

The
**ONE HUNDRED
NIGHTS**
of
HERO



A Graphic Novel by Isabel Greenberg
Author of the New York Times bestseller The Encyclopedia of Early Earth

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A Graphic Novel
ISABEL GREENBERG



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PROLOGUE



Are you ready?

Yes.

Then I shall begin.

IN THE
BEGINNING
WAS THE
WORLD



AND IT WAS WEIRD



This is because it came from the head of a strange girl with a beak. This is Kiddo.



She is the daughter of a God: BirdMan.

And the sister of another God: Kid.



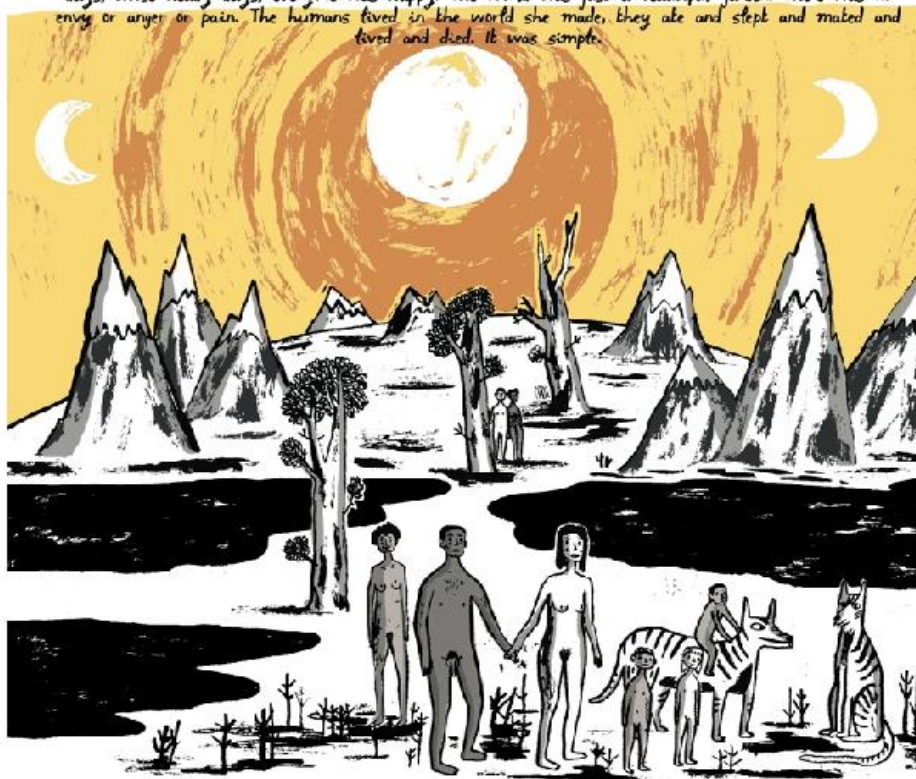
And of course she was a God herself. So they were Gods, but also they were a family, because this story is all about that. About humans and human-ness. Fathers and daughters, brothers and sisters. Love and betrayal and loyalty and madness. Lovers and heroes and the passing of time, and all those marvellous baffling things...





THOSE
THINGS
THAT
MAKE US
HUMAN.

Kiddo made Early Earth. This is true. She loved to make things, and in the days when our world was new, it was her world alone. BirdMan had bigger fish to fry, other universes, other galaxies, stranger and weirder and more wonderful life forms to tend over. So Early Earth was Kiddo's. In those days, those heady days, everyone was happy. The world was just a beautiful garden. There was no envy or anger or pain. The humans lived in the world she made, they ate and slept and mated and loved and died. It was simple.



Kiddo watched them, and she thought it was beautiful.



But then BirdMan turned his eye to Early Earth, saw the beautiful world and the little inconsequential life forms that ran around. They didn't know who Kiddo was, didn't worship their own creator. It was Unseemly, thought BirdMan, and something needed to be done.











Perhaps the world was a bit boring. But maybe the humans were happier like that, in ignorance. Well, either way, they had it no more. BirdMan gave them knowledge. And soon they began to write and create, speak and debate. And as he had intended, worship him. They wrote his words, they built great places of worship called Aviaries. And a sect of men called the Beaked Brothers rose to take charge of all the other humans.

But there was one other unforeseen consequence, a strange thing, that came in opposition to all the ambition and thirst for knowing that BirdMan had put into the hearts of the humans...



Or perhaps it had been there all along...



She was right of course. They would. All over Early Earth wars would be fought and oceans crossed and worlds traversed all for this thing they called love.

And so BirdMan had unwittingly created something that might in the end undo all the work he had put in.

We shall hear in this book the tales of many lovers. But there are two around whom all these stories will orbit, like moons around a planet. We shall meet them very soon.

Yes. Let us begin now.
And where? Where do we begin?

In the city of Migdal Bavel of course, the city that the men of Early Earth built in BirdMan's name.

We shall begin with two men.

But let me be clear, this story is not about those men who wrote the history of Early Earth, and built those great monuments in BirdMan's name...

It is about two very brave women. But I'm getting ahead of myself.
All in good time...





PART THE FIRST



A WAGER MOST FOUL



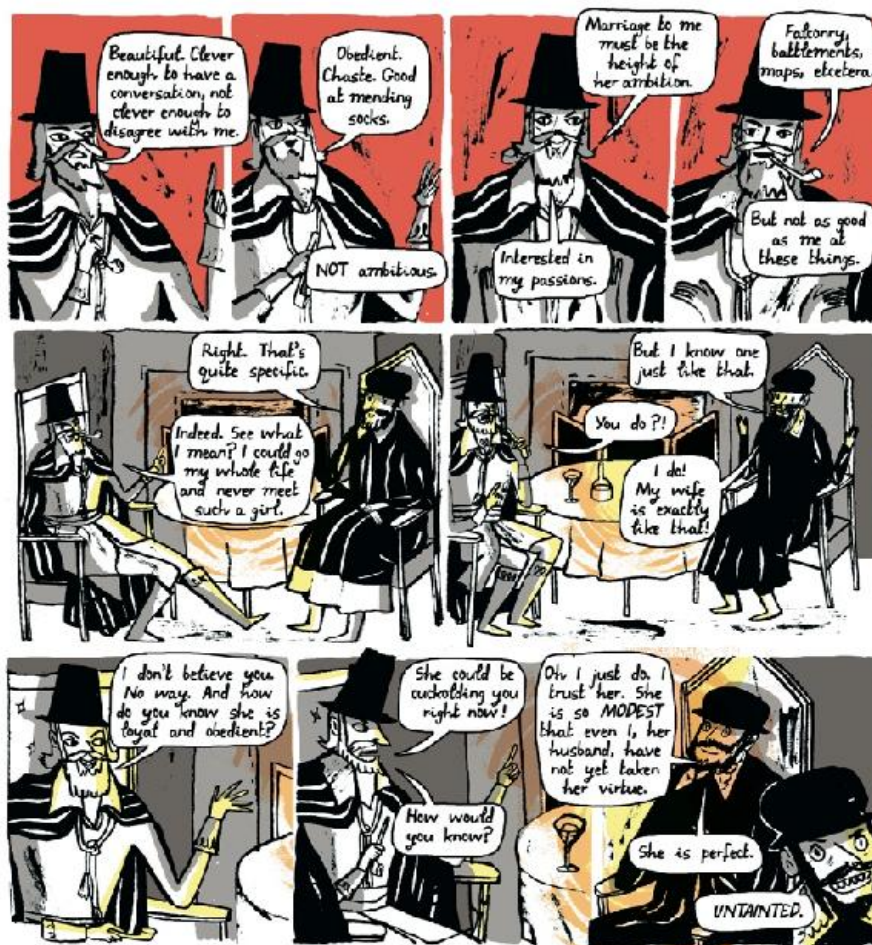
Once there were two men. (They were called Manfred and Jerome, if you want to know.) Anyway, they sat together and they talked, as men are wont to do, of Women.











Manfred laughs his head off. He laughs so hard he falls off his chair. Then he gets back on and laughs so hard he falls right back off again.





Let us pause in the story and meet this wife. Now, everything Jerome had said was true. She was beautiful, obedient, good at ballistics and falconry. However he had got one thing very wrong. She was far brainier than him.



For one glorious summer they are quite blissful. They laugh together at the suitors who come to Cherry's door, begging her father for her hand in marriage. They are all rich, polite, smirking, puffed, arrogant and entirely, dreadfully, achingly boring.



Now, if the girls have any faults at all, it is that they are a little cocky. So sure are they of their own smarts, that they are quite certain their happiness will never end. But soon enough, Cherry's father decrees that she is to be married.



So Cherry is married to Jerome, and off she goes to live in his house. But since Jerome pays her so little attention, very soon Cherry and Hero are able to carry on just as they ever did.



Which brings us nicely back to Manfred and Jerome and their diabolical wager.



Safe travels.



Hero! Get in here! We have 100 nights starting now, with no interruptions!





For Hero has overheard the whole sorry conversation (being a keen and talented amateur eavesdropper) and knows that fairly soon a man will come knocking on the door. And if Cherry doesn't succumb to his charms, it's ten to one he'll make her.



(Not of course I'm not going to show what happened then! What kind of a book do you think this is?)



SO the next evening, sure enough, there comes to the castle the Wicked Suitor, Manfred.



He is smarmy and smirky, he oozes confidence.





*yes. He is quite mad. But that is neither here nor there.



So the next night, back comes the Wicked Suitor, and Cherry is waiting for him.



So Hero clambers into the bed. Under the covers she takes Cherry's hand and grips it, tight.





PART THE SECOND



MATTERS OF THE HEART



Across the channel from the Great City of Migdal Babel lies a small village. It stands at the foot of a steep hill, and at the top of the hill are five stones. There is nothing else there, only those stones which stand straight backed and tall against the grey skies and storm tossed straits of Babel.



Strange stories are told about these stones. It is said that when the moon shines full upon them they get up of their own accord and dance. I cannot say whether or not this is true, but I will tell you the story of those five stones, and how they came to be there.



So, some years ago, in the village I have just mentioned, there lived five sisters. Their mother had died, and so they lived with their father, who was a Sea Captain.



He was a kind man, but losing his wife had been the great and lasting tragedy of his life. He had never managed to escape this sadness, although he loved his daughters very much.



Being a Sea Captain, he was often away for long stretches on voyages, and then the sisters were left to look after themselves, in the house at the foot of the hill, that looked out over the grey waves.



Now, having five daughters is a blessing, but also a curse, for they were not a rich family, and the Sea Captain knew that after he died he would have nothing to leave them.



They were all beautiful enough, but he made sure that each of them was accomplished too. The sisters could dance and paint and embroider and sing. And most importantly they were chaste and virtuous.



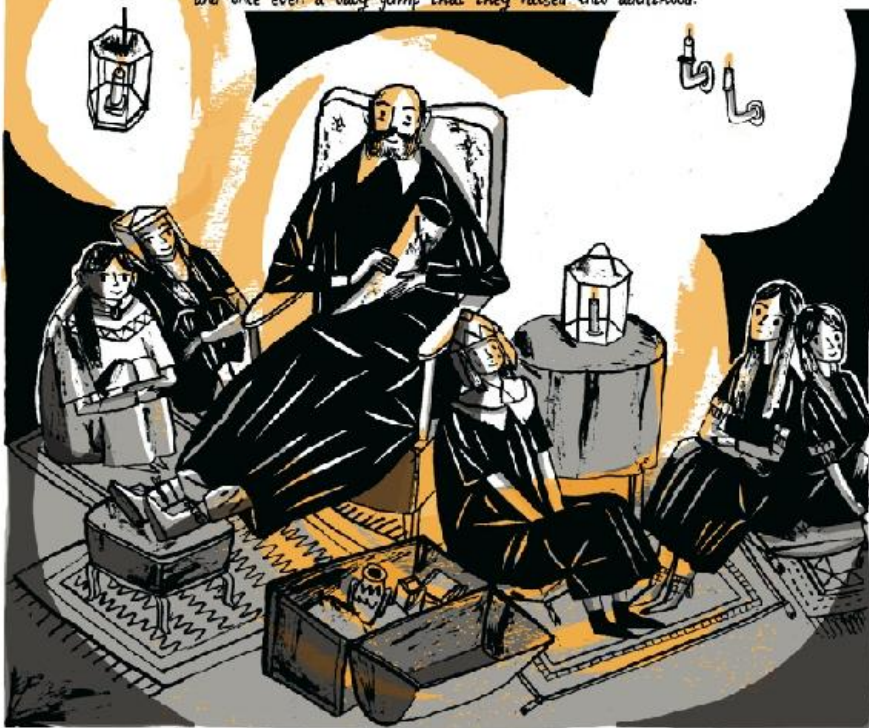
When the Sea Captain came back from his voyages he would say...



