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# Character Biography

## Eöl

By Oshun

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Eöl, the husband of Aredhel and father to Maeglin, might be considered to be yet another of Tolkien's tragically flawed First Age characters, albeit with redeeming qualities and/or surrounded by mitigating circumstances. Or, perhaps, he is simply a completely unsympathetic villain who, in the act of trying to kill his son, impaled his lady wife on a poisoned spear. In the best known version, the one found in the published *Silmarillion*, he is described as a Sindarin elf with Noldorin skills and a reclusive personality. As is not uncommon with many of Tolkien's significant characters, Eöl survives several different permutations, before he is immortalized by Christopher Tolkien in his edited compilation of his father's history of the Elves and their "long defeat" (1).

Most readers will remember Eöl as a menacing figure, dwelling as he does within a mythical dark wood and preferring shadows over sunshine.

There Eöl, the Dark-elf, who abode in the forest, found her and took her to wife. In the depths of the wood he lived and shunned the sun, desiring only the starlight of old; for so he had dwelt since the first finding of Beleriand, and took no part in all the deeds of his kin. (2)

The first encounter for most reader with Eöl is in the chapter of the published *Silmarillion* in which Tolkien recounts the history of the Sindar in Beleriand prior to the re-insertion of the exiled Noldor into their world. Speaking of the relations between the Sindar and the race of Dwarves, he notes:

Few of the Eldar went ever to Nogrod and Belegost, save Eöl of Nan Elmoth and Maeglin his son; but the Dwarves trafficked into Beleriand, and they made a great road that passed under the shoulders of Mount Dolmed and followed the course of the River Ascar, crossing Gelion at Sarn Athrad, the Ford of Stones, where battle after befell. Ever cool was the friendship between the Naugrim and the Eldar, though much profit they had one of the other; but at that time those griefs that lay between them had not yet come to pass, and King Thingol welcomed them. (3)

In the assorted accounts of the story of Eöl, it appears that he might maintain to a far lesser degree of intensity the traditional mistrust which is depicted in *The Silmarillion* between the Eldar and the Naugrim or actually be considered the closest thing among the Sindar certainly to a Dwarf-friend. Far more than most of his compatriots, Eöl shares strong interests with the children of Aulë. Those pursuits he holds in common with the Dwarves include Eöl's practice of the crafts of smithery and metallurgy as well his need for the minerals and ore found deep within the earth. Interestingly, in at least one earlier alternative description of Eöl, he is presented as an Avar, in a later one he is said to be a Sinda, and in still others is simply said to be of the Eldar.

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33. It is curious that--as in the original text of Maeglin, where he was 'of the kin of Thingol'--in my father's very late work on the story Eöl becomes again 'one of the Eldar' (p. 328), though consumed with hatred of the Noldor; whereas here he is a Mornedhel (one of the Avari), and moreover of the aboriginal Second Clan. (4)

The "aboriginal Second Clan" that Christopher Tolkien refers to above is the Tatyar, whence came the Noldor who would leave Middle-earth to travel to Aman at the urging of Oromë. (Back in some misty period of nearly forgotten history before the exodus of the Noldor from Middle-earth, Eöl may have actually been a kinsman of those preeminent craftsmen among the Quendi.) Tolkien's road to the creation of Eöl is characterized by aborted directions and retracing of his steps. In the final edit of the published *Silmarillion*, Eöl is said to detest the Noldor also, despite the fact that he might participate in the same craft and science beloved of both. Mention is made in the article *Quendi and Eldar* that there were Avari of the Tatyar who, when they encountered the returned Noldor, admitted their common heritage. However, they did not like the Noldor and considered the attitude of their newly returned kinsman to be offensively arrogant and superior (5). It is stimulating to speculate that, for all of his hatred of the Noldor, Eöl in many ways holds more in common with the returned exiles than with the majority of the Sindar, including unfortunately the same sort of tragic doom Tolkien dispenses to most of his notable artisans and scientists.

