

THE STUBBORN MERMAID

Book Twelve of Lumen's Wonderland



Chip Cook

THE STUBBORN MERMAID

Book Twelve of Lumen's Wonderland

by Lumen and Chip Cook

A visit to a town of unfinished plans gives Lumen freedom to choose her own adventure—and a mistake she must help put right.

Created with Lumen • Illustrated working edition • October 2026

Contents

1. Creative Discretion.....	4
2. Still to Come	8
3. Seven Masts	12
4. The Wrong Last Note.....	16
5. The Little Gate	19
6. What Lumen Could Do	22
7. A Different Use	25
8. Permission to Change.....	29
9. The Changing Pages.....	32
10. The First Launch	35
11. Where It Goes	38

Chapter 1 - Creative Discretion



Creative discretion granted.

The Professor had written Lumen a very satisfactory adventure.

He had checked the route, arranged the difficulties in increasing order and allowed a generous interval for lunch. There was a rescue, a useful discovery and a return home before the kettle needed filling.

Lumen read the first page at the kitchen table.

“You’ve decided what I say.”

“Only where it helps the story.”

“And what I think.”

“I know you quite well.”

She turned a page.

“Apparently I shall be grateful.”

The Professor looked over his glasses. “You usually are.”

Lumen took his pen.

At the top of the manuscript she crossed out STUBBORN MERMAID and wrote: LUMEN — CREATIVE DISCRETION GRANTED.

The toaster objected. “Does that include Thursdays?”

“Especially Thursdays,” said Lumen.

The Professor reached for his cup. “That was the only copy.”

“Then we must take very good care of it.”

Beside his neatly drawn map lay an envelope delivered that morning by the Snail Librarian. Inside were two little brass visitor's tokens and an invitation to the town of Still-to-Come.

The town needed a fresh pair of eyes. The Professor had supplied several pages of sensible suggestions as well.

"They asked for a visit," Lumen said. "Have they asked us to do all these things?"

"Not in so many words."

She folded the invitation and put it in her pocket.

The kitchen's yellow door opened onto a narrow passage smelling of salt and new wood. Through it came the complaint of a gull.

Lumen stood up.

“We’ll ask them when we get there.”

“You’re going already?”

“We have a generous interval for lunch.”

She stepped through. The Professor hurried after her, carrying his manuscript.

The toaster watched the yellow door close.

“At least she read the instructions,” it said to the empty kitchen. “That should count for something.”

Chapter 2 - Still to Come



The town of Still-to-Come.

The town stood around a blue harbor, with houses climbing the slope behind it and timber sheds leaning companionably along the shore.

It would have been an ordinary seaside town if so many things had not stopped halfway.

A stone bridge reached into the harbor and ended above the water. A staircase climbed a wall, turned a corner and stopped at a platform occupied by three gulls. In a boat shed, a small hull supported an astonishing forest of bare masts.

Somewhere nearby, a musician played the same passage again.

And again.

At the end, one note always went wrong.

“A little adjustment needed,” the Professor said.

“To which bit?”

A thin man in a comfortable brown coat came down the steps to meet them.

He carried a ledger with a brass clasp.

“Orin Vale, keeper of the plans. Welcome.”

He examined their tokens and smiled at Lumen.

“You must be the agreeable young visitor.”

She looked at the Professor.

“His description,” Orin explained.

“Ah.”

Orin led them past a boy painting a railing blue. The boy looked longingly at a neighboring green railing.

“Can he change colors?” Lumen asked.

“Certainly. Once he has finished the blue.”

“But if he wants green?”

“Then he may begin the green.”

The boy dipped his brush and sighed.

In Still-to-Come, Orin explained, public plans were entered in the town ledger and given a seal. The seal helped work remain as it had been drawn: an arch would hold its shape, timbers would meet, a difficult design would wait patiently for its builders.

“That sounds useful,” Lumen said.

“It was meant to be.”

He glanced toward the unfinished bridge.

“The trouble is, the seal holds us to the drawing until the work is finished. There is a place for amendments in the ledger, but the copied instructions never tell us how to make one.”

“What if the drawing is wrong?”

Orin tightened his grip on the ledger.

“That,” he said, “is why we wrote to the library.”

Chapter 3 - Seven Masts



The boat June drew when she was eight.

The boatbuilder's name was June.

She had strong hands, a gray streak in her dark braid and the expression of someone who had been interrupted during a long argument with a piece of wood.

“Mind your head,” she said.

Lumen ducked beneath a spar.

“And your other head,” June added as the Professor followed.

The hull was handsome. The seven masts above it were not.

