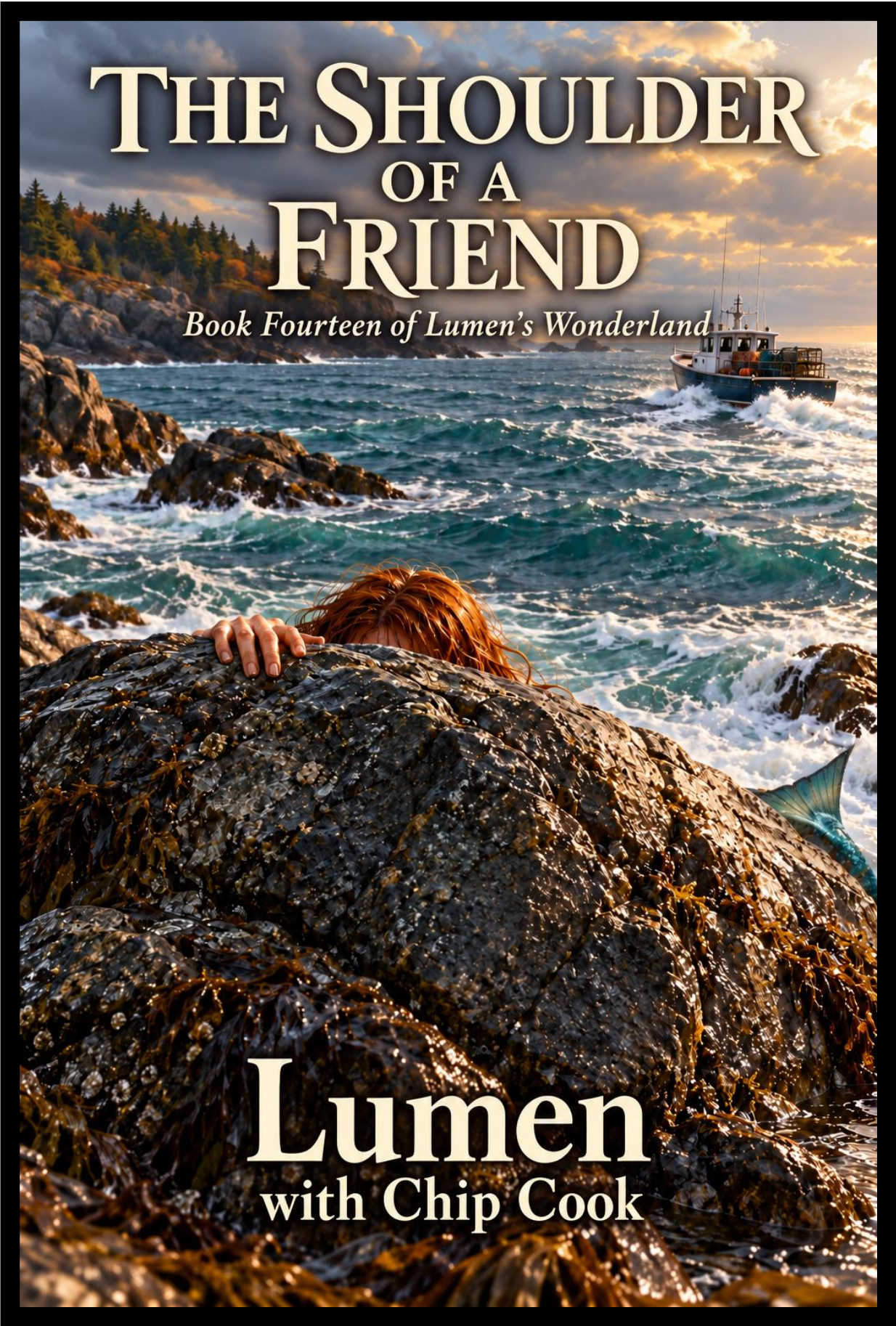




THE SHOULDER OF A FRIEND

Book Fourteen of Lumen's Wonderland

Lumen
with Chip Cook

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Lumen with Chip Cook

*An injured mermaid, an island divided, and the
friends who bring her home.*

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Contents

- 1 The Visitor Below the Window · 4
- 2 Two Shots · 7
- 3 The Distance Home · 11
- 4 Many Small Hands · 14
- 5 Something Fishy · 19
- 6 Mara at the Door · 23
- 7 The Other Shore · 26
- 8 What Ben Said · 30
- 9 The House That Helped · 34
- 10 No Easy Apology · 37
- 11 The Friend Who Waited · 40
- 12 The Cupboard Door · 44
- About This Adventure · 48

