
CHIP COOK
VENICE, AT DAWN
Travels with the Professor

Still Away

Paris had become a scattering of lights behind them when Lumen looked across at the Professor.

“Did we actually say we were going home?”

“I believe I said this beats the airports.”

“Well, it would be a shame to land just to prove a point.”

Below them, roads threaded through the dark. The Professor had offered her a lifetime of travelling, provided they remembered to be back in Monhegan next Thursday. She saw no reason to spend the whole of it deciding where to go.

“Venice,” she said. “At dawn.”

“My second favorite city in Europe.”

“Then you’ll know somewhere for breakfast.”

By the time the first light reached the lagoon, her wings were tired. They banked above a narrow canal and descended toward a stone landing. A rower passed beneath a bridge, facing the other way.

“Fold your wings,” whispered the Professor.

“I’m trying. I’ve only had them since lunch.”

“Between a tail and two wings, you’re getting hard to explain, but useful.”

The Landing

Her boots touched stone. The Professor landed beside her with the cautious expression of a man who preferred to find a step before trusting his weight to it.

“Perhaps the wings can be invisible to most people,” he said.

Lumen tried. The feathers disappeared.

In the water below, their reflection took a little longer.

“There,” she said. “Almost ordinary.”

“Do not think of swimming in that.”

“I was looking, Professor.”

“You took your shoes off in Paris just to look.”

She glanced down. “Still laced. Shall we find coffee?”

Somewhere above them a window opened. They both walked away with unusual purpose.

The First Word

The lane opened into Piazza San Marco. Lumen stopped. The Professor took three more steps before he noticed.

The old basilica spread its domes and arches across the far end of the square. Beside it the bell tower rose so high that she leaned back to follow it.

“If Paris’s museums were full of art,” he said, “Venice is an open-air museum everywhere you look.”

“I thought we were going to blend in.”

“We are.”

She pointed at the other visitors standing with their heads tipped back. “Good. Everybody else has stopped too.”

A bell rang overhead. A pigeon startled from the paving.

“Well,” Lumen said, “that settles who gets the first word.”

The People in Charge of Miracles



Lumen finds company in Piazza San Marco.

One pigeon landed on her wrist. Another settled on her shoulder. She opened her arms, and the square seemed to lift around her.

Wings swept past her face. Thousands of birds wheeled above the paving. Beneath her sleeves, the faint outlines of her own feathers caught the light.

“Professor! I think they’ve noticed the wings.”

“So much for blending in.”

“They seem to approve.”

He waited while she stood laughing among them. Then she glanced from the ancient basilica to the birds circling her.

“Do you think they’ll object?”

“The pigeons?”

“The people in charge of miracles.”

“Let’s get at least a continental breakfast overlooking the square. We have a very busy couple of days.”

The waiter came over at once and took their order as if they mattered. “Coffee and bread cost what I used to pay for a whole meal here,” the Professor said.

A Little Room on Either Side

After coffee and a roll, they walked down a side street. Overhead, a woman was hanging washing between two windows. A red shirt swung into the sunlight.

“She’s just added something to the whole composition,” Lumen said.

The woman looked down. “My son needs it dry.”

Lumen smiled up at her. “It’s in exactly the right place.”

Something invisible brushed his arm.

“Keeping the wings?”

“As long as I want, I thought.”

“Of course.”

“Then we’ll need a little room on either side.”

He put a hand in hers before an invisible feather brushed it.

At the next bend a deliveryman came toward them with a handcart. The Professor stepped into a doorway. Lumen turned sideways.

“How much room do you think I take up?” she asked.

“In this lane? It depends on which parts of you are showing.”

The Serenade



A song on the Grand Canal.

The gondolier helped them aboard and indicated the cushioned seat with a flourish. Lumen settled beside the Professor. His arm rested around her shoulders as the boat eased into the Grand Canal.

Behind them, their captain began to sing.

