

THE FROG'S LEDGER

- CHAPTER I -

AE HERON IN QUESTION

L . BROTHERWOOD

The Heron in Question

There were several gardens within the HRB's jurisdiction, what lay beyond was wild, unordered, messy, and downright dangerous. Or so the Bureau insisted.

Sir Reginald Bullrush, Reggie to those who valued efficiency over formality, had never ventured beyond the boundary fence. He considered it a matter of professional integrity. Sector P, the pond, was his domain. His responsibility. His burden, some might say, though never within his earshot.

This particular morning, the mist rose in pale ribbons from the water, softening the edges of the world. Reggie stood on his inspection stone, sipping tea and nibbling a slice of freshly buttered toast. The reeds stood to attention. The lily pads drifted in a formation that could, with some generosity, be described as "loosely cooperative."



Reggie was feeling nostalgic.

He thought of Bram.

Bram had been his apprentice for many seasons, a young hedgehog with bright eyes, uneven quills, and a dangerous tendency toward curiosity. Reggie remembered their first shift together: Bram trotting beside him, tripping over a root, apologising to the root, then asking whether roots were subject to Regulation 7A.

Bram had continued asking questions faster than Reggie's brain could compute.

"Why do lily pads have to stay in formation?" "Who decides what counts as 'overgrown'?" "Why does the Bureau get to say what's tidy?" "Who made the rules in the first place?"

Reggie had nearly swallowed his clipboard.

He explained, patiently, that rules were rules and order was order and that without them the garden would collapse into chaos. Brambles everywhere, moss behaving unpredictably, birds landing wherever they pleased.

Bram had nodded thoughtfully and then observed, "But isn't that what gardens do?"

Reggie had needed a lie-down after that.

But the hedgehog had grown in competence, in confidence, and unfortunately, in curiosity. Today he was beginning his new post as Petit Supervisor, Compost Division. A proud moment, but a worrying one. Bram in charge of compost; it felt like handing a lantern to someone who had only just learned

what fire was.

He took another sip of tea. The mist curled around his toes. He missed the little fellow already. Apprentices gave structure to a morning. They asked questions. They made you feel needed.

Now the pond felt... quiet.

Too quiet.

He was just considering a second slice of toast when a shadow passed overhead.

Reggie froze.

The shadow circled once, twice, then descended with the slow inevitability of a bureaucratic memo.

A heron landed on the far bank.

Tall. Grey. Overly leggy. And visiting far more often than Regulation 9C strictly permitted.

Reggie cleared his throat with a firm, authoritative croak.

"You there!" he called. "State your business in Sector P."

The heron blinked down at him. "Morning."

"That is not an answer."

"It's a greeting."

"This is an inspection."

The heron sighed, a long, valley-deep sigh. "Reggie—"

"Officer Bullrush."

"Officer Bullrush," the heron corrected, though without enthusiasm. "I'm here for fish."

"Fishing requires a license"

"I'm a heron."

"That is not a license."

The heron looked at him for a long moment. "There's been a shortage down in the valley. Thought I'd try my luck up here."

"A shortage?" Reggie straightened. "Fish shortages must be reported to the Bureau immediately."

"It's nature," the heron said. "These things happen."



“Nature,” Reggie muttered, making a note. “Always causing trouble.”

A dragonfly buzzed around his head, interrupting his line of thought. Reggie shook himself violently and burst out, “Fish in Sector P are not for eating!”

The heron raised an eyebrow. “You do know what herons do, right?”

“That is beside the point.”

The heron gave the pond a slow, sweeping glance. The waterfall burred cheerfully, entirely unregulated. The lily pads drifted further out of formation. A clump of weed crept an inch closer to the water’s edge.

“Seems like the garden’s doing fine despite all the rules,” he said.

Reggie stiffened. “That is a matter of opinion.”

“Yours?”

“The Bureau’s.”

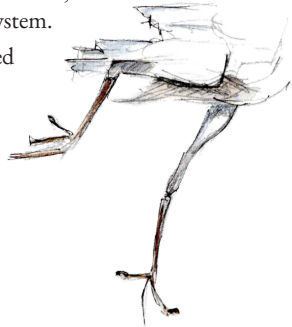
The heron shrugged his wings. “Well, good luck with err... all this.”

He gestured vaguely at the pond, the reeds, the entire sprawling, non-compliant ecosystem.

Then he lifted into the air and glided away, his somewhat gangly long legs trailing behind him like a prehistoric imposter.

Reggie watched him disappear over the hedge. His tea had gone cold.

Retirement crossed his mind.



Now that Bram was off to the Compost Division, perhaps his time with the HRB was drawing to a close. He could sit by the pond. Drink more tea. Eat more toast. Let the moss grow however it pleased.

But something tugged at him, a sense that things were shifting. Not the usual blips in protocol. Something deeper.

He took out his personal ledger and jotted down his morning report.

Heron: suspicious.

Motives unclear.

Return visit likely.

Recommend further questioning.

