



Melanie La'Brooy is an Australian author who has previously written five novels for adults, which were published in Australia and internationally. Over the past twelve years she has lived in Africa, Asia, Europe and the Middle East. Some of her favourite moments ever include boating down the Zambezi River past giraffes and hippos, seeing the Northern Lights from high up in the Arctic Circle, horse-riding through a snowy forest in Bulgaria and eating chocolate while watching movies with her family at home. *The Wintrish Girl* is her first novel for children. Also, her surname is pronounced La-Broy, like boy but with an r. It's confusing, she knows.

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The WINTRISH GIRL

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LA'BROOY

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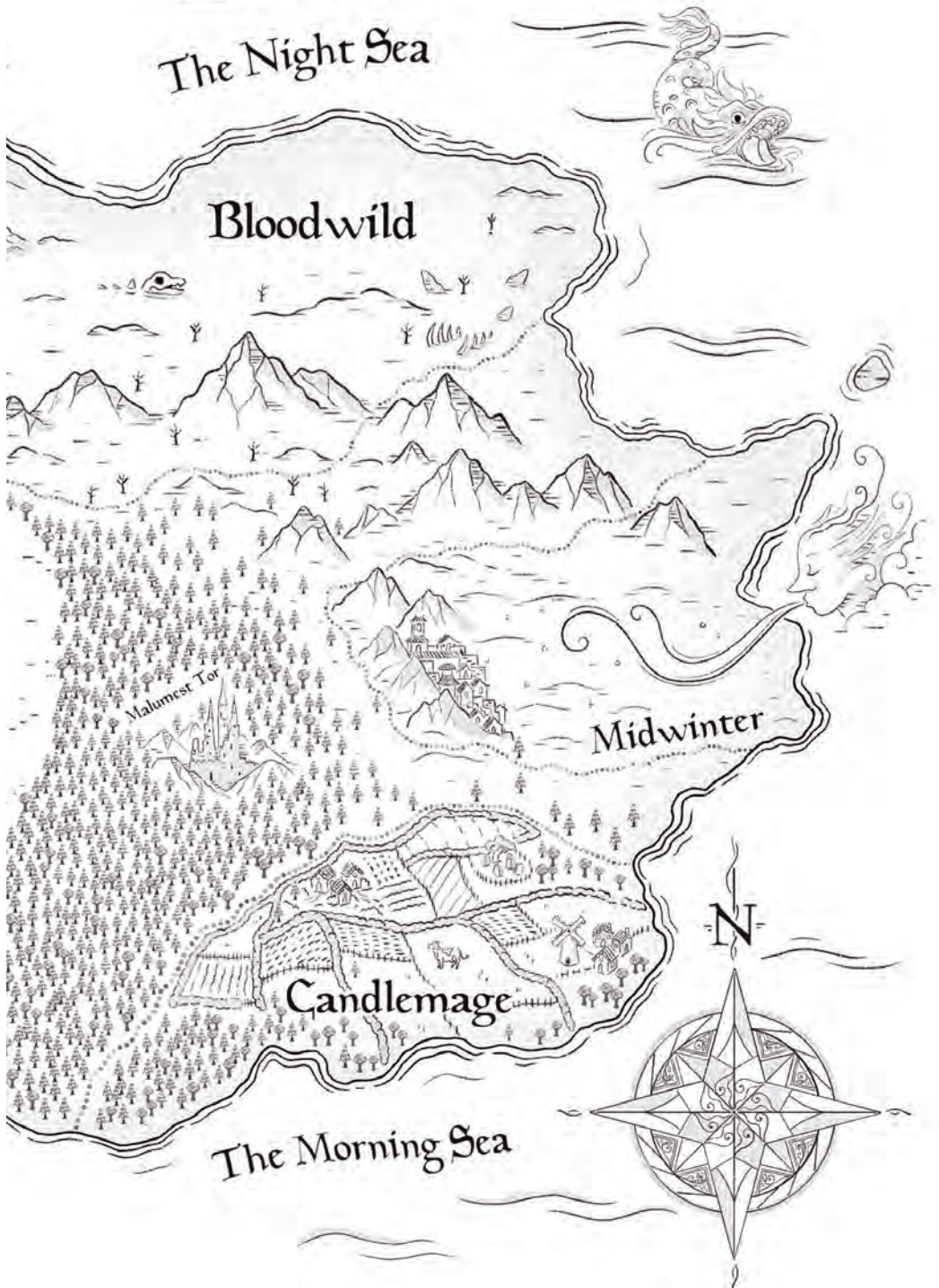
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*For
Dashiell, Raleigh & Zoë,
who read it first,
because it was written for you*

Empire of Arylia





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The Wintrish Girl



Bright moonlight shone on the gleaming walls and soaring towers of Perianth Palace. In a small bedroom at the top of the North Tower, an eleven-year-old girl with untidily cropped grey hair lay sleeping, unaware of the fate that was swooping through the ink-black sky towards her.

