



Legends of the Serai

by J . C . H a l l



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In the beginning, while the goddesses played amongst themselves high up on the mountains that touched the sky, a race of humans lived and fought each other in the lands below.

At first, the goddesses were indifferent to these humans, unmoved by their struggles and strife. But then these mortal beings became more and more contentious and belligerent. Hostilities and age-old enmities turned to war, culminating in bloodshed across battlefields throughout the lands.

The goddesses could no longer overlook the folly of these mortals who seemed bent on diminishing what was already a laughably short life-span. Besides, although they seemed somehow pitiful in their penchant for self-destruction, their very passion on the battlefields moved at least one of the goddesses.

She was the most powerful of them all and the others looked up to her. When she told them of her decision to walk amongst the mortals, they merely shrugged with the graceful indifference of goddesses. They could not possibly have foretold that she would take the humans' fate so seriously.

The goddess walked amongst the humans, watching them as they tended their dead and dying, moved despite herself by their grief and pain. The passion of the mortals was unquestionable. Why then, she asked herself, did they persist in fighting one another, forcing each other to an early grave where passion floundered as their bodies decayed?

The goddess found her answer in a queen whose king lay dying in her arms on the battlefield. She swore him undying passion even as his life drained from his body, promising him her eternal love, a pledge that would bind them together for any number of life-times.

Dispassionate as goddesses by their nature were, this goddess was moved by the vow that was meant to be binding across the imaginary boundary between life and death. No matter that the oath was only binding in the foolish imagination of the mortals. For who could tell when their souls would find each other again amidst the vast expanse of eternity?

But the promise itself, meant and meant with a fervor that shook whoever heard it, was enough to make the goddess stop and think. They may die, she thought, finally understanding, but their passion outlives them.

The grieving queen carried the dead king's child and bore him with the goddess's blessings. He grew to be wise and strong, leading his father's troops, now his own, into battle. Inevitably, leading courageously from the front, he was grievously injured.

The goddess's heart forced her once more to walk amongst the mortals and she found him, lying much as his father had before him, mortal death but a few moments away.

The goddess railed against the follies of humans who never seemed to learn from their mistakes. She stood gazing down upon the young king's face and raised her arm, her sleeve billowing in the wind.

The young king found himself in a forest glade, blinking his eyes open at the loveliest vision he had ever seen. He tried to speak, to tell her of the dreams that had promised him such a destiny, to be rescued from dying by a goddess.

But words were not necessary. She heard his heart and felt wetness upon her cheeks. The goddess blinked in surprise, never having shed tears before. He raised trembling fingers to wipe them off and, looking deep into his mortal but innocent eyes, the goddess lost her heart to him. She lay with the young king in the forest, renouncing her immortality for a mortal's passion.

The other goddesses were astounded. She had been the most powerful and now she was mortal. As was the babe she bore the young king whom she had saved. But the other goddesses made sure that the babe, though mortal, had the talents of the immortal. She grew to be a wise princess who brought her scattered people together and made peace with the nobles of the surrounding lands.

Years passed and the blood-line thinned as the goddess's offspring lay with mortals. And before so very long, the talents of those descended from the goddess became something that had to be discovered and coaxed out rather than something that was expected and evident.

Nobles eyed each other's lands; old feuds reared their ugly heads and battles were waged once again. Kingdoms, principedoms and duchies pitted their armies against each other, fighting to the death for land and titles that only the living could enjoy.

The goddesses looked down once more at the consummate folly of humans and shook their heads resignedly. The most powerful among them was no more. Should they even bother about these foolish mortals any more?

But the goddess Miraaya, who was the most powerful of the goddesses now, lost her temper with all the strife that was upsetting the peace in the mountains.

She decided to walk amongst the mortals as her sister had before her, but vowed she would only do so to punish them for their folly.

The other goddesses looked at one another, despite themselves a little concerned. They had already lost one of their sisters and had no wish to lose another. But the warmongering mortals were tiresome and should goddesses not be allowed a little peace up in their own mountains?

They looked at the goddess Miraaya, acknowledging her wisdom and pride. If anyone could subdue the warring humans, it would be she.

The goddess Miraaya walked amongst the mortals. She took some pleasure in the form she chose, striding along in the garb of a warring captain. They could not fail to heed her in her chosen form, she felt sure.

Heads turned on the battlefields as she strode, a goddess taken to human form, eyes blazing and hair streaming behind her as she called the armies to order.

The soldiers gaped at her, referred her to their officers; the officers saluted her, referred her to their kings, princes and dukes; the royalty sat up straighter on their thrones at sight of her and referred her to their generals.

The generals glared at her, demanded to know why and how she had stopped their battles, and the goddess knew that she had found the ones she came to punish. She struck them down with ne'er a thought and turned to go, anxious to return to her beloved mountains.

Five officers surrounded her as she prepared to leave. They bowed to her and thanked her for sparing the lives of their troops, soldiers who would have perished in the battles that would not now be fought. One by one they pledged their lives to her, in exchange for the lives of the men she had saved.

