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War of the Witches

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Extract

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The Prophecy of O

And the chosen one, Om's descendant, will arrive one day.

She'll have fire in her hair,
Wings and scales on her skin,
A howl in her throat,
And death in her eyes.

She will ride the sun
And brandish the moon.

CHAPTER 1

Selene's Disappearance

The girl slept in a bedroom with high ceilings and walls that had been whitewashed a thousand times. It was a cheerful room in a small-town house that smelled of firewood and freshly boiled sweet milk. The window shutters were green, as were the geometric shapes on the Turkish rug covering the hardwood floor; the valleys in the paintings on the wall; and the spines of various children's books crammed on the shelves next to many others that were red, yellow, orange, and blue. An abundance of color spread boldly on the pillows, quilt, puzzle boxes, and the abandoned slippers under the bed. But these colors of childhood clashed now with the absence of dolls, relegated to the back of the closet, and the serious desk covered not with simple drawings but a state-of-the-art computer.

Perhaps the girl was not a child anymore. Even if she was still a child, she didn't know that she would cease being one that morning.

The bright sun filtered through the openings of the poorly closed shutters while Anaíd—that was the girl's name—moved restlessly and shouted in her sleep. A ray of sunlight slithered down her quilt, reaching her hand, slowly but tenaciously climbed her neck, then her nose, her cheek, and finally, brushed against her closed eyelids, waking her up.

Anaíd screamed and opened her eyes, confused. Still in a state of light sleep, unable to tell dreams apart from reality, she was out of breath and found the intense light invading her room rather strange.

In an incredibly vivid nightmare, she had run through a storm, looking for shelter in a forest of oak trees. Amid the roar of thunder, she could hear her mother's voice screaming, "Stop!" but she didn't pay any attention. Thousands of lightning bolts were falling all around her, dazzling her, blinding her, flooding the forest with a rain of fire, until one struck her and she suddenly fell dead.

Anaíd blinked and smiled, relieved. The playful ray of light that had filtered through the window shutters was to blame for everything.

There was no trace now of the electric storm that had lashed the valley the night before. The strong wind had swept away the clouds and the clear skies shone like the purple waters of the lake.

And that intense light—was it so late? Why hadn't her mother woken her up for school yet?

Anaíd jumped out of bed and suppressed a shudder when her bare feet touched the rug. She got dressed as usual, not spending more than a second on her outfit, and searched for her watch. Nine o'clock! She'd already missed her first class. And her mother? Why wasn't she up yet? Had something happened to her? She always woke Anaíd up at eight.

"Mother?" whispered Anaíd, pushing open the door to the adjacent room. The fear from her nightmare was creeping up on her, but she pushed it down.

"Mom?" she repeated anxiously, when she realized that there was no one else in the room except for her and the icy northern air coming through the wide-open window.

"Mother!" she shouted angrily, adopting the tone she used

whenever her mother pulled a prank on her. But this time Selene didn't jump out from behind the curtain laughing recklessly, or tackle Anaíd onto the half-made bed.

Anaíd took one, then two deep breaths and wished that the wind hadn't blown away the jasmine scent she liked so much. Shivering, she closed the window. Even though it was mid-May and the first spring buds had already appeared, it had snowed the night before. In the background, the dark-slate bell tower of Urt's monastery appeared sprinkled with white like a custard tart. This was a bad omen—it was a leap year—and she crossed her fingers like her grandmother, Deméter, had taught her.

"Mom?" Anaíd repeated once more in the kitchen.

Everything was as they had left it the night before, after the argument and before the storm and the nightmare. Anaíd searched meticulously. There were no traces of a stealthily drank cup of coffee, a nibbled biscuit, or a glass of water sipped at an unusual time. Her mother had not set foot in the kitchen. That was for sure.

"Mother!" insisted Anaíd, ever more nervous.

