

# ONE MORE TASK

A TALE  
FROM THE  
STORYROOM



MIKE  
LONGMEADOW



# One More Task

A Tale from the Storyroom

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Paths are beginning to merge. Ever loyal to Milucra and eager to succeed, Lugh guides Queen Celeste to the meeting place, his heart filled with pride and his mind filled with fear. Did Milucra send him on a fool's errand or will he be welcomed as a hero?

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## **One More Task: A Tale from the Storyroom**

This tale brings us further down the path Lugh has created for himself. As a new character comes into play – the mysterious Morrigan – will Lugh manage to accomplish his task without losing his mind?

## Dedication

To the growing number of people who are jumping on the bandwagon. Although we are few at the moment, it gives me the push needed to keep the Tales going.

To the squirrel who comes into my house to watch me write while munching on nuts.

To any and all who believed in me from the start, you know who you are.



## **One More Task: A Tale from the Storyroom**



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### 1- Going to the Meeting

Just as I apprehended after I woke her up and I gave her the message from Milucra, Celeste bestowed a new task on me, which was to accompany her to her meeting with the Queen of the Shadows. As she detailed my new task, she also signaled her servants to start gathering the necessary things for our trip. Watching the Catshees look at us we prepared made me wonder if I would be of any use at all if she was to be protected by the huge felines.

As we prepared to leave the castle, Celeste had it in her heart to order that my velour cape be turned into a decent piece of garment. I wanted to try to be humble and tell her that was not necessary, but the generosity of her offer made my heart swell with pride, so I kept my tongue. The Catshees hung out nearby while I scurried around the Queen's room to find the necessities that would be needed along the way. Their gaze followed me everywhere even though they were lying in a ball, their head on their paws and their eyes barely open, simulating the fact they were sleeping, like the true predators they were. At that moment, I made it my mission to make sure I did nothing to aggravate them, hoping the trek would be a short one.

Once I filled the travel bag with all the necessary items, Celeste checked to make sure I didn't forget anything. Once she was satisfied, she gave her Catshees a quick nod and in an instant, they were standing and ready to go. Celeste took the lead, followed by her Catshees then me, and we walked together through the corridors to the main entry. The residents were all lined up in the corridors. As we passed them, they gave the Queen and the Catshees a curtsy and smile, which turned into a mean glare for me as we walked along the improvised guard of honor. As we reached the gate, the horned Imp that first greeted me walked up to me and locked her eyes with mine. Her hair was slicked back, pulling on her face in funny ways and I had to hold back a chuckle.

"Anything happens, anything at all, it's on you. Make sure it's something good." She said in a low growl.

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I was unable to speak and only nodded at her request, to which she seemed satisfied and stood aside. I wholeheartedly agreed with her, whatever happens, I hope it's all good. Celeste ignored our exchange and stood before the door to wait for it to open. While I worked at stopping my mind from falling into a pit of catastrophic scenarios, I bumped into a Catshee.

"My apologies, once again." I said, bowing to the beast.

It huffed, exasperated by my apparent indifference and turned to face the door. Celeste was looking at me, wearing a benevolent smile. I felt it like the warmth of a mother's love and took a moment to bask in its comfort.

"The first ray of the new day must touch the top of the main tower before we can venture out." She said.

As she spoke, the first ray of light was already wrapped around the tower, chasing the previous night away as it climbed. Once it reached the top and illuminated as far as the horizon, Celeste gave the signal to open the main gate with a short wave of the hand. The four Nixie children that had opened the door when I first entered the castle returned, happily running to the door to begin pulling at it. This process was slow, and as was the case in her room when she was waiting for her clothes, Celeste stood with her head held high, a slight smile on her lips and a relaxed demeanor telling everyone that all was good and that patience was required. Once the opening was wide enough for us to pass, two catshees moved to Celeste's side as she walked out. The ones that greeted and transported me remained idle as they watched Celeste leave the confines of the castle. The new ones seemed bigger, and their gaze made it look like they were permanently angry. This was a stark contrast to the other ones, with whom I'd developed an attachment, albeit it was probably one-way, I didn't know if Catshees had any emotional attachments at all. Mesmerized by the proceedings, I hadn't moved. The Queen stopped once outside and turned to me.

"I know not the direction I must follow; would you have it in your heart to show me the way?" Celeste asked me.

Celeste was smiling, but her firm tone shook me out of my stupor.

"Y-Yes, of course." I muttered, stepping out to join them.

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I went to pick up the excess velour tissue that always laid at my feet, but only grabbed some air. The Queen's tailors had done a wonderful job in adjusting it to fit me perfectly – it would take getting used to. The feeling of the velour rubbing on my skin as I bent down, the snugness between my legs, it all felt almost too glorious for me to be able to walk. That's when I also noticed the silence around me was heavy and I sensed all eyes were on me.

"Well?" This time, Celeste was curt, and her eyes had become two balls of fire. Still a child, she had the eyes of an adult who had been through hell and back, it was a little terrifying.

I scurried to her side with my mind starting to let in a pinch of panic – I had no clue of where we needed to go. I looked around, trying to see if there was anything I could use to guide myself. The trees were letting the energy flow from the ground to the sky and back, as usual. The mushrooms were keeping to themselves, lying in the shadows, silent. I waited for the air to move and tell me the direction, yet the air stood still. Celeste's beasts began to circle around us, with their focus on me. They prowled around like two hunters assessing their prey, with their ears pricked up, listening for the slightest variation. It reminded me of the fun I had with human cats when we worked together at catching mice and rats that entered the barn. The Catshee's attitude was exactly the same, except this time I was the mouse. Their gaze was locked on me, yet they walked around us with ease, evading any obstacle in their course with precise fluidity.

