



REBECCA ROSS

DREAMS  
LIE  
BENEATH



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Quill Tree Books  
An imprint of HarperCollins Publishers

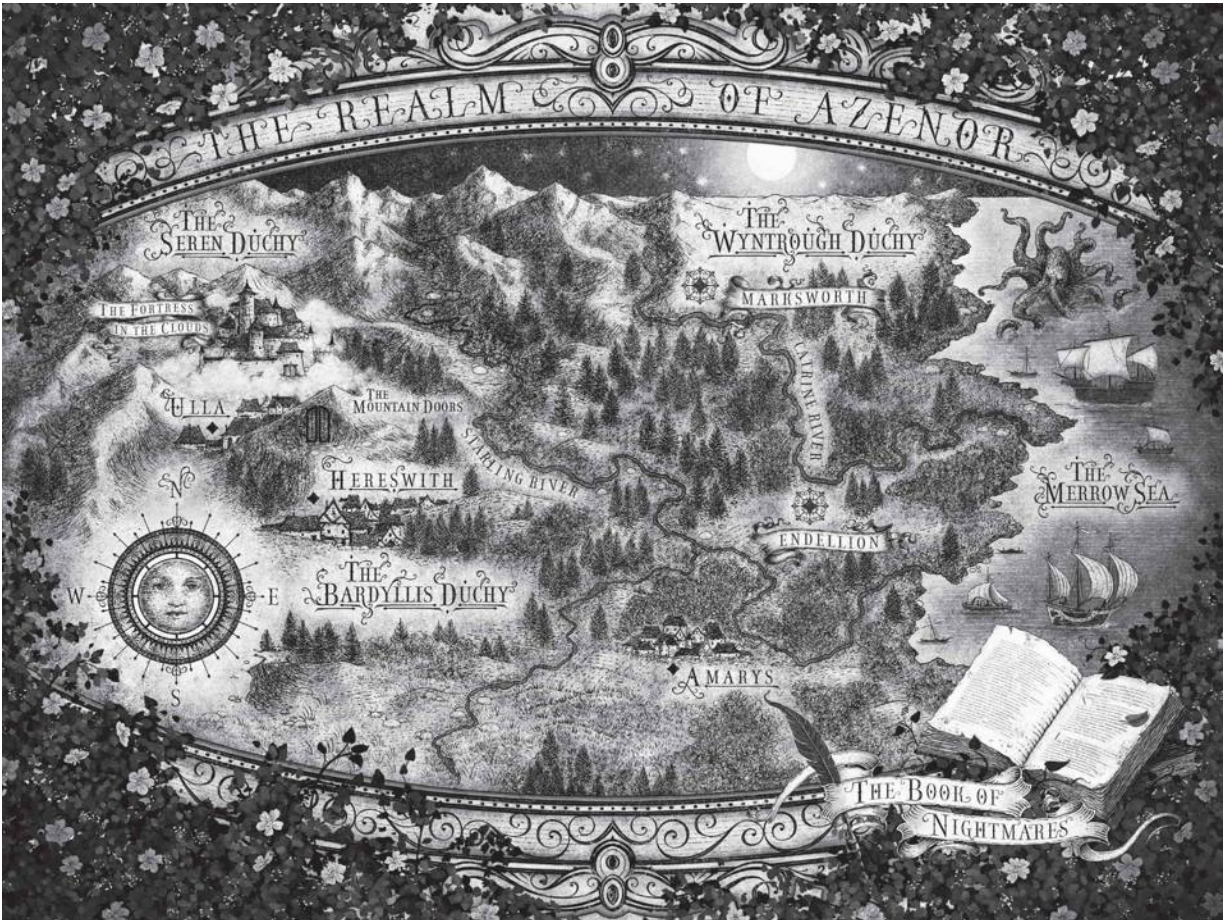
# Dedication

*To my parents, who first taught me how to dream*





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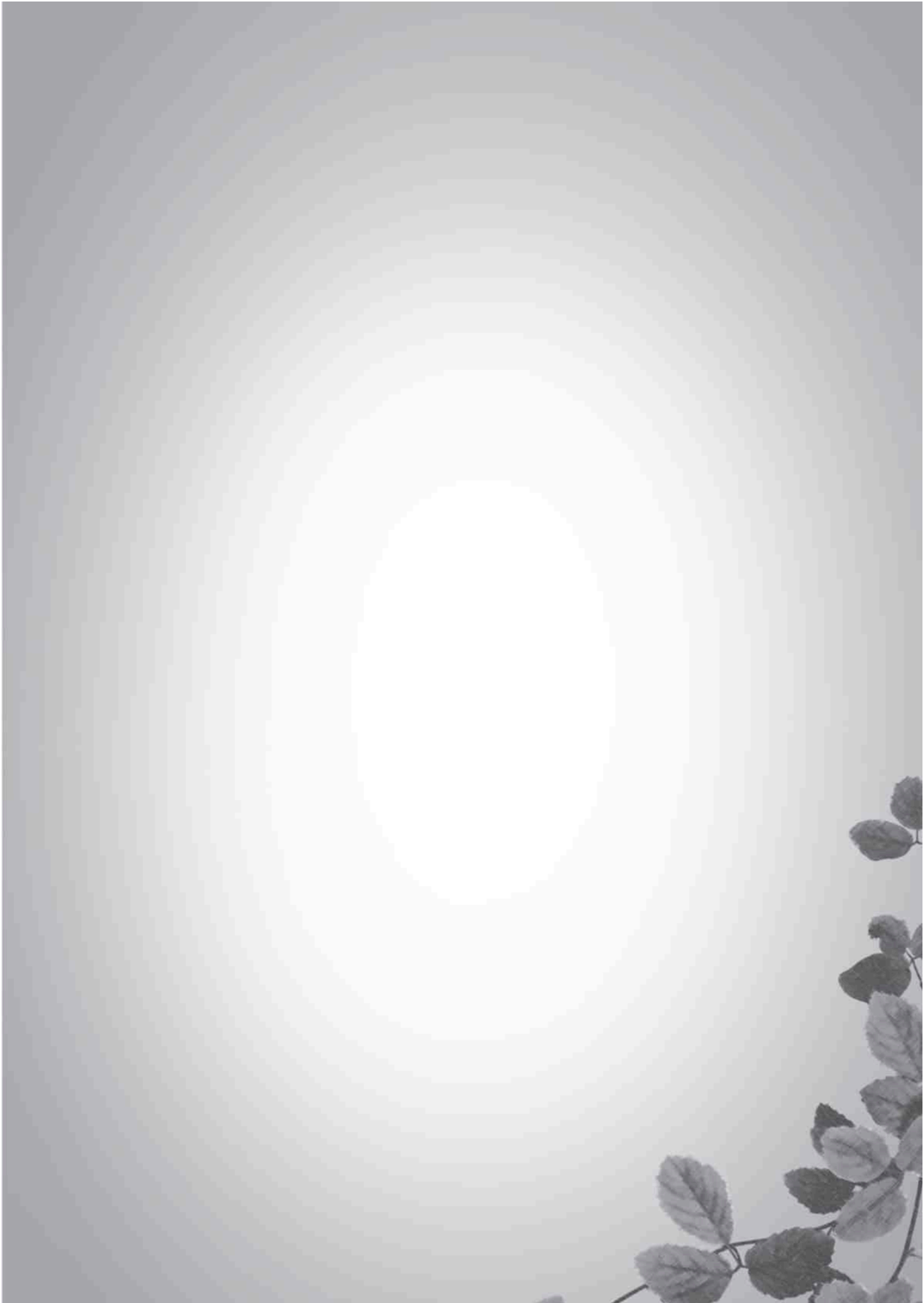
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*About the Publisher*

Part 1

*Magic of Old*









## 1

September's new moon waited for the sun to set, and I found myself trapped in Mazarine's library, drawing her twelfth portrait by candlelight. For as long as I had known her, she had never left her house during the day, and she kept her curtains closed while the sun reigned. She liked to summon me every few months for various things, the foremost to commit her face to paper with my charcoal stick as if she forgot what she looked like, the second to read to her from one of her leather-bound books. I was eager to do both because she paid me well, and I liked the stories I could sometimes coax from her. Stories that came from the mountains. Stories that were nearly forgotten, turning into dust.

