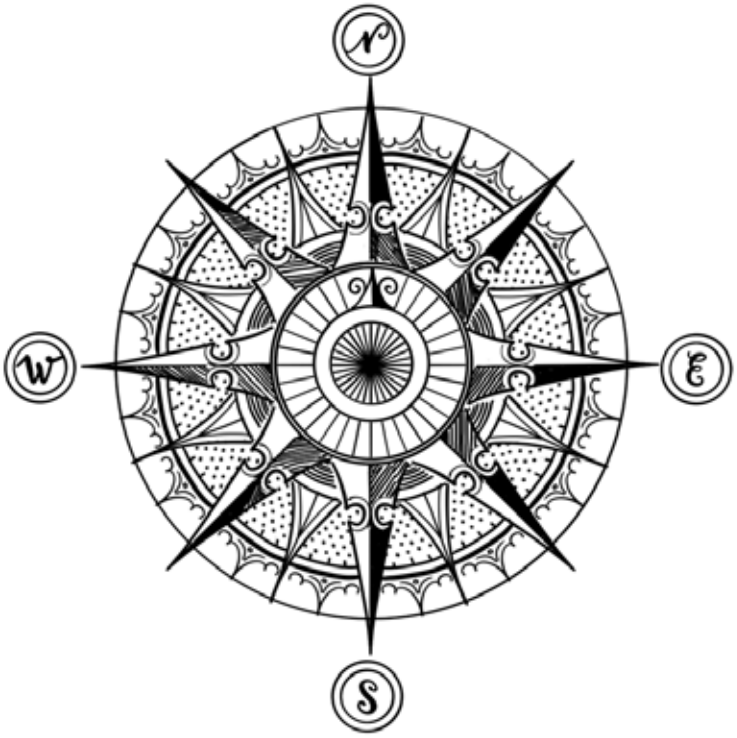
THE COMPANY OF EIGHT



For Bill

STRIPES PUBLISHING
An imprint of the Little Tiger Group
1 Coda Studios, 189 Munster Road,
London SW6 6AW

First published in Great Britain by Stripes Publishing in 2018
Text copyright © Harriet Whitehorn, 2018
Illustration © Maria Surducan, 2018

ISBN: 978-1-84715-922-9

The right of Harriet Whitehorn and Maria Surducan to be identified as the author and illustrator of this work respectively has been asserted by them in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988.

