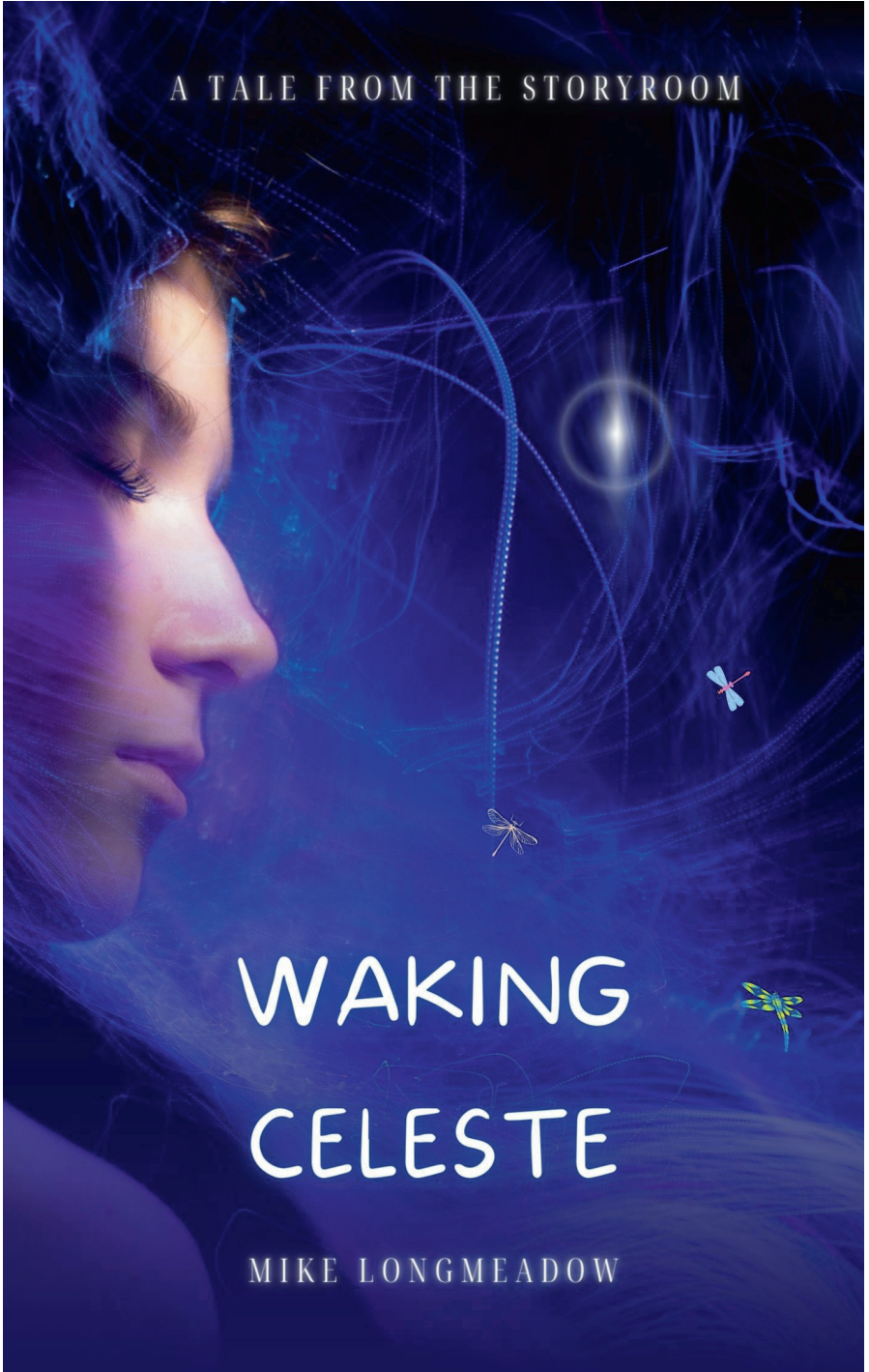


A TALE FROM THE STORYROOM

WAKING
CELESTE

MIKE LONGMEADOW



Waking Celeste

A Tale from the Storyroom

Karmic Publishing
www.michellongpre.com

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In the previous episode, Lugh, the nameless Kobold, was given a name and a task by the Queen of the shadows, Milucra. Now, he must go to awaken the Queen of the Fairest, Celeste.

Praise for Cosmic Consciousness

From Amazon certified reviews.

"I always love a story that leaves me pondering the truth as we currently perceive it. This book is cleverly crafted and an enlightening read."

"Opens up the imagination to new possibilities."

Waking Celeste: A Tale from the Storyroom

This tale is the next one to come out of the Storyroom. More are to come, stay tuned.

Dedication

To my cat, who has supervised every moment of this endeavor with
zeal.

To my wife, who never judges the chaotic process I go through.

To my son and his family, who are true inspirations and fill me with
pride every day the sun rises.

Acknowledgments

To all who still believe in a simple dream.

From Mike with Author Academy Elite

Cosmic Consciousness

www.michellongpre.com/cosmic-consciousness

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I woke up lying on my back, staring up at the sky. I was at the exact spot where I had gone in to Milucra's lair, right before I found myself stuck inside the dark tunnel. The ray of light that had let me in was still shining between two rocks, to which I was very careful to stay away from. I was not going back into the dark tunnel today... and not tomorrow, for that matter. I looked around me, not sure what I was looking for, with a lingering thought stuck at the top of my mind—what, if anything, had just happened? Was I now really a servant to the Queen of the Shadows? If it wasn't for the lush velour hugging my skin, I would question it all. I caressed the velour to reassure myself and my heart filled with joy—not only did I get new garbs to wear, but also a name to carry and honor.

I picked myself up and after taking a moment to dust off my dress, I started walking. Within a few short steps, I was back on the path that would lead me back to the despondent Fey who sent me here. I hesitated for a while, looking at the thin passage that I called a path, unsure if I should go back or not. Will they accept my new role and name? Will they believe me? I asked myself, thinking it would be easy for them to refuse to believe such a tale. I rubbed my face with both hands to free my mind and gather my thoughts. I had to make sure I could convince whoever was there that not only did I fulfill my task—I was also granted a name and given a role. I could even show the medallion to prove my claim. Thinking about the implications this situation carried caused a dizzy spell to rise and I had to hold on to something solid.

