wearing gloves of fine leather, and good riding gear. If not for the age that seemed to have touched him, only just, and the careful way he held his hands, he could have been riding from the Gap. Elrond, after a minute, dismounted beside him. It took Maedhros a second to figure out a way to dismount without falling off the horse, but he managed.

“Hello,” he said, to both of them, but mostly Elrond. “I missed you.”

He held out his arms for them. Neither moved, for a moment. Then Maglor looked at Elrond, and gave him half-hearted a shove.

“He means you, kid.”

Elrond shuffled forward, but still did not move into his reach.

“Actually,” Maedhros corrected, “I meant both of you. These long arms are good for something.”

Maglor made a noise in the back of his throat, and crossed in three long steps to bury his face in Maedhros’s shoulder. Elrond still did not move. Maedhros wrapped one arm around Maglor, and was grateful to be able to extend his right hand to Elrond.

“It is an honour to be able to greet you as my son,” Maedhros said, after a too-long search for the right words. It seemed to work. Elrond made a strangled noise to match Maglor’s, and folded into
Maedhros’s arms. Maglor shifted so they were holding their son between them, and allowed Elrond to cry.

“It will all be alright,” Maglor promised him, rubbing one gloved hand along Elrond’s back. “We have you.” To Maedhros, he mouthed, ‘good job, Nelyo. Very comforting.’

Maedhros pressed a kiss to the top of Elrond’s head. “Elrond, if you will have me, I would be very proud to call you my son.”

He only cried harder, and Maedhros suddenly found himself blinking back tears as well. Maglor whispered, “we missed you, too.”

Maedhros did not know who ‘we’ was, and did not ask. “There are some things you should know. I- I suppose Elladan will have told you; I remember being dead. Oh, you should have heard the scolding I got from the others for leaving you alone. Caranthir in particular was quite livid. But that is not what I meant to tell you. Curufin is an idiot who leveraged his own life in exchange for the chance that I could, maybe, beat Sauron. Idiot that I am, I did not stop him. But I have seen that he is returned, or will be soon. It has all worked out, in the end.”

All except for him and Fingon. He wondered by now if Glorfindel had found him. There was no doubt in his mind that Glorfindel had gone to meddle. Maedhros stroked a hand over Elrond’s hair, and tried not to think about it.

“I wonder what Finrod will think of that,” Maglor muttered. It was a possibility Maedhros had never considered.

“I hope he feels suitably avenged,” Maedhros offered, as a joke, though it felt rather hollow. To Elrond, he said. “Let me look at you, yonya. It has been a long time since I have seen your face.”

Elrond pulled away, just a little. Now that he was finally in Maedhros’s arms, he seemed reluctant to let go. He looked older than Maedhros had seen him last, though not by much. The bigger difference was that he no longer seemed to have that lightness of youth, nor the indefinite quality of mortality. Some part of Maedhros felt sorry for the change, but mostly, he was glad to have Elrond still there in his arms. It felt wrong to be there, the three of them, without Elros. He should have been there, teasing Elrond for crying so much and trying to make him laugh through the tears.

Elrond, ever intuitive, whispered, “I know. I miss him too. Every day.”

Maedhros folded him back into the hug. “I am sorry I was not there, when you decided. I would have told you both that I loved you, no matter what you chose. I should have said it then. I should have said it every day.”

“We knew.” Elrond mumbled, but Maedhros did not miss his shoulders relaxing, ever so slightly, at the confirmation of the thing.

“That does not change the fact that I should have told you. There is so much I should have said. I should have told you that I think your generosity in all things is one of your greatest virtues. I should have said the same to Elros about his steadfastness, and Maglor, I should have said it about your hope. You were right. You were! There is so much in this world to be joyful about, to be loyal and generous for.”

Maglor smiled, easy charm bubbling to the surface. “I knew you would see my point one day. About time, I say.”

Elrond finally managed to pull back, wiping his eyes undignifiedly on his sleeve. Maedhros wished
suddenly for a handkerchief, but did not have one.

“I am glad to see you,” he said, “but I do trust Elladan’s assessment as a healer. What were you thinking? You could have been killed by a band of orcs and then what would we have done?”

Maedhros pushed his hair behind one ear, feeling oddly dressed down. “Arwen reminded me of something I should have figured out years ago. Just because I have time, does not mean it is worth wasting. This is precious to me. Every second of it.”

Elrond fixed his hair and his tunic, but there was no hiding that he had been crying. “We should get you to Fingon. Then I want to take a look at you myself. Whatever you did to your marriage bond is very strange, and Glorfindel and I have been tearing our hair out trying to fix it from Fingon’s end for weeks, but we have no idea what will happen when you two actually meet. Or how you actually did what you did, by the way. If it was that easy to sever marriage bonds, Finwë would not have needed to appeal the Valar in the first place.”

Maedhros would be more than willing to allow Elrond this much, but later. “Oh, I do not think you will need to get me anywhere much. Glorfindel is handling it.”

Even as he was speaking, they began to hear the sound of two sets of approaching hooves. Maglor laughed, wryly, and Elrond could not help but smile. They stayed with him until Fingon arrived.

“Good luck,” Elrond whispered, conspiratorially.

“I plan to smack either one of you if you screw this up,” Maglor whispered, threateningly. He reached up and gave Maedhros’s shoulder a comforting squeeze, and then he threw his arm around Elrond’s shoulder and said, “come on, yonya.”

They walked off, horses following naturally, as elven steeds were wont to do. Glorfindel only appeared on the horizon before turning back, letting Fingon move on alone. Fingon stopped much closer to Maedhros than they had, and stared at him for a long second. He looked worse than Maglor did. Tired and too pale. But he was still Fingon. There was no gold in his hair, and it fell flat, limp and a little greasy. Maedhros wanted to fist his hands there and kiss Fingon until they both ran out of breath. He wanted to run his fingers over every inch of Fingon’s skin. And then his mouth. He thought maybe he should say as much to Fingon, but his breath caught in his throat.

Fingon dismounted gracefully, and muttered something to his horse, which ran off to follow Maglor’s. On his feet now, Maedhros was reminded of the difference in their height. Sometimes, when they spent a long time apart, it was easy to forget that he was a few inches taller.

Maedhros forced the anxiety in his throat down and said, “there are no words for how sorry I am.”

Fingon looked down at his hands. They were shaking. “This is real. You came. For me.”

“It is, and I did, and I always will. I promise.”

All Fingon said was, “come here, please.”

And then he was pulling Maedhros down into a kiss, hard as he could. It was inelegant, with too many teeth and not quite as much tongue as Maedhros would have liked, but, well, they had some time to work on it. When Fingon pulled back, he reached up and ran the pad of one finger across Maedhros’s teeth.

“Do you know, that is the first time we have ever kissed with two full sets of teeth?”
Maedhros nipped lightly at the pad of his finger, to reinforce the point, and then bent down to press their foreheads together.

“I love you more than I could ever say,” Maedhros told him, slipping back into the Quenya of their youth. “But I am willing to try, if you would like.”

Fingon responded by reaching into his pocket and pressing something into Maedhros’s hand. It took him a second to realize that it was a ring. He glanced down at it, and then stared.

“How?” He asked, softly.

Fingon pressed a gentler kiss to his lips before answering, “that son of yours. He kept it all these years, even not knowing what it was for. But for the record, I think the words you were looking for are, ‘marry me, Fingon’.”

It took Maedhros a second to catch up, and another to finish kissing Fingon again. “Fingon, I have no idea if this will work. Marry me?”

Fingon laughed, but he was also wiping away tears. Maedhros hoped they were happy tears. “Maedhros, I have no idea how we even made it this far. Yes.”

“Same oaths as last time?” Maedhros asked, and then he finally, finally- Eru, he was a fool- figured it out. He swore violently.

“What?” Fingon demanded.

“Why I was able to sever the bond. ‘As long as I am able.’ That was what I swore. Not ‘forever’. ‘I swear to him my sword, as long as I may in good conscience wield it, my knowledge, as long as I may trust what it contains, and my heart, as long as I am able.’ That oath in no way precludes ending the bond. In fact, under certain circumstances, it endorses it.”

Fingon swore too. “So, if you were not half so paranoid-”

“If I were not half so paranoid, Sauron might have tortured you, and that would have been on my conscience. Or worse, you might have become tied to our oath, and I would never have wanted that.”

Fingon shook his head, and then suddenly his shoulders were shaking, with tears or laughter. Maedhros touched him, tentatively, and when Fingon did not pull away, pressed him tight to his chest.

“What is it?” He asked, softly.

It took Fingon more than a minute to pull away, still sniffling, and say, “I wondered if it had worked because you did not really love me, when the truth was rather the opposite. If you did not love me, you would not have put so much care into the oath.” Then, he pulled back, and entwined his hands with Maedhros’s. “If you will not start, I will, this time. I, Findekáno, called Fingon, son of Nolofinwë Arakáno Finwion and AnaiRé Rehtaniel, High King of the Noldor in Middle Earth, do swear, in the name of Eru Illuvatar, that I will love this elf before me as long as I am able, and that I do wish to love him until Arda Remade. I swear that I shall listen to his council, respect his wishes, and trust his judgement. I swear to him my sword, as long as I may in good conscience wield it, my knowledge, as long as I may trust what it contains, and my heart, as long as I am able. Eru, hear that we two have shared love and fear, death and life, and rebirth. Eru, hear that he has already given me his heart as long as he could bear, and wishes yet to give it again. Eru, hear that he is the only person I have ever wanted, and will ever want. Eru, please, let us try again.”
Maedhros’s hands shook. Fingon had used the same oaths, changing only his ‘Eru, hear’ part. This was happening. They were trying again. He began with his name and the same oaths, and then, slowly, diverged. “Eru, hear that he has gone above and beyond to protect me and my family. Eru, hear that I have never wanted anything more than to share this bond again. Eru, hear that I know no joy greater than this.”

Fingon held his hand steady, putting on the ring, and then surged up into a fierce kiss. For a horrible second, the bond did nothing. And then it was everything. Maedhros could feel it, see it. If he reached up his hand, he felt as though even his hröa could have touched it. He reached around Fingon, hands coming to rest at the small of his back. He shook in Maedhros’s arms like a leaf. Maedhros could feel Fingon in his arms, and, as Fingon, his own arms around him. They became as each other.

Hello, Fingon thought, swirling around in Maedhros’s mind. He was tired and sad, and afraid.

Maedhros, in response, showed him everything. What he had done, with Sauron. All of it. Being dead, Curufin’s deal. Irmo. Fingon watched, and was there. He held Maedhros in life and death, wakefulness and dreams. He thought, I wish you were safer. I wish your life held less pain. I wish a hundred wonderful things for you.

Maedhros’s mind and body kissed him, together. I wish that none of my pain had ever caused you any.

Don’t you dare think that it has been worth anything less than this for me. I want this. I want to share it with you. Not some random, cheery stranger. You. As you are. Understand?

Maedhros knew he was telling the truth. He pressed their foreheads together, and wept. Show me what I did. If you are going to know what I felt, I deserve the same.

Almost reluctant, Fingon showed him. The feeling was alien and yet familiar. The coldness was something Maedhros had never experienced at Fingon’s own death, and yet the hopelessness, the pain, the emptiness of everyday. Maedhros knew that. He would never have wished it on anyone, least of all those he loved.

Fingon stopped, hovering around his memory of telling Maglor Gil-galad’s parentage, and then thought, oh, you already know, I suppose.

Maedhros sent him the knowledge, and the calm understanding. They three are together, at least. Finwë, Indis and Míriel never even got that much.

Confusion.

As Maedhros’s millennia of being dead were still settling in, memories often clarified, resolving into concrete narratives at unexpected moments. In this moment, he suddenly understood, and Fingon with him, the truth of the ceaseless bickering between their two families. It was stranger than he could have imagined, but better, in a way.