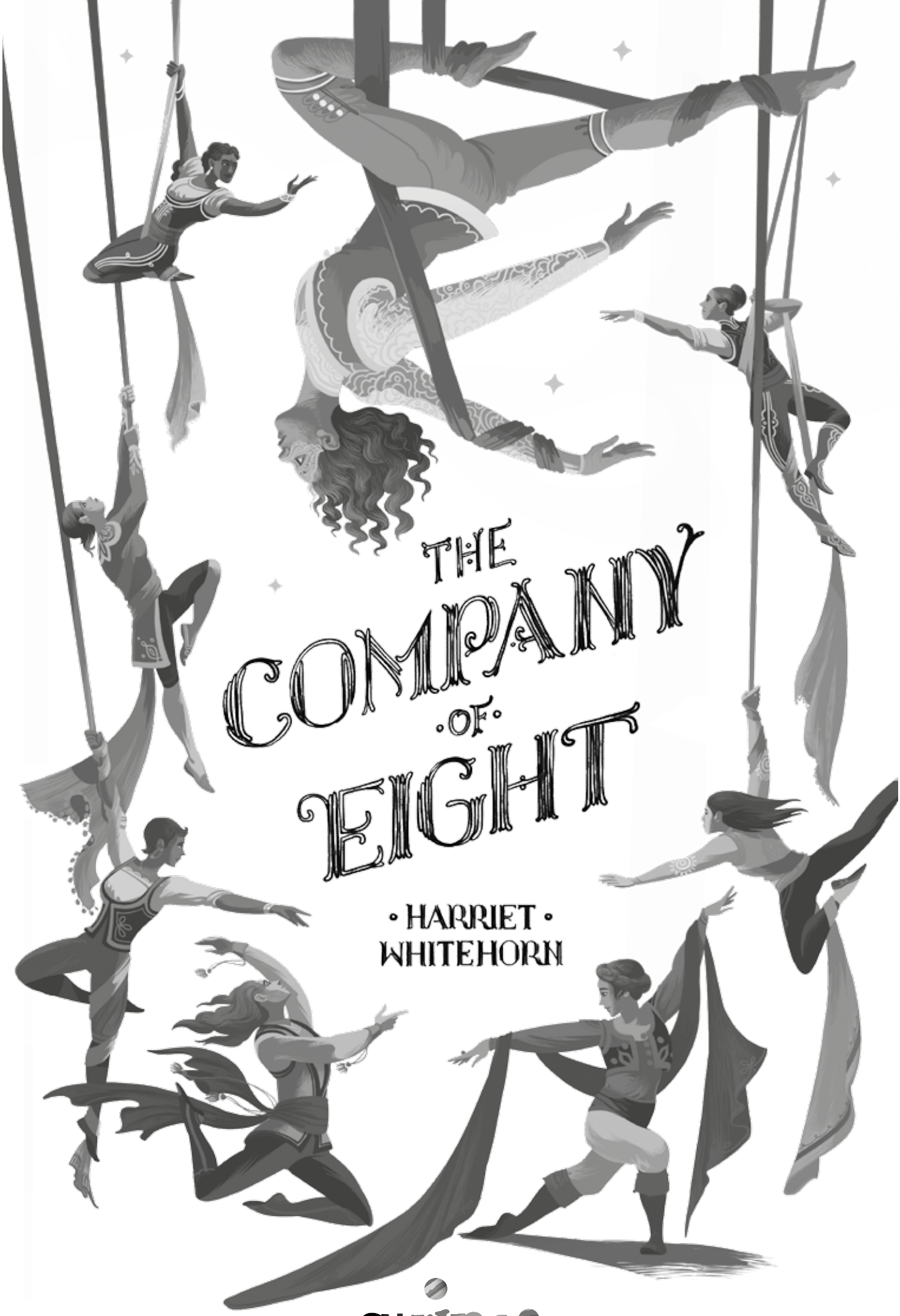
All rights reserved.

This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, resold, hired out, or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition, being imposed