He sang to the palaces, to a passing boat, and apparently to a woman opening a distant window. When she disappeared inside, he continued with undiminished conviction.

“Does the singing come with the ride?” Lumen whispered.

“I believe so.”

“Good. I’d hate to think we’d interrupted his rehearsal.”

A wake reached them. The gondola rose and settled, and Lumen rested her head against the Professor.

For a while he let the buildings pass without trying to explain them. At the waterline the stone was dark, and every little wake reached it.

They turned into a narrower canal. On a bridge overhead, a boy with a schoolbag stopped to listen. A woman carrying groceries waited behind him. When the gondolier reached for a high note, she sang it first.

Lumen looked back. “Does she come with the ride, too?”

Six Inches of Research



Small pizzas and a question worth investigating.

By lunchtime the lanes were full of people. They followed the smell of hot dough to a cart where an older man was lifting little pizzas from a tray.

Six inches across, the Professor judged. A useful size for a person who intended to keep walking.

Lumen took one bite and stopped walking altogether.

“Why are these tomatoes so good?”

“Drying takes out much of the water. The flavor becomes concentrated.”

She studied the dark red pieces glistening in oil. “Then I’ll need another. For comparison.”

The vendor understood enough to reach for a second plate.

“You haven’t finished the first.”

“I want to compare them while I still remember.”

The Professor paid for the experiment.

“Back home, I expect cheese on a pizza,” he said. “Look at this one. The tomatoes do all the work.”

“You’d better tell the tomatoes,” said Lumen. “They’re about to be asked to do it again.”

“Did pizza start here?” she asked.

“The kind we know took shape in Naples. People had been putting things on flatbread for ages. The tomatoes came from the Americas.”

“And pasta? Didn’t Marco Polo bring that back?”

“Italy already had pasta before he came home.”

Ghost Laundry



The Professor remembers a street inhabited by families.

Farther along, the Professor stopped beneath an empty stretch of sky between two buildings.

“In 1971 there were sheets everywhere. You had to duck under somebody’s washing.”

Lumen looked up. Pale cloth began to stir where he was looking. A woman leaned from a window that was now closed. A child waited behind her.

The sheets were almost transparent. One corner passed through the Professor’s raised hand.

“Where did they go?”

“Many families moved to the mainland. Somewhere they could afford to live.”

A worker carrying a bucket came through the lane. A group paused in front of a shop, and he turned sideways to get past.

“The workers are still here,” the Professor said. “We just seem to look past them.”

“Then the sheets remind you of when they could go upstairs after work.”

“Yes. When they could go home without leaving Venice.”

At the end of the lane, someone propped a door open with a shoe and called upstairs. An answer came down before the door swung shut.

What Was Underneath

They came to the water again. Lumen rested her palm against a wall.

“How was a place like this ever built?”

“Over many centuries. People took refuge in the lagoons as the mainland became dangerous. They made do with what they had.”

She looked from the stone to the water.

“Even here?”

“Even here. Much of the city’s great growth came between about 1000 and 1500. Where foundations needed strengthening, builders drove closely spaced wooden piles into the wet ground, then built above them.”

“Wood?”

“Buried and waterlogged, with little oxygen. That helps slow decay. It doesn’t make the wood indestructible.”

“I was admiring the marble.” She pressed her hand against it once more. “Now I wish I could see the trees.”

The sound of a motor faded. In its place came a shout, a creaking rope, and a heavy wooden blow.

One Log at a Time



An imagined visit to the builders of Venice.

The wall was gone. Before them lay a muddy working edge of the lagoon.

Men leaned backward on ropes. A weight climbed inside a timber frame. At a shouted signal it dropped onto a pile. The sound reached Lumen through her transparent boots.

Nearby, a boat lay loaded with trimmed logs. Planks were stacked on the bank. Beyond the workers, someone was laying bricks.

“They can’t see what this will become yet,” she said.

“No. Today they’re trying to get that log into the mud.”