I wonder what would have happened If they had just sworn one marriage oath, all together. Whose thought that was, Maedhros knew not. I suppose we will never know, now. But I wonder if Eru would have let them keep it.

I wonder who we would have been if they had spoken of it.

Would Féanor have accepted it?
Would anyone?

Amusement. Maglor might have had an easier life.

And Angrod.

Poor Angrod.

Poor Gil-galad.

Our son.

We have sons!

They did. Three, between the two of them. Maedhros thought, I am excited to finally see how you are as a father to a grown son. Fingon thought, I am excited to see how you are with the son you raised.

The bond calmed, slowly, into the easy strength it had always held before. Maedhros blinked his eyes at the sun, and only managed to regain his coordination fast enough to catch Fingon as he slumped forward in a dead faint.

“Elrond!” He was suddenly afraid, though his bond showed him nothing wrong, and his eyes could see no injury of the hröa.

Elrond returned at a sprint, but relaxed once he understood what had happened. He shook his head. “I doubt he has gotten a proper sleep in at least the months since we met. The bond reactivating was probably a bit of a psychic overload. Not, mind you, that I think you should give him any energy. Healer’s orders.”

Maedhros stroked a hand through Fingon’s hair. “At least it came back. I had worried-” He could not even bear to finish the thought.

“We were all worried,” Maglor told him, not a second behind Elrond, “whatever that was, it should not have been possible to break a bond, let alone mend it.”

Maedhros explained, then, about the strangeness of the oath, and why it had been possible to break the bond. Elrond nodded, thoughtfully, through the explanation. Maglor’s expression was strange, and unreadable.

“So,” Elrond said, when he was done, “almost anyone with a third or second age bond can probably break it. In theory. If they could survive the ordeal of losing it.” Though that surely affected him too, he did not seem sad. It was the easy confidence of someone who knew that neither they nor their partner would ever have wanted such a thing.

“But those of us with earlier bonds never could,” Maglor muttered. He was not happy, certainly.

“What worries you, ‘Laurë?’”

He looked down at his gloved hands before mumbling, “I do not think Celumë deserves to be stuck with this.”

Unlike Curufin and Liltallë, Celumë and Maglor had always gotten along well. She had not come to Beleriand with them, but she had been at Formenos. Neither Maedhros nor Fingon knew where she had gone since. It would be a terrible shame if her objection to Maglor’s return was to the fact that he
was injured and tired, rather than what he- what they- had done in Beleriand. The later objection was morally sound. The first was unkind in the extreme.

Elrond turned to Maglor and said, a little harshly, “stop that. Celumë deserves to make her own choice. She has always known the options. This changes nothing.”

It was the right reaction. Maglor seemed to accept the logic, and moved on. “I could probably help wake Fingon, if you would like. In fact, it might be good for me to give you some too, Nelyo. I have been trying lately to reopen our connection the usual way, to no avail. This might help.”

Elrond shook his head. “Sometimes, it is best to let things take the natural course. At the end of the day, no magic will make up for a lack of sleep. If we set up camp here, Arwen can rejoin us to enter the city officially, as we had planned. And more importantly, you must have been riding through the night, atar.” There was a look of true glee on his face to say the word. “You need to rest too. Fëa-exhaustion is nothing to trifle with.”

Maglor, behind his back, mouthed, ‘your mothering son’. Maedhros, surrounded by love, could not even find it in his heart to be offended.

Chapter End Notes

We’re HERE, we’re here, WE ARE HERE!!!

Today is exactly a year and a day after my first Silm fanfiction’s first chapter was published, and it is the Ultimate (although NOT final) chapter of Marred. I think there’s something nice about that. 200 000+ words later. A beginning and a climax. I like this symmetry.

In terms of next week’s publications, I have literally no idea what you’re getting, but I promise there’ll be something. 1-2 of these four things 1) Denethor’s POV chapter 2)the Queen’s chapter 3) The next chapter of this or 4) the beginning of a a Canon-Era story about Finrod that will probably come in ~4 pieces
Fingon woke, slowly, blinking sleep from his eyes. It was dark as night, and a few stars shone overhead. He could hear the slow breathing of sleeping elves all around, and at his side-

“Hello,” Maedhros whispered, rolling over to throw an arm over Fingon’s chest.

“Hello,” returned Fingon, and leant in to press a slow kiss to his lips. This was real. Maedhros was here, and their bond had reformed.

“Elrond said you needed the sleep,” Maedhros told him, by way of explanation. He wound a small strand of Fingon’s hair between his fingers. It was a comforting, repetitive, motion.

Fingon brought one of his hands to the small of Maedhros’s back. “And did you sleep any?”

“Almost eight hours.” For an elf, that was a lot.

They could have lain there, but if both had slept, then they had other options. He conveyed the thought to Maedhros, of going somewhere they could speak more privately. Maedhros agreed, and reluctantly peeled himself off of Fingon. They bid farewell to the guards who were on watch, one of whom was a silvan who Maedhros seemed to know, and then they were on their way. There was so much to speak about. So much to do. Once they were out of earshot, Maedhros stopped.

“Would you mind stargazing for a while?” He asked, softly, with a glance up towards where Eärendil sailed across that endless, starry sea.

Fingon didn’t, and said as much. They laid down, and Fingon rested his head on Maedhros’s shoulder. He could have cared less for the stars. All he needed was right there.

“How does it feel, to look at it without the oath?” He asked. Maedhros showed him, through the bond. The simple appreciation of the beauty. To the extent he still wanted it, it was more memory of the oath than the oath itself. He was free to see it as it was.

“Thank you,” Fingon said, when Maedhros was done sharing. And then, a moment later, he felt compelled to add, “he is a good man, you know?”

Maedhros nodded. “I know. You said that he helped you, even knowing about us. And he shone on me, through all this. Frodo even says that it was the star-glass Galadriel made with his light that
saved him in Mordor. Not that he knows Eärendil, a person, played a part in that, but he would have done. He and Varda both.”

“Thank you, Eärendil!” Fingon called, raising his head up to look at him.

Maedhros laughed, deep in his chest. “Thank you, Eärendil!”

Just for a second, the light flashed in and out. They both laughed. It was so good to exist together again. In the moment they were in. To speak with no fear of what the morning would bring.

“Finno,” Maedhros said, slipping into Quenya. He had a remarkable accent, in their shared father tongue. His Fëanorion upbringing had given his spoken word an almost rhythmic cadence. “What do you want to do next?”

Fingon sent him a few options, but with the strong suggestion that they should move further from camp if they were going to progress in that direction. Maedhros laughed, and reminded him that they were both exhausted and in an empty field. I may have become a little wild, he thought, but I am a Noldo at heart, and so are you.

He was right. “What do you mean, then?”

“I mean-” he went back into the bond, and showed Fingon Boromir, wondering if Maedhros would stay long enough to be at his wedding. He shared the youthful curiosity that had once been characteristic of them both. He wondered what these other lands looked like. And yet he missed his kin, and he knew they would worry. Nerdanel would worry. Fingon’s parents would worry.

It was a possibility Fingon had never considered, but he found there was a certain appeal to it. “An adventure?”

“A journey. We wanted to see Arda, once. And we will never have the chance again.”

There was something about the statement that made Fingon’s heart ache. “I would love to, if I did not think our family would worry so.”

Maedhros sighed. “And you are right, too. It is a shame. I should have liked to be here for Boromir’s wedding. He has been a friend to me when I had few, and I have taken such joy in seeing him made free.”

It bothered Maedhros more than he was letting on, to not be there. “I should like to find a way to tell them we made it, and are staying a while, but I cannot think how.”

Maedhros shrugged, and rolled Fingon fully on top of him. “I am sure there is something that I am missing. There must be a way.”

Fingon, fully aware of the madness he was agreeing to, said, “if there was a way, I would go anywhere you liked, and stay a couple of years, at least.”

Maedhros said nothing, and began to slowly kiss a line down Fingon’s neck.

They barely remembered to move away from camp before following some of Fingon’s suggestions.

They snuck back into camp at first light, careful not to wake Maglor, to find Glorfindel and Galadriel focused on making breakfast. Maedhros joined them, laughing softly when Galadriel threw a fig at him. Fingon knew well the old saying about too many cooks, but he sat near. It reminded him of their youth. He would have expected that they would have had servants with them to do the cooking.
Maedhros asked as much, biting into the fig.

Galadriel grinned. “Oh, they could. But I find I like having something to do with my hands. Moreover, I need less sleep in my old age. Not that I would be getting any even if I did need it, mind. My granddaughter is getting married. Can you believe that?”

She left unsaid the obvious. What would come after, and the true reason for her sleeplessness. Maedhros reached out, and placed his hand atop hers. Since she held a knife, this was a somewhat dangerous proposition.

“You don’t have to pretend for us, Artanis.” She set her knife down carefully, and entwined their fingers.

“Thank you,” she whispered. Fingon almost had to strain to hear her. “Nobody else can say that. They all hold too much love for you to ever say it. But we were never close, before. I always had a certain respect for you, but we were not friends. And thus, I can say it. Thank you, Maedhros. For showing that monster what true Noldorin strength is. For avenging my family.”

Maedhros leant in, and whispered something in her ear. Galadriel- unshakeable, immovable Galadriel- actually blushed. Fingon wished that everyone could have been there to see it.

“Really?” She demanded, pulling back.

Maedhros nodded, a true smile emphasising his beauty. “Really. Everyone knew, in death. I would not tell most people here, but you loved them best. Angrod was hoping I would see you here, especially if I was going to die again. It has been a long time since he had any real news.”

Galadriel, whose smile was a match for his, gave a huff of amusement. “Well, I am glad you were able to tell me. I wish I had known an age earlier. It would have been good to have family on these shores, if only for a moment.”

Glorfindel cleared his throat, awkwardly. They all turned to look at him. “Galadriel- I say this with all the knowledge of one who knows them best. Your family here loves you, very deeply. You’ve been strong for us for a very long time. You can rest now, if you want. We can take care of it.”

She leant forward, burying her head in Maedhros’s shoulder.

Maedhros thought to Fingon, she was the best and worst of us to have to do this alone. She may have been the only one who would have had the strength, but I would never have asked it of her. She deserved better. And now, with Celebrian already gone, losing Arwen- I hate that this is what has to happen.

Has to?

Aragorn is without question one of the greatest men I have ever known. If he and Arwen want each other, they are as well matched a pair to ensure each other’s happiness as any can be.

As well matched as us?

Maedhros showed him Aragorn, at their very first encounter, practically radiating leadership as he raised his sword to defend his friends. And then raised from Fingon’s memories Arwen, searching for the grandfather she had never known, trying to save him.

Fingon had to concede. Well, they will certainly be as fine a pair of monarchs as any I know. Their courage will serve them well, in the face of what is to come.
Galadriel pulled away from Maedhros, drying her tears on a handkerchief offered by Glorfindel. “Thank you. I think I needed that.”

Maedhros pushed a stray hair out of her face. “Sometimes we all do, Artanis. There is no shame in feeling what we feel.”

She picked up her knife, and did not speak again. In time, the others woke, and they ate breakfast together. Fingon sat close to Maedhros, relieved by the casual touch. It had been years since they had been able to touch with easy confidence, feeling no rush to do anything in particular. At least since before the Dagor Bragollach, if not earlier. The steady thrum of their bond meant more to Fingon— and to Maedhros, too— than he could ever have fully articulated to anyone else. Yet, as they sat in their small circle, with kin and friends, listening to Glorfindel and Maglor debate trivial matters, Fingon thought that there could have been no group better suited to understand. These people had, to an elf, lost so much, and yet had so much to lose.

