
Character Biography

Maedhros

By Dawn Felagund

Maedhros, the eldest son of Fëanor, remains one of Tolkien's most tragic characters, one whose kind and cooperative nature often seems contrary to his ruthless actions. Rational and diplomatic where his kinsmen were impetuous and wrathful, he was nonetheless driven by the oath of the Fëanorians to perform terrible deeds, and because of his oath, even his greatest accomplishments always fell just shy of bringing defeat to Morgoth.

Maedhros was born in Aman and followed his brilliant and fey father to Middle-earth, joining his father and brothers in an oath of pursuit and vengeance that would torment him until the end of his days. In *The Shibboleth of Fëanor*, he is described as having rare red-brown hair and being "of beautiful bodily form," a detail that is expressed in his epithet *the Tall*. Once arrived in Beleriand, Maedhros alone stood against the burning of the ships, remembering his old friendship with Fingon, but his disapproval was not enough, and the people of Fingolfin were driven to cross the Helcaraxë by the treachery of the Fëanorians. Maedhros's belief in the value of unity among not only the Noldor but the people of Middle-earth would shape his life ... but would be thwarted always by the shadow of his oath.

Following the Battle-under-stars, Maedhros and his brothers intervened to save Fëanor's life but not soon enough. In the same hour, Maedhros--suddenly foisted into place as the High King of the Noldor--attempted to trick Morgoth into defeat but was himself captured and hung from Thangorodrim by his right hand. A character previously described as being exceptionally beautiful (HoMe 12), Maedhros would then bear signs of his torment, both physically and spiritually, for the remainder of his life.

Maedhros's friendship with his cousin Fingon is one of the most beloved and written-about elements of his story. Following his capture, Fingon alone--without an inkling of an idea that Maedhros had attempted to prevent the betrayal of Fingolfin's people--endeavored to rescue his cousin from Thangorodrim. Being unable to reach Maedhros upon the precipice, he agreed to kill Maedhros and end his pain, but as he was stringing his bow, was visited by Thorondor of the Great Eagles and borne to where he cousin hung. Being unable to loosen or break the steel, Fingon was forced to amputate Maedhros's hand at the wrist. Ever after, Maedhros fought with his sword in his left hand and grew to be more skilled than he'd been with his right, and it is said that he was "as one that returns from the dead," of unsurpassed valor and a terror to behold in battle.

To heal the long-standing feud between his father's house and the House of Fingolfin, Maedhros relinquished the crown of the High King of the Noldor to his uncle Fingolfin. Throughout the rest of the story, Maedhros would use friendship and alliance with his kinsmen to fulfill his quest to recover a Silmaril. He and his brother Maglor, alone of the sons of Fëanor, attended Fingolfin's feast Mereth Aderthad, and he remained friends with both the Houses of Fingolfin and Finarfin. Despite his brothers' attempts to undo this allegiance--most notably Caranthir's treatment of the sons of Finarfin and Celegorm and Curufin's antics in Nargothrond--

Maedhros managed for the most part to keep the people of Middle-earth allied against Morgoth, until their eventual undoing at the Battle of Unnumbered Tears.

With his brothers, Maedhros departed to the eastern lands of Beleriand and there defended the most treacherous realm: the March of Maedhros, a cold and barren stretch of land just south of Angband. His fortress was built upon a hilltop and called *Himring*, meaning "the ever-cold." In the centuries that followed, Maedhros remained friendly with the people of Fingolfin and Finarfin, and along with Fingolfin, helped lead to victory during the Glorious Battle, which resulted in four hundred years of peace in Beleriand. During the Battle of Sudden Flame, Maedhros alone of his brothers managed to hold his fortress against Morgoth and continued to hinder the Dark Lord's plans with his constant vigilance.

It was with hopes of a similar victory through allegiance that Maedhros forged the Union of Maedhros, seeking the assistance of others of the Elves as well as Dwarves and Men in the defeat of Morgoth. However, he showed his strength too soon, and Morgoth was given time enough to install spies in the ranks of the House of Fëanor. The treachery of the Men who rode in Maedhros's ranks proved too much for the allied forces of Elves, Men, and Dwarves, and they met terrible defeat that day.

With a Silmaril out of Morgoth's clutches and possessed instead by Beren and Lúthien's son Dior, the Fëanorians' oath began to haunt them. Though Maedhros made attempts at peacefully retrieving the Silmaril, the lust for the jewel was too strong on all sides, and the kinslayings of Doriath and Sirion followed. All of the sons of Fëanor were lost save Maedhros and Maglor, and still, the Silmaril eluded them. When they attempted to wrest it from Elwing, she was borne away with it to Valinor.

After the tragedy at Sirion, the oath still pursued the two remaining sons of Fëanor. After the Valar finally chose to join with the peoples of Middle-earth to defeat Morgoth, Maedhros convinced Maglor to make one final attempt at retrieving the Silmarils from Eonwë, the herald of Manwë, though both brothers were embittered by and wearied of the oath. Eonwë would not willingly yield the Silmarils, but neither would he permit his guard to kill Maedhros and Maglor, and they each took one of the remaining jewels and fled. The Silmaril burned Maedhros's remaining hand, and in agony because of the deeds he had done in its name--knowing that they had indeed been for naught--he jumped into a chasm in the earth and took his own life.

Maedhros's character was present in varying forms throughout the long course of J.R.R. Tolkien's work on *The Silmarillion*. Maedhros makes his first appearance as *Maidros*--the name by which he is known throughout most of the early work on *The Silmarillion*--in *The Book of Lost Tales 1*. Here, he is first identified as Fëanor's grandfather in *The Theft of Melko and the Darkening of Valinor*. By *Gilfanon's Tale* at the end of the same book, however, his place has been changed to that of Fëanor's son, and first mention is made of his capture and torment by Morgoth. Thus, by Tolkien's earliest work on his *legendarium*, the beginnings of the character of Maedhros were already in place.

In the years to come, J.R.R. Tolkien demonstrated some doubt as to Maedhros's eventual role in the House of Fëanor. While always the eldest son and always proclaimed the leader of the Fëanorians, Tolkien vacillated between having Maedhros as one of the more aggressive brothers or the most passive and repentant, and from this latter version, he evolved to the tragic character of *The Silmarillion* that is known and admired by fans.

In Volume Four, *The Shaping of Middle-earth*, Tolkien portrayed Maedhros as the gentlest of the brothers, going so far as to forswear his oath prior to the attack on Doriath and taking Maglor's role as the rescuer of Elrond and Elros. In the earliest *Silmarillion*, Tolkien reverses the roles of Maedhros and Maglor completely for the final scene with Eonwë and even makes Maedhros responsible for the breaking of the Silmarils to restore the Two Trees. Through these subtle character changes, the Maedhros set forth in *The Silmarillion* emerges: a character of great personal strength who values peace and unity whose hand is forced to ruthless deeds by his oath, a tragic character who continues to inspire seemingly endless contemplation and creativity.

About the Author

Dawn Felagund is the founder and owner of the Silmarillion Writers' Guild and has authored more than thirty stories based on J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Silmarillion*, some of which have been translated and published in fan magazines around the world. These days, she directs her fannish energies towards research projects and developing the SWG into a fun and valuable group for *Silmarillion* fans. Dawn can be emailed at DawnFelagund@gmail.com.