

THE LAST AMPHIBIAN

The Voice Beneath the Water



STRANGEWOVEN

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A Strangewoven Tale

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Chapter One

The Forty-Fourth Evening

For forty-three evenings, the little creature beneath the culvert had called into the dark.

On the forty-fourth, the dark cleared its throat.

Noll stopped with their mouth open.

Water ticked from the roof of the tunnel. Above it, a truck crossed the road, shaking dust from between the stones. Then the night settled again, leaving the little drainage ditch, the flattened reeds, and a noise that had no business being there.

“Do that again,” Noll said.

Nothing answered.

They waited. Waiting was something Noll did particularly well. They could wait through a whole afternoon without changing position, except to express an unfavorable opinion of a beetle.

“I heard you.”

From the tunnel came three low notes.

Noll’s pale throat stripe brightened. They knew those notes. Before the upper marsh became a car park, before the alder pools shrank to saucers, an old keeper named Orris had used them to summon the evening chorus.

Orris had been gone eleven winters.

Noll took one careful step into the tunnel.

“Where are you?”

“Under the water,” said Orris’s voice.

This was an unhelpful distinction. Most things worth visiting were under the water.

“Which water?”

“The Bellwether Pool. Before the moon leaves the opening.”

Noll looked toward the hills. Bellwether lay beyond the abandoned pumping house, where the stream had been stopped long ago. No keeper went there now.

Of course, no keeper went anywhere now, except Noll.

In the old days, the marsh folk had called themselves amphibians because they belonged on either side. Humans, who occasionally arrived with nets and notebooks, thought this meant land and water. It did mean land and water. It also meant the places the water remembered after the land had forgotten them.

The keepers called at dusk. Somewhere beneath the visible pools, other throats answered, and the hidden channels opened for another night. Water found sleeping roots. Rain found the right hills. Things that had wandered into the wrong world found their way home.

Then the other callers had grown fewer. Some had moved upstream. Some had died. Some had gone into the hidden water to look for those who had not returned.

Noll had stayed by the culvert because someone needed to answer.

“Orris?” they said.

The tunnel dripped.

In the shallow water at their feet, a reflection appeared: a small, open doorway with a light beyond it.

Noll looked at the wall above. Solid stone. They looked down again. A shadow crossed the reflected doorway, moving slowly enough to be certain it had been noticed.

Then it was gone.



Noll backed out into the ditch.

They were not going to Bellwether at night merely because something had borrowed a familiar voice. That would be foolish. They would spend the night considering it carefully, and go in the morning.

Behind them, the thread of water running through the culvert stopped.

They touched it. No current. A little raft of duckweed hung motionless against their finger. Above the road, where the ditch ought to have been whispering, there was silence.

Noll tried the three notes.

The water trembled but did not move.

They went home.

Home was a hollow beneath an alder root, lined with damp moss and furnished with a flat stone that had taken six days to position correctly. Noll pulled their waterproof satchel from its peg.

They packed a length of blue thread, a curved needle, a waxed leaf of salve, three dried water-beetle cakes, a smooth white pebble, an empty snail shell, and the brass button Orris had once mistaken for a coin.

The button was useless. Noll packed it anyway.

Last came a damp scrap from a human field guide. Under a picture of something entirely unlike Noll were the words COMMON AND WIDESPREAD.

“Not lately,” Noll told it.

They folded it carefully and closed the satchel.

Outside, a thin frost had begun to form on the motionless water. It was too early in the year for frost.

Noll stepped over it and started uphill.

Chapter Two

The Woman at the Pumping House

The old streambed smelled of iron and leaves. Noll followed it through bramble tunnels, stopping to wet their skin in the few puddles that remained.

At the first bend they found a fish hanging in the air.

It was no longer than a finger, translucent as a breath on glass. It flicked its tail above a patch of dry stones, swimming where the stream had flowed before the channel was diverted.

Noll set a hand beneath it.

Cold passed through their palm. The fish turned toward the hill and vanished.