“Ah, but you and Ecthelion would have had beautiful children,” Glorfindel said, and then laughed at his own joke. Maglor shook his head.

“Remind me why I ever bothered to put up with you?”

Galadriel smiled coyly. “Limited options, at a time like this.”

As Maglor laughed, Fingon could feel Maedhros’s joy and relief.

He’s doing better, Fingon thought in response. Don’t misunderstand, the road ahead of him is long yet, but I think being in a group like this does him a world of good. It lets him know that he is not alone.

Maedhros leant over, and pressed a soft kiss to the side of his jaw. In it there was the most sincere thanks one person could have offered another.

After, they packed up the saddlebags, and prepared to ride on. Since they would reach Gondor that day, everyone took extra time to prepare. They braided each other’s hair, Galadriel and Elrond spending almost half an hour on braiding intricate patterns into Maglor’s. Maedhros seemed to take a particular joy in braiding his own hair, now that he was able, and Fingon’s too. For Fingon, he braided a line down the sides while leaving the majority free. When they were done, Fingon opened the bag he had carried with him all the way from Valinor, and withdrew two crowns.

“Only if you want it,” he told Maedhros.

Maedhros, as an answer, knelt so Fingon could place the iron circlet on his head, and then stood to place Fingon’s in turn.

It was heavy, but somehow felt lighter than any crown he had worn the first time. Perhaps this was because of how distracted he was by the sight of Maedhros. Celebrimbor’s work was perfect, but then, how could Fingon have expected anything less? It was the only time Fingon had ever seen a king, and been truly awed. Finwë, Fëanor, his own father, the crown had weighed heavy on them. Maedhros looked triumphant, adorned with what had once been a symbol of his tormentor. The simple grace of Celebrimbor’s work emphasized Maedhros’s natural beauty, the perfectly formed jaw and cheekbones that he had once been named for. Fingon leant in, and kissed him.

“What?” Maedhros asked, when they pulled back. “Does it suit?”

“Maedhros,” Fingon said, after a moment’s thought, “you have been a king without a crown. No matter who else I ever see wearing one, it could not suit them more than it suits you.”
Maedhros kissed him again, sweetly. “I love you, but you are wrong. It is you who suits me. The crown is incidental.”

“Flatterer.”

Fingon leant up, to kiss Maedhros first for a change, and found himself interrupted by Glorfindel clearing his throat. “Time to go.”

It would have been half a day’s ride if they had gone with any speed, but as it was, they were all dressed up, and riding with ‘dignity’. Thus, they reached the plain around the city an hour or two after mid-day. Arwen, looking sheepish, had joined them an hour earlier, and she too was garbed like a queen. Fingon, who owed to her a debt he could not express, gave her a smile. She smiled back, and then adjusted her dress to cover the bruise that was beginning to blossom just below her collar. Fingon laughed.

It was summer, and small wildflowers now sprinkled the fields where men had died only months before. The city seemed bigger up close, more like the cities of the Noldor. Fingon wondered if the resemblance was intentional, though it was a shallow and failed one if so. There was no life to the stone, nor in any other aspect of construction. In a city hewn by elves, the stones became what they were meant to be. Fingon had heard Turgon’s lectures on those principles a hundred times, and could have recited them by heart.

“Well you be terribly mad if I take some time to tell these men how to care for their city?”

Maedhros laughed. “Oh, wait until you see Osgiliath and Minas Morgul. Poor Turgon would have been driven to tears at the state of disrepair.”

King Elessar’s party rode out of the gates to meet them. They consisted of the Fellowship, and the rulers and ambassadors of various other parties. One of them, a tall man in a custom saddle who Fingon recognized from Maedhros’s memories as Boromir, laughed heartily, but silenced himself so the more ceremonial part of the encounter could go as planned.

It was not until they were all back inside the city and unhorsed that Fingon finally managed to meet all of these strange people he had seen in Maedhros’s mind. It was a whirlwind of introductions. Fingon internally thanked Glorfindel and Galadriel for their help in continuing his Westron lessons.

“Is this him?” Boromir asked, looking at Fingon with some shock.

“Last I checked,” Fingon told him, and inclined his head. “It is an honor.”

Maedhros chuckled under his breath at Boromir’s face, and then said, “and this is my brother Maglor. Maglor, meet Boromir, son of Denethor.”

Maglor got a funny look on his face. “An odd combination of names. Boromir, like Andreth’s father.”

“I’d forgotten,” Maedhros muttered, mostly to himself. To Maglor, he said, “his whole family is cursed with first age names in a seemingly random distribution. Boromir, Faramir, Denethor, Finduilas. But I feel most sorry for those who were called ‘Túrin’.”

Even Fingon had to laugh at that. Then, before he knew it, he was being introduced to the Denethor and Faramir in question, as well as a lovely woman who seemed about as new to Westron as he was. Maedhros didn’t know her name, but said it was a matter of privacy. Faramir seemed both clever and polite, while his father was nervous, but did not shy away.
What’s wrong with him? Fingon thought at Maedhros.

Maedhros shot him a smile. Oh, a great many things. Sauron’s manipulations, a bigoted upbringing, a conviction that he was supposed to die in this war. But the Queen is good for him, I think. She’s allowing him to feel something. And he’s repairing his relationship with Boromir. That’s important.

Then he was being introduced to Éowyn of Rohan, and Halon of Harad. Maedhros showed him who they were to the two brothers. Éowyn reminded him so much of Aredhel before Beleriand that it hurt. He was glad that Maedhros assured him Faramir was a good man. To see another free spirit broken like his sister had been would have been entirely too much to bear.

Then there was a wave of nobility, dignitaries and ambassadors, none of whom Maedhros seemed to know very well, though some of whom he liked. Those from Gondor and those from Rohan showed deep confusion at meeting their ally’s husband. Fingon hoped they all got over themselves soon enough. This set was concluded by Haldir and Rúmil of Lóthlorien, who had only just freed themselves from the embrace of their brother and friends who had traveled with Galadriel. Haldir, Fingon greeted cordially, but he abandoned all sense of decorum to hug Rúmil.

“Thank you,” he said in Sindarin, pulling back. He was acutely aware that his crown was crooked, but couldn’t be bothered to fix it. “You saved him, and I cannot thank you enough.”

Rúmil grinned. “Trust me, your majesty. In all the ways that matter, he saved himself.”

Maedhros actually blushed, and Fingon barely had time to tease him over it before they realized Elrond was calling them over to introduce Fingon to the rest of Sauron’s vanquishers. Maglor had drifted over to his son already, and seemed to be conversing merrily with a pair of hobbits in formal armor. Fingon could feel Maedhros’s amusement at this turn of events, and it soon spread to a smile on his own face.

The Maia preceded his friends, and offered a bow in deference to Fingon’s station. Fingon bowed in turn, as was owed to a servant of the Valar. The Maia wore the form of an old man, but there was an age to him greater than that of any mortal form. Fingon wondered if the appearance had been a choice of his, or a product of his character, or the work of his masters. Whichever it was, he seemed comfortable in the form.

It was Legolas Thranduillion next, and Fingon took a liking to him instantly, as he did to the dwarf-Gimli- at his side. Whether their relationship was friendly or romantic, Fingon would not hazard a guess, but whichever the case, it was an honor to meet two people who had so resolutely cast aside their prejudices. And then, finally, there was the ringbearer. Fingon could feel the touch of the enemy on him. Funnily, he didn’t think Maedhros had ever noticed it. Perhaps, he was too used to sensing it on everything. Everyone else had clarified Fingon’s identity by some variant on either ‘oh, so you are the High King’ or ‘oh, so you are the husband’. He decided that Frodo was his favourite of the lot when instead of either, he said,

“So, you’re the one who cut his hand off.”

Fingon laughed so hard that Maedhros had to answer for him.

There was a banquet that night, but Maedhros and Fingon slipped away early. Fingon could tell Maedhros was exhausted, and he did not want to be parted from him, even for a night. They had all the time in the world, but a second was too much to waste.

The wedding was the next morning, midsummer’s day. It was mostly in an elven fashion, with the couple swearing oaths to each other. But they also adopted the mortal tradition of an officiant, a role
which Gandalf played. Like Fingon and Maedhros some ages earlier, they had only one parent between the two of them. Maglor and Maedhros, with Galadriel and Celeborn, stood as the grandparents of the happy couple. Fingon did not stand with them, instead taking a place between the Queen and Legolas as visiting dignitaries. He did not mind over much. Though some day he might call Elrond a son, that was not yet. He sat with Maedhros at the banquet that night, and held his hand under the table. They now had enough hands between the two of them to do such frivolous things. Arwen teased them terribly.

“I would think you two were the newlyweds,” she said to him, leading him in a new mortal dance.

She would not have said that if she could have seen herself. Arwen was radiant in her joy, eyes bright and smiling. In honor of the wedding, they had given her a pair of the hairclips Celebrimbor had made for them, while Aragorn received a bracelet. They both wore the pieces in question, and, like anything Celebrimbor had ever made, they enhanced the wearer.

The rest of the jewellery had gone elsewhere. Maedhros and Fingon wore their crowns, and the necklaces that were to match, Fingon’s gold with emeralds, Maedhros’s finely woven copper wire that could have almost been part of his hair. Maglor wore the other set of hair clips, and he kept the hypnosis bracelet. He had found he could use it as a tool to calm himself when he panicked. Elrond had brought him robes, and had, through some sort of sorcery even managed to find formal wear that was the right height for Maedhros. As for the rest of Celebrimbor’s gift, there had been a matter of debate as to what to do with them. Fingon, in honor of that gaudiest of elven peoples, the Noldor, wore two of the bracelets, but that still left two more, and all of the beads. It was Maedhros who settled the matter, spending an hour braiding the beads into Fingon’s hair, leaving him feeling terribly like Finrod. He also stole the bracelets, and though he seemed to have an idea of what he wanted done with at least one, he kept it from Fingon. A secret, as much as two people who lived in each other’s heads could have secrets.

The dancing was delightful, and got decidedly more so when Maglor- plied by Maedhros and alcohol-decided he would play for them. He didn’t sing, which was good, since he was a somber singer, but he played dancing songs, the old sort that it first seemed only elves would know, but it resolved the Númenórean tradition had spread them. Fingon danced this set first with Maedhros, of course, then with Galadriel, and then with Lady Éowyn, who by her third dance had made a resounding effort to learn the thing. She actually let Fingon lead, which was a nice change.

“So,” he asked her, “are lady warriors common in Rohan?”

She looked at the floor, which was all the answer he needed. “All maidens of Rohan can defend their homes, your majesty.”

“But they do not often ride to battle?”

“No, your majesty.” She seemed almost ashamed of what she had done. Or perhaps she merely expected him to judge her for it.

“Fingon, please. I think that is a great shame. It is Rohan’s loss. My sister is an extraordinary huntress and as fine a warrior as I or our brothers. Finer, in some regards.”

She let him twirl her around before responding, “you old elves have many strange customs.”

Fingon assumed she meant his marriage. “Do you think it is a bad thing?”

“No,” she told him, after a moment. “No, I rather think the opposite.”
The party went on until the stars were up, and all the half-drunk Silvan elves left to go wax poetic about them, which Maglor, drunke than the lot of them, thought was too funny for words. Aragorn and Arwen had slipped out half an hour earlier, and so at the end, it was only the old family left.

“Well,” Celeborn said, sneaking an arm around Galadriel’s waist, “I would say that was a rousing success.”

There was a general agreement. Maglor raised his glass. “To the King and Queen of Gondor. Long and prosperous be their reign!”

They all joined him in the toast. And then, sobered by the reminder that the reign would have an end, they all found their ways to bed.

Chapter End Notes

A chapter with some inherent sadness due to mortality.

Fun fact: There is no description of the wedding in ROTK (I mean there is it’s like 4 sentences), so I got to make all this crap up.

