
Character Biography

Voronwë

By Oshun

Voronwë, a Noldorin Elf of Gondolin, is one of Tolkien's early characters, although the original is quite different from the later version. Christopher Tolkien tells us that his father first included Voronwë in his initial drafts of the story *The Fall of Gondolin* and that this tale "was the first of the tales of the First Age to be composed."¹ In a 1964 letter, Tolkien stated that he wrote *The Fall of Gondolin* "during sick-leave from the army in 1917,"² although Christopher Tolkien notes that, on other occasions, his father dated the text to 1916-17.³

Playing a significant role in the story of Tuor's coming to Gondolin in the First Age, not surprisingly, the character of Voronwë and his role in Tolkien fictional history goes through major revisions between 1917 and the latest and most detailed retelling of those events, which appear in the published version of *Unfinished Tales*. While a shortened version of the story of Voronwë may be found in *The Silmarillion*, one can assert without danger of much disagreement that the most satisfying telling of Voronwë's story is the one in *Unfinished Tales*. The accounts in *The Book of Lost Tales 2*, and an extremely brief reference in *The Lost Road* are, of course, required reading for hardcore canon nerds.

It seems useful herein, for the sake of narrative flow, to follow the most coherent account of the story of Voronwë as printed in *Unfinished Tales* and, to a lesser degree, the shortened version in *The Silmarillion* (which does not contradict the UT version). A discussion of the alternate developments of the character of Voronwë as featured in *The Book of Lost Tales* will be dealt with near the end of this article.

Most readers will first encounter Voronwë in *The Silmarillion* in a passage relating to Turgon's attempt to seek help from the West as Morgoth's noose tightens around the necks of the surviving communities of Men and Eldar following the great Battle of Unnumbered Tears (Nirnaeth Arnoediad). As the new High King of the Noldor following the death of Fingon, Turgon sends messages to the Mouths of Sirion to seek assistance from Círdan the Shipwright.⁴

At the bidding of Turgon Círdan built seven swift ships, and they sailed out into the West; but no tidings of them came ever back to Balar, save of one, and the last. The mariners of that ship toiled long in the sea, and returning at last in despair they foundered in a great storm within sight of the coasts of Middle-earth; but one of them was saved by Ulmo from the wrath of Ossë, and the waves bore him up, and cast him ashore in Nevrast. His name was Voronwë; and he was one of those that Turgon sent forth as messengers from Gondolin.⁵

In the "Index of Names" in *The Silmarillion*, Voronwë is briefly described as: "Voronwë 'The Steadfast', Elf of Gondolin, the only mariner to survive from the seven ships sent into the West after the Nirnaeth Arnoediad; met with Tuor at Vinyamar and guided him to Gondolin."⁶

The dramatic meeting between Tuor and Voronwë is a terrific set-up for one of Tolkien's great buddy stories (in the spirit of TV Tropes, that would be defined as a plotline of two friends, or

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more, closely bound together by their interdependence as they set out on an joint adventure or series of adventures). The Vala Ulmo is the instigator of the relationship between these two soon-to-be stalwart comrades, providing circumstances for a terrific road-trip tale as well (which arguably is only surpassed in Tolkien's work by the Fellowship's adventures in *The Lord of the Rings*). Ulmo decides that Tuor requires a guide to Gondolin and support on his journey, as well as someone who can assist him at his arrival in getting past its guarded gates. Ulmo provides Voronwë—an excellent practical choice. In the incomplete account in *Unfinished Tales*, the reader is presented with a well-developed character in his own right.

Tuor wends his way ineluctably toward the hidden city of Gondolin, pushed and pulled by fate and the helpful intervention of Ulmo, the lord of seas and waters. The text of Voronwë's story as recounted in the *Unfinished Tales* is an example of a maturity and a mastery of prose that Tolkien achieves in his later writings, mastery which surpasses that of his earlier versions by far. The narrative may have been left unfinished, but it does not lack polish. It conveys a strong sense of warmth between Voronwë and Tuor, making them brilliantly human and sympathetic to the reader. Even the Vala Ulmo, as grand and intimidating as he may be, is painted with affection and emotional depth.