Celeste gave me a disinterested look. "Was your sole task only to have me leave the confines of my castle? What feeble trap have you set to bring about my demise?" She said dismissively. She delicately scratched her chin with her index finger, which seemed to alert the Catshees. They stopped their patrol and homed in on me, lowering their heads and flattening their ears as they dug in their hind legs.

Celeste stayed close to them while their backside swerved from side to side, ready to pounce. The world began to spin around me. What if Milucra did set a trap? I was certainly expendable, and not telling me was a perfect way to make sure I wouldn't fail. Maybe I've been followed all this time, and my journey was nothing more than a

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scouting excursion to see what defences Celeste had on hand. If that was the case, I was ready to die with honor, since I now carried a name. The Catshees' swerving slowed down, a sign they were ready to jump. I closed my eyes and lowered my head. Having a sense of pride was now a permanent thing for me and made me straighten my back.

Then a thought floated up. I not only had a name, I had the greatest name. How could Milucra give me her grandfather's name if she planned on using me for such a deceitful act? A burst of self confidence pushed me to open my eyes, and just beyond one of the Catshee's shoulder, a single leaf that was spinning on the end of a branch caught my eye. The rest of the leaves were immobile around it. Plus, the way it twirled should have pulled it from its branch. It had to be the sign I was looking for. I raised my hand to request the right to speak. Celeste nodded.

"It's this way, Queen Celeste." I said, pointing to the spinning leaf. "My deepest apology for the delay. I am but a lowly Kobold and it is not of my habit to retain any information other than where my next meal will come from." I was proud of my excuse and gave myself a mental pat on the shoulder.

"Refrain from excuses, tis a human flaw I abhor. Walk by my side instead and let's see what Milucra has to propose." Said the Queen, bursting my bubble of cockiness in an instant. At the same time, the Catshees relaxed – and so did I. One of them took the lead while the other brought up the rear.

When Celeste invited me to walk next to her with a light wave of the hand, a sense of relief washed over me, and I ran to her side. I took her comment to heart and promised myself I would refrain from trying to explain myself – as most humans do – and just be in the moment. I jogged to her side with my chest pointed forward and my head high, feeling proud and strong. We headed for the spinning leaf, but our approach did not provoke any new reaction, the leaf just kept spinning. My heart began to beat faster – the leaf kept doing its thing – but no clear path opened to us. All I saw was dark forest and no opening to go in. We came up to the leaf and it kept relentlessly spinning. I feared that this was some sort of Faylandia



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event that had no bearing on my quest, that I was, once again, facing certain death. But just when I opened my mouth to tell Queen Celeste that I had failed, that's when the leaf then detached itself and flew into the woods. My heart sank, afraid all was now lost and at the same time my mind lit up with hope that this was the direction. The roller coaster of emotions was making me dizzy and confused, but I managed to point in the direction the leaf went.

"Please, dear Queen, it's this way." I said.

My heartbeat was banging inside my head, at each passing moment I teetered from hope this was the right direction and fear the Catshees would finish what they proposed earlier.

Celeste looked at me, waiting for me to open the path. Fighting against my desire to try and run away, I took a single step into the woods, and a path finally opened. Holding back a scream of victory, I watched the trees move and open a long tunnel that seemed to have no end. The branches merged into an arch above our heads that rivaled — surpassed some would say — the grandiosity of the greatest halls of the most beautiful castles in the human realm. The leaves that created the ceiling seemed almost painted there, the trees at our sides resembled walls, handmade from the finest wood, and the ground was a mixture of gravel and dirt that was compacted with precision — neither too hard, nor too soft — and just wide enough for us to pass. The sounds of our advance were muffled, as if the air and the ground were filled with snow. I concentrated on staying focused and calm, letting my heartbeat return to a normal rate now that I knew we were on the path to accomplish my duty.

We walked side-by-side down the path that would lead to the first meeting between the Fairest and Shadow Queens in generations. I was enthralled by the privilege I had to be in the presence of Queen Celeste. Here I was, Lugh the Kobold, serving the Queen of the Shadows by assisting the Queen of the Fairest. No Kobold — or any resident, really — in Faylandia history could pretend to even come close to such an accomplishment. I had to consciously make the choice to look ahead, as every part of me wanted keep my gaze on the Queen and celebrate the enduring lucky streak my life had become — which continued its glorious march. I couldn't believe

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how perfect the Queen's tailors had created my garbs in such short time – it was, I would dare say, almost too comfortable. I was so focused on celebrating my good fortune, I forgot about the Catshees that accompanied us. The one leading had slowed its walk and rubbed against me which ejected me from my moment of joy. I was surprised to find out its fur was soft, tickling my exposed skin like a feather as it rubbed against it, which contrasted with its metallic look. The Catshee emitted warmth all around him that I found comforting. They both had a white ring around their necks that looked like it was made of a different kind of fur that looked like the one on Clarence's stuffed imaginary friends when he was a child – faux-bears he called Teddy and Benny. And unlike the ones I met when I arrived at the castle, they seemed constantly on alert. They continuously scanned the area, combining their strong hearing powers, their powerful gaze, and their unparalleled sense of smell, occasionally stopping to analyze something more intently before continuing on the path.