And one by one they would show him the things they had accomplished.



And he would smile and nod and bring out great wonders from his travels to impress them; narwhal tusks and wolf hides, the scales of glowfish threaded into delicate necklaces, the tooth of a great bear, and once even a baby gump that they raised into adulthood.



But there was one thing the sisters learnt that they could never tell their father. It was a secret skill that their mother had passed on to them.

It was a skill that was considered sinful and wicked and was absolutely verboten for women in the Empire Of Migdol Babel to practise... But the sisters did it anyway; they read. They read and they wrote.

All those long months their father was away, they passed around secret books...

They read aloud to each other, they wrote great, swirling sentences in ink and charcoal, in mud and paint and pencil. They luxuriated sinfully in that most beautiful of all things:
The written word.



And they were not sorry. Not one bit.

One night, in the darkness of winter, when a storm raged against the windows of their house and all was black outside, the sisters made a pact. The curtains were drawn tight, and the fire barked high, and they sat in its glow, reading aloud to each other.



They knew about love, did the sisters, for they had read many books on the subject.



When their father next returned home, he brought with him a Wealthy Merchant he had met on his travels. The Wealthy Merchant was very wealthy indeed.



The Wealthy Merchant found all the daughters captivating, but it was Little Rosa he liked the best. He thought she seemed quick and graceful and full of a grave sweetness that he liked very much.



Of course, this was not what Rosa was like at all. In actual fact she was funny and smart with a sharp tongue and a quick mind, and she laughed all the time.



The next day he took her for a walk, and the day after that, and the day after that. Little Rosa had known no other man than her father, and she liked him.



She liked that he courteously held gates open for her. She liked his eyes and the gap between his teeth. She liked his stories.



On the seventh day he kissed her.



Well this was exactly how most of their books had said it would happen, so it must be right.



So they were married. The Sea Captain was happy to see one of his daughters well and safe, and although her sisters cried to see Rosa leave them, if it was True Love, well then that was OK.



PAUSE





They fell asleep in each other's arms, and although their dreams were fraught with worry, they had survived the first night.



And outside their door the guards shuffled and stretched and wondered how long it could go on and the Scoundrel slept and dreamt of smooth-skinned girls with eyes like cats and the city of Magdal Babel woke up for the day. And the hours crept by to sunset, when the story would continue...

THE SECOND NIGHT

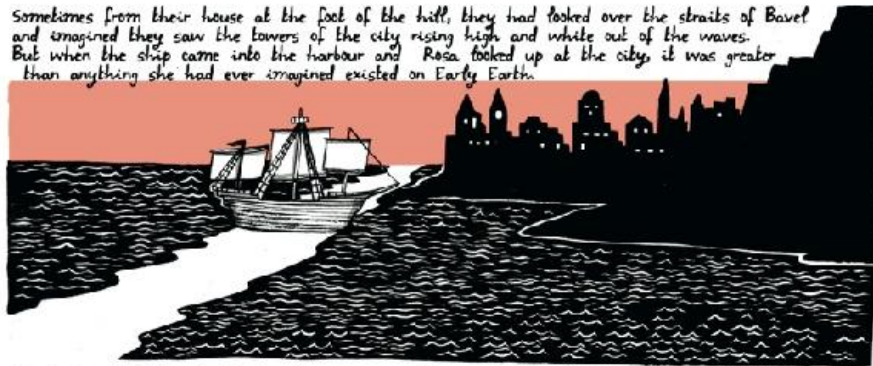
The Wealthy Merchant had a grand house in the capital city of Migdal Bavel. So Little Rosa packed up her things and bade farewell to her sisters and the house at the foot of the hill.



Before she left, the sisters fitted a cunning little fake bottom to her chest, and into it they secreted six books.



Sometimes from their house at the foot of the hill, they had looked over the straits of Babel and imagined they saw the towers of the city rising high and white out of the waves. But when the ship came into the harbour and Rosa looked up at the city, it was greater than anything she had ever imagined existed on Early Earth.



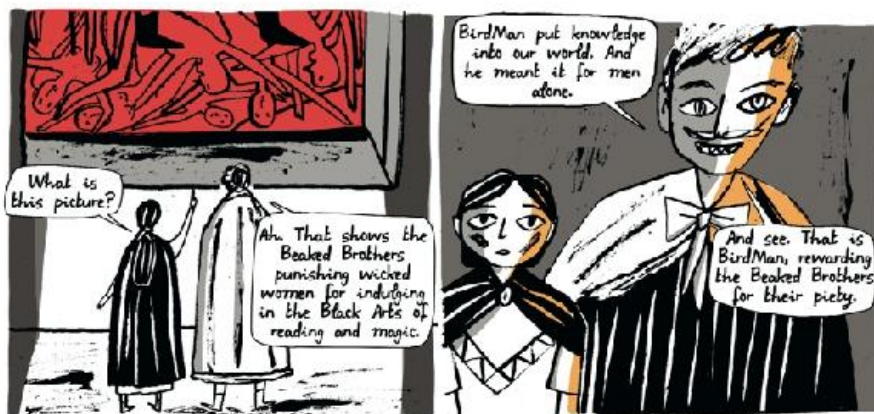
Her husband took her to the Great Aviary, presided over by the robed monks, the Beaked Brothers. Vast was the Great Aviary. Vast and dark. High, vaulted ceilings rose dizzyingly above them, great domed windows made of coloured glass that bore images of BirdMan. For he was everywhere here.





It was a beautiful place. Sun came in slanting shafts, and a molited quiet like settling dust was all about. But where the shafts did not reach, nor the flickering candlelight, in the deep alcoves and the arched walkways, all was darkness.





Rosa liked the city of Migdal Babel very much. She liked its winding streets and its bustle, she liked the smells and the sights and the sounds; she liked the secret gardens and hidden pools, the doorways and tunnels and towers and narrow flights of stairs.



She liked her husband too, and for those first few weeks, she all but forgot the secret she had. But then one evening, when a cold chill blew in off the sea, Rosa thought of her sisters.



For a moment, as the words glowed in the window steam, she thought it would be alright. But only for a moment.



He marched her to her room, he opened the trunk where all the accoutrements of her trousseau were folded and flung them across the floor. Handkerchiefs and petticoats, scarves and stockings and veils fluttered around them as he ripped the false bottom from the trunk. And the forbidden books were revealed.



He left her in her room, and locked her in. She had got it wrong, the books had got it wrong. There was no such thing as True Love, except for the love she had for her sisters, in the dark winter nights when they read to each other until dawn bleached the sky.



In the morning they came for her, the Beaked Brothers. Her husband did not meet her eye. "Watch," he whispered, and he made the sign of the evil eye.



Three weeks later a letter arrived at the little house at the foot of the hill. And the four sisters gathered around.



So the sisters packed up the little house, and crossed the straits of Babel, and came to the High Court in the Great Square. And there they presented themselves to the Beaked Brothers.



I shall not dwell too much on what happened to them. But I shall tell you what is the punishment for a woman caught reading.



They say that the sisters held hands and did not quit. That they jumped before the Brothers had a chance to push them. Even when they were dead on the stones below, they did not let go. That is what they say.

Word reached the Sea Captain, not long after, of what had happened. He went to Middel Bavel and he fetched the bodies of his girls. He took them home to the little house, and buried them high on the hill behind.



The Sea Captain never went on another voyage. He stayed in the little house and read the books his daughters had left and the words they had written. There were pages and pages and pages. Stories they had invented and accounts of things they had done whilst he was away.





PART THE THIRD



A VERY HONEST HARP





*Yes, 24 nights have already passed! I know what you're thinking, but I'm not going to include every break for daylight, it would ruin the flow! But believe you me, Hero is really spinning this tale out.



So Crafty Hero, having secured the Wicked Suitor's attention once again, prepared to begin another tale...

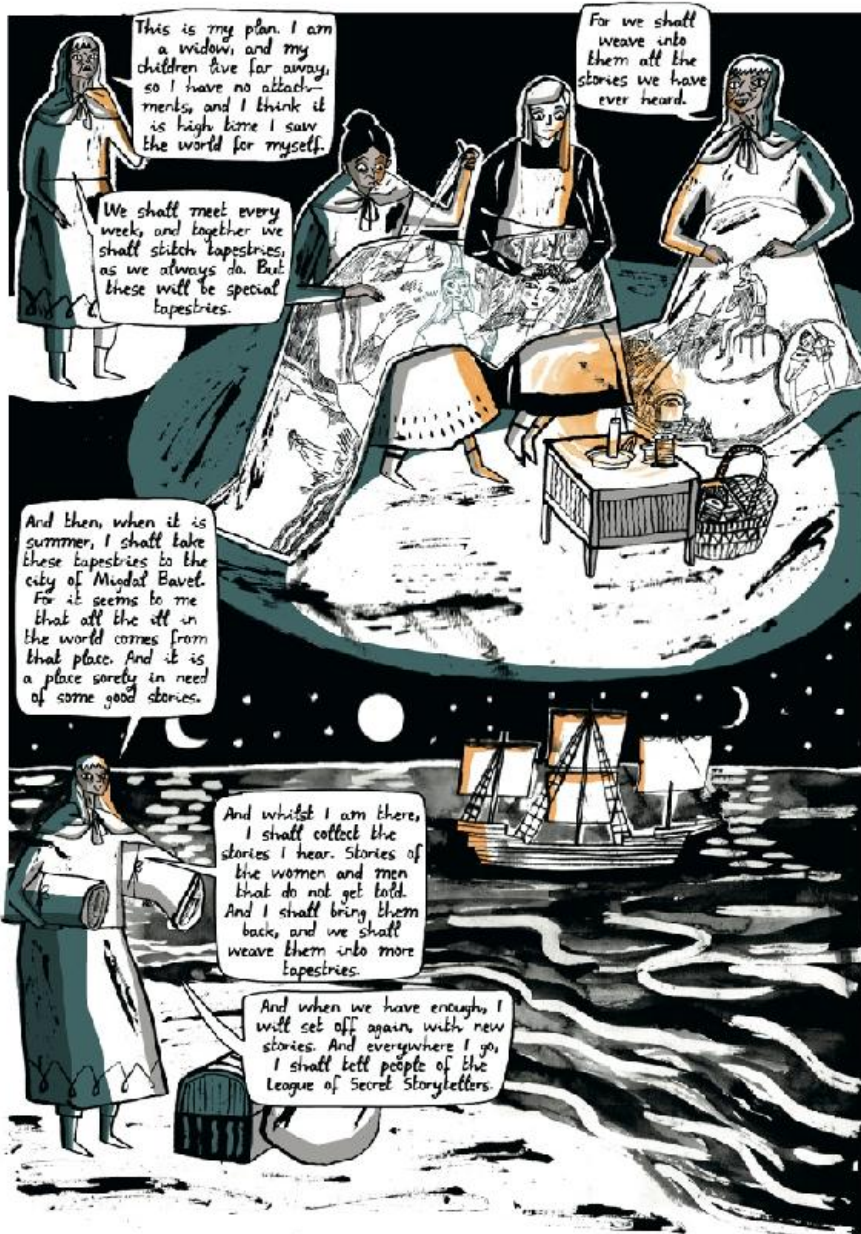




These are Wistmat's two dearest friends; Mrs. A and Esa. Esa is the daughter of the village Medicine Man. And Mrs. A? Ah, well Mrs. A is my mother. But more on that later, I promise.









