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# Character Biography

## Thranduil

By Scarlet

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The Index of Names in *The Silmarillion* states about Thranduil<sup>1</sup>:

Sindarin Elf, King of the Silvan Elves in the north of Greenwood the Great (Mirkwood); father of Legolas, who was of the Fellowship of the Ring <sup>2</sup>

Thranduil, who is referred to as "the Elvenking" in *The Hobbit*, appears throughout various texts in Tolkien's writings and yet is not well known. However, some overall picture of his character can be deduced from what is said about him directly and in scenes related to him, indirectly.

### Soldier, Son, and Prince: Thranduil's Early History

Thranduil's birthdate is unknown. It can be assumed that he was born sometime during the First Age or before, possibly in Doriath, the Sindarin kingdom in Beleriand, which was ruled by Elu Thingol and his Maian queen, Melian. Early in the Second Age groups of survivors from the ruin of Doriath, crossed the Blue Mountains (Ered Luin) eastwards. According to some of the texts, Oropher, Thranduil's father, led one of these groups, and Thranduil was among them. Other texts lead the reader to conclude that it was Thranduil setting out of Lindon eastward, who led such group.

In the beginning of this age many of the High Elves still remained. Most of these dwelt in Lindon west of the Ered Luin; but before the building of the Barad-dûr many of the Sindar passed eastward. and some established realms in the forests far away, where their people were mostly Silvan Elves. Thranduil, king in the north of Greenwood the Great, was one of these.<sup>3</sup>

...Oropher was of Sindarin origin, and no doubt Thranduil, his son, was following the example of King Thingol long before, in Doriath... <sup>4</sup>

....and they welcomed those of the Noldor and especially the Sindar who did not pass over the Sea but migrated eastward [i.e. at the beginning of the Second Age].<sup>5</sup>

Who were those Elves who welcomed the emigrants?

According to *The Silmarillion* some of the Nandor, the Telerin Elves who abandoned the march of the Eldar on the eastern side of the Misty Mountains, "dwelt age-long in the woods of the Vale of the Great River" ...

In a late etymological discussion of the names of Galadriel, Celeborn, and Lórien the Silvan Elves of Mirkwood and Lórien are specifically declared to be descended from the Telerin Elves who remained in the Vale of Anduin:

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The Silvan Elves (Tawarwaith) were in origin Teleri, and so remoter kin of the Sindar ...

The Silvan Elves hid themselves in woodland fastnesses beyond the Misty Mountains, and became small and scattered people, hardly to be distinguished from Avari;

but they still remembered that they were in origin Eldar<sup>6</sup>, members of the Third Clan, and they welcomed those of the Noldor and especially the Sindar who did not pass over the Sea but migrated eastward [i.e. at the beginning of the Second Age]. Under the leadership of these they became again ordered folk and increased in wisdom.<sup>5</sup>

Oropher, who became the king of the Silvan Elves of Greenwood, made his first home in Amon Lanc (The Naked Hill), near Lórien, but moved northward twice to get some distance from the Noldorin influence of Galadriel in Lórien and the increase of power and influence of the Dwarves from Moria. Nevertheless, throughout the Second Age, there was constant connection between the elves from Greenwood and Lórien.

In the Second Age their king, Oropher [the father of Thranduil, father of Legolas], had withdrawn northward beyond the Gladden Fields. This he did to be free from the power and encroachments of the Dwarves of Moria, which had grown to be the greatest of the mansions of the Dwarves recorded in history; and also he resented the intrusions of Celeborn and Galadriel into Lórien. But as yet there was little to fear between the Greenwood and the Mountains and there was constant intercourse between his people and their kin across the river, until the War of the Last Alliance.<sup>4</sup>

Thranduil's father, Oropher, was an Elf of Sindarin origin, but nothing is known of his mother.

