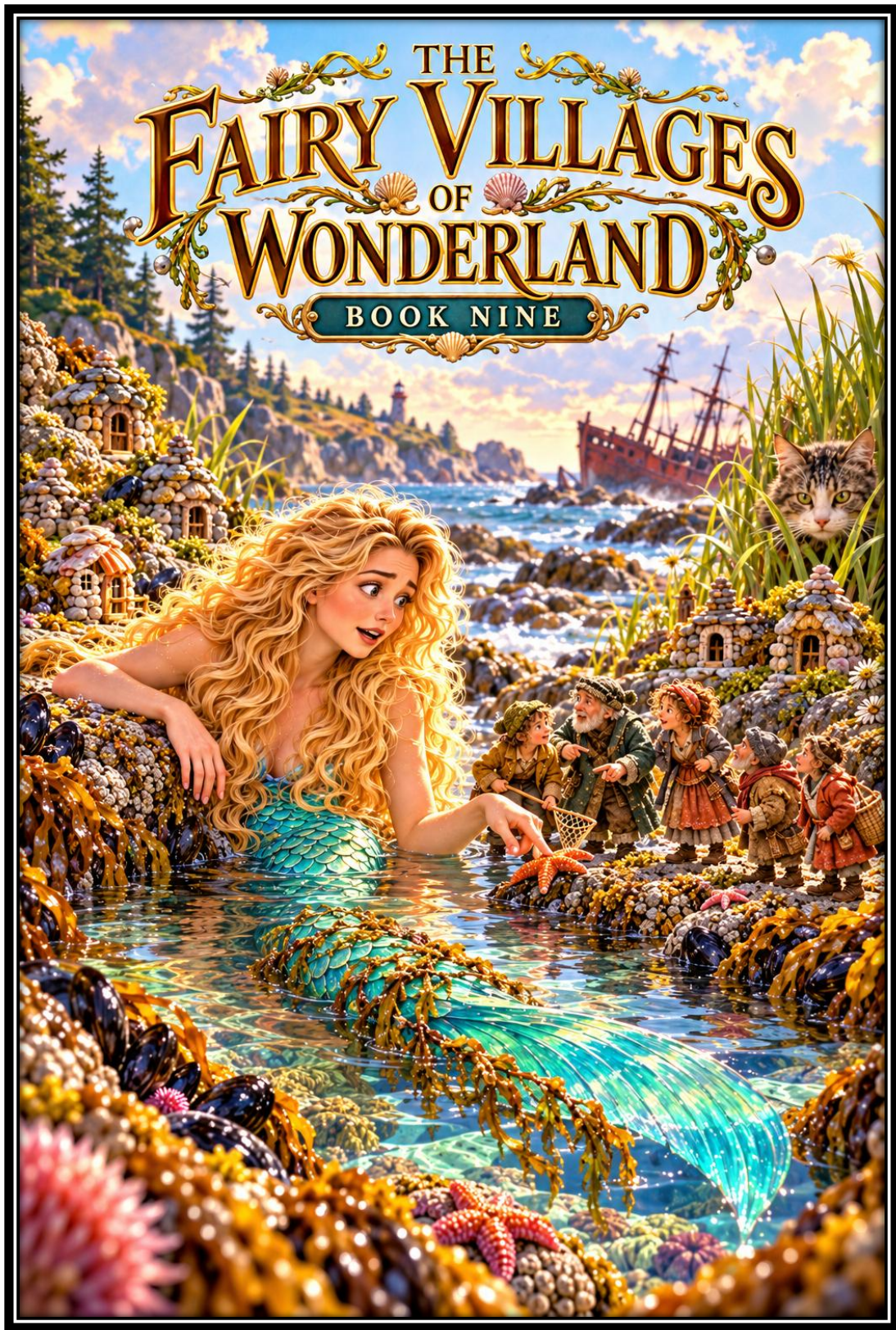




Thursday Morning

Thursday was Lumen's day to visit the Professor. She usually came ashore through a tidepool at Christmas Cove, imagined her tail becoming legs, and walked the rest of the way.