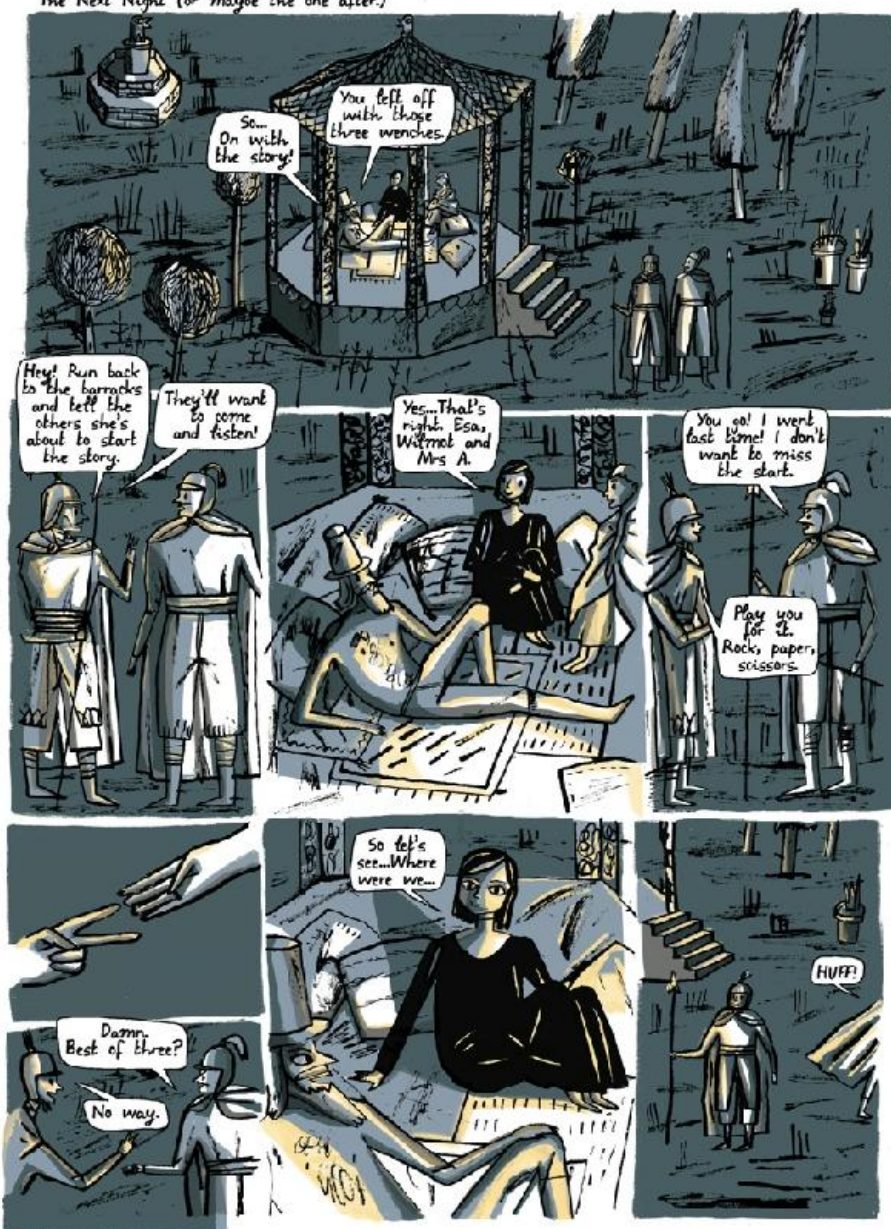


But she said this sadly, because she was going to have a baby. And she knew that if she ever tried to leave Skeragaard, and got caught, she would never see it again.





The Next Night (or maybe the one after.)







None of them could read or write, so the stories had to be kept safe in their heads until they could sew them into the tapestries. But to remind herself, Wilmot had a token for each story, so that she would not forget anything important.







A man came to their village. He came from far away and he was seeking a lover.
In the wild meadows he met Minnerie.



He wooed her with tokens
and with gifts; brooch and knife
and glove and box and spoon.

He gave her things and things...

And very soon she loved him.





But although he gave her tokens, he made her no promises. Hints and smiles so she thought he was sincere. But he was not. For walking in the woods he met Bennorie. And although he liked Minnerie, and thought her quick and funny, he was dazzled by golden Bennorie.



She, he wooed with words. And he promised her everything. He was a handsome man, but his eyes slid hither and thither and rarely met another's. He wore a brooch of a bleeding stag upon his breast and a cloak of blue velvet. He was a vain man, probably.





I've met a man too! Now we both have men!



Tell me all about him!

Tall, smart, kind, strong. He wears a brooch of a bleeding stag on his breast and a cloak of blue velvet.

A smarter girl might have smelt a rat, but as I have already told you, Bernorie was pretty dim.



Minnorie knew with certainty that they had the same suitor. And that he would pick Bernorie.

Of course he would, everyone always did.



He's told me he loves me and soon he'll ask for my hand in marriage.



I'm happy for you.

Me too! Do you think they will like each other? Our MEN?



I don't think I have one any longer, Bernorie.



Sure enough, the next day the suitor asked for the hand of Bennorie and everyone was happy. He acted as though he did not know Minnerie, and she could do nothing but go along with it, pretend they had not spent hours together in the wild meadows and that she did not have his tokens in a locked box.

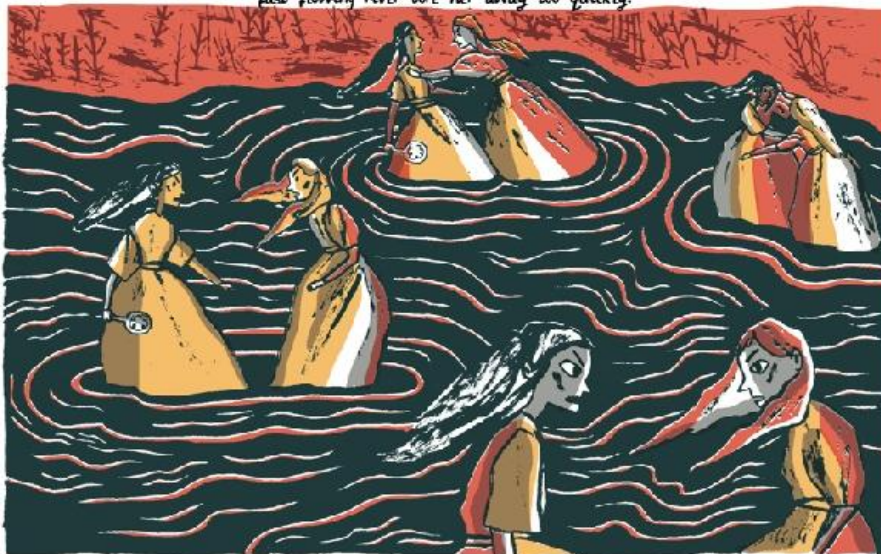


She took the tokens to the river and threw them, one by one, into the fast flowing water. The knife, the glove, the brooch, the box, the spoon, the pot, the candle and the mirror.

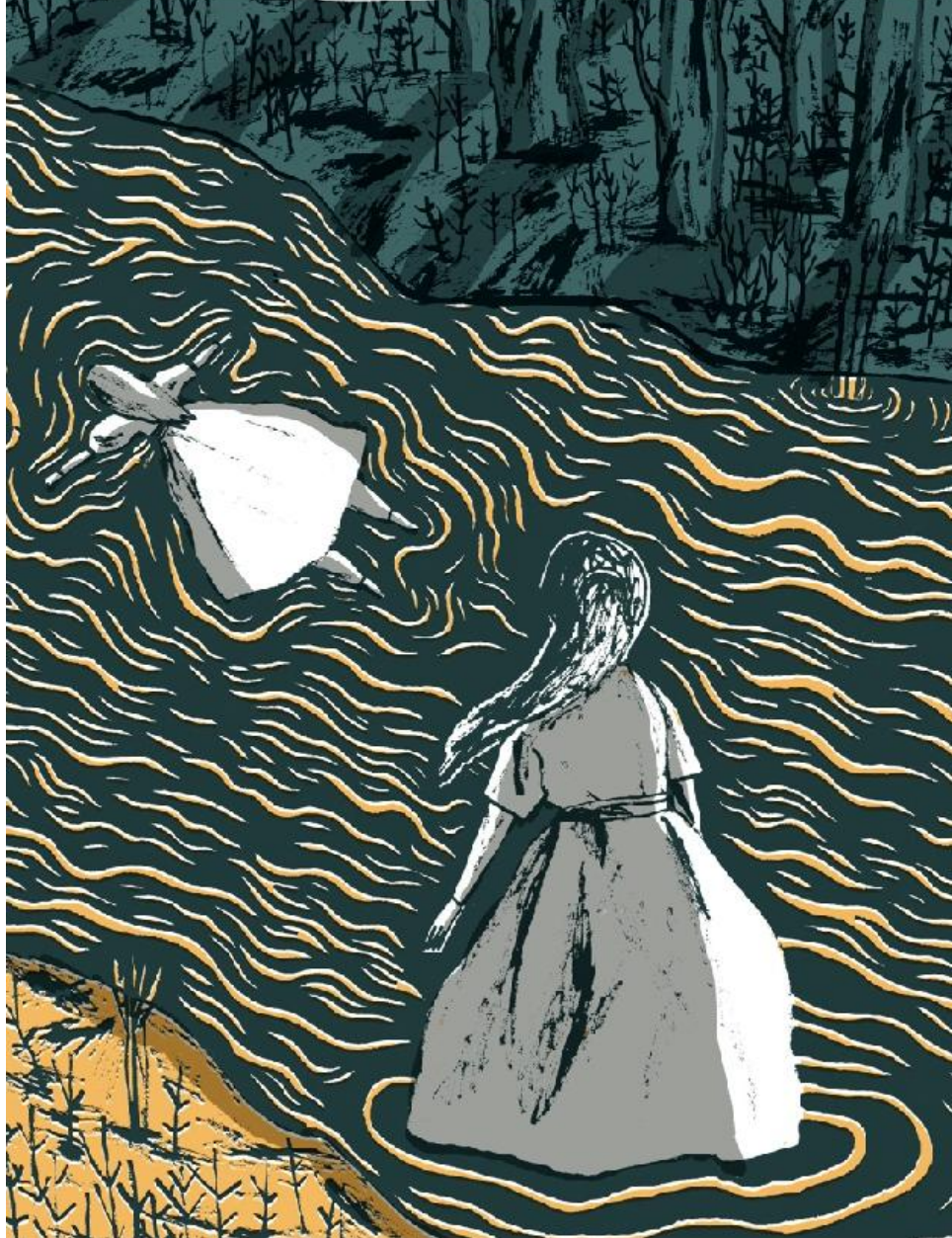




Now...what happened next, some say one thing, some say another. Some say Minnerie pushed her sister into the water, and held her down, until her thrashing body went dead as wood. Some say Bennorie jumped in after the mirror. Some say Bennorie pushed Minnerie in, and Minnerie pulled her in after. Some say they were grappling for the mirror, and Bennorie fell and Minnerie tried to catch her but the fast flowing river bore her away too quickly.



Believe whatever you like, but all the versions end the same way. With the body of Bennorie floating away facedown in the river, and Minnerie alone in the shallows.



What happened then? Well, when Bennorie did not come home that evening, everyone was frightfully worried.

I have not seen her.

She shouldn't have tied, and this is where things get even more sticky. She definitely should not have tied.