She looked upon them, taking in their courage, their youth and their mortal beauty. Would you serve me then? she asked, and all of them nodded. One, younger than the rest, answered: Yea, I will serve and guard thee.

The goddess laughed then, at the audacity of a mortal who had the unmitigating presumption to think that a goddess needed guarding. Then her eyes fell upon her mortal garb and she knew that he and the others took her for one of their own.

Despite herself, the goddess was moved. She took them with her upon the winds into the wilds of Elderey Forest. There she opened their eyes for them and showed them her immortal form. But they had already gained a glimpse of her mortal form unburdened by mortal garb just before she accomplished the change. And they were only mortal, after all, and men, and young, and with the passion of battle denied to them just a moment before.

They refused to leave her, pledged their undying devotion to her. And the goddess saw the passion in their eyes, the very mortal passion that had led to her sister's fall from immortality.

The goddess Miraaya struggled within herself, determined not to mirror her sister's fate. You may serve me, she said to them, and I may even let you think that you guard me – she smiled at the youngest– but what I need you to do for me is to guard my sister's descendants, on and off the battlefields in the lands of the mortals.

But to do this, you will have to become immortal.

The officers looked at one another, not finding much to dislike from what they were hearing. The goddess smiled again but there was no warmth in her smile.

Although I have the power to confer upon you immortality, she told them, I cannot and have no wish to take away some of your very mortal attributes.

You will still feel the agony of battle injuries, though you will heal quickly and will not die from your wounds.

You will still feel the needs and yearnings of a human, and though you may well lose your heart to a mortal woman, you will only be able to lie with her at forfeit of your immortality.

You will agonize over the folly of humans, for there is no doubt in my mind that they will go to battle again ere long, and though you may protect my sister's descendants from harm, you will not be able to save all those who have trained and fought under you.

The officers pondered but one by one they gave up their claim to be human. After all, what man could resist the offer of immortality, especially when given by a goddess who spoke and dressed and fought like one of their own?

So the descendants of the goddess who had renounced her immortality were guarded invisibly across battlefields of the lands by the officers who had renounced their mortality.

And so the line continued.

In time, the goddess Miraaya began to look upon her honorary guard with approval and even a touch of affection. And when they returned injured from protecting her sister's descendants upon the battlefields, she would pretend she was unconcerned, though their very mortal agony caused her some little heartache. But when their yearnings for her caused them to fight one another in the wilds of Elderey Forest, she stepped in to prevent unnecessary strife.

She would lie with whichever of them could defeat the others, she decreed, at each full moon. They were immortal now, after all, and it would not be unacceptable. And she was fully aware of their very mortal needs and yearnings, although she could not truly understand them. But after the first full moon, when she had lain with the first guard to claim her for the night, and it was the youngest who had pledged all those years ago, in all innocence, to guard her, she finally understood the sister who surrendered her immortality for a mortal man.

And even though, by her own word, she had to lie with whichever of them overcame the others, her heart yearned like that of a mortal's for the youngest of them, the one who had vowed to guard as well as to serve her.

He did not always win over the others and she could feel his agony as she lay with whoever defeated him.

Now I know, she told herself, almost wonderingly, now I know what it is to be mortal.

Years passed and the royalty of the lands mingled and separated. Their numbers grew and they spread out in all directions, wherever the land was good. In the west, where one could see the sun sinking each evening into the wild, western sea, a goodly number thrived and prospered.

People of other lands called them the fortunate ones, the ones upon whom the goddesses smiled. For the wars of past years had not diminished their numbers by very much. It was said that the goddess Miraaya's honorary guard kept them firmly under their wings.

These western lands used to be a kingdom, that of Alysia, and a duchy, that of Peraya. A port, named Coristan, had since flourished in the south-east while the bastion of Navolo was set up in the north to guard against invaders from the far northern shores.

The king's direct line had long since petered out and the last duke and his duchess died leaving an only daughter.

Now, among these western lands, the Overseer wields power in her talented hands.

She is a descendant of the goddess who renounced immortality and is the most talented female of her generation. Chosen by the high-priestesses who dedicate themselves to the goddess Miraaya in the many temples around Alysia and Peraya, her tenure of office can extend to twelve years before she is replaced by another.

The Overseer wields control over the Noble Houses and the Special Guilds of the Western Lands. She sends their members and their officers on any assignment which may pertain to keeping the peace of the land. She also holds sway over the Boundary-Keeper and the nomadic Serai who inhabit the Open-Land between Navolo and Alysia and Peraya.

Many Noble Houses in the Western Lands still claim direct descent from the goddess who renounced immortality. And many more pay their devotions to the goddess Miraaya who took to human form in order to save the mortal race and ensure that her sister's line continued.

And of the Noble Houses which claim direct descent from the goddess who renounced immortality and which also pledge devotion to the goddess Miraaya, the most noble and the most powerful of them all is the House of Orveen.