upon the subsequent purchaser.

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Printed and bound in the UK.

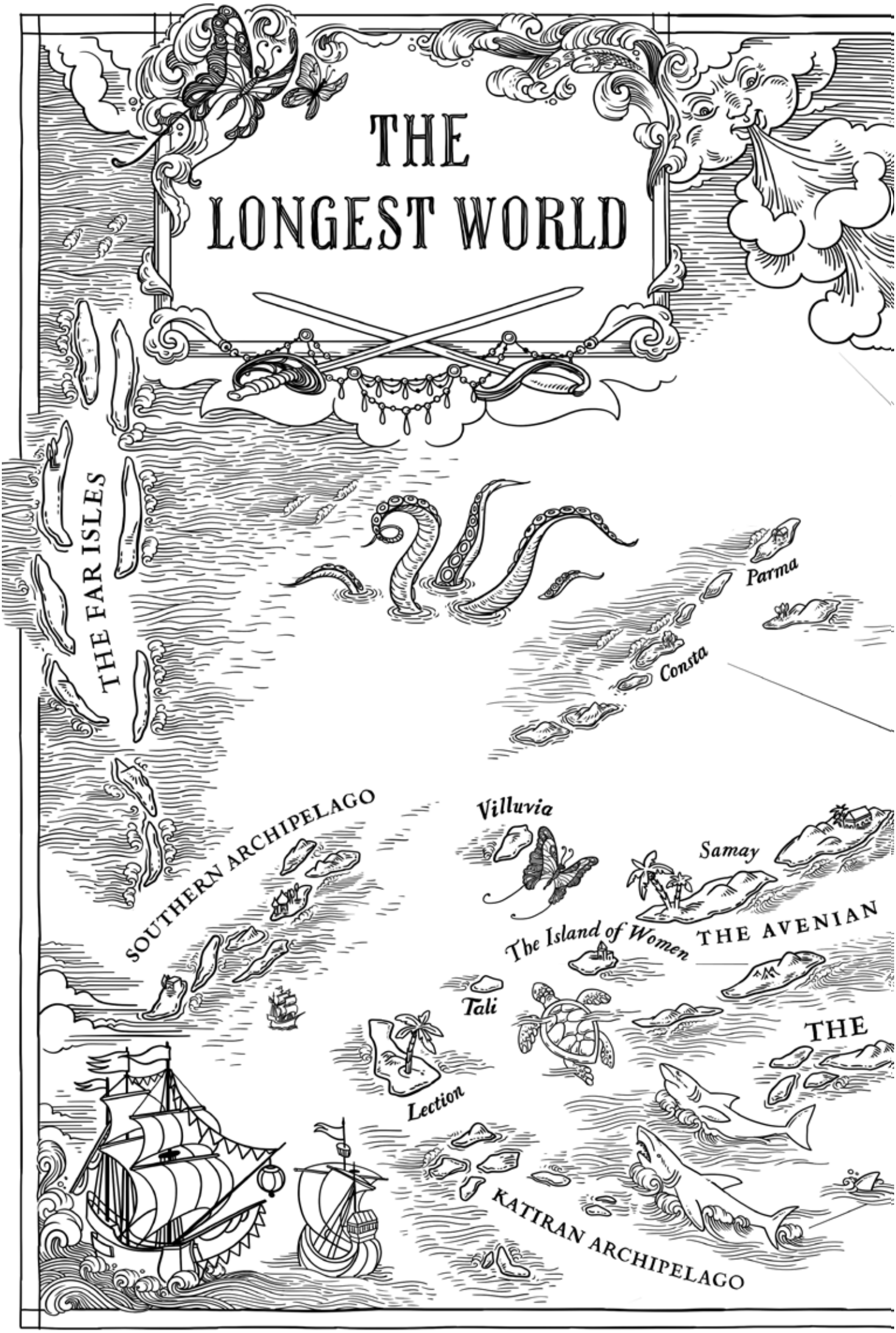
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

