The impossible happened – a Silmaril has been stolen from Morgoth’s crown. Maedhros decides to reunite the People of Beleriand against the Enemy and attack him while he is still unprepared (which is by no means less impossible). Meanwhile, in the hidden city of Gondolin, Lord Glorfindel of the Golden Flower pursues the meaning of his recurring nightmares, only to find himself in the centre of a secret ploy against the ever-growing power of Maeglin Lómion in the King’s Council.

The People of Beleriand are astir; and as the strings of our heroes’ fates tangle, a dark shadow creeps above the North – the Fifth Battle approaches. And to what end, no one could dream...

NOW UNDER REVISION
FOREWORD

“In those days Maedhros son of Fëanor lifted up his heart, perceiving that Morgoth was not unassailable; for the deeds of Beren and Lúthien were sung in many songs throughout Beleriand. Yet Morgoth would destroy them all, one by one, if they could not again unite, and make new league and common council; and he began those counsels for the raising of the fortunes of the Eldar that are called the Union of Maedhros.”

/J. R. R. Tolkien - The Silmarillion; XX. Of the Fifth Battle: Nirnaeth Arnoediad /

This fanfiction could be best described as a novelization: a retelling of the ominous Chapter Twenty of The Silmarillion. Within a few pages, Professor Tolkien’s brilliance builds an alliance of surpassing valour, only to bring it down completely as if it never existed. The Feanoreans’ hopes had barely risen and yet they are already crushed, harder and more completely than ever before…
Chapter Twenty, I think, is a breaking point, a change of tide, a moment worth exploring. A moment worth attempting the impossible, just like the protagonists do in the story.

By all means, please, enjoy!

Laerthel

P.S.: The cover image was made & is owned by the wonderful artist Catherine Chmiel.

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**PROLOGUE**

An Ode to the Fallen
(as sung in the Hall of Fire by those who still remember)

Torches burnt low and darkness grew
in starlight's gleam hope stirred anew
in weary hearts of iron hewn
on brows clouded by icy gloom.

Proud kings fled and proud realms failed
our lands devoured by fire;
bury the dead and clean the mead
were all my heart's desire;
but lo! New threat comes from the North
along with hope, though be it false!
New hordes of Orcs are stepping forth
let thus a tale of woes be told;

Of he who walks in starlight,
who drapes himself in clouds
He who hides in caves and breaches,
icy peaks that Darkness shrouds;
of he who climbed those Mountains
where all paths find their ends;
of he who found pride, worth and might
where plague, danger and evil dwelt:

Of he who was not without fear
but strong enough he was;
of he whose fate, though hard to bear,
was still the one he chose;
and all those swords and all that light
and all those clear eyes burning bright;
O! Let me sing of silent nights,
of mighty deeds and twinkling stars;

Our Bane with valor in the midst
with life in death's embrace
as proud armies rode in the mist
with the worst of foes to face;
Our Alliance, our deepest sorrow
let our Great Tale begin!
Let the light of day stir by the morrow
while crows feast on our kin.

ALTERNATE COVERS

(c) Hirfael 2016
Chapter Summary

Counsellor Tyelcano receives a report the contents of which simply cannot be true. He has no choice but to inform his Lord Maedhros immediately, which leads to a shocking realization.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Hope that is seen is not hope; for who hopes for what he already sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, with perseverance we wait eagerly for it.”

Romans 8:24

THE SEVEN GATES

The Fortress of Himring, FA 467, late Súlimë

Under the soft silk nightrobe that swerved at every start of his limbs, Counsellor Tyelcano was fidgeting. There was simply no other word for it.

He was also fingering his chalice, quite nervously.

In front of him lay a stained piece of parchment: a report from the homecoming scouts that had been handed straight to him due to its most urgent nature. His Lord Maedhros, however, had already retired to his chambers for the night, and Counsellor Tyelcano was unwilling to disturb him. It was much easier to pour himself a cup of fine red wine and read the report alone – or so he'd thought.

It had not seemed a daunting task at first, considering that the text was rather sparing of words – laconic, one could say –, confined to three brief sentences.

Lords Tyelkormo and Curufinwë banned from Nargothrond. One of the Silmarili stolen, and in the hands of Thingol. Moringotto sleeps no more.

Tyelcano took a generous sip of wine and read the report again, but the words remained the same, assertive, merciless. His eyes stopped several times above the words banned, Silmarili and stolen, a feeling of great unease surging inside him.

First of all, this was a fake report. Tyelcano did not recognize the handwriting, and any scout of the Himring would have known better than to state things of such gravity without any proof or details. If the Counsellor twisted his mind, the thick, abundant outlines of the tengwar reminded him of something – someone? - but his thoughts lost their track when he tried to match them with a face. No: this was no doing of the scouts, nor of anyone else within the grim walls of the fortress.

Tyelcano pushed the shards of wax back together to examine the seal, but he found nothing
suspicious. It was of origin, much like any other seal in the huge pile of documents that lay next to him on the desk.

*It must have been replaced,* Tyelcano decided. Someone took the original report, exchanged it with this chaotic mess of lies, then sealed it, possibly very pleased with themselves. But how and *why?* Who could have the courage – *the madness* – to steal a secret document right from Lord Maedhros's scouts, only to replace it with utter nonsense that no one would ever be likely to believe?

The whole endeavour seemed completely pointless; and even if Counsellor Tyelcano hated unanswered questions with passion, he preferred to retrieve the original report first – or have it rewritten, if necessary.

*Whoever stole the original one, good luck to them with deciphering all the codes,* he smirked.

(Lord Maedhros had always been quite resourceful when it came to using secret keywords where none were suspected; a sentence could read *“Remnants of an Orc camp found two and a half miles north from river Celon, third bend”*, and actually mean *“Lord Maglor is to pay a visit with a dozen riders in a fortnight”*).

Tyelcano suppressed a sigh, and read the message once more. He could not get rid of the sensation of overlooking something evident, something that was about to pass right under his nose. There was *something* about this message that bothered him.

*“Moringotto sleeps no more,”* he muttered under his breath.

Not that it was a surprise.

Four winters ago, the Enemy had assailed the Kingdom of Hithlum in the North, sudden, unannounced; so swiftly that the worst of the fight was over by the time Lord Maedhros gathered his army to offer help. Since then, silence and stillness reigned in Beleriand, interrupted only once in a while by Orcs lingering in the woods and moorlands. Some were whispering that the Enemy had gone to sleep, but some others – and Counsellor Tyelcano was one of them - were convinced that he was merely biding his time.

*One of the Silmarili stolen, and in the hands of Thingol,* Tyelcano read again, frowning. Only once in his waking life had he been granted with the opportunity to meet the King of the Úmanyar; and Thingol did not seem one who would risk a desperate quest to Angamando. And how could he ever dream to claim a Silmaril for himself? *Why him?*

*Why one of the Moriquendi?* Tyelcano thought with scorn – then quieted his thoughts immediately. This was not the moment to get carried away. After all, what was he reading? A bunch of nonsense. *A Silmaril stolen, in the hands of Thingol?* The idea was ridiculous, even for the vapidest kind of jest.

*Angamando is impenetrable,* Tyelcano reminded himself. *The Silmarili cannot be reclaimed, unless – unless Moringotto comes forth to face us. And Manwë help us all if he ever does that.*

Manwë has been the lone and constant recipient of Tyelcano's prayers since his lord's rescue, and even now as he uttered his name and unwrinkled the parchment under his hands, his *féa* felt a little lighter. Tyelcano read the text for what seemed like the thousandth time, now aloud.

*“Of course,”* he murmured immediately afterwards.

There actually *was* a code hidden within the message, although it read no more than a name,
swiftly (and overwhelmingly) recognized by Tyelcano as the handwriting's owner.

Which meant – Valar, could it mean that the news were actually true?! I any case, Lord Maedhros needed to be woken at once.

Tyelcano got to his feet, wrapped a thick black cloak around himself before one could mouth inappropriate attire, and rushed out of the room, clutching the precious report in his fist.

It was the third hour of the day, and lights were burning low along the corridor. The march to the lord’s chambers seemed longer than usual, and Tyelcano had to grab a torch to light his way through a particularly nasty, narrow stone bridge that linked two archways below open air. It had probably not been built for sauntering across the castle in one’s nightrobes, but the Counsellor knew all roundabouts and secret corners in the fortress, and maintained the right to use them as he wished.

When he reached his lord's doorstep at last, Tyelcano unfolded the parchment with his free hand and ran through it one last time. He considered setting it on fire and pretend it had never existed – it would have perhaps gained him a peaceful day, or another. One could not, however, change the patterns in Vairë's weaves and shut out the perils of the world. The report was already here, another thing to accept, to do with; and so the feather-light veil that separated peace from war needed to be drawn yet again.

We shall not know peace until Moringotto’s realm is overthrown, Tyelcano thought as he entered the room. We shall not know peace until the Oath is fulfilled. I have known this. Why should it strike me every time as a novelty?

Tyelcano slipped his torch into a free holder on the side of the wall and stepped into the room. The light of a forgotten candle flickered faintly in the lord's bedchamber, but it was empty: the cushions at their place, the sheets clean and untouched. Lord Maedhros was lounging in the wide armchair behind his desk instead, quill still in hand as he slept peacefully, his breathing steady and deep. Several piles of notes were lying around him, written in his own messy hand, as if he had been searching for something; and the Counsellor knew better than to look at them.

Tyelcano could not help but watch his lord for a few moments. Seldom had he ever seen Maedhros rest so peacefully since his rescue, and it pained him to disturb him in his sleep.

“Lord Nelyo,” he said gently, his voice no stronger than the rustle of leaves on a windy autumn eve.

Maedhros shifted his weight unconsciously from his left arm to the right, and gave a low grunt. Two centuries ago, such a movement would have made him scream in pain, Tyelcano knew, but the world had changed; and so had he.

“My lord,” the Counsellor called again. “You need to wake! I have news.”

“...all flowers shall wither,” Maedhros mumbled. He lifted his head unconsciously for a moment, shifting weight onto his shoulders.

“Lordship!” Tyelcano called, squeezing Maedhros’s hand. He knew better than to shake him. “Wake up!”
Tyelcano froze. Maedhros's eyes were open now, gleaming distantly; it seemed that he had slipped from the state of deep, undisturbed sleep to a more conscious one where he was able to chase dreams, and live them.

The case of the report was urgent, and Tyelcano had to wake his lord immediately. It was his duty to do so… but those words, those words filled him with great wonder and disbelief. Wonder, because they sounded so strange; and disbelief, because they sounded so familiar...

“...many years could one wander and many years could he hope, yet he shan't succeed; the mountains are high and the peaks icy cold, and all flowers shall wither.”

Tyelcano gasped loudly as he realized why did he know these words – and his lord's eyes flew open, fully open, and he was awake.

“Counsellor!” said Maedhros, somewhat grudgingly. “Dawn is still far.”

“As I am aware, lordship.” Tyelcano bowed, collecting himself. “Forgive me, but there is an important matter we should discuss immediately.”

Maedhros stretched his long legs and slid the stump of his maimed right hand from the table, out of sight, as was his habit.

“And what would that be?”

Tyelcano heroically suppressed the need to ask his lord about his latest wandering in Irmo's lands. “The scouts arrived,” he said instead, “and brought a most... strange message.”

Maedhros raised a thin eyebrow. “Tell me more.”

“At first, my lord, I deemed it was some kind of tasteless joke, because – well, read it for yourself.”

Maedhros took the parchment from his Counsellor.

“Carnistir!” he exclaimed at once.

“That was what I read from the codes, too,” Tyelcano nodded. “It may still be some kind of ruse, but that would mean someone deciphered our system of messaging, which is a rather intimidating possibility.”

“No,” Lord Maedhros shook his head. “Never. Besides, this is my brother's hand; his letters betray him.”

Now that the first matter was settled, Maedhros proceeded to read. Tyelcano watched his face eagerly: brows rising to impossible heights, lips straightening and pressing forcefully against each other, jawline suddenly harder and visible. Minutes passed like this – Maedhros sitting like a statue, eyes running up and down the parchment again and again; and Tyelcano standing, waiting, watching. Eventually, Maedhros placed the message on the table and leaned back in his chair, his face unreadable.

“Do you still like wine, Counsellor?” he asked quietly.
“Wine, my lord?”

“You smell of it. I want to smell of it, too, if you don’t mind.”

With that, the lord reached out to the top of the nearest drawer and dropped a flagon on the table. Tyelcano closed his eyes, revelling in the rich, sweet scent of wine.

“Counsellor?” Maedhros said softly. “Would you be so kind and hold our goblets? I am afraid I cannot handle this situation.”

His voice was at the same time amused and acid.

“I – oh – I apologise, lordship.”

Tyelcano sprang to his feet and reached for the wine. Silence stretched between them afterwards; Maedhros drank deep, and he did not grant him as much as a glance for several minutes. When Tyelcano could not bear it longer, he spoke up.

“May I ask what your thoughts were on the report?”

“Oh, that.” Maedhros leaned back comfortably in his chair. “Interesting, eh?”

“Interesting is maybe not the word I would use,” said Tyelcano cautiously.

“Can we settle for amusing, then?”

“Definitely not, my lord.”

Maedhros took another fair sip of the wine, and studied him from above his goblet.

“So my Counsellor is not amused. Nor should be I, in that case. May I ask what your thoughts were, then?”

“Well, I was hoping that the message would prove fake; but if it came from your lord brother, it must be true. Which entails... certain possible complications.”

“Certain possible complications.” Maedhros echoed, with an unmistakeable glint of amusement in his eyes.

“It sounds completely asinine!” Tyelcano crossed his arms. “How Lord Carnistir became acquainted with such news, I cannot imagine, unless...” He frowned, sudden and hard, as a possibility flashed through his mind.

“That unless is why you’re here for,” Maedhros said, eyes alight with interest. “Tell me!”

“A few months ago,” Tyelcano said, “a letter came from your brother Tyelkormo. Do you still have it, my lord? I would never intrude your privacy, but I wonder if he mentioned anything about...”

“Manwē!” Maedhros sighed. “What a desperate fool I am! Of course – that letter has the answers; and I even remember...”

After no more than a minute of rummaging, Maedhros found the ominous letter. “Here it is!” He whispered. “Listen... I am tempted to think, brother, that the intelligence of our House has run out with us. Findarāto is not only a great fool, but also quite dangerous, for he spreads that folly. Here he is, seeking to accompany a mortal Man into the hells of Angamando, to steal a Silmaril – a piece of our rightful heritage – from Moringotto, in exchange for the hand of Thingol’s daughter! I
They sought to hide their treason from me and Curufinwë, knowing that we would strongly protest. But – as he so wisely puts it – let them! We shall let the dullards find their own ends, their own despair. I can only hope that Findaráto or any of those who are willing to follow him (they shan't be numerous, we'll see to that) won't tell the Enemy in their torment, how to best assault Nargothrond, at least."

This was more than Tyelcano could suddenly bear.

“Venomous words,” he said in a low voice, “but they have truth in them. However, with what we know now, this means... that they succeeded?”

“They obviously did.” Maedhros’s voice was very cold. “I was a fool; I did not heed Tyelko’s warning. I thought this could never happen.”

“We need to know how,” Tyelcano whispered. “If a mortal Man could truly enter his fortress, Moringotto's power must dwindle...”

“A mortal Man and the daughter of Melian the Maia, I kindly remind you. We have to find out why exactly my brothers were banned from Nargothrond – though the answer, I take it, would likely be high treason – and what does Carnistir have to do with all this.” Maedhros crossed his arms. “When that is done, we can content ourselves with hopes and dreams if you wish.”

Tyelcano stood. “And your command is...?”

“Letters to my six brothers, biding them to come immediately. Send a letter to Findekáno as well, asking for news. Very formal and evasive, that one. If he knows something, he will understand. And double the watch. If you have news, seek me out and we'll discuss it at once. You will share your thoughts with me, and only me.”

“As you wish.”

“Now find some rest, Counsellor – and do take the rest of the wine with you. Delicious.”

“It is.” Tyelcano said, his curiosity suddenly overwhelming him. He decided to take a small risk, and sat back in the wide armchair; and he said, in the most casual tone he could suddenly produce:

“Grant me one more moment, my lord, for I must mention... You were talking in your sleep.”

Maedhros said nothing, but arched his eyebrows.

“You said something about the withering of flowers and the passing of night, and –”

“It was only a dream,” said Maedhros. “And now, if you have nothing else to discuss with me...”

“Dark is the night and ice crumbles beneath his feet as he crawls,” Tyelcano said, taking a leap of faith. “Hideous creatures lurk in the walls and he flees from them, draping himself into the canvas that is the night. But he who walks in starlight does not flinch; he hides in caves and near breaches and behind rocks, and on he wanders, and on he wanders, but a dead end awaits. The gates are closed.”

Maedhros was staring at him in awe. “But how could you...” he breathed. “I was not there in my dream yet!”
Tyelcano blinked. “Was it not for the first time, then, that you dreamed of such things?”

“It is the same almost every night,” Maedhros shrugged. “Withering flowers, flowing banners, darkness and icy peaks; sometimes a white city draped in moonlight. Why would you ask?”

“Because the same vision has been tormenting me for weeks, my lord,” Tyelcano said gravely. “I thought it would cease in time, but it doesn’t; and if you are seeing it, too…”

“This is very strange indeed,” Maedhros mused. “Have you ever seen the white city? In your dream, that is.”

“Nay. The only thing I remember is crawling in the darkness, shaking all over from the cold. And the gates –”

“The gates are closed.” Maedhros sighed. “I know. I wonder what could it all mean.”

ILLUSTRATIONS

Tyelcano's chalice (c) Laerthel 2015
"all flowers shall wither" (c) Laerthel 2014
Maedhros's dream 1 (c) elemmíre-of-aman

Chapter End Notes

Pocket Quenya:
Súlimë – March (Gwaeron in Sindarin).
Tyelkormo = Celegorm
Curufinwë = Curufin
Carnistir = Caranthir
'Maitimo' means 'well-shaped one'; it is Maedhros's amilessë (mother's name), used only by family members or close friends.
Findekáno = Fingon
Angamando = Angband
The Úmanyar = "Those of not Aman" ~ the politically correct name referring to "The Moriquendi" = "The dark elves" ~ those who never sailed.

On the use of Quenya

In this story, Quenya language is still actively in use between the Feanoreans’ household as they consider it an important part of their cultural heritage. This sense of importance may vary from convenience (Tyelcano) to habit (Maedhros) to political stance (Curufin). Likewise, Tyelcano’s and Maedhros’s viewpoints only use Quenya when they speak, and Curufin’s expands the use of Quenya to the entire narrative. Regarding Gondolin, the presence of Quenya is due to more practical reasons, as it was admittedly widespread in Turgon’s household. For this reason, the use of Quenya expands to names and even places in Glorfindel’s and Erestor’s viewpoints.
Laurefindil received terrible news, and Lómion was offended.

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The palace of King Turukáno, Ondolindë, FA 467, late Súlimë

Lómion’s voice was low and shrill; and like most of the time he’s heard it, it came from behind his back.

“Well met, Captain Laurefindil. I did not dream to find you awake.”

Laurefindil laughed. “And tell me, why would I waste such a pleasant morning on mere sleep?”

Thick fog was sprawling below their feet, past the balustrade and out in the open air, as if they were walking above mist and among clouds. The Tower of the King cut through its dim, heavy layer like a mithril-blade, gleaming sharp and needle-thin.

“Beautiful, do you think not? The last few mornings left me wandering if the city was still down there, though.”

“Have no doubt,” said Counsellor Lómion and he moved smoothly closer to the balustrade. “Look at the tower-tops and your memory shall paint the rest.”

“Is that why I see you out here at this early hour? Painting?”

Lómion blinked. “I come to you at the behest of the King. The Eagles brought news – none of them pleasant, I fear. The Council shall be gathered in a few days and King Turukáno wants you to be previously informed.”

“I’m honoured,” Laurefindil said, although this was mere formality. He already knew that King Turukáno valued his opinion as much as Lómion’s – mostly because the pair of them would seldom agree.

The Counsellor nodded, and fell into step beside Laurefindil. They descended to a lower level of the walls, where the impenetrable blade of white rock adjoined an open archway, leading to the South Wing of the Palace. Laurefindil halted in the middle there, and leaned against the epaulement.

The dim tumult of fog was still well below him, but a few puffs of mist were so close he felt as though he could reach out and catch them. Dewdrops moistened his fingers as he touched the shimmering wall. Then he touched his face; the subsiding water was so clear and cool that it made him blink.

“It reminds me of the springs near Tirion,” he said absently.
“I also like to wash my face in clouds,” Lómion admitted, “albeit for a simpler reason.”

“And what is that?”

“I have always thought it was impossible.”

Laurefindil smiled. “I understand.”

“Do you, now?”

Laurefindil gave a slow nod. “Now,” he said, “tell me about those grave news. I doubt you are here to discuss the nature of clouds.”

Lómion did not stop smiling, but Laurefindil noticed that the smile did not reach his eyes. He glanced around to see if they were alone; thus strengthened in his resolve, he sat beside Laurefindil, atop the balustrade. Neither spoke for a while; they waited in quiet, swinging their legs above the misty void. The sky was a deep, clear blue above them, the white walls of the Palace glimmering like a mountain forged of diamonds.

“A few hours ago…” Lómion spoke up hesitantly. “Well. A few hours ago, in the middle of the night, Thorondor, the King of Eagles himself came and wished to speak with King Turukáno; then persisted until we woke him up. They met in the courtyard, next to the Fountains; and their council endured until dawn. The Eagle brought many news, among them an incredible story… It seems that Lúthien Tinúviel, the princess of Doriath fell in love with Beren Erchamion, a mortal Man; and together, they broke the black gates of Angamando and stole a Silmaril from the Enemy's crown. This tale, King Thorondor said, is now spreading to every corner of Beleriand, and soon it shall be heard by the Sons of Fëanáro… and King Findekáno… and Men and Dwarves and Sindar and Teleri… and who knows what doom it may yet bring upon us!”

“One of the Silmarili!” Laurefindil exclaimed, deaf to anything else. “You said they stole one of the Silmarili?!”

“You heard me.”

“And what has become of it?” Laurefindil pressed.

“Of that, we cannot be sure; but when it comes to the Gates of Angamando…”

“Lómion, this is extremely important! What has become of the Jewel?”

Abrupt silence fell between them, and Lómion's eyebrows arched higher.

“...I apologize for my crude words,” Laurefindil said hastily, “but the question of the Silmaril is delicate and pressing. Would you please tell me everything you know about it?”

“It is said that the Jewel was brought back to King Thingol, in most unbelievable circumstances,” said Lómion rigidly.

“And he kept it for himself?”

“And so he did.”

Laurefindil sighed. “This means war,” he said quietly. “The Seven Sons shall never let him have it. This means another terrible battle, Lómion, where our closest kin shall slay our furthest; and all of their deaths shall be in vain.”
“Let the fools slay each other,” said Lómion. “This is precisely why our wise King chose to settle amongst the Oroquilta... More pressing, however, is the fact that the Enemy has been woken from his sleep and he shall no longer sit in idleness. The Eagles say that his spies are spreading everywhere in Beleriand. We have to double the watch... King Turukáno, as you are aware, has been troubled for years, seeking to help his brother, inviting him and his people to Ondolindë to live here; and now he is torn between that, and shutting the Gates once and for all. If you ask me, I have not changed my mind ever since: if we are to contact the outside world now, we risk being discovered, and thus destroyed.”

“So you would abandon our kin, helpless against the wrath of both the Kinslayers and the Enemy,” said Laurefindil rigidly.

“I said nothing alike.”

“You words themselves contain your judgement. How could you be so cold, child? They are our kin, yours even more than mine, even though you never knew them. We should help them, and help them all! Who are we to judge who has the right to be safe and who has not? We have been isolated for too long.”

“When it comes to the threat of the Black Foe,” said Lómion gravely, “I am indeed colder than ice – and you should be as well. We are talking about the safety of the King Turukáno, who, I kindly remind you, is my uncle; and twofold he is dear to me: as a leader and as one of my closest kin.”

“King Findekáno is your uncle, too,” said Laurefindil. “I am only asking you to remember that.”

“That I shall. And I shall also clash against you in council if need be.”

“Why, I look forward to that.” Laurefindil smiled wryly. “Shall we learn more there?”

“I certainly hope so.”

“Very well,” Laurefindil sighed. “You gave me much to think about. Is there anything else the King wants me to know?”

Lómion closed his eyes for a moment, and when he opened them, they were shimmering with pity and concern – open emotions, which was remarkably unlike him.

“There is one more thing. I hate to be the harbinger of grief, but the King insisted you should hear this before the Council. I am sorry, Laurefindil... but your friend, King Findaráto, has been slain.”

“Findaráto...?”

Laurefindil had not spoken the name for what seemed like Ages, but it has always been there, lingering at the back of his mind.

“...slain...?”

His head reeled wildly, as if he was drunk; and for a moment, he felt like falling into the misty void beneath.

Lómion put a cautious hand on his shoulder, and Laurefindil schooled himself. He was the Head of the House of the Golden Flower, Captain of the King's Guards and Marshal of his Armies – not some whining elfling! No one was allowed to see him perturbed.

“Do we know how...?”
Lómion seemed to ponder that for a moment. “Not precisely.”

Laurefindil drew a sharp breath. “I – King Turukáno was right. I needed to know. Thank you.”

Lómion nodded. “I presume you now wish to be alone.”

Fog was lifting over the green valley of Tumladen; the silhouettes of houses and small towers were becoming visible, grey shadows on a lighter canvas, but Laurefindil paid them no heed. He strode back to his chambers instead, locked the door, and collapsed onto his bed, burying his face in his palms.

Findaráto slain...

No tears came, only the gut-wrenching feeling of despair… and remorse.

He was slain – one I cared for, amongst hundreds. Or thousands, for all I know. How many more? How many more deaths have gone unannounced since I’ve been sitting here in idle peace?

A time may still come when the Enemy finds us; and what then? Where shall we run if all our friends are killed? We hide behind barred gates and impenetrable mountains, untouched by the perils of this World and thus taking no part of it. Why did we let this happen?

For the first time since he came in Ondolindë, Laurefindil found himself openly missing the rest of the world. He missed the friends he left when he decided to follow his King; he missed green Vinyamar and the seashores; he missed the sight of wide plains as he rode out to the fields of Nevrast.

We have been isolated for too long, he thought.
Chapter End Notes

Pocket Quenya

Laurefindil = Glorfindel [m.: "golden head of hair"]

Lómion [m.: "child of twilight"] is an amílessë (mother's name) for Maeglin [m.: "sharp glance"]

Findaráto = Finrod [m.:"golden-haired champion"]

Turukáno = Turgon

Fêanáro = Fêanor
Findekáno = Fingon

Moringotto = Morgoth

‘Oroquilla’ is a Quenya translation for the Echoriath (Encircling Mountains) around Gondolin. Since I found no Quenya equivalent for it, I allowed myself to create one. Basis: oro /mount, mountain/ + qilti- /gird, encircle/ -> quilta- / imitating later verb forms and some vocal harmony.

Ondolindë [m.:"the rock of the music of water"] = Gondolin [m.: "stone of music”]

On the use of Quenya: According to the Unfinished Tales and Tolkien’s Letters, “Turgon after his foundation of the secret city of Gondolin had re-established Quenya as the daily speech of his household” ; “Quenya was in daily use in Turgon’s house, and was the childhood speech of Eärendil” ; and Tuor heard the Guard of Gondolin speak “in the High Speech of the Noldor, which he knew not”. Also, Eöl later called his son by the Sindarin name Maeglin, but Aredhel “taught Maeglin the Quenya tongue, though Eöl had forbidden it”. 
Next morning, Laurefindil was surprised – and less than pleased – to hear the same sleek voice calling after him. To be quite honest, he would have preferred to be alone; Valar knew, the occasions were rare and cherished.

“This morn, Lómion, ’tis me who did not dream to find you awake. Have the Eagles returned?”

“Nay. Sleep eluded me tonight… I decided to take a walk, and night turned into dawn. I was already heading back home when I saw you crossing the marketplace… The streets are quiet and the peace of my mind returns.”

Laurefindil risked a glance at the Counsellor. Lómion's eyes made him as uneasy as ever – they were too lively and yet too distant, and they spoke of knowledge; an understanding of things well beyond his age.

“...and then you realised that your peace was perturbed by my hideous presence,” he said with a challenging smile.

Lómion turned away from him. “You jest, Captain, and yet our last conversation left me tense and wondering.”

“In that case, you must forgive me. Grief spoke from my heart; it cut deeper than I thought.”

“I know, and there is nothing to forgive. But pray tell me, Captain Laurefindil – do you think I am cold-hearted?”

Laurefindil blinked. Since when did Lómion care what anyone thought of him…?

“I do not remember saying that. Why would you think so?”

“No… you have never told me anything like this outright. Yet it seemed to me that you thought I was – or would be – unmoved by your pain; that I did not care for those outside Ondolindë... It is no intention of mine, of course, to cross any line of intimacy, but your reaction made me ask myself if there was anything about my behaviour that implied cold-heartedness… callousness... dispassion...”

A whole minute passed in dumbfounded silence before it dawned on Laurefindil that he could not, by any means, escape answering.

“I think, Lómion,” he said at length, “well, I think that you are excellent at containing yourself. You are courteous and delicate. Clever and observant. You know your own limits and your qualities and you use them well. This may indeed make you seem stern and distant. But callous?
Dispassionate? I think not. After all, do we act out of character or choice…? I doubt anyone could
tell me that. You may think that I am putting pride and revenge before duty when I want us to stop
hiding; and I may think that Eru had wrought your heart from ice. That does not make any of these
assumptions true, though; and I am unfit to make judgements in this matter. Are you not?”

“Am I?” Lómion raised his brows. “Intriguing. What if I choose to protect myself from something
by an act – by not being myself for mere distrust or caution? Or mayhaps to save someone? Is that
character or choice to you? Does that make me a liar?”

Laurefindil spent an entire minute staring at the silvery white gleam on the pavement, as if it was
the greatest wonder of Ondolindë.

“Yes and no,” he said at length. “Still, I cannot tell you which one would be right, or which one I
would choose.”

“How about betrayal, then? Should I break a promise if it means that I can save my family? Should
you tell a grieving mother that her son is very likely to die or should you let her hope until he draws
his last breath? Should you betray your king if he belied the bonds of blood and honor? Should you
clash against your brother-in-arms in a battle if he is grief-stricken and desperate, and might hurt
others or himself?”

“Yes and yes,” said Laurefindil. “But never crush the hopes of a mother. I refuse to live in a world
where there is no hope.”

“Is that a command of your head of your heart, then?”

“At times, they do mingle,” Laurefindil mused. “May I answer you with a question?”

He expected a dark glare, or some quick snap of Lómion's tongue as an answer, something like
“you already have,” but none came; the Counsellor only eyed him expectantly.

“My question is: why does it matter?”

Lómion's eyes narrowed suspiciously.

“Why does it matter? You could then ask – why anything matters?”


“I'm afraid I fail to understand you.”

“And I you, Lómion. You are a bright young lord of kingly blood, both counsellor and craftsman.
Yes, you are still half a child; yes, you may still have much to learn. And you eventually will. But
why do you care whether Laurefindil of the Golden Flower – or anyone else, at that –, thinks that
you are cold-hearted? What would you do if I did? Challenge me with a sword? Send me flowers
each morn?”

Lómion did not answer.

“You cannot make everyone love you, young lord: not with your sharp tongue, your cunning mind
and skilled hands. And if you were to change, you would lose everything you are now loved for.”

“My father always told me…” Lómion drew a shuddering breath. “You... you spoke like him, and
yet you did not.”
“I spoke like your father?”

“No, Captain. You did not. Forgive me.”

“There is nothing to forgive. I may have spoken like your Atar at some point of his life; why would that be impossible?”

“Because I have no Atar,” said Lómion, and now he did sound cold-hearted as he stood with his arms crossed, gripping the fabric of his clothes so hard that his knuckles whitened.

Laurefindil sighed. The young lore-master who knew every law and rule, who was smooth and convincing in the council room but hard as stone when it came to decisions, was deep inside no more than a lonely and frightened child. He had always suspected that Lómion had more to himself than what was visible; but the sheer reality of it suddenly seemed almost as heart-breaking as the passing of Findaráto.

“Prince Tyelkormo was once a good friend of mine, did you know that?” Laurefindil heard himself saying. “We liked hunting together. Oromë himself joined us at times.”

Now, Lómion did glare at him.

“He was a merry youth, always boasting of his skill with bow. And he had every right to do that.”

“Why are you telling me this, Captain?”

“Because things are different now, and it would probably come to the swords if we met. Still, that does not make him less of an old friend for me, and I refuse to hate his memory because of what happened. And you – you cannot change the past, Lómion. Yes, you had a father, and yes, your father betrayed you. And if I truly spoke like him before, ’tis only a proof that back then, he gave you the best advice he could find in his heart.”

“No, you misunderstand,” Lómion shook his head. “You spoke like him and you did not, I said. My father always told me that uncertainty was weakness itself. Again and again he insisted that if I was not loved, not cared for, that was no more than a sign of envy in those around me. That it was not my fault, and I was to hate those who scorned me. He told me to hold my head high, and look right through them... but I did not even have anyone around me to look through. And you – you are now telling me that I should not care what others think of me.”

“In a way, your father was right,” Laurefindil mused, “but his words are bitter. You need not hate anyone, young Lómion. You merely need to accept that you will never be loved by everyone around you; such a thing is not possible.”

“And wanting to be loved,” said Lómion in a low voice, “is that a sin, Captain?”

And he left.

The Alley of Roses came to an abrupt end, and the green valley of Tumladen opened in front of Laurefindil. He stopped for a moment, letting his eyes run far and free; as far as the icy peaks of the Oroquilta let them, and as free as his wandering thoughts allowed. He could not grant himself much time, in any case – he had to be on his way.
Carelessly, he crossed the fresh green sward, closing up to the edge of the encircling mountains, where the ground started to rise abruptly, and where the first watchline winded, no more than a dozen feet above the rocky ground.

Laurefindil's bliss slowly faltered as he climbed the stairs and started to ponder Lómion's last words.

*Wanting to be loved? But he is loved well enough – or acknowledged, at least. What could this be all about?*

It honestly was all but usual. Lómion preferred to hide his thoughts and feelings, and he always cared to wear a mask of confident indifference in front of those he worked with, be they craftsman, lords of might or his own uncle.

*Why would he come to me? We were never especially close – not the slightest bit, as I recall. And why would he be concerned about my mourning?*

This was not the first time Laurefindil felt embarrassed by the sudden trust of others. People were known to open their hearts to him, for they knew he could keep secrets, and he was a great listener. Laurefindil, on the other hand, found himself very reluctant to return such intimacy; and more often than not, he felt lonely amongst those who relied on him. Lómion was different, though – Lómion was someone Laurefindil did wish to know better, suddenly as the chance might have come.

The narrow wooden stairs were slippery with dew, and fresh morning scents reached Laurefindil's nose as he climbed. Two guards rose from their posts to salute him, and he greeted them back.

“Is the Warden of the Gates on duty today?” He asked one of the guards.

“He is, Captain,” came the answer, “and your presence might as well be required by his side. The Gate of Gold is to be opened this morn.”

*This means Voronwë returning,* Laurefindil guessed, and he could not hide his smile. The stern, quiet mariner was one of the lucky few Ecthelion held close – strange and distant as he sometimes was, he had a good heart; and most of all, he could be trusted. He also held the extremely rare privilege to leave Ondolindë every few years, and bring news.

Laurefindil left the first guard-post, following the winding stairs on the hillside. The next entrance was crowned with a thin arch of stone, and more guards surrounded it. After an exchange of greetings, Laurefindil passed below the arch, now following a path incrusted with stones of gleaming yellow marble. His thoughts were drifting away again; he did not even notice the approaching figure until it bumped right into his chest.

“I – oh, I apologise, Lord Captain!” the newcomer exclaimed, then stood back awkwardly. He was a lanky youth, his clever grey eyes partly draped in raven hair, but Laurefindil could see the reddening of his cheeks all too well.

“Now, Lord Captain is indeed the most glorious title I’ve ever received,” he grinned, watching the boy's face turn into a deep shade of crimson instead of the previous fresh red. “I might even say *too much!* Why the hurry, my bright young friend?”

“I was – in truth, I was sent to find you,” the boy said. “My *Toronar* bid me to call you, for his friend is returning from a long journey, and he sent forth a letter saying he had news for you both.”

“Your *Toronar?*” Laurefindil grabbed the boy's shoulders, and held him closer. “Are you – Valar, *are you...* but no, you cannot be...”
“If by Valar, you mean Erestor of the Fountain, then yes I am,” the boy all but smirked. “I remember you, Captain Laurefindil. You used to carve me little toys and sing me songs, Ages ago.”

“Ages ago!” Laurefindil laughed. “Why, it seems like yesterday to me. Little Erestor, standing tall and proud in front of my eyes – strange indeed! But let us hurry; we do not want to disappoint Ecthelion, do we?”

They were heading to the gate, side by side, and Laurefindil could not help but watch Erestor curiously. His garments were blue and silver with the crest of his family upon the chest, but his boots were worn and a knife hang from his belt. He seemed to know his way around quite well.

“What are you doing on this side of the golden Gate, if I may ask?” Laurefindil inquired.

“Mother sent me to the City and Toronar agreed to take me in,” said Erestor proudly, rocks crumbling under his feet as he led the way up to the third line of guard-posts. “I can go almost everywhere with him! I have barely been here for a week, and I have already seen the Caragdûr, and the Hill of Watch, and the gardens, and the Fountains and the King’s Tower – and Uncle said we would also enter some day!”

“Oh, we can enter even today, if that is your wish.” Laurefindil graced him with one of his brightest smiles. “I will show you were I live. I still have my books, you know.”

“That would be wonderful!” The brief flash of a child's innocent bliss disappeared from Erestor's face as he added politely, “If you do not mind, that is.”

“I would not offer it if I did. But why were you sent here, child?” Laurefindil wanted to know if his deductions were correct. Erestor, as many other children of the Gondolindrim, had been born amongst the Mountains, brought up in bastions and guard-posts, educated swiftly and practically between two changes of the watch. His wits have always been remarkably quick; it seemed only too right to have him trained and taught the way his parents were.

“I am here to learn how to fight,” Erestor declared proudly. “My trainings shall soon begin, or so Toronar said. I could content myself with no more than following him, though. When I first came here, I marvelled at how everyone answered to him! He is far more powerful than I imagined.”

“Aren’t we all?” Laurefindil winked at him. “But behold, young one, here we are!”

This time, there were no guards to salute at; stepping onto a narrow, domy terrace, they found themselves face to face with the steadily pacing Lord Ecthelion. He was dressed in blue and silver as always, lustrous black hair flowing about him. His glorious helmet was resting on a chair in the nearest corner.

“You did not waste your time, Erestor nin, I grant you that!” The Warden of the Gates laughed out openly. “Yet you could have let our dearest Captain dress appropriately!”

“I am off duty today, you pouting peacock!” Laurefindil stepped forth to embrace his friend. “Not all of us take pleasure in plundering the armoury each morn! I was already coming, if you must know, and young Erestor ran into me on his way – quite literally so. And what on Arda is the matter with my new tunic?”

“Now that I look at it twice, squinting, ‘tis almost acceptable,” Ecthelion grinned at his stunned – and now that he thought about it, also quite offended – friend. “Stressful night, was it?” He asked when Laurefindil did not laugh with him.
“It was,” he admitted, taking a seat next to the balustrade. “I believe I should tell you… I have news.”

Ecthelion sat down next to his friend, his gaze suddenly very intent.

“News? News of what?”

“Outside,” Laurefindil whispered, and Ecthelion understood at once; he knew Laurefindil as much as the Captain knew him. His face must have betrayed his sudden grief, for Ecthelion reached for his hand and gave it a squeeze.

“Something happened? Someone captured... tormented... dead...?”

Laurefindil nodded.

“Which one?”

“The last – and worst. Lómion came to me yesterday...”

As far as Laurefindil could remember, Ecthelion and Lómion had never been on good terms; even now, a slight frown crossed his friend's face before he blurted out the question, “Who?”

Laurefindil closed his eyes, fought the tears. “Findaráto.”

“Fin...,” Ecthelion grabbed hold of the table. “No, that cannot be.”

“The King Findaráto of Nargothrond, you mean?” Young Erestor broke in. “Did you know him, Toronar?”

“I do... I did...,” Ecthelion shook his head. “This is mad. This is utterly mad. Killed?! But why? How? And who...”

“I do not know,” Laurefindil sighed heavily. “I did not have the composure to ask, and I could not let Lómion see my turmoil. He would have probably told me if there was anything else. No one knows nothing, as I understand; not even the Eagles. All we hear are tales... theories... rumours...”

“But that is not the reason why you're here today,” Ecthelion eyed him.

“No, 'tis not.”

Laurefindil withstood the curious gaze of his friend for what seemed like hours to him, until finally, Ecthelion drew a deep breath, and turned to his nephew. His tone was casual, almost light-hearted.

“Climb downstairs and fetch us wine. If you tarry enough to find the best, you'll get to taste it as well.”

“So you can discuss whatever you want in peace.” Erestor nodded.

“Subtle as always, you cheeky brat. Now off you go!”

But there was a smile on Ecthelion's face as he uttered these words, and young Erestor whistled on his way down the stairs, in the unlordliest manner one could possibly imagine.

“You are fond of him,” said Laurefindil.
“Quite so. He is clever, you know, and observant, too. When I first brought him here, I wanted to have him trained as a guard like his father was; but I’m starting to doubt my judgement. I think I might take him with me to the next Great Council. When he grows a bit, he might prove useful against our sweet Counsellor Lómion. Counsellor! He is, what, a century older than my little Erestor? He never earned the title.”

“Do not search for enemies where there are none!” Laurefindil eyed his friend. “Lómion is more than capable; and deep inside, he has a caring heart. He showed me so, by treating me subtly and courteously when he told me the news. He also mentioned that a Council shall be summoned soon, and the matter of the stolen Silmaril discussed in details.”

“The matter of what?!”

“Oh. I thought you knew.”

Ecthelion could only stare at him for a while, wide-eyed, before he found his voice.

“I would have fled to your quarters as soon as I heard such news... A Silmaril, stolen?! And you just sit there and announce it like it was a most natural thing that happens every other day? A Silmaril?!”

“Valar, will you just stop shouting?! We are below open air...”

“If you look a bit further than the neck of your beloved tunic, Captain, you may notice that the terrace has a ceiling.”

“And no walls.” Laurefindil determinedly ignored the jest. “If this is news to you, though... then probably... it will be news for everyone else as well.”

“It is to be announced at the Council, I daresay. But Lómion told you in advance... why? He wants something from you, Fin. Be very careful!”

“Why should I be this suspicious about him?” Laurefindil sighed. “You’re being unreasonable. Lómion said it was the King's command that I should know about this.”

“Why not me, then?!” Ecthelion pouted. “And what did he say exactly?”

Laurefindil did his best to repeat Lómion’s words; when he arrived at the announcement of their friend's death, though, sadness crept back to his voice. “He told me that Findaráto was slain. As simple as that. No details, no explanations. Just the cold fact.”

“Which means that it is not only a tale,” Ecthelion picked up the thought, “that a body has been found...”

Laurefindil nodded.

“O, mighty Findaráto,” Ecthelion sighed. “I liked him a lot. He was so bright and fearless. And deeply, deeply good-hearted. Such a terrible loss.”

“The news of his passing saddened me as well,” Laurefindil said, “but I find that it is also filled with some strange sense of foreboding. As if Findaráto's death was the last step of something, the end of a road, as well as the beginning of a new one. As if something had to... happen...”

“Happen?” The line between Ecthelion's brows deepened as he frowned. “What do you mean?”
“I felt a change in the air when I retired to my chambers last morn,” Laurefindil mused. “And I had a strange dream: that is why I decided to come to you. I must tell someone...”

“So it was not even part of your plans to inform me about the Silmaril!” Ecthelion crossed his arms. “Thank you kindly!”

“I told you, I thought you already knew...”

“Then I would have come to you to discuss it!”

“Manwë, just stop behaving like a child!”

“I hope Manwë above does hear your bidding,” Ecthelion nodded his agreement, “for he really should!”

“Do you care about my dream at all?!”

“Come on, Fin, you know I do. I only wish to lighten your mood... I hate to see sadness in your eyes.”

“We have lost one of our closest friends,” Laurefindil reminded him.

“Closest...? For the past centuries, Findaráto has not been quite close, has he?” Ecthelion sighed. “We knew this would happen when we followed King Turukáno... one by one we've lost our companions, and there is no one now. No one, just you and I. You have me to trust, and I have you. And now pray tell me about your dream.”

“It was very strange,” Laurefindil began, suddenly reluctant to speak. “Eerie. I was stuck in a world where night was eternal; time passed and passed, the stars journeyed in the sky, but there was no dawn. I saw ice and snow everywhere; the wind was picking it up and throwing it into my face. I think I was here, in Ondolindë, but outside... Maybe around the second or third Gate. I was struggling in the snow, and a strange voice spoke to me. All flowers shall wither, it said. There were no flowers to be seen, though, only the painted one on the shield I was carrying. The crest of my House... All flowers shall wither, the voice said again, and I shivered. Night has fallen, I heard then, but it was a different voice – maybe my own, maybe yours, maybe someone else's; but a voice I knew. Storm is coming, closing in, it said, but the gates are closed. Will you open them? I did not answer; and then I saw a shadow. It came through the Gates and closer to me, but I never saw its face – and then I was awake, screaming, and covered in cold sweat. I don't know why I was screaming, though; nor can I imagine why I was afraid of the dream. Told in words, it is not at all frightening.”

“Yet meaningful,” said Ecthelion. “I think, Fin, that the shadow is you, the voice is you, the warrior hiding behind the shield is you – everything is you in this dream. You're struggling with yourself. You want to do something about Findaráto, but you know as well as I that you cannot.”

“Maybe,” Laurefindil agreed. “Is that sure, though? Is there truly nothing I can do?”

“Fin, for Valar's sake!” Ecthelion cursed under his breath. “Must I remind you that you could easily finish in the dungeons for even having uttered such words as a Captain of Guards? Must I be the one who puts you there? Matters of the outside world do not concern us. It was foolish enough that you spoke your mind to Counsellor Lómion. That treacherous bat!”

“Are you giving up on our friend so easily?”

“Findaráto is dead. We both know what dead means, Laurefindil... he is far away now, in a land no
evil can reach. Let him rest in the Halls of Mandos and don't give in to treacherous thoughts. The Enemy's ruse has no limits... Let us hope that he died an honourable death and let us keep his memory – that is all we can do for him.”

Laurefindil did not answer.

“You are grief-stricken,” Ecthelion touched his chin lightly. “Why? I did not know the two of you were this close.”

“We were not. But Findaráto... he was kindness itself. Honour itself. And he... he represents something to me. How many others have been killed that we don't even know about? We are sitting here, in the only remaining safe haven of our people, doing nothing... and they call you the Lord Warden and me the Captain!”

“Law is law,” Ecthelion said, “or have you forgotten?”

Laurefindil remembered all too well; but before he could answer, the sound of a horn cut through the fresh morning air.

Voronwë had come.

Chapter End Notes

Language

'Toronar' is a Quenya reconstruction for "Uncle" (toron-en-atar, brother-of-father). This is NOT canon. PM me for the linguistic background if you are interested.

The Caragdûr (m.: 'dark-spike') is a black precipice of rock on the north side of Gondolin, rarely used for executions (Eöl was, for example, shoved down from there). The name itself is in Sindarin, and it appears in this form in all sources I have seen, which is why I kept it. An attempt at Quenya translation could be Morikirya ("dark-teeth" – "teeth" here referring to "sharp rocks").

On Erestor's parentage: In this interpretation, his father and Ecthelion were brothers. The brother in question was called Soronto (amilesse; m.: ‘eagle’). He was one of Gondolin's Guardians from the first days of the city's existence; he died outside the borders, during an Orc-ambush, when Erestor was still a small child, around ten or fifteen years old. Now, in the story, he is only months away from his fiftieth begetting day, and thus his majority.
Sea-breeze

Chapter Summary

Anardil and his eloquently offensive manners are introduced, and Ecthelion makes a wager.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The Gate of Gold was the sixth in line of the Great Gates in Ondolindë, and first in beauty to Laurefindil’s eyes. Stern and robust it stood, a relatively low, broad wall of yellow marble that spanned the lowering crests of the Orfalch Echor. Above its narrow entrance, a pyramid stood high and proud with the image of Laurelin set upon, its flowers wrought of topaz in long clusters upon chains of gold. Paintings of Anor, the Sun inlaid the inner sides of the entrance, though they were seldom seen. Very few had the chance to ever glimpse them, and even if they did, they never saw them again; for such was the law of the Hidden City. Any well-willing Elf was accepted in the service of King Turukáno on condition that they would never leave the Valley of Tumladen again.

Sunlight danced upon the marble path before Laurefindil as he walked towards the Gate; but it was hardly visible compared to the aura of magnificence that surrounded Ecthelion as he descended the stairs. Dressed in deep blue and gleaming silver, his shining helm upon his head, the Warden of the Gates came forth; and Laurefindil, who knew him well, could tell that he was more than pleased with himself.

_A great lord he is, he thought, brave, valiant and honourable – yet horribly vain. He is here to see an old friend, who is coming home from a tiresome journey; yet dressed up as he is, he could march forth to greet mighty Eönwë and the Lords of the West...!_

Of all the weaknesses one could have, though, Laurefindil believed that vanity was still tolerable. Ecthelion liked to seem terribly important – which he _was_ –, and never denied it. He was what he was – head high, always proud and sometimes scornful, even dangerous; yet also kind and fair when it came to decisions and responsibility.

A gust of wind rolled down from the mountains; it made the guards raise their rounded red shields, Ecthelion swallow a curse and Laurefindil tighten his borrowed cloak. The guardians of the Sixth Gate were clad in the shimmering gold of his House and he took advantage of that, taking a spare from the armoury.

_Am I truly less vain than him?_ Laurefindil mused as Ecthelion clicked the latch of the Sixth Gate. If he wanted to be entirely honest with himself, he did not take the cloak to keep himself warm, but rather to hide his unusually casual attire. Now which one of them was the pouting peacock...?

Erestor appeared on his right side, peeking through the open Gate: a rare sight in the Orfalch Echor.

“Wine awaits on the table, m’lords,” he announced with mock pompousness. “The best I have found. Shall I have my reward, then?”
“You shall.” Ecthelion smiled. “We will share all goods with our guest upon his coming. You may not remember him, but he will know who you are; Voronwë is his name, and he is a kinsman of the King. He held you many times when you were little, but duty called him off, and now he is back. He may seem distant, and sometimes cold, but never let that discourage you.”

“I won't,” Erestor said, but his voice did not sound convincing. Ecthelion drew a sharp breath, but held it in when they heard the sound of horns echoing forcefully along the lowest range of the Orfalch Echor.

One, two, three, four clear calls flew over the gate on the wings of wind; and both Captain and Warden stilled.

“Four blasts,” Ecthelion whispered. The Warden of the Gates disappeared for a moment, and it was his friend and only his friend who stared at Laurefindil. “Four blasts, Fin. You heard them.”

Laurefindil nodded.

“And that would mean... guests?” Erestor frowned. “I've never heard four blasts before.”

Laurefindil’s fingers curled about the hilt of his dagger as he kept his eyes on the road outside. “Four blasts mean newcomers,” he said in a low voice. “Outsiders. Voronwë must have brought strangers with him; though for what reason, I cannot guess. Refugees, perhaps.”

“Elves from outside the Orfalch?” Erestor exclaimed in wonder.

“Yes, child,” said Ecthelion, “elves from outside the Orfalch. Which is exactly why you will stay by Captain Laurefindil's side while I ride forth to meet them. Fin, get the archers ready.”

Outside the first watchline, Ecthelion was his superior; Laurefindil nodded his agreement and climbed the stairs on the side of the wall to reach the parapet, dragging Erestor with him.

“Stay behind the pyramid,” he commanded. “You may peek through Laurelin's lowest branches if you know your way enough to climb, but stay out of sight.”

“Yes, Laurefindil,” Erestor bowed.

“Promise me that you'll do as I bid.”

“I promise. I only want to see them.”

“Then look!” Laurefindil pointed.

A small group of soldiers approached the Gate along the yellow marble path. First came two guards with lances, then two others with longbows, then a pair of way-worn travellers and four more archers at the end of the line, their eyes watchful. All soldiers wore the uniforms of the Fifth Entrance, the Gate of Silver.

Laurefindil signalled at the archers; three hundred arrows seated on three hundred bended bows, and they waited.

“Who comes to the Gates of Ondolindë?” Ecthelion spoke up, his voice clear as jingling silver bells in the morning wind.

The newcomers closed in, and the wall of guards opened in front of the two hooded travellers.

“Here comes Voronwë Aranwion from the House of Ñolofinwë, with his friend, Anardil from the
Household of Olwë under his protection,” the taller one exclaimed. “We have walked a long, perilous road and brought news for you and for the King.”

“Show your faces,” Ecthelion commanded. The soldiers stepped aside, and the newcomers threw their hoods back, opening their grey cloaks to show their garments underneath.

Voronwë was exactly as Laurefindil remembered him: tall, willowy and stark, and he moved with grace. His companion, Anardil was one of the Teleri, as his title suggested, but his shoulders were wider, his legs longer, his smile broader than what was common amongst the Sea-people; and his hair flew about him thickly, abundantly as an untamed forest, in the colour of gleaming silver.

“Stay,” Laurefindil said to Erestor. He left the parapet and ran down the stairs, almost jumping through the gate. The Teler lord had woken his interest.

“Elen síla lúmenn' omentielvo, Voronwë, meldonya! I am most glad that you returned.” Ecthelion clasped Voronwë's hands in his own. “And hail to thee! Be dearly welcome at the Sixth and Last Gate of Ondolindë, Anardil of the Falmari,” he then said, switching to a heavy, accent-dampened dialect of Sindarin. “Ecthelion I am, head of the House of the Fountain and Warden of the Gates. When thou followest our valiant kinsman, Voronwë, and ent'rest the first Gate, thou wert acquainted with the gravity of thy decision. Any son or daughter of the Eldalië is warmly welcomed in our City; the way in is open, but any way out is barred with sharp rock and iron. What brings thee, to the Hidden City?”

“I did not enter the First Gate, my lord,” Anardil said, his voice low but vibrating with a hidden strength, that somehow reminded Laurefindil of the Sea itself. “Nor the second, nor the third, nor the fourth. The Eagles flew us to the Gate of Silver, for our journey was long and I am wounded. We were being followed, and the Eagles disappeared with us just in time.”

“Followed?”

Laurefindil could have imagined many smoother ways to join the conversation, but the damage was already done. Anardil's eyes flashed upon him, and he closed his mouth with a soft thump, an uncertain expression on his face; and Ecthelion was unable to hide his smile.

“Lord Anardil, I present to thee Laurefindil, head of the House of the Golden Flower, Captain of the King's Guards and Marshal of the Armies – courteous and subtle, as he ever is. Also,” he glanced upwards, “on top of the gate, thou mayst notice my beloved nephew, Erestor in the process of ruining King Turukáno's favorite statue of the mighty Laurelin.”

Two slim hands and a pair of peeking grey eyes disappeared in an instant behind the golden pyramid. Anardil smiled broadly; he clasped the hand Ecthelion offered him, then bowed slightly in front of Laurefindil.

“Well met, Lord Warden and Captain of Guards,” he said.

“Well met, Lord Anardil,” Laurefindil echoed him. “I am grieved to hear that thou hast been wounded. Would riding be a nuisance to thee?”

“Riding? I believe I could try it,” Anardil raised an eyebrow, “but I cannot see any horses around. Can you even keep them alive in this icy mountain-land of yours?”

“Ai, we can,” Laurefindil laughed. “Lord Ecthelion and I still miss our previous homeland, Nevrast at times, and verily. The meadows there were large and wide, and we would race our mighty stallions along them.”
“And even since our races here are much shorter, they have not ceased.” Ecthelion nodded. “We still have the sons of the sons of our best stallions.”

Laurefindil sent off three guards for horses, then reached out to clasp Voronwë's arm.

“My dear friend!” He said fondly, and pulled the startled Noldo in an embrace. “How glad I am that thou hast returned!”

“You honor me, Laurefindil,” Voronwë said in his stern voice. “Yet it haunts me to see the shadow of turmoil and sadness in your eyes; and I hate to admit that the news we bring are not at all pleasant, either.”

“Who dareth hope for good tidings in these times of peril?” Laurefindil sighed. “I can only wish that your news are already known to us. I could not stand another pang of grief today.”

“That we shall see,” Voronwë answered almost casually, but Laurefindil saw the question in his stormy grey eyes. Anardil, on the other hand, threw Laurefindil an openly curious glance.

“I've been told that this City was an island of peace and prosperity, and that no harm could ever come to it. I've been told that its beauty and grace matched that of Tirion in Aman, and that is a sight I long to see... How comes, then, that even the Lords of Ondolindë have friends to grieve?”

“That, Lord Anardil, is not a matter to be discussed this far out in the watchlines,” Ecthelion said. “Follow us, and answers shall come to thee.”

By the time they climbed upon the terrace beyond the Gate of Gold, Erestor was already there, serving them wine. He greeted the two travellers courteously and smiled at Voronwë when the mariner held his shoulders and stared at him in wonder, asking if Erestor still remembered him.

While everyone else was occupied with settling around the table, Laurefindil was watching Anardil from the corner of his eye, wondering how this bold, free creature became friends with Voronwë. They could not have been more different; the only thing they shared was the clear, distant, yet lively gleam in their eyes, a privilege of those who discovered the Sea. But Anardil’s eyes themselves were nothing like Voronwë’s, either; they gleamed with a fresh, bright shade of green Laurefindil had never seen before. They slightly unsettled him – they seemed to mock the whole world and see through everything, understanding more than he ever could.

“Come, take a seat,” Ecthelion called, and Laurefindil settled beside him. His eyes were still on Anardil, who sighed softly and stretched his long legs under the table.

*His shoulder is truly wounded*, Laurefindil could now see from the way he let his right arm hang loose, *maybe the collarbone cracked*.

“Good wine,” the Teler broke the silence that stretched among them. “Delicious.”

Laurefindil raised an eyebrow. “It came from thy people, with the last trade we could make before the Enemy attacked the North. Do you not recognise it?” He added experimentally. He had not spoken Sindarin in several hundred years, and it seemed that the use of pronouns had considerably simplified since then.
“Not all of us can sit idly around, sipping wine,” Anardil said. “I’ve forgotten what it tasted like.”

“Forgive my friend, Lord Laurefindil,” Voronwë broke in, glancing weightily at Anardil. “The pain in his shoulder is sharpening his tongue.”

“I meant no offense, Captain,” Anardil added with a slow nod, “I truly did forget it. The past few years... well, suffice to say, I have seen happier times in my life. Back in the years of peace, I was one of King Olwë’s household – one of importance, you may say. Then Fëanor came and claimed my ships along with the others. Those were all my wealth; and they were stolen and burned, my mother killed, my father drowned and our house put to flames. I lived near the shores...”

Anardil spoke softly, without the smallest hint of anguish or indignation in his voice, as though they were merely talking about the weather. His eyes were hollow at first, but as he mentioned the loss of his family and beloved ships, deep wells of sadness opened within them.

“How comes, then, that thou dwellest not in fair Alqualondë still?” Ecthelion asked.

“I could not linger there singing laments for ever. I built a new ship and came to Beleriand, and here I shall remain. I have travelled far and I have seen much. I watch your proud kingdoms as they rise and fall, and I do not hate you Ñoldor... You are not the true Enemy, and we are kin. That is why I am here with my news. That is what you fail to take in those thick skulls of yours while you rant on and on about your endless grievances and strifes.”

“What have I told you about High Elves and courtesy?!” Voronwë exclaimed, but Ecthelion only smiled; and Laurefindil knew that he felt the truth in these rough words as much as he did.

“No one can tell thee, Lord Anardil, that thou art reluctant to speak thy mind,” Ecthelion said softly. “The King shall like thee.”

“That is good to hear, Lord Warden,” said Anardil, “and pray forgive me if my words have by any means offended you – or you, Captain, or you, young Lord Erestor.”

“Or me,” Voronwë broke in. “If that holds any interest to you, mellonamin.”

“I have already offended you enough times for you to learn not to take it in.” Anardil smiled wryly. “But what I truly meant to say was – well, ever since the pits of hell opened below our lands in the Bragollach, I am afraid, my lords. Sindar, Nandor, Ñoldor, the few Teleri who still wander the shores, the mighty houses of Men... we are all leaderless, adrift, like dry leaves in the wind. And the Shadow is spreading, the Enemy is growing stronger. You have this city; King Fingon has Hithlum and his watchtowers; King Thingol and his Queen watch over the woodlands... you are all separated, and Dark creatures are starting to fill the holes between your lands. I am not skilled in warfare, nor am I familiar with the ways of the Ñoldor, but of one thing I am certain: something has to happen. Someone has to... do something.”

Laurefindil almost gasped as he heard his own words from less than an hour ago, echoed by this strange Elf who seemed to have come from the end of the world.

Here I have the proof that I was right.

“In the past year,” Anardil went on, somewhat reluctantly, “I have been held in Tol-in-Gaurhoth, the fortress of Sauron. My luck saved me from being dragged on to Angband, but my imprisonment was still filled with anguish, pain, humiliation and great fear. By the grace and mercy of the Valar, I got away, though paid a great price for it... Also,” here, Anardil sighed heavily and raised his head to meet the others’ eyes, “I brought you tidings of the death of one who
– so I was told – was a dear friend to both of you.”

“Findaráto,” the Captain and the Warden said in unison.

“Indeed,” said Voronwë, “but how could you possibly know about this?!”

“Theoretically, we cannot,” Ecthelion said, “and thou better forget that we mentioned it at all. Let us only say that Counsellor Lómion is friends with the Eagles; and apparently, Laurefindil is now friends with Counsellor Lómion.”

A smile was lurking on Voronwë's face. “Now when did that happen?”

Laurefindil did not answer; his gaze remained fixed on Anardil's face.

“What befell to Findaráto?” He asked softly. “What became his death?”

The Teler swallowed, and looked away.

“What happened, I ask thee!” Laurefindil persisted.

“His death was not... easy, my lord,” Anardil managed. “If you do not mind, I shall... I shall provide a detailed description only if and when your King commands me to.”

“Tell us as briefly as possible,” Laurefindil whispered, “I beg thee! How did he die?”

“He was bit... or more honestly: lacerated by a werewolf, my lord,” Anardil said finally. “And I, along with other prisoners, was made to watch. Your friend fought fiercely, even though he had no weapon but his nails and teeth. He managed to kill the beast with his bare hands, but died shortly afterwards.”

Laurefindil swallowed. His imagination was nothing if not visual...

“He died defending... a friend of his,” Anardil went on, drawing a deep breath. “And that friend was rescued, along with some of us, though he was heading elsewhere. I led south a group of refugees but an Orc band hunted us down a few days later. My companions were massacred to the last Elf… One of those filthy beasts wounded me between my blade-bones, then I got my shoulder cracked... my blood was flowing like a river, and all I remember from that hour is terrible, searing pain. I fell into the Sirion and grabbed hold of a piece of driftwood before fainting… I do not know how my enemies' arrows avoided me. When I woke again, I was in a boat, and this strange, dark elf who turned out to be Voronwë was tending to my wounds.”

“This will make an excellent song, Lord Anardil,” young Erestor said, a little bit too enthusiastically. “But who was King Findaráto's friend?”

“I believe that is something to discuss solely with our King,” Ecthelion said when Anardil did not answer at once.

“Precisely,” said Voronwë. “That is why Anardil agreed to come with me: he believes that he could provide useful information to King Turukáno.”

“Tidings these days are more precious than gold.” Laurefindil nodded. “I marvel at your wit and valour, Lord Anardil. All prisoners fantasize about their escape, but very few of them accomplish the task.”

Anardil bowed. “If mere luck is a virtue, then I can accept your praise. Elsewise, there is none
other than King Findaráto to be held in honour.”

“Still, I wonder how...” Ecthelion shook his head mildly. “But never thou mindest. We shall have our answers soon, and so shalt thou. Now tell me, how did your journey go? And who was following you?”

“The Orcs lost my track at the seashore, the half-wits.” Anardil grinned, and Laurefindil marvelled at the sudden change in his mood. “Voronwë was very subtle and evasive at the beginning, but eventually, I told him about my life and he told me about his, along with a few goblets of wine.”

“Bottles, unfortunately,” Voronwë remarked.

“You might already know him better than we do!” Laurefindil smiled. “And how were the seas?”

“Stormy – for me, at least,” said Voronwë. “Lord Ulmo was raging and I hardly saw Anor. The winds betrayed my crew and our ship danced like a drunken soldier. We lost most of our provisions near Falas, and we arrived exhausted to the havens of Brithombar – several hundred miles south from our original destination, might I remind you. We are living in perilous times, my friends.”

“You are truly lucky to have this city!” Anardil nodded his agreement. “Peace and safety are blessings I have not known since my ships were stolen and burned.”

“Many of us feel that way, Lord Anardil, and not without reason,” Ecthelion said. “May ye both find rest within the walls of our City!”

“How kind of you, Lord Warden! But I do not intend to harness such gratitude.” Anardil smiled broadly at the silent, and suddenly very intent Ñoldor around him. “I am no soldier, nor guardian, nor hero. I only wish to tell your King a few stories he might find interesting – and then I'm on my way! The Sea is my home, and your City, however fair and glorious, is foreign to me.”

“I have already told you that things were not as simple as that,” Voronwë said alarmingly.

“Law is law.” Ecthelion nodded. “I told thee as well, my lord – if thou comest in, there is no way out.”

“If I am not mistaken,” said the Teler with a smirk, “there is a King in this City. According to the traditions of my humble people, Kings are chosen to rule their faithful Lords; even the Lord Wardens and Lord Voronwë-s – even Captains, mind you. And his decision may differ from yours. Are the ways of the Ñoldor any different when it comes to their Kings?”

“Courtesy, Anardil!” Voronwë snapped; but Ecthelion only laughed, Laurefindil watched the Teler in amazement and young Erestor stared at him wide-eyed. If Manwë himself had suddenly appeared from the empty air to take a seat at their table, their reaction probably would not have been any different.

“Well,” said Ecthelion, “brave Lord Anardil, if thou convincest our King to open his gates to thee, I swear I'll give thee my best chainmail as a parting gift. ’Tis a bet.”

“Very well,” Anardil shook the hand that was offered to him. “And you, Lord Warden, shall ask any gift from me if I won't succeed. I cannot promise such a mighty one, but I am skilled in woodcarving. And singing, now that I think of it.”

“Well and done,” said Ecthelion. Laurefindil glance at Voronwë, who shook his head in resignation; then he saw young Erestor grinning, a full goblet of wine in his hand. When he stared at him, the boy mouthed the word “Promised”, and Laurefindil gave in to utter defeat.
Later, their conversation turned towards lighter topics. Voronwë told them about his long journey North after losing his ship, and the yellow and blue flowers of Nevrast that Laurefindil missed so dearly; then Anardil told some of his own stories about strange lands and foist merchants. They both complained about the weather, the Orc-bands and the outlaws roaming across Beleriand. Ecthelion and Laurefindil gladly joined this discussion, even though they had not seen Orcs for over a century.

“Things cannot go on as they are if we want to survive.” Voronwë sighed. “If only someone, anyone would gather the strength and courage to unite the wandering troops…! Once brave and honourable soldiers are strolling about the roads, once mighty Men are killing or begging for food... 'tis horrible to see them stoop so low; and the change is more visible each time I set out on a new journey. Since King Ñolofinwë has been killed...”

“Findekáno is worthy of him,” said Laurefindil. “Give him time, and his rule shall strengthen further than his father's.”

“Let us hope for that,” Voronwë said gravely, “but I have my doubts.”

“King Turukáno has an army of twenty thousand,” Ecthelion said. “He is the one thou sekest: the protector of us all.”

“But the Gates are closed,” Voronwë sighed. “And should they be opened any time, that will mean the end of us; because sooner or later, the Enemy shall find us and break our walls.”

Laurefindil watched the sunlight in the distance as it danced from one snowy mountain-peak to another, sighing softly. All of them had tried to lighten the mood at some point of their discussion (save for young Erestor who merely stood in the shadows and listened, becoming slowly but steadily drunk), but they always came back to the same topic in both their words and their hearts: to the desperate desire of acting, of helping those in need. Somehow. Some way.

Yet the way was hidden.

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ILLUSTRATIONS
Chapter End Notes

- Anardil is – quite obviously – not Tolkien’s Anardil, but an OC.
- Voronwë is canonically related to Ñolofinwë.
- ‘The Falmari’ is a name for the Teleri of Aman. [m.: wave-folk] It is deliberately left
in Quenya, even though Ecthelion is trying to speak Sindarin.

- On archaic English: Ecthelion and Laurefindil speak an approximately 400 years older Sindarin than Anardil And Voronwe. I wanted to make it pompous and clumsy, which I believe it is.
The First Betrayal

Chapter Summary

A message comes to Himring from Menegroth.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Himring, FA 467, the first day of Víressë

Tyelcano held his arms tight against his chest as he walked, to keep a messy heap of parchments from falling. Gingerly, he placed his burden on his lord's desk and unrolled the thickest scroll: it was a map.

Lord Maedhros watched the process without comment, his fingers drumming impatiently on the table.

"Have you sent them?" he asked.

"Yes, lord – I sent off all the letters as swiftly as possible, save the one for King Findekáno. That I restrained and rewrote, as was your wish."

Maedhros's drumming ceased for a moment, and Tyelcano found himself in the focus of his full attention once again.

"Good. Read it out, will you..."

"At once, lord," Tyelcano said. He unfolded another scroll, one he had filled with different versions of the same, one-paragraph message, knowing his lord's desire for perfection. He chose the last one – which he deemed the most evasive – and drew a breath to read it aloud... only to let out the air from his lungs in a flummoxed huff when someone knocked on the door.

Maedhros's eyes meet his; and Tyelcano shook his head to answer the unspoken question. They had not been expecting anyone from inside (or outside) the fortress. No scouts were expected to return in less than a few weeks, unless some kind of disaster had stroke; and if something was indeed amiss, the guards would have sounded the horns long ago.

The watch on the borders had been doubled lately; every hand that could hold a sword was needed in service. Ever since the Bragollach had reduced the green, fertile plains of Ard-Galen to a desolation of ash, the people of Himlad slept little and less, their vigilance never ceasing.

"Enter," said Maedhros sternly, and Tyelcano closed the scroll. A letter to the High King was a confidential matter: the less people knew about it, the better the odds... The effort, however, proved vain; it was the Captain of Guards, Tulcestelmo who appeared in the gap of the door.

"My Lord Maedhros," he said in clumsy Sindarin (which was suspicious enough for the two Elves to rise from their seats). "A messenger came from the Halls of Menegroth; he brings you word from King Thingol."
Maedhros's eyes went wide. Tyelcano saw the knuckles of his hand whiten as he gripped the edge of his desk as he rose; and his own mind was racing as well. Thingol had not contacted any Son of Fëanor since the long-gone feast of Mereth Aderthad; he ignored Maedhros's strength and potency just as haughtily as Maedhros disregarded his. There was no friendship or connection between Himring and Menegroth; but nor was there enmity.

Until now, at least.

*Could it be,* whispered an audaciously hopeful voice in Tyelcano’s head, *that Thingol finally saw reason, and he seeks our friendship? Could it be that he decided to return the Silmaril?*

Nay; if he was honest with himself, neither of these options seemed by any means likely.

*Lords change little, and Kings change less. There must be some other reason for the Woodelves to send us a messenger. But what could be that reason?*

The more intently Tyelcano pondered the issue, the less he dared to hope for a favourable answer. Luckily, however, he had little time to brood on possible misfortunes and disasters, as Lord Maedhros took a deep breath and pulled on the solemn mask he wore as Warden of the East.

“Let him enter,” he said, “and speak.”

The gap between the door-wings widened, and a lonely Elf came forth, clad in the grey-green colours of Menegroth. His face was pale and austere, and the shadowy line of a scar ran through the side of his cheek. Tyelcano saw that it must have been long and painful to heal.

“Be welcome in my halls,” said Maedhros. His Sindarin was well-practiced, and despite its lingering taste of Quenya, it also seemed effortless. “I am Maedhros, son of Fëanor, Lord of Himlad and Warden of the East; and this is my counsellor, Tyelcano. Please enter and sit, for we much desire the message of your King to be delivered.”

“I greet you, Lord Warden, Lord Counsellor,” the messenger said. He bowed deeply before settling down in one of Maedhros’s wide armchairs. “Feredir is my name, and my King chose me to deliver grave tidings. First of all… Lord Warden, I inform you with regret that two dozen scouts bearing the crest of your House have been found dead near our borders, now not entirely six weeks ago.”

“In which colour they were clad in?” Tyelcano asked immediately.

“Unadorned black, Counsellor, with the Star gleaming silver upon their chests.”

*Carnistir's men, then.*

This was a piece of information, Tyelcano deemed, and a precious one at that. Maedhros obviously followed his trail of thoughts, but he showed neither approval nor dismay; he simply sat, and listened.

“My King had long intended to send you a message,” Feredir went on, “but circumstances made it temporarily impossible for us to cross the borders of the Fenced Lands. It is only now that I am able to inform you that the previously pledged union between your and King Thingol's Houses has proved a fruitless endeavour. My King offers to the House of Fëanor to lay the matter aside, and leave this attempt out of account if it comes to any further collaboration between our forces…”

“Excuse me?”

Maedhros’s face darkened, and Tyelcano was just as unable to hide his surprise and displeasure at
the half-scornful words.

“Would you mind detailing that, Feredir of Doriath?” Maedhros asked, his voice half amused, half acid. “I cannot quite remember which one of my secret Sindarin lovers you are currently talking about.”

Tyelcano glanced at his lord, alarmed. Maedhros was, without any doubt, the wisest and the most considerate among the Sons of Fëanor, but Valar forbid, that was not saying much...

Feredir of Doriath, however, was a young Elf, and of better taste for jests than most of his kinsmen, as it seemed. He could not suppress a shy grin, which was quickly overtaken by his astonishment.

“Could it be, then...” he managed, “that your lordship has yet to hear about the affair of the Lord Celegorm and our beloved Princess Lúthien?”

Maedhros leaned forward in his chair, the spark of amusement overwhelming in his grey eyes.

“Pray enlighten me.”

Feredir shifted uncomfortably in his chair. “Forgive me, Lord Maedhros, if my question is by any means too bold,” he said, “but... may I inquire exactly how much do you already know? Are you aware, for one, of the quest Princess Lúthien had pursued with a certain Beren, son of Barahir...?”

“I do know of the stolen Silmaril, if that is your question,” Maedhros said Starkly, before Tyelcano could voice his displeasure, “and I know where it is. I also know that my brothers were banned from Nargothrond... and that Morgoth sleeps no more.”

Feredir blinked hard when he heard the Enemy's name, but then his eyes widened.

“Is that... is that all, my lord?”

To Tyelcano's overwhelming relief, Maedhros gave a curt nod. “Aye, that is all... am I missing something?”

The messenger let out a stormy sigh, forgetting about his manners. “I have brought you a letter from my King,” he said wearily, “but if your knowledge of recent events is so scarce, Lord Warden, then I should perhaps tell you a few things before handing over the letter. I am grieved that is it me who should bring you these tidings, and not one of your kinsmen, as you would have deserved...”

“Please tell me you are not bringing me tidings of death,” said Maedhros.

“And yet I am, my lord.” Feredir bowed his head. “Please receive my King's, my Queen's and all my people's deepest condolences. I say with terrible regret that your cousin, King Finrod Felagund of Nargothrond has been brutally murdered.”

Brutally murdered, Tyelcano thought.

Not “fell in battle”, or “perished”, or “missing” or even “killed”.

Brutally murdered.

If the Counsellor had previously suspected that something was amiss, then now he could be entirely sure.

“This is bad news indeed,” Maedhros said, his eyes distant. His shoulders tensed for a moment, as
if struggling under some invisible weight. “It grieves me, and deeply, that Findaráto walks these lands no more. My heart weeps for his kindness; his wisdom and valour shall much be missed this side of the Sea... And yet I find solace in the thought that instead of being captured by the Enemy, he is at least with Mandos now, the chains of his hröa cast away. Morgoth cannot do him further harm and we, who are left in Endórë, must go on; for his sake as much as for ours. Tell me, Feredir of the Woods, who rules my cousin's people now?”

“Orodreth, son of Angrod,” said the messenger, “and his realm is no longer in turmoil; his strength is rising, and his borders are being shut.”

“And why should the realm of Nargothrond be in turmoil?” Maedhros asked curiously, propping his chin up with two fingers. “Not exactly the word I would use for a land that weeps for its late ruler.”

“That, Lord Warden, is one of the things you must learn,” Feredir said. “It shall be a long tale.”

“In that case,” said Maedhros, “I will listen to it comfortably. You have come a long way, Feredir of Doriath, and I ask you for more tidings than you were ordered to give. The least I can do for you is making you forget the perils of the road. You must be hungry and worn out. Counsellor, please,” he said to Tyelcano, “bid a servant to bring us food and wine, and come back here as soon as you can. I want you to hear the tale as well.”

When Tyelcano returned, Feredir was seated at the same spot, facing Lord Maedhros at the other side of the wide desk. Lunch and wine were soon served; and Tyelcano loaded up his plate with soused meat, fresh leaves of lettuce dressed in saffron and herbs, and several dippers of richly seasoned mushroom-stew to ease the discomfort of their guest. He knew that Lord Maedhros was not very likely to eat properly, not while being this alert and curious. Then he took his place between his lord and the messenger, on the shorter side of the table, and listened.

His predictions came true: Maedhros’s appetite was reduced to a cup of soup, while the messenger – taking courage from Tyelcano’s pretense of voracity – stuffed his plate and drank his fill, unused as he probably was to dine in study-rooms.

Much later, when only a few flagons of wine remained on the table, Feredir leaned back in his chair, and began his tale.

“I do not even know how or where to begin, Lord Warden,” he admitted, taking a small sip from the chalice in his hands. “I believe that I must first dwell into the past, to reach the very roots of the most unfortunate events of times nigh...”

Tyelcano crossed his legs and closed his eyes. Despite the utter contentment of his stomach, his senses told him that he was not all going to like what he was about to hear.

“When the terrible Flames struck from the North, a dozen years ago, my people were saved from the Enemy's wrath; but that never lessened our fear of his malice. We held our watch thrice as warily and vigilantly as before; and we despaired over every piece of news, peril after peril, death after death. All we could rely on was the vigilance of the Ñoldor in the North, and here in Himlad. Some deny this still, but I know it to be true... My people hoped that the Enemy would never find his way to Menegroth, or Nargothrond; and yet in the end, the shadow of evil reached them both. Our hearts soon grew hot in the face of peril; and many of us wished to take up arms and fight for
your people and the Lords of Dorthonion. And yet our King – led by the wisdom of his long years, some say; or led by his distrust of the Ñoldor, say others – remained in his seat and denied our request.”

“And yet he did not remain idle. His mind – so it is said – oft wandered past the borders of his lands, and so did the searching glance of our Queen; that is how the presence of Beren, son of Barahir was overlooked. That is why he could wander our woods unseen, unconsidered; and that is how he laid his eyes upon our beloved Princess Lúthien. This Beren was bold enough to ask King Thingol for his daughter's hand; and although the King refused him in anger and disbelief, Princess Lúthien was willing. And thus King Thingol set an impossible task upon Beren as a bride price: he asked him to steal a Silmaril from the Enemy's crown to prove his worth.”

Tyelcano and Maedhros both nodded. This much was known to them.

“Beren was valiant enough to attempt the Quest,” Feredir went on. “Remembering the oath King Finrod Felagund had sworn to his father, he rode to Nargothrond and spoke to King Finrod, who remained true to his word, and offered him help.”

“...and that was the hour when the first complications arose with this glorious Quest,” Maedhros said with pride. “For no living creature, be they Eruhín or spawn of Moringotto, can keep a Silmaril for themselves, lest the wrath of the Seven Sons pursue them beyond the Circles of the World. Surely, everyone in Beleriand is aware of this. To take it lightly would be folly; to disregard it completely, as Felagund apparently did, borders insane. Surely, I cannot blame your King for his request, for using the parallel of a stolen Silmaril to describe impossible for this mortal Man; but I most certainly have great trouble understanding why my cousin would have envisaged, or even considered such a quest.”

“He was bound by his own words of honour, Lord Warden,” Feredir said. “Much like you are.”