"Do I look the same as I did the last time you drew me?" she asked from where she sat in a chair, its armrests carved as roaring lions. She was

wearing her usual raiment: an elegant velvet gown the shade of blood with a diamond necklace anchored at her neck. The stone caught the firelight every time she breathed, winking with secrets.

“You look unchanged,” I replied, thinking that I’d drawn her only three months ago, and I continued with my sketch of her.

She was proud, even with her multitude of wrinkles and her age spots and her strange beady eyes. I liked her confidence, and I drew it in the tilt of her chin, the hint of her knowing smile, and the waves of her long quicksilver hair. I wondered how old she was, but I didn’t dare ask.

Sometimes I feared her, although I couldn’t explain why. She was ancient. I had rarely seen her move from the furniture scattered about this gilded, shadowed room. And yet something pulsed from her. Something I couldn’t identify but all the same cautioned me to keep my eyes open in her presence.

“Your father does not like when I summon you here,” she drawled in a smoky voice. “He does not like you alone with me, does he?”

Her words unsettled me, but I concealed my feelings. The dimness of the room was like a cloak, and while it seemed impossible to draw a portrait in such poor light, I did it well.

“My father simply needs me home on time today,” I said, and she knew what I implied.

“Ah, a new moon awaits you tonight,” said Mazarine. “Tell me, Clementine . . . have you read one of my nightmares recorded in your father’s book?”

I had not, because there were no recordings of her nightmares in the book my father filled and guarded. I didn’t want to confess such to her, for fear it might upset her.

And so I lied.

“My father doesn’t let me read all his recordings. I’m only an apprentice, Ms. Thimble.”

“Ah,” she said, drinking from a sparkling glass of wine. “You are an apprentice, but you wage war beside him on new moon nights. And you are

just as strong and skilled as him. I have watched you fight in the streets on the darkest nights. You will surpass him, Clementine. Your magic shines brighter than his.”

I finished with her portrait at last. Partly because her words fed a hungry spirit within me that I strove to keep hidden.

“Your portrait is done.” I set down my charcoal, wiped my fingers on my skirt, and walked the paper to her. She studied it by the candlelight that burned from iron stands around her, wax dripping like stalactites.

She was quiet for a long moment. A bead of perspiration began to trace my back, and I felt anxious until she grinned, her yellow teeth gleaming in the firelight.

“Yes, I am unchanged. What a relief.” She laughed, but the sound was far from reassuring.

My blood hummed with warning.

I gathered my supplies, tucking them into my leather satchel, eager to be gone. I couldn’t judge the time of day, since Mazarine had the curtains drawn, but I sensed that afternoon was waning.

I needed to get home.

“A magician and an artist,” Mazarine mused, admiring my sketch of her. “An artist and a magician. Which one do you desire to be more? Or perhaps you dream of learning *deviah* magic and combining the two. I would indeed like to see an enchanted drawing of yours someday, Clementine.”

I hefted the satchel strap onto my shoulder, standing halfway between her chair and the double doors. I didn’t want to say that she was right, but she had an uncanny sense of reading people. She had also watched me grow up in this town.

Since I was eight, my father had instructed me in *avertana* magic, a defensive magic that lent its strength to spars and duels. We often faced spells bent by malicious intent, which made for dangerous and unpredictable situations, such as the new moon nights. And I liked *avertana* more for those things, but I also had started thinking of the other two studies of magic, *metamara* and *deviah*—but *deviah* in particular. To take one’s skill



and create an enchanted object was no simple feat, and I had read of magicians who had devoted decades of their lives to reach such achievement.

I needed more time. More time to hone my craft of art before I tried to layer magic within it. I had taught myself how to draw and had gradually become proficient with charcoal, as art supplies were hard to come by in this rustic town, but I knew my experience was lacking, and there were many other branches of art, waiting for me to explore.

“Perhaps one day,” I replied.

“Hmm” was all Mazarine said.

She at last rose from her chair with a slight grunt, as if her bones ached. I always forgot how tall she was, and I waited while she crossed to the other side of the room, where a bureau sat in a darkened corner. I listened to her open the drawers; I listened to the chime of coins as she gathered them in her hand.