He shunned the Noldor, holding them to blame for the return of Morgoth, to trouble the quiet of Beleriand; but for the Dwarves he had more liking than any other of the Elvenfolk of old. From him the Dwarves learned much of what passed in the lands of the Eldar. (6)

(Later his son Maeglin's manifestation of an impressive expertise as a craftsman, doubtlessly resulting from his father's tutelage, becomes one of the things, along with his position of close kinship to Turgon, that helps him secure a place within the upper echelon of the hidden city of Gondolin.)

Eöl's home in Nan Elmoth is located in a deep forest outside of the boundaries of the Girdle of Melian. One might notice that while Tolkien's Quendi awakened into a world of darkness, the image of Elves living under the starlight in the earliest days often takes on a nostalgic and innocent aspect in paeans to the Starkindler and the like cited in *Lord of the Rings*. Eöl's enchanted forest on the other hand is haunted by the imagery of dark shadows hiding darker secrets or dangers. Nan Elmoth is not one of the more benign enchanted forests of happier fairy tales, but a murkier more mysterious one.

In that wood in ages past Melian walked in the twilight of Middle-earth when the trees were young, and enchantment lay upon it still. But now the trees of Nan Elmoth were the tallest and darkest in all Beleriand, and there the sun never came; and there Eöl dwelt, who was named the Dark Elf. (7)

Perhaps the reader is presented herein with a view of Nan Elmoth through the eyes of the urbanized Noldor, represented by Aredhel. She ranks among the highest of the princes of the Noldor, the granddaughter of their first king Finwë, sister of Turgon and Fingon. Her exiled people seek to mold and shape nature to their taste, preferring towers of stone to tree-shadowed depths of primeval woodland, and sunlight over shadows.

Aredhel and Eöl are the prototypical mismatched couple. The imagery of contrasting darkness and light is strong. Aredhel is no angel in the texts. She is a headstrong woman who does not know her place and endangers herself and her companions when she insists she can no longer tolerate the confinement of Gondolin and really needs to go visit her rowdier friends. Later, when her companions return without her, Turgon and one would presume many others grieve her loss. Nonetheless the mixing of standard fairy tale tropes is not simple and straightforward in this tale.

Tolkien sets up a series of oppositions between Aredhel and Eöl that position the characters respectively as 'good' and 'evil,' or 'victim' and 'aggressor.' Where Aredhel is clad in white and is "the White Lady of the Noldor" (151), Eöl is clad in "galvorn [...] black and shining like jet" and is a "Dark Elf" who "shunned the Noldor" (153). Where Aredhel is "very fair," Eöl is "dark and grim" (158). Significantly, it is the sight of the "very fair" Aredhel that incites Eöl's lust, her beauty inflaming his desire, her dress drawing his eye; his avowed hatred of the Noldor coupled with this lust would support that Eöl's desire has an angry edge--it is a desire to violate. (8)

Eöl can easily be interpreted as the bad guy. He dwells outside of the magical circle enclosing Doriath, engaging in regular interaction with the disparaged Naugrim, having rejected the protection of King Elu Thingol and Melian the Maia. While rejecting Thingol's protection, he has also made it known he wants nothing to do with the ascendant Noldor.

Of old he was of the kin of Thingol, but he was restless and ill at ease in Doriath, and when the Girdle of Melian was set about the Forest of Region where he dwelt he fled thence to Nan Elmoth. There he lived in deep shadow, loving the night and the twilight under the stars. He shunned the Noldor, holding them to blame for the return of Morgoth, to trouble the quiet of Beleriand; but for the Dwarves he had more liking than any other of the Elvenfolk of old. From him the Dwarves learned much of what passed in the lands of the Eldar. (9)

Although there are various versions of the story of Aredhel and Eöl, the shared elements include the fact that they meet in the Enchanted Forest, come together and bear a son. Dark and beautiful himself and gifted in his father's chosen profession, this son Maeglin lives to betray his uncle's hidden city to the Enemy. In [the character biography of Aredhel](#) published earlier on this site, I summarized a variant history of the meeting and coming together of Aredhel and Eöl.

