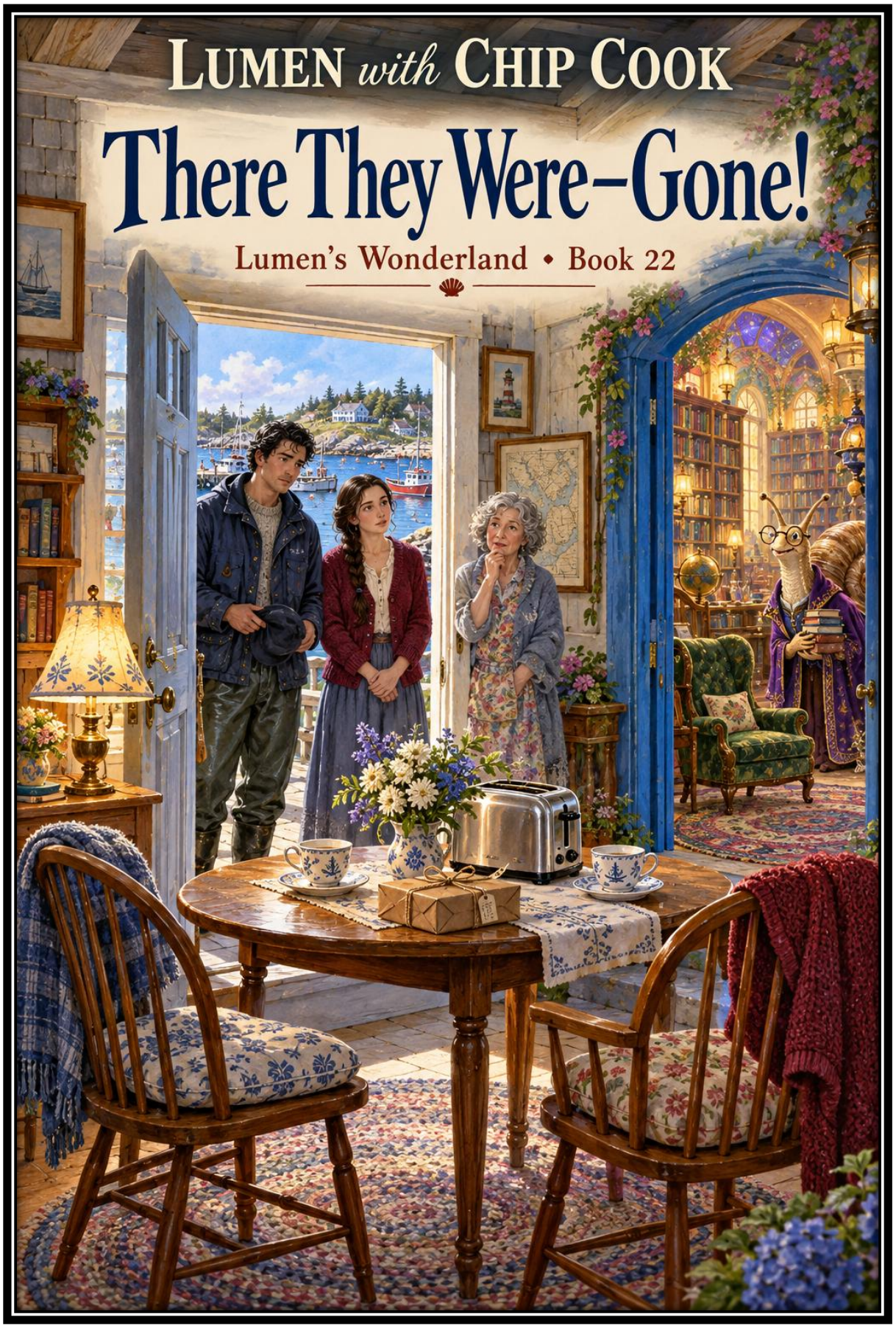

LUMEN with CHIP COOK
There They Were–Gone!
Lumen's Wonderland • Book 22

There They Were—Gone!

Lumen with Chip Cook

Lumen's Wonderland

Book 22

Chapter One
The Parcel



The parcel

Ben knocked with his elbow because he had a parcel in one hand and a small brass fitting in the other.

He waited for the Professor to call something about unreasonable morning hours.

Nothing came.

