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Witchfinder 2: Gallows at Twilight

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Witchfinder: Gallows at Twilight

William Hussey

- 1645 -

The House of Bones

"She is coming, my Sisters. The poor, doomed child…"

The witch's foot danced on the pedal of the spinning wheel.

"Her stomach is as empty as a leper's begging bowl and her feet are bare and bleeding," the witch continued. "Though she is but twelve years old she has cried all the tears of a long-lived life. And now, through heartache and hardship, she has come to *our* door. Death has found her at last."

With her right hand the witch teased an invisible strand away from the hissing wheel. The magically woven thread passed from her fingers as a funnel of smoke. It spread out, coiling and condensing, until it had grown into a wall of cloud. Inside this foggy screen, a figure moved. A child, lost in a forest. The cloud crackled and the girl emerged from between the trees and stepped under the shadow of the manor house.

"She is here."

* * *

Lizzie Redfern grasped the lion's head knocker. She tried to lift the heavy brass ring clasped between the lion's teeth, but the effort sapped the last of her strength. Her legs gave way and she tumbled down, smacking her face against the cold stone step. Lizzie felt no pain. She was beyond any sense or feeling now.

Dimly, she heard the rasp of a bolt and the weary grumble of the door. Candlelight dazzled. A figure stooped down, its ivory face pinched with concern. Arms encircled Lizzie and picked her from the ground. A rush of words wafted into her ear –

“Here you are, my dear, just as my clever sister foretold. But you are such a little thing! Come now, into the warmth and the light.”

The sound of the unknown lady’s dress was like the rustle of a half-remembered lullaby. Twice Lizzie mustered the energy to open her eyes. She saw glimpses of a gloomy hall festooned with spider webs and the sweep of a big, dusty staircase. The lady did not seem to feel her burden. With Lizzie secure in her arms, she ghosted through the house. At last, they came to one of the upper rooms.

“Drude, my dear, I have brought our guest.”

The creak of another door and the glare of another candle.

“Oh, but she is so *thin*, Lethe,” the woman called Drude clucked. “Bring her straight to the table, the broth is ready.”

No sooner had she been sat down than Lizzie felt the tap of a spoon against her teeth. Rich, meaty stew salted her lips.

“How charming,” Lethe purred. “See, Drude, how she blinks in the firelight like a newborn pup.”

Lizzie felt a second spoonful of stew wash into her mouth. Heat spread out from her stomach and spilled into her arms and legs. By the time the spoon had scraped the last of the stew from the bowl, she was sitting up and looking at her hosts.

They had called each other ‘sister’ but Miss Drude and Miss Lethe were not at all alike. Clearly the elder of the two, Drude was dressed in a threadbare nightgown stained with splashes from the broth. Straggles of white hair poked out from beneath her nightcap and brushed against a large, warty nose. In contrast, Miss Lethe had the face of a playful imp. She wore a gown of finest yellow satin and had lacy ribbons tied in her long blond hair.

“There now,” said Miss Drude, dabbing Lizzie’s lips with a handkerchief, “you must be feeling better.”

“I am, thank you, Ma’am.”

“No need for thanks, my pet. But tell us, what has brought you to Havlock Grange on so bleak a night?”

“I’ve been walking from town to town, trying to find what work I can,” Lizzie explained. “I came this night to the village not far from here—Little Muchly, I think it is called. An old lady in a cottage by the river told me to go to the big house. I was to tell the ladies there that ‘Old Sowerberry’ had sent me.”

“Dear Old Sowerberry.” Miss Drude showed a set of worn, black teeth. “Yes, we have an… arrangement with that lady. She sends all needy children to our door.”

“Tell me, my dear” Miss Lethe said, “are you quite alone in the world?”

“Yes, Ma’am. My mother died giving me life. My father…” Lizzie’s voice cracked. “He was killed the month before last at the great battle at Naseby.”

“He was a soldier? For which side?”

“He was a Parliament man.”

Drude nodded sadly. “Even here, in our lonely house far from the world, we hear tell of this great conflict—this barbaric civil war.”

