
Character Biography Huan the Hound of Valinor

By Oshun

Huan is one of the most if not *the* most truly noble beasts in *The Silmarillion* and a hero by the standards of almost any reader. He is described in the Index of Names to *The Silmarillion* as:

The great wolfhound of Valinor that Oromë gave to Celegorm; friend and helper of Beren and Lúthien; slew and slain by Carcharoth. The name means 'great dog, hound'. (1)

If there are readers who ever wondered what noble Huan was like as a puppy, the good news is that Tolkien actually tells us in *The Lay of Leithian*.

In Tavros' (2) friths and pastures green
Had Huan once a young welp been.
He grew the swiftest of the swift,
And Oromë gave him as a gift
To Celegorm, who loved to follow
The great God's horn o'er hill and hollow. (3)

The story of Huan, like so many recounted in the history of the First Age, begins in the idyllic land of Valinor in Aman only to end in sorrow in Middle-earth. But part of the appreciation of Tolkien's tales of those elder days involves the emotionally compelling contrast of the final fate fraught with drama of a character against a more tranquil origin. In this case, one is invited to consider the half-grown dog, bounding, carefree with his tongue hanging out, after a guiltless and young Celegorm the Fair under the light of Laurelin. That part of Huan's tale is, however, tragically short.

His story begins with Huan portrayed as loyal to his master in the way of all good beasts. When Celegorm follows his father from Aman to Middle-earth, against the warning of the Valar, Huan goes along with him.

Now the chief of the wolf hounds that followed Celegorm was named Huan. He was not born in Middle-earth, but came from the Blessed Realm; for Oromë had given him to Celegorm long ago in Valinor, and there he had followed the horn of his master, before evil came. Huan followed Celegorm into exile, and was faithful; and thus he too came under the doom of woe set upon the Noldor, and it was decreed that he should meet death, but not until he encountered the mightiest wolf that would ever walk the world. (4)

One must conclude from the above paragraph that Huan, for all of his loyalty and heroism, is not considered perfect and whole by the Valar. Huan sadly is as bound by the Curse of Mandos as is the Noldorin prince who is his master because the faithful hound chooses to leave Aman and follow Celegorm into exile.

Huan is described as being as big as a small horse. His connection to the Vala Oromë and to Celegorm, both notable in the legendarium as great hunters, leads one to presume that Huan is

adept as a hunter as well. No exact descriptions are given of his appearance in the text, except for the reference to his outstanding size and his grey coat. One may also make certain assumptions based upon his capacity to match himself in battle against the great wolves of Angband and Sauron in wolf form. Many readers, this one among them, are quick to imagine him being similar to the great Irish Wolfhounds whose origins are lost in myth and whose exploits extend to legends set upon the Isle of Britain as well as Ireland. Those great hounds are often described as growing to nearly the height of a colt and being the tallest of canines. The personality and dedication of Huan is reminiscent of the story of brave Gelert (5) the faithful hound of Wales, who is reputed to have been an Irish Wolfhound also. Irish Wolfhounds are commonly described in a rapture of superlatives. The following is not at all atypical of such descriptions:

Noble in character, majestic in bearing, swift in the chase, tenacious to the end, a mighty hunter, generous to friend but terrible to foe, supreme among the canine races for intelligence and an almost uncanny sense of good and evil, sublime in his devotion, the joy of his master's heart, and faithful unto death--such is the splendid record of the Irish wolfhound, gleaned from the mythological legends of the Emerald Isle and taken from the written page of English history from the dawn of our race unto the twentieth century. (6)

This creates an image which can be easily applied to Huan. In relation to the nature of Huan, the speculation is often raised that his powers of reasoning and speech, which place him beyond even the most exceptional of dogs, could lead one to believe that he ranks among the semi-divine--that is to say that Huan is more likely than not a Maia. The logic supporting that possibility and an exact reference thereto exist within the texts. In a short, less than definitive series of notes on the nature and creation of the Orcs in the *Myths Transformed* section of *Morgoth's Ring*, one finds the following remarks:

What of talking beasts and birds with reasoning and speech? These have been rather lightly adopted from less 'serious' mythologies, but play a part which cannot now be excised. They are certainly 'exceptions' and not much used, but sufficiently to show they are a recognized feature of the world. All other creatures accept them as natural if not common. But true 'rational' creatures, 'speaking peoples', are all of human/'humanoid' form. Only the Valar and Maiar are intelligences that can assume forms of Arda at will. Huan and Sorontar could be Maiar--emissaries of Manwë. (a href="#bio-ref">7)

One of the principle attributes of Huan is that he is endowed with the ability to understand the tongues of Elves and Men and to speak himself in words, but only three times in his life. In *The Tale of Tinúviel*, the following elegant words are put into the mouth of Huan at his first sighting of Lúthien:

Great therefore was the good fortune that befell Tinúviel in meeting with Huan in the woods, although at first she was mortally afraid and fled. But Huan overtook her in two leaps, and speaking soft and deep the tongue of the Lost Elves he bid her be not afraid, and, "Wherefore," said he, "do I see an Elfin maiden, and one most fair, wandering alone so nigh to the abodes of the Ainu of Evil? Knowst thou not these are very evil places to be in, little one, even with a companion, and they are death to the lonely?" (8)

The role of Huan remains similar from the earliest drafts of the story of Lúthien Tinúviel to the latest, although his history and the small details may vary. For narrative purposes, the version

which we will rely upon in this short character biography is the one found in the published *Silmarillion*. That one relies upon the text of *The Quenta Silmarillion* and *The Lay of Leithian* (9). The much earlier version of the story of Lúthien and Huan in *The Book of Lost Tales* includes a complicated abandoned plot involving Tevildo the Prince of Cats, who particularly hates Huan. Most of Tevildo's role in the story is later given over to Sauron. (Some cat fancier may wish to compare and contrast the feline villain to the character of Sauron in a separate essay. It is much too complex to track every bit of that duplicative and discarded storyline in this presumably short biography of an important but minor character.)

In all versions of the story of Lúthien and Huan, they take to each other immediately. In *The Silmarillion*, when Huan encounters the fleeing Lúthien in the forest, he brings her to meet his master and his master's brother.

Huan it was that found Lúthien flying like a shadow surprised by the daylight under the trees, when Celegorm and Curufin rested a while near to the western eaves of Doriath; for nothing could escape the sight and scent of Huan, nor could any enchantment stay him, and he slept not, neither by night nor day. He brought her to Celegorm, and Lúthien, learning that he was a prince of the Noldor and a foe of Morgoth, was glad; and she declared herself, casting aside her cloak. ([a href="#">#bio-ref">10](#))

We might presume that it is partially due to her trust in Huan that Lúthien reveals herself with such alacrity to Celegorm and Curufin and goes with them to Nargothrond. It is a short time later, when she finds herself to be involuntarily detained by the lovelorn Celegorm and scheming Curufin, that Lúthien shares her confidences with Huan and the dog returns her friendship in full.

But Huan the hound was true of heart, and the love of Lúthien had fallen upon him in the first hour of their meeting; and he grieved at her captivity. Therefore he came often to her chamber; and at night he lay before her door, for he felt that evil had come to Nargothrond. Lúthien spoke often to Huan in her loneliness, telling of Beren, who was the friend of all birds and beasts that did not serve Morgoth; and Huan understood all that was said. For he comprehended the speech of all things with voice; but it was permitted to him thrice only ere his death to speak with words. ([a href="#">#bio-ref">11](#))

Having heard Lúthien's story in great detail, Huan is finally moved to the point that he chooses to use the first of his three allotted opportunities for speech to reveal a way for her to escape Nargothrond.

Thus Huan spoke, who never before
Had uttered words, and but twice more
Did speak in elven tongue again:
"Lady beloved, whom all Men,
whom Elfinesse, and whom all things
with fur and fell and feathered wings
should serve and love- arise! Away!
Put on thy cloak! Before the day
Comes over Nargothrond we fly
To Northern perils, thou and I."
And ere he ceased he counsel wrought
For achievement of the thing he sought.
There Luthien listened in amaze,

And softly on Huan did she gaze.
Her arms about his neck she cast –
In friendship that to death should last. (12)

The reader of *The Lay of Leithian* is convinced at this point that the remarkable hound of Valinor and the Sindarin princess will make a great questing pair. *The Silmarillion* text continues the narrative of their mission to reunite Lúthien with Beren.

Then he led her by secret ways out of Nargothrond, and they fled north together; and he humbled his pride and suffered her to ride upon him in the fashion of a steed, even as the Orcs did at times upon great wolves. Thus they made great speed, for Huan was swift and tireless. (13)

Huan safely accompanies Lúthien to Tol-in-Gaurhoth (the Isle of Werewolves). They arrive just a little too late to have any chance of intervening to save Finrod Felagund. There Huan is able to defeat and kill all of Sauron's werewolves, with the assistance of Lúthien's magic.

Therefore he sent a wolf to the bridge. But Huan slew it silently. Still Sauron sent others one by one; and one by one Huan took them by the throat and slew them. Then Sauron sent Draugluin, a dread beast, old in evil lord and sire of the werewolves of Angband. His might was great; and the battle of Huan and Draugluin was long and fierce. Yet at length Draugluin escaped, and fleeing back into the tower he died before Sauron's feet; and as he died he told his master: 'Huan is there!' (14)

Sauron himself then takes upon the shape of the greatest wolf that has ever lived up hoping to fulfill the prophecy that Huan will meet his end in battle against such a wolf.

