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Witchfinder 3: The Last Nightfall

Written by

William Hussey

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WITCHFINDER

The Last Nightfall

The future of humankind rests on Jake's shoulders. His only hope is to close the demon door forever by harnessing the power of the witchball. But the demon, Pinch, holds it in hell. He waits for a witch with enough darkness in their heart to summon him back to earth.

Jake must travel to hell and back to stop the demon and save a stranded soul. All the while, a strange voice that is his, but not his, is getting louder in Jake's head. A truth as old as time has been hidden deep within him and it is slowly forcing its way to the surface.

The Age of Man is over.

Vampires stalk the streets.

Dark creatures wait to be unleashed.

The Demontide is here.

Dedicated with all my love to
Marilyn and Bill Hussey.
My parents.
My heroes.

WITCHFINDER

The Last Nightfall

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WITCHFINDER
The Last Nightfall

WILLIAM HUSSEY

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THEN circa 29,000 BC – Where Demons Dwell

'She's just a child, a baby—why must you do this?'

'Because I am hungry.'

'I have meat in my shelter. All the reindeer flesh you can eat.'

'But I have told you, I cannot live in this world on animal meat alone. I must have my fill of human flesh or I will fade back into the shadows. Is that what you want?'

'No, my child!'

'Then let me eat in peace.'

The baby in the demon's arms started to cry, a high-pitched mewling that set his teeth on edge. He ought to silence her. Snap her frail neck and then feast, but the demon wanted the blood to be as hot and as fresh as possible.

Perched on the bank of the wide river, the demon lifted the baby to its jaws. So weak, so fragile. How could these pitiful mortals hope to survive in such a cold and ruthless

cosmos? To destroy them—to *eat* them—was really a kind of mercy. The woman squatting beside the demon shivered; a delightful tremor that made him smile. Not only were they weak and fragile, they were sentimental!

The baby flailed her plump little limbs. Her hand latched onto the demon's lower lip and turned his smile in to a grimace. His tongue slavered and his needle-sharp teeth grazed her fragile fingers and moved up to her tiny wrist. He would soon strip the meat from this young carcass. Then, when the feast was over, he'd fling the bones into the great river: a watery graveyard that had already washed away the leftovers of six sumptuous meals.

The demon crammed the baby's arm into his mouth, ready to bite down . . .

'I SEE THE MONSTER! HE HAS THE CHILD!'

Three men crashed through the trees on the far bank. Spears raised, they glared at the woman and her demon.

The monster reacted with lightning speed. He dropped the baby onto the soft earth and darted into the forest. Behind him, he could hear the fading cry of the infant and the woman's breathless pursuit.

'Where are you, my child? Answer me! The hunters are crossing the river!'

And now her words became ragged with fear—

'*Please*, my little Pinch, they are going to kill us!'

The demon hurtled on into the lush green depths of the forest. A low-lying mist lapped around the trees and the creature's powerful body cut through it like the prow of a canoe through still waters. Foraging animals scattered before

him and the insects hidden in the long grass ceased their chirrup-song.

Gradually, the forest began to thin out, the trees became more stunted and patches of cold sunlight broke through. Up ahead, he could see a landslide of immense boulders that had smashed its way into the forest, felling small redwoods and providing a rugged slope to the foot of the mountain. Within seconds, he had reached the first boulder and scrambled over the scree. At the base of the mountain, Pinch craned his neck and tried to gauge its height, but the summit of the red-rock giant disappeared into a crown of wispy white clouds.

Pinch filled his lungs and began the climb. His talons found niches in the rock and he swung himself from crevice to crevice, moving with monkey-like agility. The demon was beginning to tire when he caught sight of a ledge jutting out from the rock face like a petulant lip. Exhausted, he clawed his way onto the little plateau.

Birds nesting on the ledge took one look at the demon and exploded into the sky. They climbed high, wheeling and shrieking. Anyone in the forest valley below would be certain to notice their panicked flight. Pinch scampered back to the edge and peered over.

The river blinked up from between the trees. Somewhere down there the womenfolk had herded the children into the safety of their reindeer-skin huts. Pinch imagined them sitting in circles, holding hands and praying for the safe return of the hunters. Those fearless men had tracked and killed every danger that had ever threatened their camp: hungry wolves and ravenous cave lions, even the cannibal tribe that

had made its home in the next valley. All the same, Pinch knew that they had never faced a creature such as he.

A dark spirit summoned forth by one of their own.

