



SHAUN
MICALLEF

TALES

From a

TALL
FOREST

*Art by Jonathan
Bentley*

CHAPTER SAMPLER

Tale One

The
WOLF

and the
Princess

and the **TRAIL OF**
CRUMBS

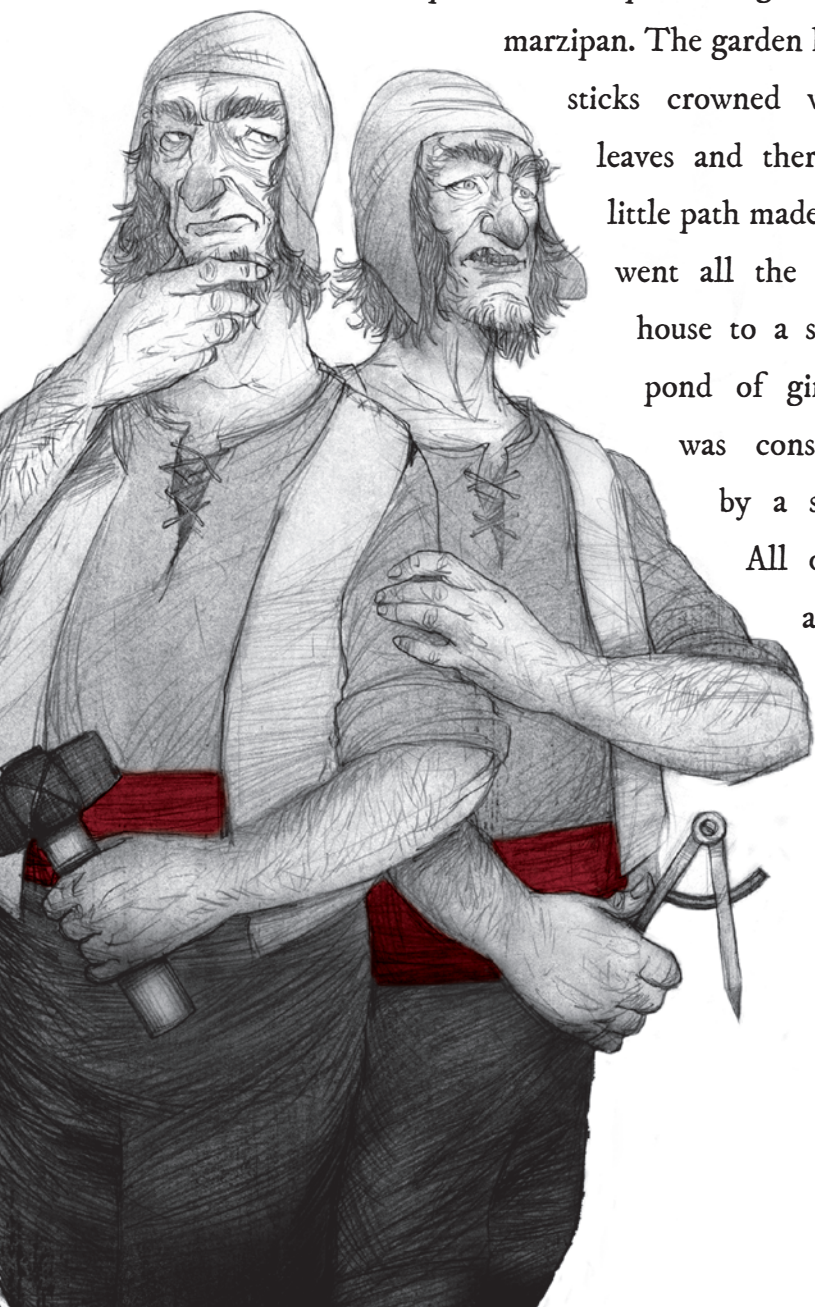


The building business was booming but Hengest and Hors were getting a bit sick of building the same thing over and over again, so they were very, **VERY** interested when an old crone stopped by their dwelling with plans to construct a cottage made entirely of confectionary.

