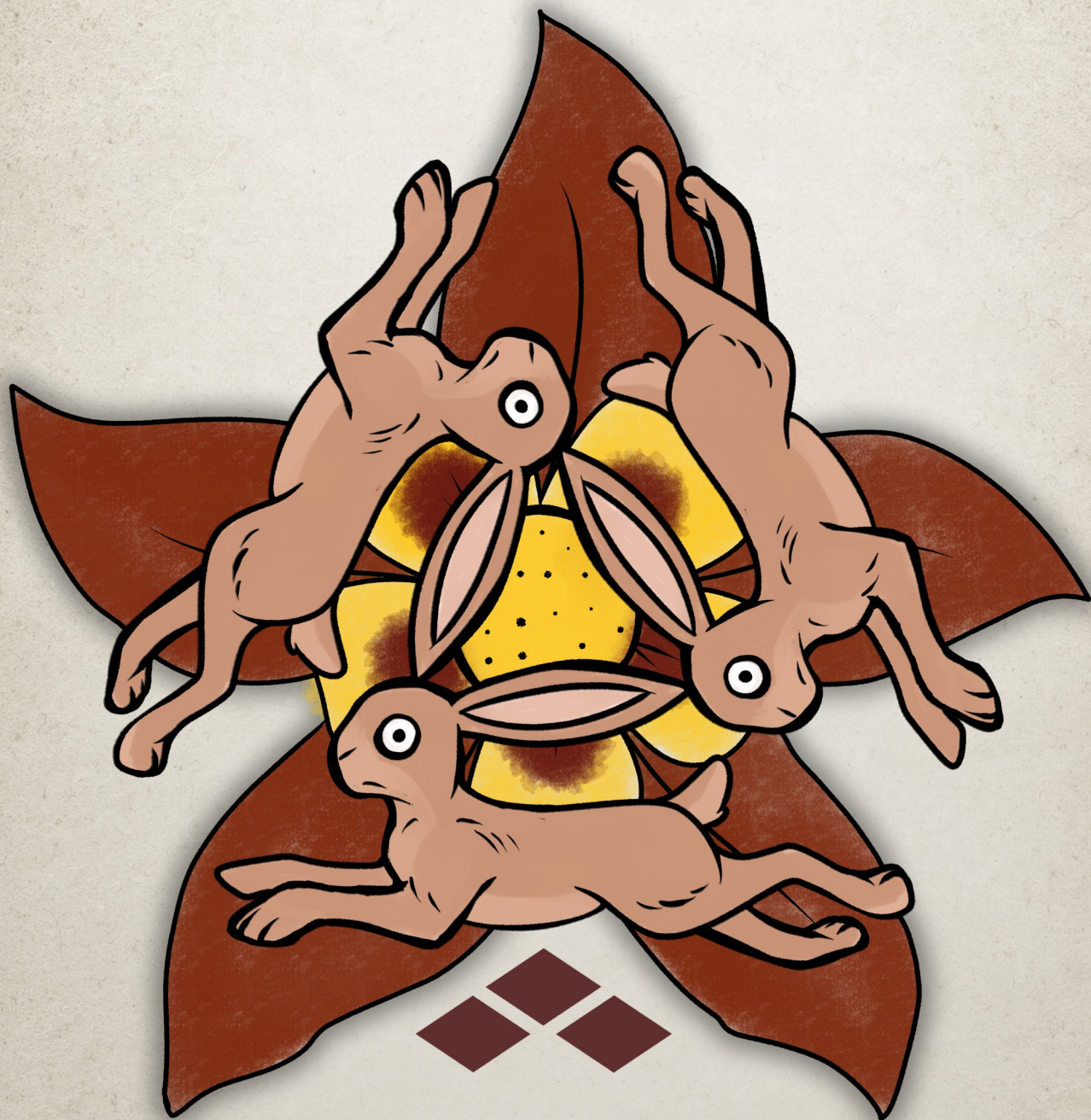


Great Warren



◆ Zachary Ross ◆

The Fall Book
Part I: Wherefore Comest Thou Here?