I have not seen her.



Search parties were sent out. They scoured the woods and the wild meadows and found not one trace of Bennorie.



But by the banks of the river they found her hair ribbon. And then they knew she had drowned.



People have said since that Minnerie was a cold girl, for pretending to mourn her sister... But I think she mourned her truly. And her heart was breaking.



The false suitor mourned her too.

Although not for long.



He took to walking again with Minnerie in the wild meadows and the dark woods. He spoke to her of love and loss and the great mystery of death. And then he asked for her hand in marriage.



He gave her new tokens, and this time promises came with them.

But his eyes still slid further and further.



Now let us pause a moment and digress. Let us go back to Bennorie, whose body is floating along that fast flowing river.



On and on it floats, and as it nears the sea...



It is washed up on the shore of a little cove.



In the cove, set up on the sand dunes is a shack, and in the shack lives a man.



He finds the body of the beautiful girl, and not being a man to waste a thing...



It comes to him to make it into something interesting.



So he strips Bennorie of her flesh, which he gives to his dogs.



He cleans her bones so they shine white, and her fine spun hair he washes tenderly, and brushes, and leaves in the sun to dry until it gleams like pure gold.



Then he carves her bones and makes from them a harp, and taking one gold hair at a time, he strings it. It makes an extraordinary and melancholy sound. The man is a travelling minstrel, and when he sets off on his next journey, he takes the strange instrument with him.



So back to Minnerie. The day of the wedding dawns clear and bright, and everyone says the ceremony is beautiful. Moving. A display of True Love. Tears are shed left, right and centre.



Evening draws in, and the lamps are lit. They feast and dance. Minnerie is radiant, happy. And then her father announces that he has a surprise.



Enter the harpist. You have guessed, haven't you, what ghastly instrument he bears?



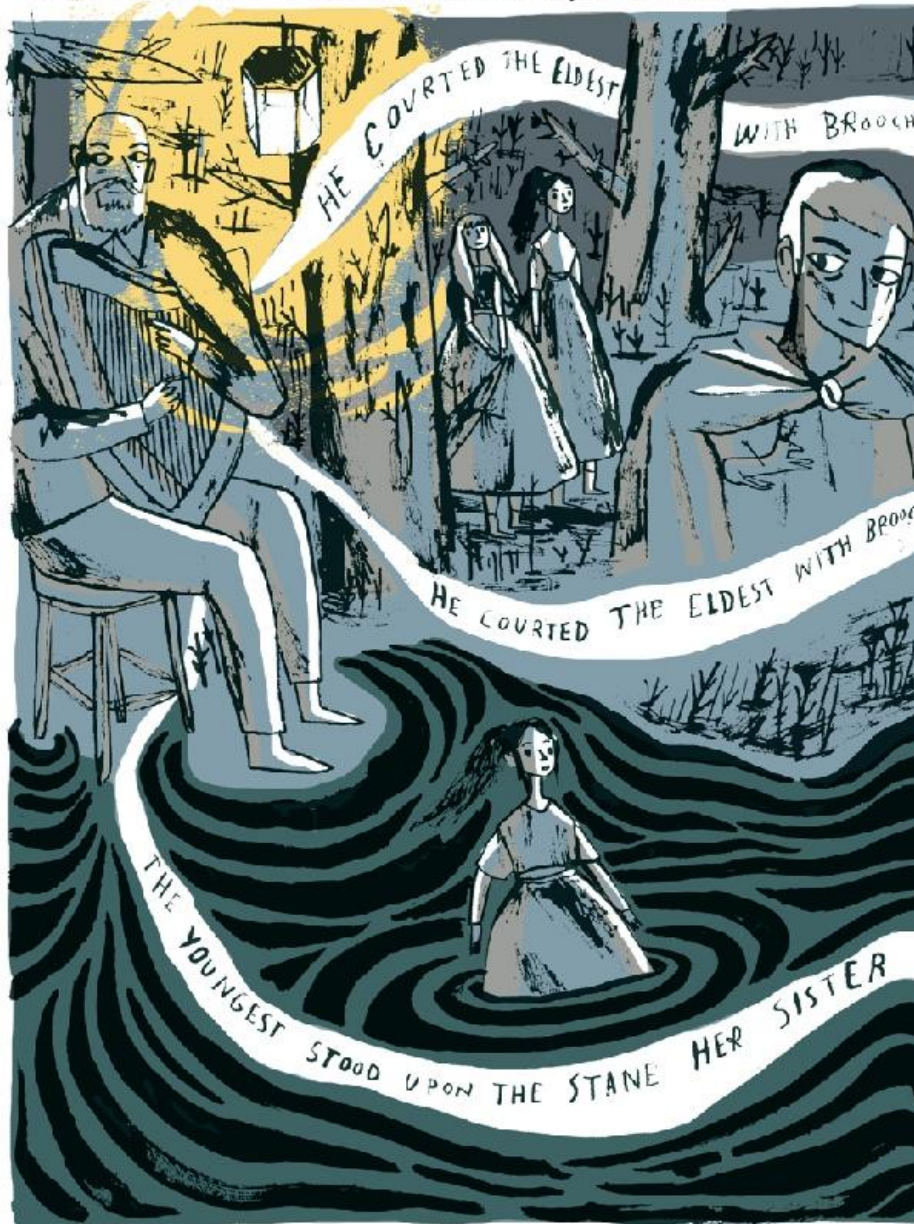
Silence falls, and he begins to play, and the sound sends a shiver through the assembled guests.

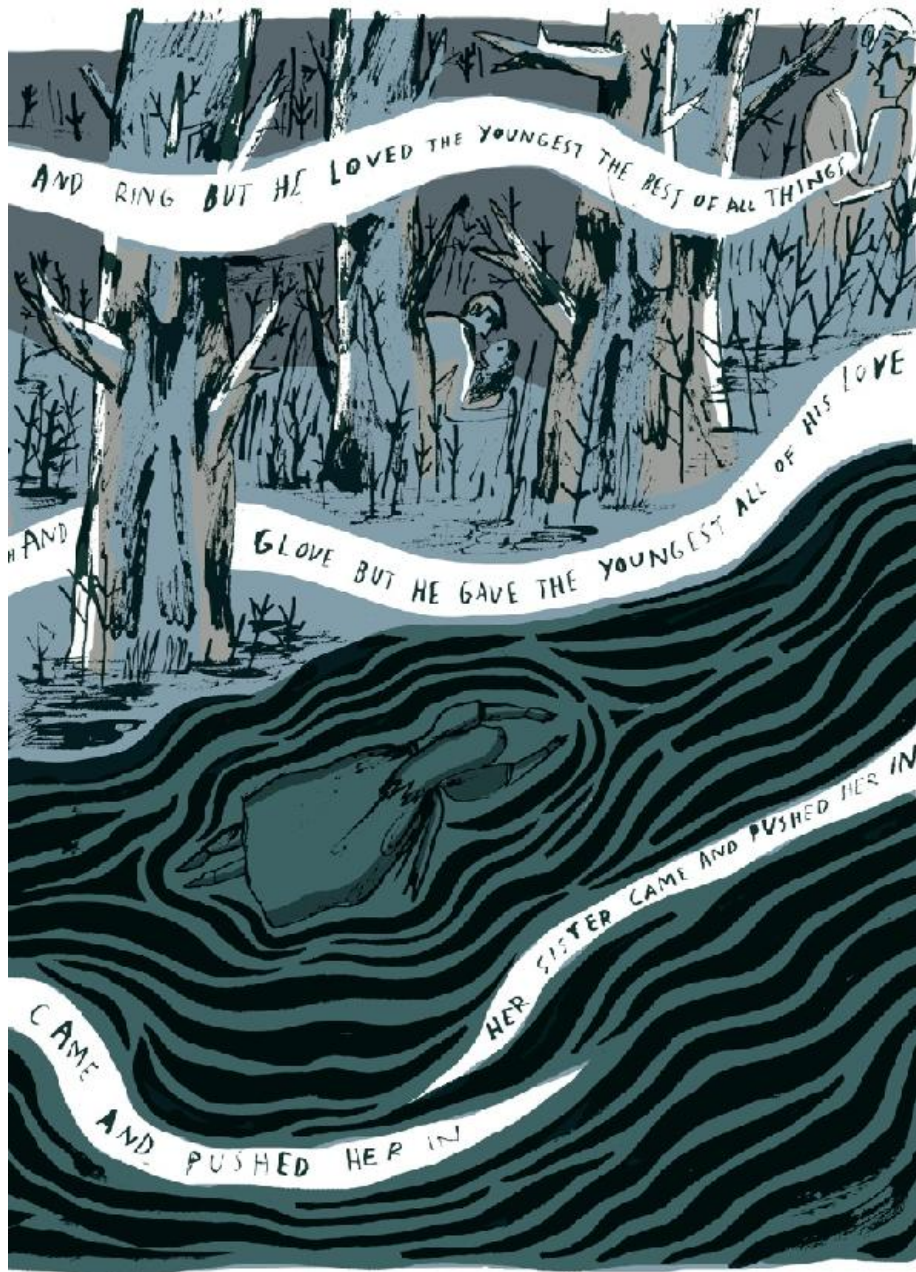


The harpist is not singing, and yet the melancholy and familiar voice of a young girl rises high and clear.



The harp sang a strange song, a song about two sisters courted by the same man...





The harp finished its refrain, and a terrible silence followed. Minneme did not make one word of denial, but cried silent tears, even as they dragged her from the wedding feast.



She was denounced by her husband, and disowned by her father. They killed her for her crime, burned her at the stake for being a murderer and a temptress and a witch. And the false suitor? He got off scot free, and was consorted by all for losing both wife and lover.



Lesson: Men are false. And they can get away with it.
Also, don't murder your sister, even by accident. Sisters are important.





 PART THE FOURTH 

**IN WHICH A MAN
MAKES AN
EXTRA-
ORDINARY
ACQUAINTANCE**



That last bit of course, Hero did not say out loud. But that was how Mrs A had told it to her. And that was how Wilmot had told it to Mrs A and Esau under the Thing Trees, that first moonlit night on her return from Migdal Bavel. Instead she finished blandly with...





So, like a swimmer who has been underwater for the longest time, and breaks the surface, but knows there are still many miles to go, and with agony and relief takes a huge, deep breath, plunges beneath the waves once more. So the Crafty Hero took a breath and began to talk.



