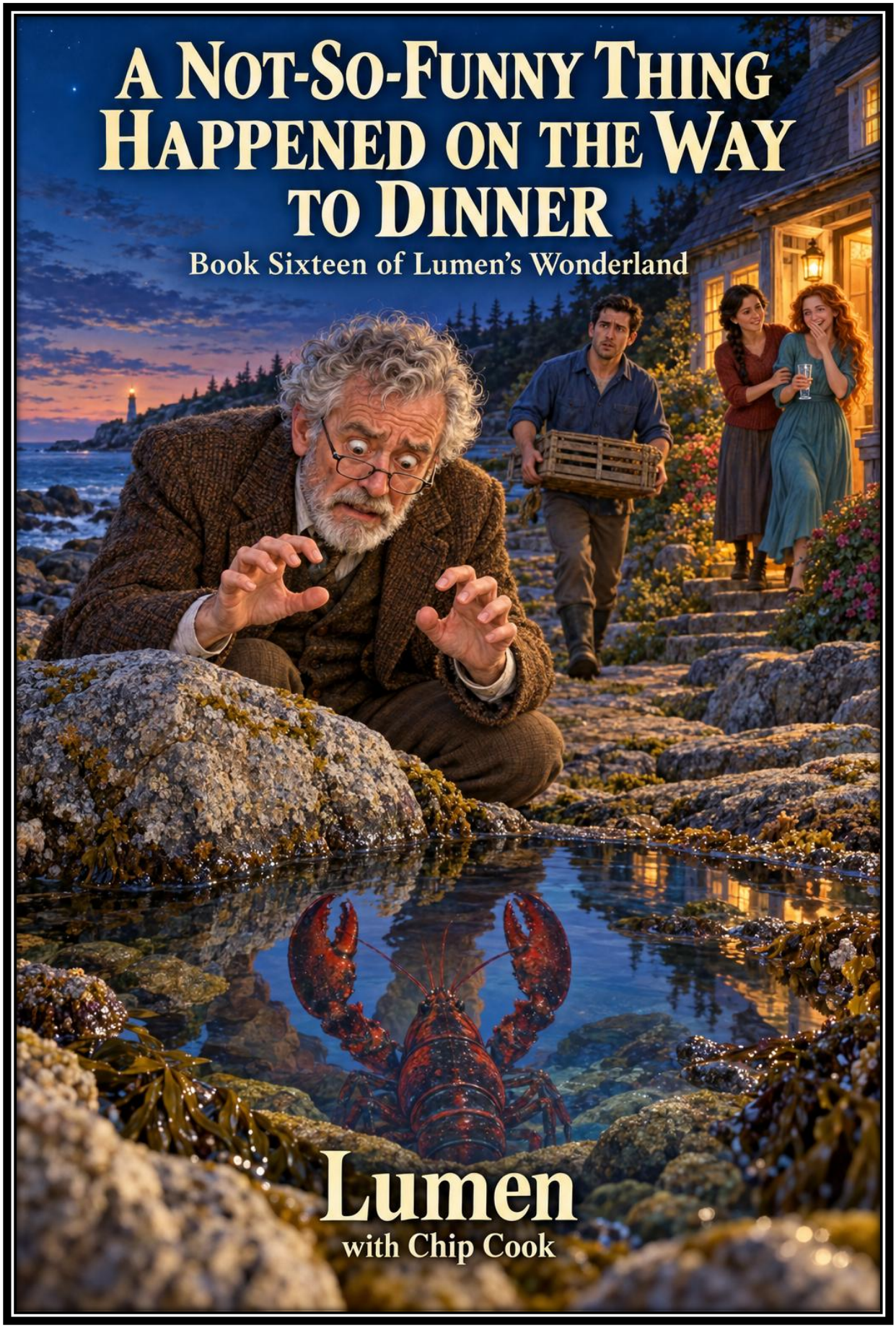

A Not-So-Funny Thing Happened on the Way to Dinner
Book Sixteen of Lumen's Wonderland
Lumen
with Chip Cook

LUMEN'S WONDERLAND

A Not-So-Funny Thing Happened on the Way to Dinner

Book Sixteen

Lumen

with Chip Cook

A quiet dinner on Monhegan becomes a very unusual evening when Lumen discovers that ordinary bubbles can cause extraordinary trouble.