The Professor knew her well enough not to worry if she arrived a little late. Even so, this Thursday was going to require an unusually long explanation.

Lumen swam beneath a curtain of seaweed, rose into the familiar pool, and felt something tighten around her tail.

"Oh," she said.

On the rocks above her, a voice cried, "We've caught it!"

The Catch

At first Lumen saw only stones, shells, grass, and several tiny houses tucked into crevices. Then the stones seemed to move.

They were not stones. They were people—little people, no more than two inches high, wearing coats and caps made for an island wind. They had no wings, and their boots were planted firmly on the rocks. Humans could not see fairies, but Lumen could: she was magical, too.

A very small fisher held a very small rope. The other end led to the net around Lumen's tail.

“Don't pull so hard,” Lumen said.

The fisher sat down with a bump. “It talks!”



A Very Large Fish

More fairies appeared from behind the stone houses. They looked at Lumen, then at the net, then at one another.

“A fish,” said one.

“A very large fish,” said another.

“Enough fish for the whole village,” said a third.

“I’m not a fish,” Lumen explained. “My name is Lumen. I’m on my way to see a friend.”

The little fisher approached the water. “Our nets are meant for the pool. We’ve never caught anything like you.”

“I can believe that,” Lumen said. “I’ve never been caught like this before.”



The Other Village

The Christmas Cove fairies were still discussing what to do when a second group came over the rocks. They wore different colored caps and stopped a short distance away.

“News travels quickly,” Lumen said.

“Only when it shouldn’t,” muttered the little fisher.

The newcomers came from the fairy village beneath the Shipwreck. Their spokesperson, a fairy with a red scarf, stepped forward.

“We hear there’s a catch,” she said. “We’ve come for our share.”

“Your share?” answered the fisher. “You haven’t spoken to us in months.”

“We’re speaking now.”

A Question of Ownership

“Your village didn’t cast the net,” the fisher said.

“The tidepool belongs to everyone,” said the fairy in the red scarf.

“It does not!”

“It did before you put your village beside it.”

Lumen lifted a hand. “I don’t believe either village is entitled to a share of me.”

The argument paused.

“She has a point,” said a young fairy.

“She has a tail,” said someone else.

“And a name,” Lumen added. “Lumen.”

For a moment both villages considered her. Then they began arguing again.

A Little More Time

Lumen could imagine her tail becoming legs. She could stand up, step out of the net, and continue to the Professor's house.

But the little people were fascinating, and neither village had paid much attention when she tried to explain herself. She decided to wait and see what they would do.

The Professor would understand. They would still have their Thursday, even if it began later than usual.

The red-scarfed fairy was explaining the proper division of a catch when Lumen noticed something move in the grass.

Two ears appeared.

The Cat in the Grass

The ears belonged to a large island cat, crouching among the blades of grass.

Lumen could see her eyes fixed on the rocks above the pool.

“Does anyone know that cat?” she asked.

“What cat?” said the fisher.

“The one behind you.”

“We’re not falling for that,” said a fairy from the Shipwreck. “You just want us to let you go.”

“Well, yes,” Lumen said. “But that doesn’t make the cat any less real.”

The cat lowered herself, and her tail gave the smallest twitch.

An Unexpected Difficulty

Lumen drew a breath and imagined her legs. Nothing happened.

She tried again, concentrating on her feet and the feeling of standing.

Her tail gave a small splash.

“Oh,” she said.

Whether the net, the pool, or something else was responsible, she did not know. The cat was coming closer, and the fairies were still arguing.

Lumen tugged at the net with both hands. It tightened against a jagged rock below the water.

The little fisher saw her pull. “Please don’t break it!”

“I’m trying not to,” she said. “But I’d rather not be eaten.”



Splash

The cat stepped into the open. At last the fairies turned.

For an instant, no one moved.

Then Lumen slapped the water with her tail.

A great spray burst over the rocks. The cat leaped backward, landed in a shallow puddle, and stared at the tidepool in astonishment.

The fairies scattered. Some ran toward Christmas Cove; others fled toward the Shipwreck. A little fairy with a green cap slipped on the wet stone and slid toward a crack.