A spark of some hidden fire flashed in Maedhros's eyes. “Aye,” he said softly, “how thoughtful of you to remind me.”

The messenger, slightly terrified, opened his mouth to form an apology; but the lord waved him off. “Pray go on with your tale.”

“As you wish, Lord Warden,” Feredir complied, his voice slightly shaking.

Tyelcano frowned. The messenger seemed quiet, respectful, even shy in his own way; but he was clearly no coward. If he was this uncomfortable with going on, something truly terrible must have happened…

“...when Beren's request and King Finrod's will of helping him was announced in the halls of Nargothrond, Lord Celegorm rose, and drew his blade; and he gave a stern remainder of the Oath he'd sworn, naming the Silmarili as the rightful heritage of your House. And there was movement among his followers, silent glares and hands upon sword-hilts; for his powerful words made Beren's quest seem not only bereft of reason, but also unwarranted. Then Lord Curufin spoke, and his words were much softer. He voiced his fear of King Finrod and his kinsmen being captured, dragged on to the mines of Angband, and the secrets of the realm drained from them by horrible torment. He spoke of death and ruin, of cruel flames invading the halls of Nargothrond. Thus, he put a great fear in every heart, and no-one wanted to follow King Finrod… Your brothers, Lord Warden, have most cruelly betrayed him; for even after he departed with Beren and the few faithful followers he had left, they searched to undermine the power of Orodreth, wishing to seize it for themselves.”
“Now that is some lunatic phantasm of you Moriquendi!” Maedhros sprang from his seat. “And a grievous insult!”

“My Lord, please,” said Tyelcano. “Let him speak. You may still have to accept that he has proof of what he is saying.”

“That is impossible,” said Maedhros icily. “They are my brothers – mine own blood...”

“To steal a Silmaril from the Iron Crown was also impossible, my lord, until the day it happened. Let him speak!”

Feredir waited several seconds before continuing, probably wondering whether Maedhros was planning to behead him now, or only later.

“...and it happened thus, Lord Warden,” he said at length, visibly bracing himself, “that the City of Nargothrond was overwhelmed by turmoil and great fear. For the rule of Orodreth was faint and feeble, and your lord brothers were still supported by their followers. My King sent me to inquire about Beren’s dwelling in King Finrod's halls: that is how I saw the following events with my own eyes. I am aware, Lord Maedhros, that you are a warrior of great renown, and a good leader of your people; and it must grieve you to hear about your – certainly most beloved – brothers’ wrongdoings. But you have asked for the truth; and I was there, my Lord. I saw what happened.”

Maedhros’s face was grim, expressionless. He gave a slow nod.

“Ignorance is a weakness. I have to know.”

“As you wish.” Feredir blinked. “One morning, your lord brothers rode out to the Taleth Dirnen to hunt, and took their hounds with them. And lo! When they returned, Lord Celegorm was carrying no game but Princess Lúthien upon his stallion; for she had run away from her father's halls in despair, and chanced upon him and Lord Curufin, who promised her aid. I thought that your brothers would return Princess Lúthien to her father's Halls; but I misjudged, for they locked her up. I was sent back to my King with word that Lord Celegorm wished to take the Princess as a wife, for he had fallen in love with her; and that he would not return her home until the request would be granted. And since your brothers’ followers were loud and many, Lord Orodreth could do nothing to lessen the harm their devious ways had caused.”

“So it happened that Princess Lúthien was imprisoned in Nargothrond. I was then away for a while, for many leagues lie between that city and my King’s halls... King Thingol was wrathful when he heard of Lord Celegorm's request; and still there were voices, small voices within our realm that said ‘better her groom be a Lord of Ñoldor than Beren, a mortal Man’. But the King did not listen to such counsel; he sent me back with a small troop of soldiers to reclaim the princess. He would have gone to war to have her back, if he had to; but that would have meant another Kinslaying, and he wanted to avoid that by all means.”

“The rest, Lord Warden, I know only from hearsay. It is said that Beren, King Finrod and their escort had been imprisoned in Tol-in-Gaurhoth, the once so proud fortress of your kinsmen in the West; and Sauron, the Enemy’s servant questioned and tormented them. Your cousin, my lord, was thrown in front of a werewolf, its claws and teeth crueler than steel and iron; and yet Felagund killed it with his bare hands, though died as well. It is also said that Princess Lúthien came, riding a mighty Hound; and she broke the doors of the fortress, setting the thralls of Sauron free. Many who once were prisoners had returned to Nargothrond, and its turmoil deepened; for people complained that lo! an Elf-maid had dared to accomplish deeds that the Seven Sons would not.”

“There was no mirth on Lord Celegorm's face when he heard that the Princess was safe; and thus,
the folk of Nargothrond understood that everything he and Lord Curufin did, they did it to seize
power and kingship. Thus, they understood that your brothers cared for nothing and no one, but
their Oath... Their followers were enraged, roused against the ones they had served for so long; and
they wanted to have their blood spilled! Blades were drawn, curses were shouted, the shadow of
Evil descended upon the city.”

“And that was when I came back. I saw your brothers, my lord, surrounded by their own kinsmen,
who, raging, demanded their deaths. I saw fires lit in the mass, and daggers drawn; and I heard
many shouting ‘Death to cravens! Death to traitors!’ Yet Lord Orodreth refused to have your
brothers killed; for he knew that such a deed would only bring more evil upon all of us, Quendi.
And he banished your brothers from Nargothrond, promising that there would never again be
friendship between him and any Son of Fëanor. Thus, your two brothers rode away, followed by no
more than Huan, the giant grey hound…”

“Followed by no more?” Tyelcano's voice was harsh. “How is that possible? Lord Curufin has a
son... a daughter...”

“No one followed them, Lord Counsellor.” Feredir shook his head. “And that was for the best.
Later, as I have heard, they chanced upon Beren and Lúthien, and it came to the swords; and that
affair is said to have had a nasty ending.”

“Do you know anything about Lord Curufin's children?” Tyelcano pressed.

“I know that Master Celebrimbor is well loved in the City of Nargothrond. But I never met him or
his sister; I have no tidings of them to give.”

“Very well,” Maedhros said suddenly. “I am beginning to understand things.”

“Are you, Lord Warden?” Feredir sighed sadly. “As for my humble self, I seem to understand them
less and less.”

“Hand me the letter of your King. That may answer a few questions.”

“As you wish,” said the messenger. He placed a thin scroll of parchment into Maedhros's
welcoming hand, who broke the seal with an agile snap of his fingers and weighed an empty
candle-holder on the upper edge of the parchment to be able to unwrap it. Tyelcano knew better
than to offer him help; and he glimpsed a spark of approval in Feredir's dark eyes.

The letter was merely a few paragraphs long – Tyelcano could see it from the corner of his eye.
The handwriting was neat and the letters small; it spoke of collectedness, and unrelenting
precision. Only King Thingol's ceremonious signature stood out from the soldierly order of his
message.

The letter is short, Tyelcano decided. And yet his Lord Maedhros sat above it for what seemed like
hours, his face frozen, as if Time itself had stopped and all Beleriand’s kingdoms had turned to
dust.

Eventually, however, Maedhros moved. He leaned back in his chair and put the candle-holder
aside so the parchment could wrap itself again on the desk.

Then, he smiled; which was only slightly less terrifying than his previous wrath.

“Feredir of the Woods,” he said, “you have done me a great service, and for that I am thankful.
Bear me no ill will if my words have, at times, wandered past the borders of being kind, or even
courteous. You may depart immediately if you so desire; but you are very welcome to spend here a
few days as my guest, and regain your strength.”

“Thank you, lord Warden.” Feredir bowed. “What response shall I bring home to my King?”

Tyelcano resisted the temptation to take Thingol's letter from the table, for he already saw the shade of resolution in his lord's grey eyes. Maedhros’s decision was already made, and without his consent; but that was not by any means a novelty. Why was he suddenly so uneasy about the situation, then…?

“Tell Elwe Singollo that I might consider his offer,” said Lord Maedhros, his voice harder than steel. “I shall send him messengers in a year. Tell him to open his vast treasuries and hand the Silmaril to my envoys. Tell him to give back what is mine and my brothers' – and then the two of us may converse about friendship, justice and good will. I have spoken.”

“Indeed you have, Lord Warden,” said Feredir. “I shall bring your word to my King. And I – I thank you once more for your hospitality.”

A servant opened the door before him, and he left the room in haste.

“Come here, Counsellor,” said Maedhros when they were alone. “I need you to have a look at this letter.”

“You seem to have made your decision easily enough without my insight, lord,” said Tyelcano, unable to hide his irritation.

“I did what was right. It was most unpleasant, as right things so often are; and I wanted to get it over with.” Maedhros took a deep breath. “Please, take this.”

Thunderstruck upon hearing please, Tyelcano took the letter and read.

To Maedhros, son of Fëanor, Lord of the Himring and Warden of the East,

Elu Thingol, Lord of the Sindar, King of Doriath and Protector of the Woodland Realm sends his kind regards

Your lordship,

I turn to thee in an hour of dire need, for my heart is anxious. The shadow of the Enemy grows, and of late, it seems to have wined its way through the borders of our realms. It is with great sorrow and concern that I think of the heavy losses your kinsmen have suffered of late.

I inform you with discontentment that your two brothers, lords Celegorm and Curufin have kidnapped my daughter, and refused to return her home unless I grant Lord Celegorm her hand. I did not expect such irreverence from the proud Ñoldor; and by the laws and customs of my realm, I must thusly deny any future request for union between our Houses.

Should they come to Doriath again, your lord brothers shall have to stand trial. In such a case, they shall be treated with care and granted fair judgement, as would any other who stands by the
throne of the Woodland King.

Lord Maedhros, you are a wise leader of your people. In times as perilous as these, you could ill afford to gain yet another enemy; and we in Doriath are weary of death and peril. Should you do justice against the captors of my daughter, I offer you my friendship, my good will and any help I can give in the hour of need.

With kind regards for you, your brother Maglor and all your vigilant people in the East,

King Elu Thingol

Written on the last day of Ninui, in the Halls of Menegroth

The room seemed to suddenly grow cold. Tyelcano clutched the parchment in his right hand, almost afraid to meet his lord's eyes.

“To do justice? Do you have any idea, my lord, what that means...?”

“I know exactly what that means, Counsellor, or I would not have been so swift to wager my own brothers' lives and freedom upon my choice.” Maedhros closed his eyes. The stern mask of the Warden of the East slipped from his face for a moment, and Tyelcano saw how weary he truly was. “Yet… by the Valar, my brothers indeed deserve punishment for what they've done to Artaresto and Findaráto! Kind, gentle Findaráto...” His voice faltered.

Tyelcano put a cautious hand on Maedhros’s shoulder, then removed a tress of auburn hair that wound its way through his forehead.

“I understand little and less, lordship,” he said softly. “What happened to Lord Carnistir's slaughtered scouts...? What happened to Tyelperinquar and Erenis...? So many riddles... so many unlikely coincidences...”

“All is veiled by a shadow of Moringotto,” said Maedhros. “I know his malice when I see it. Thingol should have never wished for the Silmarili; behold the peril it brought upon his head...! And I must have the Jewels back, for so I have sworn. Some may call Findaråto a fool for keeping his Oath; yet Feredir was right to say that his promise had bound him. But that is not what troubles me the most. What curse of Moringotto could have wormed its way into my own brothers' hearts...? I have to find them, Counsellor. I shall have no rest until I learn what happened.”

“You already know what happened, my lord,” said Tyelcano cautiously.

“I want to hear it from them. There should be some means of explanation. If the Enemy is now corrupting the very hearts of Quendi...” Maedhros shook his head. “I have seen things that you cannot imagine. Sometimes, rarely, thralls are released from Angamando and sent back home, to bear testimony of the power of Moringotto. They think that having escaped, they had also triumphed over the willpower of the Enemy; and yet their every word and every thought is still driven by a Shadow that lurks in their heart. They will never be free again... They are the greatest danger one could ever face; and if my brothers are by any means exposed to such danger, 'tis my duty to drive the Darkness out of their hearts.”
“Is such a thing possible, lordship?” Tyelcano asked quietly.

“Everything is possible,” said Maedhros in the most casual speech mode of their language, his eyes two silver, benevolent stars. “I am here, after all, am I not?”

Tyelcano smiled despite himself. “You are.”

His lord smiled back. “Indeed. Now go… I need to clean my head; and you do not have my permission to brood over things we cannot change.”

“What of your letter for the High King?”

“Later,” said Maedhros grimly. “I have had quite enough of letters for today.”

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**ILLUSTRATIONS**

The Warden of the East | (c) Laerthel 2015
Chapter End Notes

Feredir is an OC, his name means ‘Hunter’ in Sindarin.
Nínui is Sindarin for ‘February’.
Víressë is Quenya for ‘April’.
Artaresto is Quenya for Orodreth.

The Silmarillion, Chapter XIX, ‘Of Beren and Lúthien’: “But Thingol learned that Lúthien had journeyed far from Doriath, for messages came secretly from Celegorm (...) that Lúthien was in Nargothrond, and that Celegorm would wed her. Then Thingol was wrathful, and he sent forth spies, thinking to make war upon Nargothrond; and thus he learned that Lúthien was again fled, and that Celegorm and Curufin were driven from Nargothrond. Then his counsel was in doubt, for he had not the strength to assail the seven sons of Fëanor; but he sent messengers to Himring to summon their aid in seeking for Lúthien (...). But in the north of his realm his messengers met with a peril sudden and unlooked for: the onslaught of Carcharoth, the Wolf of Angband. (...)Alone of the messengers Mablung, chief captain of the King, escaped, and he brought the dread tidings to Thingol.” – I assume that in the end, no messenger came to the Himring, and Maedhros knows nothing.
Crossroads

Chapter Summary

It is quite uncommandable to attack a son of Feanor, especially if other sons of Feanor happen to be nearby.

An Orc band learns that the hard way.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“We shall not lay hands upon them!” Artaresto said. His voice rang far above the raging mass, above lances and swords and daggers. “We shall not! For despite their malice and treachery, they are still our kin. Have you forgotten the Curse of Mandos? Such a deed would bind it more closely upon us all. I will not have the blood of my kin spilled! Let them go. But bread and shelter I shall grant them no more, and there will be little love between Nargothrond and the Sons of Feanor thereafter: this I swear. You have seen me and heard my words.”

“Let it be so!” Tyelkormo said, and laughed; and he, Curufinwë...

He said nothing.

He stood there, thunder in his eyes, hatred in his guts, and smiled.

Let it be so.

When he went to gather his belongings, he saw Tyelperinquar and Erenis. They were standing in the shadows, holding hands, watching him.

Curufinwë paid no heed to his children, and tightened the straps on his bundle.

Everything was in order.

(No, in fact, nothing was in order, but the façade of precision and collectedness would be much needed on his journey north, Curufinwë knew).

“What are you staring at?” He said harshly. “Move! We need to leave before the sun goes down – the mercy of my good cousin might not prove as extensive as he claims.”

“I am not going with you, Atar,” Tyelperinquar said.

Curufinwë froze. “You were saying...?”

“I am not going with you,” Tyelperinquar repeated patiently. “I came to love Nargothrond and its people.”

“And so did I,” Erenis said, her voice like iron.

Curufinwë laughed.
“Look at you, my dears! Putting our feet down, are we…? Now pray tell… why would Artaresto let you stay here, offsprings of traitors and kinslayers?”

“Because we are loved for who we are, and not for who you should have been,” Tyelperinquar said, without the slightest sparkle of fear or remorse in his eyes. “And because we do not wish to stoop so low as you did, Father. We did not swear your Oath, and we are not your servants. ’Tis pity enough that our paths should fall asunder in such a bitter way.”

“It is,” said Curufinwë. “So Master Tyelperinquar is allowed to stay, I imagine; for his talent is much needed in the fair city of Nargothrond, and Artaresto could ill afford to lose such crafty hands. Master Tyelperinquar now feels powerful enough to discard his father. That much is clear… But what of Lady Erenis?” Curufinwë tilted his head. “Lady Erenis who cannot even lift a hammer or shoe a horse, ungifted as she is…? Surely, my sweet daughter, you have nothing to offer Lord Artaresto – or am I wrong?”

He swallowed the bitter taste of guilt when he saw the confusion, the hurt and the unshed tears in her daughter’s eyes; but then Erenis rose, and she eyed him, brave, unbroken.

“If you think so little of me, Father,” she said icily, “then why would you mind if I stayed here? Useless Lady Erenis could not even light you a fire on your journey to the Hells of Moringotto, could she…? If you think you stand above the laws of the Eldar and the mercy of the Valar, then take another wife and sire children who match your needs! Fare well!”

She slammed the door behind herself; and unconsciously, Curufinwë raised his hand as if he could have hoped to stop her.

“Fell and fey are you become, Atar,” Tyelperinquar said, and Curufinwë’s eyes widened at such boldness. “Fare well, and look for us no more! Forget the children you treated like tools and livestock for all your years in Nargothrond. I still hope against hope that one day, the Father we have lost shall return. Then we may speak again.”

The March of Maedhros, FA 467, the first day of Víressë

The roots were pale, less in width than his thumb and grungy with sour-smelling dirt. It took Curufinwë a good hour’s walk to collect them; and by the time he found anything edible, the mud of yestereve’s rain reached up his sleeves.

A year ago, he would have been disgusted by his worn-out state: weather tattered his cloak, filth scuffed his boots and the better part of his garments were either torn, shredded rags or serving as bandages to cover the wounds he’d had on the road. Life out in the wilderness was hard; and he, Curufinwë, son of Fëanáro was as much at the mercy of good fortune and nature as anyone else.

Nature itself was perhaps the only thing that would show any means of favour towards him, Curufinwë thought grimly. He tightened his grip on his mockery of a prey, and turned his long strides downhill again. Roots were all he could hope for until he would come upon an abandoned settlement, a hastily left camp, a corpse, or any other possible source of arrows; devoid of steel and too wary to light even the smallest of fires, Curufinwë could not hope to make any arrowheads himself.

He counted two hundred and fifty steps as he made his descent amongst dogwood and burberry
bushes. At the bottom of the valley, he hesitated a little, then picked some berries off a slim buckthorn. He knew that their taste would soon turn sour, and their effect was less than pleasant; but should he or his brother need to wash some kind of poison or disease out of their bodies, the wicked berries could prove more than useful. The dark, grim woodlands of what had once been Dorthonion – where they would soon be heading to – were not likely to grow such treasures.

_Fifteen pair of roots, a pocket full of rose-hips, another pocket full of mushrooms and a handful of berries, Curufinwë counted. It was little enough, but more than nothing._

He reached a wide meadow, crowned with a carpet of tiny white flowers. The green hills of Himlad were paled by morning fog, the stillness of the landscape interrupted only once in a while by the glide of thrushes and a lone magpie, buzzing back and forth about their business above the clearing. Far above and further ahead, Curufinwë could see Anor in a halo of pinkish-yellow clouds, rising above the blackened wastelands of Anfauglith.

And further still... _no_, he would not think of _that_. He would not give in to despair.

_I am a hunter of the woods, an outlaw, a wanderer. All I have is the present: the Now. For me, there is no ‘when’; there is only ‘if’. _

That was what Curufinwë kept telling himself since Nargothrond; no tears, no smiles, no petty _emotions_ to disturb his mind. Not even a flicker of pride. He had to go on, to _survive_: to live another day and yet another.

He did not know why. There was no such thing as _why_: he ate, he drank, he slept, he breathed, he placed one leg in front of another as he strode, following his brother. This state of silence and denial could not go on for ever, he knew; but while he walked the woods, meadows, hills, and rivers, while his mind was set on hunting down a hart or finding new ways to catch fish, even the endless torment of his Oath seemed bearable.

He could, in fact, link one engagement to the other. It was only natural that he needed to eat, so one day, he could fulfil his Oath. He needed to walk _“another mile”_, then _“just another”_, for eventually, that would bring him closer to his final destination. Each day, he wowed that he would brace himself at last and head to Himring, admitting his deeds, seeking help; yet he never did. There was still something in the depths of his _fëa_ that restrained him.

And then, of course, there was Tyelkormo – a shell, a shadow of his former self. Hopeless, loveless, horseless, Huan-less Tyelkormo.

Another thing that made Curufinwë go on was that he had to drag Tyelkormo with him, further and further on the road. Since Nargothrond, their communication was reduced to the expression of hunger, thirst, cold and fatigue; or now and then a sign of game in the woods. Perhaps that was the worst of it all... lack of communication. Lack of _companionship_. The maddening silence of the woodlands. The Orc-bands hunting for them.

It was not getting any better – it was getting worse, and swiftly.

Curufinwë followed the narrowing edge of the meadow, now uphill again. He and his brother had made camp on a wide plain in a sea of grass, deepened and thickened by rainfalls of late. In the approximate middle of the verdure, a small cluster of trees stood proud against the pale blue sky: it was under these trees that Tyelkormo and Curufinwë had settled for a day, and perhaps another. Their beds of moss and fallen leaves were more welcoming than most of the resting places they had encountered on their journey. Now that they had no horses or companions, a couple of unburdened trees were the best shelter they could hope for. In fact, if news in Beleriand travelled
as fast as fair Lúthien upon Huan the Hound, it might as well prove the best they would find for all their days left in Endóre...

On the edge of the forest belt that separated the blossoming meadow and the great green plain, Curufinwë halted, uneasiness taking over him. The earth whispered news, ones he had been dreading ever since they came to Himlad.

Curufinwë knelt, and listened. The steps echoed uncertainly beyond the never-ending lament of a soil once drenched with blood; their song was faint and distant, but Curufinwë, who had spent half his life hunting and travelling, could not mistake it for anything else.

Riders were coming, and with great haste. Not that Curufinwë was surprised; the lands were leached with rain, and reeking with mud. All it took was a lone footprint, forgotten and left behind.

They had been discovered; and the hunters became the hunted.

When he reached the shelter, Tyelkormo was already gathering his affairs, preparing to hit the road; and Curufinwë found it relieving to see the sparkle of life lit in his eyes again.

“Have you heard what the earth sings?” Tyelkormo asked; and despite everything, Curufinwë had to smile at the poetic expression, probably picked up from Oromë himself.

This was also the longest sentence his brother had spoken to him in the last three days.

“We must make haste, or we shall be found soon. A troop of riders, if I am not mistaken...”

“Aye. But there is no glory in the sound of their hoofs, nor the surety of the hunter who caught the smell of game. They are fleeing, Curvo, just like you and I, and terror is in their heels. Orcs are growing bold in these mountains; my heart tells me they were outnumbered, and forced to retire.”

“Nelyo’s scouts fleeing from Orcs?” Curufinwë shook his head. “Never!”

“The days of the Siege are gone.” Tyelkormo stood, suddenly regaining his former grace. “Moringotto won the last battle, and our forces are scattered. Orcs might roam these lands for all we know, and if they do, then we are in greater peril than the riders. What weaponry do we have?”

“You have your bow and three arrows,” Curufinwë counted, “a knife, and a broken lance.”

“And you, Curvo?”

“Nothing.”

“Which means?”

“Which means that we have to run for our lives, and now!” Curufinwë snapped. “I hate the thought of it; but every minute of waiting and pondering is a waste of precious time!”

Even as he spoke, he knew it was in vain; for where could they have run? North, into the open arms of the Enemy? East, where the Shadow still lingered? South, where their current peril was coming from? Or West, through open plains and grey-green wastelands, revealed to all eyes within leagues?
There was nowhere to run, and a circle of trees was no place to hide. All they could do was stay, and face whatever may come.

“Here,” said Tyelkormo, “have my knife. 'Tis better than roots and stones.”

To Curufinwë's chagrin, Anor hid behind a veil of clouds within the hour. Cumbrous silence fell on the hills around them; the birds and beasts were now silent, and the promise of rain hung heavily in the air. Unwilling to delay the inevitable, the brothers gathered their poor belongings and even poorer provisions together, and climbed the nearest hillside.

Mud, dew and filthy gravel filtered into Curufinwë's left boot across some new hole as he climbed the last few rocks, following his brother. Now it was Tyelkormo who persisted, who dragged him along. When they reached the top, Curufinwë saw that his brother's instincts were trustworthy: the scrandy juniper bushes that covered the southern slope were shelter enough to hide them. Luckily, the wind had also turned North, which meant that their foes were not even likely to catch their scent; and even if by some mischance, they were noticed, the hill-top was an easy place to shoot from.

If one had more arrows than just three, that is.

The faint but steady thud of feet was growing closer; and Curufinwë stopped listening. Whatever was coming, he was no longer in charge – he had to endure whatever the Powers had arranged for the day.

Soon, the brothers could hear the noise of approaching battle. Horses were trotting, neighing, snorting. Swift, agile feet were hitting the ground, again and again, as the scouts were losing terrain. Blades sang, people screamed, fire roared. The grunts of Orcs and the bubbling of their black blood were heard much less often than they would have liked; their kinsmen out there were losing the battle, and swiftly.

Tyelkormo lay under the bushes upon his stomach, letting his head fall on the ground. Curufinwë could not decide if he was cold, weeping, or his shoulders were simply shaking with rage. His own blood was boiling as well; but what could they do? If they wasted their last three arrows, what would they eat next day? They could not live on turnips for ever. And if they were to join the fight... what weapon would they use? Tyelkormo's lone knife? The splinters of his broken lance? Their nails and teeth?

“Angrist, my friend, I miss you most grievously,” Curufinwë lamented, damning the day their paths crossed with Lúthien; and the day King Thingol had voiced his want of their heritage.

So many evil could have been avoided that day. Does he not know that the Silmarili are ours, only ours, and we shall have to kill anyone who is after it? What right has he, the King of the Moriquendi, to keep any of our treasures?!

But King Thingol is cunning and wary, far more attentive than your Father was, and your Grandfather before him, part of Curufinwë's mind insisted as the battle cries were creeping closer. Did he not see the light of Aman as Finwë did? Did he not walk among the Valar, did he not stand before Manwë as well? Yet he was clever enough to say no and stay where he belonged, stay in the ancient lands of the Quendi. The Valar showed the Quendi their crafts and lore, yes, but they also chained their minds. Your Father broke those chains, but he could not bring freedom to the Ñoldor.
Even he, even your Father failed. Yet how could one bring freedom if he was a thrall in all his life?

Curufinwë stood, his tall figure clearly visible among the bushes, barely aware of how his shoulders shook. Where were these thoughts coming from? To say that the Valar held the Quendi in chains was saying that Moringotto's deeds were righteous, and he would have deserved to rule Aman instead of Manwë and Varda.

He could not say that. No, he simply could not say that.

But what was wrong with keeping an Oath? Was there no redemption after Alqualondë, that terrible night on the shores that still made his skin crawl? Would he ever find rest, or would any of his brothers?

“Curvo!” Tyelkormo's voice slipped unpleasantly into his consciousness. “Back down! They're going to see you!”

His hands tightened into fists.

“Curvo! They’re coming!”

Curufinwë was dragged down amongst the thicket, his eyes wet.

“I am not evil, Tyelko,” he said wretchedly. “Tell me I am not.”

“Is that the last thing you want to hear before we die?” His brother squinted. “I pray you ask Námo instead. I know you enough to tell what a wicked little gnome you are.”

Curufinwë’s laughter tasted as bitter as his tears; but it was still laughter, and laughter meant hope. He grabbed Tyelkormo's dagger in his belt, and listened.

The uproar of Orcs was almost unbearable, and Curufinwë could hear the thud of a body thrown on the ground, along with the clatter of armour and the cling of a sword, knocked out of the hand that had wielded it. Then, he heard the sound of fists and boots, kicking and banging into soft flesh. It seemed that the Orcs had triumphed, and now they were about to enjoy the company of their prisoners.

Tyelkormo crawled forward a few inches. “Ten...,” he breathed, “fifteen... twenty... thirty...”

Curufinwë swallowed. He had hoped for twenty or less.

“...forty-five, Curvo. They must have been a hundred or more. I see plenty of carcasses, and more black blood than red.”

“Any chance to flee?” Curufinwë whispered.

“Perhaps. Whatever we do, we have to do it quickly. I say we take the nearest path south, and run straight to Himring. Unarmed as we are, the only help we can offer is warning Nelyo as fast as possible.”

Curufinwë pondered that for a second. He hated the thought of abandoning any of their kinsmen to the Orcs’ mercy, but another crack on the shield of his pride was definitely worth some lives. Not even his Atar, or his uncle Ñolofinwë would have been able to face forty Orcs at the same time, armed with no more than a small hunting knife.

His reluctance to enter Himring, his self-pity, his dark broodings on the Valar and the lack of their
mercy – *everything* was forgotten at once as Curufinwë began his slow, wary descent from the hill, followed closely by Tyelkormo.

At the other side of the tumult of earth and rock, the Orcs were revelling loudly in their prisoners. Curufinwë could hear the evil hiss of a whip every other second, and there were cries of pain and dismay.

And one of the voices seemed – *familiar*?

A handful of gravel and small rocks crackled under Curufinwë’s feet, and for a moment, he was on the verge of sliding downhill. He grabbed a ledge on the cliff, his entire weight placed on his fingers. His arms were going numb, and he muttered a few colourful curses as Tyelkormo pulled him onto more secure terrain.

“Watch out!” He said. “We cannot fight with one hand if they see us.”

“Don’t say *that* if we make it to Nelyo,” Curufinwë muttered. Tyelkormo said nothing, but there was a sparkle of gallows humour in his eyes as his feet searched for the next cove.

They reached the critical point of their descent; they had to cross a spot where the veil of verdure would not hide them. Tyelkormo climbed forward, for his feet were steadier; and Curufinwë thought that he was a fearsome sight, even covered in old rags, even with his longbow hanging uselessly from his shoulder. While his brother was searching for the safest route, Curufinwë kept his attention on their enemies below.

Even if his previous mistake had been noticed, the Orcs gave no sign of it, so enraptured they were in the pleasure of having captured four Elves at once. Three of them were bound and made to stand by a fire the Orcs had lit; and the fourth one was most viciously played with.

His armour cast away, the prisoner lay on the blood-soaked ground in no more than a thin undershirt and a pair of tattered trousers. A strong Orc was standing above him, flinging his whip again and again, terrible blows thundering upon the prisoner’s back. The others were shouting at him in their hideous, guttural language; and Curufinwë did not have to understand their speech to recognise the insults.

One of the prisoners was tugging violently on his ropes, red wounds and bruises opening on his shoulders, arms and wrists. One of the smaller Orcs shouted something, and spat at him. The rest laughed, then the tortured Elf was turned on his back, and the whip lashed straight upon his face and chest. The prisoners shrieked, but the tall, lean creature on the ground endured the blow in silence.

Another cruel snap, another dreadful blow. Another kick on the purplish shoulders and hips. The Elf’s head waned aside as he passed out, and a trail of bright blood sprang from his nose. It was about to drown him soon if he remained unconscious, Curufinwë knew.

Both he and Tyelkormo stared at the pale, lifeless face in silence. Suddenly, their duty was forgotten. Their errand was forgotten. *Reality* was forgotten.

Curufinwë felt sick. Terribly sick.

Then some terrified part of his awareness reminded him that he was staring into the haggard, barely recognisable face of Makalaurë.

“*GET YOUR FILTHY HANDS OFF MY BROTHER, YOU WITLESS SPAWN OF MORINGOTTO!*” Tyelkormo bellowed. As he emerged from the verdure, entirely and wondrously
enraged, Curufinwë thought he must have been as terrible to an Orc’s eyes as a furious Vala in the fullness of his strength would be to some unlucky Elf.

His next thought was that they were about to make a terrible mistake. Tyelkormo was storming relentlessly downhill, his feet barely even touching the ground. One of their three precious arrows was already in his hand, ready to touch the string. The Orc who had tormented their brother was truly and entirely doomed – but so were they.

Unless...

Curufinwë pulled his brother’s hunting knife from its sheathe and went on his own way. Thick roots and a slick carpet of fallen leaves protested soundlessly as he raced downhill, supporting himself here and there by grabbing hold of the dew-dampened rocks.

He heard the hiss of an arrow flying through the air, and there was a cry of dismay as it hit target. As Curufinwë broke forth from amongst the trees, he saw that his brother was about to crash furiously in a line of fully armed Orcs. The whip of the torturer was in his hands now, lashing frightfully from one side to the other, reaching faces, arms, chests and legs alike.

Curufinwë marvelled at the impossible chance they’ve had: most of the archers were killed and their arrows scattered. Still, he had to break a handful of bows on his way towards the captives; and overcoming their initial shock, a dozen Orcs were now heading at him, grabbing their blades and gritting their teeth. One against a dozen seemed considerably better than two against forty-five; but Curufinwë still felt the wave of weariness taking over him. He pulled a scimitar from the chest of a dead Elven scout, and slammed into the wall of enemies.

The first head fell without protest, the mouth vomiting black blood. Curufinwë slammed the still twitching body into his next enemy’s face, and cut deep into a leg, reaching one of the thick arteries on the inner side of the thigh. Skin and flash opened with a loathsome *smack*, and Curufinwë was momentarily blinded by blood.

Someone grabbed him from behind, probably trying to crack his spine; and Curufinwë remembered the tattered remnants of once fine armour underneath his rags. They still held, but not perfectly... he was not safe, here as he was, surrounded by Orc-filth. He had to get help.

He jerked forward and slammed his fist into a swarthy face. His bones ached from the impact, but the Orc was knocked unconscious, and at the same time his left foot reached something soft and breakable; another one of his enemies must have fallen on the ground. And ahead...

Curufinwë gave a sharp cry as the first throat was sliced right in front of his eyes. The guardians of the camp had clearly intended to kill the captives before he could reach them. Luckily, he got there first.

*Did he not?*

Curufinwë tugged frantically on the rope around the second Elf – the scimitar's edge was too thick to slide underneath. He needed Tyelko’s knife – *where in the Valar's name was Tyelko's knife?! Could he truly be fool enough to drop their last piece of Elven weaponry...?*

He kicked an Orc furiously in the stomach, and watched over the gagged Elf with all the strength and vigilance of his shattered body. He could not allow them to be killed... he could not stand alone...

He was grabbed and pulled to the ground, cruel steel biting into his side. Curufinwë spat a
colourful curse and rolled over, dragging a pair of unsuspecting feet with him. He rolled the Orc around, his fingers tugging at the soft flesh in the middle of his throat, unprotected by nerves and collarbones. There was a horrible, sickening crack, then the moist, tepid vacillation of inner bleeding under his hands, and the Orc started to twitch and shake violently. Curufinwë threw him on a dying archer, letting him drown in his own vomitus.

Swift as a shadow, he slipped back to the two remaining prisoners. It seemed that the raid had not been previously planned, and the Orcs had captured them merely for sport. That, at least, gave Curufinwë some hope.

“Can you stand?” He asked the first Elf, but no answer came.

When he turned the body over and saw ragged entrails gushing forth from a wide scarring, he turned his head and vomited. The wound on his side was now throbbing steadily, and his legs were shaking with the sort of weakness that comes with the heavy loss of blood.

“I can stand, my lord,” said the last Elf, the one he’d been previously protecting with his own body. “Please, unbind me, and let me fight for you.”

Curufinwë’s inquiring hand found his brother’s dagger at last, and he slid the blade under the Elf’s ties. When the rope gave way, the scout fell to his knees for a moment, wriggling his wrists to make the blood circulate. Curufinwë handed him the scimitar and he pulled another, longer sword from the bowelled Elf’s belt.

Their enemies were already upon them; but Tyelkormo was still on his feet, and unscathed. With a fierce cry he sprang forward, and slammed into the chest of yet another Orc.

“How many still?” Curufinwë yelled, and sliced yet another belly, broke yet another arm, stepped on yet another face. His tattered clothes were becoming damp with sweat, and heavy with the smell of blood and earth.

“Twenty-some smelly filth,” Tyelkormo bellowed. Whip still in hand, he was standing above Makalaurë, defending him with every move and breath. His arms and legs were dark and slippery with Orc-blood, and a fresh spring of his own blood ran down from his scalp.

Twenty-three was the exact number of their enemies; and for one silent, dreadful moment they seemed to turn against the three worn-out Elves as one and attack in one fierce onset.

If they do, one of us shall surely die, Curufinwë thought. Perhaps all of us.

The silence stretched for four or five seconds; every body was motionless, every face grim, every muscle tense.

And then, all of a sudden, a little Orc pulled himself free from another’s grip, and broke into a run. He disappeared amongst the thicket with a cry of fear and dismay. Another pursued, and yet another; and when more than half of the party was gone, the rest followed as one.

The prey was costly; and none of them seemed willing to pay the price.

The three fighters stood frozen for several minutes; then Curufinwë fell on his knees next to his brother.
“Kano,” he whispered faintly. “Kano, do you hear me?”

His vision was darkening. It had to be the wound...

“My Lord…” The scout stepped beside him and held him steadily. “You have lost too much blood. Please let me take care of you as well as I can.”

“He comes first,” Curufinwë insisted, still holding the sides of Makalaurë’s face. “He’s hurt…”

Tyelkormo knelt down as well, and checked Makalaurë’s pulse and breathing. Both were slow and faint, but still within the borders of normal.

“He’ll soon be awake, and in great pain,” said Tyelkormo. “He won’t be able to walk, but we have to move; and yet we cannot risk to move him. A true riddle. I wonder where the Orc-filth went.”

“They are most likely hiding in some secure, dark hole until nightfall,” said the scout. “We must make haste. If you will watch over him, I shall run and warn the Lord Warden; I may reach the Himring within two hours if I am swift. I will send you soldiers, provisions, healers and anything else you may need.”

“A sharp mind,” said Curufinwë. As little as he appreciated the prospect of staying out in the wilderness with Orcs about, he still found it in himself to celebrate cleverness. “What is your name? I do not seem to know you.”

“Antalossë, my lord. I joined the watch only three weeks ago. This was my first scouting...”

“Poor boy,” Tyelkormo sighed, his eyes still on Makalaurë’s face.

“Listen to me, Antalossë of Himring,” said Curufinwë, “I cannot promise that scouting will get any better; but I presume that my brother will much appreciate your bravery. You might never need to leave Himring ever again.”

The scout blinked. “You said – my lord, forgive me, but did you just say that your brother…?”

Tyelkormo and Curufinwë glanced at each other, then laughed.

“Oh, aye,” said Curufinwë, “introductions might be in order.”

“Where is the fun in that?” Said Tyelkormo. “He shall have to guess. Which of the Seven are we?”

“As if that was a riddle,” Curufinwë snapped. “We don’t have time for your antics!”

“Yet you are the one playing Carnistir.”

“Ignore him, lad,” Curufinwë sighed. “And get back to your feet. We can get formally acquainted later.”

“Lord Tyelkormo, Lord Curufinwë, it is….”

“…a great honour, oh, do not tell me about it. It will be just as great when you return. You have to go. Now.”

“Yes, lord,” said Antalossë, and he ran. Soon, he disappeared among the hills, and the earth drank in the sound of his slender feet.

“A bright young thing,” said Curufinwë. “Centered on solutions. I like that. If I ever took a squire,
it would be him.”

For a moment, Tyelkormo looked as though he was about to answer; but then Makalaurë stirred, hiding his face. He seemed to think that he was about to get beaten again.

“Shhh, Kano,” Tyelkormo whispered. He caressed their wounded brother’s face with a tenderness Curufinwë had almost forgotten he had in his large hands. “It is over. Our enemies are lying around in black puddles of blood and entrails. They all died in terrible agony, I promise you. We will soon burn them to the last Orc. ‘Tis alright, brother.”

Something akin with disgust flashed across Makalaurë's face, and Curufinwë laughed.

“What a smooth way to cheer him up. I don't even remember the last time I had to say you were a rouge.”

“Cur...vo,” Makalaurë coughed, the haze of pain gone from his eyes. “Tyelko... what... how... when...”

“Too many questions.” Tyelkormo managed a smile.

“Where are...” Makalaurë trembled. “My head hurts.”

“That is no surprise,” said Curufinwë. “Be at ease, brother. Young Antalossë is on his way to the Himring. He'll bring help... and Nelyo will come and hunt the Orc-filth himself. It will all be frightfully amusing.”

He tried to sound cheerful, although he trembled at the thought of facing Nelyafinwë, Lord of the Himring and Warden of the East, and his eldest brother.

“Maitimo,” Makalaurë whispered. “I don't want... I have failed...”

“Failed?” Curufinwë put his arms around his brother. “What do you mean?”

“Everyone... died... I... I was too slow…”

“Too slow for what?”


“We will talk later,” Makalaurë promised, his voice a little bit stronger. “It is... it is good to have you back. Even if it was very... very stupid of you... to run down a whole armed... troop of Orcs.”

“That is what brothers are for, Kano.” Tyelkormo smiled ruefully, and bent down to kiss the elder’s cheek.

ILLUSTRATIONS
Chapter End Notes

Erenis is an OC – I have always imagined that Curufin had a daughter, too… so please forgive me for this small canon divergence.
A Day in the March

Chapter Notes

A/N: Long chapter, and maybe not what you expected. But yes, this is "Maedhros's reaction on C&C's actions, vol.1". And a bit of oneirocriticism. "MRoC&CA, vol.2" is coming next... and then we'll have a "Meanwhile in Gondolin"-block. Yay. Thank you for the increasing number of follows and reviews! I'm happy to see that people are interested in such an ignored period in canon.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

VIII. A Day in the March

Tyelcano moaned with exhaustion when the fourth impact against rain-steeped soil shook his bones. His whole body shivering with the familiar stress-filled aftermath of fighting, the Counsellor rolled onto his side and checked his aching knees for any kind of injury. He found none, though his favorite trousers had suffered a cruel tearing; and yet when he was about to spring to his feet again, hot flames of pain bit into the flesh of his calves and he fell back, gritting his teeth and heroically swallowing a colorful curse.

Lord Maedhros seemed tall as a Vala as he towered above him, longsword still in his hand, his auburn tresses an unruly crown around his head.

"Did I hurt you?"

"I did not take care when I fell."

The lord furrowed slightly.

"That is unlike you, Counsellor. May I know the reason?"

Tyelcano pulled his legs up experimentally, and swallowed another angry hiss when the pain came back. It did not feel as bad as before, but he was fretful with himself nevertheless. How could he be so careless...? He should have watched his steps, perhaps even secured his ankles. The old riding boots he wore were starting to get loose.

"I had very little time to do so. You are terrible to fight when you're upset, lord; you still do not know your own strength. Your vigilance strays for one second and you send me flying through the meadow."

"Upset?"

That was the only word that seemed to reach Maedhros's mind. The lord's bright grey eyes slightly narrowed, and part of Tyelcano's mind wanted to give in to the alarmed urge of taking up his sword again. Yet he did not yield, and spoke with such frankness as his duty required, for the lord - as both his Atar and Haru before him - was known to loathe paralogism within his household.

"Ever since that messenger came this morn, you are not yourself, Lord Nelyo. First you send me
off with the letter I wrote to the High King, saying that it can still wait; then you lock yourself up in your study for hours. And then you suddenly come and take me out to the fields with yourself, beat me thoroughly to the ground four times; and still you seem buzzing with life and energy. My dearest Lord, what ails you so? What is done cannot be undone; and you told me yourself that any haste or foolhardiness could now easily deepen the pit we're sitting in."

Maedhros sheathed his sword, and settled on the grass next to the Counsellor, his back against a trunk.

"How strange," he mumbled, "I almost feel tired. Yet I could still run a few miles."

"Try and lessen the burden on your mind instead," Tyelcano said gently. "It shall have to bear new weights soon enough, Lord Nelyo. Twould be wise to make them a little space."

A small smile rushed through his lord's solemn face, and Tyelcano wished it stayed there for ever. It did not.

"Make this easier for me, if you can," Maedhros said at length. "Let us talk about that letter you wrote. It evasively asked Findekáno for tidings about Princess Lúthien, the Silmaril and Findaráto's fate, then inquired about his well-being, did it not?"

"As you commanded, my lord."

"Very well," Maedhros was staring at his own gloved palm. "I say, Tyelco, that we now know enough. It would not be wise to send that letter before my brothers are found and brought safely to my castle... then questioned. I believe they are heading here, but it may prove useful to look for them, do you think not?"

"I do indeed," Tyelcano stole a glance at his lord. "Do you still intend to make them stand trial?"

"I've been pondering it," Maedhros admitted. "Yet I'd better avoid humiliating them any further. The loss of Tyelpé, Erenis, all their followers and even faithful Huan at the same time must have been a terrible blow. Equally terrible to the deeds they've done, surely, but pride is a fragile shield, and when broken, it might easily rise as a phoenix of madness and destruction. I cannot allow any kind of strife or breach of peace within my walls; therefore the judgement must be done by me and only me. I am head of our House and Lord of these lands, and my word is law in the Himring. I do not see any other way."

"There will be talk," Tyelcano said. "And wondering."

"Restraining people from wondering is impossible. Some things cannot be helped; it falls to lords and kings to set all doubts at rest."

"Where reason is mute, authority must speak, my lord says," Tyelcano looked Maedhros boldly in the eye. "And he may as well be right. Yet to do such a deed, a lord must trust his own judgements. And if my lord does so, what drives him out to the wilderness, what haunts his days? Why do doubts and worries cloud his brows?"

Maedhros was silent.

"Your years and battles have earned you wisdom, my lord beloved. Whatever doom you lay upon your brothers, I shall bow before it and never go against your will; and neither shall anyone within your walls and your power. I shall say what I must, and you may hear my counsel, should you need it; but I trust you as deeply and hold you as dear as everyone else in the Himring. You have made
"Let us walk," Maedhros said. Lithe and slender like a deer, he stood and extended his hand towards Tyelcano. Swallowing his pride, the Counsellor accepted the offer and let himself be pulled upon his feet, paying close attention to the fading pain in his calves. He could feel the stinging aftermath of a thorough and vile cramp, and some uncomfortable knot in the delicate muscles, but he found that the capacities of his leg were mostly restored to normal. Only weariness remained.

Gracefully, his lord slid his left arm around his waist and they took the first steps. Maedhros's strides were long and smooth, and Tyelcano managed to place more and more weight on his still aching left leg. His lord's eyes followed his every motion, and to Tyelcano, who was as used to the intimidating, haunting glance of silvery orbs as one could get, the attention seemed more soothing than reproachful.

"Appose your leg somewhere," his lord said after a few minutes of walking. "Stretch it."

Tyelcano complied, his choice falling upon a waist-tall rock in front of a slender birch, probably a remnant of some construction or replacement of walls. Maedhros sank onto his knees next to him, and he drove out the pain from the Counsellor's leg with skilled fingers.

"Thank you, my lord," Tyelcano sighed in relief, but also amazement. "Your healing capacities astonish me."

"I would deepen them, Counsellor, and with pleasure; yet one must be sane to be able to heal," Maedhros laughed ruefully. "But you should indeed be more careful with your legs; one who is more attentive might get this sort of pain from trodding mine-shafts for a couple of days without any rest."

"As if sparring with your lordship would be any better," the Counsellor retorted. The wind blowing from the wastelands was fresh and it lifted his heart up. Maedhros laughed softly, his voice fading into the unwontedly gentle breeze.

"I was hoping to speak with you about a more private matter," he suddenly confessed. "Ask you, at first. That is why I tormented you with sparring: I was probably hoping it would get easier, or perhaps that some activity would draw out the stress from me. And now, you see, my blood is boiling with a tormenting eagerness to fight, and I find myself still more restless than before..."

"Let us then speak about that private matter, my lord," Tyelcano could not suppress the concern from his voice. "It is your... condition? Did it happen again?"

"No; in fact, it hasn't happened for a long time now," Maedhros said ruminatively. "I cannot remember the last time I lost control of it. No, Tyelco; I wanted to speak of my dreams; or mayhaps I should rather call them visions. The same tormenting issue you have witnessed before. I wanted to ask... did you see such a dream again since we last spoke about it? Did your dreams... evolve in any way?"

"I cannot tell," Tyelcano furrowed, carefully hiding the surprise from his face. "Yet the same dream now comes to me every night, repetitively, without any kind of change. I now know every small second of it, every little detail, every corner and every shadow. 'Tis more of a vision than a simple dream as you said, and I cannot help but wonder what could it mean. I am starting to have my own ideas."

"Would you recount it to me?"
Tyelcano did not answer at once; he closed his eyes, took a deep breath and let the open air caress his face. He and the lord have crossed a thin forest belt, and the plains of Himlad were opening out below them, caressed by the enormous arms of low-running hills.

"In my dreams," the Counsellor said at length, "I am lying on blood-steeped soil at first. It is my own blood. I am gravely wounded, and every breath is painful. I am trying to stretch my legs, my arms. I am hearing the hoarse caw of a raven in the distance, and more creaking voices answer the call. I feel the anticipation of danger and I know my enemies are not far, though I have no memory of what they've done to me."

"With great labour, I turn on my back first, I take deep but ragged breaths, and I rejoice at the feel of fresh air entering my lungs. Wearily, haggardly, I sit up and look down on myself. I see that I am wounded, and my blood is flowing down my chest. The wound does not reach anything vital, and I feel congealed blood slowly covering my biggest wound. It is not as deep as I've thought; and suddenly I come aware of a heavy pounding in my head, as if a blacksmith was working inside my skull with hammer and anvil. I must have been knocked unconscious, and left for dead."

"I look down on myself, and I see your sigil on my chest, my lord. My garments are formal, and I don't understand why would I wear such clothes on a journey in the wilderness. It is usually at this moment that I discern to see my usual dream again. The choir of ravens would not stay silent, and my head hurts. I try to stand but I feel too weak and dizzy. I advance on my hands and knees instead, and try to look around. I see dead everywhere, but they are all Orcs. There is no sign of Elves of any affiliation; I am alone and left for dead. 'Tis dark, long before dawn. Only the stars guide me as I brace myself and finally stand when I reach the edge of the clearing where the dead lay. I stand and walk in starlight, but my wounds drag me down eventually. When I can no longer walk, I crawl; and puffs of morning fog gather around me, they hide me from my enemies."

"I am so very tired, but somehow, I know I have to go. I have to keep moving. Enemies are following me and I am alone; a strange urge to escape burns my heart and I am trying to flee, but my body drags me down, ever down. I hide in caves and breaches as the land rises around me. I walk when I can and crawl when I must. I follow the course of a dried river without any idea where it would take me. It is getting cold, and high mountain-peaks tower above me icily, mercilessly, vigilantly. I lose my sense of time and I despair; and that is when I hear the voice."

"All flowers shall wither, it says. In sorrow it has started and in sorrow it must end; behold the banners as they gleam in the light of the rising sun! The night is passing but another night shall come, blacker than ink, black as the Void beyond the Circles of the World. Many years could one wonder and many years could he hope, yet he shan't succeed; the mountains are high and the peaks icy cold, and all flowers shall wither."

"I feel terribly cold as I crawl forward. I feel my enemies closing in and I am frightened; then shadows overwhelm me. I hear echoes of voices, I feel the hotness of flame, then see the cold gleam of distant stars on my skin. My strength is coming to an end and my consciousness betrays me. I am found, found by shadowy enemies; my hands are bound, I am carried and captured. I am defeated, sinking in a cruel nightmare within a nightmare. All I can feel is fear and insecurity."

"And then the voice speaks again: Hideous creatures lurk in the walls, it says, and he fleds from them, draping himself into the canvas that is the night. But he who walks in starlight does not flinch; he hides in caves and near breaches and behind rocks, and on he wanders, and on he wanders, but a dead end awaits. The gates are closed. Hearing such words of doom, I despair."

"Yet after a long time, a time that seems like a thousand years, a faint light comes to me and I sit, or I think I sit. I am in a large room; a room at home, in Tirion, and... and I believe I see Aran Finwë
looking down at me, his hand on my forehead. He is saying something, but I do not know what.
And then I am falling asleep within my dream. Visions and memories merge, I cannot distinguish
them. I see gigantic gates, guarded by armies and barred with iron. The gates are closed. I cannot
enter. And yet... and yet at the very end I see bright golden light falling on me and I feel warmth.
That is all I can remember. Is this by any means similar to your dreams, Lord Nelyo?"

Maedhros shook his head. "I hear the same words and probably the same voice, yet my vision is
different, and it mostly consists of merging pictures of icy mountains, valleys and rocks, blood-
steeped battlefields, flowing banners and corpses. Countless corpses. Some other times I feel like
flying above the whole world and I see fair Tirion as well, draped in the light of moon; 'tis not a picture from my memory, and not only because I cannot fly. The Tirion we knew was irradiated by the
light of Trees and we cannot possibly know what it would look like in moonlight! I dislike the visions I have nowadays, for I cannot help but ponder over and over the baleful words I hear. *All flowers shall wither* might mean that all my plans shall gone awry, no matter what I would do; and I strongly believe that my visions are some means of warning that concern our people's fate. The last time you asked me about these dreams, I was still trying to convince myself that they were meaningless, no more than the product of my own tired imagination. But since then, I have grown wary and impatient, and I despise the hour when night comes and I have to rest again. In a way, it fills me with the same feeling as the darkness of Angamando used to. I feel helpless... within the power of something far greater than I am... all while I feel that physically, logically, I *could* stop the flood of war and tragedy which is straining the hurdles, but I lack the knowledge, the understanding, the *information* to do so. And that..."

Tyelcano and his lord were standing straight, facing each other, and their eyes met.

"That frightens me!" Maedhros said, and Tyelcano could not restrain the flash of uneasiness that rushed through his face. Only once before in his waking life had he heard his lord - his king - saying *I am frightened*; and that was not a moment the Counsellor now wished to remember. Yet Maedhros had chosen the word carefully, that much was evident, even if Tyelcano could not yet fully comprehend what made the issue of this recurring dream so grave to his eyes.

But maybe that did not matter at all. If Maedhros sought him, his Counsellor out with such a personal problem, it must have been gnawing at him for a long time, and Tyelcano had to try his best and help.

"Maybe, my lord," he said at length, as a sudden thought occurred to him, "it's not a coincidence that we do not share the same vision, yet hear the same voice again and again. Maybe our dreams are two parts of a whole, and they only have significance if we put them together. Or... that does not seem very likely, but there may be other parts still missing. Maybe our visions shall change with time."

"Two dreams as a whole?" Maedhros seemed to stir a little bit. "That sounds logical enough."

"Yes, lord. 'Tis strange, though, that it is *me* of all people you share this dream with. Lord Makalaurë, or any of your other brothers would seem a much more natural choice."

"I would not say, my dear Lord Counsellor," said Maedhros. They sprang to a walk along the narrow path, stray branches of burberry and dogwood grazing their waist and shoulders. "You are as much behind everything that happens in my castle as am I. I decide and you make my decisions work. 'Tis evident that you have to be warned of the same danger as I; only, neither of us can fully comprehend the meaning of these dreams."

"You told me that they made you feel helpless," Tyelcano said in a low voice. "And they filled you with uneasiness. Is that what you feel each night when the dream wakes you up?"
"Sort of. The aftermath of this dream is like some shadow of impending doom that veils the room around me, that suffocates me."

"That might be a point of departure to decipher these visions," Tyelcano propped up his chin with two fingers, deep in thought. "I, my lord, always wake up buzzing with ideas, even though my dream itself makes my skin crawl. I see this vision as a riddle, with all necessary clues hidden inside it, yet I fail to even find one of them. I think it is some kind of task, some means of hint or guidance to forego a disaster that would be inevitable if we wouldn't have been warned with these visions."

"But this is clearly not a warning," Maedhros sighed. "This is a doom. All flower shall wither, it says, not all flowers might wither if we're not swift and smart enough. Also... it says that the gates are closed. Probably meaning that no matter what we do, our doom is already weaved by Vairë and there is nothing we could do to change it."

"The gates are closed," Tyelcano looked Maedhros boldly in the eye. "Closed, my lord. Not locked. Not barred with iron. And our task is probably to open them, whatever that means. There is still a way for us to fair Tirion, and we shall find it. We will probably still suffer a lot from Moringotto's malice; but light is stronger than darkness, for it sees right through it, comprehending its ways and its purpose. Darkness cannot comprehend light and flees even from its sight."

"That is what my father once told me," Maedhros said hesitantly.

"And do you think, my lord, that he lied?"

"Nay. Yet since then, I saw veils of darkness that swallowed even the brightest of lights."

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The shadows of afternoon were deepening around Tyelcano and his lord as they walked back along the path. Soon, the forest began to thin around them, and they reached the grass-overgrown crest of the hill they had climbed, letting the imposing sight of the Fortress of Himring reach their eyes.

The castle was built upon the highest hill of Himlad, wide and treeless, its summit slightly flattened. Lesser hills dappled the horizon as far as their eyes could see, some of them covered by scant forests, others overgrown with grey-green grass, some others utterly bald and rocky. Several watchtowers stood upon distant hills, facing all directions of the compass: tall, lithe shadows against the dewy daylight. Maedhros's banners were fluttering proudly in the never-ceasing wind; the gates of the Himring were open, and a long line of riders was leaving the fortress. Along the high grey walls, beacons were lit.

Tyelcano and his lord exchanged a curious glance, then broke into a run. Soon, they were seen from the castle, and the riders started to gallop towards them with such haste as if the Valaraukar themselves were chasing them. Tyelcano had expected Captain Tulcestelmo or some other high-ranked warrior to lead the line, yet it was a lanky youth who first came to them, his clothes and armor ragged, his left arm wounded, his eyes wide and frightened.

"Lord Warden, Lord Counsellor," he said readily, despite the puzzledness of his mien. "We were about to depart and search the woodlands for you."

"And who gave leave to you, a scout, to do that?" Maedhros said coolly.
"C-captain Tulcestelmo, my lord," the youth stammered. "I - it is about Lord Maglor; he's been wounded, and..."

"My brother, wounded?" Maedhros's eyes widened. "When and how did that happen?"

"This morn, my lord, when the Orcs..."

"Orcs within my borders?! What in Manwë's name are you doing out there in the Marches?!"

"Lord Maglor was heading home, my lord," the scout explained apologetically, "and I with him... and several others... when a large troop of Orcs ambushed us. Our numbers were less than two dozen and theirs more than a hundred... we tried to flee, but..."

"A hundred against two dozen?" Tyelcano raised his brows. "How did you even survive? And where is Lord Makalaurë?"

"In the forest, lying, with only two to guard him," the scout stammered. "Please, my lords, come with me, his life is in danger! I shall recount everything you'll have to hear on the road."

"Let us go then," Maedhros straightened his back. "Senge," he called at one of the guards, "please bring my dear old friend, Silmatal."

"And Alasto with him," Tyelcano said.

"They are already saddled, my lords," Senge smiled faintly. "Three led horses as well."

"Three?" Maedhros caressed the nose of his faithful stallion as Silmatal was led to him, and pulled himself up to the saddle. "Is that how many survivors we have?"

"Indeed, Lord Warden," said the scout. Their troop began the descent from the wide hill, horses snorting happily in the faint sunlight.

"Tell us your name, young one," said Tyelcano, "and what happened. You must have fought heroically to save Lord Makalaurë."

"I am called Antalossë, Lord Counsellor," the youth said. "And while we fought with the entirety of our strength, we would have all failed, to the last Elf, if lords Celegorm and Curufin didn't come to our rescue. By the time they chanced upon us, only three of my companions were alive, and we were surrounded by forty-some Orcs. The rest we killed, or they ran off... Two of my kinsmen were bound at my two sides, and the third one left alive was Lord Maglor himself. The Orcs... they started to torment him, to beat him up, and kick him... our blood was boiling, but there was nothing we could do. We could not move, so cruelly we were bound. One of my brothers-in-arms started to kick and scream, and his bowels were cut open as a recompense. I closed my eyes and pretended I had fainted, while I was trying to think about some means of escape... and that was when the lords came. Lord Celegorm took the lash Lord Maglor had been tormented with, and it was with that cruel device that he killed many of our enemies; and Lord Curufin freed me of my bounds and saved my life. After a long and wearisome fight, we managed to scare off the remaining Orcs, but Lord Maglor had already fainted by that time, and he lost lots of blood. Lord Curufin as well. I begged him to come with me and see his wounds tended, but he would not leave his two brothers alone in the wilderness with Orcs around. I can only hope that our enemies avoided them; Lord Maglor could not be moved, and I was the only one who had the strength to run for help."

"You have done well, Antalossë of the March," Maedhros said, his voice surprisingly gentle. "You bear my favour and gratitude for having organised the rescue of my brothers, and I am sure they shall be thankful, too."
"I thank you, Lord Warden," Antalossë bowed deeply in the saddle. After slight hesitation, he went on: "Lord Curufin told me... well, he said he would gladly take me as his squire. Would you allow it?"

"I may -"," Maedhros fell silent for a moment. "I may. But my brothers and I still have grave matters to discuss; any such decision shall only come after. And you, Antalossë, have to learn a thing or two as well before you pledge yourself to any lord."

"Are they true then, Lord Warden?" Laiquenis, the healer shifted a little in her saddle. "The rumours we hear about Nargothrond?"

"I do not know what rumours you have heard," Maedhros said gracefully, "but I have my own trustworthy informators; and I would like to hear my brother's account on the events as well before I declare anything. We all know the nature of tales; the hero leaves home in silence and humbleness, and the further he goes, the more unrealistic his quest gets, the more boasting and exaggeration lies within. My brothers are noble lords from the Royal House of Finwë and I shan't have their deeds taken on hearsay."

"Yes, Lord Warden," Laiquenis bowed. "Forgive my hasty words."

"There is nothing to forgive," Maedhros said slowly, "the question was just. Yet it is wrong enough that cruel rumour is spat at the lords of the Quendi from the mouth of their own kin; we must not aggravate this general mistrust any further."

Everyone agreed upon this point, yet Tyelcano sat in the saddle with uneasiness growing in his heart, watching as the wind played with his horse's mane. Alasto was a curious shade of dapple grey, his eyes icy blue, their gaze unsettingly clever and penetrating. Every now and then, the stallion started to dance around restlessly, and the Counsellor was certain he could feel the waves of nervosity and incomprehension around them. Maedhros seemed as calm and collected as ever, but Tyelcano, who had witnessed Feredir's speech and read King Thingol's letter knew he was not as sure of his brothers's innocence as he showed; and the Counsellor himself did not know what to expect, either.

They rode for a good hour still, avoiding the dark lines of the surrounding forest. For once they wanted to be seen, and scare off any remaining enemies.

"If there are Orcs roaming this deep within my borders," Maedhros suddenly said, "something has to be done. They have already taken the Gap and several lands on the edge. They have roamed through the Pass of Aglon and Northern Thargelion. They have robbed and burned down half of Estolad... and now they have grown bold enough to lay hands on my own brothers. I have had enough. Moringotto might have won the last battle, but I am Warden of the East and still his enemy; and these are my lands and my flesh and blood that he's trying to spoil. This time, his black hand reached a bit too far; 'tis about to get burned."

For the first time since the Dagor Bragollach when his lands were sacked and his castle besieged, Tyelcano could hear unveiled anger in his lord's voice. Maedhros rode far before his escort, his eyes bright with unearthly light, his voice clear and sharp.

"Hurry and lead me, Antalossë of the March! Are we far yet?"

"I left them just there, my lord," the young scout said, closing up with his horse to the lord's. "At the foot of the next hill."

Tyelcano signalled for the riders to form a great circle around the area; most of them vanished from
sight, either into the forest or behind the close-by hills. Only the Counsellor himself, Antalossë, Senge the guard and Laiquenis remained around Maedhros, who nodded in appreciation of the Counsellor's orders, and galloped off towards the hill. His companions hurried their horses after their lord, and soon enough, they encountered the first corpses.

They were scarce at the beginning, mostly killed by arrows or stones thrown at their skulls. Only a few Orcs have been sliced up by lances and swords, while the amount of cruelly butchered Elves was alarmingly increasing as they closed up to the hillside. When they finally came upon the large meadow where the worst of the fight had happened in the morning, the scent of death and decay was already wrinkling their noses, and whole armies of flies and crows took wing upon the tracks of their horses' steps.

"Kano!" Maedhros cried, unable to contain himself any longer. "Tyelko! Curvo! Brothers! Can you hear me?"

After a few seconds of dreadful silence, there was a faint "Nelyo!" coming from the back of the meadow. Maedhros jumped off his horse and raced along the green grass, closely followed by Tyelcano and Laiquenis. Antalossë and Senge remained behind to keep the horses in check.

Counsellor Tyelcano had seen much since he'd been born under the stars in fair Cuiviénen; and though he did not know this, there were still almost seven millenia of small joys and deep sorrows waiting to burden his soul... yet even among his countless highs and lows, he never forgot the sight that greeted him when they came upon that meadow.

Maglor was lying against a pinny oak, his head propped up with a pair of tattered cloaks and some kind of other, undistinguishable linen. His face and neck covered with colorful bruises, his breath came in painful hisses and his eyelids were swollen, his lips dry. Curufin was kneeling above him, holding the back of his hand, whispering soothing words in his ears, his arms curled protectively around him. Celegorm was sitting next to the pair of them, his elbows on his knees, his face gaunt and expressionless, his eyes two empty grey pools. He did not even raise his head at the sight of them.

Both Celegorm and Curufin seemed famished and dirty, their hair unkept and matted, their hands almost skeletal, clad in rags, a faint smell of putrescence lingering around them. Maedhros, who less than a second ago had still been running mindlessly to aid his brothers, suddenly halted and stared at the scene unfolding before his eyes. Tyelcano slowed down his steps as well, and cast a wary glance upon Curufin, then Celegorm, then the seemingly unconscious Maglor, and then his lord.

Celegorm still seemed to be unaware of his surroundings; his shoulders slumped, his face pale and blank, all his figure speaking of denial and shame. Curufin, on the other hand, raised his eyes straight to meet those of Maedhros; and for the smallest fraction of a second, his face went cold and barred, something akin with enmity flashing through his eyes. It was an expression of wounded pride and humiliatedness, an expression of blind pain and mistrust, a trait of those who have been sent to exile, or who have been discarded by their own people or brothers-in-arms. For the shortest of moments, Curufin was painfully similar to Fëanor himself, the fallen star of a late Age.

Maedhros beheld his brothers in silence, his stern grey eyes softening for a moment, and his sigh was soft and unheard by all save the Counsellor; yet it was like a tempest, deep and sorrowful, in it a breeze of unearthly power and elemental fury.

"Nelyo," Curufin said, his voice throaty and low, deep wells of sadness opening within his eyes.
And that moment, Tyelcano knew that everything Feredir told them was impartial and true.

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"Are you going to let him suffer, now that we have come this far to his rescue?" Laiquenis ran across the meadow, and fell to her knees next to Maglor. "Make yourselves useful, lords, and bring me clean water! There is a spring at the other side of the hill."

"A task for me," said Celegorm, suddenly awake from his reverie.

"Not before I broke your bones, little brother," Maedhros said, his face unreadable. Celegorm stiffened, but his elder stepped to him with open arms, and embraced him, planting a kiss upon his brows. "Take my cloak, Tyelko, it will serve you well. And be swift! Kano shall need to drink fresh water once he's awake." His eyes were gentle and they betrayed nothing of his previous turmoil.

Celegorm's arms tightened around his brother's waist for a moment, but he accepted the offer and draped himself in the soft crimson fabric.

"Counsellor, Lady Laiquenis," he said, his voice calm and collected but his eyes still dreadfully empty, "I am glad that we meet again."

"So am I, Lord Tyelkormo," Tyelcano said. "So am I."

Laiquenis was already checking Maglor's pulse, but she raised her head as well, and graced the brothers with a smile.

"Well met, lords, and welcome back," she said. "Lord Curufinwë," she continued in an authoritative voice, "I have been told you were suffering from an injury."

"That can wait, my golden-handed lady," Curufin said gently. "It is no more than a scratch, while my brother is in danger."

"I've been told no more than a scratch more times than I could count," Laiquenis rolled her eyes. "Back then, I was young and naive, and I thought seasoned warriors must be able to measure the graveness of their own injuries, but that is the most cruel of lies."

"I have heard more cruel ones, lady," Curufin said gently, and helped her straighten Maglor's arms and legs.

"What happened to you all?!" Maedhros found his voice again. "And what madness made you and Tyelko attack a troop of forty-some Orcs? You could have died!"

"At first, we planned to run and warn you about their presence," Curufin sighed. "But then... then we saw them beating Kano up, and we could not contain ourselves. It was probably a witless deed to do, but we had to do it, Nelyo. We could not leave him at the mercy of Orcs. I don't think that Tyelko had anything specific in mind other than blind rage and indignation, but I was afraid that the whole ambush had been previously planned and they wanted to capture Kano, then hide their precious prize from our eyes."

"An Orc-ambush within my borders," Maedhros foamed. "Two hours' run from my own castle!
Curse Moringotto and his rats! What have they done to Kano? Do you think he might suffer from inner bleeding?"

"That is unfortunately very likely," Curufin nodded. "His nose has been bleeding as well, but at least we managed to stop that. For a little while, he was conscious, and he told us how stupid we were for rescuing him. And he also mentioned you, Nelyo... he spoke of some message that someone took and that he came too late."

"A message that someone took?" Maedhros frowned. "I wrote him a short letter, summoning him back to the Himring for I wanted to have a word, asking him to abandon his beloved watchtowers for a while. That is all."

"We did not understand that, either," Curufin shrugged. "I suppose he felt dizzy, and wanted to say too many things at the same time; thus his thoughts merged."

"He does have an ugly swelling at the back of his head," Laiquenis commented, her skilled fingers drawing delicate patterns in Maglor's hair. "And he was thoroughly beaten; the muscles in his chest are all stiff. He'll need at least three days to fully recover - if he doesn't suffer from internal bleeding, that is. Curse those cruel beasts who have done this to gentle, kind Lord Makalaurë!"

"Can you do anything now to lessen his pain?" Maedhros almost pleaded.

"I shall need a fire to heat water," Laiquenis said. "Celandine for the wounds that bleed, milfoil for the ones that are hidden. I cannot risk anything else before examining the lord more thoroughly; yet I can almost certainly say that these shall lessen his pain for a short while."

Tyelcano had to smile at Curufin's and Maedhros's eagerness as they carried out the healer's commands. Laiquenis never had a problem with ordering lords and kings around when the need arose; she was a skilled healer and a strong, stern woman, but not one without a sense of humour. The Counsellor suspected that the latter was the very reason why Maedhros let her and only her tend to his wounds; and perhaps also that Laiquenis had taken part of the group of healers who had helped him recover after his rescue from Morgoth's captivity.

Merely a few minutes later, fire was crackling happily next to them, and Laiquenis began to heat the contents of the small bottle she carried with herself. Soon, Celegorm arrived with fresh water, and Tyelcano held Maglor's shoulders while Laiquenis washed his face gently, and smiled with satisfaction when a wave of wild shiver ran down the Noldo's spine, and two stormy grey eyes opened, then blinked.

"Cold water," Maglor mumbled disapprovingly.

"A perceptive lord," Laiquenis caressed his forehead lightly. "Can you sit up?"

"Lady Goldenhands!" His eyes opened again, and with an effort, Maglor smiled. "I am saved! Am I - am I at home already?"

"Nay," Laiquenis said lightly, and helped Maglor ease his back against the oak tree behind him. "I'll give you a draught to regain your strength, and then we'll go home. Does it hurt your lordship when I do this?"

The examination went on for a while; here and there, Maglor hissed and his eyes welled in tears of pain, but he seemed to get better; and soon enough, he was sipping milfoil tea in the shadow of the great oak. Maedhros sat beside him, kissed his cheek, asked him how he fared; and Maglor leaned against his brother and accepted his comfort, not caring that the others saw him. He seemed
reluctant to speak about the Orcs, yet he very willingly provided a colorful and detailed description of Celegorm beating them up with a whip, explaining that back then, he thought he only saw a
dream. Tyelcano listened to him with a ruminative smile on his face, his fingers playing with a
strand of celandine. Such a small flower it was, yet its healing power was estimated beyond
measure...

"Curvo, Tyelko," Maglor said suddenly, his voice still a bit weak, "'tis only now that it occurs to
me... have you come alone?"

"We always come in pack, Kano," Curufin smiled quizzically. "I have Tyelko, and Tyelko has me."

"No, I mean... where is Tyelpë? Where is Erenis? Where is Huan? Where is... anyone...? Has
something happened? Valar, don't tell me that they all... that they have all... and your clothes..."

"Nothing happened," Celegorm said, his voice blank. "They are safe."

"Everything is in order," Curufin nodded.

"I have no doubt about that," Maedhros said, and there was a sardonical edge to his voice that
made them both wince. "But let us discuss those matters later, shall we?"

"Something has happened," Maglor asserted with grave eyes. "Something I do not know of. That is
why you sent for me to come at once."

Maedhros closed his eyes, and he suddenly seemed very tired.

"Do not burden yourself, Kano," he said. "Drink your tea, come home with us, and recover. You
will know everything in time, I promise you."

"Tell me," Maglor insisted. "I can handle it, no matter what it is."

"Most of it is still to be explained, I believe," said Maedhros.

"Please, Maitimo, tell me..."

"Later, I said," Maedhros caressed his brother's hair, but his eyes were cold and commanding. "And
now I, Nelyafinwë, Lord of the Himring, Warden of the East and Head of your House command
you to finish your tea and let Lady Laiquenis tend to you. Do you think you shall be able to ride?"

"I may give him a mouthful of spirit that gives him strength for a few hours to help him home,"
Laiquenis said, "but after that, he shall feel weaker than before, and he'll need to stay in bed."

"I am willing to take that risk," Maglor said, "I don't want to slow you down."

"Let it be so," Maedhros nodded. "I would like to hit the road within the hour. Counsellor, please
bid Antalossë and Senge to bring us horses, and another spare cloak as well. I won't have any of my
brothers parading around in rags."

"I don't want a spare cloak," Curufin said, his voice suddenly very cold. "And I don't want to be
lectured, humiliated and judged. If you are ashamed of me as I look now, Nelyo, then our ways
shall part here."

"And you will go - where exactly?" Celegorm growled at him. "Don't be such a fool!"

"I am no fool but I have my dignity!" Curufin hissed back at him.
"You know where you can shove your dignity! Those times are gone, sweet brother, when we had such luxuries. Seize the opportunity while you can, and be glad that we’re not rejected!"

"Be glad that I'm allowed to breathe, is it that? I will have none of it, thank you! What happened to you, Tyelko? Why are you so willing to crawl in the dust?"

"For Valar's sake, you were only asked to accept a cloak!" Celegorm cried. "I've had enough of this, Curvo! I am weak and famished, and longing for a good night's sleep when I don't have to dread enemies in the darkness who want to slice my throat! Is that so much to ask from you to accept such a comfort?"

"Rejected...? Famished...? Darkness...? Throats...?" Maglor shook his head in distress. "What in Varda's holy name is going on here?!! Maitimo...?"

"Easy, Lord Makalaurë," Laiquenis said softly, "you're tearing the bandages."

Tyelcano's and the lady's eyes met for the smallest fraction of a second, and the Counsellor knew they were feeling the same uneasiness, witnessing an unpleasant, but quite private family moment.

"Tyelko, Curvo," Maedhros finally said. "You are my brothers. I have heard many things of late, but that is a truth that will never change, nor will I ever discard or deny it. You are my flesh and blood, and my home is your home... whatever happens. As long as I draw breath, all of my brothers and their servants, followers, friends or companions of any kind shall be fed, housed and garmented. If you prefer your rags, ride in them. I wished to spare you the narrow glances and humiliation, but if it's that you would rather have, I shan't deny it from you. If either of you would rather offend me by not eating food from my table, you are free to do that as well. But if you're asking me to leave you alone in the wilderness, I cannot do that. Will not do that. Come with me, and I shall ask you questions, then we'll come to a compromise. And if your trust in your eldest brother is so weak that you think I would ever gag, humiliate or judge you, you may have witnesses on your own. But do accept that you owe me a few explanations on certain matters, and I will have my answers relatively soon, whether you are willing to provide them or not."

For a few seconds, utter stillness reigned on the meadow, only Maglor moved, his lips forming the words "what in Moringotto's seven hells" over and over again.

Finally, Curufin bowed in front of his brother.

"Forgive me, Lord Warden," he said reluctantly, "you have never deserved this insult. I grew rather... weary since last year, but that doesn't blunt the edge of my words, of course. Please grant me another moment of your patience if you can."

"Granted," Maedhros said gracefully. "Now come with me. We have to scout the surroundings over before we leave; and the burial of our dead should be organised as well. We cannot leave them rot here in disgrace, under the open air."

"What of the Orcs, my lord?" Tyelcano asked.

Maedhros did not even turn his head as he said,

"Burn them."
A/N 2:
On name meanings (all in Quenya):
Senge (adj. keen of sight, observant, sagacious)
Laiquenis: laique+nisse = Herb-woman (not the most ingenious name for a healer, I
know... but I wanted something very simple and beautiful). Initially, she would have
appeared in a previous chapter called 'O Damnation' (also in Tyelcano's POV) which
has been cropped due to changes in the storyline, but some scenes from it may still be
used later.
"Haru" means "Grandfather", as far as I know. Please correct me, if not.

About "it": "It" is a strange (and in the world of Arda, rather incomprehensible)
medical condition of Maedhros that you may witness later.
This chapter, I believe, is the most daring piece of fanfiction I have ever published. To others, it may not seem *that* grandiose or special, but I've been pondering for months whether or not to include this fragment in the story - it was extremely challenging to write, and what is before you now, dear reader, is the fifth rewritten version of the original chapter. (I still can't say I'm entirely satisfied, by the way).

I would like to thank you for your lovely and insightful comments of late :) you guys all made me really happy, and I hope you'll continue liking this story.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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**The Fortress of Himring, FA 467, the fifth day of Víressë**

The Warden of the East could hardly remember any occasion when he was trying to prolongate a small council, but today's meeting proved to be a remarkable exception. Time passed with unmatched, almost supernatural speed, and the discussion rushed through all those meticulous, worrisome subjects that otherwise occupied several hours.

It happened thus that he ran out of words, and had to face the inevitable much sooner than he'd intended to.

"Captain!"

Maedhros's voice clanged like a sharp blade on iron; he shielded himself with its stern vigour of authority, his speech blank and free of the low, gut-wrenching flame of doubt and foreboding that burned inside his chest.

"At your command, Lord Warden," Tulcestelmo said meekly, his shoulders shifting a little while he sat, and Maedhros reminded himself to lessen the intensity of his gaze. People seldom dared to look him straight in the eye; fruitlessly he wondered what were they seeing in their depths.

"The matter of the insolent Orc-filth, I believe, is settled, if your scouts had indeed killed them off. Is there anything else I should know about?"

"Nay, Lord Warden," said the Captain of Guards and he bowed, then looked around in the small room. "The attacks shall renew and our strength needs to be gathered; but for instance, we cannot do anything else but wait. If none of your lordships wish to comment, then I believe we could end the council meeting of this morn."

Maedhros looked questioningly at his brother Maglor, then at his counsellor Tyelcano who were seated at his two sides, and when neither of them raised any objections, he nodded his approvement.

"Very well. Today's small council is over, then. Captain, please pass my summon to lords
Tyelkormo and Curufinwë; seek them out in person, if it is not too worrisome to you. I want neither curious eyes nor intruding ears around my halls today."

"As your lordship commands," Tulcestelmo said. He bowed once again and turned to leave the room, but Tyelcano called after him.

"Also, Captain, it would be wise to let them know that they were summoned in the Great Hall."

For the smallest fraction of a second, Tulcestelmo's face was ruled by confusion, even a sparkle of fear, but he swiftly regained control over his mien, and went to do as asked.

"The Great Hall!" Maglor exclaimed as soon as the door closed behind the Captain. "Why? Maitimo, I waited half a week, but my patience is over! Speak! What is this all about? I have so many questions..."

"So do we, lord," Tyelcano said, sadness in his eyes. "So do we. Yet we cannot decide if learning the entire truth could bring us any sort of satiety. Mayhaps even the contrary..."

Maedhros studied both their faces carefully. Maglor's health had considerably improved in the last three days, but an air of frailness and exhaustion still lingered around him, and the silvery light of his eyes burned lower than usual. Also, there seemed to be something remarkably different in his behaviour than before, but no matter how hard Maedhros tried, he could not guess what it was. Tyelcano, on the other hand, was as cool and collected as ever, his clothes moteless and austere, his hair in a tight braid without as much as a stray tress peeking out from amongst its dark waves. Yet his face was grave, and he seemed somewhat careworn. Maedhros knew his Counsellor loathed what was now to come as much as he, but he did not expect the task to take such a striking, visible effect.

"Let us not dwell on possible outcomes while we do not yet have enough insight on the present," he said casually, suppressing his doubts. "Never you worry, my brother: your questions are going to be answered, for great things have happened while you were away in the marches; terrible, but great things. We need to gather in the Great Hall in order to demonstrate the gravity of certain happenings. Brothers or not, we need to talk to Tyelko and Curvo seriously – let me explain why."