The celebrations for the wedding had finally petered out by the end of the week, a fact for which everyone was grateful. It was a tragic necessity for royal weddings that they be full of pomp, and this one more than most. This ending finally enabled the guests, many of whom had stuck around for months, to leave. The remaining Easterlings went first, save their ambassador and his staff, three days after the wedding, followed by all of the Haradrim except Halon, Amnus and Princess Lystara.

“Why are you still here?” Maedhros had asked her. It had resolved that she spoke some very formal Quenya, which worked well enough. His Quenya was formal too.

She shrugged. “I like it here. Even if there is little to no chance Éomer or Lothíriel will ever want to marry me. As long as I am making the effort, I am free to see places I have never seen, to walk where I like, and speak to who I like. Granted, the culture is not everything I could have asked for, but it is also extraordinary. And more. I believe that this place, this time, is where the future of our world will be determined. I want to see it. I want to be part of it.”

“What are you going to do, as part of it?”

“I think,” she said slowly, “I want to begin by showing these imbeciles that a lady from ‘Far Harad’ is twice the lady any of them will ever be. Lothíriel exempted, of course.”

It was as good a cause as any. Maedhros hoped she would succeed in it.

There were only two other major revelations that Maedhros received before they left for Rivendell, but there were many other important conversations, with Fingon, with Elrond and Maglor. They spoke of their lives, and their fears, and their futures. Maglor, somewhere between Lindon and Gondor, had decided that he would not leave Elrond, and he spoke of this to Maedhros, in hushed tones, long after everyone else had gone to bed.

“Even if he goes to Valinor?” Maedhros asked, looking up from what he was writing. Maglor nodded. He was still looking at the musical notation he had been drawing when he first spoke, but his heart clearly wasn’t in it.

“Even then,” Maglor agreed. “I thought about staying, looking after Arwen. That is what Celeborn is going to do, for Celebrían and Galadriel. But I cannot bear to watch anyone else die, Nelyo. And I think if I stay, Elrond will fear that I mean to stay for good. I will not cause him any more pain if I
have the power to prevent it.”

Maedhros set down his quill. “What would you think, if I said I intended to stay?”

Maglor considered it. “I would think that I love you, and that I trust you and Fingon to keep each other safe, even if neither of you can look after yourselves.”

This was no revelation, because it was not a surprise at all. The first revelation came the next morning, from Frodo, of all people.

“Has anyone other than an elf ever been to Valinor?” He asked rather unexpectedly, as Maedhros handed off the latest set of pages for translation.

Maedhros assumed he didn’t mean a Maia or Vala. “Well, there was Tuor. I have it on good authority that he’s still there. If there was anyone else, I missed it in the intervening years. You might ask Fingon. Most of my memories only include major events where people died.”

Frodo held his papers closer. “Arwen offered me her place, in Valinor, I mean. Or on the boat, anyways. I think Bilbo will be going, if he lives long enough. I don’t- I don’t know what to do.”

And that was a revelation. “Do you want to go to Valinor?”

“What I want,” Frodo said harshly, “is to go home.”

“And since we both know that is impossible?”

Frodo considered it. “I want to try. If- if I can’t rest there, then I’ll go to Valinor. But I don’t want to leave without trying. For Sam.”

It was as good a reason as any. Maedhros squeezed his shoulder. “Some people are worth trying for.”

Maedhros’s next surprise came only a couple days later, a day before they intended to leave for Rohan. A messenger from Círdan. She was young, though older than either Legolas or Rúmil, and had never come this way before. Her brown hair was carefully plaited around her head, and she stood straight and proper, possibly nervous in the presence of so many kings, queens, and other nobility. Arwen calmed her, with a friendly smile.

“What message does Círdan have for us?” She asked, from where she sat at Aragorn’s side. The elleth flushed.

“My lady, uh, your majesty, the message was not for you.” She threw a helpless glance around the room, eyes lighting on Maedhros.

“Was it for me?” He asked, and, before she could answer, added, “no need to puzzle out a title for me. Maedhros will suit.”

They all knew him by then as an eccentric who did not expect his title in most circumstances.

It is only when you insist on it that there is bound to be trouble, Fingon thought at him.

“My- uh, Maedhros, Lord Círdan sent me to transport this. He says he wants you to do whatever you can to fix it. Many who seek to see glimpses of the far shore are disappointed.”

From her robes, she withdrew a cloth sack, and from the sack, she withdrew, in one gloved hand, a palantír.
“That will be the one that looks west,” Elrond inferred, in his element in settings such as this. “Gandalf told Galadriel who told Círdan about what you did in putting them to sleep. If there is anything you can do-”

He only had to ask. Maedhros took the Panatír in his bare hand—it could do him no harm—and left. He had not thought any from the western sub-network existed on these shores. He wondered where it had come from, and decided to blame the Númenóreans. It seemed likely as not. He went back to his own rooms, and did not notice until he arrived that he had gained two dark-haired shadows. He turned to look at them. Fingon gave him a smile, and leant over to adjust the position of Maedhros’s crown.

“You need not worry,” he said to Elrond, who did not seem convinced. “It is quite routine, really. I blew out the candles; all I need is to relight this one.”

Elrond nodded, but didn’t leave. Maedhros understood that, after all that had happened. He went and sat down on a chair, placing the Palantír on the table in front of him. It rolled for a second, until Fingon bunched up the bag it had been held in, and place it underneath.

“Hands away,” Maedhros said, to Fingon, and then, once Fingon’s hands were clear, he began.

Restoring the stone to its place in the network took him no more than a second. But once there, he realized that it was still broken. Likely, it had been for years before Maedhros had gotten to it. An manufacturing defect, even. It could see, but not be seen in turn. Someone with the stone at Tirion or Tol Eressëa or Alqualondë would not be able to see him. That took longer to fix, but was easier, now that he understood his own gifts. He told it the story of how the palantíri were made, and how they ought to work, and, at relatively low cost to himself, felt the internal workings of the thing realign.

And then he was flying, over the white-capped waves, and emerald hills, through the streets of Tirion. He knew how they had looked to Fingon, in sunlight, but this was different. It was the truth of the thing, not a memory of it. He wanted to look more, but restrained himself to only searching for the other palantíri. Several had been repaired, though most had not, and no one was looking into any of them. Maedhros was about to give up, when he felt another stone being repaired. He went to it, and saw through it, and looked straight up into Celegorm’s eyes. Celegorm ran from the room so fast that Maedhros did not even have time to say anything. He had looked well, unscarred, light on his feet. Home. In Valinor, where he belonged in a way he never had in Beleriand.

And then he was back, and he was not alone. “I saw him, I tell you!” He seemed to be saying to Anairë, hands waving wildly. Fingon’s mother looked unimpressed.

“There is—something— in Middle Earth that may speak with Valinor,” she reminded him, shaking her head. Maedhros tried to read her lips. And then, she saw him in the orb, and her whole face changed. She rushed over to put her hand on the stone, Celegorm not half a step behind, so they could see where he was too. Maedhros allowed himself to pull back into his body, now that the connection was stable.

“Fingon,” he half-whispered, feeling rather reverent, “come here, please.”

Fingon came, and pressed his hand down beside Maedhros’s, their thumbs just touching. He smiled, at the sight of his mother. She laughed, and pressed her free hand to her chest.

“You made it,” she whispered. If only she knew how much had happened since she had seen her son last.

“Yes,” Fingon said, “we made it.”
Celegorm tried to look around their side of the glass. “Did you find Maglor?”

Maglor, at that moment, was in Osgiliath with Gimli, drawing up a reconstruction theory for Aragorn. He had been a better student than Maedhros was, and had some idea of what they could do with the space. Not to mention that it kept him busy. It was always good to see Maglor willing to do something, without Elrond asking it of him. Maedhros, unsure of what to say, nodded. Celegorm whooped, gleefully.

“How is everyone else?” Fingon asked. “Have we missed anything of importance? Is Curufin-”

Celegorm cut him off. “Curufin is fine. Upset that he missed so much, I think, and angry that he was the last to be released when Celebrimbor needed him so badly.”

Of course, he wouldn’t remember. “Tyelko, I need you to take a message to him, for me. It concerns you both. In my fight with Sauron, he broke the barrier that keeps me from remembering being dead. I know now, what happened in Mandos. The reason he was released last, and you second last, is because Curufin negotiated a deal of sorts, with the Valar. They returned me here, and in exchange, his release was contingent on my defeat of Sauron. Yours was contingent on me making a difference of any kind in fighting him.”

Celegorm’s face fell. “He would think of something that mad. For Celebrimbor, I assume. Revenge. I will tell him what he did. Perhaps it will allow him to think more kindly of the Valar. And of himself, too.”

With her free hand, Anairë reached up to squeeze his shoulder. “There is other news, too, Turcafinwë.”

Fingon cocked his head at them. “Yes, actually, come to that, why are you two together?”

Anairë grinned. “Well, once your sister told me that she thought Celegorm could fix my Palantír, I was hardly going to let it sit here abandoned, was I?”

That made sense. “And the news?”

“Aredhel should tell them,” Celegorm complained. Anairë cuffed him on the back of the head.

“Out with it, you big chicken!”

Celegorm reached down his shirt, and pulled out a golden ring on a chain. It took Maedhros a second to put the pieces together. He gasped. Fingon doubled over in helpless laughing.

“Congratulations,” Maedhros told him, and then he started laughing too. It was just absolutely perfect.

Celegorm rolled his eyes. “I fully intend to tell Aredhel that you two are the worst brothers.”

“What’s happening?” Elrond asked. He seemed concerned.

“Oh, nothing bad. Celegorm and Aredhel got married, and they did not even wait for us to come to the wedding. Bastards, the both of them.”

“Hey!” Celegorm complained, but Elrond couldn’t hear him.

Elrond grinned. “Please, be sure to pass on my congratulations. And if you could ask something, for me-”
“I shall ask nothing for you, Elrond. This stone was broken. That was why it could not be seen in turn in Valinor. I have mended it. With some help from Queen Anairë and Celegorm, we can coordinate for you to speak with anyone you like. And Arwen to speak to them too, perhaps.”

The smile Elrond gave him at this was one of true joy.

Círdan’s messenger let them keep the Palantír. She planned to travel home on the same route as them, and it was only right that Maedhros, for that time, keep what was his by inheritance. And so, just as they had planned, they left three days later. Kalya, Denethor and the Variags left at the same time, but moved in the opposite direction. Boromir and Faramir’s farewell with their father was intensely private, but, Maedhros thought, they all three had walked away happier. And they would see each other again. Of that, he had no doubt. Denethor was a stubborn old goat, and he would not allow it to be otherwise.

There was some debate as to the most logical route, and when parties should go their separate ways. All the fellowship would return to Rivendell, save one, but the question of when Aragorn, Arwen and Faramir would leave them was a sad one. It was possible that some of them would not meet again. Part of that question was resolved when they reached the capital of Rohan. Faramir would leave them there, remaining with his new fiancée.

Éowyn seemed thrilled. Éomer, on the other hand, seemed oddly melancholy. Maedhros, fulfilling his role as an unapologetic meddler, cornered him in the stables.

“What bothers you so?”

Éomer, brushing his horse in thorough strokes, stopped to turn and look over his shoulder. “Your majesty.”

Maedhros addressed his horse instead. “Sir, your master is being irritating.”

The horse huffed at Éomer, who laughed and reached up to stroke his neck. “Easy, friend.” To Maedhros, he said, “it really is none of your business, your majesty.”

“I have a name, Éomer. Many, in fact. And yes, it is none of my business. But I promise that there is nothing you could say that I have not heard before. Especially sibling or love troubles.”

He returned to brushing his horse’s mane. “If you insist.”