Unfinished Tales also introduces aspects of storyline that will be built upon much later in the legendarium. Tolkien notes in a letter that a visit from Ulmo "had set in Tuor's heart an insatiable sea-longing, hence the choice of name for his son [Quenya: "sea-friend"], to whom this longing was transmitted."⁷ This sea-longing of Tuor's, which is passed to his son Eärendil, is also transmitted through the line of Elros and is picked up in the narrative of the great Númenórean seafarers.

The Tale of Voronwë the Mariner

The most coherent version of Voronwë's introduction is presented in the *Unfinished Tales* section "Of Tuor and His Coming to Gondolin." In the aftermath of the devastating defeat of free peoples of Middle-earth in the Nirnaeth Arnoediad, Turgon, aware that their chances of survival are slim barring outside assistance, develops a his own plan. He decides to seek the aid of Círdan in building and equipping seven ships to take messengers from Gondolin across the sea to the uttermost West, there to beg of the Valar help and intervention during this darkest of periods since the arrival in Middle-earth of the Noldorin exiles.

Círdan built seven swift ships, and they sailed out into the West; but no tidings of them came ever back to Balar, save of one, and the last. The mariners of that ship toiled long in the sea, and returning at last in despair they foundered in a great storm within sight of the coasts of Middle-earth; but one of them was saved by Ulmo from the wrath of Ossë, and the waves bore him up, and cast him ashore in Nevrast. His name was Voronwë; and he was one of those that Turgon sent forth as messengers from Gondolin.⁸

In *Of Tuor and His Coming to Gondolin*, one finds an incredibly beautiful autobiography delivered in soliloquy form by Voronwë to Tuor. It is over 1,300 words of poetic prose: detailed, descriptive, heart-wrenching, and profoundly human. Anyone interested in Voronwë's story should pick up that book and read it right now. No summary can do it justice.

One learns in that scene, wherein Voronwë spills out his heart to Tuor, that he is the son of a noble Noldo and was born in Middle-earth at Nevrast to a Sindarin woman of the Falas, a

kinswoman of Círdan. He notes that "there was much mingling of the peoples in Nevrast in the first days of Turgon's kingship."⁹ He speaks of how he has the "the sea-heart"¹⁰ of his mother's people and that this is why he was singled out for participation in Turgon's venture to reach the Valar and plead for succor.

Therefore I was among the chosen, since our errand was to Círdan, to seek his aid in our shipbuilding, that some message and prayer for aid might come to the Lords of the West ere all was lost.¹¹

In contrast to Tolkien's usual mariner, who is inexorably drawn to the sea, one finds the very charming and human Voronwë to be a somewhat reluctant sailor, one who, en route to the Falas, is overcome by his fascination with the forest in the springtime.

But I tarried on the way. For I had seen little of the lands of Middle-earth, and we came to Nan-tathren in the spring of the year. Lovely to heart's enchantment is that land, Tuor, as you shall find, if ever your feet go upon the southward roads down Sirion. There is the cure of all sea-longing, save for those whom Doom will not release. There Ulmo is but the servant of Yavanna, and the earth has brought to life a wealth of fair things that is beyond the thought of hearts in the hard hills of the North.¹²

The more one knows of Tolkien's usual seafarers, who would have no great difficulty in turning their back on the most appealing aspects of a landlocked springtime when the call of the sea beckoned, the more one wants to smile at this passage wherein Voronwë departs so utterly from the stereotype.

There I was enchanted, and forgot the Sea in my heart. There I wandered, naming new flowers, or lay adream amid the singing of the birds, and the humming of bees and flies; and there I might still dwell in delight, forsaking all my kin, whether the ships of the Teleri or the swords of the Noldor, but my doom would not so.¹³

But the intrepid Voronwë is a worthy hero and stirs himself (or Ulmo stirs him) and he builds himself a raft of willow wood and seeks to reach the Sirion and follow it to its sources in time to fulfill the duty which has been assigned him.

Thus I came last of the messengers to Círdan; and of the seven ships that he built at Turgon's asking all but one were then full-wrought. And one by one they set sail into the West, and none yet has ever returned, nor has any news of them been heard. But the salt air of the sea now stirred anew the heart of my mother's kin within me, and I rejoiced in the waves, learning all ship-lore, as were it already stored in the mind. So when the last ship, and the greatest, was made ready, I was eager to be gone.¹⁴

The next section is all about the hardships and terror of their time at sea. When it finally becomes clear to them that they will never be allowed to reach the land of the Valar, they turn back, discouraged and despairing.

