

Adele Adair

and the Bad Baba

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Thirteen-year-old Adele Adair recently joined her family's business: tracking and capturing monsters around the world. As the youngest member of her creature-hunting clan, she still has lots to learn—but maybe she can teach her parents and older brother a thing or two along the way!

Adele fought through the tangle of branches. “You know,” she grunted, “most people put up posters if they lose their cat. They don’t call in a team of monster hunters to track it all the way to Russia!”

“True,” Zeb agreed, his voice in her earpiece. “But most people aren’t related to a team of monster hunters like dear cousin Hortense is. Besides, Bran’s not your average kitty. He does talk, you know.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Adele said. “That just makes him even more irritating than a normal cat.”

The forest thinned, and Adele stepped into a clearing. The setting sun revealed the strangest sight she’d ever seen: a wooden hut atop a pair of living, moving chicken legs.

“Why so quiet?” Zeb asked.

Adele snapped a picture with her myPhone and texted it to Zeb.

“Oh!” Zeb exclaimed. “That’s Izbushka—the home of Baba Yaga.”

“Baba what-a?”

“That’s her name. ‘Baba’ means ‘old woman’ and ‘Yaga’ means, well, ‘Yaga.’”

“So she’s an old lady who lives in a chicken-legged house? I’ll have Bran in no time.”

“Not so fast,” Zeb warned. “Baba Yaga’s a witch. Sometimes she helps visitors, but sometimes she turns them into dust.”

Adele gulped. “How am I supposed to reach the door? Climb?”

“According to the diary of Ivan, a Russian czar, you just scratch one of the legs and call, ‘Izbushka, stop with your back to the forest and open your door before me.’”

Adele did as Zeb advised, and the chicken legs knelt to the ground. Before Adele could lose her nerve, she opened the door.

The hut contained very little—a wooden table, two chairs, and a huge chest of drawers. A skeletal, wrinkled woman with a hooked nose sat at the table. Under the table, Bran was curled into a ball, shaking with fear.

“How dare you enter Izbushka uninvited!” the old woman shouted.

Adele ignored her. “Are you OK, Bran?”

“Y-yes,” the cat said, “but I’ve had nothing to eat for five days except one blueberry. This lady is stingy.”

“I’m no lady! I’m Baba Yaga, the most famous witch in the world.”

“Oh, yeah?” Adele asked. “Then how come I’ve never heard of you?”

Baba Yaga’s face turned white. “Really? My legend has faded? What about my archenemy, Koschey the Deathless? Is he still famous?”

Adele wrinkled her nose. “Koschey? Sounds more like cereal than a person.”

Baba Yaga put her head in her hands. “Forgotten. How can this be?”

“I don’t know,” Adele said. “But I’ll take my



cousin's stolen cat and leave you to figure it out."

The witch's eyes flashed with fire. "Take one step, and I will sweep you into dust. He's mine now. I've been searching for a new talking cat since mine ran away."

"Why do you need a talking cat?"

"To fetch spell ingredients from the forest." The witch nodded toward the chest of drawers. "That chest has exactly 100 drawers, each containing a different ingredient. I need only one more to complete the collection. Not even Koschey has managed that!"

"If you get that final ingredient, maybe you'll regain your fame," Adele suggested.

Baba Yaga raised one bushy eyebrow. "Perhaps ..."

"How about this?" Adele continued. "If I can find the last ingredient for you, you'll let Bran go."

"Agreed!" the witch said. "BUT you must get it to me before dawn!"

"Deal!" Adele said. "What is the last ingredient?"

Baba Yaga smiled, showing off her cracked teeth. "A web from the Queen of the Spiders."

A few hours later, Adele stood before the gaping mouth of a cave carved into the side of a mountain.

"According to the GPS," Zeb said into Adele's earpiece, "that's the place. Activate your stealth suit and get in there. Time to give my new transparency technology a test run!"

Adele clicked a button on her belt, and her suit shimmered, turning her nearly invisible. "Cool."

The cave wound into the mountain, twisting and turning and growing ever darker. At last, a faint glow shone ahead. As Adele got closer, she saw a woman draped in red from head to toe reclining in the center of a gigantic spider web near an open fire. The woman's eyes were closed.



Adele tiptoed into the light.

"Pssst," a voice called.

Adele spun toward the sound.

A large wicker birdcage hung from the ceiling. A black cat studied her through the bars.

"How can you see me?" Adele whispered. "I'm nearly invisible."

"I'm a cat. I have good eyes."

"You're Baba Yaga's cat, aren't you?"

The cat nodded. "The Queen of the Spiders captured me while I was gathering spell ingredients. She's planning to eat me!"

"I'll get you out," Adele said. The latch on the bottom of the cage was held shut with a thick padlock. Adele twisted a knob on her wrist, creating a thin, red beam. She passed the laser through the lock, slicing it in two and opening the cage.

Panicked, the cat jumped onto her, clawing his way up her body and accidentally scratching her belt. A shower of sparks fell onto the cave floor, and the stealth suit flickered and turned off. Adele was visible again.

"Calm down," Adele said to the cat.

"No way!" the cat exclaimed.

"Why not?"

"Because the Queen of the Spiders is right behind you!"

Adele turned just in time to dodge the cloaked woman's lunge. The Queen of the Spiders slammed into the cave wall, growling and baring her fangs like an animal.

The cat in her arms, Adele raced down the winding tunnel until she saw the stars above her.

"Keep running!" the cat hissed. "She's still coming!"

Adele looked back. The Queen of the Spiders was rushing down the side of the mountain after them, her six skinny arms spread to reveal a red hourglass on the front of her black robe.

Adele didn't look back again, sprinting until she felt like she might collapse.

"I think she's gone," the cat said at last.

"Thank you!"

"No problem," Adele puffed between deep breaths.



Back at Baba Yaga's hut, the sun was just peeking over the horizon when Adele stepped inside with the black cat.

"Stenka!" the witch exclaimed, her usual frown transforming into a half-grin. "Where have you been?"

"I was a prisoner of the Queen of the Spiders!"

"That was very naughty of you," Baba Yaga scolded, although she couldn't keep from smiling. "Never do that again."

"I didn't get the spider's web for you," Adele admitted. "Can I still have Bran?"

"Of course." Baba Yaga picked up her cat to kiss him on the top of his head. "I don't need two fleabags eating me out of house and home."

Adele pushed the door open, and Bran darted from under the table and into the forest clearing.

"Another successful mission," Adele said into her headset. "Your little sister rocks!"

"How'd the stealth suit work?" Zeb asked.

"Yeah, about that ..." Adele replied. "I think you might need to look into cat-proofing it." ☐

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