The demon's gaze swept around the plateau. It was a wide ledge bound on three sides by the mountain *Ayyuk*, named in honour of the falling night and of the 'Great Giver'. At the centre stood a beautiful statue almost as tall as Pinch. Carved from mammoth tusk, it depicted the Great Giver in the form of a tribesman—a tall, long-limbed figure, his bone-white hands pressed against the earth.

Pinch snorted and shook his head. By some accident, he had reached the place most sacred to the tribe. They called it the 'Watching Eye'. From here, so the legend went, the Great Giver saw all of creation and judged everything in his view, good and evil.

A sudden fury took hold of the demon. He snatched up the idol and threw it with all his might into the forest below. The white god shimmered in the late-summer sun before vanishing into the whispering ocean of redwoods. *Down you go*, Pinch thought, *out of the light and into the shadows*. He allowed himself a brief smile before turning back to the mountain. The sheer walls were impossible to climb, even for the dexterous demon. What was he going to do?

'Pinch? Answer me!'

At the sound of the woman's voice, Pinch sought shelter in the only place he could: a rough collar of juniper bushes that ran in a semi-circle around the plateau. He snuffled, breathless, as that strange emotion—fear—ran through his little body. For a short time, he had known freedom and,

more importantly, the sense of being whole again. No longer a thing of shapeless shadow, he had felt solid earth beneath his feet and the sharp mountain wind against his face. He had breathed the air, drunk the water, eaten the flesh. After eons in the airy darkness, he had been grateful for his liberty and his crude form, but now Pinch sensed that his time in this world was almost up.

The hunters were coming.

'My little child, where you?'

The woman clambered over the ridge, a whisker away from Pinch's hiding place. Her words were rough but he had been her companion for almost a year and had developed an understanding for the tribe's brutish speech. Now he automatically translated it into his own, more refined demon-tongue.

Half-crouching, his mistress wheeled around the ledge, eyes alert, ears straining. As tough as a rhino's hide, her bare feet padded across the rocky ground. She swept her head low and the reindeer horn pendants hanging around her neck grazed the earth like limp fingers. She called out again, spittle flying from her lips, the indecision plain on her face—should she continue the hunt for her beloved 'child' or should she flee? Already she could hear the thunder-step of her pursuers and the clack of their spears.

'Where? Where?' she cried. 'Cannot lose him again. Cannot. But where my child? Where my little man? Where my son made alive again?'

Pinch drew back, the bracken folding around him like a bearskin blanket.

The hunters arrived in a wave. They broke over the ridge and fanned out around the sacred plateau. With a shriek of terror, the woman stumbled back against the cliff wall. Fifteen faces stared at her, square eyes narrowed, high foreheads crumpled. The men were dressed in reindeer hides decorated with bright feathers and painted shells. Blue thunderbolt tattoos blazed across their cheeks and rippled down their powerful forearms. Each hunter held a spear, a formidable weapon fashioned from a mammoth's thighbone.

The leader of the tribe came forward. He walked with calculated grace, every muscle in his battle-scarred body turning and tensing. He wore a diadem of bones around his head—the crown of a seasoned warrior. His sad eyes looked from the woman to the mark in the dust where the idol had stood.

'Where the Great Giver?'

The woman shivered. 'Don't know.'

A leathery squeak as the hunters' hands tightened around their spears. Some cried out in grief: this traitor to their tribe had desecrated the Watching Eye, their most sacred place.

'Where the monster?' the leader said, stepping to within striking distance of the woman. 'Where the dark child?'

'Don't know,' she whispered.

'You are wise-woman. Daughter of the daughter of the daughter of she who first saw the Great Giver. You are teacher and worker of the sacred gift. You are speaker and mover of Oldcraft.'

'Oldcraft is for good,' one of the tribe barked. 'Not evil, so said the Great Giver.'

'Our people were told, warned,' the leader nodded, 'not to let evil into our hearts. Not to let it turn the magic dark. Why you bring the monster here?'

'Not "monster"!' the wise-woman shrieked. 'My child!'

The leader pressed his fingers to her lips.

'All knew you missed your Pinch. When starving wolves found him alone in the woods, we grieved with you.'

He turned to one of his hunters, took the warrior's weapon.

The hunter bowed and stepped back, away from his leader and the killing ground.

'Cried with you, prayed with you, even begged the Great Giver to look after the boy's soul in the grey beyond, though He told us He had no knowledge of that place. That none of his kind did. We felt your pain, my sister, and saw how it made you bite and snap at us like a crazed dog. How it turned your thoughts to bleak winter. But this thing you brought to our camp—'

'Not thing! Please, brother, hear me: his face and form was made ugly by my poor magic. He told me that I had bad skill and could not shape him. But this "monster" *is* my little Pinch. My child. Your sister-son. He heard my crying in the grey place where all our ancestors go. Heard the prayers of his mother for him to return. My strong Oldcraft brought him back to us.'