Suddenly, one of them stopped, went closer to inspect, and didn't continue. He was focused on something that seemed to be a few feet ahead of us. We all stopped, and Queen Celeste took advantage of the moment to sit down, fully confident her Catshees would be up to the task of finding what lurks in the woods. She began lean back to sit, but there was nothing under her. Before I could say anything, the ground moved, and a flat, round rock emerged. The insects who were shoved out by the movement scurried and made sure to wipe away the dirt as fast as they could as they returned to the humid ground. Without even looking if it was safe for her to sit, Celeste let herself fall as if there was already something there. The rock that appeared the instant before rose from the ground and came to meet Celeste just at the right moment, as if it had always been there.

"Careful!" I yelled out, unable to stop myself from warning her as it all happened too fast.

She looked at me and smiled. "Worry not, the forest will always give me what I need, never more, never less."

She was the image of grace and Royalty with a capital R, delicately crossing her hands on her lap, rubbing away the dust on her gloves

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with the tip of her fingers. She tapped on the spot available next to her and I jumped at the occasion to join her. We watched the second Catshee take a wide berth to flank the position indicated by its partner while the ruckus in the bushes kept getting louder. Whatever was there was not preoccupied with being silent, which gave the Catshees the chance to move unnoticed. The bush trembled and shook under the impulse of whatever was there. The second Catshee approached a little more, its ears flat and nose extended. I couldn't understand how such a large beast could be so silent. It advanced, but no sound came to me. Its muscle tensed as it came closer. It was ready to pounce, and I felt a wave of empathy for who, or what, was about to meet its end. A squirrel burst out of the bush at that moment, making the Catshee jump back a good ten feet in one bound from the surprise. It landed in the middle of the path and gave the squirrel a disapproving look. The squirrel squawked and barked for a minute, after which he returned to the tree. The two beasts looked at each other and I could swear they were smiling – I couldn't help but wonder what the squirrel told them. After a short moment, during which Celeste made sure her clothes were proper and clean, we were back on our way. The squirrel stayed close, jumping from tree to tree to observe us. At one point it stopped to dig for some hidden nuts, and when we walked by it looked up at me and gave me a wink.

"Did you see that?" I asked, surprised.

"What do you speak of?" Responded Celeste.

"The squirrel, it winked at me. And smiled, I believe."

The Queen giggled. "Your time in the human realm has fogged your brain. Do you not remember that in the Faylandia, they are jesters." She paused, seeming to look for the right words. "Not all their jest is successful, mind you." Added the Queen as she extended her arm to pet her Catshee, who walked with their heads hung low, as if they were disappointed there had been no to battle.

We continued on our trek in silence for a time. I admired the Catshee's restraint towards the squirrel's stupid joke, but at the same time, it felt like it came with a message. They were after all the guardians of the Queen and her treasure, and although they were

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mostly peaceful beings, they also carried the omen of death wherever they set foot. It was unwise to surprise them, to say the least. That told me the squirrel had something important to say, which is why it was so cavalier in its approach. I quickly forgot about the small jester, and as we regained our rhythm, I felt the joy return from being successful in my endeavors since being recruited by Queen Milucra. The last time the moon was full, I had no name. Tears welled up in my eyes and I had trouble following a straight line. As we advanced in the unending tunnel, the forest reverted to the thick forest behind us, masking any trace of our passage. I began to hope we would arrive soon; my back was beginning to strain. I wasn't used to walking with my shoulders back and chest out. Then she asked me what I was hoping for since the first words she spoke to me.

“What would you answer if I was to ask your name?”

She asked for my name. I felt faint, my legs became wobbly. “The name I honor is Lugh, my Queen.” I said, almost in a whimper.

Celeste laughed heartily.

“Is it of bad manners to say it out loud, dear Lugh?” She said in a playful tone.

As soon as she said my name out loud, I fainted. The next thing I knew, there was the huge face of a Catshee licking my face, which promptly popped my mind back into place. I sat up and pushed away the beast.

“My sincerest regrets at my reaction. It is just that I have existed without a name since my birth – I received that honor from Queen Milucra just recently. Right before I was sent to find you, in fact. Now hearing it spoken from the mouth of Royalty was too much to bear.” I said, while trying to get out from under the Catshee, who playfully tried to hold me down.

Queen Celeste looked at me and smiled. With her mouth, not her eyes.

“That's endearing, but we must continue our trek — am I to expect more of these moments in the future?”

I shook my head and she immediately started walking, fast. I had to run to catch up, carried by my heart and soul which were filled with

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pride that my name was known to the Queen of the Fairest.

We walked for what felt like days, maybe weeks. I was still getting used to the fact time doesn't work the same, and that fatigue doesn't present itself in the same ways in Faylandia. I wondered how much longer this trek would have taken in the human world – considering we would have had to stop often to rest. Worry began to show its ugly head in my mind – was this path leading anywhere? All throughout, we heard unusual noises around us – in the bushes and the trees – that the Catshees voluntarily ignored. That told me it was probably the squirrel and his friends trying to distract us, but what if it was something else? We continued to walk, and I desperately hoped Celeste wouldn't ask me how long we had to go, because I had no answer.