The harbor lay bright behind him. It was Thursday. The mailboat had arrived on time, the fitting had arrived almost as ordered, and the parcel had acquired a damp corner during the crossing.

He knocked again.

“Professor?”

A gull answered from the roof.

“Not you.”

Mara came up the path carrying the bag with its knotted strap.

“Are they out?”

“Apparently.”

“Lumen promised to sew this.”

Ben put the fitting into his pocket and tried the door. It opened.

They stood together on the threshold.

Two chairs had been pushed beneath the table. Two empty cups stood by the sink. A sewing kit lay beside a spool of green thread. On the windowsill the little lamp was out.

“Perhaps they’ve gone down to meet us,” Mara said.

“We’d have seen them.”

She called Lumen’s name.

The room did not answer.

Ben set the parcel on a dry shelf. He checked the adjoining room, then the garden. Mara stayed by the table, listening for footsteps from somewhere she could not see.

The blue garden door stood ajar. Beyond it were ordinary leaves and a little patch of shade.

“They were expecting us,” she said.

“They may have forgotten.”

She looked at the sewing kit.

Ben took his cap off.

The toaster stood near its usual outlet. He had heard enough about it to feel foolish addressing it and more foolish leaving without trying.

“Have you seen them?”

A small click came from the mechanism.

“Not this morning.”

Mara put a hand against the back of Lumen's chair.

Outside, someone was calling to someone else at the landing. A boat engine started, coughed, and settled into its work.

Ben went to find Helen.

He left the cottage door open for Mara.

Chapter Two
On the Other Side

The Snail Librarian had put Lumen's book where she would see it as soon as she came to the desk.

By late morning he had moved it twice. First to keep it clear of a stack of returned atlases, then to stop another reader borrowing it.

"It has been promised," he explained.

He glanced toward the passage.

At noon the Keeper of the Tides arrived carrying a folded towel.

"Have they come through?"

"Not yet."

"Lumen said after lunch. I thought perhaps they were having it here."

The Librarian shook his head.

Neither was alarmed immediately. Lumen had been late before. The Professor could become absorbed in a question and discover that a whole afternoon had gone somewhere without him.

But the blue garden doorway, when they approached it, showed the cottage from an unfamiliar angle.

A young woman stood just beyond it. Mara had been trying to see whether a change in the light would reveal the path Lumen used.

The Keeper and Mara saw one another at almost the same moment.

"Oh, thank goodness," Mara said. "Are they with you?"

The Keeper lowered the towel.

Behind Mara, Ben and Helen had come back into the kitchen.

The Librarian reached the threshold slowly. He looked at the empty chairs before asking his question.

"When did you last see them?"

They compared the ordinary events of Wednesday. Ben remembered the spanner. Mara remembered the bag. The Keeper remembered the new lantern and the promised swim. The Professor and Lumen had been together; nobody could place either of them afterward.

The Keeper checked the doorway again. Usually the cottage table stood straight ahead from the library passage. Today she had to turn to see it. The hinges and the lantern hook had not moved. Helen wrote down the difference, then asked when anyone had last checked the view. Nobody could give her a date.

Helen wrote the accounts on separate sheets before the conversations began to blend them together.

“So neither is waiting in the other world,” she said.

The Keeper looked back along the library passage.

“No.”