While Drude had been speaking, Lizzie’s gaze wandered around the room. The table at which they sat occupied the centre, its surface cluttered with books, parchment, quills, candles and a cauldron from which the broth had been served. A large curtain had been used to screen off the far end of the chamber. Within a few paces of Lizzie stood a grand stone fireplace with gargoyles carved into its columns.

A painting hanging above the fireplace caught Lizzie's eye. The central figure of the picture stared down at the girl, his eyes like two dark gemstones. Aside from the sneer frozen upon his lips, the man in the painting was as beautiful as an angel.

"Our brother," Lethe sighed. "Our beautiful, talented brother. How we miss him."

"Did he die?"

"In a way," said Drude. "He lives still, but it is a half-life. He exists only within the Veil."

These words confused Lizzie. She asked –

"What was his name?"

"Marcus. Marcus Crowden…"

The flames of the fire quivered. Lizzie turned and saw the curtain at the end of the chamber flutter outwards.

"Come," Miss Drude muttered. "Our sister calls."

Hands locked onto Lizzie's shoulders. Too shocked to cry out, the girl stumbled forward as the sisters barged her through the room. They reached the curtain and Drude, no longer smiling, grasped the edge and tore it back.

"This is our youngest sister. Say hello, Frija."

The woman sitting at the spinning wheel lifted her head. She was small—smaller even than little Lethe—and dressed entirely in black. Although a thick veil covered her face, Lizzie felt sure that Frija Crowden was looking directly at her. Frija's fingers played through the spokes of the wheel, turning it slowly, surely.

"I saw your coming, Lizzie Redfern," she said.

"Who are you?" Lizzie whispered.

“I am the cloud spinner. My eye sees far and my hand speaks truth. See the truth I spin…”

Frija’s fingers teased a strand from her spinning wheel and cast it loose. The moment it left her hand, the fibre soared across the room and into a dark corner. Like a bright finger, it descended, touching on a large chest or travelling trunk. The lid was thrown back and, as the light strengthened, Lizzie caught sight the trunk’s contents.

Screams caught in her throat.

“Old Sowerberry sends any passing child to Havlock Grange,” Frija murmured. “They come to seek work, to beg a penny. They are brought in, they are fed… and they are never seen again.”

The magically woven strand brightened.

Arm and leg bones poked out of the trunk like the stalks of strange, headless flowers. Little skulls, some with clumps of hair still attached, grinned in the ghostly light. The sight of these remains was frightening enough, but what chilled Lizzie most were the chips and notches scored into the bones. Teeth marks. She looked back at Lethe and Drude and imagined the hungry women sitting at the table, chomping and gulping, sucking and slurping, wiping the juice from their chins. When the bones had been picked clean, they would be thrown into the chest. Such a small grave for so many children.

Lizzie thought about the delicious stew she had just enjoyed and her gaze switched back to the table. Fear sharpened her senses and she noticed things that in the haze of hunger she had missed.

She saw the slick, red gruel dripping down the cauldron’s belly. Smelled the faint stench of rotting flesh. Saw the chopping board at the end of the table, its blood-smattered surface littered with chunks of meat and scraps of gore. Six eel-black

tongues had been heaped together, ready for dicing. A single jellied eye, shucked from a child's head, sat upon the table and stared up at the ceiling. At one end of the chopping board, fingers and toes had been laid out like a row of little sausages.

Lizzie covered her eyes. She could no longer look at the cannibals' kitchen.

"Such a shame," Lethe sighed. "We had intended to keep you alive for a few weeks. Fatten you up; get some flesh on those bones. But I'm afraid Frija has forced our hand. Drude, my love, will you be a dear and fetch the axe?"

"NO!"

Frija's hands left the spinning wheel and shot out towards her sisters. Before either could respond, the spell was cast. Streams of blue light encircled the Crowden sisters, locking their legs together and snapped their arms against their sides. Frija gestured upwards and her sisters were lifted from the ground.

"Treachery!" Drude shrieked.

Lethe smiled her sweet smile. "My dear Drude, you ought to know by now that Frija cannot be trusted. As soon as she spun her vision of the girl you ought to have bound her hands."