Farther on, water could be heard running behind a bank of solid earth.

Noll did not like this. They liked water where water belonged. There was room for disagreement about the details, but inside a bank was generally poor placement.

Near midnight they reached the pumping house.

Its windows were boarded, except for one through which a lantern shone. A woman in a wool coat stood at the doorstep with a flask tucked beneath her arm. She had gray hair, muddy boots, and the watchful weariness of someone who had been listening for a long time.

"There you are," she said.

Noll stopped beneath a dock leaf.

"That depends."

The woman lowered the lantern. "My gran said there might be one of you left."

"Your gran sounds better informed than this." Noll showed her the field-guide scrap.

The woman read it and pressed her lips together.

"I'm Ada."

"Noll."

She did not reach for them. Noll approved of that.

"Did you hear the voice?" Ada asked.

"Whose?"

"My brother's. He died when we were children."

The night seemed to draw closer to the lantern.

Ada looked toward a narrow stair descending behind the pumping house. "It's been calling from the inspection shaft. Tonight it said it was cold."

"And you came."

"I brought a coat." She looked down at the bundle by her feet.

"I know."

Noll had brought a button. They were in no position to criticize.

"Something is wrong with the hidden water," they said.

Ada nodded toward the house. "The old lower gate is still shut. Gran used to complain about it. Said the men who diverted the stream closed more than they understood."

She led Noll inside. On the wall hung a diagram of channels and sluices. Ada put her lantern beside it.

"The main stream went around the hill after the mill closed. This little passage was supposed to stay open for drainage." Her finger followed a narrow line. "But the lower gate jammed. Nobody came back."

Noll examined the diagram. The passage joined Bellwether Pool to the downstream marsh. The old keepers had called there every spring.

They remembered Orris returning from that hill with rusty hands.

"Couldn't shift it," Orris had said. "We'll try again when the others come."

Noll had forgotten that. Or put it somewhere they did not have to look at it.

Ada took an iron maintenance key from a hook. "I can open the inspection door. Beyond that, the tunnel's too small for me."

"Good," Noll said.

"Good?"

"Someone should remain where things are sensible."

From beneath the floor came a boy's voice.

"Ada? I can see your light."

Her hand closed around the key.

Noll listened. The voice was soft and near, with the little catch in it that made Ada's face change.

"Ask him something," Noll said. "Something new."

Ada swallowed. "What am I holding?"

"Ada," said the voice. "I'm cold."

She raised the key, though there was no one in the room to see. "Tell me what's in my hand."

Beneath the boards, the voice gave a small, disappointed sigh.

Then Orris said, "Noll. Come down."

Ada set the spare coat on a chair. Her fingers shook, but she fitted the key into the inspection door without dropping it.

"I'll keep the lantern here," she said.

Noll nodded. They were suddenly very grateful for the sensible end of the tunnel.

The door opened on wet steps and a black slit in the stone.

Noll went down.

Chapter Three

What the Gate Had Kept

The passage was just wide enough for Noll's shoulders. Roots pressed through the mortar, and the air tasted of old pennies.

Water ran along the ceiling.

Noll watched a silver bead travel uphill and disappear into a crack. Whatever was happening at Bellwether, it was reaching farther now.

They tied the blue thread to the inspection-door hinge and unrolled it as they went. It would not reach all the way back if the passage changed, but it might remind the passage where it had been.

At the far end, the tunnel opened into a round chamber.

Moonlight fell through a broken vent. Beneath it stood an iron wheel, nearly as tall as Noll. A narrow ledge curved past the wheel to a closed lattice gate.

Beyond the bars was a flooded woodland.

Pale trunks descended through dark water. Leaves drifted overhead where there should have been a roof. Far between the trees, a light moved from pool to pool.

Noll pressed closer.

"Orris?"

Something came between the trunks.

It was tall and roughly human in shape, though its edges would not settle. Dead leaves turned inside it. Gaps opened where its chest ought to have been, showing trees beyond. Its face was a hollow held together by darkness.

When it spoke, Orris's voice came out.

