

## The Paper Witch

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I sat by the window of my high-rise flat. The rain hammered against it so hard, I barely heard the phone ringing. Nobody had my number. Not even cold callers bothered me anymore. It could only mean one thing.

“How are you, Trollop, my old girl?”

I cradled the phone in my neck and pinched my nose. “I’m hardly old, Jeremy. I’m the same age as you.”

“Don’t deny the trollop bit, though, do you?”

I’d met Jeremy on fresher’s week at Edinburgh University. I was studying environmental sciences and he was on some spurious course, like Retail Psychology or Literature, Life and Thought. It didn’t matter what it was. Not to him. Jeremy’s parents owned a fifth of Scotland and all they wanted for their son was an education, any education. Jeremy needed letters after his name and his parents needed to know he wasn’t as stupid as they suspected him to be.

“How’s that boyfriend of yours?” he asked.

In the background of the call, I heard waves lapping on a shore. I could almost smell the coconut sunscreen. Jeremy was on holiday again.

“Frederico was my fiancé and he dumped me.”

“Poor old Trollop,” he said. “Frederico sounded like a made-up name anyway. Listen, we’re organising a hunt at the parent’s estate. Low key. Just a few of us good ol’ boys and their rifles. Are you in?”

I pinched my nose harder. “It’s not a good time. Work stuff.”

“You always say that. Why do you even have a job?”

Jeremy didn’t understand the idea of self-reliance or wages or debt, but I liked him, anyway. He was the only one of my university friends who had stayed in contact. The rest had asked me to stop calling when they grew tired of my lies. Through Jeremy, I could live a life free of insecurity and high-rise flats blighted with damp. It was a window into another life.

“Come on, Trollop,” he said. “Just this once. Join the hunt and get your first blood.”

Jeremy had invited me to his annual first day shoot many times, but I had always declined. Sometimes, it really was a work thing. The monotony of my job had a way of sucking the marrow from my bones, leaving me exhausted. Sometimes, I simply wanted to be alone, staring from my window at the building opposite where Fredrico and his fiancé made a real life together. While Fredrico was not a made-up name, my relationship with him was. He had spotted me through the window, his paling face framed through the pentagram I’d etched into the glass. His eyes had widened at the chicken blood on my breasts, but I hadn’t shrunk

away as a scolded mouse should. I had cast a love spell instead. It didn't work, of course.

They never did. Two weeks, later, Frederico and his fiancé moved out. I had been listless for months, but now Jeremy's phonecall offered me an escape. At that moment, the idea of blood appealed to me and I made plans to travel.

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The train journey from London to Glasgow was uneventful and I'd buried my nose in a book. At Glasgow station, I lingered by the departure board, searching for my connection. I was approached by a woman with dyed silver hair, grasping a map in her hand.

"Excuse me, do you know how to get to Donalcraig?" she asked.

Her tight clothing was moulded to her lithe body while mine hung loosely over bumps and lumps. Her straight teeth gleamed and her eyes had yet to dim through disappointment.

"You look like the type who might help," she said by way of a prompt.

"Take the westward line," I said, without looking at her. "You'll need to get a taxi or car from Port Stanrag, but you'll find Donalcraig from there."

"Are you sure?"

For as long as I remember, I had always enjoyed directing strangers to their destinations. I liked the relief on their faces when they discovered they were not as lost as they thought they were. But when I didn't have an answer for them, I'd lie.

"Absolutely sure," I said.

I expected her to leave, maybe with a cheery smile, but the woman lingered, her face darkening. The train station grew muted, its sounds dampened by a blanketing smog.

“Paper witch,” the woman said, the words slivering from her mouth.

A trickle of sweat ran down my spine. “What?”

“You’re false, paper witch.”

I backed away, putting distance between us. I fumbled into something behind me.

When I turned to face it, the woman was there. She was everywhere. There was no escaping.

“I’m sorry,” I said.

“Your wish will be granted,” the woman said, her lips splitting into a sneer. “At your hands, they’ll all die.”

“I didn’t ask for - ”

The train station returned to life. Sounds of busy travellers and grinding engines made my ears pop and I closed my eyes against the sudden onslaught of volume. When I opened them, the woman was there, as she had first appeared, looking at me with relief.

“I was so lost. Thanks for your help,” she said before departing for the westward line.

“That’s the wrong way.” But my words were swallowed under cacophony of noise.

Unable to undo my lie, I left in the opposite direction for the train to Donalraig.

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Jeremy was waiting for me on the other side of my journey, leaning against his battered Landrover. I had forgotten how handsome he was.

“Trollop,” he shouted in greeting.

Faces on the street looked in my direction, not bothering to hide their malicious smirks.

“I wish you’d stop calling me that,” I said.

He gathered me in a hug. “Nonsense, Trollop. If I did that, I’d have to learn your real name. Now, hop in the back of the jalopy and we’ll be gone.”

I ignored the smell of alcohol on his breath and did as I was told.

As I clambered inside, two men blinked in surprise at my ungainly entry.