He picked up the thread of happenings on that fateful night when Tyelcano had brought him Caranthir's mysterious message; the tale unfolded almost by itself, and Maglor listened warily. Maedhros told him about Feredir's arrival and repeated everything the messenger had revealed; yet he did not mention anything related to his recurring nightmares. Without such mystic context the facts seemed dry and merciless, and they rang far more gravely in their ears than Maedhros had presumed. Uneasiness grew in his heart, and impulsively, he tightened his grip on the armrest of his chair.

Celegorm's and Curufin's actions, repeated aloud in these cold, impartial words, were nothing else than the story of a conspiracy.

A web of intrigues.

A series of crimes.

*Crimes require punishment*, Maedhros almost heard his father's pervasive, emotional voice emerging from the depths of time, *be it even a Vala who commits them! Injustice is against the laws of life and nature, and it is to be condoned. If the Valar decide to close their eyes, plug their ears and hum, hoping that evil shall evanish like puffs of smoke, then let them! A king brings justice to his people, even if it means his death. A king is not cowed by fake wisdom; a king takes*
**all his force and fights!**

*Would you be able to use the power of law against your own sons, Father?* Maedhros thought, but even before he voiced the question in his head, he knew Fëanáro would.

Of course he would - if the want of the law was the same as the want of his will.

*I am not as firm as you were, Father. I might waver. Yet I know that a judgement has to be made, so make one I shall. Give me strength, if you can hear me now: help me do what is right!*

It was only then that it occurred to him that his Father may not have always done what was right; but who else could he ask for guidance?

"How do you feel about the things you have now heard, Kano?" he asked to break the uncomfortable silence. Not that he expected the answer to bring him solace.

"I am at a loss of words, brother," Maglor said slowly. "I... I feel something between deep worry, fury and disgust. This... what happened to Findaráto... is unspeakable. It is horrible. It is unforgivable! I honestly do not know what to say. I can't see Tyelko and Curvo committing such terrible deeds, but evidence speaks against them. They might have deserved their punishment, yet my heart weeps when I imagine the hardships they must have lived through, alone in the wilderness for a whole year...! And then, despite everything, they saved my life; they ran down the Orcs without a second thought when they saw me in danger. I owe them my life, my freedom and my sanity, but..." Maglor shook his head. "I don't know what should we expect if we mean to question them on this matter. Would it make the situation any better, not only worse...? And Thingol's letter..."

"Today's meeting shall determine the road we should take to handle them," Maedhros said determinedly. "We shall see how they explain themselves if they're asked about their deeds, and how they evaluate them. It should help us a great deal."

Maglor straightened his back suddenly, as if bitten by an invisible insect.

"Maitimo! Are you implying that we shall pretend we know nothing? That we shall... that we shall lay a trap for them?"

Despite everything, Maedhros had to smile.

*Direct and chivalrous as ever, my dear brother. You do not deserve to see times such as these; your heart lives in fair Valinóre still.*

"We shall suggest that everything we've heard, we've heard by obscure rumors. I shall show them Carnistir's letter as a start, but nothing else. If they are honest, this should not serve as a trap," he said. "Yet if they are not..."

"Do you honestly think they shall lie...?"

"We can never know, Kano. We should see it for ourselves."

"Maitimo," Maglor shook his head violently. "This... I cannot participate in this. *They saved my life!*"

"And by their cruel machinations, they took that of Findaráto!"

"They are our brothers!"
"Do you honestly think I have forgotten that?!"

For the first time that day, Maedhros could not contain his anger and frustration; he felt it springing out from the depths of his fëa and pervading his voice, creating a sharp edge to it that made his brother flinch.

"Listen, Kano," he sighed, taking a deep breath. "I offer you a deal. Should they both prove honest, I shall tell them the truth after they've confessed, and I shall apologize for not having trusted them, promising it would never happen again. I shall also tell that you were adamantly against the idea, and it was me who forced it upon you. Are we even?"

"No!" Maglor wuthered. "If someone has to take the blame, we shall take it together. By participating in such a conspiracy, I become an accomplice."

"Nay, Lord Makalaurë." Counsellor Tyelcano spoke softly, yet the power of his will strengthened his voice. "If someone must take the blame for such an action, that should be me. You brothers must not let such strifes separate you. 'Tis me who deemed today's hearing absolutely necessary, 'tis me who arranged it the way it will happen, and as long as Lord Nelyo does not order me otherwise, my mind is set. If happenings and circumstances prove I was wrong, the wavering of your brothers' good will and trust in me shall prove a fair punishment. Neither of you lords can risk that."

Maedhros felt Maglor's eyes on him, but for once, he didn't meet his gaze. His brother's soft musical voice cut his ear like a mistuned violin string; now Maglor, too, was perturbed.

"You gave your consent to this?"

"Counsellor Tyelcano was determined to set the plan in motion," Maedhros said carefully, "and I trust his wisdom. If he's wrong, I will share the responsibility with him, regardless of what he suggests; and trust me, Kano, we both hope he shall be wrong."

Maglor shook his head.

"But why? Why on Arda shouldn't we trust Tyelko and Curvo?"

This was one of those moments when Maedhros felt the need to sincerely ask his brother how did he survive the past five centuries; but as always, he suppressed the question.

"Kano..." He only shook his head instead. "Think for a moment, think about what you have just heard. Then repeat that question to yourself. You can answer it. Love them we do, fear for them we might... yet why on Arda should we trust Tyelko and Curvo...?"

"They are Lords of the Ñoldor, the Wise People. And they are our brothers, Nelyo! Our blood!"

"Our blood, aye. Atar was our blood as well - and we are his." Maedhros swallowed hard, and stopped the train of his thoughts. "We are living dark and cruel times. Fair faces and bright eyes do not speak to me, Kanafinwë; nor does blood; nor do wise words. Faces can wither, eyes can darken, blood can be spilled and words are wind. 'Tis the deeds that speak."

Maglor had no answer to that.

"Ai, wisely did your brother speak! You were unconscious then, Lord Makalaurë, so you may not remember it," Tyelcano said darkly, "but when we came to your rescue, and Lord Curufinwë saw us, there was a strange look in his eyes. I know that look; and I fear it."
By the time Celegorm and Curufin entered, a long table had been set in front of Maedhros's richly carved chair in the Great Hall, and four other seats have been settled around it as well. The one on his right was occupied by Tyelcano, and the other one on his left by Maglor. The seats were arranged in a fashion that the two wayward brothers would have to face the trio of their judges, not being able to escape their eyes.

The table was richly loaded with roasted meat, various garnishings, rich soup and several flagons of the finest wine the servants could find in the cold cellars of the fortress: a gesture that implied the sort of warmth and hospitality that Maedhros refused to stint his brothers of, whatever the situation.

"You have sent for us, Nelyo," Celegorm spoke.

In the days past, the two brothers were all but ordered to stay in the comfort of their beds and regain their strength; and indeed Celegorm had won back some morsels of his previous grace. His eyes were still empty, though, and his voice flatter than Maedhros remembered it to be.

"Is there a particular reason for the choice of place?" Curufin inquired, his stark eyes scanning the adornments on the walls, the lustres swinging down from the far ceiling, the long banners of the House of Fëanáro hanging tensely from each wall. They were made of red velvet with the Star woven into their middle with threads of gold: Maedhros's colours.

So it begins.

Maedhros remembered the words of care and comfort he'd greeted his brothers with when they first arrived, and for a moment, he wavered; but Curufin's haughty words came back to his mind in a distorted whisper. His brother had been even reluctant to accept a cloak from him, and seemingly, he had to cow himself in order to follow his requests. If such a small flicker of his precious pride had nearly proved too much for him to sacrifice, is the trust he, Maedhros is now fighting so desperately to protect even still there...?

We're becoming strangers to each other, he lamented, but silenced his mind at once, wary of the dark places his thoughts might take him. Curufin was looking him in the eye, after all; and though he was still so slim that the lines of his exquisite cheekbones hardened the edges of his face, his eyes were honest and a smile played on his lips. His whole being radiated of grace and nobility, and Maedhros found himself smiling back at him.

"Your arrival was so sudden I did not have the chance to make preparations for a welcoming feast," he said casually. He stood, tall in the daylight filtered by grandiose windows, and gestured towards the two empty seats. "Come, brothers, sit with us and be at ease; for we have much to talk about."

Celegorm slightly bowed and did as he's been told: he took the left seat, the one that faced Counsellor Tyelcano. Curufin, however, remained standing, his intent gaze scanning the faces of the three interrogators. He was still smiling, though the smile seemed now a sad one; the tension in his shoulders loosening a bit, he let out a soft, ethereal sigh. Yet no emotion reached his eyes; their orbs remained deep and lifeless like two greyish dark pools.

"Nelyo," he said in a low voice that was almost a whisper, "I do not see why would you consider to
organise a feast for our arrival. 'Tis not a joyful or pleasant event, rather a day of great grief to us all. As you are probably aware, 'twas not the pull of brotherly love that pursued us here this time."

"Aye, that much I know," said Maedhros, and passion crept into his tone; he tried in vain to silence the words springing from his heart. "When I saw you in those stinking rags, part of me wanted to strangle you! Tyelko, Curvo, you are my brothers and I feared for you, I searched for you, I was furious with you! You cannot imagine how I felt when the Lord Counsellor sought me out in the middle of the night some weeks ago, and gave me this letter!"

With that, he handed Caranthir's message above the table to Celegorm, and waited for the effect. Curufin slid closer as well, gazing at the short note, his features unreadable.

"There it is," Counsellor Tyelcano cut in. "A stolen Silmaril, the pair of you banned from Nargothrond. And not even a word from your lordships for your worrying brothers to read. Not even the vaguest kind of news!"

"This is a most grievous matter," Maglor nodded. Maedhros still saw the lingering uneasiness in his eyes. "Would you please explain us what in Manwë's and Varda's name happened?! Who stole that Silmaril, where is it now and why were you banned...? Are those events linked by any means? We received your letter about a certain Man and the folly of Findaráto - could this mean that the impossible came true? That they succeeded?"

The words echoed in the Great Hall for a long time, finally evanishing into shocked silence. Then Curufin leaned back in his chair, and for the fraction of a second, a wave of something Maedhros could have identified as deep turmoil just as well as wild amusement rushed through his face.

"You -," he said slowly, almost experimentally. "You..."

"You know nothing?!" Celegorm swallowed, his voice becoming warm and steady at once. "Nothing? You have yet to hear..."

Another minute passed in sullen silence; only the air vibrated with the silent tension of racing thoughts. Finally, Curufin shifted a little in his chair, crossed his legs comfortably, and emptied his goblet. Counsellor Tyelcano leaned across the table and filled it again, his eyes never leaving Curufin's face, who nodded his thanks.

"They have yet to hear, Tyelko," he said after another silent, motionless minute, his fingernails playing a soft staccato on the rubies wrought into his cup. His voice was bemused and sad; Maedhros wouldn't have been surprised if he pulled out a lyre from under his cloak and started to sing a lament for some fallen hero.

"Drink deep and well, my lord brothers, Lord Counsellor, for this may be the very last time we feast together. For great wrongs we have done, and I shall not deny them. I only pray, Nelyo, that you hear our poor explanation. Please never mistake it for any means of excuse."

Curufin's voice was soft and melodious, his dark eyes shifting from every face in the hall, at one moment hidden behind his soot-black hair, at the other buried in his slender hands.

"I shall hear whatever explanation you deem fit," Maedhros said, steadying his tone, though all he wanted to do was to cross the distance between him and Curufin and pull him in a tight embrace, so great his sadness seemed to be. "Be at peace, brothers of mine; for no sin, no fault and no misunderstanding shall ever diminish my love for you. Whatever was it that you did, though, we need to hear it: otherwise, we cannot get ourselves ready for toils to come."
"Save your generosity for later, Nelyo," Celegorm said gently. "You shall gravely need it."

He exchanged a swift glance with Curufin, and for the fraction of an instant, Maedhros caught - or thought he did - that one glance in the latter's eyes Tyelcano was afraid of.

And then -

And then nothing happened.

Their meal went on, slow, delightful and perfectly usual; and the two brothers evolved their tale.

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It was Celegorm who first picked up the thread of events, starting with that fateful day when a haggard Man came to Nargothrond's halls with a strange ring on his finger, and sought a private audience with the King. He precised an important detail - the importance of which had somehow not registered in Maedhros's mind before -, that King Finrod meant to keep the aim of the Quest in secret, and did not wish for anyone from the House of Feanor to know about the errand of pursuing a Silmaril, until the very last moment, when the departure of King Findaráto was announced before the people of Nargothrond.

"He must have hoped that the veil of uncertainty would serve him and his party well either until they die or until the stolen Jewel is safely hid," Celegorm explained, "and I do not blame him for that. It could have worked - but Curvo and I have sharp eyes and sharper ears. We had word of their plans, and evidently, we strongly opposed them. We spoke with the King three times, begging him not to go; out of simple friendship at first, for even if we held a grudge against Findaráto for not trusting us, we wished him well. When we saw that rational arguments were not likely to convince him, we tried relying on his close ones, implying that his passing would prove too great of a loss for many. But all our efforts were in vain. Lastly, I knocked on his door in the middle of the night before he went on that foolish errand, and I furiously reminded him of a King's duty towards his people. I said he had neither the right to send them all to a hopeless battle, nor the allowance to leave them and race laughing to his death. I told him he was being mad and irresponsible."-

"What was his answer to that?" Maglor asked softly.

"He coldly reminded me of Alqualondë, and asked if I thought I had the right to lecture him about honour and duty. People really need to stop to use that argument against us - 'tis becoming most tiring."

"But not invalid," Maedhros muttered under his breath. In any sort of debate, Alqualondë was a cruel weapon indeed, a pair of shackles on their wrists; he wondered if they could ever break free of them.

"It happened thus that we gave up convincing Findaráto: a most grievous mistake," Curufin spoke, his voice low and far more gentle than Maedhros had expected.

*Perhaps a bit too gentle,* he thought, but some deep fibre of his being suppressed that suspicion.

"Our time was growing short, and he seemed determined to go. We dreaded the day, Nelyo, when the King and his army would depart to Angamando, and leave the city of Nargothrond unguarded; and it came far too soon indeed. Thus at the last moment, out of desperation, we used the power of
our voices to make the people stay - to save their lives. Mayhaps it was unjust and wrong what we did; we might have spoken and acted against the ruler under whose command we lived; but I am asking you, my brothers, I'm asking you Lord Counsellor: were scorn, life threat and exile a fair punishment for such a debatable act? Is it not enacted in the Laws of the Ñoldor that no one can be compelled to follow their lord into folly or cruelty?"

"Aye, Lordship, that is," Counsellor Tyelcano said softly, "at least, in theory."

"That theory should become practice, Lord Counsellor," Curufin said proudly.

When these words were uttered, there was a small flash in Tyelcano's eyes. He shifted a little in his chair, and suddenly he seemed to be listening far more intently than before.

"If the cause of authority is wrong," Curufin went on, his head held high, "otherwise treacherous deeds may prove valiant to impartial eyes. No one stands above law; and law is the command of reason and sanity. We did not let the people fall to darkness, we did not let them march into the Realm of Darkness unguarded. We saved them from falling victim to Moringotto's wrath, we saved them from dying in the dungeons of Angamando, we did not let them follow their king to utter folly; though Findaráto still took the best of his knights with him, all armed with the finest steel, a ray of light against the blackness of the Enemy's malice. The King left his people to wait, devoid of hope, and who did he leave behind to sit on his throne, take his stead and rule...? His incompetent nephew! I would rather see a Dwarf dwell in fair Nargothrond's halls than thin-voiced, stone-tongued Artaresto! That slow dullard! That..."

"Brother," Celegorm said alarmingly, and seeing a soft motion under the table-cloth, Maedhros suspected he took Curufin by the hand.

"You are right, Tyelko," Curufin said to his great surprise, and he let out a wary sigh, closing his eyes for a moment, his face suddenly tired, his voice meek. "I let my feeling run high. Artaresto must have taken our deeds for cruel treason, and he might as well have acted out of grief and desperation. Still, he ignored his duties and continued to pace back and forth along his halls like a ghost; thusly, it fell to us to govern the city. Our servants helped us much: without their assistance, we could have never held all matters at hand. For that we could be thankful; our forces were gathered, and the tasks were so numerous that we paid little heed to mourning King Findaráto. Indeed, that time we could not know what his fate would be, yet deep in our hearts, each and every one of us agreed that he would die. But we all know the ways of the people: they tend to separate, to set aside unpleasant matters from their everyday thoughts and wonderings, and with time, they forget them even; yet when the time comes and their darkest forebodings are fulfilled, who is then to blame...?"

"Their King," Celegorm answered the poetic question, his voice smooth and sweet. "Or their leaders. Their lords - which were us, in this unlucky case. Someone had to hold the reins, and we were willing to lead the people. Even under Findaráto's rule, we had a place of honour in his council, and people loved us, people followed us. Until that fateful day -"

"...when news came of Findaráto's death," Curufin sighed. "Did it come as a surprise to any soul within the city's walls? I cannot tell. Yet people were outraged, and they mourned their king in great sorrow and turmoil. Who could fault them? Not the two of us. Yet somehow, some way, everything we had done to maintain order in Nargothrond seemed to be forgotten at once; and we were exposed, pilloried and pointed at. People faulted us for having sent the King to exile by our evil machinations. I ask you, my brothers, I ask you, Lord Counsellor: was it not the pair of us who had most fervently opposed this Quest of folly at the first place? Yet that was forgotten as well. Even the final outrage was forgotten, when I stood up against King Findaráto when he was already
at the gates, amount his white stallion, and told him he was abandoning his duties as a ruler. Half
the city saw me there, standing there, uttering these words... as if some sort of dark magic, some
sort of unexplainable, horrible doom had fallen across Nargothrond. We were no longer loved; and
Artaresto finally woke from his winter sleep and banished us. At least he did not let the people
slaughter us; for that much, we can be thankful."

Silence followed these words; and Maedhros pondered everything that he had heard. The
beginning of the story had seemed almost like a song of forgotten Ages - it was vague, subtle, dark,
and Maedhros found that Celegorm's rich, deep baritone was most pleasant for his otherwise racing
mind to hear.

But when Curufin spoke, his sensations changed again: the soft, pervading voice soothed his fëa,
cleared his perceptions, ravelled out the painful bogs in his thoughts. As if new perspectives of
truth and reality had just opened before him...!

With no more than the help of that subtle voice, he suddenly understood rapports and coherencies
he'd never before took in; and all at once, everything seemed so simple and evident. Of course
people would be less wise than his brothers; they are Lords of the Ñoldor for a reason. Of course
they would wrongfully blame them! Of course his brothers had to cruelly suffer, in order to save
the people - someone had to take the blame, and they were willing. They did not flinch...

A vague impression floated through Maedhros's mind; the mild suspicion of having forgotten
something.

*Could it be something about woodelves, mayhaps?*

He still sat wordless, his gaze wandering back and forth between his brothers' faces, enticed by the
expression he saw on them. Celegorm sat straight like a king robbed of his throne, discarded by his
knights, alone with his selfless generosity and righteousness; and Curufin was like a great scholar
next to him, a master of crafts, a gentle and misunderstood soul: too proud to ask for understanding,
but too wary to demand respect.

"O, my brothers, my dear Lord Tyelco," he said mournfully, "how terribly pained I was, how guilty
I felt when I heard of Findaráto's death! I could not free myself from under the impression that I did
not do enough. I failed to notice some way out of future disaster. I should have convinced him
somehow... some way... but Findaráto was a good king, and an Elf of strong will. A worthy
kinsman of ours: once he was determined to do a deed, nothing and no one could stand in his way.
Unfortunately, not even Tyelkormo and Curufinwë from the mighty house of Fëanáro."

Curufin bowed his head, as if the weight of his past decisions was pressing too hard on his
shoulders. Celegorm wrapped an arm around him, comforting him.

Counsellor Tyelcano was listening still more intently.

"And that is not the end of the story," Celegorm said, a shadow of his ancient vigour in his voice.
"When we were banished from Nargothrond, the folly of fear was so great in the hearts of the
people that even our own servants: our kinsmen, our soldiers, our guards, our followers betrayed
us! They took us for traitors, for murderers. Not even Tyelpërinquar and Erenis were willing to
follow us; in Nargothrond they remained, under the rule of Artaresto. It was with great pain that we
parted from them, but we had no choice."

"I paid a great price for my mistakes indeed," Curufin agreed gently, his eyes suddenly fixed on his
hands. "To the end of my days I shall grieve for that day. But by the grace of Oromë, Hunter of the
Woods, I hope that we shall find our ways back to each other. That is all a father can wish for."
When Curufin looked up to meet his eyes, Maedhros saw something in their depths - a flicker that was definitely not one of grace, wisdom or sadness. It was cold, it was bright, and it was frightening; and for the smallest fraction of a second, Maedhros felt a heavy veil of fog lifting from his mind, allowing his thoughts and feelings to run free, no longer anchored on empathy towards his brothers. This tiny period of time was enough for him to perceive that something was fairly and truly missing from his brothers' account - yet he could not guess what was it. The pieces refused to come together for some reason; could it be that he did not pay enough attention? That he erred? Or could it be... maybe...

Another disturbing feeling seized him: the nagging sensation of not seeing something that was right in front of his eyes, the feverish wish to remember a thought that was just outside his grasp. The aftermath of a forgotten impression, an important memory still lingered in his fëa, but he could not ease it back into his mind. Perhaps it was something about Thingol - but how on Arda would Thingol fit into this story...?

Maedhros stole an uncertain glance at Maglor; his eldest brother was leaning towards Celegorm and Curufin and took their hands, unshed tears glistening in his wide eyes.

"Oh, Tyelko, Curvo," he whispered, "I am dreadfully sorry for what you had to endure. How could our trust waver in your righteousness! How cruelly misunderstood you were! How badly you must have been treated! Where did you go afterwards? What did you do? O, dearest brothers, when did your fine garments become stinking rags?"

"That is not a story worth telling, Kano," Celegorm answered him with a humble smile. "Snow, frozen rivers, lack of firewood, poor nourishment and wolves - that is what one can expect from winter. But life got better in spring; and last summer was a remarkably rich and beautiful one. We rejoiced on our way here, but circumstances slowed us, and we lost our way as well, once or twice. We had to sacrifice our map halfway to help us light a fire."

"But we are here now," Curufin added reassuringly, "here, under your care; and we have fine cloaks and leather boots to warm us up. We dine at your table and we sleep in your beds. We could not be more grateful for all the help you have to us, dear brothers. 'Tis good to have a warm home in such treacherous times."

Maedhros felt another pang of disturbance in the back of his mind. He could remember perfectly well that Curufin had even refused at first to have a new cloak. He didn't want to be helped, he didn't want to be "lectured and humiliated", as he put it.

What happened...? Did the long desperate months take their toll, did he merely speak out of wariness, or mayhaps out of great relief that no matter what does he do, no matter what does he say, we, his brothers would still be there for him...?

Nay: that sounds far too emotional to be true.

Something is not right. I have forgotten something...

"There is a detail I do not exactly understand, Lord Curvo," spoke Counsellor Tyelcano, his voice steady, each of his words precisely articulated. Looking at his stern, expressionless mien, Maedhros perceived with surprise that his eyes were bright with a strange light: determined and furious.

"And what would that be, my good Counsellor?" Curufin calmly inquired, not seeming to notice Tyelcano's silent wrath.
"Something must have triggered such an indignation among the citizens of Nargothrond", the Counsellor said, his voice still dreadfully calm and collected. "My heart wavers at the thought that you were so cruelly misjudged."

There was a strange edge to his voice. 

*Could it be mockery...? But where would Counsellor Tyelcano find the courage to mock any of my brothers?* Maedhros thought with rising anger.

"Unfortunately, Lord Counsellor, such scandalous things happen," Curufin lamented. "I cannot explain it any more than you can; but surely, one who is so well-versed in the ways of intrigues and diplomacy as yourself, shall eventually find some sort of explanation."

"Are you perfectly sure, lords of mine, that nothing, *nothing* happened in Nargothrond that would make you traitors?" Tyelcano inquired.

We failed to protect Findaráto. -" Celegorm sighed. 

"Nay, Lord Tyelko. Anything *else*, I mean."

"Anything else?" Celegorm eyed his brother, and once again, Maedhros saw the dangerous flash in Curufin's eyes.

"Nothing else we are aware of, Counsellor," he said a bit stiffly. "I should have probably fought more to make my children see reason; but I decided they were far too mature for that. I let them choose their own way, and though grieving because of their choice, I let them go."

"My interests," Tyelcano said very slowly, very patiently, "lie still elsewhere."

"We cannot think of anything else," Curufin shook his head, almost as if excusing himself for not being able to respond to the Counsellor's question.

"So if we leave the exile of Aran Findaráto out of consideration, nothing of your deeds in Nargothrond would make you traitors?"

"Nothing, Counsellor," said the brothers in unison.

"And how about being liars?!"

"Liars!" Maglor exclaimed with indignation. "Be careful with your words, Lord Counsellor! My brothers are well-willing Elves, and knights of honour! How on Arda could they be liars?"

Liars.

Maedhros shook his head. Why would Tyelko and Curvo be liars? He knew them since their birth, the very spring of their childhood. Surely *he* would perceive if they lied...? And why would they lie in the first place? Kano said it right: they are honourable.

*But I have forgotten something... something about Thingol...or was it Carnistir, perhaps?*

**Surely, that was Carnistir. I am being ridiculous.**

"Lord Counsellor," Maedhros said sternly, "you will excuse yourself in front of my brothers. You have no right to accuse them thusly, especially not after the wrongs they have recently suffered. I am most displeased with your behaviour!"
"Is their power so great over you, my lord beloved?" Tyelcano all but shouted at him. "Are you this easily enchanted?! Do you not see how viciously are you, both of you, being misled?!"

"This was the very first time you allowed yourself to speak to me in such a tone, servant of my House," Maedhros sprang to his feet, eyes alight with fury, towering above his Counsellor like a giant, "and the very last one as well. *Am I understood?*

"Not if I see your lordship in grave danger," Tyelcano withstood his gaze, though his voice trembled with emotion.

"In that case, I order you to leave this hall. Now."

"My lord..."

"*Leave!*"  
"Please, Nelyo, spare your wrath from our good old Counsellor," said Curufin gently. "He wishes the best for you."

"Sadly I hear that we have lost your trust and good will, Lord Tyelco," Celegorm added with a sigh, "but such wounds cannot be healed in the heat of the present. With time, I am sure we shall be as good friends as before, and you shall learn to believe us anew."

"Do you not see how cruel you are?" Maedhros turned the whole intensity of his gaze at Tyelcano's ghastly pale face. "Thrice I command you: leave, Counsellor, and avoid my company for the next few days!"

Slowly, Tyelcano emerged from his chair and looked around in the Great Hall, his hands tightening into fists at the two sides of his body. Then with a hiss of breath, he raised his chin, proud and unwavering before his lord. With a swift, fluid motion he drew his sword, and laid it at Maedhros's feet.

"Never my faith and trust shall waver in you, Lord of my home and King of my heart," he said. "If you deem my words and deeds wrongful, I respect your judgement and I shall leave; but for the sake of the countless years I've spent serving your family, Lord Nelyo, I beg you to take this letter, and read it again: read it, as you have read it to Lord Makalaurë an hour ago! Read it over and over, lest you forget what is truth and what is illusion!"

With that, he pulled out a thin scroll of parchment from under his cloak, and he held it out to Maedhros, not flinching before his gaze.

*I have forgotten something.*

Maedhros took the parchment, and his eyes widened when he saw the flaking shards of wax around its seal.

It was Thingol's seal, and it was broken.

The message has been read indeed.

"Nelyo, may I...?" Curufin shifted in his seat, a pang of uneasiness in his voice.

"No, lordship," Tyelcano barked at him, "You may not."

"You are being impossible, Counsellor!" Celegorm's eyes flashed with anger. "Curvo only wants to *help him!*"
The waves of shame and indignation that washed through Maedhros's consciousness at these words were almost too much to handle; like many, far too many other times in his life, he felt naked, spoiled, exposed.

"I may be a cripple, if that is what you are implying, brother," he said icily, "but I believe my condition is stable enough to be able to read a letter by myself."

By the time Celegorm perceived his grievous mistake, it was too late; Maedhros wedged the top of the parchment under his goblet, and unrolled it, his eyes running through the text.

And then it all came back to him.

"Nelyo?" Maglor shifted closer to him, allowing himself a feather touch on his shoulder. "Is aught amiss?"

"...now this is a most interesting take on the previously discussed events," Maedhros said after a few seconds of silence (and considered with rueful pride that his voice was not shaking with rage). "I should like you to hear it; especially you, Tyelkormo and Curufinwë. I cannot wait to hear what you will say to this."

His brothers' faces were pale, expressionless masks around him.

Maedhros rose, and began to pace behind the table: back and forth, back and forth, back and forth. Something was trembling in the depths of his being; his head felt excruciatingly hot while his chest and his limbs were freezing.

"Listen, my dear ones," he said, and a grin crept onto his face; a large, scornful grin he could not suppress or hide. "Amusing like a bedtime story, this one. Hear me thee!"

He shook out the parchment, and held it out far before himself. His pacing became slower, more controlled.

"To Maedhros, son of Fëanor, Lord of the Himring and Warden of the East," he read in slightly accented Sindarin, slowly, dramatically, the way they used to read to each other with his cousin Findekáno when the world was still young and fair, "Elu Thingol, Lord of the Sindar, King of Doriath and Protector of the Woodland Realm sends his kind regards."

He paused for a few moments, watchful for the others' reactions. Maglor's breath was caught in a sharp hiss, Celegorm cast Curufin a swift, sidelong glance, and Curufin himself resumed his thrumming on the jewels wrought in his goblet. Counsellor Tyelcano was still kneeling before him, his sword on the floor, his head slouched.

"I turn to thee in an hour of dire need, for my heart is anxious. The shadow of the Enemy grows, and of late, it seems to have wined its way through the borders of our realms. Tis with great sorrow and concern that I think of the heavy losses your kinsmen have suffered of late.

I inform you with discontentment that your two brothers, lords Celegorm and Curufin have kidnapped my daughter by pretending to save her, and refused to return her home unless I grant Lord Celegorm her hand," Maedhros read in the same theatrical voice, carefully outlining the words "anxious", "discontentment", "kidnapped" and "pretending".

"How could you...!" Maglor whispered in a horrified voice. "You lied to us! Right to our faces! You – you deceived and enchanted us! Like... just like..."

He could not say who; and nor could anyone else.
"I did not count on any irreverence of that sort from the proud Ñoldor, and by the laws and customs of our realm, I must thusly deny any future request for a union between our Houses," Maedhros went on reading mercilessly. Later, at the mention of justice, Curufin shifted a little in his seat, and Celegorm buried his face in his hands.

Silence followed his words: deaf, icy, painful silence. Maedhros was struggling with his breath, which came in impatient hisses, his heart drumming like the beat in a war-chant. Hot claws of fury were gnawing at his stomach, and his fist clenched around the thin parchment.

"Shall that be enough for us to finally be able to hold an honest conversation?" He asked. "Or would you like me to read further, and acquaint you with a written testimony from Feredir, messenger of Doriath?"

"Why, Maitimo?" Celegorm whispered, his voice trembling with emotion. "Why did you play us for fools if you already knew everything?"

"To corner us," Curufin hissed. "I should have guessed – and we all know what is coming now. Our big brothers, our good brothers, our chivalrous brothers shall name us liars and murderers. You will never understand why we did what we did, and why we wanted to keep it in secret. That was a risk we took; and we did not succeed. Lay a trap for others, and 'tis you who shall fall in it, so the wise say; yet if I ever expected a trap, Nelyo, it was not laid by you."

"Are you still capable of palliating yourself?!" Maglor snapped. "You won't be able to fool us again! Your power may be as great as Atar's; but Atar was wronged and blinded by pain. You, Atarinke, are simply vicious."

"Calm yourself, Kano," Maedhros said sternly. "Tyelkormo and Curufinwë, do you have anything else to tell us? Anything to give us further insight on your deeds – anything true?"

"Nothing, my lord brother," said Celegorm in a lifeless voice.

Curufin shook his head as well.

"Hear my doom, then. I have been asked to make a rightful judgement; and judge you I shall, by the laws of the Ñoldor and in the name of our House."

Maedhros made a desperate attempt to ease the dryness of his throat; but there was nothing to be done. The trial, however challenging and unusual, was over.

"Hear me thee, Tyelkormo and Curufinwë from the House of Fëanáro! You have been given an opportunity to freely explain yourselves and acquaint us with everything you have done. You have most cruelly misused that opportunity. The faith that begin to waver in my heart when I heard of your deeds has now disappeared; brothers we may still be, but I trust you not."

Maedhros almost gave a start when Maglor grabbed his hand under the table, and squeezed it so hard he feared it would break. Bracing himself, he ran a soothing finger along the back of his brother's palm, heroically fighting the horrible, burning ache in his chest.

This must be done, Kano, and you know it. Please do not spoil it with your good-heartedness.

"I give you two opportunities and three days to make a choice. The first one is the following: You shall no longer hold a place in my council, nor shall you be granted with any kind of confidential knowledge. You may own a house of your own in the lands of Himlad, a smithy, a garden, a stable, or whatever else you wish; but the title of lord I take back from you, and you can no longer command any servants. And the second one is the following: your titles you may keep, but you
leave this castle in a week, and take no one with you. Horses and provisions you may have, but you
cannot come back; and come strife or danger, I shan't protect you, nor shall I take any sort of
responsibility for your future deeds. I, Nelyafinwë, son of Fëanáro, have spoken, and you have
heard me. Three days henceforth, I shall hear your decisions, and this matter will be over; but now,
I have heard enough for today. I bid all of you to leave the Hall. We may still meet at the dinner
table."

Maglor was the first to move. He sprang from his chair, and all but ran out the door, shutting it
echoingly behind himself. Next in line was Celegorm; he bowed and followed his elder brother
with long, measured steps, his face sinking back to indifference.

When Counsellor Tyelcano rose as well and took his sword, Maedhros caught his arm, and looked
him deep in the eye. After a few moments of fruitless struggle with words, he bowed to kiss his
forehead.

"Thank you, wise one," he whispered.

"That, Lord Nelyo," Tyelcano said bitterly, "was not a counsel willingly given."

"It served us well nonetheless. Go, my dear friend, find yourself some rest."

It was more of a command than a simple request; and Counsellor Tyelcano knew him enough to
feel the difference. He bowed and went on his way, swiftly and silently.

Only Curufin remained now. He sat in his chair still, his face was buried in his hands.

And his shoulders were shaking.

Maedhros had never seen Curufin cry before; not even when the Trees were destroyed. Not even
when their Grandfather was lying on a bier in the empty treasure-hold of Formenos. Not even when
the ships were burned.

Not even when their Atar evanished into a pile of ash.

"Curvo -," Maedhros choked, not knowing what to do, not knowing what to say. His mind felt
strangely cool and collected when he placed his hand on his brother's shoulder; but the hand
trembled.

"I told Erenis that she was useless, Nelyo," Curufin whispered, "that she was good for nothing.
And I told Tyelpë that he was only used in Nargothrond for his talent. That no one really loved
him. I thought I was lying to protect them – that was what I tried to tell myself afterwards. But I am
not sure. I cannot be sure. I do not notice when I am lying anymore."

"Yet today, you did notice."

"I want you to understand."

Curufin raised his head, swallowed, looked him in the eye. Glistening trails of tears were running
down his cheeks, yet his voice was calm.

"I saw the look on your face when we met, and I thought you knew. So did Tyelko. But when you
offered us cloaks, when you were kind with us, when you cared for us, fed us and took us home
with you, we were starting to have our doubts. I see now that it was planned as well; I hold no
grudge against you for it - it had to be done. But at the moment, we could not believe that you
could show such an amount of care any empathy towards us, if you… if you truly knew."
"If you suspected I already knew everything, why did you lie?"

"Because I was certain you, too, would banish us as soon as acquainted with the entire monstrosity of our deeds. It seemed only a matter of time. I am telling you this only because... because Tyelko was always against it. He wanted to be honest. I insisted. I did my best to convince him, and finally, I succeeded. I thought that at least if I tried to win you with my voice and succeeded, we might stay here until the truth is revealed. I did not want to go back to the wilderness; and if my honour was worth a few weeks of food, calm and comfort, I decided to pay that price. I was wrong, Nelyo; I did not trust your good-heartedness. It never crossed my mind that you... that you would let us stay here if you knew. You cannot imagine how relieved I am, now that I heard the choice I must make."

"You thought I would banish you?" Maedhros closed his eyes for a moment. "That I'd let you wander the wilderness on your own? You think I could live with that?"

"I could no longer trust hearts or forgiveness, Nelyo. Not even yours."

Curufin's voice died out for a few moments, and another wave of tears sprang from his eyes. When he found his voice again, it was very low and very soft, almost pleading.

"I... the judgement is up to you, brother, but Tyelko does not deserve it. He was against me."

"You convinced him."

"I have certain powers to convince people, Nelyo, and I am not afraid to use them, as you have just witnessed," Curufin said, and Maedhros was amazed at the stern vigour of his voice despite the tears flowing down his cheek. "Also, I am splendidly capable of exploiting Tyelko's passion or anger when it rises. He is easily exposed, and though I would never do him deliberate harm, he has always been a great help for me to pursue my wants and needs."

Maedhros's eyes widened at the confession; but if ever, then now he believed Curufin was telling the truth.

"He is everything I have now, Nelyo, and his fate is in your hands: better than mine, at any case. Please, if there is any warmth left in your heart towards us, let him stay, and stay in honour! He does not deserve to lose his lordship, nor your trust. I know he shall be happy dwelling in your halls; please let him be useful as well, that is all I ask for."

"What about yourself?"

The dull ache in his chest was almost unbearable. The Warden of the East and the Lord of the Himring were nowhere now; the stern and fearsome Lord Maedhros was reduced to a lonely, lonely soul who wanted nothing else but to embrace the brother he could not trust.

Just ask for my forgiveness, he pleaded soundlessly. Admit your regret, Curufinwë. Just let yourself cry properly, and I shall gladly fall in your trap again, and you may deceive me. Just do not leave!

And bitterly, Curufin laughed.

"You know that I am a proud person, Nelyo. I would freely throw my honour away for comfort; yet I would throw my comfort away for an empty lordship without a second thought. Now go, big brother, fetch yourself some wine before you faint. It must be horrible to live with titles like Warden of the East, Enemy of the Enemy and Head of the House of Hopeless Morons."
A/N 2.

1) This is the opening scene of Maedhros's POV, but due to the course of events - as you may have noticed -, his usually very sharp and lively consciousness was now considerably dulled; so you could say that Maedhros, for the first time we encountered him as a central character, did not really feel like Maedhros (at least, not my version of him).

2) The concept of Curufin's enchantment was strongly inspired by the following passage from 'The Two Towers' (don't try to tell me there's no connection between him and Saruman…):

"Suddenly another voice spoke, low and melodious, its very sound an enchantment. Those who listened unwearily to that voice could seldom report the words that they had heard; and if they did, they wondered, for little power remained in them. Mostly they remembered only that it was a delight to hear the voice speaking, all that it said seemed wise and reasonable, and desire awoke in them by swift agreement to see wise themselves. When others spoke, they seemed harsh and uncouth by contrast; and if they gainsaid the voice, anger was kindled in the hearts of those under the spell."

/ The Lord of the Rings, Book III, Chapter X.: The Voice of Saruman /

3) About Curufin calling Orodreth a "slow dullard", which sounds a tad too rude: excerpt from the Lay of Leithian, Canto IX [one of Laerthel's favourite passages detected]:

Curufin spake: 'Good brother mine,  
I like it not. What dark design  
doth this portend? These evil things,  
we swift must end their wanderings!  
And more, 'twould please my heart full well  
to hunt a while and wolves to fell.'

And then he leaned and whispered low  
that Orodreth was a dullard slow;  
long time it was since the king had gone,  
and rumour or tidings came there none.
A/N: This chapter is a bit special because it doesn’t form one entity, nor one arc: for the first time in this story, the POV is shared between two characters. Moreover, the text is made of small fragments: though each of these are very important, the entirety of this instalment may seem a bit messy. I’m not entirely satisfied with the outcome (as usually), but I really do love every fragment in this chapter (especially Erestor’s part, oh my gosh. Beginnings of character development detected). Also… this is mainly a political drama, but that doesn’t mean the characters don’t face personal crisis or don’t have simple, everyday problems (which, after a certain time, can grow distressing even for the finest Elves…). This is one of those chapters where such things happen. I am very willing to answer your questions / concerns on both appearing and reappearing characters :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The storm was raging.

Terrible, maddening coldness crept up his arms and legs as he struggled along some invisible path, buried deep beneath a winter’s night: onwards, always onwards. Snowflakes were veiling his vision, completely blocking it from time to time. The howling wind picked them up and threw them into his eyes, the frost scratching his skin like tiny claws running over the trails where his tears of panic were streaming down. His hands and knees were becoming numb, but he pushed himself stubbornly to his feet whenever he stumbled, still trying to look around with the desperate determination of one whose mind is fully set upon his mission. Blurred shadows were dancing around him as drifts of snow glimmered in the night: pitch-black brushstrokes on pale silvery canvas.

And there it stood. The tall creature awaited him afront the wings of an open gate, watching, listening, as if it had been there ‘ere the very youth of the world; its face remained veiled, yet its grey eyes were measuring him steadily. There was an eerie light shining in them: the light of Aman mingled with the cold fire of madness, or so it seemed to the watcher.

The shadowy figure did not enter the gates, nor did it attempt to cross the distance between the pair of them; and as in each and every one of his dreams, Laurefindil heard the impending doom echoing in his mind.

“He who walks in starlight does not flinch,” chanted the all too familiar voice of his nightmares. “He hides in caves and near breaches and behind rocks; and on he wanders, and on he wanders, but a dead end awaits. The gates are closed. Will you open them, Lord of the Golden Flower? Or will you let the world wither?”

This was the first time he heard himself openly addressed, and he shivered at the sudden impact. For the fraction of a second, he saw – or thought he saw – a dimly lit room, thick green curtains and a wide desk full of parchments; then a table loaded with a fine meal and shy sunlight dancing on the plates. Then everything went black as ink, black as the Void beyond the Circles of the
World, and the brave Captain of Ondolindë felt himself diving deeper and deeper into despair.

It felt like falling into a pit. The world was suddenly shattered into pieces, into smoke and senseless ruin. Laurefindil screamed, lost his balance, and reeled into the incorporeal void beneath his feet.

And then, in a moment of utter despair, the shadow sprang forth.

The shady figure leaned into the whirling darkness around him, and held out its hand. Amidst dread and hollow emptiness Laurefindil caught it, wrapped his frozen fingers around his saviour’s wrist. Ice and frost ran along his nerves: an unpleasant, tingling feeling that made him feel very much alive.

It was only a matter of a second; a matter of a heartbeat, and a new vision pervaded his dulled senses. He saw a field at the dawn of spring, green grass and foggy hills; he saw a trail of black blood flowing down a gentle slope; he saw a red cloak flapping in the wind, fleeing from approaching riders.

And a silent figure he saw: an Elf sitting upon a rock, surrounded by the sour smell of earth, his shoulders slumped, his eyes hollow and empty. His face spoke of grief and utter despair.

Laurefindil knew that face.

Suddenly, he felt a gentle breeze caressing his nape. He turned his head, and the shadow was standing right next to him, sword in hand.

Laurefindil screamed.

The Captain’s Quarters in the Royal Palace of Ondolindë, FA 467, the second day of Víressë

Lord Laurefindil, Head of the House of the Golden Flower, Captain of King Turukáno’s Guards and Marshal of the Armies of Ondolindë woke up on the floor next to his own bed, covered in sweat, the covers a snow-white mess around his heaving chest. Morning light was wafting inside his bedroom across the heavy curtains and giant shadows ran along the walls, shifting softly from one side to the other as the breeze played with them. Outside, Anor’s golden light resumed its merry hide-and-seek with the vagarious clouds of spring skies, yet Laurefindil’s spirits seemed to stubbornly retire into the darkness they’d emerged from only a heartbeat before.

If only there was some way – any way – to stop this struggle, he thought. To his great dismay – and perhaps shame – he was still panting. What on Arda is the meaning of these dreams?! The Gates are closed – but ’tis not within my power to open them. And why would I? Why should I? This is absolute madness. Irmo, Lord o’ Dreams, take these visions from me, I beg thee!

And Tyelkormo, his whole consciousness wailed. Why did I have to see Tyelkormo in such a state? Could this dream be by any means real? Could this cruel Shadow haunt him, just as it haunts me…?

“No!”

Laurefindil sprang up, draped his nakedness in a blanket, and proceeded into his bathroom in a soldierly march, hands tightened into fists.

“It was only a dream,” he said aloud, eyeing his reflection in the mirror. “A meaningless vision created by my imagination, sewn together from the grief and distress in my soul and my underlying
thoughts, the ones seldom voiced or even acknowledged. These visions have nothing to do with reality. And Tyelkormo – I only saw Tyelkormo because I mentioned him the other day, and he’s been secretly occupying my thoughts since then.”

Laurefindil could hardly expect his reflection to speak up and answer while he remained silent, yet after a few seconds of apprehensive silence, he concluded:

“There is no cause to feel concerned – it was a dream, and only a dream. Everything is all right with me.”

*It is not particularly all right to converse with myself loudly in front of the mirror, though,* he admitted. He’d never felt the need before to justify his inner voice such a way; not even when a lifetime ago, he’d first received a position of leadership and was suddenly expected to regularly deliver speeches before his inferiors.

*I’ve never had such nightmares in my life, not even after the Light of Valinórë perished.*

Slowly, Laurefindil closed his eyes, then calmed his breath. *Inhale, exhale.* Soon, the mad pounding of his heart was reduced to a soft, steady rhythm of a drum, and his consciousness cleared; yet his thoughts immediately turned back to the shadowy figure, now a constant element of his visions.

*It has grey eyes. I have never noticed that before.*

*Why would I care, though? Grey eyes or not, the Shadow is a product of my own imagination as well. It has never existed, and never will. It is the symbol of something, some fear or struggle I have deep within me.*

*If I could only understand myself better...! Could the explanation truly be as easy as Ecthelion suggested? Could it be that this Shadow incarnates my own grief, or my feeling of guilt...?*

*Yes, such are the possible answers to this riddle. And nothing else.*

Laurefindil sighed in irritation. If the visions would not let him be, then he would not sleep. Eventually, he or the dreams shall have to yield; either he will fall asleep and see them through, or he will exhaust himself to a point where no dream will be able to wake him. He was Captain of the King's Guards and Marshal of the Armies, after all; and his duties and occupations could not be overlooked because of this revolving nonsense of a vision.

Laurefindil had tried to fulfil this conviction the night before: he’d picked up the nearest book from his shelf and settled back in bed, trying to convince himself that the lore of ancient poetic structures and symmetrism held much more interest than any stupid, disturbing nightmare he could possibly have through the night. For a couple of hours, there had been no sound in his wide quarters, save for the low rustle of turning pages; but suddenly came a moment, when Laurefindil closed the book with a soft thump. It was all over – he read it, he swallowed it whole. Poetic structures and quantitative verses were chasing each other in his weary mind, and the back of his head was pounding.

Considering the issue thoroughly, he could conclude that it was almost pounding iambically.

The Lord of the Golden Flower was *being assaulted by legions of fury,* as his friend Ecthelion (who tended to hold chiselled words in an overly high esteem) would possibly have said, and he would have been right: Laurefindil had had enough. His nightmares were now constantly interrupting his rest and they were becoming to drive him mad; they made his days a turmoil and his nights an
agony. He knew he had to put an end to their onslaught, once and for all. Only, he did not have the slightest idea how to accomplish that.

Or did he…?

Laurefindil’s perturbed thoughts turned to the lowest drawer of his nightstand, hidden in which there was a small flask: Voronwë’s gift from his last great journey a few years ago. The mariner refused to speak about the land he brought the small bottle from, and Laurefindil was not sure, either, if he wanted to know what kind of people had made the drink it contained: a particularly effective mixture between strong alcohol and sleeping draught. Those who tasted too much of it were bound to suffer the impact of the former, while those who used it within bounds could enjoy the latter’s qualities.

Laurefindil’s first encounter with the swill had been a stormy one: though Voronwë did warn him and Ecthelion not to drink more than one sip, apparently, they did not take the advice seriously enough; and dawn found the pair of them kneeling behind the parapet above the Caragdûr, hoping that the surroundings of the dark crevasse were as empty and avoided as always so no one would witness the struggle of two mighty lords emptying their stomachs as green boys.

Laurefindil remembered the moment when he had tasted the drink, tentatively at first, feeling the clean, burning bouquet lurking in the liquid. Eventually, he had become bolder and took a large sip; and that proved to be his downfall for that night.

The world had started to twirl slowly, the colours had faded, the sounds had hushed around him. He had become clearly and utterly drunk in no more than a few minutes, but that was not the only effect the mysterious drink had had on him: his senses were dulled and his thinking slowed down, his breathing becoming dawdling and steady, then he fell asleep in a haze. A blissful dream he’d seen afterwards, completely devoid of shadows, snow, withering flowers… and Tyelkormo.

All I want is to get some undisturbed rest, Laurefindil sighed. Is that too much to ask?

His hands opened the lowest drawer almost by themselves.

~ § ~

The Royal Library of Ondolindë, the third day of Víressë

"Come on," Erestor gritted his teeth, and prayed to any Vala above for his hand to reach just a little further. "You are the next Lord of the Fountain, you can do this..."

"May I be of any assistance, young lord?"

Erestor almost fell off the ladder when he heard the intruder’s voice, and he looked down to see no one less than Counsellor Lómion smile reassuringly up at him.

"I...yes, cundunya," Erestor bowed his head. "I wish to reach a book, but I am not tall enough."

"Nay, winyamo. The ladder is too short. You are not the first to complain."

Erestor pulled himself off to the left side of the great wide ladder as Lómion climbed swiftly up next to him, his hand stroking the rootlets of the books at the top.

"And which one did your lordship wish to read?"

"The first of the great annals," Erestor pointed, his voice barely even hiding his excitement.
Lómion’s hand abruptly stopped.

"A yearbook?" He gazed suspiciously down upon Erestor. He was smiling still, yet the youth could see the surprise in his dark eyes. "Are you trying to tell me that the small book of bawdy poetry just next to it holds nothing of your interest?"

Erestor’s face turned to a deep shade of crimson.

"I promise, cundunya, that I did not see it. ’Twas the yearbook I wanted, and from the beginning."

For a moment, Lómion’s intent, almost obstrusive gaze turned upon his face with its full focus, and Erestor felt as if his heart was being read like an open book.

"I believe you," the Counsellor smiled mysteriously, "though I could not be more surprised… and impressed." With that, he lifted the thick book and handed it to Erestor, who, despite still being deeply embarrassed, smiled gratefully at him.

"Hantanye," he said. "You are very kind, you know."

There was a faint sparkle in those dark eyes, one he could not quite grasp.

“Praise should not spring this easily from your lips, Erestor of the Fountain,” Lómion said effortlessly, “yet I am most pleased to hear that you think of me in such a way."

He slid gracefully down the ladder and Erestor followed him as fast as he could, but the Great Library of the King’s Tower still held his gaze. Through seven stories its collection expanded, and each level was furnished with giant bookshelves from floor to ceiling. The two Elves were now standing on the top of the conglomerate; they could see snowy mountain-tops outside the windows in all directions of the compass.

Erestor watched Lómion in silence as the Counsellor packed himself with huge, thick volumes of books and settled behind a desk below the largest window. He was curious what the other was about to start reading, but he didn’t dare to ask. Lómion’s straight and confident manners intimidated him in many ways, though the Counsellor was not without patience and kindness – as Erestor had just witnessed, moments before.

And he immediately witnessed in once more, for Lómion patted the chair beside him and called at him, directly at him, at young Erestor of the Fountain.

"Come and sit with me if you wish. There is enough room for the pair of us, and annals are heavy; you may need a table to hold it. Also, you might enlighten me why would you care for such a dry read."

Erestor climbed a few steps, then settled beside Lómion. His armchair was stuffed with cushions, the desk was wide and richly carved. There remained enough place indeed for them both. Erestor placed the book gently on the table and opened it with great respect, marvelling at its small letters and smaller dates, all carefully marked, the margins measured, the most important details underlined with red ink.

"I have always wanted to see annals for myself, cundunya," he said in barely hidden awe. "My mother told me that everything we see and do, everything of importance and every happening is marked inside them. Annals hold the greatest knowledge on Arda, and my wish is to delve inside that lore; just once and not more, if that is all that the Valar grant me."

"I promise you that whenever your duties shall call you back in this City in times of peace, you'll
have both the permission and the spare time to appease your thirst of knowledge," Lómion gave a slow nod. "I'll see to that."

"I would never abandon my duty," Erestor promised. "But I'd gladly spend here any time that is granted, and I thank you from my heart again."

Lómion only nodded; and the next hour passed in comfortable silence. They merely sat beside one another, each minding his own business, yet in some unspeakable, unexplainable, unrecognizable way Erestor felt himself more and more associated with the silent Counsellor.

"You are so wise and gracious, cundunya," he blurted out suddenly, without any previous hint or warning. "Will you be my friend?"

Lómion placed the book on the table with a soft thump. For a few moments, his face remained unreadable, and Erestor felt the flame of shame and panic stirring in his guts.

What have I done…? One could not, one would not just pat the heir of King Turukáno on the shoulder and ask for his friendship in a voice that implies it has been already granted…!

Yet a sudden, honest smile lighted up Counsellor Lómion’s features and his eyes met Erestor's.

"I will cherish your friendship," he said in a low voice, "and do so with great honour."

"Truly, cundunya?" Erestor stared at him in awe. "Then the honour is mine."

"Meldonya," Lómion corrected him gently. "And yes, truly. I shall be your friend, and protect you from all pitfalls and tumblers of life in court, as long as it is within my power; and I shall pay you visit in the mountain-lands when your training is complete, and you'll be sent back as a guard."

Being sent back was not a thought Erestor cherished; he sought comfort in the peaceful silence they shared as pages were turned and turned still.

"What book is that you are reading, cun...meldonya?" Erestor asked after what seemed like barely a few minutes to him. It felt strange to address Counsellor Lómion that freely, in the most intimate speech mode he knew. Not even with his own Toronar dared he use it every day; and still with Lómion it seemed most right and natural, as if their fëar rejoiced their sudden closeness, approaching each other, observing each other, finding out they were akin.

"The fifteenth volume of our Books of Law," Lómion showed him, let him run his fingers through a passage. "I am currently refreshing my memory on the rules that concern quendi who are – or were – granted passage in our City in times of war and peril. I have a vague feeling I shall need to acquaint myself with their duties and rights before the Great Council of this eve. I like to know things precisely."

"Is this book about duties and rights, then?" Erestor looked at the thick volume that may have held the answer for a question that has been bothering him since the very spring of his childhood.

"Mostly, aye. The fifteenth volume contains all that is necessarily forbidden for the sake of varnassë in our city, and in the meantime, all the iquista we have according to law."

"And is there something in there that precises..." Erestor quickly swallowed the rest of the sentence. "Ah, never you mind, cundunya."

"So I am suddenly cundu again?" Lómion's dark eyes held his, and Erestor felt that his friend could see right through him. "What troubles young Erestor of the Fountain?"
"I was wondering," said Erestor, regaining himself, "if there was any law that obliged any son or daughter of Ondolindë... that would now mean myself, indeed... to follow the footsteps of their Atar. If my Atar was a guard, must I grow to be a guard as well?"

"I do not need any book to answer that," Lómion said. "There is no such law, and there will never be. You are free, Erestor, to learn any lore or craft you wish, as well as learn the art of any weapon you desire."

"And," Erestor said, his voice now barely even a whisper, "If Toronar would not allow me to become, for example, a harpist, must I..."

"No one has power over your choice," Lómion stated solemnly. "Not even the King. But your Toronar is a noble lord, and not without generosity. I doubt you would have to confront him... though I believe your eagerness to become a musician might scandalize him as deeply as it astonishes me."

"I have no such inclinations," Erestor assured him with the ghost of a smile on his face. "It was merely an example."

"Then what is that you would wish to learn?"

"Anything that concerns books," Erestor said enthusiastically. "And parchments. Maybe also languages, and laws, and... any kind of lore that would help me materialize the things I plan... the ideas I have..."

"Ah, meldonya," Lómion laughed. Erestor had never heard his laugh before: soft and rueful, and yet merry in a way. "I understand your heart's desire. See, that is for the same reason that I've become both a scholar and a craftsman. I have ideas – and Valar know 'tis the best feeling in this world to make them work! Now, as it happens, I barely see the laws I'd have to read, so eagerly does my fēa work to solve the problem of ladders you, among many others, pointed me out! If we make them any longer, they would become dangerous and no Elf could lift them. We could carve some kind of structure to keep them at place, but we'd thusly end up building tiny stairs everywhere, blocking half the library's contents from view."

Erestor remained silent for a while as something dawned on him.

"Out in the mountain-lands where I live," he said slowly, "ladders are pushed and pulled along bars of steel that are anchored in the cliffs. Even in the biggest storm, they stick to the bars, as curtains do to the pelmet. If we could build such a structure here..."

With every word he uttered, Lómion's eyes grew wider and wider.

"...both the ladders and the bars would have to be made from some type of steel, though; maybe decked with wood... do you think that it could work?"

"By the Valar," Lómion said, "this is the most marvellously excellent idea I've heard since I live here!"

"Truly?" Erestor found himself blushing. Lómion was kind, and more patient with him than most. And he only had to tell what he imagined, and his friend understood at once...! Erestor even suspected Lómion could see the eventual result in his mind's eye just as clearly as he did.

"Absolutely," the Counsellor said. "Wait here!"

He came back with a whole pile of books in his strong arms, and all volumes of law were set aside
as they delved into architecture. Lómion knew what he was looking for, and Erestor was very swift and eager to learn. So deep was their devotion for what they had envisioned that neither of them noticed Anor's journey on the sky; and they missed the moment when its golden plate sank amongst the icy peaks of the Echoriath as well.

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"Lómion?" Said a stern, yet calm voice from behind the nearest shelf after what seemed like barely an hour to Erestor. "Are you in there, sellonya?"

Lómion gave a start.

"Aye, I am here, Aranya," he said, "am I late already?"

"Almost," said King Turukáno of Ondolindë, and stepped out from amongst the shadows. "What a great relief to find you, child, after today's turmoil!"

"Turmoil?" Lómion raised an eyebrow. "What happened?"

"Well, if you must know," King Turukáno said, a spark of amusement lingering in his voice, "I have spent this morn in the halls of our beloved Great Master. Apparently, that strange Teler lord, Anardil offended him in some way… and you know Great Master Rog when he is offended. Then I have received a strange report about disturbing voices during the night: some within our walls were apparently interrupted in their rest by screaming. Then to my dismay, I have learned that Captain Laurefindil did not show up for muster today which is most unusual; yet I could not spare the issue enough time and thought while the last preparations for the Council were finished. And now I have an unstrung Lord Ecthelion pacing back and forth across the palace wherever I go because his nephew went missing. Manwë and Varda above, I deeply regret having mentioned yestereve that time hanged heavy on my hands...!"

Lómion could not hold his laughter in any longer; and even Erestor managed a smile as he kneeled before his King and forced himself to speak, in a thin voice that was unlike his own:

"I did not go missing, Aranya! I was here with cundu Lómion the whole time."

"For the Stars of Varda, child!" Sighed King Turukáno, and to Erestor's great surprise, pulled him to his feet by the shoulders. "Next time think twice before you disappear!"

"I shall, Aranya," Erestor bowed deeply. "Ávatyara ni."

"It is your Toronar who must forgive you," said King Turukáno. In a way, he reminded Erestor of Ecthelion; he was also very tall, dark-haired, wide-shouldered, his eyes piercing grey, his face perhaps too proud, too stern, but not without gentleness. "But tell me, what were the pair of you doing behind this desk all day?"

"Young Erestor came up with a flawless concept on the matter of lengthening ladders," Lómion said. "I shall follow his plans."

"Our plans, cundunya," Erestor said shyly. "I only imagined it; 'twas you who made it realizable."

"Indeed?" King Turukáno stepped closer to the table. "And what would that plan be?"

Erestor told him about the bars of steel, timidly at first, but when the King showed great interest in his and Lómion's plans, he eventually became bolder.
"A sensible idea," King Turukáno said when he was acquainted with the entirety of the concept. "It only lacks a way to make the whole structure comely. Perhaps if we crusted it with gold or the noblest kind of silver..."

"A gripping remark," Lómion said, and marked a few words on the side of the parchment. "Would you prefer gold or silver, Aranya? Rubies and sapphires here and there, perhaps? ...or a few ladders made of diamond?" a smile rushed through his face.

"Too slippery," said King Turukáno, his face utterly solemn. Erestor watched them in cautious awe, unable to tell if they were truly jesting.

"As you wish," Lómion looked at his uncle, a spark of great interest in his dark eyes. "Now, Aranya, shall we proceed to the Great Council?"

"We still have half an hour to converse about metals and ladders, if we must," King Turukáno said, "but I would prefer we left such enriching conversations for the morrow. It would now be best to go, Lómion."

“As my King commands,” said the Counsellor. Silently, Erestor watched as their glorious plans were set aside, and Lómion cast a last glance upon a paragraph in a law-book. For the smallest fraction of a second, he felt a burning, aching desire to follow his friend and his King into the throne room and witness the Great Council; and in that same fraction of a second, Lómion held his gaze.

“Aranya,” he said suddenly, his voice low, yet shrill. “May I make a suggestion?”

“Always, Lómion,” said the King softly. “You were not appointed Counsellor for nothing.”

“I am relieved to hear that,” amusement was lurking in Lómion’s voice. “Now, my King… I must tell you that planning and construction are not the only areas where young Erestor showed remarkable talent to me. I believe that for the sake of his personal development as well as for the fulfilment of his ambitions, it would prove most edifying for him to be allowed inside the council room and witness the debate.”

Erestor felt his eyes widen in shock, and his tongue was already forming words of protest: words against this bold statement, this request bordering careless insolence. But Lómion’s eyes met his once more, and in them shone a silent command: stay still!

“Indeed?” King Turukáno turned his eyes upon his nephew again, and Lómion held his gaze without even blinking.

“Indeed, Aranya. Young Lord Erestor is a rare talent; moreover, I would not ask such a thing from you if I did not see its purpose.”

Erestor’s heart was pounding in his throat. He’d done nothing to deserve this. What did he do to gain Lómion’s special attentions? What did he do to deserve the consideration of King Turukáno? What did he accomplish to merit his heart’s desire…?

“The Great Council is an event reserved to the governance of Ondolindë and a few honoured guests,” King Turukáno answered. “I cannot grant such a privilege freely.”

“I have never asked you to give it freely, Aranya,” Lómion said smoothly.

“Let it be, then,” said King Turukáno; and then, all of a sudden, he turned to Erestor who could barely hold his commanding gaze.
"Witnessing the Great Council is a reward, and for a reward, one must prove his abilities. Tell me, young lord - how much do you know about the laws of our City?"

Erestor paled; but Lord Lómion, who was standing closely behind the King’s back, gave him a confident smile and nodded.

"I… I know much, Aranya," said Erestor uncertainly.

“And about heraldry?

“Almost everything, Aranya,” Erestor stated proudly, finding his voice.

"And how well do you think you could guide our honoured guest, Lord Anardil in the maze of our laws and customs while the Council is held?"

Erestor’s heart missed a beat.

"Perfectly well, Aranya," he jabbered. "I would not miss one reference!"

"What a strange chance," King Turukáno said, laughter in his eyes, "that Lord Anardil would most fervently need someone to guide him this eve...! I see, Erestor of the Fountain, that you are interested in the ways of our city, and you have your own ideas; and this far, I happen to be very fond of those ideas. Consider this offer as a reward of your future service; one of many that are still to be earned. What say you?"

Erestor sank to one knee, and said that he was very thankful, of course. His Toronar had once mentioned something about the Great Council being restricted, and he’d seriously warned Erestor to not even try to slid in. And now he was heading exactly there!

King Turukáno gestured for both him and Lómion to follow, and Erestor complied in awe, his heart filled with sudden mirth and disbelief.

The Great Council had been summoned for the evening; and he, young Erestor of the Fountain was invited by King Turukáno himself.

And the Royal Library was to be refashioned after his design.

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_Meanwhile in the Captain’s Quarters_

"Lord Laurefindil!"

"Fin?"

"My Lord of the Flower!"

"FIN!!!"

"Captain?"

"Fin, you great oaf! Have you moved to Mandos…?!"

Laurefindil. Laurefindil. Laurefindil. The name was hammering in his head like some determined blacksmith, and would not let him be. He pulled the sheets more closely around himself, and groaned disapprovingly.
I was finally about to get a good night's sleep! Ondolindë is a city of might, a sealed kingdom, a safe place – why couldn't they spare me for a few hours? Or is it just the shadow of my nightmares that calls after me?

He would not answer the voices either way.

"Captain! Captain, are you in there?!"

When someone started to bang steadily on his door, Laurefindil could no longer pretend to be deaf. Supporting the weight of his body with a trembling elbow, he rose.

"What the seventh bloody hell of Angamando is going on out there?!" He wuthered with an enraged fierceness he’d not known he had in his heart. “Are the guards so dim-witted that they cannot even change the watch without their Captain?!”

There were a few seconds of sullen silence after his outburst, then a familiar, uncertain voice answered him from outside:

"The Great Council has been summoned for this eve, Captain... and King Turukáno commanded my humble self to use the warhammer of Great Master Rog to open your doors if you do not show up in the throne room in ten minutes."

A short silence followed.

"In that case, Lord Warden," Laurefindil spoke up, as calm as his voice could get, "forget what I just said. Ten minutes it is."

"Wise choice, my Captain," said in the ringing voice of Ecthelion from the other side of the door, and Laurefindil could hear the muffled sounds of his amusement.

Slowly, though, the meaning of the words ten minutes started to sink in.

O, ill fortune!

O, deadliest curse of Moringotto!

O, cruel mischief of mariners and their gifts!

Gathering the remains of his dignity, Laurefindil stood and moved to his bathe-chamber. After washing his face thoroughly in ice-cold water, his vision cleared and the iambic pounding of the night before seemed to quiesce in the back of his head. Then he decided it was time to dress; he settled for a light blue tunic to match his eyes, a deep green jerkin and a pair of dark leggings, then he prepared his favourite leather boots. If he was to endure a Great Council this eve, he would at least endure it in the most comfortable way possible.

He was still struggling with the – suddenly very complicated – clasp of his belt, when he heard a soft knock on the door outside.

“Let me in,” came the stifled voice of Ecthelion through the white wood, now soft and gentle, devoid of any sort of amusement. “We still have six minutes and a half to talk.”

“Later,” said Laurefindil as he wound a heavy green-and-golden cloak around his shoulders. Bracing himself, he opened the door and faced his friend. Seeing the extent of concern and suspicion in Ecthelion’s eyes, he concluded that he must look horrible. Yet all his friend said was,
“You seem pale… did you have nightmares again?”

“I am merely bathing in your radiance, Otorno. Fear not for me, I am all right.”

Ecthelion squeezed his shoulder lightly. “I shall tell you what you are, Fin – a terrible liar.”

Chapter End Notes

Author’s Notes
On characters:

Rog is a canon character, mentioned in "The Fall of Gondolin"; but it was me who gave him the title of "Great Master". In Tolkien's writing, he appears as a character of much cruder, harder nature than Elves in general. What we can surely tell is that he was a blacksmith, and a mighty leader of his House.

This is the first appearance of King Turukáno, and you have no idea how nervous I am about it. And also about Lómion... but my headcanons are strict, and I’m determined to respect them. Feel free to ask questions or raise doubts, though, I like them.

Quenya (if I left something out, feel free to ask):

cundunya: "my prince", with cundu meaning "prince" (a poetical expression that befits the courteous manners of the Gondolinrdim).
winyamo: "youngster"
hantanye: "I thank you"
meldonya: "my [male] friend"
varnassë: "security"
íquistar: "requests", here: "lawful rights" -> both varnassë and this word are left in Quenya because they are meant to be juridic terms
sellonya: means something like "sister's-son"; an endearment of Lómion Turukáno will sometimes use in the story.
aranya: "my king"
Ávatyara ni: "Forgive me"
Otorno: "sworn brother"

One last remark: Erestor calling Lómion a prince is a demonstration of the reverential Quenya speech mode. You may remember that Laurefindil called him simply "Counsellor", or "Lord"; that doesn't make Lómion any less than a heir of the King, but since Laurefindil is both older and of higher rank (in the army) than he is, I decided he should skip the title. Erestor, on the other hand, was here meant to switch in and out of colloquial and reverential speech rather awkwardly, because he's still a bit uncomfortable with theeing Lómion.

I've been pondering a lot how reverential Quenya amongst the Gondolinrdim (that basically means extra-mega-ultra-reverential Quenya) could be written and used, since #1 I don't have the necessary linguistic knowledge to translate every other sentence #2 I believe the average reader wouldn't approve...

You'll get more of these mazy speeches when we actually get to the Great Council. ;)
XI. Bats and Werewolves

"Be welcome, Lords of Ondolindë!" the ringing voice of King Turukáno swept through the Great Hall, clear and sharp as a sword-blade. "Behold! The Sun is flashing his golden smile at us as he settles to rest behind icy peaks; it is time for our Council to commence."

"Let the Council begin!" Princess Idril declared in her exquisite treble, which, despite its softness, was clearly audible in the whole immensity of the Hall. King Turukáno rose from his high throne and slowly, pontifically descended seven marble steps. His long strides were aimed at the gleaming pulpit in the middle of the hall, surrounded by wide seats: each of them reserved to one from the group of dignitaries who were, until now, silently waiting for the King's leave to enter and sit. Now that the greetings have been voiced and the Council officially started, they were approaching in single file, but given the immensity of the Hall – and thus the distance to cross -, it was still about to take several minutes before the first speaker could have his word.

Erestor felt a set of long fingers gripping his shoulder with a strength that almost reminded him of Ecthelion.

“Listen to me, little one,” Lómion susurrated to his right ear. “Lord Anardil is approaching. Do you still feel capable of guiding him through this Council? Now is the last moment to change your mind and leave.”

“I would never leave, cundunya,” Erestor said proudly. “The King counts on me!”

“Well said,” a faint light stirred in Lómion’s eyes. “In that case, I shall now leave you to him. You will accompany him to that seat, at the far side of the Hall. Facing mine. I will be right there if you need me; you’ll need only to look at me, I shall know.”


“And remember, child,” Lómion’s voice was low now, very low and very soft, and it made the tip of his ear tingle, “that Lord Anardil is not one of us. He is from outside… and for that reason you
shall need to be very careful with him.”

“Is he trying to hurt us?” Erestor whispered back. Lómion’s voice gave a disquieting undertone to the word ‘outside’.

“The King seems to favor him for some reason; and he is not very likely to cause trouble indeed. He is but a mariner from distant lands… but his eyes and ears are sharp and little can escape them: that much is already clear to me. Things are often not as simple as they seem. Watch him, Erestor, and learn. And be very courteous.”

“Cousin,” came Princess Idril’s voice from behind, “we need to leave. The King is waiting.”

“We do indeed, my princess,” said Lómion, and looking up, Erestor saw yet another kind of light kindling in his eyes. The boy greeted Princess Idril with the finest courtesies he could suddenly produce, and placed a grateful kiss on her ring when it was offered. The princess smelled like roses, and Erestor would have been contented with no more than that fragrance, unmoving, oblivious to the passing of time outside his closed eyelids; but Idril only laughed, and ran her fingers through a particularly unruly strand of his hair, and that sensation made Erestor stir.

Lómion was but a ghost in Idril’s light: tall, straight, yet lithe like a willow-tree, his high cheekbones casting a long shadow on his wary face. His eyes were two lightless pools, his lips pressed into a thin line, as if he was trying to keep a whole rush of words from a careless escape.

“Let us go,” was all he said at the end. He offered his arm, and Princess Idril took it.

Erestor blinked, trying to chase a stray hair from his eyes. All of a sudden, a terrible sense of foreboding seized his entire fëa, the wild and consuming desire to right some wrong, unseen and unlooked-for, that had been committed just a moment before. Something felt absolutely, terribly wrong with the way prince and princess had looked at each other, with the way they had walked away, with the way their breath mingled in the heavy air of the Great Hall. Something felt wrong with the colourful array of lords rushing indoors, taking their spaces. Something felt wrong with the absence of his Toronar, otherwise so caring and devoted to him.

“You are being impossible,” Erestor mumbled to himself. “Ondolindë is a safe realm – the last one that is left east of the Sea. There is nothing to worry about. And now your duty is to go and fetch Lord Anardil.”

“I do not quite need fetching, young lord,” said someone behind his back in outrageously accented Quenya. “Yet I appreciate the sentiment.”

Half-amused, half-horrified did Erestor turn around, only to find none other than Lord Anardil smiling leniently at him.

“You - ,” Erestor choked, “you speak Quenya…?”

“I babble, as Great Master Rog has kindly corrected my assumptions.”

“You let us speak Sindarin all along…”

“I found it strangely endearing,” the Teler grinned. “Especially Lord Salgant. He has a little space between his teeth, and when he says thou and thee, it makes a faint whistling sound. Did you ever notice that? Of course you did not. Thou need to be more perceptive, Erestor of the Foun-teen.”

No gloom or dread could have erased the surprised grin from Erestor’s features that moment; and when Lord Anardil furrowed his brows and ordered him to take care of his mannerz, his glee
escaped him in the form of an easy, careless roll of laughter that drew quite a number of
disapproving looks on the pair of them as they were heading to the seats.

“I… I apologise for my carelessness, Lord Anardil,” Erestor swallowed the rest of his mirth, and
bowed. “I did not even greet you in the appropriate manner.”

“Thank the Valar you did not,” Anardil sighed. “I always forget that you are such a cold-veined
people.”

“Cold-blooded, my lord?” Erestor tried.

“Yes, yes that. Now – King Turucáno said that you shall indulge me in the mysteries of your
customs and heraldry. I cannot wait to hear that.”

Erestor bit the inside of his mouth, lest he’d smile at the pronunciation.

“I would be very glad to guide your lordship in any way,” he said. “Understanding our tongue will
help you a lot… may I inquire where did you learn it?”

“You may,” said Anardil, and he leaned back in his seat.

Several moments passed; chairs were pulled around them, legs were trodding the shiny marble,
people were approaching and disappearing from view.

“And would you tell me?” Erestor said shyly.

“I would.” Anardil crossed his legs comfortably and knuckled a bit of dirt down from the sleeve of
his cloak.

“And… will you?”

“I may,” said Anardil, obviously very pleased with himself, “if you only ask.”

“All right, my lord,” Erestor sighed, a little bit out of his patience, “so where did you learn
Quenya?”

“Ah, we finally getting somewhere!” Lord Anardil laughed. “In fair Tirion I had learned it, many
years ago, when the Trees were still alive and blossoming. I liked to journey in your great cities –
those times, I used to look up at the Ñoldor, just as many of my people did. And your tongue – in
many ways, your tongue is like mine, Telerin. The older the dialect gets, the less difference you
can spot.”

“Indeed?” Erestor started at the strange Elf in interest. “And would you teach me… I mean, please,
*do* teach me a few phrases sometime! If means no burden to your lordship, that is.”

“All right, my lord,” said Anardil, honestly pleased. Before he could say anything else, though,
Erestor stiffened.

“King Turukáno is coming back,” he whispered.

The King was indeed proceeding to take his place in the middle seat; and the rest of The Hidden
City’s greatest lords were approaching steadily. The banners of the twelve Great Houses of the
Gondolindrim were hung from large windows of painted glass, six from one side and six from the
other. There still remained more than enough source of light in the Great Hall, though, since
twenty-four gigantesque windows were facing the green valley of Tumladen from each long side;
but the exposed flags created a shadowy area in the centre of the hall, the rays of the setting Sun filtering mysteriously through the twelve great canvases of various colours, draping the whole length of the table in rainbows.

"Now let us count those lords and spy on them as they cross the hall ceremoniously!" Lord Anardil allowed himself a soft laugh, and no more than a feather touch of scorn in his voice. "Let us look at the banners. I am in dire need of your aid, young Lord Erestor – so do you recognize them all?"

"The first banner is that of the House of the King," Erestor said, his eyes suddenly gleaming proudly. He finally felt to step on familiar terrain. "Moon, Sun and scarlet heart on a blue-white field. Led by the King Turukáno."

"His Highness the King and Regent of Ondo-lindë, Turucáno Nolofinwion, you mean," Lord Anardil expanded unmercifully.

"Yes, Lord, I meant exactly that, but with the right pronunciation," Erestor reprimanded. Before he could get horrified at his insolence, Lord Anardil let out a snort of laughter.

"Very good. Anything else you recognize?"

"The House of the Heavenly Arch. Rainbow, opal and jewelled boss on a turquoise field. Led by the Treasurer, Lord Egalmoth. Next to that, the House of the Tree; white tree in a deep green field with an iron-studded club and slings, led by Chief Advisor Galdor."

"Next to that, the banner of the House of the Golden Flower; a flower and the Sun itself, clad in deep, shining golden in a fresh green field," Erestor declared. "Led by our beloved Captain Laurefindil."

"He doesn’t look quite dashing this eve, does he?" Anardil mumbled. And indeed; the Captain’s face was unusually pale, his strides soldierly and collected. Yet as his eyes met the King’s, he smiled chivalrously and made a small gesture of homage. And as ever, he was walking side by side with…

"Next to the Golden Flower," Erestor said, his voice trembling, "the banner of the House of the Fountain, its blazon a silver fountain with diamonds and a flute."

"Not dramatic at all..." Anardil broke in with a smirk.

"...led by the Warden of the Great Gate, Lord Ecthelion."

"...aye, possibly the only entertaining person in this hall."

"Do you find my Toronar entertaining?" Erestor's gaze was suddenly very intense on the Teler’s face. "My Lord?" He added awkwardly.

"Just watch, and you shall see. Now, any other piece of heraldry I should get acquainted with?"

"The House of the Swallow, last in the line. An arrowhead and a fan of feathers, led by the Captain of Marches, Duilin. And then, on the other side: the House of the Harp," Erestor continued, his voice suddenly lower and his speech swifter, as the lords began to take their seats around the Hall. "Silver harp, laden with tassels of gold and silver, led by the Lord Salgant."

"Always in Lómion's heels, that one," Anardil mumbled. "One would think they are lovers -"

"...the House of the Mole," Erestor went on without intrusion, gritting his teeth against the
playfully meant, yet wounding insult against his new friend. "Plain black banner of moleskin, and for blazon, a double-bladed axe. Led by the First Counsellor, Lord Lómion. The House of the Pillar, up next; gleaming silvery white pillar in a blood-red field, and the House of the Tower of Snow, its blazon a tall white tower in a sky-blue shield; also, the House of the Wing, silvery feathers in a light blue field; all three of them led by the brave Lord Penlod.* And then, last but not the least, the graceful House of the Hammer of Wrath: stricken anvil and black iron in a deep red field and a mace, led by Great Master Rog."

"Oh," Anardil smiled. "Another entertaining person in the hall."

"It is said that Great Master Rog is very fearful once he's angered," Erestor whispered.

"That he is, I assure you. The trick is, do not anger him – so, preferably, do not talk, do not swallow and do not blink in his presence. Ah, and restrain yourself from breathing."

By the look on young Erestor's face, anyone could tell he was not especially reassured; but the time has finally come. King Turukáno settled at his seat, and the Heads of the Houses joined him, along with other lords of the royal household, a group of lesser counsellors, twelve scribes (one of whom took his place right next to the beaming Erestor) and six servants waiting dutifully at each door of the Great Hall.

Still arm-in-arm with Lómion, there also came Idril Celebrindal, Daughter of the King and Princess of Gondolin, her stunning, piercing beauty smuggling a smile on Anardil's face and making Erestor blush again. Prince and princess were seated at the two sides of the King; and Idril greeted all newcomers with that silent, discreet but majestic politeness Erestor so greatly admired in her. Effortlessly she sat, throwing a few strands of golden hair behind her slender shoulders, her gaze fixed intently on her father's face.

Then Lómion stood; and he looked around in the Great Hall, bathing in the attention of many different eyes.

"Well met, lords and friends!" Lómion said with a disarming smile, gesturing widely towards everyone seated. "Thank you for coming; our Council has begun and we have grave matters to discuss."

There was a choir of clearly declared "well met, cundu Lómion"-s, and Erestor caught the glance his Toronar sent towards Captain Laurefindil. He saw sadness in it, which was mingled with uncertainty and deep concern.

He did not even notice him, Erestor!