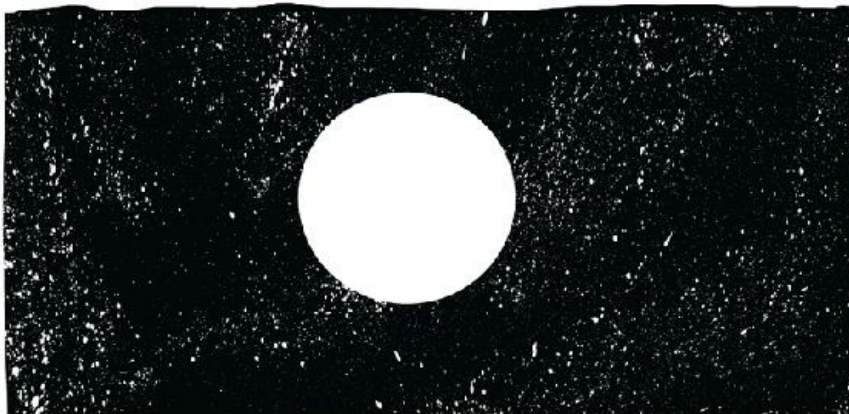
THE THING TREES

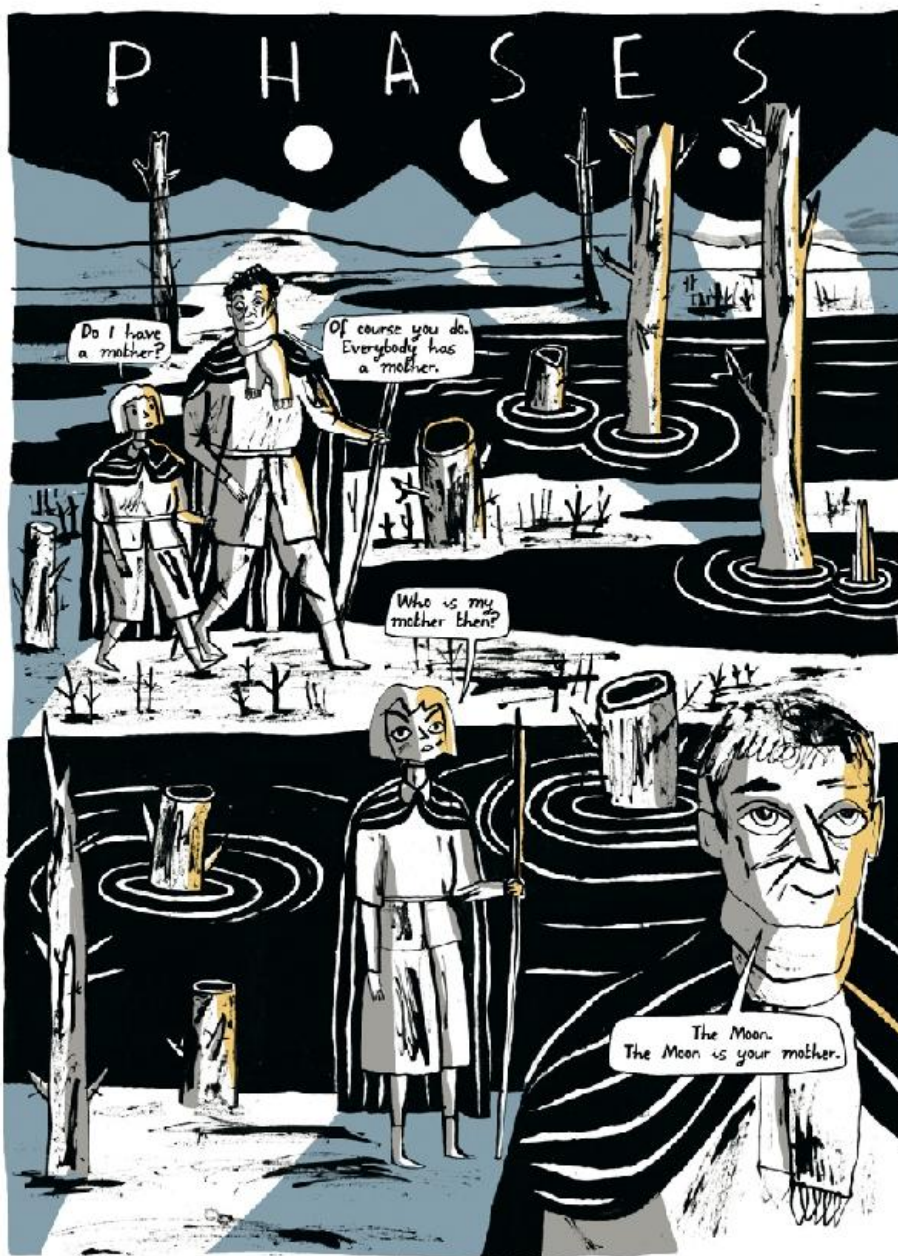
It was Mrs A's grandmother who had first hung a thing on a tree, and started the Thing Trees. They were forgotten for a while, but then Esa and Mrs A and Wilmot began the League of Secret Storytellers. And they began to hang things again. Because every Thing has a story.

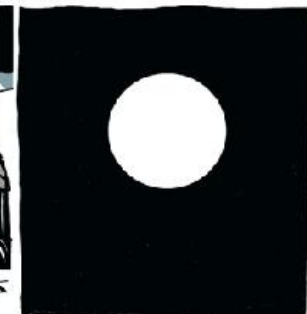












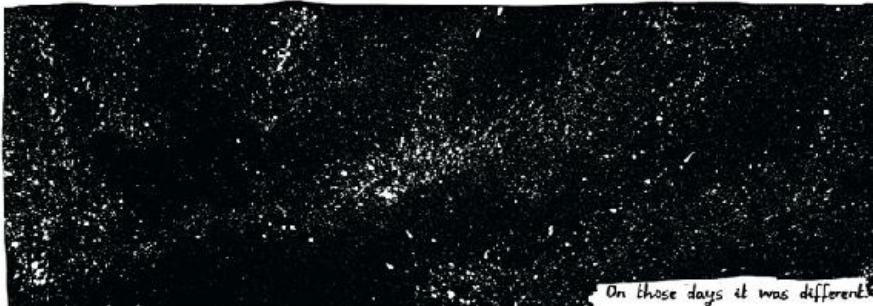
This tale begins in a village called Darkly End, on the Island of Nagood, in the Archipelago, at the farthest edge of the Bavethian Empire. Darkly End stands on the edge of a great marshy swamp. It is a vast place full of pools of black water, fathoms deep, and sticky treacherous mud that could drown a grown man.



Situated as they were, between two large mountains, the folk of Darkly End could only ever see the smallest of the Moons of Early Earth. And so they loved her, and felt that she was theirs.



For when she shone, she lit up those marshes as bright as day, and then, even by those black pools they felt safe. But when she didn't shine, on those days when she wrapped herself up in her cloak of darkness, and left the stars all alone in the sky...



Out there, so it was said, would come the Things and the Terrors and Creeping Horrors. And then it was not safe for the folk of Darkly End, and they bolted their doors against the night.



Well, eventually the stars noticed and they told the Moon the mischief that was happening on those nights she was away. And she was very angry, and thought she ought to go and see for herself.

So at the month's end, when she had waned away to a leaner sliver, and then to nothing at all, she pulled on her cloak; it had been cut from a piece of the night sky at the edge of a black hole and was blacker than the blackest black you or I can possibly imagine...



Onwards she walked through the twisting paths that were laid out between the pools and tussocks like an endless skein of tangled threads.

Well, this isn't
so bad really...

But no sooner had those words left her mouth,
than an iron hand gripped her ankle, clammy
and ice cold.

And suddenly they were everywhere!

She strained with all her might to put out some light, but all she could produce was a faint glow
and that was not enough to frighten away even the smallest of them.





And that's when she heard a cry, an unmistakably human cry, and crashing out from the gloom came a man, being pursued by terrible things, and lost, lost in the marshes. Her fight, faint as it was, had lured him away from the path, to almost certain death!



Well, she could not have that on her conscience. So mustering every ounce of her strength, she forced every bit of light inside her to come blazing out. There was a flare of brightness, and the creatures withdrew, as if burned by fire!



The man cried out with relief, but so dazzled was he by the brightness that he did not see the Moon. He stumbled back to the path, unpursued, and did not stop for one moment to wonder who or what had saved him.



And once he was gone, her fight faded, and spent and exhausted, she could do nothing as they surrounded her. They tied her up and danced around her, laughing and mocking. They had long hated her, for ruining their delightful darkness. And now they had her.



They dropped her into the deepest pool they could find, foul smelling and black bottomless, and over it they pushed a huge rock. And then the wickedest of them, a horrid, grinning devilish thing, sat on top to keep guard.



So there was the Moon, trapped in the bog, and no one knew she was there.

The days passed and soon it was time for the new Moon to rise. The folk of Dorkly End looked anxiously to the sky, but she did not come. Not the next day, nor the one after. The sky stayed black and empty and the marshes full of terror.



And as the nights stretched on, the bog creatures grew bolder, venturing out of the marshes and thronging the streets of the town, so that the villagers bolted their doors as soon as the sun had set.



So he went to see his Grandmother, who also happened to be the villane's Wise Old Crone, and he told her what had happened to him, when he had been lost in the marshes that night.



So the young man found his way back to the deep pool.



And there was the great stone slab and sitting on top of it, the bog creature still grinning.



Take that!

And that!

AND THAT!

Now get lost!

He put all his weight against the great stone slab, and to his surprise was able to move it. Not much, but just enough to reveal a head and shoulders' worth of that black pool.



Down into the water he reached, down until his hand touched something—cold, stiff fingers. But he squeezed them, so and so, and all of a sudden they squeezed right back!



(*In actual fact the pebble possessed no magic properties whatsoever, and was simply an ordinary stone. But the Wise Old Crane knew that a little suggestion can go a long way.)

He pulled her out of the water, and she hurried, drenched and freezing, into his open arms.



So the Moon and the man walked together through the marshes as dawn (she with her rosy fingers) drenched the sky with fierce pink. And as they walked they talked.







So the Moon left, and the next night, there she was back in the sky, and the folk of Darkly End rejoiced to see her and the bog creatures withdrew to their holes and sulked.



But the young man, he willed the month to end faster, watched the moon climb in the sky each night, watched her wax and wane and go through each of her phases.



Until at last the night came when the sky was empty. He paced around his little house, wondering if she would come, and then finally he heard a soft tap at his door.





But the Moon, she just smiled, and kneeling beside him, she took his face in her cold little hands, and kissed his mouth. Well, it would not be possible to describe to you that kiss. But it is enough to say that it changed the man, and he was lost to her.



That night passed, and then next, and then she returned to the sky. But at the end of the cycle she came back again, knocking on his door with her soft tap and lighting up his house with a glow that made everything, everything, everything, extraordinary.



It began to seem to the man that everything that happened in between those nights was a dream; that he was sleepwalking his way through the days until she would come to him again.



And when she was with him it was as if that twilight, muffled, underwater place he had been inhabiting was suddenly gone, and all the sights and sounds and smells of the world came back to him in glorious technicolor.



Sometimes he dreamt that he was lost in a dark forest. She was leading him through, but he couldn't keep up, and she was always just out of reach.



But it was too late, far too late, to turn back. Because he would never find his way out alone.



When she was with him, they would be awake all night and talk and talk and talk. What did they talk about, a man and the Moon? Oh, everything!

Tell me some of the things you've seen.

When?

Ever.

Ever? But I've seen so much...

I've seen the tower of Migdal Bavel crumble and burn. I've seen the cold lands of Nord lit up like day by the vast aurora...



I've seen the lost city of Atlantis sink into the sea and the Hanging Gardens of Nemore. Now they were a sight to see, I can tell you that. I've seen Gods walk the Earth and I've walked with Gods.



I've seen hundreds and thousands of lovers and murderers and fiars and thieves. I've seen all the good of man and all the folly.



And now you're here, with me.



Yes. Now I'm here.

One night, the man looked into her eyes, (which incidentally were a peculiar shade of obsidian grey, which you could not match here or anywhere on Earth I think) and told her that he probably loved her.