Maedhros laughed, and dug in his back pocket for a carrot for the horse. The quickest way to a man’s heart was through his horse’s stomach. Or something.

“So,” he asked, “is it love or family?”

Éomer sighed. “Love, if you must know. Éowyn is alright. Well, not alright. Better than she has ever been in some ways, and worse in others. But she’ll be alright. I trust in that. The trouble is, her marriage has got me thinking about my own. Whoever I marry will be Queen of the Rohirrim someday. I owe it to my people to pick someone who is best suited for that task.”

Maedhros thought he understood what was happening. “Lystara got to you, did she?”

Éomer met his eyes. “Worse. She got to my Lady of Dol Amroth.”

Oh dear. “You mean romantically, or?”

“She convinced Lothíriel that a marriage between the two of us was strategically redundant and one
of us should marry her instead, since nobody from either country is marrying someone Haradic, and it could spell disaster.”

Given Boromir and Halon’s relationship, and Lystara’s knowledge of it, this was an out and out lie. But Maedhros couldn’t tell Éomer that in good faith. He also could not tell him that Lystara already believed she had failed.

“What If none of you were nobility?” Maedhros asked, carefully. “What if you did not have to weigh that as a concern? Who would you marry?”

Éomer made a noise of frustration. “I don’t know. I love Lothíriel. I do. But Lystara is brilliant, and on top of that, I think Lothíriel likes her better than me. And I have no concept at all of what Lystara wants out of all this.”

Elves and mortals. Idiots, across the board. “I wish I had an easy answer for you. But I have none. Like it or not, you will be king, and they each will remain great ladies. I kept secret my relationship with Fingon for many years in part because it would have made life very difficult for him in public, being married to someone like me.”

“A male?”

Mortals, especially. “A murderer, Éomer. The son of a mad king. The reality is, no matter how brilliant Lystara is, your people will probably only ever see her as a foreign enemy.”

“That only makes me want to marry her more!” Éomer exclaimed. “She doesn’t deserve to be rejected for such a shallow reason.”

And that was why Maedhros still held that mortals had the capacity to be wonderful.

“Have you talked to both of them about it?” He asked. “I know Lystara never much liked being other people’s tool. She might not want to be yours any more than her father’s. You should ask her what she wants.”

Éomer sighed. “I wanted to, before we left, but I was afraid.”

“These things are frightening,” Maedhros acknowledged, “but in my experience, not as frightening as they feel. Write them both. You have time to figure it out. If anyone asks why you’ve yet to wed, tell them you would not encroach on Éowyn’s wedding with your own.”

Éomer laughed wryly at that. “Imagine how miffed Éowyn would be if she heard that flimsy excuse. You are, however, right about writing them. They both deserve as much.”

Maedhros laughed too. Then, duty fulfilled, he clapped Éomer on the shoulder and wandered off to find Fingon.

They left Faramir and the Rohirrim in Edoras, and Boromir wept silent tears as they rode away. He told Maedhros, later, why. Last time he had left Faramir, they had both come close to death. Such things were much in his memory, all that day. Maedhros too was distracted by personal matters. He had spoken, in the morning, to Amras and Amrod. He, Maglor, Elrond and Fingon had been speaking to people over the course of several days, as they came to Anairë or as she went to them. They had spoken already to all of Fingon’s siblings, to Gil-galad, and Celebrían, who had stolen away with Arwen for many long hours, and the twins after. Galadriel had spoken to Finrod, and Glorfindel to Turgon and Ecthelion. Curufin, Nerdanel, Celebrimbor and Caranthir, Celegorm had assured them, were on their way.
It was a happy thing, of course, and yet it filled him with so much guilt. None of them could stop talking about how excited they were to see him and Fingon again, and yet his desire to travel had only increased as they journeyed through Rohan, and saw places and things that he had never seen before.

I feel so guilty, he confided to Fingon that night, resting his head on his chest. They all want to see me home, and somehow, after everything, I feel as if I still don’t know where home is.

Fingon wrapped an arm over him. Maedhros, you’ve spent your whole life trying to make other people happy. Just this once, do something for yourself. Valinor will still be there in a year, or two, or ten. They’ve waited a thousand years for us. They can wait a little longer.

My mother-

If you think your mother could ever begrudge you something that made you happy, you’ve forgotten who she is.

He was right, and yet, as he counted down the days until he saw her again, Maedhros was guilty, and afraid.

All personal concerns were temporarily forgotten when they arrived at the ruins of Orthanc and discovered that Saruman had gone missing. Gandalf seemed oddly unconcerned about the whole thing, but Maedhros very much was not. He knew how much trouble one Maia could cause. Fingon knew also, but he was much too distracted by catching up with the Ents to be of any use. Elrond seemed mostly confused by the whole proceeding.

“I thought such things were more the province of…” he trailed off in the middle of the thought, watching Fingon in close and very slow conversation with Treebeard.

Maglor shook his head. “The Sindar? No, not really. Yavanna’s people are guardians, but what need had they for guardians in Melian’s walls? No, you were most likely to find Ents in places where the trees needed protection. We never had any in the Gap. Too few trees. But Fingon had plenty in Hithlum, and Angrod and Aegnor many more.”

He was right. Maedhros nodded along. “I am glad to find them still here. But I would have wished for more pleasant circumstances. The news of Saruman’s escape gives me an ill feeling.”

Elrond considered this. “I think we have not seen the last of him, one way or another.”

He was right. Maedhros couldn’t tell if it was prophecy, or too much experience with corrupted Maiar. Saruman, when they met him, after bidding tearful farewells to Arwen and Aragorn, seemed tired and weak. But Maedhros had seen the strength of the desperate. Like Gandalf, his chosen form was that of an old man. Whether it was a coordinated decision, Maedhros could not have said. But he did say something.

“Curumo!” Once he had learned that the Maia was a servant of Aulë, it was not much of a surprise to learn they had known each other. He wondered how betrayed Lord Aulë felt, to lose another Maia to Morgoth. “Many years has it been, and you have gotten no less stubborn nor insolent.”

Maglor, just behind him, stifled a laugh. The Maia’s eyes snapped to Maedhros, suddenly angry. “Ahh, the least of Fëanáro’s sons. My, my. I wonder if Sauron was offended to have one so untalented sent against him.”

Fingon gave an angry start at his side. Maedhros saw Saruman’s companion start in turn, and thought he might have been going for a dagger. Reaching a calming thought out to Fingon, he dismounted
from his horse.

“With a tongue like that, you really would have been more suited to the service of Nessa. Then maybe you would have at least learned to make your pretty words say something.”

Saruman just glared at him. Maedhros clapped the Maia on the back. “Come, Curumo. Let us take a walk, for old times’ sake.”

The Maia followed him reluctantly, but he did follow. For a supposed beggar, he was remarkably unhumble. Once they were out of earshot, Maedhros turned to him. “Why, Curumo?”

“Why?” He demanded, and clearly prepared himself to launch into a long speech about power and advancement and the greater future. Maedhros cut him off.

“No, you would just turn others to it. For someone who pretends to be principled, you are remarkably free of principles, Saruman.” He drawled the name, mockingly.

“And you? Would you kill me for refusing to return to the same prison you fled?”

He had a point. “No, no I will not. I refuse to be Morgoth’s creature. But if you are going to walk away from here, I want you to swear that you will never harm any of Eru’s children again, nor Aulë’s, nor Yavanna’s, nor will you incite them to harm each other or themselves.”

“You never would,” the Maia hissed. “You know what such things can do.”

“I do. I know the power of words very, very well. Your other option is that I behead you, so think about it carefully. I’ll craft the oath so you can still act in self defence, if you need to, but I will include psychological harm as harm.”

“You would enslave me to yourself instead of to Them?”

Maedhros drew Cánë. “My choices are to have your blood on my hands, or the blood of all those you would do harm. Odds being what they are, I would rather yours than theirs.”

Saruman was self-interested, to the end. He swore to Eru, and Maedhros let him go.

Once he was gone, and his man with him, Fingon, who had been listening from the edge of Maedhros’s mind, leant over to kiss him.

“What was that for?” Maedhros asked.

Fingon shrugged. “What? Am I not allowed to kiss my husband?”

You are. I just meant, why now?

I love it when you’re kingly and heroic.

Ha- you just find it attractive.
You’re just figuring this out now?

Elrond cleared his throat. They both turned to look at him. “Fingon told us what you were doing. Was that ethical?”

Maedhros met his eyes dead on. There was no fear there. “Honestly, Elrond? It was the only option I could think of other than killing him, letting him do harm, or dragging him back to Valinor by his ears.”

Elrond had never expected more than the truth from him. He nodded solemnly.

Somehow, that final part of the day was what stuck with Maedhros the most, and when he lay awake that night, far from sleep, it was what danced in his mind’s eye. Elrond did not expect him to be more than he was. Never had. Fingon expected him to be more than he felt like, and yet always seemed to want him to hold himself to less high a standard. Not because he wanted Maedhros to be less, but because he wanted him to be happy. Maglor had once expected a great deal, and now expected nothing at all. Maedhros had spent so long categorizing the wants and expectations of others that he was barely familiar with what he himself wanted any more.

Eventually, he slipped out from under Fingon’s grasp, and stood, shaking the sleep from his body. Glorfindel, who was on watch, gave him a look.

“Irmo playing hard to get?”

Maedhros gave him a wry smile. “Nervous. My mother and Caranthir are supposed to contact us sometime tomorrow, and I have suddenly been struck with the horrible realization that I have no idea what to say to them. They both wanted me home so badly, and I do not know if I am ready to go. Not yet.”

Glorfindel nodded. “I was unready for Valinor, when I returned to life. I believe that is why I was the one who was sent here. Turgon, Ecthelion, Rog, they were happy in Valinor. I was not. There was no place for me in peace when I had yet to make peace with myself. I understand most people do that in Mandos, but for whatever reason, I could not.”

“Do you think you have made peace with yourself now?”

“I don’t know. But I found something more valuable than ‘peace’ could ever be. And maybe that is what matters, in the end.” He gestured at their assembled friends and family, looking fond.

Grinning, Maedhros said, “funny, I was thinking almost the same thing.”

Chapter End Notes

This is my least favourite chapter of this story and I kinda hate it but also it is what it needs to be. *deep screaming* I have my first exams next week, so if anything is updated, it’ll be Songbirds and Corvids, my Finrod/Maglor story, which has got a chapter written but short on editing. Love y’all, SpaceWall (ha, that rhymes, I should say it more often)
What We Owe Each Other

Chapter Summary

Debts: owed, paid, and non-existent.

Chapter Notes

Maedhros panics a ‘lil bit in here. I don’t think anyone who’s read this far will need to skip, but if it’s not your day, the lines are “Fingon knelt back down...” to “Elrond shook his head...”

Yes I have been watching The Good Place thank u for asking I'm a few weeks behind. Also: Does anyone know any good Fic for the Old Man’s War Series? By John Scalzi? Because I’ve been binge reading it the last few weeks and I can’t find ANYTHING. That’s, like, one.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Nerdanel was old, in that intangible way that truly ancient elves, who have lived more consecutive time than their younger counterparts can comprehend, are old. She was older, in this respect, than anyone Maedhros had ever known. She should not have been. Part of the reason elves had gone to Valinor was to prevent the exhaustion of the spirit that uncounted millennia could give them. This was, perhaps, why the first elves were nowhere to be found on the far shores, even now. They were still too exhausted to speak with the younger generations, in life or death.

Nerdanel was as old as they were, now. Fingon had seen her, of course, but not in the way Maedhros saw her now. She wasn’t his mother. It wasn’t the same.

“Ammë,” he whispered, and wished madly that he could reach through the palantír and have her hold him.

“Yonya.” She sounded the same. If he closed his eyes, it would seem like only minutes had passed since they had seen each other last.