Something has gone awry, Erestor felt with every fibre of his being. But Ecthelion's glance wandered off the Captain before he could be sure what he saw; and the Council started.

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Anardil could not have been more impressed with the scribe. Valar, he was writing fast, and that fast meant a speed he'd never experienced before. The mute, solemn Elf was sitting next to young Erestor, a mere two seats away from him, plume and planchette in hand with a billowing roll of parchment hanging from it; which was becoming entirely covered in his small, elegant tengwar. Anardil cast a glance at his notes every few minutes, realising that instead of writing only 'mole' or 'tree' as might have been the custom in such situations as a Grand Council, the fellow was scribing so fast he actually had the time to mark "First Counsellor Lómion" or "Chief Advisor Galdor" (or F.C.L. and C.A.G. after a few hours, but that seemed impressive as well). Anardil could not help
but think that at the end of the Council, King Turukáno was about to hold in his hands the most
detailed account ever prepared in Ondo-lin-de.

Anardil’s thoughts and eyes, though, were already deflected off the scribe at the very beginning of
the Council; when, after a flow of formal greetings, kundu Lómion declared the aim of the day's
meeting in his shrill intriguing tone. The Counsellor had indeed made an effort to fit into such a
lordly company, Anardil could say; his slender figure was entirely covered in black cloth, but here
and there a fine, palely gleaming hauberk showed from under his garments. His hair was also
carefully braided and his eyes were gleaming with a fierce passion that was known to be a flavour
of the High Elves. His speech was flowing clear and elegant, and after several minutes, Anardil
had to make a tremendous effort to remember he was not supposed to let Lómion convince him.

The Counsellor was only introducing the subject, but Anardil could already sense the hidden
message behind his words: hear me, Lords of Might; we can only spare ourselves the monstrosities
of the Enemy if we remain hidden, undiscovered, closing our gates in front of the world; letting no
one in and no one out.

It appeared, though, that several of the Leaders of the Houses were already familiar with some
morsels of the events, and showed deep interest in the subject. Even Ecthelion, who otherwise held
Counsellor Lómion in a particularly low esteem (as far as Anardil could see) listened to him
intently, not missing a word. Lómion explained in details how he had been woken by the Great
Eagle Thorondor, a few weeks ago, who had only granted him two sentences for a start: I need to
speak with King Turukáno. And, The Enemy has been rused.

At this statement, a wave of joyful cheering rose around the table, but all sound ceased
immediately when King Turukáno raised his hand.

"This morning," he said severely, "I have been told the whole story, as they recount it beyond our
borders. Listen to me closely, Lords of my Court; for never in your lives have you heard such a
tale. It raises grave questions and gives answers to unasked ones; and that is the reason why I
summoned you here today."

At this point, Anardil reclined in his chair, let his shoulders loose, his piercing green gaze fixed on
the King. His instincts told him to pull his limbs tense, to goggle his eyes, trying to elevate his
concentration with every inch of his body, but his fëa knew better. Not wanting to seize entire
control on his muscles, he let all information flow through him. The Council was meant to be long,
and he could not let himself waste all his energy before it came to the interesting part - debate.

And thus Turukáno Nolofinwion, King and Regent of The Hidden City of Ondolindë rose to
speech and the white walls of the Great Hall drank eagerly in the deeds of Beren Erchamion and
Lúthien Tinúviel, as they were told amongst the Free People of Beleriand a year after they had
been done – a tale the silent scribe carefully captured, word by word, in his small orderly hand.

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Lúthien was the daughter of King Elu Thingol, lord of the Sindar, and Queen Melian the Maia,
rulers of the Kingdom of Doriath; and Beren Erchamion was a mortal man, son of Barahir, who
had fled from the deadly Dagor Bragollach. By accident had they met each other in the forest of
Neldoreth, and Beren had laid his eyes on Lúthien, and he had loved her, and gave her the name
'Tinúviel' that stands for 'Nightingale' in the Elven Speech of Beleriand; and Lúthien was also
willing to give her heart to him. But the King Thingol thought Beren unworthy of the love of his
daughter, and thus he set an impossible task on Beren that he had to achieve before he could wed
Lúthien: Thingol wanted Beren to get him one of the Silmarili, the wondrous Jewels that Fëanáro
Finwion had wrought with his own hands, and Moringotto the Great Enemy had stolen them, and
kept them in his fortress, in Angamando, wrought in his own black crown.

And thus Beren departed, and Lúthien followed him later, though Thingol had forbade her to do so. And it happened that Beren arrived to the Kingdom of Nargothrond, where King Findaráto ruled his faithful and worthy people; and two sons of Fëanáro, Tyelkormo and Curufinwë also lived there and were held in high esteem in the Council of the King. Beren had told the King Findaráto what befell him and asked for his aid, making him remember the Oath of friendship he had once sworn for Beren's sire. And King Findaráto agreed to aid him, though he was followed by no more than ten of his warriors; for it is said that when the lords Tyelkormo and Curufinwë learned Beren's aim, they decided to seize kingship for themselves; and they planted a great fear in the hearts of those living in Nargothrond, and thus very few were willing to follow their rightful King.

And so Beren Erchamion, King Findaráto and the ten faithful warriors departed to Angamando; they were disguised as foul Orcs, but they had been discovered and thus imprisoned in Tol-in-Gaurhoth, left to a horrible death. It is said that they were chained with cruel iron, and one by one eaten by a werewolf that was kept in the dungeons; but one day, when only Beren and the King remained, Findaráto broke his chains and fought the werewolf with his two bare hands, and fought so fiercely that they both died.

Ill fate tormented fair Lúthien also: for she left his father's halls to follow his beloved, but was captured by the lords Tyelkormo and Curufinwë who hunted in the woods, and the bards sing that the lord Tyelkormo became enchanted with Lúthien's beauty and he wanted to take her as a wife. But lo! Huan, the terrible Hound that had been following the Lord Tyelkormo's steps all his waking life, forsook his master and rescued Lúthien; and together they fled to Angamando, to find Beren. It is said that Huan the Hound defeated all the terrible Werewolves that remained in the fortress; and he fought the evil Sauron himself who took the shape of a wolf and thus attacked him. Then Lúthien freed his beloved and took ownership of the evil fortress; but Sauron escaped in form of a bat.

Beren's heart was weary of the road, but he did not give up. To Angamando he wanted to return, willing to fulfill his Oath, and Lúthien swore to follow his steps. But alas! Once more has their way crossed that of the lords Tyelkormo and Curufinwë, once more did those try to restrain them from the Quest. Beren was wounded by Curufinwë as they fought, but the Sons of Fëanáro were driven off and Beren was healed. And Lúthien used magic to disguise the pair of them; they took the shapes of Turingwethil the Bat and Draugluin the Wolf that Huan had killed, and thus they went to Angamando and stood at Moringotto's throne. Then Lúthien sang a song of magic, and enchantment lay on the Dark Lands and the Black Foe and his court fell asleep and Beren cut one of the Silmarili from Moringotto's crown. But in his pride and valour he wanted to take them all; and when he cut the second Jewel his knife broke and a shard of metal glanced off Moringotto's face and awakened him; and the gate has been barred as the lovers fled, and Carcaroth the terrible Wolf was guarding it, and he bit off Beren's hand and swallowed it with the Silmaril; but the Jewel burnt him horribly, and Carcaroth started to howl in madness and ran, and ran, and fled from the Dark Lands.

Beren and Lúthien returned to Doriath, and songs of their deeds were sung; and the King Thingol's heart softened, and he let Beren wed his daughter. But Carcaroth in his madness returned to Doriath, and caused enormous damage; Beren and Huan then joined those who hunted for the Wolf. Carcaroth killed the two of them, but before he died, Beren handed the Silmaril to King Thingol, thus fulfilling his Oath, and leaving Lúthien to grieve. And so it happened that one of the Silmarili, the bright Jewels, the Treasure of the Noldor was now in the hands of Elu Thingol of Doriath, and the Sons of Fëanáro knew this – and also knew Moringotto, the Black Foe, who has been awakened, his deadly wrath menacing once more the Lands of Beleriand.
When King Turukáno came to the end of his speech, a long, deep silence followed. The utter stillness stretched out uncomfortably in the Great Hall, reaching even the furthest corner.

"This... this is like some ancient lay from a lost Age," Captain Laurefindil murmured under his breath, seemingly lost in thought and time. His words, though, lingered in the air for long; they echoed relentlessly, from one white stone wall to another and they seemed to become ever louder, finally as if he had been shouting: *lost Age, lost Age, lost Age.*

"My thoughts exactly!" the Great Master Rog said, his firm proud voice shattering the air in the silent Hall like a bellow. "An Elven maiden and a mortal Man in the Enemy's fortress... werewolves and bats... Forgive me my boldness, sire," he bowed before the King, "but this could not have happened - this is impossible..."

"Highness," Lómion said smoothly from behind the curtain of his hair, "I beg for word."

"You need not beg for it, Counsellor," King Turukáno said. "Step forward and speak, for such is your duty."

The Counsellor stood, his slender figure gaping black against walls wrought with marble.

"Highness," he said, holding his head high. "Princess Idril," he proceeded in a much softer tone, and in his eyes a pale spark lighted and went out immediately. "Captain Laurefindil and all my noble lords, hear me now! Did King Turukáno not say that this was the tale that the People of Beleriand told of the noble deeds of Beren and Lúthien beyond our borders? Did he not precise that this was the account of others on what happened? We must not take this tale for granted. There should exist an explication for everything, *everything* that we have just heard. Only, it takes time to collect the true events. Surely, the Lord Beren and Lady Lúthien must have encountered those terrible beasts that lurk in the Dark Lands, on their way to Angamando. With no doubt, Sauron has attacked them – and I would also say that the lords Tyelkormo and Curufinwë have not welcomed the planned Quest of the Silmarili with open arms. But what we have heard now, is no more than a tale of noble deeds. Captain Laurefindil spoke the truth – this *is* nothing more than a lay of forgotten Ages, an excellent material for bards to work on. What truly matters in this story is not werewolves and bats, but the fact that this mortal Man *woke Moringotto from his sleep* in his arrogance and folly and stole a treasure that could provoke war in Beleriand. That *shall* provoke war in Beleriand, if you ask me! A storm is coming, but together, in peace, within the walls of our City, within our mines and mountains, we shall endure."

*So here we are,* Anardil thought, and part of him was bewildered to feel hot fury boil up his veins.

But then, suddenly, something entirely unexpected happened.

"Highness," The golden lord of Gondolin said, his voice illusively cool and formal. "May I have a word?"

"Please do proceed, Captain," said the King.

Laurefindil stood (which seemed to take a much more striking effect than the same movement of Lómion before), shook out his gold-embroidered cloak with a flourish, and spoke, a carefully hidden pang of grief in his voice.

"Highness, and my fairest Princess Idril," he said, not without gloating when he earned a bright smile from the maiden her cousin did not, "and all of you, my lords and friends, hear me now! The
Counsellor is right. These events may, or may not have happened as the People of Beleriand tell it. The Eagles have keen eyes and sharp hearing, and little escapes their attention. We shall know everything in time. The Counsellor is right again: Moringotto has been awakened, and Beleriand is in grave danger. And the Counsellor is once more right: within these walls, we shall endure, whatever may come: another Kinslaying, another war, death or cruel flames. But alas! Hear me, Highness, hear me, my Princess, hear me thee, my lords and allies – Counsellor Lómion errs, terribly errs when he says that what matters above all in this story is that we should keep our position and peace. The true question is – when, o King, o Princess, o lords... when shall we have enough?

Captain Laurefindil's voice was suddenly roaring like thunder, a fearful light in his usually gentle blue eyes, threads of gold reflected from the glass-smooth white walls as waves of sunlight rose from his sea of hair.

"The Last Battle, the deadly one, the terrible one, the Dagor Bragollach, the raging inferno that killed a great part of our people and put their homes to ruin – was it not enough? The death of the Lords Aikanáro and Angaráto – was it not enough? The death of High King Nolofinwë himself, when he gloriously fought that demon of darkness – was it not enough? When did the grief in my heart turn to fury and anguish, I cannot tell. We have stayed, we have silenced ourselves, we have endured. The Evil of Morgoth has cowed my heart, as it cowed us all. But now that my friend and brother-in-heart Findaráto, the noble, gentle King Findaráto has been savagely killed, I can stay silent no more! Death, death, death to Moringotto and all those accursed lickspittles of his! No more grief! No more sorrow! We cannot shut our hearts from our people anymore!"

The Captain finished his hot speech with a soft, barely audible gasp, then bowed deep towards the King.

"Highness," he said, his voice softening, "forgive me my harsh words. It is not treason I speak. I do not wish to break or lighten the laws of our City, for there is reason and sanity behind them, and your will to me is solid like stone. Nor do I wish to forsake any order or any decision of the Council. Nor do I disrespect your words, Counsellor Lómion! But hear me. I said – and I say it again -, we cannot shut our hearts from our people. We cannot let any more of them die. We cannot let Moringotto and his evil servants slowly eradicate the Lords of the Noldor! He is afraid of us, even if he is stronger; we know that. Ha hates us with fervency; we know that, also. King Turukáno, my King, my only true lord, I speak to thee now: there must be a way to act... to do something. Anything that predicts the actions of Moringotto, anything to warn our people that they are in danger. Anything to bring them here in safety, anything..."

Anardil felt that the Captain was forcefully silencing himself before his voice could have the opportunity to betray him and turn into pleading.

"I agree, and verily!" Lord Ecthelion exclaimed. There were other sounds of agreement, and Lómion said nothing but arched his eyebrows.

"Captain," he said in a quiet voice, when all sounds died out. "Do you think our King has no sorrow that plagues his heart? Do you think that the deaths of Nolofinwë, Aikanáro, Angaráto, and now, Findaráto left him untouched? Or any of us? Do you think any of us has ever shut his heart before any of our kin?"

"One thing is thought or belief, Counsellor," Captain Laurefindil retorted, "and another thing is act. We have our beautiful City, a rich and secure place. Do the Noldor of Hithlum deserve less?"
"Such things are not a matter of deserving," Lómion said, "but that of possibility. We cannot guide here hundreds and thousands in a short period of time – and Moringotto, if he strikes, shall strike very soon."

"Highness," Lord Penlod said, "May I speak?"

"Do so," came the quiet word from the King, who seemed reluctant to voice his own thoughts, who was just sitting in that richly carved chair of his, and listening to the ensuing debate.

"Captain, Lord Counsellor," the Lord of Three Houses said, "you speak of battle and death and ruin; but we saw nothing yet that would by any means imply this evidence. The Enemy still has two of the Silmarili. It is not possible that he chooses to let us labour under the delusion that his power dwindles? Is it not possible that the glory of Beren and Lúthien is simply a carefully prepared trap to prove our ruin…?"

"Highness," Ecthelion spoke, "may I...?"

King Turukáno made a small gesture with his hand, allowing the Warden of the Gate to rise and speak.

"It is a trap, lords," Ecthelion said, a proud gleam in his eyes, "there is no doubt. But the trap is not aimed at us – not yet. Moringotto takes great pleasure in making the most valiant ones of the Ñoldor perish, or even killing them himself. It started with the Great King Finwë, continued with Fëanáro, then Nelyainwë – though there Moringotto failed miserably -, then came Aikanáro, Angaráto, then his Highness King Nolofinwë and now Findaráto. Findekáno is coming next – it shall not stop, unless we open our heart – and gates – towards our own kin."

"You are the Great Warden of the Gates," Counsellor Lómion hissed. "Are you truly fool enough to openly forsake our King's command? We cannot open the gates. We must not risk our own safety, not even for the sake of others! Tell me, o champion of wiseness, what is the use of a wolf's teeth if by some heavenly inspiration, he's determined not to bite with them?"

"To let them glint in the light of moon," Ecthelion said, "and plant fear in the heart of any foe. And now tell me, o idol of truthfulness, what is the use of a deadly sharp sword if rust gnaws at its steel? Who would sing a song about such a blade? Who would count the number of necks it has severed?"

"Would that number thus be changed?" Lómion raised a thin eyebrow.

"Enough of wolves and blades and champions and rust!" Great Master Rog broke in, getting the King’s leave to speak before he could even voice the wish. "If I understand you well, lords, your hearts are troubled. Some of you would act, some of you would wait; and all of you would march to battle without hesitation if that was what it took to defend your own truth. Hear me now, Highness, hear me now, Princess, hear me thee, lords of Ondolindë! I do not know what to believe, and the only thing that shall ever convince me is the command of mine own fëa. I deeply hate Moringotto, I mistrust the Sons of Fëanáro and I pity those of Hithlum, surrounded by death and fire. But my heart, too, is troubled; revealing ourselves may prove a terrible mistake. What if Moringotto sees us? What if his spies find a way or another, if they stick to our heels and discover where our City is? What if we open our gates in front of our kinsmen, and thus Moringotto awaits the last moment to unleash his terrible beasts upon us? Trapped among these mountains, our death would be sure."

"We have been dwelling here for what seems like an Age," Ecthelion said gravely. "We cannot hide forever. One day, Moringotto shall discover us as his malicious power grows. It is inevitable."
"Warden," Rog said in his booming voice. "Are you taking me for a coward?"

"I know better," said Ecthelion with a ghost of a smile on his face.

"Very well. Then hear me now: I part Orc-heads from their necks with great pleasure, but above all, I am a craftsman and I shan't chase battle and death if there is still an honourable way to evade it. Why not delay disaster while we can?"

"Wise words from a wise lord," said Lómion. "To seek contact with those of Hithlum while we still cannot exactly know what happened in Angamando would be madness. We must make further investigations with the aid of the Eagles."

"This takes precious time," Laurefindil sighed. "Our only true weapon against Moringotto. He is now unprepared, his vigilance evaded! What a great chance we have! We shan't have it ever again. If we seek contact with our kinsmen, we should seek it now, and without delay."

"What say you, Chief Advisor?" King Turukáno suddenly spoke up. All speech and murmur immediately ceased in the Hall and every face turned towards Lord Galdor who smoothed the foldings of his cloak and looked around before speaking up.

"Turmoil I see, Highness," he stated calmly. "The tale of Beren and Lúthien is unexemplary, and I believe there is much more truth and reality in it than it would seem by first hearing. Nevertheless, we must know what truly happened. Captain Laurefindil does not err when he says acting could prove successful, but acting is a weapon that could easily be used against our own selves. Haste means fear and uneasiness, and Moringotto knows that. To chase desperate risk would only feed our insecurity; and that would bring evil upon us faster than Vairë weaves. Wisdom and tarriance are not the same, yet sometimes related; and I would not risk letting any friends and loved ones of King Findaráto to the battlefield while the memory of their loss is still so deep and fresh in their fëar. There is nothing deadlier in this world than love turned to hatred by anguish and pain."

Anardil saw the glance that Galdor sent towards Lómion while he uttered the last sentence, and he wondered why did the Counsellor flinch; but his attention was quickly averted by King Turukáno, who spoke up anew.

"It seems so that the Council has decided to make further investigations about the events in Beleriand; to that I give my consent. In a month we shall reunite again and discuss the matter of aiding our kinsmen. Now, if none of you has any other comment on this matter, we shall move on."

Anardil felt his body moving on its own accord: he stood.

"Your Grace," he said, doubtlessly in a very un-Quenya-like phrasing, "I find that I have quite a few comments on this particular matter; and sadly, none of them are pleasant."

"We would be all delighted to hear what you would say, Lord Anardil," said King Turukáno.

Anardil looked around in the immense Hall, the pale and silent sea of faces, the gleaming, starry eyes that were fixed upon him. He almost burst out with laughing when he spotted the look Ecthelion and Laurefindil exchanged upon hearing him speak their tongue. Voronwë’s betrayed gaze, however, seemed to burn holes in his back.

He’s such a sensitive fellow – might even feel personally hurt at the revelation …

"Counsellor Lómion, you said that you needed more information," Anardil spoke up with an effort. "I could provide you with that."
The intensity of the attention he received suddenly seemed to increase.

“From a soft armchair, one might think about the murder of King Fin…rod as some nursery tale,” Anardil commenced, the sharp sonants of reverential Quenya breaking upon his tongue. “Yet I can tell you that the tales are true – he was lacerated by a werewolf, slowly, piece by piece. This I know; for I was there, no more than a few cells away, and I heard him scream.”

With that, he folded back the sleeves of his tunic, showing raw, purplish black shackle-marks on his wrists.

“I have been imprisoned for roughly a few months; yet that was enough for a lifetime. There were many thralls, both First-and Secondborn in that accursed fortress. Sauron liked to play his wicked games with us; and I can also confirm most stories about bats and werewolves. You are very welcome to laugh, lords; or you may say that I am exaggerating, or am still blinded by fear. That is not true. No one knows all productions of Sauron’s vigilant malice, hidden in Tol-in-Gaurhoth; yet his hand reaches far enough at all times to turn the life of the average traveller into a living hell.”

“You may think that one should seek trouble to fall in such an obvious trap, and to be imprisoned. That is no longer true, my King and my lords; not since the Battle of the Cruel Flames. All sense of authority, all kind of order we knew has disappeared entirely from Beleriand. All that remain are some assailed islands, the last ones that stand still. There is the Kingdom of Hithlum, that of Nargothrond, that of Doriath, that of Ondo-lindë; and there is Himlad in the East; and the Isle of Balar in the far South. That’s all. And you know what is in between? Died out, dried out plains; burned and sacked villages; vile troops of Orcs that grab you by the wrist, strip you from weapons, coin and even smallclothes, then chase you along the wastelands, as naked as you were born! One can no longer ride from Nargothrond to the Falas without having to fear for their life; the everyday traveller shuts his eyes, grinds his teeth, grabs a knife and moves on, hoping that his head will not be severed from his shoulders anytime soon, and his entrails rest at their rightful place. Beleriand has become a vile land, a dangerous land to live. Orcs are becoming more and more numerous: they are feasting on our wives and children, taking captives, shooting the horses down. And as for my humble self… at first it was Fëanáro who stole my ships, now it’s the thralls of Sauron; and by the looks of ‘em, I swear if Fëanáro came back from Mandos and demanded a few other ships, I’d rather give them all to him full-heartedly and even apologise for the delay!”

Anardil saw more than one hidden smirk aimed at him.

“If you ask me, King Turu-káno, my lords,” he said, finally getting more than half of the cruel sonants right, “‘tis now that you should seek contact with your kinsmen. Moringotto is probably still lying upside-down in his chair, trying to figure out what on Arda just happened. Perhaps not even the Seven Sons are in motion. You have a silent and eventless moment – now. You won’t be having it again anytime soon. And if you are fearing possible resistance, just remember that Orcs these days are used to lonely, helpless wanderers who would rather flee from them than get into a fight. These are not well-armed or disciplined troops, only witless rogues whose mouths starts to water at the first jingle of coin. I am no lord (even though you call me one) and I have little knowledge of politics and diplomacy and warfare and all those clever-sounding arts that make our lives so difficult; yet I feel that things cannot go on as they do now. Something has to happen; and if you do not seize the initiative, it might as well be the Enemy who takes it.”

“Seldom do we hear such deep wisdom draped in such raw and simple wording,” said Princess Idril suddenly. “I, for one, tend to agree with you, Lord Anardil.”

“We cannot rely immediately on someone not skilled in warfare, however wise their suggestion might be,” Counsellor Lómion said.
“He might be a slightly annoying fellow,” said Great Master Rog, “but Lord Anardil *does* know more about the current state of Beleriand than we do.”

“Was that a compliment, Master?” Anardil could not help but grin.

“I believe,” Ecthelion broke into the reproach before it could have been voiced, “that there is another person in the Hall who knows much about recent happenings. Lord Voronwë has been particularly silent for the last few hours; I believe it is time for him to rise and share his own opinion with us.”

There were numerous sounds of agreement; and Anardil’s heart sank in his chest as he half-saw, half-felt the swift, energetic motion of the Noldo rising behind him.

“I would rather like to voice a few question towards Lord Anardil himself,” he said with unhidden fury, “who told me he was one of King Olwë’s household, yet now he claims himself to be no lord.”

“Well,” said Anardil heartily, “I might have lied.”

“I might have already noticed that!”

“You are always so dramatic about everything, my friend,” Anardil sighed theatrically. “You see, I was not the only one who feared for their life that day, the day when you saved me. Of course I told you I was someone important; I wanted to get your attention before the others, to end my misery, to get somewhere safe so I could see my wounds tended and my soul eased a bit after months of cruel torment.”

“And learning Quenya?” Voronwë raised an eyebrow.

“I’ve spent some time in Tirion as a painter’s apprentice. I picked it up on the streets, that is all. Then my master got a small work in the palace; I was always carrying his things, and Prince – I mean, High King Finde-cáno once walked right up to me and said that he liked my hair.” Anardil rested a musing finger upon his chin. “I wonder if he remembers that. Surely, he doesn’t. Yet that was where I picked up ceremonial Quenya from: the King’s Palace.”

“And the story about the ships?!” Ecthelion and Laurefindil exclaimed in unison with Voronwë.

“That was true. Well, perhaps…with a slight exaggeration. I did have two ships the Feanoreans took, and I mourn them until this day. And my parents truly died; and I journeyed many lands and saw many things. I have never lied about who I was - only about where I come from. Because tell me truly, o fine Lords of Ondolindë: who would care about a painter’s apprentice who lost some sorry ships and loved ones in the raging conflicts of the past? Who would notice that it was all he had? Who would understand his only need, his sole desire, that of safety and home? Who would care to see such a small Elf safe?”

“From this moment on,” said King Turukáno of Ondolindë, “I do.”

“Then, Highness, you could ask yourself another question: are the people of this City by any means better, more important, more valuable than those poor souls you have left behind in Beleriand? Are they your kinsmen or not? For if you consider them as such, ‘tis your duty to aid them.”

Silence stretched in the Great Hall; so long that it made Anardil cringe. Then finally, when he was already utterly convinced that he messed everything up with some grievous insult he barely noticed, the King laughed. The sound of his mirth was soft, yet it rang free and clear between the
high walls.

“You have been complaining about your lowly state, my friend,” he said, “yet there is no lord who could remind a king about his duty; only a painter’s apprentice.”

Chapter End Notes

**Author’s Notes**

*The House of Wing was canonically led by Tuor, and possibly also founded by him. There is no information to be found of it preceding the events in The Fall of Gondolin.

But instead of reducing the Houses to eleven, I preferred to give the Eleventh House to Penlod as well – as you’ve probably noticed, I preferably stick to symbolic numbers, just like the 12 Houses, the 7 marble stairs or the 24-24 great windows. I just can't resist...

I gave Galdor, Egalmoth, Duiin, Rog and Laurefindil important positions that are not described in 'The Fall', 'The Silm' or Tolkien's other works. Echtelion's title, however, is full canon, and Lómion is also known to have participated in Turukáno's Council.

One thing I believe I haven’t cleared up yet: Laurefindil being Marshal practically means that everyone in the city who belongs to the army in any way responds to him. Each of these made-up titles is a huge responsibility, and has its own privileges and limits, you will see that in time.

All descriptions of Gondolin heraldry were written with the aid of Tolkien Gateway, and ‘The Fall of Gondolin’.

Anardil’s bad pronunciation is marked by commas, dashes and sometimes Italic. Telerin is canonically similar to Quenya: From the viewpoint of the speakers of Quenya (who considered their language the main direct descendant of Common Eldarin), they considered Telerin (a direct descendant of Common Telerin) a "dialect of Quenya". Telerin was therefore considered a closely related language still largely intelligible. [as in ‘The War of the Jewels’]

About Anardil: well… :) what can I say? I hope you’ll continue to like him with his “lowly” birth and insolence. If you’re upset and disturbed now, trying to grasp what on Earth his intentions could be and what the actual heck he’s doing in this story, that only means I did my job well… :D

And also… I can’t believe I’m saying this, but this chapter did not quite turn out as intended – which makes us tarry yet another instalment in Gondolin.
The King's Doom

Chapter Notes

A/N: Here goes the second instalment the Great Council of Gondolin. (That means we’re still stagnating on the third day of April / Víressê, year 467 of the First Age). This chapter is an important setup for later ones. Also, let me seize the occasion and thank you once again for all the praise and critique – basically, any sort of feedback. It means a great deal. And last but not the least: my amazing friend, nosmaeth made a trailer – yes, a trailer -, for ‘The Seven Gates’, which you can watch on YouTube. Here is the link: (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kX_rsxwHjsk).

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“This above all: to thine own self be true,
And it must follow, as the night the day,
Thou canst not then be false to any man.”

— William Shakespeare, Hamlet

“When in this lifetime,” Ecthelion hissed, “did that impossible brat learn our tongue?! No, wait… this is no more than a dream. The drunken sort. He could not have just said that.”

“These days,” Laurefindil answered him softly, “boundaries between visions and reality are not half as prominent as we could expect, my friend. Well - it’s either that, or we’re simply bound to face a set of very unlikely situations.”

Even as he spoke, Laurefindil had to admit himself that unlikely was a very soft word to describe the council’s happenings. At first, he’d heard the lay of Beren and Lúthien: their toils, their suffering, the way they unleashed Sauron’s wrath, topped with an all-too detailed account on Findaráto’s murder that made his blood boil. Then words of Tyelkormo’s treachery had come, accompanied by the low, gut-wrenching sensation of rage and regret in the pit of his stomach. Seeing calm, collected faces all around him, part of him suddenly wished he could smash some of the most toughly impassive heads into a wall of iron. How could they not care was entirely beyond his grasp.

And then, just as he thought he’d already heard everything that could be said, Lord Anardil – or, as his freshly acknowledged lack of titles required, simply Anardil - stood and spoke; and he voiced the same suppressed, hidden sorrow, anguish and disquiet that was lurking in Laurefindil’s heart.

His hands gripping senselessly the sides of his chair, the Captain’s knuckles turned white as he struggled to fight back the sudden hotness and mist that filled his eyes. Anardil’s grim declarations felt just as dark and ill-boding as his own recurring dreams; and for a second, the two levels of perception mingled in his mind. It happened thus that when Captain Laurefindil shot an alarmed, sidelong look at his closest friend, he could not understand that the sources of their turmoil were
not only different, but nearly unalliable.

“He speaks and understands Quenya,” Ecthelion seethed, “yet he made me thou and thee like some pompous fool!”

“I fear he may have done some even more outrageous things, Lord Warden,” Laurefindil murmured empathically. “Just look at our friend, Voronwë!”

Seeing the always stern, always quiet and impeccably courteous mariner practically shaking with rage, Laurefindil felt a pang of doubt. Could it be wrong to feel the same way as Anardil? Could he be misguided, or mistaken to agree with him?

He listened very intently while the Teler unveiled all the lies he had told them, and held his breath with the rest of the Great Hall when King Turukáno of Ondolindë was brusquely and inelegantly reminded of his duty as a ruler – then, as everyone else, he utterly still when he heard him laugh. He felt a soft impact pressing his feet as Ecthelion shifted his weight from one leg to the other as he sat; and Laurefindil knew he had to collect himself, lest he spring to his feet and protest.

“You have been complaining about your lowly state, my friend,” King Turukáno said, “yet there is no lord who could remind a king about his duty; only a painter’s apprentice.”

Silence stretched in the hall again; the air went dense with thoughts and suppressed words, and from the many eyes fixed on Anardil, few were friendly. Finally, it was Counsellor Lómion who stood and voiced the general discontentment.

“Highness,” he said, and for once, Laurefindil could see he was struggling to keep a mask of diplomatic quietude on his face. “I have been told that my counsel was worthy of your kingdom, and there was wisdom in it. For that alone I beg you to hear me now: it would be best to spare your good thoughts and attention from this Elf. His behaviour itself is the proof how fell and dangerous he is. You, Highness, have heard yourself, as have you all, my Lords,” here, Lómion raised his head to look around in the vast immensity of the Hall, “how little his own words of honour mean him. He broke all possible laws of our City to get in – he misguided our best informator, Lord Voronwë, and he almost succeeded to gain the trust of our Captain of Guards and the Lord Warden of the Gates by claiming a false identity. Tell me, o King, what fate does one merit who betrays us so? This is a Council of honourable lords, not – well, petty liars.”

That was an insult, and a grievous one.

Laurefindil drew a sharp breath, his legs getting ready to lift him, but Ecthelion was swifter.

“My King,” he said slowly, gravely, “I have never dreamed that one day, I’ll agree with Counsellor Lómion – and alas, the day has come! Yet everything that happened, happened out of my own folly: I should have never let this Elf enter our Gates and utilize our kindness.”

“Let him enter or have him killed: this was the choice you had to make, Lord Warden,” said Voronwë sternly. “The fault was mine. I should have discovered I was lied to – and for that, I owe my most humble apology for you, Highness, and for the whole Council. Yet what was done is now done, and there is no way to change the past. We need to examine the situation as it is now; and I accept any sort of punishment you seem fit as the laws and customs of our realm require.”

“Do the laws and customs of your realm also require to talk about people as if they were not present?” Anardil found his voice. There was a new, strange edge to his tone; one Laurefindil could not yet grasp. “Also, what on Arda was that about me being killed?!”
“You never told him about the regulations,” Chief Advisor Galdor said, and his unrelenting eyes paused on Voronwë’s face.

“I did not; not precisely,” said he, “and that was another grievous mistake. I told him that our kingdom was sealed; but I did not inform him about the strictest of rules, as I have never dreamed they would apply in his case. Also, I deemed it would give away too much information; ‘tis only now that I see my mistake.”

“Whyever would they not apply?” Counsellor Lómion crossed his arms. “The case of Húrin and Huor was an exception, and it happened against the Council’s wishes, because our King, in his wisdom, deemed otherwise. Keeping secrets is a delicate matter, Lord Voronwë; and I am afraid your friend shall not be as lucky as our mortal guests were.”

“He is no friend of mine,” said Voronwë calmly. “If you want to know, Lord Counsellor, I had planned to ask for the direct judgement of our King: the only one who has the right to decide in such a matter. Huor and Húrin, as you are aware, were flown into our City by the mighty Eagles; and so was now the pair of us. A liar this Elf might be, but he doesn’t know the way in.”

“And he shall never know the way out, if this Council holds any common sense,” Ecthelion suddenly said.

“Why is it that the one time in my life when I decide to be honourable, my attempts are thrown back into my face with the most colourful insults I have ever heard?!” Anardil exclaimed, and Laurefindil shifted in his chair, so surprised he was at the fervour in his voice. “Yes, o mighty Lords of Ondo-lindë, I have lied: pity enough that one has to lie to claim your attention! Yet it is not for myself that I speak –“

“And there you just lied again!” Hissed Counsellor Lómion. “You, traitor, care for nothing but saving your own skin. You have told us yourself: you wanted to end your misery – to have your saviour’s attention before the others. If you cared about the well-being of anyone else, you’d perhaps have let yourself carried away by the Call of Mandos when you noticed a drowning child a few feet away from you! Or an injured soldier, wearied by torture and pain! Yet you only had eyes for yourself! You seized a privilege that was not yours.”

“A privilege that should not even exist!” Anardil shouted back at him, but Lómion’s eyes were dark, furious and terrible, and they seemed to strip him to the core.

“You have no right to decide what should or should not be,” he said. “You broke our laws and deceived us: for that deed, you are named traitor, and a danger to our kingdom. The Council shall now decide of your fate. Do you have anything else to declare?”

“I have already declared too much,” Anardil said. His features remained stern, but his eyes betrayed confusion and fear. “If you name me traitor and chop my head off, my blood is on your hands – and then I will know that the brave Ñoldor are indeed no more than slayers of kin. Tell me, o wise Counsellor, are these diamond walls made of the wealth of those you have already executed because they told you the truth?”

“You are not helping yourself!” Voronwë exclaimed.

“Why should I? I have my no-friend-of-mine by my side to help me!” Anardil shot back at him, now openly raging. “You are going to have me executed because I have hurt your pride. Is that not enough for you, you still have to preach your non-existent wisdom?!”

“ENOUGH!”
Both Laurefindil and Ecthelion gave a start. Never in their waking lives have they—or anyone else, at that—seen Chief Advisor Galdor raising his voice even the slightest bit; yet now he sprang to his feet, anger sparkling in his grey eyes.

“Your words are poisonous,” he said. “I feel the work of the Enemy here; you have brought back a shard of evil with you from your journey. But that evil is no part of you, children, nor does it come from within. Let it go! You should never allow anger and fear to cloud your eyes, to make you say or swear things you cannot hold onto. Counsellor Lómion, that regards you as well. One thing is caution, and another thing is misgiving.”

More and more cautious glances wandered towards King Turukáno with every passing moment, but the King remained silent, and seemed deep in thought.

“Let the Council decide, then,” Counsellor Lómion said. “The charges are known to all. Are there any witnesses who wish to provide us any further information?”

Ten seconds passed in utter silence and stillness.

“If not…,” Lómion went on, but Voronwë stood.

“I have a right I would like to use,” he said, voice utterly flat and emotionless. “As you are aware, my Lords, I am member of the Small Council and my word, as I am told, matters to you; for these reasons alone I gather now my courage to beg for the mercy of my kinsman, Turukáno Ňolofinwion, King of the City of Ondolindë and Protector of this Realm.”

“What?!” Ecthelion whispered, a little bit too loudly.

“And now,” said Voronwë Aranwion, “if you may excuse me.”

He shoved an empty chair out of his way, and almost raced across the Hall with his long strides. Even at such speed, it took him half a minute to reach the main entrance which was shut behind him with a loud bang.

To his own surprise, Laurefindil could hardly suppress a grin. Sending an unobtrusive look around the Great Hall, he saw a sea of confused faces, of brows clouded by raging thoughts, of mouths trembling, pushed by the weight of unsaid words. As for Anardil, he turned slowly around, his bright green eyes fixed at first on Voronwë’s back, then the gigantesque ebony door, wrought with cunning jewels of every colour.

“One would think the Council is at loss, my friend,” Laurefindil murmured to Ecthelion. “A rare sight.”

“Precisely,” Ecthelion nodded. “I think we might have heard enough for today. ‘Tis really hard to perceive all at once—the bats and the werewolves, the stolen Silmaril, the betrayal of Tyelkormo and Curufinwë and Sauron’s machinations, and now this impossible, dangerous Elf... in all honesty, Fin, I don’t believe anything else could surprise me toda…. ERESTOR! WHAT IN MANWÊ´S HOLY NAME ARE YOU DOING IN THIS ROOM?!”

Laurefindil’s eyes widened at the exclamation, but Erestor was there indeed, sitting comfortably on a chair, merely a few seats away from the King. On his left, a scribe was making notes, his quill dancing delicately on the parchment; the seat on his right, however, was empty. When Laurefindil looked at the boy, Erestor eyed him back steadily, with a little quirk at the corner of his mouth that could be a shadow of a smile. Though he had the grace to blush at least, his voice was flat and entirely without regret when he said,
“I am executing a royal order, Lord Warden.”

Seeing the look of approval Counselor Lómion sent the youth at the answer, Laurefindil began to suspect that he was missing something. Curiously, though, Ecthelion seemed just as perplexed at the revelation as he did.

“And since when is my underage nephew qualified to carry out such an important task, if I may inquire?” he raised a thin eyebrow.

Laurefindil could sense mild anger behind the veil of words so soft, so polite. He had to remind himself that his friend’s pride was being hurt the third time that day, lest he say something - rebuking Ecthelion at such a moment might have led to unforeseeable consequences.

“Since never, most likely,” said young Erestor with dignity, “yet one would be insane to deny the King’s request when made, and deprive themselves of the honour to witness a Great Council.”

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“Any fault young Erestor might have committed today is mine, not his: he is indeed here at my request.”

When King Turukáno finally spoke, all other sound died out immediately in the Great Hall. Laurefindil could feel attention and apprehension vibrating in the very air they breathed. Lord Anardil was the only one who did not look at the King; his eyes were fixed on either his own boots or the curious shapes on the marble floor, one could not be sure.

Laurefindil was waiting for orders to carry out, explanations to come, new questions to be raised, yet all the King said was,

“Upon the request of Voronwë Aranwion, and upon my own will, I shall personally judge the case of our guest, Anardil; therefore, our Council is now dismissed. I thank you for coming here today and sharing your insight. The tale of Beren and Lúthien, as we have heard it, is to be known by every single soul within this realm, and praised freely by those who find joy in them, for they were remarkable. On the contrary, any action or plan of action that might take place as an answer to recent happenings, and which has been discussed here, should be kept in secret until the Council deems otherwise. Our next meeting shall take place after the celebrations of Tarnin Austa, on the first day of the new month. I expect the members of the Small Council in my study tomorrow morning, at first light; for now, all of you are dismissed save for our guest, Anardil. I have spoken.”

And Captain Laurefindil of the Golden Flower stood, following the flood of council members, undisturbed by all waves of wary looks and confused whispering. At the doorstep, he glanced back behind his shoulders, and saw the King stepping near the dazed, lonely figure of Anardil, still encircled by empty chairs, and placing a steady hand on his shoulder. The Teler gave a start, rays of light dancing around in his luxurious silver hair as he raised his chin to face King Turukáno.

Laurefindil shook his head, and forced himself to turn back and walk away.

_Councils are supposed to clear things up, he thought, not to complicate them._

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_The Tower of the Fountain, Dining Hall_

“This is insane,” Ecthelion slammed his fist on the table, so that the bits of salad gave a small jump in the plate before him. “Honestly, Fin, I just can’t believe what I saw and heard. It seems that evil has found its way to our City at last; this was the very thing that we have always feared,
and now that it’s happening, we are sitting idly, hoping that the storm shall pass us by. Moreover, I am *convinced* that the King knows something we do not. I sense it. He dismissed us so abruptly and quickly, as if he just got the confirmation of something, an answer to a secret question he’d been waiting for. And then there is Anardil – he is the most dangerous fellow we have ever seen, and King Turukáno does… *what exactly*? He laughs at his offensive jokes…? We have never seen him treating a criminal in such a way before. Like an honoured guest! And…”

“Let us leave it at that,” Laurefindil placed a knife across his empty plate, and looked at his friend with interest. “*A criminal*…? Tell me truly, and without any shame: why exactly do you think Anardil is *that* dangerous? Because he lied? Because he has hurt your pride? Because he’s been speaking his mind in a way we have never experienced before in this kingdom?”

“Mock my pride all the way you like,” Ecthelion said icily, “but that Elf is not an honest soul.”

“Not entirely, or perhaps not *yet*, that is for sure,” Laurefindil said. “But I sense something strange… or rather, thrilling about him. His tale still seems false, or at least not entirely true. Do you not remember the day we greeted him – when he spoke of Beleriand, and of how fell and dangerous Orcs have become in the wilderness? He *cared* about all those villages burned, all those women and children killed, all those lands laid waste… they have touched his soul. He would have perhaps cried for them if we were not there, but he pulled on the mask of the wearied traveller who is no longer touched by the cruelty of this world. And now, in the Council, he proved – or pretended – to be loud and selfish, a pure opportunist. I think that was a mask as well. You think he spoke the truth at last? If you ask me, he merely weaved the web of his lies even further. If I could only know why he is truly here…!”

“The truth, usually, is less complicated than this,” Ecthelion objected.

“Usually, yes. Yet I trust your good judgement, my friend. You would have never let an impure soul pass your beloved Gates.”

“You should not trust me this much, Fin.”

“Even if I would choose not to trust you, which I cannot, there is still Voronwë, and the way he treated this Elf. He is warier and more seasoned than the pair of us combined, and even *he* tended to genuinely trust Anardil! When the pair of them arrived at the Gates, they seemed almost friends.”

“Curiously enough,” Ecthelion sighed. “Everyone can make mistakes, Fin; and I admit that there is something exceptionally… *disarming* in this Elf. He seems perfectly direct and natural, yet you can never see his true colours. I wonder what King Turukáno shall do to him.”

“So do I, my friend,” Laurefindil mused, “so do I. It seems an even greater mystery than the case of young Erestor.”

“I find that I am somewhat proud of him, you know,” Ecthelion gave a small smile at the change of subject, “yet the two of us need to talk. It seems that he wishes to become a scholar.”

“Well, that is a good thing, is it not?”

“I am not so sure,” Ecthelion shifted in his seat. “I want this child to learn how to take care of himself. How to *defend* himself.”

“In some wars, one may find that a quill is sharper than any blade.”

“True enough; but first and foremost, I want to protect Erestor from Counsellor Lómion and his
likes, and becoming a scholar will not help him with that.”

Laurefindil drew a sharp breath, but hesitated a few heartbeats before speaking.

“Valar, I know I swore to evade this terrain,” he said warily, “but are you aware of the extent of your hostility towards Lómion? It is becoming palpable, and I am sure he’s starting to sense it as well. You have no… no public reason to treat him this way, Ecthelion. Be careful, if you do not want him to guess the reasons behind your grave looks.”

“There is nothing to guess,” Ecthelion said, articulating every word with accurate precision.

“I know what Itarillë meant to you, and…”

“You don’t,” his friend barked, “and I suggest we try and discuss this whole matter another time.”

Laurefindil looked up to meet Ecthelion’s eyes – they seemed somewhat tired and empty, only embers remaining of their bright silvery gleam –, then slowly, he nodded.

“Perhaps that would be best,” he said. “I should be on duty in any case. Thank you and your household for the lunch – it was excellent, as ever.”

He stood and shook out his cloak with an elegant flourish, then made his way to the door. Ecthelion grabbed the handle, though, before he could have reached it.

“There is no need to see me out,” stated Laurefindil calmly. “I know my way around your halls.”

“I would be surprised if you did not,” Ecthelion said, “yet… I am surprised that you would leave this abruptly. Was I crude to you?”

“Not particularly,” Laurefindil grinned. “And I am aware of all the rhetorics behind your soft rebukes… yet you were right. This is definitely not the best moment to dwell on such matters. I should not have brought it all up…”

“It doesn’t matter,” Ecthelion squeezed his shoulder, somewhat more strongly than was his custom. “You cannot leave this quickly, I wanted to talk to you. About your dreams.”

“Yes, Thel, and since you know me as well as you know yourself, you might have already guessed that this is the very thing I am now trying to avoid.”

Though a grave warning lingered behind it, Laurefindil’s voice was casual, even playful; and his friend clearly pretended he did not even notice it.

“Come on, Fin, you will not escape without any explanation! I don’t remember the last time you have overslept even a few minutes. You would have missed the whole Council if I had not knocked on your door!”

“Thankfully enough, you did,” Laurefindil said, as if that could settle the whole matter.

“Aye. But… you should tell me more about these dreams, Fin. They are starting to unsettle me. You are not yourself since you began seeing them. Sometimes you appear far more… distant… than you used to be. Your eyes wander beyond the world one can see. You’re thinking about your dreams too much, my friend… I think that they’re starting to rule your whole life.”

“No; not really,” Laurefindil sighed. “In truth, I have – well, I have helped myself a bit to sleep last eve, and I have never thought that the method would prove this effective. As for the dreams, I only
want them to go away. They’re an unsolvable puzzle. They are nothing more than parts of a great whole I shall never fully see or comprehend. My dreams are unintelligible, and they are driving out the worst of me. But I hope they shall soon pass.”

“Parts of a great whole…,” Ecthelion muttered. “That is interesting.”

“Why so?”

“Because admitting that your dreams are not forming a whole entity means that you think there are several parts missing from them. And if you assume that there are missing parts, that raises the question where said parts of your visions are. Perhaps they linger still in the back of your head, waiting to break out and overwhelm you… or perhaps others are seeing them, witnessing the same feeling of incompleteness as now you do. Both these options are equally interesting – and worrisome.”

“You suddenly seem to care much more about my dreams than I do,” Laurefindil forced a smile on his face. “I say, Thel, that I am merely too worried, and my imagination is running wild. Now, though, I need to go, for duty awaits. We shall meet again at the small council – and I would dearly like to spar with you afterwards if you’d agree.”

“It would both please and honour me,” said Ecthelion, and Laurefindil felt the warmth of fondness spreading in his chest at his friend’s lofty speech. When they clasped their arms in a warriors’ greeting, though, their words of farewell were collected and formal.

Far more formal than a good-bye of two lifelong friends should be, Laurefindil thought.

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King Turukáno’s study

The first things Anardil could discern were the colours: a rich palette of blue, white, and golden, from the cleanest, most pale tinges to the deepest shades. The King’s hand was still resting on his left shoulder, its touch no longer a grip but mere guidance through stairs and doorsteps still unknown to him. Anardil let himself being led, tearing the shreds of his own conscience apart, refusing to imagine what was about to happen; but more and more dreadful theories came to his mind with every step and every heartbeat.

The study of the King was bright and spacious, with a large ebony desk in the middle, several enormous windows of painted glass around the walls and a slender balcony door in the far end of the room. By the time they reached the desk, Anardil felt ready for almost anything to come; numb, senseless acceptance filled his entire being.

I am no coward, some proud, dignified (and previously unknown) dimension of his conscience insisted. I can accept my fate, whatever it is.

The first momentum of Anardil’s curious fate consisted of King Turukáno letting his shoulder go, gesturing towards the luxurious armchair that faced his desk, and asking,

“Red or white wine?”

“I… what?” Anardil blurted out most ungracefully. “I mean… excuse me, your Majesty?”

In Quenya, the title had a strange, alien ring to it; and the stern lines of the King’s face softened a
little as Anardil uttered it.

“I took the courage to inquire,” he said slowly, calmly, uttering every word with merciless, accurate precision, “about your preference in wine. Is it red or white, then?”

“Well… er… white,” Anardil stuttered, allowing himself a careful glance at the King. For the present, he did not look like a tyrant who wanted to execute him. Truth be told, he did not look like a tyrant at all, and a murderer even less.

Yet neither had Fëanáro.

By the time Anardil settled in the armchair and collected himself a little, King Turukáno slid over to some far corner of the room, came back with a bottle of wine and two goblets wrought with diamonds - Anardil roughly estimated their valour to be worth twice the wealth he’d earned in the past four centuries -, then sat down at the other side of the desk, filled the two goblets himself, and leaned back with ease, long, slim fingers curling around his own cup.

“Be most welcome in my halls, Anardil of the Falmari,” he said with a quizzical smile, and raised the glittering chalice. “May your stay, long or short, be pleasant here.”

He is trying to unsettle me, Anardil decided, refusing to acknowledge that he was already far too unsettled. Very well, then let us play on. If this is the very last day of my life, at least let it prove amusing!

“I thank you for your hospitality, Highness,” he said aloud, and raised his cup likewise, “for it is most remarkable.”

“I am glad to hear that.”

King Turukáno took a generous sip of wine, then placed his chalice on the table, and looked him straight in the eye. Anardil steeled every bit of his consciousness against the flood of questions long awaited – and doubtlessly rightful -, but they did not come.

“Do you know why you are here, Anardil of the Falmari?” the King asked instead.

“You are to judge me.”

“The Council was to judge you, mere minutes ago, and they seemed not very willing to vote in your favour. You angered them beyond measure… you’d better be more careful with that in the future. I believe Voronwë did not tell you much about the ways of law and decision-making in my kingdom.”

“He refused to speak about the place he was taking me at,” Anardil shrugged. “And I did not insist. It made lying easier, for if I ever asked anything, he asked me back. That was how it went between us: a question for a question, an answer for an answer. Few questions and half-answers, therefore.”

“I see,” said the King. “Let us play the same game of questions and answers, then! The only hardship I shall weigh on your shoulders is that if I catch you lying, I will kill you.”

Anardil, who had never heard a death threat voiced with such flawless elegance, such exuberant courtesy before, could not help but blurt out, his eyes wide and surprised,

“And what if I catch you lying?”

“I shall give you my crown and kneel before you, then; and the Seas will rise, the world will
change, and the Valar shall come and chase Moringotto out to the blackest Void; and we shall all
greet the new dawn with thunderous applause.”

At Anardil’s bewildered gaze, a soft, elegant laugh escaped King Turukáno’s lips, much like the
one he’d uttered in the council room, less than an hour before. His hand then wandered down,
under the edges of the table. Anardil gave a start when he heard a pang of sharpened steel, and
watched in awe as King Turukáno placed a pale, softly gleaming longsword on the table.

“This is Nambegotto,” he said, almost gently. “May he stay between us while we play our game.”

“May it be so,” said Anardil, letting a long-caught breath escape his lungs. “Forgive my insolence,
Highness, for being the one to ask the first question, but… why did you suddenly dismiss the
Council? And why did Voronwë ask you to judge me personally…? Do I have more chance for
your mercy this way?”

Or perhaps less?

“You asked me three questions at once,” said King Turukáno, “yet for the first and last time, I shall
answer all of them. Hear, I dismissed the Council because tempers were rising; and anger kills real
discussion, which is most undesirable. Voronwë asking for my personal consideration – and mercy
– in your case means that you shall be judged outside the frames of public discussion. Whether that
leaves you more or even less chance to rest unharmed, I cannot yet tell.”

“Very reassuring,” Anardil sighed. “And tell me, Highness, what did…,” he sighed, shook his
head, swallowed the rest of the question. “No, wait. Your turn.”

“He has buried his manners deep inside his heart; mayhaps deeper than the roots of our
mountains, mayhaps deeper than the very heart of the world, yet they are there: so I have told to
good Master Rog,” said the King, “and lo! I was not mistaken. Tell me truly, Master Anardil, do
you think that the charges thrown at you in the Council were unjust?”

“Yes and no,” said Anardil carefully. “Part of them was just, since I did lie about my identity in
order to reach a safe and secure place, and to gain attention. Sometimes, I feel ashamed of what I
have done, even if from my own point of view, it seemed necessary. But then… then there is the
other side. Counsellor Lómion has deeply insulted me when he called me a traitor and a danger to
this city. How could I endanger any of you? I could not even hurt a fly!”

“You might forgive me if I refuse to believe that,” said King Turukáno.

“That is either most flattering or terribly offensive to hear, Highness,” Anardil allowed himself a
smile. “I cannot yet decide. Now tell me, o King, about the rules and regulations of entering your
city.”

“Ondolindë has six gates, and neither of them is easy to enter,” came the calm, collected answer.
“They are well hidden, and heavily guarded. The easiest way inside is to fly, as you have done,
until you reached the Gate of Silver; in such a case, guests are handled personally by first Lord
Ecthelion, the Warden, then myself. You were not told the rules since you came here on the wings
of the Eagles; and never in your waking life shall you pass my Gates again.”

Anardil felt a very uncomfortable pang in the back of his head.

“Is that not too quick a judgement, Highness?” he objected, far less elegantly than he’d meant to.

“No judgement was spoken yet,” came the answer, “only the laws of my kingdom.”
“But you are King, so you can overwrite your own rules,” Anardil offered gleefully.

“That would be too quick a judgement indeed,” said King Turukáno smoothly, and took a sip of wine. “My kingdom is sealed, Anardil of the Falmari. Once you come in, there is no way back. But I assume your friend Voronwë told you that as well.”

“He did,” said Anardil, only partially aware of giving away information while, in truth, no questions have been asked, “yet he also spoke of a case of exception; and that was while I went along with my lie, and continued to pretend being a lord. Voronwë did not tell me why the exception in question did occur, so I was left to wonder. I did not want to miss my chance.”

“Tell me everything about your last days in custody, and your escape,” said King Turukáno.

*That is a story not worth telling,* Anardil wanted to say, but the gleam of Nambegotto, lying so peacefully and harmlessly across the table, was cold and sharp, and he could almost feel the bite of steel on his skin.

“I was certain that I would die,” he swallowed. “The King… King Findaráto… he was there. And Beren, that mortal was there, too. And their companions. I saw them between the bars of my cell sometimes, and heard them a lot more. The walls were very thin, for a prison. Every day a werewolf came and ate one of them. Finally, only Beren and the king remained. That was a bad day; the lash split across my back when the Orcs came to deliver my daily dose of curses and beatings. They blamed me for the loss of their favourite toy, of course, so they… well, that angered them. They stripped me. Not that I was well dressed before, but they stripped me completely… then they dragged me and another poor Elf along to that cell, bound me, and… they made me watch as the wolf – well, the wolf did what a wolf was supposed to do. I think they even starved that beast so it would attack King Findaráto more furiously. It was… it was horrible, I still retch when I think of it sometimes. They kept me close enough to get dripped in blood and flesh and… well, everything. Back in that cell, I was certain that I was about to die, but then… then *she* came, and freed us, and the walls crumbled… or perhaps I only dreamed that, and someone cut the ropes and dragged me on my feet.”

“The next thing I remember is running downhill, out of that accursed fortress, leading everyone and anyone who could walk, and who agreed to escape with me. We knew Sauron was going to hunt for us, and all we wished for was a square meal and safety. My companions fell around me… so many have died on that day… and then we reached the river, and I do not know what happened but I fell; I tried to swim but my strength failed me. I grabbed hold of a swimming loggat, and I must have fainted… Then the next thing I remember is a ship, and Voronwë on the decks. He seemed someone stern, someone of authority. So I cried for help. I knew there were people around me, perhaps others who begged for help. Orcs ambushed us, arrows were flying everywhere. I was afraid, I was terribly afraid… I did not want to lose my life just then and there! Then something possessed me, and I yelled that I was one of King Olwë’s household, one of wealth, one of importance; and strong arms grabbed me to pull me out of the water, and my eyes saw no more. When I woke, Voronwë was by my side, and he was tending to my wounds.” Anardil sighed. “Tell me, Highness, are you going to punish him for bringing me here?”

“I may not,” said King Turukáno. “Now tell me in return, for I am most curious: why did you reveal your lie in front of the whole Council?”

*Now that I look back at it, that is a very good question,* Anardil thought.

“It was starting to weigh hard on me,” he chose to say, “and most of you could guess from my manners that something was off… I mean, not entirely all right with me. Otherwise, my King, I really do not know – it merely felt the right thing to do. I clearly could not live with such a lie any
further, and I was hoping to get your attention by such a revelation… which I did, at the end, but perhaps not in the way I had intended to. I am not a chivalrous, nor a very respectable person, but I never wanted to do you harm. I am an enemy of the Dark Lord, much like you. I hate him and his creations, much like all other Elves do. I would be happy to see his downfall… much like whole Beleriand would.”

Their game of questions and answers was entirely forgotten as King Turukáno leaned over the table, the gleaming blade of his longsword painting curious reflections on his skin.

“Your lie still seems entirely unnecessary to me,” he said. “You would have been saved and treated with respect in any case. What happened in those prison cells that made you feel so unworthy of care and attention?”

“A… a great many things, Highness,” said Anardil, trying in vain to swallow the lump in his throat. Suddenly, his mouth went dry and he had to fight back a wave of unwanted, rather graphical memories. “I can’t… I can’t tell you right now, not yet, it’s just entirely too close. Yet this is the very essence of Sauron’s means of torture: he strips you of everything you ever were. He… he makes you feel like he’s doing you a favour even while torturing you, because you’re not even worthy of that kind of attention. He sees under your skin, through your flesh, he sees inside you… sees that you are nothing. And once he strips you of all protest and dignity, you become his puppet. I have seen that happening before. People start to do unnecessary things, like… like lying.”

Cold dread ran through Anardil’s veins as he uttered that, his eyes wide with confusion and shock.

“I did not mean to…,” he whispered. “I’ve never wanted… it’s just so hard… so hard to be normal again…”

“Being normal is entirely too hard,” said King Turukáno. “Sometimes bordering impossible.”

“I did not want to cause so much trouble,” Anardil whispered miserably. “I was just afraid, terribly afraid, more afraid than you could ever understand. While I was tormented there, I could bear it, I braced myself every day and went on, but now that it’s over, the sheer reality of it, the smallest possibility of it ever happening again… it unsettles me, it puts me out of my mind. I could not bear it, Highness, I could not live through it again. And the shadows of pain past shall never let me be! I’ve been having nightmares for years, and they only worsened in the prison, but I will never be free of them again.”

“Then, if I understand correctly, you had hoped you would finally get to a place where you can live peacefully, untouched by the perils of the world. Yet also freely, for you are a traveller, and the challenges of the unknown call you, speak to you from time to time. You’d hoped to get away, and start a new life, far from war and suffering, and you’d hoped as well to deliver a message of warning to those who live in safety still. Yet, in order to chase your dreams, you were obliged to lie; and that lie gnawed at you from the inside, until today, when you revealed it, still not quite ready to face the consequences. The memory of your capture and torture veils your eyes still, and you crawl in the darkness, chasing the smallest flicker of light.”

“As you say, Highness,” said Anardil, suddenly becoming aware that he was trembling. “Peace and safety was everything I wanted – is everything I want -, and I was ready to do anything for it. I will not deny it. I accept any sort of punishment you deem fit, only… please, have mercy on me, and do not put me into prison. Never to prison. I’d rather have my head chopped off for the whole city to see!”

King Turukáno remained silent for a time that seemed a whole Age to Anardil, and he was watching him intently, his razor-sharp gaze shining right through his bare bones. Later, the King’s
eyes wandered off towards the walls, the windows, the gemstones on his chalice.

Then suddenly, he leaned back in his chair again.

“*My judgement is made,*” said he, “*and soon it shall be heard throughout the City. Hear me thee,* Anardil of the Falmari! *Thou hast come to my kingdom, unwanted and unlooked-for, and deceived my people, even though thou meanest them no harm. Thou hast revealed thine lies in front of my Council, yet in honour of my kinsman, Voronwë I alone shall decide of thy fate.*”

“It is written in the Laws of Ondolindë that no living soul who passes the Oroquiltë and sees my Gates may ever leave again while this Kingdom stands, or until Moringotto is defeated. Therefore, freed thou shalt not be, and pass the Gates thou shalt not. Thy life I spare, thy freedom I give back, with the sole exception that thou must remain in this city. A home I give to thee, to dwell there freely as require the customs of thine people, Clothes I give to thee, to dress as befits a lord. Wealth for a year I give to thee to start thy new life and get accustomed to the ways of my people, and earn thy living as seems best to thee. May thou find the peace and safety that thou so desire, in the fair valley of Tumladen. May no dread or shadow haunt ye! May no enemy find ye! I, Turukáno Ñolofinwion, King of Ondolindë and Protector of the Hidden Realm have spoken, and thus my judgement is made.”

Silence fell on the room; Anardil could hear a bird singing faintly in the distance. Bright sunlight was filtering through the windows, painting tiny rainbows upon the desk between them.

“This…,” when Anardil finally found his voice, it was crooked, and tears were falling from his eyes. “*There is punishment in this, and you know it.*”

“Oh! Indeed.”

“How could I be ever worthy of your mercy, o King?” Anardil cried out desperate, shaken. “Me, a liar, a thrall – and a painter’s apprentice!”

“If there is any hardship in my doom, it lies within your own self,” said the King. *His king.* “I would not have granted you a remuneration for your future deeds if I would not see them coming, Anardil of Ondolindë. As an inhabitant of my city and my subject, you’d better at least respect my insight and consideration until you learn to trust it.”

“Yes, Highness,” said Anardil with such peace and acceptance he did not know he had in his heart.

“See,” King Turukáno stood, and gestured for him to follow, “you are learning.”

And Anardil complied. They stepped out together to a balcony around the lithe Tower of the King; looking down, Anardil could see the green valley of Tumladen opening up before him in the icy embrace of the Encircling Mountains, and the white-silvery gleam of the seven-storied City, buzzing with life.

“What a wondrous place,” he murmured. “Untouched by death and peril. My heart feels lighter since I am here, Highness. This City is like a beautiful flower – so vivid and vibrant. So unlike everything I’ve seen in the past perilous months.”

“Beautiful it is,” murmured King Turukáno, “yet against all odds, I fear for it. The mountains are high, and the peaks icy cold… yet all flowers shall wither.”

Anardil drew a sharp breath. Slowly, hesitantly, he raised his eyes to meet Turukáno’s.

He had heard those words before.
This chapter is very closely connected to the previous one (‘Bats and Werewolves’), being a direct continuation. I am truly sorry that you had to wait two months to read a direct continuation.

Shoutout to those who are interested in the nightmare-mystery: if I were you, I’d reread Tyelcano’s monologue about his dreams in ‘A Day in the March’, then I’d take a closer look at Ecthelion’s and Laurefindil’s conversation, then the very last passage of this chapter. (And the only reason I’m giving this clue away is this shameful two months’ wait. Good luck!).

Your Daily Dose of Quenya:

‘Oroquilta’ is Quenya for Encircling Mountains [my own creation]
‘Nambegotto’ is Quenya for ‘Glamdring’ [m. ‘foe-hammer’]. This version is suppressed to a name; the literal version should be something like “Namba ñgothova”.
‘Nambegotto’ is my own creation as well, roughly following the same rules as the name ‘Moringotto’.
The Crows Are Screaming

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Potius morti quam foedari”

XIII. The Crows Are Screaming

Reading Room in the Fortress of Himring, FA 467, first hours on the ninth day of Viressë

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Dream 2/467/82

I am wearing my formal robes, and am wounded. Three holes on hauberk: two on the right, one on the left, dangerously close to my heart. Looks like I’ve been shot, then pulled over a heavy inanimate object. It feels like hell. One boot is missing from my feet, and blood is dripping down my chin. ‘Tis probably coming from my nose, but that particular pain eludes me: all I feel is numbness. My head is pounding, I’m losing too much blood.

I call for a fellow soldier, several times. I don’t remember his name, but what I do recall is that my voice is raspy, my throat burns. I reach for my sword, but it is not there. I grab a knife in its stead, the length of which is unfamiliar. I do not remember owning a knife like that.

Crows fly around me, watching me with hungry eyes. I know they are waiting for me to die so they could have their feast. Their screams are maddening.

I hear steps coming, closing in. I am being tracked down, and followed. The enemy, whoever it is, wants me alive – elsewise, I would be dead already. I am swiftly losing blood, and panic stirs in me. I feel like a green boy on his first scouting mission.

My mind is in a blur, I see strange colours and things that could not possibly be there - such as a group of archers. Strange emblems are flowing through my vision: there is perhaps a tree among them, if Dream 2/476/46 can be trusted – yet it could just as well be a ladder, or a barred gate, or anything else.

Something gleaming is coming right at me. I can’t remember what it is. Could be a helmet just as much as the point of a lance, or a longsword ready to impale me from guts to skull. I cannot see anything anymore. I fall on the ground, and darkness swallows me.

Dream 2/476/83

I crawl on blood-steeped soil. Mist is all around me, and I see the shadows of great mountains in the distance. And I hear the Voice.

I am wounded. Three holes on hauberk: two on the right, one on the left. Very close to my heart. My head is pounding.
I am being followed, and all I can do is crawl.

(Crows).

“Why do I crawl,” I ask myself. “Why can’t I just die in peace? Why is it so important to go on?”

“All flowers shall wither.”

Dream 2/467/84

My hands are bound, and I am being carried through a narrow passageway. Blood is dripping from all possible places on my body. People are talking above me, but I can’t understand them, I cannot even discern the language. Its sonants and rhythm, though, are highly familiar.

And the Voice speaks.

“Hideous creatures lurk in the walls,” it says, “and he flees from them, draping himself into the canvas that is the night. But he who walks in starlight does not flinch; he hides in caves and near breaches and behind rocks, and on he wanders, and on he wanders, but a dead end awaits.”

“The gates are closed; and all flowers shall wither.”

NOTE: It doesn’t make sense. There is no passageway without a gate at its end. If I am carried through, that means I have already passed the gates. Given, of course, that we are talking about physical gates and not missed opportunities.

And since Dream 2/467/72, the Light is entirely missing from my dreams.

~ § ~ § ~ § ~

Counsellor Tyelcano picked up his quill and dripped it into red ink for once, instead of hollow black. For a few moments, only the turning of pages could be heard around him, sometimes interrupted by the soft scratch of feather over parchment. Countless words became bracketed, and countless others were underlined with neat, red lines. Later, several brackets duplicated and many lines were highlighted; and new pages were filled right afterwards.

Outside, the moon disappeared from the deep black skies by the time the Counsellor placed his quill on the table and leaned back in his armchair, contemplating his work. Of the thick, leather-bound book he used to keep record on his wandering dreams, only a handful of sheets were now empty; his most recent piece of work alone filled a dozen pages. The last time he’d given up such an amount of place in his precious book was when he had poured out all his nightmares, during the siege of Himring in the Dagor Bragollach. This particular writing, though, was not a dream’s description, rather an extensive analysis.

On the first eight pages, Tyelcano had described several scenarios of his recurring nightmare, all of which have been sewed together from previous shards of his dreams. Whenever he found that two parts came together as a whole, he wrote them down continuously. The three following pages were filled with two major scenarios in accordance with whom the dreams have evolved. Tyelcano named these ‘I. Light Comes’ and ‘II. Darkness Falls’.

The next pages were thickly filled with a list of variously combined examples and the rate of their appearance. At the beginning these were single elements, then they were extended to two linked words; by the end, however, they became whole sentences. The most frequent words were ‘enemy’ [84], ‘darkness’ [82], ‘fog’ [79], ‘Voice’ [77] and ‘wounded’ [72]. The combination of ‘fog’, ‘enemy’ and ‘wounded’ appeared almost everywhere, and wherever ‘Light’ was featured, one could
also find ‘Voice’, ‘enemy’ and ‘darkness’.

As time went by and pages were filled, Tyelcano saw – or thought he saw – more and more connections, more and more intertwined, mutually dependant items. His writing became more rapid and ardent and his keen eyes danced over the pages with unmatched speed. This, at last, was his own terrain: one complex chart of standalone, logic and easily sortable elements. For a few undisturbed minutes, the entire mystery of his visions seemed no more than a mathematical equation, one that could be solved.

Yet no matter how many complicated formulas he scribed on top of the pages, no matter how many times he calculated the probability of this or that element appearing in predictable sequences, no matter how many methods of scatter he used to approach any possible solution, the fortress of his dreams still stood impenetrable, proud and darkly mysterious against his rebelling consciousness.

After more than two hours of fruitless work, the Counsellor let go of his quill once more. Not even a trembling finger betrayed the irritated frustration beneath his mask of tranquillity when he stood. He remained motionless for a minute or two, unwilling to reach for the last existing tool that could help him.

This room is spacious, he thought. I would probably not even find that book. I’d need to ask Lord Nelyo if we still have it, and that is a shame I cannot allow to bring on my head.

“If you leave now,” he whispered softly, as if to convince himself, “you will never ask for it. And then you will never know. ‘Tis the fourth hour of the day, and no one is around. No one will ever find out what you were reading.”

I am an old Elf. A renowned counsellor and a lore-master. How could I rely on nursery tales and superstition?

At this thought, Tyelcano steeled himself and left the table, holding the thick dream diary tight against his chest. He was a lore-master indeed; and even more. He was the most trusted advisor, the most faithful servant of Nelyafinwë Fëanorion. The word pride did not, could not have any meaning to him.

My Lord needs me, sane and whole as I am. He needs my capacities to the fullest; I cannot allow myself any failure or distraction. These dreams occupy my thoughts and I dwell on them, wasting precious time I could spend on the matters of Himlad and our household. These dreams are inextricable; I must seize every opportunity to end this nonsense and focus on things of importance. And I cannot do that without obtaining this final confirmation for the hopelessness of my case.

Thus having steeled himself, Tyelcano disappeared in the far end of the library. With stern and unrelenting steps he walked, his notebook in one hand, his beloved lantern in the other. It was a perfect copy of the one he had kept on his desk while he’d dwelt in Formenos; a courtesy of Fëanáro for the occasion of his begetting day – either the three-hundred-and-ninetieth or the three-thousand-eight-hundred-and-third one, depending on how one chose to count.

Tyelcano preferred not to dwell on that; begetting days have long lost their meaning to him… and yet once again, after all these years, his eyes were lost in the mysterious gleam of his lamp. To the lay mind, it was no more than a fine blue crystal hanging in a delicate chain net; yet by either the remarkable skills of Curufinwë Fëanorion or by some sort of magic, the blue hue of the large gemstone shone from within its very centre, where a small flame was captured. Its light was clear and radiant, cutting into the deepest pits of night like fine steel. That bright shade of blue enticed, beguiled Tyelcano’s eyes; and at once, the dancing shadows on the walls seemed to spring to
The Counsellor saw the gleam of Fëanáro’s eyes and a cup of wine they raised in the silent depths of a smithy; then the long and ceremonious feast Aran Finwē had insisted to host on his who-knows-which begetting day; endless music and laughter and more cups of wine; Fëanáro standing with his arms crossed, terribly amused as his beloved tutor was made to drink, drink and drink to his own health; the unearthly gleam of Tirion’s towers, the sound of trumpets greeting both a new dawn and a new year in the life of the King’s most trusted advisor; endless council sessions; the fresh scent of parchment as he worded the Laws of the Ñoldor; Nelyafinwē, Kanafinwē then all the others being born; little Carnistir leaving fingerprints on a pile of freshly sealed reports and equally little Findekáno trying to cover them with white paint; tears, laughter and strife; Fëanáro and Ñolofinwē facing each other from the two separate ends of a sword; Nelyafinwē admitting in a hollow voice that he had not spoken to Findekáno since their House had departed from Tirion…

Telperion and Laurelin dying, pitch-black shadows descending on the Blessed Realm…

The ghastly pale face of Aran Finwē, blood dripping from his nose, eyes hollow and glassy, gazing to nothingness…

Fire rising from white, majestic swan-ships, the song of the flames singing in horrid harmony with the wails of the dying and wounded…

Fëanáro dissolving into a pile of ash…

Beaten, humiliated, tormented, mutilated Nelyafinwē lying on what could have been his deathbed, ribs poking out from beneath bruised, paper-thin skin; his breath coming in raspy, shallow sighs, never watching, never listening, never waking up, trapped in the agony of living death because he, Tyelcano, Counsellor of the King had abandoned him, he discarded him, he gave everything up, he washed his hands, he let it all happen…

Tyelcano stopped abruptly in front of the last shelf, grabbing the cold, merciless wood as if he was fearing that he would fall to pieces; then he took a deep, ragged breath and steeled his willpower.

Never dwell on the past. Your memory reaches too far.

With an effort, he turned his focus on the book-case before him. He reached for the rickety frame and clicked its door open, the blue hue of his lantern dancing around a good number of threadbare, sour-smelling volumes. Old as these books were, their value was nothing if not questionable; no one in the Himring read them, and the only reason Tyelcano had not already used them as kindling in his hearth was that he instinctively warranted books a certain amount of respect. Most of them were copies of already existing annals, outdated maps and inaccurate reports; yet there were also a few chunks of bawdy poetry hidden behind them, as well as several collections of sickeningly sweet love stories and other questionable volumes – like the one he now sought.

The book was lying precisely where it had been left the last time Tyelcano came across its pages. It was no more than a storm-beaten, smelly pile of parchment by now, held within its leather-bound covers by no more than the will of the Valar; or so it seemed. Now that he came so far, Tyelcano had no choice but to suppress his elemental mistrust and take it, heading back to the inviting pair of his desk and armchair. Once behind the desk, he placed the remains of the book gently on the table, next to his own diary; then folded back the cover and sent a challenging glance towards the front page.

The Nature o’ Visions, it read in the most archaic Sindarin he had ever seen, and How to Unriddle Them. Penned by Teithion, son of Gwaenor in the Seventy-fifth Year of the Great Shadow.
Tyelcano did not even have the slightest idea what could the Moriquendi call the Years of the Great Shadow, but he did know that the book was older than most of the scouts in his lord’s army. If he were to guess, though, he would have said that the book had been brought as a gift to the Feast of Reuniting, and everyone forgot about it. There wasn’t any wonder why: the Ñoldor were lords of renown, lore-masters, craftsmen and seekers of the truth - and by no means did they believe that the haze of nightmares held any special meaning that could be identified, other than a demonstration of the underlying sorrows that plagued the dreamer. The only such mysterious power Tyelcano knew of was foresight; and while he, personally, was not gifted with it, he knew well enough how the ability worked, and that it had little to do with actual dreams.

Yet there he was, at the mercy of Woodelven lore, running through pages and pages and pages of hazy dream-meanings. Apparently, picking flowers meant that the dreamer was about to wed a fair maiden very soon; and looking at growing moss meant slow progress on an important matter. Tyelcano shook his head and sighed amusedly. Was he truly fool enough to hope that a book of eloquently worded nonsense could ever help him?

Yet it was within his nature to try – and the results left him in deep disturbance.

~ § ~

“Crow,” Counsellor Tyelcano read softly to himself, secretly hoping that by naming the monster, he could gain the strength to defeat it. “Always a symbol of failure and death. The scream of crows means the loss of a loved one, or upcoming grave news.”

They would not stay silent.

“If the crow flies close to you, that is a sign of approaching death or deadly danger.”

They were about to feast on me.

“They were about to feast on me.

“Then there is mist. An obscured landscape foretells tribulations and likely failures in the future. And mountains: they mean tasks and missions. Snowy peaks in the distance mean that I aim too high, and they also signify upcoming misunderstandings with a superior.”

Why does that frighten me just as much as death?

“To descend from a rocky mountain means small success – well, at least, that much is granted. Then there is blood… bleeding foretells a long and grave illness… Blood flowing from a wound is an announcement of sorrows and afflictions; also, an unhappy love affair or a dispute with a valued friend.”

Good to know that I am now to be involved in love affairs, albeit unhappy ones. One learns ‘till death, and then some.

“Blood-soaked clothes refer to the enemies that want to destroy the dreamer’s career; they should be wary of new friendships,” Tyelcano read further, and though he forced out a chuckle through his teeth, he felt a very uncomfortable pang in the pit of his stomach.

“Being chased in a dream means fear of confrontation in a certain matter. If one manages to control their visions, if one turns around and confronts their pursuer, then they shall face the one they are afraid of, and the torment of dreams may end. The distance between dreamer and pursuer is telling; if the pursuer is at the dreamer’s heels, the source of frustration is not going to go away by itself, and needs tending.”

If I could control these dreams, they would be filled with sunny green fields, horses running in the
sunrise and the lights of Tirion.

“And there is the gate. Standing in front of a gate means upcoming debates, or the necessity of taking position in council; it can as well signify the start of a new period in the dreamer’s life.”

Well, this new period looks slightly stormy.

Counsellor Tyelcano closed his eyes for a few moments, as if battling himself; then he took his quill, and began to note each one of the meanings precisely, including page numbers, references and footnotes.

By that time, soft light filtered into the room from behind the heavy curtains; and when he took a break from his work to open a window, a hint of morning breeze and the song of a wayward thrush brought him a promise of spring - and the song of a lyre.

To Tyelcano’s great delight, the sound was approaching. Careful not to disturb the musician, he left the window-sill and settled back behind his desk, slightly turning his armchair towards the incoming fresh air.

His new position proved excellent to observe as Tyelkormo, son of Fëanáro slid through the open window in a most theatrical manner, swinging the ominous lyre before him as if it was a wounded animal in need of caring. He had been nowhere to be found in the past three days; and the memory of their last meeting suddenly crushed down between him and the Counsellor as a wall of iron.

“Good morn to you, lordship,” Tyelcano said frigidly. “I am most glad to see that your instinctive good manners are returning.”

“Good morn, Counsellor,” said Celegorm, visibly not sure if he was allowed closer. “You must excuse me. My thoughts are… wandering lately.”

“You should not let them loose,” Tyelcano nodded, a bit more measuredly than he had intended. He was furious with both Tyelkormo and Curufinwë; yet now, that one of the pair appeared this unexpectedly, it would have been graceless to show that. And Counsellor Tyelcano was proud to be an exceedingly polite Elf.

“May I ask, why the instrument…?” He swiftly asked, instead of letting lose the thunderstorm of chiding that lingered on the tip of his tongue. Lord Tyelkormo was no longer a child, after all. None of the Seven Sons were.

(They were far worse now).

“By no means shall I ever rival good old Makalaurë,” Celegorm said with a thin smile, “yet letting my thoughts loose was my very intention. I hope you shall hear them someday, once they are arranged into a song.”

“As do I,” said Tyelcano.

He does look healthier than mere days before. Maybe those thoughts – or getting rid of them - shall bring him solace, whatever that might mean to him.

Celegorm was still holding the lyre, shifting his weight from one leg to the other in discomfort. The last time Tyelcano saw him doing this, the lord did not reach higher than his elbow.

“What is it that you are writing, Counsellor?” Celegorm suddenly asked, and he tried in vain to discern the question behind question.
“This…,” he shut *The Nature o’ Visions* with a swift, fluid motion, and clicked the lid of the inkwell, “is a short report in an important matter, one that I should present to Lord Nelyo this eve.”

“I see,” Celegorm nodded, and pulled a chair to the other side of Tyelcano’s desk so they would face each other. “Listen, Counsellor. I know that you are furious with me… with us… and you are right. I can’t believe we were fool enough to believe we could deceive you…” His face was clean and fair, his large grey eyes so bright that one could drown in them. “…and to tell the truth: I want to have a word with you ever since the day we met in the Marshes. A private word. It would have been best to speak before our… well, our trial, but I dare hope that it’s not entirely too late. We still have about three hours before Curvo departs.”