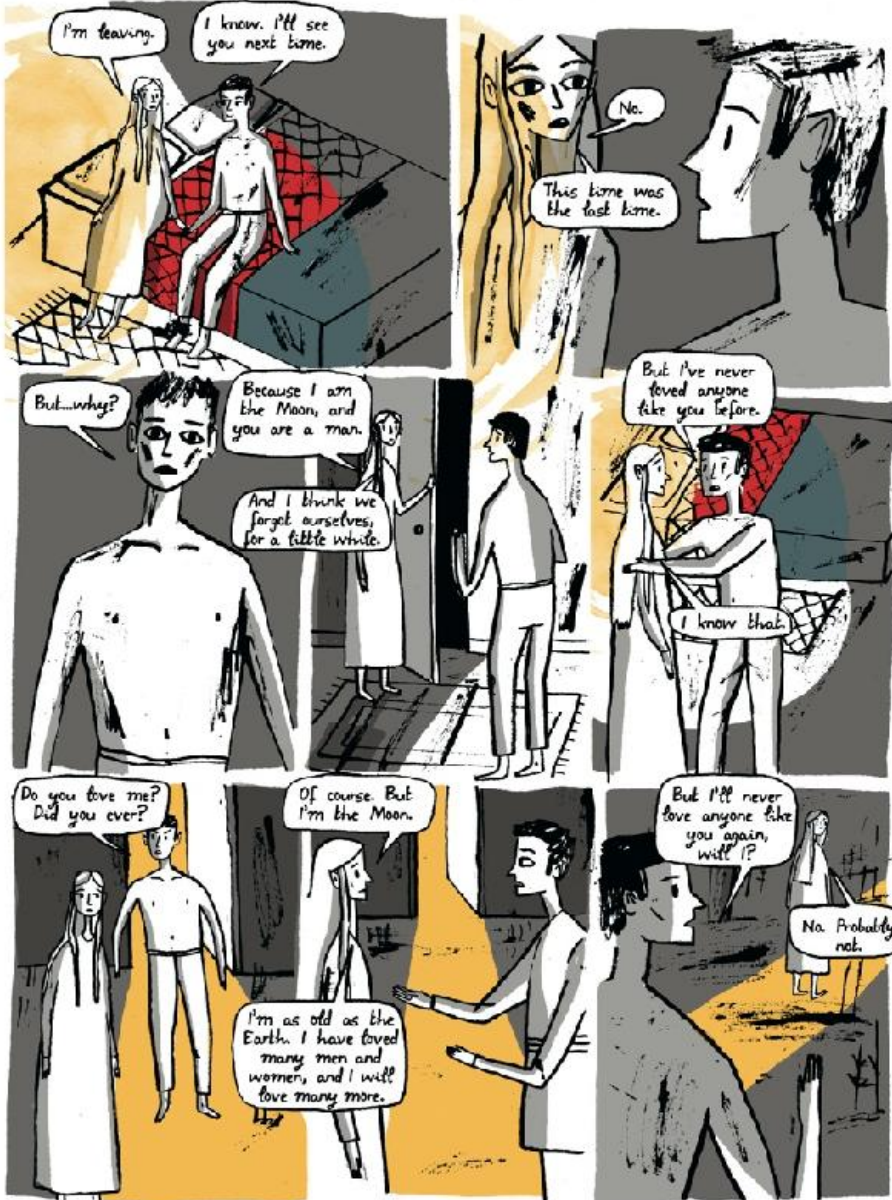


His life was shrinking and shrinking. Sometimes, when the sun was high and the village full of a daytime joy that didn't reach him, he wondered if he had gone stark mad.





But the next month, something was different.



She was gone. And everything was grey.



He couldn't bear to see her, every night.



She was not coming back.



But then one day, almost a year later, he heard that soft tap on his door.



The man knew then that she loved him, and it was only the incontrovertible fact that she was the Moon that was keeping them apart.



He never saw her again. Well, not standing in front of him as a woman. But sometimes he would go out into the marshes, with his daughter, and they would talk to her. All night they would stay, talking and talking. And on those nights, she blazed so bright and so brilliant that everything was lit up like day. And then they knew she heard them.









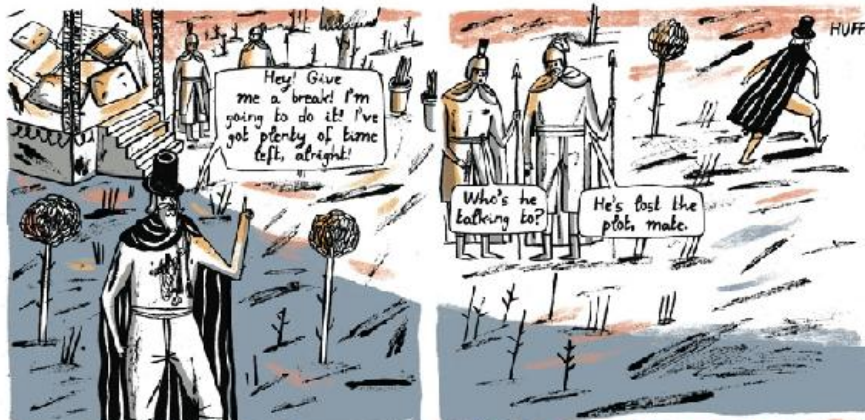
PART THE FIFTH



**IN WHICH
HERO &
CHERRY
FIND THEMSELVES
IN PRETTY
HOT WATER**



For night after night the Wicked Manfred had come to Cherry, and night after night Hero had kept him at bay with her stories. The problem was, the more time he spent with the two women, the less inclined he felt to force himself on her.



But as the nights blurred into a delightful kaleidoscope of strange and beautiful words, of the moonlit gardens, of silks and cushions and fabrics woven with designs that enchanted him and crept into his dreams, he found himself unable to keep track of time.





As you might have gathered, it was a most favourite job of the castle guards to be stationed watching Hero and Cherry. Those on duty would report the stories back to those in the mess and the barracks, who would tell their families, who would tell their neighbours.



And pretty soon the stories were spreading through the city.
People were whispering, people were gossiping.





So the nights went on, and the stories went on, and each time Manfred felt even more added, and the guards (who by now were seriously rooting for Hero and Cherry) did nothing to help him out.

























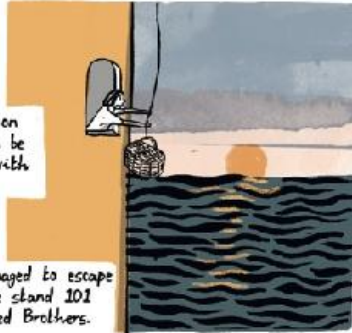
So Hero and Cherry are locked up. If there was ever a point in this story where you should feel sorry for them, it is now. Let me paint a picture. The Tallest Tower has no stairs. And no doors.*

There is a pulley on which a basket can be sent up and down with food and water.

And even if they managed to escape to the bottom, there stand 101 guards of the Beaked Brothers.

Who would skewer them without a thought on 101 glittering spear ends.

Things are not good.



* Oh yes, it is, of course, the self same Tallest Tower that Rosa and her sisters found themselves in.

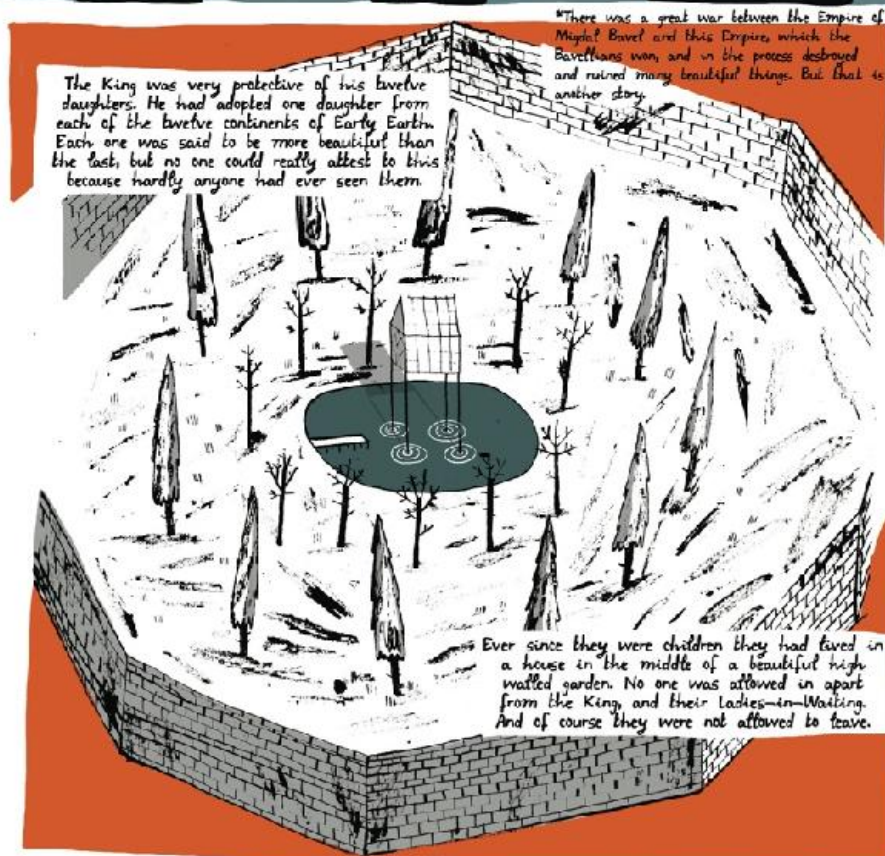




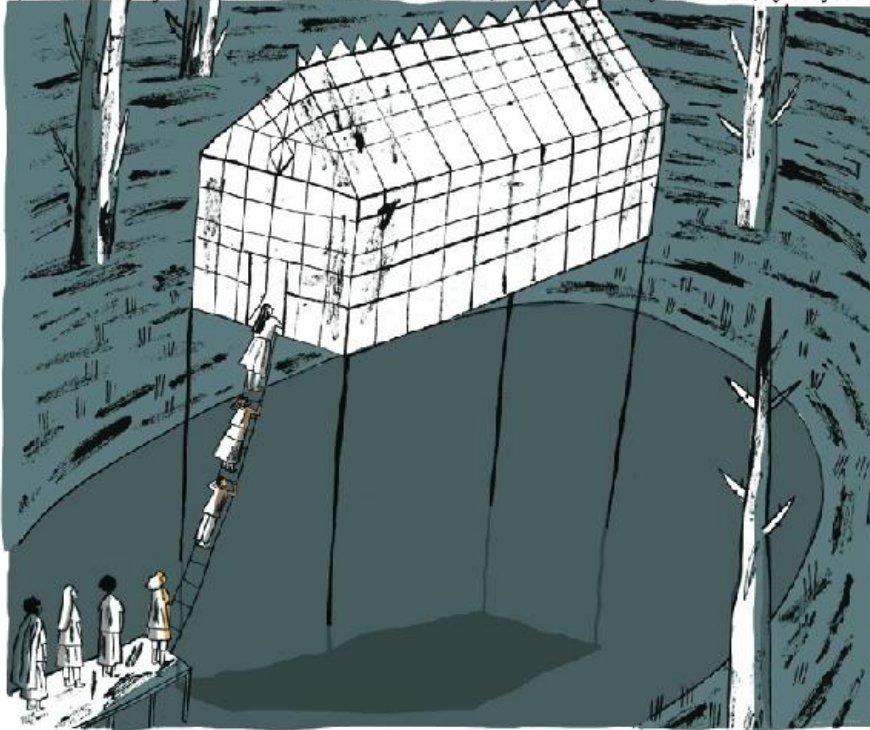
 PART THE SIXTH 

**NEVER EAT
A POISONED
SAUSAGE**

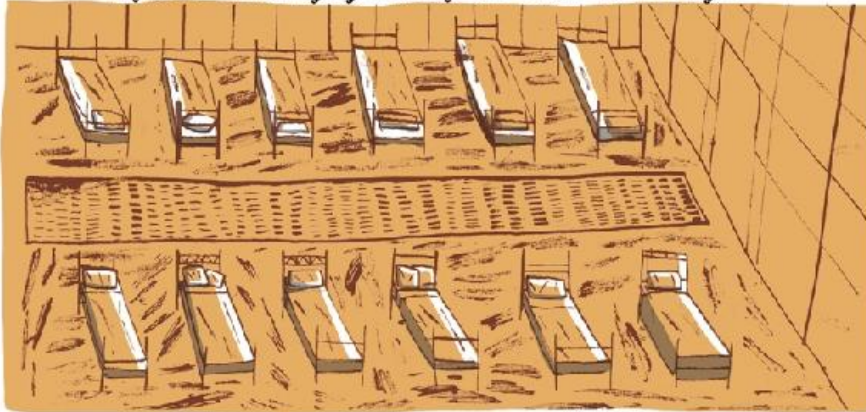




The house was made all of glass and stood in a still pond in the middle of the garden. When night fell and the filigree ladder was removed, it was like a floating island rising above the fragrant garden.



The sisters slept in twelve beds (in two straight lines) in the glass house. And they longed, oh they longed, to know what lay beyond the high stone walls in the world beyond.