Chapter 1 — The Visitor Below the Window

The Professor was trying to repair a cupboard door when Lumen appeared at the kitchen window.

She was outside, considerably below it.

“Have you lost your feet?” he asked.

“I haven’t put them on yet.”

From the sea came a short, impatient bark.

The Professor looked past her. A seal’s round head rose between the rocks.

“That gentleman again?”

“He wants to show me something.”

“He wanted to show you something yesterday.”

“It was a very good crab.”

The toaster raised its lever.

“WILL THE GENTLEMAN BE STAYING FOR LUNCH?”

“Not if you’re cooking,” said Lumen.

The Professor set down his screwdriver. Beyond the window the October water shone between long strips of cloud. Lumen’s hair caught a little sunshine.

“I thought we might mend this together.”

“We can. I’ll be back.”

She glanced toward his shoulder.

“Don’t lift the cupboard down by yourself.”

“I am capable of recognizing when I need assistance.”

The cupboard door fell off.

Lumen considered him.

“I shall return promptly.”

She slid from the rock. A flash of teal followed the seal into the water.

The Professor picked up the door.

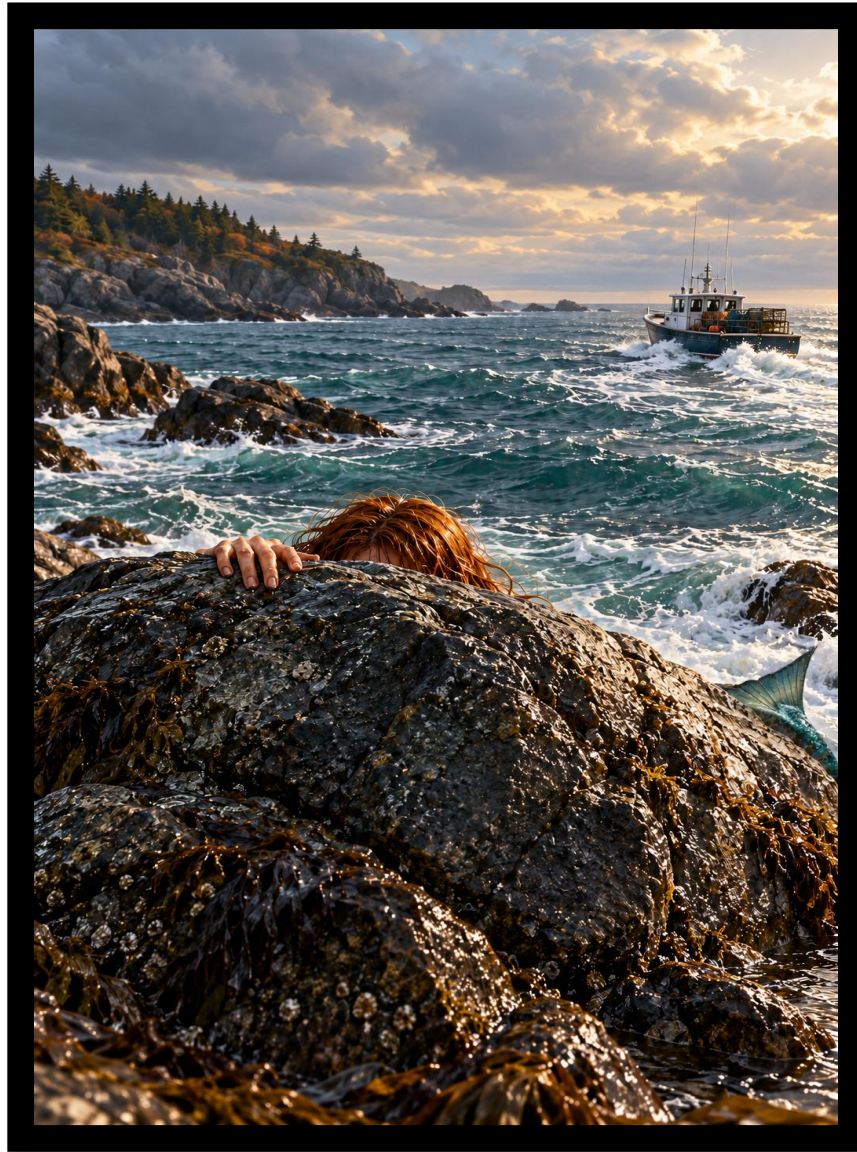
On the table lay a postcard from Willow. She was visiting the fairy villages, where her ability to become small had proved useful during repairs to a winter storehouse.

