

Prologue

Baba Yaga peered into the blizzard, squinting one sulphur yellow eye as gray hair lashed her face. She bent a cavernous ear to listen to the howling of the wolves and grinned. The ruby in her incisor glinted. “*Tak, tak,*” she muttered, “*Molodtsy.* Good boyses.” She had heard the sound too rarely in recent times, especially in the last hundred years.

Events were awhirl, after long stagnation. She lofted her colossal nose and breathed deep: mud and decay and steel and tar, laced with wormwood. Faint and far away, she caught a whiff of something else. Her yellow eye popped open. Could it be—after all this time? She scrunched both eyes shut to sniff harder. Her nostrils distended until she was almost borne aloft. The scent was nearly imperceptible. But it was there—far, far away. On the other side of the world. Amidst the swirling snow, with her black dress whipping her bony frame, she strode through the skull-topped gate back to her hut.

The mottled yellow legs of the hut squatted hastily as she approached. The door swung open with a creak. Ignoring the snow gusting in behind her, Baba Yaga grabbed the mirror that hung above the huge mortar and pestle. The copper face of the mirror was framed on three sides with oak carved into snouts and fangs and tails and horns. The fourth side was unframed.

Baba Yaga squinted at the dull surface of the mirror. Her eyes narrowed to slits as she growled a long incantation. She concentrated on the elusive scent: dank and rich and salty.

The surface of the mirror clouded then resolved itself into a dim image: vehicles threaded among buildings. She scowled as the image wavered, clenching the mirror so hard that it winced. The street scene was replaced by a whirl of impressions: lilting music, a crumbling stone façade, a spicy taste. The picture was fading again. She slapped the mirror, which yielded one last convulsive image: six gaudy banners. Above them shone a solitary star.

A lone star.

Baba Yaga had no time to pack. The surface of the mirror was already growing matte. She placed it on the floor, snatching a bundle from the mantel above the fireplace and

her twig broom, which gave a little shriek. She glanced around the room. The mortar and pestle were too heavy to carry. Clutching her bundle and broom, she stepped through the mirror, grabbing the frame at the last instant and pulling the mirror itself after her.

Chapter 1. A Near Accident

Sitting at her cramped desk in the Bexar County Museum Association office, Rachel Vargas stared at the roster of names of the Daughters of the Lone Star. The Lone Star seemed to have a lot of Daughters for such a purportedly exclusive group.

Her boss, Ms. Shinkampf, was planning the cocktail party for the Eldest Daughters on Friday as if her life depended on it. Only Texas-made products were suitable, she reminded Rachel daily. The products had been ordered weeks in advance, along with the engraved invitations.

At least the handwritten notes that Ms. Shinkampf had ordered her to type up were a change from the usual museum business. All the names of the invitees had a sentence or two after them, presumably to help Ms. Shinkampf tell them apart rather than for extortion or bribery purposes. It was all pretty dry: one of them had cats named Lamar, Travis, and Seguíñ. She typed the note on the last semi-illustrious name.

Rachel wasn't looking forward to the party. Try as she might, though, she couldn't think of any way to get out of the gathering and still keep her job, short of being abducted by aliens.

A breeze wafted through the open window. As Rachel looked up, garish letters on the side of a passing bus caught her eye. "Cantrip Can Help!" promised the advertisement, rolling by. Who or what was Cantrip: a sleazy lawyer, a psychic hotline, a new mood leveler? Too late to find out. The bus was gone.

As Rachel printed out the notes on the invitees, she caught sight of her image in the mirror on the wall. It revealed her unruly hair and the dark circles under her eyes, reporting: "You are the most raccoon-like of all."

"Who asked?" Rachel muttered, averting her eyes. Every room in the building had a mirror. But at least they all showed Ms. Shinkampf's reflection, proving that she wasn't a vampire, despite her pale skin and chilly hands. Who needs so many mirrors anyway? As if in answer, she heard the swish of silk that announced the arrival of her boss.

Ms. Shinkampf flicked a glance at her blonde coif in the mirror before turning to Rachel. “Have you finished?” As usual, her voice sounded like silver scraping china. “It’s taken you long enough.”

Rachel bit back a reply and handed her the notes.

Ms. Shinkampf’s blue eyes raked over the names. “*Ttch!*” A lacquered nail poked the paper. “Not ‘Skunk,’ for heaven’s sake. It’s Miss *Skink*.” As she handed back the notes, her eyes fixed on the Klingon Bird of Prey earrings dangling from Rachel’s ears.

“Cloaking device, cloaking device!” Rachel ordered silently, not for the first time. But as usual the mirror showed that the tiny silver Birds of Prey were still visible.

Rachel sat down and dutifully replaced the *u* in “Skunk” with an *i*: Skink. She pictured a slender, squirmy woman. After printing out the page again, she handed it to her boss. “There you go. Anything else?”

Ms. Shinkampf’s alabaster brow furrowed slightly. Then she smiled, never a heart-warming sight. “I’ve got an assignment for you, Rachel. Try to pay attention. A copy of a Fabergé ornament has been stolen from the McNay Museum. Some of the other museums also have reported thefts. Quite bizarre things. I volunteered our services to coordinate investigations.”

