Character Biography
Dorlas

By Himring

Dorlas features in the section of the *Tale of the Children of Húrin* that is set in the forest of Brethil. Dorlas’s role is as the chief opponent of Brandir’s rule among the Haladin and a source of problematic advice—or even, depending on the reader’s point of view, disastrous advice—to Túrin, son of Húrin, the protagonist of the tale.

In the history of the Legendarium, Dorlas emerged relatively late, at least as a named character. Tolkien introduced Dorlas at a time when he was expanding the earlier versions of the *Tale of the Children of Húrin* in general and the Brethil chapters in particular to achieve the more novelistic treatment that we see in the *Narn i Hîn Húrin* in the *Unfinished Tales*. The germ of some of the sentiments and actions attributed to Dorlas, however, goes back the earliest version of the tale, *Turambar and the Foalókë*, in *Book of the Lost Tales 2*, in which they were attributed to unnamed characters or people in general.

The following account is chiefly based on the *Narn i Hîn Húrin* in the *Unfinished Tales*. This is virtually identical to the version in *The Children of Húrin* and much more extensive than the chapter in the *Silmarillion* (“Of Túrin Turambar”), which here represents a condensed version.¹

Dorlas is one of the Edain of the First Age, a Man of the people of the Haladin who live in the forest of Brethil, in a community traditionally led by the House of Haleth. At the time of Túrin’s arrival in Brethil, the scion of that House is Brandir,² who has succeeded his father Handir, a staunch fighter, who had fallen a year before in battle against the orcs. Brandir himself, however, is not a warrior like his father. He is physically disabled by his lameness and peace-loving by temperament. On the other hand, he is skilled in healing and in lore of the wood and the living things and has a reputation for wisdom.

Dorlas, it is clear almost from the start, fully appreciates the heroism of warriors. He is in no way willing to appreciate equally the unwarlike strengths that characterize Brandir. In Tolkien’s late text *The Wanderings of Húrin*, it appears that Tolkien envisages Dorlas as associated with a rival branch of the House of Haleth, represented by Hardang, son of Hundad, and apparently opposing Brandir’s father Handir as well as Brandir himself on those grounds. Although it is difficult to provide clinching evidence, because the *Narn i Hîn Húrin* is very much focussed on Túrin’s fate rather than the history of Brethil, this looks a lot like a late reinterpretation. The Dorlas of *Narn i Hîn Húrin* appears to oppose Brandir precisely because he thinks him unworthy of his ancestors; there seems to be no hint that this might include Handir, whose fighting qualities clearly left nothing to be desired.³

The late version that makes Dorlas Hardang’s friend is not entirely easy to square with the character as represented in the *Narn i Hîn Húrin* on other counts. Hardang’s branch of the House of Haleth is said to be opposed to any influence of the House of Hador in Brethil, but the Dorlas of *Narn i Hîn Húrin* is quite the opposite, very much an overeager supporter of Túrin, although he knows that Túrin is a scion of the House of Hador. Also, the suggestion that Hardang and Dorlas opposed the succession of Brandir politically relies on the idea that

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leadership among the Haladin was partly elective (i.e. any scion of the House of Haleth could theoretically be elected), but this also looks like a very late revision. In the *Narn i Hîn Hûrin*, although it is not explicitly stated, the impression given is certainly that Brandir succeeded as a matter of course and had a right to expect loyalty from Dorlas, while Dorlas probably thought of Brandir as unfit to rule from the start, but had no legal option to oppose his succession or withhold his allegiance. Compare Hunthor’s comment later on, when he accuses Dorlas of disrespect and disobedience towards "his liege."

However, any assumptions about Brandir’s succession and relations between Brandir and Dorlas at the start of Brandir’s rule (at least as far as the *Narn* is concerned) must be deduced from what is said or what passes after the arrival of Túrin in Brethil, as the reader is only introduced to Dorlas at the point when Túrin meets him. And even at that first meeting, we apparently see Dorlas and other Haladin disobeying Brandir’s orders, although the reader’s attention is not immediately drawn to their disobedience—it is only a later comment by Hunthor that suggests that Dorlas’s history of disrespect is a long one. However, we first see Dorlas and his companions in a highly dangerous situation, which seems to have arisen as a consequence of their failing to follow Brandir’s policy of withdrawing deeper into the forest and avoiding confrontations. In their subsequent conversation with Túrin, Dorlas reports another occasion when apparently they did not follow Brandir’s policy of non-involvement: the attempt to free the prisoners of Nargothrond, which ended with the death of Finduilas and other prisoners.

