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# Character Biography

## Morwen

By Oshun

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Morwen Eledhwen is the quintessential strong, tragic female character of Tolkien's history of the Men and Elves of the First Age. Morwen was born to Baragund of the House of Bëor, the oldest and the smallest of the principal houses of Men that allied themselves with the Eldar in the First Age. Morwen's mother is unnamed, and there are no references to her personal history. The kinship tables of the House of Bëor indicates that Morwen was also a close kinswoman of Beren Erchamion (whose father was Morwen's great uncle). The name Morwen is a combination of the Sindarin words *môr*, which can be translated as dark, and *gwenn*, meaning maiden.

Húrin wedded Morwen, the daughter of Baragund son of Bregolas of the House of Bëor; and she was thus of close kin to Beren One-hand. Morwen was dark-haired and tall, and for the light of her glance and the beauty of her face men called her Eledhwen, the Elven-fair; but she was somewhat stern of mood and proud. The sorrows of the House of Bëor saddened her heart; for she came as an exile to Dor-lómin from Dorthonion after the ruin of the Bragollach.

*The Children of Húrin*, "The Childhood of Túrin"

Morwen's personal characteristics as described above also relate closely to those Tolkien uses to describe the representatives of the House of Bëor in general: they were "steadfast in endurance of hardship and sorrow, slow to tears and to laughter; their fortitude needed no hope to sustain it" (*The Peoples of Middle-earth*, "Of Dwarves and Men"). One might infer from this that Morwen was not likely to have been light-hearted even in her youth. The lives of Men in the First Age, in general, would not have tended to produce those who would lean toward the frivolous.

After marrying Húrin of the House of Marach, Morwen bears him three children: a son, Túrin Turambar, and two daughters, Urwen (also called *Lalaith*, which means laughter), and, finally, Nienor Níniel. One of the early personal tragedies of Morwen's young adult life is the loss of her first daughter, Lalaith. Tolkien takes some care to describe this child, who died at the age of three and, therefore, plays little part in the history of the children of Húrin. One might even be led to believe that Tolkien felt he needed to enforce his point with a sledgehammer, early and often, that this would not be a tale of an untroubled family. Lalaith is said to have laughter "like the sound of the merry stream that came singing out of the hills past the walls of her father's house" and that the entire household's "hearts were glad while she was among them." Further, Húrin portentously remarks that "Fair as an Elf-child is Lalaith...but briefer, alas! And so fairer, maybe, or dearer" (*The Children of Húrin*, "The Childhood of Túrin"). A short while later, a dark breath from Angband strikes both children. Túrin survives, but Lalaith does not. Túrin grieves for his sister and even the usually dour Húrin gives open voice to his great sorrow. When Morwen tells her son of the death of his sister, "she did not seek to comfort him any more than herself: for she met her grief in silence and coldness of heart."

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Morwen at this point in the tale began to affect this reader rather negatively, reminding me somewhat of the grim-faced, stiff woman in the famous painting, "American Gothic," by Grant Wood. However, there had to have been a spark in the woman for her to have gained the epithet Eledhwen (Sindarin for *Elf maiden*), which Tolkien also interprets as "Elfsheen." Her relationship with her young son also appears to have been good. It is said that Túrin loved his mother for her "forthright and plain speech" (*The Children of Húrin*, "The Childhood of Túrin").

Morwen, clearly a competent and intelligent woman, was also considered to be a trusted confidant and adviser by her husband, as the following description of his discussion with her, before he left to participate in the Nirnaeth Arnoediad, makes clear.

Húrin, knowing her courage and her guarded tongue, often spoke with Morwen of the designs of the Elven-kings, and of what might befall, if they went well or ill. His heart was high with hope, and he had little fear for the outcome of the battle.  
*The Children of Húrin*, "The Childhood of Túrin"

The few pages which follow this comment contain an interesting discussion between Húrin and Morwen of the upcoming battle, the current state of Men and Elves in Middle-earth, and the threat they are under, and Morwen manifests a remarkable knowledge of political circumstances of the Age, coupled with a capacity to plan and the determination to act. Húrin's tone is replete throughout with confidence in her abilities. Except for a continual overwhelming sense of foreboding that underlies the entire story of Húrin, this was perhaps the highlight of the account of the character of Morwen.

Húrin leaves to join with Fingon's forces in the Nirnaeth Arnoediad. Húrin is taken prisoner during the course of that tragic defeat, and "Morgoth cursed Húrin and Morwen and their offspring, and set a doom upon them of darkness and sorrow" (*The Silmarillion*, "Of the Fifth Battle: Nirnaeth Arnoediad").

Morwen is already pregnant with their younger daughter. Faced with threats on all sides, she acts to safeguard Túrin by sending him to King Thingol of Doriath for his protection. Despite the fact that Thingol begs Morwen to abandon Dor-lómin and come to Doriath, she refuses to leave the home that she and Húrin shared. Left to await Húrin's return, still in her mid-twenties, shortly after having lost their fair-haired, happiest child, Morwen spends the rest of her life attempting, largely unsuccessfully through no fault of her own, to do what she can to protect their children in the nearly thirty-year absence of their father.

At the end of *The Children of Húrin*, on the verge of dying, Morwen, after searching relentlessly for her children finally comes upon the stone that marks their grave. It is also there in Brethil, after having finally been released by Morgoth, that Húrin is at last reunited with his wife at the burial place of their children.

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But Húrin did not look at the stone, for he knew what was written there; and his eyes had seen that he was not alone. Sitting in the shadow of the stone there was a woman, bent over her knees; and as Húrin stood there silent she cast back her tattered hood and lifted her face. Grey she was and old, but suddenly her eyes looked into his, and he knew her; for though they were wild and full of fear, that light still gleamed in them that long ago had earned for her the name Eledhwen, proudest and most beautiful of mortal women in the days of old.

*The Children of Húrin*, "The Death of Túrin"

Húrin finally takes his wife into his arms, and she says to him: "You came at last, I have waited too long." Then she manages to speak again of her children, "But you are late, too late, they are lost." Húrin holds her in his arms until, with the setting of the sun, Morwen dies.

The last words of *The Silmarillion* on Morwen are most moving:

He looked down at her in the twilight and it seemed to him that the lines of grief and cruel hardship were smoothed away. 'She was not conquered,' he said; and he closed her eyes, and sat unmoving beside her as the night drew down. The waters of Cabed Naeramarth roared on, but he heard no sound, and he saw nothing, and felt nothing, for his heart was stone within him. But there came a chill wind that drove sharp rain into his face; and he was roused, and anger rose in him like smoke, mastering reason, so that all his desire was to seek vengeance for his wrongs and for the wrongs of his kin, accusing in his anguish all those who ever had dealings with them. Then he rose up, and he made a grave for Morwen above Cabed Naeramarth on the west side of the stone; and upon it he cut these words: *Here lies also Morwen Eledhwen.*

*The Silmarillion*, "Of the Ruin of Doriath"

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**The disclaimer and source material:** This is the part where I insist that I really didn't make this all up, nor is it a definitive textual analysis. The facts for the history of Morwen have been principally gleaned from *The Silmarillion*, *The Children of Húrin*, with close attention to the original *Narn i Chîn Húrin* segment of the *Unfinished Tales*. Because of the intended nature of this piece (a simple, quick summary) exact citations are given for direct quotations only.

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## **About the Author**

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