Over time I grew more comfortable around Catshees, and took some time to observe them. They were the size of young bulls, a lethal combination of power and grace as they ambled along almost absent mindedly. Their steel gaze was the only indication of their focus, but it was enough to instill fear in any opponent. Their fur was black, short around the stomach and long on their backs, with a white ring around the neck that seemed so soft and inviting. Their tail was braided, it was an example of perfection, tight from the body to its end, where a little puff of fur was left to dance around freely. An impeccable looking whip if I said so myself, and I would not want to be at the other end of its crack.

“They have been by my side all my life.” Said the Queen, who saw me observing them. “I've had them since they were kitty-cats, only this high.” She said, placing her hand on her hips to show how “small” they once were.

I took a step sideways, surprised she spoke to me in such informal ways. Not knowing what to respond, I gave her a soft nod to signify I understood. One of the Catshees looked at me and gave me a what's up head nod while the other kept walking with its head held low, its nostrils opening and contracting as it scoured the ground for any indication of trouble. Everything was calm, peaceful, I was well protected in case of trouble, and the Queen of the Fairest spoke to me as an equal. Yet the longer our trek continued, the more I felt the

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joy gradually changing back to anxiety, as scenarios of impending doom began to fill my mind, each one as spectacular as it was improbable.

Celeste was deep in thought, her gaze lost in the horizon. She continued. "The beast's presence will be essential to the Rade." She stopped and extended her hands towards her Catshees, inviting them to come closer. "And if we don't need their valor, they are wonderful companions when it's cold." She added, hugging the Catshees who responded, her face fully immersed in the thick neck fur of the beast while she rubbed him with vigor. The Catshee sat back and accepted her caresses with smiling eyes.

Once she was satisfied, Celeste sat down. On a log that was already present, this time. She began to undo the buttons that held the top of her dress in place, located along her ribs. She opened the first two buttons but couldn't reach the last two and looked at me.

"Could you, please?" She said, her arm lifted over her head.

I didn't know what to do. Why did the Queen want to undress? Celeste giggled.

"I request more comfort and at the moment, you are the only one who can help me attain that goal." She stayed in position as she said this, throwing me a mean gaze that said I had better get moving on helping her.

I fought to understand how to undo the first button. A Catshee growled at my fumbling. A deep, menacing growl that made my hands tremble even more. I desperately tried to undo the button, cringing at the idea of being devoured by the beast for being unable to undo a button.

"It's ok, my love." Said the Queen to the Catshee. "Relax." She added. She turned back to me. "Continue, my hunger grows."

What she meant by that was alien to me. Nevertheless, I reached for the button again and this time easily undid both. I immediately shrunk back, sensing it was best if I didn't stay so close to her. Celeste pulled on the armor chest piece that was the front of her dress and reached in. She pulled out a pouch, and immediately, the catshees were at attention. She delicately undid the leather lace that held it closed and began pulling out food. It was the size of a coin

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bag, yet Celeste kept pulling food out until there was a glorious feast spread out before us. The best breads, fruits, and cookies were spread out in front of her. She placed the cookies in front of the Catshees while the fruit and bread were divided between her and me. My mouth watered with anticipation, and I started by stuffing a bunch of grapes in my mouth and joyously indulged in the moment with grape juice leaking down the side of my face.

Within seconds, the cookies were gone, and the Catshees were asleep. One of them was in a tight ball and was snoring, while the other laid on its back, its four legs hanging loosely in the air, like the humans' cats sometimes did when they felt especially safe. Celeste and I feasted on the bread and fruit, voraciously at first, engulfing anything that fell into our hands. Our eyes met for a second and we burst out in laughter. The moment was pure perfection, and I didn't want this to stop. I slowed down, taking the time to savor the moment in its entirety. My focus returned to the food, this was a first real meal in a long time, and I could feel the nutrition spreading, filling my body with fuel that transfused to my muscle and mind. I already felt proud of what I'd accomplished to this point and felt no need to add to that wondrous feeling. Regardless, now I felt proud and indomitable. Each bite brought a new wave of energy, and soon, I felt something that had not happened in a long time. I felt satisfied. Once we finished our feast, Celeste licked her fingers, put her gloves back on, dusted herself off, and stood up. She reinserted her chest armor and placed her arms over her head. She gave me a head bob, telling me it was time to get going again and she needed help. I buttoned her up and stood by her side, but she sat back down. This time choosing a tree stump that was facing another, with her back straight and her head held high. I looked around, trying to see if she was waiting after me for something, then noticed a rock sticking out from the ground, between the two stumps. It was engraved with the symbol of a flower encircled with a row of floor moss. This was the meeting place.

**2- Someone is watching**

A large crow, so black it shimmered blue in the sunlight, sat atop the trees that overlooked the castle while the Queen of the Fairest disappeared into a newly opened path in the woods. She was with two Catshees, but what was intriguing to the crow was the Kobold dressed in luxurious garments that was with them. Once they were out of sight, the crow flew off in the opposite direction, attracting the attention of a guard in the tower. He watched the crow fly away and a frown of worry appeared on his face.

“What causes your frown, brother?” Asked the other guard.

“Nothing, just a glare of the sun.” He replied.