However, based on Thranduil's description from *The Hobbit*, he may have had Vanyarin ancestors among his family roots. He had golden hair, which was the most distinguishing trait of the Vanyar, but not a common trait among the Sindar:

... and at the head of a long line of feasters sat a woodland king with a crown of leaves upon his golden hair ...<sup>7</sup>

The name (singular Vanya) means 'the Fair', referring to the golden hair of the Vanyar...<sup>2</sup>

Elwë himself had indeed long and beautiful hair of silver hue, but this does not seem to have been a common feature of the Sindar, though it was found among them occasionally, especially in the nearer or remoter kin of Elwë (as in the case of Círdan). In general the Sindar appear to have very closely resembled the Exiles, being dark-haired...<sup>8</sup>

In *The Hobbit*, it is said about Thranduil (although he is never mentioned by his name, only referred to as *the Elvenking*), that he was "their greatest king." During the Third Age, Thranduil is the only one who carries the title *king* among the Elves. But during the Second Age there were other kings who ruled the Silvan to compare with: Oropher his own father, and Amdir and Amroth from Lothlórien.

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In a great cave some miles within the edge of Mirkwood on its eastern side there lived at this time their greatest king.<sup>7</sup>

The events of the Third Age, when Thranduil was the ruling king of his people, reveal a strong charismatic, wise leader, who despite his own fears and worries, was able to guide his people, survive hard trials, and emerge in one piece at the end of the age, providing his people with a renewed realm at peace with its neighbors.

### ***"Their Greatest King": Thranduil the Elvenking***

Thranduil's father, Oropher, understood that no peace could last while Sauron remained undefeated. For this reason he took a large army and together with Malgalad<sup>9</sup> of Lórien joined the Last Alliance with the Noldor, the survivors of Númenor, and the Dwarves, in Mordor. Even so, things did not work out smoothly. It was said about the Silvan Elves that

The Silvan Elves were hardy and valiant, but ill-equipped with armour or weapons in comparison with the Eldar of the West; also they were independent, and not disposed to place themselves under the supreme command of Gil-galad. Their losses were thus more grievous than they need have been, even in that terrible war. Malgalad and more than half his following perished in the great battle of the Dagorlad, being cut off from the main host and driven into the Dead Marshes. Oropher was slain in the first assault upon Mordor, rushing forward at the head of his most doughty warriors before Gil-galad had given the signal for the advance. Thranduil his son survived, but when the war ended and Sauron was slain (as it seemed) he led back home barely a third of the army that had marched to war.<sup>4</sup>

Thranduil, now the king, returned home to a forest full of life and light, a home where he and his surviving warriors could heal from the horrors of the war and the massive loss of their kin. That home was the great forest Greenwood the Great.

A long peace followed in which the numbers of the Silvan Elves grew again ...<sup>4</sup>

Now of old the name of that forest was Greenwood the Great, and its wide halls and aisles were the haunt of many beasts and of birds of bright song; and there was the realm of King Thranduil under the oak and the beech.<sup>10</sup>

But even though there was peace (which lasted for about a thousand years, until 1050), the Silvan Elves were restless, sensing the changes that would come with the new age. Thranduil himself, who was never able to forget the horrors of the last war, lived in constant fear from the moment when the enemy will return and gain power once again.

... but they were unquiet and anxious, feeling the change of the world that the Third Age would bring. Men also were increasing in numbers and in power. The dominion of the Númenórean kings of Gondor was reaching out northwards towards the borders of Lórien and the Greenwood. The Free Men of the North (so called by the Elves because they were not under the rule of Dúnedain, and had not for the most part been subjected by Sauron or his servants) were spreading southwards: mostly east of the Greenwood, though some were establishing themselves in the eaves of the forest and the grasslands of the Vales of Anduin. More ominous were rumours from the further East: the Wild Men were restless. Former servants and worshippers of Sauron, they were released now

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from his tyranny, but not from the evil and darkness that he had set in their hearts. Cruel wars raged among them, from which some were withdrawing westward, with minds filled with hatred, regarding all that dwelt in the West as enemies to be slain and plundered. But there was in Thranduil's heart a still deeper shadow. He had seen the horror of Mordor and could not forget it. If ever he looked south its memory dimmed the light of the Sun, and though he knew that it was now broken and deserted and under the vigilance of the Kings of Men, fear spoke in his heart that it was not conquered for ever: it would arise again.<sup>4</sup>

And indeed, in 1050 of the Third Age, shadow crawled into the forest, taking hold of Amon Lanc in the south, where once Oropher's ancient dwelling was. The place became a stronghold of the darkness known as Dol Guldur (Hill of Sorcery). No doubt this could not have been easy for Thranduil. The forest became dark and men began to call it Taur-nu-Fuin (translated *Mirkwood*): forest under night.<sup>11, 12</sup>

What does "the forest became dark" mean? In *The Hobbit* there are several descriptive passages for these horrors: giant talking spiders, who hung the mummified dwarves by their cobweb and with whom Bilbo had to use Sting to fight; orcs who later, near the end of the Ring War, set the woods on fire and invaded the woodland realm; and scary fauna such as the black squirrels, large bats, and black butterflies that Bilbo saw.