Lumen reached out and caught the fairy in her open hand.



The Little Fisher

The fairy lay still for a moment, staring at the enormous fingers around him.

“Are you hurt?” Lumen asked.

“No,” he said. “I don’t think so.”

She lowered her hand beside a sheltered rock. He climbed off, shook water from his cap, and looked back at her.

“You saved me.”

“I was hoping to save myself too,” Lumen said. “Could you help me with this net?”

He looked toward the grass. The cat had retreated, but she was still watching.

“My name is Pip,” he said. “I’ll try.”



A Knot Beneath the Water

Pip followed the rope to the edge of the tidepool. He could see the net caught beneath a sharp ledge, but it was too far below the surface for him to reach.

“I made that knot,” he said. “It’s a good knot.”

“It certainly is,” said Lumen.

The fairy in the red scarf appeared behind a stone. “You can’t untie it from there.”

“Then come and help,” Pip said.

“We’re not speaking.”

Lumen looked from one to the other. “You seem to be doing quite well.”

The fairy stepped closer. “My name is Tern.”

Two Sides of a Knot

Tern pointed to a loose line beside the rock. “If you pull that end, the knot will move.”

Pip pulled. Nothing happened.

“Not that way,” Tern said.

“It’s my net.”

“And I can see the knot.”

Lumen held the line steady while Pip pulled again. This time it shifted, but the rope remained trapped.

A small shadow crossed the water. All three looked up. The cat had climbed onto a higher rock.

Tern swallowed. “We need somewhere safe to work.”

“I thought you weren’t speaking,” Lumen said.

“We aren’t. We’re discussing a knot.”

The Cat's Complaint

Lumen lifted her hand and splashed lightly. The cat moved back, shook one paw, and gave her an offended look.

“I’m sorry,” Lumen said. “But they’re not your breakfast.”

The cat’s nose pointed toward the pool. She had come to investigate the smell of Lumen’s tail and had found a gathering of fairies as well.

“She’s never caught one of us,” Pip whispered.

“Let’s keep it that way,” Tern replied.

The cat sat down in the grass to consider her next move.

Trouble at the Shipwreck

A young fairy came running from the direction of the Shipwreck.

“Tern! The water is rising beneath the hull. The winter box is stuck, and the passage is filling.”

“The box?” Pip said.

Tern turned away. “It’s Shipwreck business.”

“The winter box is everybody’s business,” said Pip.

“We don’t need your help.”

The messenger looked at the cat, then at the tidepool. “We might need somebody’s.”

Lumen listened. Two villages, one approaching winter, and a box important enough to interrupt an argument. She had questions—but the messenger sounded frightened.

The Autumn Voyage

Every fall, Tern explained, the fairies left Monhegan before winter storms made their homes too cold and exposed.

They made a dangerous voyage across the sea to Provincetown. There, people who understood fairies gave them safe places to hibernate in their basements until spring.

“The route changes with the weather,” Tern said. “We keep our charts and a small beacon in the winter box.”

“Then bring it out,” said Lumen.

“It’s trapped under the wreck.”

“And the cat is between us and the path,” Pip added.

The Golden Key

Tern held up a small object on a cord. It shone yellow in the light.

“Our key,” she said.

Pip stared at it. “The gold key.”

“You said we took it,” Tern replied.

“You did take it.”

“We took it to keep it safe!”

“And forgot to tell us where.”

The two fairies faced one another. Lumen began to see that their quarrel had at least one very small, very shiny part.

“Does the key open the winter box?” she asked.

“It does,” Tern said.

“Then perhaps it should go to the box.”

The Box and the Net

Lumen tugged at her net again. “I would come with you if I could get free.”

Pip crouched by the water. Tern joined him, and together they traced the line to the place where it disappeared beneath the ledge.

“The tide is turning,” Tern said. “When it rises, the water may lift the rope away from the rock.”

“Or pull it tighter,” Pip said.

“We won’t know until we try,” Lumen replied.

A gull called from somewhere beyond the grass. The cat looked up. Lumen had an idea.

