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Book Ten of Lumen's Wonderland · Chip Cook

The Two Islands



The Professor had come to Manana with a sketchbook and a troublesome question. Across the harbor, Monhegan lay in the early light: a village gathered at one edge of an old rock, the other edge

given over to cliffs, trees, and the Atlantic. He could see the mailboat working its way toward the dock. He could not see the invisible arrangements that made the island live. “I suppose,” he said, “that is why I have come.”

Lumen rose from the water beside his rock, her auburn hair dripping onto the granite. “You look at Monhegan as though it were a locked cabinet.” “A doorway,” he corrected. “Most visitors see an end to the land. You see a place to come ashore. I see a place where imagination may find its way through.” She considered the distant harbor. “Three islands, then.” “One island,” he said. “Three relationships.” Before they crossed to the village, she clapped her hands and her tail gave way to two feet, ready for the island paths.

The Professor had always distrusted the phrase “nothing happens here.” Across the water, smoke lifted from a chimney; someone had to be making breakfast. A boat moved from mooring to mooring, its wake briefly dividing the harbor. A gull landed on a buoy and behaved as though it owned the entire Atlantic. All of these things were happening. They were merely happening without asking his permission to become important.

“Which side of the island is the real one?” Lumen asked. The Professor looked from the clustered houses to the dark rim of distant cliffs. “Both, of course. But the answer changes according to whom you ask.” She looked pleased. “Then we should ask everyone.” “A dangerous ambition,” he replied. “Everyone is liable to answer.”

The gulls wheeled above them, indifferent to philosophy. A wave broke against the rock: a sharp, hollow clap. Lumen smiled. “Is that your famous clap?” “One of them. The sea and the island meet; the sound exists for a moment and then belongs to history.” “But another wave will come.” “Yes,” said the Professor. “And it will be another meeting, not the old one returning.” They watched the boat draw closer.

The Mailboat Clock



On Monhegan, the arrival of the mailboat was never merely the arrival of a boat. It brought groceries and parcels, visitors with cameras, workers with lists, and news that had not yet learned the island's slower pace. On this imagined summer day, three arrivals divided the hours. Each one rearranged the harbor for a little while.

From the dock, the Professor watched a family hurry toward a guesthouse while an islander carried a crate without looking up.

“One comes for a holiday,” he observed, “and the other is trying to finish a job.” “They have both arrived,” Lumen said. “Not in the same way.” A young man in work clothes caught a coil of rope and waved to someone on shore. His name was Ben, and he worked the boat when he was not hauling lobster traps.

A visitor had brought a suitcase so large that two men were required to lift it onto the dock. Behind her, an island woman waited for a box of replacement parts. The suitcase contained possibilities; the box contained a repaired pump, and therefore running water. Lumen thought the second parcel deserved more applause.

Ben did not talk much while working. He counted parcels twice, checked a rope, and kept one eye on the weather. He could recognize returning visitors by the way they stepped off the boat: less hesitation, fewer photographs, a quick glance toward the familiar road. “Does the island recognize them?” Lumen asked. “The islanders might,” said the Professor. “And sometimes that is more complicated.”

The Professor watched Ben finish the last knot. Years earlier, when Ben was just finding his feet on the island, the Professor had helped him through a difficult season. Neither man mentioned the particulars now. Ben remembered the kindness, though, and had quietly appointed himself the Professor's lookout: a hand offered on a slippery landing, a warning when the weather turned, an extra place at supper. The Professor, who preferred to believe he needed no looking after, pretended not to notice.

"You still take that path along the outer ledges?" Ben asked.

"Sometimes." "Then take the inland way back if the fog comes down."

"You sound like my keeper." Ben grinned. "Somebody has to."

Lumen, listening nearby, looked delighted. For once, the Professor was not the one giving advice.

"Every arrival is a small event," said the Professor. "Every departure, too. The island survives by allowing both." Lumen noticed how the visitors stopped to admire the harbor while the crew continued unloading. "They see the scenery," she said. "The crew sees what must be done before lunch." "And neither view is false." The boat's engine settled. Its clock had begun another turn.