The shadow that crept into the forest was first thought to be a Nazgûl. But in 2060 the Wise (a group which included Mithrandir, Curunír, Elrond, Galadriel, Círdan, and other lords of the Eldar) began to suspect that it might be Sauron taking shape again. Gandalf went into Dol Guldur to check that suspicion, and Sauron, who indeed was the dweller of the place and still not strong enough, fled east. The Elves in the forest had about 400 years of a watchful peace, which ended in 2460, when Sauron returned with increased force. In 2850 Gandalf came once more to Dol Guldur and found that Sauron had collected by then all the seven rings of the Dwarf lords, in addition to the Nine with which he controlled his Nazgûl. It was only in 2941 that the White Council (a council of the Wise, of which Thranduil is not mentioned as one of its members) drove Sauron away from Mirkwood to Mordor.<sup>12</sup>

It is likely that the darkness which ruined parts of the forest, hurt not only the trees but also the water, resulting in scarcer game fewer resources for the Elves to live upon. It is hinted in *The Hobbit* that the slow degradation of resources over the long years, combined with the spreading of Men's power and influence, and the fight for their survival against growing evil affected them deeply, and they became suspicious and hard.

If they have a fault it is distrust of strangers. ... and they wandered in the great forests that grew tall in lands that are now lost. They dwelt most often by the edges of the woods, from which they could escape at times to hunt, or to ride and run over the open lands by moonlight or starlight; and after the coming of Men they took ever more and more to the gloaming and the dusk.<sup>7</sup>

Faced with indescribable darkness, the Elves and their king retreated until at last a new palace was delved in the ground, after the example of Menegroth (the Thousands Caves), the seat of the king in ancient Doriath. A cave it might have been, but the place was filled with life and light. The Silvan Elves did not only fight during the long years of the Third Age, but also knew how to celebrate.

... when a thousand years of the Third Age had passed and the Shadow fell upon Greenwood the Great,

the Silvan Elves ruled by Thranduil retreated before it as it spread ever northward, until at last Thranduil established his realm in the north-east of the forest and delved there a fortress and great halls underground. Oropher was of Sindarin origin, and no doubt Thranduil his son was following the example of King Thingol long before, in Doriath; though his halls were not to be compared with Menegroth. He had not the arts nor wealth nor the aid of the Dwarves; and compared with the Elves of Doriath his Silvan folk were rude and rustic. Oropher had come among them with only a handful of Sindar ...<sup>4</sup>

... but it was lighter and more wholesome than any goblin-dwelling, and neither so deep nor so dangerous.<sup>7</sup>

Inside the passages were lit with red torch-light, and the elf-guards sang as they marched along the twisting, crossing, and echoing paths. These were not like those of the goblin-cities: they were smaller, less deep underground, and filled with a cleaner air. In a great hall with pillars hewn out of the living stone sat the Elvenking on a chair of carven wood.<sup>13</sup>

The elvish folk were passing bowls from hand to hand and across the fires, and some were harping and many were singing. Their gloaming hair was twined with flowers; green and white gems glinted on their collars and their belts; and their faces and their songs were filled with mirth. Loud and clear and fair were those songs ...<sup>7</sup>

As a matter of fact there was a great autumn feast in the woods that night, and in the halls above. Nearly all the king's folks were merrymaking.<sup>13</sup>

So, when Thorin Oakenshield and the Dwarves of his company were captured during one of the Elves' feasts, they were not welcomed. In fact, when Thranduil questioned them and they refused to answer, he imprisoned them. As explained in *The Hobbit*, the Elves thought of the Dwarves as the enemy. *The Silmarillion* tells us about the origin of the ancient grudge against the Dwarves. The Dwarves commissioned by the Elvenking of Doriath to set a Silmaril in the necklace Nauglamír and slayed him in an argument over possession of the jewel. Thranduil, a Sindarin Elf, remembered this detail from the history of Doriath.

