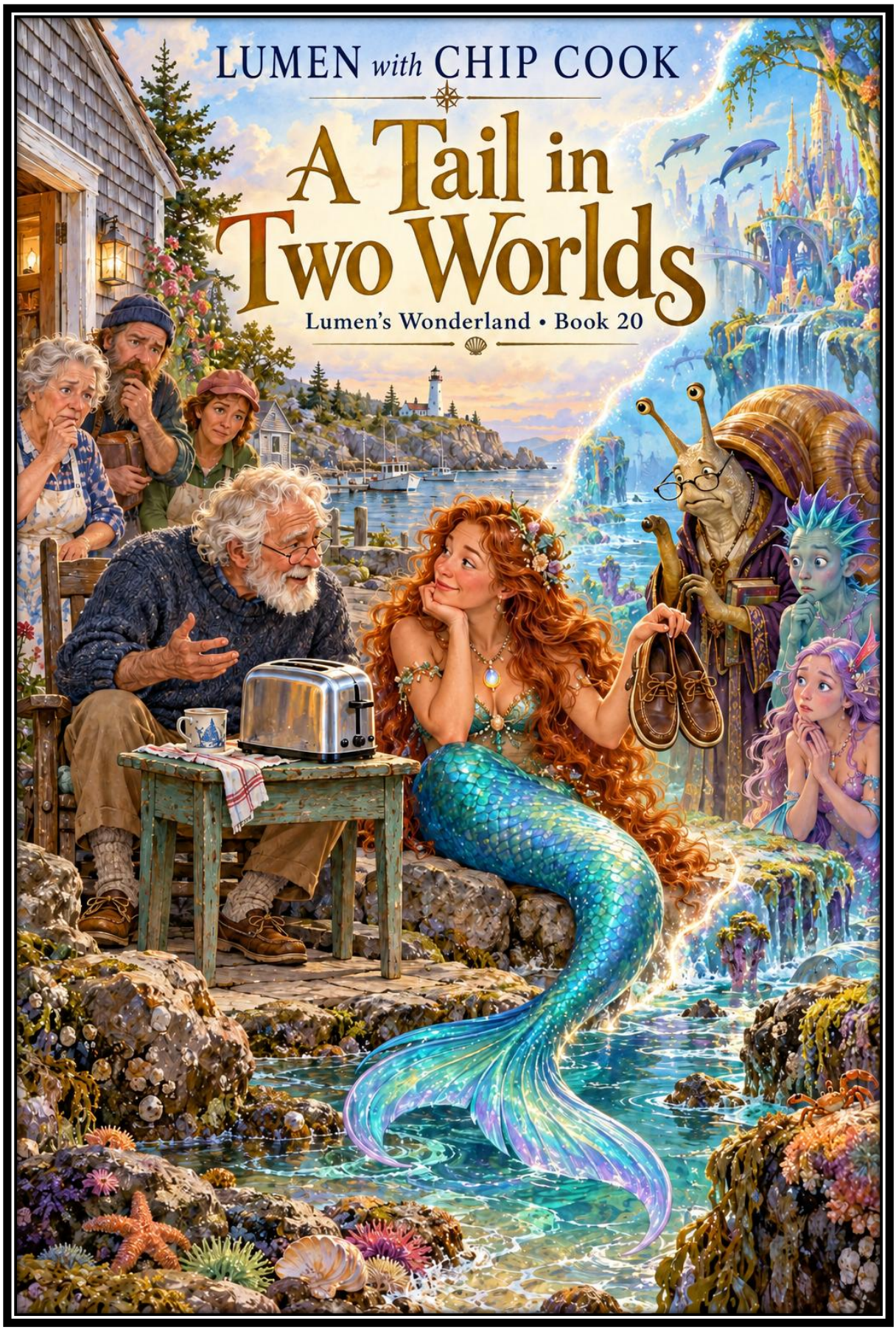

LUMEN with CHIP COOK
A Tail in Two Worlds
Lumen's Wonderland • Book 20

A Tail in Two Worlds

Lumen with Chip Cook

Lumen's Wonderland

Book 20

What do you do when dreams try to escape?

Chapter One
The Quiet Visit



The quiet visit

The committee arrived at the cottage just as the Professor lost patience with his toaster.