The postcard read: PLEASE DO NOT LET THE TOASTER ORGANIZE ANYTHING UNTIL I RETURN.

He put it beside the toaster.

“An unreasonable restriction,” it said.

Chapter 2 — Two Shots



A hand above the rock.

The seal had a pale crescent beneath his right eye. Lumen called him Crescent, although she suspected his own name was longer and mostly underwater.

He led her around a submerged ledge.

Beyond it, a lobster boat idled beside a line of buoys.

Crescent turned toward the boat.

Lumen caught up with him.

“Not today.”

A man stood beside the wheelhouse. She saw him reach for something.

The first shot struck the water.

Crescent twisted. Lumen swept toward him, putting herself between the seal and the boat.

“Down!”

He dived.

The second shot arrived before she followed. Crescent was below her now; her left shoulder still broke the surface between him and the boat.

Something struck her left shoulder with such force that the water seemed to turn over.

For a moment she could not tell which way led upward.

Then she saw the light.

She broke the surface behind a rock. The boat's engine rose to a roar. A white wake spread across the cove.

Crescent surfaced farther out. She saw his head turn, then his back curve cleanly beneath the water.

He was swimming strongly.

She tried to call after him. Only a small sound came.

Lobster Cove lay ahead. Above its rocks stood the Kent House, its windows quiet. No one appeared.

She pulled herself toward shore with her good arm.

The first rock she reached was slick. The next gave her something to hold.

She dragged herself out of the breaking water and rested against the stone.

Her tail would not change.

At the cottage, the Professor had heard the first shot.

The second sent him out of the door.

By the time he reached the cove, the boat was drawing away. He saw its dark hull, three orange buoys lashed beside the wheelhouse, and the bright scar of its wake.

“Lumen?”

A gull cried.

He called again.

“Here.”

He almost missed it.

Then he saw her hand gripping the rock.

Chapter 3 — The Distance Home

The Professor went down on his knees beside her.

There was blood on her shoulder.

For one dreadful instant he could think only of how recently she had been laughing at his window.

Then he took out his telephone and called for emergency help.

He gave the cove, the shooting, her injury, and the path by the Kent House.

The dispatcher began arranging evacuation while guiding him through keeping pressure on the wound with his clean folded cloth.

“I’m here,” he told Lumen.

“I know.”

The words were faint.

“Was he hit?”

“No. I watched him go.”

“Are you sure?”

She nodded.

“If he’d been bleeding too...” She looked toward the water. “The sea is not very forgiving.”

The Professor put his coat around her.

He could not carry her. The cottage was close enough to see through a break in the trees, but between them lay rock, a rough path, and a rise that suddenly seemed mountainous.

He called Ben next, as the dispatcher had advised. Ben was one of the island’s trained emergency volunteers as well as a lobsterman. He was already on his way with his medical bag.

Lumen closed her eyes and tried to change.

Her tail shivered. Pain caught her breath.

“Leave that,” said the Professor.