“Ammë, by all the Valar I promise you, I am sorry.”

Maedhros couldn’t help the tears. They came slowly at first, and then faster and faster. Fingon, who was there and could hold him, did. There was great comfort in his firm embrace.


No, of course she didn’t. She had ever blamed his father, which was right and wrong.

“’Laurë?’” Fingon asked, twisting around to look over his shoulder at Maglor. “Do you want-”

Maedhros heard him make a stricken noise. Through Fingon’s eyes, he could see a flash of Maglor’s
pained face. “I do not believe I can.”

Nerdanel, who must have been watching the proceedings, said, “Tell him to take as much time as he needs. It is hard enough. I will not make this harder for him.”

Maedhros could hear Fingon relaying the message. To Nerdanel, he said, “I should have been there sooner. For you. For Ambarussa and Caranthir. I’m sorry.”

“Could you have been?” She asked him. “Because the impression I was given was that you did as the Valar asked of you, for the best chance you, Tyelko and Atarinkë had for release.”

“If we had not tried to destroy Sauron, maybe-”

She gave him a classic disappointed-Ammë look. That was never good. “Nelyafinwë Maitimo Russandol. Were you where you needed to be?”

He thought about the things he had done in Middle Earth, about fighting Sauron, about negotiating the alliance. He thought about Theoden of Rohan dying slowly on the battlefield. He thought about Frodo, sitting in a cell in Mordor, and Denethor, at his son’s bedside. He thought about Boromir, bleeding to death, Aragorn desperately trying to save him, and not being fast enough.

“Yes, Ammë. I was.”

“Good,” she said, and smiled at him.

How to say it without hurting her? “I think I might still be where I need to be.”

The smile faded. “Maitimo, what are you saying?”

“Maedhros,” Fingon corrected, because Maedhros never would. “He really does prefer Maedhros.”

Maedhros forced himself to keep his hands on the orb. “I- I am not ready yet, to go home. I wanted to see Beleriand once. At some level, I still want to see what I can.”

“Maedhros,” said Nerdanel, making it sound like his full name said angrily. “It is over, now. You can come home.”

It was what he had known and feared she would say. “Ammë, I am sorry, I-”

“Stop it!” He and Fingon turned as one to look at Maglor. “Stop apologizing for doing the only thing you have done for yourself in, what? Seven thousand years?”

He’s right, Fingon thought pointedly. When was the last time you did something because it was what you wanted?

I married you.

I wanted that.

True, but, I asked you because I wanted it too. Just because it’s right for someone else doesn’t mean it isn’t what I wanted too. I wanted to be with you, and I am. Finally.

It only took us a few millennia. Fingon paused, for a moment. If going home will make you happy, I’ll be there. You know I will. But if you’re going to do it for them, you shouldn’t. You’ve paid any duty you ever owed in blood and tears a thousand times over.
Not to my mother. She wasn’t there.

Fingon pulled his hands off the palantír. “And that was not a decision you made, Maedhros. She chose that. It was a duty she owed you, as your duty to Elrond. Do you think he owes you anything?”

“Excuse me,” Maedhros said, and pulled his hands off the palantír too. “That it different.”

“How?”

“Fingon,” Maedhros began.

“No, Maedhros. Tell me how it is different. And do not dare to say because Elrond’s more ‘good’ than you, or because the oath was bad, or any of that. You could not have known at the time how severe the consequences would be. Elrond left you to go to Gil-galad, did he not?”

“I sent him away.” Fingon was winning the argument, Maedhros could already tell he had some rhetorical point that he was walking right into.

Fingon looked pleased with himself. “And what would anyone in Tirion have predicted the consequences of making the Sons of Fëanor choose between their parents to be? Because I can tell you that ten out of ten Noldor would have known the outcome of that.”

Don’t blame my mother for that.

Don’t blame yourself for that, any more than you would blame Elrond.

Elrond was a child; we were grown.

Elrond is a half-elf. Dior came of age at, what, twenty? Elrond was more than grown by the time he left you. Do you think he ‘abandoned’ you? Because unless you think that, you never get to blame yourself for your relationship with Nerdanel. Part of being parents is that we have to let our children be their own people, even if it hurts. Elrond is his own. Gil-galad is his own. Why don’t you get to be?

I don’t want to hurt her, Finno.

Fingon hugged him close. I know. You wouldn’t be you if you ever wanted anyone to be hurt because of your actions. But she loves you. She’ll understand in time that you need to do this for yourself.

How can she?

Go talk to Elrond about it. I think he’ll understand.

You think?

From both sides of the issue. He pulled Maedhros to his feet. Go talk to your kid. I’ll smooth things over with Nerdanel.

Fingon knelt back down to press his hands to the palantír, but Maedhros was done watching. He turned and fled, past Maglor, who still looked stricken, out of the camp, and away until he was standing on his own ankle deep in a stream. The water was cold mountain run off, and soon his feet were numb entirely, but it was well a match for the numbness that seemed to consume the rest of him. He sank to his knees in the water, and then felt arms wrapping around him, pulling him away.
“Atar,” Elrond was saying, worry clear in his voice. He seemed afraid, but of course he would be. He had grown up with Maedhros at the sickest he had ever been, and even in the weeks they had now been reunited, he would not have truly come to understand how much improved Maedhros’s health was, of the fëa in particular.


Elrond let out a ragged breath Maedhros hadn’t known he was holding. “I saw you fall, and for a second I thought—”

Elrond was his own, as Fingon had said, but it was also true that parents owe a duty to their children above and beyond anything a child could ever owe them. “I am sorry for scaring you, yonya. It was not my intent. I promise, I am more whole now than you have ever known me.”

He held Elrond against him. Despite the cold that had seeped into Maedhros’s bones, Elrond was the one shivering. “I know. I know, but—”

He seemed haunted. “How long did you dream about my death, ion?”

Elrond gave an almost ironic laugh. “How long were you dead?”

“I am sorry,” Maedhros said again, and meant it. He had never wanted Elrond to be hurt by his death. At some level, he had not understood the love that had grown between them.

Elrond shook his head against Maedhros’s chest. “I know you did not choose it. Not really. Elves die of sicknesses of the fëa all the time. It is never their fault, and yours no more so.”

“That does not make it hurt you any less. If you will not hear my apology for dying, at least hear my apology for leaving you, and for hurting you. I never wanted that, and I’m sorry.”

Elrond squeezed him even harder. “I forgive you.”

They were quiet, for a long time. Maedhros cradled Elrond’s head against his chest. Eventually, his son peeled away, and rummaged through his pockets. At a quirk of Maedhros’s head, he explained, “I know Bilbo made me bring a handkerchief, but I cannot for the life of me remember what I did with it.”

He eventually found it tucked away somewhere, and dried his eyes. “Would you like to go for a walk?” Maedhros asked him.

Elrond thought about it, and then nodded. “Yes, I would. Thank you.”

They moved upstream, for no particular reason other than that it was the direction in which they were moving.

“If Celebrían were here,” Maedhros said, tentatively, “would you want to go to Valinor?”

Elrond stopped dead. “Would I want to? I do not know. On the one hand, if I could stay, I could be with Arwen, I could support Elladan and Elrohir through whatever their paths bring them. On the other hand, I do understand why Melian fled when she did. To watch your children die— I have done it before, but never with a child of my body. I do not know if I have the strength in my heart to watch Arwen fade away before my eyes.”

There were a thousand things Maedhros could have said, about how she was not dead yet, and Eru’s gift to man, and on and on. But Elrond knew all of that. Instead, Maedhros said,
“It is terribly unfair, how much you have had to lose.”

Elrond looked up at him. “You know, I think very few people have ever had the courage to say that to my face.”

That made Maedhros angry, unquantifiably angry. “Well, I say it because it is true. It is not fair. You did nothing to deserve it. Nothing. If there was anything I could do—”

“I know. I know. And you should know that you have already done more for me than you understand. You let me grow up loved, not as a thing, or an idea, or as Eärendil’s son or Thingol’s heir. Just as a person. Elrond. It was not perfect. Beleriand was not kind, and you were not well. I remember. But you chose me. You chose to raise me, and protect me, and love me to the best of your abilities. You and Maglor gave me everything I am, and I gave you nothing in return.”

Feeling a strange sense that he had been there before, Maedhros said, “you are my son, Elrond. You never have to give me anything for that.” Elrond looked down at his feet. “Look at me, yonya. You owe me nothing you would not say Arwen and her brothers owe you.”

“It is different,” he protested, faintly.

What Maedhros would give to make his kind, generous, empathetic son understand that he was deserving of love. Oh. Oh, that made sense. Findekáno, you sneaky bastard.

“It is not. In every way that matters, Maglor and I know you to be our son. If we have not shown you that, it is our fault, and not yours. In fact, if you would allow me, I would show you, now. Anything you want. Everything, if you want”

“Are you sure?”

Who was the last person other than Fingon he had been so confident in sharing something so intimate with? Rúmil had seen some, but not anything like this. “I am. But you should know that for all my healing, there are still some parts of my mind that are very dark. Memories, old scars. The gap where the oath used to be, the kinslayings, Thangorodrim. Any of that is open to you. But if it ever becomes too much, please, take a step back before it hurts you.”

Elrond considered this. “Maybe we should sit down first?”

“I think that is an excellent idea.”

They sat side by side, and, after asking for permission again, Elrond opened the connection he shared with Maedhros, and waited for Maedhros to do the same. He was so cautious, so afraid of hurting Maedhros even now, that it broke his heart a little.

Maedhros opened the connection, and welcomed Elrond in. Look wherever you want, he thought. And if there’s some things I don’t want to see?

I’ll stop you if you get too close to anything… private.

Elrond acknowledged that, and then with the easy touch of someone who had practiced healing, if more of the body than of the mind, he began.

He wasted little time on Maedhros’s earliest memories, on his youth in Valinor, on Tirion and Formenos. When Maedhros queried about it, he thought, that isn’t you. Not yet. Not really. If that makes sense.
It was not far removed from how Maedhros thought of himself.

He looked with a healer’s practiced eye at the memory of the oath, and the hole that had been burnt in it. How didn’t you notice that something had been altered there?

It’s not quite that the memory is altered. The memory is the same. But it feels like it happened to someone else, now. It does not feel dissimilar from the time I spent directly under the oath’s influence. Or some of Thangorodrim, come to that.

He watched the first kinslaying, and the burning of the ships, and then jumped right to the founding of Himring, giving all of Thangorodrim a wide breadth.

Are you skipping that for you or for me?

Elrond paused. I think I’ve seen enough people I love in pain.

Maedhros couldn’t really argue with that. Elrond spent a long time watching him at Himring, building up the castle, caring for the people there, and falling in love with Fingon. He seemed particularly fascinated by memories of Maglor, young, hopeful, and a little arrogant. He watched the Dagor Bragollach, and the associated fallout. The first word of Lúthien’s triumph, and the beginnings of the alliance that would come to share Maedhros’s name. And then he gave the Nirnaeth as wide a breadth as he had Thangorodrim. But this one, Maedhros suspected, was for him. He appreciated it.

Quiet and critical, Elrond watched Doriath fall, saw bodies and blood, heard the screaming, and felt Maedhros, possession of his senses returned, keep killing anyways.

What would you have done if you had found them? Elrond asked, as he watched Maedhros searching frantically for the children who would have been his uncles.

Ransomed them to Elwing?

Suspicion. Ransomed them to Elwing like you ‘ransomed’ me to Gil-galad, or properly ransomed them to Elwing?

Properly, probably. Gil-galad didn’t have a silmaril. And if we had, and she’d taken the deal, then maybe you wouldn’t have grown up without a mother.

Please. How long do you think a city that couldn’t hold against the remnants of Fëanor’s sons with a silmaril would have been able to hold against Morgoth without one? I would have died.