The crow flew in an irregular pattern, constantly adjusting its flight to brush the treetops so it remained out of sight. It reached a small clearing, where an abandon shack – so run down it seemed a light breeze away from falling – stood in its middle. The crow flew in through the window which made the walls of the shack sway under the impulse of the landing. The forest around the shack was silent, except for the sound of flapping of wings inside the shed. The intensity of the movement inside the shack steadily grew until a loud thud was heard and Tufts of feathers flew out of the window. The shack door then opened and a black-haired woman walked out, clad in a dark silk robe and a red cloak draped on her shoulders that was matched by the red hair shimmering on her head in thin streaks. The woman brushed off a black feather from her shoulder before tossing her long, thick mane of black hair back with both hands, which made the red streaks shine even more. She planted her feet shoulder width, closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and held it. The forest around her was perfectly silent as if the woodland creatures were awaiting her orders. Time stood still; the air stopped flowing. The black-haired woman opened her arms in a cross, palms to the sky. A bird broke the silence and chirped. Within moments, the woman was surrounded by a wide variety of creatures. The ground dwellers – squirrels, hares, and racoons came to sit at her feet, while the robins and songbirds lined up on her arms. An owl came to quietly



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land on her shoulder, without disturbing the air around it. A few foxes and one bear also came to the proceeding, but they stayed back, keeping some distance between them and the woman, keeping their heads hung low to show their submissiveness.

The woman waited for complete silence to return, still holding her breath. "Tell me." She said, while exhaling the air in her lungs which caused the leaves on the ground to rise and caused a small dust storm that violently shoved the trees around for a few seconds.

The animals reacted by all closing their eyes simultaneously, except the owl. It turned to look at the woman straight in the eyes, its iris flickering wildly. The woman responded by staring back at the owl. Her eyes were perfectly round and black as she absorbed the information being shared by the owl. The bear, who was up on its two hind legs hiding behind a tree, dropped to its four legs and advanced on the woman with its head held low. The bear showed reverence and respect in its advance, seeming to be doing a short curtsy and every step. The three foxes that stayed also began to approach, also showing reverence with their heads held low, and sat alongside the creatures that are usually their prey. They didn't close their eyes, but rather started to yip and bark. They went one at a time, and seemed to complete each other's sentences, eager to tell the woman everything. The bear had reached the woman and sat besides her, patiently waiting his turn. He looked like a happy Buddha, with his hind legs spread out in front of him for balance and his giant brown body lightly slumped forward as he pawed at the little rocks in front of him to pass the time.

"Enough." Said the woman.

The animals all opened their eye in unison, the foxes stopped yipping, and the owl's eyes returned to normal as it looked away.

"So, they need to plan a Rade — of course, they need to. This is perfect timing." The woman said out loud.

She turned to the bear. "Your power grants you a direct connection to the mycelial network. Do you feel any excitement about the Rade?"

The bear looked at the woman and shrugged its shoulders.

"Good." Said the woman. "Let's keep it that way." She stroked the

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bear's thick fur and turned to the group, still quietly sitting at attention. "Be my angels and let me know what transpires at the meeting between Celeste and Milucra."

The bear responded by leaning its head in and rubbing its forehead on hers, and the other animals grunted their approval.

"And find Zanna of the Isles. I have a message for her."

The woman turned and went back to the shack without saying another word, closing the door behind her. The air in the forest picked up a light breeze and returned to its normal state, and the animals that had gathered looked to go back to their daily realities. When called upon by Morigan, the greatest shapeshifter to grace the earth, a war-Goddess with no equal who was banished from her pantheon for becoming too familiar with human witchery, the animals usually gave each other a five-minute head start when a ceremony ended so it didn't turn into a bloodbath. Except today the foxes were hungrier than usual and seemed uninterested by the rule as they began walking in circles in an attempt to stop the smaller animals from leaving, which worked perfectly. They slowly made their circle smaller, looking to trap their prey so they could each pick and choose their meal for the day. The small animals huddled closer together, with the racoons forming a barrier on the outside of the ill-fated circle so they could have a fighting chance. The foxes, satisfied by their strategy, dug in their feet, ready to pounce. Then a crow cawed, so loud it made the foxes jump and turn their attention away from their buffet, which gave the small animals one chance to flee, that they used to its full advantage as they scurried in every direction. The foxes tried to salvage something from their opportunistic attempt amidst the sudden chaos, but within moments, the three foxes found themselves looking at each other, forming a circle that had nothing inside it, with none having caught a meal. The crow, a strand of red hair peeking out from under one of its feathers, flew away, its caw sounding more like a laugh.

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### 3- Shadow preparations

After Delphina reconnected with Jasper when she was sent to inspect Forrest's human home to see if he had really left it empty, she wandered around in a half daze. Seeing Jasper again brought back the memory that she had wanted to take him the first time they met, but not to give him to the Queen, she wanted him for herself. His soul provided her with comfort. His mind was a wonderful playground. His heart was open to a multitude of possibilities. She could feel him in her soul like no other human, and it hurt her to think she could have caused him pain during his existence. Delphina headed for the pond that was located in the fruit tree orchard that she was told would become central to the future, hoping she could make some sense of the events.

When she arrived, the pond was perfectly still, it reflected the decor around it like a mirror. A water strider danced on the standing water, barely causing any ripples as it skipped across. Delphina noticed it was spreading waves of pheromones – she could feel its longing for a mate. Curious to see if her powers could work on this creature, she decided to approach the water strider and see if she could play with its desires. The water strider felt her presence and turned to face her. She could see it squinting its eyes, wary of her approach, which gave her hope something fun might happen after all.

“Worry not, I come to provide some relief to your longing.” She said with her thoughts, trying to win it over. “Is your wish not to find a mate?”

The water strider tapped its legs on the water three times in rhythm.