1

Stout white clouds rolled eastward over Cinnamon's head, a great herd of bison pulling wagonloads of rain. In his boredom he listened to their hooves clomping on the stones beneath, to the clatter of their wagon wheels, to the wind which drove them toward the sun and scattered leaves like glowing embers over the face of the earth. They were at the height of their glory now, red maples, birches burning orange on wicks of white, brilliant golden tamaracks ready to shed their robes while spruces just beside clung to their green. The air was sweet with the scent of decaying leaves. The warmth of summer had ended too soon, too abruptly; with every mile they gained toward the Ess, the chill grew.

It was the very last day of the tenth month, the twelfth day since they had set out upon the Mistway. The foothills of Mount Arzkoroll were gentler on her western side; after only five days they had come to a wide road winding northwest through undulating country. Uncut forest shaded them on either side for a while after. Clearings were few and far between, but in those moments when the trees gave way to the east Cinnamon was awed to find the mountain miraculously veiled again. The hills rolled on, but no peak could be seen.

They came across two small villages in those woods, but stayed at each for a single night only and did not bother setting up any tents. Rather, to the surprise of the Circusfolk Hilarion instructed the exorcists not to hide their work behind clowning, but to declare openly that they had come to cast out demons and to overturn the works of the enemy. This they did, healing many made ill or bound in terror by unwholesome spirits tracked in by queer folk from the north and west. Most often these fiends brought chills, worming their way into homes to cast frost over all within and without during the night. They were easily cast out, however, proving themselves cowards as all demons inevitably do. Cinnamon, to his own surprise, joined in these exorcisms with surprising confidence. His sinews had been steeled, he found, by those greater demons he had already encountered; as it turned out, the spirits who haunted cellars and closets were less intimidating than those who held whole cities in their grip.

There was, however, one exorcism in the second village which disturbed him. A great swarm of flies had been plaguing them, streaming always from a hermit's shack off in the woods. Coming to this shack, they found the hermit raving, covered in flies he sowed like seed over a withered garden. He choked when he saw their lamps approaching. The flies scattered before their light, revealing the demoniac an unwashed bullfolk who had yoked himself like a dumb beast. Spells he wove at first, their words little more than beastly grunting, then turned to run when he found they would not work. Seeing that he was surrounded, however, his fear turned to rage and he lashed out at Cinnamon, perceiving perhaps that he was the weakest of the bunch. A stream of fire from Hilarion's lamp handily repelled him, yet even so Cinnamon trembled to behold so hale a folk made speechless by the enemy.

The trembling ceased when the exorcism began. Flames licked harmlessly at his fur, roaring from a lamp inexplicably brighter than those of his companions. Yet even after the blazing form of the Great Badger wrenched demon from demoniac and burned the fetor from the air, his feral expression remained in Cinnamon's mind. No monster from his nightmares could compare to the horror of a folkish face robbed of its folkishness.

When the hermit was in his right mind again, they kindled a fire in his hearth and gave him food and water, for he had grown thin and very weak. Far from being angry, he thanked them profusely, explaining in tears how he had purchased seeds from a traveler who swore that they were enchanted to bring abundant harvest. The seeds had only been flies, however, and he had not known it until he was seized in the sowing by a madness of which he could not rid himself.

Hilarion blessed his hearth-fire then, and taught him a song to the Great Ox which he had learned in his youth and forgotten, warning him sternly to never again heed the words of traveling magicians. "Drive them out of town with stones if you must," he said. "That's how you can make up for the trouble you've caused." He agreed to this, and the very next morning The Circus took to the road again.

Four days later they had come across no other settlements. Once or twice they passed merchants on laden wagons who marveled at the long train of clowns rolling on in file like a gaudy rainbow, but apart from these they encountered nobody else. The forest went on uninterrupted while the ground began to rise again, then at midday they crested a high hill and met the treeline. Cinnamon rolled his neck, sore from resting it on the back of the bench, and looked ahead. The road fell swiftly into a fruiting green valley hemmed in by hills north and south. Fevered trees looked down from the farther side, nestled in intimate copses flanking a lazy river flowing southwest. Mills hugged the water, and on a level place near the south bank Cinnamon could see a town shining white beneath an intermittent sun. Four roads converged at its center, north, east, south, and west, carrying many folk into and out of its whitewashed palisade walls. The east road wound through the valley, plunging deeper into farm country until it disappeared behind a bend in the hills. The north road crossed the river over a wide stone bridge before climbing again into the trees, and the west road followed its course out of sight, never diverging from the dark line of the water.