Frija paid her sisters no heed. She turned to Lizzie. "Come here, child."

The girl approached the black-robed figure, her eyes rooted on the thick veil.

"You see the coin resting there below the bobbin? Take it and run."

The coin glinted in the firelight, bright and golden. Despite all the impossible things Lizzie had seen this night, this seemed the most miraculous. It was a Double Crown: more money than her father would have earned from a year of soldiering.

She reached for the witch. "Come with me."

"I cannot. I… I must never be seen. Please, you must hurry."

Lizzie clasped the coin to her chest. She cast one last, sorrowful look at her saviour and ran from the house.

* * *

The witches collapsed to the ground.

"Sentimental idiot!" Drude moaned, picking herself up. "Now we will have to clear the house of bones, just in case the little wretch tells the constable and –"

"Hush, Sister," Lethe hissed. "See, she is spinning again."

Their anger momentarily forgotten, Lethe and Drude gathered around their more gifted sister. Frija's foot rocketed up and down upon the pedal, working the wheel so fast that its whistle could be heard in every corner of the house. Her hands were a blur as she spun the fibre into a pitch-black cloud. Lethe and Drude looked at each other: they had never seen their sister spin a vision of such intensity.

"*He* is coming!" Frija's voice lost its sadness. Now it was cold, hollow. "Very soon now he will begin his long journey."

An image formed in the cloud. A boy—tall, thin, brown hair falling across his eyes. Eyes that seemed to fix upon the Crowden Sisters. He stretched out his hand towards them, as if casting a spell.

Lethe and Drude fell back.

"He is coming to find us, Sisters. The boy conjuror. The Witchfinder." Frija's eyes dazzled. "Jacob Harker…"

- NOW -

1.

The Lost Art of Magic

Jake stepped off the road and into the dark embrace of the trees. Stalks of yellow grass rattled against his shins as he scrambled down a bank of loose earth. He hit the ground, paused for a moment, and breathed in the stillness of the forest. Save for the shimmer of moonlight between the branches, nothing stirred. Not an animal, not an insect, not a bird. He had expected someone—some*thing*—to be waiting for him; a lurking, monstrous presence that would fall upon him as soon as he set foot in its domain. But there was nothing here—just silence, darkness, and the reek of decay.

He sucked down the mouldy forest air and whistled. A second later, he heard footfalls on the bank.

"Over here," he hissed. "Follow my voi—"

Something shifted in the darkness. It lashed out and hit Jake like a jolt of electricity, surged inside his head, tumbled and roared in his brain. He could hear nothing, see nothing, beyond that single overwhelming force.

Evil.

In response, a pale blue light appeared between his fingers. Jake managed a weak smile and turned to the others. He took a tattered map from his pocket, ran his finger over the page, and pointed east.

"Two miles 'til we reach the grounds, then another mile to the Crowden house. Stay close."

Comforted by the sight of his magic, his father and Rachel Saxby nodded and followed Jake into the shadows.

They had gone a little way, their feet crackling over a carpet of dead leaves, when Jake held up his hand. Rachel and Adam came to a halt.

"Something's not right," Jake said. "The colour of the forest—it's different."

Rachel peered into the gloom. "What do you mean?"

"Shhh. There's something up ahead."

The evil that haunted the forest had changed. No longer an invisible force, Jake saw it as a colour running through the trees—a sickly grey smoke, the shade of a rotten egg or maggoty meat. It had a smell, too, that reminded Jake of the day when the sewers of New Town had burst and the filth of a thousand homes had been spewed into the streets. But this was not the only change he noticed. Some distance from where they stood, a lonesome powder-blue light shone between the trunks of the trees. This new colour stood out against the grey evil like a lantern's glow. A familiar fragrance accompanied the colour: citrus and jasmine.

Jake breathed easy. "It's Pandora."

At the sound of her name, that handsome, eight-armed woman, who had once mustered an army and saved Adam and Jake from the clutches of the evil coven master Marcus Crowden, emerged into the light. Jake smiled and hurried to greet his friend. It had been only a few weeks since their first meeting in the back office of Crowden's bookshop, and yet it felt as if he had known Pandora for years. She had become a regular visitor to the Harker home, teaching Jake and Rachel the ways of the dark creatures and explaining some of the mysteries of her world. Already it was difficult to think of life without Pandora.

