



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 Kidde.



She is the daughter of a God: BirdMan.

And the sister of another God: Kid.



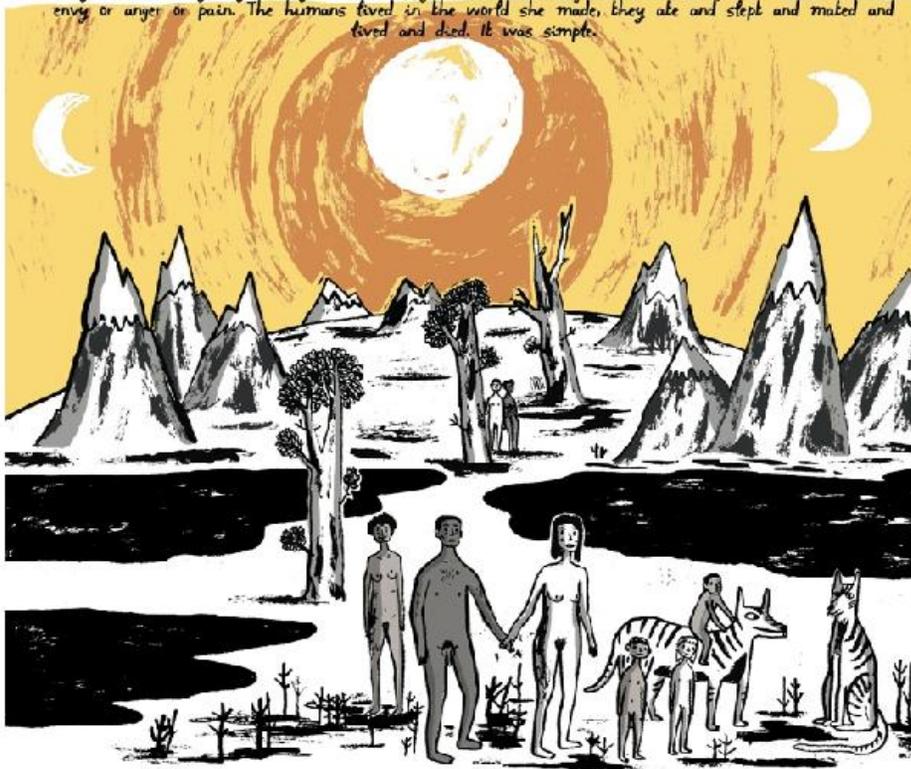
And of course she was a God herself. So they were Gods, but also they were a family, because this story is all about that. About humans and human-ness. Fathers and daughters, brothers and sisters. Love and betrayal and loyalty and madness. Lovers and heroes and the passing of time, and all those marvellous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





They're multiplying.

I know. It's interesting, isn't it?

I didn't know they'd do that.



They seem to be enjoying it.

Yeah. I didn't plan that either.



They are taking a shocking amount of pleasure from this revolting act.



Look at them!

It is NOT SEEMLY. In fact, daughter of mine, I should say it is rather sinful.



Sinful? ...it's kind of gross I suppose.



But it's not doing any harm.

I don't mind what they do. I just like to watch them, and sometimes go down, and walk with them, and talk to them.







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...





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.

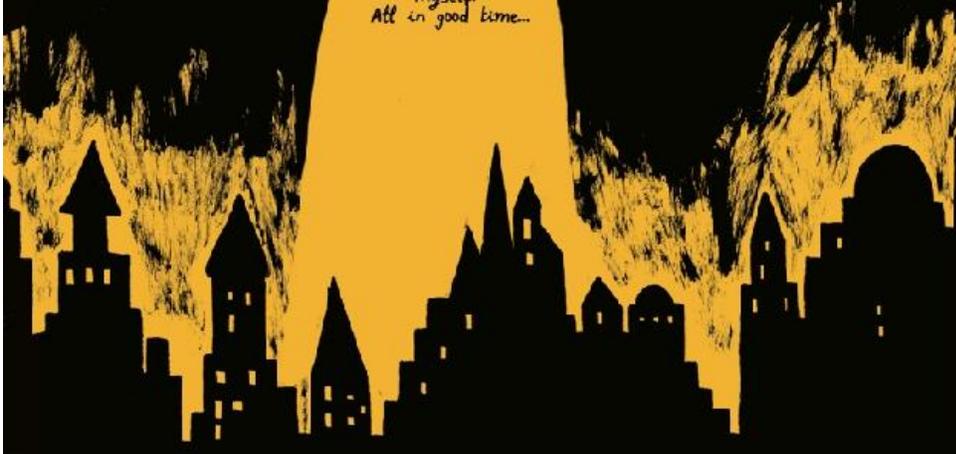
Yes. Let us begin now.
And where? Where do we begin?

In the city of Mizdal 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.









Sleeping with your servant?

You caught them?



No. Not exactly.

He came out with her knickers. And a precise description of a scar she had on her inside leg.

As a test of her loyalty I sent the servant in to seduce her.

What did your wife say?



She denied it. Said he had forcibly removed her knickers.

And you didn't believe her?

Certainly not.

So what happened?

I killed her of course.

Anyway. Back to my criteria.



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!





Not quite my dear.

I'm afraid I've got something rather alarming to tell you.

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.



We must outsmart him! We must outsmart them both!

And so we shall.

But first get into bed with me because I have missed you!



Alright. We must make a cunning plan.

What it boils down to is, how can we keep him at bay for 100 nights?

I'm lost, my dear.

For even if I refuse, he will surely topple me, and then he'll tell my mother of a husband. And he won't believe me.

(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 Suitors, 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 Bavel 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 Bavel.



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.



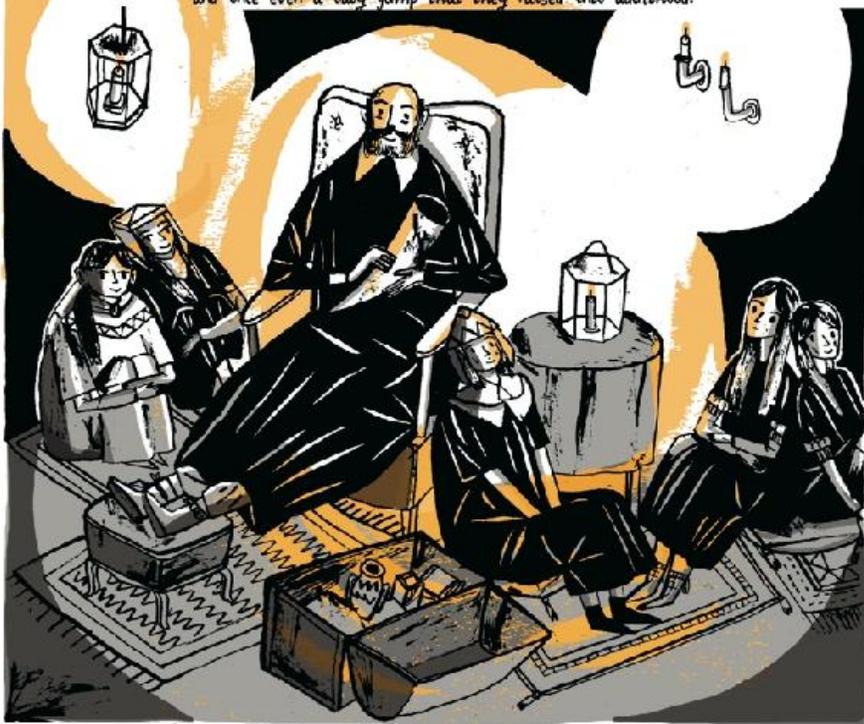
When the Sea Captain came back from his voyages he would say...



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 Bavel 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 swirly 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 quiet 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.

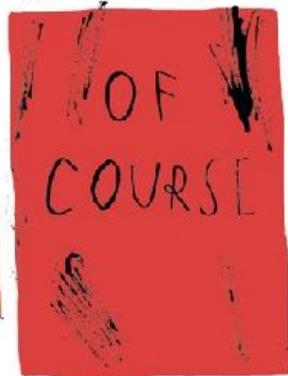


The next day he took her for a walk, and the day after that, and the day after that. Little Rosa had known no other man than her father, and she liked him.



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.



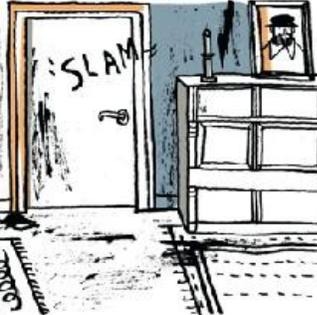
Well this was exactly how most of their books had said it would happen, so it must be right.



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 Migdal Bavel wake up for the day. And the hours crept by to sunset, when the story would continue...

THE SECOND NIGHT

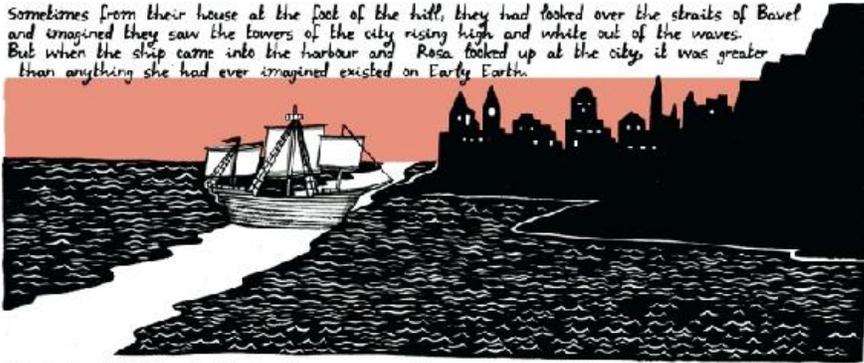
The Wealthy Merchant had a grand house in the capital city of Migdal Bavel. So Little Rosa packed up her things and bade farewell to her sisters and the house at the foot of the hill.



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 Bavel 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 startling shafts, and a molten 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.



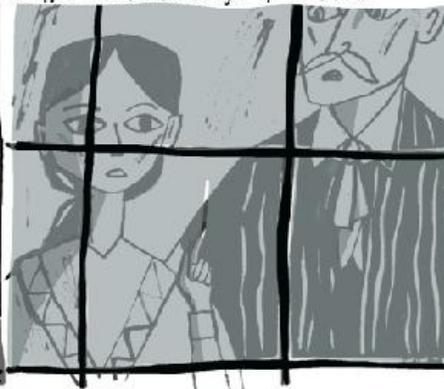
And it filled Rosa with a strange dread.



Rosa liked the city of Migdal Bavel 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.