A gigantic figure landed noiselessly on the tower roof. The figure paused, but its shadow continued, unspooling down the roof tiles and through the open window. Like a dark stain, the shadow slithered across the floor, towards the small bed.

The girl shivered. As the first black fingers of shadow reached her, she stirred uneasily in her sleep. Before she could wake, the shadow covered her like a cloak of black ice, plunging her straight into a nightmare.

It is cold. So cold and dark.

No stars. Just a faint moon, hidden behind clouds, with black sky above and black water all around. The rocky outcrop she huddles on shudders with each wave that crashes against it. Cold water sprays up, drenching her, the salt stinging her eyes.

There is the sound of heavy breathing. She looks up. The shrouded figure of a Night Hag looms over her.

Hovering. Waiting.

Bone-white leathery skin stretches tightly over its skeletal frame. Blood-red eyes glare. The Hag is wreathed in moving shadows, nameless things that creep and scuttle.

There is nowhere to run. She is trapped.

Terror floods every cell of the girl's body as the cold, dark tendrils of the Night Hag's thoughts force their way into her mind.

She fights, but it is too strong. Everything she once knew about herself, which was already so pitifully little, is vanishing. She can't remember how she came to be here. Even the memory of her name is melting away. The only thing that is still recognisably her own, that she can cling to, is her fear.

She screams and screams – but there is no-one to hear or care. There is only the cold and the dark and the terror.

She screams again, but no sound emerges—

With a jolt, the Night Hag released her. The shadow swiftly retracted, across the floor, out the window and back up to the rooftop. The Night Hag took one deliberate step backwards and fell from the roof. Within moments it was swallowed by the darkness from which it came.

The girl woke up screaming, clammy with sweat, in her tiny bedroom at the top of the tower.

Although this time her screams could be heard, there was still no-one to care.



Her heart pounding, Penn sat bolt upright in bed.

She ran to the window and looked out. The night sky was empty. Moonlight flooded into her sparse room. Limp with relief, she slumped to the floor and hugged her knees to her chest, as the thudding of her heart gradually slowed. Of course it had been a nightmare. Night Hags didn't exist. Not anymore, anyway. Penn briefly thought about going back to bed and pulling the covers over her head, but then she remembered what day it was.

Talisman Day.

After eleven long years, the most famous day in the Province of Arylia had returned. Today would be filled with celebrations and feasting and the all-important Talisman Ceremony.

Talismans could take the form of any object – weapons, scientific devices, clothing or musical instruments – but they were infinitely more powerful than the everyday objects they resembled. For they were bound to Marvellance: the great power that enabled the Arylians to perform wonders, like running faster than the wind, summoning storms or moving things using only their minds.

Whatever Marvellous Talisman a young Arylian pulled out of the Casket of Fate was for life, revealing their future profession and giving them extraordinary abilities to carry out their duties. For centuries, Talismans had been the source of the Arylian Empire's

formidable power. So there had been great rejoicing exactly one year ago, when fiery silver streaks had lit up the night sky. It was the triumphant signal that, for the first time since the War, Talisman Day was finally returning. It was the day the Arylians had waited and longed for.

It was the day that had already ruined Penn's life.

But Penn knew there was no point thinking about all that again. The sun would rise soon and she had been ordered to start work at dawn today for there was so much to do. She shed her thin pyjamas and pulled on her loose black trousers and matching black shirt. Dragging a comb through her short, grey hair, Penn saw her reflection in the tarnished mirror. Her strange sea-coloured eyes, which shifted between blue, grey and green, stared back at her. On her right wrist shone a knotted golden cord that glowed with a soft light against her brown skin. Penn scowled at the sight of it. She pulled her sleeve down and buttoned it tightly so the cord was hidden. As she pulled on her worn shoes, two small rolled scrolls zinged through the open window like hornets. One hit Penn hard on the forehead. 'Ow!' she exclaimed, rubbing her head. 'I was *already* up!'

The Epistles flew excitedly around her room until they crashed into one another. The force of the collision caused one to unroll, revealing a typed message.

Hunters HERE!

Stole your face.

Stole it back. Will hide HOT.

B

p.s. If they eat me, please finish the dusting.

Penn had no idea who B was or how anyone could steal a face. The message was just a string of nonsense that clearly wasn't meant for her. Even odder, the Epistle had been typed in scarlet ink. Penn frowned. She had never seen this before – scarlet ink was only used for emergencies. She examined the other side of the scroll. No wonder the Epistle was lost. Whoever B was, they hadn't put the name of the person they were sending it to.