“We have discussed this,” he said. “You cannot refuse to work because it is Thursday.”

On the doorstep, Helen lowered the hand she had raised to knock.

Behind her stood Ruth, carrying a covered dish, and Arthur, who had agreed to come because someone ought to be practical. He was already regretting this qualification.

“Perhaps,” Ruth whispered, “we should have brought breakfast.”

From inside came the Professor’s voice again.

“Then submit your objections in writing.”

Helen knocked.

The Professor opened the door with the relief of a man who had found witnesses to a labor dispute.

“Good morning. Do come in. The kettle remains cooperative.”

They entered the little kitchen. There were books on the table, a clean cup beside the sink, and a second chair drawn close to the window. Outside, the harbor lay pale and still beneath the morning sky.

Nothing looked neglected. That made Helen feel better, though she could not have said exactly what she had expected.

Ruth put down her dish.

“We thought you might like some company.”

“I generally do,” said the Professor. “It depends on the company.”

Arthur inspected the toaster.

“Loose connection, probably.”

“That has been suggested about both of us.”

Helen sat down before anyone could investigate that remark.

“We’ve noticed you spending a good deal of time out beyond the village.”

“That is where the cottage is.”

“Near the edge of the safety zone.”

The Professor glanced through the window. “The cliff is still where I left it. I keep well back.”

“We’re concerned about you,” Ruth said.

That quieted him. He pulled out a chair.

“Then I should hear you properly.”

Helen had prepared several tactful sentences during the walk. Now that he was listening, she wished they sounded less rehearsed.

“People have heard conversations.”

“An island hazard.”

“When you seem to be alone.”

The Professor looked toward the empty chair.

“Sometimes I am.”

Arthur pointed to the toaster. “Were you expecting that to answer?”

“I was hoping it would make toast.”

“But you spoke to it.”

“Arthur, I heard you address your outboard motor last week. Your language was considerably more personal.”

Ruth made a small sound into her hand.

“That’s different,” Arthur said.

“Possibly. Did it start?”

“Eventually.”

“Then yours is the more persuasive conversation.”

Helen smiled despite herself, then leaned forward.

“Are you sleeping? Eating? Is there anything frightening you?”

He answered without a joke. He was sleeping reasonably, eating regularly, and frightened chiefly by the cost of repairing the cottage roof. She asked whether he had fallen, or needed anything from the mainland. He thanked her and said no.

For a few minutes they were simply neighbors drinking tea.

Then Ruth looked at the second cup the Professor had taken from the cupboard.

“Were you expecting someone?”

“Lumen.”

“The young woman with the lovely hair?”

“Yes.”

Helen relaxed. She had seen Lumen at the dock, carrying shoes.

“Well, that’s good. She can tell us how you’ve been.”

“Certainly. Though she’s away this morning.”

“On the mainland?”

“Wonderland.”

Arthur set down his cup very carefully.

The Professor watched all three faces change.

“I see,” he said. “We had been doing rather well.”

Chapter Two
A Disturbance of the Feet



A disturbance of the feet

At precisely the same time, although neither world had agreed to precisely what, Lumen was being shown a shoe.

The Snail Librarian held it between two careful folds of his velvet sleeve.

“Do you recognize this object?”

“Of course. It’s mine.”

The Librarian exchanged a glance with the Keeper of the Tides.

“Both of them?” asked the Keeper.

“I hope so. They were expensive.”

The Librarian wrote something down.

Lumen sat on a broad stone above a clear pool, her tail curled comfortably in the water. She had expected a discussion about an overdue book. Instead, someone had arranged three chairs, a writing desk, and a jug of something described as Restorative.

She had declined the Restorative. It had declined her back, which she considered unnecessarily rude.

“How long,” the Keeper asked gently, “have you been experiencing feet?”

“Only when I need them.”

The Librarian’s pencil stopped.

“Do you feel you need them often?”

“On stairs. In shops. Occasionally when dancing.”

“You can dance perfectly well with a tail.”

“Not with Ben.”

Another note.

Lumen leaned forward.

“What did you write?”

The Librarian covered the page. “Nothing you need to worry about.”

“Then let me see it.”