I had a name. Lugh. My name is Lugh, I am a Kobold.

“Pleased to meet you, I am Lugh.” I said out loud. It sounded so good

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in my mouth.

Part of me was unsure about why she chose that name—her grandfather, Lugh, was known for many different talents across all the lands, be they human or Fey—and I was unknown to all. The doubt I felt was easily overcome by the pride and privilege I felt at the notion I could answer when asked to identify myself. Besides, spending any time thinking about why was a moot point, it was done. I had to focus; I had a task bestowed on me from a Queen. The first step of my journey was to find directions to Queen Celeste. I decided to start by going back to the disgruntled Fey Folk, there might still be people there who could help me. And if they refused to believe me, too bad, I'll find another way.

A vague memory told me I could use the mycelial network to find my way, but I needed help to remember how to accomplish that. All I knew for sure is that it had something to do with following some unknown melody.

I pricked up my ears, trying to listen for any sign of the mycelial call. The forest was calm and quiet. The leaves hanging carelessly on their tree branches, sluggishly letting gravity pull them down, pivoting lightly under the weak impulse of a barely perceptible air current. The energy flow within the tree was slow and lazy. The ground was emitting swirls of humidity that would normally feed the mushroom community, but the ongoing heat and drought caused it to rise then dissipate in the air in seconds, before it could nourish the ground. I looked at the strands of rising humidity and moved closer to them, trying to listen for their vibration, hoping to hear the mycelial network's song. I wasn't disappointed. The distant sound of a melody touched my ears—it immediately powered its way from my mind down to my soul in one felt swoop. The music, chaotic yet melodious, dug deeper. It flowed to fill each particle of my being, while my mind was flooded with a chaotic montage of images from Feyland's many places. This was the network; I was sure of it.

Now all I had left to do was to recall how it worked. I focused on the melody, if it could be called that—it sounded more like chaotic ramblings from old, out of tune instruments, even if it did carry an appealing softness. I tried to understand the song's structure, hoping

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to find a way inside the musical vibration it emitted. Except it was erratic, and I couldn't find how I could follow its rhythm. I was lost with nowhere to turn.

I let myself slide into a long moment of self pity. I saw myself standing before Milucra and telling her I couldn't fulfill my task. I saw her getting angry and punishing me with a salvo of lightning or something even worse. But now I had a name to bear and honor, so I gathered myself and started to focus my mind on finding a solution and get me on my way. I had to get busy. I didn't know her well, but something told me Milucra was not a patient person.

Once I got my mind focused on the task, it didn't take long to find a solution. I gathered some dead leaves and twigs and placed them near a strand of steam that was released from the earth. I tried to place the leaves in a triangular shape for them to capture as much humidity as they could, hoping this would give the mushroom community a safe place to solidify their network. I felt my chest swell with pride when a small patch of mushrooms near my stack of humid leaves released some spores that took to the air inside a tiny cloud of humidity that held them together. They followed a path only known to them. Each spore shone like a tiny star, doing flips and cartwheels under the impulse of an invisible air current. Slowly, they began to let gravity bring them back. I was fascinated to see most of them were voluntarily aiming for the patch of leaves. Some spores missed the patch completely and fell to the ground to blink out of existence without a sound, rejoining the earth until the next release. Those that reached the leaf patch—it was most of them—immediately merged with the ground, creating a vibration in the air. I had managed to create a new point of connection for the mycelial network, and the melody immediately grew stronger and less chaotic. My idea worked and I felt a surge of confidence fill my soul, a feeling I rarely had, if ever. I could now use the network to locate Queen Celeste and avoid going back to the hungry Fey where I would face possible ridicule, maybe even death if they thought I was lying.

Something moved in the woods behind me. A shiver of fear danced along my spine as I braced for the worst. Whatever it was, it was big

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enough to disturb the air, forcing the spores to break apart and spread out before quietly falling back to the ground, far from my pile of leaves. I hid behind a tree to observe—there were two beings travelling together. A Lake Maiden and a human were walking in my direction. They hadn't seen me, so I made sure to stay hidden by sliding down into the tree root grooves. The Lake Maiden had long blue hair that was adorned with bright red flowers, and her gaze was stern. She was leading the duo's trek with long and confident strides. I was surprised to see the human was keeping up with ease, showing no sign of being confused or afraid. He diligently followed behind the Lake Maiden wearing a silly smile.

"We're going the wrong way." Said the human. "We should be leaning to the left."

"It's fine, worry not." Answered the Lake Maiden. She took his hand and pulled him to her side. "Still, we advance. The direction we choose has little influence on the result." She added.

They walked past me without noticing my presence and as they edged their way further, I relaxed. Once they were far enough, I exited from my hiding place and waited for the air to stabilize around me. The dust they had raised was slowly returning to the ground, giving the mycelial spores another chance to rise. I waited for a moment, and once I was certain I was alone, I returned to the leaf patch. I bent down and sat besides it, playing around with the leaves to make sure they were still able to absorb humidity. A cloud of spores popped out from under them and formed a circle around me. The cloud emitted a low hum that acted as a barrier from all other sounds in the forest. The hum was constant, equal, and unrelenting. I waited for something else to happen, but it remained present without anything else happening. It was seemingly waiting for my next move.

"Where can I find Queen Celeste?" I asked with a quivering voice.