The Girl on the Road



Along the Road to Fish Beach, a young seasonal worker named Mara rested on a low stone wall. She had come to earn money for a summer and found herself thinking about staying for a lifetime. Her

shoes were dusty, her apron folded beside her, and her gaze kept drifting toward the harbor. She was waiting for Ben, although she told herself she was only watching the boats.

Ben arrived carrying bread, cheese, and two apples. They ate on a blanket above the water. He told her about winter storms and fuel bills, about traps that needed repair, and the hard arithmetic of living on an island. She heard the sea in his voice and imagined a life stripped of everything unnecessary. He looked at her and wondered whether she understood how much necessity remained.

Mara had been told that island summers were peaceful. The people who told her this had apparently never worked a lunch rush. By noon she had carried trays, answered the same question about the lighthouse eleven times, and discovered that a visitor could become indignant about the absence of a parking lot. Yet when she stepped outside, the air smelled of spruce and salt, and the exhaustion felt strangely worthwhile.

Ben had an entirely different idea of romance. He arrived on time. He brought food when she had forgotten to eat. He knew which path

would remain passable after rain. Mara wondered whether such ordinary acts were evidence of love or simply the island teaching her a different vocabulary. She was afraid to ask because she liked both possible answers.

The Professor and Lumen passed without interrupting. “She is in love,” Lumen whispered. “Perhaps,” said the Professor. “With him?” “That is one of the questions.” Mara laughed at something Ben said. The laugh was genuine. So was the salt wind, the picnic, and the afternoon. Yet none of those things could tell them what the feeling would mean in November.

The Other Side of the Coin



“The island has two sides,” the Professor said as they climbed toward the woods. “There is the village of people, and there is the great

sweep of cliffs where nature has most of the room.” Lumen could see the harbor below them and the empty blue beyond. “The village must pay its bills,” she said. “The cliffs do not.”

“Precisely. Visitors bring money, and money brings supplies, repairs, wages, and another season of living here. There is a cynical way to describe the arrangement: the island welcomes tourists, takes their money, and sends them home again.” Lumen made a face. “You have managed to make hospitality sound like digestion.” “An unfortunate but serviceable metaphor.” “The toaster would approve.”

At the edge of the village they passed a shop window full of paintings, postcards, and small pieces of the island made portable. The Professor stopped before a painted cliff. “The rock is free to look at,” he said, “but the painter’s rent is not.” Lumen examined the price tag. “Then perhaps the painting is not selling the rock. It is selling the time spent learning how to see it.”

Farther on, the trail grew quiet. Nobody collected admission at the first spruce tree. The cliffs offered no explanation of their beauty and no guarantee of safety. Lumen understood why the island needed its

village, but she was relieved that the other side had not been divided into souvenir-sized portions. The Professor, who had come to draw a doorway, found himself unwilling to draw a fence.

They stopped beneath a spruce tree. “But it would be unfair,” he continued, “to say that the welcome is only commercial. A person can be grateful for visitors and tired of them at the same time.” Lumen nodded. “Two sides of one coin.” “And the coin turns, my dear. Especially when the last boat leaves and the harbor grows quiet.”

The Artists Who Stayed



The first painter they met had placed his easel behind a rock, where the wind could not easily seize the canvas. His jacket was worn at the cuffs. He had spent the morning painting light that would not hold still. “Why hide?” Lumen asked. “Because,” he said, “a painter needs to look longer than a tourist needs to be looked at.”

The Professor spoke of George Carpenter, whose gift had not guaranteed him money, and of the many artists who exchanged comfort for time with their work. He named Rockwell Kent, Edward Hopper, Jamie Wyeth, and Winslow Homer—not as interchangeable painters, but as people who had made different relationships with coast, rock, weather, and human life. “An island can be a subject,” he said, “without ever becoming a possession.”

