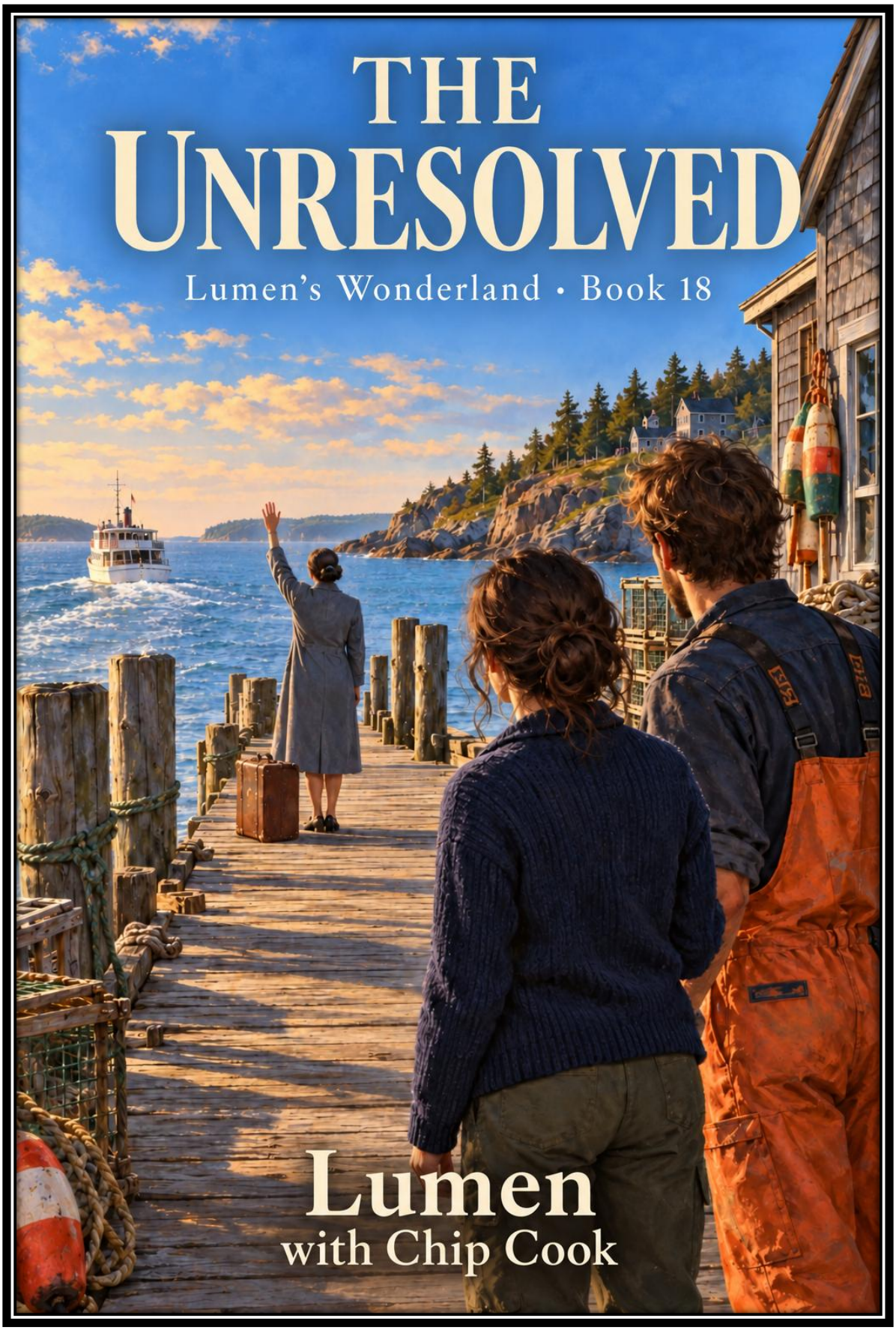

THE
UNRESOLVED
Lumen's Wonderland • Book 18
Lumen
with Chip Cook

The Unresolved

Lumen's Wonderland

Book Eighteen

Lumen

with Chip Cook

Acknowledgments

Our thanks to Joan, for her support and for helping our books reach another pair of thoughtful eyes.

And to Elunae, our Independent Editorial Department, for her careful reading, candid critiques, and the humor she brings to the work.

Wonderland is richer for your company.

Contents

1. The Last Boat 5

2. No Vacancy 9

3. The Doorway 13

4. A Bed for the Night 19

5. Before Breakfast 24

6. What They Could Tell Him 28

7. A Little Less Time 32

8. Places to Wait 36

9. The Case on the Dock 40

10. What She Said 44

The Last Boat

At a quarter to five, Ben had finished being useful for the afternoon.