Her voice resonated in the garden, on the porch, and it even reached the old barn they used as a garage. Anaíd stopped for a moment in the rickety wooden doorway, struggling to adjust to the semidarkness inside the barn. The old car was still there, covered with dust, the keys in the ignition. Without it, Selene couldn't have gone far. Urt was out of the way and in the middle of nowhere. You needed a car to go to the city, the train station, the ski slopes, the mountains, the lakes, and even the supermarket on the outskirts of town. So, if she hadn't taken the car . . .

Anaíd had a sinking feeling. She returned to the house and rummaged around thoroughly. Her mother's belongings were still there. She couldn't have left the house without her coat, purse, keys, and shoes.

Anaíd was starting to feel déjà vu, remembering the morning her grandmother died. It was ridiculous, but everything seemed to indicate that her mother had vanished with what she was wearing, without so much as a hairpin, half-naked and barefoot.

Her heart pounding, Anaíd yanked her down jacket from the hall's coatrack and put it on as best as she could. She made sure her keys were in her pocket; then she closed the door behind her and started running. The freezing wind crept into the alley, whistling and zigzagging through the narrow corridor formed by the thick-walled houses built to withstand the northern wind.

Urt, with its stone houses and slate rooftops, stood at the head of the Istaín Valley, under the Pyrenees, and was surrounded by high mountain peaks and glacial lakes. In the town's square stood a Romanic church, which faced east so that its altar would receive the first ray of morning light. Up high, looming over the valley and at the beginning of the mountain pass, stood the ruins of a large fortified tower, now inhabited by crows and bats. In the past, a guard would stand watch day and night with only one task: to keep alive the torch that would light the bonfire if he saw an enemy approach. The signal from Urt's lookout tower could be seen from six different towns. And legend said that it was Urt's bonfire, in an anonymous and ignored feat, that stopped the relentless advance of the Saracen troops through the Pyrenees in the eighth century.

Anaíd was fairly protected from the wind until she crossed the ruins of Urt's old city walls. Once in the open, the north wind whipped at her face. Two big teardrops slid down her cheeks, but she still wasn't afraid. Facing the gale, she took the road to the forest without stopping even once.

• • •

The old oak grove looked pitiful early in the morning. Torn-off branches, charred ancient tree trunks, fallen leaves, scorched underbrush . . . The storm had left scars that only time would be able to heal. Little by little, and with the help of a stick, Anaíd cleared the muddy blanket covering the ground. She was terrified of finding what she was looking for. She told herself over and over again that it wasn't possible. But nonetheless she kept working carefully. She walked through every inch of the forest, checking every corner.

She was looking for Selene's body.

Anaíd would never forget the morning her grandmother had disappeared, or the night before her death. Deméter, a midwife, had died in the forest on a stormy night less than a year ago, on her way back from attending a birth. Just thinking of it, Anaíd could taste the salty tears she had cried all over again.

That morning, after a torrential storm, a discolored fog had covered the sky. Anaíd's mother was worried because Deméter had not slept in her bed, and Anaíd felt a vague fear. Selene didn't let her come to the forest with her—she wanted to do it alone—and when she returned, numb with cold, her eyes clouded with pain, she could barely speak the few words to tell Anaíd about her grandmother's death. It was not necessary, though, because Anaíd already knew. She had felt the bitter taste of death coming up her throat when she awoke. Selene choked out that she had found Deméter's body in the woods, and then fell silent. Usually a chatterbox, now she wouldn't answer any of Anaíd's questions.

On the days that followed, the house was full of distant relatives from all over the world. They received hundreds of letters, phone calls, and e-mails, but nobody dared say anything about Deméter's cause of death. In the end, they concluded she had been struck by lightning, and the forensic doctor—a specialist who

flew in from Athens—confirmed it. Anaíd couldn't kiss her grandmother before she was put in the coffin; her body was charred, unrecognizable.

People in town spoke at length about the lightning bolt that struck Anaíd's grandmother the night of the electric storm, though no one ever understood what Deméter was doing in the oak grove at that time of night. Her car was found on the road, parked by the gutter, with the driver's window open, the headlights on, and the blinker flashing stubbornly.