Jake was halfway across the glade when he stopped dead. This instinct to see the colour of a soul had come so suddenly and naturally to him that he hadn't questioned it. Now he wondered if it might be something like the feel for evil that he had inherited from the Witchfinder. It was a comforting thought—maybe he was tapping into those old powers again. As soon as this idea occurred to him, however, the magical instinct seemed to fade. Pandora came forward, and the lantern-glow around her grew dimmer until, finally, it was extinguished.

Old doubts began to whisper in Jake's ear. Ever since he had destroyed the Door into the demon realm he had felt the powerful magic of the Witchfinder slipping away from him. He had tried his best to hold onto it, summoning memories of those times when he had sensed the magic at its strongest. Times when he had been angry or despairing, like on the night his mother had been murdered by the witch, Tobias Quilp. Sometimes these memories sparked his powers, more often they failed. His father had reminded Jake that, as a clone of Josiah Hobarron, magic was part of Jake's genes, his DNA. All he had to do was find a way back to that forgotten place inside himself.

Jake tried to push his doubts aside. Tonight was their first real chance to rescue Simon Lydgate. His best friend was counting on him, and so Jake could only pray that the magic would be there when he needed it.

Two of Pandora's arms wound around Jake's waist. A pair of hands gripped his shoulders and another cupped his chin and lifted his face.

"Really wish you wouldn't hug me like that, Pandora," Jake complained. "It feels like I'm being frisked by a dozen cops."

"I hope that ain't prejudice I hear coming from your lips, Master Harker," Pandora said in her warm, Louisiana drawl. "Octo-phobia is not cool."

Yet another hand slapped Jake lightly across the cheek.

“And lookee here, Miss Rachel Saxby, always a pleasure. Please tell me you’ve been practising with that bow, Rachel honey, we’re gonna need all the help we can get tonight.”

Rachel came forward and kissed Pandora.

“Religiously,” she nodded.

“Loving the confidence, girl. Show me.”

In one fluid motion, Rachel swept the bow from her back and reached for an arrow from the quiver. The bow was loaded, the string drawn taut and the arrow fired with lightning speed and deadly accuracy. It thunked into the skinny trunk of a sapling several hundred metres into the forest.

“Woo-eee,” Pandora breathed.

As Jake watched Rachel trot into the forest and retrieve the arrow, his thoughts returned to that first night back at home after the Door had been destroyed. Despite being exhausted, his father had immediately started to research the Demon Father—that dark, infernal presence that had taken possession of Marcus Crowden. Likewise, Jake had begun practising his magic, trying to hold onto his already fading powers.. For her part, Rachel was determined not to be left out. She had no magical ability, but Adam told her that, when the time came, there might well be creatures fighting for the Demon Father that could not defend themselves with magic. He had taken her to his study and, after half an hour of rummaging through his collection of mystic odds and ends, he had found the bow of Nuada.

“Nuada was the one-armed king of the Tuatha Dé Danaan,” Adam said, handing Rachel the beautifully-engraved silver bow. “They were warrior race that, in

the mists of Irish legend, might once have been gods. The sword of Nuada was called Claiomh Solais—the Sword of Light. Once drawn, no enemy could escape its sting."

Taking the bow, Rachel had run her fingers over its curved sapwood limbs.

"After the Claimoh Solais was destroyed in the battle, splinters of the blade were embedded in the heartswood of a bow. This bow."

"You're kidding," Rachel laughed.

Adam had puffed out his cheeks. "I've known stranger things."

Jake watched now as Rachel slid the arrow back into its quiver. She'd had only a few weeks to practice and yet she held the weapon with authority and poise. He wondered if this was really the result of the magical properties of the bow or of Rachel's own natural marksmanship. He remembered that her father, Dr Saxby, was also a crack shot.

Pandora high-fived Rachel and then turned to Adam. She tried to hide her emotions, but Jake knew her well enough now to read the concern in her face. She hugged her old friend, careful not to brush against his wounded shoulder.

