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## Character Biography Nellas of Doriath

By Oshun

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One finds no mention in *The Silmarillion* of Nellas, a Sindarin Elf-maid of Doriath, despite her significant presence in the childhood of Túrin. Her connections to the young son of Húrin encompass those of companion, quasi-nursemaid, and teacher. The first mention of Nellas is in the *Narn i Hîn Húrin* in the *Unfinished Tales* and, as part of that narrative, her involvement in the story carries over into the pages of the later compilation *The Children of Húrin*, where she is described in the index of names as an “Elf of Doriath, friend of Túrin in his boyhood.”<sup>1</sup>

Nellas is advised by Melian, who took a particular interest in Túrin’s welfare, to keep close watch on the boy.<sup>2</sup>

In the years of his childhood in the kingdom of Doriath Túrin was watched over by Melian, though he saw her seldom. But there was a maiden named Nellas, who lived in the woods; and at Melian’s bidding she would follow Túrin if he strayed in the forest, and often she met him there, as it were by chance.<sup>3</sup>

The next mention of the companionship of Nellas and Túrin could lead a reader to believe that she is quite young: “Then they played together, or walked hand in hand; for he grew swiftly, whereas she seemed no more than a maiden of his own age, and was so in heart for all her elven-years.”<sup>4</sup> Clearly, however, she must have been an adult, as the phrase “for all her elven-years” implies, and further, a responsible one to have been entrusted by Melian with the welfare of this precious child of the Edain, who bears the liability of the fragility of his short-lived breed.

There is in these passages a hint of a certain childlike quality in Nellas--although one must argue it is not childishness--which separates her from many of the more sophisticated inhabitants of the stone city of Menegroth. She lives among the trees, attuned to the forest, nature, and the wildlife of the territory encompassed by the protective Girdle of Melian, but never resides within the Thousand Caves. She apparently rejects the political complications she would have found in the city of Menegroth, as well as turning her back on the marvels of Sindarin technological development and cleaving instead to the forest.

But Nellas imparts two unique types of wisdom to the boy, both of which carry a weighty significance for Tolkien. She teaches him of the natural world around him, a knowledge which will be of enormous use to him in his future adventures and misadventures. And it is Nellas who imprints upon Túrin, for life, the particular form of Sindarin that is used within the boundaries of Doriath.

From Nellas Túrin learned much concerning the ways and the wild things of Doriath, and she taught him to speak the Sindarin tongue after the manner of the ancient realm, older, and more courteous, and richer in beautiful words.<sup>5</sup>

Through Nellas, Túrin masters Doriathrin, what Tolkien refers to in *The Peoples of Middle-earth* as "the Sindarin of Doriath,"<sup>6</sup> or that the Norwegian linguist Helge Fauskanger calls "the mother-tongue of Lúthien."<sup>7</sup>

All that is known of the language of Doriath is some eighty words found in *The Etymologies* in LR:347-400 [*The Lost Road and Other Writings (The History of Middle-earth, Vol. 5)*], plus one or two words from the *Silmarillion* chapter 21. Yet this was once the language spoken at the court of King Thingol, who ruled Beleriand for four thousand years of the Sun and sired "the fairest of all the Children of Ilúvatar that was or shall ever be" (*Silm.* ch. 4 [*The Silmarillion, "Of Eldamar and the Princes of the Eldalië"*]). Doriathrin must have been the mother-tongue of Lúthien Tinúviel. When she later learnt Beren's native Mannish tongue, he indeed asked her why she bothered, "since her own tongue was richer and more beautiful" (PM:369 [*The Peoples of Middle-earth, "The Problem of Ros"*]).<sup>8</sup>

The language, taught to Túrin by Nellas, as well as his demeanor, contribute to the image that Túrin will present to the world throughout his short life. In *The Silmarillion* it is noted that, when Túrin came to Nargothrond, his "speech and bearing were that of the ancient kingdom of Doriath."<sup>9</sup> Despite recent rough living and his usual bad luck, Túrin still resembles nothing so much as an Elf-lord of a noble house.

Returning to that early period in Doriath, however, Nellas serves as a comfort for the lonely young boy.

Thus for a little while his mood was lightened, until he fell again under shadow, and that friendship passed like a morning of spring. For Nellas did not go to Menegroth, and was unwilling ever to walk under roofs of stone; so that as Túrin's boyhood passed and he turned his thoughts to deeds of men, he saw her less and less often, and at last called for her no more. But she watched over him still, though now she remained hidden.<sup>10</sup>

When Túrin grows into a man and, like most youth, longs for independence and, uniquely, suffers from the preoccupations of his personal burdens, he forgets his friend and the companion of his childhood. For her part, Nellas never loses interest in him; rather, she watches him from a greater distance. The affective attachment she feels for Túrin will shortly play a dramatic part in his tale.

To summarize a complicated story, Túrin has made an enemy of a certain Saeros of Doriath through a series of prejudices and misunderstandings. Nellas is an unknown witness to their final confrontation, which ends in the more or less accidental death of Saeros, who slips and bashes his skull on a rock in the River Esgalduin. Túrin flees and is banished from Doriath by Thingol, in light of the appearance of guilt and the absence of any explanation. Beleg, having returned to Doriath after an absence, hears of Túrin's troubles and immediately seeks out Nellas, knowing of her proclivity for watching over Túrin.<sup>11</sup>

Predictably, Nellas has observed the encounter between Saeros and Túrin and is without difficulty persuaded by Beleg to appear before Thingol and testify on behalf of Túrin. There is an awkward moment when the reclusive and unpretentious Nellas is brought in before the king. Her stance and Thingol's response to it reveal a lot about both the Elf-maid and her king. She has determined to brave the courtly setting and the uncomfortable-for-her stone walls in order to

defend her friend. Thingol appears to understand this and strives to encourage her to speak so that he may learn the truth.