If we’d been working against Morgoth again-

Don’t ask me to act as though I really miss two people I barely even remember. Why, you probably know Eärendil and Elwing better than I do.

This was probably true, and with a wave of agreement from Fingon, he showed Elrond Eärendil, as they knew him. Neither of them knew enough about Elwing to really speak to her character. But they both liked Elrond’s other father well enough, and he and Elrond deserved to be able to share a relationship, if that was what they wanted.

Elrond thanked him and Fingon both, and then continued linearly. He watched Sirion, saw himself for the first time, as Maedhros had seen him, and then began to see their relationship from Maedhros’s side, all the love and concern that lay in his heart, how he had kept the depth of his feeling private to keep Elrond from feeling pressured. Memories with Elros were the thing that
seemed to capture his attention the most, and he watched them almost in real time.

I didn’t realize we looked so similar. I never saw it in us. By the time I had spent enough time looking in a mirror to be really familiar with my own face, we didn’t look the same anymore.

He showed Maedhros what Elros had looked like, the last time Elrond had seen him, already beginning to show his mortality.

And then he pulled away, before he could see Maedhros die.

They both blinked away, slowly. Elrond leant in to rest his head on Maedhros’s shoulder. The connection between them remained, steady and calm. Stronger than what Maedhros had shared with his own father. But then, there had been many secrets there, a great deal of fear and anger. Fëanor’s grief for Míriel and selfishness, Maedhros’s inability to admit to either of them that he was madly in love with his half-cousin. Almost ironically, Maedhros thought that if Fëanor ever returned, they might have become closer than they had ever been.

“So,” Elrond said, “we got distracted, a bit. But I think you were trying to ask me if I think you should stay for a while?”

“A bit?” Maedhros repeated.

“Well, perhaps more than a bit. But for the record, the answer is yes. I think you should. I wouldn’t stay, because I have lived already long ages in this world, in times of peace. You never have, and it is an extraordinary place. Gimli and Legolas I am sure will be thrilled at the chance to show you their homes. And selfishly- you might think that selfishly I would want you to come to Valinor with me, and I would, if you wanted to be there. But more selfishly still, I want to know that my children are being looked after. By you, and by Celeborn, and by Glorfindel and Erestor. But by you in particular. Right or wrong, Celebrían got to see our children have a relationship with her parents all their lives. It is something I could not have avoided missing, but missed all the same. After all, I never had grandparents either. I want my children to know you.”

“I want to know them,” Maedhros told him, softly. And he did. He wanted to spend more time with Elladan and Elrohir, to come to know Arwen as Fingon and Maglor had. “And you will have grandparents. Soon, at least. Idril, Fingon and I know much better than we know Eärendil, and she is… well, forceful, but also deeply brave and very loyal. You two will get on. I am not sure about your other grandparents, I do not know them well enough to say.”

Elrond took this in stride. “What about your mother?” Maedhros tried to keep his stricken look off his face, but it didn’t work. “You were speaking to her today, were you?”

“I was,” admitted Maedhros.

“And you told her that you want to stay?”

Maedhros shook his head. “I tried. And then I panicked, and Fingon convinced me to leave, and then you found me. Eru, but I hate disappointing her. Sometimes, I think I have never lived up to her expectations my whole life. In some ways, it was easier for me to live with disappointing my father. He was always so ridiculous about my friendship with Fingon that I was used to doing things he disapproved of. I know more than one of my brothers lived in fear of upsetting him, but not me. I just hated the disappointed look my mother would get when I failed again and again. She must have hated me so much, for going with him, for taking my brothers with me, for getting them killed. I would hate me, for doing something like that.”
Elrond sighed. “Maedhros, you hate you more than the rest of us combined. If she thinks you would not have died for any of your brothers in a heartbeat, she does not know you at all.”

Fingon had been saying the same for years, but somehow, it meant more to hear it from Elrond. “Right as usual. Sorry. I did not mean to make you spend today acting as my healer.”

“I do not mind a bit. I learned mind healing because I hate the fact that nobody ever helped you. You have no idea how cathartic it is for me to actually, finally, have a chance to help the person who made me want to help people.”

Maedhros pulled him into a hug again, because he deserved it. “I am incredibly proud of you.”

They ended up going on a longer walk, upstream and then down again, speaking of everything and nothing in particular. Maedhros felt guilty, for missing the time he ought to have been talking to his mother avoiding the thing, but, well, Fingon’s touch in his mind seemed to suggest that there was no hurry.

When they finally made it back, they found Galadriel, Erestor, Elrohir and Rúmil playing some kind of dice game while Celeborn, Glorfindel and Elladan watched. Poor Elladan seemed confused as to who to be supporting. And then, as one unit, all seven of them turned to look at Elrond and Maedhros.

“Pay up,” Erestor said. Galadriel inexplicably pulled a pinecone out of her pocket and handed it to him.

“Bastard of a swine,” she muttered, under her breath.

Elrond crossed his arms, and raised an eyebrow so threateningly that Erestor actually handed the pinecone back, and all seven of them turned back to what they’d been doing. Maedhros whistled appreciatively.

“I learned from the best,” Elrond said, modestly.

That wasn’t quite true. Elrond had surpassed everyone who had ever taught him many years ago—well, perhaps not Maglor as a musician. But in other respects, certainly. In light of that, Maedhros made a choice.

“Elrond, would you like to meet your grandmother?”

His face lit up. “Yes, please.”

They found Maglor and Caranthir halfway through an increasingly ludicrous shouting match while Fingon and, presumably, Nerdanel, watched disapprovingly. Maedhros shot Fingon a sceptical glance.

“They needed to get it out of their system,” Fingon explained.

“Elbereth,” Elrond muttered.

Maedhros laughed. “See, and now you know why I thought raising you and Elros was easy as could be.”

“Oh, you think I’ve been selfish?” Maglor roared, and launched full tilt into a rant about every vaguely self-interested thing Caranthir had done in his entire life. Caranthir probably deserved it.
“Have they always done this?” Elrond asked, seeming quite concerned.

Fingon laughed. “Oh, you have no idea. If you really want to see a fight, you should have seen Celegorm and Caranthir go at it. I actually think, given the circumstances, Maglor is being rather reserved. If I were him, I would not be talking to Caranthir at all.”

This necessitated an explanation of why, exactly, Caranthir deserved to be shouted at, an Maedhros finally learned what Elrond looked like when he was really angry.

“Excuse me,” he said, voice impossibly smooth, and interrupted Maglor mid-rant with a hand on his shoulder. He placed the flat of his palm on the palantír like he’d been doing it all his life, and said, “hello, my name is Elrond Peredhel, and I have the distinct honour of being Maglor’s son.”

The scolding he gave Caranthir could have been used to sharpen knives. Maglor and Maedhros watched with something like awe. Fingon covered his mouth to hide the fact that he was trying very hard not to laugh. The basic thesis of Elrond’s argument seemed to be this: Caranthir should not apologize for feeling afraid in a time of panic, but he should apologize for blaming Maglor for something that was not and had never been his fault.

Caranthir said something in return, and Elrond said, “I know,” before pulling back and turning to look at Maedhros. “You were going to introduce me to your mother?”

Steeling himself, Maedhros approached, and put his hand on the palantír between Elrond’s and Maglor’s.

“Hello,” Caranthir said to him. His face was flushed red, from yelling or crying. “I missed you. I haven’t liked being the responsible brother one bit.”

Maedhros found it impossible to keep a smile off his face. “Moryo, you have been known to be the responsible one even when I was in the room. We all make mistakes. Thank you, for looking after everyone for me.”

“Thank you,” Caranthir returned, “for keeping my mistakes from hurting anyone else. Did you want to speak to ammë again?”

“Please.”

Nerdanel reappeared in front of him. It was clear she’d been crying. “Maedhros,” she said, before he could speak, “under no circumstances do you owe me anything. You are your own. As parents, the hardest and best thing we can do is to let our children make their own choices. Your actions are yours, always. I will miss you, of course, and have missed you. But it would not make me happy to have you feel trapped. Go freely, and come freely, when it is time. I trust you to know that for yourself.”

“Thank you,” he said, because there was nothing else that could be said. “For everything.”

There was such sadness in the smile she gave him, but love, too. He swallowed his fear, and continued.

“Ammë, let me introduce you to Elrond, your grandson.”

And so he did. Permission given to stay, by Fingon who would stay with him, by Elrond and Maglor who would leave him, and by Nerdanel who would await him on the far shore, he stayed. For them, and for himself too.
*incoherent screaming*

This is the LAST ACTUAL CHAPTER of this STORY. Next week is the EPILOGUE. AGH. PANIC.

Okay, so, on a more serious note, here’s what the next few weeks from me are going to look like, probably:

Next week, early in the week: Songbird and Corvids, my Finrod/Maglor Canon-Era story

Friday: Epilogue.

Early the week after: Corvids

Friday: Short story set in the marred-verse, can’t tell you who about

Christmas: Indis-centric Dawn-verse story (ha! bet you thought that was dead but no... Also, Dawn had a Christmas update last year, so this seems fitting)

Friday: Corvids

After that, I have NO IDEA.
“Are you ready?” Fingon asked. He had come up behind Maedhros softly, leaves crunching under his feet.

Maedhros stood, eyes lingering on the grave marker in front of him. “I am, now.”

Fingon threaded their fingers together, giving Maedhros’s hand a gentle squeeze. “Goodbye, Arwen.”

“Goodbye,” echoed Maedhros, and let Fingon pull him away.

She was the last of their friends and family on this shore to go, one way or the other. Her brothers had taken their leave some years earlier, taking Celeborn, Erestor, Glorfindel and Rúmil with them. Privately, Maedhros suspected none of the others had been willing to stay and watch those they loved die. For his own part, Maedhros knew death. He remembered how Eru had made it a gift. It never pleased him, but choosing to leave, a second before he needed to, would have hurt more. Now, with Arwen gone, it was time. They had already bid farewell to Eldarion, alerted Círdan of their coming and Thranduil of their going. It was time to bid farewell to this world, where Maedhros had been reborn, twice.

“Another year or two would not hurt,” Fingon said, softly.

Maedhros shook his head. “I miss them. And I know you do too.” Since Gandalf had insisted on the western-set palantír going into the west, where it belonged, they had not seen anyone in Valinor in many years.

“If you are sure.”

Maedhros stopped, and turned Fingon’s face gently, a hand on his jaw. His eyes shone, with tears still unshed for their lost granddaughter. “I am ready. I promise.”

They travelled a wandering path to Mithlond, stopping in at Bag End to speak with Sam’s children, ducking up to Armor see Boromir’s eldest, and finally, finally, into a boat. There, too, they lingered, wandering their way to Himring. They stayed a night there in the ruins, because they could. They
had been married there, after all. It was their home. Maedhros built a fire, and, with an accompaniment of Fingon on the harp, he told the castle her own story.

The years had tuned his gifts finely, turning what had once been a clumsily wielded hammer into a precision instrument. Now, as Maedhros spoke, the spirit of what had once been shone in the night. They watched the impression of friends long gone dance across the sky on floors that had collapsed in the intervening ages. On the sturdiest walls, in every language Maedhros knew, there appeared a simple phrase.

Here, Maedhros, Fëanor’s son, led forces against Morgoth, in the reigns of Fingolfin and Fingon of the Noldor. He led men and elves, of many creeds and races. In these walls, they lived and died. They deserve to be remembered. These are their names:

Fingon knew why he was doing it. Maedhros told that in his story, too. So much had been forgotten, but it deserved to be remembered. This served many purposes. First, the spell, as he wove it, would protect this place, as long as it could. Second, it would help the linguists of the future to know the eldest tongues, by comparing the translations of each to the next. Last, it would preserve the memory of Maedhros’s friends, as many as he could fit on the crumbling but solid walls of their home. Aragorn, Faramir, Boromir, Halon, Lystara, Arwen, their memories were secure, as kings and queens and rebuilders of the world. Frodo and Sam, Pippin and Merry, would be remembered in the hobbitish way, by children and grandchildren and great-grandchildren as an Odd Baggins or Gamgee or Took or Brandybuck. These friends were long forgotten already. But they did not deserve to be.