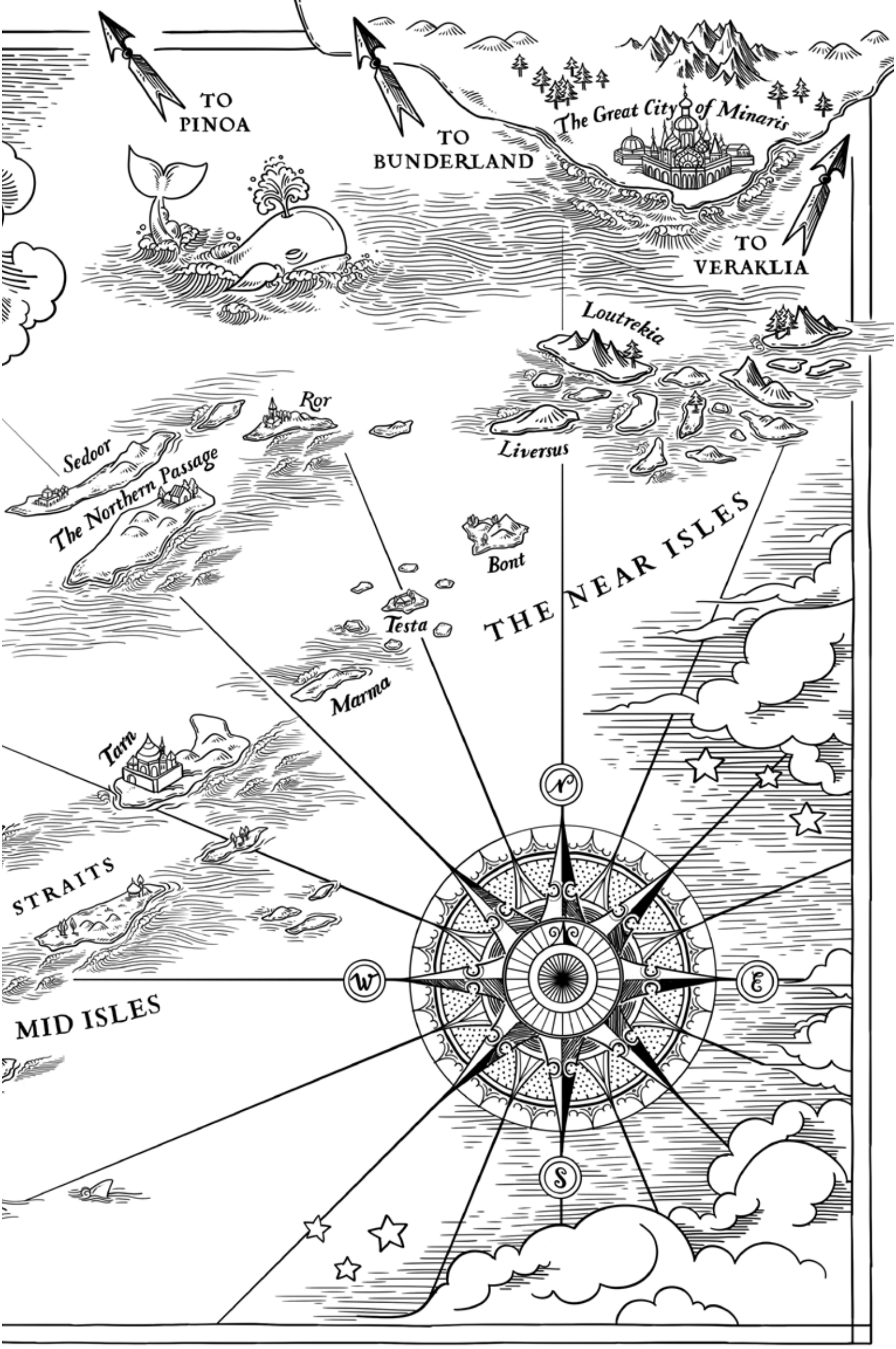


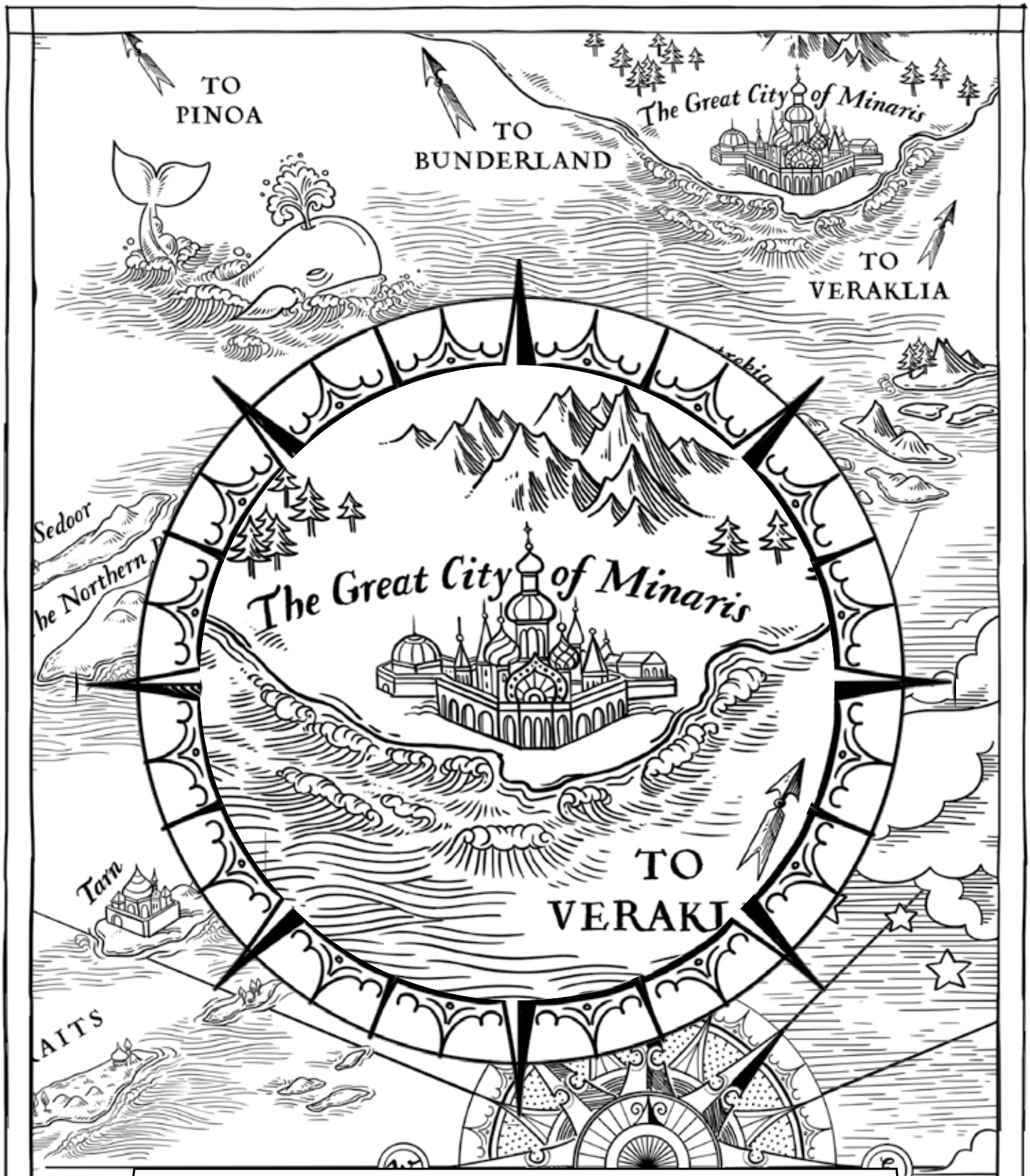
THE COMPANY OF EIGHT

HARRIET WHITEHORN

Stripes


THE
LONGEST WORLD
THE FAR ISLES
Parma
Consta
SOUTHERN ARCHIPELAGO
Villuvia
Samay
The Island of Women
THE AVENIAN
Tali
THE
Lection
KATIRAN ARCHIPELAGO

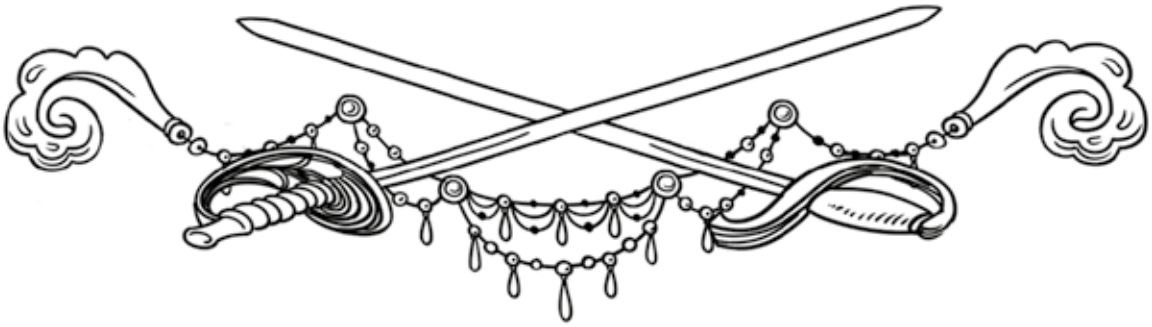

TO PINOA
TO BUNDERLAND
The Great City of Minaris
TO VERAKLIA
Loutrekia
Ror
Sedoor
The Northern Passage
Liversus
Bont
THE NEAR ISLES
Testa
Marma
Tarn
STRAITS
MID ISLES
N
W
E
S



The Circus Tent, the Square of Disbelievers,
the Great City of Minaris
Six o'clock in the evening

I

A Star Over Your Head



The girls were late.

They tore across the Square of Seas, their skates cutting into the thick ice that covered the city.

"This way is quickest!" Cass cried, grabbing her friend Tig's hand and pulling her down Truelove's Way.

They were headed for the Square of Disbelievers where the giant blue Circus tent had stood for five glorious days. That night was the Grand Finale and Cass had queued for hours and paid a good many silvers for two tickets. And then Mrs Potts had deliberately made them late by giving Tig too much work to do, or at least that's what it

seemed like to Cass.

The clocks struck six as the girls sped along Tick Alley, right at the centre of the watchmaking district. Cass shoved her fingers in her ears to shut out the deafening noise as they swerved into one of the narrow courts that led down to the Square of Disbelievers.

Everyone had already taken their seats, so the huge square was deserted. If the girls had been in less of a hurry they might have noticed how beautiful it looked, the whale-like tent glowing deep blue from the lights inside, casting everything else in the square into deep-violet and navy-blue shadow, except for the faint glimmer of the palace's silver domes. But they had no time to look around, hurtling themselves at the entrance and sliding the blades out from the bottom of their boots.

One of the circusters, as the stagehands were known, stood at the door, fabulously dressed in a red and gold outfit, his features hidden by a mask. He took their tickets and whispered that they would have to wait to take their seats because the show was about to begin. And sure enough,

a moment later, the tent was plunged into complete darkness. Everyone instantly fell silent, anticipation shivering through the air.