"It's bigger than Kent!" he exclaimed, perking up and turning to Bregdan. "What town is that?"

"Wester's Corners," Bregdan answered, yawning and blinking away tears. "Just in time, too. Four days of the same thing was a-puttin' me to sleep."

"Wester?" asked Cinnamon. "Who's Wester?"

"All them," Bregdan snickered, motioning toward the town. "Westers is what they call folk from the coast. That road along the river there goes all the way to some big city by the sea – Kingsmouth, I think it's called. Wester's Corners got named after the Westers what like to stop here on their way to Fiscufen and Whitspring, places like that." He traced the river with his claw as he spoke, then reached his arms into the air and stretched, yowling.

"All the way to the sea?" Cinnamon marveled, standing to look west down the valley until it slipped over the horizon. "How far is that?"

"Too far," said Bregdan. "More'n a thousand miles, maybe? I don't know, I don't think about the coast much. Too much road to cover 'round the Ess as it is."

"A thousand miles," Cinnamon breathed, dizzily falling back onto the bench as he tried to conceive of such a distance. Turning his eyes again to the road, he watched the colorful canvas of the wagon train descend into the valley. On they rolled past yellow grasses with white heads swaying in the wind, their aged blades braced against the dying of the year. Farther fields were ripe for harvest. Cinnamon watched as folk in wide straw hats brought in their sheaves, oxfolk and boarfolk with their mighty arms, and gopherfolk from their little farmhouses. As they neared the river he saw also many ramfolk with wool from white to dun to black, as well as goatfolk with shaggy coats and long, flowing beards. Near the side of the road worked a white billy with great, forking horns. He glanced up from his labor as they passed, flashing a tickled grin.

"It's funny," Cinnamon said after they had gone by. "All of the goatfolk in the Enchanted Forest live on the other side of The River, so I never got to meet any. Mount Arzkoroll is the first place I ever saw one."

"No kiddin'!" Bregdan exclaimed, cocking his head to the side. "They like the heat, or what?"

"They like to keep to themselves," said Cinnamon. "I think they suffered terribly under Black Goat, and so they prefer the deeper, quieter parts of the Forest, even now. The enchantment is thicker in the Southlands, according to Bear."

"Hard to imagine folk stickin' around in one place for so long," said Bregdan.

"Many old families are still there," said Cinnamon, "right where they settled when the Forest was sung into being. There's a badger clan down the road from Home Cave who trace themselves all the way back to folk who ran north during the reign of the enemy."

"Well flick my whiskers!" Bregdan whistled. "That's more'n the king of Fiscofen can say!"

"It's more than I can say," Cinnamon smiled. "I would give my right arm to know which warren is mine."

"How many warrens is in Great Warren, anyhow?" asked Bregdan.

"It depends on who you ask," said Cinnamon. "There were eight ruling warrens at her height, and at least sixteen smaller warrens scattered throughout the Valley. Some say there were many more, but with rabbitfolk it can be hard to get a straight answer. The line between warren, run, den, and burrow is hardly a straight one."

"We got hollers like that in catfolk country," Bregdan nodded. "Nobody can tell you if'n the houses up the road are your village or if'n they're someone else's, but everyone knows his holler."

"Was your holler like that?" asked Cinnamon.

"It ain't no more," Bregdan replied darkly, and said no more.

It did not take them long to arrive at the gates of Wester's Corners. The afternoon was still young when the gate guards let them pass through the little portal in the whitewashed wall, scarcely large enough for their wagons. It was a far cry from the towering stone of Whitspring, and the guards, half asleep, added not an inch to its stature; but as they entered upon that wide street, Cinnamon saw at once that Wester's Corners possessed a charm far grander in its humility than even the noble dwellings of the horsefolk. Its homes were simple cottages of one or two stories, with square, shuttered windows, gabled, round-tiled roofs, and little half-moon porticoes over oaken front doors. Its beauty, rather, came not from size or strength of stone, but rather from its colors and in the artful arrangement of its streets. The walls of the buildings were exclusively white, so bright and spotless that the sun set them aglow whenever it shone down, while in each of its four quarters colors had been chosen in imitation of the four seasons. Blue and yellow and pink and pale green spoke of spring in the northeast, deep green and brown and sky blue of summer in the southeast, red and orange and yellow for fall in the southwest, and pure white and gray for winter in the northwest.