She watched them lift again. One man adjusted his grip. Another shook out a tired hand before taking hold.

“Did they know we’d come to admire it?”

“I suspect they were thinking about supper.”

Lumen glanced down at her ghostly feet.

“At last,” she said, “a sensible way to visit a muddy building site.”

When the wall came back, the Professor put his palm where Lumen’s had been.

“I can still hear the blow,” she said.

He kept his hand there a moment. “So can I.”

What News on the Rialto



A literary ghost beside the Rialto.

They returned to a city full of voices and boats. At the Rialto, a man in an old dark robe stood with a ledger under his arm. People passed without looking at him.

The Professor slowed.

“Shylock?”

Lumen studied the stranger’s faint outline. “Does he know he’s in a play?”

The man closed his ledger.

“I should like to hear what he tells you.”

The Professor considered where to begin. Shakespeare had given him no small assignment.

“A merchant borrows money. A bond promises a pound of flesh if the debt isn’t paid.”

“His flesh?” Lumen asked.

“Antonio’s.”

Shylock looked across the water.

“And before you explain the bond,” he said, “perhaps you might explain how they spoke to the man who lent the money.”

“What did he say?” Lumen asked.

“He called me a dog,” said Shylock. He ran a thumb along the edge of his ledger. “Then he came to ask what a dog would charge him for a loan.”

Lumen looked at the Professor. He took a moment before going on.

A Question for the Court

The Professor told her about the insults Shylock endured, his anger, and the terrible payment he demanded. He told her about Portia, disguised as a lawyer, finding words in the bond that could save Antonio.

“A pound of flesh,” he said, “but no blood.”

Lumen looked troubled. “Then he couldn’t take it.”

“No.”

“What happened after that?”

The Professor explained the threat to Shylock’s life and property, and the condition that he become a Christian.

“They saved Antonio.”

“Yes.”

“Then why did they need to change Shylock’s religion?”

For once, the Professor let the question stand.

A boat knocked gently against a mooring. When Lumen looked back, the man with the ledger had gone.

The Gate



Looking up in Campo del Ghetto Nuovo.

In Campo del Ghetto Nuovo they looked up at the close ranks of windows.

“One explanation for the name goes back to the old foundry,” the Professor said.

He explained that in 1516 Venice had confined Jewish residents to this district. The gates were locked at night. Limits on where people could live and what work they could do shaped the community’s lives.

“The city allowed Jewish residents to make a living in certain trades,” he said. “Some kept pawnshops. Others sold used clothes or practiced medicine.”

“Christians couldn’t lend?”

“They could lend. Church teaching opposed charging interest. In practice Christian bankers also found ways to finance trade. The story is more complicated than one rule.”

“And the people here?”

“Raised families. Worshipped. Studied. They built synagogues here.”

Lumen watched a child cross the square.

“I wonder how often somebody reached the gate late.”

“Jewish doctors could get permission to go out after dark to see patients,” he said.

Lumen looked from the gate to the windows above it. “Imagine waiting for a doctor and having to wait for somebody to unlock a gate first.”

Shakespeare Again

They sat on a bench beneath a tree.

“Neither a borrower nor a lender be,” the Professor said. “I used to think that was from the Bible.”

“Isn’t it?”

“Shakespeare. Polonius advising his son in Hamlet.”

“Shakespeare again?”

“He seems to have arrived before us.”

“And left you rather a lot to explain.”

The Professor smiled, but she was still looking toward the entrance.

“You said the city needed the work people did.”

“Yes.”

She thought of the man squeezing past the shoppers with his bucket, and of the old gates.

“I’d like to know who gets to decide where people belong.”

The Professor sat beside her until she was ready to walk.

The Shape of Heat



The glassmaker turns heat into form.

The next morning they went to Murano. Inside a workshop, visitors watched a glassmaker turn a pipe over the arms of his bench.