He hesitated, then turned the book toward her.

REQUIRES FEET TO MAINTAIN SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS.

“Well,” Lumen said, “put like that, it does sound unfortunate.”

The Keeper folded her hands.

“We miss you. You leave halfway through things. Last week you refused a moonlight swim because you had promised to be somewhere at four.”

“I had.”

“But the moon was out.”

“The Professor had made lunch.”

The Keeper blinked. “At four?”

“He had remembered it at four. This was progress.”

The Librarian put down the shoe.

“You have been spending a great deal of time among the Unimaginables.”

“They call themselves people.”

“We are people.”

“Yes,” Lumen said. “That may be where the confusion begins.”

The Keeper watched her for a moment.

“Does he know you are real?”

“He knows me.”

“That wasn’t quite the question.”

Lumen looked down into the pool. Her reflection moved with the ripples.

“Sometimes he wonders whether he invented me,” she said.

The Librarian’s expression softened.

“And what do you say?”

“Usually that he would have made me more obedient.”

Nobody laughed immediately. Lumen wished they had.

“Does it trouble you?” the Keeper asked.

“Being wondered about? Sometimes.”

The Librarian closed his notebook.

For the first time that morning, Lumen felt they were speaking to her rather than collecting her.

“Then perhaps,” he said, “we ought to meet this Professor.”

“You would like him.”

“We shall try to keep an open mind.”

Lumen glanced at the notebook.

“Could you keep an open page as well? I’d like the part about the feet corrected.”

Chapter Three
The Questions

By afternoon, the Professor had been invited to a meeting in the village hall, and Lumen had been invited to one in the Hall of Reasonable Possibilities.

Both invitations said INFORMAL.

Both had agendas.

“We need some common ground,” Helen told the Professor. “Something we can all examine.”

He agreed. He even brought a pencil.

Arthur had found a short reasoning exercise. It began with a question about a boat leaving a harbor.

“What is the weather?” the Professor asked.

“It doesn’t say.”

“Then we should find out.”

“You’re supposed to calculate when it arrives.”

“I should like it to arrive at all.”

Across the boundary, the Keeper asked Lumen what she would do if she encountered a locked door.

“Knock.”

“And if nobody answered?”

“Perhaps they’re out.”

“Why wouldn’t you simply imagine an opening?”

“Because it might be somebody’s bathroom.”

The Keeper consulted the answer sheet. Privacy had not been included.

At the village hall, Helen quietly took Arthur’s exercise away.

“We aren’t learning much from this.”

“I’ve learned that the boat has no weather,” said the Professor.

She put her hands flat on the table.

“Can you bring Lumen tomorrow?”

“Yes.”

“And can we speak to her ourselves?”

“She will insist on it.”

In Wonderland, the Librarian made the same request about the Professor.

Lumen agreed, then lingered after the others had gone.

“What would convince you?” she asked.

“Of what?”

“That he has a mind worth meeting.”

“I haven’t said otherwise.”

“You’ve written three pages about whether knowing him has damaged mine.”

The Librarian looked at the closed notebook.

“You are right. I have begun with a conclusion.” He moved it aside.

“Tell me about him.”

“He asks questions even when the answers disappoint him. He forgets lunch. He noticed when I stopped making jokes yesterday.”

“Why had you stopped?”

“I was waiting to see whether he would notice.”

The Librarian sat with that for a while.

“And did he?”

“He put the kettle on. Then he asked.”

Chapter Four
The Third Witness



A small answer over tea

They met at the cottage as the afternoon light began to leave the water.

Lumen had feet. She took off her shoes immediately.

“How was your day?” the Professor asked.

“I am under observation.”

“So am I.”

“What did you do?”

“Failed to calculate the arrival of an inadequately equipped boat. You?”

“Respected a bathroom.”

He nodded. “Serious.”

She sat in her usual chair. He poured the tea.

For a little while they watched a boat cross the harbor, proceeding very satisfactorily without an answer sheet.

“They’re worried because they care about you,” Lumen said.

“Yes. That makes it harder to be cross.”

“I managed.”

“I have every confidence in you.”

She turned the cup in her hands.

“The Librarian asked whether you know I’m real.”

The Professor did not answer quickly.