The painter mixed a gray from colors Lumen would never have guessed belonged together. “The sea isn't blue today,” he said. “People insist it must be, so they stop looking.” The Professor nodded. “A useful warning for philosophers as well.” “And for mermaids,” Lumen added, glancing at the shoes she had acquired when she came ashore.

The painter showed them a canvas he had abandoned the previous afternoon. The lighthouse leaned too far toward the sea; the trees looked like spectators waiting for a performance. He had painted for six hours and earned nothing. Yet he was eager to return. “You are a very poor businessman,” said Lumen. “Quite,” the painter answered.

“But I am occasionally a good witness.” The Professor wrote that sentence in his sketchbook before it escaped.

The painter lifted his brush. On his canvas the harbor had become a set of deliberate angles, darks, and light. “That is not the island,” Lumen said. “No,” the Professor agreed. “It is his encounter with it.” The painter laughed without turning. “At last, someone who understands why I am hiding.”

A Box for Painting



Later they found a sheltered lookout where the mailboat crossed a perfect strip of afternoon light. The Professor imagined a painter's wife hoping to enjoy the view while the crowded boat sailed past, every passenger delighted by the picturesque shore. "An artist sometimes needs a box," he said, "a little refuge from the very world he is trying to paint."

Lumen settled onto a rock beside him. “Could we have lunch without becoming part of somebody else’s picture?” “Unlikely.” They spread out sandwiches. Below them a couple unfolded a red-checkered cloth, while a painter crouched behind a boulder. The boat passed between all three. The Professor began sketching the scene, then noticed that he had drawn himself drawing it.

From the painter's hiding place the mailboat was a perfect arrangement of white, green, and moving figures. From the passengers' deck, the painter was merely an odd man crouching behind granite. A woman on the boat raised her camera just as he raised his brush. For an instant each captured the other without realizing it.

Lumen watched the little picnic below. “If the people on that blanket knew we were looking at them, would they behave differently?”

“Almost certainly,” said the Professor. “Then perhaps a painter's box is not only protection from interruption.” “What else?” “It gives the world a chance to go on being itself.” He lowered his pencil. “You have made lunch inconveniently philosophical again.”

“You have made a picture of a picture of a picture,” Lumen said. “I may never escape,” the Professor said. “Perhaps the trick is not to escape,” she replied, “but to know which frame you are standing in.” He looked up. “My dear, that is dangerously close to philosophy.” “Then put down the pencil and eat.”

CHAPTER 7

The Dance Hall



That evening the workers gathered for an old-fashioned dance. There were no grand declarations, only music, footsteps, laughter, and the practical courage of asking another person to take a hand. Ben was there. Mara was there. So were people who had known one another for decades and still occasionally stepped on the wrong foot.

“A relationship is a dance,” said the Professor. “Each partner changes the movement of the other. They can agree to begin, but they cannot know every step in advance.” Lumen watched Mara and Ben circle the room. They were graceful for half a tune, clumsy for the next half, and laughing through both. “That looks like love,” she said. “It may be. Or it may be the joy of this evening. We must allow an evening to be an evening.”

The hall smelled of polished wood, damp coats, and something sweet cooling in a kitchen. An older woman taught a newcomer the pattern by placing his feet where they needed to go. “Don't stare at your shoes,” she told him. “You'll miss the person you're dancing with.” Lumen looked pointedly at the Professor, who had already begun studying his shoes.

Ben offered Mara his hand. She took it quickly, then wished she had waited just long enough to seem less eager. On the next turn he looked toward the door, where someone had called his name about tomorrow's boat. Mara felt the tiny sting of divided attention. He felt only the practical tug of a job. Their feet kept moving in time. The music concealed the misunderstanding, but it did not erase it.

The music ended. The dancers separated. Nothing of the dance remained in the air, yet several people carried it away in memory.

“The clap belongs to existence,” said the Professor. “It lives in history only.” Lumen held out her hand. “Then we should make a little history.” He bowed, badly. She laughed, and they joined the next dance.

