
Character Biography

Aredhel Ar-Feiniel

By Oshun

Aredhel was the daughter of Fingolfin, sister to Fingon and Turgon. She was the second to last of Finwë's grandchildren who feature in the published *Silmarillion* (Galadriel being the youngest). In the *Shibboleth of Fëanor*, Aredhel's Quenya name was given as Irissë. Tolkien also noted there that this was most likely intended to be her father name [\(1\)](#) and offered no mother name for Aredhel.

. . . their sister was Aredhel the White. She was younger in the years of the Eldar than her brothers; and when she was grown to full stature and beauty she was tall and strong, and loved much to ride and hunt in the forests. There she was often in the company of the sons of Fëanor, her kin; but to none was her heart's love given. Ar-Feiniel she was called, the White Lady of the Noldor, for she was pale though her hair was dark, and she was never arrayed but in silver and white. [\(2\)](#)

The above passage from the published version of *The Silmarillion* raises an interesting detail with its hyperbolic description of her choice of clothing. It could strain the imagination to picture Aredhel tearing around on horseback with the sons of Fëanor and hunting in the forest, either in Aman or Middle-earth, clad only in silver and white (which realistically would be tattered, torn, and mud-splattered). Not a particularly appealing picture, but one that is a clear reminder that this legendarium is not meant to be read literally. It is instead narrative that must be classified within the context of mythology, fantasy, or, to use Tolkien's own words, as a Fairy story [\(3\)](#).

Aredhel first appeared in one of Tolkien's earliest narratives of the Elder Days, *The Fall of Gondolin*, [\(4\)](#) began in 1916. There she was given the name of Isfrin. Tolkien later changed her name to Aredel, then Aredhel. How she finally came to be called Aredhel Ar-Feiniel is the result of an editorial decision made by Christopher Tolkien in the process of preparing the manuscript of the printed version of *The Silmarillion*. According to Christopher Tolkien, his father, in marking the change of the name Isfin throughout two separate carbon copies of *The Fall of Gondolin*, indicated it should be altered to either Aredel, Feiniel, or Ar-Feiniel. Christopher Tolkien states that: "In the published *Silmarillion* I combined them as Aredhel Ar-Feiniel, although there is no warrant for this; they were evidently competing names, and the notes at the head of the carbon copy cited above suggest that Aredel (Aredhel) was his final choice" [\(5\)](#). One can only sympathize with Christopher Tolkien in this instance in his attempt to systematize these contradictory changes shown on duplicate copies of the same manuscript.

In the account of the life and character of Aredhel given in the published *Silmarillion*, prior to the telling of the tale of the fall of Gondolin therein, the most important thing we learn about Aredhel is that she is one of the few named women among those who followed the Noldor in their flight from Aman, despite the fact that perhaps as many as ninety percent of the Noldor (men, women and children) left [\(6\)](#). The *Shibboleth of Fëanor* also indicates that Aredhel "was under the protection of Turukáno who loved her dearly, and of Elenwë his wife" [\(7\)](#) when she left Aman with the rebellious Noldor.

The text implicates that she and her brother Turgon were especially close to one another. This simple assertion is not demonstrated anywhere in accounts of Aredhel's personality or behavior. A reader might notice greater similarities or affinity of Aredhel with the nature of her brother Fingon the Valiant, who is shown to be reckless and impulsive, and who cultivated a lifelong particular friendship with Fëanor's oldest son.

Much is made of the relationship between Aredhel and the sons of Fëanor by aficionados of *The Silmarillion*. Aredhel sought the company of the bold sons of the Spirit of Fire. A scrap of text that fascinates fanfiction writers, relating to her relationship with Fëanor's sons is: "but to none was her heart's love given" (8). This could be read as indicating that it could have been possible for her to have loved one of them. Tolkien seems to have vacillated relating to when or if cousins might marry or love one another. In the story of Aredhel's son, Maeglin, and his fatal infatuation with Idril, Tolkien writes that the "Eldar wedded not with kin so near, nor ever before had any desired to do so" (9). This directly contradicts his statement in *Morgoth's Ring* where he explains that "'first cousins', as we should say, might marry, but seldom did so, or desired to do so, unless one of the parents of each were far-sundered in kin" (10).

Nowhere in the story of Aredhel do we read anything of her sitting home and weaving tapestries, nor do the generalized descriptions of her make that type of stereotypically womanly behavior easy to imagine in her case. She enjoyed hunting and riding and the company of fiery men. Since her name was never mentioned in connection with the early Battles of Beleriand, one must, however, assume that she never went to war.

However, instead of traveling about Middle-earth, as Galadriel was to do, Aredhel withdrew into the closed and isolated city of Gondolin with her brother Turgon. What we do not know is why. She is described as "strong-willed and stubborn, doing what she wanted rather than listening to other peoples' advice" (11).

Modern readers, particularly women, may have a tendency to view and judge Aredhel as a female character under the contemporary standards used in analyzing the modern novel, to which they are more accustomed. Much formal and informal discussion is raised about the paucity of strong female characters in Tolkien's work. The debate encompasses whether Tolkien was an unconscious misogynist or simply drawing on a much earlier and less realistic model for all of his characters, male and female alike. The answer may be: probably a little of both. It also might be least prejudicially stated that Tolkien was representative of his background and circumstances and, additionally, reflected his abiding interest in ancient myths and legends.

Yet, even comparing Aredhel to a modern fictional character, one could assert that she is presented as a strong or, at the very least, willful woman. One might assume that the author judged her to have more obvious flaws than, for example, Galadriel or Lúthien. If reading from the perspective of modern narrative prose one might suppose that Lúthien should be considered the model of female virtue and valour in *The Silmarillion*, then perhaps, by contrast, Aredhel should be viewed as a poster child for bad behaviour. However, the actual details show that Aredhel's choices, on the face of them, are not especially less prudent than Lúthien's. Instead, one might extrapolate that Aredhel's bad luck and ill fate could have been the result largely of the curse of Mandos. Lúthien's actual deeds and decisions could be argued to be neither less rebellious nor wiser than those of Aredhel.