"You took your time."

Noll's knees weakened. It was such an ordinary thing for Orris to say.

"What am I holding?" Noll asked.

They held nothing.

The thing leaned toward the bars.

"You took your time," it repeated.

Noll stepped back.

Orris used to say that when the young keepers arrived late for chorus. The water must have heard it hundreds of times.

"You've been listening," Noll said.

The creature's head tilted. A leaf slid through the space where its cheek should have been.

"I'm cold," it said, in the boy's voice.

Behind Noll, the wheel creaked without turning.

They examined the gate. A heavy wooden stop had swollen into the wheel's mechanism. Someone had driven it there years ago to keep the jammed gate from slipping. A tiny current seeped beneath the bottom bar, then disappeared into a crack in the ledge instead of flowing down the proper channel.

The hidden water was backing up. Every year, less could get through. Now its trapped memories were spilling into the living streambed.

And something had made itself out of what had been left waiting.

"Open," it said.

That word was new.

Noll looked up.

The hollow face was watching their hands.

They understood then that the gate was holding back two things: the water the marsh needed, and a creature Noll could not possibly wrestle.

"An awkward arrangement," they said.

The creature lifted one long arm. Behind it, shapes moved among the pale roots: fish, drifting leaves, something with delicate legs. They were caught in a slow current that went nowhere.

Noll put both hands on the wooden stop and pulled. It did not move.

They tried standing on it. This was equally unsuccessful and less dignified.

"You took your time," said Orris.

"I am aware."

Noll sat down, breathing hard. The moonlight was slipping up the chamber wall. Soon it would leave the vent, just as the voice had warned.

They opened the satchel.

The brass button shone among their supplies. Noll rubbed a thumb over it, remembering the sound of Orris laughing when the supposed coin would buy nothing.

For a moment the gate, the wheel, the whole impossible night became too much. Noll had spent so long waiting for someone who knew what to do.

They took out the empty snail shell instead.

Orris had taught them the evening call with a shell. Listen for the hollow, find the low note, let the throat do the rest. Noll had been very small. There had been twenty other voices in the reeds.

They set the shell beside the little current on the ledge and sang into it.



The first note shook. The second steadied.

Across the gate, the leaf creature bent toward the sound. It answered with the first note, a little late.

Noll stopped. The thing stopped too.

It could repeat what it heard. Perhaps that was all it knew how to do.

Noll moved the shell nearer the crack where the water was escaping. They sang again, softly enough that the shell gathered the sound and sent it down into the narrow opening.

The creature folded itself toward the ledge.

"This way," Noll whispered.

Leaves loosened from its shoulders. Its long body thinned into a wavering ribbon and followed the note through the bars, toward the shell, toward the cold water running into the crack.

Noll kept singing until the last leaf disappeared.

Below the ledge, their own voice continued, faint and far away.

They did not know where the crack led. They knew only that, for the moment, the creature was following a sound away from the gate.

Noll sprang onto the wheel.

They worked salve around the wooden stop, pushed the curved needle into the softened edge, and worried out a strip of rotten wood. Then another. The needle bent.

“Unacceptable,” they gasped, and kept working.

At last the stop shifted.

Noll pulled with both hands. It came free, carrying them backward into a puddle.

The wheel lurched. Beyond the gate, the trapped woodland shivered.

Noll scrambled up and threw their weight against an iron spoke.

The gate rose an inch.

Water rushed beneath it.

Chapter Four

The First Answer

The wheel struck Noll's shoulder and knocked them flat.

For a moment there was only water: in their ears, over their eyes, pulling at the satchel strap. They caught the ledge with one hand.

The wheel was turning backward.

The gate dropped with a crash, leaving a finger's breadth beneath it. Water squeezed through in a furious white line.

Noll hauled himself out.

They had removed the old stop. The worn mechanism could not hold the gate's weight on its own.

From the crack beneath the ledge came a small rustling sound.

Their last note was fading.