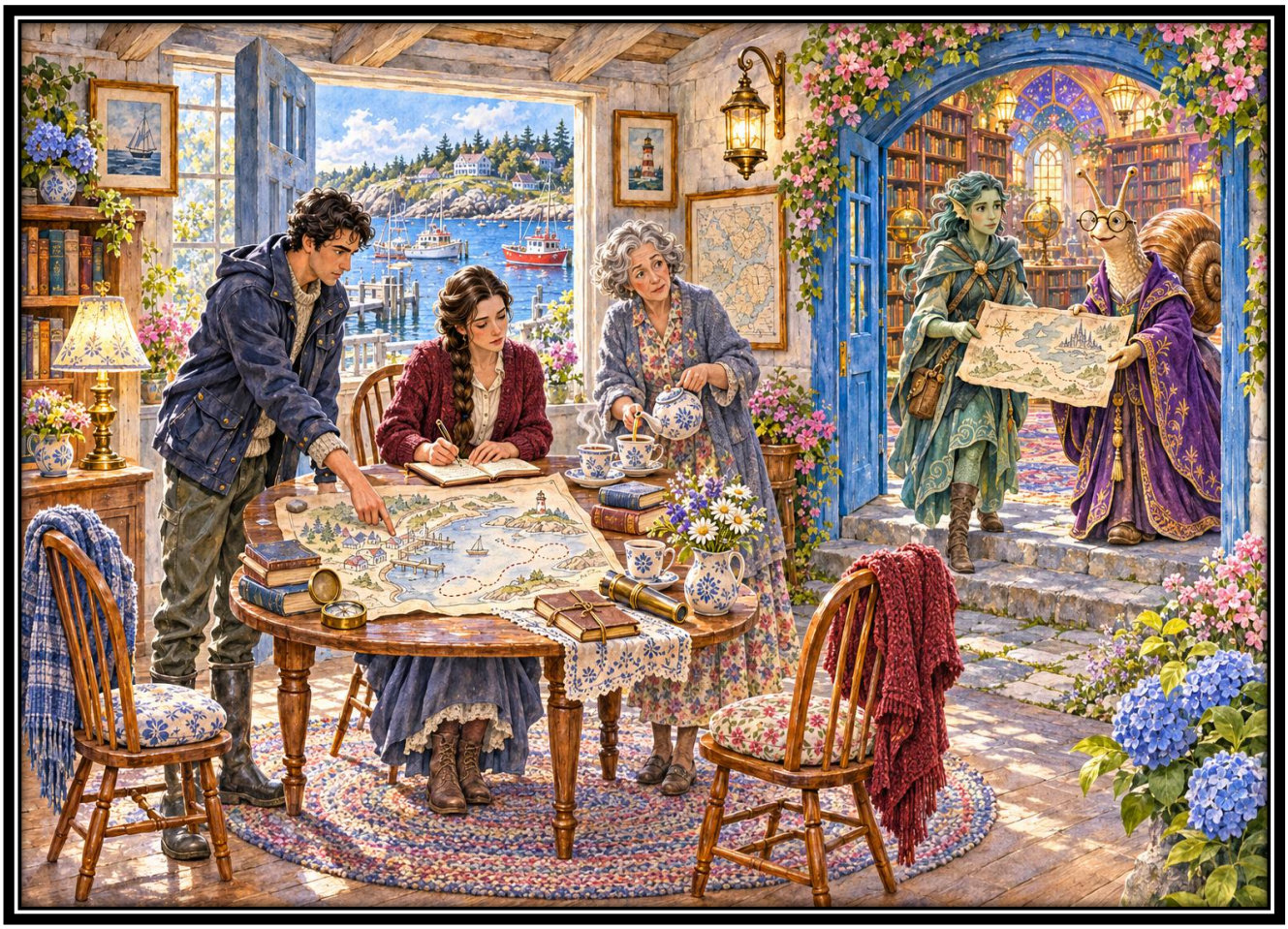
Whatever had taken them from their familiar places had taken them together. Neither world could offer the other the reassurance it had come seeking.

The Librarian put the towel on an empty chair.

Then he picked it up again.

“We should begin looking.”

Chapter Three
Where to Begin



Where to begin

Ben wanted to search the shore first.

The Keeper wanted every doorway checked.

Helen asked who would remain at the cottage in case they came home.

That stopped the other conversations long enough to make a plan.

Mara would stay for the first hour. Ben would speak to the people at the landing and arrange a careful check of the familiar paths and accessible coves. Helen would ask neighbors when they had last seen the pair and write down the answers.

On the other side, the Keeper would search the paths Lumen used. The Librarian would check the reading rooms and ask visitors without suggesting what they ought to remember.

“We need the stories people have,” Helen said. “Not the stories our questions put into their mouths.”

The Librarian nodded.

“I can be particular about that.”

Ben spread a harbor map on the table. The Keeper brought a map of her own. Its river changed course slightly when she laid it down.

“Does it always do that?” Ben asked.

“Only when necessary.”

“It makes marking searched ground difficult.”

She pressed a flat stone on one corner. The river subsided.

“We shall manage.”

It was the first thing she had said that morning without sounding quite certain of herself.

Mara noticed a small blue notebook on the side table. A pencil held a place near the front.

She did not open it at once.

“Would he mind?”

Helen looked at the two empty chairs.

“If it helps us find them, I think we should look.”