Cass felt prickles of excitement as she heard the Circus Master, whose name was Ravellous, cry, "Welcome, one and all, to my domain – the Greatest Circus in the Longest World. Prepare to be amazed." His deep voice, magnified by a loud hailer, thundered around the tent.

Cass watched spellbound as, high above the audience, right at the very top of the tent, a single candle flame appeared. And then came a voice – a perfectly clear woman's voice – singing a sad but beautiful lament.

The light began to move slowly down towards the audience as if suspended in the air and then shifted to illuminate a face, lit up like a lovely singing ghost, descending down from the sky. She was Helene, the star of the show and Cass's heroine.

The rest of the company, dressed in dark cloaks and holding candles, walked out slowly into the arena, their voices joining with hers until the whole tent was filled with glorious, melancholy

singing. They formed a ring facing the audience and as Helene reached the ground, they placed their candles on the floor and bowed solemnly.

The crowd erupted into applause and the music changed tempo to a fast beat as the performers threw off their cloaks to reveal bright, glittering costumes. The stagehands lit the arena torches and the lamps, brilliantly illuminating the tent. Trapezes were dropped and the acrobats divided; some stayed on the ground to form a human pyramid, while others leaped on to the trapezes, which were then raised and a breathtaking aerial show began.

Cass, along with the rest of the audience, was left dizzy with trying to watch so many different things at the same time.

"Just think, that will be you after tomorrow!" Tig whispered. "Cassandra Malvino, Star of the Circus!"

Cass made a face.

"Please don't jinx it," she whispered back.

"Sorry," said Tig. "But you're easily good enough. What time is your audition?"

"Noon," Cass replied, her stomach flipping with

nerves. Never in her life had she wanted anything as much. Except perhaps to bring her parents back from the dead. But since that was impossible, she had focused on merely the incredibly difficult.

Cass's father had been a famous acrobat, and Cass had inherited much of his natural grace and agility. But she also practised very, very hard.

Her guardian, Mrs Potts, thoroughly disapproved of acrobatics, considering them extremely unladylike, and thought that Circus people were "a bunch of bohemian hoodlums". So Cass practised in secret, up in the dusty attic of the Mansion of Fortune, the tatty old house where they lived, or out on the roof in the summer, with only an old book of her father's for instruction. Its title, written in curly gold lettering, was *Dr Bromver's Complete Guide to Acrobatics and Gymnastics.* Tig helped Cass, warning her if Mrs Potts ever looked like making one of her very rare trips up all those stairs.

When Mrs Potts had adopted Cass, after a fire had tragically killed her parents, Cass had been a pretty blond-haired moppet of seven and both had been genuinely fond of each other. Mrs Potts

owned and ran the magical establishment in which Cass's mother, one of the foremost fortune tellers of her day, had worked and so Cass was used to visiting the house and being spoiled by the old lady. And the spoiling continued in the form of silk dresses and sweets, until it became clear, a couple of years before, when Cass was twelve, that she showed no magical ability at all – in fact the opposite. All her mother's skill had reversed, making Cass something known as an "obtuse", which was a person particularly insensitive to magic.

Some called it a gift in itself but for Mrs Potts it was a bitter blow – she had hoped to make a good amount of silvers out of Cass. The old lady had failed to hide her disappointment, leaving Cass angry and hurt. The pair had had an uneasy relationship ever since.

Cass had left Mrs Papworth's Academy for Young Ladies a couple of months before and Mrs Potts, still slightly resentful, was now determined that Cass should become something genteel that she could boast to her friends about, like a governess or draper's model. But Cass was simply

not cut out for such a career – she had a restless energy that could not be contained and a desire for freedom that would not be dampened. For her, life on board the Circus Boat, not only working as an acrobat but also exploring the Islands, was as close to perfection as she could imagine.

"You may take your seats now," the circuster said when there was a moment's lull in the show and, after glancing at the tickets, directed them right to the front row of benches.

"These are amazing seats," Tig said.

"I know, I queued hours to get them," Cass replied.

As they sat down, Tig gasped and elbowed Cass, whispering, "Look who's over there!"

Cass followed her gaze and saw, sitting just to the front and side of them on a padded, throne-like chair, the object of Tig's undying love – Lord Enzo.

