
Character Biography

Lenwë

By Oshun

Living in Middle-earth during the Years of the Trees, Lenwë was an Elf of Telerin origin. He was the leader of a large assemblage of folk who had started the march from Cuiviénen amongst the clan first referenced as the Nelyar. The Elves who awakened at Cuiviénen, the inland sea far in the east of Middle-earth, are identified in their mythical history as three separate clans or tribes, eventually to be named the Vanyar, Noldor, and Teleri. They are described as deriving "from the three Elf-fathers: *Imin*, *Tata*, and *Enel* (sc. One, Two, Three), and those whom each chose to join his following. So they had at first simply the names *Minyar* 'Firsts', *Tatyar* 'Seconds', and *Nelyar* 'Thirds'."¹

As the story was transmitted, the 144 Elves² who were the first to awaken were sorted into these clans in numbers of "14, 56, and 74; and these proportions were approximately maintained until the Separation."³ (There is little more frustrating than to have a discussion of Tolkien's story canon with a reader who seeks to make these numbers "work." It is a bit like discussing the age of the planet Earth with a Creationist.) Meanwhile, the reader can assume, for storytelling purposes, that the original Vanyar were the smallest clan and the eventually widely-dispersed Teleri were by far the largest. One cannot help but notice that this third and largest clan, not surprisingly given their superior numbers, were the grouping prone to the greatest amount of hemorrhaging—splits and departures of people seeking to find their own path aside from the one promoted by their leaders at the encouragement of the Valar. Amongst those self-sufficient pioneers is Lenwë of the Teleri.

The "Quendi" diagram found with the family trees in *The Silmarillion* shows that the majority of the Teleri remained in Middle-earth, becoming the Sindar (Grey-elves) and the Nandor (Green-elves). At the point when one reaches the brief account of Lenwë in *The Silmarillion*,⁴ the Avari have already fallen away, being "unwilling and refused the summons [of the Vala Oromë who encouraged the Eldar to come to Aman⁵], preferring the starlight and the wide spaces of the Earth to the rumour of the Trees."⁶ The Teleri were stunned when they first reached the Great River Anduin and saw the Misty Mountains (the Hithaeglir) across their path to the West.

Some fell away from the journey for a period—shorter or longer—only to regain their bearings and continue forward later. It was, however, at this point that Lenwë led a part of the Teleri south down the Vales of Anduin:

Then one arose in the host of Olwë, which was ever the hindmost on the road; Lenwë he was called. He forsook the westward march, and led away a numerous people, southwards down the great river, and they passed out of the knowledge of their kin until long years were past. Those were the Nandor; and they became a people apart."⁷

In *The War of the Jewels*, Christopher Tolkien speculates that the name *Nandor* (a Quenya word) came into existence at that point in time and was used to refer to "certain groups of the Teleri [who] gave up the March; and it was especially applied to the large following of Lenwë."⁸ *The Silmarillion* says of them:

Little is known of the wanderings of the Nandor, whom he [Lenwë] led away down Anduin: some, it is said, dwelt age-long in the woods of the Vale of the Great River, some came at last to its mouths and there dwelt by the Sea, and yet others passing by Ered Nimrais, the White Mountains, came north again and entered the wilderness of Eriador between Ered Luin and the far Mountains of Mist. Now these were a woodland people and had no weapons of steel, and the coming of the fell beasts of the North filled them with great fear. . . .⁹

The people of Lenwë, a significant part of the Teleri, who had been living independently from and with little contact to their former kin, eventually reunited with Elwë Thingol—once lost and now found, and in charge again. The game changer, however, in the history of the Nandor is Morgoth's return to Middle-earth. By this time, Lenwë has disappeared from the story without explanation—lost, captured, or killed. There is no record of his demise. Lenwë's legacy, however, is his people, the Nandor, persisting as a unified body under the leadership of his son Denethor. They will now reenter into the recorded history of the Quendi in Middle-earth:

Denethor, the son of Lenwë, hearing rumour of the might of Thingol and his majesty, and of the peace of his realm, gathered such host of his scattered people as he could, and led them over the mountains into Beleriand. There they were welcomed by Thingol, as kin long lost that return, and they dwelt in Ossiriand, the Land of Seven Rivers.¹⁰

Both the name Lenwë and the name of his people feature in *The Silmarillion* as *Nandor*, which "meant 'those who turn back.' These Elves were later called Silvan Elves or Wood-elves."¹¹ The importance of naming among the Eldar is explained by Angelica in detail in her essay on this website, Name Calling: Group Identity and the Other among First Age Elves.¹² I cannot recommend this essay highly enough (definitely one of the hidden jewels of the SWG's reference collection). Angelica manages to restate and render the similarities and differences among the groups of the Quendi in language more transparent and accessible to the non-expert than that to be found in *Quendi and Eldar*. In doing so, she elucidates for her readers the manner and roots of the self-regard of the various clans as well as their attitudes toward their sundered brethren, which seem to survive from the shores of Cuiviénen itself well into the Third Age of Arda.

In Nandorin, Lenwë is called *Dân* and his people *Danas* or *Danians*.¹³ The word *Nandor* is said in *Quendi and Eldar* to signify "those who turned back." (Actually this is a misnomer—they never turned back nor reunited with the Avari, but continued to pursue their own course.) In the mouth of a Noldo, one might see how the term takes on a distinctly pejorative tone, i.e., those dawdling behind on the road, forever distracted by one natural wonder or another, and forever looking backward are finally unable to complete the journey which would have rewarded them with greater wisdom, vast knowledge, and a theretofore unimaginable level of technological development (like the far superior Noldor!):

Of the long years of peace that followed after the coming of Denethor there is little tale. . . . In Beleriand in those days the Elves walked, and the rivers flowed, and the stars shone, and the night-flowers gave forth their scents; and the beauty of Melian was as the noon, and the beauty of Lúthien was as the dawn in spring. In Beleriand King Thingol upon his throne was as the lords of the Maiar, whose power is at rest, whose joy is as an air that they breathe in all their days, whose thought flows in a tide untroubled from the heights to the deeps.¹⁴

Peace was not to be the order of the day. Denethor son of Lenwë, leader of the Nandorin Elves that came at last over the Blue Mountains and dwelt in Ossiriand, is to be slain on Amon Ereb in the First Battle of Beleriand:¹⁵

Now the Orcs that multiplied in the darkness of the earth grew strong and fell, and their dark lord filled them with a lust of ruin and death; and they issued from Angband's gates under the clouds that Morgoth sent forth, and passed silently into the highlands of the north. Thence on a sudden a great army came into Beleriand and assailed King Thingol.¹⁶

War had caught Thingol unawares and desperate in what was to be his last martial excursion outside of his soon to be encircled territory protected by the famous Girdle of Melian. He calls upon Denethor and his numerous people to join with him in the defense of their peoples. Denethor accepts the challenge. He has the numbers, but not the weaponry. Denethor's Elves arrive in force to join with Thingol's Doriathan troops:

And the eastern host of the Orcs was taken between the armies of the Eldar, north of the Andram and midway between Aros and Gelion, and there they were utterly defeated, and those that fled north from the great slaughter were waylaid by the axes of the Naugrim that issued from Mount Dolmed: few indeed returned to Angband. But the victory of the Elves was dear-bought. For those of Ossiriand were light-armed, and no match for the Orcs, who were shod with iron and iron-shielded and bore great spears with broad blades; and Denethor was cut off and surrounded upon the hill of Amon Ereb. There he fell and all his nearest kin about him, before the host of Thingol could come to his aid.¹⁷

After the loss of Denethor, the Nandor were no longer to name a clan leader:

Bitterly though his fall was avenged, when Thingol came upon the rear of the Orcs and slew them in heaps, his people lamented him [Denethor] ever after and took no king again. After the battle some returned to Ossiriand, and their tidings filled the remnant of their people with great fear, so that thereafter they came never forth in open war, but kept themselves by wariness and secrecy; and they were called the Laiquendi, the Green-elves, because of their raiment of the colour of leaves. But many went north and entered the guarded realm of Thingol, and were merged with his people.¹⁸

Later, it seems clear that when Tolkien wrote *The Hobbit* he drew upon his earlier stories of the history of Beleriand (which were, after all, unpublished and, for all he knew, likely to remain so). He picked and chose material from his vast body of earlier work for the story of Bilbo and his Dwarven companions. The Wood-elves of *The Hobbit* and their king grew out of the "Silmarillion tradition."¹⁹ The nature of *The Silmarillion* is that it is written largely as a history or chronicle and not, except for parts here and there, in any manner approaching a novelistic style: "The work is a sweeping legendarium, an imagined mythology with all the familiar mythological characters, elements, and themes—creation and transgression, gods and men, love and war, heroism and doom."²⁰

One is never shown how Lenwë and his people lived, what differences that they had developed with the greater part of their Telerin kin, or how they reached their decision to separate from the majority. We have no dialogue or even reports of any discussions. But the conclusion of the telling of the great trek from Cuiviënen to the sea gives one the impression that the Vanyar, the

first to awaken according to the *Cuivienyarna* legend, were single-minded in their purpose even in their earliest days.²¹ The Noldor were contentious and excelled in craft even in those earliest years. Meanwhile, the Nandorin split-off of the Teleri, despite its paucity of detail, is reminiscent of the Wood-elves the dark forest of *The Hobbit*. They do not have the ambition or obsession with craft and intellectual development of the Noldor nor the steadfast piety and devotion to the Valar of Vanyar. They are reclusive and evasive:

There were many people there, elvish-looking folk, all dressed in green and brown and sitting on sawn rings of the felled trees in a great circle. There was a fire in their midst and there were torches fastened to some of the trees round about; but most splendid sight of all: they were eating and drinking and laughing merrily.²²

They were a self-sufficient people and, as Tolkien scholar Corey Olsen explains in his examination of the Nandorin-like elves of *The Hobbit*, "The Wood-elves remain *elves*, and therefore 'Good People,' but the narrator admits that 'if they have a fault it is distrust of strangers,' and also that they are 'more dangerous and less wise' than High Elves such as Elrond's people."²³

Silvan elves (referred to here as Wood-elves) are the descendants of the Nandor of Lenwë and Denethor, and continue to play a role in the history of the Third Age in Middle-earth as recounted in *The Lord of the Rings* and *Unfinished Tales*. They maintain, as did the earlier Nandor, the desire to remain as far as possible from "the affairs of the Noldor and Sindar, or of any other peoples, Dwarves, Men, or Orcs."²⁴ But despite this independence they live along aside and pledge loyalty to the Sindarin lords Oropher and Thranduil in the far-reaching forest of Greenwood the Great when it is later benighted and imperiled under the name of Mirkwood. Silvan elves made up the bulk of the populace of Galadriel and Celeborn's Lothlórien.²⁵ Within Gondor there was a small settlement of Silvan Elves.²⁶ Dol Amroth was the seat of the hereditary rulers of the coastal Belfalas area of Gondor, a region that, incidentally, was home to Silvan Elves from Lórien. This area included, mostly notably, the ancient harbor of Edhellond—the only Elven settlement in Gondor. Readers of *The Lord of the Rings* know of the legend of the origin of the princely line of Dol Amroth, where the story is told of one of their earliest fathers wedding an Elf-maiden of Silvan origin.²⁷

