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## Character Biography

### Glorfindel of Gondolin and Glorfindel of Rivendell (Part 2)

By Oshun

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[Read Part One here.](#)

#### Glorfindel of Gondolin

Although he is one of Tolkien's most popular characters, Glorfindel of Gondolin receives a scant three mentions in the text of the published *Silmarillion*. One must dig deeper into the source materials to assemble the basic details of his physical description and his life. We are able from those references to piece together that Glorfindel is a high-ranking lord of Gondolin. His first appearance in *The Silmarillion* is in the account of the tragic Nirnaeth Arnoediad (the Battle of Unnumbered Tears). His arrival there with the host of Turgon from the hidden city of Gondolin occasions one of the few moments of hope in that heartbreaking episode of First Age history.

But now a cry went up, passing up the wind from the south from vale to vale, and Elves and Men lifted their voices in wonder and joy. For unsummoned and unlooked for Turgon had opened the leaguer of Gondolin, and was come with an army ten thousand strong, with bright mail and long swords and spears like a forest. (1)

Glorfindel is named, along with Ecthelion of the Fountain, as one of the captains of Turgon's forces.

Then Turgon took the counsel of Húrin and Huor, and summoning all that remained of the host of Gondolin and such of Fingon's people as could be gathered he retreated towards the Pass of Sirion; and his captains Ecthelion and Glorfindel guarded the flanks to right and left, so that none of the enemy should pass them by. (2)

The presence of the forces of Gondolin led by Glorfindel and Ecthelion in that battle also brought forth some of Tolkien's most beautiful imagery:

In the morning came hope, when the horns of Turgon were heard as he marched up with the main host of Gondolin; for they had been stationed southward guarding the Pass of Sirion, and Turgon restrained most of his people from the rash onslaught. Now he hastened to the aid of his brother; and the Gondolindrim were strong and clad in mail, and their ranks shone like a river of steel in the sun. (3)

After the account of the Battle of Unnumbered Tears, we do not read of Glorfindel again in *The Silmarillion* until the attack upon Gondolin that began on the Feast of the Gates of Summer. He no doubt should be considered among "the chieftains of the noble houses" (4) found in the following citation.

... the deeds of desperate valour there done, by the chieftains of the noble houses and their warriors, and not least by Tuor, much is told in *The Fall of Gondolin*: of the battle of Ecthelion of the Fountain with Gothmog Lord of Balrogs in the very Square of the King, where each slew the other, and of the defence of the tower of Turgon by the people of his household, until the tower was overthrown; and mighty was its fall and the fall of Turgon in its ruin. (5)

Glorfindel is mentioned but briefly in the escape of the survivors of Gondolin through Idril's secret passage: "Then Tuor and Idril led such remnants of the people of Gondolin as they could gather in the confusion of the burning down the secret way which Idril had prepared" (6). This whole section contrasts greatly against the much more fully developed narrative detail of *The Book of Lost Tales, Part Two*.

There was a dreadful pass, Cirith Thoronath it was named, the Eagles' Cleft, where beneath the shadow of the highest peaks a narrow path wound its way; on the right hand it was walled by a precipice, and on the left a dreadful fall leapt into emptiness. Along that narrow way their march was strung, when they were ambushed by Orcs, for Morgoth had set watchers all about the encircling hills; and a Balrog was with them. Then dreadful was their plight, and hardly would they have been saved by the valour of yellow-haired Glorfindel, chief of the House of the Golden Flower of Gondolin, had not Thorondor come timely to their aid. (7)

Glorfindel's role in the defense of that last march to safety by the surviving exiles is summarized almost out of existence in *The Silmarillion* account. A far more developed account of the flight of the survivors from Gondolin, written decades earlier, may be found *The Book of Lost Tales*. It includes the following passage which tells of honor paid by Glorfindel after his death, by both Thorondor and his own people.