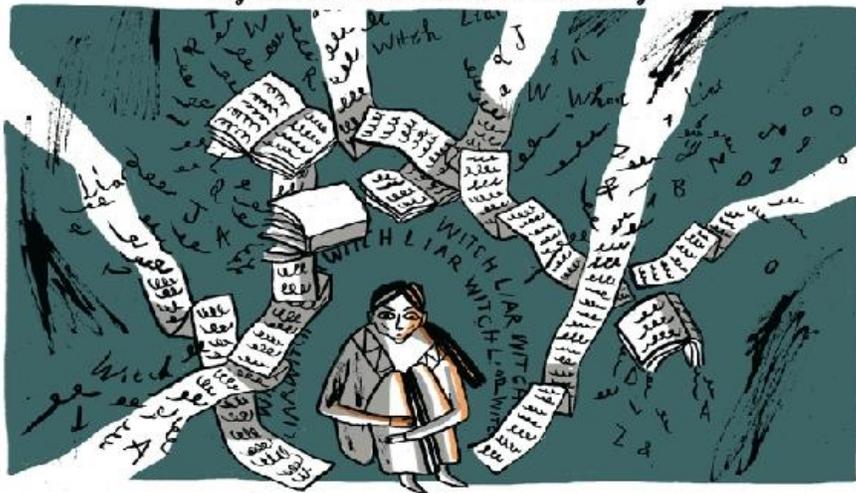
For a moment, as the words glowed in the window steam, she thought it would be alright. But only for a moment.



He marched her to her room, he opened the trunk where all the accoutrements of her brouseau 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. 'Witch!' 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 Bavel, 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 quail. 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 Mindal 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



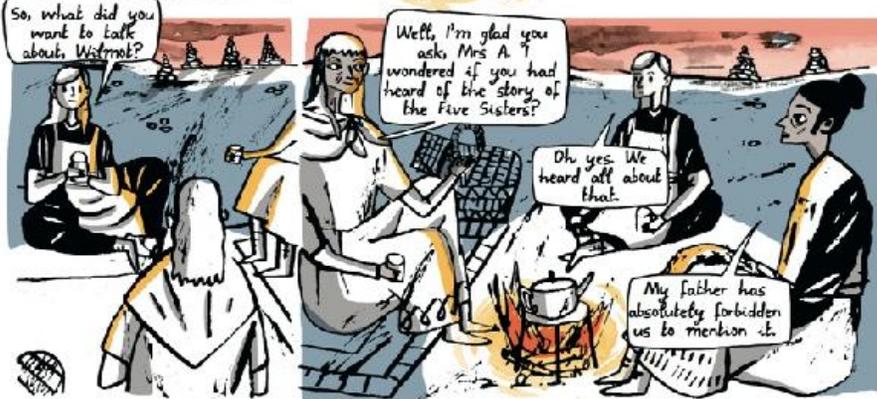


*Yes, 24 nights have already passed! I know what you're thinking, but I'm not going to include every break for daylight, it would ruin the flow! But believe you me, Hero is really spinning this tale out.



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

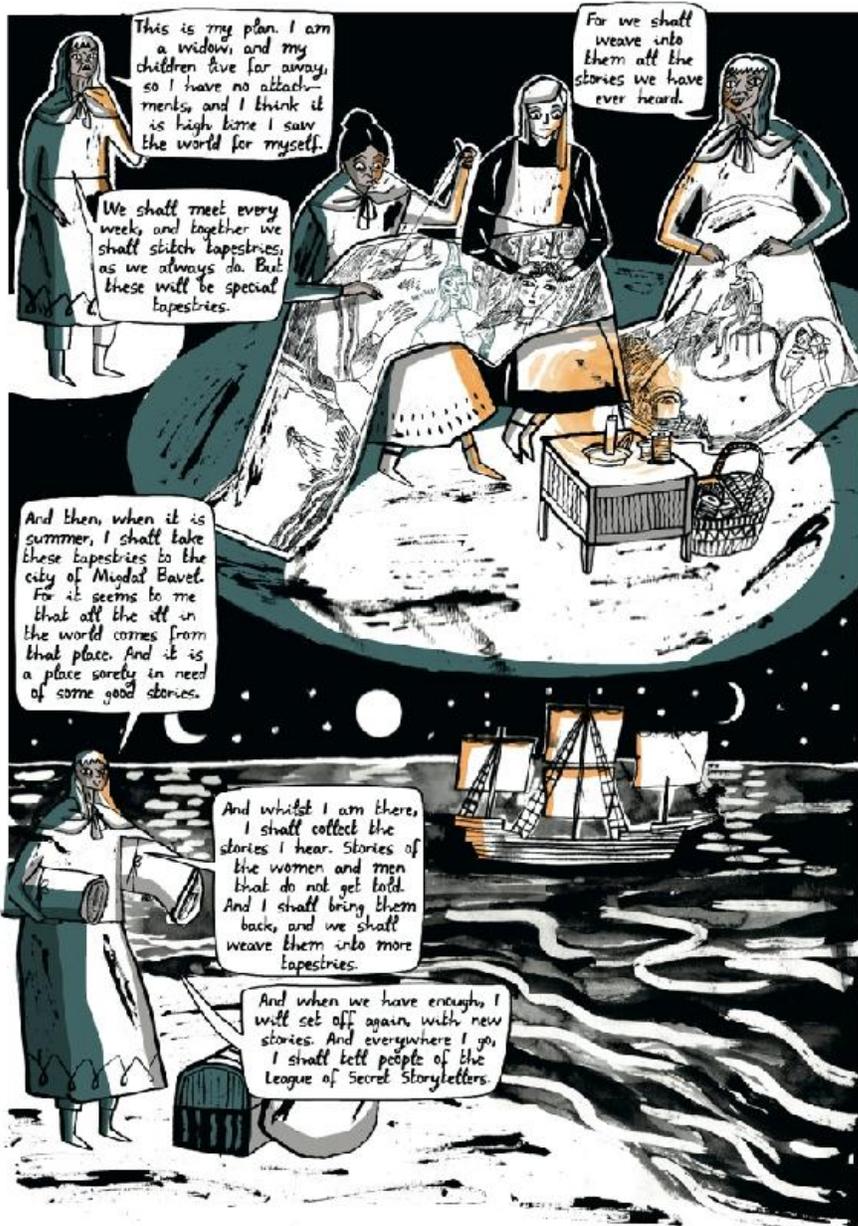




These are Wafmat's two dearest friends; Mrs A and Esa. Esa is the daughter of the village Medicine Man...And Mrs A? Ah, well Mrs A is my mother. But more on that later, I promise.







This is my plan. I am a widow, and my children live far away, so I have no attachments, and I think it is high time I saw the world for myself.

For we shall weave into them all the stories we have ever heard.

We shall meet every week, and together we shall stitch tapestries, as we always do. But these will be special tapestries.

And then, when it is summer, I shall take these tapestries to the city of Migdal Babel. For it seems to me that all the ill in the world comes from that place, and it is a place sorely in need of some good stories.

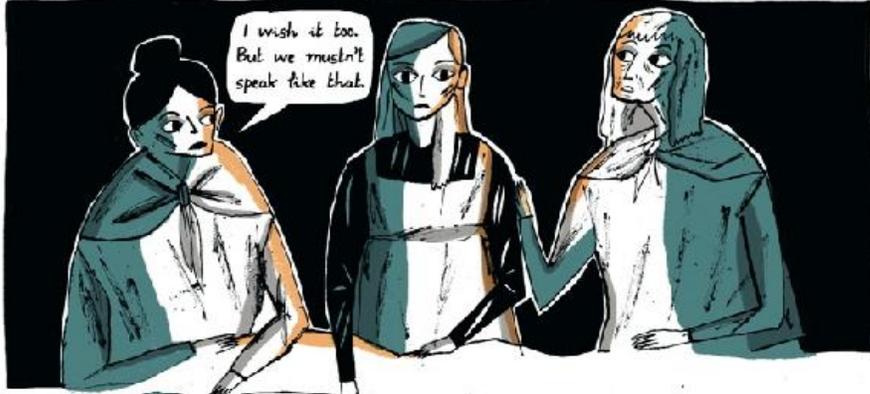
And whilst I am there, I shall collect the stories I hear. Stories of the women and men that do not get told. And I shall bring them back, and we shall weave them into more tapestries.

And when we have enough, I will set off again with new stories. And everywhere I go, I shall tell people of the League of Secret Storytellers.





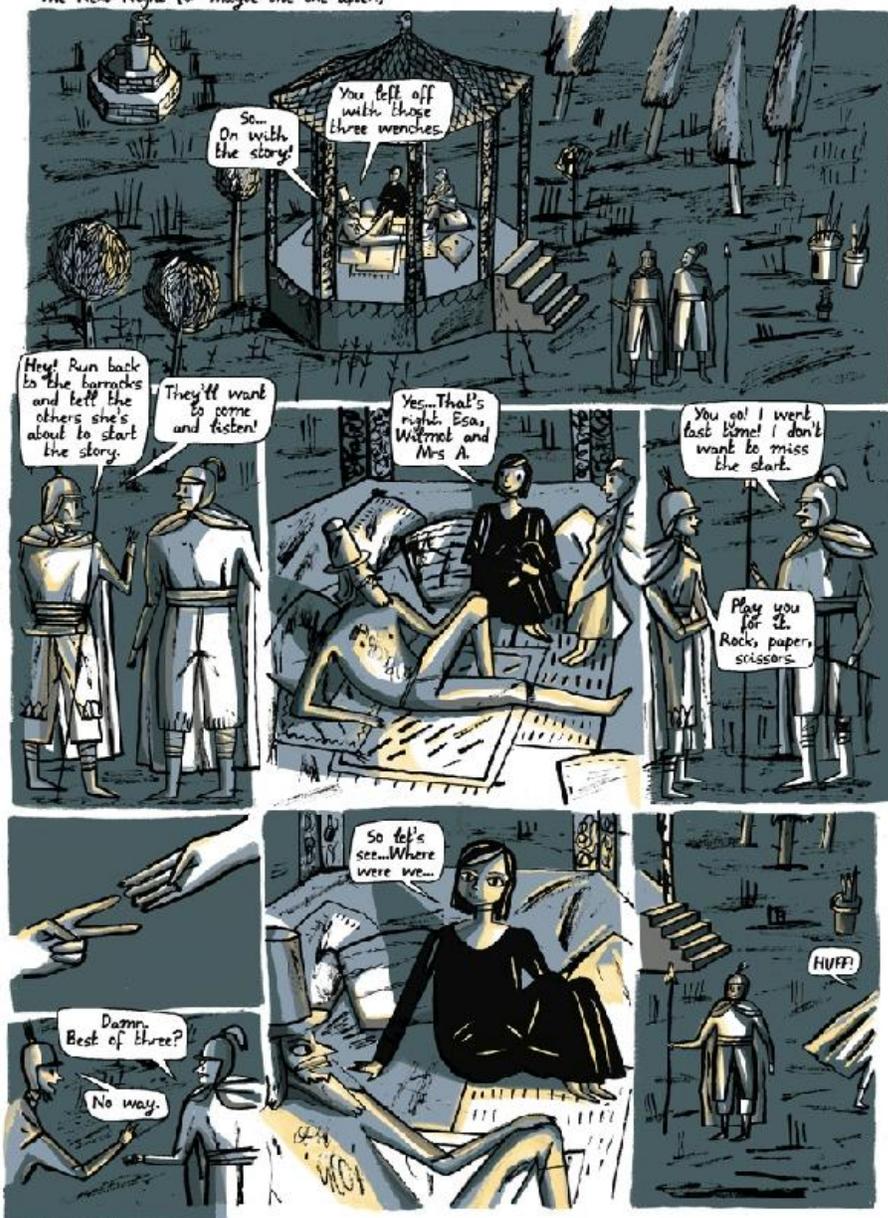
But she said this sadly, because she was going to have a baby. And she knew that if she ever tried to leave Skerrgaard, and got caught, she would never see it again.