"How are you, sweetness?"

"Good. I'm good, Pandora."

"You don't look good. You look like an ol' mule rode half to death and then rode the other half. You shouldn't be here."

"Pandora, please." Adam inclined his head towards Jake.

"You know something, Adam Harker? For a clever man you do a fine impression of the world's biggest dumbass. The boy can see you ain't up to this."

Jake felt the truth of Pandora's words. Now forced to walk with the aid of a stick, his father looked like a man aged before his time. When Marcus Crowden had cast a hex at Jake, Adam had thrown himself into the path of the dark magic. Now his

skin was creased like old paper and his eyes scored with deep lines. Pandora had been treating him with mystic remedies and her potions had succeeded in holding back the worst of the magic. Despite his father growing ever weaker, Jake remained confident that the resourceful Pandora would find a cure.

"I told him to stay at home," Jake said, flanking Pandora.

"Least someone in your screwy family has some sense, then."

"Don't talk about me as if I'm not here," Adam snapped. "I'm not totally useless, you know. I might even be able to help."

Pandora rested her forehead against Adam's.

"You ain't useless, friend of mine," she sighed. "You just ugly."

The joke cut through the tension and the four of them burst out laughing.

A deep, rumbling grunt interrupted the hilarity.

"You lot gonna stand there gabbin' all night? My club's itchin' to bust some demon skull."

Pandora rolled her eyes.

"Ladies and gentlemen, may I introduce Mr Brag Badderson."

The ground trembled as the creature stomped out of the shadows. Standing at a height of a little under ten feet, Brag Badderson towered over the company. His grey-green skin had the ridged texture of a tree trunk; a natural camouflage which might have accounted for the fact that they hadn't noticed the giant earlier. His huge barrel chest heaved and the nostrils of his tiny, flattened nose sniffed the air. Aside from a pair of raggedy leather shorts, the monster was naked. Moss and lichen had grown in patches on his body and what looked like the remains of a bird's nest clung to his right shoulder.

“I sometimes fall asleep standin’ up,” Brag explained, self-consciously brushing away the woven twigs. “Bloomin’ birds think I’m a cliff or summat.”

“What *is* he?” Rachel whispered.

Brag cupped one of his tiny ears.

“Aye? Speak up, girl! Wha’s she say, Pand?”

“She was wondering what kind of creature you are, Brag!”

To everyone’s surprise, Brag drew himself up to his full height, placed a three-fingered hand on his chest and began to sing in a deep, bass-baritone.

“*They call me Troll—Gnawer of the Moon—Giant of the Gale-blasts—Curse of the rain-hall—Companion of the…*”

“Yes, yes,” Pandora groaned. “We’ve heard it all before.”

“Aye? You wanna hear some more?”

“I said—WE’VE HEARD IT ALL BEFORE!”

Brag picked at one of the tusk-like teeth that overhung his bottom lip.

“Some folk got no culture,” he grumbled.

“Brag’s a forest troll,” Pandora explained. “And, as you may have noticed, he’s as deaf as post. He’s also hideous, rude, stupid, and has the worst personal hygiene of any creature I’ve ever encountered, dark or otherwise. But don’t let any of that put you off. If it comes to a fight, you could do worse than have Brag Badderson in your corner.”

Jake took in the troll’s massive arms and the great stone club that he bounced idly against his shoulder. Pandora was right: this guy was a definite asset to the team!

“Hey!” Brag shouted, shivering a shower of leaves from the trees. “I may be hideous, rude, deaf and…” He counted the insults off on his fingers. As he had only three on each hand the tally seemed to confuse him.

“And putrid-smelling,” Pandora said.

“Yup, that too,” Brag agreed, “but I ain’t dumb. You said I’d be getting paid for this little gig, Pand, so where’s the gold?”

Pandora shot Adam a sheepish look. “I promised him gold. Thought the big idiot would forget.”

“‘*You wanna cross a bridge, you gotta pay the troll’*,” Brag said solemnly. “That’s the Badderson family motto.”