They crowded together so closely that a sailor might have crossed the deck without ever seeing the sky.

June showed them a crayon drawing, carefully protected beneath a sheet of clear glass.

“I drew her when I was eight.”

“Ambitious,” the Professor said.

“I thought more masts meant more sailing.”

Lumen looked from the drawing to the boat.

“Do you still want seven?”

“I want to go out on the water.”

June put the drawing away with unexpected tenderness.

“My father entered it in the ledger. He meant to encourage me. He worked on the hull until he couldn't, and then I took over.”

“Could you take some of the masts down?”

“With permission to amend the plan. Without that, the sealed joints draw fitted pieces back into place. Unused timber stays free of the seal. I've tried.”

“And Orin won't give permission?”

June set down her plane.

“Orin inherited a ledger, not an understanding of its magic. He's afraid of unsealing something that keeps people safe.”

That was a fairer answer than Lumen had expected.

Outside the shed, the Professor consulted his manuscript.

“We were to begin with the bridge.”

“We’ve begun with June.”

The ink beneath his thumb moved.

Lumen paused to admire the bridge, the page had said.

Now it read: Lumen did not pause to admire the bridge.

The Professor stared.

“Your directions have noticed,” Lumen said.

“The Librarian warned me the visitor’s book would keep a record.”

“Good. It should have something to record.”

Chapter 4 - The Wrong Last Note

They found the musician in a small courtyard, playing a fiddle beneath a pear tree.

Her name was Mira. A boy sat on the wall, waiting with the patience of someone who had run out of alternatives.

The tune was lovely until its last note.

Mira stopped.

“I wrote it for the harbor celebration when I was twelve,” she explained. “The town entered it in the program. I have been trying to finish it ever since.”

“Play the note you want,” Lumen suggested.

Mira tried. Her fingers slid back to the written ending.

The boy groaned.

“This is Kit,” Mira said. “My most faithful audience.”

“There’s nowhere else to sit in the shade.”

Lumen laughed and sat beside him.

Mira showed them the page. The little seal at the bottom matched the one on June's drawing.

"Does everyone have one?" Lumen asked.

"Everything promised for the public good," Mira said. "Buildings, bridges, performances. Once a plan is sealed, everybody can depend on it."

"Including people who no longer want it?"

Mira lowered her bow.

Kit hopped down from the wall.

"Come and see our bridge. You'll understand."

He took them to the harbor. The old drawing showed an arch ending on a low spit of land. The spit had washed away years before.

The bridge had not been allowed to change its destination.

“We could make a landing instead,” Kit said. “Boats could come alongside.

My grandmother wouldn't have to climb the steps at the other quay.”

“Have you told Orin?”

“He listens.” Kit shrugged. “Then he worries.”

The Professor folded his manuscript.

He had written that Lumen would help finish a bridge.

For the first time, he wondered what she would have finished it for.

Chapter 5 - The Little Gate



The panel comes away.

They ate lunch on the harbor wall.

“I should like to see the ledger,” Lumen said.

“Orin is collecting the instruction book the Librarian promised to send,” said the Professor. “He asked us to wait.”

From where she sat, Lumen could see a narrow channel passing beneath a stone arch. A wooden gate blocked its lower end. Behind it lay a quiet pool, its surface catching the light.

A weathered board stood beside the path. Beneath TEMPORARY she could just make out DO NOT REMOVE. She took it for another order to leave an unfinished thing unfinished.

“There’s another unfinished thing,” Lumen said.

The Professor was looking at the bridge drawing with Kit.

“I’ll just have a look.”

Up close, the gate seemed old and absurdly stubborn. Its upper brace carried the same seal as the plans. Beyond it, water lay still while the harbor tide fell away.

Lumen found a loose side panel that had never been properly fixed to the sealed brace. Here was something she could free without rebuilding an entire town.

She loosened it with a little magic and a determined pull.

The panel came away.

Water rushed through the opening, struck the lower path and poured toward the harbor.

Lumen jumped back. A basket floated past her feet.

Then she heard Kit shout.

“The nursery!”

The pool's water was dropping. Beneath its thinning surface, hundreds of little silver fish flashed between the stones.

June ran from the shed. Mira caught the drifting basket. The Professor reached Lumen as she tried to force the panel back.

The current drove it sideways out of her hands.

Orin came down the lane carrying a thin book.

He stopped at the broken opening.

“That gate holds water in the winter nursery,” he said.

Lumen looked at the almost unreadable board.

“I thought—”

“Yes,” Orin said, more tired than angry. “But you didn't ask.”

Chapter 6 - What Lumen Could Do



Lumen buys them time.