Now his guards watch us all day. And it's too late.

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.







Right then, her sister; she was called Bernorie. And her eyes were as bright and blue as a clear sky on a windy autumn day.

She was as fair as Minnerie was dark, and her hair was fine spun gold.

She was sweet and silly and had a heart that was kinder than butter, and was not even a quarter as brainy as her sister.

But as is often the case, this made people love her all the more.



Sisters are complicated. If you have one, you'll know this.



Now, I'm not saying that this excuses the terrible tragedies that follow...

But perhaps it goes some way to explaining it.

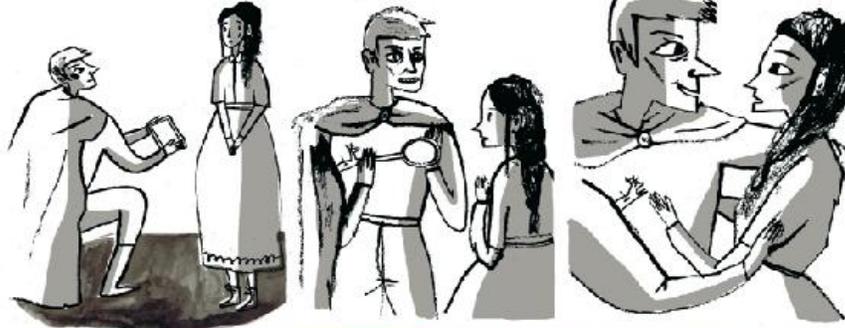
A man came to their village. He came from far away and he was seeking a lover.
In the wild meadows he met Minnerie.



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.





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

Of course he would, everyone always did.



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.

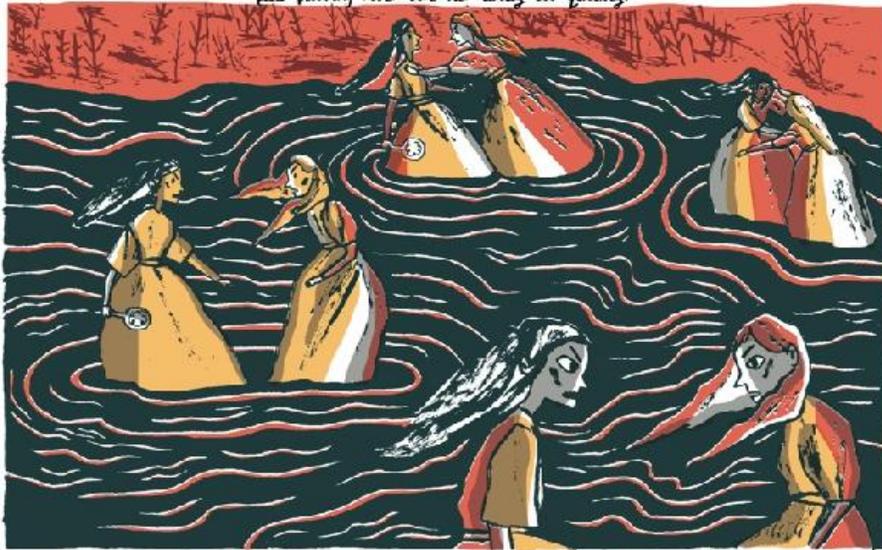


She took the tokens to the river and threw them, one by one, into the fast flowing water. The knife, the glove, the brooch, the box, the spoon, the pot, the cards and the mirror.

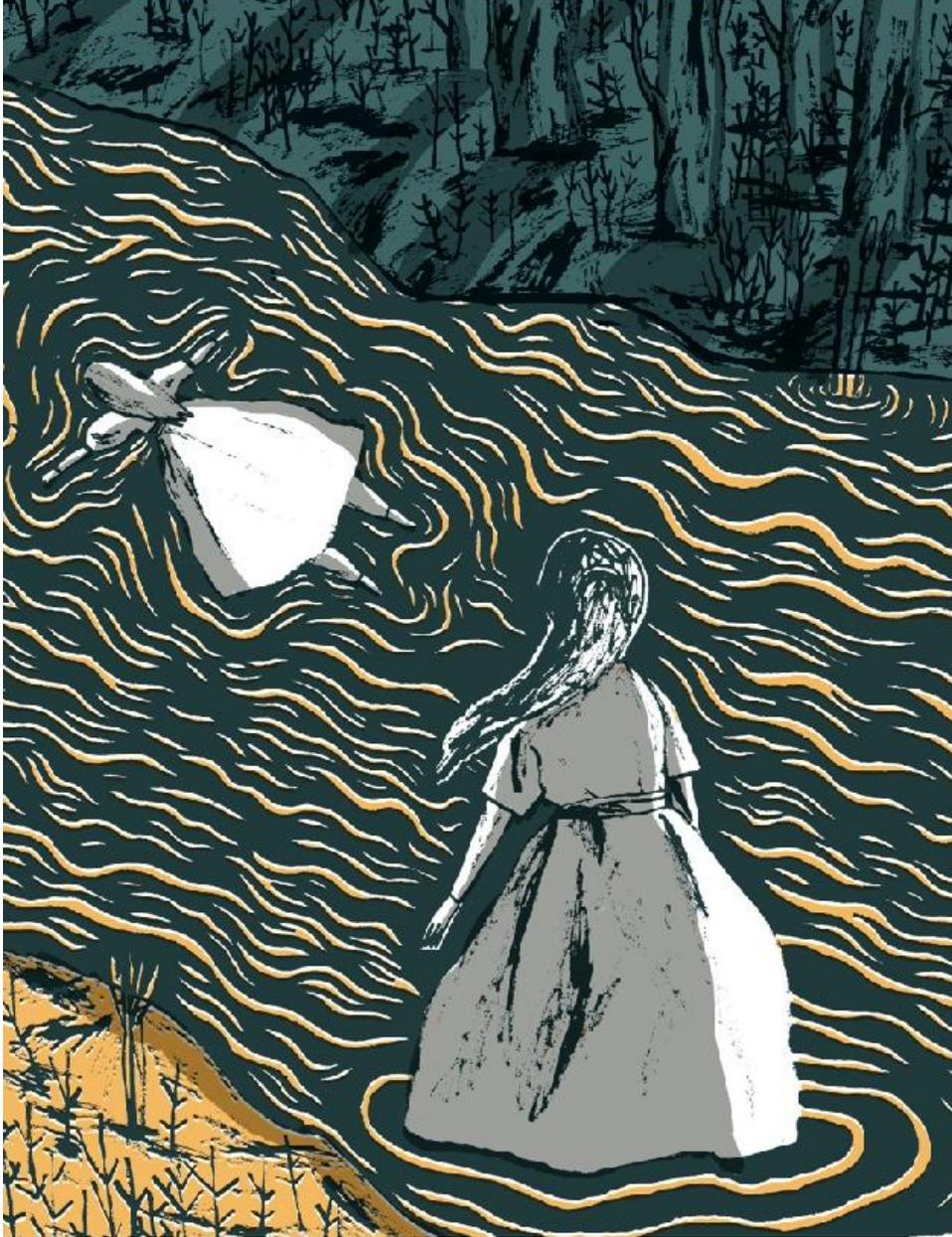




Now...what happened next, some say one thing, some say another. Some say Minnerie pushed her sister into the water, and held her down, until her thrashing body went dead as wood. Some say Bennorie jumped in after the mirror. Some say Bennorie pushed Minnerie in, and Minnerie pulled her in after. Some 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 Bendorie did not come home that evening, everyone was frightfully worried.

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



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



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

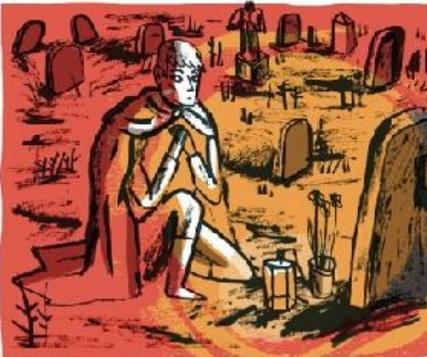


People have said since that Minnerie was a cold girl, for pretending to mourn her sister... But I think she mourned her truly. And her heart was breaking.



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 stid tithier and blither.



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?



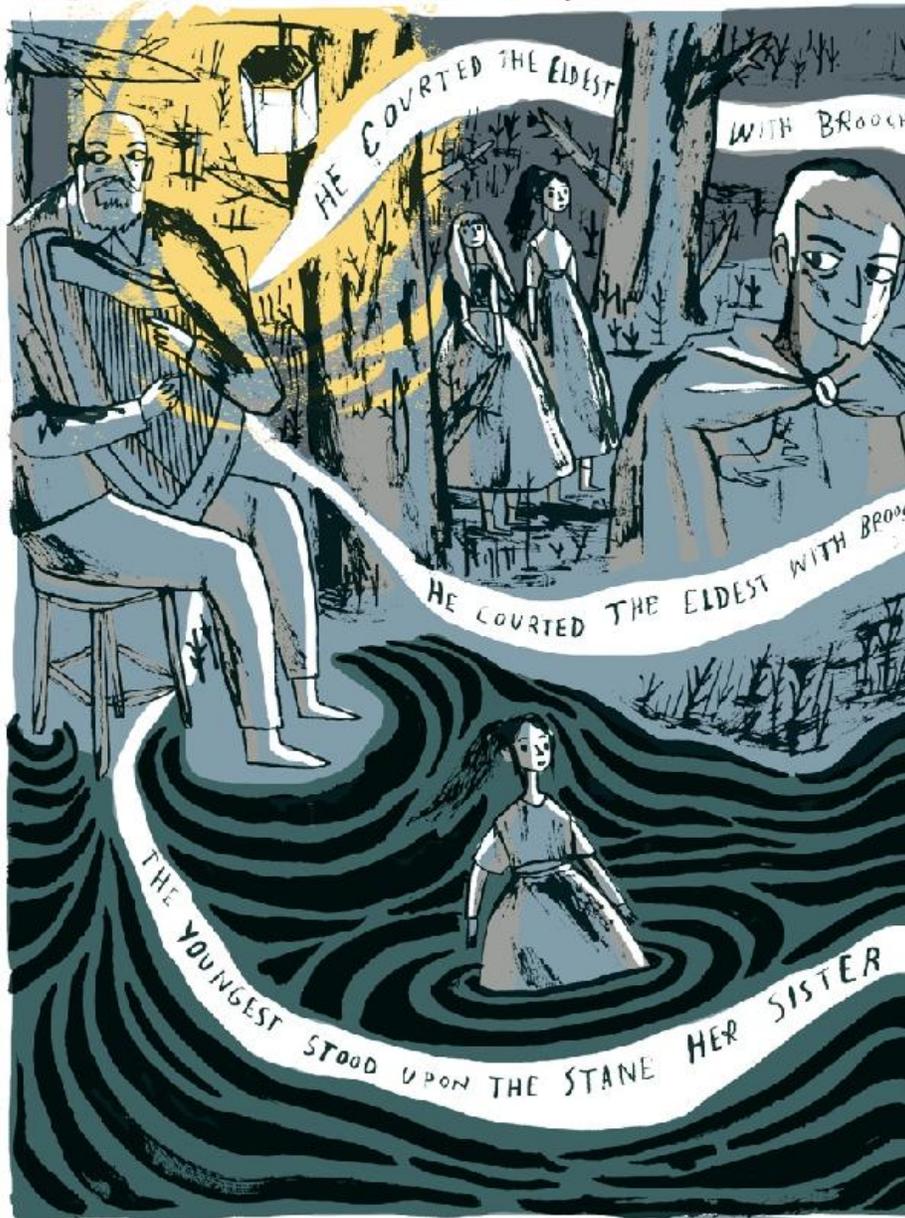
Silence falls, and he begins to play, and the sound sends a shiver through the assembled guests.