Many are the songs that have been sung of the duel of Glorfindel with the Balrog upon a pinnacle of rock in that high place; and both fell to ruin in the abyss. But the eagles coming stooped upon the Orcs, and drove them shrieking back; and all were slain or cast into the deeps, so that rumour of the escape from Gondolin came not until long after to Morgoth's ears. Then Thorondor bore up Glorfindel's body out of the abyss, and they buried him in a mound of stones beside the pass; and a green turf came there, and yellow flowers bloomed upon it amid the barrenness of stone, until the world was changed. (8)

*The Book of Lost Tales* version also gives a point-by-point account of the battle within the walls of the city. It contains more explicit details of Glorfindel's battle with the Balrog, the character of the exodus itself, and the honor paid Glorfindel posthumously.

... and the others straggled, for all Tuor's efforts, back over most of the mile of the perilous way between chasm and cliff, so that Glorfindel's folk were scarce come to its beginning, when there was a yell in the night that echoed in that grim region. Behold, Galdor's men were beset in the dark suddenly by shapes leaping from behind rock where they had lain hidden even from the glance of Legolas. (9)

Prior to the escape, the text does not simply introduce Glorfindel, briefly and without detail, but gives one an impression of the intensity of the fighting he had participated in preceding his last stand. The shortened version in *The Silmarillion* does not convey the sense of a fierce leader of the warriors of his house that *The Book of Lost Tales* version does.

Thus comes the last stout defenders in the Square of the Palace of Turgon. Among them are many wounded and fainting, and Tuor is weary for the labours of the night and the weight of Ecthelion who is in a deadly swoon. Even as he led that battalion in by the Road of Arches from north-west (and they had much ado to prevent any foe from getting behind their backs) a noise arose at the eastward of the square, and lo! Glorfindel is driven in with the last of men of the Golden Flower. (10)

The account of Glorfindel's actions in the defense of the city itself continues.

[T]here fought they bitterly for hours till a fire-drake new-come from the breach overwhelmed them, and Glorfindel cut his way out very hardly and with few men; but this place with its stores of goodly things of fine workmanship was a waste of flames. (11)

Glorfindel fought with a depleted force of warriors hard-pressed on all sides by the superior force of their foes, including orcs and balrogs. In the account written in *The Book of Lost Tales*, one has at least some understanding of the determination and heroism of Glorfindel and why the survivors of Gondolin would seek to honor him as they did.

Then at the death cry of the Balrog the Orcs before and behind wavered and were slain or fled far away, and Thorndor himself, a mighty bird, descended to the abyss and brought up the body of Glorfindel; but the Balrog lay, and the water of Thorn ran black for many a day far below in Tumladin.

Still do the Eldar say when they see good fighting at great odds of power against a fury of evil: "Alas! 'Tis Glorfindel and the Balrog," and their hearts are still sore for that fair one of the Noldoli. Because of their love, despite the haste and their fear of the advent of new foes, Tuor let raise a great stone-cairn over Glorfindel just there beyond the perilous way by the precipice of Eagle-stream, and Thorndor has not let not yet any harm come thereto, but yellow flowers have fared thither and blow ever now about that mound in those unkindly places; but the folk of the Golden Flower wept at its building and might not dry their tears. (12)

One cannot but be reminded of descriptions of mourning rites and monuments for mythical warriors of ancient Celtic legends, although Tolkien himself claimed he desired to distance himself from those in order to construct an entirely new legendarium.

