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## Character Biography Nerdanel

By Dawn Felagund

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Nerdanel is the least discussed of the characters we've featured this month both in *The Silmarillion* and its accompanying volumes, and as the only Seven in '07 character *not* to follow Fëanor to Middle-earth, perhaps it seems odd that we've decided to devote a day to her at all. On the surface, to first-time readers of *The Silmarillion* and casual Tolkien fans, Nerdanel is easy to overlook. She is the wife of Fëanor and the mother of his seven sons, and rarely does she emerge as a character beyond these capacities.

But we do know a bit more about her. She was the daughter of Mahtan, a metalsmith with tremendous loyalty to Aulë. In this detail arises one of the key conflicts deduced by fans of the House of Fëanor: that Nerdanel, from a family traditionally servile to one of the Valar, should marry Fëanor, who later rebels against them. While Nerdanel's particular affiliations are never made explicit, her later estrangement from Fëanor and her reasons for it make it very likely that she shared her father's loyalty, at least to a degree.

Like her father and her husband, Nerdanel was gifted as an artist and craftsman. According to "Of Fëanor and the Unchaining of Melkor" in HoMe 10, while it was uncommon for Noldorin women to work with metal and stone, Nerdanel did not shy from the challenge, and her statues were said to be so realistic that people would approach them and speak to them before realizing that they were not alive. In addition to such realistic pieces, Nerdanel crafted "... many things she wrought also of her own thought in shapes strong and strange but beautiful."

Perhaps it was these talents that made her so attractive to Fëanor. In the same passage from HoMe 10, it is said that Nerdanel was not particularly beautiful, and people wondered why he chose to marry her. Little about their marriage is made explicit in *The Silmarillion* or its accompanying works, but readers often interpret their marriage as one of great passion, in part due to the startling number of children they had together, more than any other couple among the Eldar on record. In the additions made to "Of Fëanor and the Unchaining of Melkor" in HoMe 10, it is said that in her youth, Nerdanel loved to wander in solitude, and there she met Fëanor, and they were afterwards traveling companions. While Nerdanel's age at marriage is not explicitly stated, it is said that Fëanor married in his "early youth," and many readers assume the same of Nerdanel.

Despite the misgivings of his people due to her lack of overwhelming beauty, Nerdanel was in many ways the perfect wife for Fëanor. Strong, independent, and creative, it is said in *The Silmarillion* that she could restrain the worst of his temper. Alone of all of the Noldor, Fëanor sought her counsel. But where Fëanor desired control and mastery over others, Nerdanel sought understanding, and she had greater patience and restraint. Perhaps for this reason, she is given the epithet "the Wise." In fact, until late versions of his drafts of *The Silmarillion* that appear in HoMe 10, J.R.R. Tolkien used the name *Istarnië* for Nerdanel, a name etymologically derived from words meaning *wise* and *wisdom* according to *The Etymologies* in HoMe 5.

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Nerdanel is the mother of seven sons, including a set of twins, both rarities among the Eldar. While Fëanor persuaded all of his children in the end to follow him into exile, Nerdanel's influence is nonetheless present. It is said that some of her sons inherited her mood more so than their father's. It is never said which of her children were so fortunate, but fan favorites for this honor are Maedhros and, particularly, Maglor.

But it is the story of the twins presented in *The Shibboleth of Fëanor* in HoMe 12 that provides perhaps the most insight into Nerdanel's relationship with her children and also her husband. According to this late addition to the story, Nerdanel gave the twins the same mother-name *Ambarussa* at birth. At Fëanor's request that they be named differently, she changed the name of one to *Umbarto*, meaning "fated," though she said time would choose which son would properly deserve it. Fëanor was displeased by the ominous name and changed it to *Ambarto*. Nerdanel worried little over this; the child's name may have changed, she said, but his fate had not.

As Fëanor prepared to leave with his sons for Middle-earth, Nerdanel intercepted them and asked him to leave the twins with her, or one of the twins at least. Fëanor retorted that if she wished to keep her family, she would have to act as a proper wife and accompany them. Angered, Nerdanel retorted that one of the children would never set foot in Middle-earth. Fëanor refused to believe her misgivings and left without her, taking all of the children.