“This is Blobbo and Knobnose,” Jeremy called from the front seat. “And guys, this is Trollop.”

Knobnose smiled in my direction. He was a well-built man in a loose-necked shirt and khaki shorts. He offered me his hand.

“The name’s Ian,” he said.

Jeremy gunned the engine, squealing into untold traffic. “But everyone calls him Knobnose.”

“Only he calls me that,” Knobnose said.

Jeremy didn’t learn real names. He invented them. People thought I was called Trollop because I was a scarlet woman of some kind. The truth was I once skipped out of a university party to read a book I’d purchased earlier in the day. The author? Joanna Trollope.

Who knew where Knobnose got his name from?

Blobbo didn't offer an explanation behind his moniker. (CUT: It was obvious from the way his stomach strained against his cloth shirt. The material was so tight, I saw imprints of hairs around his navel where they were pressed like dried flowers.)

The journey continued in an awkward silence, loose rifles rolling around our feet. I closed my eyes and tried to put my encounter at the train station behind me, but the face of the silver-haired woman crept behind my eyelids. I'd read witches like me had visions, but they were not to be taken literally. My psychiatrist had told me the same thing. He had also told me the occult wasn't real. It was merely my way of avoiding the consequences of my many falsehoods.

But what did he know?

We soon passed the granite stone buildings of Donalraig. It was a picturesque town giving way to the kind of countryside created by constant Scottish rain. Real witches had lived here. Women misjudged because their knowledge of herbs and healing exceeded that of the men who surrounded them. They were like me, destined for greatness, but how much of this green grass had been scorched by the flailing body of a witch put to the torch, I wondered?

Jeremy hummed as he slalomed along single-track lanes toward his family estate and the red stag deer waiting to be shot.

The Landrover jerked to a stop and we fell from the rear doors, gathering our rifles as we found our feet. Hip flasks were passed around and I took a gulp of something smoky.

According to the Wikipedia entry – an entry I had read several times over – the Donelraig estate was over eight hundred square miles. It stretched out before me in a canvas

of scratchy purple heather. Battered trees clung desperately to stony outcrops as clouds raced across a steel dome sky. At the end of the entry, in a paragraph requiring citation, came the legend of the white stag. Supposedly, the Donalraig estate was home to an albino stag shorn of its rustic colour by a lightening strike on All Hallow's Eve. Legend had it that the mystical beast would grant the wishes of any hunter brave enough to cleave its heart in two.

“You ever fired a rifle before?” Blobbo asked me, startling me from my reverie.

“Just point and shoot, right?”

Blobbo shook his head before his attention was drawn to a lone figure emerging from the landscape. It was small, growing bigger, moving with purpose and carrying a cardboard sign above its head.

*Hunt the Rich, Not the Deer.*

“Oh god,” Jeremy said. “It's another fucking vegan.”

As the figure approached, my heart lurched in recognition. It was the woman from Glasgow train station.

“This is private property,” Jeremy said.

How had she found the estate when I had sent her in the wrong direction?

“*Hunt the Rich, Not the Deer,*” she began chanting.

Odd that she was on her own, I thought. One lone woman confronting a group of rifle toting idiots? But I knew her to be something else, something dangerous and mystical. Whether the vision at the train station was real or not, it had happened and there was power behind her youthful face.

I didn't want any part of this confrontation.

"You," the woman said, her eyes crinkling in recognition at my stunned face. "We spoke at the train station."

I shook my head, my gaze transfixed upon the ground, fearful she would curse me again.

"I asked you for directions. You lied to me."

"You must be mistaken," I said. "I didn't lie. You're here. You found Donelcraig."

"Do you know this hippy?" Jeremy asked.

When I looked up from my boots, I expected to see her dark form and clouds gathering around her shoulders. Instead, the woman stood with her hip cocked, watching me, fingers caressing her slender neck.

Jeremy shoved her in the chest. "Get the hell off my land."

"This isn't your land," the woman said. "It belongs to Mother Earth and all the creatures that dwell here."

Knobnose and Blobbo snickered, as if she had said something silly, though I didn't know what.

The woman stood tall against their laughter. Her silver hair glinted in the muted sunlight and she eyed me directly. "Did you send me on a wild goose chase or not?"

The woman pushed passed Jeremy and pressed her face close to mine.

I smelled soil on her breath.



“Admit it and you’ll be spared,” she said.

My lips clamped shut, as if they were physically incapable of telling the truth. The admission would strip away my falsehoods; the preoccupation with dark magic, my engagement to Fredrico. It would all disappear, leaving me with nothing but an empty flat and a boring job.

“Who are you?” I asked quietly.

The woman snorted. “You’ll know me soon, paper witch.”

Jeremy raised his rifle and shot into the air, startling everyone except the woman.

“Are you going to shoot me if I don’t leave?” she asked him.

Jeremy wasn’t a violent man so I was surprised when he slid another cartridge into his rifle and pointed it at the woman’s body. Knobnose and Blobbo followed suit, though their fingers were trembling and Blobbo’s cartridge slipped to the ground.