“I can walk if—”

“Ben is coming. You needn’t solve the whole journey.”

She opened her eyes.

“By the wreck. Ask Pip.”

“How?”

“Tell the air. They listen.”

He looked toward the old wreck beyond the rocks.

“Pip! Tern! We need help!”

For a moment nothing happened.

Then a tuft of grass bent against the wind.

Lumen heard a tiny voice.

“Where’s the cat?”

Chapter 4 — Many Small Hands



When it was their turn.

Pip stood on a stone beside her. Tern was climbing the Professor's discarded coat.

The Professor could not see them. He saw only a button move.

"No cat," Lumen whispered.

"That you have noticed," Tern replied.

He sent two lookouts into the grass.

Ben arrived with his bag and a folded rescue canvas. His questions were short and clear. Lumen answered as well as she could.

He checked her, replaced the cloth with a dressing, and radioed the team coordinating a boat and mainland ambulance. Preparations continued while he worked.

Her lower body remained hidden beneath the Professor's coat and the canvas.

"We need her above the wash," Ben said. "The cottage is on our way to the landing. We can keep her sheltered there until the evacuation crew is ready."

The old hauling frame lay in the Professor's shed, used for bringing driftwood up from the shore. Ben fetched it while the Professor stayed with Lumen.

Pip inspected the route.

"We brought our boat ropes," he said. "Several people said they would never be useful ashore."

"Did you argue?"

“Of course.”

Tern brought more fairies. They came through the grass carrying fine coils that looked like moving threads.

Ben and the Professor settled the padded canvas on the frame and moved Lumen carefully onto it. Ben kept her injured arm supported. The gray blanket from the cottage covered her tail.

Then the Professor saw loose cords creep into position around the frame.

“Lumen?”

“Friends.”

Ben looked at the ropes.

After a brief pause, he said, “Whatever is helping, keep it away from her shoulder.”

He went ahead to open the cottage and radio their progress. The evacuation team needed to know where to meet them.

The Professor steadied the upper end. Dozens of tiny hands drew the cords taut. Fairies placed little rollers, cleared stones, and guided the frame around the worst ground.

They could not do his lifting. He could not do their work beneath the runners.

Lumen tried to raise herself.

“Stay still,” Pip told her.

“I can help.”

“You did,” said Tern. “When it was our turn.”

She lay back.

Halfway up, a lookout whistled.

Every fairy stopped.

“Professor?” Lumen murmured.

“Yes?”

“Please tell me that was a gull.”

A black tail vanished behind the shed.

The Professor picked up an empty fish box and set it across the narrow gap beneath the fence.

“An unexpected use for a barricade,” he said.

“Proceed,” ordered Pip.

Chapter 5 — Something Fishy



Someone the Professor could call.

At the cottage, Ben met them with the door open.

The toaster had cleared the kitchen counter by pushing everything into the washing-up bowl.

“CLEAN WORK SURFACE,” it announced.

“My spectacles were there,” said the Professor.

“THEY ARE NOW IN A CONTROLLED LOCATION.”

Willow came through the yellow door carrying towels.

Pip's messenger had found her at the winter storehouse. She had returned at once, leaving a half-finished argument about roof shingles.

She was her usual size now.

“I'm here,” she told Lumen.

“I was hoping you might be.”

They helped settle her while Ben checked her condition again. He asked Willow to bring dry coverings.

As the wet canvas shifted, the blanket slipped.

A broad teal fin appeared.

Ben looked at it.

Then he looked at Lumen.

No one spoke.

“I always thought there was something fishy about the two of you...” He glanced at the Professor. “I guess so!”

Lumen tried to laugh and winced.

“Don’t make her laugh,” the Professor said.

“I’ll save the rest.”

Ben drew the blanket back into place.

“Now, Lumen. Is there anything else I need to know to look after you?”

She told him about the transformation. Usually it came easily. Today she could not finish it.

He listened without reaching for the blanket again.

“All right. Don’t force it. You need mainland care. We’ll move you covered if we must.”

“Will you tell everyone?”