A single spore split from the cloud and came toward me. It blinded me with a powerful brilliance and headed directly for my eye. I instinctively took a step back and shut my eyes. Nothing else happened, so I tried to take a peek and slightly opened one eye. The spore was there, waiting, and it jumped at the opportunity it was

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given and dove in. Instantly, my body dissolved into a billion particles, yet I felt no pain. I was absorbed by the cloud and taken into the mycelial network. I could only hope the particles that made up my body would stay close to one and other to counter the unfathomable speed I was travelling inside the network. Thankfully, before panic had time to set in, I found myself hovering over a lush garden filled with extravagant topiaries. A young girl was splashing around in a fountain, having herself an overall great time. Then I blinked, and suddenly found myself back where we started. The spore cloud had dissipated. My pile of dead leaves was broken apart by some unseen gust of wind. I realized my question had been a little too precise, and looked around, trying to figure out how to interpret what I just saw into an actual direction.

“Showing me where the Queen lives is exactly what I asked for and your input was invaluable.” I paused, waiting for something to happen, which didn’t. “Yet I find myself still blind regarding the direction I must take and still have no way to reach her.”

Still nothing. The forest was as calm as ever and the spore cloud I created had returned and was now floating lazily above the destroyed cluster of leaves. I couldn’t say if it possessed the power of thought, but I had the impression it was clearly ignoring me. An idea popped into my mind, and without questioning it, I decided to head in the direction the human and Lake Maiden went, thinking it was as good a way to start as any. As soon as I took one step, the air filled with a chaotic collection of sounds that somehow worked together to form a decent melody. It was pulsing inside my ears, with waves of pressure pushing down on my eardrums. I stood still and turned my head, expecting to see the cloud of spores behind me but instead the music’s volume went down as soon as I looked back.

An old feeling rose from my soul. I remembered why I felt a need to leave Feyland in the first place. It was the network. It will always show you the direction you feel in your heart, which means it doesn’t always correlate with what you think you desire. I had exhausted myself trying to find the right balance, systematically only finding sadness, despair, and confusion. I knew all I had to do was listen to its call and follow it, but I all I wanted was a simple life with

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no obligations. The day I came across an opening between the worlds, I crossed over to the human realm to get away from its obscure lure. But now I had to trust my heart and my mind could align themselves with it. I had no other choice. As soon as I turned back in the direction I had started, the melody returned. A surge of anger rose to my throat.

“Why are you playing with me? I am Lugh, it is the truth that I act as a servant to Queen Milucra, you cannot refuse my request.” I yelled. A combination of instant regret and pride filled my chest, leaving me unsure of the spore cloud’s reaction.

The melody didn’t change, except it was no longer in the air around me but only in my head. I took a step to one side, then the other, and it waned ever so slightly. That’s when I understood it varied with my movements. It was playing “hot and cold” with me, directing each one of my steps. I tilted my head from side to side to see if I could decipher a direction. It was telling me to follow it by keeping my focus on our connection. I began walking, feeling a pang of guilt at my earlier outburst.

“Please accept my sincerest regret, my attitude was not a complaint but rather a manifestation of my own stupidity.” I said in the most apologetic tone I could muster.

There was no reaction. The music kept ringing in my ears, and I began to understand it wanted me to continue my trek, that we had not yet arrived. I followed the melody for days, adjusting my direction so many times I could never retrace my steps. My confidence in the spores grew weaker with every step, and I was starting to feel like I was being led astray, that this was leading nowhere. My frustration was pushing me to give up, which I almost did more than once. Except I was now endowed with a name by the great Milucra, and I could not slander it. Plus, I had a strong motivation to avoid the Queen’s wrath.

The more I advanced, the deeper I got lost in thought. I was so absorbed by my own meditations, I didn’t even notice when the music ended. Once I noticed its absence, I realized I was wrapped in complete darkness, under a moonless sky. I tried to look around but couldn’t see anything as the darkness enveloped everything inside

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an opaque blanket. I got to my knees and started to feel my way around, hoping I would find the trace of the melody. Without it, I was lost.

“I carry a message for Queen Celeste in the name of Queen Milucra.” I said, desperate to reconnect with the network.

The connection was broken. The sound of my voice was swallowed by the pitch-black blanket that enveloped me. Even the sounds of the forest were hushed, everything seemed so far away. Only one thing was crystal clear—raspy breathing coming from everywhere around me. I stayed where I was without moving, expecting something to happen. The darkness closed in, and it created a force that pressured me to lay down. I had seen this before—it was the fog created by the Mares. The same one they used on the humans at the Fairchild farm. It’s a shroud that holds you prisoner, forcing one to feed them with deep rooted fears until they are satiated. Or until one dies, whichever comes first.

“The mushrooms played you.” A hoarse voice rang out, making me jump.

I was unable to move and tried to look around using only my eyes, hoping to see who might be speaking. I was right, it was a Mare. It was looking at me, its head floating in the darkness, seemingly detached from its body. Its eyes were hard, blackened with anger and spite but bore no effect on me. I was too busy being simultaneously repulsed and fascinated by a trail of drool that hung lifelessly from its mouth. While I fought the urge to run, my mouth opened to speak.

“Why does your tongue enjoy lying so much?” I said in a firm tone. I had a name now after all, and it was important that I show some dignity.

The Mare stepped out from the dark to reveal himself completely. If he hoped to intimidate me, it was an utter failure. I felt confident, and I knew I could stand my ground. He was clad in a green jacket with blue accents that covered him down to his knees. His legs looked like hairy tree trunks, projecting a sense of power. He was not smiling, nor did he seem taken aback by my apparent toughness. That said it was always hard to decipher a Mare’s mood. The way

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their eyes rested on the side of their heads made it impossible to look them in the eyes. And even if you did meet their gaze, the lack of eyebrows and the way their nose and mouth met up at the bottom of their faces made it impossible to decipher their emotions. The only thing I knew is that no matter what, one must never interpret a Mare's mood until they tell you what it is. With that in mind, I stopped myself from trying to fight my way out from under the blanket of darkness and decided to wait and see what it had planned for me. The Mare's veil lifted ever so slightly and gave me the opportunity to stand. He sneered and leaned in to get closer to me. I took a step back despite myself.

"Hehe, your bravery is fleeting, is it not?" Snickered the Mare.

I was unperturbed by his arrogance. "I am here as a representative of your Queen, the glorious Milucra."