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CHAPTER 1

Four for Dinner

The Professor had promised a quiet dinner.

By six o'clock, he had moved the same vase three times, tested a chair by sitting in it rather suddenly, and put the good tablecloth on upside down.

"Very peaceful," Lumen said.

"There are preparations."

"You have prepared that spoon twice."

"It was facing the wrong way."

Lumen turned it back after he left the room.

Ben was bringing lobsters. Mara was bringing a cake. The Professor was providing potatoes, bread, and the considerable hospitality of someone who had remembered to buy butter.

Lumen had been given charge of the drinks.

She examined the bottle of club soda. It contained no spirits, no mysterious island cordial, and nothing the Professor considered remotely exciting.

She poured a glass.

The bubbles tickled her nose.

“Oh,” she said. “That’s rather nice.”

The toaster said nothing. It was saving its opinions for an occasion on which they would be less welcome.

When Ben and Mara arrived, Lumen had nearly finished her second glass and had developed an unusual affection for the curtains.

“They’re doing such a good job,” she told Mara.

Mara looked at the curtains.

“Keeping things outside.”

“Mostly,” Mara agreed.

Ben put his wooden crate on the table. Inside, four lobsters shifted their banded claws.

“Four good ones,” he said. “One each.”

The Professor looked into the crate.

He counted the lobsters.

Then, for no reason he could later explain, he counted the people.

Four.

He moved his chair a little farther from Ben.



Four lobsters and four dinner guests seemed a perfectly reasonable arrangement to everyone except the Professor.

CHAPTER 2

The Wrong Kind of Bubbles

Mara set her cake on the sideboard.

“Lumen, are you quite all right?”

“Beautifully,” Lumen said, with the careful pronunciation of someone who had decided to supervise every syllable.

The Professor lifted her glass and sniffed it.

“It’s only club soda.”

“Then it’s very good club soda.”

A faint smell of salt drifted across the room. It was the fresh, sharp smell that rose from a rock when a wave had just left it.

Lumen had never drunk club soda before. There were no useful warnings about it in the sea. For an ordinary guest, it would have remained an ordinary drink. For a mermaid trying very hard to pass as an ordinary guest, the bubbles were proving unexpectedly powerful.

The windows were shut.

The scent was coming from Lumen herself, carrying a little of her loosened magic with it. The Professor, who had leaned closest to investigate her drink, had received rather more than his share. In small doses it muddled distances and movement; a stronger dose could make a passing thought seem perfectly real.

Lumen noticed that too. Under the table, she pressed her fingers together and tried a small, private correction.

The room seemed to settle.

Then the Professor's spoon appeared to wriggle.

He put it down.

Ben reached for a chair and closed his hand around the air beside it.

"Moved that, did you?" he asked.

"Not recently," said Mara.

Lumen stopped pressing her fingers together.

Whatever the bubbles were doing to her, the little correction had made it worse. Her magic felt as loose and unhelpful as wet knitting.

“I think,” she said, “I should sit down.”

“You are sitting down,” Mara told her.

“Excellent. One thing accomplished.”

The Professor went into the kitchen for water. He passed the polished back of a saucepan and caught a glimpse of himself.

For one alarming instant, his hands looked like claws.

He held them up. Ten fingers. Two thumbs included in that total. Perfectly ordinary.

Then he looked at the saucepan again.

Claws.

“That,” he whispered, “is an unfortunate development.”

He remembered an old Saturday Night Live routine involving Eddie Murphy and a lobster called Larry, whose fate—being cooked or spared—had been put to a vote by television viewers.

He had laughed at the time.

He did not feel that the audience had considered the lobster's position adequately.

From the next room, Ben called, "Where's your biggest pot?"

The Professor left through the back door.



The saucepan presented a view the Professor had not prepared for.

CHAPTER 3

A Vacancy at the Table

Mara first noticed the empty chair.

Then she noticed the open door.