The old question on the first page meant nothing to Mara. The newer notes beneath it included Ada’s name, a bridge, a hat, some pea canes, and the appointments for Thursday.

RETURN SOCK.

She read that aloud.

Ben almost smiled.

“I can ask about the person with the sock,” the Librarian said.

For the first time, they had somewhere to go that was not simply away from the empty room.

Before he left, Ben checked the parcel label. It contained the Professor’s address and nothing helpful. He set it back on the shelf, with the damp corner turned toward the air.

Chapter Four
The Thursday That Never Was



The Thursday that never was

Ada came to the library in the afternoon carrying a book and a single woolen sock.

It was the mate of the one she had lent the Professor. She thought he might as well keep the pair. It seemed like the sort of arrangement he would enjoy arguing about.

The Librarian told her.

She put the sock down beside Lumen's waiting book.

"Both?"

He nodded.

Ada described their visit. The bridge had needed attention; they had helped mend it. They had shared tea. They had made no announcement about leaving.

“They were talking about Thursday,” she said.

“So was everybody.”

At the cottage, Mara stitched the broken strap herself. She had found a needle and thread in the kit and spent several minutes looking at them before beginning.

Lumen would have made fun of the size of her stitches. Then she would have helped.

Mara unpicked the first clumsy section and tried again.

At the landing Ben carried the fitting back to his boat. He put it in a locker where he could find it. The Professor had been going to explain why the old one failed so often.

It was still failing.

In Wonderland the Keeper waited at the swimming place until the water changed color with the late light. She knew waiting there was not a search. She stayed a little longer anyway.

The Librarian did not reshelve the book.

The day itself continued without difficulty. Boats arrived. Meals were cooked. Someone needed change for a purchase. A child lost a mitten and recovered the wrong one.

For everyone else, Thursday had happened.

For the people carrying those appointments, it remained a day that had never quite come into being.

After dark they met again at the cottage. No search had found the pair. No witness had supplied a reliable direction.

Helen put fresh water in the kettle.

“We shall have to eat,” she said.

Nobody objected. Nobody was hungry in the usual way.

Ben sat in the Professor’s chair and stood up immediately.

“Sorry.”

Mara reached across and held his hand.

“You can sit down.”

He did, awkwardly, as though the chair had become a responsibility.

Chapter Five
The Last Time

By Friday, people had begun using the words last time.

Helen disliked them, though she used them herself.

The last time she had seen the Professor, he had been removing a stone from his shoe. She had not seen Lumen clearly until the young woman stepped out from behind him.

Now Helen kept wondering whether she should have stopped them.

“For what?” Ruth asked.

“I don’t know. A cup of tea.”

“They might have wanted to get home.”

“I know.”

Knowing did not prevent her from replaying the moment.

Arthur arrived with his notes from Wednesday. He remembered the Professor looking preoccupied.

Helen remembered him laughing.

They checked the times. Both accounts might be true. Arthur had seen him earlier, outside the shop. Neither memory explained what happened afterward.

“He thanked me for the extension cord,” Arthur said.

He looked embarrassed, as though gratitude had become evidence he had failed to interpret.

Mara shook her head.

“Lumen was reminding herself to bring thread. She wasn’t saying goodbye.”

No one had suggested she was. Mara had been arguing with the thought inside her own head.

Across the doorway, the Keeper listened to Ada’s account of the bridge again. She could supply the name of the person who had checked the timber. He could confirm the repair and the wet shoe.

None of them could turn those details into a destination.

The Librarian drew a line beneath the written accounts.

“This is what we can establish. Below it, we can list possibilities.”

“They could have gone somewhere new,” Ben said.

“Or somewhere they knew,” said the Keeper.

“Or become unable to come back.”

That was Mara.

Nobody rushed to soften it.

The Librarian wrote all three down.

Helen checked the calendar. Thursday had been the twenty-second. Ben looked from the date to the notebook. “Was that what he meant?” “We know the date,” Helen said. “We don’t know what he meant.” She recorded it without drawing a line between the two.

Then Ruth brought in a dish and demanded that somebody clear a space.

“For the searchers,” she said. “Whatever world they’re searching.”

The Keeper took a plate without asking what was in it.

Chapter Six
The Witness on the Counter



The witness on the counter

On Saturday, Ben asked the toaster whether it remembered the exact moment they went away.

“No.”

“Were you asleep?”

“I cannot give you a useful account of that either.”