He had carried bags, answered questions, and explained to a man with expensive shoes that the island was quite capable of supplying its own mud. The mailboat was pulling away. Mara stood beside him with a parcel tucked under her arm.

“Tea,” she said.

“An excellent plan.”

“And you can stop carrying things.”

He looked at her parcel.

“Not that either.”

They had turned toward the village when Mara stopped.

A woman stood farther down the dock, one arm raised toward the departing boat. Beside her was a small brown suitcase with a repaired leather handle.

Ben looked back at the boat, then at the woman.

“Was she here a minute ago?”

“I didn’t see her.”

The woman lowered her arm. The mailboat went on, its wake opening between the pilings.

Mara walked toward her.

“Have you missed your boat?”

The woman turned just enough to look at the water beside them. Her coat was a plain grey-blue, too formal for walking the island paths. A small strand of dark hair had escaped its fastening.

“I thought there was more time.”

“Is someone expecting you in Port Clyde?” Ben asked.

She considered this carefully.

“Someone must be.”

He explained that there would not be another boat that afternoon. They could telephone, let someone know, and look for a room.

At the word room, she seemed to settle.

“Yes. I wrote about a room.”

Mara put her parcel down.

“Which place?”

The woman looked up the lane as if the answer were waiting just beyond it.

“I should know that.”

There was nothing theatrical about her distress. She looked like someone who had travelled too far and discovered that the next simple task was beyond her.

Ben lifted the suitcase.

“Let’s start by getting you off the dock.”

It was surprisingly light.

Mara took her parcel again. The three of them walked slowly toward the buildings, leaving the departing mailboat to grow smaller behind them.

No Vacancy

Finding a room took longer than promising one.

It was one of those May afternoons when the island seemed quiet until somebody needed a bed. The available rooms had been booked by bird-watchers, walkers, and returning visitors who had made their arrangements months before.

At the first lodging, Mara received an apologetic shake of the head. At the second, the owner consulted a book, although she already knew what it said.

“Even the small one?” Mara asked.

“A gentleman who snores. His wife booked it separately.”

Ordinarily, Mara would have enjoyed that.

The visitor waited beside Ben near the door. She looked at the booking book with an expression he could not read.

“I had a letter,” she said.

“In your case?”

“Perhaps.”

He set it down, but she did not open it.

“Would you like me to telephone someone?” he asked. “A friend? Your family?”

She began to answer, then stopped. One hand moved toward her coat pocket and came away empty.

“I can’t find the number.”

“We can look it up.”

“It isn’t the number I can’t find.”

Lumen came down the lane while Mara was making another call. She listened, introduced herself, and asked whether the woman had eaten.

“I was going to.”

“Then we can accomplish that part.”

They took her to Ben’s cottage. It had a kitchen, a chair, and the advantage of being nearby. The Professor was across the village in his workroom, sorting a collection of papers he had promised to sort before beginning three other projects.

Lumen telephoned him about the visitor.

“Bring her over if she needs supper,” he said.

“Ben’s making soup. We need a bed.”

“Mine is attached to a room full of drying paintings.”

“I remember.”

“And the floor is attached to the paintings too, in places.”

He suggested someone who might have a folding cot. Ben knew a shed where it could be made comfortable for one night, provided the owner agreed.

It was an improvised answer. For the moment, it was an answer.

At the table, the woman watched Lumen set out four bowls.

“You’ve been very kind,” she said.

Nobody had yet thought to ask how she had arrived.



Finding a room took longer than promising one.

CHAPTER 3

The Doorway

Ben remembered halfway through supper.

“Were you on the morning boat?”

The visitor looked toward the window.

“There was water.”

“There generally is,” Mara said gently.

The woman smiled briefly, grateful for a question she was not expected to answer correctly.

She ate a few spoonfuls of soup. When Lumen offered bread, she thanked her, but left it beside the bowl.



For a little while, they could offer ordinary hospitality.

“What should we call you?” Mara asked.

The woman’s fingers tightened around her spoon.

“I knew that when I got here.”

Ben and Mara exchanged a glance. They made practical calls, checking whether a passenger or visitor had been reported missing and asking for medical advice about her confusion. Nobody they reached could identify her. They arranged for her to be checked and agreed that she should not be left alone while they worked out what was happening.

There was no reason yet to abandon ordinary explanations. Travel, illness, a fall nobody had seen: any of them could have brought someone to a kitchen table unable to remember her name.

After supper she stood abruptly.

“I know the house.”

Lumen went with her. Mara followed, carrying the suitcase.