Then Beleg went out, and led in by the hand the maiden Nellas, who dwelt in the woods, and came never into Menegroth; and she was afraid, as much of the great pillared hall and the roof of stone as of the company of many eyes that watched her.

And when Thingol bade her speak, she said: 'Lord, I was sitting in a tree'; but then she faltered in awe of the King, and could say no more.

At that the King smiled, and said: 'Others have done this also, but have felt no need to tell me of it.'

'Others indeed,' said she, taking courage from his smile.'<sup>12</sup>

With her tongue loosened, she recovers herself well and is able to convince Thingol that Túrin had no intent to kill Saeros and to persuade the king to lift Túrin's banishment.

'Lord King!' she cried then. 'Bear with me, and let me speak first. I sat in a tree to look on Túrin as he went away; and I saw Saeros come out from the wood with sword and shield, and spring on Túrin at unawares.'

At that there was a murmur in the hall; and the King lifted his hand, saying: 'You bring graver news to my ear than seemed likely. Take heed now to all that you say; for this is a court of doom.'

'So Beleg has told me,' she answered, 'and only for that have I dared to come here, so that Túrin shall not be ill judged. He is valiant, but he is merciful. They fought, lord, these two, until Túrin had bereft Saeros of both shield and sword; but he did not slay him. Therefore I do not believe that he willed his death in the end. If Saeros were put to shame, it was shame that he had earned.'<sup>13</sup>

Despite Thingol's express desire for Túrin to then be welcomed back into Doriath, Nellas remains devastated by all that has come to pass and worried for the future of her friend. Beleg tries to reassure her.

But when the doom was pronounced, suddenly Nellas wept. 'Where can he be found?' she said. 'He has left our land, and the world is wide.'

'He shall be sought,' said Thingol. Then he rose, and Beleg led Nellas forth from Menegroth; and he said to her: 'Do not weep; for if Túrin lives or walks still abroad, I shall find him, though all others fail.'<sup>14</sup>

There are no further accounts in the texts to what happens to Nellas, whether she lives or dies, and if she survives the sacking of Doriath by the Dwarves and the destruction of Menegroth by the sons of Fëanor.<sup>15</sup> It is entirely possible that she might have been able to slip away unscathed, given that her home was the forest surrounding Menegroth and not the halls of the city itself.

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The last reference to Nellas in the texts is a sad and poignant one, which points out that she has cared much more for Túrin than he was able to care for her. (This is not at all an uncommon denouement for those who love Túrin best.) When Beleg catches up with Túrin again, he explains what has passed in Doriath in his absence, the details of Túrin's trial in absentia for the murder of Saeros, and his acquittal due to the testimony of Nellas.

Túrin remembers nothing of Nellas, who had succored him when he was most in need of a friend and instructed him in wood lore and language.

Coming suddenly out of thought he looked at Beleg, and said: 'The elf-maiden that you named, though I forget how: I owe her well for her timely witness; yet I cannot recall her. Why did she watch my ways?' Then Beleg looked strangely at him. 'Why indeed?' he said. 'Túrin, have you lived always with your heart and half your mind far away? As a boy you used to walk with Nellas in the woods.'

'That must have been long ago,' said Túrin. 'Or so my childhood now seems, and a mist is over it – save only the memory of my father's house in Dor-lómin. Why would I walk with an elf-maiden?'

'To learn what she could teach, maybe,' said Beleg, 'if no more than a few elven-words of the names of woodland flowers. Their names at least you have not forgotten. Alas! child of Men, there are other griefs in Middle-earth than yours, and wounds made by no weapon. Indeed I begin to think that Elves and Men should not meet or meddle.'<sup>16</sup>

Different interpretations have been posited by readers of what Beleg might have meant by his remark, "Indeed I begin to think that Elves and Men should not meet or meddle."

The questions raised include whether he refers to the upshot of the relationship between Nellas and Túrin, or even perhaps to his own dedication to Túrin's welfare and his affection for him, which is returned in a measure unequal to that which Beleg offers time after time. Others have interpreted the sentence as a reference to the fact that Nellas has indeed harbored deep feelings for Túrin, which are fated to never be returned, since even the friendship they had shared had been dismissed and long forgotten by Túrin.

One is left feeling that Nellas' affection, friendship, and positive contributions to Túrin's education and welfare has been sadly underappreciated by the doomed youth.

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## Works Cited

1. *The Children of Húrin*, "List of Names in the Tale of the Children of Húrin."
2. *The Children of Húrin*, "Túrin in Doriath."
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
6. *The Peoples of Middle-earth*, "The Problem of Ros."

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7. Helge K. Fauskanger, from his [Ardalambion](#) web page.
  8. Ibid.
  9. *The Silmarillion*, "Of Túrin Turambar."
  10. *The Children of Húrin*, "Túrin in Doriath."
  11. *Unfinished Tales, Narn i Hîn Húrin*; and *The Children of Húrin*, "Túrin in Doriath."
  12. *The Children of Húrin*, "Túrin in Doriath."
  13. Ibid.
  14. Ibid.
  15. *The Silmarillion*, "Of the Ruin of Doriath."
  16. *The Children of Húrin*, "Túrin among the Outlaws."
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## About the Author

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