'But the Great Sea is terrible, Tuor son of Huor; and it hates the Noldor, for it works the Doom of the Valar. Worse things it holds than to sink into the abyss and so perish: loathing, and loneliness, and madness; terror of wind and tumult, and silence, and shadows where all hope is lost and all living shapes pass away. And many shores evil and strange it washes, and many islands of danger and fear infest it. I will not darken

your heart, son of Middle-earth, with the tale of my labour seven years in the Great Sea from the North even into the South, but never to the West. For that is shut against us.¹⁵

His details of the hardship of those long and bitter years upon an unyielding sea with all paths to their destination barred to them might remind one of the middle section of the celebrated Anglo-Saxon elegy *The Seafarer* (one of Tolkien's lifelong inspirations).

Of smashing surf when I sweated in the cold
 Of an anxious watch, perched in the bow
 As it dashed under cliffs. My feet were cast
 In icy bands, bound with frost,
 With frozen chains, and hardship groaned
 Around my heart. Hunger tore
 At my sea-weary soul. No man sheltered
 On the quiet fairness of earth can feel
 How wretched I was, drifting through winter
 On an ice-cold sea, whirled in sorrow . . .¹⁶

Tragically, the Elven sailor companions of Voronwë are already within sight of the shores of Middle-earth when their ship is caught in one last great storm and all are lost with the single exception of Voronwë, who survives. His monologue ends with those famous words describing what he had seen, among other things, on his treacherous journey: "bright were the stars upon the margin of the world."¹⁷

He, without a doubt, has been spared by the intervention of Ulmo, who has further use for him.

Voronwë and Tuor Travel to Gondolin

When Tuor arrives at Nevrast, he also tarries. There is a mirroring quality in Tuor's delay to the description of Voronwë's inability to tear himself away from the forest discussed above. Tuor is loath to continue his trek because of his attraction to the abandoned city he finds there and uncertainty about his next step but *most of all* because he is overwhelmed by his sea fever. Finally, Ulmo directly intervenes again and provides him with handsome and highly symbolic Elven armor, a sword, and instructions, promising him a guide who will accompany him to Gondolin. Ulmo informs him that the time has come to finish his trip and carry a message, actually a warning, from him to Turgon: "And Ulmo bade him depart from that place and seek out the hidden kingdom of Gondolin; and he gave Tuor a great cloak, to mantle him in shadow from the eyes of his enemies."¹⁸

Almost immediately thereafter, saved by Ulmo from the wrath of Ossë, Voronwë, the lone survivor of the last of Turgon's questing ships, washes ashore at Nevrast exhausted and disoriented.

And Tuor looked down from the lowest terrace and saw, leaning against its wall among the stones and the seawrack, an Elf, clad in a grey cloak sodden with the sea. Silent he sat, gazing beyond the ruin of the beaches out over the long ridges of the waves. All was still, and there was no sound save the roaring of the surf below.

As Tuor stood and looked at the silent grey figure he remembered the words of Ulmo,

and a name untaught came to his lips, and he called aloud: 'Welcome, Voronwë! I await you.'¹⁹

The magical touch in this part is that Tuor has never heard Voronwë's name, but it immediately comes out of his mouth when he sees him. This meeting of Voronwë and Tuor is a memorable one among literary first encounters. Their first impressions, each of the other, parallel in a satisfying and fairy-tale-like manner:

Then the Elf turned and looked up, and Tuor met the piercing glance of his sea-grey eyes, and knew that he was of the high folk of the Noldor. But fear and wonder grew in his gaze [the Elf's, i.e., Voronwë's] as he saw Tuor standing high upon the wall above him, clad in his great cloak like a shadow out of which the elven-mail gleamed upon his breast. A moment thus they stayed, each searching the face of the other, and then the Elf stood up and bowed low before Tuor's feet. 'Who are you, lord?' he said.²⁰

The die is cast. The stage is set. Our resolute duo is ready to set out upon their trek, the success or failure of which will, in the end, determine the fate of Middle-earth. As Ulmo puts it to Tuor, ". . . it is not for thy valour only that I send thee, but to bring into the world a hope beyond thy sight, and a light that shall pierce the darkness."²¹ Voronwë is instantly won over to the importance of the task to be fulfilled by Tuor.