A reader studying the history of Lenwë, his son Denethor, and their Silvan descendants will find they have cast a long shadow over the great events of Middle-earth. Over their long history, they are to be found in many geographically scattered locations of importance in Tolkien's legendarium. Valorous to an extreme, they might appear to have been the metaphorical cannon fodder of a few significant battles. They died in great numbers in the First Battle of Beleriand and they suffered the greatest losses in the War of the Last Alliance of Elves and Men which ended the Second Age with a temporary victory over Sauron. Finally, in the War of the Rings at the end of the Third Age, they served as the troops on the ground supporting Celeborn, Galadriel, and Thranduil in defending Lothlorien, storming and taking Sauron's stronghold of Dol Guldur, and in the cleansing and restoring of Mirkwood from the ravages of Sauron.

The culmination of the tale of the Nandor, however, is uncertain, subject only to speculation. Some Silvan elves, given their reluctance to leave Middle-earth, might have continued to live in the reclaimed Wood of Greenleaves until fading out of history. The same may have been true for others who had dwelt for centuries in Galadriel's Golden Wood. We know that Legolas

brought Silvan Elves from his homeland into Ithilien in Gondor to restore the forests there. Still other Silvan Elves might have sailed to Aman, but their stories are not told.

Works Cited

1. *The War of the Jewels, Quendi and Eldar.*
2. Christopher Tolkien notes that the tale of awakening of the Elves and their very precise numbers and divisions are to be "found in a single typescript with carbon copy. On one copy my father wrote (and similarly but more briefly on the other): 'Actually written (in style and simple notions) to be a surviving Elvish 'fairytale' or child's tale, mingled with counting-lore.'" *The War of the Jewels, Quendi and Eldar.*
3. The famous 144 must be presumed to be an invented number—myth not history. But then Tolkien proceeds to develop names and languages around this origin story which give it that quality of realism which permeates his invented world. His fictional authors mimic in their storytelling his own methods. Unravel that, if you believe you can.
4. *The War of the Jewels, Quendi and Eldar.*
5. *The Silmarillion*, "Of the Coming of the Elves and the Captivity of Melkor."
6. "Ingwë, Finwë, and Elwë were brought to Valinor by Oromë as ambassadors of the Quendi; and they looked upon the Light of the Trees and yearned for it. Returning they counselled the Eldar to go to the Land of Aman, at the summons of the Valar." *The War of the Jewels, Quendi and Eldar.*
7. *Morgoth's Ring, The Annals of Aman*, "The Chaining of Melkor."
8. Ibid.
9. *The War of the Jewels, Quendi and Eldar*, "C. The Clan-names, with notes on other names for divisions of the Eldar."
10. *The Silmarillion*, "Of the Coming of the Elves and the Captivity of Melkor."
11. Ibid.
12. Helge K. Fauskanger, "[Nandorin](#)," *Ardalambion*, accessed 25 February 2018.
13. Angelica, "[Name Calling: Group Identity and the Other among First Age Elves](#)," *The Silmarillion Writers Guild*, accessed 28 February 2018.
14. *The War of the Jewels, Quendi and Eldar.*
15. *The Silmarillion*, "Of the Coming of the Elves and the Captivity of Melkor."
16. *The Silmarillion*, "Index of Names."
17. *The Silmarillion*, "Of the Sindar."
18. *The Silmarillion*, "Of the Sindar."
19. Ibid.
20. John D. Rateliff, *The History of the Hobbit: Mr Baggins and Return to Bag-End* (New York: HarperCollins, 2011), Kindle Edition.
21. Verlyn Flieger, *Splintered Light: Tolkien's World*, Revised Edition (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 2002), Kindle Edition.
22. *The War of the Jewels, Quendi and Eldar.*
23. *The Hobbit*, "Flies and Spiders."
24. Corey Olsen, *Exploring J.R.R. Tolkien's "The Hobbit."* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2012), Kindle Edition.
25. *Unfinished Tales, The History of Galadriel and Celeborn*, "Appendix B, The Sindarin Princes of the Silvan Elves."

About the Author

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