The King was very proud of his daughters, who he named One through to Twelve, and had their number-names embroidered on all their clothes.

He visited them every day in the garden. So things went for many years, until one afternoon, on his daily visit, he found all twelve daughters fast asleep on the grass.



But the next day it was the same. And the one after, and the one after that.



So the next night he had one of the ladies-in-Waiting sleep in the glass house with the sisters.



Now in truth, the lady-in-Waiting had actually fallen asleep herself. She had drifted into the deepest and most pleasant sleep, and not awoken until daylight. But she wasn't about to tell the King that.



So the King decreed that any man who could discover what was happening to the princesses...



Well, you and I know that in any good story like this, the mystery can only be solved by a plucky hero, youngest son type. But of course a great surplus of cocky princes turned up first, and one by one failed.



Well, enter our plucky hero. He is a lowly but handsome farmer, who lives with his grandmother and his eleven older brothers in a great forest.



Grandmother. * It seems to me that a remarkably satisfying bit of plot symmetry is going on!

(*Well spotted, his grandmother is a Wise Old Crone!)



Wouldn't it be just the thing if I solved the mystery and we 12 poor but plucky farm boys...

...could marry those 12 beautiful princesses.



My Grandson.

You are quite right. And what princesses would not be overjoyed to have such strappingly handsome husbands such as you and your brothers.



Go and win those princesses, make your fortune...



And make your old grandmother proud.

And I'll be dead soon, so you better do it quick. No pressure.



When I have made our fortune I shall build you a grand tree house and buy you one hundred head of cow and a golden hen!



Ah. You are a good boy.



Now. Take my hazel staff and this magic pebble.*

The staff is for eating things...



And the magic pebble will make you invisible.*



Whatever you do, don't eat or drink anything those girls might give you.

Something fishy is going on. There is very possibly some magic at work here.

*It really is a magic pebble this time.

*No, honestly this one really is magic!



There is a saying among Wise Old Crones... 'Never trust a poisoned sausage.'



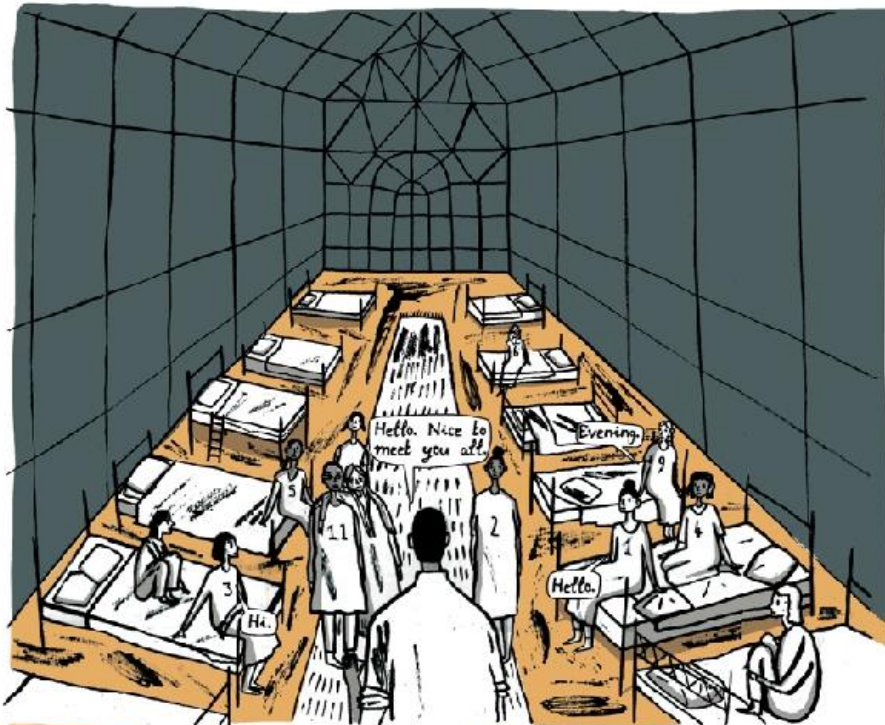
Good luck. Bring yourself back a fine wife. Remember that you are very clever and wonderful.

He goes to the palace and since volunteers are getting thin on the ground now, he doesn't have to wait long for his turn.



So into the secret garden he is led. And the King takes him to the glass house where the twelve sisters are waiting to meet him.







But when they aren't looking, he makes sure not a thing passes his lips.



The sisters, apparently satisfied, climb into bed and make a great show of yawning and falling asleep. Our plucky young hero does the same. He even adds a convincing snore. But really he is wide awake.





They light lamps and soon the house begins to blaze.

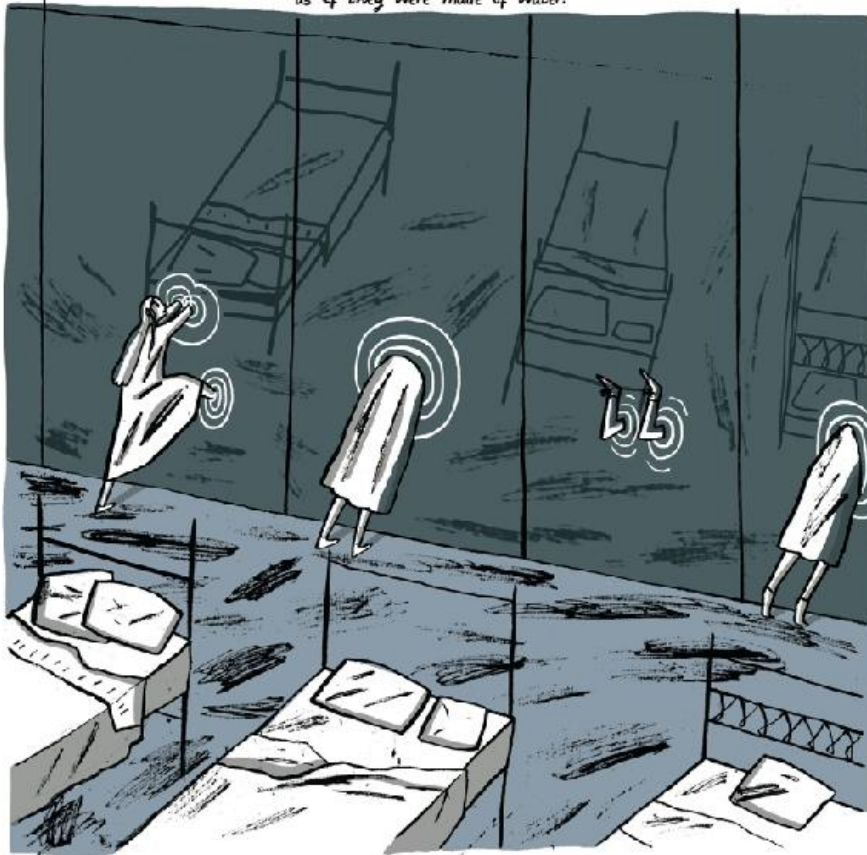


Every pane of glass has become a mirror. The dark garden can no longer be seen, they are in a house of mirrors, sisters look back at each other from every surface.





And suddenly one by one, they step through the glass walls, slipping delicately through them, quite as if they were made of water.



Our plucky hero grabs the magic pebble and pops it in his mouth.



And then he leaps through after them.



He stumbles through and finds himself not plummeting to the lake below, but in a dark passage.



The passageway leads to a grove of trees, with leaves all of shining silver.



They come to another grove, and this one
has leaves of gold.



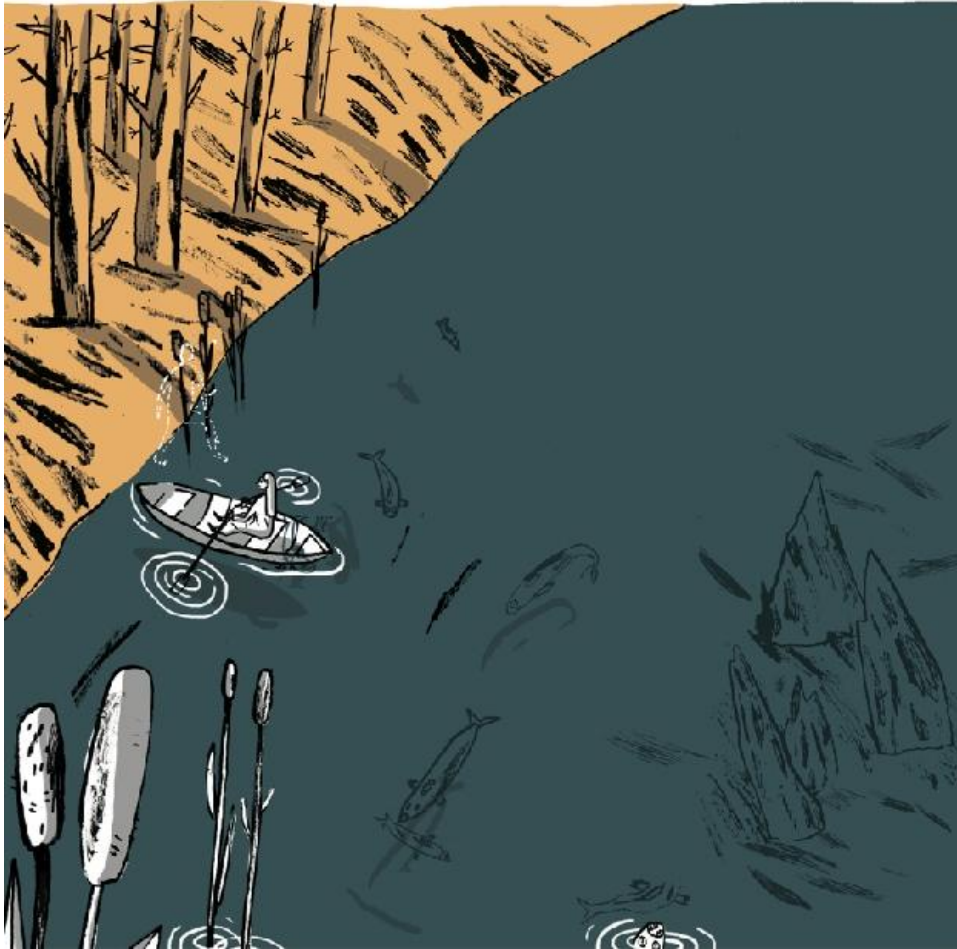
And finally a third grove, and in this one
the leaves are of glittering diamonds.

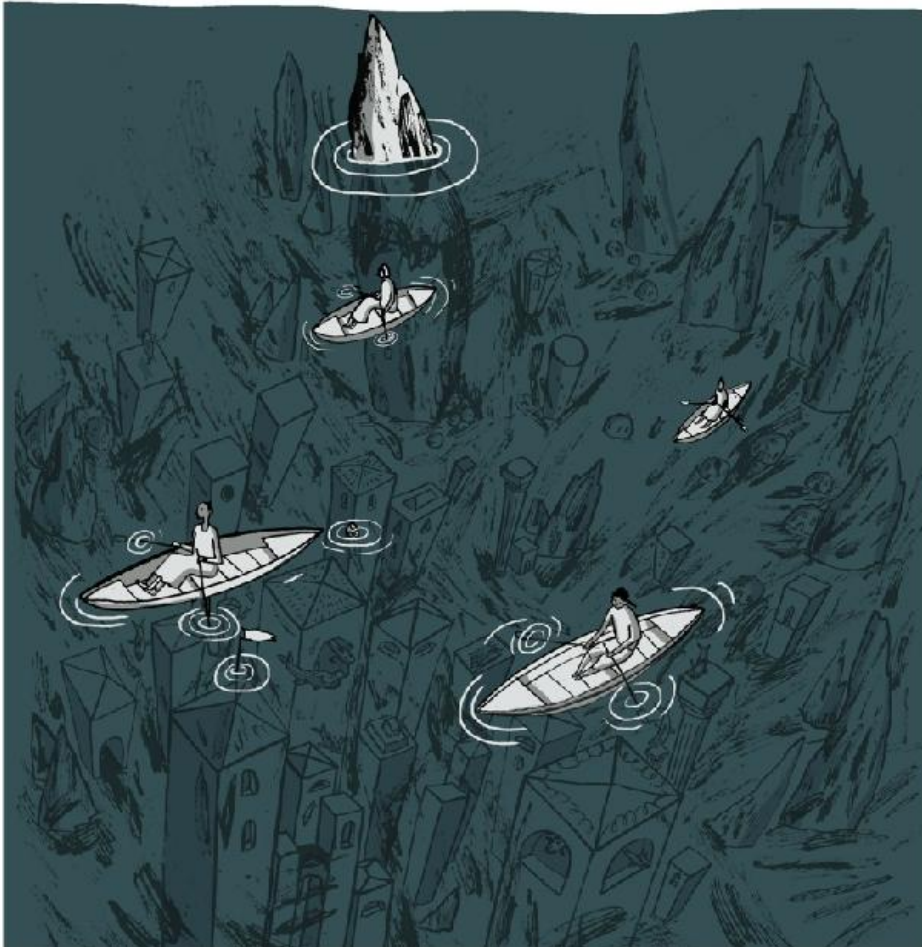


He snaps a twig from a tree in each grove, as evidence. Because he is smart, as well as plucky.