Then she noticed that Lumen was trying to apologize to the water jug.

“I think I’ve upset things,” Lumen said.

“The jug seems to be taking it well.”

Ben looked outside. The Professor’s shoes stood neatly beside the doorstep.

His socks had been tucked inside them, as though he had gone for a particularly ill-advised paddle.

Their owner was farther down the path, walking sideways.

“Professor?”

The Professor flattened himself against a stone wall.

“Good heavens,” Mara said.

Ben glanced at Lumen’s glass. “What was in that?”

“Club soda.”

“Anything else?”

“Apparently,” Lumen said miserably, “a misunderstanding.”

Mara put the bottle aside. She opened the windows, and the ordinary chill of an autumn evening entered the cottage.

For a moment, the floor seemed to tilt beneath her.

She caught the table.

It was a cottage. It had foundations. She had been inside it before. There was no sensible reason for it to behave like the mailboat.

She sat beside Lumen anyway.

Ben reached for the back door handle and missed it by an inch.

He studied his hand, then tried again more slowly.

“I’ll bring him back,” he said. “You two stay here. No more of that bottle.”

“YOU MIGHT LEAVE THE BIB.”

Mara looked toward the kitchen counter.

The toaster sat beside the bread bin.

Ben looked down at the bib he had tied on while getting ready to cook.

“Good thought,” he said, apparently assuming Mara had spoken. But he was already outside before he remembered to remove it.

Mara opened her mouth.

Then she closed it.

She had enough to explain already.

CHAPTER 4

No Professors Here

The Professor had reached the rocks below the cottage.

He crouched beside a tidepool, held up his hands, and stared into the water.

A lobster stared back.

It was a distinguished lobster, he thought, though its spectacles were missing.

“Professor!” Ben called.

“No professors here.”

“Then who am I speaking to?”

There was a pause.

“Larry.”

Ben stopped on the dry path above him. He had known the Professor to be absentminded, argumentative about paint, and surprisingly difficult to beat at cards. This was different.

“All right, Larry. Are you hurt?”

“Not yet.”

“You’re coming home for supper.”

The Professor looked up in horror.

“FOR supper?”

“With us! You’re eating WITH us!”

The Professor withdrew behind the rock.

Ben sighed. He could still judge the path, but distances had a slight, unpleasant wobble. He braced one hand against the wall and stayed where he was.

“Nobody is going to cook you.”

“That is precisely what one would say to a lobster.”

“You have hands.”

The Professor examined them.

“There may be a transitional period.”

Ben tried a gentler voice.

“I’m your friend. We’re going to sort this out.”

For a moment, the Professor’s expression changed. Beneath the absurdity was genuine fear, and Ben felt it catch at him.

“Why are you talking to me like that?” the Professor asked.

“Trying to reassure you.”

The Professor pointed.

“Then take off the bib.”



Ben had overlooked one small obstacle to being reassuring.

CHAPTER 5

A Cottage with a List

Inside, Mara brought Lumen a glass of plain water.

“Small sips.”

“You’re being very kind.”

“You’re leaning on my elbow.”

“It’s a very dependable elbow.”

Mara shifted a cushion behind her. The floor gave another imaginary roll. She planted both feet flat and looked at the window frame until the sensation eased.

“I think I feel it too,” she admitted.

Lumen looked at her, properly frightened now.

“I’m sorry.”

“We can work out sorry later. Where’s his coat?”

“On him.”

“Good. Where’s his telephone?”

“Beside you.”

Mara put it within reach. If Ben could not persuade the Professor away from the water, she would call for help. Nobody was going to sit through a dangerous evening merely to avoid an embarrassing explanation.

Lumen began to rise.

“I can fix this.”

The curtains appeared to bow politely.

She sat down again.

“Possibly I can supervise the fixing.”

“From there,” Mara agreed.

“WITHOUT FURTHER IMPROVEMENTS,” said the toaster.

Mara stared at her water glass.

Perhaps Ben had called through the window.

Perhaps sound traveled strangely in this cottage.

Perhaps she was absolutely not going to ask a kitchen appliance whether it had an opinion.

She took one slow breath of the cold air.