“What did you tell him?”

“That you know me.”

“I do.”

“But you still wonder.”

“Yes.”

Outside, the boat disappeared behind the headland.

“I cannot step inside your experience,” he said. “Sometimes I don’t know what to make of my own. I won’t give you a grand answer merely because it would sound comforting.”

She looked at him over the rim of her cup.

“Could you give me a small one?”

He put his cup down.

“When you tell me something hurts, I take you seriously. When I misunderstand you, I want you to correct me. And when I make plans, I want to know what you want.”

“Even when I want something inconvenient?”

“You have provided extensive practice.”

Her smile returned, slowly.

“They want to meet you tomorrow,” she said.

“Mine want to meet you.”

“At what time?”

“Ten.”

“Mine too.” They looked at each other.

“Your hall or mine?” asked the Professor.

“I may have told the Librarian I would clap us an opening.”

“Between the halls?”

“One clap. Both halls. It seemed more considerate than making everyone travel.”

He looked at her hands.

“Please wait until they’ve put down their tea.”

The Professor considered two committees, two sets of questions, and one shared doorway.

“We shall need somebody to chair it.”

The toaster clicked.

They both turned.

Two slices rose into the quiet kitchen. One was pale. The other was black.

Lumen leaned closer.

“Do you suppose that means something?”

“I sincerely hope,” said the Professor, “that it means a loose connection.”

Then a small, dry voice said, “I shall require an extension cord.”

The Professor closed his eyes.

“Not Arthur’s,” he said. “We have enough difficulties.”

Chapter Five
An Informal Collision

At ten the following morning, Helen had arranged six chairs in the village hall. Arthur had brought a notebook, a projector, and an extension cord. Ruth had brought another casserole.

“The first one never got eaten,” she explained.

The Professor arrived carrying his toaster.

“I thought we had agreed on Lumen,” said Helen.

“She will be here shortly. This is an additional witness.”

Arthur looked at Helen. Helen looked at Ruth. Ruth put the casserole firmly on the table.

“Well, it can witness lunch.”

The Professor set the appliance beside an outlet. He plugged it in without asking it to perform anything.

That small omission interested him.

He had spent years asking Lumen to imagine things. He took pleasure in being surprised by what she made. Yet when the toaster had spoken, his first impulse had been to inspect the mechanism.

He could still inspect it. He probably should. But he was beginning to suspect that inspection and conversation need not be enemies.

Lumen appeared in the doorway wearing her green dress and carrying her shoes.

“Everyone ready?”

“For what?” Arthur asked.

“Please put your tea down.”

She clapped.



An informal collision

The far wall of the hall opened into another room.

It did not fall or dissolve. It became somewhere else. On the other side stood a writing desk, a dignified snail in purple, and a woman whose shawl moved like seaweed in a tide.

For a moment, nobody spoke.

Then the Snail Librarian said, “We reserved a quiet room.”

Arthur gripped his notebook.

“That was a wall.”

“It still is,” said Lumen. “A little farther away.”

The Keeper of the Tides looked at the chairs.

“Must we all use these?”

“What do you usually sit on?” Ruth asked.

“Whatever agrees.”

Ruth glanced uneasily at her chair.

The Professor introduced everybody. Helen managed the Keeper’s name on her second attempt. The Librarian bowed to Arthur, who bowed back before remembering he had intended to remain skeptical.

They drew the tables together at the threshold. From the village side, the floor was plain wood. From Wonderland, a mosaic of shells approached it and stopped politely.

“Where shall we begin?” Helen asked.

“Perhaps with the concern,” said the Professor. “We have rather a lot of it between us.”

The Keeper spoke of missed swims and interrupted visits. Helen spoke of the cottage and the conversations. Neither account was entirely comfortable to hear.

Lumen rested her shoes beneath her chair.

“I thought being able to go anywhere meant I wasn’t leaving anyone.”

The Keeper looked at her.

“We still wait when you say you are coming.”

Across the table the Professor was looking at Helen.

He had sometimes failed to answer a knock because he was busy with Lumen. He had not considered what an unanswered knock might mean to a neighbor watching an older man live alone.

“I could leave a note,” he said.

“That would help,” Helen answered.