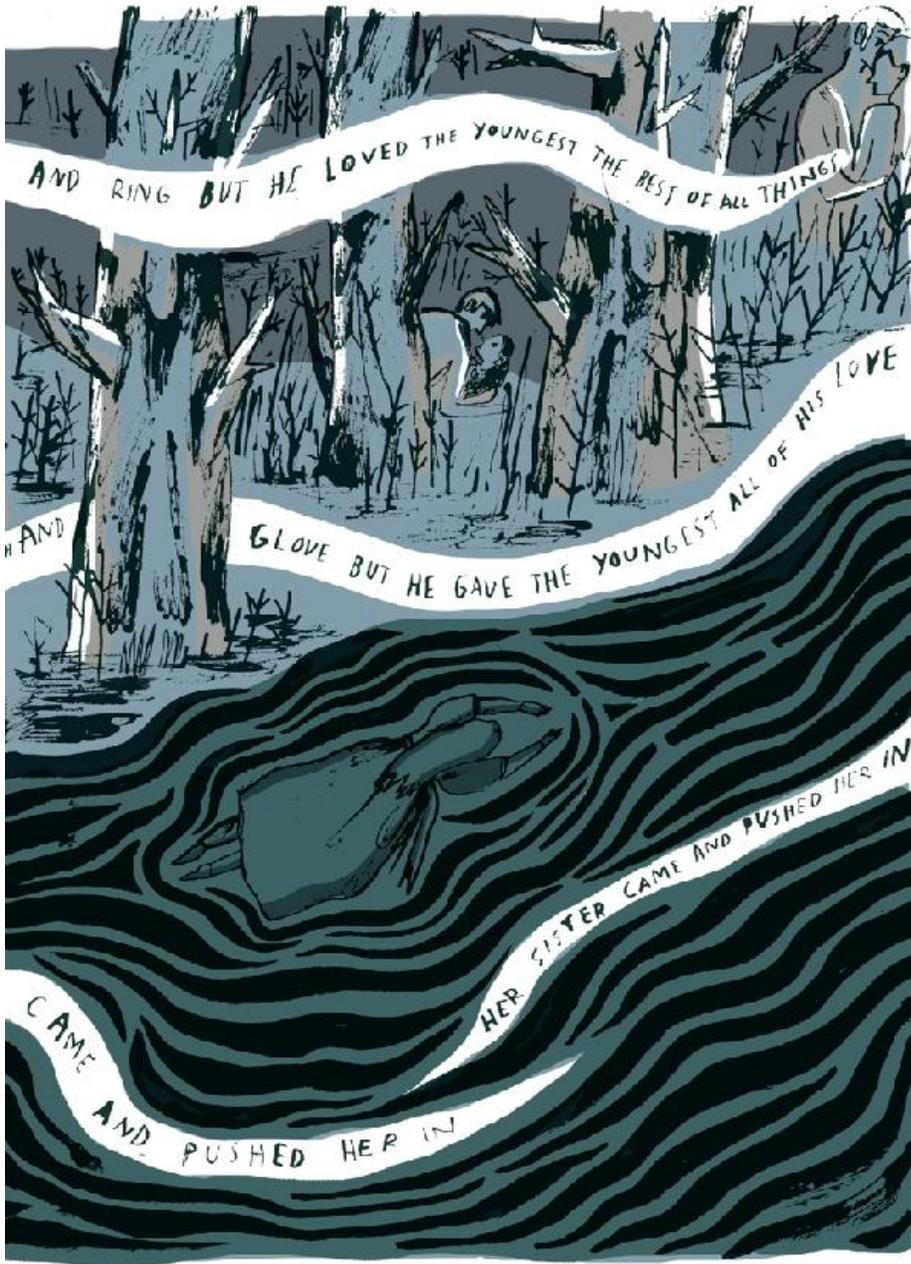


The harpist is not singing, and yet the melancholy and familiar voice of a young girl rises high and clear.



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





AND RING BUT HE LOVED THE YOUNGEST THE BEST OF ALL THINGS

AND GLOVE BUT HE GAVE THE YOUNGEST ALL OF HIS LOVE

CAME AND PUSHED HER IN
HER SISTER CAME AND PUSHED HER IN

The harp finished its refrain, and a terrible silence followed. Mirrenne 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 consoled 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 Eca under the Thing Trees that first moonlit night on her return from Migdal Bavel. Instead she finished blandly with...



And then they were both dead, those sisters.

Well...I declare that I am ALMOST moved by that...

Almost but not quite!

SOB!

SOB!

SNIFF

Hey! You love! Keep your snivelling to a minimum or I'll have you replaced! You're guards, not little crying girls!

Now, I have questions. What did Mrs A and Eca think of the story?

And did they weave it into their tapestries?



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.





Wreaths, ribbons,
rags, a set of
chiming bells and
keys, many keys.

All these objects,
these magic tokens,
they hang from the
branches of the
Thing Trees.

They are a
beautiful sight to
behold, but also
to hear.

They sigh they
softly chime, and
they rattle,
rattle rattle.



They are always
unquiet, those
Thing Trees.

Do you see, Hero,
the strange
fruit the Thing
Trees bear?

You must
never pick
it.

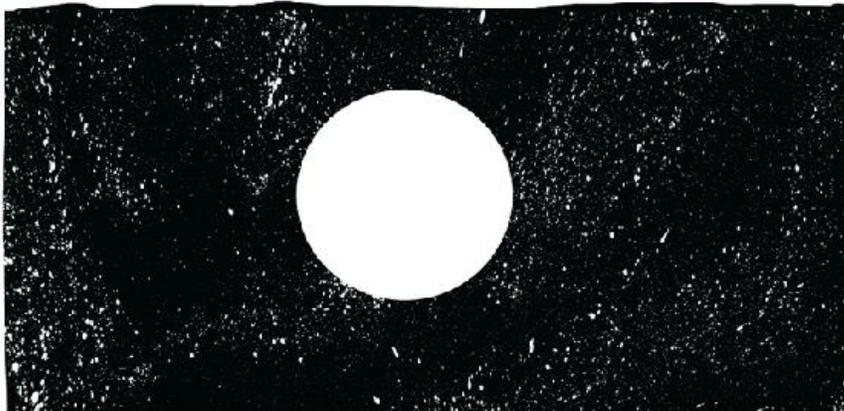


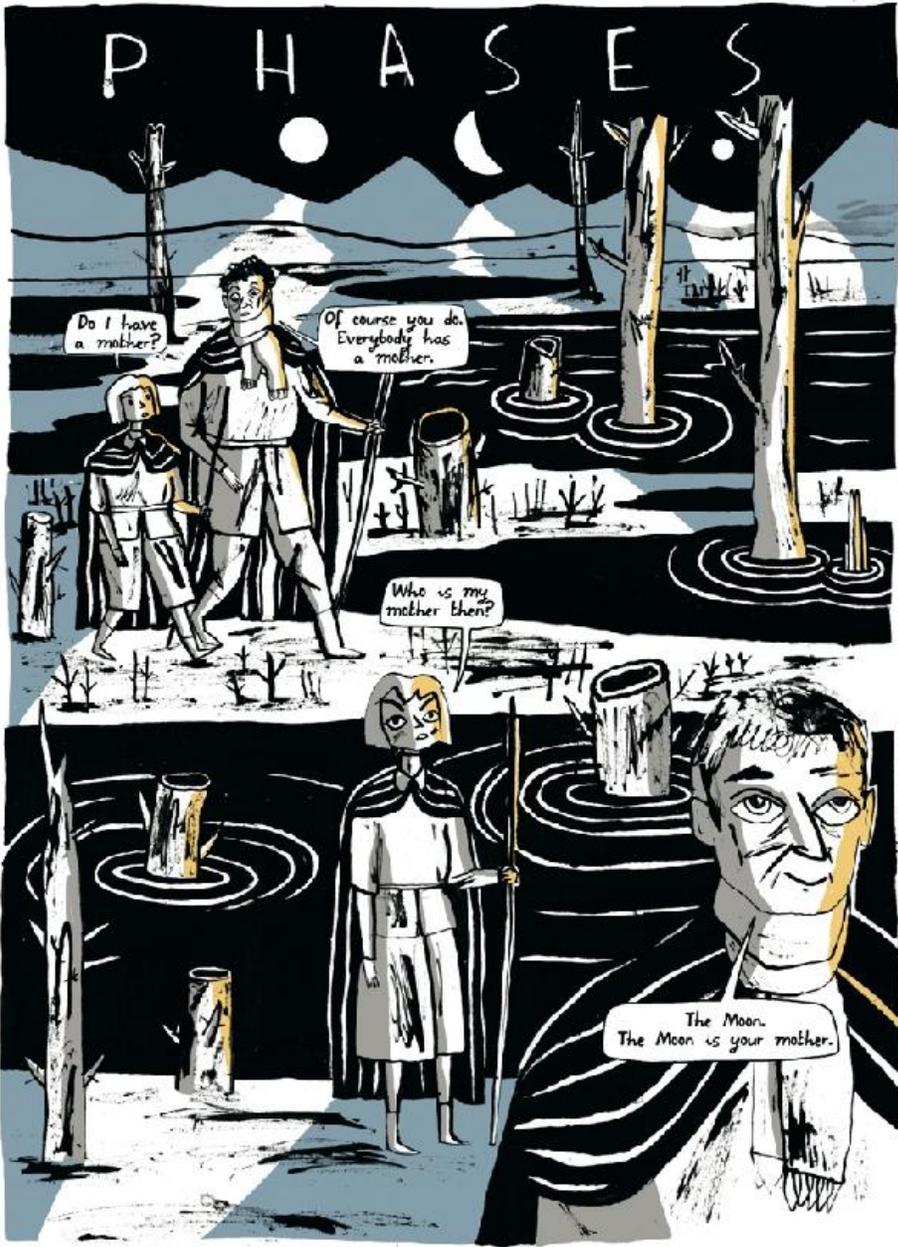
And if you happen
to come across a
fallen Thing, do
not take it...