Noll reached for the white pebble, then paused. It was round and smooth. It would roll straight out. The cakes would crumble. The shell was gone. The field guide had never been useful and was unlikely to start now.

The brass button had a thick little loop on its back.

Noll held it against the worn catch beside the wheel. Almost. They pushed the bent needle through the loop to keep it from slipping sideways.

Then they pulled the wheel.

It moved a fraction. Pain ran through their shoulder.

Above, in the passage, Ada called, "Noll?"

"Pull the thread!"

"What?"

“Gently!”

The blue thread tightened along the ledge. Noll tied its free end to a spoke. It would not lift an iron gate, but it took a little of the wheel’s weight while they found a better grip.

They planted both feet and heaved.

The catch lifted. Noll jammed the button beneath it.

Metal scraped. The needle bowed.

The wheel held.

Through the opening beneath the gate, water poured into the channel that led downhill. A small transparent fish shot past Noll’s ankles, followed by a leaf that unfolded into a moth and rose toward the vent.

Noll watched it go.

There was room now. A passage, however small.

The rustling in the crack grew louder.

Noll climbed to the dry edge of the ledge and called.

They sang the opening notes Orris had taught them, then the longer phrase that belonged to the downstream marsh. Their voice scraped. They swallowed water and began again.

The flooded woodland beyond the bars changed.

What had seemed like distant lights were openings between the trees. One by one they brightened. The water found them, and a current began to pull away from the gate, deeper into the hidden places.

The rustling stopped.

In the crack, something breathed with Noll’s breath.

They sang a third time.

The leaf creature emerged low along the floor. It gathered itself on the far side of the bars, smaller now, its edges streaming toward the awakened current.

Noll let the final note go.

For a heartbeat, nothing moved.

Then the creature answered.

It was Noll's voice, but carried farther than their lungs could carry it. The note crossed the flooded wood. A light opened among the most distant trees.

The leaves turned toward it.

Slowly, the creature came apart. Each leaf went separately, riding the current between the pale trunks. The darkness thinned behind them until Noll could see all the way through.

From very far away came Orris's three familiar notes.

Noll listened until they ended.

"Good night," they said.

They did not ask the water to say anything more.

By the time Noll reached the inspection door, dawn had begun to lighten Ada's window. She was sitting on the floor with the taut thread wound around two fingers.

"You said gently," she told them.

Noll leaned against her muddy boot.

"You did very well."

Ada looked down at their shaking hands. She set a shallow dish of clean water beside them and waited while they climbed in.

After a while she asked, "Was he there?"

Noll knew whom she meant.

"I heard what the water remembered."

Ada looked at the coat on the chair. Then she folded it and laid it across her knees.

They stayed until the light became morning.

Later, Ada went down with proper tools. She fitted a sound iron pin where a brass button and a ruined needle had done their best. She cleared the channel outside the pumping house by hand. There was more work to do, but the stream was running.

Noll meant to go home.

They had an excellent stone, a familiar root, and several justified complaints about the night. But as they passed Bellwether Pool, a movement caught their eye beneath an alder root.

A tiny tail flickered.

Noll crouched.

There was a tadpole in the shallows. Then another, no larger than a seed. A cluster of dark little bodies sheltered among the roots where fresh water entered the pool.

They did not look quite like the tadpoles in the human field guide.

Neither had Noll.



For a long time they sat without moving.

They could not tell where the little ones had come from. Perhaps a surviving clutch had waited in a spring beyond the blocked gate. Perhaps the hidden channels reached farther than anyone knew.

There were questions enough for several journeys.

For now, there was a pool that needed watching.

Noll took the smooth white pebble from the satchel and placed it beside the bank, marking the place for Ada. Then they moved into the shade so their shadow would not darken the shallows.

At dusk, they climbed onto a low stone and cleared their throat.

They called once, quietly.

Nothing answered. The tadpoles were much too young, and Noll was not unreasonable.

"That was the first note," they told the water. "We'll do it again tomorrow."

Below the stone, a tiny tail flicked against the current.

Noll settled in to wait.

The End