

★ **The Night of Baba Yaga****Akira Otani****Sam Bett, Translator**

Soho Crime (Jul 2, 2024)

Hardcover \$27.95 (216pp)

978-1-64129-491-1

An indefinable connection grows between a reluctant bodyguard and a yakuza's daughter in Akira Otani's novel *The Night of Baba Yaga*.

Shindo's life is far from perfect, but when she is pressed into service as a chauffeur and bodyguard to Shoko, the sheltered daughter of an iron-fisted mobster with an ax to grind, life takes a dangerous turn. Despite their initial distaste for each other and their situation, the two women form a fragile affection that might just be strong enough to save them from the grisly fates that Shoko's father has planned for them.

Shindo and Shoko are opposites in almost every way. Thanks to a brutal upbringing in Hokkaido, Shindo is ruthless but merciful: she will beat up any man but agrees to work for Shoko's father Naiki to save a stranger's dog. Haughty Shoko lives under her father's thumb and seems to feel nothing but disdain. Yet they are both trapped by Naiki, whose rigid expectations and cheerful, casual cruelty keep them in line. Bonding over illicit outings to fancy coffee shops and tales of childhood trauma, the duo realize that what they have in common is most important: the desire to live life on their own terms.

The sharp prose conveys action sequences, tense exchanges, and tender moments with deftness and lively details. Exhilarating twists and disturbing revelations lead to a gory fight for freedom that turns Shoko's predictable world on its ear. She and Shindo make a decision that neither could have predicted and that neither will ever regret, no matter where it takes them.

By turns terrifying and empowering, *The Night of Baba Yaga* is a dark thriller in which two women defy all conventions and risk much to regain their autonomy.

EILEEN GONZALEZ (July / August 2024)

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