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# Character Biography

## Núneth

By Oshun

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Núneth, a Númenórean woman best known as the mother of Erendis, is a complex and realistic character who figures in the tale of *Aldarion and Erendis: The Mariner's Wife*.<sup>1</sup> Tolkien does not tell us where Núneth is born nor of her heritage in this tale, which is the only place in the legendarium where her story appears. It is a fair assumption that she shares a background with her husband, but there are no statements within the texts explicitly supporting that fact.

### Roots in the North

Núneth and her husband Beregar lived in the northwestern part of the island in the area of the Andustar, also called the West-lands.<sup>2</sup> This region is rocky and remote "with high fir-woods looking out upon the sea."<sup>3</sup> It also contains important great woodlands. But neither is it completely cut off from the rest of Arda since it has its own ports as well. (This will become more important in future years in the history of Númenor than it is during the lifetimes of Núneth and her immediate family.) The Andustar, geographically distant, is a far cry from the bustling sites of governance and courtly functions in the south, such as "the haven of Rómenna, the Meneltarma, and Armenelos, the City of the Kings . . . [which were] at all times the most populous region[s] of Númenor."<sup>4</sup> In the northernmost part of the Andustar is

. . . the Bay of Andúnië, for there was the great haven of Andúnië (Sunset), with its town beside the shore and many other dwellings climbing up the steep slopes behind. But much of the southerly part of the Andustar was fertile, and there also were great woods, of birch and beech upon the upper ground, and in the lower vales of oaks and elms. Between the promontories of the Andustar and the Hyarnustar was the great Bay that was called Eldanna, because it faced towards Eressëa; and the lands about it, being sheltered from the north and open to the western seas, were warm, and the most rain fell there. At the centre of the Bay of Eldanna was the most beautiful of all the havens of Númenor, Eldalondë the Green; and hither in the earlier days the swift white ships of the Eldar of Eressëa came most often.<sup>5</sup>

It says in the *Akallabêth* that, "Of old the chief city and haven of Númenor was in the midst of its western coasts, and it was called Andúnië because it faced the sunset."<sup>6</sup> Far from the administrative center and courtly circle of the Kings of Númenor in Armenelos, one found both rocky land and steep slopes but also fertile fields and timberland.

Perhaps, most importantly for its history, one finds in the north a unique connection to the easternmost lands of the West. Eldarin ships sail out of Tol Eressëa into the northern ports. There will remain in that area, throughout the history of Númenor, the legacy of a particular friendship with the Eldar and loyalty to the Lords of the West. (It is in the context of this background the future differences are framed between the so-called Faithful or Elf-friends of the north and the King's Men partisans operating under the influence of Sauron in the south.)

In this distinct northern region, Núneth gives birth to her daughter Erendis, her only child, who will in time marry an heir to throne of Númenor. Aldarion will be renowned among the kings as Tar-Aldarion, a famous shipbuilder, seafarer, explorer, adventurer, and the king who also solidly reestablishes a connection between the Kings of Númenor and the High King of the Noldor in Middle-earth.<sup>7</sup> Núneth further claims a mention in the history of Númenor through the person of her only grandchild Tar-Ancalimë, the first Ruling Queen of Númenor.<sup>8</sup>

As noted above, while Tolkien does not say where Núneth is born or anything explicitly unique about her personal heritage, we do know where she lived and raised her daughter. It is a fair assumption that she shares a background with her husband. Beregar is said to be "from the Westlands of Númenor, descended from the House of Bëor."<sup>9</sup> It would not be unreasonable to assume that Núneth hails originally from that same part of the country and is of the same ethnicity. If she had different origins, they might have been mentioned. Tolkien does take care to compare and contrast Erendis' genealogy, cultural differences, and appearance to those of the royal family of Númenor at the time and its descent from the line of Elros. One thing we do know for certain is that Erendis learned Sindarin as her mother tongue from Núneth and passed this along to her illustrious daughter Tar-Ancalimë.

All Ancalimë's teaching was from her mother; and she learned well to write and to read, and to speak the Elven-tongue with Erendis, after the manner in which high men of Númenor used it. For in the Westlands it was a daily speech in such houses as Beregar's, and Erendis seldom used the Númenórean tongue, which Aldarion loved the better.<sup>10</sup>

### **Núneth Fancies Herself the Mother-in-Law of a King**

Núneth would have identified with the famous line from Jane Austen, "It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife."<sup>11</sup> And she might have desired to extrapolate that nowhere is this principle more obvious than in the case of the heir to the throne of Númenor and, further, that no young woman could be more suited to that role than her own beautiful daughter.

It is refreshing in the tale of *Aldarion and Erendis* that, in addition to the usual details one receives relating to a supporting character who is a named female in Tolkien's legendarium--a place in a genealogical table or index, and the names of her husband and sons--Núneth receives notable character development. She has a voice, which she uses, for good or ill, and strong opinions, at times different from those of her equally hard-headed daughter. One cannot but smile when Núneth reads her daughter the riot act for being stubborn and unmovable because it is not difficult to see where Erendis got those traits.

After Núneth becomes aware that her daughter loves Aldarion and that he returns her love, she eventually loses patience with her. Erendis has delayed a betrothal for years, running the risk of losing him. Núneth takes it upon herself to complain to her daughter about her personal character and also to lecture her about the compromises that she believes a woman must make for her husband and the support she owes him.