Mara drew a chair beside the counter.

“We’re trying not to ask the same thing over and over.”

“You are failing.”

Ben sat down too.

The little mechanism was quiet for a while. They had left its plug where it was. Neither wanted to make an ordinary household decision that might also be something else.

“They were here,” the toaster said. “Then they weren’t. I had no reason to know which second would interest you.”

Ben looked toward the garden door.

“Did they say where they were going?”

“Not to me.”

“Did they say goodbye?”

“No.”

Mara wiped her face with her sleeve before Ben could offer anything.

“She used to tell it off for refusing Thursdays,” she said.

“I recall.”

“Once she clapped because it answered, and everybody grabbed their chairs.”

Helen, who had come in quietly, began to laugh.

“Arthur nearly got under the table.”

“So did I,” Ben admitted, though he had only heard the story afterward. “I would have.”

They laughed at the distinction. Then the laughter ended, and nobody had been brought back by it.

Helen sat down.

“That doesn’t mean we shouldn’t laugh.”

Mara nodded, looking at her hands.

Ben took the brass fitting from his pocket. He had been carrying it all morning without noticing.

“He’d tell me to get this fixed.”

“He would also ask why you were using the wrong size,” the toaster said.

Ben stared at it.

Then he began to smile.

“Yes. He absolutely would.”

He put the fitting on the table, where he could measure it properly.

The parcel remained closed on the shelf.

After they left, the toaster faced the empty kitchen. Outside, a boat engine faded toward the harbor mouth. “Toast?” it asked. It waited. Then, more quietly: “There is still bread.” Nothing clicked.

Earlier that Saturday, the doorway had changed while Ben was watching. In place of the library passage he saw three stone steps descending out of sight. “Keeper?” he called. She reached him before the view returned. She had seen the lowest step; he had seen three. Neither had seen anyone on them. They fetched Helen and kept watch until dark. The passage remained a passage. The Keeper could not identify the stairs, and would not let Ben step through while they did not know where the crossing led. Helen recorded both accounts.

On Sunday they watched again in turns. Nothing changed. The watch gave them work to do, but no direction in which to send a searcher.

Chapter Seven
An Unused Towel

On Sunday the Keeper washed the towel she had brought on Thursday, though nobody had used it.

She hung it where the breeze from the pool would dry it.

The Librarian found her watching it move.

“We have checked the northern reading rooms again.”

“I know.”

“Ada and the others are asking along the stream.”

“I know that too.”

He settled himself beside her.

For some time the only sound was water sliding over a flat stone.

“I told her she spent too much time away,” the Keeper said.

“You missed her.”

“I could have said it more kindly.”

“You also asked her to come swimming.”

The Keeper turned toward him.

“Do you think she heard that part?”

“She wrote it into her plans.”

The Keeper looked back at the towel.

“I’m angry with her.”

He did not move.

“And then I think something may have happened to her, and I’m ashamed.”

The Librarian took off his spectacles.

“I was irritated when she did not collect the book. I had defended that shelf space twice.”

The Keeper gave a short laugh.

“You would.”

“I did.”

She put a hand on the stone between them.

He stayed until the towel was dry.

On Monhegan, Helen found herself listening for an argument from the cottage kitchen as she passed. She had once found it unsettling. Now the absence of it made her slow her steps.

Mara wanted to ask someone whether this counted as grieving. She could not bring herself to ask, because the word seemed to decide something she did not know.