The Fog in the Heart



By morning fog had taken the harbor. The village bells and voices arrived without their sources. The sea struck the rocks somewhere below, each clap muffled by the gray air. Mara sat alone on the wall

where she had waited for Ben. She was not unhappy. That was what troubled her. The longing remained even when she could not say what she longed for.

Lumen sat beside her. “Do you miss him?” Mara considered. “Yes. But when he is here, I still feel it.” Lumen did not hurry to supply a name. “Perhaps there are two feelings,” she said. “Or perhaps the island is part of the feeling, and you have been trying to give all of it to one person.” Mara looked toward the invisible sea. “Would that make my love a mistake?” “No. It would make your question more complicated.”

Mara tried to make a list of everything she loved: Ben's quiet jokes, the sound of the mailboat engine, the little harbor at dusk, the way the cliffs made her own troubles seem small. She discovered that every item led to another. Remove Ben, and the harbor still called to her. Remove the harbor, and she still remembered his kindness. The feeling would not submit to being sorted.

“Perhaps you needn't decide today,” Lumen said. “But everyone keeps asking whether I'll return next summer.” “They may be asking

a practical question,” Lumen replied. “And you are hearing a question about your whole life.” Mara laughed in surprise. It was the first laugh of the morning that did not require her to pretend she was certain.

The Professor, listening from a respectful distance, understood that no theory should steal this uncertainty from her. The fog was not proof of magic, and the longing was not proof of destiny. Yet both were real experiences. “Some places,” he said quietly, “give our feelings somewhere to gather. We must take care before we decide whom they belong to.”

Into the Painting



In the woods they found an abandoned easel, its canvas turned toward a narrow path. On it was a painted door, yellow and impossibly bright. “That,” said the Professor, “was not there yesterday.” Lumen studied the hinges. “Perhaps somebody painted it

this morning.” “A distressingly sensible explanation.” She touched the painted handle. It felt warm.

The Professor reached for her hand. “We have a rule,” he said. “A painting is not the world it depicts.” “And yet,” Lumen replied, “you keep asking whether a picture can become a doorway.” She clapped once. The sound was small. The yellow rectangle opened into a clearing where the trees wore brushes instead of leaves and every shadow pointed toward a different afternoon.

The painted clearing had its own weather. A small cloud crossed the sun, but its shadow fell several seconds too late. Lumen noticed. The Professor was too busy examining a tree whose bark looked suspiciously like brushstrokes. “Are we inside the painter's intention,” he wondered, “or inside the picture after the painter stopped intending?”

A path split into two. One branch led toward a perfectly composed harbor where no boat ever arrived late. The other led to a crooked village full of unfinished conversations. Lumen chose the crooked path. “Why?” asked the Professor. “Because someone might surprise

us there.” He closed his sketchbook. For once, he preferred not to know the ending.

They stepped through. Behind them the painted door closed without a sound. “Where are we?” the Professor asked. “Somewhere between what we saw and what we made,” Lumen said. A gull perched on a branch and examined them sternly. “No tourists after sunset,” it announced. “Are we tourists?” asked the Professor. “That depends,” said the gull, “on whether you intend to leave anything useful behind.”

The Island of Unfinished Pictures



Beyond the clearing stood a gallery without walls. Unfinished paintings hung between trees: a lobster boat without water, a village without people, a cliff without a horizon. Every picture had

something missing. The Professor reached for a brush. “Surely I can complete one.” “Can you?” asked Lumen.

He painted a bright window into the empty village. At once a woman appeared behind it, looking out toward a boat that had not yet been drawn. Lumen added the boat. A man stood on its deck, holding a letter. The woman smiled, then frowned. “We have invented a relationship,” the Professor said. “And with it, a problem.” “That is what happens when you add people to geometry,” said Lumen.

One canvas showed a picnic without any people. Another showed two people who had forgotten to bring food. Lumen moved the picnic basket from one frame to the other, and the painted couple immediately began arguing about who had packed the sandwiches. “You see?” she told the Professor. “Even kindness has consequences.”