Dorlas and his companions are fighting orcs when Túrin encounters them. Túrin lends them decisive support, single-handedly, throwing the orcs into disarray with a ruse, the pretence that he is leading reinforcements to their aid. It is no wonder that Túrin’s daring and tactical thinking wins the gratitude and admiration of Dorlas and the other Haladin who are with him. That admiration is only reinforced when later Dorlas deduces from Túrin’s reaction to news of the death of Finduilas that their saviour is identical with the Mormegil of Nargothrond. As Mormegil, in Nargothrond, Túrin pursued a course that was diametrically opposed to Orodreth’s earlier policy for Nargothrond and to Brandir’s policy for Brethil. The consideration that Nargothrond was destroyed soon after does not appear to give Dorlas pause, now or later, nor to others of the Haladin who think like him.

Dorlas’s tendency to act against Brandir’s policy does not at first seem inexcusable, but even in its early stages, his involvement appears ominous. The attempt to try and free the prisoners of Nargothrond is both courageous and altruistic (and indeed, we are not told whether this particular action was opposed by Brandir). There is just a hint in Dorlas’s words that pride may also have been a motivation: "we thought to deal our small stroke in the war." In any case, the outcome was disastrous, as the prisoners were killed before they could be freed. It is, of course, not at all certain that Túrin would have done better than Dorlas and his followers, even if he had arrived earlier on the scene.

While Dorlas mostly reports the failed rescue attempt to Túrin using the plural noun we, he says Finduilas’s last words were addressed specifically to him. This appears to confirm that Dorlas was the leader of the Haladin on this occasion. Dorlas’s reactions to Finduilas’s death, and to Túrin’s grief on learning of it, appear entirely sympathetic at this point. While Dorlas’s sympathy is not invalidated by his later behaviour, it does reveal that he is more inclined to pity the sufferings of those for whom he has admiration.
This chain of events leads to Dorlas and his companions carrying Túrin into the heart of Brethil in the deadly swoon into which he has fallen on hearing of Finduilas’s death. Brandir, who has a strong premonition of disaster at the sight of Túrin, protests at this, but Dorlas and his companions disbelieve Brandir’s warnings, placing more confidence in Túrin’s reputation than Brandir’s premonitions. Thereupon Brandir takes Túrin into his care and eventually heals him, but he is yielding to their admonition to aid a victim and to his healer’s ethic, not to their expectations of good fortune from Túrin’s future aid.

When Túrin awakens from long unconsciousness, he attempts to reinvent himself once again, taking on a new name (Turambar) to shake off both his errors and their consequences and his doom. This attempt is partial, arguably superficial, and seems destined to fail from the beginning as earlier such attempts did. But it is Dorlas, who reminds Túrin of his identity—not only as the Mormegil of Nargothrond, but also of his true identity as Túrin, son of Húrin.

When questioned by Dorlas, Túrin half admits that he is indeed the son of Húrin, but begs Dorlas to conceal his identity in the name of friendship. The request turns out to be just as futile as trying to shed the identity of Mormegil is, because other inhabitants of Brethil, including Brandir, are aware of the rumours that the Mormegil of Nargothrond was Túrin, son of Húrin, as well. However, the scene also shows Túrin regards Dorlas as a trusted friend. This is ironic, both because Dorlas is already abetting Túrin in repeating some of his errors in Nargothrond, and even more because Dorlas will eventually betray Túrin, even by his own standards.

Túrin and Dorlas, with a few others, begin to undermine Brandir’s authority, by attacking orcs on the border of Brethil. The narrative now makes entirely clear that this activity contravenes Brandir’s known wishes—and that Brandir, at least, sees Túrin as repeating earlier mistakes and warns him of this. Túrin mainly turns a deaf ear, but at first infringes on Brandir’s orders only to a limited extent, finding reasons and excuses for what he does. He will never at any point really acknowledge the extent to which he gradually undermines Brandir, as he had already undermined Orodreth and Gwindor in Nargothrond, although his usurpation of power in Brethil will grow increasingly blatant over time. Dorlas, however, is apparently acting rather more consciously in this.

The arrival of Níniel (Niënor) in Brethil puts such activities of Túrin’s on hold for a while, as Túrin stays at home, in the heart of Brethil, for her sake. Dorlas’s presence does not entirely fade away even during Túrin and Níniel’s courtship, however. Once again, he is the one who reveals Túrin’s identity as Mormegil, this time to Níniel. He probably hopes that she will also encourage Túrin to fight, but although she is proud of Túrin’s prowess, Dorlas’s hope is not realized.

Eventually it is Dorlas who persuades Túrin and others to take up fighting against the orc attacks again. When Túrin hesitates, for Níniel’s sake, and the woodmen are defeated without him, Dorlas upbraids him, showing his wounds to him and reproaching him for neglecting his obligations. He makes the kind of demand for aid that Túrin finds impossible to resist. Dorlas is not, by his own lights, unjustified, as the orcs are now seriously threatening to invade Brethil. However, Túrin’s victory against this orc invasion will bring Glaurung on the scene.