“Our”? Rachel hoped it was the royal “we,” but of course it wasn’t.

“Your task will to be to ask some local . . . institutions whether any of their items are missing,” Ms. Shinkampf said.

Not the Alamo, of course. Even though they were technically no longer the official custodians, the Daughters of the Lone Star still had a lot of influence (having outflanked the reluctant Texas Land Office to get the current excavations started). They brooked no outsiders, especially now, with the protests at the current excavations. Ms. Shinkampf, long a Daughter herself, aspired to become an Eldest Daughter. Hence her planning for the party on Friday as if it was D-Day.

Rachel took a guess at which museums might want their help. “The Institute of Texas Cultures? The Witte?”

Ms. Shinkampf shook her head. “No, I’ll take the larger museums myself.”

Rachel thought smaller. “Museo Alameda? The Longhorn Hall of Horns? The O. Henry House?”

“No, no.” Ms. Shinkampf handed Rachel a short list written in purple ink, without looking her in the eye. “It’s quite an opportunity for you, Rachel.”

Rachel read the list: “Ripley’s Believe It or Not! Stella Attractions. Barb Wire Bonanza. Jeremiah Fort’s Collection of Anomalous Phenomena.” Ms. Shinkampf didn’t even blush.

“You said a *copy* of a Fabergé ornament had been stolen, not the real thing. What would these museums have that would be valuable?” Rachel asked.

“The stolen things didn’t seem to have much monetary value at all. More or less knickknacks in some cases.” Ms. Shinkampf waved a maroon-nailed finger. “Just find out if they’re missing anything, even if it’s not something expensive.” She swished out of the room with another satisfied glance at herself in the mirror, fingering her pearls and trailing Bond’s of Texas Lavender Eau de Parfum.

“Right,” said Rachel, putting the list of assignments by the phone. “Lucky me.”

None too enthusiastically, Rachel made an appointment for 10:30 the following morning at Ripley’s Odditorium. This assignment promised more than her fair share of oddities.

Stella Attractions was not listed in the yellow pages on the computer, but Rachel found an address scrawled in red in an old file on a shelf, although it had no phone number.

When she phoned Barb Wire Bonanza, the owner, Eldon Scarper, said that he couldn’t talk long because he was just on his way out of town for a few weeks. But he was polite enough until Rachel mentioned Ms. Shinkampf and the Museum Association.

“Mind your own bidness,” he yelled. “You snitty, jumped-up daughters of—”

Rachel held the phone farther away from her ear. “Sir, if you could just tell me whether you’ve had any thefts—”

“When the Ice Capades tour hell! I wouldn’t step over a cow pattie to help that passel of drippy-voiced, Perrier-swilling eggheads. That Mizz Shinkampf don’t know diddley-

squat about bobwar, that's sure. And you tell her I ain't forgot the banquet. Got that? The banquet." Rachel winced at the sound of the phone slamming down.

Right. One down, three more to go. It was a start at least. After erasing a few false starts, Rachel inscribed "No comment" for Barb Wire Bonanza. She wondered what Eldon Scarper had against Ms. Shinkampf (well, what his particular complaint was) and what had happened at the banquet. With a faint smile, she added: "Eldon Scarper says hello to Ms. Shinkampf."

Rachel made an appointment with Mr. Fort for the day after tomorrow. He seemed pleased to be included.

It was one minute to five, according to the clock on the wall. Rachel walked as slowly as she could out of the office. The parking lot was deserted as usual except for Ms. Shinkampf's BMW and her own second-hand green Chevy with an off-white hood. As she pulled out of the parking lot, she remembered that she had forgotten to ask Ms. Shinkampf about being reimbursed for gas money for this museum-hopping venture. At least Fort's Collection of Anomalous Phenomena wasn't far from the area where she lived.

A few blocks north of the Bexar County Museum Association building, the neighborhood changed drastically. Only a few buildings were occupied: El Papagallo restaurant, with its neon parrot (never lit), Adelante! bookstore, with its curious mix of pink and gold romance novels and political tracts in the window, and the liquor store, which seemed to have no name. When Rachel turned the corner, she felt a blast of cold wind.

An old woman clasping a twig broom and a large mirror stood in the middle of the road. Her malevolent sulphur yellow eye skewered Rachel as the car swerved, barely missing a parked pickup. Rachel slammed on the brakes. But when she ran back to see if the old woman was all right, the pavement and narrow sidewalks were devoid of pedestrians: dead, injured, or unharmed. She saw no one.

"Well, she must be all right," Rachel muttered to herself, glancing up and down the street once more for signs of body parts or slivers of glass and bits of broom. "I didn't feel a bump. And there's no pool of blood." But how did the old woman flee so quickly? She must really have been flying.

Rachel walked up and down the block and even peered around the corners. Seeing no sign of the old woman, she got back in her car. She'd never seen a broom like that before—except in *The Wizard of Oz*, of course. And that evil-looking eye!

Rachel felt a peculiar tingle.