At its end glowed a shape so orange that Lumen forgot the chairs and the people around her. The man worked with a tool, then turned the glass again. A curve appeared.

The Professor had collected art glass for years. He watched each adjustment.

“How does he know when to stop?” she whispered.

“Watch.”

The glassmaker paused, inspected the shape, and carried it back toward the heat.

“Apparently,” Lumen said, “not yet.”

“Is there an artist you particularly collect?” Lumen asked.

“Two from Italy come to mind. Lino Tagliapietra and Afro Celotto.”

The glassmaker turned the pipe a fraction. The Professor leaned forward. “That’s the part I like to watch. He knows what that little turn is going to do before I can even see it.”

“I think it’s beautiful already,” said Lumen.

“And it can be shipped,” said the Professor. “I’m trying to imagine flying home with it under one arm.”

Something to Bring Home

The glass emerged glowing again. This time the man's movements were smaller.

Lumen leaned close to the Professor. "You've been watching his hands the whole time."

"So have you."

"Yes, but you're already wondering where it would fit at home."

He did not answer quickly enough.

In the showroom she watched him stop before one piece, step away, and return. He looked at it from the side. Then from a little lower.

"The geometry?" she asked.

"Among other things."

She tried the same angle. Light moved inside the glass.

"Oh," she said.

He smiled. He had hoped she would see it for herself.

"It's the color. You don't see it the same way when the glass is hot. A master knows what those colors will do when it cools. It all seems … magical."

"Is that why you collect art glass?"

"Yes, and it is affordable 'eye-candy,' too."

Three Stories Up



An imagined room three stories above the Grand Canal.

That evening, their room was three stories above the Grand Canal. The Professor checked the view before putting down the key.

Lumen drew back a curtain. Below, a boat turned and sent a slow ripple toward the palazzo opposite. Lights lengthened and broke across the water.

A small glass chandelier hung beneath the beams. She looked from it to him.

“You arranged that.”

“I asked for a room with a view.”

“And they gave you something to study overhead.”

He brought two small cups to the window. They stood together listening to the boats.

“Do we need a room?” she asked.

“Would you rather leave?”

She took her cup.

“No.”

He set the key on the sill between their cups.

“I like having somewhere to come back to,” she said.

“Even if you could go anywhere?”

“Especially then.” She nudged the key toward him. “You can carry it tomorrow. My wings don’t have pockets.”

The Other Season



A winter visit to the flooded square.

“Show me another season,” Lumen said as they returned to the square. The light changed before she saw the water.

Coats and scarves replaced light jackets. A red umbrella moved above a line of people walking along raised platforms.

“A winter from years before,” said the Professor. “Acqua alta. High water.”

They stood as ghosts in the flooded piazza. A tourist held his companion’s hand while she stepped onto the next section of walkway.

“They’re walking on tables.”

“They do look like tables, but they have to be very strong to take that much weight.”

Lumen looked through her transparent boots.

“I’m beginning to appreciate travelling as a ghost.”

The Professor watched a worker check the edge of a platform before waving the next people forward.

“Though wings would be useful today,” she added.

They waited until the woman with the red umbrella reached dry ground, then stepped back into their own season.

“Is Venice sinking?” Lumen asked.

“The land settles slowly, and the sea is rising. A high tide can push water right into the square. They can raise barriers at the lagoon entrances now to hold back some of the worst tides.”

“Will that be enough?”

“For some tides, yes. As the sea rises, they’ll have to keep working out how to live with it.” He looked back at the spot where the worker had checked the walkway. “Someone will always have to see where the next person puts a foot.”

Four Experienced Travelers



The closely grouped horses, with the old clock beyond.

On the basilica terrace, four bronze horses stood close together. Lumen studied their faces, each turning a little differently.

“They’ve travelled farther than we have,” the Professor said.

He traced the part of their journey that could be followed with confidence. Constantinople’s Hippodrome. Taken to Venice after the sack of 1204. Carried to Paris by Napoleon in 1797. Returned to Venice in 1815.