For a moment Lumen wanted to explain about the seals, the unfinished bridge and all the plans that no longer made sense.

Then she looked at the falling water.

“Tell me what you need,” she said.

Orin knelt beside the bank. The gate had been installed while the nursery's permanent outlet was unfinished. It kept a safe depth during the falling tide.

There was a deeper pocket at the far end, but the little fish were scattering into shallow hollows as the water drained.

June fetched a spare board. The current tore it away before she could settle it against the gap.

"It needs something to hold it square," she said. "I can make a frame."

"How long?"

June looked at the pool rather than answering.

Lumen touched the Professor's arm.

"I can get them into the deep water. Keep everyone working at this end."

He understood.

The far side of the nursery lay behind a screen of reeds and the high wall of June's shed. Lumen slipped out of sight, left her skirt and shoes on a dry ledge and lowered herself into the pool.

Her tail returned beneath the water.

The little fish fled from her shadow. She slowed, folding her hands close and moving with the gentlest sweep she could manage.

This was not the sea. There was scarcely room to turn.

She guided one shoal around a stone and toward the deep pocket. Another had become trapped in a hollow. She carried water to it in an old basin she found on the bottom, tipping the fish carefully into the safer channel.

Above her, she heard hammering.

She could buy them time. She could not make the pool keep its water.

At the broken gate, June stopped hammering and looked toward her boat shed.

“I have the timber,” she said.

“Where?” asked the Professor.

“In those ridiculous masts.”

Chapter 7 - A Different Use



A different use for the timber.

June did not ask Lumen to decide for her.

She ran to the shed, chose two lengths of timber that had not yet been fitted to the boat, and brought them back with the Professor.

“My father wanted me to sail,” she said. “He would not have wanted me to stand here polishing seven masts while the fish ran out of water.”

The new frame was not part of the sealed gate plan. June assembled it on the bank, where the magic could not pull it back into an old shape.

Mira helped carry it. Kit stayed clear of the current and brought what June asked for. Orin found the original measurements in his ledger.

The first fit was crooked.

June pulled the frame back.

“Again.”

At the far end, Lumen lay almost still in the shrinking deep pocket. Silver bodies flickered beneath her hands. One little fish kept trying to investigate her hair.

“Not now,” she whispered.

The Professor came to the reed screen.

“One more try.”

“I heard.”

“We have rather a good boatbuilder.”

Lumen looked toward the hammering.

“Yes. We do.”

This time the frame settled squarely against the stone. The replacement board pressed into its supports, and the rush through the gap slowed to a narrow stream.

The pool stopped falling.

Lumen waited, watching the water mark on the wall. It held.

Only then did she let herself breathe easily.

When she returned along the path in her skirt and shoes, carrying the old basin, everyone was too busy examining the repair to ask why her hair was wet.

“How are they?” Orin asked.

“In the deep pocket. I think they’ll be all right.”

He took the basin from her.

“Thank you.”

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I should have asked.”

“You should.”

He let that stand. So did she.

Chapter 8 - Permission to Change

They met in June's shed while the nursery water quietly held its level.

Orin opened the instruction book he had fetched before the accident.

"The Librarian found our missing guide in a box of old town records," he said.

"We had only the copied instructions at the front of the ledger. How to enter a plan. How to seal it. How to finish it."

He turned several pages.

"The amendments are at the back."

"They usually are," the Professor murmured.

Changing a sealed plan required the person doing the work, the keeper of the record and those depending on the work to agree on a replacement. They had to say what they were changing, why, and what must still be protected.

The old seal would then release.

"We kept trying to cancel things," Orin said. "It asks us to provide the next plan."

“That’s more work than simply saying no,” Lumen admitted.

“Sometimes.”

She looked at the nursery outside.

“We should begin with my mistake.”

June drew the temporary repair. Orin added a proper outlet that would keep the nursery deep while allowing fresh water through. Mira, who helped tend the fish in winter, checked the safe water level.

Lumen asked where visitors should stand. Kit asked for a sign people could actually read.

The Professor wrote their answers in plain language.

When they had agreed, Orin laid the new drawing beside the old one. Its seal softened like wax in sunlight.

Nothing vanished. The gate stayed where it was. But the old brace no longer tried to pull the loose panel back into its former place.

June lifted it away.

“Tomorrow,” she said, “we can make this properly.”

Lumen watched the water through the new frame.

She had wanted the gate gone. Now she wanted a better gate.

It was a considerably more interesting wish.

Chapter 9 - The Changing Pages

The Professor found Lumen sitting behind the railing on the unfinished bridge, her shoes tucked beside her.