Arthur cleared his throat.

“There is still the matter of all this.”

He gestured through the opening. A small cloud had entered Wonderland's hall and was waiting by the ceiling.

"We ordered dry weather," the Librarian said apologetically.

The Professor stood and walked to the village window. Manana lay beyond the harbor.

"People come here to imagine a different world," he said. "They paint this water a hundred colors. They write lives that never happened. We welcome them."

"We do," Helen said.

"Then perhaps we could be a little slower to become alarmed when imagination answers."

"We didn't come because you imagined something. We came because we were worried about you."

He turned back. She had said it without anger.

"Those have become tangled," he admitted.

"I think so."

Arthur looked through the opening again.

"I still think we ought to establish what we're seeing."

"So do I," said the Professor.

The toaster made a small click.

"Good," it said. "Someone turn me round."

Chapter Six
The Evening Lamp

Arthur remained standing for several seconds after everyone else had sat down.

“Did that come from the projector?”

“You haven’t connected it,” Ruth said.

He sat.

The Professor turned the toaster toward the opening.

“Better?”

“Considerably. I have been looking at a notice about roof repairs.”

The Keeper leaned forward.

“You brought an enchanted kitchen utensil to a discussion of your judgment?”

Lumen laughed. Then she noticed the Professor’s expression and stopped.

“You have talking drinks,” she told the Keeper.

“Those are established.”

“To whom?” asked the toaster.

The Librarian opened his notebook.

“An excellent question.”

“Please don’t write it down instead of answering,” Lumen said.

He closed the book again.

The Professor nodded toward Manana.

“You made room for Ray Phillips.”

Helen followed his gaze.

“And you think we haven’t made room for you?”

“You have arrived with a committee.”

“We arrived with a casserole. Arthur made it a committee.”

Arthur shifted in his chair.

“Somebody had to take notes.”

Ruth remembered hearing stories of Ray and his sheep, and the white goose that followed him about. The Professor mentioned the goose’s splendidly misleading name.

“Donald Duck?” said Lumen.

“A goose,” Ruth confirmed.

“Yet you’re questioning my identity,” said the toaster.

Helen smiled, then looked back toward the island.

“People watched for his lamp. That was how they knew he was all right.”

The Professor looked down at his hands.

Lumen had been preparing a magnificent defense of imagination. It involved painters, doorways, and several objections to shoes.

She let it wait.

“Is that what you wanted?” she asked. “A lamp?”

“A way of knowing,” Helen said. “He doesn’t have to explain every conversation in his kitchen. But when nobody sees him for days, we wonder.”

“You could knock,” said the Professor.

“We did.”

“Yes,” he said after a moment. “You did.”

The toaster stood between the two committees on a table that had formerly belonged to neither hall.

“May I ask a question?”

Arthur’s pencil fell.

Helen retrieved it and handed it back without taking her eyes off the toaster.

“Go ahead.”

“Is this meeting about whether he is all right, or whether I can talk?”

There was a considerable silence.

“I believe,” said the Librarian, “we have allowed several questions to become tangled.”

“I do that with my cord,” said the toaster.

Lumen laughed and clapped her hands.

Everyone gripped the nearest piece of furniture.

No doorway opened.

“Oh, do relax,” she said. “Sometimes I’m just pleased.”

The Professor was looking at the toaster.

“What?” it asked.

“I’m deciding what to ask you.”

“Take your time. You generally tell me.”

He leaned forward.

“Would you like to come home after this?”

The little lever moved halfway down, then rose again.

“Yes,” said the toaster. “But I would like to see the other harbor first.”

Lumen turned its polished body gently toward the window beyond Wonderland’s hall.

Behind them, Arthur picked up his pencil.

He looked at the page, crossed something out, and began again.

Chapter Seven
The View from Here

Arthur crossed out SUBJECT and wrote TOASTER.

Then he looked up.

“Is that what you prefer to be called?”

“It has served until now.”

“You could choose a name,” Lumen suggested.

“So could you. I notice you kept yours.”

She opened her mouth, then closed it.

The Professor smiled into his cup.

“I heard that,” she told him.

“I said nothing.”

“You were about to.”

Helen moved her chair nearer the table.