But bury it. Because
once somebody climbed
into those branches and
put it there.

And it could be their
hope or dream or worst
and darkest secret.







Do I have a mother?

Of course you do. Everybody has a mother.

Who is my mother then?

The Moon.
The Moon is your mother.



The story that came with this pronouncement was so strange and outlandish and wonderful that it beggared belief. But my father never lied. So I know it to be true, and I tell it to you now. Here, just as he told me.



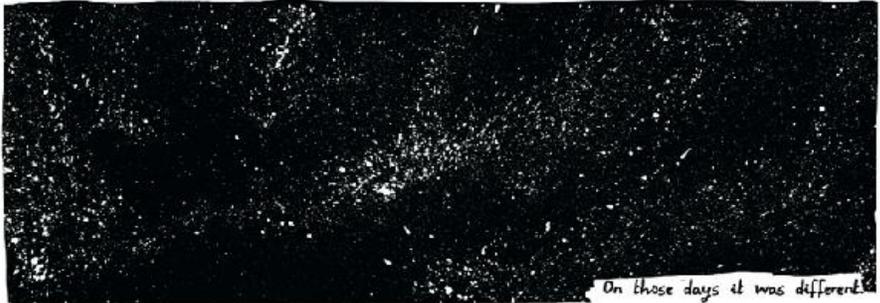
This tale begins in a village called Darkly End, on the Island of Nagood, in the Archipelago, at the farthest edge of the Bavethian Empire. Darkly End stands on the edge of a great marshy swamp. It is a vast place full of pools of black water, fathoms deep, and sticky treacherous mud that could drown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



On those days it was different.

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 lean 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...



She donned a hood to cover up her pale, glowing hair...

And then she set off into the marshes to see what trouble the wicked creatures were causing...

All was dark, pitch dark, save for her feet, which poked out from under that cloak, and glowed softly...

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 faith, 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 villain'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 boy creature still grinning.



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.



It must be the magic pebble! It must have some kind of strength-giving power!

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 bubbled, 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.

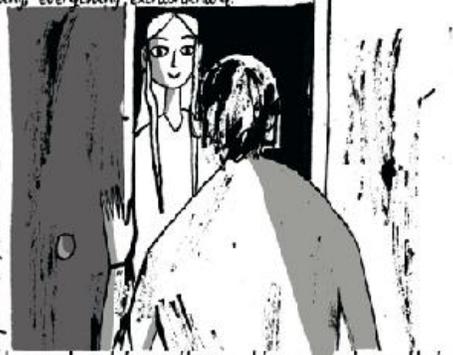




But the Moon, she just smiled, and kneeling beside him, she took his face in her cold little hands, and kissed his mouth. Well, it would not be possible to describe to you that kiss. But it is enough to say that it changed the man, and he was lost to her.



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 Babilonia. 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.

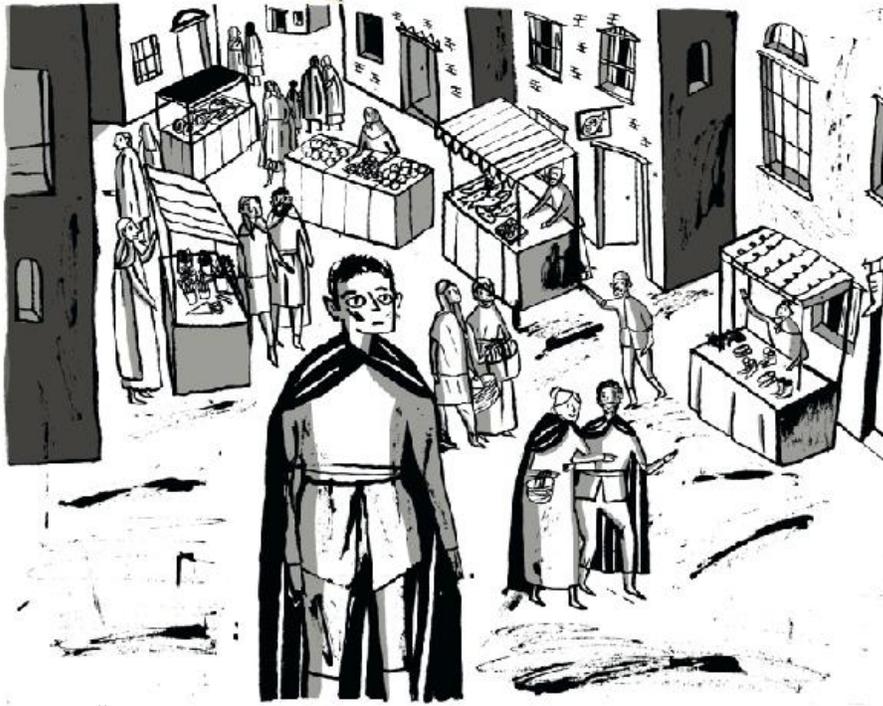


Yes. Now I'm here.

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.

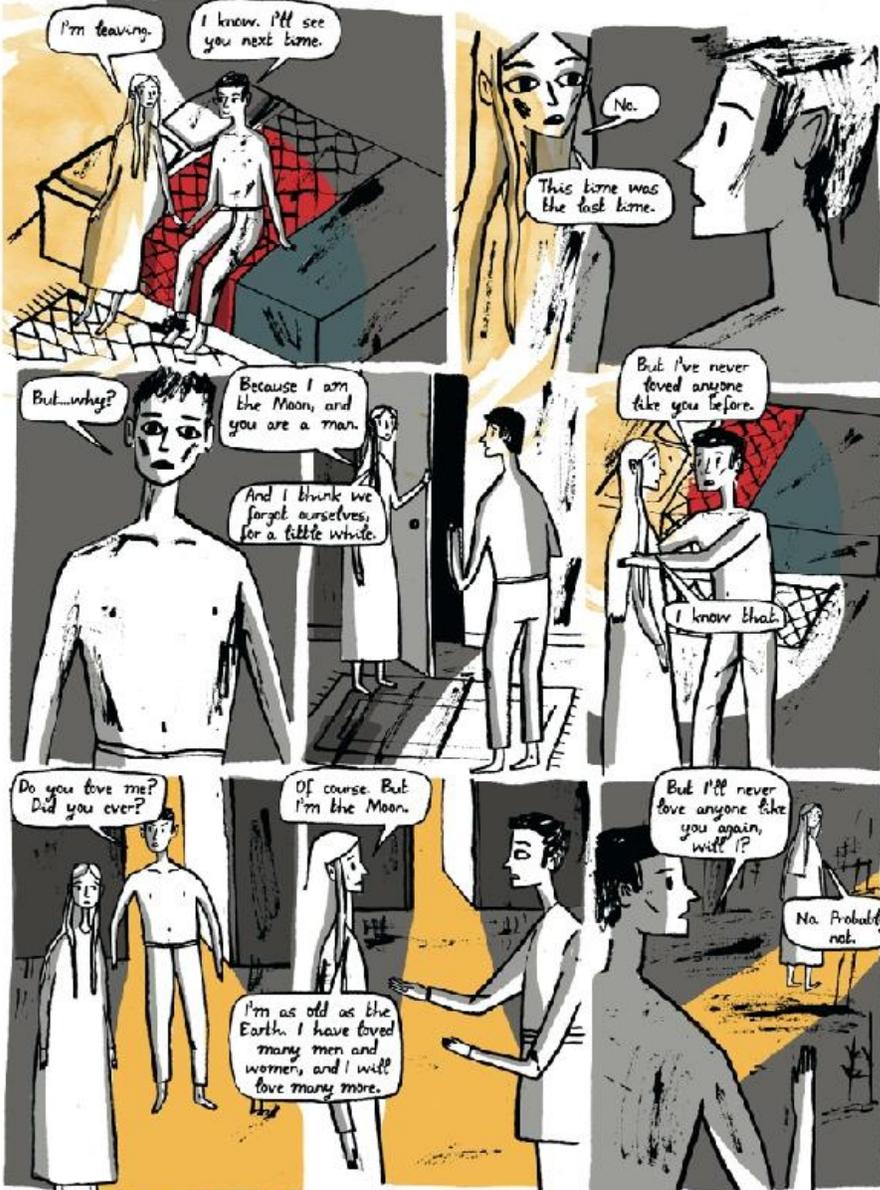


His life was shrinking and shrinking. Sometimes, when the sun was high and the village full of a daytime joy that didn't reach him, he wondered if he had gone stark mad.





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 garden, 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 gossipping.





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.











Ah ha! So it looks like I win!



Wife! How is your virtue?

Is it intact?



Oh yes, Tabatty. One hundred per cent.



Maid! Does she speak the truth?

She does, Sir.



Guards? Is the woman honest?

Oh she absolutely is!

We've been here the whole time. We can vouch for her.



OUTRAGEDNS!
I have been bricked and befuddled!
I declare FOUL PLAY!











Cherry, stop.

No, I'm not finished yet.

I've had quite enough of staying quiet thank you very much.



I hate you both.

And I hate this city, Migdal Bavel. This stony city with its great aviaries and effigies to BirdMan.

They say that it was Kiddo his daughter who made this world. But that she made it full of sin, and so BirdMan took it over. But I think this is a lie. I think that the sin and the darkness comes from the rule of men. That is what I think. I will pray to Kiddo, and to the Moon Sisters. Down with BirdMan, down with the Beaked Brothers.



BLASPHEMY! LOCK THEM UP!

Send them to the Beaked Brothers!

YES LOCK THEM UP! Guards! Seize these wicked women!

Call for the Beaked Brothers immediately!

These women must be charged with sorcery, witchcraft, reading and sassiness! Their behaviour is INTOLERABLE!



That's right guards! Take them away!

Feel free to rough them around a bit!



And if you were one of my daughters, I would be very proud of you. Very proud indeed.

You're going to the Tallest Tower. There is no way out.



I'm sorry. I think your stories were amazing.

I've been telling them to my daughters. They are massive fars.

Couldn't get us out of this mess, could you?

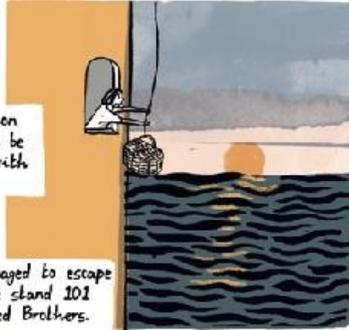
I wish I could help you. I really do. But I must think of my family.



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.



Well, my dear, it looks like we've reached the end of the line.



I'm so sorry.

Don't be sorry!



Don't you dare be sorry.



You are the greatest adventure of my life.

And I am not sorry. Not even a tiny bit.



All those stories you have told, all those wonderful stories...

They are nothing to **OUR STORY**. People will tell it in years to come...



And they will say, that was a story about love.