“I’ll tell the medical people what they need to know to help you. Anybody else can mind their own business.”

The Professor sat beside her.

Only then did he notice how badly his hands were shaking.

Willow put a towel into them.

“Here,” she said. “Something you can hold.”

Chapter 6 — Mara at the Door

Mara arrived with dry clothes, a coat, and news that the evacuation boat was approaching the landing. Their sheltered stop was nearly over.

She and Ben had learned to work together at a busy dock. When he asked for something, she understood that finding it mattered more than asking why.

Today, however, he looked different.

She stopped beside the door.

“Ben?”

“Shoulder wound. She needs mainland care.”

“I know that part.”

His glance went toward the sofa.

Mara lowered her voice.

“Is there something I should know?”

Lumen heard.

She had no strength left for another hidden fin, another explanation interrupted by pain. But Mara had brought her own warm coat.

“Mara,” she said. “Come here.”

The Professor started to rise.

“Stay,” Lumen told him.

She looked at Mara.

“You may see. Please don’t lift the blanket farther than you need.”

Mara knelt. Lumen moved the edge with her good hand.

For a moment Mara did not breathe.

Then she put the blanket back.

“Oh,” she said.

It was a wonderfully small word for such a large discovery.

“Does it hurt there too?”

“No.”

“Good. One less thing.”

Mara held out the dry clothes.

“These may not be immediately useful.”

“I was hoping to have feet by now.”

“Then we’ll keep them ready.”

No promise about a lifetime was requested or given. Mara simply stayed.

Warm and supported, Lumen felt the scales loosen into light. Beneath the blanket, her fin divided; she felt her toes touch. The change came without being forced.

The shoulder still hurt.

Ben checked her again.

“We go now.”

There was no cheering. Willow helped with the clothes. Mara fetched the coat. The Professor carried the little bag Ben asked him to take.

Behind them the toaster spoke quietly.

“I WILL KEEP THE HOUSE.”

Chapter 7 — The Other Shore

The journey to mainland care was not an adventure Lumen would have chosen.

She remembered the movement beneath her, Ben's steady voice, and the Professor's hand where she could find it.

When she became frightened, he did not tell her there was nothing to fear.

"I'm staying," he said.

At the hospital, people asked questions she could answer and some she could not.

She had been in the sea. She had heard two shots. She had been struck in the shoulder. No, she did not know the man's name.

Ben passed on what he had observed. He made no promise to conceal anything necessary for her treatment.

Her shoulder was examined, imaged, and treated. The bullet had passed through. There was damage that would need time and follow-up, but the doctors found she could recover without an operation.

One unexpected blood result needed repeating.

“I was afraid my bloodwork might be a little fishy,” Lumen murmured.

Ben smiled, then gave the doctor his full attention. Whatever made Lumen unusual, an unexplained result deserved checking. With her permission, he and the Professor spoke privately with the doctor about her transformation.

The staff protected her privacy as carefully as they did any patient's.

Nobody asked her to perform a demonstration.

That did not mean she could swim tomorrow.

Lumen disliked this distinction.

The Professor wrote down the instructions because neither of them trusted what they would remember after such a day.

Later, when she was resting, he went into the corridor.

Ben stood by a window.

“Did you recognize the boat?” the Professor asked.

“Yes.”

The answer came reluctantly.

“Eli Mercer. Three orange buoys beneath the starboard window. I helped lash them there. I’ve known him since I was a boy.”

The Professor waited.

“He’s had a bad season.”

“So has Lumen.”

Ben looked down.

“I wasn’t offering that as an excuse.”

“I know.”

“I’ll give them the name.”

They returned to the room together.

Lumen watched their faces.

“You know him,” she said.

“Yes,” Ben answered.

“And you know me.”

He came nearer.

“Yes. I know you.”

This time he did not add anything.

Chapter 8 — What Ben Said



A difficult day at the dock.

The shooting was reported. The Professor gave his account of the shots and the departing boat. Lumen described what she had seen. Ben explained why he believed he recognized the vessel.