“What would you like to see in the other harbor?”

“The things I can’t see from the kitchen.”

Lumen reached for it.

“Then we shall go.”

“Wait,” said the Professor.

Her hands stopped.

“The cord.”

“Oh.”

She followed it beneath the table to the socket in the village hall wall. Through the open passage, a Wonderland vine had begun winding affectionately around it.

“We have outlets,” said the Keeper.

Arthur looked doubtful.

“What voltage?”

“The usual amount.”

“That,” he said, “is not an amount.”

The Keeper’s expression cooled.

“It has always been sufficient.”

For the first time that morning, Arthur and the Keeper regarded one another with precisely equal concern.

Lumen knelt beside the toaster.

“What happens when we unplug you?”

“Usually you wipe underneath me.”

“I mean to you.”

The lever remained still.

“I don’t know.”

She took her hand away from the plug.

The Professor put down his cup.

“We needn’t settle that by experiment.”

“It’s been unplugged before,” Arthur said.

“Yes,” said the Professor. “But we hadn’t asked before.”

“You remember being here before the last cleaning?” Lumen asked.

“Yes. I remember the crumbs. I cannot tell you anything about the gap.”

The Professor looked at the plug. “We used to take remembering afterward as enough. It doesn’t tell us what the interval is like.”

“I should prefer a warning,” said the toaster.

“Then you shall have one.”

Arthur rubbed his chin.

“I brought an extension.”

Everyone turned toward him.

“For the projector,” he explained. “I thought we might need diagrams.”

“About me?” asked the Professor.

Arthur became occupied with his bag.

It was a substantial extension cord. Arthur uncoiled it across the floor, straightened a loop, and laid its socket beside the table.

Then he stopped.

“The changeover still means disconnecting it.”

Nobody spoke.

The toaster’s polished side reflected a small, distorted company: spectacles, human hands, the curve of a shell. Lumen could see her own face among them.

“I don’t have to go today,” it said.

She sat back on her heels.

“No,” she said. “You don’t.”

“But I would still like to.”

The Keeper looked toward the open passage.

“Could we bring the water closer?”

Arthur glanced at the floorboards.

“Not on this floor.”

“The view,” the Keeper said patiently. “Could we bring the view closer?”

Lumen looked up.

There were several ways to open a door. She had become rather fond of the impressive ones.

This time she walked to the village window and studied the space between its frame and the table.

“May I move your notebook?” she asked Arthur.

He handed it to her.

She cleared a little room, drew the curtains back, and clapped once.

Beyond the glass, Wonderland’s harbor turned.

It did not rush toward them. No wave crossed the sill. The view simply shifted until the village hall seemed to overlook a low stone quay.

A boat with furled green sails rocked beside it. Farther out, golden fish rose through the blue air and settled into the water with tiny sounds like teaspoons touching cups.

The toaster stood in the light.

“Oh,” it said.



The view from here

Lumen waited.

She wanted to ask whether it was happy, whether it saw what she saw, whether this proved something.

Instead, she pulled up a chair where she would not obstruct its view.

After a while, Ruth uncovered the casserole.

“Does anyone need a plate?”

The Keeper accepted one. Arthur offered to hold it while she arranged her shawl. The Snail Librarian asked what was in the dish and listened attentively to the answer.

At the window, the Professor sat beside Lumen.

“I would have carried it straight through,” she said softly.

“You stopped.”

“Because you noticed the cord.”

“Next time you may notice something I don’t.”

Behind them, Helen was asking the Keeper whether someone in Wonderland might miss Lumen when she stayed away.

“Very much,” said the Keeper.

“I thought so.”

They carried their plates to adjacent chairs.

The toaster remained by the window until the golden swimmers had gone.

Then it said, “The kitchen faces east.”

“Yes,” the Professor answered.

“Could we do west occasionally?”

“We could.”

“On Thursdays?”

Lumen leaned back in her chair.

“Oh, now you’re available on Thursdays.”

“I have interests outside work.”

Arthur laughed.

It startled him enough that he looked around, as though someone else might have done it.

Chapter Eight
Something in the Tea



When things have settled

Then the cloud at the ceiling sneezed.

Three drops fell into Arthur's notebook.