Delphina smiled. “That’s good to hear.” She offered her best smile, the one that has caused grown humans to cry, scream of joy, and everything in between. “Approach to receive my gift.”

Delphina outstretched one arm, with her hand closed save the index and middle finger that were outstretched to offer a landing spot. The water strider seemed to hesitate for a moment, but her smile melted any defenses he might have mustered, and he strode over to her. Once it was close enough, it climbed up on Delphina’s outstretched

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fingers. The moment he touched her, a small puff of shiny dust was ejected from her skin pores and covered the water strider from head to toe. For a moment nothing happened, and Delphina felt a pang of regret to find that her powers are only good on humans. The insect then jumped and pivoted in the air, before running out to the middle of the pond, frantically tapping its legs on the water. The taps were all at the same frequency, three megahertz, but the music, the rhythm, was so enchanting, so alluring. Delphina knew it had succumbed to her powers of seduction and that filled her heart with joy. This was her true calling – before the Queen of the Shadows took her to use her powers at the court’s convenience. Since then, Delphina had found her taste for spreading desire had waned considerably. Feeling energized by the water strider’s growing excitement, she let herself get into the rhythm set by its tapping and began to dance like no one was watching, wildly shaking her head, and throwing her arms and legs in random directions, only obeying to the beat instilled by her new friend. She was enthralled by the knowledge her powers extended far beyond humans. Soon, the water strider found himself surrounded by others, some females who were attracted by his hypnotizing song, some males who were irritated he had all this attention.

Some of the males injected their own water tapping rhythm, as they worked together to break their rival’s enchanted songs. This stopped Delphina’s wild dancing, and turned her attention to focus on the unfolding events, interested in what was going to happen next. The raucous activity was beginning to attract the attention of some birds, and the fish in the pond were circling just below the surface, attracted by the prospect of a quick meal. The enchanted male continued its rhythmic chant, focused on one thing and one thing only, finding a mate. That’s when a bird flew in and took the first victim. This didn’t slow one particular female water strider as she braved the danger and approached the spellbound male, ready to accept his invitation. As soon as she was close enough, he climbed on top of her, and they began to mate which was the starting point to the birds and fish feeding frenzy. The water striders were going down one by one before they could even understand what was

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happening. The new couple ignored the events around them and continued their mating ritual as if they were alone in the world, until a trout flew out with its mouth wide open, swallowing them both in one fell swoop. Soon, the pond was back to its quiet splendor, with the only audible sounds coming from a racoon that was busy gathering some flowers that he then placed in piles according to their colors.

“Well, that was disappointing.” Delphina muttered to herself.

Now that the little bit of excitement at the sound of the music produced by the enchanted insect had passed, she felt nothing. She was proud that she had managed to create an uncontrollable desire to mate in something different than a human, but she found that not being the center of the insect’s desires was quite disheartening. Since Milucra had taken her, which was so long ago it was almost impossible to remember the time before that, Delphina found that she had grown very fond of being the center of someone’s attention. Not once had she consumed the tease, since she used that time to replenish by absorbing the human’s craving. She could reassure that she still possessed the power to encourage procreation, but she did relish the idea of being at the center of the attention when she used her power. Today’s experiment felt like a waste—she couldn’t reclaim her energy; all she could do was watch them consume it.

“Dearest Delphina, hath thou begun preparations for our trek?”

Milucra’s call shook Delphina right out of her thoughts. Milucra was standing in her chariot, with two excited centaurs pulling at the reins, ready to take off.

“Yes, my Queen, I awaited your signal to leave and chose to tease the creatures—are we ready to lift off?”

Milucra looked at her without showing any expression whatsoever, a talent Delphina admired – and feared.

The Queen’s eyes locked on to Delphina’s “That’s good to hear.” She said. The gaze was warm, with wrinkles of a slight smile showing on either side. “I do worry for you, my dearest.” Milucra said. “I feel your fear of the changes that will come to be soon, but you mustn’t. You hath shown great loyalty, and my sentiments towards you have grown to become those of a friend. You shall be of importance in the

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new world, that is a promise I make to you. Here, now, and forever.” Delphina felt an irresistible urge to confront her Queen. If she was to give up seducing humans, she needed more. She needed Jasper.

“You speak of a promise but give no details. What place shall mine be? What do you believe is important for me?” She asked.

Milucra frowned and looked at Delphina with a mixture of wonder and outrage. She descended from her chariot and placed herself squarely in front of Delphina. Her eyes had become dark, and her mouth was pursed so tight her lips had turned white. Delphina stood her ground despite the fear, aware that if one challenged the Queen, the only way out was to stand by its action. Milucra locked eyes with her. She slowly leaned in, trying to will Delphina to look away, which did not happen. Milucra took a deep breath, and in moments the softness returned to her gaze, and her smile was Delphina’s signal to breathe again.

“I shall make it known you possess boundless courage. Trust me.” Milucra said as she placed a hand on Delphina’s shoulder.

Milucra returned to her chariot and turned to look at Delphina. She said nothing but it was clear she was inviting her to join her on the chariot.

“You can ride with me.” She said. “Tell your acolytes we are ready.” Delphina responded by calling the other Nymphs with a loud whistle. In an instant, thirteen of them appeared in front of the chariot, each one harnessed to a cord. Milucra raised her hand, and soon a billow of smoke emerged from the end of the cords and enveloped the chariot and its occupants, provoking the centaurs to run after it. Delphina instantly felt they were pulled upwards and forwards and had to grab the crossbar to avoid falling off.