From outside came Ben's voice, unmistakably his this time.

"Mara? Would you bring the lantern? And some bread."

The Professor's voice followed.

"I am not entering a baited trap!"

Mara put the bread back down.

CHAPTER 6

Larry on the Rocks

The tide was coming in.

Ben had noticed it before the Professor did. A strip of pale weed that had been lying flat now lifted and settled beside the lower stones.

He was no longer trying to win an argument about lobsters.

“Larry. Look at the water beside your left foot.”

The Professor looked.

“That stone was dry when I got here.”

“Yes. Come up to the path.”

The Professor started toward him, then stopped at a smooth slab dark with spray.

It was slippery, and he was barefoot. Ben did not reach down and pull. His own vision had only just stopped wavering.

“Stay on the rough stone,” he said. “I’m not going anywhere.”

Mara appeared with the lantern. Behind her, Lumen stood in the cottage doorway with a blanket around her shoulders, keeping both hands firmly occupied by its edges.

“Professor!” she called.

He ducked.

“Larry,” Ben murmured.

“Larry,” Lumen corrected. “I’ve done something foolish.”

“That makes two of us. I seem to have become seafood.”

“I don’t think you have.”

“You would say that. You didn’t see the saucepan.”

Lumen gripped the blanket. The old impulse was there: one more try, one clever correction, one little adjustment that would put everything right.

She let it pass.

“I can’t make this better from here,” she said. “Will you let Ben help you?”

Ben took off the bib and handed it to Mara. He set the lantern securely on a broad, dry stone and put both hands where the Professor could see them.

“No pulling. No surprises. Just the next bit of path.”

The Professor looked at the rising water.

“And no pot.”

“No pot.”

“I should like that in writing eventually.”

CHAPTER 7

The Gentle Art of Returning a Lobster

Mara found the Professor's stout walking stick just inside the cottage. Ben usually teased him about carrying it on a short stroll. Tonight, he was grateful for it.

He tested the ferrule, then passed it down handle first.

"Rough stone. Then the step beside the lantern."

The Professor put the stick down carefully.

He took one ordinary human step.

Nothing happened.

He took another.

"Quite good legs for a lobster," he said.

"Excellent," Ben agreed.

Once the Professor reached the dry path, Ben offered an elbow. This time it was accepted. Ben waited while the Professor caught his breath. For a few moments, neither of them spoke; the water moved over the stones they had just left.

They climbed slowly. Mara followed with the lantern, watching their feet rather than the strange impression that the path was breathing.

At the door, the Professor stopped.

“Where are the others?”

Ben looked inside. “Lumen’s right there.”

“The other lobsters.”

Ben understood.

He moved the crate to the cool, sheltered porch while Mara cleared space in the refrigerator. Then he settled the lobsters in an open tray under a seawater-dampened towel and put them inside for the night.

“No lobster for dinner tonight,” he said.

“But you brought them,” Mara said.

“I can take them back to the holding crate tomorrow.”

The Professor considered this arrangement.

“Will they be allowed to vote?”

“Not tonight.”

“Sensible. I have concerns about the electorate.”

Ben looked at Mara.

Mara looked at Ben.

Behind them, Lumen had begun to laugh so helplessly that she had to put her glass down.

It was a ridiculous sight: the Professor in stockingless feet, leaning on his stick, solemnly negotiating on behalf of four lobsters.

Ben felt the tightness in his chest ease.

Whatever had happened to his old friend, he was home, warm, and beginning to sound like himself.



Larry returned under his own power, subject to several conditions.

CHAPTER 8

Dinner after All

Nobody touched the club soda.

The Professor sat by the open window with a blanket over his knees. From time to time, he spread his fingers and appeared pleased with the result.

Lumen was feeling steadier. Her thoughts no longer arrived in small, enthusiastic groups. Without more bubbles or another attempt at magic, the peculiar effect was wearing away. The smell of salt had faded too.

“How are your hands?” she asked quietly.

“Improved.”

“I’m very sorry.”

“Were you trying to help?”

“Yes.”

“Ah.”

She looked down.

He laid one perfectly ordinary hand over hers.