Anaíd stopped in her tracks as reality flashed back through the oak trees. Her stick had touched something, a hard object covered by fallen leaves. Her hands trembled insistently, she couldn't help it. She remembered Deméter's advice for overcoming fear when panic took over. She quieted her mind, then removed the leaves with her boots and held her breath: before her was a still-warm body. It wasn't human . . . it was . . . it was . . . a wolf, or better said, a female wolf, for Anaíd could clearly see its mammary glands swollen with milk. Its cubs couldn't be too far. The poor things, they would starve to death without their mother's milk. Anaíd hoped that they were old enough to survive with the help of their pack. She studied the animal. It was beautiful. Its fur, despite being dirty with mud, was pearl gray, soft and silky to the touch. She felt sorry for the young she-wolf and covered its body again with dried leaves, branches, and stones to prevent it from becoming food for scavengers. The wolf was far from the mountains; it had descended to the valley, ventured into human territory, and found death. Why would this wild creature come down to the valley?

Anaíd checked her watch. It was noon. She thought it best to go back home and make sure everything was still the same. Sometimes, things changed unexpectedly and what seemed terrible earlier suddenly wasn't so bad anymore.

Counting on the remote possibility that she might find her mother at home, Anaíd took the road back and, unfortunately, ran into her classmates coming out of school. The last thing she needed at that moment was to have to explain herself or answer their annoying questions. She wasn't in the mood to put up with their taunting, either, so she turned around and darted in the opposite direction, walking toward the bridge. But when she turned her head to see if she'd managed to avoid them, she lost her balance. She didn't see the blue Land Rover coming down the hill; she only felt a strong blow to her leg and the screeching of brakes. Then a cry. And then nothing.

Anaíd was lying on the ground in a daze, unable to move. The driver, a blond, blue-eyed female tourist in casual attire, with a slight foreign accent, was kneeling over her, muttering and checking her body.

"Poor girl, don't move. I'll call an ambulance. What's your name?"

Before Anaíd could open her mouth, a chorus of voices replied for her.

"Anaíd Tsinoulis."

"The know-it-all midget."

"The nerd."

Anaíd wished she could melt and refused to open her eyes. She'd heard the voice of Marion, the most beautiful girl in class, the one who threw the best parties and never invited her. And she'd also heard Roc, Elena's son, who'd played with her when they were younger but now didn't speak to her, or look at her, or even notice her . . . She wanted to die.

She assumed all the class's vultures were standing around, pointing fingers, relishing in her misfortune, and making fun of her accident . . .

She was mortified.

Ever since the other girls in her class began growing taller and taller, leaving her behind and laughing at her small size, Anaíd felt as if she'd come from another planet. Neither Marion nor the other girls invited her to their birthday parties or on their nights out in the city. They didn't share their secrets or exchange outfits and CDs with her. And it wasn't because they were mad at her or envied her for getting better grades, but because they didn't even notice her. Anaíd's big problem was that despite being fourteen years old, she was only as tall as an eleven-year-old.

Invisible, she went unnoticed everywhere, except in the classroom. In class she shined with her own light, and that was her small tragedy. She understood everything quickly and got the best grades, so when she answered questions in class or got As on her exams, her classmates called her "the know-it-all midget." To make things worse, her intelligence also bothered some teachers, and more than once, she had regretted not shutting her mouth in time. Lately, she refrained from raising her hand and always tried to make a few mistakes in order to get lower grades. But it didn't matter; she was still the know-it-all midget. And that hurt; it hurt a lot.

Still on the ground, Anaíd wanted only for the kids to go away and leave her alone, to stop staring at her with their cruel, mocking eyes.

"You kids, get out of here!" the foreigner reprimanded them.

The same sweet and steady voice that had tended to Anaíd had become harsh and inflexible. Her classmates did as they were told and scattered. Anaíd, sprawled in the middle of the road, heard the soles of their shoes resonate as they ran down the cobblestone streets to spread the news of her accident.