[L]earning of the command laid upon Tuor by the Lord of Waters Voronwë was filled with wonder, and did not refuse him his guidance to the hidden door of Gondolin. Therefore they set out together from that place, and as the Fell Winter of that year came down upon them out of the north they went warily eastward under the eaves of the Mountains of Shadow.²²

Their trip is to be a long one, filled with great discomfort and hardships. They are indeed traveling through a dangerous and blighted land in the aftermath of the destruction and havoc wreaked throughout Beleriand after the Nirnaeth Arnoediad.

Where once the fair pool of Ivrin had lain in its great stone basin carved by falling waters, and all about it had been a tree-clad hollow under the hills, now he saw a land defiled and desolate. The trees were burned or uprooted; and the stone-marges of the pool were broken, so that the waters of Ivrin strayed and wrought a great barren marsh amid the ruin. All now was but a welter of frozen mire, and a reek of decay lay like a foul mist upon the ground.²³

They see marks of devastation on all sides of them, including the signs of the passage of the great dragon—great claw marks on the ground. Voronwë says, "Here not long since was the Great Worm of Angband, most fell of all the creatures of the Enemy! Late already is our errand to Turgon. There is need of haste."²⁴

Even the weather is not in their favor, for winter has overtaken them. It is at this point that they hear and see a man, whom they do not recognize but who turns out to be Túrin, but Tuor never meets or speaks with his cousin. Voronwë and Tuor struggle on, although there are times when Tuor fears they will not survive this journey, while Voronwë remains determined and more hopeful.

But their last obstacle in their quest to reach Turgon and deliver Ulmo's warning is to be found at the very gates of Gondolin itself. As Tolkien tells of their approach to Gondolin up a dry river bed, he manifests a drama and power in his prose that is not rivaled by any of the most polished passages to be found in *The Lord of the Rings*. It culminates in a moment of great suspense.

Suddenly an elven-lantern was unhooded, and its bright ray was turned upon Voronwë before him, but nothing else could Tuor see save a dazzling star in the darkness; and he knew that while that beam was upon him he could not move, neither to flee nor to run forward.

For a moment they were held thus in the eye of the light, and then the voice spoke again, saying: 'Show your faces!'²⁵

After their long, hard struggle, and despite the importance of the message they bear from Ulmo, they did not expect to pass the gates of Gondolin unchallenged. By guiding a stranger, worse yet a Mortal Man, to the hidden city, Voronwë has broken Gondolin's "prime directive"—its single most unassailable rule—and he has earlier warned Tuor that the danger they face could even be a mortal one.

And Voronwë cast back his hood, and his face shone in the ray, hard and clear, as if graven in stone; and Tuor marvelled to see its beauty. Then he spoke proudly, saying: 'Know you not whom you see? I am Voronwë son of Aranwë of the House of Fingolfin. Or am I forgotten in my own land after a few years? Far beyond the thought of Middle-earth I have wandered, yet I remember your voice, Elemmakil.'²⁶

While Voronwë is recognized as a returning son of Gondolin, he is cautioned that Tuor's fate may be much harsher than his own. This never-finished narrative leads us past the seven gates of Gondolin, each described in refulgent detail. This version of Voronwë's guiding of Tuor to Gondolin ends with their view of the majesty of the material representation of Turgon's great dream of re-creating Tirion in Middle-earth—Voronwë seeing it again after more than seven long years of hardship and the failure of his quest to reach the uttermost West and Tuor's first astounded glimpse.

Then Tuor passed through, and coming to a high sward that looked out over the valley beyond, he beheld a vision of Gondolin amid the white snow. And so entranced was he that for long he could look at nothing else; for he saw before him at last the vision of his desire out of dreams of longing.

Thus he stood and spoke no word. Silent upon either hand stood a host of the army of Gondolin; all of the seven kinds of the Seven Gates were there represented; but their captains and chieftains were upon horses, white and grey.²⁷

Christopher Tolkien follows Tuor past the seven gates in the version that he prepared for the published *Silmarillion*, drawing upon this final unfinished draft and adding some aspects of the earlier tale of *The Fall of Gondolin* from *The Book of Lost Tales 2*. But Tolkien's own final, if unfinished, version of the story of Voronwë ends here, just inside of the gates of Gondolin.