True to Nerdanel's prophecies, one of the twins did not survive to stand upon Middle-earth. After arriving in Losgar, he remained on board his ship, supposedly to sleep in comfort. However, it was believed that he'd been upset by his father's deeds and sought to sail his ship back to Valinor to return to his mother. When Fëanor burned the ships, he did not know that his youngest son was still on board, and the aptly named Umbarto perished in the blaze.

The story presents the lengthiest scene involving Nerdanel that we are given in all of Tolkien's works, and it not surprisingly reveals much about her character. Her courage in standing up to Fëanor at the peak of his madness reveals her personal strength, and we see also that Fëanor's hold on his sons is not as invulnerable as their later unflinching loyalty to him and his oath appears to be. At least one of the seven considered returning to her, going so far as to take action to do so ... and losing his life for it.

This scene also reveals the reason--or part of the reason--why Nerdanel probably left Fëanor in the first place. While *The Silmarillion* explains it as "his later deeds grieved her," little detail about which of his many darker deeds inspired such action, or even at what point in their history the estrangement occurred. In "Of the Silmarils and the Unrest of the Noldor" in HoMe 10 comes the surprising note that, after Fëanor's banishment to Formenos, Nerdanel would not go with him and asked leave to abide with Indis, setting the time of her estrangement from Fëanor more precisely to some time before he left for Formenos.

However, the exact reason is still unknown, though their conversation in the passage about the twins in *Shibboleth* begins to shed some light on it. Here, Fëanor calls her "cozened by Aulë," and it is revealed that her father Mahtan had been warned by Aulë not to participate in the rebellion as "[i]t will in the end only lead Fëanor and all your children to death." Fëanor's reply to her fears that one of their children will not reach Middle-earth is to "[t]ake your evil omens to the Valar who will delight in them," leading to the conclusion that he knew about Aulë's warning and the continued influence of the Valar on his wife. Was it a matter of ideological differences, her

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loyalty in light of his rebellion--and his perception that the Valar had directly caused his father's death and the theft of the Silmarils--that led to their estrangement? Or was it, as other researcher's and authors have proposed, his poor treatment of Fingolfin and the increasing sway of the Silmarils on his affections and sanity?

Regardless, Nerdanel ended up first alone and then a widow while her children perished one by one in a foreign land. Yet her influence extends beyond that of the mere mother of rebels and kinslayers. While Tolkien had done considerable writings on Nerdanel, all but a few lines about her were cut from the published *Silmarillion*. One of those lines that remained gave her credit for restraining Fëanor and also for providing temperance in the moods of her sons.

Fëanor's rebellion could have come sooner and with less legitimacy had he not been influenced by his wife. As it was, his rebellion occurred with just cause, even if the deeds that followed were not always done with goodness and fairness in mind: after the betrayal of Melkor, the murder of Fëanor's father, and the theft of what had, by then, become important symbols of strength and accomplishment. And despite the predominant awfulness of their deeds following the rebellion, the sons of Fëanor did show the occasional kindness, and one can easily imagine that this was inspired by their mother Nerdanel. These deeds, however small, would resound through the ages and help to lead Middle-earth out from thralldom first under Morgoth, then Sauron, until it was indeed as Fëanor had predicted at the gates of Tirion:

Is sorrow foreboded to you? But in Aman we have seen it. In Aman we have come through bliss to woe. The other now we will try: through sorrow to find joy; or freedom, at the least.

And so Nerdanel is a wife and mother, yes, and by some accounts, partly to blame for the mess her husband and sons made in Middle-earth. But beyond that, she is a peacemaker and a voice of reason in a family overwhelmed by paranoia and grief. Though she never set foot in Middle-earth, never hefted a sword in war or rebellion, and often easier overlooked and even more quickly forgotten, Nerdanel's role in establishing peace in Middle-earth is nonetheless present for those--like her--apt to understand and appreciate subtleties.

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## **About the Author**

Dawn Felagund is the founder and owner of the Silmarillion Writers' Guild and has authored more than thirty stories based on J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Silmarillion*, some of which have been translated and published in fan magazines around the world. These days, she directs her fannish energies towards research projects and developing the SWG into a fun and valuable group for *Silmarillion* fans. Dawn can be emailed at [DawnFelagund@gmail.com](mailto:DawnFelagund@gmail.com).