It is at this point that Dorlas’s words and actions entirely cease to be ambiguous and defensible. When Túrin in a general assembly asks for volunteers against the dragon, Dorlas volunteers immediately, showing praiseworthy courage or rashness, depending on one’s point of view. But when others, understandably, hesitate, he resorts to openly insulting Brandir, who has already
been repeatedly bypassed and ignored by Túrin during these proceedings, blaming him for his past counsels and for his failure to take part in the attack on Glaurung:

Dorlas upbraided the people, and spoke scorn of Brandir, who could not play the part of the heir of the house of Haleth; and Brandir was shamed before his people, and was bitter at heart.\textsuperscript{14}

In the \textit{Narn}, Dorlas says:

‘Will none of you take the place of the son of Handir, that the House of Haleth be not put to shame?’\textsuperscript{15}

The implied accusation of cowardice is the more insulting as Brandir is not even directly addressed. Túrin fails to rebuke Dorlas, to Brandir’s resentment, and it falls to Hunthor, Brandir’s kinsman, to admonish Dorlas that Brandir does not deserve to be humiliated for being physically unable to assist in attacking the dragon and point out that Dorlas has so consistently disregarded Brandir’s counsels that he can hardly claim that they are now disproved.\textsuperscript{16} Hunthor shows foresight or superior insight, warning Dorlas that he may not be as courageous as he supposes and should cast no aspersions on others’ courage. Hunthor then volunteers in Brandir’s place, and it is only at this point, far too late, that Túrin attempts to appease Brandir, still without rebuking Dorlas.

Hunthor’s warning comes true. When Túrin, Dorlas, and Hunthor reach Nen Girith and further details of Túrin’s plan of attack on Glaurung are revealed, Dorlas finds himself confronting a danger he did not anticipate: a river crossing that he knows and fears. Although he uses his local knowledge to guide the others part of the way, he fails the test, for he is too afraid to even attempt the crossing and thus never comes within striking distance of the dragon. Not only does he remain behind at the crossing, he then hides in the woods in shame and thus fails to witness the outcome for his companions and the death of the dragon.\textsuperscript{17}

When the narrative turns back to Niniel and Brandir, it is revealed that Dorlas is in fact married to a wife who loves him and fears for him, who has not been mentioned before, throwing the risks Dorlas was willing to take with Brethil’s future and his eventual failure in its defense into even sharper relief, perhaps. However, his wife turns out to be of a rather similar temperament to Dorlas himself: she also disobeys Brandir, dislikes him, and opposes him.

Brandir, following Niniel, manages the climb up to Glaurung and Túrin—thus disproving all of Dorlas’s earlier accusations, as he does not yet know Túrin succeeded and the dragon is dying. He witnesses the harrowing scene in which Niniel learns Túrin’s true identity and her own and commits suicide. Shaken and grieving, on his return he encounters Dorlas in the woods.\textsuperscript{18}

During this encounter Dorlas, rather than being humbled by his failure, becomes even more aggressive towards Brandir, trying to shift the blame onto anyone except himself. Brandir guesses the rest, after Dorlas’s partial confession, and reproaches Dorlas for deserting Túrin, but even more for failing even to bring news that might have saved Niniel. Dorlas responds with further insults and tries to hit him, expecting Brandir to fail to retaliate but, to his surprise, Brandir, beside himself and no longer the peaceable man Dorlas thinks he knows, draws the sword that he never got a chance to use to defend Niniel and kills him.
Thus Dorlas ends outmatched in every way by the man he owed allegiance to, whom he underrated, undermined, and insulted—but he has also, by his relentless goading, pushed a wise and gentle man into committing manslaughter.

His legacy lives on after him, in the attitude of the Haladin that Brandir tells the news of Níniel’s death and Túrin’s supposed death to. These are people who have already disobeyed Brandir before by coming so close to the dragon. Now, instead of trying to make sense of what he tells them, some call him mad and are ready to turn on him and insult him when Túrin turns out to be alive after all. It is the words of Dorlas’s wife that trigger Túrin’s fatal reaction. He attacks Brandir verbally and, when Brandir refuses to back down, kills him.10

In the late addition to the Legendarium that has already been mentioned above,20 it appears that Dorlas and his wife also had a son, Ávranc. Ávranc is embroiled in the disaster that ensues on Húrin’s arrival in Brethil, after his release from Angband. He supports Hardang, Brandir’s successor in a series of complex events that include Hardang’s mistreatment and threatening of Húrin and the death of Hardang and culminates in Ávranc shooting Manthor, Brandir’s and Hardang’s cousin, who sided with Húrin, so that by this last death the House of Haleth in Brethil becomes extinct. Thus, in this late addition to the Legendarium, the involvement of Dorlas and his family continues to be ominous for Húrin and his children and fatal for the House of Haleth.