“Departs?” Tyelcano grabbed hold of the desk, lest he’d swing right backwards. “Are you trying to tell me that your lord brother would rather choose exile than absolution?”

“We are already in exile, Counsellor,” Celegorm grinned sardonically. “And I assure you, Curvo would rather fight a dragon with his fists alone than ever renounce the title of lord.”

“Lord Nelyo did not tell me,” Tyelcano whispered. “Not even a word… not even the slightest mention of it…”

“I think he likes to pretend it’s not about to happen, yet Curufinwë shall leave if we won’t do something! And I assure you, Counsellor, I would deeply grieve such an outcome. Which is why I am now asking for your help… well, in fact, I only want to ask you a question.”

“If your father heard you speak in such mazy words, he would knock your head with an anvil!” Tyelcano snapped, tugging *The Nature o’ Visions* in the foldings on his cloak, since Celegom’s gaze had wandered dangerously close to the matted cover lately. “Say what you will, lordship, and say it swiftly, if time is indeed as short as you claim!”

“Clearly speaking,” said Celegorm in an irritatingly precise tone – *one that veiled the deepest of sorrows*, Tyelcano realized -, “I should ask: does assaulting someone is a crime if they picked up their sword first?”

“In that case,” said Tyelcano slowly, “the act counts as self-defence, and not an assault. Never as an assault.”

“My thoughts exactly,” Celegorm crossed his arms tight against his chest. “Well, let’s say there are two allied… people. One of them is attacked and brought to the ground, and seeing this, their companion becomes enraged, and attacks as well…”

“That is camaraderie,” Tyelcano raised his brows.

“And if it’s one’s brother who falls on the ground, and is threatened with death - which, in this particular case, would be Curvo…”

*The Nature o’ Visions* fell from Tyelcano’s lap, its rootlet hit the ground with a loud *knock*, and the book opened up right at “*crow*”, “*crown*” and “*cruelty*” - but the Counsellor could not care less.

“For the Stars of Varda, child,” he exclaimed, forgetting himself, “what happened?!”

“A few weeks after we left Nargothrond,” said Celegorm, his voice suddenly low, “wind rose in the East. We were riding north; in fact, we were heading here after what befell us. We felt wronged, betrayed, humiliated; and we hoped that our kinsmen here would greet us kindly. Therefore, we raced along the wastelands, fast as our horses could get; and it happened thus that we came upon the daughter of Melian and that mortal Man anew. I shan’t say their names; for I
have cursed them under cloud and skies as a farewell, cursed them to the last days of Arda. I have
not felt such hatred since Atar died."

"Yet we met them nevertheless; and thought we would try for the last time to escort the maiden
back to the woodlands of Doriath, to his father where he belonged – and I do not care what is
whispered behind my back, *you know me*, Counsellor; and *I give you my word* that that time, such
was indeed my only intention - though I must admit there was a certain thirst for vengeance in it.
Thus my brother sprang forward when we saw them, his lance across his chest. Hunters use that
trick as a means of defence; and yet the Man sprang forward and kicked him from the saddle. As I
rode upon them, all I saw was my brother, my flesh and blood lying in the dust, being strangled,
upon the very brink of death. The most burning, the most maddeningly furious dismay had
possessed me then, and I came upon that Man, wounded him… and I wanted to kill him,
Counsellor, I wanted to kill him more than everything… for he took *everything* from me! I could
have torn him, shredded him to pieces. Yet I did not; for the witch turned my Huan, my faithful
Huan, my terrible Huan against me, his own master; and I had to lie down, soundless, motionless,
while the rotten paws of that monstrous Man were still around my brother’s neck!"

Celegorm paused in his tale, and Tyelcano supposed he should say something, but all sound stuck
in his throat.

"Is that why I haven’t seen Lord Curvo without a collar since you came here?" He finally managed
in an unnaturally calm voice.

"Quite so. Back in the Marshes, dirt hid the marks well enough; yet now beneath the cloth, his
colours put the birds of Valinórë to shame. And months have passed!"

Tyelcano shook his head. "But what happened *afterwards*?"

"The witch decided that she’d grant us mercy,” Celegorm shrugged. “And the hideous pair went
on their way; but they stripped us of our weapons first. They took my brother’s knife, my sword
and lance, a scimitar we’d found on the road… thankfully, the witch was gracious enough to let me
guard my bow and a few arrows so we’d not starve on the road - yet in the end, we did,
nevertheless. If they wanted to humiliate us, this was a spectacular way to do it. The mortal did not
murder my brother, and for that much, I am thankful; yet it angers me that he only let him live out
of scornful amusement. The world now treats us as criminals and murderers – yet I tell you,
Counsellor, the Witch and her Thrall are no better. And ‘tis us who are labelled kidnappers and
rogues."

"Well, you are no paragons of innocence, either,” Tyelcano gave Celegorm a long, wary look. “I
have not forgotten what happened the last time Lord Nelyo decided to trust your
straightforwardness."

"Once again you are right, Counsellor; we have lied, and we have wronged you. We made a
terrible mistake. Yet you know just as well as I that we are no evil!"

"How do I know that you are not lying *right now*?” Tyelcano crossed his arms. “That you’re not
trying to bend the facts your own way? I was not there, and nor was any other who has or who is
about to judge you. All one can rely on are your own words of honour – if you still know what
honour means."

"If you want to hate someone, hate *me,*” said Celegorm, and the fervour in his voice was so great it
made the Counsellor’s heart jump into his throat. “*I did* kidnap the witch. She wormed her way
into my head, beguiled my thoughts. And afterwards, I wanted to… I tried to kill her, Counsellor.
My blood was boiling, I was furious, I was *afraid,* I have never felt such elemental hatred in my
Fury, distrust and bad blood were all forgotten as their eyes met, and all of a sudden, Tyelcano discerned the one incurable illness the other was suffering from – one he’s never been plagued by, yet one he saw many times of his life already. And from that moment on, he understood; and he felt in his entire being that this understanding would become an unspoken secret they shared, from that moment to the last they would share on Arda marred.

And yet he said nothing: for words were given meaning and shape, and were acknowledged when they were spoken - and some things are best left unacknowledged.

“What can I do for you, cundunya?” he said instead, his voice uncharacteristically gentle, his heart suddenly filled with a strange mingle of scorn, fondness and pity.

“Make Curvo stay,” Celegorm simply said.

Indeed. Because I am not already determined to follow good reason. You have yet to get on your knees and beg me.

“And why would I want him here?” Tyelcano said aloud. “All he brought to this castle so far was strife and scandal. Other than the hot water tubes, of course – for that much, the household is forever thankful.”

The Counsellor felt a sudden urge to laugh as Celegorm opened his mouth to voice his disaccord, then closed it; then reopened it, only to close it again in shock.

“You – you were jesting, right?” he finally managed. “You… Counsellor, you are able to jest?”

“Who knows?” Counsellor Tyelcano said smoothly as he stood and slid his precious notebook into his pocket, along with The Nature o’ Visions. “Now, lordship - you might have the whole day to dance around and write mediocre poetry, but some people have work to do in this castle. A pleasure to have seen ye!”

And with grace, he walked out of the room.

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Lord Curufinwē Fēnárion was housed in one of the most airy and comfortable suits in the castle, and Tyelcano shook his head in displeasure when he saw that most of the windows had not been opened in a whole week, or even more. Dust was starting to gather near their hinges, and many of the shutters were closed.

All of the lord’s earthly possessions – two half-packed bundles – were gathered on the bed, thrown carelessly across freshly changed sheets and covers, and Curufin himself was nowhere to be seen; so Tyelcano settled down to the edge of the bed, and waited. His eyelids were already starting to get heavier when he heard the pounding of approaching steps and the soft creak of the opening door.

If Tyelcano thought that Curufin was about to show shame or even the slightest glint of remorse, he was deeply mistaken. The lord’s face was fair and smooth as ever; and as their gazes met, a sparkle of sardonic mischief kindled in his eyes, then went out immediately.

“Good morn, Counsellor,” came the most casual greeting Tyelcano had ever heard in his long life. “How fare ye?”
Pleading will not help me here, the Counsellor decided. And nor will anything else.

Still he said, with a winsome smile,

“How fare I? Very thoughtful of you to ask. Now that you’re on your way, lordship - remarkably well, thank you.”

“And still you’re sitting here like a faithful old dog,” Curufin shot back at him.

“Old dogs give the worst bites. Careful you be, or they might fester.”

Their words lingered long in the dusty air, and Tyelcano felt an ember of determination spark in the depths of his heart.

I will not let this happen. I am Heru Tÿelkáno of Kuiviénen, older than the Sun and the Moon, older than the dwellings and kingdoms of the Kwendi. If there is a way, any way to save this child, I shall find it and see it through.

“It is against your nature to feast upon the sorrow of others, Counsellor. Why are you here? What may I do for you?” Curufin crossed his arms. Standing still, he towered above Tyelcano like a watchtower.

Tyelcano held those terrible keen eyes with his own, his whole being hardened to steel.

“You can promise me that you shall die quickly out in the wilderness,” he said calmly, though he felt as though he could cry. “And without any theatrical scene for your brothers to suffer through.”

Silence.

Curufin opened his mouth, then closed it, then opened it again - much like his brother, mere minutes before. Yet this time, Tyelcano did not even feel the slightest stir of humour in his heart.

“Counsellor,” Curufin finally said, “I… I am wounded.”

The knife was in his chest, and it took all Tyelcano’s willpower to twist it.

“Oh,” he rolled his eyes, “Save me the sea of your self-pity lest I drown in it, and do us all a favour for one time in your life, lordship. Your things are packed and I don’t see anyone begging you on their knees to unpack them. Go!”

“Counsellor!” Curufin’s eyes were wide, his face suddenly pale.

“Do not try to tell me you don’t know exactly what you are doing, you cruel, cruel Elf,” said Tyelcano, as disparagingly as he could. “Begone, and swiftly! I do not wish to see you – ever again.”

His heart was crying as he beheld the ghastly pale, mask-like face of Curufin. The lie kept floating in the empty air between them, and silence made it grow; then the understanding of it finally settled in Curufin’s eyes. The lord’s fist clenched, and a single wave of tremble rushed along his body; then he let the air out of his lungs with a stormy sigh.

“You are standing in the doorway, Counsellor,” he said.

“That is because I am not done with you just yet. You have to promise me another thing.”

“I cannot even promise dying quickly enough for you,” came the answer. “I shan’t chain myself
with another engagement."

“Do you really not understand, little prince?!” Tyelcano seethed. “Can you even imagine what shall happen when He catches you alive? For ‘tis not an ‘if’, ‘tis a ‘when’. As soon as Moringotto shall have word of what happened between you and your brothers, he shall hunt you down and drag you to his dark dwellings so you may never see the Sun again. And your brothers will not come after you, Curufinwë; for if they do, that shall be the death of us all. I cannot let that happen.”

Tyelcano’s eyes were suddenly filled with a strange kind of hot mist, one he would not acknowledge as the gathering of tears.

“Do you not see how cruelly you misuse your brothers’ trust? Do you not see how deeply you shall wound Lord Nelyo by being caught and put through the same torment he had suffered? Do you not see how Moringotto has you now, how he controls you, how he puts strifes between you and your loved ones, how he makes you deceive and betray others? He has won, Curufinwë: you and your deeds are the living proofs of his victory.”

“I cannot, will not bend your will, young lord, and no one else will. You have chosen loneliness and exile rather than family and a small victory over the Enemy, and that is your row to hoe. Yet I tell you now, the only place he shall never find you are the Halls of Mandos. You have let on evil happen, Curufinwë, and your brothers are divided. Stop right here, and don’t let that poison kill you all.”

“You gave up on me,” Curufin whispered.

“Was that not what you wished for?”

“You gave up on me!”

The hot mist cascaded into tears, and ran down Tyelcano’s cheeks.

“I have no choice, lordship. With or without you, I must carry on. I must lead the household and aid your family. I must stand up against the Enemy as long as I am able. I need to stay sane and whole, and attend to my tasks. As do your brothers… and as do you, Curufinwë. But I cannot, and will not force you.”

“What would you have me do?” Curufin snapped. “I am declared a traitor and a murderer, exiled from Nargothrond, exiled from Doriath, exiled from fair Valinórë across the Sea… maybe not even Námo would let me dwell in his Halls! My own kin turned against me. My own children forsook me… and you, Counsellor, you made me sit on your knees when I was little, yet even you have turned your back on me! I see no way back – a dead end awaits! The gates are closed!”

Tyelcano’s eyes widened.

“Will you open them?” he said slowly, unaware of his own speech. “Or will you let the world wither?”

Curufin’s face and voice were both calm as he asked anew,

“What would you have me do? Crawl on my knees? Beg for mercy with fake tears? I have no tears left to cry, Counsellor.”

“I want you to stop running, Atarinke,” said Tyelcano measuredly. “Wherever you go, you shall never be free of yourself. If you want to help us, swallow your pride, stay, and work for the well-being of our people, as we all do. If you won’t… then no-one can hold you back.”
“The well-being of our people!” Curufin’s laugh was devoid of amusement. “Was that what Father said to you at Losgar? No, Counsellor: we have sworn our Oath, and we did not swear lightly. Our words of honour bind us, burn us, kill us all. And we need to fulfil our promise, to see it through. For me, nothing else matters.”

“That cannot be true. You are a noble lord from a house of Kings. All you need to do is start acting like one.”

“And renouncing that title of lordship right away?” Curufin’s eyes narrowed. “I believe you can’t understand… that is all I have left.”

“For now!” Tyelcano sighed in exasperation. “Would you not try and get your family, your friends and your honour back instead? Would you not find work for your hands in this castle, instead of getting caught and brought to Angamando as Moringotto’s plaything?”

“I don’t want to be patronized and humiliated,” Curufin hissed. Tyelcano felt a maddening flash of anger in the back of his head, but before he could grab the other Elf by the shoulders and shake him as he suddenly wished to, Curufin’s fist clenched, and he added slowly, sadly, “And I could not face Nelyo and Makalaurë again after… after what happened in that room.”

“That choice is yours to make,” said Tyelcano. Despite all efforts he could make, his voice trembled a little. “Yet it is very painful to watch you turn and fall into a pit while standing at the very beginning of a new path. I wish I’d taught you better, lordship.”

“You taught me well,” Curufin said, hesitating. “Yet… I do not think I have the strength, nor the will to start a fruitless battle for my honour and credibility. My brothers shall never trust me again. You shall never trust me again.”

“It is said that the blades of trust are hard to forge and easy to blunt,” Tyelcano said, “yet once they are sharpened anew, they slice the very stones from the earth. And you, lordship, are a forgeron.”

There was nothing else he could say or do. Slowly, he extended his hand…

And the long, slim fingers of Curufinwë Fëanárion slid between his own.

Chapter End Notes

Author’s Notes

Excerpts from The Lay of Leithian, Canto X.:

„But as they came the horses swerved  
with nostrils wide and proud necks curved; 
Curufin, stooping, to saddlebow 
with mighty arm did Luthien throw, 
and laughed.”

“[…]and with a roar 
leaped on Curufin; round his neck 
his arms entwined, and all to wreck 
both horse and rider fell to ground; 
and there they fought without a sound.”
„[…]the Gnome felt Beren's fingers grim
close on his throat and strangle him,
and out his eyes did start, and tongue
gasping from his mouth there hung.
Up rode Celegorm with his spear,
and bitter death was Beren near.”
For your information: Celegorm believes he is entirely honest here – because from his
own point of view, he is. (Yet he is not).

What I did here is a shameless re-interpretation of events. As stated several times in
my Author’s Notes, this story tries to find a balance between mythological lays and
modern novelisation – which means that while certain magical, unexplainable
elements do exist, many events described in 'The Silmarillion’ are handled as – well, legends.
In the Lay of Leithian, Celegorm and Curufin are villains. In my stories, they are not
(or not entirely); and Celegorm did not know that Curufin had intended to kill Lúthien.
In the text, it looks pretty much like he wanted nothing more at that point than to save
his brother’s life. So in this case – shame on me – I’ll interpret the passage that says
„They saw the wanderers. With a shout / straight on them swung their hurrying rout /
as if neath maddened hooves to rend / the lovers and their love to end” as the malice of
the scribe who had worded the tale ;) which of course still doesn’t mean that the
brothers are innocent.

Tyelcano was born in Cuiviénen in YT4600 (the year when Melkor was chained and
brought to Valinor, to be sentenced into the Halls of Mandos for the following three
Ages to come. This means that his age can be determined in both Tree and Sun-years, thus
the difference between calculations. (One Tree-year equals around 9,75 Sun-
years). This means that at the beginning of this story, our Counsellor is 4367 sun-years
old – only slightly younger than Elrond was when Olórin came to Middle-Earth in the
disguise of Gandalf (just to see the proportions).

The motto of this chapter means “Better to be dead than disgraced”[as my own
translation from classical Latin. If you google it, you shall find “death before
dishonour”].

The dream-meanings were found either all around the Internet, or – in some cases – in
an old Hungarian dream-book I found in my childhood home’s basement.
The Falls of Sirion, FA 467, the last day of Viressë

Erenis was sitting on the fresh-smelling ground, her hands folded in her lap, lest she’d resume her nervous fidgeting. She could feel Tyelperinquar’s steps in her bones as he paced across the small clearing around their camp: back and forth, back and forth, back and forth. She could also hear the merry tune Gwindor was plucking on his bowstring, tautening and loosening it in different angles. Her friend did not wander far among the trees and the sound was no more than a dwindling echo: still, she found it maddening.

The Falls were roaring like thunder in the distance, and Erenis felt a sudden pang of curiosity. She had never seen the mighty Sirion before as its waters fell beneath the earth, only to spring forth from their stony grave under the hills a whole nine leagues further. Such a sight would be breathtaking, she knew – and definitely worth the time while she and her companions were forced to wait.

*He wrote he would come*, Erenis repeated to herself: a promise she was adamant on believing. *And he will. And once he came, he shan’t leave without having spoken to me.*

That thought was enough to help her stand and weave her hair into a lazy braid. She felt a sudden urge to whistle as she adjusted her boots, yet she knew she had to remain subtle and silent. And - most of all -, princesses did not whistle.

(Then again, she was no longer a princess).

“Where do you think you’re going?”
Tyelpe’s voice was sharp as a razor-blade, hard as the bits of steel his hands bended to his will through countless hours of hard labour each day. Even now that they were outside the smithy, above the earth, and well away from the eternal battle of hammers and anvils, his body moved like a tool, or a set of cogwheels…

_A machine oiled to perfection_, Erenis concluded. It made her sad; she could remember times when her brother was less of steel and more of warm, melted gold.

“It is my begetting day,” she said, hands on her hips, “so you have the obligation of politeness to please me, or at least to leave me alone if you can’t do that. I go wherever I like, and I do not see how anyone may deny me that. Already you’re insulting me by making that natural right sound like a privilege,” she concluded with a playful grin.

“As things are now, what you see as a natural right is dangerously close to transgression,” Tyelperinquar crossed his arms. “These lands are getting more and more dangerous, little sister. You have already pressed the King’s benevolence by leaving his Halls and dragging us along with you; and now you’re planning to leave even our care! If I were less vigilant, you would have slipped away already, silent as a shade, perhaps for never to return. And for such a pointless reason! These hills are silent. There is nothing here but deserted roads, gloomy forests and crows prowling over abandoned carcasses.”

“Why should we still linger here, Erenis? _He shall not come_. Perhaps he’d intended to; perhaps he’s been detained; perhaps he’s been killed for all we know. We may learn about that later, to our joy or sorrow, but there is nothing we could ever hope to do _now_ – such is the course of life. We can only sit and watch. That may be maddening, but it won’t change the very simple fact that _he will not come_, at least, not in time for us to meet him. We should be back at the Halls in five days; you know that. Lest the Gate shall be sealed. If we hit the road in this instant, there will still be a danger we wouldn’t make it home!”

“Let the Gate be sealed,” Erenis shrugged. _“He will come, I tell you. He must. He is our uncle!”_

“We have a couple of uncles, dear one,” Tyelperinquar sighed, “and this far, none of them have proved particularly helpful. And even if they were – would that change anything?”

“Yes. We could make them understand… and we could perhaps hear some news…”

“I am not interested in news,” her brother’s voice was hardening back to merciless steel. “I am only interested in putting a barrier in front of your reckless stupidity and escorting you back below the earth where we belong.”

“You seem to be in a particularly good mood today, sweetheart,” Erenis laughed. “Come, let me tend to your hair. You look positively horrible.”

“Sometimes, appearances are not half as deceptive as one would think.”

Though Tyelperinquar did not seem to emerge from his black mood, the corners of his mouth _did_ turn a little upwards; and for Erenis, that was a true achievement. Humming softly, she ran her fingers through her brother’s thick, coal-smelling tresses, and braided them to a similar fashion as she’d done with her own. She could not resist, and planted a small kiss on Tyelperinquar’s forehead; and her large, broad-shouldered, fiery-eyed, fierce brother wound his arms around her neck (the strength, the heat, the pulse of blood in those huge limbs were almost frightening), and let himself collapse for three entire heartbeats.

“I have made something for you,” he said then, murmuring softly against the neckline of her tunic,
and Erenis stirred.

“You shouldn’t have,” she whispered immediately, not daring to raise her eyes.

“Whyever not?”

“Because ‘tis nothing like the gifts I could make you, and you know that. I thought that our agreement would last, and you’d once again write me bad poetry. I was even looking forward to it!”

“Oh, but I did, and it’s worse than ever. Yet I could not resist the urge to give you something useful as well, something you shall – unfortunately – be needing… If I tell you that Gwindor’s gift comes together with mine, and mine is less than half of it, shall your wrath pass us by harmlessly?”

“I cannot estimate the degree of harm,” Erenis sighed, “but it shall pass.”

“How reassuring,” Gwindor’s merry voice interrupted from among the nearby trees. “I thought you’d never get across the dog-fight part, then the dramatically dark part, then the poetically emotional part, and then…”

“That will be quite enough then, thank you,” Tyelperinquar snapped, but the shadow of worry seemed to have lightened upon his brows. “Shall we get to the gift-giving part?”

“Oh, I insist,” came the answer; and Erenis knew her fate was sealed. Whatever her begetting day gift was, it was now bound to be given (and accepted).

“Well, here it is,” said her brother without any grandeur or glamour, and unbuckled a small scabbard from his belt. Erenis had long before noticed the carefully protected weapon but paid no heed to mention it; there could be a handful of chisels stuffed inside the shiny leather case for all she knew. “May it protect you from any harm; may it sharpen your conscience; may it keep your mind clearer than the waters of long-lost Valinórë. Happy begetting day, dearest one!”

Careful and more than a little wary, Erenis took the scabbard from her brother’s hand, her fingers clutching the delicate hilt.

A dagger, she thought, amazed. But why would I need one?

When it came to forging, or any other handicraft, Erenis was well and truly unskilled: a bitter truth she’d already learned to accept. Yet nothing could erase the long years of experience she’d earned in her father’s and grandfather’s smithies: lessons, scolding, rare praise and merciless exactitude. Erenis could tell good work from bad, excellent from good, and perfect from excellent. And this dagger – as anything and everything her brother made these days – was perfect, from the tiniest adorned branches and leaves from the soft, rosily gleaming gemstone at the middle of its pommel, or the airy engravings that ran across the silver blade.

“You have outdone yourself, this time, Tyelpë,” said Erenis, trying very hard not to sound jealous towards the maker of her own gift. “It’s wondrously beautiful – and deadly. Whyever would you give this to me? And how could this be less than half of my gift…? Am I getting Gwindor’s old armour too, perhaps to protect my childlike innocence?”

“Now that would be a sight!” Gwindor snorted. “Nay, little one: the truth is much simpler than that. Your brother placed the weapon into your hand; and I shall be giving the lessons.”

“Lessons?” Erenis’s eyed widened. “Are you actually implying that I am to learn how to kill?”
“Or how to defend yourself,” Tyelperinquar said. “I assure you, sweet sister, that I do not particularly like the image of you running around with sharpened bits of steel. Yet the world, as I have told you before, is dangerous; and I am willing to cope with such inconveniences if they could by any means save your life one day.”

“I have already killed once, Tyelpê,” Erenis swallowed, “you know that. I didn’t know what it meant, I didn’t even want to do it, yet no one shall ever forgive it. And I cannot, will not do it again, perhaps not even to an Orc. It makes my stomach turn. You, who has the power and talent to make things, might not be entirely stranger to my silent wish to try and let things be.”

“That is all well,” Tyelperinquar said, “but there are some evil things in this world, sister, that do not seem very willing to let us be in return.”

“That is not what my heart tells me, but I grant you this much: you may not need to kill ever again,” Gwindor added, “yet it is our wish that you wouldn’t feel the slightest stir of blood if a servant of the Enemy tries to attack or capture you.”

“That depends on the servant, I think,” Erenis smiled with an effort, “but I hear you. All right – if there is no obligation to kill: then, and only then shall I accept your gift, and cherish it.”

“That much is settled, then,” Gwindor nodded ceremonially. Tyelperinquar was silent.

Upon some unspoken agreement, they all turned to the far West in the rising wind. Now, the roar of the Falls was only a distant whisper behind the rustling of verdure and birds scratching about in the undergrowth. Not far before them, there was a narrow opening between the trees, and they could see a few miles to the empty air above the woodlands of Andram.

“Where are the guards?” Tyelperinquar asked, just when Erenis was about to forget their helpless and endangered state, imagining that they were out on a simple trip in the wilderness.

“Scattered around this hill, and down a bit further in the woods,” came Gwindor’s answer. “No foe himself could take us by surprise.”

“We never know what Moringotto is capable of,” Tyelperinquar gritted his teeth. “Not since the Battle of the Flames.”

“Can we just call him the Enemy?” Gwindor flinched. “I mislike that name.”

“A banned language to curse a backboneless foe,” Tyelperinquar smiled dangerously. “More than fitting - wouldn’t you agree?”

“No more rowan berries today, mellon nín. You’re bitterer than a heartbroken maid!”

“Stop squabbling and listen!” Erenis sang in her clear voice. “Someone is coming.”

“Better be the guards,” Tyelperinquar gave his friend a sidelong look, “or I shall have to deeply question your trustworthiness, Lord Gwindor.”

“You need not question it, Your Insufferableness. Here comes a familiar face!”

The silhouette that emerged from among the silent tumult of trees was one of their guards indeed; he bowed before them then spoke, his voice tense and hushed:

“My Lords, my Lady; a lone rider is approaching from the far North. He mounts a strong stallion, and seems to be in a great hurry. Shall we let him pass?”
“I told you!” Erenis exclaimed, her fingernails digging into her brother’s arm for a thoughtless moment. “I told you he’d come!”

“We cannot be sure,” Gwindor said immediately. “We have to verify – “

“Who else could it be?”

“Someone who wants us dead,” Tyelperinquar snapped. “Anyone! You cannot just trust people blindly!”

“We are surrounded by guards, and the rider is alone. Uncle Carnistir is here, Tyelpë; and he could kill our whole entourage in a single fit of rage if he only wanted. And that much is true about many of our enemies. Let us use our precious time and go.”

Together, they began their descent to the declivous vale that opened between a pair of the low, forest-covered hills above the Fens of Sirion. The moist, ungrateful smell of the close moorlands brushed Erenis’s nostrils from time to time; it was not a pleasant sensation, but she greeted it with her usual quiet dignity. Restraining herself from racing ahead, she even kept her hand of the hilt of her new dagger, for she knew it was expected of her. She tried hard not to ponder how empty that treat would seem to even the clumsiest of foes.

Gwindor and his guards had set up a makeshift camp in the middle of a grove of ebony trees, at the very bottom of the valley. Their horses were grazing about at a close-by glade, rays of morning sun dancing around in their brown coats. Most of their small entourage had gathered at the camp by the time of their arrival, forming a wide circle around the already dismounted foreign rider. The newcomer was tall, broad-shouldered, heavily built, more than a little ragged… and - without any doubt —, he was Carnistir, son of Fëanáro.

As soon as Erenis met his eyes, she shouted ‘Uncle!’ and sprang forward to greet him. Lithe and light as she was, she thought she could slam with full force in his chest and did not even make him reel; but Carnistir cried out in a voice thick with pain,

“Careful – CAREFUL you little fiend!”

Erenis immediately released him, and stared at him with uncertain alarmedness - and the more closely she looked, the more curious things could she notice about her uncle indeed.

Uncle Carnistir was dirty, to begin with – he, who had always paid ridiculous amounts of care and attention to his garments, he who had made efforts to look good and smell good, he who braided his hair every morning, he who kept his teeth whiter than the gems wrought in her grandfather’s goblets… Moreover, he was injured. His left arm seemed fastened to his chest with stripes of dirty linen, and his wide, black cloak billowed about his form like bat-wings in the rising wind.

If Erenis wanted to be entirely honest, Uncle Carnistir did not look like himself at all – save for his large, lively eyes, his broad smile and the booming great voice that echoed on in the pit of her stomach whenever it spoke.

Silence fell to the grove of trees for a few seconds; then Carnistir spoke again, his voice slightly clearer now:

“I was afraid you might leave before I get here. I was also afraid you’d be insane like me and come alone. I’m glad I was wrong.”
“My sweet sister would not have hesitated to make that mistake,” said Tyelperinquar, who was still standing at the edge of the glade, in the exact same position as three minutes before. “Thankfully, she has me.” He then addressed the Elves around them. “Be at peace, for the one we sought has come to us. We shall sit in council for an hour or two; Lord Gwindor shall see to your tasks.”

At the mention of his name, Gwindor came forth, and bowed slightly. “Greetings, Lord Caranthir,” he said in his schooled Sindarin. “My name is Gwindor, and I am Captain of the King in Nargothrond. I am most glad that you found us.”

“Yes, I imagine that,” crackled Carnistir in the same tongue and dialect, and Erenis wondered what happened to his voice. “Thank you kindly, Captain; you may leave us alone for now. I wish to talk to my niece and nephew without you cave-dwellers pricking your ears about.”

If Gwindor of any of his kinsmen were offended, they did not show it; and Erenis had to admit that the playful insult rather humoured than annoyed her.

“They will have to stay around,” she heard her brother saying. “Someone may have been following you, lordship, or simply lurking around in the woodlands. We cannot risk anyone finding us.”

“As you wish,” Carnistir said, his voice suddenly formal. “It seems that we have much to talk about, m’lord, m’lady.”

“Can we just skip the part when we act like strangers and move on to the second phase, where we’re actually overjoyed to see each other sane and whole?” Erenis snapped. She crossed the distance between herself and her uncle with two determined steps and stood on tiptoes to plant a kiss on his forehead. When Carnistir did not protest, she pulled him into another, less tight hug, now paying attention to his scars and injuries.

“I am quite willing to do that,” her uncle said through the curtain of her hair. “What say you, kinsman?”

“I did not mean to be rude,” said Tyelperinquar. “Too much things have happened lately, and I am not sure what should we call each other.”

“I will still call you my little nephew if you grow another head, dye your hair vibrant blue and decide to earn your living as an Orc impersonator,” said Carnistir with a shrug (then winced). “I did not come here to get lost in the intrigues of our unfortunate family… I have news for you if you care to hear them – good and bad.”

“And we have questions, Uncle,” said Erenis, looking him up and down without the slightest sort of subtlety. “So many questions. But will you not sit down?”

“It will not help my shattered state,” Carnistir sighed. “Just send your moles further off.”

“Uncle… you can’t just call the King’s best scouts moles,” Tyelperinquar whispered deprecatingly, though the corners of his mouth betrayed him, and turned slightly upwards. Finally, he gave in and walked off to Gwindor. After a brief exchange of murmurings, their guards disappeared among the thicket, and Erenis suddenly felt exposed.

“There we are,” Carnistir said when there was none other around them than his peacefully grazing horse. “Much better. Now, look at you – you both seem slightly troubled, if you don’t mind my mentioning it. Tyelpë, those black circles below your eyes would be enough to silence a room. And Erenis, you’re fidgeting again. I have told you a million times not to do that. Curiously enough, you both look like tiny frightened animals – not a pair of bright young Elves who just shattered the
shackles of their maniac, power-monger father.”

“We did not -,” Tyelprinquar shook his head, glimpsing his reflection in a small puddle of
rainwater. “...are they really that horrible?”

“I have never seen such magnificent circles,” Carnistir nodded. “I must congratulate you, really.”

“And you, Uncle?” Erenis burst out, folding her hands in her lap lest she’d resume her fidgeting.
“What happened to you?”

“A friendly banter with Orcs, nothing more,” Carnistir said casually. “I will tell you later, but we
don’t have much time. I would like to know at first what in Manwë’s holy name happened, how,
and most importantly, why.”

And so Erenis began to talk. She spoke about the Battle of the Flames, about how they’ve fled;
how they lived through their first years in Nargothrond; how their father’s and their Uncle
Tyelko’s power grew and how they gradually changed; how did that slow, gradual change cascade
in their father’s mind; how he started to treat them as tools who could only be used to serve his
purposes or to please him; how they grew closer and closer to the folk of Nargothrond and how
they became alienated from their own father. How their father hurt them, and how they both hurt
him back. How their fights became recurrent, then common, then unceasing.

She finished her account before their last debate, leaving to Tyelperinquar the unpleasant task of
recounting the rest: the betrayal, the riot, the fracture – and the deaf, puzzled vacancy that
followed. When Tyelperinquar fell silent, Carnistir sighed boisterously (for a split second, Erenis
was reminded of the billows in her father’s smithy), and asked:

“That would be all?”

“That would be all,” Tyelperinquar nodded.

“Are you sure? No mushy letters of explanation coming from your father? No declarations of
unconditional love despite everything? Not even tears? No news, no blessings, no curses?”

“Absolutely nothing.”

Carnistir shook his head.

“Blast it,” he declared. “I was hoping that rumours were a little bit less true. Could it be all true,
then…? You cannot imagine all the unholy things I have heard about your father.”

“I think things have passed a point,” Tyelperinquar said slowly, “where nothing should surprise us
anymore.”

“No, Tyelpē, that is not true…” Erenis sighed. “Well, I hope it isn’t. It’s just… he’s not entirely
acting like himself lately. But neither do we – neither does anyone. The whole world is mad with
grief, and that’s…”

“That doesn’t excuse anything,” her brother retorted. “I’m tired of hearing the same weak
arguments over and over. Ethics and morality are the sort of ground we should walk on: a ground
that cannot be cut from under our feet. Some of our father’s deeds are inexcusable: you know that
just as well as I. He has taken a path and we have taken another, and the two shall not collide.”

Carnistir finally settled down upon the ground, weighing his injured back slowly, gently against a
boulder.
“What is the meaning of inexcusable?” he said, his voice considerably clearer than before. “Something you cannot pardon? Something that shouldn’t be pardoned by the laws of justice or common sense? Something you just don’t want to pardon?”

“All of that at once, I think,” Tyelperinquar answered him. He did not sit like his uncle or sister did; he was pacing around them in slow circles instead, sometimes wide, sometimes narrow, as if moving would help him settle his thoughts. “After all that you’ve heard, what do you think we should do?”

“Thinking would be much appreciated, I think,” Carnistir let out a stormy sigh. “Because we’re in horrid trouble. Did I guess correctly that the words of King Findaráto’s death were the last news you’ve heard?”

“We have heard all sort of nonsense since then,” Erenis sighed. “Envoys are either expected to promptly swallow all relevant information they possess, or there is none. Yet you cannot imagine the number of songs we’ve heard on the heroic Quest of Princess Lúthien and Beren the Mortal Man, how they tore down the gates of Angamando and attacked the Enemy in his sleep, then escaped with the Jewel…”

“The songs are true,” Carnistir said.

Tyelperinquar’s pacing stopped so abruptly Erenis almost gave a jump. Her brother was staring at their uncle as if he’d just grown a second head.

“Excuse me?”

“You have heard me,” Carnistir nodded gravely. “The songs say that Princess Lúthien stroke Moringotto with the lightning of Manwë, and burned his black hands with the Jewel; then she and Beren flew across the lands on Eagle-back, right to the Halls of Mandos where they were greeted with applause and sent back to the world of the living at the mercy of the Valar. Most of it is rubbish, I expect, yet we know for certain that the Jewel has been stolen, and it is now in Doriath.”

“But they cannot have…,” Tyelperinquar stared at his open palms. “That’s impossible!”

“It was, until it happened. Now, we know that Moringotto isn’t unassailable, and that there is a way to his halls. Yet we cannot expect him to fall back to sleep without avenging Beren’s and Lúthien’s little Quest. Of course, ‘tis not them who shall suffer – that shall be us, who still have the misfortune to be alive. And if the Enemy attacks again, we shall be in horrid trouble. Our forces are scattered, our watchtowers ruined, our weapons broken. So many of us have perished in the Battle of Flames! And our family, as always, stands closest to the fire; we can almost already feel its heat. In a few weeks, I shall be forced to abandon Amon Ereb and ride north to the ever-safe haven of Himring. Thargelion is lost. The Gap is lost. Arthórien is lost and Ossiriand falling. There is a huge gap between Estolad and Andram where no kin of us walks. Whoever might dwell in Taur-im-Duinath are cut off of us completely. And our new High King is a fellow so responsible that he walked straight up to the Iron Prison with a bow and a blasted harp! Do you even realise how doomed the Ñoldor are?! For Valar’s sake, children, this is just not the time to throw a tantrum against your father! We are so few, so shattered… we should stick together! Did I really need to ride a hundred leagues just to remind you of that?!”

Erenis opened her mouth, but closed it immediately as she realised she had no answer to that. She was surprised to feel shame bubbling up from the depths of her fëa. She stole a shy glance at her brother, but Tyelperinquar’s features were calm as a mountain lake, at sharp as steel.

“Are you saying that the charges we hold against our father are unjust?”
“I shan’t deny that your father can be an unholy bastard at times, if that is what you want to hear,” their uncle sighed. “Yet what I am truly saying is that this is no time for justice, Tyelpë, but for survival. Moringotto will hunt us down and serve our heads with pastries upon his table if we don’t act quickly enough. We should help each other while we can. For family’s sake. For honour’s sake.”

“These two just don’t seem to fit together anymore in my eyes,” said Tyelperinquar gravely. “My father’s late deeds disgust me. I do not regard myself as part of the family anymore: this I have told him. I care for you and love you for old times’ sake but I have no wish for participating in further kinslayings.”

“What do you think of us, Tyelpë?!” Carnistir’s voice was barely more than a whisper, yet the red heat of indignation creeped up his neck and coloured his cheeks. “What do you think of us?!! That we kill Moriquendi out of sport?! That it would bring us joy or any sort of satiety to start another war?! Who do you think we are? Criminals? Robbers? Rogues…?”

“He’s not…,” Erenis tried to say, but Tyelperinquar raised his hand.

“Yes, I am! I am saying this, and I am meaning it! You swore an Oath we did not swear, therefore you may be forced to do things we cannot, we should not, we will not relate to. If that is so hard for you to accept, why won’t you try and fight your Oath?”

“For the same reason why I will not reach out to pluck the moon from the skies!” Carnistir bellowed. “Because it’s bloody impossible! Do you think I have never tried?! That I have never…”

He suddenly fell silent, hiding his face in his palms for a moment that seemed like Ages. Erenis tried to think of something, anything to say, but her tongue went dry and words eluded her.

“Did you come here to try and lure us back to the father we’ve denied?” Tyelperinquar asked sharply. “Because we’re only wasting our precious time, then.”

“Tyelpë!” Erenis sprang to her feet, dismayed. “Can’t you hear your own speech?! You’re being outrageously rude!”

“I’m being honest!” Her brother’s hands were tightened into fists. “Is that something to resent?”

“Yes, if you’re using your honesty to deliberately hurt others!”

“I’m not trying to hurt him, I’m just trying to save time…”

“Save time for what? So you can go back to your toys in the smithy? So you can continue bathing in the King’s praise?”

“Stop this childish banter!” Carnistir snapped. “Now we’re wasting time!”

With an effort, the siblings turned their eyes off each other, and looked reluctantly at their uncle, whose attitude, despite being dirty and ragged, still held some uncertain, but surely distinguishable means of authority.

“I came here because I care for you two,” Carnistir went on, his tone still harsher than usual. “Because we’re family. I don’t want to bend your will, nor do I think I ever could. I don’t believe it was a good choice to turn your back on your father, but I can understand why you did it. Perhaps you made the right decision – that is for you to find out. Knowledge shall come with time. I merely want you to know that you don’t need to throw all our family away just because you’re at bad terms with your Atar. And if something, anything goes awry, you shall always have a place in
my... well, I could say castle but I can’t see how I could get my hands on one in the foreseeable future. So, let’s say you’ll always have a place with me, or any of my brothers, wherever we might dwell. Did you hear me?"

“We did,” Erenis said, “and thank you kindly.”

“You have always been good to us, Uncle,” said Tyelperinquar with the ghost of a sad smile on his face. “And overly generous. Forgive me if I have offended you.”

“It’s worse, Tyelpé,” Carnistir said. “At times, you’re scaring me.”

But he grinned right afterwards, and took the hand Tyelperinquar offered to him; and they all fell to the pretence of piece and accordance.

*We should call it a truce,* Erenis thought.

~ § ~

The three Feanoreans took their luncheon with Gwindor and the guards; their conversation rambled on to lighter topics then, and – from time to time – even to those of interest. Carnistir told them about all the strange news and rumours he’d heard in Ossiriand, Belegost and what remained of Thargelion; then he sang them a song he’d written about a dwarf merchant who challenged everyone to played the dice with him, and repeatedly drank so much that he fell straight upon the table, face down his mug. The song met great success among the guards, and not even Tyelperinquar managed to hide his grin.

“You still have to tell us about your friendly banter with Orcs, Uncle, as you so eloquently put it,” Erenis reminded Carnistir when the remnants of their food were carried away and she filled everyone’s cups with watered wine.

“Oh yes, I suppose,” Carnistir grinned. “Unfortunately, the story isn’t quite as heroic as it could have been.” He delved into his pocket, and pulled out a small parcel. “I’ve gone to great lengths to get this for your begetting day, young lady, but alas! Bad fortune pursued me, for I’ve been robbed on my route: my heart was stolen.”

Erenis (who had never received a begetting day gift with such open directness before, without any needless blessings or compliments) could not hide her grin, nor her utter delight when she unpacked the delicately wrought brooch from wet, mottled paper. It was of Dwarish making without any doubt: but curiously enough, its silvery outlines formed an eagle.

“It is magnificent,” she breathed, and leaned forward to kiss her uncle on the cheek. “Thank you! But you have to tell me - who stole your heart on the road? And why should that mean bad fortune?! I’m so glad for you, Uncle!”

“Aye, we should drink to that!” Gwindor suggested with his usual heartiness.

“Help yourselves,” Carnistir laughed, “yet the thief wasn’t the sort of creature you might expect. If you keep your voices down and don’t jump on her all at once, you may see her.”

With that, he stood up slowly, gritting his teeth when his bandaged hand reached an uncomfortable angle, and went to his horse. Erenis glimpsed that the large saddlebag on the stallion’s side was half open, as if to let the air enter; and when Carnistir pulled out his hand from the bag, he was holding a small, black bundle. As he came to settle back in their circle, Erenis saw that the bundle was, in truth, a little pup, its fur black as night.
“Oh,” said Gwindor in a tone that did not quite match the Captain of Nargothrond. “She’s so tiny!”

“She also has teeth like steel,” Carnistir said happily. “We met on a cold night, not entirely a day ago. I stayed far from the road to look for a swift way up here, and that was when I saw a fire, and fifteen Orcs around it. They were about to cook and eat this tiny helpless creature. One of them held her by the neck. I saw that from amongst the thicket, and… well, Lord Gwindor, you don’t yet know me when something gets on my nerves. Long story short, I suddenly felt slightly upset and I might have accidentally massacred those filthy Orcs. At first, I just wanted to throw them into their own boiling cauldron but I didn’t quite get to that. Orc-necks break so easily… And then there was this little lady, yowling and scratching about, helpless and frantic with fear. So I took her. What else could I have done?”

“Nothing!” Said Gwindor in unison with three guards.

“Wait,” said Tyelperinquar, fingers drumming a steady staccato on his knees. “Uncle Carnistir. You threw yourself alone, without any entourage or hope for help, at the middle of an Orc camp… to save a puppy?”

“At that moment,” said Carnistir measuredly, “it seemed perfectly reasonable.”

“I would have done the same thing,” Gwindor declared grimly. Tyelperinquar shook his head.

“That’s… I cannot decide if that’s beyond honourable or beyond stupid.”

“Children and animals are the worst,” Carnistir sighed. “And maybe women. Or any other being that is suffering, really. You just see it and can’t look away. You must… do something immediately. I fell to that trap, as so many times before – the Orcs were surprised enough, but they left an ugly scar on my side -, and now I have my little lady friend to take care of. I still think it was worth it, though.”

“Does she have a name already?” Erenis scratched a tiny ear with her fingertips, smiling as the pup leaned into her touch.

“I’ve been seriously considering Melko,” Carnistir grinned, “but I figured that I could not risk your old Uncle Nelyo throwing me out of his halls. Moreover, I noticed she was a girl.”

“Oh, come on!” Erenis tried to appear outraged, but could barely hold back her laughter. Carnistir had a strange talent for making insults and otherwise horrible things seem chokingly funny.

“Nobody deserves to be called Melko,” said Tyelperinquar. The way the joke appeared to be of no effect on him sent a chill creeping down Erenis’s spine, and once again she was filled with the fear of her brother becoming this cold and distant for eternity. But as so often those days, her fear was momentary; and – as if to reassure her – some faint reflection of their former light returned to her brother’s eyes as he said, “I would name her Egnor, for the sake of her rescue and sharp teeth. Consider that, if it is to your liking.”

“She deserves a finer language,” Carnistir commented, “but I admit I like the idea.”

~ § ~

Hours went by in silence and stillness, and the two siblings tended to their uncle’s wounds as much as they could. The cuts were not deep but ugly, and their edges a little bit blackened, which left Erenis worrying. Yet Carnistir had no fever, he found joy in drink and food, and talked just as much as usual. Erenis stayed around him until nightfall, more for the sake of his booming voice and the sight of his face than the actual content of his endless chattering. Her uncle might have
guessed that filling the stubborn silence that lingered around the grove gave her comfort; yet suddenly, when the fiery red plate of the sun almost settled below the horizon, he said,

“Well, I suppose this is farewell, then.”

The statement was abrupt and decisive; it sent an invisible wave of uncertainty around their dwelling that seemed to shake even Tyelperinquar who was tending to some ropes that held a tent.

“It must be,” he said slowly. “That will be better for everyone.”

Their uncle nodded slowly, gravely.

“I understand. Yes, I think I am starting to understand you two. Take care of yourselves… and if you’re this determined to trade your family for the people of Nargothrond, stick with them at least. They are decent, as it seems to me.”

“We’re not trading you, Uncle,” Erenis promised. “Never you!”

“Favouritism is an unholy thing, young lady,” Carnistir raised his finger, and winked. Erenis was suddenly strongly reminded of her Uncle Nelyo’s measured old counsellor, and couldn’t suppress a grin. “I’m flattered, though.”

“I am… we are very thankful that you came, Uncle Moryo,” said Tyelprinquar, and spread his cloak upon Erenis’s shoulders before she could resist. The evening chill was getting sharper.

“I will come whenever you need me, provided that I have still legs to walk upon,” Carnistir said lightly. “Though I’m afraid you’ll soon be obliged to reach out to Himlad if you want to hear from me.”

“We will take that risk,” Tyelperinquar said. “May the Blessings of the Valar stay with you on your road north!”

Carnistir nodded.

“Now that would be a sight to see,” he murmured, seemingly oblivious to the fact that his voice was clearly audible all around the camp. “The Valar’s Blessings upon me.”

Chapter End Notes

Author’s Notes

- Egnor [Sindarin] means approximately “fire-thorn”.

- On the usage of names: Erenis’s POV will always use Quenya names for her close relatives and Sindarin for her friends and/or acquaintances, as well as locations.
“Am I asking for the moon? Is it really so implausible?”

/Sting/

Gate I. of Cleanwater Alley in the Hidden City of Ondolindë, FA 467, the ides of Víressë

It was the sharp whistle coming from the kettle that shook Anardil from his reverie. For a few seconds, he could only blink and wonder if the sound meant that the whole house was on fire, and about to collapse onto his head; but nothing of the sort happened. The kettle merely went on whistling, and began to shake, ever so slightly, as if it was trying to get away from the heat of his furnace. Of course. He must have forgot about it – again – and fallen back to sleep.

Anardil watched it jolting for a few seconds, silently appreciating the mere fact that he once again owned a furnace and a kettle. At times, the sudden turn of his luck felt somewhat overwhelming.

Slowly, he sat up, a stormy sea of soft, clean blankets extruding around his waist, still far too thin to match the strong build of his shoulders. He flexed his fingers, traced the outlines of fading scars where Sauron’s shackles had clawed on his skin, and observed that they were no longer ravaging his wrists. Around him was a light, spacious room that opened out to a small terrace. It faced the snowy Echoriath and the green-green meadows of Tumladen, several hundred feet above its sea of grass. Below him was a soft mattress, caressing his gratefully stretching back. His hands, feet and hair were warm and clean and they smelled of soap, safety and a good night’s sleep.

Anardil climbed out of the bed and took the still protesting kettle, pouring himself a cup of tea. It was a concoction of dense, sweet-smelling camomile: the cheapest he could find in the Lesser Market. He knew from hearsay already that the City had another market, one that was as big as the King’s Gardens; but he knew he would need a companion to wander that far from his new home, lest he’d get lost.

That was the only thing he lacked indeed: a companion. The King had fulfilled his promise and gave him a small house to dwell in, with a garden and large windows opening out to a breathtaking landscape; he filled his rooms with fine furniture, pillows and sheets, robes and shoes and trousers and everything he could need for house-keeping (even a couple of lanterns included), and he also found a bag of coins on the dining table when he’d first entered the house; yet no one, not even King Turukáno had the power to give him company. Anardil knew the latter was something he was supposed to find on his own, yet he did not have the slightest idea how to start. Owning the first house in the street meant that he had but one neighbour; moreover, the next house seemed empty, which cut him off from the easiest and most evident practice of befriending the person who lived closest to him. Then again, Anardil could not be sure if anyone from around there would be willing to befriend him at all. The Way of Running Waters ran not entirely two corners away from his dwelling: almost all the folk who lived there belonged to the House of the Fountain, and Anardil had not forgotten the way Lord Ecthelion treated him at the Council. When an opinion or belief was well and truly stuck in such a leader’s head, the same prejudices could swiftly extend to his household just as well as his circle of friends: Anardil had learned that lesson long ago, in fair Tirion.
Yet the thing he missed the most from his life was definitely Voronwë. In the past days, he had gone to great lengths to be able at least to thank him for his unexpected request on the King’s judgement. When he finally succeeded, the tears that filled his eyes upon seeing the stern Elf were perhaps more honest and real than any emotion he’d ever expressed to anyone; yet Voronwë remained collected, courteous, and cold as an iceberg. He assured him that he’d acted out of mere nostalgia for the sake of times they’d spent together, although he wouldn’t wish to indulge in Anardil’s friendship or company any more. This decision may have had to do something with the fact that since he refused to open the door for him all day, Anardil had climbed down his roof a few minutes past midnight, sliding through his open window…

Anardil was sure he would appreciate if he had a friend this dedicated to him. Then again, the Ñoldor were the most bizarre creatures he had ever met.

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The Sun was already high in the skies, and Anardil concluded that the day was too beautiful to waste with lying idly inside. Once it was sufficiently cooled, he refilled his kettle with water instead of tea, and stepped out into the garden to observe the state of spice and vegetable seedlings he’d planted a few days ago. He wanted to grow them on his own.

Anor’s glow was so warm he did not even feel the need to dress; he had no more than a thin white sheet wrapped around his waist to cover his nakedness. At one point, he even considered to drop that, but the scars around his thighs were still swollen and ugly, and he did not want to see them. He watered his plants instead, humming softly to himself; then, seeing that one lavender was growing very promising fresh leaves in a sunny corner, he burst into a song out of joy.

Now there, now there,  
now there, good friend  
why would you smile so bright?  
Why would your laughter  
fill my dark halls  
at such an early hour?

The moon is gone  
the stars asleep  
not even Anor shines  
Why would you be  
so happy now  
at the silent dead of night?

Thus spoke to me  
the landlord’s son  
upon the midnight hour  
when I was dancing  
all around  
new hope shy in my heart

Good landlord’s son,  
where I begin?  
- I laughed as if I’d burst  
Have you ‘ver heard  
water running  
when you were mad with thirst?
Such things I feel
wildly, I reel
for my dear wish came true:
in Anor’s light
I gently bathe
with my Lady to woo;

Her heart I took
my lute I plucked
or the other way a-round?
I cannot say;
I’ll tell you true -
By honour I am bound!

Anardil shook the last drops of water out of the kettle, running his fingers idly over the leaves of a rosebush – and was quite taken aback when brushing the leaves aside, he found himself staring into a curious face. As they eyed each other, the intruder gave a low cry, and made a frantic move, as if to cover himself with the same twigs Anardil was holding aside with his free hand.

“Spying on people is a wise thing, if you ask me,” the Teler said cheerfully, once he’d overcome his general bewilderment. “For instance, if they don’t know you’re watching them, they might show their true colours. As it happens, I am exactly what I now must seem to you – a bad-mannered idiot who makes up songs on the spot and talks to his plants. Otherwise, I am quite harmless, I promise you. Fancy a cup of tea? …or a piece of bread and jam, perhaps? They’re from yesterday, but the bread is still soft.”

The intruder swallowed nervously, though it was not hard to notice that his eyes gleamed with low-key amusement.

“I am…,” he managed. “I am very sorry.”

“Good morn, Very Sorry,” the Teler nodded ceremonially, and extended his hand. “I am Anardil.” Before he could savour his joke, though, a sudden realisation dawned on him. “Hey, I know you, don’t I? I saw you in the Council – you’re the King’s scribe with those marvellously swift hands!”

“It might have been someone else you saw, Lord Anardil,” said the Elf. His voice suddenly seemed much more confident, though a tinge of pink crept up his neck to reach his cheeks. “King Turukáno has many scribes.”

“You cannot fool me,” Anardil declared. “I remember you fully well. What a fortunate meeting! Now come on, climb out of those bushes and break your fast with me! You must wait, of course, until I change my flaunting stage of undress.”

To his great delight, the intruder followed him after a few moments of hesitation, and Anardil could have sung and danced around out of sheer joy. He was finally about to have company!

Rushing back into the house, he dressed, he filled his kettle for the third time that day, then he loaded the table with two loaves of bread, rich, yellow butter, vegetables and fruits, honey, several jars of jam and spices, salt and sugar, and even a bowl of cold stew. Now that his purse was heavy, having a guest was a thousand times worth emptying his pantry.

“There is no way I could be worthy of your hospitality, my lord,” the Elf protested, but suddenly, his eyes went wide. “…by the Valar – is that blueberry jam? It’s very rare and precious this far up in the mountains…”
“It’s my favourite,” Anardil said cheerfully. “I mentioned it to the King, just in case he has a good memory, you know. Come, share it with me!”

“You honour me, my lord,” said the Elf smoothly. “It would be horrendously rude of me to turn down such a kind offer.”

“Indeed,” Anardil gave a grave nod, and held out the jar with a flourish. “I would be deeply wounded.”

That earned him a startled, ringing laugh: its sound was fresh and pleasant.

“You are one curious elf,” his guest admitted.

“True enough,” Anardil nodded, and proceeded to fill a bowl with salad. “I am curious, in the sense that my eyes and ears (and sometimes hands) wander everywhere they should not. Then, usually, they get burned, but the whole process is terribly amusing.” Unabashedly, he winked. “But to your well-mannered Noldo eyes, I may also seem a little… well, odd. And just a tiny bit mad.”

“Considering all meanings of the word curious, I find that they all have a chance to prove appropriate,” said his guest, the mazy words of Quenya springing fair and free from his lips. “But I do not think you’re mad. You’re just… well, different. But that is a good thing. I can’t imagine Lord Ecthelion, for one, offering me such a splendid meal if he caught me eavesdropping through his fence.”

“So you admit you were eavesdropping,” Anardil grinned. “I like that.”

“What choice do I have?” The Elf took a measured bite of his bread-and-jam, an expression of utter contentment rushing through his face. “It is the truth. I was eavesdropping, because I cared to hear the song that woke me from my best dreams – and having found out who the singer was, I took my chance. For I am curious about you, Lord Anardil of the Falmari; curious as a scribe, a historian and a collector of tellings and tales.”

Surely, your sweet tooth has nothing to do with it, Anardil thought, but all he said was,

“Do you have another name then Very Sorry?”

That earned him another soft laugh.

“I am called Pengolodh,” the Elf fell silent for a few seconds, as if waiting for some kind of recognition, then – as he earned none – he pressed on, “and I am told to be a lore-master, yet I do not claim that name. I have collected, noted and tidied the history of Ondolindë in the last few decades. I wrote the lay of our coming here, and various others of battles and other remarkable events. You could say that I am the King’s chronicler… one who likes to pick up the role of a scribe from time to time. You see, the last council meeting seemed very promising to me. Grave news arrived to the City and I was almost certain that something interesting would happen.” Pengolodh made a vague gesture with his butter-coated knife. “Something that would be worth writing down. And I am so glad I’ve attended the Great Council in person – seldom do I have an opportunity to witness such a heated debate! And then there were you, Lord Anardil – the highlight of the whole session! You made my afternoon amusing, and for that, I am forever grateful. If you only knew the rarity of eventful meetings…” Absentmindedly, he shook his head and his voice trailed off.

“You, like many others, seem to remain under the false belief that I am some kind of wayward lord,” Anardil could not help but grin. “And that is flattering, really. I could live with that
reputation. But King Turukáno made me quite clear what he thought of lying and deceiving people… and from now on, I share his views. I must tell you the truth, Lore-master, as it is: I’ve made an honest confession at the Council. I am no lord, and never was. I’m a simple, lowly Elf from Tirion or Alqualondë, as you please – well-travelled for sure, experienced, perhaps a little bit eccentric and in certain things, doubtlessly precocious; but a simple Elf nonetheless.”

“But that is exactly what I’m talking about!” Pengolodh clapped his hands excitedly. “Yours is a unique perspective, one I’ve never researched, one I’ve only dreamed to work with! Your perception and understanding of events shall be new to me as much as to anyone who may later read my accounts. You are a historian’s dream, Anardil of the Falmari, rushing into our quiet city like a wave of storm, shaking us all from our winter sleep. The King granted you a great privilege with the treatment you received, and now everyone, everyone is talking about you in the City! Everyone is wandering who you are, where you came from, what your intentions are… some even claim you are a wizard, who possesses Fëanáro’s talent of speaking and deceiving.”

“…so you came here, determined to get my story out of me before anyone else does,” Anardil laughed. “Smart!”

“I would have tried to if I had any idea where to find you,” Pengolodh shook his head. “The King was very secretive about that; it is true, though, that rumours are already starting to spread through the streets about your location. But if you care to know the entire truth, we happen to be neighbours. I’ve spent the last few weeks with a friend of mine, discussing his new research and I came home yestereve – or maybe I should rather call it this morning, for it almost dawned. I know that ‘tis almost midday, but I was weary and my mind needed rest; thus, it was your song that woke me.”

“Oh, sorry about that,” said Anardil. “I was fairly certain that no one lived in the next house! So… my neighbour is a historian. That’s…unexpected; and I must confess, you’re not how I imagined such a lore-master.”

“You were convinced we were all sour, collected, dry dunderheads,” Pengolodh nodded. “A common mistake.”

“I shall know better from now on,” Anardil promised. “Now listen to me, lord – I’m sure we can come to an arrangement.”

“And that of which sort?”

“You need a story, right?” Anardil asked, his voice as innocent as it could get. “And I, I need someone who shows me around here, providing me company and some sort of amusement. We could call it a trade – stories for evenings out. Since you’re a master of lore, you can surely teach me how to behave myself. I, on return, can teach you as many bawdy songs as you’d like. I can tell you of my adventures and you may put them through hammer and anvil, exaggerate them, arrange them into a heroic lay for all I care, you just… you just don’t let me drown in boredom, right? Will you accept that?”

There was a moment of silence.

“That seems like a fair deal,” Pengolodh nodded with a small, satisfied smile, and extended his hand. Anardil reached out to clasp it, then hesitated.

“One last thing,” he said. “Of my story… you must respect that I’m not quite ready to talk about the Sauron-part yet. Which is… being imprisoned and all. It still perturbs me a little bit.”
“I hear you,” said Pengolodh. “We shall proceed with such speed you deem comfortable. I shall never push you.”

“Thanks,” Anardil smiled earnestly, and squeezed the hand that was offered to him. “That means more to me than you might imagine.”

The next few days passed in a rush, and the two neighbours’ new routine was swiftly and effortlessly established. Anardil woke each day at Anor’s first light, prepared himself a tea, took care of his beloved plants, took a short walk in the nearby streets (sometimes, he made it as far as the Lesser Market where he gathered a few things for his pantry). Near midday, Pengolodh knocked on his door and they broke their fast together, exchanging news and the newest bunch of rumours that spread through the King’s Palace. Pengolodh was the source of all the nonsense, insisting that Anardil should be well-versed in such matters if he ever wanted to become involved with the court; and the Teler did not protest, since some of the stories made him shed tears of laughter.

After their meal, they settled down in Pengolodh’s spacious study, and Anardil spoke of his adventures. Pengolodh was adamant about maintaining chronological order, so his first days were spent with vast and rambling accounts on his childhood. Yet no matter how detailed Pengolodh’s questions were, no matter how livingly Anardil remembered his journeys on stormy seas, his adventures at distant lands, his neat escapes, his many losses and few gains, he ran out of stories far sooner than he would have liked.

Then came a night they passed in Pengolodh’s study, sinking in soft cushions and sipping wine, when Anardil recounted the story of his capture and imprisonment in such detail he’d never done before. By the end, he was shaking with anguish and tears of shock, and Pengolodh had gave up scribbling. He sat tight next to him instead, and held his shoulder in such a vice-like grasp it almost hurt; and unwillingly, unconsciously, Anardil accepted his comfort.

There was a curious change to their companionship after that day; they spoke no more of their agreement, and merely wandered the streets of Ondolindë together instead; and Anardil spent long evenings in his neighbour’s study, watching him work through some historic or linguistic delving. Later still, he accidentally discovered that Pengolodh wrote poetry from time to time, and offered to turn some of those into songs.

The moon went full, then new again; and unexpected, uncalled-for, unnoticed for long by their own selves, the neighbours became friends.

Chapter End Notes

On plagiarism: ‘Practical Arrangement’ (as the source of the chapter title and starting quote) is one of my favourite Sting songs. I find it deeply plausible and true, not only for those who seek romantic feelings, but friendship as well. Friendship perhaps even more.

On story-building: Chapter 16 will be a direct continuation of this instalment. Also, the story has now entirely passed its ‘setup’ phase: by now, you have encountered each of the central characters (Pengolodh being the last in line), you know their situation and their motivations, so – finally – it is time to move on and set things in
motion. I hope to publish the next chapter relatively soon, but I can’t promise anything.

On Anardil’s song: If you manage to find out where I’ve “stolen” its rhythm from, you’re one smart fellow, and you’re allowed a good laugh.

On Pengolodh: I insist on my theory that he is not a dry historian, just an eccentric bibliophile of high intellect, an innocent sense of humour and a knack for storytelling. And he’s relatively young. I admit that I really like my take on him, but I admit as well that I’d very much like to know what you’ve thought.

Special Thanks for everyone who commented on, liked, followed, bookmarked this story or promoted it any other way. I'm sorry to see that almost all of my readers from this site have moved on; but I sincerely hope that if one day you have a glimpse back on this story, even if you have no time to leave a note, you'll have a good time reading.
"If we shadows have offended,
Know but this and all is mended.
That you have but slumbered here,
While these visions did appear,
And this weak and idle theme,
No more yielding, but a dream."

/W. Shakespeare/

XVI. He Who Walks In Starlight

"What on Arda was that about looking decent?" Anardil inquired.

They were standing side by side in a dark, empty alley, amidst faint notes of music and laughter rolling down from the nearby inn to where they waited. Anardil was wearing a long, blue-and-silver robe, the most festive one he could find in his wardrobe. His unruly tresses were tamed with a hairclip as well, and he wore a pair of new boots. They made him feel almost like a true lord.

"I wanted to make sure you seemed like a normal person this evening," Pengolodh said nonchalantly. "We're going somewhere new and you shall meet people there – some of them important. Provided that you want to make a good impression, it will not hurt if you look fine, speak well, and in general, behave."

"And am I good-looking?"

"Well, your robe certainly is."

"You have too much salt in your body," Anardil countered with a grin. "It's dangerous, you know. Makes your heart race."

They both burst out laughing.

"Where are we going, by the way?" Anardil glanced at his companion. "To the King's Palace?"

"The place is called The Blind Guardian," said Pengolodh, "and it is something you would perhaps call a tavern. It looks like a tavern, it feels like a tavern, it smells like a tavern; yet in the deeper sense of the term, 'tis nothing like that. It is... well, it is a place of importance, a place of renown. When two lords come to an agreement, it oft happens at The Blind Guardian. If a young musician wants to try his luck, he goes to The Blind Guardian. If a bunch of historians and other madmen want to spend a night out together, they visit The Blind Guardian... and if you want to buy or arrange something in secret, the Blind Guardian is the place to go as well. Everyone heard of it, and still, no one ever gets caught. 'Tis like a legend: some believe it, some not, but we, scholars know the truth behind."

"You can always surprise me," Anardil grinned. "And what unholy thing shall we do in that tavern-
that's-no-tavern this evening?"
"Nothing unholy, mind you," said Pengolodh elegantly. "I shall introduce you to some people
you'd might care to meet. They are my friends, and I hope they will be yours as well. Also, I
confess I shall boast a little about how I gained your good will and utter trust in one single day. I
ask you to assist and cooperate. Agreement is, let's say, a bottle of wine every two hours, and you
get to choose."

"Consider it done," said Anardil with an easy laugh.

"Good. Now let us go!"

They rushed through the lower parts of the city, and headed almost straight to the King's Palace.
Not far from its guarded gates, however, they turned left to the Road of Arches, and climbed a set
of steep, ivy-mantled stairs at its narrowing end. There opened before them the bushy green park
that covered the Square of the Folkwell. Indeed, one who wandered close enough to the centre of
the park could clearly hear the chatter of a fresh spring; and as Anardil approached in awe, he
glimpsed the light of Ithil glimmering on a thin stream of water, running carelessly downhill. Once
the water reached the cobblestones, though, it was immediately led off by small, clever marble
ducts and pipes.

"A forest within the City," Anardil whispered. "Marvellous! This place has everything indeed;
everything save the Sea."

"Save the Sea," Pengolodh echoed. "Would that I could see it again! But come now; The Guardian
is on the other side, and I thought you'd like a walk through the verdure."

They slid through the park arm in arm, paying little heed to the heads that turned after Anardil as
he walked. The Teler knew already that the gesture of holding a companion's arm, which had been
considered highly intimate in the old days of Tirion and Alqualondë, was perfectly common in
Ondolindë; in fact, it was highly recommended to stay in physical touch with the one you were
walking with, lest you be buffeted by the crowd in the streets.

A wide path led through the park, illuminated on two sides by colourful lanterns that hung from
the trees: some blue, some red, some orange, some green; some golden, some silver; some pink,
some purple; and the array of hues went on and on, endlessly. Anardil doubted he'd seen each of
those colours before.

"Painted glass?" He looked at his companion.

"They are," Pengolodh nodded, somewhat offended. "Although many who have walked this road
with me thought they were flameless lamps."

"Anyone who saw the Kinslayer's handiwork before would only laugh at that," Anardil declared
with bitter admiration, and turned away from the lamps.

"When did you..." Pengolodh's sudden halt resulted in an uncomfortable pull in his shoulder. "You
did not speak of that when you told me your story!"

"I told you of the time when I was assistant in a stage-house in Tirion, did I not?"

"You did, but..."

"They had one of those Feanorean lamps," Anardil said in a low voice. "The small kind. It worked
marvellously. It had such a vivid light... I would oft sit around it late at night, just for the sake of
watching. There was nothing burning inside, but *something* moved beneath the surface. As if the lamp was alive. It was small and precious; I could have pouched it in my pocked if I dared, but it was likely worth more than the whole stage-house itself, so I did not want to risk that."

"The King gave orders not so long ago to recreate those lamps for mine workers, as I have heard," said Pengolodh. "And our good Counsellor Lómion succeeded, or at least he made similar lamps. Their light is white, though."

"I thought he was a lore-master," Anardil raised his brows.

"Was Prince Fëanáro not a lore-master as well? And a fearsome fighter, a poet – and the veriest fool?"

"You have a point, but…," Anardil closed his mouth immediately as they reached the entrance of the tavern (that was no tavern). The oaken doors were wide open, with a pair of luxurious red curtains tied loosely to the sides in an inviting gesture. Looking up, Anardil glimpsed a large signal on the façade, gleaming bright silver in the embrace of low tree-branches. It read, in archaic Quenya,

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HERE STANDS THE INN TO THE BLIND GUARDIAN
FOR TIRED HEROES-TO-BE TO SIT AND WAIT
UNTIL THE NIGHT PASSES
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"…*tenn'auta i lómë,*" Anardil read with an effort, furrowing his brows. The words tasted foreign on his tongue. "And what is that supposed to mean?"

"It is an allusion to the Lay of Arinion the Great," Pengolodh said. "I do not think you have ever heard about it – a friend and myself have picked it up from the Dark Elves, a long time ago; and in our youthful arrogance, we'd re-worked it a bit so it would suit our traditions better. Somehow, the story was entirely forgotten through the years, and nothing more than our voice and quills carried it to this city. It was my friend's suggestion to name the inn after Arinion."

"And what is the lay about?"

"That is a fair question," Pengolodh nodded approvingly. "What is any lay *about*? Perhaps they all tell us the same thing, perhaps they tell us nothing. Perhaps they are trying to teach lessons, perhaps they were written to woo a lady or scorn a lord. Perhaps they were written as a bedtime story for the author's children and with time, they became a lesson for us all."

"All right, Master of Subtle Secrecy," Anardil rolled his eyes. "How does the story go, then?"

Pengolodh stayed silent for so long, Anardil was beginning to doubt he was about to answer at all. When he finally did, his voice was that of a storyteller.

"Arinion was a prince in the realm of Intyalë. He was young, strong, fair of face and many deemed him wise, yet he was never pleased or satisfied with his own valour: he wanted to be a Hero, and the greatest of that name. It happened thus that he set out and travelled all the known and unknown world. When he had journeyed for seven times seven years, he encountered Manwë Súlimo, King of All Things himself and his brother Námo, Lord of the Sleeping and Passing. Both were in disguise, and Arinion was kind to them, even if their glamour made them seem frail and fragile. He offered them the comfort of his tent, the warmth of his fire and the luxury of his finest food and drink; and in exchange for that, Manwë, King of All Things revealed his face to Arinion, and gave his counsel on how to become a true hero."
"A Hero has seven faces, he said. He has the face of a lore-master, an adventurer, a warrior, a guardian, counsellor, a lord, and finally, that of a King. Thou shalt need to be all those seven things at once, son; then and only then shalt thou become a Hero. – Thus spoke Manwë, King of All Things, and Arinion thanked him kindly, for genteel was his counsel and wisdom was in his words. Yet Námo, Lord of the Sleeping andPassing spoke up as well, and said: That is what makes one a Hero indeed. Yet thy wish is to become the greatest of them all; therefore, thy trials to prove thy valour must be all the harder. Hast thou the bravery, the endurance, the humbleness to become a lore-master while thou hast no memory? An adventurer while thou art seasick, and afraid of heights? A warrior whilst thou fear thy own shadow? A guardian while thou art blind? A counsellor while thou art mute? A lord without men to command, and a King without a crown?"

"And lo! As soon as Námo, Lord of the Sleeping and Passing spoke these words, Arinion lost his memory; and thus began his Seven Sufferings and Tribulations. For each trial, he lost the very ability, the very talent in himself that would have been essential to carry out the task at hand: his voice, his power, his eyesight... Yet his will was strong, his heart good and his soul pure, and he passed all trials. At the end, he became not only the greatest Hero, but the most renowned lore-master, the most seasoned adventurer, the strongest warrior, the keenest guardian, the wisest counsellor, the most graceful lord and the most just King of all times. And the Valar saw that, and rejoiced."

Pengolodh's voice trailed off. They both watched the shadowy figure of the bartender moving back and forth inside the building. A gust of wind played with the curtains and made the door's hinges creak.

"There you have the story in short," Pengolodh spoke up again, hesitantly. "You would want to hear the whole ballad tonight – its story is no work of art, for it has been forming itself for centuries by folk who sang it to others, and other folk who sang it in return; yet the one, more or less crystallized version is heart-warming."

"Why is it always Námo who has to ruin things?" Anardil asked, grinning. "I thought we, Teleri were the only ones who held that fact as some kind of folk tradition. It is unfair, surely, considering that Manwë, King of All Things has another, slightly more problematic brother."

"Lord Námo ruined nothing," Pengolodh raised his brows. "He gave Arinion the Great the very chance to become – well, Arinion the Great."

"He must have been very thankful for that. Especially when he lost his eyesight."

"At the end, he was thankful, and his humbleness earned him his titles and experience. That is the moral of the story."

"I don't like the moral of stories," Anardil crossed his arms. "The very term seems haughty and pretentious to me. Stories have morals only for those who hear them from afar: at the comfortable distance of not being involved. Which, essentially, is nothing less than an insult towards the real heroes in those tales."

That earned him a sharp, lingering look from his companion, but Pengolodh said naught else on the matter. "Come, let us enter," he said instead. "Follow me and be courteous, the way I've taught you."

Having no time to protest, Anardil followed the Noldo's smooth footsteps inside the inn.

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The first thing to strike him inside the famed Blind Guardian was the abundance of curtains and hidden corners. The building had no second or third floor as most taverns in Tirion did; it expanded mostly backwards instead, worming its way amongst the verdure like a giant labyrinth. The shadowy, spacious room that had first seemed to be the main piece of the inn was, in truth, only its entrance; at the far end of the room, there stood a small bar with a bored-looking keeper tending to it. Behind his back yawned seven open doors, each of which seemed to lead out to a different looking corridor.

Pengolodh stepped forth, presented a swift bow that seemed far too formal to match the occasion, and said,

"Hail and well met! Tired wanderer as I am, I would much appreciate the hospitality of this house, and perhaps a Loremaster's Mischief. As for my friend here – he is a new resident of our City, yet he deserves no less."

Anardil tried very hard not to smile triumphantly upon hearing the term 'friend', but his face betrayed him. The bartender nodded, unmoved, and poured two cups of red wine, so dark and dense that it was almost black.

"Let us drink to the King's health," said Pengolodh casually; he picked up his own cup, and drank the wine in one long swallow. Anardil did likewise, silently appreciating the bouquet; it was thick and almost sticky sweet, and it smelled of fresh grapes and summer. It almost felt like drinking stum.

The bartender then stood aside, and Pengolodh grabbed Anardil's arm - less gently than before -, and led him through the first door from the left. Anardil found himself in one of the dark corridors he'd glimpsed before, framed by richly carved columns and an abundant forest of wild, capricious decoration; but very soon, the corridor took an abrupt turn and he bumped into a giant bookshelf, overloaded with thick volumes and dust-smelling parchments.

"Careful!" Pengolodh hissed. "Some of those are hundreds of years old!"

"What the…" Anardil tossed a thick pile of linguistic studies back to its place, and looked around in awe. It seemed that they had walked right into an ancient archive; there were bookshelves looming in the dimly lit piece as far as he could see. "Is this... a library?"

"This is the Lore-masters' Lair," Pengolodh said, as if this was the most predictable evidence one's mind could convey. "Lore is found and acknowledged through reading. If it is silence and studies that you seek, this is your place to dwell in The Guardian. But come now! My friends are waiting for us."

Six turns and several dimly lit corridors later, just when the sore wounds on Anardil's thighs were starting to ache, they walked through an open door, into a room that bathed in candle-light. It was a large chamber, slightly similar in build to the one with the bartender, but there were no further rooms opening from it. It was furnished with large, comfortable armchairs instead, all of which were placed around a wide round table with a merrily burning hearth behind it. Around the table sat five Elves; three of them reading, one of them scribbling, and another one looking up at them as they entered, beckoning them closer with a smile and a wave.

"You are late, Quendo," he said in an amiable, but slightly accusing tone. "I trust you have subterfuge enough to defend yourself?"

"I do indeed," said Pengolodh smoothly. "I came with one worth a story: I have the one you all were seeking. Let me present you, my friends, Anardil himself of the Falmari."
All well-rehearsed gestures of courtesy were forgotten in an instant as Anardil made a realization.

"Your name - Pengolodh!" He said. "How did I never hear it before – it is Sindarin!"

A small creak of disapproval appeared between Pengolodh's brows, but Anardil paid no heed to it.

"It must be a translation, of course," he said. "Which raises the very evident question why did you let me know how your name sounded in my language. Did you want me to understand you better? Did you want me to see you as less of a stranger? Is your name so foreign to you that you prefer to use it in another speech…?" He suddenly realised where he was. "Oh, forgive me, good lords. Please receive my greetings."

"Received!" Said one of the Elves, placing down his large book. "And lo! That is a fair question indeed, that of Master Quendingoldo and his name. I would pretty much like to hear the answer myself."

"Your companion is every bit as crude as the stories describe him," said the previous Elf, grinning. "This level of honesty, however, is nothing if not admirable."

"It has been a long time since anyone called me honest, lord," Anardil said. "Rude, sadly, is a much more common case; but my people has a saying which goes, there is no smoke without a fire. There may be a small basis, a tiny chunk of truth to those stories; even if my scandalous level of righteousness is not something I can deliberately change, or even acknowledge."

"Can one ever acknowledge themselves?" said a third voice from the shadows. "What say you to that, Master Anardil?"

Anardil fell silent for a few seconds. He knew when he was tested.

"I say yes," he answered, hesitantly. "Just as much as one may be certain that the sky is blue; even if at times, it is clearly grey or black or even purple. Just as much as one can claim that there is healing and consolation in the Halls of Mandos, even though they never dwelled there. Just as much as one may claim that they do not fear death or blood or shadow or prison when they have never seen them. Only as much as one may hope when hope seems foolish or even a lie. One can think that they acknowledge themselves; for even if our fear have their limits, the only true way to acknowledgement is thinking. Whether one can acknowledge himself justly is entirely another question."

A strange sort of silence followed his words; and suddenly, Anardil became very much aware of all the clear grey Noldo eyes on him.

"I must be very drunk," he mumbled apologetically, and laughter broke out around him.

"You should drink more, my friend," said one of the Elves, and Anardil's heart fluttered upon being called a friend for the second time that evening. "I wish my ventures in the hazy realm of drunkenness made me spit phrases like that."

"Luckily for all of us, you keep spitting them even without a sip," Pengolodh said. "If you stopped for just half a day, my sweet Ilcorin, they would come again as a surprise."

Laughter rose again, and Anardil sat down in one of the armchairs, facing the burning hearth. Pengolodh settled beside him, and they slipped back to their previously rehearsed roles: that of the boasting scholar and his new, slightly amazed acquaintance. Anardil listened dutifully to the Elves' mazy names, as if he could hope to remember them at first hearing; he recounted his first meeting with Pengolodh (detailedly describing his stage of undress and his utter astonishment when he
found a spy in his rose-bushes), then improvised a hymn on Pengolodh's smartness, empathy and the way he honoured him with his friendship. It then fell to Pengolodh to present a revised version of Anardil's story; and the Teler had to admit that it did have a nice ring to it, now that it was all tidied up and written down with nice calligraphy.

And that evening, for the first time in decades, he felt like someone respectable and valuable, surrounded by friends.

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"I can't believe I forgot to ask your friends about the Lay of Arinion!" Anardil grieved much-much later as they crossed the park arm in arm, relying on each other to ease the curious swaying of their steps. It almost felt as though they were boarding a ship.

"None of them could have answered that," Pengolodh said measuredly. "The friend I'd collected the story with... she did not pass to greet us today. 'Twas a busy night, of course – she must have been with the innkeeper."

Pengolodh's voice trailed off, and for the thousandth time that night, Anardil was left in the dark. The Blind Guardian was home to many curious things, and nothing was, in fact, more curious than those who worked there. All of them wore names like Lómelindë, Parmaitë or Ránasta: names that were tailored and cut like fine clothing: names that fit them, yet were not truly theirs. All servants of the inn were polite, silent and swift as shadows, yet pleasant to have around whenever they appeared. The drinks had strange names, such as 'The Wayward Moon' or 'King's Bane'; and when Anardil tried to make fun of the habit by ordering a 'Bystander's Bollocks', he was offered a cup of dry, white wine that seemed to fit the description quite spectacularly.

