



Tales of Briar's Thicket
Book One: The Herbalist of the Verdant Claw

Chapter One

The Lights After Sunset

When I was eight years old, I was completely certain that Renzu Leroux was hiding something.

Not because he was a tanuki.

In Briar's Thicket, that sort of thing hardly mattered. Half the town had ears, tails, horns, feathers, scales, or some combination thereof. Renzu's rounded tanuki ears and striped tail were simply part of him, like Maeve's red hair or Old Havelock's crooked walking stick.

No, Renzu was suspicious for entirely different reasons.

For one thing, his greenhouse glowed after sunset.

For another, plants seemed to behave better around him than they did around anyone else.

And most suspicious of all, Renzu always smiled like someone who knew the ending of a story before anyone else had reached the first page.

Adults called him the proprietor of the Verdant Claw Herbal Emporium.

I called him my chief suspect.

Not aloud, of course.

Even at eight, I understood the importance of stealth.

I also understood the importance of notebooks.

Mine was a small, battered thing with a bent cover, three missing pages, and a heroic number of duck sketches in the margins.

Across the first page, in my finest handwriting, I had written:

Investigation into the Strange Affairs of Master Renzu Leroux

Beneath that, I had begun my list of evidence.

Observation #1: Greenhouse glows after dark.

Observation #2: Renzu talks to plants.

Observation #3: Plants appear to listen.

Observation #4: Tail twitches when questioned.

Observation #5: Definitely hiding something.

Looking back, I admit some of my evidence was weak.

At the time, I considered the case practically solved.

The Verdant Claw Herbal Emporium sat near the heart of Briar's Thicket, tucked along a cozy lane where the morning sun warmed the stones and the smell of fresh bread drifted from the market.

The shop itself was built of dark timber and pale stone, with bundles of drying herbs hanging beneath the eaves. A carved wooden sign swung above the door, painted with curling green vines and a claw-shaped leaf.

But the greenhouse was the true mystery.

It stretched from the back of the shop in a grand arch of glass panes and wooden beams. By day, it was beautiful enough. Sunlight shimmered across the glass. Leaves pressed against the windows. Flowers of every color leaned toward the warmth.

By night, however, it became something else entirely.

Blue lights flickered between the panes.

Gold glimmers pulsed among the leaves.

Sometimes a soft green glow shimmered so brightly that the greenhouse looked less like a place for growing herbs and more like a captured star.

Naturally, I came to the only reasonable conclusion.

Renzu Leroux was performing secret magic.



The adults disagreed.

“Those are only Moonblossoms,” my mother told me one evening.

Only Moonblossoms.

As if that explained anything.

I had seen daisies.

I had seen roses.

I had seen turnips, cabbages, pumpkins, and one truly suspicious squash behind the baker’s house.

None of them glowed blue after sunset.

The matter required further investigation.

So, on a bright spring morning, I set out across Market Square with my notebook tucked beneath one arm and a half-eaten honey roll in my pocket.

Every investigator needs provisions.

The town was already awake.

Merchants lifted shutters.

Chickens complained in alleyways.

A baker's boy rushed past with flour on his nose.

Somewhere near the fountain, someone was arguing cheerfully over the price of apples.

And there, stepping out from the direction of the greenhouse, was Renzu Leroux.

He carried a basket of clipped herbs in one hand and a watering can in the other.

His sleeves were rolled to his elbows.

A smudge of soil marked one cheek.

His striped tail swayed lazily behind him as he walked.

He looked ordinary.

That, I felt, made him even more suspicious.

I ducked behind a stack of empty crates.

Renzu paused.

One rounded ear twitched.

I froze.

He turned his head slightly, though not enough to look directly at me.

"Good morning," he said.

I held my breath.

"Good morning to anyone who may happen to be hiding behind the onion crates."



I slowly looked down.

They were onion crates.

A good investigator notices details.

A great investigator notices them before being caught.

I stepped out with as much dignity as an eight-year-old with honey roll crumbs on their sleeve can possess.

“Good morning, Master Renzu.”

His eyes drifted to the notebook under my arm.

“Important business today?”

“No.”

“No?”

“Possibly.”

“I see.”

He smiled.

That smile immediately went into my notes.

Before I could escape, the bell above the herbal shop door chimed.

Maeve stepped inside.

At the time, Maeve was already known throughout Briar's Thicket as one of the finest seamstresses in town.

She had bright red hair usually tied back from her face, sharp eyes that noticed every crooked hem, and the sort of posture that made even adults stand straighter when she entered a room.

She carried a roll of pale fabric beneath one arm and a bundle of thread samples in the other.

Renzu straightened so quickly that his watering can sloshed.

Interesting.

Maeve smiled at him.

“Morning, Renzu.”

His ears lifted.

“Maeve. Good morning. I was just—well, I was watering. Obviously.”



I narrowed my eyes.

Observation #6: Renzu becomes strange when Maeve enters shop. Possible enchantment?

Maeve glanced toward the greenhouse.

“How is it?”

For the first time that morning, Renzu’s smile faded.

Only a little.

But I saw it.

“It’s holding on,” he said.

Maeve’s fingers tightened around the fabric.

“The wedding is in twelve days.”

“I know.”

“I wouldn’t ask if it weren’t important.”

“I know that too.”

Something passed between them then.

Something quiet and grown-up and impossible to fit neatly into an investigation notebook.

I disliked it immediately.

Maeve lowered her voice.

“The bride’s mother wore Moonblossom thread on her wedding day. Her grandmother too. I promised I would do everything I could.”

Renzu nodded.

“And I promised you I’d try.”

Maeve looked at him for a long moment.

Then she smiled gently.

“I know.”

This caused Renzu’s ears to flatten in a manner I found deeply suspicious.

Maeve left soon after, the bell chiming softly behind her.

Renzu stood very still for several seconds.

Then he sighed.

Not loudly.

Not dramatically.

Just enough for me to hear.

It was the sort of sigh adults make when they are carrying something heavier than baskets or watering cans.

I had never heard Renzu make that sound before.

He turned toward the greenhouse.



I looked at my notebook.

For the first time, I did not write anything down.

Not because there was nothing to record.

Because I did not yet understand what I had seen.

That would come later.

At the time, I only knew one thing for certain.

The strange lights after sunset were no longer my only clue.

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End Chapter