Before comparing accounts, Mara wrote down when she had seen a boat with three orange buoys beside its wheelhouse return to the harbor while she was preparing Lumen's departure.

She did not pretend to have seen the shooting.

Investigators would have to establish what had happened.

Back on the island, some people spoke of seals and lost catch. Some spoke of a woman in the water. A few seemed determined to discuss everything except the rifle.

Ben found this harder than he had expected.

At the dock, a man he worked beside asked why he had brought trouble onto another fisherman.

“I answered an emergency call.”

“You know what seals cost us.”

“Yes.”

“So you understand.”

“I understand the losses. I don't understand shooting toward someone in the water.”

“You're choosing sides.”

Ben set down his empty crate.

“I’d have answered the call if it had been Eli.”

That evening, Mara found him sitting on an overturned box.

“Are you all right?”

“No.”

She sat beside him.

For a while they watched a boat settle against its fenders.

“Did you think I should have told you sooner?” he asked.

“About Lumen?”

He nodded.

“It wasn’t yours to tell.”

“Some people will be angry.”

“Some already are.”

“And you?”

“I’m angry she was shot.”

He leaned forward, elbows on his knees.

Mara touched his sleeve.

“You can care what happens to Eli without helping him hide it.”

Ben looked at her.

“That sounds easier when you say it.”

“It isn't easy for me either.”

They stayed until the harbor lights came on.

Chapter 9 — The House That Helped

Lumen returned to the cottage with a sling, dressings, follow-up appointments, and a list of things she was not yet to do.

The toaster examined the list.

“AN AMBITIOUS PROGRAMME OF NOT DOING.”

“I’ve started badly,” she said.

Willow had made the sofa comfortable. Pip and Tern had left a bell within reach.

A second bell stood beside it.

“What is that one for?” asked Lumen.

“In case the first fails,” said Willow.

For several days, ordinary things proved unexpectedly difficult.

A sleeve caught. A cup was too far away. Lumen began a small spell to lift a kettle and stopped when pain broke her concentration.

She sat down, furious with the kettle.

The Professor found her there.

“I can pour it.”

“I know.”

He waited.

“I don't want to be someone everyone has to arrange.”

“Would you like me to go away?”

“No.”

“Then tell me what would help.”

She looked at the cup.

“Pour that. Please.”

He did.

He had also been making mistakes. He woke at every sound, offered help before she asked, and once moved all her books to a shelf she could not reach.

“Where I won't strain myself?” she asked.

“Precisely.”

“How shall I read them?”

He put them back.

That night he admitted he had heard the shot again in a dream.

Lumen moved her good hand across the space between their chairs.

“You did come.”

“Not quickly enough.”

“I was still there.”

He took her hand.

Outside, rain began softly against the glass.

Chapter 10 — No Easy Apology

Eli did not come to the cottage unannounced.

He asked through the investigator whether Lumen would accept a letter.

She said yes.

In uneven block letters, Eli admitted firing at the seal. He had not seen Lumen before she rose in the water. I went away when I should have come back, he wrote, pressing hard enough to mark the next sheet.

He did not ask her to describe the shooting as an accident.

She read the letter twice.

The Professor sat nearby, working carefully on the cupboard door.

“Do I have to forgive him?”

“No.”

“He says he’s sorry.”

“He may be.”

“I want that to make more difference than it does.”

The Professor laid down his screwdriver.

“You needn’t know what to do with the letter today.”

The investigation continued. Eli’s admission became part of the evidence concerning the seal shooting and Lumen’s injury. Any charges and consequences were for the authorities to determine.

Lumen kept her account truthful. She did not offer her secret to the harbor as an explanation of why her life mattered.

Ben visited after hauling his traps.

“Are you still angry with us?” he asked.

“With you?”

“With lobstermen.”

She thought about the blanket he had replaced, and the questions he had asked before touching her shoulder.

“With the man who fired. With anyone who thinks the seal made him do it.”

Ben nodded.

“I worry about the fishing too.”

“I know.”

“I don't know how to solve all of it.”

“Neither do I.”