"They are gone, Anaíd," murmured the beautiful foreigner.

Anaíd opened her eyes and immediately felt comforted. A knowing smile and a pair of eyes as deep blue as a lake awaited her—a heartwarming welcome.

"I think I'm okay," said Anaíd, suddenly optimistic, touching her injured leg.

"No, wait! Don't get up." The tourist tried to stop her.

But Anaíd had already jumped to her feet and was gingerly moving first her knee, then her ankle. She seemed okay.

"I can't believe it," whispered the foreigner, lifting Anaíd's pant leg and searching for a fracture.

"Really, I'm fine, it was just a scratch," said Anaíd, showing her leg and feeling the soft caress of a delicate, fair-skinned hand on her knee.

"Get in, I'll drive you to the doctor myself," the woman insisted.

She took Anaíd's hand to help her get in the car.

"No, no, no. I can't go to the doctor," Anaíd refused.

The woman seemed to hesitate.

"I can't leave you, they need to take X-rays, tests."

Anaíd begged vehemently. "I really can't. I need to go home."

"So, I will go with you and talk to your mother."

"No thanks!" shouted Anaíd, already running down the street, completely recovered from her fall.

"Wait!" shouted the beautiful woman in confusion. She didn't know what to do.

But Anaíd had disappeared through the first alley on the left and, at that precise moment, was opening the door to her house.

But the house was still empty. Despite the good omen Anaíd had felt in the forest when she found the dead wolf, Selene hadn't returned.

Anaíd sat down in the rocking chair that once had been reserved for Deméter and rocked herself for a long time. The repetitive

motion of her body going back and forth, swaying her sadness, calming her anxiety, soothed her and relaxed her mind. She couldn't rush; she needed to do things methodically, one after another. Her mother was out there somewhere, and if Anaíd couldn't get in touch with her, she might as well try to track her down.

Before going to anyone for help, Anaíd printed out every message sent or received from her mother's e-mail account during the past month. She wrote down the numbers of the last fifty phone calls in the answering machine's memory and checked her mother's bank account transactions to see if she had withdrawn any money in the past week or made any strange payments in the last month.

She also gathered her mother's correspondence, mostly about her work or from the bank, and flipped through her calendar, where she jotted down meetings, engagements, and names. Glancing over the information, she realized that the most repeated number in the dialed and received phone calls was from Jaca, the city closest to Urt, where they shopped frequently.

Without hesitating, Anaíd dialed the number. On the other end, a male voice answered, "Hi, I'm Max. I'm not home right now, but please leave a message." Anaíd hung up. Who was Max? Why had Selene never mentioned him? Was he a friend? More than a friend? There was no trace of him in her e-mail or calendar. The only interesting thing Anaíd found was some increasingly intimate and frequent correspondence with an admirer who said she was an avid reader of Selene's comics and suggested they meet in person.

Her e-mails were signed simply *S.*

• • •

Gaya was grading exams by the fire. Sometimes, like that afternoon, she lit it only for the simple pleasure of bringing her hands near the flames and enjoying its caresses. She regretted having

accepted the position as a teacher in Urt. She had too many students, winter lasted ten months, and she had no time or energy left for her music. She'd thought the town would be a quiet destination and that the isolation would allow her to compose, but she was wrong. Interruptions occurred one after another, and the miserably cold air made the notes of her music perish, frozen before they were born.

She had been deceived and wound up in the eye of the storm. Right then, the bell rang, and Gaya knew from the anxiety that invaded her that the worst hadn't happened yet.

It was none other than Anaíd, Selene's daughter, who hadn't been at school that day. Gaya had actually just graded her exam. A good exam—too good. That's why she had lowered her grade by one point, claiming that her handwriting was too pointy. It wasn't that she didn't like the girl . . . Anaíd was awkward and shy, but she wasn't annoying. What bothered Gaya was that Selene took credit for her daughter's merits, and an A was excessive for the arrogance of that narcissistic redhead.