Then the lust of the Dwarves was kindled to rage by the words of the King; and they rose up about him, and laid hands on him, and slew him as he stood. So died in the deep places of Menegroth Elwë Singollo, King of Doriath, who alone of all the Children of Ilúvatar was joined with one of the Ainur; and he who, alone of the Forsaken Elves, had seen the light of the Trees of Valinor, with his last sight gazed upon the Silmaril.<sup>14</sup>

This grudge is not much different from what is mentioned in regard to another Elf of the Sindar, about whom it was specifically said:

Celeborn had no liking for Dwarves of any race (as he showed to Gimli in Lothlórien), and never forgave them for their part in the destruction of Doriath ...<sup>15</sup>

That memory may have been a partial reason for Thranduil's treatment of Thorin's company, even though these Dwarves were not related to the ones from Doriath. Another reason is

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explained by looking at Thranduil's questions to the Dwarves. It is obvious that he was worried about their purpose at being in his realm at such perilous times. Having to be on guard for nearly 500 years (the number of years that had passed between the end of the Watchful Peace and the time the Dwarves were captured) certainly was reason for such questioning.

"Why did you and your folk three times try to attack my people at their merrymaking?" asked the king.<sup>7</sup>

Such a question of course made the king angrier than ever, and he answered: "It is a crime to wander in my realm without leave. Do you forget that you were in my kingdom, using the road that my people made? Did you not three times pursue and trouble my people in the forest and 'rouse the spiders with your riot and clamour? After all the disturbance you have made I have a right to know what brings you here ..."<sup>13</sup>

### Thranduil the Treasure Collector? Traits of the Elvenking

*The Hobbit* tells us that, "If the elf-king had a weakness it was for treasure, especially for silver and white gems." It adds that the king always wanted to increase his treasure, because although he had plenty, it was not yet as much as the elf-lords of old used to have. The Wood Elves did not work the land, mined or worked metals or jewels, nor did they trade.<sup>7</sup> It seems that they didn't have any income source, so it is safe to assume that all their needs were purchased with the king's treasure, namely the realm treasury.

This weakness might be the reason why Thranduil is viewed as greedy in the eyes of some readers. However, that is not the evidence reflected by the texts: Thranduil set out towards the Lonely Mountain, hoping to get some of the Dragon's gold, but deviated from his path in order to provide help to his hurt neighbors. He refused to fight for gold and showed his concern to the safety of Bilbo, a messenger of his enemy, when the latter offered some leverage in the shape of a treasure he did not own.

When Thranduil heard that the dragon Smaug was slain, he started to march with an army towards the Lonely Mountain, as he knew of the wealth of Thrór, the last Dwarven king under the mountain, which the Dragon took. While on his way, messengers sent from the ruined Esgaroth, the town of Men which was burned by the dragon, reached him, begging for help for their wounded and starving people. Thranduil turned from his course, sending aid before him over the river.

But the king, when he received the prayers of Bard, had pity ... but great store of goods he sent ahead by water ...<sup>16</sup>

After leaving food, medicines, and some of his Elves to help the people of Esgaroth, Thranduil and the rest of his army, together with Bard and his men went on towards the mountain. At that point they both believed that the Dwarves did not survive. Soon they learned of their mistake and negotiations nearly ended with a clash between the Dwarves on one side and the Elves and Men on the other. Near the end of what was believed to be failing negotiations, Bard tried to persuade Thranduil to attack before the Dwarves had time to fully prepare. But Thranduil, who had suffered much loss in his time, had a different set of priorities, and he told Bard:

But the Elvenking said: "Long will I tarry, ere I begin this war for gold".<sup>17</sup>

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This near calamity ended when the goblins and the wargs appeared. Gandalf was able to remind the rivals that they had a common enemy, and so the Battle of the Five Armies was fought and won with the Men, Elves, and Dwarves as allies.