The Mare seemed surprised at first, then he grinned, revealing multiple rows of razor-sharp teeth.

"Is that so?" He sauntered over to me, sending chills down my entire body. I had to be careful, Mares give human nightmares, and feed off the fear they emit. But they can literally devour residents of the Land of the Fey if they deem it is to be—or if they just feel like it. He was now close to my face and his breath filled the air, a mixture of sulfur and rotting meat, causing me to choke. "And how, may I ask, does a Kobold become a representative of the Queen?"

I hesitated. Not only was I unable to breathe, I had no idea where to begin.

"I was tasked with giving the Queen a dire message—about the mycelial dry spots. She accepted my message, then tasked me with... well a new task." I managed to say, trying to avoid telling them too much.

"Quite the vocabulary on this one, no?" Said the Mare to someone behind him. He looked at me while scratching its chin, clearly undecided on how to dispose of me.

Two more Mares appeared from the shadows and flanked me. They were focused on me, which made the air around me even thicker. I could taste the sulfur and rotting meat in my mouth, in my nose, and all over my skin. I was starting to have serious doubts that having

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been given a name would change anything. At that exact moment, I would have given anything to be back at the Fairchild farm, innocently taking in the Sun and playing with the bees and squirrels. One of the Mares placed its hand on my head and started to massage my scalp. I felt the long claws on its fingers, but it was careful not to press too hard. The feeling was deeply soothing but I kept that to myself, aware that Mares rarely, if ever, voluntarily did anything that produced good feelings.

“If you speak true, your... our Queen must have provided you with proof you are in fact at her service. No one with half a mind would accept a Kobold could have such a high rank. Especially not one that was in the human realm for so long.”

Panic seized me. They knew about my time in the human realm, which meant they might be the same ones who came to the lumber camp. Half my mind wanted to show them the medallion, the other half was screaming to keep quiet about it. The Mares sensed my disarray.

“Show us now, or we’ll take you to the human realm to eat you so you can feel the pain when we do.” The two silent Mares snickered at this, making the drool on the side of their mouths dance.

My shivers had gotten so strong I was sweating profusely. I had to show them the medallion. They would find it anyway while they tore me apart. I reached inside my velvet gown to grab the medallion. The Mares tensed up, seeming surprised I was going to show them something.

“Before I show you, you must promise to leave it be. I need it to fulfill my, our, Queen’s request.”

The Mares nodded in unison, so excited the drool that clung to them fell to the ground. Their mouths were frothing, and they were stamping their feet, excited at the prospect of seeing something from the Queen. I pulled out the Medallion and held it up. It glistened in the darkness, pulling in light from an unknown source. The Mares dropped to their knees and began to wail.

“Oh my, oh my.” Said one “Please don’t tell the Queen we threatened you.” Said another. The Mares were sobbing. “We vow to protect and honor your journey if you vow to keep silent on our

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interaction.” His two acolytes had already disappeared in the bushes, and the veil of darkness began to dissipate.

I nodded, surprised they had such a strong reaction.

“As such it shall be. Now leave me, I must continue my trek.”

The shivers I had felt moments before were gone and in its place was a sense of pride and confidence I was still trying to master. The remaining Mare slowly backed away as I kept the medallion well in view with my arm up in the air. The air around me returned to the delicious perfumes of the forest, and I started to breathe normally. Moments later, I was alone and the medallion began to glisten with more intensity. Its glow grew strong enough for me to see around me and find my bearings. Everything looked normal, except for a bush adorned with flowers of many kinds. When I pointed the medallion in its direction, it glowed even more, which told me this was possibly a passage. I took a moment to celebrate the fact I had found my way, then walked up to the bush and pointed the medallion at it. It stopped shining, but I still kept it pointed at the bush.

“I carry a message for Queen Celeste in the name of Queen Milucra.”

The bush quivered, its leaves dancing under the impulse of an unseen force coming from its center. I felt the excitement rising inside me—I was proud to show the Queen, and myself, that I was up to the task. Then the quivering stopped and nothing else happened. Unsure of the next step, I ventured a question.

“Does thou need more from me?” I asked.

The bush quivered again, and this time it seemed as though something was fighting to get out. There was something small moving from its center, and it kept edging closer. I was convinced this was the opening that would lead me to the road toward Queen Celeste’s castle. I leaned in to see the event unfold. But it wasn’t an opening, it was a squirrel. It jumped out, flying towards me. My heart stopped, and before I could even move, it bounced off my shoulder and ran up a tree. I could swear it was laughing, proud of its successful prank. While I caught my breath, I looked for the squirrel and saw it looking down at me, its head cocked sideways so I only saw one eye. It was clearly smiling—in a friendly way—and

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suddenly I recognized it. This was my friend from the human realm.

“I have great news, my friend. I am now the proud owner of a name.”

The squirrel jumped down to get closer, its tail twitching in anticipation.

“’Tis true, I answer to Lugh.”

The squirrel ran down, circling the tree as it descended, then climbed up my leg and settled on my shoulder to look at me in the eyes. It did this when it thought I was lying, as if it could see the lie if it came closer.

“This is the truth. Queen Milucra gave it to me, along with a task I must fulfill.” My gaze went towards the flowery bush. “Is that a passage toward Queen Celeste’s castle?”

The squirrel looked at the bush, then at me, then back to the bush, and jumped down before disappearing into the forest. Either it went to hide so it could surprise me again, or it knew I would be gone soon, having passed to another part of the realm. I waited for a moment, listening for its movements. I could hear it getting further and further away—it had moved on to its next adventure. I bent down to face the bush and presented the medallion.

“My name is Lugh.” I felt it lacked gravitas and thought about what Milucra told me. “I am Lugh the truth-teller.”