Entering from the south, the wagons rolled up between the Summer and Fall Quarters. To his left Cinnamon saw a lovely long workshop with a red roof and a vibrant maple tree laying a carpet for a king on the lawn before the door, and to his right he admired the conical spire of a white post office with its black weather vane spinning beneath the iron form of the Great Rooster. The streets were busy, with noisy folk parting on either side as they crowded around shops and inns; and the closer they drew to the center of town, the more crowded it became. Travelers from Fiscofen and the more distant Westers were set apart by their unfamiliar clothing. Local folk, mostly farmers, wore the same quaint suspenders and straw hats that anyone living in the Ess would recognize. All alike stopped to gawk at The Circus – some with delighted grins, others with bitter frowns. Cinnamon was reminded of Glorybell, and he wondered how much of the enemy's influence had trickled down from the mountains.

He did not have to wonder long. Mingled scents of food and folk and foreign wares hung in the air. He closed his eyes and sniffed, sifting through a thousand like grains of sand, only to be suddenly compelled to look east down a narrow street in the Summer Quarter. A slight fetor blew out of it, barely perceptible; but once winded, it was unmistakable. And while the sky above the town was clear and bright, the little street seemed dark somehow. Its mouth was flanked by a cobbler's workshop and an inn taller than it was wide, both neglected except by a few folk who looked darkly at the wagon train from beneath their porches. Eyes more suspicious still met them farther up the street.

A chill breeze found its way into the open breast of Cinnamon's cloak. He shivered, looking to Bregdan; the sable cat was scowling, but looked only ahead.

"Corners is always like this," he said. "Sometimes it's a street, sometimes just a house. We do what we can whenever we're in town, but there's just too many folk a-passin' through from who knows where, draggin' in their mud as fast as we can clean it up."

"If only there were exorcists living here," Cinnamon said. "Someone who could keep an eye out."

Bregdan laughed grimly. "That's how it used to be! Most towns had an exorcist or two in the old days. Then they stopped makin' sons and croaked with nobody to replace 'em."

"Why did they do that?" Cinnamon asked, furrowing his brow.

"I s'pose folk didn't wanna do it no more," Bregdan shrugged. "Couldn't tell you why. All's I know is that we gotta pick up the slack now."

Shortly they came to the crossroads, that meadow of nectared blossoms every merchant for a hundred miles wished to pollinate. Food and drink spilled out of multicolored inns to tables beside the road. Buskers cheeked their fiddles and howled. For all of the bustle, however, the Summer Quarter was even here sparsely attended. Merchants, mostly well-dressed Westers and robed catfolk from Fiscofen, traded bitter-smelling herbs and viscous liquors, books imprinted with queer devices and machines of unclear purpose. Local folk from the Summer Quarter would come to buy from time to time, only to return to their homes after; apart from these, no one seemed keen to visit that part of town.

A coyotefolk in a flat flannel cap and mink coat caught their eye from behind one of the booths. His dark eyes drilled into theirs, brimming with suspicion. Bregdan bristled at him, and it seemed that even the bison huffed in contempt as they passed.

"They don't even bother runnin' 'em outta town no more," he grumbled.

Crossing to the north side of town, The Circus at last left the road, pulling onto a great, wide park in the Spring Quarter dotted with cherry trees and wintered lilac bushes – The Square Lawn, as Bregdan called it. It was not square, in fact, but round, so-named because folk preferred it for square dancing in the warmer months. In that same raucous spirit came The Circus, circling the wagons on the grass with permission from nobody.

Performers leaped down from their benches and got to work immediately, hauling out their bright canopies and pitching their tents with song and dance as if it were an act unto itself. They were to stay only two nights, said Hilarion, and so did not erect the Big Top; but the personal tents went up, and a number of the smaller performance tents were arranged like a spoked wheel around a great fire-pit at the center of the lawn. Swiftly made and soon to be swiftly taken down, it was far from the grand city of clowns to which Cinnamon had awoken in Glorybell. Unexpectedly, it brought him some amount of sadness. The Circusfolk seemed no less exuberant than usual, however, and some even donned their costumes as soon as they could, though performances were not slated to begin until the following day.