"What's the matter, Anaíd?"

Anaíd's eyes were red and she seemed scared. Before she could answer, she burst into sobs. Gaya lost her patience and made Anaíd blow her nose and drink some cold water. Anaíd splattered her sweater with water. She wasn't ugly looking. Her eyes, a magnetic cobalt blue, had always fascinated Gaya. But the poor thing was so ungainly, so skinny in those huge sweaters. With her few sparse, short hairs jutting out from under those woolen hats, she looked even worse. Gaya had never understood Selene's poor taste in dressing her daughter and cutting her hair that way. Nobody who saw them together would guess that such an attractive and provocative redhead was the mother of that scrawny teenager. Finally, Anaíd seemed to snap out of it.

"My mother has disappeared."

Gaya grew agitated.

"When?"

Gaya noticed that Anaíd was guiltily avoiding her eyes.

"When I woke up this morning, she wasn't there, that's why I didn't go to school. I've been waiting and waiting, but she hasn't come back."

Gaya considered the possibility that Anaíd was confused.

"She's probably at Melendres's office, discussing her last installment of *Zarco*."

Anaíd shook her head. Melendres was the editor of her mother's comics, and the two of them fought like cat and dog even though Selene's character, Zarco, was beginning to do quite well.

"She hasn't gone to the city; her car is in the barn."

"Perhaps—" Gaya tried to interrupt.

But Anaíd was sure.

"I've checked her shoes and coats, nothing is missing. And her purse with her keys, wallet, and credit cards is hanging from the coatrack."

Gaya turned pale and picked up the phone, barely paying attention to Anaíd. As she dialed, she was overcome with rage. If Selene was in front of her, she would slap her, yank her hair until she'd pulled it all out. She would step on those feet of hers squeezed into those flashy stiletto boots. Why? Why didn't she follow her advice? She had been seeking her own downfall for a year, ever since Deméter's death.

"Elena? It's Gaya. Anaíd is here, and she says that Selene has disappeared."

Gaya seemed taken aback by Elena's words.

"An accident?" She turned to Anaíd. "Elena says you had an accident, that you were hit by a car this morning."

Anaíd cursed all her classmates, especially Roc and Marion.

"It was nothing. The car barely touched me."

"Did you hear her? Okay, we'll be waiting for you."

Gaya replaced the receiver and stared at Anaíd. She felt sorry for her. She was alone and had been through one tragedy after another . . . But Gaya wasn't willing to pay for Selene's mistakes. Anaíd was Selene's daughter, not hers. She glanced at the exams, then at the fire, and couldn't help feeling irritated by all the trouble she'd have to go through no matter what decision she made.

"Elena is on her way, and she'll take you home with her."

Anaíd's eyes widened in surprise. "We have to go to the police."

"No!" cried Gaya instantly. Then, when she saw the counter-productive effect her words had had on Anaíd, she corrected, "What if she's run off with . . . someone? It would be a scandal. We'll look for her ourselves."

"But—"

"Your mother isn't always completely together; she does stupid things sometimes. Do you want people to point fingers at you, on top of everything else?"

Anaíd fell silent. She knew that despite being her mother's friend, Gaya envied Selene. She envied her curly red mane, her long legs, her congeniality and self-confidence. You didn't need to be very bright to realize that the self-righteous teacher would have sold her soul to the devil to be like Selene.

• • •

Elena, the town's librarian, who had provided all of Anaíd's children's books, came in panting. Anaíd was usually embarrassed in her presence as she could never tell when Elena was pregnant, had just given birth, or neither. She reckoned that Elena must have

seven children, if she hadn't missed anyone. Roc was the eldest and was just like his father, the town's blacksmith—strong, sarcastic, with dark skin and hair. She and Roc had played in the forest and swum in the river when they were kids. Now Roc owned a motorcycle, wore flashy jeans, had his ear pierced, and went to the city on Saturdays . . . And if he ran into her, he looked away like everyone else.