A group of small, white flowers bloomed in unison. Spread out in an almost random pattern, they seemed to detach themselves from the bush and moved with grace and fluidity to form a circle in the middle. The petals began to twinkle and rotate, each one independent from the other. As they spun, they gradually meshed into one and other, slowly morphing into one big flower. It spun slowly, its constant rotation creating an invisible force that compelled me to walk towards it. That’s when the squirrel reappeared for an instant, bouncing off the top of the bush, causing a small puff of perfume to erupt and float towards me. The flowery aroma reached me, and I was instantly hypnotized. My mind was empty, save one powerful desire—enter the bush. I had no control over my body’s decision to advance, as it maneuvered to dive in headfirst, but I felt confident this was the right thing to do.

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I barely had time to feel the small branches touch my face as I dived in that I realized I was somewhere else. I couldn't stop myself and soon I was on the other side of the bush, my face acting as a break for my fall, while my feet were flipping over me. After a short slide, I bounced up to dust myself off and make sure I didn't damage my new garbs. Relieved that the damage was concentrated on my face, I looked around to see where I was. The light was too bright, forcing me to close my eyes. I tried to hide my eyes from the glare by putting my arm up, but even so, the brightness shone through and burned my iris. I wrapped my head with my velour cape in an attempt to create a safe space. The glare seemed softer, and it felt safe to open my eyes, which I did. The smallest of openings at my feet let in a sliver of light which made it as clear as day under my cape. I made a conscious effort to keep the opening as it was, afraid that the light coming in could blind me permanently.

I didn't move for a long moment, and slowly, and gradually, I felt more and more comfortable in my velour fortress. I didn't know if it was my eyes getting used to the brightness or if night had fallen, but I decided at that moment to open my cape. With my foot, I pushed on the opening that let the light in. An iridescent brightness filled the space, but it was no longer painful to keep my eyes open. Except that what I saw only confused me more. The light was broken into billions of photons, and they danced around me, as if waiting for a reaction on my part. It moved like wind ripples on the water, but it didn't touch me. The particles seemed to float aimlessly, at peace and in the moment. The photons let the ripples carry them, offering no resistance to the movement. They reminded me of the glowing flies that came to the Fairchild farm on occasion. The more I watched the waves, the more I relaxed, to the point that I forgot to keep my hand on my cape. It slid down my head. In a panic, I tried to catch my cape but only managed to completely remove it in one felt swoop. I had the reflex to shut my eyes but realized I could see without pain.

I was submerged with emotion. Before me was a lush forest of dense foliage. Hidden inside its thriving greenery were a few fragments of a magnificent castle that revealed itself in small pieces through the

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treetops. I didn't need to see the rest of it for me to know it was an important place and was no doubt the residence of the Queen of the Fairest. I tried to see where the walls could fall, but the castle was incorporated into the existing forest without any trees having been moved or cut. I decided to walk towards the bits of castle I could see, hoping it wouldn't be too long before I found its entrance. A trail appeared, it rose and fell, following the hills, disappearing in the dense foliage, and I chose to follow it. I moved slowly but with head held high. At times, in a dip in the path, the castle almost disappeared behind the trees and that's when a touch of doubt came to tickle my soul. After walking for a while, it completely disappeared and did not reappear at the next rise. I stopped, trying to find any trace of the top of a watch tower, or a flag sitting atop its roof to guide myself, but to no avail. I could only keep going forward, which I did. With my gaze fixed on the treetops, I tripped. I went to get back up, but a piece of wood that was jutting out emitted a wave of energy that told me it was something else, possibly even the main path to the front door. I approached it gingerly.

The air around me was so peaceful. I took a moment to revel in it and try and understand my next steps. An eager squirrel ran by at full speed, breaking the moment. I watched it climb a tree and disappear in a large knot before I could see if it was my friend, although it certainly was. I bent over to look at the wood plank that was protruding to see what I could do. It was hidden under a well-made weave of small branches. I grabbed one and pulled to see how I could untangle the knots. It was as if I had pulled on a doorhandle. A door opened to a long wooden path. At its end was a massive wooden door. Vines hung from the top of the wall that surrounded the door, falling like manes of hair down a solid stone wall that was clearly chiseled with love and expertise. The door was adorned with flowers that were growing out almost randomly but revealing a semblance of a face.

I was excited I had found my way, but now a feeling of dread seized me. Would the folks in the castle let me in? Would I be forced to return to Milucra and tell her I failed? That was not an option, so I decided to walk up to the door, hoping my mind would come up

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with something to help me. It took but a short moment to get close to the door, and to my left I could see a tower that jutted out from the trees. It was manned by three guards, and they were all watching me. Their disinterested look and the fact they left their arms to their side helped me relax, but I had yet to enter the Castle. I looked around for some sort of signal button I could use to announce my presence, but nothing stood out. Two of the guards turned away, and one of them kept looking at me but did nothing else.

“Hello?” I called out.

My voice barely left my mouth and was swallowed up by some invisible force.

“Can you hear me?” This time I yelled louder.

Again, the sound of my voice was absorbed as quickly as it left my mouth. Then an Imp stuck its head out from a porthole at the top of the door. Her hair floated freely on her head, as if it was trying to pull away. But I kept any remarks on her looks to myself. She was an Imp and she wore a stern look on her face and I didn’t want to incur any wrath from this little person. One must never underestimate the strength of an Imp, no matter how small. Finally, she spoke.

“Shut it, the Queen sleeps.” She whispered, which opened a channel between us to let the sound travel.

Not sure what to do, I tried gesturing for them to open the door. The Imp just stared at me with a confused look on her face.

“What has possessed you to cause such ruckus?” She whispered, the sound of her voice sliding down the door and headed directly for me.

“I come with a message for Queen Celeste from Queen Milucra.” I whispered back.

“Not so loud!” Its whisper was more like a shriek this time. She stared me down for a moment. “Tell me, I will pass it along.” She finally said.

I was afraid this might happen.

“That cannot be.” I whispered, almost in a mumble. Getting no reaction from my first comment, I continued. “My orders are clear—I must deliver the message myself.”

The Imp didn’t say anything at first, but she was rubbing her chin,

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clearly thinking about what to do.

“Wait.”

The Imp stuck its head back in and closed the porthole. I stood at attention and waited, expecting the door to open. Nothing happened. I let some time pass and still nothing. I knew I couldn't go back empty handed, and there was no way I could force my entry, so I chose to wait.