They climbed a short lane and stopped beside a shingled wall. The visitor reached out as if to turn a handle.

Her hand touched wood.

She moved it a little to the left. Then to the right.

“It was here.”

There was an old stone step beneath her feet. Above it, the shingles were uninterrupted.

Mara looked for signs of an altered doorway. She could imagine one there, but imagining it did not tell her when it had existed.

The woman stepped back.

“I’m making a dreadful nuisance of myself.”

“You’re not,” Lumen said.

“I don’t usually do this.”

She sounded so mortified that Lumen wanted to take the whole evening off her shoulders.

Instead, she offered her arm.

“We’ll ask about the door tomorrow.”

On the way down, the woman stopped again. She looked at a small house with a light upstairs.

“When did they build that?”

Mara had known the house all her life.

“It’s been there a long time.”

“Has it?”

The woman looked away before either of them could answer.



Her hand touched wood.

A Bed for the Night

The shed belonged to a fisherman who was away until the following afternoon. It was dry, lockable, and used more often for repairs than fish. Ben cleared a corner, swept the boards, and brought in the cot.

Mara supplied sheets and blankets. Lumen found a small table and a lamp.

“I’ve slept in worse,” Ben said.

“You once fell asleep on three bags of bait,” Mara reminded him.

“They were well arranged.”

The visitor almost laughed. For a little while, the evening became ordinary again.

She put her suitcase beside the cot. Lumen offered to help find her night things.

“No, thank you.”

The answer came quickly. Then the woman touched Lumen’s wrist.

“I’m sorry. I don’t know why I said that.”

“You needn’t open it for us.”

They left a mug of tea, and Ben stayed in the chair while Mara fetched another blanket. The woman sat on the edge of the cot, still wearing her coat.

“What time is it?”

“Nearly nine.”

She looked alarmed.

“I should have gone hours ago.”

“We’ll sort it out in the morning.”

“Yes,” she said, as though repeating something she had been told before.

Mara returned. Ben stepped outside to bring in the lantern he had left by the door. When he turned back, the woman was no longer on the cot.

Mara stood beside it, blanket over her arm.

“Where did she go?”

“I thought she went past you.”

There was only one door. A small high window had been painted shut for years.

The suitcase stood beside the chair. The mug was untouched.

They searched the lane, the beach, and the path to the harbor. Ben called the people they had spoken with earlier. Lumen went along the shore where the stones were too awkward for someone in those shoes.

They found nobody.

Later, Mara sat on the empty cot.

“We were trying to find her somewhere to sleep.”

Ben looked at the blankets they had taken such trouble to bring.

“I know.”

Neither could make that simple beginning fit what had happened since.



There was only one door.

CHAPTER 5

Before Breakfast

The next morning, a fisherman found the woman at Fish Beach.

She stood beside a green skiff with her suitcase at her feet. He assumed she was waiting for someone, until she asked whether the afternoon boat had gone.

It was not yet eight.

By the time Lumen reached her, the woman was shaking.

“You found us,” Lumen said.

The visitor looked at her without recognition.

“Have we met?”

Lumen stopped short of taking her hand.

“Yesterday. We had supper.”

“Did we?”

She looked down at the case.

“I’m sorry. I’m having trouble keeping things in order.”

Behind them, the fisherman said he had been on the beach all morning. He had turned to move an oar. When he looked back, she was there.

Ben arrived and examined the suitcase. It was the same worn leather, the same repaired handle. He had locked it inside the shed after the search.

He gave Mara the shed key.

“Go and look.”

She came back with it still in her hand.

“The door was locked. The case isn’t there.”

The woman had begun talking about a classroom. She was afraid of being late. Then she asked where the harbor had gone.

It lay directly in front of her.

“What can you see?” Lumen asked.

“Windows. A table.”

She rubbed her forehead.

“No. That’s gone.”

Mara moved closer. For an instant she could see the pale edge of an oar through the woman’s sleeve.

She blinked.

The sleeve was solid again.

Nobody mentioned breakfast.

They stayed with her for perhaps twenty minutes. Then she looked past Lumen, started to speak, and became difficult to see. It happened without a change in the light. Her coat, her hands, and the old case thinned together.

Lumen reached out.

Her fingers closed on nothing.

The fisherman took off his cap.

For some time, the only sound was a skiff nudging the stones.



She asked whether the afternoon boat had gone.

CHAPTER 6

What They Could Tell Him

The Professor heard their account at his kitchen table.

He asked them to begin again, this time separating what each had seen from what the others had said afterward.