He closed his notebook with a decisive snap and took a sip of tea, which ambushed him with its coldness for the second time that morning. He grimaced. The garden hummed around him as a bubble rose from the depths of Sector P, shaking a nearby lily pad.

Reggie narrowed his eyes.

Perhaps now was not quite the right moment for retirement after all.

EXTRACT: Personal Garden Ledger

OFFICER: Sir Reginald Bullrush

DATE: May 2026

There have been whispers. Not the sort you can catch on a breeze or report to the vicar, but whispers all the same, most noticeable at first light and again when the sun slips behind the trees. The garden, outwardly calm, continues its usual nonsense with remarkable consistency.

The valley heron has taken to visiting Sector P, with suspicious regularity. More often than etiquette would suggest. One suspects it carries messages of some sort, though it has, alas, failed to submit the proper paperwork. Such birds.

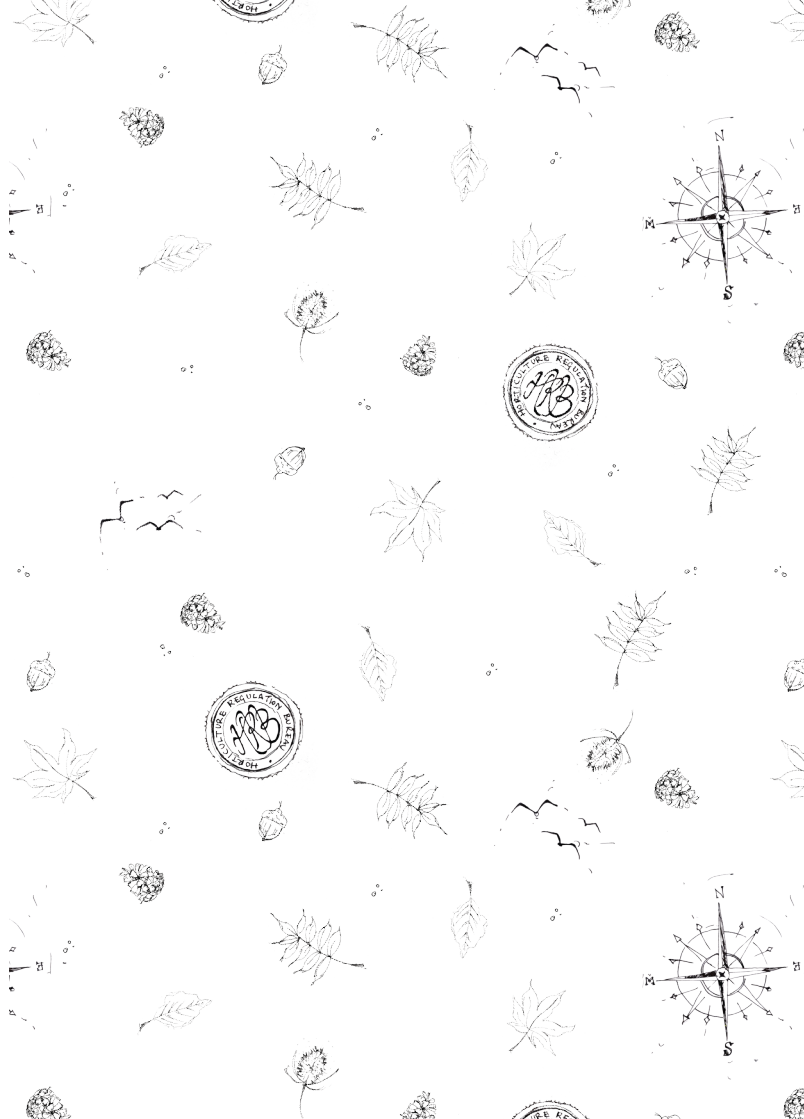
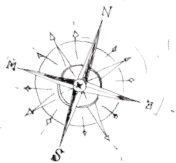
Beneath the soil, there is a stirring, subtle, persistent, and altogether improper. While nothing has broken the rules outright, prudence recommends keeping a sharp eye on rhubarb, raspberries, and any particularly suspicious patches of moss.

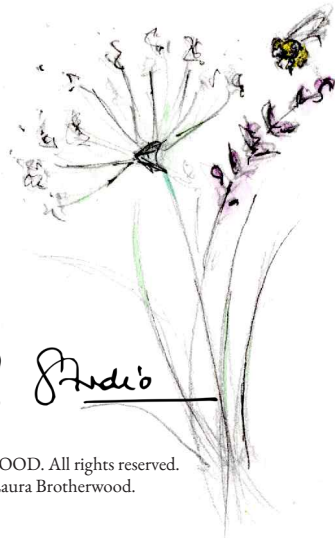
All seems orderly, and yet something is moving through the garden, just beyond polite notice.

Further observation is strongly advised. Possibly with biscuits.

—S.R. Bullrush

HORTICULTURAL REGULATION BUREAU
GARDEN 5T7MCTOR-P





Brotherwood Studio

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