Although I had spent a lot of time in the human world, I still knew that in the Realm of the Fairest, it is unwise to show arrogance or be aggressive in any way when requesting an audience with the Queen's court—even more so the Queen herself—so I stayed at attention but relaxed my position to be able to wait in relative comfort and show no signs of impatience. The flowers on the door had all bloomed and were now turned towards me. A small unit of dragonflies had quietly arrived, spreading out, all of them squarely focused on me. Even the trees seemed to be turned towards me, twisted as if pushed by a strong wind—except the air was still. The whole forest was pointing in my direction. The doubt residing in my soul that I might not fulfill my mission grew stronger. My heart was beating loudly in my chest and my mouth felt dry, but I had to deliver my message. I looked around to see if there was anything else keeping an eye on me and saw my squirrel friend had gathered a group who were watching the event while munching on their nuts. The fact my Fairchild farm friend was present helped me relax a little.

“I am nothing more than the messenger, you know.” I whimpered. “Here is proof that my words are not lies.” I added, showing the medallion.

The dragonflies slowly flapped their wings in unison at my comment, which only exacerbated my feeling of helplessness. Seeing their wings beat in unison while they stared at me was frustrating. I knew they were speaking to me, but I knew nothing of their language. Then I saw that my squirrel friend seemed insistent on getting closer. He was walking in a zigzag pattern, cautious in its approach, before settling at my feet and standing on its hind legs. It glared at me with a serious sideways glance. I didn't understand why it was being so

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aggressive and its attitude made me take a few steps back. The squirrel stayed on me, squeaking aggressively, forcing me to back up. I hadn't realized it was pushing me towards the door, and a flower tapped my shoulder, shaking off some pollen, which seemed to calm the squirrel immediately. A few bees came over to pick up the pollen, softly landing on my shoulder and diligently sticking it in their leg hairs and antenna. One of the bees hovered in front of me.

"Hello." I said to the bee. "Please believe me when I say I hope my presence does not disturb your plans."

The bee responded by buzzing its wings to a quick beat. I didn't understand what that meant, but the bees on my shoulders burst out laughing—or that's what I thought—it sounded like footsteps on a squeaky floor. I had never felt so far from the human realm than I did at that time, causing a wave of nostalgia to overcome me. I stayed silent and let them do their thing, and when the last bee left my shoulder I sat down, leaning my back against the door. I missed my Clarence. I let the nostalgia take hold and told myself that once I'm done with the Queen's request, I could resume my search to find him. Then I heard some scurrying on the other side of the door and stood to face it.

The Imp opened the porthole and stuck its head out. This time I could clearly make out two horns that were sticking out from under her hair. They were black and polished, reflecting the light in tiny sparkles that flew off randomly.

"You can come in, but be advised, our catshee will be watching you." She was not whispering any more. Seeing all the precautions that were taken made me feel important and I felt my chest rise on its own power.

The door began to open. It creaked and moaned, pushed open by four Nixie children. I was amazed at their strength; they are smaller than Water Sprites and should not be strong enough to open a door this size. This made me suspect me their child shape must be a ruse—in case I was aggressive in some way—so I tried to seem as harmless as possible to avoid finding out their true nature. I kept my arms along my body and lowered my head. Their ruse made me laugh; it was funny to watch them battle the weight of the door.

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Except my amusement lasted but for a moment, as two huge feline-like creatures appeared in the door frame, erasing any happy thought I was harboring. The door frame was massive, at least five times taller than me. The two feline creatures occupied more than two thirds of the opening. They must have been the catshees the Imp warned me about. Beads of sweat began to appear on various parts of my body. I had become accustomed to human sized cats, much smaller and cuter, and had forgotten about these magnificent beasts. The Catshees looked very much like a human world cat, except their head was as wide as their body and their fur seemed made of spikes of metal. Their gaze was fixed on me, which made me feel smaller than ever, a reminder of my vulnerability and weakness.

No one moved, so I took a step. The felines could swallow me in one bite in their giant mouths, but they stayed put. I took another step. This time, they rose. They were lying on the ground before, and now stood as giants before me. The Nixies let go of the door and ran back in as it began to swing shut. When I saw the door closing in on me, I followed suit and ran inside, straight into one of the catshee's legs. It looked at me with its ears perked up, and I could swear I saw murder in its eyes.

"Please accept my apology. I did not intend to injure you."

The giant cat looked at me and huffed—causing a burst of wind to throw me back. The next moment, the door slammed shut with a thundering clang. The sound exploded in my head and knocked me down, forcing me to land against the catshees' leg, again. I looked up and smiled, to which the beast responded by lowering its head towards me, its mouth open. I cringed. Such a noble end, I'm proud to stand at death's door bearing a name that is mine. I thought. It gently bit down on my velour garbs before lifting me up. I gripped my cape to avoid being disrobed and went along for the ride, relieved it didn't want to eat me. I managed to settle enough tissue under me to form a small hammock and I let myself get rocked back and forth as I took in the scenery. We stepped into the central court and walked to the middle—which was filled with magnificent flowerpots and impossibly real looking statues—then we turned left

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and went down three flights of stairs. I bounced around in the hound's mouth, holding on to my velour cape as we advanced, more worried the hound's saliva would damage the velour than hurting myself.

Without warning, the catshee stopped and dropped me. I didn't have time to react and fell in a heap, wrapped in my velour. Both felines went to sit on either side of a wide French door. A curtain blocked the view from the refined windowpanes that decorated the doors, but I knew this was the place. A catshee growled and shook its head toward the door. They didn't look like patient beasts, so I placed my hand on the door handle and turned it. It opened to a room that seemed so large it was easy to believe it could swallow the whole castle.