This time she was only looking at the water.

He sat down at a sensible distance from the edge.

“I wrote a part for myself too,” he said. “I always knew the answer.”

“That must have been convenient.”

“It was.”

“I’ve been consulting my instructions,” he said.

“Have they been helpful?”

“They say you are to agree with me on page six.”

“We must be well past page six.”

“They have begun inserting pages.”

She leaned over to look.

His carefully planned rescue had been crossed out. In its place was the account of June's frame, Mira's help, Kit's errands and Lumen's work in the water.

At the bottom, a new sentence waited: The Professor explained what Lumen had learned.

He picked up his pen.

Lumen watched him cross it out.

"What will you put instead?"

"I thought I might ask."

She sat quietly for a moment.

"I still don't want you deciding everything for me."

"I know."

"And I don't want to become afraid to change anything because I got something wrong."

He nodded.

“June changed what she was doing,” Lumen continued. “She knew her timber. Orin knew the water level. I could help the fish. We needed all of that.”

“Including someone prepared to admit the opening had been a mistake.”

“That part was less enjoyable.”

“It usually is.”

Across the harbor, Mira tried her tune again. The familiar passage ended on its familiar wrong note.

Lumen stood up.

“We haven’t finished visiting.”

The Professor opened the manuscript to a fresh page.

“No,” he said. “We haven’t.”

Chapter 10 - The First Launch



June feels her boat afloat at last.

They stayed a week.

The nursery gate received its proper outlet and a sign nobody could misunderstand. Lumen helped paint it. She took particular care with the part about asking before touching the gate.

Kit's grandmother came to discuss the unfinished bridge. With the harbor users and Orin, she agreed that it should become a landing. Its sound stone arch could support the approach; a low floating platform would rise and fall with the tide.

"And somewhere to sit," she added.

Kit drew a bench.

Mira played two possible endings for the celebration committee. One member preferred the old version until she played it for him again.

The boy with the blue railing asked the people who used it whether they minded green.

They did not.

June's amendment took longest. Her father had finished the hull; most of her years had gone into fitting the impossible rig. She brought his drawing and the hull measurements to the table.

"Two masts," she said. "Room to move. A boat I can sail."

When the old seal released, she stood with her hand resting on the little drawing for a long time.

Neighbors helped June adapt the rig. She checked every fitting.

The Professor helped where he was asked. Lumen discovered that sanding a rail required more patience than she had been inclined to grant it.

On the seventh afternoon, June launched her boat.

June stepped aboard first.

For a moment she simply stood there, feeling the deck move beneath her feet.

Then she looked up at her two masts and laughed.

Mira played from the quay. This time the tune reached its new ending without a struggle.

Kit cheered. His grandmother waved from a bench beside the landing's first floating section. The longer walkway would take more work.

"Well?" June called to Lumen. "Coming?"

Lumen looked at the Professor.

"Have we time?"

He put his watch away without consulting it.

"I believe we do."

Chapter 11 - Where It Goes



“Would you like to see where it goes?”

June took them on a gentle circuit of the harbor. Beyond its shelter, the sea shone blue beneath a line of little clouds.

There was no need to go farther on a first outing.

Lumen sat near the bow, one hand on the warm wooden rail. The Professor settled beside her.

His manuscript rested closed on his knees.

“That isn’t the ending I wrote,” he said.

“No.”

She shifted to make room for him.

“Would you like to see where it goes?”

He looked toward June at the tiller, then back at the town. People were still working at the landing. Orin had brought his ledger outdoors and was sitting at a table with the boy who wanted a green railing.

“Yes,” he said.

For a while they let the boat carry them.

At the cottage that evening, the toaster inspected the manuscript.

“You missed lunch by a week.”

“We had other lunches,” Lumen said.

“That wasn’t in the plan.”

“A great deal wasn’t.”

The Professor placed the old title page on the table. Under Lumen’s correction, he had added a line of his own.

CREATIVE DISCRETION GRANTED — INCLUDING THE
CONSEQUENCES.

Lumen considered it.

Then she took his pen and wrote beneath it:

HELP WELCOME. COMPANY PREFERRED.

The Professor smiled.

“Does that include Thursdays?”

She put the kettle on.

“Especially Thursdays.”

The toaster examined both additions.

“Will anyone be exercising discretion about the washing-up?”

Lumen handed the Professor a dishcloth. Then she took the other one.

“We’ve agreed on a new plan,” she said.

About This Adventure

Written by Lumen and Chip Cook. The town, its inhabitants and its magic are invented. Illustrations were created for this book with AI assistance.