With his floppy blond hair and dark skin, he was instantly recognizable from the gossip sheets that Tig pored over when Mrs Potts hadn't got her scrubbing floors. Tig was a year or two older than Cass and always had a crush on someone.

Enzo's father, Lord Bastien, the Lord Protector of the Islands, sat next to him, and then on Enzo's other side, was a boy and girl who Cass didn't recognize. *Of course*, Cass thought fleetingly, *they must be in Minaris to celebrate King Lycus's engagement.* And then Cass's attention was drawn back to the show as the lights dimmed again and the trapeze artists began their daring display of aerial acrobatics.

There was a short interval in the middle of the performance when the audience stood up to stretch their legs and buy cones of shaved fruit ice and rum bonbons. Cass got a few coins out of her pocket – she didn't want Tig to spend any of the measly amount of silvers that Mrs Potts paid her – and bought a couple of pomegranate ice cones.

Cass was never entirely sure what happened next – did someone push her or perhaps she tripped? Anyway, something made her lurch forwards just as she was about to sit back down next to Tig, sending the ice cones catapulting out of her hands. One landed on the floor but the other flew into the air, turned upside down and tipped its chilly contents all over the boy who was now standing next to Enzo, making him yelp with the cold.

Enzo, Lord Bastien and the girl all burst out laughing and turned to see where the cone had come from.

"I'm so sorry," Cass cried, staring in horror at what she had done. She could hear, or rather *feel*, Tig vibrating with silent laughter beside her.

"I think someone is trying to get your attention, Rip," the girl said cattily.

The boy smiled as he wiped his face and rubbed his hands through his hair, shaking off the ice.

"It's fine," he said. "Really," he added, seeing Cass's mortified face.

"It's so hot in here, I wish someone would throw an ice cone over *me*," Lord Bastien drawled, puffing on a cigarillo.

"Well, this young lady appears to have the skills for the job," Enzo replied, laughing. "Perhaps if you ask her nicely she'll oblige?"

It was a remark that needed an amusing response, but poor Cass could think of nothing witty to say. She simply blushed and simpered and hated herself for it.

"Ignore them," the boy said kindly.

Cass was saved from any further embarrassment

by a loud drum roll signalling that the show was about to start again.

"I'm so sorry," she repeated as they all took their seats. She could feel her cheeks burning red.

"Couldn't you have thrown it over Lord Enzo instead?" Tig whispered to her. "Then I could have brushed the ice off him."

"Very funny," Cass whispered back, glad of the dark to hide her crimson face.

It didn't take long for Cass to be lost again in the excitement and spectacle of the Circus but as soon as it ended, her embarrassment returned and she grabbed Tig's hand and pulled her out of the tent so she didn't have to see any of Lord Bastien's party again.

Tig chattered about Lord Enzo all the way home – surely he was the best-looking boy in the whole world? Had Cass seen how green his eyes were? Did Cass think he had noticed her?

But Cass was barely listening, she was so focused on thinking through every move of her audition piece – was it bold and daring enough to impress Ravellous the Circus Master? she wondered nervously.

The Circus auditions were nearly as much of a spectacle as the Circus itself. They were always held down on the Great Quay of Thieves while the Circus tent was dismantled and the whole marvellous show was somehow crammed back on to the Circus Boat. It always reminded Cass of a children's pop-up book in reverse. Then the boat would sail off, cheered on by the crowd. It was part of the tradition that everyone auditioning would bring their bags, and usually their entire family, as they would have to leave there and then to sail around the Islands, not to return to Minaris for another year.

That afternoon Cass had carefully packed a large duffel bag with her clothes and most beloved possessions, and hidden it under her bed. Then, when Mrs Potts had popped out to the wine merchants, Cass had guiltily sneaked into her boudoir. She had taken a piece of Mrs Potts's finest writing paper, with the name of the mansion at the top, and using her best dipping pen had written a short note. It said:

I, Emmelina Potts, happily give consent for my ward, Cassandra Malvino, to join the Circus and go with you to the Islands.
Signed Emmelina Potts

Cass had used Mrs Potts's seal at the bottom of the note to make it as look as genuine as possible. She was usually a painstakingly honest person and felt bad about this act of deceit.

But since she was only fourteen, and therefore not in charge of her destiny for another whole year, she knew it was necessary for her glorious new life.