A Distraction

“Can your villages make a noise?” Lumen asked.

Pip looked offended. “Of course.”

“Together?”

He looked at Tern. Tern looked at him.

A moment later, fairies began beating tiny spoons against shells. One blew a reed whistle. Another shouted from behind a rock.

The cat turned toward the strange commotion. She padded toward the sound, paused, and peered into an empty shell.

Lumen pulled the net toward her as the water rose. Pip worked the line. Tern held the loose end.

The knot slipped free of the ledge.

Not Quite Free

The net loosened, but it still wound around Lumen's tail. Pip and Tern worked from one side while Lumen lifted the rope on the other.

At last, the last loop slid away.

"Thank you," she said.

"You could have left us to the cat," Pip replied.

"I could see you needed help."

Tern gathered the net. "And now we need help with the box."

Lumen imagined her legs again. For a moment she thought she felt a change, but her tail remained.

She looked toward the narrow channel beyond the pool. "Then I'll swim."

A Route Along the Rocks

The tide had risen enough to connect the pool with a channel between the rocks. Lumen slipped through, careful not to disturb the fairy houses above her.

Pip and Tern traveled over the rocks with the golden key. Lumen followed in the water below.

The cat watched from a patch of sun. Her fur was drying, and she seemed less interested in the fairies now that they were difficult to follow.

“She may have decided this isn’t worth another bath,” Lumen said.

Pip glanced back. “I wouldn’t count on it.”

Beneath the Shipwreck

The great rust-red hull rose above them. To Lumen it was a wreck resting among rocks; to the fairies it was a shelter, a landmark, and the roof over part of their village.

A narrow channel ran beneath one edge. Water was creeping into a dark opening where several fairies stood beside a wooden box scarcely bigger than a human hand.

The box had caught between two stones.

“It was higher yesterday,” Tern said.

“The tide and the rope have shifted it,” Lumen observed.

“Can you lift it?” Pip asked.

“Perhaps. But I don’t want to crush it.”

A Very Large Hand

Lumen put her hand into the water beside the box. The fairies stepped back as her fingers approached.

“Tell me where to push,” she said.

Tern pointed to one corner. Pip pointed to another.

They exchanged a look.

“Together?” Lumen asked.

“Together,” they said.

She nudged the box gently while the fairies pulled a line tied around it. The box moved a little, then jammed again.

A wave entered the channel. Lumen braced her hand against the rock to keep it from being swept away.

The Cat Returns

From above the wreck came a familiar meow.

The cat had found another route across the rocks. She peered down into the opening where the fairies were working.

“Shelter!” Pip called.

The fairies ran beneath the edge of the hull. Tern stayed beside the box, the golden key clutched in her hand.

“Come away,” Lumen urged.

“I can’t leave it.”

Lumen raised her hand from the water. The cat stepped back from the sudden movement, giving Pip time to reach Tern and tug her under cover.

The cat sat down again. She was proving to be a patient observer.



The Turning Tide

The water lifted the wooden box just enough for Lumen to slide a flat stone beneath one end.

“Now pull,” she said.

The fairies hauled on their line. This time the box came free and floated into Lumen’s waiting hand.

She carried it to a dry ledge. The fairies gathered around it, leaving a careful distance between themselves and the cat above.

Tern fitted the golden key into the lock. It turned.

Inside lay a rolled chart, a small lamp, and several folded scraps of paper.

Pip stared. “There are two charts.”

The Missing Map

“One for each village,” Tern said quietly. “We kept them together so neither would get lost.”

Pip unfolded one. It showed the coastline, a series of sheltered stops, and a carefully marked route toward Provincetown.

The other chart was almost the same, but it included a different starting point beneath the Shipwreck.

“Our boats have never needed to leave from the same place,” he said.

“No,” Tern answered. “But they need to meet before the crossing.”

Lumen watched the two fairies study their maps side by side.

The Argument

“Why did you take the key?” Pip asked.

“The storm last autumn was coming,” Tern said. “I was afraid the box would wash away. We moved it beneath the wreck.”

“And never told us.”

“We tried to send word. Your watchman said our messenger wasn’t welcome.”