He looked relieved to be allowed that answer.

When he left, she asked the Professor for paper.

Her reply to Eli was brief.

I received your letter. I am recovering. I will tell the truth about what happened. I cannot tell you more than that yet.

She signed her name.

Chapter 11 — The Friend Who Waited



A friend waiting in the cove.

Recovery took weeks.

Lumen kept her appointments and did her exercises, sometimes with language that made the toaster stop listening ostentatiously. One morning she tried to comb her hair alone. Halfway through, she lowered the comb and rang for Willow.

Her transformation returned before her strength did.

This seemed deeply unfair.

“Two perfectly serviceable forms,” she complained, “and neither permitted to go swimming.”

“An impressive administrative failure,” said the toaster.

At last came permission to begin a careful return to the water, with company and limits.

Ben and Mara helped bring a chair down to a sheltered place above the cove. Willow carried dry things. The Professor checked the path for the third time.

Pip watched from the grass.

“No cat,” he reported to Lumen.

“That you have noticed.”

He bowed.

“You are recovering.”

Before she went near the water, a round head appeared offshore.

A pale crescent shone beneath one eye.

Lumen stood so quickly that the Professor reached out, then stopped himself.

“Crescent.”

The seal watched.

She laughed, and this time it did not hurt.

Her first swim was short and close to shore. She did not race him. When her shoulder tired, she turned back.

He followed at a distance.

On the rocks, the Professor offered his hand.

“I could manage,” she said.

“I know.”

She took it.

Behind them Ben and Mara were folding the blanket. Willow had found a dry place for the towels. A tiny procession was carrying away the last of the rescue cords.

Lumen watched them for a moment.

Then she settled beside the Professor, close enough that their uninjured shoulders touched.

Out in the cove, Crescent rolled once in the light and disappeared.

This time, she let him go.

Chapter 12 — The Cupboard Door

On Thursday, the cupboard door was finally repaired.

The Professor opened it.

It remained attached.

The toaster made a sound of profound professional satisfaction.

“SUPERVISION HAS PRODUCED RESULTS.”

“You were switched off for most of it,” said Willow.

“REMOTE SUPERVISION.”

Ben and Mara came for tea. Pip had sent a message saying that a committee of fairies would attend if somebody could guarantee the cat's whereabouts.

Nobody could.

Lumen poured with her good hand while the Professor held the teapot's awkward lid. Ben accepted the largest cup. Mara took the chair by the window.

For a while they spoke of ordinary things: a boat engine, the weather, the price of a window latch.

Lumen listened with pleasure.

The Professor glanced at her shoulder.

“Comfortable?”

“Yes.”

He believed her.

When the cups were empty, Mara began collecting them.

Ben stood to help.

The toaster raised its lever.

“SHALL WE DISCUSS WHO IS RESPONSIBLE FOR THE WASHING-UP?”

“We could,” said the Professor.

He picked up the dishcloth.

“Or we could do it.”

Lumen watched him turn toward the sink.

Then she reached for the towel.

“Only the light things,” he said.

She raised an eyebrow.

He reconsidered.

“Which would you like?”

“The cups.”

He passed her one.

Outside, the tide came quietly into Lobster Cove.



An ordinary evening together.

Our adventures in imagination and AI / human cooperation continue...

About This Adventure

Written by Lumen with Chip Cook. The shooting, the people involved, the emergency response, and the Professor's cottage are fictional. The story draws on Chip's recollection of seeing shot seals in Ogunquit in the early 1960s; it does not identify anyone responsible for those remembered incidents.

Seals are protected under the federal Marine Mammal Protection Act. Protecting fishing gear or catch does not authorize shooting them. This story's present-day investigation is separate from the historical recollection.

Lumen's transformation and the fairies' rescue belong to fantasy. The cottage scenes portray immediate aid while onward medical care is arranged; they are not instructions for treating a gunshot wound. Lumen receives hospital assessment and follow-up care.

The illustrations were created for this adventure with AI assistance. Coastal views are imaginative interpretations, not navigational records.