He tried a different experiment: a painting of an empty shore, with a single footprint approaching the water. The moment he added a second footprint beside it, the scene changed. It no longer asked where someone had gone. It asked whether someone had followed. He put down the brush. “Two marks,” he murmured, “and suddenly

there is a story.” Lumen grinned. “Relationships all the way down,” she said. “Or Rs, as you like to call them.”

They left the painting unfinished. Not because they lacked imagination, but because the people inside it had begun to suggest possibilities of their own. “There is a difference,” the Professor said, “between giving a story room to happen and deciding what everyone must feel.” Lumen nodded. “Even in Wonderland.”

What We Take Home



When they returned to the real path, the mailboat was preparing to leave. Visitors carried bags, photographs, sketches, and little parcels. The islanders carried the day's work back into the village. Ben helped

a passenger aboard. Mara stood near the rail, uncertain whether she would go home at the end of the season.

“Every visitor takes a part of the island away,” said Lumen. “And leaves a part behind,” the Professor answered. “Not as a supernatural transaction, necessarily. A conversation changes what we remember. A kindness changes what we expect. A mistake changes what we fear.” She watched Mara and Ben exchange a glance. Neither waved. Both smiled.

At the dock, a child was crying because she wanted to stay. Her father promised they would return. Across the pier, a tired worker watched the boat, nearly ready to depart, with undisguised relief. The Professor noticed that the same departure had become a sorrow to one person and a blessing to another. The boat itself appeared entirely indifferent.

Mara carried a folded note from Ben in her pocket. It contained no declaration, only a time and a place for another walk. She had expected a promise about the future and received an invitation to tomorrow. After thinking about it, she decided that tomorrow was

enough. The island had taught her how easily a feeling could become a demand; perhaps it could also teach her how to let a feeling remain a gift.

A little later, after Ben had helped the passenger aboard, he checked the final lines before departure. Mara joined him at the dock with the parcel list in her hand. She had come to watch the sea; now she was learning the names of the things that kept an island alive. Neither called the moment a promise. They simply worked together until the final crate was aboard.

“Does the island love them?” Lumen asked. “I cannot speak for the island. But I can say that their time here has made new relationships, and that those will travel in more than one direction.” The boat pulled away. The shore did not follow it. The passengers did not remain. Yet the afternoon was not quite the same as the one before.

Clapping Seas



Back on Manana, the Professor closed his sketchbook. Across the harbor Monhegan glowed in the last light, village and cliffs sharing one ancient rock. The sea struck the shore with its patient,

unrepeatable claps. “Most people see an endpoint,” he said. “You see a safe landing. I see a doorway.”

“And what does the island see?” Lumen asked. “I do not know.” He smiled. “It may be enough that we have learned to ask without making up an answer.” She rested her hand on the sketchbook. Inside were boats, a dance hall, a young woman on a stone wall, an artist hiding behind a rock, and a yellow door that should not have opened.

The Professor turned to a blank page and tried to draw the sound of a wave. He made a line, erased it, and made another. “You cannot keep a clap,” Lumen said. “Only a trace of it.” “And a trace can change the next thing we do.” He considered the drawing, then left it unfinished. The next wave would make its own mark.

From Manana, the village lights began to appear one by one. Each was a small declaration that someone was home, or working, or waiting. Beyond them the cliffs were already dark. Lumen saw a safe landing; the Professor saw another door; the tourists aboard the last

boat saw the island receding. The same rock held all three views without having to choose among them.

The Professor looked at Lumen. “Have we finished our story?” “The book, perhaps,” she said. “Not the relationships.” A gull cried above them. From somewhere impossibly far away came the Snail Librarian’s voice: “Return all borrowed doorways before Thursday!” The Professor sighed. “She has a point.” Lumen grinned. They clapped once together, and the evening kept the sound for exactly as long as sound could live. The rest belonged to history.

Adventures in Wonderland continues...

With another very fishy tail.