Unlike Gaya, Elena was affectionate, and the first thing she did was hug Anaíd and smother her with kisses.

"Tell me what happened, honey."

"She doesn't know anything," interrupted Gaya.

"She must be able to give us a clue, something we don't know about . . ."

But Gaya was furious.

"We all knew it. We knew it would happen sooner or later."

"You're jumping to conclusions."

"What did Selene expect, with her short skirts and that long red hair, all curly and flamboyant, blowing in the wind? What did she expect with those articles on the Internet, being interviewed and photographed in her house, making those controversial statements, and daring to criticize public figures? Not to mention her constant speeding tickets! And her much-talked-about drinking."

Startled, Elena interrupted her.

"Gaya, please, Anaíd is here. Behave yourself."

But Gaya had felt like exploding for too long and couldn't hold back one last jab.

"Her ego has betrayed her."

Anaíd felt compelled to defend her mother.

"She is special, different . . . I love her."

Gaya's hard words made Anaíd brave, but also cautious. Anaíd

decided not to share the information she'd gathered about her mother's last movements.

Gaya sighed. She despised Selene, so narcissistic and in love with herself, and she couldn't believe that the poor girl Selene had overshadowed and neglected like an old piece of furniture was now defending her.

"I'm sorry, Anaíd. I have nothing against your mother, only against her lack of judgment. It seems she is . . . looking for enemies, for attention, you know?"

"Are you saying that she's missing because of an interview on the Internet?" Anaíd asked sarcastically.

Gaya wished she had shut up minutes before.

"No, no, I . . . Well, I, forget it. But, just so you know, I really admired your grandmother Deméter. She was a real lady."

Elena took Anaíd's hands.

"Anaíd, did you hear anything last night, or sense anything was wrong like when—"

"My mother is not dead." Anaíd was abrupt, sharp. She didn't even question where the strength that urged her to reply so confidently was coming from.

Gaya and Elena exhaled, relieved. Anaíd's certainty left no room for doubts.

"How do you know that?"

"I know it and that's it."

Elena sat on a chair and was deep in thought for a moment before speaking.

"We'll do something, Anaíd. The two of us will help you find Selene, but you must help us, too. First of all, we must ask for something that will be very hard for a curious girl like you."

"What?"

"That you don't ask any questions."

Anaíd swallowed. She needed just one reason to be sure that complying would help them find Selene.

"Is she in trouble?"

Elena and Gaya looked at each other and nodded.

"Okay, I won't ask any more questions. What else?"

"That you don't speak to anyone about this. *Anyone.* Understood?"

Anaíd needed to take in Elena's words, to believe that there was a reasonable explanation for Selene's disappearance. And there was one.

Anaíd nodded. "What should I say to people in town?"

"We'll say . . . we'll say that she's out of town. In Berlin. Do you like Berlin?"

Anaíd nodded. "And in the meantime?"

"In the meantime, I will take care of you," said Elena.

"Where will I sleep?"

"Well, with . . ."

"I can't sleep in Roc's room!" Anaíd shouted with a hint of desperation.

"Why not? You are friends."

Anaíd thought she would faint. The worst thing that could happen to her was not her mother's disappearance but to be subjected to the most terrible embarrassment of her life—sharing a room with Roc. The possibility of living under the same roof felt like torture.

"No, we're not friends."

"So . . . you can make up. What do you think?"

"I think it's awful."

Elena sighed and brought her hand to her stomach. Anaíd noticed. Did it move? Elena's big belly shook restlessly. She must be pregnant again.

Gaya stroked Anaíd's hair with a tense hand, a gesture that, coming from her, meant a great deal.

"Come on, I'll go home with you to pick up your stuff, but you must eat something first. I'm sure you haven't had a bite all day."

Gaya brought out some cold chicken and vegetables to warm up on the stove. Anaíd hadn't had anything to eat since the night before, and despite hating vegetables, she was grateful.