Cinnamon and Bregdan did little but rest that afternoon, for they drew the short straws that determined who would take the first watch that night. This turned out to be the most agreeable option to Cinnamon, who after a much-needed nap and subsequent supper felt the urge to wander for a while. Miles spent in the seat of a wagon had made him restless, and the solitude of the camp at night would be a suitable setting in which to pace and think.

Clouds rolled in ahead of evening. Fires were lit, and when the exorcists had chanted the watch-hymn, all went to bed save Cinnamon and Bregdan and those odd clowns who preferred to drink and laugh than to sleep. The pair joined them for a time, leaning on their staves before the fire lest in sitting they grow drowsy; but soon even the catfolk went to bed, leaving them alone beneath the overcast sky. The din from the crossroads faded until it was little more than a murmur, carried to their ears by a chill, stiff breeze. Cinnamon pulled his cloak around him and flattened his ears against his head, slipping on its hood. By force of habit he fingered the little censer around his neck, still as fragrant as the day he had received it, though his nose was by now learning to ignore the odor.

"I'm beginning to wonder which is worse," he said, staring into the fire: "walking twenty miles a day behind Hilarion, or sitting on a bench for twenty miles a day behind a bison."

"Shut your eyes and you wouldn't know the difference," Bregdan snickered.

"True!" Cinnamon laughed. "But my tail hurts, and I think I prefer my feet to hurt."

"You gotta build callouses," Bregdan said with a wink.

"Tail-callouses," Cinnamon grinned. "A traveler's worst nightmare."

"Speakin' of nightmares," said Bregdan, "how's the dream-wanderin'?"

"It's been the same every night since we left the mountain," Cinnamon answered, lowering his voice. "It's so strange. I wander the runs for hours. There's never anyone there, and as long as I don't go too deep my lamp stays lit. There seems to be a border, though, and past it the wind blows out its Flame." He grew sullen here and sighed, watching his lamp flicker.

Bregdan nodded. "No more eyes watchin' you?" he asked at length.

"Not since my numbering," said Cinnamon. "I fear they're too afraid to approach."

"Scared you'll put the fire to 'em, eh?" Bregdan smirked. "Good. Let 'em be scared. Cinnamon the Fire-Eater's a real fearsome sight to the wraiths."

"I haven't been able to perform my act a single time yet!" Cinnamon lamented. "I can't exactly make such a name for myself when we don't stay anywhere for more than one night."

"Well how's about that?" Bregdan teased. "You sound disappointed."

"I've really gotten it down!" Cinnamon insisted. "Especially now that I know I can do it without burning myself alive. I don't know, it just seems like a waste to practice it and never use it."

Bregdan cracked a crooked grin at him, firelight glinting upon the flecks of gold in his eyes. "You're takin' to clownin' real quick," he said. "Hilarion's a bad influence, I know."

"Terrible," said Cinnamon. "I don't even like having eyes on me, but he gets so excited about performing that it's hard to not be pulled in after him."

"Oh, I know what you mean," said Bregdan. "Just you wait, you'll be in the Big Top sooner'n later."

"Heaven forbid!" Cinnamon shuddered. "And in any case, he would never put a mute in the center ring."

"So you're playin' the mime then?" asked Bregdan.

Cinnamon nodded.

"I reckon that's a good choice," Bregdan nodded. "Gives you that feelin' of mystery the harefolk have. Your voice gives you away, soon as you open your mouth."

"Have you ever met any harefolk?" asked Cinnamon.

"Yep," said Bregdan. "Seen some Westers once or twice on the road. They don't come 'round too often, even with Great Warren gone."

"She isn't gone," said Cinnamon.

"Shut up tight, then," Bregdan amended. "Hungry ghosts is still a good reason to keep away."

"Someday I hope to meet some harefolk," said Cinnamon. "It's always been a dream of mine."

"You'll give 'em a good scare if'n you do!" said Bregdan. "You might fool other folk into thinkin' you're a hare, but you sure as sugar won't fool them."

"Not even if I play the mime?" Cinnamon joked. "Hide my mousy voice?"

"You better find a way to hide your short legs and your pretty face too, then," said Bregdan.

"You flatter me, Bregdan," said Cinnamon, bowing to his fellow lookout. "I'm going to walk around the camp for a while, if you don't mind," he said. "I'll only get sleepy again if I sit in front of the fire."

"Don't wander off," said Bregdan.

"Thank you, Geranium," said Cinnamon, and walked to the edge of camp.