'All or nothing, Erendis,' said Núneth. 'So you were as a child. But you love this man, and he is a great man, not to speak of his rank; and you will not cast out your love from your heart so easily, nor without great hurt to yourself. A woman must share her

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husband's love with his work and the fire of his spirit, or make him a thing not loveable. But I doubt that you will ever understand such counsel.<sup>12</sup>

Erendis clearly does not want to hear this advice. But eventually, after a rocky and lengthy courtship, replete with partings and reconciliations, Erendis and Aldarion finally wed. The north of Númenor shows great interest in the marriage of a native daughter to the heir to the throne of Númenor and throws an impressive party for them.

In the eight hundred and seventieth year of the Second Age Aldarion and Erendis were wedded in Armenelos, and in every house there was music, and in all the streets men and women sang. And afterwards the King's Heir and his bride rode at their leisure through all the Isle, until at midsummer they came to Andúnië, where the last feast was prepared by Valandil its lord; and all the people of the Westlands were gathered there, for love of Erendis and pride that a Queen of Númenor should come from among them.<sup>13</sup>

Not least among the honored guests are the Elves.

. . . Erendis looked forth, and she saw a tall white ship, with white birds turning in the sunlight all about it; and its sails glimmered with silver as with foam at the stem it rode towards the harbour. Thus the Eldar graced the wedding of Erendis, for love of the people of the Westlands, who were closest in their friendship.<sup>14</sup>

### **The Matter of the Eldarin Song Birds**

One might presume that Númeth must have felt that finally her fondest dreams for her daughter had been realized. But this was not to be the case, and Númeth is anything but a woman who lacks in perception.

For as Númeth had said to Erendis long before: 'Ships he may love, my daughter, for those are made by men's minds and hands; but I think that it is not the winds or the great waters that so burn his heart, nor yet the sight of strange lands, but some heat in his mind, or some dream that pursues him.'<sup>15</sup>

After what appears to have been an interlude of a peaceful few years in a relationship blighted at its roots, Aldarion and Erendis have a child before his wanderlust strikes him with vengeance again.

Backtracking a little to the wedding, at that time, the Elves from Eressëa had gifted Erendis with an unusual and magical wedding gift.

To Erendis they gave a pair of birds, grey, with golden beaks and feet. They sang sweetly one to another with many cadences never repeated through a long thrill of song; but if one were separated from the other, at once they flew together, and they would not sing apart.

'How shall I keep them?' said Erendis. 'Let them fly and be free,' answered the Eldar.

'For we have spoken to them and named you; and they will stay wherever you dwell. They mate for their life, and that is long. Maybe there will be many such birds to sing in the gardens of your children.'<sup>16</sup>

When their daughter is still very young, Aldarion decides to venture forth again upon a long voyage of at least two years. Erendis objects. After he leaves, Erendis grieves that she has been unable to convince him to stay and "deeper in her heart she felt a new pain of cold anger, and her love of Aldarion was wounded to the quick."<sup>17</sup> She takes their daughter, leaving their home in Armenelos, and "settles with the child in Emerië in the midst of the Isle, where ever, far and near, the bleating of sleep was borne upon the wind."<sup>18</sup>

Erendis sends no word to Núneth and Beregar, dismissing also, with great bitterness, the Eldarin love birds who follow her. The birds return to the north, where Núneth sees them.

But when Núneth held out her hands to them they flew steeply up and fled away, and she watched them until they were specks in the sunlight, speeding to the sea, back to the land whence they came.

'He has gone again, then, and left her,' said Núneth.

'Then why has she not sent news?' said Beregar. 'Or why has she not come home?'

'She has sent news enough,' said Núneth. 'For she has dismissed the Elven-birds, and that was ill done. It bodes no good. Why, why, my daughter? Surely you knew what you must face? But let her alone, Beregar, wherever she may be. This is her home no longer, and she will not be healed here. He will come back. And then may the Valar send her wisdom – or guile, at the least!'<sup>19</sup>

The reader is shown that Erendis has neither the pragmatic cynicism, which perhaps would have been viewed as wisdom in this case by Núneth, nor the guile to pretend she feels nothing or can endure a situation that she believes is beyond what should be expected of her.

The bitterness and resentment of Erendis calcifies. In her possessiveness of Ancalimë, she even prevents her from visiting and learning to know her maternal grandparents in the north. Instead, she nurtures Ancalimë in the isolation of the Emerië, in the company of only a few women attendants--and, of course, the sheep--until Aldarion returns from his voyage. Far from becoming reconciled, the couple is absolutely unable to regain their previous intimacy and affection. Aldarion comes to Emerië angry that Erendis has withdrawn from their marital home with their daughter. He leaves in cold anger as well.

She [Erendis] had looked for some penitence, that she might extend after rebuke pardon if prayed for; but he had dealt with her as if she were the offender, and ignored her before her daughter. Too late she remembered the words of Núneth long before, and she saw Aldarion now as something large and not to be tamed, driven by a fierce will, more perilous when chill. She rose, and turned from the window, thinking of her wrongs. 'Perilous!' she said. 'I am steel hard to break. So he would find even were he the King of Númenor.'<sup>20</sup>

This is the last reference to Núneth written into the *Aldarion and Erendis* narrative.

A short while later, Aldarion's father abdicates in his favor. One of his first acts as king is to order Erendis to come to Armenelos with their daughter, but Erendis refuses to leave her seclusion in the north and sends Ancalimë to her father, where he may mentor her as his heir.

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Tolkien never finishes this tale, although he does leave notes from which may be constructed a relatively coherent view of the ends of the days of Aldarion and Erendis. But we learn nothing more of Núneth or Beregar. One thing which is quite clear is that Núneth's attempts at matchmaking do not result in a happy ending, nor is it written that, after the estrangement of Aldarion and Erendis, she had any further opportunity to care for and support either her daughter or her granddaughter.

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## Works Cited

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## About the Author

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