'No, sister. What came to you was a thing of lies and death. Would your good child Pinch have returned here and made his mother's magic like poison? Would he have murdered so many of our little ones? No. It is the thing the Great

Giver warned us of. It is *demon*.'

'I do not believe—!'

'Your belief does not matter. Now, tell us where the demon is.'

The leader brought the tip of the spear to rest against the throbbing artery of his sister's throat. A rustle of feet as the hunters gathered around. Anticipating the kill, some of the younger tribesmen smiled, but the older ones, weary from a lifetime of blood, merely nodded in acceptance. Although she was sister to the leader, her crime was the gravest their people had ever known and execution the only punishment. Chosen children of Oldcraft, they had a duty to stop this evil before it spread throughout the known lands. If not, then how many more demons might come out of the darkness?

'Guide us!' The cry was taken up by the tribe. 'Guide us to the demon!'

'Not demon,' the wise-woman said, her voice as barren as winter. 'Son. He told me, promised me—*son*. Please, brother, he said he was my Pin—'

The leader struck home. His spear pierced flesh, grazed bone, split rock. Pinioned against the mountain, the wise woman kicked and wriggled, her hands loose around the bloody spear. The younger hunters roared their approval, a victory call that was soon silenced by their leader's bellow.

'SHE WAS MY SISTER!'

He turned back to the woman.

She was trying to speak.

'Pin . . . Pin . . . '

The wise-woman pointed a shaking finger. In her dying

moments, she had glimpsed the shape in the juniper bushes.

'Pin-ch. M-my Pin-ch . . . '

The demon had been summoned by this woman and his life force was tied to hers. Now Pinch felt the last flickers of that force die out. Fire erupted around his body. He was going home. In a final act of cruelty, the demon locked eyes with the witch who had given him his form and freedom, and slowly, slowly shook his head. A gesture that meant only one thing—

I lied.

The scene before him—the furious hunters, the grief-stricken leader, the betrayed and slow-dying witch—flickered and vanished. As the fire faded, Pinch felt himself being drawn through the dimensional rift and back to the demon prison. Leaving the solid world of the tribe behind, he had expected that his body would melt away to its old shadowy form, but here he was, on the cusp of the demon realm, still possessing the crude shape that the witch had conjured for him.

The creature now known as Pinch smiled. He would go straight to the Shadow Palace and beg an audience with the Demon Father himself. He would tell of his adventures: of the woman whose bitter cry had pierced the walls of the demon dimension and drawn him to her. He would tell of the tribe's magic, of its superstitions, of its 'Oldcraft', and then he would outline his plan.

These mortals had the power to release demonkind. If their hearts were dark, if they hated and envied, if they lusted for power and vengeance, then their minds would be open

to demonic influence. Let us prey upon their weak natures, Pinch would suggest. When they cry out in pain and fury, let us answer them and pretend that it is only through *us* that they can work their magic . . .

He arrived in the murk and silence of the demon realm and hurried to the palace gates. Without sun or moon or stars in the empty sky it was impossible to gauge time here, but it could not have been many minutes before Pinch was standing in his master's presence.

Once, long ago, the Demon Father had possessed a form, wondrous and terrible. Then the war had come, and the trap had been set, and demonkind had been relegated to things of shapeless shadow. Even the Demon Father had managed to maintain only the crudest of forms: a pair of heavy, blood-soaked eyes that hovered above his insubstantial throne.

Breathless, Pinch bowed before his master and began his story.

The Demon Father did not possess a mouth, but when Pinch reached the end of the tale, a deep, booming voice echoed around the chamber.

'Oldcraft . . . Is it possible that one of the Three could have gifted the mortals their magic? They called the mountain *Ayyuk*. Nightfall.' A brief silence, and then the terrible eyes focused on Pinch. 'Your plan is admirable, my child, but your ambition is too limited. Temporary freedom will do for now, but my eyes see far. The mortals you have described are a primitive breed, but gradually they will evolve until their knowledge and their magic reaches a pinnacle. There are clearly weak points in this world of theirs, portals into

our dimension, otherwise the woman's magic could not have reached here and drawn you to her. One day, when the time is ripe, the mortals will use their magic to open a great door into our prison. A door large enough for all of demonkind to pass through.'

'But that may take centuries!' Pinch cried.

'Thousands of years,' the Demon Father corrected, 'but we have been imprisoned here for millennia and we have learned patience. I promise you, my child, one day the Time of Demons will come. One day the Demontide will dawn!'