His task finally done, as the sun was rising, Maedhros sagged with exhaustion. He let Fingon guide him back to their ship, and then away. When he woke, they had fallen off the edge of the world.

“Welcome back,” Fingon said, quietly. Maedhros loved that he did not say ‘welcome home’.

Maedhros stood, and watched Arien’s light flicker over the waves. It was different, in sunlight, but still, he could see the tips of the Pelori mountains rising in the distance. Their edges seemed harsher than they had when the smooth light of the trees had flowed over them. But, still. These were the mountains in whose shadow he had been raised. This sea was the sea where he had first swum in Ulmo’s domain. This was it.

“The Valar seem to have made the road a little shorter coming this way,” Fingon was saying. “I seem to remember it taking longer moving in the other direction.”

Maedhros nodded, never taking his eyes off their destination.

“I alerted my mother to our coming,” Fingon added, as an afterthought. “My siblings, too. And Gil-galad.”

Right, of course. With somewhat more care than he’d given the task at his rebirth in Middle Earth, he threw his mind open, and immediately started to cry. There were so many of them. Elrond, first and foremost. Rúmil, faint but present. Elladan and Elrohir, quite distinguishable by their mental presences. Celebrimbor, brilliant and fierce and gentle and alive. Celegorm, all entangled with Aredhel, moreso even than he had been when last they had seen each other. Amrod and Amras, minds open and easy to touch. Curufin, mind hard and smooth. Caranthir, like a firework. Maglor, who reached out and grabbed at him, full of joy and light. Their connection was strong as it had ever been. His mother, welcoming his presence like a hug.

And there were more. Haldir, Celeborn and Galadriel. Finrod. Erestor and Glorfindel. The more abstract senses of the rest of the family. The Valar, everywhere and nowhere. Irmo in particular,
Maedhros suspected, was watching. A strange and familiar person who could only have been Gil-galad. Legolas. Elves who had fought with him in Himring. Elves who had died beside him and upon the point of his sword. So many people.

“Eru,” Maedhros whispered, because there was nothing more to say than that.

“Aman,” Fingon said. And then, “oh, hello, who’s that?”

Maedhros listened to Fingon’s connections, and then realized that Fingon was looking at one of his own.

“Impossible,” he said, with feeling, which was all Fingon needed, really, to know who it was.

“Ask Maglor.”

Such simple words, such a hard thing to do. He reached out, letting his touch linger.

‘Laurë, is it real? Is it really him?

Confusion-understanding-amusement. Yes.

Fingon had to catch him before he fell out of the boat entirely.

“Fingon. Fingon, Manwë and Varda, what are we going to do?”

Fingon considered the proposition, rummaged around in a bag, and pulled out his crown. Carefully, he set it on his head.

“You are going to coordinate people to meet us when we dock. I am going to make sure we actually do dock, at the intended location, and then I am going to use several centuries of diplomatic tricks to charm your father into being very pleased to see me.”

Maedhros raised an eyebrow at him. “You think the crown will help? In what way? He was rather adamant at my keeping it in the family, you recall.”

Fingon raised an eyebrow in turn. “Two ways. One, you did keep the crown in the family, technically. You married me. Much as I like the ring, the crown is a little showier. Two, the ring may be fine the finest craftsmanship Erebor had to offer, but Celebrimbor made this, and your father has been rendered absolutely helpless by Celebrimbor making anything since he was ten and put a rock in front of Nerdanel and called it a statue.”

These facts were both objectively true.

“If he does not welcome you into the family this time around,” Maedhros informed him, “it is very likely that this will very quickly devolve into a great deal of shouting.”

“I sometimes forget that you have done this before.”

And of course, he had. But the last time, he had been sick and dead, and it had been out of mutual love for him that his father and Fingon had been able to come together. Now, neither of them would remember that. But, on the other hand, if Maedhros’s father was there, then he was healed enough that Námo had released him onto the world. Him. Námo. Released. Eru.

“Maedhros,” Fingon said, “are you going to talk to him?” At the stricken look on Maedhros’s face, he added, “I would not judge you for waiting.”
Maedhros shook his head to clear it. “No, I mean to, it just… seems too much.”

Fingon leant in to press a gentle kiss to his lips. “Good luck.”

Maedhros reached out, down the strands of woven metal that made his connection to his father. They were the same old wires they had always been, but polished until they looked like new. Maedhros hoped that boded well.

Yonya.

Atar.


I missed you.

Maedhros. I am so proud of you. My son. Then he spoke in the language of memories, of first holding Maedhros in his arms, of Maedhros, defiant, refusing to burn the ships. Of Maedhros, broken, in his arms, of Maedhros, determined, saying goodbye.

I don’t understand.

Amusement-sorrow. Nenya told me you remember being dead.

I do. Sauron made me. He- anger-hate-fear-acceptance-understanding. You were there. You kept me from being nothing. I remember.

Fingon helped. Fëanor’s mental voice was mischievous.

You remember too?

I remember. Námo decided I needed to. I think Irmo and Nienna brought him around with a compelling argument that it was not fair to the rest of you to have to share your sorrows with me twice.

I was told it was dangerous to remember. That that was why we did not.

‘That that’- Disapproval. Find better phrasing, Maedhros.

Atar.

It is. Dangerous, I mean. Also, bad phrasing. But Námo asked me if I was willing to accept the risk, and I said I was. After all, the risk is that remembering will make your Fëa want to be dead. And I never could. Not while all of you are here. And I needed to remember. I needed to remember that Indis grieves with me. I needed to remember Fingolfin’s bravery. I needed to remember what I wrought with my oath. I needed to remember what I owe to Fingon. I needed to remember that Nenya was right, in many, many ways in which I was wrong.

I was worried, that if you didn’t-

I know. I know. But I do. It’s all going to be okay, I promise.

I don’t think that’s something you can promise.

His father showed him a memory, reuniting with a Fingolfin who didn’t remember how much they had loved each other. It made Maedhros want to weep. Learning Celebrimbor’s death from Rúmil
was nothing compared to looking someone you had loved in the eye, and knowing they had never
loved you at all. Then there was a skip in the memory, the location changed from outside to inside,
Fingolfin made a bitter remark about his relationship with Fingon, and Maedhros’s father broke his
nose.

Atar!

In my defence, he deserved it.

How is that going to help?

Well, that was about the point at which he realized that I really did remember being dead, since the
Fëanor he knew would have been much more upset about the whole thing than he was, so it sort-of
worked. Frankly, however, the far more important thing was the incident with you killing Sauron.
According to Nenya, he’s been much better since then. It’s not his fault that he and I have always
brought out the worst in each other.

Well, I would say it’s approximately half his fault.

He said he would follow, didn’t he? Well, generally, this has been where I’ve led.

Amusement.

“Maedhros,” Fingon said, distracting him, “I love your father as much as the next elf, but I should
prefer it if he was not the only person you convinced to meet us.”

Excuse me, Atar.

Maedhros managed to avoid having half the population of Tirion at the docks, but it was a close
thing. There were enough people with foresight in the family that their coming had been anticipated.
And, Elrond confided, those who had seen Arwen’s death had guessed that he would return to them
soon after.

Yonya.

Don’t be sorry. You stayed with her. I’m glad.

And so it was, that when they arrived on the far shore, they were surrounded by family.

“Ready?” Fingon asked him.

“Yes,” Maedhros confirmed, and, for the first time, he meant it.

There was a long silence, as they watched the family, and the family watched them. And then
Maedhros’s father stepped forward. The look on Fingon’s face like a panicked horse was what made
Maedhros realize that he hadn’t told him what Fëanor knew.

“Maedhros,” Fëanor whispered, and then pulled both of them into a hug. Fingon made a noise like
he was being strangled, and Fëanor let go. “Did you not bother to tell him?”

“I forgot.”

“What?” Fingon demanded.

Fëanor laughed. “I remember being dead. And so, for what you can never remember, thank you.”
Fingon looked at Maedhros. “I remember it from his eyes. Thank you. You know why.”

The three of them shared a moment, before the rest of the family seemed to realize it was done. Then Maedhros immediately found himself with an armful of Maglor and Elrond, while Fingon found himself the subject of a fierce stranglehold from his sister. There were more. Elladan and Elrohir, uncharacteristically solemn in the wake of their sister’s death. Amrod and Caranthir, Amras and Celegorm, Curufin and Celebrimbor.

“Thank you,” Maedhros said to his nephew, “for all the help you gave us.”

Celebrimbor opened his mouth to say something, and in a gesture of classic Fëanorian parenting, Curufin cut him off. “He feels grateful, and also very embarrassed, and definitely thinks that this was all his fault and none of you would have ever been in danger if he was not too gentle for his own good.” Celebrimbor blushed, revealing the truth of his father’s words.

“Telpe,” Maedhros addressed him, hoping his words were right. At the very least, they were true. “You were right. There is far more good in the world, in people, than they are given credit for. On the balance of things, condemning someone who is true is probably a worse sin than trusting someone who is false.”

Celebrimbor raised both of his eyebrows. “Were you right, to go parley with Morgoth? Would you do it again, given the chance?”

Maedhros couldn’t help but look at him like he was an idiot. “If I could- Celebrimbor, I did!”

Celebrimbor laughed, sending a ripple through the many beads in his hair. “Well, I suppose I walked right into that one. But do you really believe it? Because I have to say, I have heard a great number of defences for my own actions over the years, but ‘forgiving Sauron was a good decision’ is a new one for me.”

“Oh, do not misunderstand. I think you could do with being a little more suspicious of well-spoken strangers. It is always better to negotiate from a position of knowledge. But it is also better to be kind, I think. Mercy and forgiveness are the virtues on which our lives are built. That is how we are here, and how we are together.”

Celebrimbor hugged him again, tight, and then moved on without saying a word more, trailing Curufin behind him. There were so many more people to greet, and then, last of all, waiting, waiting, for him to come to her, Maedhros saw his mother.

“Ammë,” he whispered. For the first time since the years of the trees, they embraced. Maedhros was so much taller than he remembered being when he thought of her, now, and found he had to lean down to hug her properly. He had seen the entire rest of the family- those he was close-ish to, anyways, more recently than he had seen her in person. He had seen Finwë, and Finarfin, and Aredhel more recently than he had seen her. He had seen Finduilas, and Argon, and Eärendil more recently than he had seen her.

She held him, and, as he closed his eyes, he felt the easy, sure love between them. He felt the dozens of bonds, new and old, strong and weak, that tied him to the people here. It was peaceful, and bright.

Chapter End Notes
Nenya is the name of Galadriel’s ring, from the sindarin word for water ‘nen’ (sometimes 'nín'), if it sounds familiar. In Quenya, -nya is a suffix denoting possession ‘my’ or ‘mine’. Celebrimbor thought he was being very clever.

Okay. I think that was all the content notes.

*screaming*

Okay done with that.

I’d like to thank the Academy...

Okay, kidding. But really, I have a BUNCH of thanks for the end of this fic.
To all of you: Thank you! This is a long, sometimes hard story. You made it. You did the thing, and I am *very* grateful.
To my commenters: I really love hearing from every one of you. It’s always a highlight of my week.
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To rio_abajo_rio, for translating this into Russian (I’m still a bit in awe of this. Translators both impress and terrify me).

I’m sure I’ve forgotten someone, so if I have, please feel free to call me out. I really love and appreciate all of you.

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