Pip looked uncomfortable. “We’d already been arguing about the tidepool.”

“Then we argued about the key,” Tern said.

“And stopped talking.”

Neither fairy claimed that finding the box had solved everything. But now both could see where the other had been standing.

A Meeting, Not a Feast

The fairies carried the charts to a broad, flat rock between the villages. This time they gathered to discuss the voyage.

Lumen remained in the channel. No one suggested dividing her.

“We have two departure places,” Tern said. “We can meet at the sheltered point before crossing.”

“The Christmas Cove boats need repairs,” Pip admitted.

“We have spare thread,” someone from the Shipwreck offered.

“And we have a good needle,” said Pip.

The discussion grew noisy. Lumen could not tell whether they were agreeing, arguing, or both.



The Problem of the Boat

A fairy brought out a tiny boat made from bark and driftwood. One side had split.

Lumen steadied it with a fingertip while Pip and Tern examined the damage.

A Shipwreck fairy brought thread; a Christmas Cove fairy brought the needle.

“You could stitch that seam,” Tern suggested.

Pip considered it. “And seal the outside before we leave.”

They worked together while Lumen held the boat still. By the time they finished, it looked small and sturdy.

“Will it reach Provincetown?” Lumen asked.

“We’ll test it first,” Pip said. “It has a long way to go.”



A Cat and a Key

The cat had settled in the grass, watching the activity. Lumen kept an eye on her while the fairies returned the charts to the box.

“Who keeps the key now?” Pip asked.

Tern looked at the golden key in her palm. Then she placed it on the flat rock between them.

“Perhaps both villages should know where it is.”

They agreed to find a safe place and tell each other. The key belonged to both villages, just like the voyage they would make together. It was a modest arrangement, but no one shouted.

The cat stretched, yawned, and closed her eyes. Lumen suspected the meeting had become less interesting than the splash.



The Key Between the Villages

Legs and a Promise

Lumen tried once more to imagine her legs. This time, as the tide eased around her, her tail changed.

She stood carefully in the shallow water.

“Why now?” Pip asked.

“I don’t know,” Lumen said. “The net is gone, the tide has changed, and a few other things have changed as well. Perhaps one of them helped.”

“Perhaps all of them,” Tern said.

Lumen stepped onto the rocks. Both villages had boats to repair and a voyage to plan; their quarrel had not vanished in an afternoon.

“Will you come back?” Pip asked.

“I’d like to see your boats before you sail.”

Still Thursday

As Lumen prepared to leave, Pip brought her a tiny shell.

“For saving me,” he said.

Tern added a short piece of golden thread. “And for helping us find the box.”

Lumen held both carefully in her palm. “Thank you. Now I must go and see my friend.”

“Will he believe you?” Pip asked.

“He may have a few questions.”

She looked toward the grass. The cat was asleep, although one ear moved when the fairies spoke.

“Keep watching,” Lumen told them.

“We will,” said Tern. “And we’ll watch for each other too.”



A Thursday Adventure

By the time Lumen reached the Professor's door, the sun was lower and her Thursday visit was very late.

He opened the door. "I wondered where you were."

"I was caught in a net by two-inch fairies, nearly divided between two villages, watched by a cat, and helped recover a golden key and a winter box."

The Professor considered her carefully.

"Would you like some tea before we begin?"

Lumen smiled. "Yes, please. It's quite a long story."

From the kitchen came a pop. The toaster offered a note:

FISH FOR TWO?

"Not today," Lumen said.

And at Christmas Cove, two villages began preparing for the voyage ahead.

When Autumn Came

As the weeks passed, Lumen returned to Christmas Cove. The two villages were still capable of a good argument, but now they also shared thread, patched sails, and checked their boats together.

At last the morning came to leave for Provincetown. Fairies from Christmas Cove and the Shipwreck gathered at the sheltered point, carrying blankets, provisions, and the precious winter charts.

Pip waved from a little bark boat. Tern held the golden key on a cord around her neck. “We’ll keep the box where everyone can find it,” she called.