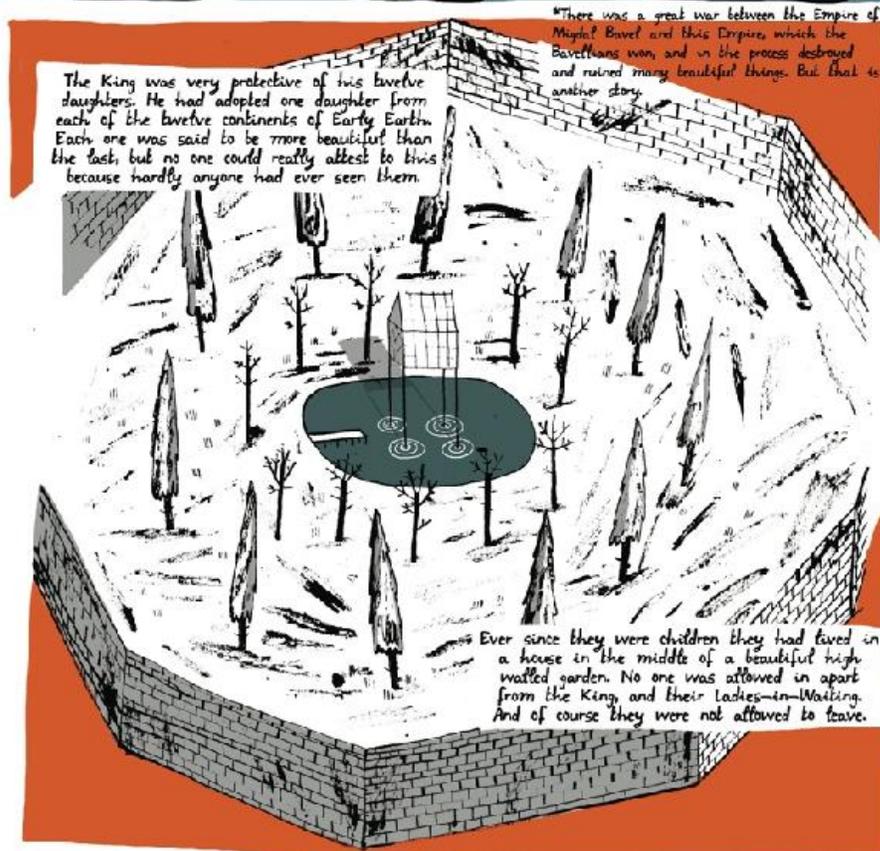
And about two brave girls who wouldn't take shit from anyone.



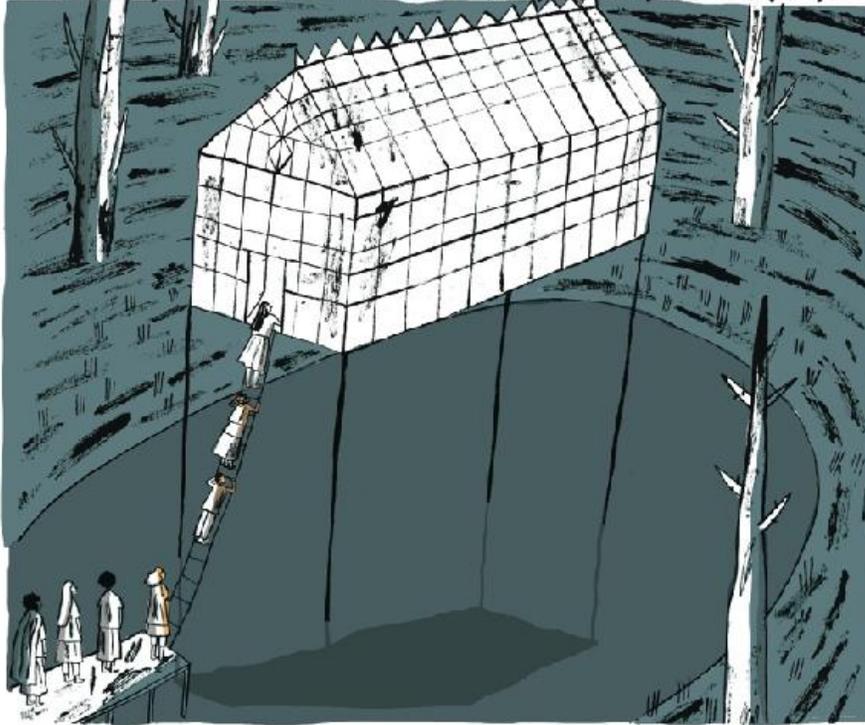
 PART THE SIXTH 

**NEVER EAT
A POISONED
SAUSAGE**

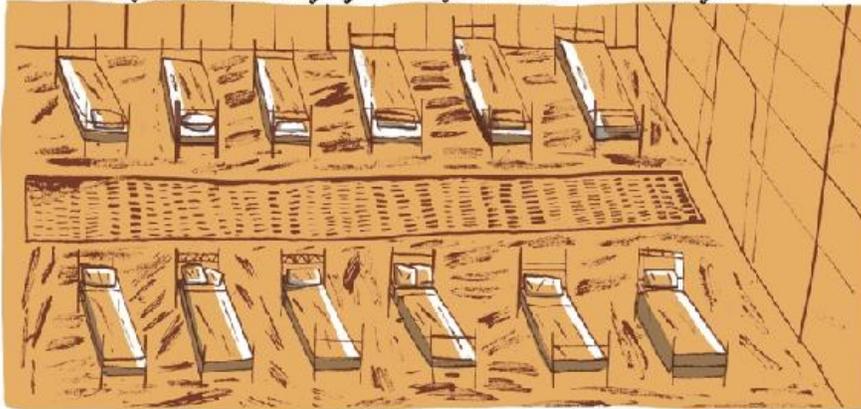




The house was made all of glass and stood in a still pond in the middle of the garden. When night fell and the filigree ladder was removed, it was like a floating island rising above the fragrant garden.

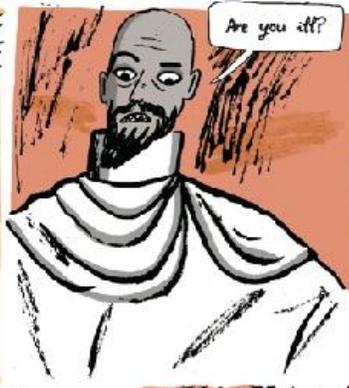


The sisters slept in twelve beds (in two straight lines) in the glass house. And they longed, oh they longed, to know what lay beyond the high stone walls in the world beyond.



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.



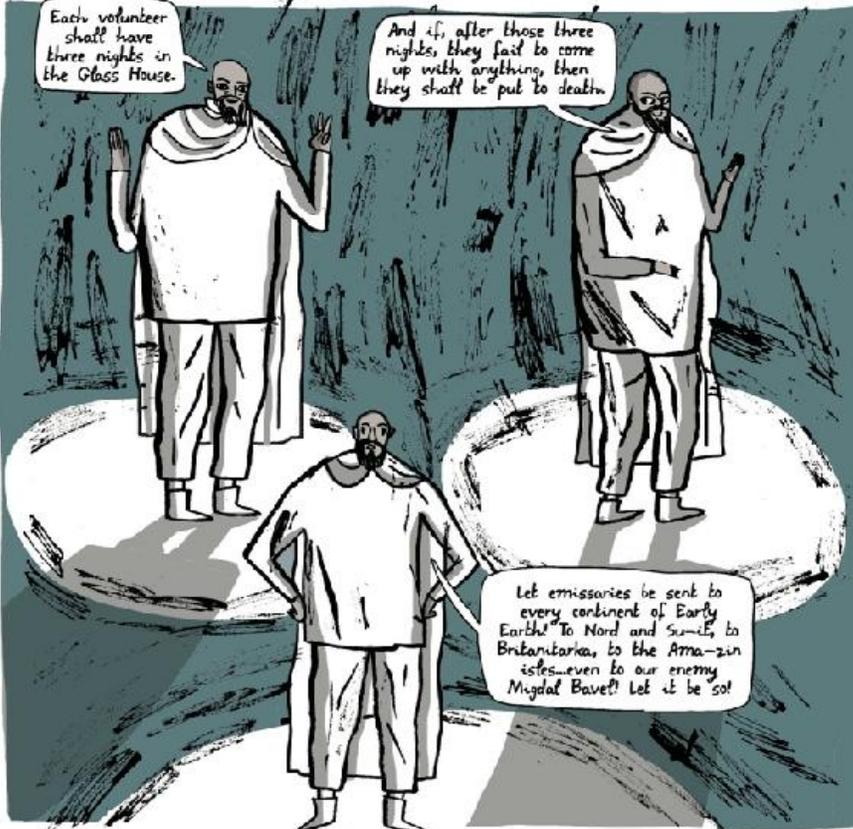
So the King decreed that any man who could discover what was happening to the princesses...



Can marry
whichever of
my daughters
he fancies!

And he shall inherit my
Great Empire. Which is a
far better Empire than
the Empire of
Mugdál Bavel!

The Mystery of the
Worn Through Shoes
shall be solved!

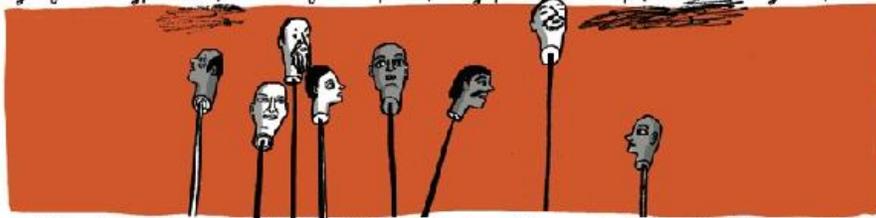


Each volunteer
shall have
three nights in
the Glass House.

And if, after those three
nights, they fail to come
up with anything, then
they shall be put to death.

Let emissaries be sent to
every continent of Early
Earth! To Nord and Su-~~it~~, to
Britanbarica, to the Ama-zin
istes...even to our enemy
Mugdál Bavel! Let it be so!

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.



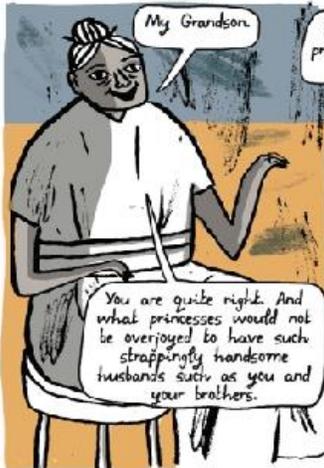
Grandmother. * It seems to me that a remarkably satisfying bit of plot symmetry is going on!

(*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.



*It really is a magic pebble this time.

*No, honestly this one really is magic!