They rose into the sky under the guise of a rolling storm cloud. Having a moment to let her mind wander, Delphina felt scattered. She had been unconditionally loyal to Queen Milucra, her belief firm and unwavering from the moment she was called. Now, a feeling of doubt had settled in the crest of her heart, and she needed to understand what her role would become in Milucra’s new order after the upcoming Rade. If Milucra is successful in her plan to create a hybrid human/Fey, would she still have the opportunity to play

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with them? If the water strider incident was any indication, she was losing out on the one thing she had become an expert—to seduce a human and absorb their life energy. More than that, she would lose all possibility to seduce any human, since Faylandia inhabitants were strictly off guard. Will that rule apply to the hybrids? As their cloud rolled along, Delphina thought back to her dream the night before.

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When she opened her eyes in the dream, there was a small boy standing in front of her in an empty landscape.

“I know something.” He told her.

Delphina bent down to speak to him face to face, and saw the face of an old man, wrinkled and worn. It had one hand with four fingers and no thumb, the other looked more like some sort of crustacean claw. The rest of its body was hidden behind an oversized red and green plaid jacket. She had not seen a Portune in a long time and had to wonder why it would come to her in a dream. They were harmless, but had the ability to lead someone astray just for kicks, and that included Fey Folks. She couldn’t help but wonder if he would try some sort of trick.

“It has been long since I set my eyes on one of your kind. Speak, dear Portune.” Said Delphina.

He looked around, as if making sure they were alone, then leaned in to speak.

“The Queen of the Shadows, Milucra, has plans to take a child born a halfling from the bosom of one Zanna of the Isles.”

Delphina was disappointed. She didn’t expect the Portune to have any profound secret to share, but to have him speak of something she already knew left her unsatisfied.

“Why should such news interest me?” She asked, hoping he had more to say.

“This halfling shall become the seed that will one day overcome humans. With halflings in the place of humans, Milucra can reign not only over Feylandia’s shadows, but the physical world as well.”

Every time she heard about her Queen eliminating humans, Delphina felt attacked and a wave of anger rose in her throat. But she was

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curious, this was the first time she heard this outside of the closed confines of the court.

“How do you know such important news?” She asked with an angry tone.

The Portune shrugged his shoulders and smiled. “My kind has never disappeared; we have remained hidden, free from the obligations of either court, to listen and observe. It is a task given to us by the mycelial network – we could not refuse. One of our obligations is to intervene when balance is threatened. As it is now. The two courts must remain. Without them, confusion and disorder would overcome our lives. More than that, the physical must remain separate from Faylandia’s pure chaotic energy. If I have shown myself to you, it is to ask if you can find Zanna of the Isles and warn her to remain hidden throughout the duration of the Rade. If she can keep the child safe, there may still be a chance everything will be good.”

Delphina was surprised by the Portune’s words but knew this was her chance to do something to help preserve the universe’s state of being. “I know what to do. I appreciate the time you have given me” Delphina said.

“We appreciate your endeavor. If the need arises to speak again, we shall continue to use the dream vessel to communicate.”

The Portune disappeared as soon as he spoke his last words, leaving Delphina in an open field.

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Delphina was awakened by the feeling of humid air on her face coming from the cloud that surrounded them. She stretched out her neck to absorb as much liquid as she could to quench her thirst. Her mind was filled with memories from the time she had spied on the Queen when a Kobold had entered her quarters through the secret tunnel. She had named him Lugh, which was strange to Delphina, since this Kobold had nothing to honor such a great name. She didn’t hear everything, but she did understand he was tasked with delivering a message, and she was almost certain she heard the



name Zanna being spoken. Now they were headed to a meeting with Queen Celeste to initiate the Rade, and Delphina knew that from this point, she would need to play it just right for everything to work.

Milucra remained silent beside her, with her head held high and her crown shining under the little amount of light that did come through the cloud. She looked off into the distance, her hair floating behind her under the impulse of the wind. Delphina began to think about what she could do once they got there. She could use her powers on the Kobold, who would surely be there, to hopefully derail the proceedings and have the Rade cancelled. Or at the very least, delayed. And what if Zanna was there as well? If so, there was little chance of doing anything to change the outcome of the meeting.

As they grew closer to the meeting place, Delphina could sense the Kobold's presence along that of the Queen of the Fairest and two beasts, but felt no sign of any Water Sprite in the area. She focused her attention exclusively on the Kobold, trying to establish a mental connection before they get there so she could easily complete her seduction once they got there. She closed her eyes and opened her mind to his thoughts. It didn't take long; she found a cluster of thoughts floating freely in the ether between the worlds and she concentrated her thoughts on it. She tried to hone in on something that would tell her this was the Kobold, but all she got were expressions of pleasure related to some soft tissue rubbing on the skin and giving this thought cloud an almost erotic feel. She went to pull her mind away from this cluster, but something in the back of her mind was telling her to stay put.

She felt a strong wave of panic hiding behind the thoughts – whoever this was, it had no idea where it needed to go. It had to be the Kobold, only their kind would be stupid enough to take action without knowing how to accomplish it. It was now clear she was connected to the right being and worked at making sure he felt her.

“What occupies your mind with such vigor?” Asked Milucra.