The Queen's bed was massive, yet I couldn't see any legs on it. It was as though it sat on the sheets that were hanging on each side. It occupied the middle of the room, placed in such a way its occupant could look out the window if desired. I could smell it was made with elm tree wood. The rumor was that the bed frame was cultivated from one specific tree over generations. It is said that the first bed was a simple cot made of interwoven small branches. It has since been the Fairest Queen's bed. I could feel the rejuvenating energy it emitted, but this was no small cot. The bed I was looking at was a huge structure. Carefully stuffed into its wooden frame, the mattress gave an impression of pure comfort. Its lush and soft appearance was entrancing—I could feel its call to hop on to its luxurious surface and slip under the thick covers made of the softest cotton to get warm and regenerate. It was a bed that had grown in pieces, with each part of the bed being its own piece of art. Wooden sculptures were also added over time that told the stories of Queen Celeste's ancestors. That said, the story's origin goes back to when time didn't exist, so it was hard to say what was true or not.

Celeste was still asleep, barely visible under the thick sheets. All I could see was her face—flawlessly symmetrical in every aspect. With each breath, she emitted wave after wave of calm and serenity, creating an invisible bubble around her designed to protect her sleep. Aware I would be the one to wake her, I moved a little closer

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while I racked my brain to find a way to do it without incurring her wrath.

She had been thrust onto the throne when her parents were killed during a botched Rade that never even reached the human realm. There was very little that was known as to what exactly happened, but over time the general consensus was that Goddess Morrigan had a hand in it. But the only proof of that was the fact she was expelled from her Pantheon. Lost in thought, I now found myself at the side of the bed. As young as she was, I was not looking at the face of a child. Even asleep, she carried a power, a presence that commanded instant respect.

The silence in the room was peaceful, troubled only by the occasional breeze that came through the windows to rustle the curtains and the soft sound of Celeste's breathing. A servant entered the room with a plateau of fruit. He was careful to tiptoe, in a clear effort to refrain from making any noise. I pulled back, happy to let him take the blame for waking the Queen. Then he tripped, sending his plateau flying. This provoked a chain reaction that knocked over a table, then a lamp that landed in a bookcase, which sent a pile of books to the floor, which knocked over a podium holding a bust of the Queen that fell to the floor, shattering into a million pieces.

Celeste awoke in a startle. The fruit carrying servant—laying face first on the ground but still holding his tray—froze. A train of servants had entered behind him, all of them carrying something for the Queen. They also stopped moving, some of them even refraining from breathing. That created a strange line of otherworldly statues from the door to the bed. I looked at their reaction and couldn't understand why the servants were so afraid. The being that was now sitting in the middle of the bed could not be malevolent in any way—she oozed Love, and Kindness, and Generosity, even in the advanced disheveled state she was. Such a being couldn't hurt me, could it?

“Who dares interrupt my rest?” She growled. Her hair was still covering her face but revealed enough for all to know she was angry. All the servants took a step backwards. “How can I bequeath any vitality if I have none?” She wasn't screaming, but her voice was

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powerful and intimidating. I also took a step back.

She brushed the hair away from her face with her hands, revealing red, puffy eyes that seemed independent from each other as they floated freely in her eye sockets. Her face was inflamed and red with her mouth pursed in an angry pinch. She was far from the serene porcelain doll I saw a moment ago.

“I need my rest if I am to fertilize the fields. Why have you disturbed me?” She asked, taking the time to give an angry gaze to each of the servants that were standing still. This was far from the tales that celebrate her benevolence and empathy that were told about her.

The servants didn’t move. Now I wasn’t sure how to approach her and slid behind a large Troll to hide and gather my thoughts. Celeste seemed to calm herself and took a deep breath. It was clear she was still fighting against the confusion of interrupted sleep after being forced to abruptly wake up.

“What day is this?” Her voice was deep and hoarse, which clashed against her childish features. She sounded like Clarence’s grandmother when she was drunk, and I had to hold back the desire to laugh.

The servants had all lowered their heads and waited. A sense of calm returned to the room, and feeling that the Queen had come to accept her fate of being awakened, I stepped out from behind the troll. My new velour cape, so red and regal, made me feel like I belonged here. Still, I couldn’t help but be self-conscious about how it would make my shaggy hair and busted face stick out like a sore thumb. Before I could slip back behind the Troll, Celeste noticed me and smiled. I sensed she had calmed, only the redness on her face and the puffy eyes gave her a maniacal look, which worried me. I better choose my next words carefully. I thought. I took a deep breath and pulled out my medallion before speaking.

“I am here as a representative of Queen Milucra to inform you the dry patches are growing in the Land of the Fey — Spots of mycelial disconnection have touched both the Fairest and Shadow courts. The life essence depositories that still exist are strained to the breaking point. This is why the Queen declares that we must unite the courts to organize a Rade and help the network rebuild its

connections.”

I finished speaking and lowered my head as I took a step back. Celeste’s gaze was much stronger, and she was fully focused on me. All traces of sleep were gone, and her gaze had turned cold and distant, showing no trace of any emotion. She’s going to tear me apart. This was all a cruel joke from the Shadow Queen. I thought.

After a moment of tense silence, a dragonfly entered the room and flew to the side of the bed. Celeste leaned over to caress its head. The dragonfly beat its wings for a moment, then the Queen turned back to me, this time seeming much calmer and wearing a benevolent smile.

“All right, I understand. In that case, we must prepare.” She said as she jumped out of bed in one agile bound.

The Queen walked to her podium, or rather floated, and stood with her arms stretched out, awaiting her royal dress. Her skin was almost translucent, and it emitted a light that found its way to every nook and cranny throughout the room. The light carried a surge of energy, and suddenly the room was busy with servants hurrying to get her dress and royal gear. The purity of her beauty acted as a catalyst to the wave of energy she had released. It would have been impolite of me to stare at her, but it seemed clear that each of her heartbeats made the light she emitted even more powerful. Most servants were overjoyed and danced to an unheard song while they worked, but some were standing still, their faces filled with tears, overwhelmed by the light. They had to leave the room, and were accompanied by others, who supported them as if helping a very drunk friend. This was far more chaos than I expected in this place, and part of my mind started looking for a way out of here. Celeste stood on her podium, arms stretched out in a cross, undaunted by the disarray. She was wearing a content smile on her face and her gaze was lost on the horizon. I told myself that if I didn’t do something, we would be here all day, so I grabbed an Elf that was near me by the collar.