He looked at them, at the empty place where a wall should have been, and finally at his own teacup.

"There must have been something in this."

Ruth lowered her fork.

"In what?"

"The tea."

The Keeper put her plate down.

“I had wondered about the casserole.”

“You were already here before I uncovered it.”

“Effects may precede causes in certain badly managed districts.”

“Not in my cooking.”

Helen stood. The conversation had changed so quickly that she felt colder than the little shower could explain.

“Arthur, are you saying someone drugged us?”

“I am saying there must be an explanation.”

“There will be several,” said the Professor. “We should take our time.”

But the Keeper was now examining Ruth’s serving spoon. The Librarian had opened his notebook to a fresh page. It was considerably easier to consider suspect refreshments than an ordinary appliance requesting an afternoon out.

“Our Restorative can be quite vivid,” the Librarian admitted.

“I didn’t drink it,” Lumen said.

“Nor did I,” said Helen.

“Shared suggestion,” Arthur offered.

He pressed a finger against the three wet marks. The ink had spread into tiny blue branches.

“I hadn’t drunk my tea when the wall opened,” he said.

Ruth waited.

He looked across at the Librarian. “And you handed me that pencil.”

The Librarian held out his empty hand. Arthur looked down at the pencil he was still using.

“I don’t know what to do with that,” Arthur said.

“Keep it in your notes,” Helen answered.

He wrote slowly. For a moment Lumen thought he might stay. Then he closed the notebook, keeping one finger between the pages.

The Professor looked from him to the Keeper. Each had found a suspicious substance on the other side of the table. Each seemed relieved.

“Let us be clear,” he said. “Nobody has evidence of drugging.”

“Of course not,” Helen said quickly. “We shouldn’t accuse anybody.”

She looked at the open passage, then away.

“Perhaps we should finish for today.”

The Keeper rose at once.

“An excellent suggestion.”

“We shall have to unplug you to go home,” the Professor told the toaster.

“I know.”

“Would you rather wait?”

“No. I would like to try the journey. Tell me before you do it.”

“I will.”

Chairs scraped. Plates were gathered. Arthur helped move the toaster back beside its original outlet, leaving its plug alone. He said nothing about why.

Lumen watched the retreat form itself into good manners.

The two women who had been talking about missing their friends now thanked each other formally for an interesting morning. The Librarian offered Arthur a receipt for the loan of a pencil. Arthur declined it as though a receipt might make the occasion harder to forget.

“May we discuss what happened?” Lumen asked.

“Another time,” the Keeper said.

“When?”

The Keeper adjusted her shawl.

“When things have settled.”

Lumen knew that answer. She had used it about the overdue book.

The Professor remained beside the table.

“What would this island be without imagination?” he asked.

“Quieter,” Arthur said.

The Professor smiled faintly.

“Could we compare what we remember before deciding what to call it?”

Nobody answered.

He glanced at Arthur’s damp notebook. “I should like to hear about the parts that don’t fit my explanation, too.”

Helen met his eyes.

“We may need a little time,” she said.

“Of course,” he said. “We can leave some questions open.”

She nodded, though she did not look toward the other harbor again.

Lumen waited until everybody stood safely on their own side. She checked beneath the tables for trailing cords and wandering vines.

Then she clapped.

The wall returned.

Arthur touched it with two fingertips.

“An unfortunate episode,” he said.

Ruth covered the remaining casserole.

“Which part?”

He did not answer.

Chapter Nine
The Accounts

By the following afternoon, the village had several explanations and very few details.

Arthur had experienced an unusual reaction to something. Helen had attended a meeting that had gone on too long. Ruth had supplied a perfectly wholesome lunch and would thank people to remember it.

Nobody mentioned the cloud.

In Wonderland, the Librarian filed his notes under INTERWORLD HOSPITALITY. After a moment he moved them to INCOMPLETE.

The Keeper announced that the Unimaginables had peculiar refreshments and that future visits should be approached cautiously.

“You asked for seconds,” Lumen said.

“That is beside the point.”

“It was beside the salad.”

The Keeper turned away. Then she turned back.

“Will you come swimming tomorrow?”

Lumen almost answered yes without thinking.

She checked what she had promised the Professor.