Penn looked out of her window again. On the top floor of the palace, opposite her tower, a light was visible in the Regent's study. 'Try that room,' she said, pointing.

The Epistle rolled itself back up and zigzagged unsteadily out the window. Penn turned her attention to the second Epistle, which had been typed in ordinary purple ink and was waiting patiently, hovering in midair.

Throne Room. Now.

A stamp underneath the words showed a set of keys.

Penn sighed. This Epistle was definitely meant for her. With its message safely delivered, the Epistle took itself off to be erased and re-used, or filed if its message was deemed important.

Penn pulled the wooden door shut behind her and started down the long, tight spiral of stone stairs, just as the dawn bells started to ring out.

Talisman Day was off to a very bad start. Penn was quite sure that, for her at least, today was going to be the exact opposite of marvellous.



At the bottom of the tower, Penn stepped into the chilly morning air, crossed the cobblestone courtyard and opened the side door that led to the palace kitchen. Inside, the cavernous space was filled with an army of adult servants, all of whom had brown skin and hair the exact shade of grey as Penn's. The kitchen was alive with noise – the hiss and bubble of huge pots on the stoves, the roaring of the hearth fire, pans clattering and footsteps on the flagstones – as the servants prepared for the Feast.

But there was no talking. The Grey Ones never spoke.

'Good morning!' Penn said cheerfully, as she always did, even though she knew perfectly well she would be greeted with silence and blank stares. The Grey Ones had all been born in the Province of

Midwinter, which made them Wintrish, the same as her. She couldn't just ignore them or order them about, the way all of the Arylians did.

The Arylian Chef in charge scowled at her. His Talisman was a Marvellous wooden spoon. It could create a pot of soup that would feed an entire army and butterfly-shaped biscuits that could actually fly. The spoon could also deliver a hard whack when he thought Penn was shirking her duties, so she hastily grabbed her bucket of cleaning things and slipped through the huge oak doors that led to the Banqueting Hall. She sped past enormous tables set with silver plates and delicate crystal glasses, and paintings depicting long-gone members of the Royal House of Arylia. The portrait of Queen Hagar the Beautiful seemed to look down on her with disapproval as she raced by.

Using a servant's staircase, Penn ran up two flights of stairs, then darted down some service passageways until she rejoined the grander part of the palace. She sprinted past the Royal Gallery and then turned right to avoid the hallway that led to Princess Seraphine's extravagant rooms.

It was quicker to go through the Princess's wing to the Throne Room but Penn wasn't allowed that way anymore. The cosy, familiar room she had slept in for ten years was in that wing. She felt a flash of longing as she remembered her snug bed with the patchwork quilt and her most prized possession:

a small painting of a village in Midwinter that she had carefully hung in the back of her wardrobe. The painting had mysteriously appeared in her bedroom one day and Penn liked to imagine that a member of her family had left it for her, even though she knew that couldn't possibly be true.

A year had passed since Penn was ordered to move out of the palace. Two Warriors had watched over her as she'd packed her meagre belongings and moved into the North Tower. As most things to do with Midwinter were forbidden in Arylia, she hadn't dared take the painting with her. She hoped it was still hanging in the quiet darkness of her old wardrobe, undisturbed.

Penn skidded to a stop outside a pair of arched golden doors that were wide open. The only thing blocking the entrance was a translucent curtain of flickering silver, which wasn't exactly water and wasn't exactly light, but a strange combination of both. Penn took a deep breath and closed her eyes, bracing herself for the unpleasant, clammy sensation as she pushed through the silver veil.

The immense octagonal Throne Room was dark and silent. Grand, unlit chandeliers drifted around the room. Hanging in the middle of the space was a small bead of golden light. Penn made her way towards the Spark.

'Glisten,' she said clearly.

The Spark glowed brighter. A moment later, all

of the candles in the chandeliers burst into warm, golden flames. Penn had to shield her eyes as the rich furnishings and art of the Throne Room dazzled her with their magnificence. But once her eyes adjusted, Penn paid her glittering surroundings no attention. Growing up in the palace had dulled its ability to awe her a long time ago.

As always when she was alone in the Throne Room, Penn checked to make sure that the Panthera was still asleep and she wasn't in danger of being eaten. The great beast, with its gleaming black coat, jewel-studded collar and huge wings, had slept at the foot of the silver throne for eleven years now, since the death of the last emperor and empress. Only members of the Royal House of Arylia could control the centuries-old Panthera, but Princess Seraphine was still several years away from being put in charge of such a powerful creature. Until she was of age, the Panthera was kept asleep using Marvellance.