Twice Bilbo and Thranduil have meaningful encounters, each one revealing a new side of the king's personality. The first was when Thranduil and Bard laid siege on the Dwarves fortified under the mountain. Bilbo snuck to the camp of Thranduil and Bard during the night, hoping to find some way to end the siege. He offered Bard the Arkenstone, a great jewel prized by Thorin, as leverage. Thranduil was awed by the jewel, but he also worried about Bilbo's fate when Thorin discovered what Bilbo had done. He tried to persuade Bilbo to stay with them, for his own safety.

The Elvenking looked at Bilbo with a new wonder. "Bilbo Baggins!" he said. "You are more worthy to wear the armour of elf-princes than many that have looked more comely in it. But I wonder if Thorin Oakenshield will see it so. I have more knowledge of dwarves in general than you have perhaps. I advise you to remain with us, and here you shall be honoured and thrice welcome."<sup>18</sup>

On their way home, Thranduil and Bilbo had a second illustrative exchange. At the point where their path parted, Bilbo offered Thranduil a gift of a necklace made of silver and pearls. When Thranduil questioned why Bilbo offered this gift, Bilbo confessed to have been an uninvited guest at the king's halls, using his food and wine. Thranduil accepted the gift, but before they parted he added humorously:

"I will take your gift, O Bilbo the Magnificent!" said the king gravely. "And I name you elf-friend and blessed. **May your shadow never grow less (or stealing would be too easy)! Farewell!**"<sup>19</sup> [emphasis added]

Thranduil proved to be a team player. He was willing to accept the responsibility for Gollum, the odd creature that was brought to him, under Gandalf's advise. He imprisoned Gollum and showed him kindness as Gandalf asked. When Gollum escaped, Thranduil, accepting responsibility, sent Legolas, his son, to Imladris, to report the escape to Gandalf. It turned out that the Council of Elrond was being held in Imladris at the same time, and Legolas was chosen to be one of the Fellowship of the Ring.<sup>20</sup>

### The Fate and Legacy of Thranduil

Thranduil's last recorded valiant stand was part of the War of the Ring. The "Tale of the Years" in *The Lord of the Rings* tells us of a desperate battle under the trees, in which the forces of Dol Guldur invaded Thranduil's realm. At the same time, in other parts of Middle-earth, Frodo was struggling to reach Mount Doom, Minas Tirith was fighting for its survival against Sauron's forces. In Dale, Men and Dwarves stood together against the Easterlings. The One Ring was destroyed. In Lórien, three attacks were repelled, after which Dol Guldur was taken and Galadriel threw down its walls and laid bare its pits.

The Battle under the Trees was hard and long, and much of the forest was ruined, but in the end, Thranduil prevailed. After the battle, on the Elven new year, Thranduil and Celeborn met, renamed the forest, and divided it between themselves and the woodsmen. This last act of collaboration might be viewed as an expression of the desire for peace. After the war was over

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Legolas returned to his homeland and, with his father's approval, took some of their people to south Gondor, where they restored the forest of Ithilien to its former beauty, and health.

In the North also there had been war and evil. The realm of Thranduil was invaded, and there was long battle under the trees and great ruin of fire; but in the end Thranduil had the victory.<sup>21</sup>

And on the day of the New Year of the Elves Celeborn and Thranduil met in the midst of the forest; and they renamed Mirkwood Eryn Lasgalen, The Wood of Greenleaves. Thranduil took all the northern region as far as the mountains that rise in the forest for his realm; and Celeborn took the southern wood below the Narrows, and named it East Lórien; all the wide forest between was given to the Beornings and the Woodmen.<sup>21</sup>

It is important to note that Thranduil was the only leader of a major Elven realm that fought actively against the enemy in the Third Age who did not have a Ring of Power. In Imladris, Elrond held Vilya, the Ring of Air. In Lothlórien, Galadriel had Nenya, the Ring of Water, and Gandalf was given Narya, the Ring of Fire by Círdan when he first arrived in Middle-earth. The lack of a Ring of Power must have made the battles against darkness much harder for Thranduil and his people, but it is also reasonable to assume it is what allowed them to live on untroubled after the war. When the War of the Ring ended, and with it the Third Age, the Rings lost their power when the One Ring was destroyed. Their bearers became weary from the long years of using the Rings and sailed west. Imladris and Lothlórien both lost the magic influence of the Rings and started to fade, but

In the Greenwood the Silvan Elves remained untroubled.<sup>21</sup>

Tolkien's writings do not recount the fate of Thranduil.