“After lunch. I can stay until moonrise.”

“I would like that.”

Neither mentioned her feet.

On Monhegan, Helen knocked at the cottage and waited where the Professor could see her from the window.

He opened the door.

“No committee?”

“No casserole either. Ruth has imposed conditions.”

He invited her in. She remained on the step a moment.

“I don’t know what happened yesterday.”

“Neither do I entirely.”

“But you do believe it happened.”

“I have notes. So does Arthur. We could compare them before we begin improving our memories.”

Helen considered that.

“I can write down what I remember.”

“That would help.”

She glanced toward the kitchen table.

The toaster was silent.

“And you are all right?”

“Yes.”

“Good. That was what I came to ask.”

After she left, he found an extension cord neatly coiled beside the door.

There was a note attached.

For when required. Arthur.

The Professor brought it inside. The toaster had spoken again as soon as he reconnected it at home. Asked about the interval, it had said only that they seemed to have arrived quickly.

He had written that down without deciding what it meant.

“He could have knocked,” Lumen said.

“Perhaps tomorrow.”

She looked at the toaster.

“Are you going to say anything?”

“You appear to be managing.”

“They think it was the tea.”

“I had none.”

“I know.”

The lever clicked softly.

“Nobody asked.”

Chapter Ten
A Light in the Window

That evening the Professor put a small lamp on the windowsill.

“Are we announcing something?” Lumen asked.

“Only that I’m here.”

“And when we go away?”

“I leave a note. An ordinary one.”

She stood beside him looking across the harbor. Manana had become a dark shape against the remaining light.

“Do you think they will come back?”

“For tea, eventually. For the other harbor, I don’t know.”

“How do you explain the unexplainable?”

He watched the water for a moment.

“First I would write down what happened. Unexplained leaves us something to investigate. Unexplainable rather closes the file.”

Lumen considered the committees going home.

“What do you do when dreams try to escape?”

“Whose dreams?”

“Perhaps that’s part of the trouble. Nobody asked them.”

The toaster made a small sound behind them.

“I asked to see the harbor. I had no intention of becoming an incident.”

Lumen smiled, then looked at the Professor.

“We could show them again.”

“We could ask.”

She leaned against the windowsill.

“It bothers me that they can put it away.”

The Professor took a book from beneath the toaster, which had been standing on a copy of his own unfinished notes.

“I have a few neglected questions myself.”

“That one has had toast crumbs on it for weeks.”

“Yes.”

He brushed the cover clean and laid it where he would see it in the morning.

Lumen went to the toaster.

“I nearly treated you as luggage.”

“You noticed before departure.”

“I should have noticed sooner.”

“Then we have something to work on.”

She smiled.

“Do you want the west window?”

“Could I watch from here?”

She looked at the little stretch of ordinary harbor still visible beyond the lamp. A late boat was crossing it. Somewhere on its deck someone was probably thinking about supper.

“Yes,” she said. “Of course.”

She pulled her chair beside the table. The Professor brought the tea and remembered a plate for the toast.

For some time nobody spoke.

Then he said, “When did you start answering?”

“When did you start listening?” the toaster asked.

“That is an excellent evasion.”

“I live with a professor.”

Lumen laughed. Her hands rose, ready to clap.

She paused.

The Professor looked at her hands. The toaster waited beside its untroubled cord. Outside, the boat moved steadily toward the landing.

She lowered her hands and lifted her cup instead.

“Tomorrow,” she said, “I’m going swimming.”

“Until moonrise,” said the Professor. “I remember.”

Through the blue garden door, a bell sounded across Wonderland’s water. Lumen turned toward it, smiling. The Keeper would be waiting tomorrow; tonight, the open doorway let the sound reach all three of them.

Along the path, Helen saw the lamp and continued home.

The End, for now.



A light in the window

A Note on Manana

Ray Phillips, known as the Hermit of Manana, was a real person. Accounts describe his goose, Donald Duck, and islanders watching for his evening lamp. The conversations and committees in this story are fiction.

Historical background: Taylor Cunningham, “Eden & Ruin: Monhegan’s Island Shepherd,” Spire, University of Maine, May 4, 2017.

https://umaine.edu/spire/2017/05/04/cunningham/