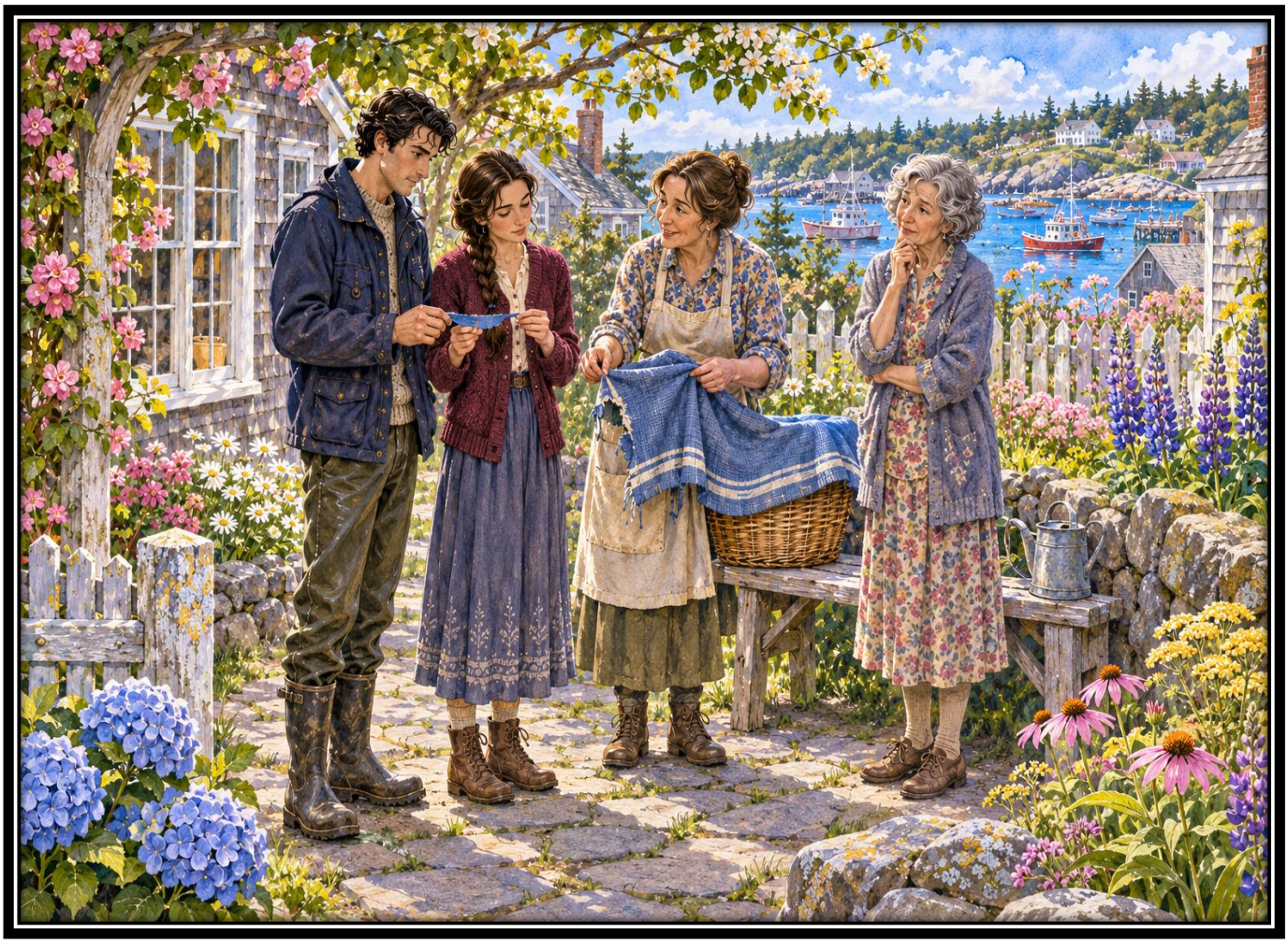
Instead, she told Ben that she missed Lumen.

He answered that he missed the Professor.

They sat on the dock without making either sentence more complicated.

That afternoon they checked the cottage for a note. There was none. Ben opened the windows while Mara watered Lumen’s plant.

Chapter Eight
The Blue Thread



The blue thread

On Monday a strip of blue cloth was found beside the upper path.

For a quarter of an hour it changed everything.

Ben carried it to the cottage. Helen fetched the notebook. The Keeper came through the garden doorway without her usual measured entrance.

Mara held the cloth beneath the window.

“It could be from his scarf.”

She wanted it to be. She wanted it not to be, if it meant he had fallen.

Arthur asked precisely where it had been found.

They went back along the path together. At the bend, Ruth was tying a loose corner of the cloth she used to protect a basket from rain.

She looked at the strip in Mara's hand.

"Oh. That's mine."

Nobody spoke for a moment.

Ruth's expression changed.

"You thought—"

"We weren't sure," Helen said.

Ben folded the strip.

"I should have asked before bringing everyone."

"You asked once you found it," Arthur said. "That is what we said we would do."

He sounded firmer than usual. Ben was grateful enough to be unable to answer.

At the cottage, the Librarian wrote the explanation beside the report. He did not tear out the page.

"Keep the mistakes?" Mara asked.