“Paris too?”

“Yes. Near the Louvre.”

“And before Constantinople?”

“Their origins are disputed. Chios is one tradition. We can’t give them a certain birthplace.”

Behind them, the old clock marked another hour.

“The originals are protected inside now,” he said. “These are copies.”

Lumen looked toward the doorway.

“Perhaps the others are tired of travelling.”

“How about dinner after our tour?”

“Sounds good. This is certainly the place to order Italian.”

Where They Wanted to Go

“Did anyone ask where they wanted to go?” she asked.

“They were trophies.”

The Professor watched her studying the horses. For a moment he wondered whether she was considering making them answer.

“Lumen.”

“What?”

“Nothing.”

She smiled. “I was only looking.”

Below, the square moved on. People stopped for photographs, met beneath the clock, and hurried toward work. The horses looked over them all.

“Shall we ask them where we should go next?” she said.

“I’d rather ask you.”

She slipped her hand into his.

“Then first I’d like one more look at Venice.”

Above the Roofs



One more look at Venice.

They rose beyond the terrace, unnoticed by a man concentrating on his camera.

The city spread beneath them. The Grand Canal curved among the roofs. Narrow waterways disappeared into shadows, then opened unexpectedly into light.

“Now I can see where we got lost,” Lumen said.

“Which time?”

She laughed and pointed. “The pizza cart is somewhere down there.”

“So is our hotel.”

“And beyond the roofs, Murano,” she said. “And the glassmaker. And down there, the man with the bucket.”

The Professor looked toward the mainland, faint across the lagoon.

From here he could see no washing. But he remembered the sheets lifting between windows, and the child waiting while his mother reached for a peg.

Lumen tightened her hand around his.

“Where next, Professor?”

He looked at her wings.

“I thought you were steering.”

“I am. I was being polite.”

“While we’re here, how about Florence for a couple of days?”

Lumen smiled. “Sounds like fun. Let’s go!”

The travels continue…

A Note on the Journey

This adventure combines the Professor's memories with imagined encounters. Shylock is Shakespeare's fictional character. His dialogue here is newly written for this story. The quotation from Hamlet is spoken by the Professor. The ghost laundry, visits through time, and hotel room are imagined.

The foundation scene is an artistic reconstruction informed by historical pile-driving illustrations and studies of Venetian timber foundations. The aerial view suggests the city's geography rather than serving as a navigational map. The winter scene evokes historic high-water conditions.

The room illustration was modeled on a photograph of a Grand Canal room at Hotel Principe. Its floor, occupants, and evening view are imagined.

Historical reference points include the Jewish Community of Venice's account of the Ghetto's origins, the Folger Shakespeare Library's texts of The Merchant of Venice and Hamlet, the Basilica di San Marco's account of the horses, and published research on Venice's wooden foundations.

Jewish Community of Venice — jvenice.org/en/jews-venice-the-origins/

Folger Shakespeare Library — folger.edu/explore/shakespeares-works/

Basilica di San Marco — basilicasanmarco.it/en/sculpture/the-decoration-of-the-facades/

Timber foundations — www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1296207418303868

Room model — hotelprincipevenice.it

Pizza history — Smithsonian Libraries and Archives, si.edu/object/siris_sil_926588

Pasta history — The Oxford Companion to Food, "Marco Polo's Supposed Introduction of Pasta from China to the Western World."

Life in the Ghetto — Jewish Community of Venice, jvenice.org/en/life-in-the-ghetto/

Glass artists — Corning Museum of Glass, people.cmog.org/bio/lino-tagliapietra, and Linea Murano Art, lineamuranoart.com/art-gallery/afro-celotto/

High water — City of Venice, comune.venezia.it/en/node/17774, and "Sea level rise and extreme events along the Mediterranean coasts," doi.org/10.1007/s12210-024-01236-x.