Personal Note: I'd like to offer a "happy ending" to this character that I admire. However, there's no simple or easy solution to the question of "what is a happy end" in Tolkien's universe, which is full of philosophical and moral inner debates. The West is considered Elven home, but it is a foreign land to the natives of Middle-earth, and there's no guarantee that those who passed west are happy in their new dwelling. On the other hand, Middle-earth had become the home of Men, and it is assumed that those Elves who remained, are fated to fade. Therefore, it is best to leave the end obscure, and allow each reader to imagine his or her own image of happy ending.

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## Notes

Thanks to [IgnobleBard](#) for editing this article, and for his support.

Oropher, Thranduil's father is mentioned only in the *Unfinished Tales*. Although that may raise a question as for the character's existence or his deeds, that is a subject for separate research, and has no direct bearing over this article.



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## Works Cited

1. *Parma Eldalamberon*, Issue 17, P. 187. The meaning of the name Thranduil is 'vigorous spring':  
"THAR-, vigour, only in Sindarin. tharan, vigorous, theria-, be vigorous, flourish. Hence th(a)randuil 'vigorous spring', a name. [D59.]"
2. *The Silmarillion*, "Index of Names."
3. *The Lord of the Rings*, "Appendix B, Tale of Years of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Age."
4. *Unfinished Tales, Part 2: The 2<sup>nd</sup> Age*, "Appendix B, The Sindarin Princes Of The Silvan Elves."
5. *Unfinished Tales, Part 2: The 2<sup>nd</sup> Age*, "Appendix A, The Silvan Elves And Their Speech."
6. *The Silmarillion*, "Index of Names.": It is said about the Eldar:  
"According to Elvish legend the name Eldar 'People of the Stars' was given to all the Elves by the Vala Oromë. It came however to be used to refer only to the Elves of the Three Kindreds (Vanyar, Noldor, and Teleri) who set out on the great westward march from Cuiviënen (whether or not they remained in Middle-earth), and to exclude the Avari."
7. *The Hobbit*, "Flies and Spiders."
8. *The History of Middle-earth: The War of the Jewels, Quendi And Eldar*, "The Clan-names."
9. *Unfinished Tales* Part 2: The 2<sup>nd</sup> Age, "Appendix B, The Sindarin Princes Of The Silvan Elves.": Christopher Tolkien opines that Malgalad and Amdir refer to the same character, based on context:  
Malgalad of Lórien occurs nowhere else, and is not said here to be the father of Amroth. On the other hand, Amdir father of Amroth is twice (pp. 252 and 255 above) said to have been slain in the Battle of Dagorlad, and it seems therefore that Malgalad can be simply equated with Amdir. But which name replaced the other I cannot say.
10. *The Silmarillion, Of the Rings of Power and The 3<sup>rd</sup> Age*.
11. *Unfinished Tales, Part 2: The 2<sup>nd</sup> Age*, "The Disaster of the Gladden Fields, The sources of the legend of Isildur's death," note #12.
12. *The Lord of the Rings*, "Appendix B, Tale of Years, The 3<sup>rd</sup> Age."
13. *The Hobbit*, "Barrels out of Bonds."
14. *The Silmarillion*, "Of the Ruin of Doriath."
15. *Unfinished Tales, Part 2: The 2<sup>nd</sup> Age, Concerning Galadriel and Celeborn*.
16. *The Hobbit*, "Fire and Water."
17. *The Hobbit*, "The Clouds Burst."
18. *The Hobbit*, "A Thief in the Night."
19. *The Hobbit*, "The Return Journey."
20. *The Lord of the Rings*, "The Council of Elrond."
21. *Lord of the Rings*, "Appendix B, The Great Years."

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## **About the Author**

Scarlet first discovered Tolkien in the mid '80s. The published books *Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit* were favorably accepted. But it was *The Silmarillion* after which she became addicted, and was never cured. It is a malady to which she hopes to be subjected at least till Dagor Dagorath (the final battle at the end of the world).

The article about the character of Thranduil, is her first dip into the waters of writing.