There are a number of extrapolations or conjectures relating to personal characteristics or facts of family history that are often made about Glorfindel of Gondolin, which can neither be proved nor disproved from the textual references available. Some of these include whether or not Glorfindel was purely Noldor or half-Noldor and half-Vanyar or whether one might assume that Glorfindel was always close to Turgon given that he ended up in Gondolin. That Glorfindel did not participate in the First Kinslaying at Alqualondë could be argued but not definitively proven either based upon Tolkien's own discussion of the possibility he had not (13). Other readers,

because of the proximity of the names of Glorfindel and Ecthelion in *The Silmarillion* and other texts, might chose to infer that they were personally close. Nowhere in the texts are there references to a close friendship as there is to that between Maedhros and Fingon, or Aredhel and the sons of Fëanor. One writer of popular Tolkien scholarship, Michael Martinez, makes a number of such popular assumptions (or perhaps one might wonder if they were popularized by him?) and defends them in his essay "The Wars of the Glorfindels" (14). The article is interesting in light of the number of such assertions that the author makes and the speculative extrapolation of canon which he uses for his arguments.

First Age Glorfindel's greatest deed in the texts is the act of successfully guarding the escape of the company of refugees from Gondolin. He saved not only Tuor and Idril but Eärendil, thereby preserving the line of the Peredhil which was to play such a significant role in the history of Middle-earth. His single-handed slaying of a balrog is the deed of an epic hero; yet one could almost miss him in *The Silmarillion* if one were not looking for him.

### **Glorfindel of Rivendell**

The nature of *The Lord of the Rings* as a completed novel provides us with a different perspective from which to view the character of Glorfindel of Rivendell. We see him through the point of view of other characters and hear his voice in direct speech.

Glorfindel's role in *The Lord of the Rings* is threefold. The reader first encounters him in the rescue of Frodo from the Ringwraiths. He is immediately presented as bigger than life and otherworldly, in contrast to the more fallible and human Elves of *The Silmarillion*.

Clearer and nearer now the bells jingled, and clippety-clip came the quick trotting feet. Suddenly into view below came a white horse, gleaming in the shadows, running swiftly. In the dusk its headstall flickered and flashed, as if it were studded with gems like living stars. The rider's cloak streamed behind him, and his hood was thrown back; his golden hair flowed shimmering in the wind of his speed. To Frodo it appeared that a white light was shining through the form and raiment of the rider, as if through a thin veil. (15)

He is immediately recognized and introduced by Aragorn in a tone that suggests to the reader that this is a figure stepped out of legend.

Strider sprang from hiding and dashed down towards the Road, leaping with a cry through the heather; but even before he had moved or called, the rider had reined in his horse and halted, looking up towards the thicket where they stood. When he saw Strider, he dismounted and ran to meet him calling out: '*Ai na vedui Dúnadan! Mae govannen!*' His speech and clear ringing voice left no doubt in their hearts: the rider was of the Elven-folk. No others that dwelt in the wide world had voices so fair to hear. (16)

When we meet Glorfindel again in the house of Elrond, we are treated to perhaps the most attractive physical description of him and one that also by its phrasing gives insight into his character.

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Glorfindel was tall and straight; his hair was of shining gold, his face fair and young and fearless and full of joy; his eyes were bright and keen, and his voice like music; on his brow sat wisdom, and in his hand was strength. (17)

This description of Glorfindel as "fair and young and fearless and full of joy," along with Elrond being described as "warm as summer," would seem to give lie to the interpretations which portray Tolkien's Third Age Elves as grim, ethereal sourpusses.

A little later, in an exchange between Gandalf and Frodo, the wizard verifies to Frodo the extraordinary power of this golden Elf.

'... And here in Rivendell there live still some of his chief foes: the Elven-wise, lords of the Eldar from beyond the furthest seas. They do not fear the Ringwraiths, for those who have dwelt in the Blessed Realm live at once in both worlds, and against both the Seen and the Unseen they have great power.'

'I thought that I saw a white figure that shone and did not grow dim like the others. Was that Glorfindel then?'

'Yes, you saw him for a moment as he is upon the other side: one of the mighty of the Firstborn. He is an Elf-lord of a house of princes. Indeed there is a power in Rivendell to withstand the might of Mordor, for a while: and elsewhere other powers still dwell. (18)

This passage tells us a couple of significant bits of factual information: first, that Glorfindel is an Elf who has dwelt in Aman and, secondly, that even among Elvenkind, Glorfindel is no ordinary representative of his kinsmen.