Reassured by the sound of soft snoring, Penn put down her bucket and carefully wound the Clock Immemorial. Its hands started to tick as the Clock woke up.

'Talisman Day?' The Clock's voice was ancient and deep, but it sounded puzzled and unsure.

'Yes, Clock, that's right. It's Talisman Day,' Penn said, moving the Clock's hands from *Yesterday* to *Today*. She was fond of the Clock, which had lost its

winding key and been badly damaged during the War against the Malevolents. These days it struggled to announce even the major events of the year. ‘It’s okay to be confused. There hasn’t been a Talisman Ceremony for a very long time.’

She gave the Clock a pat and began to drag the first of thirteen heavy golden chairs into place, to the left of the throne. The chairs were for the members of the Eslit, Arylia’s ruling council. Any one of them could have easily moved all of the chairs using Marvellance but Penn was still made to do it the hard way.

An hour later, rays of sunlight flooded through the enormous stained-glass windows, turning the motes of dust stirred up by Penn’s sweeping and polishing into a swirling, multicoloured swarm. She had polished the Deathless Dagger without slicing any of her fingers off thanks to the Anti-Severing Gloves that were guaranteed to work *almost* every time, and she had even brushed the sleeping Panthera, just to prove that she wasn’t scared of it. Everything in the Throne Room now sparkled, except for Penn, who was hot, tired and wishing that she had taken something from the kitchen to eat. It was too late now though, as she could hear footsteps in the hall outside.

She grabbed her cleaning equipment and shot across to a corner of the room as the Eslit arrived. They paid Penn no attention and headed straight to their seats, talking in low tones to one another.

They varied in age and appearance but all wore the silver cloaks that marked them as members of the ruling council. Small glowing brooches identified which of the four Talismanic Guilds they belonged to: Weapons, Treasure, Lore or Art.

The next to arrive was Corin, a tall boy who was several years older than Penn, with a face marred by a permanently spiteful expression. Penn shrank back further into the corner. Corin was followed by a gang of boys, all of similar age. Angus, who liked to torment dogs until they turned savage, caught sight of Penn. His eyes lit up with malice and he nudged Corin, an unpleasant grin sliding over his face.

Penn felt a jolt of dread. Corin and his gang had never liked her, but until a year ago she had been protected by her rank and they'd had to limit themselves to insults. Since losing that protection, their bullying had become more frequent, nastier, and they now made no attempt to hide it. Penn's eyes flicked to the double doors, but her escape route was too far away.

'Happy Talisman Day, Slumweed,' Corin said, using the nasty slur for a Wintrish person. 'Oh, wait a minute. Slumweeds don't get Talismans.'

His friends sniggered.

Pointing out the obvious isn't a joke, Penn thought. Or even a proper insult. Try harder. But she managed to keep her mouth shut and her gaze down.

‘Should never have let them come here, my dad says,’ Angus growled. ‘He reckons the worst thing that ever happened to Arylia was allowing Slumweed traitors into our province!’

‘I agree,’ Penn said, looking up. ‘So why don’t you let us go back to Midwinter?’

At the sound of Penn’s voice, even the members of the Eslit turned around. Corin looked thrilled and Penn wanted to kick herself. By talking back she had given him the excuse he needed.

‘The borders between Arylia and the other provinces were sealed when the War ended. I thought even stupid Slumweeds knew that! There’s no way to reopen them so while you are in *our* province you need to keep your mouth shut and do as you’re told!’ Corin looked around for bullying inspiration and his gaze fell on the Deathless Dagger. He pointed to it. ‘Bring that to me.’

‘No gloves,’ Angus added.

Penn stared at him in disbelief. ‘Everyone says the Deathless Dagger is cursed!’ she said. ‘I’m not touching it with my bare hands!’

‘It’s called the Death-*less* Dagger.’ Angus sniggered. ‘How scary can it be?’

Penn looked at Corin. For a moment he seemed to waver but then he saw the other boys looking at him. ‘No gloves,’ he said.

Angus grinned.

Penn looked over at the Eslit. Some of them met her gaze, but the rest looked away. She bit her lip, then walked over to where the Deathless Dagger revolved in the air, its wickedly sharp blade gleaming. Penn's bare hand shook as she stretched it towards the dagger's bone handle.

The handle was almost within her grasp when suddenly the dagger swung upside down. Its razor-sharp tip pierced Penn's palm. She cried out and snatched her hand away. Tears sprang to her eyes as blood seeped from the stinging cut, but she managed to blink them back.

'Make her do it again,' Angus said eagerly.

'Enough.' A hard voice rang out across the expanse of the Throne Room.

Penn knew that voice but she didn't know why its owner would be standing up for her. Bewildered, she looked past Corin and stared straight into the cold, black eyes of the Regent.