As already mentioned above, Dorlas as a character was introduced at a late stage. In the early version of the tale, Turambar and the Foalókë, the character corresponding to Brandir, Tamar, does indeed have scorn poured on him for his physical disability and for his inability to fight by his own people, but Tamar is not a leader, so this scorn is not political opposition, although no less cruel, and Tamar never kills anyone. Also, there are six unnamed woodmen who desert Turambar, the character who corresponds to Túrin, during his attack on the dragon, but, unlike Dorlas, three of these return to him later, after the dragon is dead, to carry him to shelter.21

Dorlas was introduced as a named character to fill such unnamed earlier roles during a stage when Tolkien was revising the events in Brethil so that they eventually came to mirror more closely the previous events in Nargothrond and Dor-Cuarthol, showing how Túrin, despite his attempts at self-reinvention, can no more change himself than a leopard can change his spots. Although there is no precise correspondence between Dorlas himself and any character in the earlier episodes set in Nargothrond and Dor-Cuarthol, the invention of Dorlas is clearly part and parcel of this series of revisions.
Works Cited

1. For an account of the relationship between the published versions of the story in The Silmarillion, The Unfinished Tales, and The Children of Húrin, see the section The Composition of the Text in the Appendix of The Children of Húrin, and also Douglas C. Kane, Arda Reconstructed: The Creation of the Published Silmarillion (Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, 2009).

2. See my biography of Brandir for a more detailed treatment of Brandir and his background.

3. The War of the Jewels, Wanderings of Húrin. Compare also Christopher Tolkien's notes on this group of texts, which include mention of a late name change to Darlas (note 55).

4. Dorlas's later question "Will none of you take the place of the son of Handir, that the House of Haleth be not put to shame?" suggests to me that it is Handir's example that is not being lived up to, rather than Handir being included in his criticism (see Unfinished Tales, Narn i Hîn Húrin, "The Coming of Glaурung").

5. Unfinished Tales, Narn i Hîn Húrin, "The Coming of Glaурung."

6. Unfinished Tales, Narn i Hîn Húrin, "The Coming of Túrin into Brethil." The following discussion follows this chapter closely, for the most part, except where indicated otherwise.


8. Unfinished Tales, Narn i Hîn Húrin, "The Coming of Túrin into Brethil."

9. Ibid.

10. The wording in the Silmarillion text suggests that Brandir may already have learned from Dorlas that the stranger is the Mormegil at this point, making the premonition seem less strong and more of an informed suspicion (The Silmarillion, "Of Túrin Turambar). Christopher Tolkien comments on this in his notes on Unfinished Tales, Narn i Hîn Húrin, "The Coming of Túrin into Brethil," Note 21.

11. It is Brandir who eventually tells Niënor (Unfinished Tales, Narn i Hîn Húrin, "Niënor in Brethil").

12. Unfinished Tales, Narn i Hîn Húrin, "Niënor in Brethil."

13. Unfinished Tales, Narn i Hîn Húrin, "The Coming of Glaурung." The following discussion follows this chapter closely, for the most part, except where indicated otherwise.

14. The Silmarillion, "Of Túrin Turambar."

15. Unfinished Tales, Narn i Hîn Húrin, "The Coming of Glaурung."

16. "...how can it be said his counsels were in vain, when they were never taken? You, his liege, have ever set them at naught" (Unfinished Tales, Narn i Hîn Húrin, "The Coming of Glaурung").

17. In a draft version, although Dorlas did not make it all the way, he made it the farthest of several companions, but Tolkien discarded this and eventually it became Hunthor who follows farthest, but dies in the climb (see Christopher Tolkien's notes on §§322-5 in The War of the Jewels, The Grey Annals).

18. Unfinished Tales, Narn i Hîn Húrin, "The Death of Glaурung."

19. Unfinished Tales, Narn i Hîn Húrin, "The Death of Túrin."


21. See Book of the Lost Tales II, Turambar and the Foalökë, and Christopher Tolkien’s discussion in the notes on section ix, "The Slaying of Glorund."
About the Author

Himring has been writing Tolkien fan fiction since the winter of 2009. She mostly writes *Silmarillion* fan fiction, with a particular focus on the Sons of Fëanor, especially Maedhros and Maglor. Her main archive is at the Silmarillion Writers Guild. Her stories can also be found at Many Paths to Tread and Archive of Our Own (AO3), including those that are not *Silmarillion*-centred.