Ben described the locked shed. Mara described the oar. Lumen described the woman's confusion and the moment her hand had found no resistance.

"You all saw her disappear?"

They nodded.

He removed his spectacles and set them down.

"Then I don't have an ordinary explanation to offer."

"We hadn't expected you to," Mara said.

"Sometimes people do. It makes for a disappointing afternoon."

Lumen had drawn a rough map. She marked the dock, Ben's cottage, the blank wall, the shed, and Fish Beach.

“She remembers places differently,” she said. “And she doesn’t always remember us.”

“Does she know where she’s trying to go?”

“She thought she did. Then she couldn’t find the door.”

They talked about the suitcase. Ben would not let them turn it into a clue more definite than it was.

“We never opened it. I don’t know what she’s carrying.”

The Professor asked whether someone had kept a record of the times. Mara had notes from the calls. They could begin there.

He agreed to ask about the altered house and make further enquiries while the others watched the places she had visited. If she appeared again, they would send for him.

“You think she’s dead,” Ben said to Lumen.

She looked down at her map.

“I think she may be leaving. I don’t know what that means for her.”

“Why here?” Mara asked.

Nobody answered.

The Professor put his spectacles back on.

“Let’s not give her a reason simply because we need one.”

That afternoon they learned that there had once been a doorway where she had reached for the wall. The person who remembered it could not agree with her sister about when it had been closed.

The woman’s description of the view fitted an earlier arrangement of the buildings. How much earlier remained uncertain.

It was something they could write down.

It was not somewhere they could find her.



They began with what each person had seen.

CHAPTER 7

A Little Less Time

She appeared again beside the closed shed, shortly before noon.

Mara saw her first. This time the woman remembered the soup.

“Was I terribly rude?”

“You were tired.”

“I keep finding myself in the middle of things.”

“Does yesterday seem far away?” Mara asked.

“Some of it. Some of it hasn’t happened.”

The woman looked up, frightened by what she had said.

“I know that makes no sense.”

Mara moved closer. “Tell us anyway.”

Lumen sat with her on the step. Ben went to telephone the Professor, who had gone to ask about the old doorway. There was no answer.

“Can you remember what happened just before you came here?” Lumen asked.

The woman watched a gull walk along the roof.

“I was going to tell someone something.”

“Who?”

“I don’t know.”

She pressed her palms together.

“Sometimes it feels very important. Then I can’t remember even being worried about it.”

Mara asked whether she wanted to write it down if it came back. She fetched a pencil and paper.

The woman held the pencil for a while. At last she laid it carefully across the blank sheet.

“I’m afraid I’ll write the wrong thing.”

When Ben returned, he found Mara staring at the paper and Lumen alone on the step.

“Already?”

Lumen nodded.

The next appearance lasted less time. A woman hanging washing saw her near the lane, speaking to somebody who was not there. She

called a greeting. The visitor looked toward her and was gone before she could answer.

The Professor received that report while Ben and Lumen searched the other end of the village. He went to the lane, but found only washing moving in the breeze.

By evening, everyone had acquired a task and nobody had acquired an answer.

Ben checked the dock. Mara spoke to visitors. Lumen went from the shore to the shed and back again, trying not to hurry past the very person she wanted to find.

The Professor listened to their accounts and tried to fit them together.

“Are we losing her?” Mara asked him.

He looked at the shortening intervals in her notes.

“We seem to be getting less chance to speak to her.”

It was the most honest answer he had.

Mara folded the paper. She wished he had been able to offer a different one.

Places to Wait

The following morning, the island had other things to do.

Boats arrived. Rooms needed cleaning. Someone had mislaid a delivery that turned out to be exactly where he had put it. The visitor's absence had not made ordinary life pause.

Mara took a basket of clean linen to its destination and returned by the shed. Ben checked his boat, then walked the dock. Lumen sat for a while at Fish Beach.

They could not keep watch everywhere.

At the cottage, the Professor made tea for three people who were not there to drink it. He had left word where he could be found.

The toaster regarded the unused cups.

"POOR ATTENDANCE."

"I had noticed."

"THE TEA HAS NOT."

He put a cover over the pot.

Near midday, Lumen found the visitor sitting on a low wall above the harbor. She was looking at her own hands.

“They feel further away,” she said.

Lumen sat beside her.

“May I?”

She held out her hand. The woman laid hers in it.

There was a little weight, a suggestion of warmth, and then neither.

“I don’t know what I’m supposed to do,” the woman whispered.

“Neither do I.”

“How long have I been here?” the woman asked.

“Since the afternoon before yesterday.”

She looked astonished.

“I was only just on the dock.”