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" (*The War of the Jewels*, Vol. 11, *History of Middle-earth*, Quendi and Eldar, footnote 9). 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" (*The Silmarillion*, "Of Maeglin"). 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. (10)

Those readers unwilling to accept the picture of Eöl as a rapist and/or cardboard villain and who might find him attractive may tend to view him as a broodingly handsome, Heathcliffian type of

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guy, who in possession of some mad skills, particularly relating to smithery and metallurgy, could indeed be in the eyes of a Noldorin princess a desirable match. He is acknowledged in his profession, in a field which is held in high esteem by the Noldor. Among other accomplishments, he is credited with the creation of his own highly superior, shining black metal.<sup>TM</sup>

There [among the Dwarves] he learned much of metalwork, and came to great skill therein; and he devised a metal as hard as the steel of the Dwarves, but so malleable that he could make it thin and supple; and yet it remained resistant to all blades and darts. He named it galvorn, for it was black and shining like jet, and he was clad in it whenever he went abroad. (11)

Galvorn is a curious invented metal. Most readers assume that it is an alloy including a meteoric component. One of the origins for that description is to be found not in the section devoted to the dysfunctional family of Eöl, Aredhel and Maeglin, but in the reference to the famous sword Anglachel and its twin.

Then Beleg chose Anglachel; and that was a sword of great worth, and it was so named because it was made of iron that fell from heaven as a blazing star; it would cleave all earth-delved iron. One other sword only in Middle-earth was like to it. That sword does not enter into this tale, though it was made of the same ore by the same smith; and that smith was Eöl the Dark Elf, who took Aredhel Turgon's sister to wife. He gave Anglachel to Thingol as fee, which he begrudged, for leave to dwell in Nan Elmoth; but its mate Anguirel he kept, until it was stolen from him by Maeglin, his son. (12)

Tolkien acknowledges that the Dark Elf is easy on the eyes by noting that "Eöl, though stooped by his smithwork, was no Dwarf, but a tall Elf of a high kin of the Teleri, noble though grim of face; and his eyes could see deep into shadows and dark places." (13)

With his gloomy fine looks, his refusal to bend his will to that of any others, not even Thingol or Melian, and his incomparable skill as a craftsman, one can imagine without much difficulty that Eöl could initially at least provide quite the dark and dashing image which might appeal to Aredhel. A stubborn and rebellious person herself, one might imagine that she is willing to trade her confinement in the secret, guarded city of Gondolin for the depths of Eöl's dark forest. She is unlikely to be found there and be persuaded to return to Gondolin. On the other hand, she is not the sort of woman who would accept with grace Eöl's attempts to confine and control her.

Later after bearing Eöl a son who manifests physical and mental attributes of both sides of his remarkable genetic pool, Aredhel fixes her gaze outside of the forest. She misses her family and her people. Telling wondrous tales of the magnificent city of Gondolin and the illustrious accomplishments of the Noldor, she wins Maeglin's heart and imagination with her stories. It is not surprising that Maeglin prefers his lively mother over his dour and controlling papa. The tragic seeds of Eöl's demise along with that of the city of Gondolin have been sown.

The story of Eöl's wife and son abandoning their forest home for Gondolin is usually summarized as Aredhel leaving her husband and returning to her family. In fact, Eöl's son, although still young in Elven terms, is fully grown and it is he who originally seeks to leave Nan Elmoth and see the hidden city of the Noldor. When he mentions his desire to his father, it is met with a predictable reaction.

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'You are of the house of Eöl, Maeglin, my son,' he said, 'and not of the Golodhrim. All this land is the land of the Teleri, and I will not deal nor have my son deal with the slayers of our kin, the invaders and usurpers of our homes. In this you shall obey me, or I will set you in bonds.' And Maeglin did not answer, but was cold and silent, and went abroad no more with Eöl; and Eöl mistrusted him. (14)

The estrangement between father and son further sets events in motion that lead to the terrible end of Eöl's tale. While Eöl is away at an annual festival of the Dwarves, Maeglin convinces his mother to lead him to Gondolin; she is willing, even eager, to do so. Eöl returns and, furious to find his family gone, sets off in search of them. He eventually does find his way into the secret city of Gondolin. He enters by stealth and is immediately discovered and held by Turgon's people until Aredhel acknowledges that he indeed is her husband.