It becomes clear in the manner in which Glorfindel participates in the Council of Elrond that he accepts his role as one of the Elven wise. He is not only knowledgeable of nature of the forces of evil they will face in the attempt to prevent Sauron from ever again laying his hands upon the One Ring, but of the capacity or lack thereof of the representatives of the good in Middle-earth they might bring together as allies in the accomplishment of this task.

It is Glorfindel who answers the proposal of turning to Tom Bombadil to act as a keeper of the Ring.

'But in any case,' said Glorfindel, 'to send the Ring to him would only postpone the day of evil. He is far away. We could not now take it back to him, unguessed, unmarked by any spy. And even if we could, soon or late the Lord of the Rings would learn of its hiding place and would bend all his power towards it. Could that power be defied by Bombadil alone? I think not. I think that in the end, if all else is conquered, Bombadil will fall, Last as he was First; and then Night will come.' (19)

Finally, in the Appendices (20) to *The Lord of the Rings*, published at the end of *The Return of the King*, we are told the story of Glorfindel's prophecy relating to the Witch-king and the lord of Angmar until its destruction in the Battle of Fornost. We first hear of this prophecy in *The Return of the King* when Gandalf speaks of it to Denethor (21).

'Yet now under the Lord of Barad-dûr the most fell of all his captains is already master of your outer walls,' said Gandalf. 'King of Angmar long ago, Sorcerer, Ringwraith, Lord of the Nazgûl, a spear of terror in the hand of Sauron, shadow of despair.'

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'But our trial of strength is not yet come. And if words spoken of old be true, not by the hand of man shall he fall, and hidden from the Wise is the doom that awaits him. . . .'

Later and, more dramatically, the Lord of the Nazgûl repeats it himself to Éowyn at the Battle of Pelennor Fields, "Hinder me? Thou fool. No living man may hinder me!" (22).

The Appendices tell of the circumstances of Glorfindel's prophecy. When it became clear at the Battle of Fornost that Angmar had been lost, the Witch-king singled out Prince Eärnur of Gondor and attacked him. Glorfindel had to merely ride upon the Lord of Angmar for him to flee. He was unable to look upon the face of the glory of Glorfindel, who then said:

Do not pursue him! He will not return to this land. Far off yet is his doom, and not by the hand of man will he fall. (23)

This event in the Appendices explains why Glorfindel was so formidable when faced with the Ringwraiths at the Ford of Bruinen. Even with the considerable power endowed upon those perverted creatures by Sauron, even the foremost among the holders of the Nine Rings of the Kings of Men cannot stand up to the strength and presence that is Glorfindel.

We next hear of Glorfindel in the narrative sequence of *The Lord of the Rings* when he accompanies Elrond to Minas Tirith for the wedding of Aragorn and Arwen: "First rode Elrohir and Elladan with a banner of silver, and then came Glorfindel and Erebor and all the household of Rivendell . . ." (24). No mention is made of Glorfindel in account of the departure of Elrond and Galadriel in the last chapter of the trilogy "The Grey Havens."

## Works Cited

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14. Michael Martinez, "The Wars of the Glorfindels in J.R.R. Tolkien," Suite101, <http://www.suite101.com/article.cfm/tolkien/53015/1>
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17. *The Fellowship of the Ring*, "Many Meetings."
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19. *The Fellowship of the Ring*, "The Council of Elrond."
20. *Appendix A of The Lord of the Rings*, "Gondor and the Heirs of Anarion."
21. *The Return of the King*, "The Siege of Gondor."
22. *The Return of the King*, "The Battle of Pelennor Fields."
23. *Appendix A of The Lord of the Rings*, "Gondor and the Heirs of Anarion."
24. *The Return of the King*, "Many Partings."

## About the Author

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