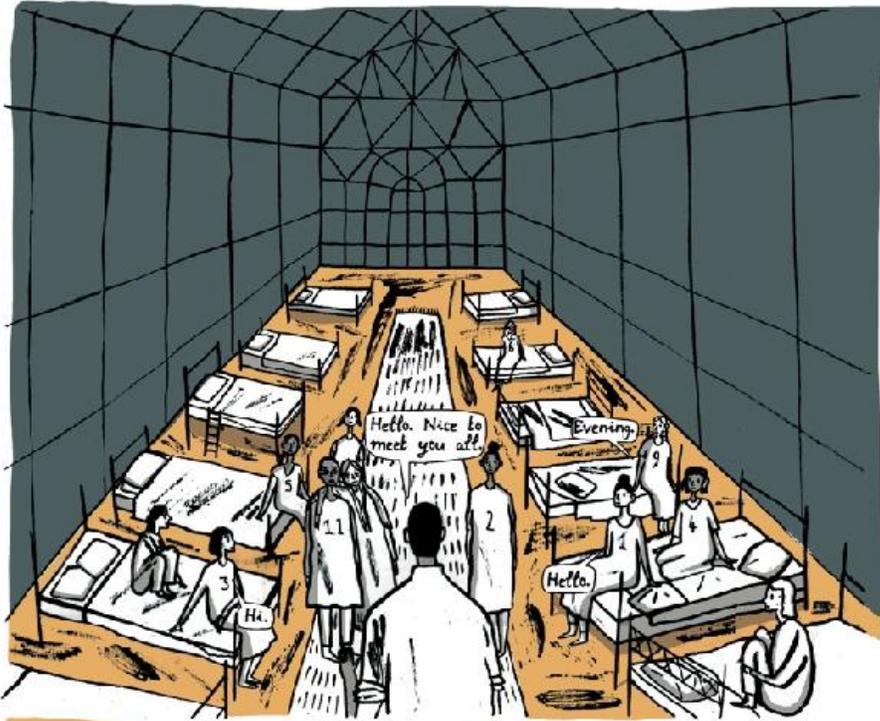


He goes to the palace and since volunteers are getting thin on the ground now, he doesn't have to wait long for his turn.



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.



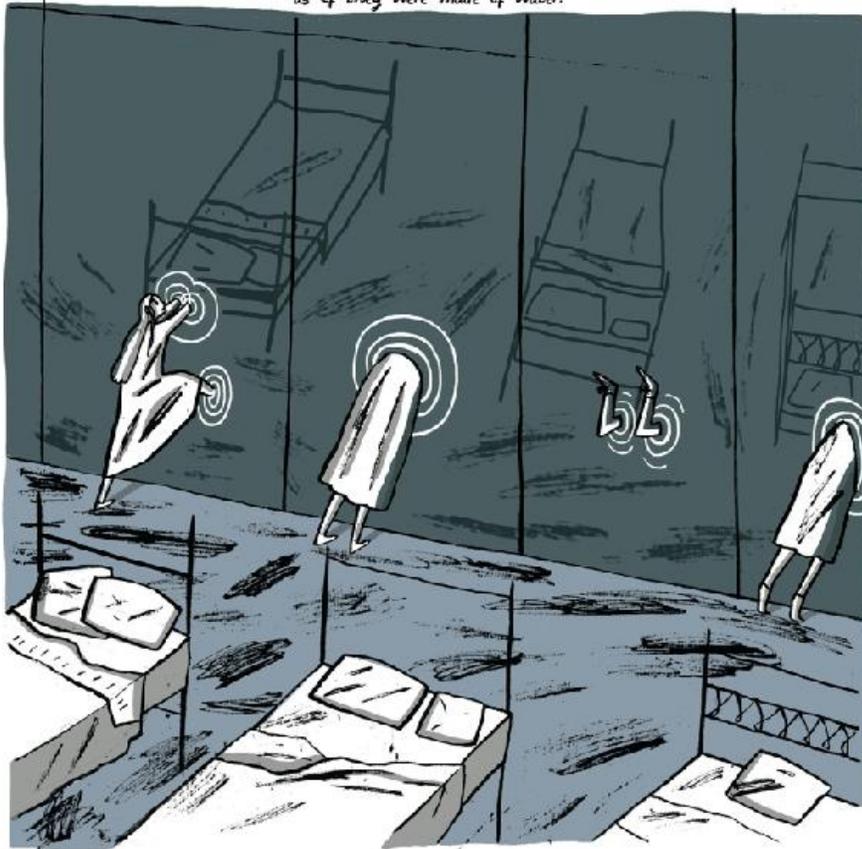


They light lamps and soon the house begins to blaze.





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.

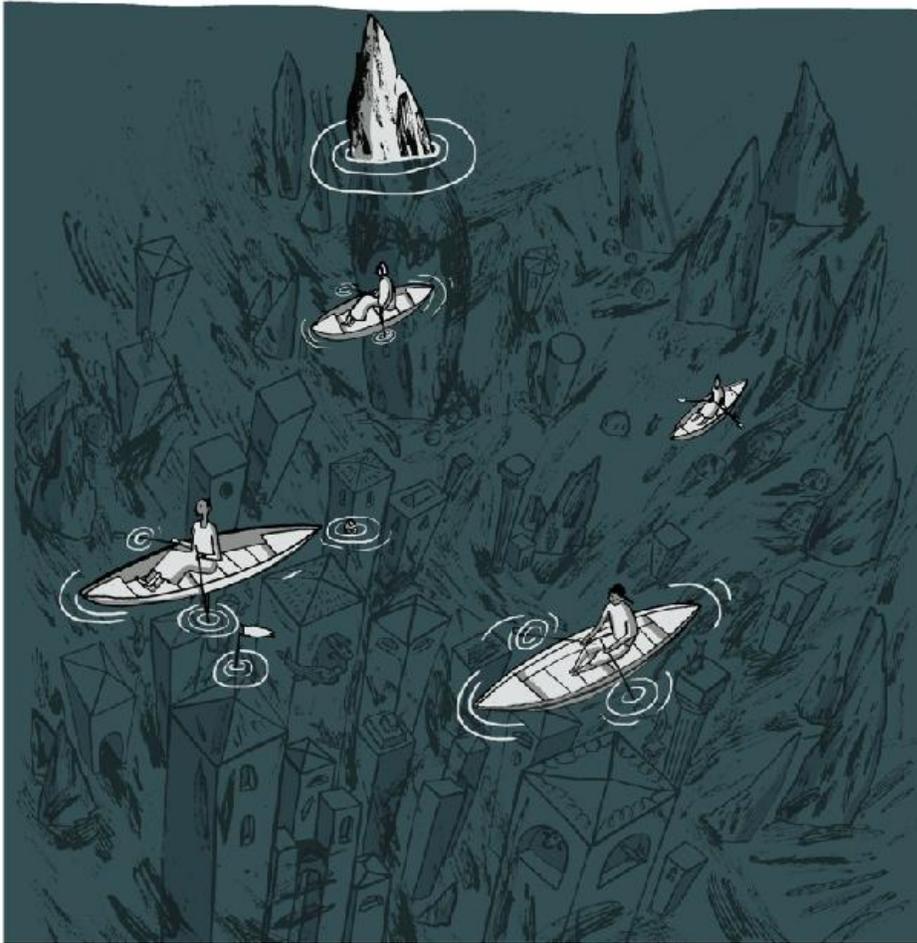
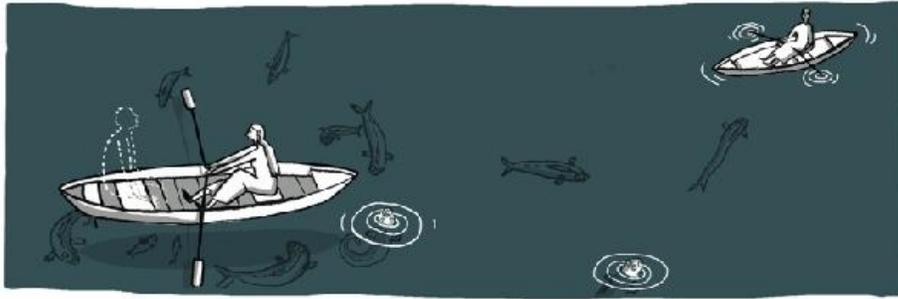


He snaps a twig from a tree in each grove, as evidence. Because he is smart, as well as plucky.



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.



Well. That explains it.

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 Puckey 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...

Father, they went through the Mirror...



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.

STOP!



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.





What can we do?

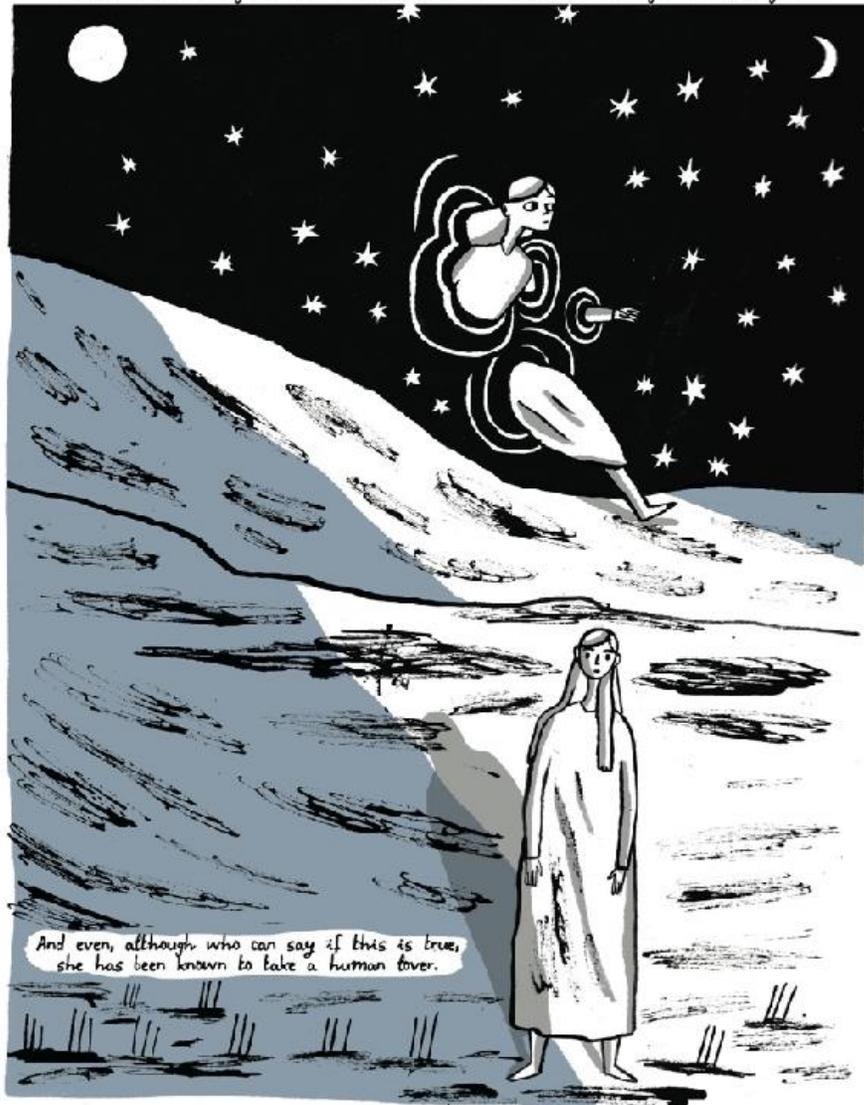
The world is breaking around us! And our shoes are all worn through!

Keep dancing.