The old crone went by the name of Baba Yaga and she was a recent arrival. Hengest didn't recognise her accent but Hors thought she might have been Trebizondian.

'You'll have to build it under the ledge of a cliff,' said Hengest, looking at her drawings. He was concerned about the colours running if it rained. Hors was more worried about the ants.

It was, it must be said, a sweet little cottage with liquorice-allsort stones, candy-cane door frames and a rooftop of chocolate pieces all grouted together with marzipan. The garden had trees of musk sticks crowned with peppermint leaves and there was a darling little path made of sprinkles that went all the way around the house to a small ornamental pond of ginger ale, which was constantly refreshed by a sherbet fountain. All of that was do-able and exciting; what worried Hengest and Hors was the massive walk-in oven in the kitchen.



That, and the cages.

‘For the children,’ explained the old crone. ‘That’s why they don’t have to be full-size and I save money.’

Hengest and Hors were still worried. Perhaps even more so.

‘Although they can’t be TOO small,’ she continued, ‘because they need to accommodate the children as they become fatter and fatter.’

One of them had to say something. Neither of them saying anything didn’t seem to be working.

‘Are you are intending to kidnap these children and cook them?’ asked Hors as diplomatically as possible.

‘Only to eat,’ explained the old crone. ‘I wouldn’t dream of doing it just for sport. That’d be cruel.’



‘Would you excuse us for a moment, Mrs Yaga?’ said Hengest, grabbing Hors by the elbow and pulling him towards the door.

The brothers were in a bind. On the one hand they had a customer with an exciting new project, but on the other hand she was planning to use it to capture and eat small children.

‘I’ve never worked with such challenging building materials,’ said Hengest to Hors as they huddled in the alley to discuss the matter. ‘The possibilities are endless.’

‘Yes, but consider the cottage’s use,’ reasoned Hors, unconvinced by his brother’s enthusiasm. ‘Cannibalism has been against the law since the Great Famine ended in 1317.’

The two debated the pros and cons, form versus function, nutritional value over aesthetics. Meanwhile, the old crone, who had grown tired of waiting, wandered next door to Peatbog McGinty, the barn builder, and showed him her drawings. He had no problem with the idea of a candy slaughterhouse and would do it for half the price.

It was almost two and a half years before Baba Yaga moved into her new home – there had been delays getting certain permits and approvals from Sheriff Belknap – and by then the old crone was quite blind. This was to cause her a few problems when it came to child-catching and consuming – as we shall see (and she would not).