“You claim I am unchanged,” she said, coming to meet me where I stood. “And yet you are not, Clementine. Your skill is improving, in magic as well as art.” And she extended her fist—knuckles like hills, veins like rivers beneath her papery skin, fingers full of coins.

I turned up my palm, and she paid me double. More than she had ever bestowed upon me before.

“This is very generous, Ms. Thimble.”

“Your father and that housekeeper of his who looks after you may not like me. But you are the only one in this town who does not fear me. And I reward such valor.”

I held her gaze, hoping my wariness wasn’t shining like ice within me.

“Let me walk you out,” Mazarine said with a sweep of her arm. “The day grows old, and you must prepare for tonight.”

But she didn’t move, and I sensed she wanted me to precede her. I led the way to the double doors, and she remained two steps behind me. We passed a mirror hanging on the wall, which I had never noticed before. Its frame was golden and elaborate, fashioned as vines and oak leaves. I saw my reflection—a girl with a smudge of charcoal on her chin and thick copper

hair that refused to be tamed by a braid. My gaze began to shift to the doors when I caught a glimpse of what walked behind me.

Not Mazarine. Not the elderly woman I had drawn multiple times.

She was something else, tall and broad shouldered, her face creased and jagged like rocks, with a long nose that hovered over a thin, crooked mouth. Her skin was pale and her hair was still silver, but it was long and wiry, and threaded with leaves and sticks and thorny vines, as if she had risen from a forest. Two horns crowned her head, small and pointed, gleaming like bone.

Her eyes, large and dark and glittering with glee, met mine in the mirror for a fleeting moment, and I knew that I had just beheld her true nature. She knew it, too, and yet I didn't react. I told myself to walk no faster, to breathe no deeper. To remain calm and poised. I swallowed the urge to bolt and I paused at the doors, to give her time to open them for me.

"You can find your way out from here?" she asked.

I smiled. My face felt strange, and I imagined I was grimacing. "Of course." Once more, she appeared as the elderly woman that I had always known. But her eyes . . . I saw a trace of the wild being that she truly was, flaring like embers.

"Good. Until next time, Clementine."

I slipped past her and made my way down the curling stairwell, my boots clicking on the marble in a measured pace, because I knew she was listening.

Her butler—an old, craggy man dressed in livery of a lord long dead—was sitting in a chair by the front door, snoring. I tried to sneak past him, but he startled and stood, fumbling for the door handle.

"A good day to you, Miss Clem," he said in a raspy voice. "And may you be victorious in battle tonight, with the new moon."

"Thank you, Mr. Wetherbee."

While his eyes were gentle and haunted by cataracts, the sort of eyes a grandfather might have, I couldn't help but wonder what reflection he cast in a mirror: if he was the old human man he appeared to be, or if he was something quite different.

I passed over the threshold, descending the steps to the gravel path that led to the road. Triangles of shrubs grew in perfect symmetry, and when I reached the iron gate, I dared to glance back at the house.

It was a grand manor, built of red brick and three stories high, with square windows that glistened like teeth. The first magician of Hereswith had dwelled here, and then her successor. This had always been the domain of the town magician, and one would think magic still lingered in the walls and had seeped into the floors. And yet Mazarine had lived here for many years, according to the town records, and she was no magician.

She was not even human.

I wondered how she had accomplished such a feat, hiding her true face. Fooling us all.

I hesitated, as if to turn my back on the mansion was foolish. But at last, I pivoted away from the gate and began the brisk walk home.

Hereswith was not a vast town. My father and I could walk the entirety of it in the span of an hour. It was quaint, if one forgot the curse of the adjacent mountains. Cottages were snug, two storied, and built of stone and cob, capped with thatched roofs. Some had little gardens with ivy that attempted to eat the house; others had brightly painted front doors and mullioned windows blown from an erstwhile era. And then there was Mazarine's mansion, which felt overwhelmingly out of place with its grandness, but still lent character to the town.

To me, Hereswith was home, beloved, even as it seemed to languish beneath summer's final days. By late afternoon, when the sun began to set, the shadows from the Seren Mountains would reach us, and the breeze would smell of cold grass and smoldering wood and damp stone. Like old magic.