Delphina was startled but managed to keep her thoughts aligned. “Just mentally preparing for the meeting, my Queen. I feel the

presence of two large beasts with Celeste and I want to be ready.” Milucra frowned and smile simultaneously. “It pleases me to great lengths to see you are invested in this important moment in our history. Worry not about the beasts, Celeste always travels with her Catshees. They are harmless if not provoked. And I’ll keep you safe if they get excited.”

The Queen seemed satisfied with Delphina’s response and turned her attention back to her centaurs, who were frothing at the mouth from the effort they deployed. Delphina tried to see her sisters, but could barely see figures where they should be. She told herself they would be fine, as their presence was only to produce the cloud and incite the centaurs to run after them. Yet another task that would become obsolete in the new order Milucra wanted to instill.

Delphina had to work at making sure whatever happens with the Kobold remained at the seduction level. She knew that playing this game with a Fey person meant she could be exposed to her own powers and succumb to them. If she was ever to let herself become enthralled, it would be with Jasper, and that had little chance of happening. Still, she had to be careful, Kobolds are quick to react and it could bounced right back to her. She would need to indulge his desire but keep a safe distance. With humans, she could improvise in her approach, but with a Fey person, she needed to be precise with her actions.

Before she could establish a clear connection with the Kobold, the cloud that carried them began to dissipate, slowly revealing a clearing below, where Celeste, flanked by two Catshees, was waiting patiently. Milucra snapped the Centaur’s harness and they immediately changed course to begin the descent.

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We waited for a time, during which I took a satisfying nap while the Catshees took turns standing guard. Celeste also took advantage of the moment to replenish by lying down, but as I emerged from my deep sleep, she was just lying there, eyes open. I had no intention of disturbing whatever it was she was doing, and besides, I was quietly

celebrating the fact I had been granted access to a good meal and some rest — I was ready and rearing to go. The sunrays were punching through the leaves, leaving a trail of particles in their wake. One particle caught my eye. It glittered with more intensity than the others, and while all the other particles around it floated aimlessly, this one flew with purpose, seemingly headed somewhere specific. I got up and went to observe it more closely. I couldn't say if it saw me, but I could swear it began to float towards me as soon as I focused on it. It flew in and stopped in front of me. I stretched my hand to touch it. I was thrown on my back the moment it touched my skin. Celeste noticed my fall, but the Catshee stayed back, uninterested by my misfortune.

"What is the cause of your discomfort, Lugh?" Celeste asked, as I lumbered back to my feet, more worried about tainting my velour garbs than seeing if I was injured.

"This strand of energy" I said, pointing to it. "It appeared but a moment ago, and what you saw was caused by my hand touching it."

"Milucra is coming." Celeste said, to which the Catshees responded by raising their ears and standing at attention, their muscles tensed. I looked at my hands. Have I been blessed, or cursed? I thought. There was a tiny spot between my thumb and index finger, I couldn't remember if that was a birthmark that had always been there. I saw Celeste was now standing before the energy particle, her hands cupped in a circle around it.

"I am ready." She said.

The Catshees flanked Celeste, their attention turned to the sky. A storm cloud was being pulled by two centaurs. On top of the cloud stood Milucra. She was regal, intimidating. She stood as if on a solid floor and let her gaze fall far behind us. Her crown was a snug fit around her head, seemingly holding her hair in place. Her eyes shone through the cloud's darkness, lit by some red hued light emanating from inside her. Her dress was regal, designed with the utmost care to detail, and entirely made of armor. Thirteen Nymphs vivaciously kept the cloud active, motivating the centaurs to pull harder still, yet Milucra stood firm, her head held high. She landed

softly, as the storm cloud that carried her dissipated upon touching the ground. The thirteen Nymphs landed some distance away, wary of the two Catshees who stood by Celeste.

The Nymphs hid behind bushes and trees, but even that couldn't hide their spectacular beauty. I felt a rush of lust rise in my heart. I couldn't look away — one of them had the most beautiful eyes, the kind I could get lost in forever. Another had lush, inviting lips, just waiting to be kissed. Each one had a specific element that was designed to overcome any human man's resistance, and I could see why. I managed to control myself, aware that these Nymphs are used by Milucra to lure unsuspecting humans when she needed new servants. Then I saw her. Sitting next to Milucra. She was perfection. She was my everything. I placed all my concentration into fighting the urge to run to the Nymph's side, aware it would be considered bad manners. And the fact she was making a conscious effort to evade my gaze only made me want to be with her even more. Milucra, now busy petting her centaurs, turned to me.

"My faithful Lugh, my heart expands with joy. You were true to your task. I feel so proud of you."

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THE END

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### **Coming in December in the Tales from the Storyroom:**

The meeting between the Queens takes place – under the watchful eyes of the forest dwellers – and a plan is put in motion to prepare the next Rade into the human world. Lugh tries to return to his search for Clarence, but will he be able, or even allowed, to do so?

Mike Longmeadow

## About the Author

Mike Longmeadow is an author fascinated by the invisible realities that permeate our lives. He is a curious bookworm who's constantly looking to learn, discover new things that will augment his outlook on life.

This has led him to read and learn about a variety of past cultures and beliefs, which he then introduces into the here and now to create a compelling story.

In the meantime, let's Connect:

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/MikeLongmeadow>

Instagram: [https://www.instagram.com/mike\\_longmeadow/](https://www.instagram.com/mike_longmeadow/)

Website: <http://michellongpre.com/>



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Mike Longmeadow