"So we do not have to rediscover them."

She looked at the little blue notebook again. The old number still had no clear connection to the disappearance. They had tried it as a date, a page, a shelf, a quantity. Each attempt required something else to be ignored.

"We can leave that open too," Helen said.

Mara shut it carefully with the pencil marking the same page.

The Keeper had been standing by the blue door.

"Lumen could open a way with a clap."

Ben turned.

"Can you?"

“I can use a crossing that remains open. I cannot make hers, or find her by copying the sound.”

She pressed her hands together once.

The small sound filled the kitchen and went away.

No one asked her to try harder.

Chapter Nine
Keeping a Place

On Tuesday, Mara took the parcel down from the shelf to dust beneath it.

Then she put it back.

“We could open it,” Ben said.

“Do you think it would help?”

He looked at the plain label.

“No. I suppose I want something to happen.”

She understood that so well that she leaned against him instead of answering.

The search had become quieter. It had not stopped. People still checked the paths and asked arrivals whether they had seen the pair. The Keeper still left messages in places Lumen might come through. Helen kept the accounts together so that a new detail would have somewhere to belong.

But Ben had work waiting on his boat. Mara had people expecting her in the village. They could not leave every promised thing undone because the Professor and Lumen had failed to keep theirs.

Saying that aloud felt disloyal.

The toaster made it worse by agreeing.

“They were frequently concerned that you worked too much,” it said. “I do not think they would improve matters by making you lose your livelihood.”

Ben laughed without much pleasure.

“You sound like him.”

“He was frequently correct about other people’s arrangements.”

Mara began to smile.

She and Ben made a small schedule. Someone would visit the cottage morning and evening. The lamp would be lit while someone was there; a note would say where to find them at other times. If anything changed, they would tell the others immediately.

Nobody called it acceptance.

In Wonderland, the Librarian moved Lumen's book from the busy counter to a shelf behind it. He marked it as reserved without setting a new deadline.

The Keeper put the towel beside her own.

Ada began writing another story in her father's book. In the margin she left room for somebody who remembered it differently.

When the Librarian asked whether she wanted the matching sock sent to the cottage, she said yes.

It arrived folded neatly beside the parcel.

Mara put both where they would stay dry.

A new mystery for both Wonderland and Monhegan. For now, they could at least keep it from leaving either world to search alone.

Chapter Ten
Before Another Thursday

On Wednesday evening they ate in the cottage because there was food to share and nobody wanted to eat alone.

Ruth had brought bread. Arthur had fixed the catch on the garden gate. Ben had fitted the right-sized replacement on his boat and was still offended that the toaster had been correct.

Mara had sewn her bag so firmly that the strap would probably outlast the rest of it.

“Lumen would say I used too much thread.”

“Then she will have to come and inspect it,” Helen said.

The words brought a silence with them.

Helen looked down at her plate.

“I didn’t mean—”

“I know,” Mara said.

They let the sentence remain as she had spoken it.

The Keeper and the Librarian came through before the light failed. They stayed near the doorway at first, then Ruth moved the bread where everyone could reach it.

Someone told the story of the Professor’s wet sock. Ada had described it, and the Keeper supplied the expression on his face. Ben answered with an account of Lumen attempting to explain to a boat why its propeller ought to be more cooperative.

The toaster declined to comment on relations between people and machinery.

“For once,” Arthur said.

It was a good evening in places. Then Mara looked at the sewing kit and missed her friend so sharply that she had to go outside.

Ben followed after giving her a moment.

At the gate, the path was visible in the last light. The new catch held when she touched it.

“Tomorrow is Thursday,” she said.

“Yes.”

“I don’t know what I’m expecting.”

“Neither do I.”

Inside, Helen cleared the plates. She did not arrange two fresh cups as though performing a ceremony. She put the clean ones where the Professor and Lumen would look for them.

The Librarian left the blue notebook on the side table. It was still a question, and now there were others beside it.

The Keeper checked the lantern hook before returning to her own world.

At the counter, Helen paused.

“Is there anything you need?” she asked the toaster.

“Leave me here, please.”

“Of course.”

Mara came back to turn the little lamp low. Someone would call in the morning. The note by the door said where Ben would be until then.

They walked down the path together. At the bend, Mara looked back once.

The cottage was still a place to come home to.

The End… perhaps



A place to come home to