“Do not let the ground befoul the Queen’s garments!” I said, pointing at the fallen objects left behind by the beleaguered servants. I tried to speak their language, and could only hope the Elf

understood.

“Oh no, fowl is not allowed in the Queen’s room.” He said, looking around for a bird.

I tried again. “The ground, don’t let the clothes touch it.”

This time the Elf got it and scurried to pick up the dropped pieces, then stood where he was, unsure of what to do next. I knew very little of Royal habits, but I presumed that preparing the Queen for her day requires that certain things happen in a specific order. Maybe there’s a list somewhere? I thought. One servant had a dress in his hands, standing idle next to the Queen’s podium. I gestured with my head to go to the Queen. The servant advanced to the Queen to slip her dress on. He looked at the crumpled dress in his hands, not knowing which way to start. Celeste smiled.

“Do I not get the privilege of undergarments first? And what of the perfume?” She asked playfully.

The servant, a Wood Nymph clad in weeping willow branches, gave Celeste a crooked smile and fainted. The dress fell over him in a crumple and hilarity instantly filled the air. The servants in the room burst out laughing—seeing their colleague faint at the feet of the Queen was too funny to respect the protocol. Howls of hilarity quickly filled the room, and nothing was being done. Some even began to dance in circles around the fainted Nymph.

“Oh my, oh my! The Queen’s beauty has made you weary” They sang with abandon while they joyously pranced around the unconscious wood Nymph.

Celeste stood on her podium, arms outstretched and smiling—an image of patience if there ever was one. A Lake Maiden then entered the room. She was the same I had seen walking with a human not long ago, I was sure of it. She stood in the doorway, watching servants crawling on the floor laughing, while others danced around the Queen’s crumpled dress. Her blue eyes contrasted starkly with her white skin and gave her a menacing presence.

“Silence!” The Lake Maiden shouted with her hands around her mouth.

Nothing happened, hilarity occupied the entire room and the

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servants were its victim. The Lake Maiden climbed up on a dresser that adorned the wall. She sucked in as much air as she could and let it out in one long scream. If one closed his eyes at that moment, he would believe a banshee had entered the room. The sound from her voice spread through the room like a violent wind. A heavy silence followed the Lake Maiden's intervention. Within a short moment, the servants had returned to their positions, hands crossed in front of them, heads hung low. I remained silent, curious to see what, if anything, would happen for their behavior. I'd heard rumors about the Fairest court's harsh punishments. It was said their benevolence had its limits, and when reached, it was best to be prepared for the worst. Celeste, unperturbed by the scream, turned to see who was making such a fuss with a disinterested look.

"Zanna of the Isles," she said, turning to face her "Shall I count on your loyalty in my venture with Queen Milucra?" Her delivery was calm, yet forceful, leaving the impression she gave an order rather than ask a question.

"You can." Answered Zanna. Then she turned to the servants, "Let's assist the Queen and do it right, people."

Zanna looked at them as everyone stood idle, apparently not knowing what to do.

"Bloody hell." She sighed.

She jumped down from the dresser and went to Celeste. I was happy she took the lead, I had no idea on how to lead a group of strangers and make them do things. Zanna, her blue hair flowing under an invisible wind, had things in control and I was happy to watch and learn.

"Perfume." Zanna ordered, her hand extended.

A shy Elf came forward, lowering his head as he walked with his hand outstretched in front of him with the perfume bottle.

"For my Queen." He said as he placed the bottle at Zanna's feet before scurrying away.

Zanna picked up the bottle, unable to refrain from smiling. She grabbed the pump attached to it and pointed the nozzle toward Celeste. She offered one pump for the neck, one for the breasts, and one for the stomach. A lavender smell filled the air as the Queen

spun on her podium to spread the perfume around her body. Wispy clouds of lavender escaped the pull of her gravity and silently slid towards the window. I was careful to stay back and watch, I didn't want to get stuck with another task. I had done my part, which was to awaken the Queen and deliver my message. I didn't know what would follow, but I felt I had fulfilled my obligations. I began to caress my velour cape, content and happy I could retire in such glorious garments.

Dragonflies began to enter the room, forming a straight line along the windowsill. I thought they were probably attracted by the smell of lavender that escaped through the windows. As if trying to contradict me, they then all firmly planted themselves on their legs and started to flap their wings. They started in unison, attracting the Queen's attention. Soon seven of them broke the rhythm and started their own beat, and I noticed that attracted Zanna's attention. Some of the servants started tapping their feet or bobbing their heads to the hypnotizing rhythm. Even Celeste lowered her arms and turned to take a moment to listen. Zanna stayed focused on the smaller group of dragonflies that were producing a pronounced counter beat.

"That is so beautiful! I extend my deepest gratitude to your offering." Celeste exclaimed after they stopped.

Now that she was well awake, her voice carried unequaled power, and all the beings present in the room, even the plants, turned to face the Queen. As if choreographed, everyone then took one knee in unison, visibly overcome by emotion. The Queen ignored this and kept her attention on the dragonflies, standing tall as if speaking to a crowd.

"You shall join us in the Rade. Your rhythms will enchant the troops."

One by one, the dragonflies flew away in different directions. Those that were holding a counter rhythm stayed for a moment longer, their attention on Zanna, then also flew away.

Zanna looked at Celeste, who remained still on her podium. Zanna moved behind the Queen to finish tying the ribbon on her back.

"What message did they convey, Lake Maiden?" Celeste asked Zanna, who froze, surprised by the question.

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THE END

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EPILOGUE

This was the first of many stories I have for you. I can't wait to share details about my life on the orchard, how we founded the village, my adventures in Feyland, and how I found what the promise was. All of it is coming soon, stay tuned for more Storyroom installments soon.

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.

In the meantime, let's Connect:

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

Instagram: https://www.instagram.com/mike_longmeadow/

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