Now Sauron knew well, as did all in that land, the fate that was decreed for the hound of Valinor, and it came into his thought that he himself would accomplish it. Therefore he took upon himself the form of a werewolf, and made himself the mightiest that had yet walked the world; and he came forth to win the passage of the bridge. (a href="#bio-ref">15)

However, Huan, with the support of Lúthien, is able to defeat Sauron, who abandons the form of a wolf in order to escape. "And immediately he took the form of a vampire, great as a dark cloud across the moon, and he fled, dripping blood from his throat upon the trees . . ." (16).

At the reunification of Beren and Lúthien, Beren grieves for the loss of his friend Finrod and Huan leaves the couple to themselves, returning to his master out of a long habit of loyalty, although he is never to love Celegorm as he had before all that had transpired in Nargothrond.

Later, after the Fëanorian brothers have been exiled from Nargothrond by Orodreth when he learned of their schemes, Lúthien and Beren once more encounter Celegorm and Curufin. Curufin tries to kill Lúthien, but Huan turns against his master, defending Beren and Lúthien.

Then for the second time Huan spoke with words; and he counselled Beren, saying: 'From the shadow of death you can no longer save Lúthien, for by her love she is now subject to it. You can turn from your fate and lead her into exile, seeking peace in vain while your life lasts. But if you will not deny your doom, then either Lúthien, being forsaken, must assuredly die alone, or she must with you challenge the fate that lies

before you--hopeless, yet not certain. Further counsel I cannot give, nor may I go further on your road. But my heart forebodes that what you find at the Gate I shall myself see. All else is dark to me; yet it may be that our three paths lead back to Doriath, and we may meet before the end.' (a href="#bio-ref">17)

Huan told Beren and Lúthien of a plan he had devised for entering Angband. He is the one who suggested using the pelt of the werewolf Draugluin and the skin of Sauron's messenger bat Thuringwethil. Wearing these skins Beren and Lúthien are able to gain access into Angband. Huan does not accompany them, but he is right in his prediction that they will meet again soon. Beren and Lúthien manage to regain the Silmaril through their courage and clever trickery, but Beren loses his hand that holds the Silmaril to the monster werewolf Carcharoth.

A terrorizing Carcharoth, crazed with the pain of the Silmaril still clasped in the severed hand of Beren burning within his gut, goes off on a killing spree crossing over the border into Doriath, attacking closer and closer to Menegroth. Beren and Lúthien reach Doriath and tell the tale of their adventure and their seizure of the Silmaril and its loss to the same beast which is ravaging the country around Doriath. Determined to protect Doriath, King Elu Thingol, Beren, Mablung, and Beleg Cúthalion, with the invaluable assistance of Huan, organize the Great Hunt for the Wolf. Huan pursues and successfully tracks Caracharoth. Beren is gravely injured bringing Carcharoth down while Huan continues to fight the wolf to the death. Huan at last prevails over the massive werewolf but is poisoned in the process and dies.

Huan's third and last use of his opportunity to speak is expended in bidding good-bye Beren and Lúthien before dying.

Huan in that hour slew Carcharoth; but there in the woven woods of Doriath his own doom long spoken was fulfilled, and he was wounded mortally, and the venom of Morgoth entered into him. Then he came, and falling beside Beren spoke for the third time with words; and he bade Beren farewell before he died. Beren spoke not, but laid his hand upon the head of the hound, and so they parted. (18)

Works Cited

1. *The Silmarillion*, "Index of Names."
2. Another name for Oromë used in, among other early texts, *The Shaping of Middle-earth*, *The Quenta* (*Quenta Noldorinwa* or *Pennas-na-Ngoelaidh*).
3. *The Lays of Beleriand*, *The Lay of Leithian*.
4. *The Silmarillion*, "Of Beren and Lúthien."
5. The legend of brave Gelert, the archetype of the magnificent and faithful hound, is old and retold in countless sources; George Borrow's *Wild Wales: Its People, Language and Scenery* (1862) contains an accessible, relatively modern account.

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6. Ralph Montagu Scott, "The History, Character and Description of the Irish Wolfhound," The Irish Wolfhound Association, published September 1925, accessed 28 March 2011.
 7. *Morgoth's Ring, Myths Transformed*, "Orcs."
 8. *The Book of Lost Tales, Part Two, The Tale of Tinúviel*.
 9. *The Lays of Beleriand, The Lay of Leithian*.
 10. *The Silmarillion*, "Of Beren and Lúthien."
 11. Ibid.
 12. *The Lays of Beleriand, The Lay of Leithian*.
 13. *The Silmarillion*, "Of Beren and Lúthien."
 14. Ibid.
 15. Ibid.
 16. Ibid.
 17. Ibid.
 18. Ibid.
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About the Author

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