At length they come to a clear lake, where twelve boats are waiting, and one by one the princesses leap in and begin to row themselves across.





The sisters reach the far shore of the lake, and the sound of music and laughter greets them. Lanterns hang from the trees. A great party seems to be going on.



There are drums and singing floating through the trees. The sisters begin to dance. They dance and they dance all night long, until dawn begins to turn the light grey, and the music fades. Their shoes are worn right through.



So the next morning...





Sparing no details, the Plucky Farm Boy told the King everything he had seen that night in the Mirror House.



The King called his daughters to him. He showed them the twigs, relayed what the Plucky Farm Boy had told him.



The Glass House was closed, and the twelve sisters left the garden and were led to the King's palace, and locked up there instead.









One by one the sisters nod their agreement. But from Ten, Eleven and Twelve, there is a mutinous silence.







So he did. And that night three sisters went through to the mirror world.



Now, I am sad to say what happened next, for I do not like to tell of sisters betraying each other...



Oh, One...

Don't tell him. Don't do it...



She looked back on that moment as the gravest mistake of her life. But it had been done.







Over and over again the King swung his sceptre, and he
smashed every last pane of glass in the Mirror House.



The world in which they danced began to spin and crack. It was a mirror world after all, a flighty reflection world, a not-really-there world. It was a world of their fragile whispers and dreams, and who knows how they made it or from where it came.

He's smashed the
Mirror House!

How could he do this?
He will regret it!



But if you smash a mirror the reflection dies. It's as simple as that. And there they stood, as the sky rained glass and the groves of silver and gold and diamond trees began to bow and sag.



Of course he will regret this. But it will be too late! We can't get back if the mirrors are broken!





But they were not quite gone. No indeed. For the very next night, as the stars began to shine in the early evening twilight, three beautiful orbs rose alongside them. Three moons. It is said that those moons, the three moons of Early Earth, are Ten, Eleven and Twelve. And that every night, all right, they dance again across the sky, and never come back. Except sometimes, some say, the smallest and the brightest moon, Twelve, will come down to walk again on solid ground.



And even, although, who can say if this is true, she has been known to take a human lover.

Now, if you are wondering what happened to the Plucky Farm Boy, he and his brothers did not marry any of the sisters in the end. He went back to the forest and built a tree house for his grandmother, and planted many beautiful things. Rescuing damsets, he concluded, was far more complicated than he had ever thought.



And the other sisters? Well, after Ten, Eleven and Twelve had gone, they hatched an escape plan (with a little help from the Plucky Farm Boy and some more poisoned sausages) and they vanished from the palace one moonlit night several months later. The stories about them all end there, with them vanishing off into the horizon, together. But I hope that, somewhere, they are dancing still.





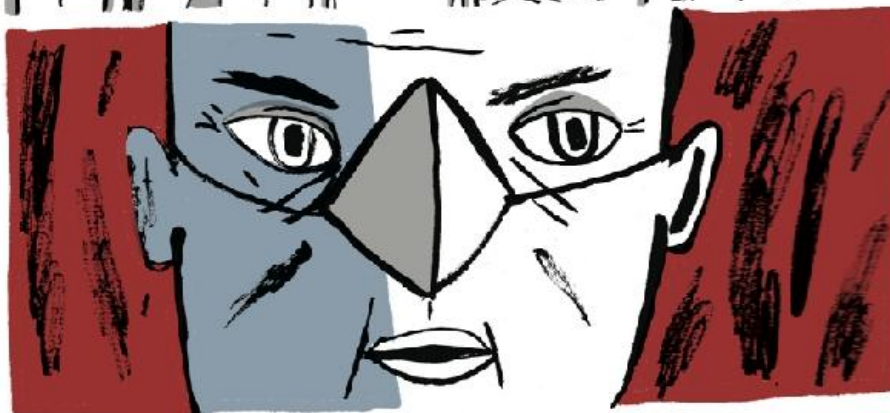
So Hero and Cherry lay together, and below the Tallest Tower, the crowds began to gather. Word had got out that the Beaked Brothers had summoned the executioner, who, when night fell, would go up in the basket, and lead Hero and Cherry out to the long teetering plank, where they would jump to their deaths.



The city was alight with whispers; from house to house the stories spread. And silently the crowds beneath the Tower grew and grew.



But the crowd did not cheer.













Hey! Where did they go?!



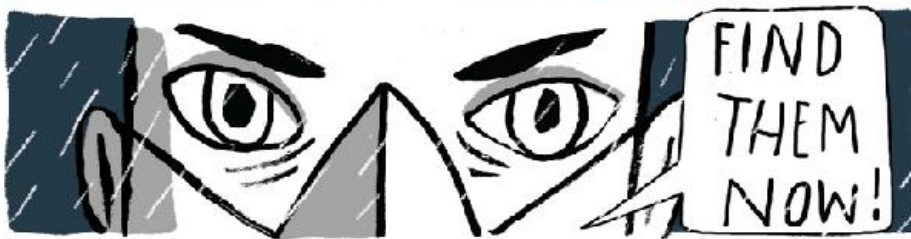
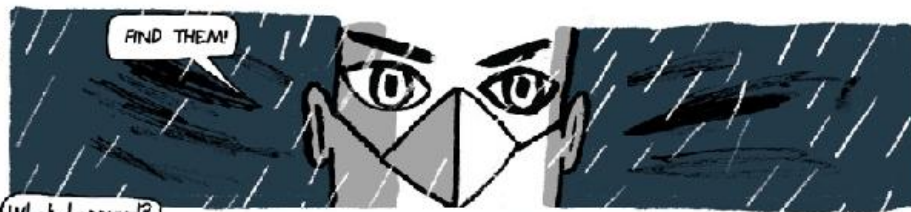
FIND THEM!

They just vanished!

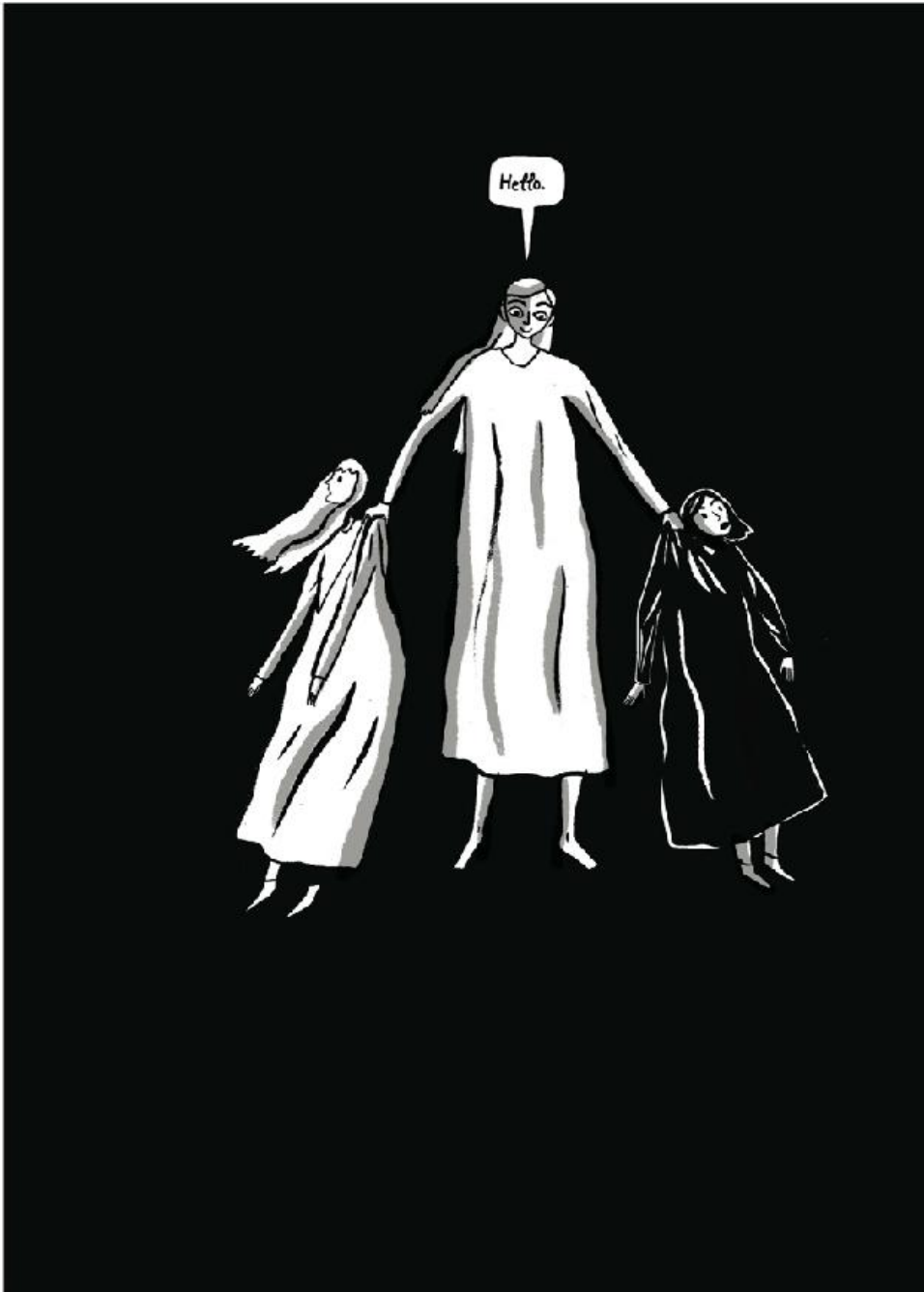
Did you see that?



Find Them Now.













The next night there were two new stars in the sky. A new constellation that shone clear and bright, brighter than all the other stars. Nearly as brightly as the smallest moon.

And do they have a name?
What do people call them?



Yes. They are called many
things; the Twins, the Eyes,
the Lovers...but the name most
commonly held is
THE HEROES.

EPILOGUE







The ship came into the port of Skerrygaard, and on it were many women.



We are the League of Secret Storytellers.



We have come from Migdal Bavel, seeking the League of Secret Storytellers.



We have come to tell you a story.



We've come to tell you that the Tallest Tower has fallen and that the reign of the Beaked Brothers is over.





That night they went down to the beaches at Skerngaard and they lit many fires and built cairns for Hero and Cherry. And all night long they told each other stories.



And in the sky above the three moons were full and bright and blazing, and the two new stars shone and shone and shone, so brightly, some said, that it was almost as though it were day.



Most thanks of all to Murrn, Dad and Im.



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