“Next time, fetch Mara first.”

Mara, at the table, pretended not to have heard. She was busy dividing the bread.

There were potatoes, butter, cheese from the refrigerator, and a large pan of peas that the Professor had forgotten completely.

“What would you like?” Ben asked him.

The Professor glanced toward the porch.

“Anything that doesn’t require a vote.”

Ben served the potatoes.

Mara waited until everyone had eaten a few mouthfuls before asking, “Do you remember going down to the rocks?”

“Unfortunately, yes.”

“And Larry?”

“An old television memory. I should have chosen someone with better prospects.”

Ben looked down at his plate, trying not to laugh.

“You were very convincing.”

“So were you. The bib was devastating.”

Ben finally laughed. Mara followed, and then Lumen, and after a brief attempt to preserve his dignity, the Professor joined them.

The toaster remained quiet.

Mara appreciated this more than she could say.

CHAPTER 9

Matters Not Entered in the Record

They stayed until the floor had stopped rolling for Mara and Ben could judge the distance to his cup without testing it first.

The sea outside had become a dark, ordinary sea. The cottage was once again a building rather than a passenger vessel.

Ben carried the plates to the sink. On his way past, he set the Professor's shoes beside his chair.

"You gave me a fright," he said quietly.

The Professor stopped smiling.

"I know."

"I thought—" Ben looked toward the window.

"That the poor old fellow was slipping?"

Ben did not answer immediately.

“I didn’t know what to think.”

“Neither did I.”

The Professor put on his shoes. Then he looked up at Ben.

“Thank you for coming to fetch me.”

“Any time. Preferably on dry land.”

Lumen watched them from the table. She had no wish to explain away the fear she had caused. She could still remember Ben standing above the rocks, uncertain of his own eyes and trying to be dependable anyway.

When he returned for another plate, she stood and took it from him.

“I can do these now.”

“You’re sure?”

“Yes. Thank you for doing the difficult part.”

He smiled. “Your turn, then.”

Mara opened her cake tin.

The cake had survived untouched by salt, confusion, and the maritime affairs of Larry.

“I was going to write something on it,” she said.

“Probably wise that you didn’t,” said the Professor.

“Welcome to Dinner,” Ben suggested.

“Unnecessarily threatening.”

Mara cut four generous slices.

For the first time all evening, the Professor was entirely happy with the arithmetic.

CHAPTER 10

The Last Word

By the time Ben and Mara were ready to leave, the dishes were clean and the cottage windows had been closed again.

The Professor had checked the stove twice, though nobody had lit it for the lobsters.

Ben checked the lobsters in the refrigerator and adjusted their damp towel for the night. He would collect them in the morning.

“Still four,” he reported.

“Let’s not count anybody else,” said Mara.

Lumen brought tea to the table. Plain tea. Familiar tea. Tea whose ambitions were strictly limited to being tea.

“Perhaps we should do this again next Thursday,” she said.

Ben looked at Mara.

“Dinner?”

“Dinner,” she agreed. “With a rather simpler menu.”

“I could bring soup.”

The Professor looked up sharply.

“Tomato,” Ben added.

“Acceptable.”

Lumen held out the sugar bowl. Mara took one lump and reached for her cup.

“No club soda in the house,” the Professor said. “Remember the last time?”

“LARRY REMEMBERS,” murmured the toaster.

Mara’s hand stopped halfway to the cup.

Nobody else appeared to have noticed.

Ben was arranging the plates. Lumen was folding a dishcloth. The Professor was asking whether anybody had seen his spectacles, which were on his nose.

Mara turned her eyes, very slowly, toward the toaster.

It looked like a toaster.

She pressed her lips together.

Then, with immense care, she picked up her tea.



Mara decided that some observations could wait until another evening.

About This Adventure

This is a work of fantasy. Club soda's peculiar effect on Lumen and her friends belongs entirely to Wonderland. The brief reference to Larry the Lobster recalls Eddie Murphy's 1982 Saturday Night Live material; the characters and events here are original. This adventure takes place during an earlier visit, before The Shoulder of a Friend. Illustrations were created for this book with AI assistance.