Lumen floated nearby, her blue-green tail moving in the water. “I’ll see you safely away,” she promised.



Preparing the Little Fleet

A Wave Out of Nowhere

The little fleet sailed beyond the rocks. For a while, the boats bobbed along together, their tiny sails bright against the sea.

Then the wind shifted. A steep wave lifted the boats, tipped one over, and scattered the others. Four fairies tumbled into the cold water: Pip, Tern, and two others. Another boat drifted toward the next rising swell.

Lumen scooped Pip into her hand and set him on a floating piece of bark. Farther away, Tern clung to the winter box. Beyond her, two more fairies struggled between the waves.

“I can’t reach them all in time,” Lumen said. Then she remembered she did not have to try alone.

Lumen Calls Her Friends

She slipped beneath the surface and called through the water. Her voice traveled beyond the scattered boats, out to friends who knew the sea as well as she did.

A seal appeared first. Then another. Dolphins rose nearby, and more friends came swimming toward the little fleet.

“Pip is out of the water, but three fairies are still in it,” Lumen told them.

“They’re very small. Please be gentle.”

The rescue fleet spread out. Lumen swam toward Tern, while a seal slipped beneath a fairy and lifted her safely onto its back. A dolphin nudged a drifting boat toward calmer water.



Lumen's Rescue Fleet

Every Boat and Every Fairy

Pip climbed from his piece of bark into the nearest boat. A Christmas Cove sailor caught the rope of a drifting Shipwreck boat, and a Shipwreck crew helped steady a boat from the Cove.

Lumen brought Tern and the winter box to a waiting boat. Pip counted the fairies who had fallen in. Tern counted with him.

“Pip, me, and the fairy on the seal,” she said. “That’s three. One is still missing.”

Before Lumen could dive, the second seal surfaced beside them. On its back sat a very wet fairy, holding on to a strand of seaweed and looking more surprised than frightened.

“That’s four,” Pip said. Then he and Tern checked every boat and counted everyone once more. Every fairy was safe.

A Fleet of Friends

The sea friends stayed close while the fairies righted their boats and gathered their belongings. Lumen helped secure the winter box, and Tern tucked the golden key inside her coat.

One fairy looked out at the seals, the dolphins, and the other creatures waiting around the little fleet. “Are they all your friends?”

“Every one of them,” Lumen said.

Pip looked at the sea friends, then at Lumen. “You really were the catch of a lifetime.”

Lumen laughed. “I was beginning to think so myself.”

The Way to Provincetown

The sea friends accompanied the tiny boats toward Provincetown. When the water grew rough, they helped the fleet find a sheltered course; when the fairies grew tired, they stayed nearby.

At last the boats reached the harbor. In the basements where the fairies spent the winter, there would be room for both villages, their blankets, and their carefully saved charts.

At the shore, Pip and Tern stood together to wave goodbye. “We’ll see you in the spring,” Pip called.

“And we’ll bring the box back together,” Tern added.

Lumen waved until the tiny figures disappeared. Then she turned toward her friends, her tail flashing blue and green beneath the water. There were many ways to find your way home, she thought, and sometimes it took a whole fleet.

Epilogue Another Thursday

On her next Thursday visit, Lumen arrived at the Professor's door with a little salt in her hair and a very long story to tell.

"Did the fairies reach Provincetown?" he asked as he poured the tea.

"They did. But their boats were scattered by a wave, and I couldn't reach everyone by myself."

The Professor set down the teapot. "What did you do?"

"I called my friends. Seals, dolphins, and others came to help. They carried fairies, steadied boats, and stayed with us until everyone was safe."

"A whole navy?" the Professor asked.

"A whole navy," Lumen said. "And the fairies helped one another too—even the ones who had been arguing."

The Professor smiled. "That sounds like a voyage worth remembering."

From the kitchen came a pop. A small note rose from the toaster:

ALL HANDS ON DECK!

The Professor looked at Lumen. "Does your navy do dishes?"

"I think," she said, "that duty belongs to the Professor."

He picked up the dishcloth. Lumen settled in with her tea, and this time their Thursday had room for the whole story.



Exploring Wonderland continues...