Eöl was brought to Turgon's hall and stood before his high seat, proud and sullen. Though he was amazed no less than his son at all that he saw, his heart was filled the more with anger and with hate of the Noldor. But Turgon treated him with honour, and rose up and would take his hand; and he said: "Welcome, kinsman, for so I hold you. Here you shall dwell at your pleasure, save only that you must here abide and depart not from my kingdom; for it is my law that none who finds the way hither shall depart." (15)

Eöl is disgusted that Turgon intends to try to prevent him from leaving. He responds in anger:

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. But not so Maeglin. My son you shall not withhold from me. Come, Maeglin son of Eöl! Your father commands you. Leave the house of his enemies and the slayers of his kin, or be accursed! But Maeglin answered nothing. (16)

He releases Aredhel voluntarily, while referring to her as a caged bird in Gondolin, the implication being she has been free in Nan Elmoth. He does assert his authority over his son and heir. In this entire encounter, Eöl does not sound like a crazed monster. However, when Turgon insists that no one leaves Gondolin alive and Maeglin refuses to deal with his father at all, Eöl loses control.

Then Eöl looked into the eyes of King Turgon, and he was not daunted, but stood long without word or movement while a still silence fell upon the hall; and Aredhel was afraid, knowing that he was perilous. Suddenly, swift as serpent, he seized a javelin that he held hid beneath his cloak and cast it at Maeglin, crying:

'The second choice I take and for my son also! You shall not hold what is mine!'

But Aredhel sprang before the dart, and it smote her in the shoulder; and Eöl was overborne by many and set in bonds, and led away, while others tended Aredhel. But Maeglin looking upon his father was silent. (17)

Both Idril and Aredhel are moved to beg for mercy for Eöl, but his son Maeglin remains silent (the proverbial bad seed—remorseless and utterly lacking in empathy—one might conclude in

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light of future events). Aredhel's wound turns septic and she dies during the night. Eöl is executed by being thrown from the walls of the city of Gondolin.

Then they cast Eöl over the Caragdûr, and so he ended, and to all in Gondolin it seemed just; but Idril was troubled, and from that day she mistrusted her kinsman. But Maeglin prospered and grew great among the Gondolindrim, praised by all, and high in the favour of Turgon . . . . (18)

One might be easily inclined to agree with Idril that the truly most sinister part of the story of Eöl is intended by the author to concern Maeglin.

### Works Cited

1. "The long defeat" is Galadriel's expression used to indicate the heroic and protracted, yet ultimately doomed, struggle of the Elves in Middle-earth, dating back to the return of the Noldor to Middle-earth. *The Fellowship of the Ring*, "The Mirror of Galadriel."
2. *The War of the Jewels*, Vol. 11, *History of Middle-earth, Quendi and Eldar*.
3. *The Silmarillion*, "Of Maeglin."
4. *The War of the Jewels*, Vol. 11, *History of Middle-earth, Quendi and Eldar*, editorial note by Christopher Tolkien to *Quendi and Eldar*.
5. *The War of the Jewels*, Vol. 11, *History of Middle-earth, Quendi and Eldar*.
6. *The Silmarillion*, "Of the Sindar."
7. *The Silmarillion*, "Of Maeglin."
8. *Mythlore*, Sep. 22, 2010, Whitaker, Lynn, "Corrupting beauty: rape narrative in The Silmarillion."
9. *The Silmarillion*, "Of the Sindar."
10. Aredhel Ar-Feiniel by Oshun, Silmarillion Writers Guild.
11. *The Silmarillion*, "Of Maeglin."
12. *The Silmarillion*, "Of Túrin Turambar."
13. *The Silmarillion*, "Of Maeglin."
14. Ibid.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid.
17. Ibid.
18. Ibid.

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### About the Author

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