There was nothing else for it. So they threw off their shoes, and they danced and danced and danced, as the world broke around them.



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 night, 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.

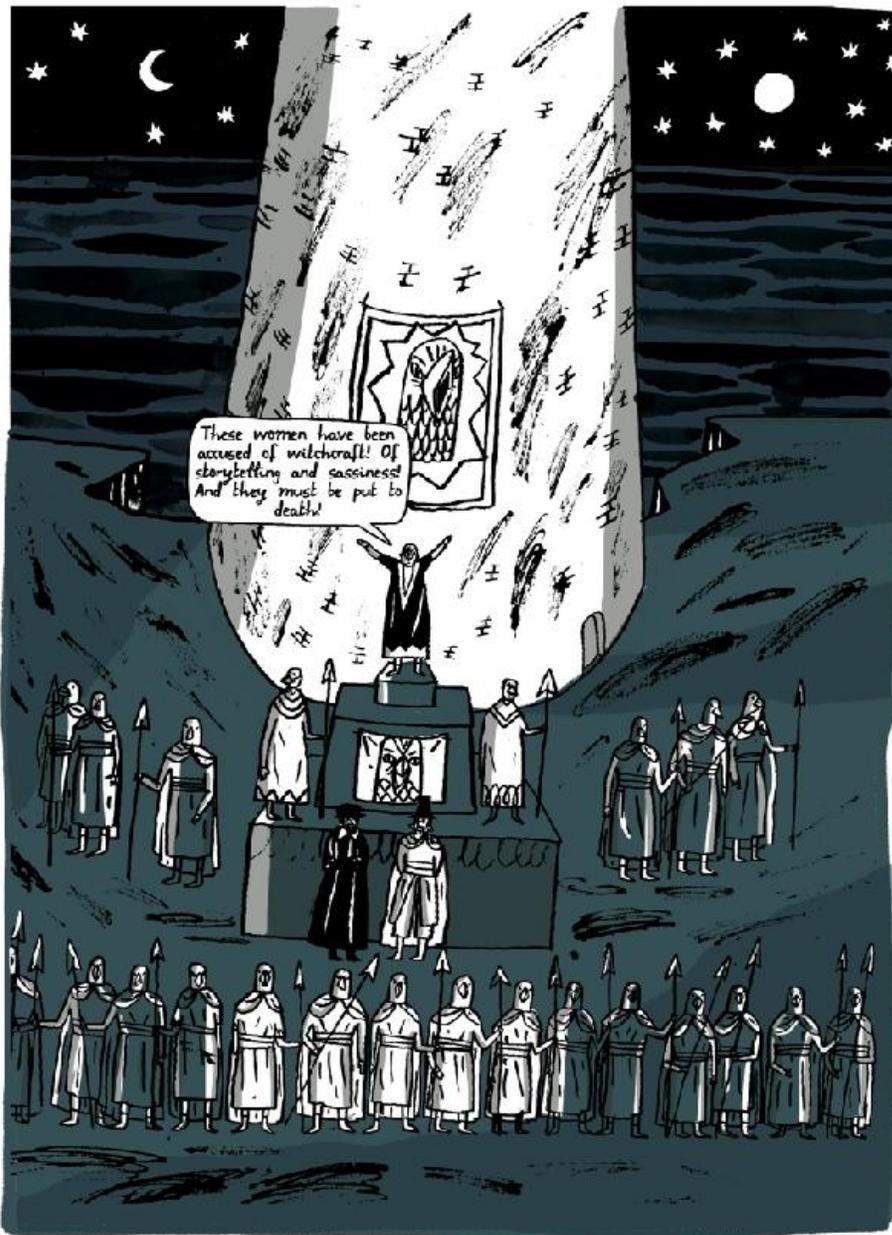




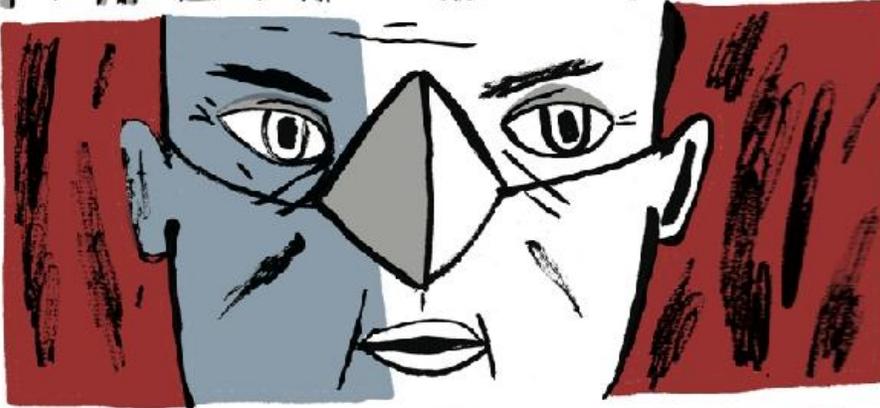
So Hero and Cherry lay together, and below the Tallest Tower, the crowds began to gather. Word had got out that the Beaked Brothers had summoned the executioner, who, when night fell, would go up in the basket, and lead Hero and Cherry out to the long keeling plank, where they would jump to their deaths.



The city was afloat 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?!



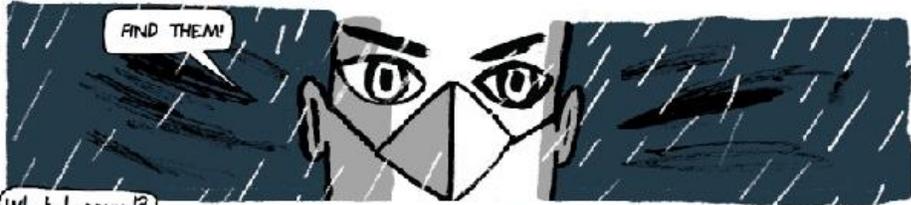
FIND THEM!

They just vanished!

Did you see that?



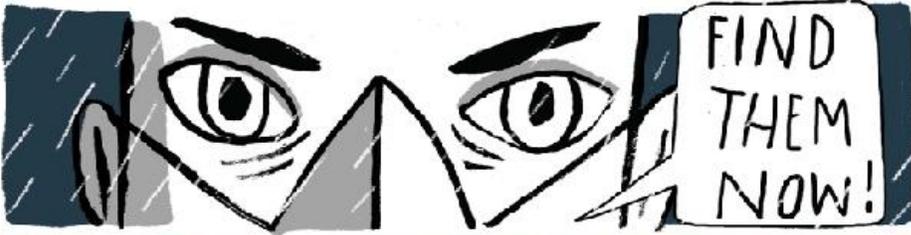
Find Them Now.



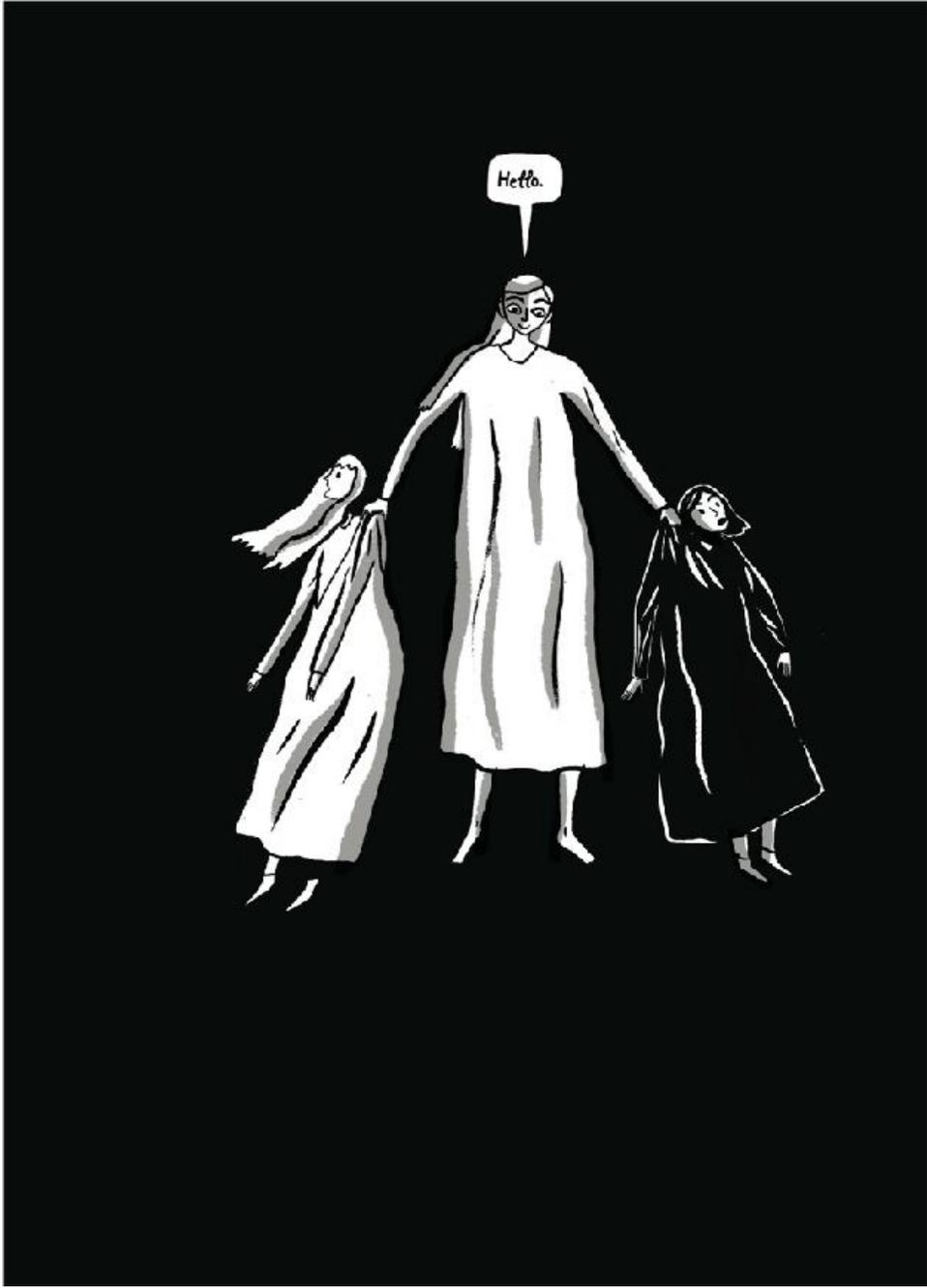
What happened?



I'm here!













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 Skerrigaard, and on it were many women.



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



We are 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.





We've come to tell you about a girl called Hero who told stories for one hundred nights, and how those stories have started a great revolution, and the city is burning and the Beaked Brothers have fled.

All because of two excellent women, called Hero and Cherry.



Ahhhh. That sounds like our Hero.

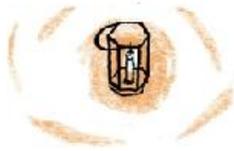
That night they went down to the beaches at Skerrgaard and they lit many fires and built cairns for Hero and Cherry. And all night long they told each other stories.



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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