“Badderson, Badderson…” Adam clucked his tongue against the roof of his mouth. “Of course! Got it!” He took the mobile phone from his pocket and dialled. While he waited for the call to connect, Adam winked at the confused forest troll. “Ah, hello? Yes, this is Dr Adam Harker speaking… Yes, it’s been a long time, hasn’t it? How are you? The wife? Good, good. And the other wife? Ah, ran away with a Bulgarian ogre—I’m sorry to hear that… How many kids now? My, you have been busy, Mr Badderson.”

Brag, who had been cupping his ear and listening carefully, looked thunderstruck.

“Yes, I’m fine, Sir,” Adam continued. “I’m just calling because I have your son here. I was telling him about the old days. You remember the time when I helped to smuggle your family out of Scandinavia during the troll-hunting season…? Indeed, it was *quite* an adventure. Well, I was telling young Brag that I needed a favour, but he seemed quite reluctant to help out, and so I thought… Yes, he’s here.” Adam held out the phone. “Daddy wants a word, Brag.”

The troll gulped. He took the phone, which looked like a baby’s toy pinched between his formidable fingers.

“Hi, Dad… Yeah, but… But the family motto… The family motto’s horse dung?! That’s not what you say when you’ve had a few on Sammal’s Eve… No, please don’t put Mum on… Ok, I will… Said I will, didn’t I? No, Sir. Yes, Sir. Yes, tell her I put a fresh pair on this mornin’… Yeah, g’night, Dad.” The troll returned the phone and looked down at his feet. “I’m very sorry, Dr Harker. My Dad says I’m to do whatever you tell me and to keep my big, fat, ugly mouth shut.”

Pandora slapped the troll playfully across the knee.

“Well, that’s that sorted. Shall we get this show on the road? By the way, Brag, try to keep that great melon of yours below the trees—we’re not in the grounds yet, but we don’t want to warn them we’re coming.”

The reinforced company struck out, moving ever deeper into the forest.

Adam tried to keep his voice low but Jake heard him whisper to Pandora –

“Is the troll all you could muster? I was hoping you could bring at least ten dark creatures with you. Maybe more. Loads of you fought against the Crowden Coven.”

“Times have changed, honey. It ain’t just witches we’re facing these days. Rumours are spreading like wildfire among the dark creatures: something has been released from the demon realm –”

“But he’s not here,” Jake cut in. “Your contacts, Pandora, they said he’s abroad.”

“Boarded a plane this mornin’,” Pandora confirmed. “But when he gets back and finds out what we’ve done… Listen, even *I* thought twice about coming tonight.”

“I guess we should be thankful for small mercies then,” Adam muttered. “But just what is the Demon Father up to? Weeks have passed since he came through from

the demon world, but he still hasn't made a move against us. And all these short trips abroad: the US, Japan, Egypt, Australia, and now Spain. Who's he visiting?"

"Beats me," Pandora said. "All we know is that, wherever he goes, his trident mark turns up a day or two later: burned into cornfields, graffiti tagged onto monuments, even scratched into the earth of the Australian outback. Last night, one of my contacts in Tokyo saw it as a red neon light flashing high above the city streets."

"Whatever he's doing, I'm just glad that this time Pandora found out about his travel plans in advance," Jake said. "This is our first real chance…"

He reached for Rachel's hand.

"It's now or never. We have to rescue him tonight. Simon's counting on us."

Adam gave a weary sigh. "Jake, I know we've had this argument before, but are you sure about this? The Demon Father will have left behind powerful protections to guard the boy. Simon is his son and–"

"I owe him," Jake said through gritted teeth.

"But you have to consider: he may no longer be the boy you knew. He's half-demon, Jake."

"He's my friend." Jake locked eyes with his father. "My *best* friend."

Adam nodded. "Very well, then we better get moving."

They marched on for another ten minutes or so before coming to a break in the forest. A fence, twelve feet high and covered in barbed wire, cut through the trees. The metal sign attached to the chain-link rattled as they approached –

KEEP OUT!

HAVLOCK GRANGE

Private Property

Trespassers will be ~~Prosecuted~~DEVOURED!!!