Yet the greatest mystery of all appeared to be the innkeeper. Anardil supposed they had to be a very strong, fearsome Elf, for no one, not even Pengolodh spoke their name; and his friend appeared to be slightly blushing whenever the innkeeper was mentioned. It might have been only the wine, though.

Yet now, as they were waddling their way back home, Anardil seemed so grieved by his missed chance that Pengolodh gave in with an exhausted sigh.

"I'd need to read my notes to recall how the lay starts," he said, "yet I know that before each of his Trials and Tribulations started, Arinion had to enter a gate; there were seven gates, just as there were Seven Sufferings. And it was when he entered the fifth gate that he lost his clear, ringing voice that had always been a pleasure to listen to; and alas! this grieved him so, for it was his fifth mission to become the greatest Counsellor the world has ever known. Yet there he was, out in the wilderness with foes around, and he wasn't even able to call out for help."

And softly, Pengolodh sang,

On blood-steeped soil he lay,
above him crows sang shrill
and no other sound was heard
atop the lonely hill;
he crawled on hands an' knees
as one crawls on cruel ice
and 're was no gentle breeze
to blow his hair from his eyes.
Moved Arinion's mouth:
"All flowers shall wither"
no voice escaped his lungs
and no-one came thither;
"In sorrow it has started,
in sorrow it must end!"
Alas! his strength was gone
his voice, gone with the wind.

And the night was passing,
yet another came to loom;
so black, blacker than ink
so black, blacker than doom;
many years would he wonder
many years would he hope
yet he would not find his way!
for the mountains were cold;
for the windy slopes were high
the peaks icy and cold
and he had no voice to shout
his heart empty and cold.

And in starlight he walked
draping himself in clouds
in cavern's shade he hid
in breaches he lay down;
and on he wandered still
and on he wandered more
yet to dead end he came:
for the Gates, the Gates were closed -

"...but Anardil, my dear friend, what ails you?" Pengolodh suddenly exclaimed, staring into the other Elf's shocked, stricken face.

"Oh," said Anardil, "nothing. Nothing, really. It's just – I am slightly surprised, if you care to know."

"You're looking at me as if Lord Námo had his hand around your wrist and you were about to answer his call."

"It is but the ghost of the hand, and the echo of the call," Anardil whispered. "Yet for a moment, I felt as if I was... no, no, forget that. I rarely drink this much, and I sleep rather badly sometimes. I am mixing things up. I am giving too much significance to certain coincidences. It is most intriguing, though..."

"What?" Pengolodh said, losing his patience. "You babble as if you were reciting the choir's lines from some tragedy. Speak your mind!"

"It appears," said Anardil, "that I've been seeing dreams about Arinion. All this time, only about him; and I had no idea! Indeed: it is all clear as day now: the sea, the storm, the shadows, the foes and the crows. It was him! Now this is clearly a sign that is above my means of understanding; yet I shall search for my answers, relentlessly, until I find them."

"You dreamed of Arinion?" Pengolodh's voice was very serious, even though he had to grab hold of a fence in order to set himself straight. "Are you certain?"
"No," said Anardil truthfully. "I am probably too drunk to be certain of anything. We shall speak of these matters on the morrow; nothing more than thinking of those dreams gives me the chills."

"We still have almost ten minutes to go," Pengolodh sighed, as if that meant the end of the world. "And dawn is not far. Will you not tell me now?"

"You won't remember anything once you get sober, and I won't bother explaining myself for a second time," Anardil grinned; then he gave a sudden start. "But wait... ten minutes? How is that possible?! You see that tower over there? 'Tis only two corners away from my house. And that other house after the bend in the road opens to the Way of Running Waters. We're very close!"

"No, we're not – we have to go all the way around. There is no path between the buildings before us; these are lordly quarters here with parks, fountains and street-long arbours."

"Then those lords can all go to the Enemy's seven hells with their fountains and arbours," Anardil declared, once he gave the matter a few moments of consideration. "I'm weary and hungry, and I'm going as the crow flies."

And he shook out his cloak with a flourish, then pulled himself halfway up on a gleaming silver fence, his legs searching for hold.

"What – are – you – doing?!" Pengolodh whispered, scandalized.

"Going home. What do you think I'm doing, setting the City on fire?!"

"Those are Lord Ecthelion's gardens!"

"They will serve as a shortcut just as any other. If you intend to fret your legs all around the City in this impossible hour, I'm not standing in your way – but I shall go through here. So are you coming or not?"

"There is no way I would ever do this," Pengolodh said, and he pulled himself up onto the fence beside Anardil. "This is the stupidest thing I have ever seen."

"You did not see much, then, for a historian," the Teler said nonchalantly, and grabbed hold of a nearby tree-branch. He sank his knee into a breach on the top of the fence, balancing his weight between two spikes of shining metal. His feet and knees were both on the other side now.

"You're drunk!" Pengolodh spit out what appeared to be his final argument.

"I'm drunk, you're drunk, the whole world is drunk," Anardil sang, and he chuckled. He had not felt this alive in a very long time.

"Anardil," Pengolodh pleaded. "This counts as trespassing! And a very ridiculous way of trespassing, at that."

"Only if Lord Fancy Helmet catches us," Anardil shrugged, and there was a strange, wild edge to his smile. "And what would such a mighty Elf do outside in his gardens at this hour? All decent people are asleep, my sweet! Yes, of course, you are decent as well, I see it in your eyes; just climb back, then, and go around like all the other sheep! Sweet dreams – we shall speak tomorrow!"

And he swung his legs, then jumped (perhaps a bit less gracefully than intended) – then he waited. Pengolodh landed beside him a few moments later, muttering phrases that did surely not match any decent person's vocabulary. There were stray tree branchlets stuck in his dark hair, and his robes
were dirtied with grass-marks, which considerably diminished his charms as a renowned scholar.

"If I get caught because of you...," he hissed, "I swear I don't know what I'll do with you, but you're going to regret it."

"That sounded very menacing," Anardil gave a chuckle. "I almost wetted my pants."

"Close your mouth and listen to me!" Pengolodh grabbed the sleeve of his robe, and turned him around. "We're about to make a terrible mistake. We should climb back – now."

"You're no fun at all," Anardil complained. "Come on, it's just a minute. We cross the park, we go around the fountains, we climb the fence on the other side, and we're home. You act like we were about to march through the Iron Prison. What is that you're afraid of?"

"I'm not afraid," Pengolodh said, precisely articulating every word. The drunken haze of the evening was entirely gone from his wide eyes. "It just seems like a bad idea."

"It seems good enough to me," Anardil declared merrily. "It wouldn't hurt to explore these gardens a bit."

"That's what I thought," Pengolodh lamented, but as Anardil hit the narrow path leading into the garden, he was still walking beside him. "You're a hopeless fool, a bad-mannered idiot who somehow always finds his way out of trouble with his charming smile. You know that you do – and you count on that! You play on the good hearts of people, just because you know you can make them laugh! And you just – you just do it and you don't give a damn, how do you do that, really?! Where do you get the courage, the guts, the cheekiness to do whatever the hell you please?! And why am I so envious of that?"

"I don't know," said Anardil happily. "Stars above, look at that!" He strayed off the path to contemplate a fountain, chattering merrily below a circle of slender, flowering cherry trees. It was carved of clean marble, and its top formed the statue of a fierce, heavily armed warrior. "Do you think it depicts the lord of the House? Do you think he'd filled his halls with marble busts of his likeness and made all of them spit gold?"

Pengolodh coughed, a roll of laughter stuck in his throat. "You're still a little cross with him for the way he treated you in the Council, are you not?"

"Me? Cross? Oh no, not at all," said Anardil, and he gave the fountain a last, indecorous look before turning away. "I'm a blessedly good soul, my friend. I'm never cross with people. I'm not even cross with Voronwë for treating me like dirt on his soles. I'm merely curious – well, I want to know why people act the way they do. Yet I think I will never comprehend it. I think I will never know why are you still following me, for one."

"Because you're drunk as a fiddler," said Pengolodh, "and I don't want you to get in trouble. Most likely, of course, I'm throwing myself into the pit as well, but at least that will be a pit for two."

"You're such a wonderful person," Anardil sighed dreamily. "Why are you not married?"

"Don't let the wine make you ask stupid questions," Pengolodh chuckled; and Anardil was too dazed to hear that his voice had an edge to it.

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They had encountered no one in the park, nor around the great fountains rippling in the courtyard, nor on the small path as they stole around Lord Ecthelion's house. A horse whinnied at them as
they passed along its lair, but Anardil gave it a privy "psst!" and patted its nose. Pengolodh stifled a laugh at the ease his friend walked around the whole domain, just as if it was his.

And just as their minds were starting to clear, just as the specks of dust in the air were beginning to swim in the red beams of the rising sun, just as they glimpsed the great fence on the other side that opened out almost directly to Anardil's own gardens, they heard the low, frantic sounds of a debate before them.

"I have told you a million times," said a heated voice, "that my dreams meant nothing. Nothing! They're simple nightmares – irksome and disturbing for certain, yet nightmares all the same! They shall pass with time. They might have much to do with Findaráto's death – you know how it shook me. I appreciate your concern, but I am all right, or at least, I will be all right relatively soon. And now, if we have nothing else to discuss..."

"No! No, no and a thousand times no!" said another voice Anardil recognised as Lord Ecthelion's. "How dare you say this, how dare you lie both to me and to yourself? You know that this is much more serious than that! You know that you need help – why are you so reluctant to accept it?! Your dreams, Fin, are trying to tell you something! They are signalling something – you said that yourself, the first time you told me about them! You can't go on trying to ignore this any longer; look at yourself, the dark circles beneath your eyes! When was the last time you've had a whole night of deep, undisturbed sleep...?"

"Just yesterday," said Captain Laurefindil of Ondolindë, quite dryly. "I am perfectly fine, thank you; the dreams are getting scarce."

There was a short pause.

"I do not believe you," said Ecthelion. "Do you believe yourself? Because if the answer is yes, your state is worse than I have thought."

"What should I do, then?!" the other voice sighed, depleted. "Knock on the King's door and apologise for no longer attending to my duties, with the pretext of losing sleep? I already hear the whole court murmuring behind my back that I must be courting some lady... or I must be afraid of the dark. I can't do that! Life should go on – I should get over these dreams and live my life, the life we have always known! You worrying over me and exaggerating my problems will not help."

"And do you think it would help if you just... slept here sometimes?" said Lord Ecthelion in a much lower, softer voice. "We could share a goblet or two, speak about whatever you please – then you could just stretch out in my guestroom and perhaps sleep in peace. And if your nightmares come back and I hear you shouting, I'll be there in a split second, and chase their darkness away."

"Honestly, my friend, I'm touched that you would do such a thing for me," said Captain Laurefindil, "but I can't accept it. You have a life, too..."

"You have always been there for me when I really needed it," said Lord Ecthelion sincerely. "I would be honoured to do the same. You – you're like a brother to me."

Anardil would have really liked to swallow a chortle at such a timid confession coming from a fearsome lord, but – to his great dismay – he felt probably as touched as Laurefindil himself. Pengolodh cowered beside him without a sound; by the looks of him, he was determined to pretend he did not even exist.

"Thank you," said Laurefindil after a long silence. "Thank you kindly. And forgive me. I did not mean to treat you so unkindly. I only... I don't understand why my dreams have such an effect on
me. I have told you about them all, they're not even truly frightening. Yet they exhaust me, they bother me, they never cease to gnaw on my shall I be free of them?"

"As soon as we find out what they mean, my friend," said Lord Ecthelion sternly. "And trust me, we will. Together, we will."

A few moments later, Anardil heard the sound of closing shutters, and when no other noise than the chirping of crickets was to be heard for several minutes, he emerged from the bush he'd been hiding in, and continued his stroll in the lord's gardens as if nothing had happened. Pengolodh soon caught up with him, his eyes never leaving his friend's face, not even when they successfully climbed through the fence at the other end of the property.

"All right," he finally spoke up when they arrived at Anardil's doorstep. "Are you happy now? We've just witnessed a private conversation, and finally, we wasted much more time than we would have spent if we'd simply walked all the way around."

"I'm not happy," said Anardil,"I'm confused. For a reason I cannot truly determine, my friend, I'm entirely convinced that Captain Laurefindil and I are seeing the exact same dreams. And that – if true – is most unsettling."

"How will you prove that?" Pengolodh raised a thin eyebrow. "He'll never share such private matters with you."

"No, he shall not. But Lord Fancy Helmet here would do anything for his friend, or haven't you heard?" Anardil grinned, sinking back to his strange mood. "So I, as you have promptly guessed yourself, shall play on the good hearts of people. And you, my friend, will help me with it this time. After all, my dreams do weigh on my tortured little soul as well. It would be beneficial for both Captain Goldilocks and myself to get the whole matter sorted out, would it not?"

Chapter End Notes

Author's Notes

On symbolism: "The tavern that is no tavern" is one of the most frequently (and wildly) used symbols in my works in general. Although its whole appearance and function is very different, I think it might have something to do with my childhood and the milieu I grew up in. (Those who know me a little bit, or chatted with me about the subject are allowed a resigned nod).

On 'The Blind Guardian': This special tavern has been devised many years ago, when I wrote a series in which I messed up the timeline of Gondolin so much that Elrond and his parents could live there in peace before its destruction happened. The inn wasn't named Blind Guardian (I don't think people called it anything else than 'The Inn'), but it was very similar to this one. I'd like to say that I decided to bring it back, but it didn't happen quite consciously: I've had a dream a couple of months ago, and it came back so vividly that it would have been a sin to leave it out.

I freely admit that the tavern was named after the famous metal band, and not the Lay of Arinion (which, on the contrary, had always included a blind guardian).
On 'The Lay of Arinion': The roots of this story are very old. I think I might have wrote the first version of it when I was 12 or something... It takes mostly after the legends of my people, in which Jesus Christ and Apostle Peter are walking our roads in disguise, and trying to mend people's ways (you would be surprised by the amount of sarcasm Jesus expresses in some of these tales). What is even more striking in them is the way the narration mixes up Catholic religion with ancient pagan folk tradition and symbols. I've been trying to implement these elements into a tale which can be sort of a basis to the whole story, which could leave us wandering if stories could come true, if belief was in vain or not... You'll see all that dilemma unravel later, and you may also start wondering what the Lay of Arinion could mean to the characters. (I might be reading slightly too much Russian classics nowadays...)

On names:

Quendingoldo is the Quenya version of Pengolodh's name, meaning "teaching sage" / "doctor of lore".
Ilcorin is an ancient-structured name, meaning something like "Not of Aman".

Arinion means "Son of morning" or "Son of dawn".
Lómelindë stands for Nightingale [literal: dusk-singer] (male version), Parmaitë stands for "book-hand" and Ránasta means "Lunar month".
It’s strange to be back after such a break – it wasn’t nearly as long as I have imagined it could get. These three months, though, were nothing if not eventful.

To tell you the truth, I’ve been feeling down for a relatively long time, so I wasn’t quite motivated go on publishing this story. Even if I’m writing it ever since, with the same enthusiasm and nigglings as before. When I last looked at the stats in May (on Fanfiction.net: thousands of views and 28 comments) I suddenly just felt like everyone – save the few, faithful readers I dearly appreciate – clicked on my work, thought ‘this is sh*t’ and moved on.

What changed my mind about publishing was, among other things, a ten days long camping and roleplaying event with the Hungarian Tolkien Association, where my works – and in general, my person – were pretty much appreciated. Moreover, the Legend of Arinion (from the last chapter) has been adapted to drama with our small theatre group, and we brought it onstage. To direct such a thing, and to impersonate Mandos in a play you have written and devised yourself… trust me, it gets you in an artistic mood.

Special thanks to Onach for helping me with the script, and for everyone else who had to bear with my person through the workflow.

Special thanks to that beer I drank one night at 4 am. In fact, I hate beer, but at that moment it was just perfect, and helped me finish a song for the next evening gathering.

Special thanks to my fellow Elves of Lindon and our good lord Círdan (and everyone else in the Council).

…special thanks to the whole association for their love and care. Really.

And now on to our story!

“The must have been a moment, at the beginning, were we could have said -- no. But somehow we missed it.”

/ Tom Stoppard, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead /

The Fortress of Himring, FA 467, the fifteenth day of Lóttessë

“Lord Nelyo,” said Counsellor Tyelcano for the fifth time, “is weary. He has been weary ever since the last time your lordship inquired about him, which was exactly twenty-four and a half minutes ago; and sadly, if you look for him in another twenty-four and a half minutes, I shall probably have
to send you away again. Let him rest.”

“It is important,” repeated Maglor stubbornly, and he crossed his arms with the very same, wide gesture he’d used all those minutes ago. “I must speak with him about a very pressing matter. As I have told you before, it concerns the safety of Himlad and our people.”

“And as I have told you before, Lord Nelyo gave me precise orders that I should tend to all matters of the household this morning, and I should make all urgent decisions in his stead about what we should or should not do. Therefore, it would be best if you sat down, lord, and told me about all those urgent matters so we could take the necessary course of action.”

Tyelcano fell silent for a few seconds, as if measuring what he was about to say, then added, “This is a strange occasion to question my competence in leadership, Lord Makalaurë. If the question is not too forward, may I ask when and how did I earn such mistrust...?”

Maglor collapsed into the armchair facing the great desk in Maedhros’s study. It felt strange - Tyelcano was used to sitting at the other side of the table.

“There is no need to see offense where there is none, Counsellor! There isn’t a soul in this castle who can deny your capability or trustworthiness. If I told you about my intentions, though, you would restrain me from doing anything stupid... and that, on this special occasion, goes against my very plans.”

“...which suggests that you are planning to do something stupid - on purpose,” said Tyelcano. “And you expect the lord to help you with that... Tell me, why are masters of art always drawn to lost causes?”

“They inspire the best songs,” said Maglor, and he smiled; but the smile did not reach his eyes.

Their conversation seemed to clog at this point, but the Counsellor did nothing against it. He proceeded to read another report instead, corrected two grammatical errors with a sigh, then placed the parchment on top of a slowly collapsing tile.

“Nelyo would try to understand me if I told him about my plans,” Maglor pressed. “And maybe, maybe he would approve of them.”

Tyelcano’s quill stopped above the next parchment, stayed there for a moment, then it was placed neatly back in the inkwell.

“I can see two ways to solve our situation, Lord Makalaurë,” he heard himself saying. “One: you sit back in that thrice-damned chair and tell me all about your plans... And two: you turn around and leave. I have been reading reports since the third hour of the day and I am at the very end of my patience.”

“If anyone told me that our Counsellor’s patience had an end, I wouldn’t believe them,” Maglor raised his brows in a way that bordered insolence. “But now that I know it has, I would rather not find out what is beyond. All right, I shall stay if you will listen to me; but I want my brother to hear about everything I said. Today.”

“We will make sure of that,” Tyelcano leaned back in his chair. “I’m listening.”

“Good,” Maglor, to the Counsellor’s astonishment, didn’t immediately start speaking. Instead, he looked around the room, picked up a chessboard from a nearby table, and placed it upon the desk, in front of the Counsellor; only then did he take his own place.
“This is Beleriand,” he declared, running his slender fingers along the board. “This is the Himring,” he said then, and placed a white rook at the far edge. “There is Angamando and the Anfauglith.” A black rook and two black pawns around the top-middle. “The scattered Orc forces in Himlad.” One black pawn west, and one south of the Himring. “What remains of the Gap.” A black rook with two black pawns. “And here we are!”

Two white knights and three white pawns were stuffed around the Himring, and Tyelcano was beginning to hope that the conversation would not take the most likely course of purpose.

(Then, of course, it did).

“Even a child can say that we are surrounded,” said Maglor, the outlines of his face hard and sharp in the morning light. “We’re an isle floating idly upon a poisonous sea. The longer we pretend we’re safe, the harder our walls shall crush down. We should clean Beleriand up, starting with our own homeland – starting with Himlad.”

Tyelcano took a deep breath, ready to interrupt, but Maglor raised a finger.

“Yes, Counsellor. I know what any sane person would say: we’re too few, too tired, too weary. Too far from our kinsmen, with no place to return to if we tire ourselves in Orc-hunting at the far south or east. We would need at least another castle to do such a deed: at least another safe haven for our people to return to.”

“One other at the very least,” Tyelcano nodded.

“The very least should be enough, should it not? Well, if you acknowledge the need for it yourself, you might as well approve my intention of retaking the Gap. All I need is the accord of my brother to gather my men and leave.”

There was a swift, almost invisible flash in Maglor’s eyes, as if the weight of his own words made him recoil; but it was no more than a passing impression.

Valar above… he must have truly meant what he said!

Tyelcano forced himself to count to ten in his head, lest he’d start screaming or tearing his hair out.

“Cundunya,” he said, his voice calm as a frozen lake, unaware of his use of the outdated title, “your brother doesn’t have armies stuffed in his pockets. The few soldiers he does have are either exhausted and scarcely armed – as you have mentioned yourself – or constantly out scouting. I fear that you might be asking too much.”

“I don’t need much,” Maglor looked him in the eye. “Our enemies are unprepared, and not fit for a true battle. I think a hundred scouts would suffice... I would gather solely those who were my own followers, and my castle had been their home – my castle, which is now a hothouse for thieving Orcs and other disgusting monsters. Surely, my brother shall grant me the permission to hunt them down.”

Tyelcano shook his head. “Perhaps the Orcs are unprepared for such an assault, yet so are we. You are Lord Nelyo’s eldest brother. You are valuable in our enemies’ eyes; if captured again, you would get them a ransom you cannot imagine, and you would be carried off to Angamando, to suffer a fate that is far worse than death. We cannot risk that! Your last escape was a miracle, and you shan’t be that lucky next time. Sending you – or anyone else – off with a hundred scouts would mean risking a hundred lives to take a castle we cannot man, renovate, or even keep. And you seven, the heirs of Fëanáro, the Sons of the Star should all gather and stay together, here within
these walls. Do not scatter your forces to chase dreams! Our household is not that strong, nor that wealthy anymore; yet with all our forces united, our eyes keen, our spirits steeled, we may survive, as we have survived the Battle of Flames and all the horrors that followed.”

Maglor’s face hardened into an expressionless mask.

“Lord Counsellor,” he said slowly, almost menacingly. “I have been captured and tormented by Orcs – in the light of day, during a ride that was supposed to be a routine scouting. My men were killed in front of my own eyes, and I was tossed and turned and kicked and lashed upon the ground like some rag doll, stripped and trampled into the ground with those filthy beasts standing above me, spitting on me, laughing at me. I shall not tolerate the memory of that any longer. It was an insult to my person and title. It was humiliating.”

His tone would have made Tyelcano wince if he wasn’t so terribly tired.

"Do you hear me, servant of my House!?” Maglor spoke with a vehemence that almost invoked his father. “I felt devastated. I felt like a helpless child. I, a Lord of the House of Fëanáro and a former High King of the Ñoldor, will not abide such flagrant insults to my dignity! I will avenge them! I will chase the filthy Orc-scum out of their dwellings and I will pull the hair out of their skulls, strand by strand! I will make them taste the lash like they made me! I will make them crawl before my feet and fear my name!” His voice was steadily getting stronger.

“I deserve that much! Give me men and let me end this ridiculous retreat we’ve been doing for the past years! We’re still Lords of the West, and Moringotto’s thralls should learn to fear our names again. Where is the Lord Counsellor I have known, the one who wielded both the quill and the sword…? Where is the Hero of the Battle of Flames…?”

“That was Lord Nelyo, I only assisted,” Tyelcano sighed, suddenly overwhelmed by sympathy and a deep sort of understanding. “My lord… my child, listen to me…”

“I am no child, who needs your consolation and pity,” Maglor seethed. “I WANT JUSTICE! DO YOU – OR ARE YOU A COWARD?”

“JUSTICE?!”

It seemed that Tyelcano’s patience truly had an end, after all – right there. It felt as though all the blood had run out of his face; the air seemed to grow hot around him, his heart was suddenly racing, and his hands trembled. Still, he schooled himself, tightening his fists, taking several deep breaths and raising his chin. His voice rumbled like a summer storm, and his eyes were ablaze as he spoke.

“If you want justice, my child, go straight to Moringotto’s doorstep, and bid him to kindly hand over your father’s holy Jewels; and tear the Iron Prison down with your own nails and teeth if he does not! Then go and break through the Gates of Mandos, and bring back all the lonely, sorrowful souls who have suffered because of the Enemy’s work, and climb up the Taniquetil with them to appease the Powers! I wish you luck.”

Maglor sprang to his feet, and knocked the chessboard over with a loud snap.

“I came here to receive your counsel, not to suffer your arrogance and mockery! Aye, it is justice what I desire, and whatever you may say, I shall have it!”

Tyelcano ignored the hot flames of indignation in the pit of his stomach.

“Justice, as an absolute entity, is non-existent, lordship,” he said with an effort. “The wish for
justice was what made Moringotto turn his back on the Valar... and justice is what your father was chasing as well. Behold, what it brought upon all our heads?"

“How dare you!” Maglor hissed. “How dare you utter Father’s and the Enemy’s name in the same sentence?!”

“What is the meaning of this?”

The voice was faint and raspy, but it held enough authority for them both to swallow the rest of their argument and get on their feet.

Maedhros was standing in the doorway, a green cloak pulled tightly around his lean figure. The hemlines of a nightshirt could be seen around his neck, as far down as his collar-bones. Tyelcano could hardly remember the last time he saw his lord in a state this close to dishevelled; it seemed that he’d been shaken from his best dreams, even though the dark circles around his eyes suggested that he’s been awake for at least a few nights in a row. And yet his countenance was still stern and imperious, and the light in his grey eyes bright and lively.

He is losing sleep again, and here we are, ruining his few precious hours of undisturbed rest.

“Lord Nelyo,” The Counsellor bowed, his voice devoid of all emotion. “I am terribly sorry for this flare-up, and even more ashamed of my rash and ugly words towards your brother. I got... carried away.”

“What happened?”

“We were engaged in an argument, and I didn’t take his opinion well,” answered Maglor readily, like one who wants to make an impeccable impression. “It was my fault. The Counsellor has been working all night and I didn’t take that into account.” With that, he turned to Tyelcano. “I am sorry, my lord. I was inconsiderate and rude.”

“And most of all, lordship, you were being irresponsible,” the Counsellor sighed. “Thankfully, it is over now – I hope that what was previously a quarrel shall turn to a fruitful clash of views between the pair of you. And now, if my lords shall both excuse me, I must return to my reports.”

“Absolutely not,” said Maedhros sternly. “I shall have no enmity within my walls. We will talk about this matter now, whatever it may be. Sit back.”

“You need rest, lordship,” Tyelcano insisted.

“Then do not tarry,” Maedhros tilted his head. “That concerns you as well, Kano. I don’t think anyone else than Father has ever managed to make our dearest Counsellor spit flames like that.” When he received no immediate answer, he looked meticulously around the room, noticing the disorder. “People who smash chessboards to my favourite oaken floor are usually people who have things to say. Please, do go on. I am a great listener.”

Tyelcano sat mutely in the lord’s chair for several seconds. His eyes wandered off to Maglor’s face, who seemed to have swallowed his tongue. Next to Maedhros, he was almost like a ghost with his pale skin, his dark robe and those wide grey eyes, now partly hid behind the curtain of his raven hair. His wrath had faded, evanished like puffs of smoke, and to Tyelcano, he suddenly seemed colder than the ever-changing Moon; and Maedhros, though weary and scarred, shone like the Sun itself next to him, burning him... outshining him.

Yet all of this was no more than a passing impression in Tyelcano’s head, a sharp, telling image that stuck in his mind’s eye; and before he could put it into thought or words, Maglor collected
himself, straightened his back as he sat, and spoke up,

“...I can see now that the Counsellor was right about my plans: they were presented with the wrong words, and consequently, they may have seemed rash, or even flippant. I shall try a different approach. What I want, Nelyo, is solely to...”

There was a loud knock on the door; so assertive, so determined that Maglor swallowed the rest of his sentence, Tyelcano sprang to his feet, and Maedhros said,

“Enter – and pray that you have reason enough to disturb us!”

It was Antalossë, the young scout who answered from the gap of the door, his breath rapid and inordinate, as if he’d been running all the way up from the training fields.

“Lord Warden, Lord Makalaurë, Lord Counsellor,” he jabbered, bowing deeply, “a messenger has arrived from Barad Eithel, and it was so exciting – I mean, my lords, that he was racing as if the Enemy’s fire-spitting demons were in his heels, and he told me –“

“I cannot wait to hear what he told you, my child,” Maedhros interrupted with a small smile, “yet I would like to read the message first.”

“That is not possible, Lord Warden – I mean, there is no written word – ‘tis a private message from the High King.”

A small crease appeared between Maedhros’s brows, his gaze suddenly much more intent.

“Let him in immediately. I cannot wait to hear what my cousin has to say.”

“The messenger is on his way uphill, my lord,” Antalossë bowed once again. “As soon as I saw him, I ran so I could tell you... in fact, the squires always run in the stories to tell their lords about such news, so I took the courage...”

Antalossë made Maedhros smile for the second time in the past ten minutes – a remarkable achievement, Tyelcano thought -, nevertheless, the lord raised his hand to silence him.

“Bring him here, young one, as soon as he enters the gates - and make sure that his horse is well tended, that he’s offered a cup of hospitality and that his accommodations are comfortable. Then come back! I shall be wanting you here.”

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The next hour passed in a noisy, vivid blur; they all donned their formal robes and Maedhros locked himself up with the High King’s envoy for what seemed like a very long time. Young Antalossë ran off, then came back, then ran off again when the lord’s favourite stallion stormed out of the stables, determined to tamper with a fresh wagon-load of apples; which caused a monstrous calamity in the courtyard. Not entirely ten minutes later, two scouts arrived in all haste from the west, announcing the arrival of Carnistir Fëanorion, the Lord of Thargelion and “his noble companions” in five days – only to be interrupted by three of their brothers-at-arms coming from the direction of Ossiriand. They brought news of death and havoc, and Orcs lurking in the river-lands. Tyelcano, who knew a lost cause when he saw one, left the whole matter in Maglor’s hands – trying not to think about how it was justifying his cause –, and began devising the most impeccably logical way to house a host of weary soldiers in the Himring (the task seemed almost as daunting as the prospect of returning to his lord’s reports). He was almost done with the count of free rooms and other possible accommodations in the Northern Wing when the door behind him opened, and the royal messenger was sent off to have rest. Maedhros followed him almost
immediately, an air of strain and great determination about him.

“Come,” he said in a low voice as he stormed beside the Counsellor. “Walk with me.”

Tyelcano was a tall, strong Elf himself, yet even he had to make effort to keep up with Maedhros’s mile-long strides. The lord was too deep in thought to care, and Tyelcano knew better than to speak, or complain, or to give any reminder of his presence; he simply waited, and made speed.

“What am I going to do now, Counsellor?!” Maedhros suddenly shook his head, his gaze lost in distances he could not fathom.

“I know not, lordship,” Tyelcano said, “but by the look on your face, I daresay it shall be something loud and impetuous.”

“It shall be more stupid than anything else,” Maedhros admitted. “Yet it must be done. There is no other way.”

They descended the old, rickety oaken stairs that led to the back of the courtyard. On any other occasion, Tyelcano would have found solace in the steady, well-known sound of his strides over aging wood, but now he did not seem to have the ears for it; and neither did his lord, for he suddenly halted, then turned around to face him, a cold gleam in his eyes.

“The dreams, Tyelco,” he said without any introduction or explanation, in the most informal speaking mode of their tongue. “Findekáno is seeing them, too. And they’re making him suffer.”

“The dreams,” echoed the Counsellor, not being able to hide the wariness from his eyes. “So that was the message you received. And now you’re wondering whether you should storm down the stables, haul Silmatal out of his box and ride north to save your cousin. As if that would change anything.”

His words had an edge to them, and he regretted them as soon as they left his mouth; yet all they earned him from his lord was a sad smile, and a complete change of subject.

“Makalaurë must have truly angered you. What did he want?”

“To do something rash and dangerous about the Orc-packs around your lands. I will tell you in detail, if that is your command… but please, lordship, find the time to hear your brother’s own explanations as well. I may have been wrong or biased, or it could be only my caution speaking. You’d better be the judge of that than I, or anyone else.”

“Kano wants his castle back,” Maedhros guessed immediately, with a small noise under his breath; too bitter to be a chuckle, too sharp to be a sob. “Don’t think I keep my eyes closed. It was only a matter of time.”

“I must say I am surprised. I… I have rarely seen him speaking with such vehemence. Perhaps never.”

“Everyone would say I am wrong, but I sometimes think Kano is more like Carnistir than anyone else,” Maedhros said, puzzled. “Especially since my rescue. I have always been amazed to see how no one else noticed all the anger and frustration stuffed inside him. He can let some of that out through his songs – ever so sweet, ever so melancholic –, yet the worst of it remains inside, in his heart, and gnaws on him. They’re alike with Carnistir, I say, in everything save the essence… the bile is there: one brother spits, the other swallows.”

“I have never thought about them that way,” Tyelcano admitted, finding his lord’s argument
disturbingly well-founded.

The silence stretched between them for a few minutes as they exited the castle and crossed the courtyard. The Counsellor expected his lord to take the right turn towards the stables before he could devise any clever way to hold him back; his chest felt heavy, as if some great, ineluctable doom weighed on it. But Maedhros took the left fork in the road to climb the nearest watchtower and waved the guards off when they greeted them, so they could have their privacy. Finally, they were standing side by side above the lands of Himlad, many-pointed Stars gleaming imperiously below their feet as the wind played with the flags in their holders.

“You were right. I want to haul that horse out of the stables, Counsellor,” Maedhros suddenly said. “I want to storm off to Either Sirion, to an extent you cannot imagine. I wish I could do that – but it is hardly possible. I can see that much. My lands are stuffed with Orcs, my scouts are being hunted and we’re beginning to be surrounded. My people need me here.”

Tyelcano let out the air stuck in his lungs with a soft ‘huh’.

“Young I need to answer Findekáno,” Maedhros went on. “And I need to do so in the same way he messaged me – not by written word, because that could be read, because Moringotto’s servants could find a way to break even the cleverest codes one may devise. And yet… and yet I cannot trust any messenger with such information, Counsellor. I cannot… It has to be me who delivers that message, because the safest place it can be guarded is here, inside my own heart, unspoken. I shall not trust anyone with it, for the safety of us all. Now, this leads us to a most uncomfortable situation, in which I am needed here and in Eithel Sirion at the same time. However – as we’re both aware –, I cannot split myself in two.”

Tyelcano – for the second time that day – was beginning to hope that the conversation would not take the most likely course of purpose.

(And again, it did).

“If I am truly to depart, I shall need a plan of action to be followed while I am away, to cleanse my lands from all enemies,” Maedhros stated calmly, “by a capable person to execute my orders in the exact way I bid them to. I cannot think of anyone who is better suited to such a task than you, Counsellor. You shall need to be me while I am away. You shall need to be Regent Lord of the Himring.”

“Lordship…,” Tyelcano closed his eyes shut, then counted to ten in his head, silencing his thoughts with merciless, accurate precision. He could not let himself loose his patience there and then. It would have meant the end of the world. “Lordship,” he said again. “I am honoured that you would weigh such a responsibility on me… yet it would not work. Your brothers would not listen to me the way they do to you. They… they need you now, to keep them together after everything that happened. And your people as well: they need you to unite them under your flag. If Himlad is to be cleansed, ‘tis you who should lead the hosts and sound the horns, ‘tis you whose name should be praised, not mine!”

Maedhros took a breath to interrupt, but Tyelcano raised his hand.

“Lordship, listen to me, I beg you! If we are to do anything about that stolen Silmaril, you should keep your name impeccable and your title steady. If you rise again as the saviour of the free people and Moringotto’s bitterest enemy, as you did after the Battle of Flames, what sort of light shall it shed upon King Thingol of Doriath that he retains your rightful heritage…? And if you go… what sort of light shall it shed upon you, the Warden of the East, to hide under your cousin’s cloak while your servant is holding the ranks for you…?”
“That,” said Maedhros in a hard voice, “should very well earn you the same sort of response you’ve received from Makalaurë. I will not have such insolence from you, or anyone else.”

“If that is what it takes to shake you back to your good senses, I am ready to receive any punishment you seem just,” said Tyelcano, gathering the rest of the insolence he could find in himself. “In matters regarding your cousin, my lord, I tend to be more objective than you, and you know that. I understand that you need to answer him, and I understand as well that the prospect of your answer getting known is daunting to you. Yet it would be very unfortunate to risk everything you’ve built here only because pouring your heart out to a messenger is risky and uncomfortable.”

“I care less about comfort than I did about wearing a crown,” there was a flash in Maedhros’s eyes. “What I care about is…” His voice trailed off. Following some instinct, Tyelcano looked down, and he saw that the lord’s hand was gripping the parapet so hard he almost expected to see cracks on the moisty stone.

“What I care about,” said Maedhros again in a raw, shrill voice, “is my dignity. No, perhaps not even that. Yet I cannot suffer… there are still a few things left in this world that I cannot suffer, Tyelco, and one of those would be my men starting to whisper things behind my back. You… if you heard my response to Findekáno, you would understand. I am the Warden of the East, the Enemy of the Enemy, and the holder of all those mad names and titles that hang from me like rotten-ripe apples from a scrogged tree. There are things I cannot permit myself to do – or reveal. Have I been clear?”

Part of Tyelcano’s mind must have been aware that his lord was eyeing him expectantly, yet he said nothing, and did nothing. His hand stopped mid-air, pointing at his chin, and worry lifted from his bows like rainclouds after a spring storm. His path was suddenly clear, laid before his feet; all he needed to do was to step on it, and pray that the Powers would be in his favour.

“Lord Nelyo,” he said slowly, “you said that I needed to be you while you were away, so that your hand and will would reach Barad Eithel as well as Himlad.”

When Maedhros nodded, Tyelcano said, his voice betraying nothing of his inner turmoil and anticipation, “Then, my lord, if you can find it in your heart to trust me with your message, I would happily – and safely – deliver it to the High King, and lead any sort of negotiation you seem fit, so you could stay here and tend to the matters of our homeland. This would be the safest way to execute your plan, and this is what my heart tells me to do.”

Tyelcano knew his suggestion was bold. He suffered through the rapidly changing waves of emotion in his lord’s eyes: elemental surprise, then disbelief, then anger, then suspicion, then excitement, then pain – and then, he felt humbled and bowed his head. When his lord spoke, though, his voice was gentle.

“You hate travelling… with a passion. Do you truly think this would be the wisest way to proceed?”

“There is nothing I hate more than the thought of you – any of you seven, but especially you, lordship - riding around in Beleriand while Moringotto’s henchmen are running free. Against that, what is a bit of rain and a few roots to batter my back while I am asleep…?”

Maedhros took a deep breath. “I hear you.”

Wind rose in the west, and the flags were flapping so rapidly and loudly they almost made out the beat of a battle song. Tyelcano closed his fists as a current of fresh air wormed its way under his cloak, and prayed to Manwē and Varda for his warning to be heeded for once.
“All right,” said Maedhros after a long time. “Though my heart is against it, I shall do as you advise, and put wisdom and caution before my pride. You shall depart on the morrow, and you shall hear the message to deliver on your way, out in the wastelands, where there are no walls and no ears. I shall ride with you for a while, then, to clean my thoughts; for there are other matters we should speak about. Go now, and rest. You will need your strength.”
Morning Mist

Chapter Notes

This one is dedicated to all the heroes who have been wandering since Chapter VIII. what Maedhros's secret illness might consist of.

I would like to thank all of you for your feedback, I dearly appreciate it!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

XVIII. Morning Mist

"All great literature is one of two stories; a man goes on a journey or a stranger comes to town."

— Leo Tolstoy

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"You closed it! Closed – like one would close a hole on a pair of underpants!"

Curufinwë's voice was nothing short of hostile as he trailed along the workshop, chisel in hand; back and forth, back and forth, back and forth. There was an unsteady rhythm to his strides, but a rhythm nevertheless; and Tyelcano anchored his mind to the soft thump-thump of his feet that kept the world together.

"You closed it!" The accusation clashed upon the shield of his pride for the third time, as true as it has ever been.

"This is my best hauberk," Tyelcano said gently, "the one that survived the Flames with me. I did not think that I'd have to use it again, and this soon. I didn't want to part from it, so I took a few precautions…"

"You ruined it! You stole into my workshop by night and r-u-i-n-e-d it!" Curufinwë sang. "Look at this, look at the way you've tackled these poor strings of metal…" He shook the hauberk slowly, theatrically, listening to the eerie jingle of its rings. "Hear them scream in pain!"

Tyelcano couldn't hide his smile. Listening to such a distressed lament over rough-and-ready work felt cosy and reassuring in an odd way: it draped a veil of normality over the chaos that seemed determined to settle in his life. He remembered suffering through such growleries from Tirion and Formenos, both by Atar and Atarinke.

"…why didn't you tell me, anyway?" Curufinwë sighed, proudly and exasperatedly as a minstrel concluding his epic ballad. "Though no longer your lord, I am at least a craftsman in this castle. I could have ended the suffering of your wounded chainmail instead of tormenting it any further!"

"It would have been audacious to wake you in the middle of the night with such a request," Tyelcano said, almost apologetically. "I did not have much time to reflect on the details of my journey; I have to leave in all haste, and my plans of action were consequently reduced."
"What I find audacious is the botching-up of this poor piece of metalwork," Curufinwë crossed his arms. "Your only chance is that you're leaving so I won't have to look at it every day. Now hurry, take it off!"

"Lordship, there's no time…"

"Tsk-tsk," Curufinwë raised his finger, a bit imperiously, a bit mockingly, a bit playfully. "No more lordshipping. Find something dark and destructive, and call me that."

"A sledgehammer?" Tyelcano offered. Instead of the snort of laughter he'd been hoping for, the comment earned him no more than a disgruntled noise under the smith's breath. In a better place and a better time, it could have been a chuckle; but this was Beleriand, and the fourth hour of the day, and the Counsellor was soon to leave.

"Take that outrageous thing off, I said," Curufinwë commanded. "You shall have a new one by the time you come back, but I must have your size."

"Don't waste any expensive material on me, lordship," Tyelcano insisted, but he began undoing the clasps all the same. "We are becoming short on metal."

"You're like Nelyo in my eyes, in the sense that if you get a hole in your chest, this whole country will burn down to ashes within a few weeks," Curufinwë stated matter-of-factly. "Get your hands out of my way," he added, and tossed the Counsellor's arms up into the dusty, coal-smelling air. Tyelcano felt a measuring-tape grazing his back like a strayed band of lash. "I won't let you die, Counsellor. You will have a decent armour, and you will use it." Another caress of the measuring-lash. "Left arm up, right arm down 'til midway!" Another. "Good, now switch them!" Curufinwë muttered under his breath, "...to ruin a perfectly fine hauberk like that... what would Father say?!" The measuring-tape crept all the way up Tyelcano's shoulders. "Flex your muscles and raise your arms again!" There was a touch of leather upon his neck, then an uncomfortable shiver ran down his spine. "Don't move and keep your chin up! Thank Manwë you don't have Nelyo's size, how can someone be so terribly tall and have such a thin waist... arms down, Counsellor, we're almost done. Unflex your flexing bits. I'll cover you in metal from head to toes if I have to, but you won't die."

"Yours has always been a practical mind," Tyelcano smiled.

"If you want me to precise how profoundly grateful I am for everything you have done to me the past few weeks, you don't need to have any doubt about my sincerity," said Curufinwë calmly. "I truly am. You gave me work and a purpose, and the latter... that's something I've been lacking for a long time. It's a nice change. Now raise your chin once again, if you don't want your armour to throttle you!"

"You don't need to be grateful, filthy sledgehammer of Moringotto," said Tyelcano (and this time, Curufinwë did smile), "you only need to get better, and remain sane and useful to Lord Nelyo... and above all, be happier, if you can. That is all I ask from you."

"I will try," Curufinwë said, and his voice was so calm and indifferent that for a second, the Counsellor almost believed that happiness could truly be acquired through simple effort. The smith then grabbed a piece of parchment and scribbled a few inconsistent-looking numbers upon it. Tyelcano could not help but watch the process, for he used the same size-listing as his father would use, and under his breath, he also resumed his previous litany about the hauberk, just as Fëanáro would if he were there. If the Counsellor did not know Curufinwë since he'd been a promise in his father's magniloquences, he would have probably taken offense; but he was Tyelcano of Formenos, who knew good smith-work from bad just as well as acceptable from good. He also knew that the
corrections he'd made on his hauberk, despite not reaching feanorean standards, were above 
acceptable; and most importantly, they would serve him well on the road.

And since Curufinwë grudgingly chose his family over his pride and remained in the Himring 
under Maedhros's protection, he seemed to grow healthier and livelier with every passing day. 
Housed and well-fed for several weeks now, his face and hands did not look sickly and skeletal 
anymore; the fiery heat of the smithy coloured his arms and cheeks, and instead of blood, sweat 
and sour earth, he smelled of oil and coal once again: a familiar scent. His hair was shoulder-length 
now, its matted ends having been cut and thrown away, and the clothes he wore were clean and 
soft against his ivory skin. The title of lord he wore no more, but that did not seem to have any 
effect upon his mood, or upon the imperious, kingly way he moved around the castle; and to the 
Counsellor, it seemed as though some heavy shadow had lifted from him, and he could once again 
laugh and play his scoffing japes. The only noticeable change in his behaviour was his absence 
from council meetings, dinners, routine scoutings and other public events. He spent all his time in 
the smithy with his new assistants and apprentices, and for the better part of the day, the only 
remainder of his presence was the thick band of smoke exiting the chimneys. He spoke to no one 
about his plans and their results, but he seemed to be in great labour, driven by his own insatiable 
spirit.

"You have to go, Counsellor," he suddenly said, with unexpected gentleness in his voice. "Dawn is 
coming, and Nelyo awaits. Be sure to taste wine in Eithel Sirion – our cousin has a remarkable 
collection, as I recall. Provided that it hasn't been eaten by the Flames."

"Let us hope I'll get there in time to taste that wine at the summer celebrations," said Tyelcano 
smoothly.

"Well, I have made something for you that may help you get there," said the smith. "Here, have it! 
It's not a remarkable thing, but useful: that much I can promise. It's the sort of weapon I've been 
dreaming about through all my clueless wanderings in the wilderness. More than a knife but less 
than a sword, sharp and rough, thin but widening near the hilt, slender but deadly. And it's well-
made, within the circumstances. It cuts wood and flesh and bone and Orc-necks, and even the 
lesser kinds of iron… but I shall be very cross with you if you break it to splinters upon some 
Dwarwish helm."

"Warning heeded," Tyelcano smiled and reached out to examine the dagger. "This is a generous 
gift, Curufinwë; one I do not remember having earned. But I thank you for it."

"Once again, you thick-headed Moriquend," the fifth son of Fëanáro said, "I will not let you die. 
Now, shall you try it or not?"

Tyelcano grabbed the hilt without a second thought, and pulled the blade out of its smooth 
scabbard. The new dagger had a cold gleam to it; its weight and length was unfamiliar in the 
Counsellor's hands, and the soft engravings at its sides glimmered like tiny stars in the trembling 
light of candles.

Tyelcano stared at the weapon for several mute seconds, his hands numb, his head empty. He was 
silent for a minute, or perhaps a whole Age; he did not know and cared even less.

"Is it not to your liking…?" Curufinwë raised his brows lazily, disgruntledly, as if he himself could 
hardly believe the truth of his assumption.

"I – I have dreamed of this dagger, cundunya," Tyelcano said slowly, waveringly. "Several times."

Ten seconds passed in utter silence and stillness; then the Counsellor gave a short, unconvincingly
bright smile.

"In those dreams," he lied, "it saved my life."

"Well - sometimes," said Curufinwë, and he clasped Tyelcano's arm in a warrior's farewell, "dreams come true."

An explanation. There must be some sort of explanation, which I will probably find out later; but there is no time for that now. Lord Nelyo awaits, and patience is not one of his many virtues.

Tyelcano forced the roughly repaired hauberk back upon his shirt, then locked himself up in the dark cell of his formal robe once again; the one with the Star shining golden across his chest upon a deep blue field: so blue that it was almost black. He had worn the same colours as Herald of Finwë, as Principal Advisor of the High King, as Head of the Great Council in Tirion, as Regent Lord of Formenos and as Chief Captain of the High King just as well as First Counsellor of the Warden in the East. That robe of blue velvet was thick with duties and heavy with responsibilities; it smelled of blood and futile efforts, and reeked of mistakes and inconsistencies; yet there was also a lightness to it, a gush of wind and the strain of power. Still… now, as the Counsellor locked the last of its clasps upon the collar, he suddenly felt like his robe carried the Doom of the Valar itself, and their scythe had just bit his neck through the chainmail.

I'm being highly illogical, Tyelcano insisted, determined to calm his revolting heart. No more than a few weeks ago, I've concluded that my dreams held no particular consistency or coherency: that they were a foggy mess of recurring symbols and threats of death. There is no way I could be sure of having seen this particular weapon in my visions, while I'm not even sure if I saw archers or trees or a gate! And from this moment on, certainly, my mind shall pair up Lord Curvo's gift with the dagger from my dreams; therefore, I shall surely dream of this exact dagger from now on. How can I be so ridiculous…? Perhaps I have even offended the lord, while the only thing he did was giving me a gift – apart from measuring me from head to toes to prepare another.

The Counsellor shook his head, and shrugged the whole matter off with a veil of calm and soberness, a privilege of diplomats.

It was nothing if not interesting, though, he admitted silently as his horse was led out of the stables. A guard informed him that his escort had rode far out to the open lands, while the Lord Warden was waiting for him at the gates; the two parties were supposed to meet at the Pass of Aglon.

There must be something, some small detail that linked the two images in my mind. Perhaps the length of the weapon – I have never owned a dagger quite like this, so it was foreign to my hands. Or it might have been the form of the hilt… and it would be unwise to forget as well that I received it barely an hour before setting out on a dangerous journey. It is very easy to feel such foreboding when one's mind is weary, and sharpened to see ill omens everywhere.

Tyelcano sighed. Here was a stern reminder that he, even he could be driven too far by his emotions. It seemed entirely unnecessary to create himself more problems and grievances than he already had.

This dagger is a fine gift and nothing more. What I said to Lord Curvo may as well prove true – it shall probably save my life upon the road.

The Counsellor took a deep breath, straightened his back and rallied his horse out of the courtyard, towards the gates.
The clatter of hooves of the two horses seemed to have been swallowed up by the dim, heavy layer of fog sprawling above the wide wastelands. The riders sat stiff, motionless, every muscle tense as if spying upon enemies in the colourless landscape; but there was not a soul to be seen, nor anything else. The fog hid them just as much as it veiled any approaching foes - not that their presence was much likely in the heart of the Marches.

Tyelcano had been surprised to see Tulcestelmo at the gates. The Captain of Guards was standing on top of the wall, cold and stern like a sculpture of a king long dead; he nodded in recognition when the Counsellor led his horse through the cramped rear gate of the fortress. The Captain offered him his arm in a warrior's farewell and wished him a good journey, voicing his hope that the he would return soon.

And then suddenly there he was, out in the wide wastelands with no more than his lord's great white destrierin his heels; for they had promised to join their escort at the Pass, under the last watchtower's grim, dark walls. The Sun was probably rising, but nothing could be seen of it through the fog – they were well inside the month of Lótessë, yet the last chilly breath of winter still lingered in Himlad's lands.

Tyelcano let out a soft sigh to see if his breath was visible - it was. He shifted a little in the saddle, categorically ignoring the sudden longing he felt for his comfortable suite, somewhere behind (and well above) his back. The Himring may have looked grim and fearsome to the eyes of an outsider; but hot fires burned night and day behind the thick walls, soft, heavy curtains shut out the creeping fingers of the north wind, and every single soul inside was well fed and garmented.

When Maedhros first spoke, they were galloping through a wide meadow, encircled by the stooping hills of Aglon; neither could see them, but as they knew every rock and every hog's back in the wastelands, they sensed their closeness.

"You are wordless," the lord said, and Tyelcano had to smile.

"I am your messenger, lordship; I speak only if asked. You are wordless, though."

Silence stretched between them for a while and Tyelcano glanced carefully towards the lord. Maedhros's features would have been unreadable for the eyes of a stranger - but not for his Counsellor, who had led him by the hand when he was still an elfling.

"You are not convinced if you've made the right choice," Tyelcano said straight to his eye. There, he risked being angrily reminded of his role as a messenger – notably speaking only if asked -, but as part of him had expected, Maedhros only let out a soft sigh, returning his stare.

"No, I am not."

"And why is that?"

"I still profoundly dislike the idea of sending my most trusted advisor to such a sinister journey… And then I need to remind myself that said sinister journey consists of nothing more than crossing Beleriand to safely deliver a message to the High King – one message! When did we allow our enemies to bar us out of our own lands? This is outrageous, and an insult to our noble people!"

Maedhros closed his eyes for a moment, then he said, without his previous fervour, "I am beginning to agree with Kano when it comes to the retaking of the Gap. I shall see how many swords can Carnistir assemble… it might as well be enough."
"You have plans," said Tyelcano.

"I do."

"Since when?"

"Since I spoke with my brother," said Maedhros measuredly. "No, that is not entirely true: I've been having them for a long time, perhaps ever since the Flames; but I put them to conscious thought only yestereve. And I daresay that they're well-founded plans, save for the part where I send you off to the wilderness to meet your fate. I wish I could do that in your place." A small crease appeared upon the lord's forehead. "Even so," he murmured, his eyes glimmering dimly in the faint mockery of a morning light, "considering everything..."

Here, his voice trailed off and he sank back to his gloomy mood as if his thoughts were too dark to put to words. The sky began to slightly lighten behind his silhouette and Tyelcano knew they had to make speed.

"You cannot consider everything, my lord," a nearly invisible smile played at the corners of his lips. "That would take all the years and Ages of Arda that are still to come. Someone must deliver your message to the High King, and not by written word. You cannot take this mission upon your shoulders, lordship; we both know that."

"That is not the questionable part," his lord said with a strange coldness creeping into his voice. "The questionable part is what will happen if the quest fails and I send you to your death."

"In that case, such is my fate; but I strongly believe that the Valar are guarding and guiding us. Yes, lord, even us," he emphasized as he saw Maedhros rolling his eyes. "Do not think I wouldn't be merrier staying by your side, yet we need to get your message to the High King, and swiftly. Still... leave haste to me, lordship, I beg you! You don't like to wait, you never did and never would; though you have already learned to be patient through the years, even if it makes you itch. This is the path I advise you to take once more: the path of forbearance."

"Patience will not help me now," Maedhros's voice was coarse, even rough.

"Patience always helps, my lord."

The only answer the statement earned him was a swift pull that resonated through his whole body, as his horse turned to follow the lord's proud stallion, uphill at last. They were coming close to the Pass; the last watchtower emerged from the pale green verdure like a black lance, fires burning below its narrow windows. Their orange glow pierced through the fog and made Tyelcano's eyes water for a few moments.

"Let us linger here for a while," Maedhros said with a sigh, when they reached the hilltop. "We have one gruesome business left with each other."

Following some silent accord, they both jumped off their horses, letting them taste what remained of the dead-grey mountain grass. Despite the rains, the hill was becoming bald.

"As you say, Lord Warden," said Tyelcano, for he knew he had to say something, yet he recognized the lord's foul mood just as well, and he was determined to remain as calm and collected as possible.

"You must forgive me for retaining my message this long," Maedhros said, his voice softer now. "I had hoped in vain that speaking would be easier if I tired myself with a long ride out."
"And shan't it be, my lord?"

Maedhros laughed softly. "I did not tire myself."

The idea was bold, unruly and slightly insolent even; moreover, it should not have been acted out with his best robes on, this far out in the wilderness on a cold, foggy morning like it was; yet Tyelcano's hand and mouth moved on their own accord.

"Then let me tire you, lordship!"

And Curufinwë's dagger flew out from its scabbard.

Whenever Tyelcano sparred with someone he knew, the only thing he heeded were the eyes: two shiny windows inside the soul of the other, warning him, guiding him, and betraying their owner. While fighting, Maedhros's eyes were oft empty or shut like barred gates; and some other times, the pride and fury of singing steel made the lord's gaze flicker with harmless scorn and amusement (though never joy). This time, though, his eyes were wide and unguarded, and Tyelcano saw a flicker of surprise and naked turmoil in them, before they narrowed and the veil of impassivity descended upon them.

Fighting Tyelcano of the Marches with a longsword against that dagger was indeed a tiring business, and it required a lot of jumping, rolling, swearing and running around from both of them; yet for once in a lifetime, it was the lord who sweated first, and had they fought to blood, Tyelcano would have slit his left thigh open once. That would have made the Counsellor worry if he had time to consider anything else than the steady rhythm of his own strikes and slashes, and his constant awareness of the deadly longsword dancing around him.

Then suddenly came a moment when he leapt forward, arms and legs moving on their own accord, in a reckless and wild jump, his entire being alert and tense with the energy of fighting. The dagger jerked forward, and the whole length of the blade touched the lord's right shoulder. Had they fought to blood…

The next thing the Counsellor knew, he was lying face-up in what felt like a whole lake of dew, thin strands of grass slashing-and-slashing his entire body like blades of steel. A knee was pressed most uncomfortably against his guts, and the lord's longsword, with its entire width, rested across his throat.

"That was a good fight," said Maedhros almost cheerfully. His eyes were dark and furious, and his face was close, very close. "I admire your self-control. If I'll ever get you like that with a sharpened sword, I'll probably slash you open like a sack of corns. For a moment, I wondered if I should."

"Not the throat, m'lord," Tyelcano mumbled against his tears of pain. The touch of Maedhros's knee was getting sharp and heavy in his stomach. "That would considerably diminish my charms as your honey-tongued envoy."

"As would your robes getting dirty? What will the High King say? You look like some errant knight from a realm of Men."

"Everything and anything for m'lord's contentment," said Tyelcano, not without scorn. "And now would you be so kind and gracious and remove your entire weight off my stomach?"

"If you ask so politely," said Maedhros, and he did so. The longsword disappeared as well; and the lord settled beside him in the dead grass, and sighed.

"If you've collected your guts, I shall tell you my message."
"My guts are just fine, lordship," Tyelcano sat up as well, crossed his legs, and threw an indecipherable glance upon Maedhros. "All they needed was a little space." He sighed, liberating the air long stuck in his lungs. "I'm listening."

Maedhros looked up to meet his eyes; and Tyelcano saw that his gaze was barred again.

"Whatever you will hear now," the lord said slowly, "you shall receive it as if you were a blank paper being spotted with ink. As much as I value your opinion and insight in general, in this case, I don't want to hear it, or to see it expressed in any way. Have I been clear?"

"Entirely, lordship," said Tyelcano, beginning to suspect that he would not like what he was about to hear.

"Also – I have already told you that this was a secret message. However, there is one rule I would like to overwrite. If, for any reason, you find yourself unable to continue your journey, don't pass on the message. No one else can know. You keep it to yourself, and the High King is going to receive it another time, however urgent it would be. Understood?"

Tyelcano took a deep breath, then nodded his accord.

"Good," said Maedhros, and pulled his cloak tighter around his shoulders. Wind was rising in the north, and a relentless army of grey clouds was gathering over the Hills of Aglon. The air was cold for the fifth month, even in the Himring; yet despite the promise of rain in the air, the Sun was rising well above the earth somewhere behind them, and both lord and Counsellor knew that they did not have much time left.

And with a stormy sigh, Maedhros started speaking.

"Findekáno," he said, his voice faint as a prayer, entirely forgetting about the three minutes long litany of courtesies that was supposed to precede any manner of communication with the High King. "I received your word on the ides of Lótessë, from your messenger, Nirwion; and I received it with a heavy heart, since similar visions have been plaguing both me and my Counsellor for months now. Withering flowers, banners flopping in the wind, darkness, icy peaks, a white city draped in moonlight, the scream of crows, forebodings of death and havoc… we've all seen the same things. My own dreams are hazy and indistinct, often delirious and filled with terror; yet their regularity and similarity have long convinced me that they did not take part of my usual nightmares, no matter how reluctant I first was to consider that possibility. These visions, cousin, are trying to warn us. My heart tells me that Moringotto is not satisfied by his swift and complete victory in the Battle of Flames; that he's plotting against us at this very minute, seeking our deaths and ruin. Orcs linger in my lands, and bother my people. The roads across Beleriand are dangerous, and one cannot walk them without escort. Strange tales have reached my ears about the errands of Lúthien, the daughter of the Moriquend-king, and her lover, a mortal Man… and since then, my vision has cleared. I can see the damage the Oath has caused to my family… And my heart trembles when I think of what future may bring if we have the misfortune to forget who the real enemy is – that it is and it will be, always and forever, Moringotto the Accursed. We need to counter his schemes with such power and endurance we have; and for that reason, I shall seek counsel and gather allies. For too long we have wobbled around, crushed by the Enemy's last blow! We need to steady our feet again, and chase His servants from the lands that have been ours for centuries. My will and my first intention, Findekáno, is to put an end to all bitter grievances and endless strife between the Quendi, and bring peace to our dominions; and these I shall do, with your help if you grant it, and with the support of any free folk who might offer it. This is the decision I have made, and this is the path I shall take; and no living thing can stand in my way!"

Here, Maedhros fell silent for a while, and when he spoke again, his voice was much softer.
"Then again, of course, you are no fool. You know just as well as I that Thingol has a Silmaril; and you know as well that sooner or later, I shall be forced to do something about it, lest my Oath torment me to insanity. Yet you need not to fear; I shall do Doriath no harm, and no Oath can crack my mind… not after what I have been through. It shan't come to war, or even the slightest bloodshed; I will not let the old wounds fester any further. We have a common Enemy, at least; woe to the times when that Enemy shall be defeated, so nothing shall stand between me and the Moriquendi!" Here, Maedhros laughed softly, then his face suddenly darkened; and Tyelcan knew that he spoke as if it was truly his cousin who listened.

"…Yet doubt, cruel doubt pervades my thoughts; for along with the strange dreams, my illness has also returned," said the lord, and his hand tightened into a fist. "And it is bad, Findekáno, it hasn't been this bad for a very long time. It is all back… I am happy if I fall healthily asleep once a week, only to be dragged awake by the sensation of being suffocated – sometimes screaming, completely out of my mind, the way I used to be when… it doesn't matter. I cannot stomach this. I can barely eat. I am feverish. I often need to draw blood – do you know how hard it is to draw blood with one hand?! – then the smell gives me nausea and the fit worsens, instead of tiring me out. I almost dread the moment when night falls and I have to find rest – there is no rest, no calm to find in my chambers, only dust and ghosts. And darkness makes them grow. What sort of warlord am I if I'm afraid in the dark?! How am I supposed to protect my people if I can't even sleep?" Maedhros's voice had a furious edge to it. "I feel like I am going to tire, and to be blown out like a candle in the wind. Yet who could I speak to…? No one can know of my weaknesses, not even my brothers, least of all my brothers – they shall be the downfall of each other, and of us all if things continue the way they are now. If one day, the mask I wear as Lord of the Himring falls down, we're all doomed… and that mask is full of cracks. Someone has to keep my men together, to bond them together, and I know it has to be me, because who else would do it…? Everything around me is so fragile, so ephemeral; it feels as though the slightest breeze of wind could ruin everything I have built. And they call me the Warden of the East! And they praise me as the Enemy of the Enemy… and that is what I have to be! Can you see now how cruel you were under that cliff…? I told you to shoot that arrow, Findekáno. I told you to shoot it…"

Maedhros's voice trailed off for several seconds; and when he spoke again, his tone was surprisingly flat.

"Sometimes, I feel miles away from everyone. I cannot even hear them speak … it would be relaxing, if not for the memories. I am alone those times, Findekáno – there is only me around, and that is when I truly see myself, and what I have become. I am not who you think I am. I am only some wretch who is afraid of that thrice-damned dark! Or maybe not of the dark itself, but of the forms it takes. I am afraid of re-living things again and again; dreams are only dreams, you may say… but I feel the lash, the shackles, the thirst and hunger, and the numbing persuasion of being utterly, entirely doomed, helpless against Moringotto's appetite for cruelty and abuse…the images my mind creates are sharp and believable; so believable that you would believe them if you saw them… that any sane person would believe them… for they are so wonderfully detailed! Afterwards, I oft wonder about them, in complete awe. How could I, crippled of body and mind, be capable of creating such perfect illusions…? Is this a sign of madness…? My train of thoughts always stops at the concept of madness, though. I cannot be mad, Findekáno, can I? I cannot allow myself such luxuries. I have a castle to rule, a household to look after to, six brothers to keep at bay… I cannot go mad, not right now, I don't have time… Forgive me, I've rambled." Maedhros held up his chin with two fingers, his eyes suddenly livelier. "Yet these dreams, Findekáno… I cannot help but think that the dreams worsen my condition, or that they are somehow related to it. They tend to mingle with the shadow-assaults, sometimes I cannot even know if I am awake or dreaming. My visions are calling for me, pulling me in, and I am lost in them… sometimes I feel like I would never emerge from their pit, and don't even want to. In my delirious dreams, I
understand connections and coherencies I have never before perceived, then I forget them as soon as the Sun is up and I open my eyes. 'Tis maddening. I see the same dreams you've described almost every night now: I see the banners, the crows and the withering flowers before they turn into vivid set-scenes of Angamando. And He is always there, Findekáno, laughing at me… It makes me anxious to know that these visions have reached you, too; that you could be suffering from them as well. I pray that you'd heed my warning and keep them secret. Do not speak about them – it could be dangerous. People talk… and stories grow by the telling. I hope that you, unlike my brothers, will listen to me and remember that.” Maedhros sighed.

"Elsewise, there is nothing to say. I am anxious and exhausted, and that makes me restless. There are so many other events I'd love to tell you about, but my time is growing short. But don't worry about me, Findekáno; worry about yourself, and most of all, worry about these visions. They are not likely to go away. As soon as Himlad is cleansed of the Orc-filth, I shall find a way to visit you so we could talk. You must as well have many things to say. Fare well! Take care of yourself… and whatever happens, whatever you might hear, please don't do anything rash." Maedhros made a noise under his breath that could have been a chuckle if there was any joy in it. "Fare well, Aranya."

With that, it was over.

As soon as he finished his speech, Maedhros stood, and went for a walk around the bald hill-top; and Tyelcano took advantage of the gesture to arrange his thoughts. If he'd previously disliked the idea of leaving his lord alone, by now he outright loathed it, and every fibre of his being trembled at the thought of Maedhros facing his fits of panic alone; yet he knew that his only other choice would be to see the lord himself leave, and that would have proved even more excruciating for his loyal heart.

The only thing I can do, Tyelcano concluded, is make speed. To come back to him, and quickly. To accomplish the task I was given.

It happened thus that when Maedhros came back to him, Tyelcano's face was solemn and collected; and he patted the ground beside him, as calmly and naturally as if they have only been chatting about the weather.

"Come, Lord Nelyo," he said, "sit with me for a moment."

Maedhros sat, and he looked at him with a stern, rigorous expression that made Tyelcano remember his last promise.

No comments.

"Please, lordship," he sighed, "just accept four words of counsel from me. Will you?"

Maedhros's countenance somewhat softened. "Go ahead."

"Candles," said Tyelcano vigorously, "music, books – and a valar-damned healer!"

Maedhros, who had intended to count all those words out upon his fingers, stared at him disparagingly.

"Are you familiar with the concept of number four, Tyelco?"

"…and sleep at least thrice a week, I beg you!" Tyelcano sighed, ignoring him. "And please, lordship, don't draw your own blood. Your condition could worsen or you could fall insensible and if you don't stop the flow…"
"You promised me something, Counsellor!" his lord reminded him in a ringing voice.

"My promise be damned," Tyelcano leaned forward, and took that beloved face between his palms, in a way he rarely dared to. "Listen to me, lordship – those visions shall not break you. They did not break you before, and they are not about to break you now. You are stronger than them, and you shall lead us all to victory against that Orc-filth. If you say that you can, I believe it. I believe you. You are the Warden of the East, you are the Enemy of the Enemy. You are our beacon of hope, and you shall open those gates from the dreams, whatever their significance might be – you shall not let this world wither! I know that much. Be strong, lordship, and wait for me; I will be back by your side in an instant."

Maedhros said nothing, his eyes narrow and distant; and Tyelcano sighed.

"I know what you're thinking at this moment," he said. "You're disappointed, because you have let your mask slip, you showed me your insecurities, something you've been forced to do; and I'm still capable of speaking of hope and victory…! Yet I have known for a long time that you doubted yourself; I know you well, lordship, and I have at least a notion about what plagues your heart… Yet I have just as much of a notion about who you truly are and what you're capable of. We… we will speak of this another time, a time when we shall be allowed to; but please keep in mind that I believe in you. Fare well, lordship! May good fortune help you with all your plans!"

"And may my blessings guard you upon the road," said Maedhros stilly; and to Tyelcano's astonishment, the lord leaned forward to kiss his forehead. "You're a treasure I cannot afford losing, Counsellor," he said with a wry smile, then extended his hand. "Here, take my ring! It may serve you well; give it to my cousin when you see him."

"This is your father's seal-ring, lordship," said Tyelcano uneasily. "Are you certain you want me to…?"

"Don't make me ask you thrice. Take it!"

Tyelcano obeyed; but when he wanted to sink the ring into his saddlebag, Maedhros's quick fingers thwarted his movement, and the ring slid safely upon the middle finger of his right hand. It did not cling to his skin nearly as perfectly as it would fit its original owner.

"Now-now," said Maedhros with a strange smile. "It stays there, understood? You are supposed to be me now, messenger."

"I will not fail you," Tyelcano promised.

"That I dearly hope," said his lord. "Fare well!"

Tyelcano spurred his proud stallion to meet his escort of nine Elves, who were waiting for him near the Tower of Aglon, as promised. Five of the party were the High King's soldiers, clad in the rich blue-and-silver of Nolofinwë's household. Maedhros's own four scouts were bright patches of red-and-golden against them; and as he came closer, Tyelcano was surprised to see young Antalossë among them. He turned his head to ask his lord about the choice, but Maedhros had stayed upon the bald hilltop, and raised his hand in a soundless farewell. Tyelcano returned the courtesy, then turned his horse's head towards his companions, and burst into gallop.

He looked back once more, battling his own stern will; by then, the Tower of Aglon was nowhere, nor could the lowering hills be seen. He saw the Himring in the distance, tall and proud upon the flat cleeve upon which it had been built; and as he eyed Maedhros's flags fluttering proudly in the wind, a dark, daunting sense of certainty pierced through his heart.
He knew he would not see that castle in its glory, he would not see those gleaming red-and-golden flags flapping above its gates ever again; and the truth of that realization was so cruel, so overwhelming that he almost reeled out of his saddle.

Yet he barred that ruthless foresight out of his head and rode on; for he knew that duty would not melt away, no matter how much he might wish it to.

(To Be Continued)

Chapter End Notes

"Lótessë " is Quenya for the month of May.

"Aranya" stands for "my King" in Quenya.

Maedhros suffering from PTSD is a very old concept of mine - and not very original, I suppose... We'll see more of it later; now that Tyelcano leaves the Himring, he'll have a chance to step forward as a viewpoint character.
"What we've got here is failure to communicate;  
Some men, you just can't reach.  
So, you get what we had here last week, which is the way he wants it -  
whatever, he gets it!  
(No, I don't like it any more than you men)." *

~ § ~

XIX. Steel to Temper

_The Fortress of Himring, FA 467, the twenty-first day of Lótessë_

Someone knocked sharply on the smithy's door, and Curufinwë felt his lips curve into a solemn smile as his mind refused to acknowledge all happenings related to the intruder.

"Look at this, Maril," he said instead. The vapours of sweating steel rose right up to his eyes and wetted his hair, but it mattered little: the course of his purpose was straight and clear, and it lay right under his gloved hands. "Look at it! Take the hammer, it shan't bite you. Good. Now tell me what you see."

"The steel was not clean, Master Curufinwë," said the apprentice keenly. "The visor did not have the right amount of silver in it."

"Which would be?"

"Eight ounces out of ten, Master."

Another knock was left ignored.

"...good. Can you tell me what kind of alloy do we have here?"

"Silver with copper, Master."

"What else?"

At the next furious knock-knock-knock, the apprentice's eyes wandered to the door, but when Curufinwë did not seem to pay any heed to the noise, he forced his attention back to the smelter.

"The black patches could be lead, maybe...?"

"You could use a bit more confidence, child," Curufinwë furrowed his brows and leaned closer. There was another element in the slowly decomposing steel; slightly similar with clean silver, yet dark and dull where it was shiny, sleazy and bitty where it was smooth and melted...

Curufinwë swore under his breath as he heard the upcoming knock-knocks evolving into blatant bang-bangs. He had no choice but to storm to the back of the room, and open the door. He
performed the deed so abruptly that Tyelkormo's tall, lean figure almost fell across the smithy's doorstep – it seemed that his brother had been preparing to push his fist into the protesting wood, supported by the entire weight of his body, in a last, invincible boom.

"Finally!" His brother sighed, rolling his eyes. "I was beginning to doubt you were in there at all."

"Then, if I close the door again and pretend I am beyond the Circles of the World, will you let me work in peace?"

"Ha!" Said Tyelkormo, and for the fraction of a second, Curufinwë could see open mirth in his eyes; then it vanished, and only wariness remained. "Not today. We need to talk."

"Then come in. You have roughly ten minutes until I reheat the smelters."

"I can reheat them for you, Master," Mari's voice was thick with excitement and jabbering with plea. "I saw you doing it before. That way, you shall not be disturbed!"

Curufinwë shot a sharp glance at his apprentice, then looked back at the solemn face of his brother, who stood in the doorway like a rock, reluctant to give space. Annoying as the timing might have been, Tyelkormo would not have forced his company upon him if it wasn't strictly necessary.

"All right then, young one," he said, "you may reheat the small smelter and finish our work for this morn. But heed my warning: if so much as a chisel shall be jagged by the time I come back, youshan't touch anything in my workshop ever again. Is that clear?"

"Clear as crystal, Master Curufinwë," said Mari, somewhat shaken.

"I have seen clearer things," said the smith; yet it was not so much for chiding as for the sake of comedy (and, perhaps, for the sake of having the last word), and the boy seemed to note that as well.

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The citadel's four great bastions loomed behind the brothers like greedy fangs as they exited the smithy and walked through the backyard, amidst empty spotting posts and ruinous store-cells, all overgrown by amber and ivy. It seemed that Nelyafinwë's household did not have the means to men all the peeping watchtowers around the lesser regions of the Himring…

Tyelkormo offered his arm and Curufinwë took it, suddenly grateful for the spring wind's caresses on his face and neck; his newly regained – pretended – devotion for work had deprived him of such sensations for what seemed like a very long time.

It was a fair day: and what clouds stormed through the clear skies were frail and almost transparent, lighter than the finest white silk; the sort of clouds that brought no rain, and were too thin to veil the Sun. And they flew high, very high, Curufinwë knew; unfathomably far above the lands and hills, where not even Moringotto's black hands could blemish them.

Tyelkormo spoke no word until they were far out in the training fields, and well across a group of sparring soldiers at the opposite corner; and Curufinwë knew better than to rush him. He tried to enjoy the weather instead, and when his elder finally halted, he picked a nice, untamed spot among daisies and dandelions, and settled down to stretch his legs. He had been working all night, and suddenly found that he could easily fall asleep, if not for the sharp nervousness radiating from his brother.
Curufinwë crossed his legs in a pretence of comfort, and folded his hands in his lap.

"Well?"

"Well," Tyelkormo settled down beside him (careful so that their eyes would not meet, or so it seemed to Curufinwë), then removed his cloak and folded it, lightly yet with respect, the way Mother would. One time, he got a folding line wrong so he shook out the whole cloak and restarted the process. Once he succeeded, though, he suddenly decided he would much rather undo the foldings, and spread the stained fabric around his shoulders again.

"Quit your fidgeting," Curufinwë snapped.

"Tricky weather," said Tyelkormo. "Care for breakfast?"

"You wanted to talk to me, I trust?"

"That, too. But I just came home from patrol, and I would not mind spending some time merely… sitting with you. At peace."

Peace.

Curufinwë sternly reminded himself that throwing a sardonic laugh into his brother's face would probably not be considered as a polite (or well-earned) action.

"Well," he said instead, "if that breakfast you mentioned means dried meat and other horrid things they fed you on the road, then you're very welcome to share it with someone else," He threw a lazy glance on his brother's storm-beaten bundle. "What have you in there?"

"Delicacies," came the theatrical answer (and a demonstration to prove it right). "Honey to sweeten your tongue, as one."

When Curufinwë did not even smile, Tyelkormo added, with a puzzled expression on his face, "It's not so difficult to switch back to… normal life, isn't it? To the life of a decent person, who has something to eat every day and a home to return to…"

"You feel humbled, huh?" Curufinwë snorted. "Is that what ails you?"

"I may have felt that way," said Tyelkormo cautiously. "But I no longer do. I… I have been thinking about things – everything – a lot, Curvo, and I wanted to know… I want to know how you feel."

Curufinwë slowly, methodically opened the honey jar, dipped his brother's spoon in it, and licked it off.

His tongue didn't feel sweetened.

"How I feel… about what? My feelings, as you call them, are rather reserved these days."

"So have I noticed," Tyelkormo sighed. "Three times I departed with the scouts, and three times I came back without seeing you outside your workshop. Do you even eat, brother? Do you even sleep?"

"Sometimes," Curufinwë tilted his head. "And, occasionally."

He stuffed another spoonful of honey in his mouth, so that the rest of the sentence would echo only in his head,
Tyelkormo threw a long, clever glance at him above his bread-and-butter, and for less than a heartbeat, Curufinwë feared he’d spoken aloud.

"It is not what I have been expecting, to be sure," his brother finally said, and his lips curved slightly; so slightly that Curufinwë could not call it a smile. "When Nelyo spoke his judgement, I… I was convinced you would choose exile, you know."

"Well, so was I."

"I'm glad that you changed your mind, Curvo."

Curufinwë smiled innocently. "I did not."

The bread yanked to a stop in Tyelkormo's hand, and a bit of butter landed upon his nose. Curufinwë felt a sudden, ferocious need to rub it off, but his brother's eyes went wide, and – somehow – fearsome and fearful at the same time.

"What do you mean you did not?!"

Curufinwë gave a resigned sigh, and pulled another, not-so-convincing layer upon his mask of careless pretence.

"You cannot be stupid enough to drag me out of my workshop, only to repeat a conversation we've already had! You know my opinion, Tyelko: I have already told you that we were different, you and I, and what was best for you may not prove best for me. My interest would have been to hit the road and try my luck once again, one last time… yet sometimes, we're bound to put others' well-being before our own. Thus have I stayed, and thus am I newly… invested in my work."

His voice sounded like it was about to betray him again.

Tyelkormo raised his brows. "I thought you enjoyed it…?"

"Oh?" Curufinwë laughed, his voice full of mirth… *his eyes two bottomless dark wells.* "But I do! *I do!* I have never been happier in my life!"

He choked on that last sentence; and his voice trailed off, suddenly croaky and utterly, completely – powerless.

"Forget it, Tyelko," he said wretchedly. "I cannot do this. Not with you. *Forget it.*"

"Well you would do well to stop indeed," his brother said coolly. "I shall not be fooled."

Curufinwë forced down another spoonful of honey, but somehow that, too, felt bitter.

"Might we try this once again, then?" He sighed, and did not even wait for Tyelkormo to nod. "If you must know, I have spoken with Counsellor Tyelcano after… after all that happened. Or I should rather say that he spoke with *me*; and as a result, I was forced to choose between two vicious things. I chose the one that seemed a little less vicious for our family and more mortifying for me… you might as well say that I killed myself, Tyelko," Curufinwë shrugged. "Of course, I could not tell the poor Counsellor just that… he would not have deserved it, the faithful old dog. Thankfully, my self-control did not betray me then, and he departed with the assumption that I was perfectly satisfied and thankful, beaming with life and excitement, and searching for new purposes. Also, that I was feeling better, and being useful, and alive, that sort of thing. I think he desperately..."
wanted to believe all that, so it worked… that was my chance, for otherwise, he would not have been so easy to fool."

Tyelkormo was watching him with a very strange expression.

"And are you not alive, at least?"