Alternative Versions of Voronwë's Tale

In *The Grey Annals* Voronwë is named as a captain of one of the ships that sail to find assistance in the West.²⁸ However, in all of the versions, Voronwë, sometimes called Bronweg,²⁹ remains the guide and companion of Tuor, the one who helps him reach Gondolin.

"O Tuor, think not but that thou shalt again one day see thy desire; arise now, and behold, I will not leave thee. I am not of the road-learned of the Noldoli, being a craftsman and maker of things made by hand of wood and of metal, and I joined not the band of escort till late. Yet of old have I heard whispers and sayings said in secret amid the weariness of thralldom, concerning a city where Noldoli might be free could they find the hidden way thereto; and we twain may without a doubt find the road to the City of Stone, where is that freedom of the Gondothlim."³⁰

When Voronwë and Tuor finally reach Gondolin, they are welcomed with joy and solicitation for their welfare³¹ rather than the stern and even threatening greeting we read of in the later redrafts of his story to be found in *The Unfinished Tales* and *The Silmarillion*. There is a sea change from the reception they receive in the Gondolin of *The Book of Lost Tales* (more a greeting one might expect for beleaguered travelers and allies arriving at Elrond's Last Homely House during the Third Age), although in that tale Voronwë is neither a noble of Gondolin, nor a son of one of its lords, much less a distant kinsman of the king from the "house of Fingolfin." Neither is he one of those long-awaited mariners sent to seek succor from the Valar; instead, he is a craftsman and an escaped thrall of Melkor. But his loyalty, steadfastness, and nobility of spirit are familiar to the reader as characteristics he shares with the Voronwë of *The Unfinished Tales'* account of this story.³²

In the *Lost Tales* account, Voronwë also continues as a great friend and mentor to Tuor once they reach the hidden city: "Now Tuor learnt many things in those realms taught by Voronwë whom he loved, and who loved him exceeding greatly in return; or else was he instructed by the skilled men of the city and the wise men of the king."³³ One moving aspect of the tale of Voronwë, which is only mentioned in *The Book of Lost Tales*, is that when Gondolin is attacked, it is Voronwë who is charged by Tuor to guard and defend Idril and his son.

Then Tuor and his men must get them to the battle of the Gate, for the noise of it has grown very great, and Tuor has it still in his heart that the city may stand; yet with Idril he left there Voronwë against his will and some other swordsmen to be a guard for her till he returned or might send tidings from the fray.³⁴

In the *Lost Tales* version, Voronwë is also, after they depart from the city, instrumental in guiding the survivors of Gondolin to safety, much as he had brought Tuor without harm to that fabled city at the beginning of the tale.

Here did Voronwë guide them, for he had caught a whisper of Ulmo's in that stream one late summer's night - and he got ever much wisdom from the sound of waters. Now he led them even till they came down to Sirion which that stream fed, and then both Tuor and Voronwë saw that they were not far from the outer issue of old of the Way of Escape, and were once more in that deep dale of alders.³⁵

In an index of names in the *Lost Tales*, we learn that Voronwë was to have participated in great adventures sailing with Eärendil. "He rideth now with Voronwë upon the winds of the firmament

nor comes ever further back than Kôr, else would he die like other Men, so much of the mortal is in him."³⁶ Christopher Tolkien also divulges the contents of several outlines found in an old notebook from his father's youth. These notes provide lists of details of Voronwë's tale that some might wish had been written. The following list is included among those: "Voronwë and Eärendel [Eärendil] set sail in Wingilot. Driven south. Dark regions. Fire mountains. Tree-men. Pygmies. Sarqindi or cannibalogres."³⁷ (Peter Jackson, for one, would love the cannibalogres.) There exists among the papers containing this earliest of Tolkien's writings also the briefest of mentions of a son of Voronwë named Littleheart.

Voronwë was clearly a character close to Tolkien's heart. He has crafted the great-hearted Elf with affection and sympathy from his first introduction to his last mention. He is, a bit like Sam is to Frodo, or Beleg is to Túrin, one of the great embodiments of loyalty and friendship in Tolkien's work. The impulse is irresistible to end this biography with some fantastical last lines written for the *Lost Tales* version of Voronwë: ". . . Eärendel 'returns from the firmament ever and anon with Voronwë to Kôr to see if the Magic Sun has been lit and the fairies have come back'" ³⁸

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About the Author

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