Aredhel followed her brother Turgon from the area around Lake Mithrim to Nevrast, where he founded the city of Vinyamar. When Turgon constructed the hidden city of Gondolin, she accompanied him there. Not surprisingly, after two hundred years (12), Aredhel was yearning to escape from the confines of the guarded city. Turgon was reluctant to grant her leave to depart, because he feared exposure of the city. Eventually, he permitted her to make a trip. When he attempted to place restrictions upon her excursion, suggesting that she visit their brother Fingon in Hithlum, Aredhel answered, "I am your sister and not your servant, and beyond your bounds I will go as seems good to me. And if you begrudge me an escort, then I will go alone" (13). Turgon did provide an escort, who are not named in the published *Silmarillion*, but in the *War of Jewels* chapter *Maeglin* (14), Christopher Tolkien states that his father had penciled in the names of Glorfindel, Egalmoth, and Ecthelion as Aredhel's companions on her journey.

When Aredhel and her companions reached the borders of Doriath, they were refused entry and forced to take a longer and more treacherous route to her chosen destination. In the region of Nan Dungortheb (Valley of Dreadful Death), a known haunt of Ungoliant's children, Aredhel became separated from her escort, who returned to Gondolin and reported her lost. In fact, she safely reached Himlad, where she had hoped to find Celegorm. After waiting for Celegorm, who was away at the time, Aredhel eventually grew bored and restless and wandered into the forest of Nan Elmoth, where she lost her way.

In the *Silmarillion* version of the tale of Aredhel and the Dark Elf Eöl, he finds her alone in the forest and entices her to his home. They married and lived together for one hundred years or so. In this version, he not wholly unattractive, described as "a tall Elf of a high kin of the Teleri, noble though grim of face" (15). Furthermore, their life together seems not to have been "hateful to her for many years."

There is an alternate version of this story in *The War of Jewels*, wherein Eöl "took her to wife by force: a very wicked deed in the eyes of the Eldar" (16). In the *Silmarillion* version, however, Eöl and Aredhel could have been arguably even a love-match; there is a certain lyrical quality to phrases used to describe them: "they wandered far together under the stars or by the light of the sickle moon; or she might fare alone as she would, save that Eöl forbade her to seek the sons of Fëanor, or any others of the Noldor" (17). It seems that Eöl's only restriction upon her was that she stay completely away from her kin and all of the Noldor. Therein, however, lay the seeds of their destruction.

Aredhel bore Eöl a son, named Maeglin. Longing for her kin and those familiar to her, Aredhel entertained her son by speaking to him of her past and people, of the great deeds of the princes of the House of Fingolfin, and stories of Aman. She aroused in Maeglin a curiosity to know his mother's people. Finally, desiring to see her family again, while Eöl was away, she took Maeglin and left Nan Elmoth, traveling to Gondolin. Not realizing that Eöl tracked them, they led him to Gondolin. He was captured and brought before Turgon to be judged by him. Turgon's judgment was that he would never be allowed to leave Gondolin.

In the midst of the uproar over Eöl and his defiance, he expressed to Turgon, an understanding of Aredhel that her brother himself apparently did not possess. Eöl's words to Turgon are powerful ones containing an inexorable logic:

'I acknowledge not your law,' he said. 'No right have you or any of your kin in this land to seize realms or to set bounds, either here or there. This is the land of the Teleri, to which

you bring war and all unquiet, dealing ever proudly and unjustly. I care nothing for your secrets and I came not to spy upon you, but to claim my own: my wife and my son. Yet if in Aredhel your sister you have some claim, then let her remain; let the bird go back to the cage, where soon she will sicken again, as she sickened before.' (18)

Unable to convince Maeglin to support him and having heard Turgon's judgment that he must stay in Gondolin or die, Eöl attacked Maeglin with a poisoned javelin. Jumping in front of her son, the javelin struck Aredhel instead and she died that same night. Turgon had Eöl executed by throwing him from the walls of the city. The fall of the City of Gondolin was to be rooted in the events of that day.

Works Cited

1. *The Peoples of Middle-earth*, Vol. 12 *History of Middle-earth, The Shibboleth of Fëanor*
2. *The Silmarillion*, "Of Eldamar and the Princes of the Eldalië"
3. Refers to Tolkien's essay in *Tree and Leaf*, "On Fairy Stories"
4. *The Book of Lost Tales 2, The Fall of Gondolin*
5. *The War of the Jewels*, Vol. 11 *History of Middle-earth*
6. *The Silmarillion*, "Of the Flight of the Noldor"
7. *The Peoples of Middle-earth*, Vol. 12 *History of Middle-earth, The Shibboleth of Fëanor*
8. *The Silmarillion*, "Of Eldamar and the Princes of the Eldalië"
9. *The Silmarillion*, "Of Maeglin"
10. *Morgoth's Ring*, Vol. 11 *History of Middle-earth, The Later Silmarillion Part One*
11. *The Silmarillion*, "Of Maeglin"
12. *Ibid.*
13. *Ibid.*
14. *The War of the Jewels*, Vol. 11 *History of Middle-earth, Maeglin*
15. *The Silmarillion*, "Of Maeglin"
16. *The War of the Jewels*, Vol. 11, *History of Middle-earth, Quendi and Eldar*, footnote 9
17. *The Silmarillion*, "Of Maeglin"
18. *Ibid.*

About the Author

Oshun's *Silmarillion*-based stories may be found on the [SWG archive](#).