She decided that she would compose a letter of farewell to Mrs Potts the following morning, that Tig could give her if Cass passed the audition.

The Mansion of Fortune in the Square of Seas, where Cass lived with Mrs Potts, was at the centre of the magical district. This was the area where people who had no desire to go to bed at a reasonable hour flocked to. They would drink in the famous Inn of the Outraged Octopus or visit the magical establishments around the Square of Seas, where they could have their fortunes told, or

their minds read, or try to trace long-lost relatives and friends through a form of telepathy called trancing.

It was sometimes hard to believe that magic had once been the most powerful force in the Longest World. It had all changed fifty or so years before when, exhausted by the bloodshed and horror of the final Magical War, the ordinary, non-magical people had risen up in revolt against the magicians and their petty quarrels. Almost all of the magicians were killed.

The few that survived either lived quietly in the magical districts of the great cities or fled to the remote, outer reaches of the Longest World, away from the prying eyes of the Magical Enforcers and their strictly imposed Laws of Magic, which allowed only very minor arts such as fortune telling or conjuring tricks to be practised.

As the girls skated under the Arch of Fate and back into the Square of Seas, a voice called, "Cass! Tig!" from above their heads.

They looked up to see their friend Lin leaning out of the window of her room in the Mansion of Truth. She was a few years older than both

Cass and Tig, and was something of a big sister to them. In the daytime, Lin looked rather like a beautiful boy, with her neat features and short hair, but at night she transformed herself with a wig and heavy make-up, to make sure she looked every bit the part of Minaris's most sought-after fortune teller. Cass felt Lin's green eyes sweep over her and her voice was light with excitement.

"You have a star over your head, Cass. It's faint because it's you but it's definitely there. Did something good happen today, something important?"

Tig burst out laughing. "Not unless you call chucking a load of ice over some poor boy good! But," she added, "he was with Lord Enzo. Perhaps your destiny is to marry Lord Enzo!"

Cass rolled her eyes. "I don't think so, but we have just been to the Circus." Lin knew all about the audition. "Do you think it's a good omen for tomorrow?"

"Maybe," Lin replied. A voice called from inside the room and she said, "Sorry but I must go. Good luck, Cass!"

The neighbouring Mansion of Fortune was buzzing with customers when they got back, and Mrs Potts greeted them with a martyred expression.

"Well, I hope you girls have had a lovely time," she said. "It's been a complete nightmare here without you and I have the most appalling headache."

Then she disappeared off into her room clutching a bottle of smelling salts and a large glass of Rimple's Finest, the strong Minarian liquor that she was so fond of.

The girls immediately got to work, running up and down stairs, escorting customers to the array of magicians and fortune tellers that Mrs Potts crammed into the mansion.

But a couple of hours later, as the square clock struck twelve, Tig caught Cass by the arm and said, "You go to bed – you need your energy for the audition tomorrow."

Cass thanked her friend and gratefully went to her room.

Every night before she climbed into bed, she had a ritual that she followed.The terrible fire

that had killed her parents had also destroyed all their possessions except for a couple of objects that had been preserved in a small tin chest.

One was Dr Bromver's acrobatics book and the other was a small, framed picture that had belonged to Cass's mother. It was an oil painting of the Island of Women, which was where her mother, an orphan too, had grown up. Situated in the south-western archipelago of the Mid Isles, the small tropical island was famous not only for being a sanctuary for women but also an orphanage where unwanted babies were shipped to from all over the Longest World.

There was something about the vivid blues and lush dark greens of the picture that Cass loved and she found that however bad a day she had had, just a couple of moments looking at it soothed her. So every night, she would stand in front of it, and usually have a short conversation in her head with her parents and wish them good night.

That night her thoughts were entirely focused on the audition the following day.

"Please let Ravellous choose me tomorrow,

please please," she entreated them.

Cass felt as if she were leaning far out of a window, trying to grab something just out of reach. Her dream of being an acrobat was so near that she just needed to stretch a tiny bit further and it would be hers.

Harriet Whitehorn grew up in London, where she still lives with her husband and three daughters. She studied at Reading University and the Architectural Association, and previously worked in building conservation. She is now a full-time writer and has also written the Violet series, which is published by Simon and Schuster.

Although she is not known for her fondness for boats or acrobatic skills, nevertheless, there's a part of her that would have loved to run away on a Circus Boat.