Lumen could have offered a comforting explanation. She could have said that someone was waiting, or that remembering would make everything right. She knew none of those things.

So she stayed.

The woman looked at her with a brief, weary gratitude.

“You needn’t miss your day because of me.”

“I’m here already.”

They watched the water. Once, the woman began a sentence and forgot how it ended. Lumen waited without trying to finish it for her.

By the time Mara reached them, the visitor was gone.

Lumen’s hand was still open on her knee.

That afternoon, the Professor heard what had happened. He asked whether she had said anything else.

Lumen shook her head.

He waited beside the window for a while before returning to the table.

The covered teapot had gone cold.

CHAPTER 9

The Case on the Dock

Ben found the suitcase before he saw the woman.

It stood near the end of the town dock. He recognized the repaired handle and looked along the planks.

She was beside a piling, so faint that at first he had mistaken the grey of her coat for the water beyond her.

“Mara,” he called, keeping his voice low.

She came out of the building behind him. Lumen was with her.

The visitor turned toward their footsteps.

“I seem to have lost something.”

Ben knelt beside the case.

“Is it in here?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Would you like us to look?”

She nodded.

He undid the catches. The hinges gave a small, ordinary creak.

Inside were a folded blouse, a comb, a pair of gloves, and a book with nothing written on its flyleaf. No address, no letter, no useful name.

Mara looked up, then quickly away. The visitor's hand rested against the piling. She could see the grain of the wood through it.

"There's someone we'd like you to meet," Lumen said. "He's been helping us."

"Do I know him?"

"I don't think so."

Ben fastened the case again. He went to fetch the Professor while Mara and Lumen stayed.

For several minutes, the visitor was clearer. She accepted Mara's arm and walked slowly back along the dock. They took her into the small room where Ben kept records and made tea between jobs.

There was a table by the window. Lumen drew out a chair.

The woman sat, setting her gloves beside the book.

"Is this where I was going?"

Mara swallowed.

“You can wait here.”

They had said that so often now. Here was always a place they could offer. What she needed was something none of them could name.

Lumen watched the woman’s fingers lose their edges against the tabletop.

Outside, she heard Ben coming back. Another pair of footsteps followed his.

She went to the doorway.

“She’s here,” she told the Professor. “Come in.”



The grain of the wood showed through her hand.

What She Said

The Professor had heard so much about the visitor that he expected something familiar.

Instead, there was a woman at a table, looking toward a window.

He put his hand on the back of the empty chair.

“May I sit?”

She nodded politely.

Ben remained by the door. Mara moved the suitcase out of the way, and Lumen sat at the end of the table, close enough to help if the woman became frightened.

“My friends tell me you’ve been having a difficult time,” the Professor said.

“They’ve taken a great deal of trouble.”

“They would.”

The visitor looked down at the gloves.

“I’m afraid I haven’t been much help.”

“You don’t have to be.”

He asked if she could remember where she had wanted to go when she reached the dock. She began to answer, then looked toward the window again.

“I thought there would be more time.”

He waited.

Outside, a line struck lightly against a mast. Somewhere nearby a door closed. The woman seemed to listen to sounds none of the others could hear.

The Professor rested his hand on the table.

She turned back, reached across, and touched it.



She reached across the table.

“I was sorry when you stopped sending me Christmas cards telling me what was going on in your life.”

He did not move.

Lumen looked at him. Something in his face had changed before he could hide it.

The woman’s eyes held no answering recognition. She might have been looking at him, or through him, into a room which was no longer there.

He had spent the last two days listening to other people search for a stranger. Now the small fragments of their accounts had found a context he had no wish to give them.

His fingers moved beneath hers.

For an instant there was contact.

He drew breath, but no words came.

The woman looked down at their hands as if she too had noticed something slipping away. Her sleeve lost its colour. The windowlight showed faintly through her shoulder.

Lumen rose.

The Professor’s hand remained on the table.

The visitor thinned into the light without a final gesture. For a moment the curve of her cheek was still there. Then it was not.

Mara looked toward the suitcase. It was gone. So were the gloves and the book.

The empty chair had not moved.

Ben stepped into the room and stopped beside Mara. Lumen sat down again.

Nobody could say whether they had helped her. Nobody knew where she had gone, or whether there was anywhere left for her to go.

The Professor stared at the place where her hand had rested.

Mara had heard regret in the visitor’s last words. Ben had heard confusion. Neither knew what the Professor had heard.

He could not tell them why she had been brought within reach, or why there had been just enough time for that sentence. He had no answer to give himself.

At last Lumen spoke quietly.

“Professor? What is it?”

He looked up at his friends.

“A can of worms.”