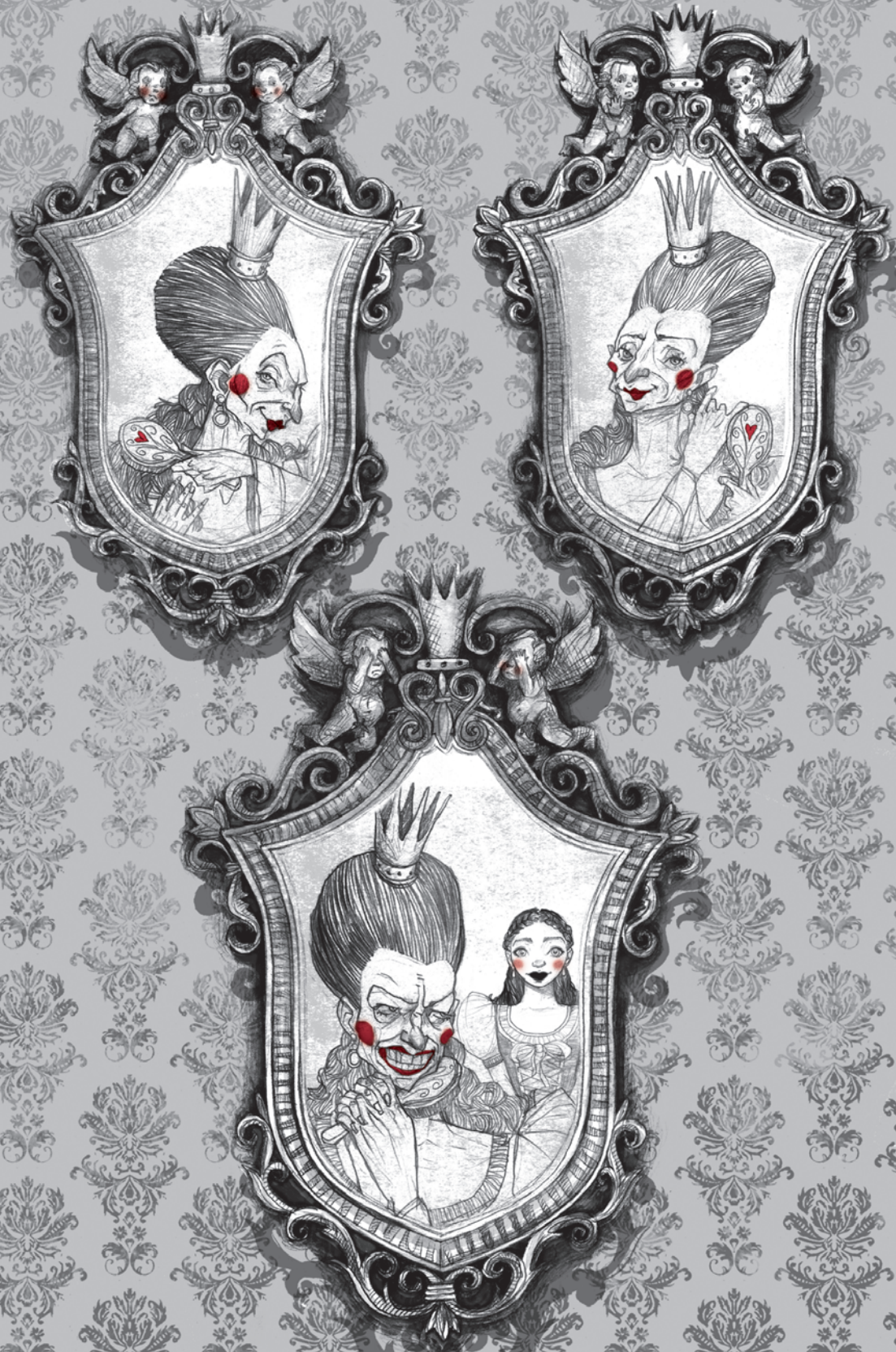
Meanwhile, back at the castle, the King was away on a skiing holiday in Münster. There was nothing he enjoyed more in the spring than to be towed along the Rhine by a Viking ship filled with a galley of madly paddling shield-maidens. Especially since his beloved wife, the Queen, had died of mange and his new Queen, though astonishingly beautiful, had a heart of pitiless stone and was not much fun to be around. In fact, she made life in the royal household most unpleasant for everyone, especially the young princesses – and extra-specially for the youngest princess, Mathilda.

Mathilda was quite a beauty in her own right. She had skin as white as alabaster, lips as red as blood, and hair as black as a raven's wing.

These days, of course, such contrasts are commonplace – but you have to remember that in the olden days, dyes and cosmetics were very uncommon and so Mathilda was considered quite breathtakingly attractive.

Vanity, though, has always been with us and Mathilda's wicked stepmother, the new Queen, would sit for hours in front of her mirror brushing her hair and practising her smiles.





She had many smiles: the Surprised Smile, the Delighted Smile, the Indulgent Smile, the Understanding Smile, the Naughty Smile, the Sympathetic Smile. But her favourite was probably the Lovely Smile, a smile that seemed to shine from the purest of hearts but, really, was the result of much practice and tight muscle control. Not that it was just about the mouth – the Lovely Smile was as much about the angle of the head and the promise of a joyful laugh, the crinkle at the top of her nose, and the way her hair played about her shoulders when her head turned. Oh, it was about many things, but the key to the Lovely Smile was the illusion of its bespoke-ness: that were it not for you, there would be no Lovely Smile at all. It was for you and only you – and it was this Lovely Smile that she trained on the reflection of her stepdaughter like a crossbow as Mathilda entered the room.

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