I never wanted to leave this place.

With each step I took from Mazarine's demesne, the more my doubt began to simmer. By appearances, Hereswith felt idyllic and charming. But I began to wonder if the town was hiding something beneath its exterior.

I learned a vital lesson from Mazarine that day. One that made me vow that I would never trust appearances alone.



## 2

**“W**hat is Mazarine?” I asked Imonie the moment I returned home. She was exactly where I knew she would be—in the kitchen, preparing dinner. My father and I always ate well on new moon nights, just before the streets turned deadly. If it wasn’t for Imonie, the two of us would have been shriveled-up magicians with threadbare clothes and wounds that never healed properly.

She stood at the counter, peeling a mountain of potatoes. She was like a grandmother to me, although she was too young to be such a thing. She had never confessed her age, but I guessed she was in her early fifties. She was tall and trim and had threads of silver in her corn-silk hair, and while she rarely smiled, a few wrinkles touched the corners of her eyes.



“What do you mean?” Imonie asked, her attention devoted to her task. “Mazarine is a grumpy old woman.”

“No, she’s not.”

It must have been the tone in my voice.

Imonie stopped her peeling and met my gaze. “Did she threaten you, Clem?”

“No,” I said, despite the fact that there *had* been a moment when I’d felt afraid of her. When her gaze had met mine in the mirror.

“I’ve told you for years now to stay away from her.”

“She’s lonely and she pays me well. She also feeds me stories from the mountains.” I intently watched Imonie’s face, and I noticed how her brow furrowed. She longed to return to her ancestors’ home in the Seren Mountains.

“I could tell you the same stories,” Imonie said, and resumed her paring, viciously.

“Then why don’t you?”

“Because they fill me with sorrow, Clem.”

I fell quiet, feeling a twinge of regret. But in that silence, I thought of the mountain story she had told me often when I had begged her as a girl.

The realm of Azenor had not always been beset with tangible nightmares, although it was difficult to imagine such a world. It was all I had ever known, but Imonie had told me the legend that had started it all: Once, the mountains held a prosperous duchy. Magic itself had been first born in the summits, where the clouds touched the earth. But when the Duke of Seren was assassinated by his closest friends, the mountain province had sundered. Well versed in magic, the duke had cast a curse as he lay dying. No death and no dreams for those in his court who had been touched by the betrayal. They would live endlessly, watching as those they loved grew old and perished without them. And without dreams . . . their own hearts would become dry and brittle.

One does not realize how powerful a dream is, in the sleeping world as well as the waking one, until it has been stolen from them.

The duke had died on a new moon, and that was when the mountains began to spin nightmares into reality, all across the other two duchies of Azenor—the valleys and forests and meadows of Bardyllis and Wyntrough. No one could escape it, and so magicians had risen to answer the danger, perfecting the *avertana* branch of magic and becoming wardens of intricately mapped territories. Like my father.

Imonie hefted a sigh, as if she knew the exact story I was imagining. It seemed fitting for a new moon day, though. And she set down her potato and knife, leaning on the counter to fix a firm gaze on me.

“I can smell her from the road when I pass that ugly manor,” she said. “Moss and stone and cold winter nights.”

I waited for Imonie to continue, eager to know the truth. Eager to know who I had been drawing over and over for months now.

But then Imonie smirked and asked, “What do you think Mazarine is, Clem?”

“I think she’s a troll from the mountains.”

“You’re probably right, although I haven’t gotten close enough to her to see for myself.”

“Is she cursed?”

“Cursed? I think whatever guise she dons is one of her own making, how she wants to be perceived. For while Hereswith has warmly welcomed those such as me from the mountain duchy . . . do you think the mortals here would be delighted to know a troll dwelled among you?”

“Most people would be afraid of her,” I confessed. “Although it seems people already are.”

“And perhaps she likes the fear,” Imonie said. “Just enough to keep people and their suspicions away. So she can live peacefully here.” Her eyes narrowed at me. “And how did you come to know her true nature?”

“I caught her reflection in a mirror,” I answered, and remembered seeing her two steps behind, crouching toward me with her bloodied teeth and fierce, dark eyes. Would she have harmed me? I wanted to believe that she wouldn’t.