"Alive, yes, in the sense of breathing and spitting on things," Curufinwë shrugged. "But I… how could I even hope to explain it? This, all of this is terrible for me, Tyelko. I have never felt so deeply, so utterly, so hopelessly uprooted. I see myself like a pariah of sorts, an unwanted person, like that one brother everyone would much rather forget, and no one would invite to the dinner-table if not for the sake of blood-forged bonds!" Curufinwë fell silent for a few seconds, amazed by the harshness and the bile seeping from his own voice; yet now that he spoke his mind, the rest came spilling out. "I don't want to be just silently tolerated at council meetings, at dinners, in the courtyard! And if such an amount of scorn wouldn't make me miserable enough, I can always feel Nelyo's eyes on me: watching, pondering if I'm planning to betray and murder him now or only later. He would not let me move a grass-blade without his knowledge, because he trusts me not, he told me so, you heard him, the Counsellor heard him, we have all heard him! Do you not see, Tyelko, how my name has been besmirched, how my person bemired…? Do you think I have earned this…? And even if I truly have: for every sinner, there is a trial, and at every trial, the accused must have a choice."

"And you had one!"

"Ah-hah, that is where you err," Curufinwë laughed mirthlessly. "What words have been said between me and Tyelcano have left me with no choice but to stay within these walls and endure... And all I can think of now is how great would it be to live, to ride around Beleriand on my own horse, as my whole master, doing what I please! Tasks be damned! Responsibilities be damned! Past, present and future be thrice-damned! For I am tired, so tired of everything! Yet if this cannot be, and my fate is to stay here and be despised, at least let me continue being despised in piece and silence, and – most importantly – alone!"

"Trust is a fragile thing, brother," said Tyelkormo in a puzzled voice. "We broke it."

"Oh, don't start with that!" Curufinwë seethed, suddenly tempted to let out all his anger and frustration. "You broke it, is what you wanted to say. And Counsellor Tyelcano told me the same thing. It is said that the blades of trust are hard to forge and easy to blunt, he cooed in that deep wise voice of his, yet once they are sharpened anew, they slice the very stones from the earth. And he expected me to believe that. Trust is granted or denied, Tyelko – it is there or it isn't. There are no logical foundations for trust! Elsewise, we'd always be capable of thinking through our choices and decisions, and we could not be deceived."

"I do not agree with you," Tyelkormo swallowed. "I refuse to. We have done wrong things, Curvo, and when I say we, then that is what I mean. I was part of it, just as much as you were. Neither of us is blameless… Yet I am convinced, I am entirely sure that there is a way back for us, a way to regain Nelyo's trust and a way to make him proud! And if there wasn't… well, even then, we would be obliged to try! But you know our brother, Curvo, you know him, he will understand, and he will reward everything that could be rewarded!"

"Do you mean that we should start begging for things that are ours by birth-right?!!" Curufinwë said in a low voice.

"Nelyo's trust is no birth-right. We have cruelly misused it. Now we must be punished."
"And, as usual, my punishment is bigger than yours."

"Indeed?" Tyelkormo's voice was very still, yet somewhat menacing. "Mine, who roams about Himlad restlessly, among ruined watchtowers and bowelled corpses? Mine, who still lives on salt beef and lukewarm water? Mine, who…" His voice trailed off, as if something had dawned on him. "But wait, maybe you are right," he said then, his tone suddenly mocking and vicious. "Maybe it is truly more difficult for you to lock yourself up in your workshop all day, and order your apprentices around, than it is for me to protect our borders! Maybe it is much easier to try and face your own mistakes and learn from them, to try and learn how to be humble while it is clearly against your nature, then to crawl around in the dark, cursing and muttering under your breath, trying to deny your faults – and failing miserably at it! Oh, my poor-poor brother, how horrible is your fate! How outrageous it is that you have been forgiven! It must be a horrendous punishment for one so selfish and vain you to be faced with generosity beyond justice! You are right, you should have been kicked out from this castle and dragged along Himlad's wastelands for every eye to see: that is what you would have deserved! Shame on you, Curufinwë, and on everything you said! How can you still feel sorry for yourself?!"

There was a long pause.

"You have a bit of butter on your nose," Curufinwë said.

"Butter," Tyelkormo responded, puzzled, as if unsure of the word's meaning.

"Aye. Right there. No, there. No… let me," Curufinwë leaned forward. "There," He licked his fingers. "It goes well with the honey."

Tyelkormo was looking at him with wide eyes.

"Curvo…?"

"Hm?"

"…hm is all you have to say?!" Fury was filtering back into his brother's voice. "Quit mumbling! Quit muttering incoherent phrases and answer me!"

"I have nothing to answer."

Tyelkormo grabbed Curufinwë by the shoulders and shook him so hard that his teeth clanked together.

"Quit – being – all – dramatic – about – yourself!" He seethed. "Stop it! Stop this… theatre, your pretences, your bad lies and big scenes, all the soundless sulking and the great monologues! Stop ignoring me and everything I say! Stop playing with the power of your voice, stop avoiding everyone, stop fooling me, stop flickering like a candle being blown out by the wind! Just – stop! I can't help you if you shut me out! No one can! You will destroy yourself, Curvo, and no one will be able to help you then!"

"I don't want anyone to help me!" Curufinwë said, precisely articulating every word. "I don't want to be helped! I don't want to get better! I prefer crawling around my workshop in the darkness, as you call it. Just leave me be! You are not helping by forcing yourself upon me. You are not helping by imagining in what exact way I should get better, and dragging me along, only to convince yourself that I am all right. I am no responsibility of yours, Tyelko. Nor anyone else's."

Tyelkormo stared deep into his eyes, and Curufinwë knew he saw the sincerity in them. Indeed; he truly meant what he just said.
The slap was open-handed, magnificently arched and so forceful that his whole skull resonated with the blast it gave; and for a few moments, his vision was reduced to bright spots floating upon an endless horizon of darkness. The slowly fading picture was so overwhelming that it shut out the sensation of pain for a whole minute, before Curufinwë could even think of raising his hand, and sticking a finger under his nose. Something was hot and wet there; and when he removed his hand, he saw that the skin was sticky and dark, and his mouth filled with the peculiar, metallic taste of blood.

Curufinwë flexed and unflexed the muscles in his hands, paying no heed to the red river dripping down his chin.

"I have enough problems without you breaking my nose, Tyelko," he said, his voice still flat. "But if that is what you want, I will suffer it. Go on. Hit me again. Trample me into the ground. Spit on me for all I care. I will not be cowed, and you will not change my mind. If you want to cause terrible pain, though, I'd rather suggest breaking my knees. Injuries effected upon my head may temporarily render me even more tunnel-visioned and stubborn than I already am, you see."

"I don't want to cause you pain," Tyelkormo said, his voice frightened. "I just want to wake you. I just want my brother back. At whatever cost. We have always threaded our paths together. Why would you suddenly leave me, Curvo? Is that what you would call fair? The witty, lofty-tongued dunderhead I know, the dunderhead you are would not choose the easy way, and let himself be drowned in his own mistakes and stupidity! Curufinwë, son of Fëanáro, the brother I have known for long-long years would raise his head with pride and honour and he would fight, because he would know he is needed!"

"Raising my head would mean looking around, and looking around would mean acknowledging things," said Curufinwë, a lot more honestly than intended. "I don't want to do that."

"Sooner or later, you must," Tyelkormo countered mercilessly. "Carnistir has come, and he brought an army of Men with him, along with many news. I met him yestereve out in the wastelands, then rode far ahead to bring Nelyo the word. I gravely doubt that he would grant you the chance to go on hiding and skulking."

"I do what I please," said Curufinwë, and for a short moment, his usual loftiness crept back into his speech. "Tell me about this army of Men!"

"Come, eat with us tonight," said Tyelkormo, "and you may meet them. There is a Council to be held as well."

"I no longer frequent dinners and council meetings."

"Then crawl back to your cellars to feast on lead and bits of coal! If they're bitter enough, you might still come back to your right mind, and act like a son of our sire again!"

Curufinwë could feel from the tone and rhythm of his words that Tyelkormo had finally grow tired of him. He seemed more likely to finally leave him alone than to slap him again... However, the former prospect filled him with some deep, gut-wrenching sensation of dread rather than relief.

"Tyelko," he said in a low voice. "I am not wanted at the high table."

"You are!"

"You are the only one who wants me there."

"No. Our whole family wants you there, and it is your duty to come. You must meet these Men,
Curvo. They shall very likely be our new allies, and our only hope to drive the Orcs out of Himlad – if they could be trusted. Since the Counsellor is not here, Nelyo might have need of your mind-reading skills."

"I cannot read minds, Tyelko, you know that very well."

"But you're a fairly good liar," Tyelkormo winked. "Therefore, an excellent spotter of lies."

Curufinwë knew he was running out of arguments, and it seemed too cruel for his taste to deprive his brother of the sensation of victory. As he took in Tyelkormo's slender form once again, the shadow was lifted from his heart for an absent-minded moment; and his entire fëa welled with love and something akin with gratitude.

Would it hurt to give in to the only person's desires who cared about him? Would it hurt to go to that dinner and feel miserable there, instead of continue feeling miserable down in the smithy? Curufinwë concluded that his choice did not matter. He could might as well go to that Valar-forsaken feast, and meet those miserable Men.

Tyelkormo was still looking at him expectantly, so he cleared his throat.

"Three things, Tyelko," he said. "One: I don't give a… a single thought about your Men. Two: this dinner will put me through torment your feeble mind cannot imagine; therefore, you will have to compensate me. Thoroughly. And three… I am not convinced – I have merely taken pity on you." Curufinwë crossed his arms. "And I might still change my mind until eve – but as things are now, then yes, I will go to that sorry dinner. But only for your sake. I want you to remember that."

"I will," said Tyelkormo. His hands were warm as he raised them to his face. "Thank you," Curvo, he added slowly, sincerely. "You don't know how much this means to me."

"Well I suppose I don't," Curufinwë sighed. "But I do know that if you don't pull out your water-skin in three seconds to clean my face, you're going to regret it. I cannot waltz around this castle all bloody and smudged like some scoundrel!"

"You are a scoundrel," Tyelkormo raised his brows, but there was mirth in his eyes. "Maybe we all are."

The only answer Curufinwë gave to that was raising a finger; then, when Tyelkormo did not seem to get his meaning, he raised the second one.

"All right, all right!" His brother sighed, and proceeded to remove the patches of dried blood from his face. His skin was filled with watered wine, and Curufinwë sniffed at the faint scent of alcohol pervading his nostrils.

"Besides," he heard himself saying, "it might be worthy of note that it still hurts."

"Aye," Tyelkormo muttered, rubbing at a particularly stubborn bit of caked blood near his bottom lip. "I'm good at punching people."

"It has been a long time since I've had the chance to experience just how good you are. It is truly exceptional."

"Should I thank you?" Tyelkormo winked, but his voice was regaining its seriousness. The more blood and dirt he removed from Curufinwë's face, the more he seemed to lose his humour.

"Ah…," he said after a time, "Curvo… I'm sorry. I didn't know I hit that hard."
"You left a mark," Curufinwë knew it would happen so. He knew it right from the moment he received the slap.

"I'm afraid I did."

"And?" Curufinwë smiled mockingly. "How do I look?"

"Like someone who's been punched in the face," Tyelkormo said truthfully. "By an expert."

"Wonderful. This is just what I needed now."

"But it also makes you look… fierce," his brother added hesitantly. "Like, I don't know, like someone who entered a fight with a band of Orcs with no more than a hunting dagger in hand."

"Oh yes, surely. And the Orcs just slapped me instead of giving me a black eye at the very least."

Tyelkormo peered down on him with a hang-dog look, and Curufinwë drew a sharp breath. "I don't have a black eye, now, do I?"

"Currently," Tyelkormo said diplomatically, "it's a red eye."

"You filthy little…" Here, Curufinwë paused for a second to search for sufficiently grievous insults, but he could not quite choose, so he gave up with a resigned sigh. He felt too weak, too uprooted to pursue such arguments.

"I told you, I'm so sorry!" Tyelkormo exclaimed, and raised his hands, as if to shield himself. "Not sorry I slapped you," he added with a gnomish grin, "but sorry I coloured your pretty face. Truly. Sincerely."

Curufinwë considered that, imagining how it would feel if his heart felt a little lighter; and he laughed.

"Forget it," he waved his hand. "Just… let's forget it. It's not like it will hurt my dignity, either way. I don't have much left."

"Curvo…"

"I mean it," Curufinwë said (his lungs still dutifully producing those laughing sounds) and held his brother's hand. "I daresay this dinner will be quite interesting. But will you do just one thing for me, Tyelko?"

"Anything," came the answer.

"Let us keep in secret how this happened," Curufinwë's stern will drew a wide, impish grin on his face. "We won't tell anyone. Never. Let's always remain very grave, theatrical and mysterious about it."

"Let's," Tyelkormo echoed happily.

"With time, even we will forget what truly happened, and the impossible pieces of fiction floating around shall take the place of true memories in our heads. And thus, your punch-mark on my face shall become myth and legend."

"As my lord brother pleases," Tyelkormo grinned.
I am no lord, Curufinwë thought as he constrained the muscles in his face into a warm, sincere smile, and kissed his brother on the cheek. And you cannot please me.

(To Be Continued)

Chapter End Notes

Author's Notes

* The starting quote is originally from the film 'Cool Hand Luke', but the Guns n' Roses song 'Civil War' made it much more famous.

Maril [m. glass / crystal], who is an apprentice here, made several appearances in my other works (no longer published), so some of you may remember him.

To be honest, this chapter barely escaped my cut, being strictly what you would call an "episode": it doesn't advance the plot by an inch. However, I decided to include it so you would fully understand Curufin's bizarre state of mind and his later actions… and, frankly, I'm publishing this chapter because I really LOVE this character and the challenge he means to me. I'm excited to see if I manage to get my characterization across, because I feel that what I'm trying to express here is well beyond my grasp…

Thank you, all of you so much for your continued support and your comments!
The Evening Play

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"There we were - demented children mincing about in clothes that no one ever wore, speaking as no man ever spoke, swearing love in wigs and rhymed couplets, killing each other with wooden swords, hollow protestations of faith hurled after empty promises of vengeance - and every gesture, every pose, vanishing into the thin unpopulated air. We ransomed our dignity to the clouds, and the uncomprehending birds listened. Don't you see?! We're actors - we're the opposite of people!"

/ Tom Stoppard, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead /

XX. The Evening Play

All echoes of murmur ceased in the Great Hall when Lord Maedhros, Protector of Himlad, Warden of the East and Enemy of the Enemy rose to his feet, his sharp commanding glance measuring everything, from the tiniest movement to the softest intake of breath. He glimpsed several old friends in the pale sea of faces below, but gave no sign of recognition. The Warden of the East was more like a marble statue than a living person; and he seldom smiled, for it was seldom his duty to smile.

Maedhros waited a few moments for the silence to deepen, to fill the entire building from floor to ceiling. Then, he pushed his chair lightly in the table, his fingers tightening around his diamond-wrought chalice: one of the scarce things that remained from his father's heritage. The Warden of the East took a liking to that chalice, and used it only on special occasions. (Maedhros, as far as he was concerned, found it artsy, heavy, and entirely useless, since it was designed in such a way that half a precious mouthful of wine always rested at its bottom, and it was terribly frustrating to have it poured out within the boundaries of polite dining).

However, no more than the sight of the jewel-bedight goblet was enough to raise spirits in the hall. Something important is happening, it implied: a mute answer to hundreds of unasked questions. And answers were long overdue.

Despite all Maedhros's efforts, rumours spread like wildfire behind the thick walls of the Himring, and – as far as he knew – the few morsels of valid information that managed to escape his council chamber had evolved into heroic, if not very believable tales. A pair of scouts claimed with sincere conviction that Lord Tyelkormo – but he is no longer a lord, some other scouts whispered -, battled a Valarauko out in the wastelands, and it was the whip of that beast that wounded the Lord Makalaurë's arms and back - which, according to certain sources, had been cut and whipped in the shape of a dragon. Others claimed that they saw Master Curufinwë forge swords that could be held into fire, only to catch it like oil-dampened wood and burn with a vicious red flame (Maedhros intended to ask him about that one). And there were voices, of course, that whispered news about a stolen Silmaril, and Thingol's daughter who broke into the Enemy's fortress, aided by none other than her lover, a mortal Man from the House of Barahir; and Huan the Hound, who had been following Lord Tyelkormo's (no longer a lord!) horse for centuries. Maedhros could almost hear those voices whispering, Lo! The princess of the Moriquendi dared a deed our Lords did not. A Jewel is missing from the Enemy's crown, and it is in Doriath. What will our Warden do?

Your Warden will protect you, Maedhros thought, and for a heartbeat, his pale eyes were on fire.
For there are still two Jewels wrought within that crown; and Moringotto sleeps no longer.

The lord who tries silencing rumours by force can shake hands with the lord who dies in the effort of putting a dike in front of the Sea, his counsellor had once told him. Tis like one of those tiring games your Haru played with you in Valinóre, and you tried in vain to guess the point, only to realize that the point was non-existent.

They were simple paradoxes, Maedhros heard himself responding. Mazes with a narrow way in, and no way out.

Gazing around in the crowded Hall, he felt slightly uncomfortable without Tyelcano's well-known figure on his side; his chair the first from the right, always clad in blue or black, silent and sincere, keen and resourceful, solving every situation with quiet, ruthless grace. The Counsellor had become the head of his household, solid and permanent as if wrought within the very walls of the fortress. Maedhros barely noticed him anymore, because he was always there, everywhere and anywhere he was needed; solemn, chivalrous and ready to serve. Now, his absence all but annoyed him. He had all his brothers, his captains and his bannermen assembled in the same Hall, along with potential allies. If anyone, then the Counsellor could surely prevent disaster from striking... but could he?

He had no choice but to find out.

"Let us all greet our noble guests, dear friends of mine," The Warden of the East said imperiously, taking a few lithe steps down the stairs that separated the high table from the smaller ones, chalice still in hand. The folds of his lustrous red-and-golden cloak hid tactfully the stump where his right hand should have been, and the words of the Sindarin tongue sprang fair and free from his lips. "My lord brothers all rode fast and far so they could feast with us tonight. I must say that my heart is glad to see my family gathered anew after all the long and perilous years that passed... May this feast bring joy and satiety to you all! You, who guard these walls and fill these halls at all times, be they good or evil - raise your cups now to Maglor, Celegorm, Caranthir, Curufin, Amrod and Amras from the House of Fëanáró – then fill them again and raise them for your own sake! People of my halls, rejoice!"

A wave of joyful cheering washed down the old, thick castle walls and a hundred cups gleamed golden in the light of torches. Maedhros raised his chalice well above his head before he proceeded to drink: a spectacle he remembered both Atar and Haru doing.

The wine tasted at once sweet and sour. Once he swallowed it, he felt some rich smack lurking at the end of his tongue, suggesting that the vintage was very old.

All cups were emptied as the Sons of Fëanor delivered their speeches one by one in flowing Sindarin, greeting their eldest brother, and thanking him for his hospitality as courtesy ordained. Their speeches were smooth and uncharacteristically moderated, although Maglor repeatedly included Quenya words, forgetting their Sindarin counterparts; and Curufin was adamant at using the archaic pronunciation of the 's' sound, which made his speech sound like lisping. And then, finally it was time for the youngest to rise to speak.

"I thank you all for your kind greetings, brave friends and noble brother," Amrod said, descending with slow steps at the opposite side of the table, not reaching the level where Maedhros stood to mask their difference of height. "I am most glad to be back behind the walls that withstood the Flames of the Enemy. You assembled here are all dear to my heart, be you a sergeant of mine or of any of my brothers'. Yet alas! There are many Elves and Men, many brave and noble souls who cannot be here with us tonight; either because they have been killed by the Enemy's servants or because they stand watch over us, protecting us from the rogues and scattered Orc-bands that run
all around Beleriand. These brave soldiers, these noble guardians are the only, thin wall standing
between us and Moringotto's utmost will: the destruction of our lands and fortresses, and chaos
among our people. Let us raise our cups for our comrades and guardians!"

"Rejoice!" The cry went up all around the tables, and Maedhros bowed his head with the rest of his
brothers, thinking of Tyelcano above all.

"And last, but not the least; on the contrary, in utmost importance," Amrod went on, "let us greet
the one without whom the Ñoldor's kingdoms would not be more than scattered ruins over empty
wastelands, without whom all hope would leave us. Let us all raise our cups one more time and
drink to the health of our noble Lord, the Warden of the East, the Protector of our land, the Enemy
of our Enemy, and my eldest and wisest brother. All hail the Lord Maedhros, son of Fëanáro, son of
Finwë the First King; people of his halls, rejoice!"

"All hail the Lord of Himring!" The attendants of the feast boomed. "All hail the Protector of
Himlad! All hail the Warden of the East! All hail the Enemy of the Enemy! All hail our Lord
Maedhros! Let us drink to his health!"

When his brothers joined the soul-stirring ovation, Maedhros felt a thin smile escaping his heart
and rushing onto the Warden's face. He would have never admitted such a thing, but he loved to
hear the praise of his people; mostly because it was scarce, and it came from the depths of their
hearts.

"Thank you all for your greetings," Maedhros forced that smile to stay on the Warden's face, then
emptied his goblet once more (and mutely cursed the last sip of wine that lingered alow). "And
now, before we let ourselves enjoy our food and drink, before we fill our plates, before we feast
the night away, I demand your attention for a short while."

The complete, utmost silence that settled in the entire Hall within the next heartbeat tickled his
sense of humour; nevertheless, he nodded his thanks and handed his cup to a passing servant,
shooing him off towards the high table.

"As my brother Amrod has wisely mentioned, Himlad is being raided by Orc bands, who have
gone as far as to lay hands upon my own brothers, Maglor, Celegorm and Curufin..."

Maedhros raised his hand to silence the uproar that followed his words.

"...who have successfully met their assault, and chased them off to the North. Your brothers-in-
arms are currently pursuing them, yet there are more coming. Many more. More than you might
think and more than we can handle alone; and this disaster did not only strike in Himlad. If you
look around in this Hall, you may see than Men from the East are settled among us. As things are
now, they are strangers to you; yet from this day to the end of our days in Beleriand, I shall expect
you to treat them with friendship and respect, for they have offered us their swords and axes. They
have been chased from their homes and lands by Moringotto – his name be cursed! – their fathers,
their mothers, their wives, and their children were killed, their houses burned, their weapons
melted, their goods stolen. And in that sense, we are all one in this hall! Let the leaders of these
people now rise, and step in front of you, along with my brother Caranthir, Lord of Thargelion,
who vouches for their trustworthiness."

"That I do," Caranthir's booming voice emerged from the High Table as he stood, and walked
downstairs to reach Maedhros's level. "I have walked a thousand paths with these Men, and
befriended them, if I am permitted to say; and I am glad to have them by my side, our side, in times
such as these. For the roads of Beleriand are truly becoming dangerous; elsewise, we would have
arrived three entire days ago! Yet we were running late; for we've had news that another band of
that Orc-filth was crossing our way. I would have felt *inglorious* had I let them slip away!"

"All hail the Lord Caranthir and his sense of duty!" Maedhros exclaimed in a high-toned voice. It was something the Warden of the East would probably do.

"*Rejoice!*" the cry went up around the tables, echoing cheerfully.

"And all hail the wine of the Himring!" Caranthir countered when he tasted the dense drink and a hundred cheerful voices echoed his clamour. Then, to Maedhros's surprise, he handed the emerald-wrought chalice straight to a Man who seceded from the crowd and stepped forward, followed by seven others.

"Here, friend," Caranthir said in a lordly tone, "try the best vintage you've ever tasted. This shall warm you up, I have no doubt."

"Thank you for your courtesy, Lord Carnistir," a croaky voice answered in fluent Sindarin – save for the name – the 'r' in that name was whirling like an 'r' should in the clearest archaic dialect one could imagine. Maedhros watched with keen eyes as the Adan folded back his riding-hood and took the chalice from Caranthir's hands.

The face that emerged from under the black cloth was something like the one he'd expected. It was hard and deeply lined, with swarthy skin that enhanced the Adan's broad features. Even now as he smiled, a dim wild gleam was present in his dark eyes, his lustrous black mop of hair falling recklessly onto his forehead. His beard was short, though, and well-trimmed.

*This is one fearsome warrior,* Maedhros decided.

"Brother," Caranthir said in a voice that sounded at the same time broadish and high-toned. "Let me present you Lord Ulfang at first, along with his sons, Uldor, Ulfast and Ulwarth. They and their people have entered my service merely two years ago, and already, they have aided me more than others did in two centuries. I had hoped to give them lands south of Thargelion, but the Orcs chased us until your doorstep: a shame I shall no longer try to swallow. Let them aid you, brother, along with me and every soul assembled under my flag, and we shall help you cleanse your lands of the pent-up dirt!"

"That is long overdue," said the Warden of the East, his voice a lot more majestic than Maedhros felt himself being. "I greet you, Men of the East! Be welcome in my halls and bear my friendship, as long as you bear my brother's."

"And I greet you, Lord of Himring and Warden of the East," Ulfang answered, bowing his head. "I've heard much about you from your people; many tales of your deeds and bravery and many more of your stalwartness against the Enemy. My sword and life are pledged to the Lord Carnistir just as my sons' but one day, if odds dictate that my Lord should fight by your side, our hearts would be glad if we were not to stay behind."

"Your wish may come true sooner than you think," Maedhros said, slightly astonished by such words of courtesy coming from a Man this hard and battle-worn.

"That is good to hear m'lord," the Easterling said. "My people already owe you a debt you cannot imagine, yet we hope to give you a gift in return. My kinsman has decided to offer you his service, and kindly asked me to vouch for him, for he has yet to learn the curious ways of Elven speech."

*Tongue,* Maedhros thought absently, *here, you should rather use 'tongue'.*

"...my kinsman and his sons are leaders of the tribe that fled across the Blue Mountains, hunted by
the shadow of the Enemy. Food, shelter and work for their hands they seek; and they are willing to pay for such goods by swearing fealty to you and your House."

"Every hand that bears a weapon is most welcome," said the Warden of the East gracefully, although the Elf within found the notion of swearing slightly repulsive. "Let your kinsman step forth, for I would like to see his face and hear his name."

Ulfang bowed before him, and said a few harsh, shrill words he did not understand. A Man's shadowy figure stepped forth from behind Ulfang's three sons, followed closely by three of his own. His skin was darker than olive, his beard long and his features broad and mannish, much like those of the others. His deep dark eyes were wide open, filled with fear, admiration, and some other emotion Maedhros could not quite discern. The Man withstood his gaze for less than a second, then he fell to his knees before his feet, and dropped his head. His sons stood like mute statues above him, their heads bowed, their arms tense. The Man then spoke a few sentences in his funny tongue; jarred and overwhelmed, his voice trembled in a way that was close to sobbing, yet it was still one of the proudest, most dignified orations Maedhros has ever heard. He glanced at Ulfang, who came to his rescue as soon as the other Adan fell silent.

"My kinsman is grateful that he could kneel before you tonight, m'lord," Ulfang said, voice upraised so his words would be heard in the entire Hall. "He has long wished to see the Enemy of the Enemy whose hair is red as flame and whose wrath is feared by many servants of the Darkness. He says that you are the only hope for his people, and he begs you to let him enter your service and dwell in your lands. He is offering his sword and life to you, Lord Warden."

The Warden of the East nodded, and let the approving murmur of his people trail off.

"Orya!" he said, and leant down to touch the Adan's chin lightly. He spoke in his own tongue, as he knew that it had a strange power over mortals; and he was right, for the Man raised his head, the joy of being accepted setting in his eyes. He stood.

"What is your name?" Maedhros asked him, switching back to Sindarin. He saw a flicker of recognition sparkling in the dark orbs, and he thought the Adan understood, but in the next moment, he shook his head.

"No," he said grudgingly, when only silence answered him. "No name. You give me name."

"You want me to name you...?" For a split second, the Warden of the East was forgotten, and Maedhros stared at the Man in wonder. Naming was a very intimate thing...

"This Man and his tribe have lost everything they had, brother," came Caranthir's voice from the left. "Their homes, their wealth, most of their families... when Ulfang and his sons laid their swords before my feet, they asked me to give them names as well, and I chose to give them back their old names, the ones they had forsaken when Moringotto destroyed their lives. I said I would help them avenge their loss, so they would feel worthy of their own names again; but the Adan who stands before you is proud and stubborn; and he shall not wear his old name again, for he considers it dead. He has chosen you as his lord and commander, and it shall be up to you to name him after the deeds he will do in your service."

*I cannot have nameless soldiers!* Maedhros thought. *I am not Moringotto...*

The Warden of the East drew a deep breath, knowing that all eyes were on him in the Hall. And suddenly, he knew what to do.

"Bór," He declared, his voice deep, his eyes grave, and he touched the side of the Adan's face...
lightly. "Bór I shall name you, and that name is a promise. I want your sons and grandsons, and your people to remember you as the one who stood, and never wavered. You shall remain by my side in battles and trials to come. I want the Enemy – his name be cursed! – and his servants to cry Bór's name in anguish and fear. Come now, son of Men, and draw your sword so the torches may light it!"

Half of Ulfang's throaty translation was stifled by the ringing cheers of the audience, but Maedhros paid no heed to that. His eyes were on the Adan's – Bór's – face, radiating with heat and emotion. Something akin with wonder and gratitude lit up in the dark eyes, and he finally dared to properly look at Maedhros. He could only guess what the Man saw – a noble face with hard outlines, a forest of auburn hair, a graceful jawline and a pair of stormy grey eyes, still hideously beautiful and unblemished, burning with a distant white flame; thin, light cicatrices running down at the sides of his neck: whip-marks, cuts and other blemishes, all vanishing, all faint, vacant ghosts of pain… No other than Findekáno and his healers knew how they ran all through his body, up and down and across and around…

Yet, the Warden of the East had a beautiful face; white as marble. Cold as marble.

Dead as marble.

"All hail the Men of the East!" Cried a voice at the high table.

"Rejoice!" The clamour went up once again, and it was echoed ten times as Bór of the East swore fealty to the House of Fëanor and the Easterlings were seated among Himlad's best captains.

Maedhros hoped that the cries were loud enough to stuff his people's ears and heads, so they would forget about all the strange rumours buzzing around.

For one evening, at least.

~ § ~

When they arrived back at the dais, Caranthir took his place casually between Amrod and Amras. Maedhros settled at the head of the table, and had his chalice refilled.

"It is good to have you all gathered around my table," he said, with the lightest smile he could suddenly produce. "Too many things have happened since we last met in council."

"Too many indeed," Curufin answered him, playing absentmindedly with his spoon, while food was served; then he suddenly raised his eyes, and Maedhros was surprised to see mirth in them. "Bór, Nelyo? Seriously? You could have at least given him a mazy name… for educational purposes…"

Maedhros let the adequate grin spread on his face; only then did he notice that there was something curious about Curufin's countenance. And he was not the only one to see it…

"Now-now, brother," Caranthir snickered, "who punched you so properly and deservedly in the face? I shall give them a medal."

Celegorm and Curufin exchanged a mysterious glance.

"Consider it a battle scar," said Celegorm very seriously.

"A most unfortunate incident," Curufin nodded.
"…shared only with the worthy few."

"I shall let my worth be otherwise defined," Maedhros broke in, though he was terribly curious. "What do you make of these Easterlings?"

"As our Lord Warden has wisely said, every hand that bears a weapon is most welcome," Celegorm recited. His eyes were sparkling, and Maedhros supposed he had been in his cups. "Or did it go the other way around? Every weapon that bears a hand…"

"They are very different from us, there is no doubt," came Maglor's solemn, though slightly emotional voice from across the table, "but they impressed me, in a way, or so I feel."

"I am getting fond of them," Caranthir declared. "They are witty, and fierce on the battlefield. Some of them learned quickly to present our courtesies, even if their true nature is much cruder... And Ulfang has a startling but deeply amusing sense of humour."

"I can imagine," Curufin snorted. "He seems to be the kind of fellow who plays puppetry with the skulls of his enemies."

"That is a plaything of Orcs," Maglor stated reproachingly. "He has his manners, or haven't you heard? I wonder when were you granted with an occasion to meet foes of that kind."

"Why, Nargothrond is filled with them," Celegorm shrugged. "Only, they are playing puppetry with words, which gets slightly boring after a time."

"Oh," Maglor countered in a shrill tone, "and is that a comic play? With one puppet calling 'King-slayer!' and the other calling 'Traitor!?!'"

I should have had that wine watered, Maedhros realised.

In happier times, this would have been the moment when Tyelcano came to the rescue – the counsellor had a remarkable talent of switching from cumbrous subjects to pleasant ones. But he was far away now, probably struggling through the thick layer of fog in the wastelands; and before Maedhros could think twice, Curufin's entire countenance froze, and disaster stroke.

"Speaking of Nargothrond," Caranthir raised his thin brows, "I've heard of your wondrous esclandres, sweet brothers. Congratulations in hindsight! Forgive me if my applause was not loud enough to hear a thousand miles apart."

Oh no. Oh, Valar, no. Not now.

"Do not poke your nose into things you cannot hope to understand," Celegorm growled in a low voice. "We have been betrayed."

"O, damnation!" Caranthir sighed theatrically. "Betrayed! My eyes are watering! You must have been very deeply hurt to be able to jest about all the turmoil you caused! You must horribly regret your malevolence... your ignorance... your stupidity! And I thought that you have been wronged! And I thought that you have been put to danger! And I worried for you...! I have feared for your life you filthy little...! Pray tell me what happened! Pray tell me why on Arda you thought that high treason was a good idea...!"

Maedhros opened his mouth to harshly rebuke him but no sound escaped his lips. Valar knew, he did not have any arguments to clash against that reasoning... And as unwise as it seemed, part of him desperately wanted to hear Celegorm's response.
"Shut your mouth, Carnistir!" Curufin hissed. "I will not have you questioning our decisions. I've already had enough of that. I'm coming to regret that I came to this accursed dinner at all."

"Aye, you should," Maglor suddenly called at him, his voice unusually cool. "For you have no place among us…"

"K-a-n-o!" Maedhros groaned in distress. Manwë above, this was going the worst way possible! He knew Maglor heard him and was aware of him, *he saw it* – still, his brother adamantly finished his sentence.

"…and not even among your children!"

"Enough!" Maedhros half snapped, half gasped. "By the Valar, Kano, do you hear yourself speaking…?!"

But it was too late.

Curufin looked disturbingly like their long-dead father when he rose from the table, chalice still in hand, lustrous black hair flowing restlessly, exuberantly down his shoulders; and his voice was also much like Fëanáro's when he spoke.

"There is not much to be said," he glanced darkly at his brothers, grey eyes fixed finally at Maglor's face. "You speak of my children in vain. I have no son and no daughter."

His chalice banged on the table and half its contents were spilled; the oldest wine of the Himring's cellars was drenching the table-cloth with arborescent lines of blood-red while Curufin took five quick steps down the stairs and disappeared behind the rear door. Celegorm stood as well, turned his back on the high table, and went after him, though his moves seemed somewhat less guarded. There was no shouting, no swearing, nor any kind of loud confrontation but the air seemed to vibrate with tension; and this alone was enough for dead silence to spread in the hall.

Maedhros chose to ignore it all and had his cup filled for the eighteenth time, if he counted it correctly. After a few more seconds of sullen silence, Amras took a hesitant mouthful of food and Caranthir pushed his chair closer to the table. Slowly, they went on feasting as if nothing had happened; and all the rest of the hall willingly joined the theatre.

A few tormenting minutes passed.

"One day," Amrod suddenly spoke up, his voice strangely distant, "we found an Orc-nest under the mountains with Carnistir and the Easterlings. We wandered far south from the lands of the Dwarves – I have never been there before! Telvo and I had chased those Orcs for three days straight… They never seemed to tire, and their dwellings were well hidden. The passages were becoming so narrow under the earth that two soldiers could not march forth shoulder to shoulder, yet I went on with Telvo, Moryo and Ulfang… And there we went, guarding each other's steps; I went forth, and Carnistir followed with Telvo and the Adan at his heels. The paths were silent…"

"Now," Maedhros said, ready to unleash his frustration upon the first possible target, "what *exactly* do you think you were doing in a narrow passage well under the earth, with no more than a mortal Man to guard you? You are not reckless Elflings anymore! You could have been attacked, or worse, captured!"

"That is not the moral of the story!" Amrod countered with a sigh. "What we found... what we found in those caverns were thralls. Not Elves and not Orcs; something in between. Creatures that could not be healed, not in this Age of the world. In happier times I might have known some of..."
them by the name... Yet we had to kill them. To slaughter them one by one, to chase them as hounds would chase a deer for their master to hunt it down."

"Is this an attempt to help our mood settle?" Maglor snapped.

"No. This is an attempt to make you listen!" Amrod crossed his arms before his chest. "We were furious. And we did not understand what was happening. Are thralls not meant to stay in the Dark Lands until their... their transformation is complete? Or if this is what Moringotto wants, why would he not keep them in Angamando? We could not even dream why..."

"Why Moringotto let them stay in such conditions?" Maedhros laughed darkly. "Or why did he hand them out to his Orcs? He did it for you to find them, evidently. For your mere distress, little one. For you to start to wander what kind of hideous sorcery must lurk in Angamando that could be capable of this; as well as for me to remember dark days long gone. To plant fear in our hearts, to let it grow."

That is still not the moral of the story," said Amrod, and he raised a finger. "We could not even dream why Moringotto let them stay in such a condition, aye. But I think I understand it now, like you do. He did it for the same reason he seeks to plant enmity between us. And you, brothers, are all helping his cause! You, Kano, by insulting Curvo; you, Carnistir, by irritating him; you, Nelyo, by silently letting all of it happen; and you, Telvo, by simply eating, all so naturally, and pretending we don't even exist!"

"Are you seriously reproaching Telvo that he was eating?!" Caranthir rolled his eyes. "Without even mentioning what Tyelko did...?!"

"I should not have mentioned Curvo's children," said Maglor, his face white as a wall. "I know that. But I just... I couldn't just sit there, and suffer these two jesting about what they did, after everything that happened... knowing what they did to us..."

"Enough."

There was something in Maedhros's voice that made the air all but freeze around them.

"I am the one who made a mistake tonight," he said, "by thinking you could manage to spend one evening without clawing at each other's throats. From this moment to the end of our feast, I demand silence. I don't want to hear your chattering and muttering and hassling and flite."

One by one, his brothers bowed their heads before their elder.

"Kano, Moryo," said Maedhros menacingly, "You shall look for Curvo and apologise. What happened after his and Tyelko's arrival stays between us. You have no right to speak to him in such a way... no matter what. Patience and generosity are the worst kind of punishment you can give him."

"As you wish," Caranthir nodded. Maglor remained silent.

Maedhros looked around. The faces he saw mirrored his own displeasure, hurt and uneasiness. Amrod and Amras were shooting quick glances towards Caranthir who was twiddling his thumbs, his brows furrowed. Maglor, on the other hand, sat still, his thin lips pressed together as if he'd decided not to speak anymore in this Age of the world. Celegorm and Curufin were nowhere to be seen.

Laughter escaped Maedhros's lips; harsh, raspy, bitter laughter. The same laughter that shook his entire body when he saw the stump of his right hand for the first time in the light of day.
"Nelyo?"

Maglor was staring at him. He recognised his foul mood, Maedhros knew.

"Raise your cups," he said with a mocking grin, "and hail the Lord of the Ñoldor, the Head of the House of Fëanáro, the Warden of the East and the Enemy of the Enemy! All hail the Lord Maedhros, the Hero of Many Battles – who cannot even keep his brothers in hand!"

"That's not…," Maglor started, but Caranthir dashed his goblet against the table, and cried in his booming voice,

"Rejoice!"

And the unsuspecting Hall echoed

Chapter End Notes

Author's Notes

'Valarauko' is Quenya for 'Balrog'.

Bór's name means 'faithful', and it was canonically given to him by the Elves – so I thought it would be appropriate if Maedhros himself named him. It was a very conscious decision to make him appear much more cultivated and dependable than Bór and his sons. Don't worry, though, we'll see more of the Easterlings' culture and traditions later.

'Atar' stands for 'Father' and 'Haru' for 'Grandfather' in Quenya.

'Orya' [m.: 'Rise!'] is an archaic form of Quenya imperative, signalling a very direct command.

A short note on Amrod & Amras:

There are two versions of the canon we know: The (published) Silmarillion one, where Amrod is the elder and Amras the younger, and they both survive until the Third Kinslaying; and the Shibboleth one, in which the twins are reversed – Amras being the elder and Amrod the younger –, and Amrod perishes when the ships are burned in Losgar.

My interpretation is a mashup of the two, since Amrod is the younger, but they both survive the burning of ships.
XXI. The Oath Awakens

“We are puppets dancing on the strings of those who came before us, and one day our own children will take up our strings and dance in our steads.”

/ George R. R. Martin’s Tyrion Lannister /

The Fortress of Himring, FA 467, the last day of Lótessë

“Maitimo,” came a melodious voice from the other side of the half-open door, “I don’t want to bother you with this, but the provision counts…”

“…are ready. Three copies. Come and collect yours.”

“Oh.”

Maglor stole into his room like a stray cat: with cautious, unsure steps, as if he was expecting the floor to crack below his feet. Maedhros leaned back in his chair, and proceeded to read Celegorm’s latest account about his patrols, and the disheartening state of dams over Little Gelion. He was trying to forget how his Counsellor had told him almost twelve years ago to start having them renovated. The dams were the least of his concerns at that time, though – and who could blame him for that? Who could have had the heart to order constructions, with the death-rate of Ñolofinwë still so woundingly fresh and vivid, in this cold, far country where the Northern Wind still carried the whirling ashes of Anfauglith over emptied wastelands…?
Devoid of clear instructions, Maglor spent a little time finding the adequate scroll of parchment and he lifted it up with a puzzled, dreamy sort of gesture. Maedhros watched him from the corner of his eye, wondering when would he finally leave.

“Maitimo?”

He closed his eyes for a moment.

“I could never fathom,” he said, in a tone that sounded far more exhilarated than crude, “how could one address people questioningly. You called for my attention. Where is the question in that?”

“Questions are everywhere,” said Maglor in his own quizzical manner. Then he swallowed, as if to push some invisible lump down his throat. “I just wanted to thank you, you know, for allowing me…”

For allowing you to ride off into a battle and bet your life on the biggest, emptiest gamble I’ve ever thrown? Anytime. Great pleasure.

Maedhros felt the pieces of his lordly mask click together as he made his daily effort to smile.

“If any of us has the right to claim the Gap, ‘tis you, Kano. My heart tells me I’ve made the right choice, however unwise it may seem to send you off with an army of wild Men to meet your fate.”

“I will not disappoint you,” said Maglor, his voice suddenly proud and unwavering.

“I know,” Maedhros lied, the muscles in his face constrained to the verge of being torn. “I expect you in the small council in the eighth hour this evening. Tell your men to be ready to depart at dawn – swiftly and quietly.”

The flight of stairs that led up to the Northern Tower was painfully long. Not that Curufinwë was tired; oh, not at all. But the passage – and thus the march – was largely long enough for his dark thoughts to break free from the chains of his shattered self-restraint, and overwhelm his fëa. Still, he went on, grinding his teeth, hands tightened into fists; restless, graceful, invincible.

But what for?

You shall no longer hold a place in my council, nor shall you be granted with any kind of confidential knowledge, Nelyafinwë had said, thunder in his eyes, the title of lord I take back from you.

And still he had been summoned, with the rest of his brothers, he supposed. The word had reached him, no matter how hard he’d tried to elude it, no matter how many locks he kept on the doors of his workshop. The message was waiting for him placed promptly upon the bench when he entered the smithy, written in his eldest brother’s hand, ridiculously clumsy to any eye who knew not the story behind that snaggle-toothed cursive.

He, Curufinwë was expected in the council room. Why?

Has Nelyo forgotten? Could he be jesting?
Nay, and nay.

Curufinwë’s quick stern steps were slowing down, his breath spasmodic as if he’d just run a mile without halting. It was an alien sensation; did he, Curufinwë Atarinke run out of breath after no more than climbing a tower? He, who had no notion of being truly exhausted? Why was his breath speeding up, why was his heart drumming frantically against his ribcage?

Breathe. He could not breathe, as if someone had set his insides on fire; cruel flames were lighting up in his chest, making his limbs go stiff. What was it – anger? Shame? Distress?

He stopped grudgingly, leaning to the wall with his back. Coldness crept up amongst his muscles where the back of his cloak met the hard rock; the thick wool sheathings beneath his garments were no challenge for the creeping coldness of the Himring to penetrate. This corner of the castle seemed seldom used; merely one or two torches were lit in each bend of the staircase, the rest of the holders gaping emptily.

Curufinwë let the sensation of cold overwhelm him. He closed his eyes for a few seconds, taking several deep breaths, trying to chase away the demons inside his head.

He did not want to see any of his brothers now. Oh Valar, how he loathed to see them.

Where are your children? Makalaurë’s soft musical voice echoed mercilessly in his head. Where is Tyelpë? Where is Erenis?

Tyelperinquar is his own master now, the ghost of Tyelko’s voice clashed sharply against Kano’s. Seek for the answer in your heart, you will find this is true. Why would you be so eager to fight your own fate? Let him go, Curvo. The Oath is enough burden on our shoulders.

Curufinwë ran his fingers through the surface of the hard stone wall, exploring every lump and delve. There was not one finger-hold that escaped his unceasing attention. The stones were to his liking, from an old and deeply solid kind that might have been forged and chiselled long ago by the Great Smith Aulë himself, only to be left behind in Endórë, given over to the black claws of Morgoth.

But the ghosts of the past went on haunting his mind.

We shall not lay our hands upon them, the echo of Orodreth’s voice said bitterly. But bread and shelter I shall grant them no more within my realm and there will be little love between Nargothrond and the Sons of Feanor thereafter: this I swear.

Let it be so! Tyelko had laughed like a madman. And he, Curufinwë – he’d said nothing but smiled.

Why had he smiled? Maybe it was just the irony of it all.

They called us traitors. But what else could we have done?

Pressing his thin lips together, he gathered what strength he could and attacked the stairs once more. It was not like he, Curufinwë, son of Fëanáro could allow himself to stay behind while his brothers sat in council – whatever the circumstances. Bridling his legs, he paced on with calm, lithe steps, his chin up, his countenance now a pretence of graceful and commanding.

He gathered himself completely by the time he reached the door; his thumb lingered on the handle for a moment, for he could not hear any words spoken from behind. Still, he entered, silent as a shade.
The warmth came unexpected.

A jolly fire was burning in the hearth at the nearest corner; its crackle echoed softly between the cramped walls, coaly nibs of flames lapping the hearth-frames. The entire room was no more than a cave-like hole on the top of the tower, and looked more like an attic than a council-chamber, save for the fact that a big round table stood in the middle (which alone occupied half the space in the room) and his six brothers were surrounding it. Apart from the hearth, the only source of light was the huge golden candle-holder that stood firmly in the middle of the table; its gleam reflected yellowishly upon a heap of unfolded parchments.

The only empty chair was placed right between Makalaurë and Carnistir, and this fact angered Curufinwë. Of course, he would be forced to sit in silence, to act as if nothing had happened all those days ago. He could not show any sign of weakness – not now.

“I am glad that you came at length, brother,” Nelyafinwë glanced up to meet his eye.

“Tell me what decisions were made,” said Curufinwë, far less smoothly then intended.

“We did not start the meeting without you present,” His eldest brother replied patiently. “We are to discuss an important matter that concerns all of us. You cannot stay behind, Curvo. Come, and sit.”

Curufinwë took three steps towards the table, then came to an abrupt halt.

“This is unexpected,” he crossed his arms before his chest: a shield of flesh. “It has come to my understanding that my title as Lord of the House of Fëanáro has been taken from me, along with the burden of knowledge and responsibilities. Why would you, any of you suddenly wish to discuss anything of importance with me? Or Tyelkormo? I see him at this table as well, although he’d suffered the same fate as me. Have you changed your mind, lord brother?”

“I did not involve you in the making of my decisions,” said Nelyafinwë without a blink, “yet I have tasks for you, and I thought it would be useful to acquaint you with them. If your wishes extend to no more than sharpening arrows, though, you are very welcome to crawl back into your hole.”

Curufinwë had at least three possible comebacks at the tip of his tongue, but there was something in his brother’s eyes that made him stop; a distant white flame, burning terrible and low. Curufinwë knew that look; it was enough to make him nod, and take three other steps towards the table then sit, escaping both Makalaure’s and Carnistir’s searching glance.

“Good,” said Nelyafinwë. “Now hear me, brothers! We have battles to win and allies to gather if we truly want to cleanse our lands from the pent-up dirt. We have all made our choices, faced our foes, fought our wars; yet there is one mission, one mission above anything and everything we shall ever do, one task that binds us together until our Quest ends and our heritage, our birth-right is safely back in our hands – until then, or until the World ends. This ultimate purpose: the burden of our Oath is above every rule, every law and every judgement ever made. For what is the doom of the Lords of the Ñoldor against the Doom of Mandos itself?”

“So we came to the proverbial dead end, at last,” Makalaurë said, a myriad of emotions puzzling in his soft voice.

Curufinwë looked at him, wondering. Makalaurë had been the last to utter the Oath that bound them endlessly to the fate of their father's Silmarili; Makalaurë, who had never wished to do it and possibly never intended. Makalaurë, who – in Curufinwë's opinion – had always wanted to stay behind. Makalaurë, who tended to overlook or sometimes even forget what they had sworn to do...
“…so we have. And yet, a sparkle of hope has flared up in my heart,” said Nelyafinwë firmly, measuring his brothers' faces one by one. “A fool's hope, if you wish. We have sworn a terrible Oath and we are bound to it until the end of Arda; or maybe after that. And while there is the smallest chance to fulfil it, we have no choice. Each of you must know this, deep in your hearts, as I do.”

“We do,” said Tyelkormo, his voice distant. “Moringotto has been rused and one of our Atar's Jewels is now missing from his black crown. And alas! it is in Doriath – in the hands of Thingol the Thief.”

“Aye, it is,” Carnistir growled. “And have you and Curvo been just a little less foolish, it could have never got there. Did you even consider the possibility of reclaiming the Silmaril after it had been stolen? Let me answer my own question: of course not. I remember Atar knocking on my head from time to time, asking, Do you keep a brain in there, Morifinwë? I am now asking the same question. You could have aided that Man, or could have feigned to do so. You should have challenged the son of Barahir to get the Jewel and keep it if he could, encouraging him. Indeed, you did not.”

“Do you keep a brain in there, Morifinwë?”

Curufinwë barely raised his voice but his tone and speech were so alike Fëanáro's that each of his brothers gave a start, then glanced upon him with wary eyes.

“Indeed, we did not,” Curufinwë said, articulating each word thoroughly and precisely. “Our trial has long ended, our choices were made, our deeds discussed, and our punishment received; yet to satisfy your curiosity, Carnistir, hear this. We were convinced – as any of you would have been – that the Quest of the Silmaril was initially doomed to failure. There seemed to be no point in wasting our time on such foolish notions. What would you have done in our stead, brother? Join the party in their folly? You would have been killed before even winning a chance to glimpse the gates of Angamand. Have you not heard what happened to Findarátó and his company? That Man has also been captured and nearly killed; who could have guessed that Thingol's daughter would go after him with Tyelko's hound in her heels to fight that lickspittle of Moringotto and his bats and werewolves and all the monstrosities that lurk in those dark lands?! Had it fell upon me to first tell you the tale, all of you would have deemed it nonsense! As it was! As it is! Search your feelings – how could we have been possibly able to foresee this?!?”

“You could have tried to measure their valour better, at least,” Carnistir said. “You could have elaborated a what if-plan. And, most of all, you could have been eluded to be dismissed from Nargothrond for all Ages to come... and all the mess that came with it.”

“We did what we deemed best, as I have already said to Nelyo,” Curufinwë said gravely. “And I answer to no one else. It is not my problem that the power to hammer common sense into heads is now taken from me.”

“If I were to hammer common sense in any head I would not entrust you with it,” Carnistir snapped. “You are far too fierce and proud, Atarinke. And what for?”

“Then teach me, o Champion of Sobriety!” Curufinwë boomed, in his eyes a menacing light. Before he could realise what was he doing, he jumped to his feet, staring down at his older brother with unhiden anger.

“Enough!” Said Nelyafinwë, his voice splintering down the walls like pieces of gravel crashing down from a cliff on a stormy day. “Carnistir, what our brothers have done is already done, and calling them names will not change the past. Nothing will. Let us be thankful that they have not
fallen into a trap of Moringotto, nor were they ambushed by Orcs on their way from Nargothrond and they are here, safe and whole. And Curufinwë – you answer to each and every one of us in this room, just as we do to you, when it comes to any deed related to our Oath. Understood?"

Curufin swallowed his anger. This was justice, and he'd earned it. Still, the humble words seemed to roll up his throat like hot flames of pain,

“Yes, Nelyo. Understood.”

“Good. Now sit back, you two, and let us turn our attention to things of importance. Unless anyone protests…?”

There was a long silence. The sound of heavy rain washed down from the roof and the flames in the hearth were growing down, crackling angrily as a few straggling water-drops wormed their way amongst them from some hidden breach in the walls. Then Nelyafinwë stood up, pacing soundlessly in the room for a minute or so. Curufinwë watched the dim light dancing around in his auburn hair, his long thin brows, his stern jawline, and those thin lips that seldom smiled, but when they did, they changed the entire face.

“As I was saying,” his eldest brother spoke up genially after a time, as if nothing had happened, “I believe we have some hope now to stand against Moringotto. My heart feels alive again; if an Elven maiden and a mortal Man could indeed manage to steal into the Enemy's fortress, so can we. Yet we are no thieves, brothers of mine, as were this Man and his mistress; nor could we ever hope to get through the Iron Gates unnoticed. The borders of the Enemy's lands will be fortified now, and watched thrice as carefully as they were before. There is no more hope in playing hide-and-seek with Moringotto.”

“Then what would you have us do?” Tyelkormo gazed up to meet Nelyafinwë's eyes. “Gather an army and go to Angamando to bang on his doors with a thousand lances?”

“Now there is an idea worthy of our King,” Nelyafinwë said, eyes lighting up in amusement. “Nay, Tyelko; all I hope to do – for now – is to bring back order to these lands. Beleriand shall no longer be a playground of Orcs and other monsters; for Beleriand is the rightful property of the Free People, be they Quendi, Atani or Casari; and the Free People shall defend it. Together.”

“We’re gathering allies,” Curufinwë heard himself saying. “You’re gathering allies,” he corrected himself with a snarl.

“Aye,” Nelyafinwë closed his eyes for a moment. “I have a task for each of you, after your merits, and I shall trust you with those. I shall expect them to be carried out by the time I come back.”

“You are leaving!” Curufinwë exclaimed. His bitterness was suddenly forgotten, and all he felt was the terrible, terrible lack of balance; something akin with dread. “But Nelyo, you can’t leave…”

“I am going on a diplomatic mission,” said Nelyafinwë coolly. “So does Káno, albeit a more violent one. And so do Pityo and Telvo.”

“Albeit an entirely pointless one,” Carnistir barked.

“Silence.”

What, Curufinwë wanted to ask, then realised that he would probably get no answer to his question. He wished to spare himself the shame of being defied.

“Tyelkormo,” Nelyafinwë’s voice rang proud and shrill, “you shall be the commander of the scouts
until my return, and Captain Tulcestelmo is remanded to his post in the castle-watch. I know that you are fond of hunting, brother, and I am sorry that the only amusement I can offer is a hunt for Orcs.”

“Better have a lowly amusement than no amusement at all,” said Tyelkormo truthfully. “And I am glad to be of any help.”

His voice was calm, almost indifferent and his face unreadable, yet Curufinwë sensed the tension within him.

_He knows nothing, either._

This was the first time he truly understood what their punishment meant; that they were deprived of trust and honour, yet were treated with honour all the same.

“Curufinwë,” said his eldest brother, and he dared not look away as their eyes met, “my task for you is sole and simple: I want you to finish what you’ve started. I need craftsmen; smiths, apprentices, eager hands. I want you to teach anybody who is willing to learn, and to pass on as much of your craft as possible. You have all my workshops, my iron and silver and gold and my tools.”

“You will not be disappointed,” said Curufinwë, but he could not grasp the meaning of his own words.

“Good. And now, there is one more thing to discuss…”

The sentence wasn’t immediately finished. Nelyafinwë studied their faces one by one, and Curufinwë had to hold himself from flinching and looking away when that stern, penetrating gaze proceeded to read his heart.

“…do you want the Oath fulfilled?”

_Do we want – what?_

“What is the meaning of this?!” Carnistir snapped. “We do – Valar, of course we do!”

“And why do you want it fulfilled?”

Everyone stared at Nelyafinwë at this question. Why. Why?

“There is no such thing as why, Nelyo,” Makalaurë finally said. “We have no choice. We fall to the Darkness, if we don’t…”

“But that is why you want it fulfilled. To save your own wretched skin,” Their elder’s eyes were suddenly afire. “And what if I told you that it made no difference? That the Valar were never to pardon us, no matter what we would do? We could do as some of you would, we could take up arms, march against Doriath, and slay those of our own kin again… Is this truly your choice, brothers of mine? Strife and peril? Are we no more than common thieves and murderers? I believe I am – and I have had enough! I shall not spare the lives of the Moriquendi because I seek absolution – I shall spare them because I am a Lord of the Ñoldor and not some Orc-chieftain. Our Enemy is not Thingol; it is Moringotto and he still has two of our Atar’s Jewels. That disgusting monster killed our Grandsire and he robbed us; then he had our sire killed… Then he captured me, enslaved me, disgraced me, tortured me; and how many times since then has he charged at us with all his power and wrath…! _Are you truly foolish enough to think that he shall ever stop?_ For as long as we draw breath he shall be after us, ever seeking our death and ruin! Moringotto would be
pleased above all if we attacked Doriath, for he would know we could never find pleasure in our victory, even if we would happen to win. And, how could we? No one would come to the aid of traitors and kinslayers. Murderers! How could you wish to stoop so low? I see it in your eyes – I see it; I see you would all choose the road you deem easier. But I shall not – hear me, I shall not attack Doriath. No more kinslaying. Never again. I have had enough.”

No more than a flicker of that voice would have been enough for any soul to understand that Menegroth was not to be attacked; not while the Lord of Himring drew breath.

“And now hear me thee, sons of Fëanáró!” Nelyafínwë went on, with such a power in his voice that seemed to put Cúrufínwë’s own to shame. “Cruel is the choice that lies in front of us. We have sworn to get the Silmarilli back and we have not sworn it lightly. It would be foolish to think that our Oath could by any means be neglected or delayed. You say that we cannot fight Moringotto with the strength of arms we have – but do you think, do you truly think that we are the only ones to hate the Black Foe? That we are his only enemies? Others loath him too, others have also suffered his torments and monstrosities. You have heard the Men of the East, their wishes and their complaints. They hate the Enemy with fervency, and they would do anything to brighten their families’ lives – and the same is true for all the Free Ones! Every single soul in Beleriand curses the name of Moringotto, people shake their fists and grind their teeth when they hear it! Tales spread to every corner of these lands and if we gather our army while the flames of hope are still high in all hearts, we may gain the power that we desire, and the aid of the High King himself with it.”

“But not under our banners, Nelyo,” Makalaurë said softly, sadly. “You shan’t abide any more kinslaying, you say – but we have already committed this sin. All of us. No one shall pardon it. It makes no difference...”

“Yes, it does,” Nelyafínwë held his head high, so the gleam of lustrous red hair that ran down his shoulders and his back danced around, mirroring the flames in the hearth. “It does – for I want our Oath fulfilled, and fulfilled swiftly so it could cause no more harm. Absolution I shall seek no more; but I believe, I must believe that if our cause is good we shall get the aid we desire. For too long we have stayed in the shadows, not seeing further than our own fear and self-loathing. Imagine we’ve never swore that terrible Oath – even in that case, we would want to avenge our sire and grandsire and those hundreds, thousands of kinsmen and kinswoman we have lost by Moringotto’s evil scheming. The Noldor have lost three Kings to Moringotto. The fourth one we shan’t give to him – this must stop! The first Men and many of our kin, the Avari have been enslaved and disgraced by Moringotto’s servants – this must stop! Those of Doriath and Nargothrond have long suffered from his dark thoughts and malice – this must as well stop! Even the Casari have felt his wrath in their halls and caves and forges. Even they hate him and curse his name. We are all friends and allies in this one cause – all the people of Beleriand. We must stop Moringotto while we can! And I believe we can. All the force we have in these lands – all the weapons joined, all hands raised against the same Enemy, all voices crying death to the Black Foe and his servants... it has to be enough. My heart is weary not only for our own days to come, but for all the world we live in. We cannot let this Evil grow any further. We must stop the course of his plans – if we do not, no one shall.”

“This is all well, my lord brother,” Carnistir sighed, “but you cannot be fool enough to think Thingol or Orodreth would ever help us. And without them, we’re doomed to failure.”

“Maybe not,” said Nelyafínwë with a wild smile. “Maybe not,” he repeated, much more softly; then his eyes inflamed again. “Whatever happens, I want you all to remember who we are, who we once were. We are noble lords of a noble people and I shan’t let dark deeds of long ago doom our hearts.”
“The doom lies within us,” Makalaurë said. “We cannot escape it, Nelyo.”

“We shan’t escape it,” Nelyafinwë answered him. “We shall smite it.”

He towered above them all; tall, stern, and kingly. Curufinwë felt a sudden a wave of pride, devotion and enthusiasm wash over him as he looked upon their eldest.

*This is the big brother we’ve greatly missed. This is Nelyafinwë, son of Fëanáro, Lord of the Ñoldor and Warden of the East; the Enemy of the Enemy.*

“What would you have us do, then?” Makalaurë asked.

“I want you to be my first and most loyal allies,” Nelyafinwë said. “And you too, Tyelkormo and Curufinwë; for our faiths are all bound within our Oath. Never fail me, my brothers. Never fail our sire’s and grandsire’s name and their memory. Cast away all kind of strife and hatred you have; divided, we shall never defeat our Enemy. I need your composure and clairvoyance, Kano; your wits and ardour, Tyelko; your fairness and prowess, Moryo; your cunningness and crafty hands, Curvo; your clear sight and loyalty, Pityo; and your frankness, yet kindliness, Telvo. I need all these.”

“You shall have them,” Tyelkormo sighed, “but now – heed my warning, for ‘tis not something that happens every day – I agree with Moryo. It seems impossible to me that Thingol and Orodreth would ever come to our aid.”

“I do not blame you for not being able to trust them,” Nelyafinwë answered him softly. “Yet if you cannot, trust me, brother. Trust my plans and decisions.”

For a few moments, they all were utterly, gravely silent.

“And now,” Nelyafinwë said, “after all that has been said, all that we’ve been pondering, do I have your support against Moringotto and his scheming? Shall you help me gather allies, chase Orcs and keep secrets? Shall you all stand by my side?”

“We shall,” Curufinwë heard himself saying as he stood, and pulled his sword from its scabbard. The blade glittered warmly in the torchlight. “The wrath of the Sons of Fëanáro arises in might, and it is ready to chase Moringotto to the end of this world.”

And the Seven Sons all stood, and the edges of their swords clashed against each other as they promised to stand side by side, for now and always, and face together whatever may come; and thus the Oath of Fëanáro had been awakened, but the flame of its fury was no longer fed by hatred.

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The Regent Lord of Himring found the departing one in the fifth hour of the day.

“Nelyo,” came the ragged whisper through the gap of the stable’s door, “I’ve searched the whole castle for you. I don’t want to bother you with this, but…”

The Warden of the East stayed still as he was, his face half-buried in the welcoming warmth of his favourite destrier’s mane.

“…but?”

There was a sharp intake of breath. “Are the provision counts ready, or should I prepare to hang myself?”
Maedhros could not stifle a short laugh. “I have finished them,” he said. “Three copies. It was the biggest battle I’ve fought since the Flames.”

“Right?” His brother took a few hesitant steps towards him. “Nelyo… listen. I’m really honoured by your trust, and thank you, but… I still have very serious doubts about sending Kano off to battle with the Easterlings.”

“It is a question of honour for him,” said Maedhros. “And if I have to leave someone other than Counsellor Tyelco in my seat, I’d rather it be you than Kano – especially with Tyelko and Curvo this close to the fire. Keep an eye on them, Moryo… but let them help you, if they are willing. And be stern.”

“Stern,” Carnistir nodded. “And then… there are the twins…”

“The council meeting took place three days ago, and we have come to an agreement,” Maedhros’s voice rang more mercilessly than intended.

“I know,” Carnistir let out a shuddering breath, and Maedhros suddenly saw a change upon his face; as if he’d suddenly pulled on the same death-mask he wore as Warden of the East. “My heart is full of doubts, but I shan’t give in to them. Pray come back soon. Everything shall be in order… I will not disappoint you.”

Maedhros felt his own lordly mask crack open upon his face; and he smiled from his very heart.

“I know,” he said lightly, and kissed his Regent on the forehead.

Yet then again, he lied; he knew nothing.

He could only hope.

Chapter End Notes

The Casari [quenya] is a name for ‘Dwarves’ and the Atani [quenya] for Men.

Of names: Curufinwë’s POV always uses Quenya names for everyone, as you might have already remarked. Other than that, I often call Caranthir Carnistir in dialogues and other interactions, but there’s no general rule for that.

The beginning quote is one of my favourite extracts from ‘A Song of Ice and Fire’. You may encounter other ones, too, throughout the story; I know that Mr. Martin is generally against the concept of fan fiction, but I still think he wouldn’t mind using some of his quotes to settle the mood…
A/N: …we keep telling ourselves that we all make mistakes. Which is very true. Everyone makes mistakes, everyone can get angry and everyone can be disturbed – even Counsellor Tyelcano. That said, please allow me to quote Anakin Skywalker for once: “This is where the fun begins!” ENJOY!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

XXII. A Dead End Awaits

“And in vain does the dreamer rummage about in his old dreams, raking them over as though they were a heap of cinders, looking in these cinders for some spark, however tiny, to fan it into a flame so as to warm his chilled blood by it and revive in it all that he held so dear before, all that touched his heart, that made his blood course through his veins, that drew tears from his eyes, and that so splendidly deceived him!”

(Fyodor Dostoyevsky)

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He was wearing his formal robes, and he was wounded. Upon his hauberk yawned three gaping holes: two on the right, one on the left, exposing the cloth above his rapidly beating heart. Such a fault in his armour betrayed a disastrous turn of luck when it came to the Valar’s favours bestowed upon him.

Vaguely, he remembered being shot, and dragged along the remnants of a river-bank, long dried. He offered no more protestations than a sack of corns, or a deer carcass would have; and that was making him vengeful, as much as he could tell. This was a dream, after all, and emotions, impressions, convictions in dreams were unstable, ephemeral. They came and went, they materialised with the speed of thought, only to disappear a heartbeat later.

One boot was missing from his feet, he realised with a sudden pang of anger. This new emotion was sharp, and it cleared his mind like a breeze of fresh air. Here and there, his bare foot grazed along big, rounded stones among the messy undergrowth, as if his captors were following some long-forsaken path.

Blood was drippling down his chin, scarcely but steadily: red tears of helplessness. It was probably coming from his nose, but he felt no pain. All he felt was numbness, and the disturbing weight of air on his heaving chest.

His head was pounding.

He was losing too much blood.

He screamed a name, any and every name that came to his mind, pleading for help and salvation; yet no answer came. He grabbed the hilt of a weapon in his belt; its length was unfamiliar. He could not remember owning a dagger like that.
...yes... yes, he could, after all, now that he thought of it. It was the dagger Curufinwë gave him; bright and sharp and defiantly beautiful. Deadly.

_Crows were gathering around him, watching him with hungry eyes, waiting for his last breath so they could have their feast. Their screams were raspy, and they chilled him to the bone._

_Steps were coming, closing in, and he knew it would soon be over. All over._

_And the Voice would call..._

Yet this time, it did not; and he woke with a low cry, drenched in sweat.

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_Dimbar, North-West of the Brithiach, FA 467, the last day of Lótessë_

“Not much vegetation,” Counsellor Tyelcano muttered, and made a few notes on shattered parchment. “Dim, foggy even with the Gates of Summer approaching, and even greyer than it used to be. Nothing to eat, save perhaps the frogs.”

He made a new mark with his thin carbon-stick, and shifted the parchment a little, looking for possible mistakes. The northern half of Beleriand was traced out splendidly before his eyes, all even and precise, all measured out in a one to five miles-scale: mountain-lines, hills, plains, rivers, routes fortresses... still, something was amiss. Tyelcano had carefully counted every single mile between the Himring and Tol Sirion, where he was supposed to meet the High King, but either there was an error in his calculations (and the Counsellor, despite his general humble manners, excluded that possibility) or there was a large uncharted area between the dreadful Nan Dungortheb and the northern riverlands.

“Senge!” Tyelcano called, and when the target of his attention turned around, bowed, and asked how could he be of assistance, he made a brief inviting gesture towards the rock he was leaning on while he worked.

“Come, my friend,” he said casually, “and tell me everything you know of those mountains over there.”

Senge, who had spent years as a messenger of Lord Maedhros before he joined the scouts (his departure being the first obvious sign of the true seriousness of the lord's need for warriors) sat down beside the Counsellor, and stared at that makeshift table of a rock for a few moments before answering.

“Those are the peaks of the Crissaegrim, m'lord. It is said that King Thorondor's folk live among the mountains, and their vigilance guards or restrains those who travel along the Sirion. But the Orcs are becoming numerous in these lands, and the Eagles show themselves less and less. I have never journeyed through those mountains, and nor had anyone else I know; the roads are narrow and dangerous, and the passes are covered in snow even at Midsummer.”

Tyelcano stared at the massive walls of icy rock in the distance, miles above the whole world, graceful, invincible.

“Yes, well, and what is past those mountains?”

“More mountains, m’lord,” Senge said readily. “Walls of ice, snow and impenetrable rock. Lands of eternal winter, as I have heard. No Elf had ever set foot there; ’tis mayhap only the Eagles who know a way across the Fangs – for so they are called in the kingdom of Hithlum. And past all that,
there are the once safe and fertile lands of Dorthonion. Then, north of that – you need not draw anything on the map you're making for our Lord Warden.”

“It shall not be necessary, either way,” said Tyelcano elegantly. “I have made a mile-count around Angamando in our days of peace; it is a pity, though, that we do not know what is past its gates. Or if those mountains end anywhere. Or if there are any passes, valleys, hills and rivers past that.”

“Why the insatiable hunger for knowledge, lord?” Asked the scout with a little smile. It was the same sort of smile Tyelcano oft received when he finished a particularly long and dry report, or went through the provision counts within two hours.

“Knowledge is the whetstone of wit,” he said without thinking, then cleared his throat. “Provided that one’s mind has any edge that could be sharpened.”

“As you say, m’lord.” Senge nodded his accord, and not a muscle moved in his face as he went about his business.

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Days came and went without any notable incident, and Tyelcano barely counted them. He kept his pragmatic mind on the indispensable: eating, drinking, riding, taking first watch, trying to sleep. Occasionally, he forced himself to have short rests up in the saddle, for peaceful slumber eluded him ever since he’d left the Himring. He saw the same dream every single night now – a dream of wounds, capture, crows, cold and empty wastelands; always fresh, always vivid, always painful, grim, and shockingly believable. The vision seemed to prowl endlessly in the back of his mind, assaulting him as soon as his eyes gazed over, then vanishing when he opened them again, like the warning of a ghastly hand that dissolves in the morning sun.

*My dreams are trying to tell me something,* Tyelcano decided, again and again, and every time his iron will pressed against that unuttered truth. He could have sooner broken his own knees than turn back. He was a servant on a mission, the bearer of weighty news, the keeper of unpleasant secrets that had to be passed from one lordly ear to another with the swiftness of an arrow.

*A poisoned arrow,* Tyelcano kept telling himself, but that thought was to be shaken off as well. The orders of Lord Maedhros had been precise and explicit; and several millenia of service have taught him to give counsel whenever asked… and follow orders whenever denied.

Relentlessly, he pressed on, taking the lead, giving first watch, riding out to hunt, sending out scouts from their humble company of ten, working on his maps and notes and entries on his insufferable visions.

Time seemed to crawl along with the speed of a sleeping snail; and the road went ever on.

~ § ~

On the fifth day of Nárië, the wind turned, and brought the promise of rain. The mist-laden air hung heavily in the deep valleys where their road ribboned, and there was a soft bristle in the endless sea of grass that reached up their horses’ knees. The Sun hid its golden face behind veils of wreathing mist; nothing moved within eyesight, and the only thing that changed since yestereve was the pattern of clouds.

Cold fingers of morning breeze crept under Tyelcano’s collar as he gently nudged his stallion to the edge of a small cliff to have a look.

“Anything new, Lord Counsellor?” Called young Antalossë.
“The grass-blades have moved some twenty degrees North,” said Tyelcano, very seriously. “And the skies are three shades darker.”

“You’d think that he was joking…” Came the demure voice of Senge from behind.

“He might have been.” Tyelcano gave him a diplomat’s smile: flawless, yet one dancing on the verge of mockery. “I’m a funny old Elf, little one. Especially when sparring. Would you care to try?”

“I’ve grown somewhat too fond of my four limbs, m’lord…” Senge bowed with a slight grin, pondering the possibility. “…but I always like a challenge!”

“Then grab that toothpick of yours, and charge!”

It was all a façade, Tyelcano knew; the playful insults, the barbs and the barely contained mockery they entertained each other with. He and Senge were frequent companions ever since the Flames, when the scout had killed forty Orcs in a single, heated assault to open the gates before Lord Maglor’s fleeing soldiers. Then, he even found in himself the audacious heroism to tousle the lord out of the raging battle and into the Himring’s welcoming cool – a deed just as remarkable, as far as the Counsellor was concerned. Senge had always preferred a lance over any and every other weapon the smiths’ minds could convey, which made him a dangerous, and more than a little unpredictable sparring partner.

The two Elves retreated a few steps from the scalloped edge of the cliff, to more solid settling. Dust whirled under Tyelcano’s feet as he prowled around, searching for higher ground, and found none.

“Are you certain you want to run into my toothpick with a single dagger, m’lord?” Senge asked jokingly.

“Oh, I am.” Tyelcano took three short steps, span around, tightened and loosened his legs, then slowly turned back, regaining balance. “This is just what I needed.”

Focus. Curufinwë’s gift slid out of its scabbard and into his welcoming palm, smoothly, flawlessly. Steel merged with flesh as he moved, and the dagger was part of him now, a graceful extension of his own arm. Movements came neatly, naturally, as if he was merely waving his hand around.

Wait. The lance answered the call with a fluid swoosh, and Tyelcano half-saw half-felt Antalossë turning away from the empty view of the wastelands to watch them, beaming with excitement. Capable for certain; but he was still half a child…

Charge!

Steel rang on steel, and Tyelcano was finally at peace. In combat, there was nothing but balance and speed and focus: deep and endless focus in the centre of it all; some hidden power within his very core that slept soundly through his daily ordeals, rising only when the immediate danger of an assault loomed above his head. For a few precious minutes, everything was forgotten: his mission, his hopes, his fears, his dreams… some proud, fierce need to disarm his opponent filled his entire being. Gracefully, he danced, closer and closer to Senge, sliding in and out of the spear’s reach, sometimes madly close, sometimes ridiculously far; ever-changing, ever-moving like the clouds, the Moon, and the very shapes in the tapestries of Vairë. And for a fleeting moment, everything was perfect.

Then came the intruder.
At first, it was only a blurred black patch on the left edge of his vision, and his mind barely even acknowledged its existence, following the soft gleam of the spear-head instead, arranging his body into curious constellations. Later, the black patch continued to grow, and later still, it materialised into a large carrion crow. The bird landed sloppily upon a rock, right above his left ear, and watched him, just watched him with eyes of shiny coal.

*It's just a crow,* Tyelcano reminded himself, as he almost missed a blow. *The commonest bird you can imagine. It has nothing to do with you. Focus!*

Then the crow began to caw – as crows normally do, although its voice was somewhat shriller than usual, and terribly familiar.

*Caw.*

Tyelcano missed a beat, and only his barest instinct saved him as the spearhead rushed past his right shoulder.

*Caw.*

Now he was outright late, his rash counter-strike a means of flight rather than an attack.

*Caw.*

Senge was charging at him with a fearsome grin, shouting something like *“You’re slow, Counsellor!”*, and his own backlash was clumsy and wrath-driven.

*Caw.*

*“Begone!”* Tyelcano bellowed, and with an agile spin, he was out of spear-range once again, and he charged, with all his wrath, onto the creature, with inconceivable speed. He half-hoped, half-wished that the sorry thing would be fast enough to escape him…

The crow let out a last, irrevocable *caw.* Its scream was raspy, and it chilled him to the bone…

…and then it charged as well, right at him, aiming for the eye.

It all happened within a heartbeat. Tyelcano gave a cry of dismay and stooped as low as he could, shielding his face with his arms, momentarily forgetting how his dagger could have pierced through the creature from beak to tail; the crow disappeared in the valley below them with a last, mischievous *caw;* and Senge slammed into the Counsellor’s crouched figure with his entire weight and buoyancy, still delirious with the verve of fighting. Before Tyelcano could move, or cry out, or take a breath, he was flying off the cliff.

There was a terrible, sickening *crack,* and his vision blurred.

~ § ~

He heard a faint voice at the edge of the world, at the frontier of his muffled perception.

*“Do you think… I mean, he is alive, is he not?”*

*“Of course he is, you sack of dragon dung. He’s breathing…”*

*“When do you think he will wake?”*

*“I don’t know, ‘Lossë. Would you care to be less of a nuisance and look for the General?”*
"And what do I tell him? Good day, Lord Gildor! Oh yes, everything is fine, there is a bad storm coming and Senge just killed our Lord Counsellor…"

"I told you – he’s breathing!"

"I’m not that easy to kill, young one…” Tyelcano forced himself to speak, although his voice rang far weaker than intended.

"Counsellor!” Senge’s troubled face filled his previous view of stormy skies. “How are you feeling?”

“Like a piece of dragon dung,” Tyelcano declared after a moment’s consideration. “What happened?”

“I ran into you… I could not stop… and then you fell off the cliff. Sadly, there was a sharp rock underneath, and… Thankfully, the cliff wasn’t very steep, but everything happened so rapidly…” Senge shook his head, and his voice suddenly switched back to its usual accurate precision. “Well, m’lord, the gist of the situation is the following: you broke your right leg. It is… very ugly. Not the sort of injury you’re supposed to journey with.”

The pain itself materialized while Senge uttered these words, and it was unlike everything Tyelcano had ever experienced. He’d been hit by a Balrog’s whip before, he’d been strangled by an unnamed monster near a silent lake back in the Mountains of Mist, he’d been slammed into a wall by Moringotto’s black hands, he’d wrestled with wolves, he’d been burned by fire, cut with all sorts of blades, pierced through with arrows and he’d even broken bones before… but not like this. Never like this. He’d never experienced anything even close to this sheer, horrendous, stomach-turning agony. It felt as if Fëanáro was testing the solidity of a new hammer-set on his shin. And it smelled like blood… it was also wet and warm and so terribly, terribly exposed… a broken bone wasn’t supposed to feel quite like this…

With an enormous effort, Tyelcano propped up his body up on his elbows, and looked down at his legs. He barely even felt how the movement pulled his muscles into an agonized knot; at first, he was too preoccupied with trying not to faint upon the sight itself.

“Manwë…”

It was an open fault – so wide open that almost the entire width of his calf-bone was visible. His trouser leg had been cut away above his knee, exposing the entire fissure. It went as far as five, six, seven inches down on his leg. The pale white bone emerged as an island of solitary pain from the raging bloody mess of the wound below.

Tyelcano shut his eyes, nails digging into the sour-smelling ground as he fought nausea, then vertigo, then the hysteria of pain.

Focus.

“Blast it!” He declared, swiping the moist from his forehead with a trembling fist. “We don’t have time for this right now! We’re on a mission!”

“We are delayed.” Senge’s hand was warm upon his back. “We’ll manage, if you sit still and let me tend to that… thing.” After a few moments’ hesitation, he added, “It might hurt.”

~ § ~

The three servants of Himring were waiting side by side for the rest of the afternoon, Tyelcano
with his back against the cliff, Senge kneeling in silent vigil beside him and Antalossë pacing back and forth around their makeshift camp: three pairs of gleaming eyes scouring about the silent mountain-ranges. And yet there was still no sign of their companions returning.

“They left before sunrise,” muttered Antalossë. Only the wuthering wind answered him, and a couple of strain water-drops upon their doublets. Tyelcano could not tell if they were the first tears of rain or the last ounces of dew from dawn that got carried away.

“It is past noon,” the young scout went on, quite anxiously.

“…and in a few hours, Anor shall go to sleep and give way to the falling night,” Senge snapped. “Here’s your third piece of unnecessary information.”

“Enough!” Tyelcano raised his hand (even that movement sent an arrow of pain through his shattered body). “Something is moving in that far valley.” He waved Antalossë to the front. “What do you see, young one?”

“…crows,” said the scout; yet as he uttered the word, Tyelcano could see them clearly, too; and a giant flock of them. They emerged from the valley in a cacophony of black patches and ragged screams, only to plunge back down at the next convenient cliff, and settle at its edges neatly, in consort, as if following some twisted dance-card.

Not again…

“They won’t stop screaming,” Senge said with sudden uneasiness, and Tyelcano felt a soft yank in the ground as his muscles pulled dead tense. “They are waiting for a battle to end, so they could have their feast.”

“Not today,” said Tyelcano against his better judgement, in his voice a soft tremor. Slowly, he raised his head against the view of Dimbar below his feet; against the graceful line of mountains, with the Crissaegrim to the East and the meandering grey ribbon of Sirion to the West. Silently he stood, for six entire heartbeats, as if struggling to carve the landscape into his very mind and soul until the world’s end. The wind was rising again, lashing up new waves of the silken sea of mountain grass below, weeping as a knight would weep for his fallen lord when no one watches, singing as a maiden would sing where words would fail her.

And their companions’ horses emerged from the valley, one by one, and in great haste. Tyelcano felt his insides shrink as he saw the fierce, determined look in the leader’s eyes.

“Counsellor,” said Gildor Inglorion, General in the army of Hithlum, trusted companion and preferred envoy of King Findekáno (if rumours could be believed). “The results of today’s scouting are somewhat less boring than usual, although more than a little inconvenient. We have come across an Orc band in the wastelands. They have wolves with them, and they must have followed our trail for the last few hours. How in Arda could they pick it up, I cannot fathom…”

When Tyelcano made no answer, Gildor shifted impatiently in the saddle, long fingers drumming on the hilt of his sword.

“Lord Counsellor, with respect, we need to make haste, and find shelter. There are too many of them. I despise the thought of fleeing, but we are envoys. We cannot afford to lose lives…”

“That is very clear, General,” said Tyelcano blankly. “However, I am afraid I’m not going anywhere in the near future.”

Gildor’s tactical eye shifted to Senge’s kneeling figure, then Tyelcano’s leg, then the restlessly
pacing Antalossë.

“What in Moringotto’s seven accursed hells happened here?!” He exclaimed.

“I have made the last mistake of my life, as it seems,” Tyelcano allowed himself a quizzical smile. “At least I made it spectacular.”

“I think we would all prefer a spectacular solution, m’lord!” Senge snapped. “Work your wondrous mind!”

Tyelcano did just that, considering every possible course of action with utmost care, arranging and rearranging the pawns on an imaginary chessboard, only to realise that there was nothing he could do. The icy, numbing sensation of helplessness settled upon his chest, and he suddenly found it difficult to breathe.

“How many of them?” He heard himself asking.

“Five-and-fifty Orcs and some twenty wolves that we saw. There might be more lurking in the shade.”

_Five-and-fifty._

Tyelcano took three calming breaths, battling the searing, mind-boggling pain that radiated from his broken leg. _Focus._

“Blast it,” Senge hissed beside him. “Counsellor, we should get you on a horse. Right now.”

“You tended to my leg yourself,” Tyelcano sighed. “You know there is no way on Arda I could hold myself in a saddle right now.”

“You _must_ do it!”

“Senge,” the name, though gently spoken, was a warning. “I can barely move. I would be an illuminated target bouncing before the wolves’ eyes, then I would fall, and lucky as I am today, I’d break my other leg, too. I would only slow you down.”

_There. I said it._

He saw the thought materialising in Senge’s eyes; at first, the scout’s face screamed denial, then anger, then pain, then cold, ruthless resolution.

“No,” Senge declared, raising a finger in menace. “No-no-no. Don’t even _think_ about it.”

“The message should be carried to the High King. You cannot afford to tarry.”

“Yes, lordship, and in case you’d forgotten, you are the one carrying that message!”

“I could tell you,” said Tyelcano.

_No, Lord Maedhros’s voice emerged from the depths of his memories, you could not. No one else can know._

He hung his head, fighting a new wave of pain. All of this felt utterly, terribly wrong.

_The King should hear the message, his fēa tugged on his mind with quiet urgency. He must!_
With a defiant flash in his eyes, he folded his left leg softly under himself, then made the slightest, barest motion with the right – and fell right back against the cliff, all but howling in agony. Antalossë caught his arm, trying to help him; and the Counsellor shut his eyes, gritted his teeth, and stood – then fell right back, fresh blood gushing out from the makeshift bondage along his shin.

“No,” Tyelcano whispered, tears of pain engulfing his eyes. “I can’t. I can’t. I am so sorry.”

“You’re a stupid, reckless, irresponsible piece of trash, he reminded himself. And this is going to cost your life. You, Counsellor of Kings, are going to die out of IRRESPONSIBILITY.

This time, the thought did not come as an underhanded jest; suddenly, it became very real, and jarring. Still, he could almost have laughed as he looked at the puzzled faces around him.

“All right,” said Gildor, and drew his sword. “If we cannot go, then we shall fight.”

Tyelcano was almost moved as his nine companions began dismounting their horses and herding them together in the shelter of the cliff. Almost.

“Broken leg or not, I believe I am still in charge here.” His voice was suddenly clear and full of authority.

“We’re not leaving you, Counsellor,” said Antalossë. “We’re a team.”

“Our mission is not to save my life but to deliver a message! And that message, to quote Lord Maedhros himself, is not worth ten lives!”

Well, that is not exactly what he said.

“Yet your life, Counsellor, is worth another hundred,” Senge said, very sincerely. “And I am quoting the lord as well.”

“I was unaware he ever said that,” Tyelcano raised his head din defiance. “Here you have the proof that he, too, can be wrong at times.”

“We’re not leaving you!” Nine voices chanted at him in unison.

“Lord Maedhros needs you,” Senge knelt beside him again. He was so close that the tip of his nose almost touched his forehead. “You know that. He would never pardon us if we came back without you… neither would I ever pardon myself, for that matter.”

“All right.” Tyelcano closed his eyes. “All right,” he repeated in a voice of steel, “then we are going to fight, but not out of our minds, and definitely not without a secondary plan.”

“A secondary plan?” Gildor raised his brows.

“Yes, General. And for that reason, you shall ride ahead with young Antalossë here, and another soldier of your choice, and find shelter for tonight. What remains of the Orcs shall be after us all along our route. We should be prepared…”

Gildor’s searching gaze met his, and Tyelcano knew that the other heard and understood the unspoken part of the sentence.

“Yes, lord,” the General said, and made a curt bow. “If next time, you’ll allow me to fight by your
side.”

“I shall.”

That said, Gildor was already mounting. Young Antalossë took a half-hearted step towards his steed, then turned around when he heard Tyelcano’s call.

“Must I leave you, Counsellor?” He whispered, discontent.

“Will you defy my order while I have your lord’s seal ring upon my finger?”

“N-no,” the youth stammered, “I did not mean…”

“Good. Then come closer. There is something you need to hear.”

No one can know, the ghost of Maedhros’s voice protested, but Tyelcano steeled himself against it. It was the right thing to do. It simply was.

“If anything happens to me,” he breathed into the other’s ear, softer than the lightest breeze, “tell the High King that his warning has been heeded. And… the dreams. Lord Nelyo is seeing them as well. The very same dreams. This is very important. And… they should talk, His Highness and our lord. Soon. Tell him that.”

“I will,” Antalossë whispered, amazed.

“Good. Then take this.” Tyelcano pulled the large ring off his finger and buried it into the cocooning warmth of the youth’s palm. “It should be given to the High King when you see him, as a token of the message’s discrete nature. If you have this ring with you, no other than His Highness himself has the authority to ask you about your mission.”

“I understand, Counsellor…” Antalossë looked at him warily. “But you shall be the one delivering the message.”

“Of course.” Tyelcano graced him with a faint smile. “This is only a measure of security.”

~ § ~

General Gildor choose a stern, tacit youth from among the High King’s envoys as his second companion; he was known by the name Lindír, and even if he was not pleased with the prospect of leaving the others behind, he gave no sign of it. Soon, there was no more reminder of the chosen trio’s presence than the traces of their horses’ hooves in the gathering dust.

Somewhere in the valley, a wolf howled.

“So it begins,” Senge sighed, and finished sharpening the head of his spear.

“Let us hope for a swift ending,” an Elf called Vorondo answered him readily from Tyelcano’s other side, and the Counsellor stifled a smile at his fellow Himring servants and their fierce loyalty. He supposed that it had more to do with their lord’s reputation than his own.

The High King’s three envoys were waiting in one stern line in front of them, with the sole exception of Ohtar of Himring standing in the middle with his arms crossed, longbow hanging from his shoulders.

Soon, they could all hear the clutter of makeshift armour and the fierce cries, the bawdy farrago of approaching Orcs. No one moved; his companions stood vigil around him, and Tyelcano knew
they would all sacrifice their lives without a second thought to save his.

Suddenly, he understood, or thought he understood Lord Maedhros’s sometimes die-hard efforts to spare his soldiers’ lives.

“I will never forget what you did for me today, my friends,” he said softly.

“It is only our duty,” Vorondo answered him, but his fierce tone suggested that the task was carried out quite willingly. “And we shall do more before this day ends.”

~ § ~

The pounding in the Counsellor’s leg was getting worse, and it soon extended to his whole body.

The first moments of the battle had immediately crystallized in his mind, frozen to boundless eternity; the way the reeking Orc-heads popped up from the cleft of the valley, the way they hawked and rattled and howled and chattered in laughter when they saw his injury, and that his companions were ready to defend him. Seven Elves they had seen in the wastelands and seven Elves they had found upon seeking; and they would not ask them any questions, nor did they seem to suspect that there were more hidden in the colourless landscape. Tyelcano hoped with fervency that General Gildor was sensible enough to have sought shelter high up in the hills.

The Orcs charged at them, then the wolves as well, but the cliff-wall was belled out, and it sheltered them from their assaults for a time. There was a colourful, raging jungle of blood and gore and screams and shouts and swearwords; then Ohtar’s dead body slammed into his wounded leg with its full weight, and he fainted, battling the pain with utmost effort, but without any result at all.

When he regained consciousness, he was horrified to see no more than Senge and Vorondo defending him from a scarcer company of Orcs. Heaps of dead bodies lay everywhere, and the smell of death and fast decay was so strong his stomach protested.

*I must fight,* he willed himself into moving. *I must help them. It is all my fault. I must protect them.*

*I have a message to deliver!*

Fury tripled his strength as he propped himself up on one elbow, then a shaking knee. With one swift push, he liberated his broken leg from Ohtar’s pressing weight, choked out a bunch of Valarin swearwords he did not even know he remembered, and pulled his dagger. He would fight – sitting, if he had to.

An arrow pierced through his right side in a flash of searing pain, and he wavered. The next shot came at once, and he wasn’t swift enough to lean out of range. This time, the pain was almost familiar.

*Dim-witted brutes,* he thought. *You should aim for the heart if you want to kill.*

The third arrow did just that; but it missed target as Vorondo yanked the Counsellor back under the cliff’s half-shelter.

“What in Manwë’s holy name are you doing?! Stay down!”

“I wanted to…”

“*Stay – down!*”
Vorondo’s breath caught in his throat with an audible hiss, and his face contorted for a moment. Tyelcano’s eyes widened as he felt a stream of blood cover his chest.

“Voro… you have been shot.”

Vorondo struggled to his knees, a haze of pain covering his eyes.

“You have always been… very perceptive.”

“Voro…” Tyelcano felt a lump in his throat, but he steeled his voice. “Senge, find that son of a… shadow that’s shooting arrows here!”

“No need,” Vorondo growled, and forced himself back to his feet, the black-feathered arrow poking halfway out of his back. “I shall find them myself.”

With that, he was gone again; and Tyelcano had to fight a new wave of nausea as he looked down his chest, and the last image that reached his darkening vision.

Upon his hauberk yawned three gaping holes: two on the right, one on the left, exposing the cloth above his rapidly beating heart.

~ § ~

When he woke again, he was dragged, roughly, along the remnants of a river-bank, long dried. One boot was missing from his feet; here and there, his bare foot grazed along big, rounded stones among the messy undergrowth, as if his captors were following some long-forsaken path.

Or was it a lone captor?

...was it a captor, at all?

Blood was drippling down his chin, scarcely but steadily: red tears of helplessness. It was probably coming from his nose, but he felt no pain. All he felt was numbness, and the disturbing weight of air on his heaving chest.

His head was pounding.

He was losing too much blood.

“Voro…” he whispered, weakly.

“Dead,” said Senge’s voice from above him. “Much like everyone else. I don’t know about the hiding three… Some Orcs escaped, and wolves as well, I fear. They will probably come back after nightfall. I’m hiding you, m’lord, so the others could go on. Lossē would never agree to leaving us behind in such a state… but as it happens, you are a beacon for our enemies, and so am I.”

“You… you did well,” Tyelcano forced the air out of his lungs. “Senge… forgive me.”

“Nonsense,” the younger Elf declared. “It wasn’t your fault.”

“Yes, it was. I got… carried away. I lost my balance… because of that blasted crow… do you know that I despise crows?”

“So much?” There was a waver of gallows humour in Senge’s voice.

“So much. I’ve had dreams about them… for a while. And I think they are becoming true now. I
have dreamed about being here. Every instant . . . ”

“Well . . .” Senge furrowed his brows and looked around. “In that case, we should probably follow
your dreams, m’lord. What happens now?”

“You’re dragging me,” Tyelcano said. “Along and along and along. Very far. At one point, my leg
will hurt very much. I will also . . . well, I won’t be able to stomach it. And . . . there would be crows.
Around. Watching me.”

“Your dreams have deceived you, Counsellor.” Senge turned to face him, and Tyelcano could have
wept at the sight of his rueful smile. “We shall not make it very far.”

Tyelcano heard a wolf’s call in the distance, shrill and demanding. More voices answered the call,
from closer, much closer.

“Senge,” he tried, “I’m heavily bleeding.”

“A perceptive lord. But Voro has told you that before.”

“I’m attracting them. You should . . . ”

“No,” came the answer from between gritted teeth. “And if you won’t stop saying that, m’lord, I
will punch your bad leg so hard that you won’t wake for days.”

“Then drag me a little faster, will you not? I deeply despise the thought of you dying on me.”

“I’m trying,” the scout growled, visibly steeling himself against the sudden swaying of his steps.

“Senge . . . ? What’s wrong?”

“Blood loss,” came the answer, somewhat too quickly. “It matters not. Can I trust your lordship to
watch out for the wolves?”

“If you insist,” said Tyelcano, and they spoke no more for what seemed like centuries. The
unworldly howls intoned from closer and closer, and Tyelcano could see a great circle of predators
with his mind’s eye, as it narrowed and narrowed around them, in all directions of the compass.
Soon came the crows, as he knew they would, watching him with hungry eyes, waiting for his last
breath so they could have their feast.

And then, the very earth began to weep.

“They are upon us,” Tyelcano said what his companion already knew; but Senge picked up some
speed with his last strength, dragging him into the looming shade of a close-by cliff. They have
been following the banks of the dried river all along, and the shallow ravine had led them to a wall
of rock that stood flawless, smooth, and impenetrable.

“All this fatigue, and a dead end awaits,” Senge murmured. “Wonderful.”

“There is a passage,” Tyelcano pointed at a blurred black patch at the edge of his vision. Senge
charged at the entrance – if that was indeed an entrance –, and Tyelcano’s bad leg was carelessly
dragged over a ledge of unforgiving rock. He could have wept, but he swallowed his cries of pain
and let go of his conscience.

He must have immediately slipped back to one of his curious dreams; for it seemed to him that
they arrived in a tight channel of chiselled walls; and he thought he saw a giant gate at the end. It
stood under an austere arc boarded by pillars, with a wooden portcullis of bright torches and many squinting windows on top of it.

And before deep, uneasy swoon could claim him entirely, Tyelcano also thought he heard the call of a rigorous voice,

“Stand! Stir not! Or you will die, be you foes or friends.* The Gates are closed.”

Chapter End Notes

Author’s Notes
* Elemmakil’s words are quoted from ‘Of Tuor and His Coming to Gondolin’.
Name meanings:
Senge [Quenya]: adj.: keen of sight, observant, sagacious
Vorondo [Quenya]: comes from ‘Voronda’ ~ adjective. steadfast in allegiance, in keeping oath or promise, faithful, steadfast in allegiance/in keeping oath or promise / very similar to Voronwë’s name meaning, ‘faithfulness / steadfastness’ /.
Ohtar [Quenya]: means ‘war’, with a masculine ending; could be translated as simply ‘warrior’.
On Gildor and Lindir: I have my reasons to feature the (almost) entire collection of Rivendell Elves in such an early era. I need their backstories to be founded… I hope you will like my take on them.
Dragged. He had been dragged through some moist, hollow tunnel; his shoulders had repeatedly grazed along coarse walls, and there was blood, and anger, and itching pain.

Captured. He had been captured, then carried along long-forsaken paths like a sack of corns, to use Lord Nelyo’s favourite figure of speech. What a disgrace to die like this, he remembered thinking, to be put out like some smouldering little flame, drowned in the ashes of its own ambition!

Senge had been there, too; and there had been whispering, then arguing, then shouting, and spectacular swearwords and a scandalised “do you have any idea who this Elf is…?!” Then other words were spoken, hushed and urgent; and later, a hot, burning liquid washed down Tyelcano’s throat, and he saw no more.

Such a vivid dream. However, if he were to believe his visions, he was now held in captivity – which raised the question why would he, a prisoner, be tucked safely and diligently under the finest feather bedding he’d ever felt against his skin.

Counsellor Tyelcano opened his eyes, propped himself up on elbows and glanced around. Thick, heavy curtains of velvet encircled him as he lay; delicate patterns danced across them, flickering playfully in the half-light. (Were they stars…? or shells… or tiny eagles…?)

As he looked further, Tyelcano also understood that the curtains were not attached to the frames of his bed but were hung from a wide round-arch that shielded him from three sides. The entrance of the berth was bevelled, so as to shield its occupant from curious eyes; and the round-arc itself was a masterpiece, laced with thin leaf-patterns and stills of a depicted hunt.

Somewhere at the edge of his vision, faint, silvery hues of light filtered through giant windows of painted glass, and the giant canopy bed engulfed his shattered body like an ocean of silken pillows.

And the pain, that terrible pain from his dreams had vanished like smoke, like light-headed promises, like the snows of yesteryear.

There was no pain, no death, and no fear. There was only peace, and solace, and that gentle silver-light, so very different of Anor’s intrusive burning…

...could it be…?

Staring at the ceiling, Tyelcano took a deep-deep breath, and let it out slowly, gently, relishing in the privilege of aghast relief.
Yes. There was only one way to explain this –

A dream.

A terrible-terrible dream without beginning or end. Everything – the death of Finwë, the Oath, the Doom, the Flight, the ships, the battle under unforgiving stars, Fëanáro’s demise…

…Nelyo…

He, Tyelcano son of Ettelë, Counsellor of kings and mentor of princes was back in Aman now: in magnificent Tirion itself, where he belonged. That was the only possible, feasible explication. It had to be true. The beauty, the luxury, the comfort, the peace, the silence that surrounded him – it was non-existent in Endórë, and impossible, and entirely alien.

Valar, how his head was swaying, and pulsating with foggy pain…!

~ § ~

As time passed, and a feeling akin with hunger slowly settled in his stomach, Tyelcano felt his senses sharpen a little bit, and other curious details caught his attention.

There were two openings within the soothing circle of curtains, one of them on the front and one on his left. The former adjoined a dimly lit hallway with cushion-loaded armchairs that bathed in the gleam of the polished marble floor, while the latter revealed a table loaded with twenty-some different vials of medicinal potions and fifteen further boxes of dried herbs.

Tyelcano kept glancing at them, then away, then back again, puzzled, and unsure. He doubted if such a variety of medicine had ever existed in the Blessed Realm. A new feeling settled in his guts: that of unease, faint, yet shrill. He stared stubbornly at the ceiling for a time, battling his weary mind, then closed his eyes to think.

Those who dwelt in Aman knew no illness, no weariness, no sorrow, and no fear. The Lands of the Valar were not besmirched by Moringotto’s machineries… All taint of darkness Tyelcano carried with himself came from his own memories of Endórë, and the Great Journey; cold and distant like the Stars themselves.

They had ceased to haunt him a long time ago. Why would they return now? And why would he see all those horrible visions of the royal family…? Their mere concept was ridiculous and highly improbable; yet they were so vivid, so detailed, so horribly believable… And there they lingered still, at the delicate frontier of memory and fiction within his mind. His fëa was pulling them to the closer end, feeling the truth in them, while his logic persisted, pointing out the evident irrationalities of Fëanáro battling giant demons of fire, of Ñolofinwë fighting the Grinding Ice, of Ñelyafinwë being captured by the Enemy, of various, slightly hostile kingdoms forming in the wide, unoccupied lands over the Sea…

…and still…

At this point, there was a fracture in Tyelcano’s thoughts, and for once, he relished in the warm, welcoming fog that settled within his conscience. He was weary after all, so weary… and Manwë, how soothing it was to be released of the burden of his pain…!

Pain.

With an uneasy turn of thought, Tyelcano looked down on himself, only to realise that his right leg was broken – badly – and it was hung from the canopy with straps of weaved linen. An alarmed
look at his arms revealed dozens of tiny cuts and bruises, all cleaned, all tended to, all bandaged or
sewn together where needed. And he was clean, entirely clean from head to toes. Someone had
even bothered to stuff his pillows with fresh-smelling herbs.

All gentle phantasms of Tirion vanished immediately from his mind, giving way to shivers of
uncertainty. Where in Moringotto’s seven hells was he…? Has he been stuck within his own
dreams…?

Then, with a slight creak, a nearby door opened beyond the curtains, and two shadows fell on the
embroidered pattern of hunting dogs charging at a white stag.

“How is he?” asked a ruefully gentle, and alarmingly familiar voice.

“The lord is the lucky one of the pair, Highness,” said another. “The infection affects him no
longer. I have stayed with him through the night… his breathing is even, and he feels no pain; yet
weeks may pass before he walks again, and not solely because of the fracture. Some of the
draughts I had to use are heavy. Highness, with all due respect, is speaking with him truly that
urgent…?”

“I shall not disturb him,” said the other voice, “all I demand is to see him for a short while. And as
soon as he wakes up, you will tell me.”

“As you say, my King,” came the answer, and the invisible door closed with a soft thump.


No dream, then. So that was where this strange feeling of peace, and the wild swaying of his head
came from…!

*Milk of the poppy, most probably. And some light venom, too, with a purging side-effect; also, one
of those potions that help raise my fever to get rid of hidden infections. Aye, that would explain
everything… seven hells, did those dim-witted brats carry me all the way to Barad Eithel…?*

Tyelcano decided he would have a word with General Gildor and his scoundrels as soon as he was
strong enough to distribute some heartfelt slaps. At this point in his thinking, however, a soft
current of air caressed his face, the curtains fluttered aside on his left, and someone sat on his
bedside.

“There we are,” murmured the familiar voice from earlier. “You seem slightly less pale than the
last time I looked, if I may mention. Then again, you have always been a fighter, haven’t you,
Counsellor?” A small chuckle. “I wonder what brings you here, this far from your cold dungeons
at the end of the world.”

Within a heartbeat, face and voice clicked together in Tyelcano’s mind, as terribly unlikely as their
match was. He’d never reached Barad Eithel, either, that much was evident…

Questions assaulted his mind like an arrow-flight, yet all he managed to utter was a ragged
whisper,

“Turukáno…!”

There was a sharp intake of breath.

“Nay,” Tyelcano murmured to himself, “impossible. You have vanished from the face of the earth.
No one has heard from you for centuries.”
“Yet you have found me,” answered the voice gently. “You have been carried past my Gates and accepted in my House. You are safe now.”

“Safe,” Tyelcano echoed, savouring the word. He gathered his strength and opened his eyes – and there he was, settled comfortably on his bedside; slender-faced, starry-eyed Turukáno, son of Ñolofinwë and brother to Findekáno. There he sat, exactly as how Tyelcano remembered him – long nose, thin lips, dark hair weaved into mazy patterns, brows knitted in deep thought, as if in eternal worry over some ineluctable doom. Yet he could not recall all the lines that furrowed the austere face, or the crown that graced the tall forehead, wrought of fibres of the cleanest silver, gemmed with diamonds, opals, and glowing sapphires. These details were new to him and mysteriously meaningful; and he took notice of them, one by one, and they stayed with him for a long time afterwards. He remained silent for long moments and watched that strange outer light paint its meandering shapes upon Turukáno’s face.

“It is good to see you, child, after so many dark and perilous years,” he finally offered. “Although, if my eyes do not betray me, I should rather call you **Highness** now.”

Turukáno lifted the circlet from his brows, placed it neatly upon the nightstand, and gifted him with a smile.

“Please, do not let that trouble you.” Without the silvery gleam of the crown, his eyes seemed grave and hollow, like bottomless wells. “I presume we both have questions to each other.”

There was something in his tone that made Tyelcano tense, and **extremely aware** of the fact that he was no longer speaking to the pouting little boy he used to ride on his knees, as he’d done with most of the House of Finwë. All he did, however, was mirror the smile, and rearrange his limbs into a more comfortable position.

“The first thing I have for you is an expression of my thanks,” he said. “You – your people saved me from death. Or worse.” Tyelcano gave the matter a thought. “Aye, definitely worse. Yet I was not alone… what happened to my companion, Senge? Is he safe as well?”

Turukáno closed his eyes for a moment. “I am sorry, Lord Tyelco… he has answered the Call of Námo this morning. My healers tell me that he died of a poisoned wound that ran too deep in his stomach. I am afraid he carried you through my Gates with his last strength; for he would not let go of you, not even when my guards came to your rescue.”

“Wondrously stupid,” Tyelcano closed his eyes, bowed his head. “That is how I shall remember him.”

His voice was thick with sorrow and regret, yet his mind was clear, and it felt as if, somehow, he had always **known**.

“Senge of Himring shall rest in peace while this kingdom stands,” said Turukáno. “I will see to that.”

“There are others…” Tyelcano whispered. “Five other corpses. Somewhere out there. Three of Findekáno’s and two of our own. Friends. We could not… there was no time…”

“I understand.” Turukáno placed a comforting hand upon his shoulder. “Is there anyone else… anyone **alive**… perhaps following your tracks?”

There was it again, that strange waver of tone, that impalpable pression…

Tyelcano shook his head. “None of us followed. Those still alive – **if** alive – are headed west. To
the High King. We were... carrying a message.”

“I have guessed that much.” Turukáno crossed his legs and glanced at him with great interest. “But why you? Why would Nelyo send his most trusted advisor on a mission that an ordinary messenger could complete, if he had no other purpose with it?”

Tyelcano took a deep breath, hiding his sudden wariness beneath a well-rehearsed pretence of exhilaration.

“My Lord is a sober and demure Elf,” he said, and his voice swelled with gentle, rueful amusement, “…except that sometimes, he is not. The message I am carrying is of strictly personal nature, and Lord Nelyo was reluctant to share it with anyone else than myself. It was either him or me to carry it West, and the day I let my liege expose himself to unnecessary danger shall be the day when Moringotto hands us the Holy Jewels on a diamond plate and apologizes for the inconvenience.”

Turukáno’s laughter was lighter than the jingle of tiny bells as the spring breeze makes them dance. “Of course,” he said, and the same merriment seemed to have found its way into his eyes. “Now, is there any part of your endeavour that you are ready to share with me?”

Tyelcano considered that for a moment. “I have news that may prove of interest to you,” he said carefully. “And I shall tell you about them; but I have a question for you, King Turukáno, that has been gnawing on my mind ever since I am awake, and I cannot find the answer: _where am I?_ What is this strange and wonderful place...?”

“I thought you would never ask,” said Turukáno, his smile all the wider. He stood, and pulled back the curtains with one fluid motion, draping the whole room in colourful hues of unearthly radiance. Wonder-stricken, Tyelcano set up in his bed, ignoring the firm protests of his broken leg, and looked.

Through the semicircle of crystal-clear windows, he saw a great white city with jewel-wrought façades and colourful rooftops; narrow streets paved with the noblest marble, statues and fountains rimmed with clusters of gold; giant windows painted in the colours of the rainbow; thin towers with gargoyles and sparkling tops that seemed too thin and too high to even exist; statues of kings and knights and dragons, their eyes wrought with gleaming jewels of all colours; an abundance of gardens, singing birds and strange flowers; and all that emerging from a sea of rich, green mountain-grass. Sharp, icy peaks loomed upon the horizon as far as the eye could see, and Eagles chased each other through their steep, deadly clefts, chasms, and abysses. Anor had already passed his peak, and hid behind the closest mountain, sending orange and golden rays of light through blankets of eternal snow.

Such was the Hidden City when Tyelcano saw it first; and words stuck in his mouth and his breath in his throat, for he was reminded of Tirion over the sea, and the Mountain of Túna as it bathed in the light of Valinórë, and his eyes sting.

“This,” said Turukáno, not without pride, “is the Sealed Kingdom of Ondolindë, the last safe haven of the Quendi, be they of any blood or affiliation; home to me and to all who chose or accepted me as their King.” He removed the curtains from the other side of the bed as well, revealing an airy, luxurious parlour with squashy rugs, wide armchairs that were work of art themselves, and two gigantesque (and stuffed) bookshelves that both grazed the ceiling. “…and this is your new suite. I hope your accommodations are to your liking.”

“Woefully short is the time I shall have to enjoy them,” said Tyelcano, struggling to find his voice. “They... exceed my expectations, to say the very least. Aye...” He glanced wistfully at the closest
of the four great armchairs, picturing himself as its occupant, holding a large goblet of mulled wine, admiring the breath-taking view over a book on map-making, or astronomy… “I believe I could get used to this.”

“I am sure you will,” said Turukáno, still with that smile, so strange, so unlike the way Tyelcano remembered him. He swallowed.

“When may I walk again?” He asked, trying in vain to hide the restlessness in his voice. “I thought to grant myself two weeks of rest, if you would be so kind to have me; then I shall be on my way, swiftly and quietly, careful not to draw any eyes on my journey. I hope your guards shall have a map to spare.”

“I think it would be in your best interest to discuss this matter only later, when you have regained your strength,” came the answer; light, honest – and filled with warning.

Tyelcano deliberately ignored it.

“Highness,” he said, honeying his voice with respect and gratitude, “I beg you, if there is anything of importance regarding my journey West that you would share with me, please do. I need to be able to make plans.”

Turukáno turned away from the view of his kingdom, and sat back on his bedside, suddenly appearing a millenia older.

“As you wish,” he sighed. Then, when he spoke again, his voice was distant, and faint.

“It had all started with the dreams,” he began, “hazy at first, then all the more detailed. They would not let me rest: they would come back, again and again, always with the same message. At first, I had mistaken them for nightmares, as they spoke of death and ruin, and of Moringotto’s servants chasing my beloved people to their deaths. Yet the message of my dreams became clear after a time, and simple: find cover. Find a place where the black hands of the Enemy cannot reach you, and those you love. Still, I hesitated, for I could not guess the origin of my visions, and I feared they would mislead me. Then, the Lord of Waters himself came to me and showed me the way. Into this valley he led me. This is the Valley of Tumladen, he spoke in a deep voice and the mountains themselves rumbled with the echo of his words –, here your kingdom shall stand for many years to come. Lead your people here, son of Ñolofinwë, and you shall be safe from all perils but the ones you carry with yourself, and your people shall call you the Wise.”

“What could I have done…? My heart was full of His words for many years to come, and I made plans. Countless scrolls of parchments I have filled; I have designed streets and houses and halls and dungeons, gates and fountains and pavements and the very patterns of the fence that separates my balcony from my daughter’s, so lost was I in details and accuracy. And I have imagined a great many other things as well, until the whole concept was readied in my head, and Ondolindë sprang to existence in the vaults of my fëa. Yet I have returned to Vinyamar and wandered the seashores, deep in thought. I was still unsure, hesitant like the Teleri, wishing to depart, yet unable to do so. For I knew that the only way my kingdom would last was that of secrecy, and isolation, and the thought of leaving grieved me more than anyone could understand.”

“Then the Glorious Battle came, and our great victory with it; yet all I did was count my losses, and visit the graves of my fallen friends, one by one. They looked terribly similar in the morning light, and I remember losing count of them, not even knowing which one I was looking at. Later, a feeling of restlessness came over me, a warning from Ulmo himself, as I understood; and I knew I had to do what was best for my people. I had to leave Vinyamar behind while it was still green and peaceful, with seagulls cracking mussels on the edge of my window-sill. Thus, the constructions
began, and on they went for dozens of years; in swiftness and secrecy my people have laboured, and I with them. With Ulmo’s mighty help, we moved here, leaving no one behind; and when the last ones arrived, the six Gates of my City were sealed, and watchful guardians were placed upon them, so no one may enter or leave. This was the first and utmost rule I had based my Kingdom on: that of secrecy.”

“See, Counsellor, those who have chosen to follow me all accepted to stay at the safe haven once they reached it. For the Marrer is stronger than us all, and he knows the ways of our hearts; and no loyalty, no valorous stance can help us guard the secrets of our fëa if he captures us. My people – and I – are not willing to take that risk. The safest way would be, of course, to lock our Gates once and for all, letting no one in and no one out; yet we, in this City, are unable to shut our hearts completely from our people. Those who, by fate or by chance, do find the Gates of Ondolindë, and prove to be of good and honest intention, are let inside, and taken care of. I give homes to them, very often in my own house, and do my best to help them start a new life in my kingdom. There is only one, utmost rule they must all respect: once they entered, they cannot leave while the Iron Prison stands in the North, and the Doom of the Ñoldor is at work.”

Tyelcano took three deep breaths, ignoring the horrible, gripping dread that spread across his chest.

“I presume,” he said, voice calm as a frozen lake, “that said interdict is not extended to, forgive my immodesty, but envoys of high stance from the upmost quarters of the household of the Star.”

“I am afraid it does,” said Turukáno, his voice low, regretful, but harder than stone. “Your companion has carried you all the way here. You have found the Orfalch Echor, and with that, a scholar as well-versed with maps as yourself shall find the exact location of this City in no time. I cannot risk that knowledge somehow – anyhow – reaching the Enemy. I know you would never betray me by free will; but who knows what Moringotto is capable of…? Only once before had I let guests leave my City – for three days and three nights my Council debated the issue, and the only reason I decided in the guests’ favour was that the Eagles had carried them through the mountain-lands. They would never find us again on their own, not even if Moringotto were to break their will and read their minds; but the same is not true in your case, Counsellor. You are family, and rescued from a deadly peril that will come after you if you continue seeking it. And, first and foremost, you know where you are. I am sorry, from the bottom of my heart, but I cannot let you leave; at least not now, with the Enemy’s forces scattered in Beleriand and with deadly threats looming above the heads of the Ñoldor.”

“Lord Nelyo needs me,” said Tyelcano slowly, balefully. “I have to go.”

“This matter is not up to discussion,” Turukáno snapped, and in that moment, he seemed stern and adamant like Finwë himself. “You shall leave when the time comes for you to leave – if you still wish for it.”

Tyelcano counted thirteen breaths until he trusted himself enough to answer. “Do not think that I scorn your hospitality, Highness, or that I am without gratitude,” he said. “It is only that I am sworn…”

“…to the House of Finwë.” Turukáno’s eyes were two gleaming gems in the light of sunset. “And you tend to forget that Finwë had three sons, and his sons had sons, who have always been more eager to hear your counsel than Fëanáro, or any of his kin.”

Tyelcano let himself sink into the welcoming embrace of his pillows and let out a sigh equal to a small tempest.

“You should have let the Enemy capture me,” he declared. “Being burned with hot iron, reshaped
into an Orc or threatened with the Eternal Darkness are nothing to the sheer torment of your good old family feud.”

“Then the torment shall cease until you get better,” said Turukáno gently, and he tucked the blankets tighter around him. “Do not let the shadows of this marred world trouble you!”

“The shadows are within, and I, myself, feel marred,” Tyelcano sighed. Then, deciding to push his luck a little further, he added, “Turukáno… will you do something for me?”

“Anything except one.”

Of course.

“You have always been friends with the Eagles,” Tyelcano tried. “Can you at least… with or without their help… assure that my friends reach Barad Eithel safely?”

“I may.”

“And will you come to see me again in my exile?”

“Exile is something we all share.” Lithely, Turukáno stood, and stepped outside the circle of curtains. “Worry not! You have not seen the last of me, or my household. Now, rest, and regain your strength. I shall send a healer to have a look at you. Feel free to ask for any book your mind can convey – my library has it.”

With that, he was gone; and unearthly silence settled in the room once again.

Tyelcano propped his head up with five silk pillows and crossed his arms, wincing inwardly at the painful tension the movement caused. He would need time to heal indeed; and assistance, and care. And he would have all that.

All his commands would be carried out, all his requests heard and honoured, all his wishes granted. Save one.

He was a prisoner, after all.

And as he lay in the cocooning warmth of his bed, indignant, grief-stricken, a sudden image flashed before his mind’s eye, from his home in the Blessed Realm across the Sea, unfathomably far, far over the waves of Ulmo. From Formenos, where, in an empty room, there probably still was a marvellous diamond cage – courtesy of Fëanáro –, and within, a small bird, wrought of silver and gold with eyes of topaz and wings red as rubies. If one turned the key below its maw twelve times, it would sing.

And so would he.

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Dimbar, North-West of the Brithiach, FA 467, the first day of Nárië

Antalossë had seen – and built – funeral pyres before.

Antalossë had seen innumerable horrors before, his life being one endless sequence of consecutive disasters.

Antalossë had lost friends before, and he had wept bitter tears for them.
Antalossë knew what peril was, and death scared him no longer.

Why were his legs shaking so much, then?

The corpses looked ordinary; three sleeping, two at the verge of awakening with their eyes half open.

The flames crackled their tempestuous song as they ate flesh and bared bones like a pack of crimson hounds.

Seven hells, why were his legs shaking…?

Antalossë had hoped that this latest disaster would elude him, but that desire did not douse in him the awareness that it could happen. Nor was he surprised that it did, after all. Perils had a habit to find him wherever he went; and if he tried to run, their pursuit was only the hotter.

Trouble found him, as it always did, as it always would. There was nothing special about the occasion, save perhaps for the detail that this newest disaster would have been easier to endure if he had two more corpses to burn.

There they were, slowly becoming a heap of ash and blackened bones: five empty shells, five limp likenesses of brave soldiers. He knew them by their names and called them friends. When he first came upon them, his stomach had curled into a tight knot, dreading the moment when he would turn over a corpse, and recognise Counsellor Tyelcano, or Senge, or Vorondo. And Vorondo, he found; but not the other two.

He counted the dead again and again, over and over, caressed their faces, closed their eyes, clenched their palms around the hilts of their swords and whispered blessings into their ears as he helped Lindír lift them onto their pyres; yet there would always be two missing.

Later, he found the tracks: the crystal-clear path carved by a body that had been dragged along the airy plains, trails of blood and nails digging into the ground to fight the pains of a broken leg; and the deep, tamped footprints left by limber Orc-feet on the pursuit.

Antalossë looked at the tracks, then turned away, then looked again. Lindír was standing beside him, holding the pieces of a broken lance he was somehow reluctant to throw into the fire.

“They tried to run,” he managed. Antalossë wanted to nod, but his entire body seemed frozen to the spot.

“They whole band leapt after them. They could not have gotten very far.”

This time, Antalossë did nod. Lindír gave the fire a stir and turned away from the charred bones of their friends. The wind kept the billowing smoke away from their faces; still, their eyes stung.

Lindír took a breath. “Maybe we should…”

“There is nothing for us here.” General Gildor’s voice was sharp, and very clear in the morning air as he emerged from under the edge of the nearest slope. “I have followed the tracks while you gathered wood and fed the fire. They keep getting increasingly trampled by Orcs as they run on, then they become unreadable.”

Antalossë stirred, his heart leaping into his throat. “But… the bodies, General,” he whispered. “Where are the bodies…?”
Gildor looked him in the eye, hardly, almost challengingly… and Antalossë felt the thrill of the icy claws of dread and disgust running down his back.

“Do you mean that they were… captured?” Lindír’s hands tightened into helpless, indignant fists. “Carried away…? What do you mean, General?”

“Three miles North.” Gildor’s chest rose and fell, rose and fell, rose and fell. “I burned them.”

(to be continued)

Chapter End Notes

Author’s Notes

‘Tyelcano son of Ettelë’ actually means Tyelcano son of ‘foreign lands’, in reference to his upbringing in Cuiviénen. The names of his parents are not known, and he never speaks about them, although it is rumoured that his father was one of the first Elves awakened by Eru himself. Turgon’s story about the founding of Gondolin is a (stretched) retelling of the canon. A piece of omniscient advice: don’t be very quick to judge Gildor…!
Leavens of Revolt

Chapter Notes

A/N: Three things. One: I would like to thank all of you for your reviews, favs, follows, e-mails, PMs and other forms of support. They mean the world to me. Two: This story is still struggling under a HUGE writer's block – I hope I will able to resume regular updates in 2019, though. And three: ENJOY!

Now let's return to our (slightly troubled) heroes in the Hidden Kingdom of Ondolindë – for those who have forgotten where we stand, I advise skimming through chapters 10, 22 and 23.

"And some that smile have in their hearts, I fear, millions of mischiefs."

/ William Shakespeare /

XXIV. Leavens of Revolt

The Inn to the Blind Guardian, FA 467, the third day of Nárië, before dawn

Laurefindil squinted at the artfully calligraphed tengwar on the list, with their archaic overbars and stylized initials, and sighed. He wished his head would hurt just a little less, or – if that was impossible – that it would at least cease its pounding.

Since he had no such luck, he chose what he could first decipher.

"...I shall have a goblet of Hillside Nectar, please. Or two goblets... maybe three... ah, as it happens, we'll rather have the entire bottle, thank you."

"And a glass of water," called Voronwë from the back.

The innkeeper smiled as she emerged from the cellar with an old vintage of Hillside Nectar. "What is it with sailors and water? One would think you've tasted enough of it."

"I shall rather drink water that knows it is water, than some sour grape juice that claims to be nectar," Voronwë quipped.

The innkeeper laughed. "A curious answer from a lord who recently decided that he was a spy and knocked on my door in the middle of the night to organise a secret meeting!"

As far as Laurefindil was concerned, any meeting that was announced in a clear, ringing voice that echoed through a bar was no longer secret. Voronwë, however, did not seem to share his concerns for once, cautious as he was.

"...nothing of the sort, m'lady, I assure you. Only – lately, there were strange developments in the City, which our humble company would prefer to discuss in the silence and peace of your rooms."
"I hear that the walls in the Royal Palace have grown large, shapely ears," said the innkeeper.

"Now," said Voronwë, as he picked up his glass of water and led a puzzled Captain Laurefindil to the backdoor, "you haven't heard that from me, to mention that walls with poking ears would look absolutely awful."

"As my lord wishes," said the innkeeper. She left the taproom, and the two door-wings embraced behind the two Elves with a soft clank.

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Lords Ecthelion and Egalmoth were already present – as agreed – and seated at the two opposite heads of the table. They both made a considerable effort to seem at ease; said efforts, however, were completely ineffective, as a bow-string would have been looser if one were to stretch it between them.

The room was tidy, and solemnly elegant – it looked, in fact, almost cosy for one accustomed to the ever-extravagant, pompous architecture of Ondolindë. If Voronwë was to be believed, the room was one of the many remote corners of the inn that were provided for those who sook privacy. Laurefindil had to rely on his friend's words in that matter – he was not known for holding lengthy clandestine discussions.

Until now.

He took the seat facing Ecthelion's and sank into weary silence. He did not know why they were here, or how long they were to stay – and, most of all, he had no idea what he was about to witness.

"Thank you all for coming," said Voronwë, when everyone was seated. "Forgive me for having dragged you all the way down here in such an inconvenient hour – I assure you that I would not have done so if it was not strictly necessary."

"It is quite all right, Aranwion," said Ecthelion, "but why…"

Voronwë raised his hand. "We will get there in a moment. First of all – Ecthelion, Laurefindil, you both must promise me that you will keep in utmost secret whatever you might hear in this room. Once and for all – even if, at the end, you decide against helping our friend Egalmoth."

Both addressed lords stared at him as if he'd grown a second head.

"Trust me," Voronwë repeated, "this is necessary."

Ecthelion crossed his arms. "What is happening here…? Why should I swear secrecy to some unknown matter, why should I grant my loyalty for a hidden cause?"

"Promise that you will stay silent, and we will tell you everything," said Egalmoth, with a shadow of pain in his eyes. "Please."

"All right," said Laurefindil slowly, "I, your friend, give you my word that I shall keep your secret, and I trust that you will not make me regret it."

Ecthelion gave him a sidelong look, then sighed exasperatedly.

"All right – for friendship's sake, I give you my word as well. Now explain."

Voronwë emptied his glass and looked around the table, his face solemn, yet grave.
"Before we get to that, I must inquire… to what extent have you been made aware of certain, ah, recent happenings?"

"You mean, about the intruders?" Ecthelion raised an eyebrow.

"To my best knowledge," Laurefindil offered, "they were messengers from the East. The entire City is debating whether they are dead or alive, and if they were sent here on purpose. We had to forcefully seal the Palace against all the onlookers and their bustle. I have not seen such a commotion since…"

Laurefindil swallowed the rest of his sentence, and the lords all bowed their heads in mournful understanding. The last time Ondolinë had seen such commotion was when the Eagles had borne the body of High King Ñolofinwë, hero to many and sire to their King, after he had fallen to the cruel hammer of Moringotto. The whole City had then come out to the streets, standing vigil and singing laments.

"No one is allowed to see those newcomers," Laurefindil said cautiously, "as if they were guarding some great secret… The King has been visiting them, every morn and every eve since their arrival. I seldom saw him in the past few days, but whenever I did, he seemed very grave to me; deep in thought, yet somewhat hopeful. I cannot guess the cause or the meaning of his perturbation; he spoke naught to me – he had us double the city watch instead."

"Laurefindil," said Egalmoth slowly, "has the King – or Ecthelion, for that matter – told you about certain complications surrounding the arrival of these… intruders?"

"I meant to, but I did not have the chance yet," Ecthelion gave a stormy sigh. "The developments are… painful. The envoys were chased by Orcs, and they ventured to our Gates by nothing more than chance; or maybe – as some claim – by the will of the Valar. Nevertheless, the Orcs did not follow them closely enough to see where exactly they had disappeared; therefore, they had practically no chance to find the secret entrance of our City. Well – they would have probably never had the chance to find it, if Captain Elemmakil of the Watch did not ride out on them like a mad cat thrown in the river!"

"He did…?!" Laurefindil exclaimed, more out of dread than admiration. "But that is against the Law!"

"Aye, it is." Ecthelion bowed his head. "The fool… One of the newcomers, he said, begged him to help his friends who had fallen behind, and Elemmakil complied like the pompous fool he had always been…! And on he rode. Doing justice in this situation shall be like wielding a two-edged sword with no scabbard… I do not like the thought of it… yet whatever Captain Elemmakil did – and however heroic it might have been – he purposefully broke the Law of Secrecy. And for breaking the Law of Secrecy –"

"No!" Laurefindil exclaimed.

"Yes, Fin. Yes. You get thrown into the Caragdûr for that."

"And that is why I am here today," said Egalmoth solemnly. "As you all know, Captain Elemmakil is an honourable servant of my House. I cannot suffer him being killed for the bravest deed he'd ever done. I wondered, Ecthelion, if you could help me lift the sentence. Somehow… Anyhow…"

For a long time, the only sound in the room was the soft patter of rain on the roof and the windows.

"This is one of those times…" Ecthelion said, then his voice faltered; but finally, he resolved to
finish his sentence. "…this is one of those times when the King's Laws may seem cruel. Yet it cannot be denied that Elemmakil could have avoided the whole raid. The Orcs themselves did not find the Gate – he went out to chase them… he rode out several miles, for Valar's sake! He is full of hatred and anger towards Moringotto and his servants… And for that reason, I do not see how I could help him. As Lord Warden of the Gates, all I could do was assure that Elemmakil drags his heroic behind back in time… that all the Orcs are hunted down… that our guests are assigned to the best healer… I may still, of course, acquaint the King with my opinion, but I doubt that it would change much. I may be the Lord of the Fountain, but I have no power here – such matters belong to the consideration of Counsellor Lómion. He is the only one who can still save your captain, and – well, good luck with that."

"Could Lómion truly want him to be executed?" Laurefindil raised his brows. "I doubt it."

"Lómion saw his own father executed and did not even blink!" Ecthelion snapped. "Or have you forgotten…?! Fin, you can really be a giant, empty-headed dandelion sometimes!"

Laurefindil took a deep breath. "I was only trying to say…"

But his friend was far too preoccupied with his aversion towards the Counsellor. "I was there when he spoke the doom, if you must know," he said brusquely. "And he did say it saddened him to decide so – but the King's Law cannot be taken lightly, he declared, and he would not tell me another word. As much as I hate to admit it, Lómion has the Law on his side this time. After all, Captain Elemmakil did endanger our entire City with his actions – and that could, under no circumstances, be denied, or – in the Counsellor's words – taken lightly."

"And yet," Laurefindil tried, "if Lómion were to give him a second chance – to make sure he would respect the Law in the future and take every word to heart – I am sure that Elemmakil would not disappoint!"

"Had he broken any other Law than that of Secrecy," Ecthelion sighed, "I believe there would be a chance to save him. Egalmoth, my friend, I am sorry. I can do naught."

"Well… if Lómion's mind is truly made – nor can I," admitted Laurefindil, a great weight settling on his chest.

Egalmoth bowed his head in mute acceptance, while Voronwë, who had stayed silent all the way long, propped up his head upon an elbow, and made a scornful 'tsk-tsk' sound, shattering his usual image of quiet grace.

"Why, my friends," he said, a smile hovering on his lips, "I've assembled you lot here today to tell you that there is, in fact, someone could do plenty – if we are insane enough to ask for his help."

"Please, go on," said Laurefindil, his interest piqued.

"Well," Voronwë crossed his arms and leaned back in his chair. "Our Captain Elemmakil, as it happens, is exceptionally fortunate in his choice of obedience. When he charged at those Orcs at the plea of a fallen traveller clad in blood-coated rags, he had no idea who he had just saved, upon whose command was he breaking the Law. Little did he know that dressed in those particular blood-coated rags was no mere messenger, but a great lord from Tirion: Counsellor to Finwë, then Fëanáro, and now Nelyafinwë, from the fortress of Himring; one named Tyelcano. This I have learned only yestereve, when I spoke to the King… he is, to tell the truth, very happy to have this Lord Tyelcano under his wings. Now – by service and in heart, this lord belongs to the King's, and therefore, my family – perhaps not in the same way Lómion does, but in a way that is no less valuable. And although I do not yet know him in person, I am sure that he would not cherish the
thought of Captain Elemmakil dying for having granted his wish. Lord Tyelcano is, the King tells me, one of Nelyafinwë's closest; and Nelyafinwë, whatever one might say about him, is an epitome of knightly valour. If anyone, then this Lord Tyelcano can help you."

"How?" Laurefindil whispered, his suspicion rising. "How could he, an outsider, do anything, if Lómin's doom has already been spoken?"

"There is only one way to change what has been settled – bringing the matter before the Council," Ecthelion said, as if doubting his own words. "Aranwion means that we will have to accuse Lómin of injustice..."

"...after which a debate would commence." Egalmoth shook his head. "A debate with Lómin in charge, which – in itself – is a lost cause. Have you ever heard him speak...?"

"Not against the legendary counsellor of Finwë himself – not against the one who had talked Fëanáro into accepting his exile," said Voronwë, now visibly amused. "I, for one, would dearly like to watch that debate."

For a short while, they all contemplated the thought in silence and doubt. Finally, it was Laurefindil who spoke:

"I do not understand. How did this Elf come here? Has the House of the Star sent us messengers, respecting some unknown agreement...? Or have they only lost their way?"

"They came here by chance," Ecthelion said slowly. "That much is clear. If you ask me, they were heading to Barad Eithel..."

"Only two envoys made it to the Gates, and one died the night afterwards," said Voronwë. "He was a scout. The lord is recovering... and he will stay here, my friends. The King has already made that very clear. He's going nowhere – as goes the Law." He made a pause. "The King seems to have great respect for him. Aye, I believe that he could help us."

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The Royal Palace, in the evening

To say that Counsellor Lómin's study was dark would have been an overstatement – when Erestor pressed the handle and walked in, his heart in his throat, he found it draped in faint gleam instead. The silvery hue came from a flameless lamp, the likes of which he often saw around Lómin; it was like a sharp, gleaming jewel, a maze of erratically connected angular surfaces. It tripled, quadrupled, quintupled Erestor's shadow as he sneaked closer to the table and shrugged off the tension of intimidation.

He had been told to come and wait here; and wait he would.

Lómin was known to be very strict and reserved about the usage of his library, but Erestor risked a glance at the nearest bookshelf all the same. Sadly, he could not have reached any of the books without making noise – the spaces between the furniture were too narrow, and the tips of the bookshelves (were the rarest items were kept) almost touched the ceiling.

Erestor had no choice but to admit his failure and turn his attention to the landscape. Lómin's window looked out to icy Crissaegrim instead of the lush gardens, or the King's many fountains as they chattered and sang – it was a strange choice of view, one with edges and depths, one with sharp lines and narrow angles.
A large pile of paper was placed on top of Lómion's desk, ready to be studied, signed, or even copied for all Erestor knew. He stepped closer, suddenly overwhelmed by curiosity. Maybe, if he could just steal a glance… he would not tell anyone. No one would know…

His plans, however, were interrupted by Lómion himself as he walked into the room (cradling another roll of parchment in his arms) and sat down behind his desk to read through it. He seemed oblivious to his young friend's presence – wordless, he took his quill, and scribbled a note between two lines, brows knit in thought. Erestor could tell that whatever he was reading, he was not at all happy about it.

Quite possibly, he was being a nuisance.

Erestor suddenly felt childish and stupid for having come here. Lómion surely had things of greater importance to do than answering his questions… He should probably just turn and leave, as quickly and quietly as he had come.

The Counsellor's eyes suddenly locked with his. "Oh, it's you." He sighed. "You must excuse me, young lord. I got… carried away in my thoughts, and I didn't see you. Please, sit."

Erestor did not sit. "I don't want to disturb you…"

"Clearly, you do – otherwise, you would not be here." Lómion smiled quizzically. "Out with it!"

"You have better things to do now, Lómion," the boy stammered. "I – I just wanted to ask you stupid questions, like I always do."

"If you must lie to me, little one," said Lómion gently, "at least try and get better at it. You're carrying an unnecessary weight. Let it go."

Erestor came closer, his steps faltering in front of the desk, and he sank into the other chair. Now that he was here, facing his friend and protector, the matters that had brought him there seemed petty and ridiculous.

"I was hoping…," he began cautiously, "that you could help me decide… Yestereve, my uncle told me something that I did not quite understand, but he would not explain, telling me that I had no notion of it. I almost admitted to him that I was no longer a stranger to law, but I did not dare to speak, because… Lómion, do you not think that we should finally tell him about… about us? About you teaching me law, and me being your friend, and… and everything? I feel like a thief in the night whenever I come here, yet I'm not doing anything wrong…"

Lómion raised his hand, smiling.

"One matter at a time, young lord! First, you would do very well to explain what Lord Ecthelion had said that you failed to understand."

"He said…" Erestor swallowed. "He said… Oh no, I should not speak. Lómion, I… I was eavesdropping. The words my uncle spoke were not meant for me to hear, and when he realised that I had, he was angry with me… I should not…"

Lómion nodded. "Then you should not," he said, his voice serious. "However, if those words were not for you to hear, they are no concern of yours – therefore, you should stop worrying about them. Let the lords discuss their own matters and be glad that you are spared such burdens for the time being."

"Yes, you are right," Erestor was suddenly ashamed. "I should not be talking about any of it. It's
just that… that you are my friend… and although it may be wrong to tell you about this, because it's like… like disobeying my uncle… but you're my friend and you've always been nice to me, and I think you should know about this, before… before something really bad happens…"

"Manwë and Varda above, child," said Lómion, his voice suddenly grave. "What was it that you heard?"

"Uncle said that Lord Egalmoth was asking for the help of the Grand Council in a matter of injustice, and…" Erestor bowed his head. "…and a breach of the King's Law. He also said that he was vouching for Lord Egalmoth in front of the Council, so that his words would be heeded… and that Captain Laurefindil would be witness, too. It was him that Uncle spoke to, when I heard them… Captain Laurefindil…"

"It is only what was to be expected," Lómion smiled tightly. "Your Uncle is a proud and noble lord, and such lords are known to prefer loyalty over the black-and-white sincerity of justice where their friends are concerned. Just remember what I told you about law precedents…"

"Aye," said Erestor. "But when… when I was discovered eavesdropping, I asked my Uncle if it was Lord Egalmoth himself who stood accused of injustice, and he said no. He would not tell me who it was, or why, but he exclaimed in anger that it was you who breached the law, cundunya, and that you were about to get away with it…!" Erestor's eyes were wide and fearful. "I told him it was impossible… and then he spoke harshly to me and scolded me. And now I feel torn, because my Uncle never lies. He just can't – it's impossible, just as impossible as the thought of you, of my friend, breaking the King's Law. Thus, here I stand, torn between two impossible things. My Uncle must be mistaken – but why would anyone think, cundunya, that you've done such a terrible thing…?"

Lómion took a deep breath, and Erestor saw that he had to struggle to keep his voice calm.

"Lord Ecthelion, as it appears, spoke in anger and frustration, and that is how I shall treat his words. I restrained myself from doing anything that exceeds my authority, but certain words I spoke to him yesterday were… far from polite. It is true that I overstepped myself, and perhaps – unintentionally – disrespected him in the heat of the moment. For that, I shall apologize."

"But why…"

"If you have your eyes open, young lord," said Lómion, his gaze suddenly scrutinizing, "you must have noticed that our City has visitors. We do not know whence they came, or what they want – and their reception has not been seamless. A captain from Lord Egalmoth's house is to be held responsible for his rash actions, and that is where my conflict with your Uncle Ecthelion stemmed from. You should not worry about it – the Lord Warden is known to speak hotly sometimes, although he means well. He always does."

"You're just telling me that in hope that I would finally leave you alone," Erestor said.

"Perhaps. Perhaps not. Even I am prone to the weakness of damaged pride, Erestor nin." Lómion reached out above the table and held the boy's chin gently. "Now tell me, young one… is there anything else you would like to tell me?"

Erestor looked into his friend's eyes, deep and dark like two bottomless wells, and suddenly wished he could stream all the knowledge of Arda into them.

"Not much… only that… there is a debate to be held. In – in the Council."
"The decision is already made," said Lómion, puzzled. "Captain Elemmakil is going to be punished ..."

"My uncle spoke about a debate in the Council. And that... that you are not going to like what will happen. I don't know what he meant by that, though - I really don't know, Lómion, but be wary...! You are far from unprotected, but it is never good to be on the receiving end of my uncle's wrath."

There was a long silence. Lómion's face betrayed none of his thoughts, but his eyes were bright and keen, as if searching for truths and explanations beyond the boundaries of the visible world.

"These are wise words from one so young," He finally said, musing. "Thank you for your kindness and loyalty, Erestor nin. I will not forget it."

"It is I who should thank you, *cundunya.*" Erestor bowed, then hesitated, then finally spoke. "What about... well, should we keep meeting in secret?"

"In the light of recent events," said Lómion measuredly, "I think we should. I will try my best, however, to reconcile with Lord Ecthelion."

The boy nodded, a little bit shaken. He was already in the doorway when Lómion called after him.

"And - Erestor!"

"Yes, *cundunya?*"

"If one day you find that there is anything, *anything* that bothers you, that weighs on you, anything you would like to tell me - please, do it, as bravely as you did today. I promise that I will do my best to help you."

"Thank you," said Erestor, deeply grateful. "Thank you. I will."

"Good night, then." Lómion smiled faintly. "May your dreams be sweeter than mine." He glanced at the revolting amount of parchments on his desk. "Now shoo, leave me to my work. Council reports will not write themselves, you know."

*(to be continued)*
A/N: I'm sorry that updating this takes me so long every time… but now, I have several chapters planned and partially written, so that gives us perspective. I hope this new chapter offers some recompense for the wait.

Amrod and Amras's Doriath adventures have been cut from the story, but I've posted them separately under the title 'Wasted Weeks'. Do give it a try!

"The truth is like a lion; you don't have to defend it. Let it loose; it will defend itself."
/Augustine of Hippo/

XXV. Waybirds' Nest

Hithlum, FA 467, the eighteenth day of Nárië

The fortress of Barad Eithel sat in the embrace of Ered Wethrin, large, painted windows squinting down on the narrow mountain pass like curious eyes. Its watchtowers faced the East proudly, an open threat to the forces of the Enemy: such was the seat of the High King of the Noldor since the times of the Siege, when Morgoth had cowered before Ñolofinwë and the strength of his alliance; and even with Ñolofinwe dead and his people decayed, it still held some stern, quiet authority.

Antalossë of Himring was staring blankly at the blue-and-silver flags of the High King as they fluttered in the wind. The softest breeze made them fly, as if they had been weaved of empty air themselves, and they were so fine that he thought he could see the outlines of the walls behind them. He could have ripped them with his bare hands if he wanted… could he not? They seemed so fragile. Or were they like pendants of Curufinwë's making – thin, detailed and fractile-looking, yet solid as rocks?

Antalossë had never thought he could see those flags, or the High King, or his court. Life outside the Himring had become hard and dangerous since the Flames; and the average Elf got shot, hammered, captured or daggered by Orcs before they could even dream of such things. Yet here he was, and in Lord Nelyafinwë's good graces at that. After all, he had somehow managed to save three of his brothers.

Antalossë had never saved anyone else before, even if it had been no more than sheer, dumb luck. If the Lord's brothers had not come...

Yet none of that mattered now. Not the past, and nor the future. Only the here and the now. Only the course of his purpose as he would carry it out. Only the truthfulness of his reasons. Only the fact that he was about to do the right thing, even if that right thing meant death.

It truly did not matter. He had delivered the message he had been trusted with; and thus, his imminent duty was done. Now came the duty of honour and decency. Of friendship. Of gall and despair...

Lord Nelyafinwë's seal ring graced King Findekáno's finger now, but Antalossë could still feel its weight in the pouch that hang from his belt, cold and insistent, like the touch of a heavy hand that sought to turn him back from the fate he had chosen for himself.

There was, however, no true challenge in choosing one form of treason over the other. No matter
which way he went, darkness awaited; and the only stable point in the storm of his doubts was his wish to choose the lesser evil and desert the command his heart so strongly resented. With every step he took on the other road, the road reason and common sense told him to follow, he was failing his Lord and betraying his command…

"What are you doing, child?"

Antalossë immediately recognized the voice, and his breath stuck in his throat. Of all the people who could catch him red-handed…

"Nothing, Highness," he said, and folded the sheet in his hands as calmly and accurately as he could manage.

"And you're wording that nothing just now with a bar of – what even is that?"

"A sharpened bit of coal, Highness."

High King Findekáno leaned against the balustrade next to him and smiled. "Are you a poet?"

Antalossë knew he was supposed to raise his head and look at him; and so he complied, stricken by the sudden force of his presence. King Findekáno was ageless, like most of the Eldar: neither old nor young, lithe yet strong, lively and graceful like a willow-tree that has seen many winters, yet still grows greener than saplings. His dark hair was a sea of waves lapping at his elbows, his eyes wide and bright like gems, his voice liquid silver; and his entire being a well of radiance that shone through his garments, which seemed way too modest for one of his stature.

"You must be a poet," he decided. "Only poets stay mute if asked. They are particularly bad at lying."

"I – I do not possess the talents of poetry or deceit, my King," said Antalossë, bewildered. "I thought poets were good at lying," he added uncertainly. "Skilled as they are with words…"

"Skilled, aye. Common misconception – it is not the wording that makes a good liar. It is the ability to speak of something else than yourself. If you show me a poet who is capable of that, you know more of the world than I." King Findekáno laughed. "You must have met my cousin Makalaurë. Have you ever heard him lie…? No. You cannot always catch the meaning of his words, that much is true… but whatever he says, he means it in some implausible dimension, because that is the way he is. It must be as tough as the Doom of Mandos."

Neither of them spoke for a long moment. Then Antalosse said, as if against his will:

"I am trying to – to draw a map of these lands. The only ones we have are from before the Flames, and I thought… well, Counsellor Tyelco was preparing one for the lord. So I am trying to finish it, you see. Highness. Have it sent to him somehow."

"I see," said King Findekáno gently. He leaned closer to the youth, and they both looked at the silver ribbons of distant flags as the wind picked them up. "Was he your friend?"

"I cannot truly say, as I seldom saw him… but everyone likes Lord Tyelco," said Antalossë truthfully. "He is clever… he was clever. And he always knew what to do." He swallowed. "It is… it is so unjust, you know. I should have died instead of him. He was the one carrying the message… but he broke his leg, and then the Orcs came… there was nothing I could do. I remained helpless against the will of the Enemy and that pained me. It pains me still, and I cannot stop thinking about ways I could have spared Lord Tyelco from his fate. He was… he was the wisest Elf I knew. Apart from Lord Nelyafinwë, of course."
"I do not claim to understand the workings of Arda," said King Findekáno slowly, "but I know this: everything happens for a reason, and behind the evil machineries of the Enemy, there always remains the simple, unbreachable order of life. Of dusk and dawn, of rising and falling, of victory and defeat. Of acting, then suffering the consequences of your acts. No one is free from that, young one. Not even Moringotto. One day, he shall pay; and I shall do my utmost to live to that day and see it for myself. The Enemy can be defeated – we have defeated him before, and we shall do it again if we have to."

"If anyone, then you will, Highness." Antalossë bowed. "You, and your cousins. Forgive me for weighing my sorrow upon you… there must be many matters and grievances on your heart at all times. I do not wish to be one of them."

"Worry not. You did not make it onto the list," said the King, his smile suddenly rueful. "In fact, I was hoping you could help me do something very stupid and irresponsible. See, I have found myself in possession of a secret I have never meant to possess, and it gnaws on my mind. It would be best to lock it up in my fëa until the end of times, but I cannot do it. My heart tells me otherwise – it tells me that the evil of untruth is greater than the evil of trepidation, and I find myself conflicted."

"What kind of secret is that, Highness?" Antalossë asked. "Are you certain that it is me you wish to share it with?"

"I must tell someone, and swiftly, before my heart gets chained by common sense," said King Findekáno softly. "There are times… strange and rare times… when the clockwork of our logic betrays us and we must walk other paths. I have never been afraid to walk such paths, you see. If I was, my dear cousin would still be hanging from that cliff."

Antalossë did not trust himself to speak; and the King held his face between his palms, turning it upwards until their eyes met.

"There is a chance that Counsellor Tyelcano is still alive," he whispered. Then he turned away. "There. I said it… now there are three of us in Arda left with such terrible knowledge; and tell me, please tell me that your heart aches as much as mine. What would you have me do, soldier of Himring? What would you have me do?!" And Antalossë trembled at the fervour in his voice.

Then something occurred to him.

"General Gildor knew…" He choked on the words. "And he lied. He said that he'd burned the bodies. He left Lindir and me with the knowledge that Lord Tyelco had found rest. And my brother-at-arms Senge. He led us on in blessed ignorance… but he told you, did he not? He had to. He cannot hide anything from his King, in the same way that I cannot hide anything from Lord Nelyafinwë. It is unimaginable." Antalossë drew a heavy breath. "Woe to me, High King! You have told your subject a secret that could bring great evil upon us all."

"I do not see why it should," said King Findekáno, "as you would already be on your way North if I wasn't holding you back with my speaking."

Antalossë winced. "How did you know…?"

"I am a king, not an idiot." Findekáno crossed his arms, fingers drumming impatiently on his doublet. "I know your kind, Antalossë of Himring. Yes, I do remember your name. You remind me of myself, from the times when I was, in fact, not a king but an idiot… You would have now been ready to ride North and avenge the demise of your friends as any true soldier should – and leave the guarding of your lord's lands to others. Leaving duty to others. I have done that before, and it
could have brought the evil of evils upon my head – if it did not, it was only because the Valar heard my desperate plea and the great Thorondor rescued me. Yet one cannot rely on such unearthly interventions. You are needed here, young one; and not out there in the wilderness, alone, however upliftingly terrible it might seem for your troubled conscience. Have I been clear?"

"Y-yes, my King," Antalossë said, as determined as he could make himself sound. "But… Highness, if I may ask… why is this knowledge so terrible to you, then? You seem to be sure what to do… you seem to have accepted that the delivery of a simple message from Lord Nelyafinwë cost him his most trusted Counsellor, even if he is alive… then again, we do not know if he is alive, do we? He could be anywhere. He could be in an Orc camp… or even worse… oh, Manwë and Varda, where do you think he is…?"

"Aye, said King Findekáno softly, "that is the true question. Where is he? Are Exiles taken into Mandos, even? The Counsellor has killed, young one; same as I have killed, and my cousins, and their father, and my guards, and my cupbearer, and many, so many of our people. What happens to us when we die, we cannot know. Maybe our fëa flies free… and that was the best possibility. If I assume the worst – well, you cannot erase a truth by delaying its enunciation. The worst place Tyelcano could be is Angamando. If the Enemy's servants find him… if Moringotto finds out that he has captured Nelyo's closest advisor, right from the House of the Star… beloved servant to Finwë himself, mentor of princes and Counsellor of Kings… what do you think he shall do, then?"

Antalossë could not speak.

"Can you now see why my head battles my heart, young one? Can you now see how cruel is the choice that lies in front of me? Lie to my cousin, and he shall find it out – perhaps not immediately, but sooner or later he shall, just as surely as Anor rises the next morning – and then he shall turn away from me and call me traitor, and I shall lose one who is closer to me than any friend or brother has ever been. Tell him the truth and I deliver him the blow myself, hiding behind the pretence of a High King who is always busy and has no time for such things as grief or despair. I could not even grieve for my own father…" King Findekáno's voice was hard as steel. "And what do you think your Lord will do then? What do you think he will do when he finds out that his most beloved servant is about to suffer the same fate as he had? The same unspeakable torment? Nelyo is… Nelyo is his father's son, and his wrath is terrible, his despair deadly. I am afraid of telling him, but he will learn the truth anyway and his wrath shall only be the greater." King Findekáno shook his head. "I lead the Noldor, day by day. I manage hundreds of miles of lands and I stand vigil over thousands of people, yet I find that I cannot carry this weight. Whatever I do, evil awaits at the corner, ready to destroy any semblance of peace and order we have. It seems that once again, I shall need to choose from a variety of evils; and I dread the thought that as time goes on, all my choices shall be reduced to that."

"Then it is your duty to find the lesser of those evils, Highness," said Antalossë weakly. "That is why I wish to leave: to avenge the friends I have lost… I have lost too many this year, and I could not grieve for them properly, either. There were too many things to be done, tasks to attend; and sometimes, merely staying alive was the hardest of those tasks. I am not even a hundred years old, and I feel ancient." He swallowed. "And losing the Counsellor… Lord Nelyafinwë bid me to go with him because I had saved his brothers from an Orc attack. He did not understand that it was not my merit but only luck… I did not understand that it was only luck… and now I have failed my Lord and I have failed Counsellor Tyelco, too. It seems only right that I should avenge him, and Senge… and Ohtar and Vorondo…"

"You could do more by simply going home."

"Maybe… but I am guilty of cowardice, Highness. I could not look my Lord and his brothers in the
eye and tell them what happened! They would send me in exile, and they would be right about it. No scout should stay alive while his lord is dead – worse, captured! Oh, if I could only know that Lord Tyelco has gone to Mandos! I believe that if he had the chance, he would go willingly, rather than to expose himself to Moringotto. But if he had been truly captured…” Antalossë swallowed the end of his sentence, then slowly raised his eyes to meet the King’s. "Well – then Lord Nelyo is in grave danger, and you are the only one who can help him."

"I ask you because you are loyal to my cousin and you follow his command…What would you have me do, Antalossë? Should I tell him – or should I lie, and risk his wrath, and wonder how long the bliss of illusion lasts?"

"General Gildor must have already told you what you should logically do, Highness," said Antalossë measuredly. "You should choose the lesser of evils and lie – not to conceal, but merely to delay the inevitable."

"Is that what you would do?"

Antalossë raised his head, suddenly fearless. "No, Highness. I would tell Lord Nelyafinwë the truth. And I would not use messengers… I would go myself."

"Truly?"

"Aye. As you can surely see, this is a terrible piece of advice – which is why you should definitely ask someone else."

King Findekáno narrowed his eyes. "I like you," he decided. "I might as well have you ride next to me."

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Meanwhile in the City of Belegost

"…therefore," said Azaghâl, landing yet another jug of ale upon the table, "you are telling me that you have finally and decisively let a screw loose."

Maedhros turned the words of the Common Tongue over and over in his head, unable to tell if he was supposed to be offended. "Which would mean…?"

The Dwarf's laughter was hot and rough like Curvo's smelters on a particularly dry summer morning. "It means that you have lost your mind, dear friend. You have always had these phantasms, that the people of Beleriand shall all stand together and hold hands in the moonlight. If you truly expect the Green-Elves and the Grey-Elves and all those other haughty hunter-people to help you… if you expect Men and Khazâd and who-knows-what-else to unite under your flag and shake their fists in unison – if you honestly do – then there is no madness in this world that could match yours. You're telling me that King Thingol still hasn't forgotten about that incident with the ships…"

"I do not want him to forget about Losgar, although he had little to do with it," said Maedhros patiently. "I merely wish he would answer my letters, if meeting him remains impossible still."

"High expectations," Azaghâl quipped. "I, for that matter, would content myself with him lowering duties around that Mahal-forsaken forest. If it wasn't for Lord Caranthir, our minerals would barely have market." The Dwarf bowed his head. "But enough of my complaining! It is ill luck to share one's grievances with a mad Elf."
"I am truly sorry for you, then."

"Forget it, Maedhros. The Enemy is sleeping now, and we should live and prosper while he is; for he shall wake again and try to destroy us. We should always be ready. But to seek union…"

Azaghâl laughed. "My dear, dear friend. At times, one should think that you have left half your brain in the Dark Realm along with that hand."

"Findekáno says that all the time about my sense of humour," said Maedhros, puzzled. There were not many people in Beleriand who addressed him as equal, and Azaghâl was one of them. He had previously observed that getting told off by a Dwarf did wonders to one's ability to switch perspectives – if they were not too busy trying to translate the japes or getting offended.

"Hmm. I would not say that. If you were truly smart, you would cry fool now, and tell me that you're only here to order a thousand breastplates."

"Actually," said Maedhros, "it would be closer to three thousand."

Azaghâl slowly lowered his jug and placed it on the table, next to the empty ones. "Excuse me…?"

"I am seeking to establish a Union, whether you think it is foolish or not," Maedhros declared, not without complacence. "I know that it shall be difficult, and I also know that there are many conflicts to resolve; but I believe that it could be done." He breathed in, breathed out. "I can still believe, my friend: that is the only thing I have left. I am the Enemy of the Enemy… his power is growing, and he has isolated our kingdoms from each other. Yes; he is stronger than us. Yes; he is terribly dangerous. Yes; his malice is persistent and terrifying. And yet… someone has to do something before it is too late. Someone has to make amends, to initiate discussions or even feud… someone has to unite the Free People of Beleriand. And why not me? I know the Enemy and his power. I have defied him… and marred though I remain by Moringotto's vices, he is the one who gave me the power to fight him. I wear no crown and the only lands I hold are my own. I am the only one who can face him. And for that, I shall turn over every leaf and shout into every bush if that is what it would take to have the Sindar and the Laiquendi fight for me. I shall travel to the kingdoms of Men and bend them to my cause. I shall come back to you, my friend, and buy as many breastplates as you would have me buy if that helps your kingdom prosper. Someone has to do this… and it might as well be me – me, who did terrible things, who had killed in Alqualondë and stood aside in Losgar, letting evil have its hour. It might as well be my punishment, or my means of redemption if that sounds better for your ears. All I know is that I shall have to unite the Free People to defeat the Enemy. That is the only way."

Azaghâl scratched his beard. "Pretty words," he quipped. Suddenly, he raised his eyes to meet Maedhros's; they shone like two gems of smouldering onyx in the light of the torches. "Tell me, Elf," he said in a rough voice, "if I follow you to battle… and suddenly, let's say, Moringotto stuffs those Silmarils inside the belly of a bat and lets it loose… and if that bat, for instance, happens to land among my archers… what will you do, then? Ask nicely? Wait for the battle to end? Overrun us – your own friends and brothers-at-arms?"

"Once I have defeated the Enemy," said Maedhros, smiling, "I do not think it would be very difficult for me to find that bat."

"Clever and elusive, as always. The problem with you Elves is that you pretend to misunderstand questions we, base mortals immediately know your answers to."

"You cannot dream to know my answer, for I do not know it myself," said Maedhros, his voice suddenly shrill. "You know that I have sworn, and that I did not do it lightly. You know that I must take the Silmarili back… but the key to that, I believe, is the defeat of the Enemy. One Silmaril has
recently been stolen, and it is now in Doriath; yet you will not see me going after it. Not yet. My Oath bounds me, that much is true, but its rope is not around my neck. Not for the time being."

"Is it true, then?" Azaghâl raised his brows. "King Greymantle stole a Jewel of yours?"

"He had it stolen." Maedhros sighed. "We do not truly know how or why. I have sent two of my brothers to speak to him, but I deprive myself the luxury of waiting for a decent answer."


"That makes two of us." Maedhros smiled ruefully. "Anyway… what I have told you about Curufinwë and the forge…"

"All is well and done." The Dwarf waved his hands absently. "I shan't say no to good companionship. And we have decided that Lord Caranthir's duties shall remain… have we not?"

"We have." Maedhros tilted his head. "This is the third time you asked. Is something amiss?"

"I want to be sure. The roads are becoming dangerous once again, and my people continue to suffer losses," Azaghâl said. "You must have noticed. Since the Orcs took the Gap…"

"Maglor is taking it back. I have sent my best troops with him."

The Dwarf scratched his head. "You are really doing this, eh…?"

"I am." Maedhros stood, fighting the sudden impact of ale in his head. The absence of balancing forces where his hand should have been suddenly became unbearable. "Please receive my thanks for being such a kind host. I look forward to those trade agreements."

"That's it?" Azaghâl crossed his arms, a trace of indignance colouring his voice. "No more sweet words? No more persuasion? No more listing of reasons why I should follow you into a battle that is already lost?"

"I would never ask you to follow a cause you do not believe in, my friend," said Maedhros, bowing his head. "But the day when my Union has grown and it stands ready to face the Enemy… that day I shall come to you and ask you to fight by my side, for I know your people's strength in arms. Until then – may the Stars watch over you!"

He bid good-bye to Azaghâl and left his chambers. Outside the door, he stopped absently, as if to admire the ornaments of the Casari in the walls; and he creased his face into an expression of great surprise when his friend stormed out the door, almost running him over.

"The Powers help me!" Azaghâl growled. "You! The way you appear out of thin air when one needs you the most! The way you fill my head with your impossible fantasies! They way you defeat armies by yourself, and protect the East, and face the enemy, laughing – what metal are you made of, Maedhros of the Overseas?! What madness possesses me when I follow your witless lead?!" Azaghâl clasped Maedhros's good arm in a warrior's greeting, so sudden and so strong that he almost tripped over. "All right! All right – I shall join your Mahal-forsaken Union if that is the last thing I do, and we shall cleanse these lands together. No more Orc-filth for us!" The Dwarf looked at him sharply. "You knew I would do it, of course. That is why you are still here. You have been waiting for me to change my mind."

"I was merely admiring the wall," said Maedhros lightly. "Your tongue is fascinating. What does barûk mean?"
Azaghâl stared at him. "You can read the runes?"

"I have been taught."

"By whom?"

"A bat," said Maedhros after a moment of brief consideration. "If you see one swallowing my Father's Holy Jewels, I grant you my personal permission to slice it open."

(to be continued)

**Note:** (1) *The Common Tongue* Maedhros and Azaghâl use is meant to be archaic Adûnaic/Westron, as the Westron we know from *The Lord of the Rings* does not yet exist here. However, it seems plausible that the languages of Men would serve as lingua franca between Elves and Dwarves, since Khuzdûl is never introduced to outsiders; and Dwarves, I believe, show general aversion towards learning Sindarin (or Quenya, for that matter). (2) The line with the proverbial bat that THEORETICALLY swallowed the Silmarils comes from a live RPG I've been playing; it wasn't my own wonderful idea.

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