“Men and their toys,” the woman said, spinning on her heels. She trudged through the heather toward the horizon.

Jeremy and his clan jeered at her diminishing form.

“Watch out for the white stag,” she called over her shoulder.

“Crazy bitch,” Blobbo said.

“We get them from time to time,” Jeremy said, lowering his rifle and swigging from a hip flask. As he gulped at the fiery liquid, the colour returned to his cheeks. “Just got to teach them who’s boss, that’s all.”

He gave me a grin. “Glad you’re not like that, Trollop. Now come on. Daylight’s wasting. It’s time for you to shoot your first stag.”

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I was too used to sitting behind a desk. I’d overheard colleagues in the office lamenting their purchase of gym memberships and failing to use them. I hadn’t even got that far. (CUT: Instead, I’d spent months asking the universe for health and happiness while steadily getting fatter so the terrain’s rise and fall was proving arduous.) A thin sheen of sweat covered me from head to toe while my heart beat out an unnatural rhythm.

(CUT: Even Blobbo was out-pacing me.)

“How are you doing back there?” Jeremy asked from the front of the pack.

“Fine,” I said between gasps. “I do spin class four times a week.”

Blobbo snorted. (CUT: “Yeah, and I’m on a diet.”)

“I do go to spin class,” I said.

The words landed in a disbelieving silence and I considered how to convince them.

Suddenly, the group halted. Jeremy, Blobbo and Knobnose dropped to the ground and after a moment’s hesitation, I did the same.

“What?” I asked.

Jeremy placed a finger on his lips and then used it to point into the distance. A red stag grazed in the undergrowth, its huge antlers like antennas above the greenery. It was a mass of meat and power, and yet unaware of the eyes crawling over its hide.

Jeremy gave me a wink.

“Come and get your first kill,” he whispered.

I wriggled forward, already trying to find an excuse not to shoot. My lip wobbled and I felt like crying. I’d thought that if I could take a life, it might somehow give my own more meaning, but I couldn’t do it. I’d been lying to myself.

Jeremy dragged the rifle from my shoulder and loaded it, thrusting it back into my hands. “Hurry up, Trollop.”

Would Jeremy like me more if I shot the stag? Of course he would, if he thought of me at all, but what about me? I’d pretended to be a witch because I had no identity of my own. It had started at university where everyone was suddenly brighter, prettier and more together than I was. My desire to be special had led to me drowning in the myth, but it wasn’t real. Not like this.

Jeremy’s expectant eyes rested on me and I found myself aiming the rifle.

“Shoot the bloody thing,” Blobbo said with a hungry mouth.

Lying on my front, my heart beat rapidly against the ground, sounding like the stag had already bolted and its hooves were drumming past my ear. I didn’t want to do it. *I didn’t want to do it.*

“Get your first kill,” Jeremy whispered.

And I did as I was told. I closed my eyes and pulled the trigger. The rifle barked, slamming into my shoulder. I rolled onto my back, the wet earth soaking into my cheap coat. Still in darkness, my eyes still pressed shut, I sank through the soil until the sky was the

ground and blood rushed to my head. I somersaulted through a tunnel where animal mouths and cruel faces saw me fall.

“I’m sorry,” I said, sure that I meant it, but the demons didn’t care and I continued my descent. Bones rained down on me, skeletons held captive in the soil were now loosened and clawing at my clothes. The material slipped from my body and I was naked in an endless abyss.

Years passed, I think, or seconds, and the sky became the ground again. It rushed at me and I landed like a raindrop on wet heather. I lay in the embrace of the earth and tried to catch my breath, but it came in ragged gulps. Pain radiated from my leg. My body was too heavy and my head too large. I no longer fit the space I occupied.

Looking for an escape, I searched the landscape, but I must have been concussed. I saw to the west and the east at the same time. My split vision was painted in blue and green. No orange of the sun. No reds.

I was still on the estate, but not where I had lain with my rifle pressed against my cheek. I was surrounded by a crooked wood. There was a small stream, its babbling murmur an assault on my ears. I staggered forward, pain digging into my leg, as if panic had teeth and was biting into my flesh.

I leaned over the water to inspect whatever injury had me so confused and saw a face of a stag staring back at me, a crown of antlers perched on its head.

No.

I coughed in surprise, and retched. The stag did the same. Head swimming, I looked over an alien body with my new eyesight. Muscled shoulders and a meaty back. A tail

flicking flies from my red, coarse fur and a bullet hole in my hind leg, leaking blood and burning down my nerve endings.

“Don’t be afraid,” a voice said.

On instinct, I bolted, a preternatural energy commanding my body to run, but this wasn’t my body and I couldn’t control it. Powerful legs kicked up clods of soil and a burst of uncontrollable speed saw me career into a tree. The old wood splintered and my new antlers became trapped in twisted branches. I tried to pull free, but I was wedged fast.

“Don’t be afraid,” the voice said again.

My heart raced, my muscles twitched under my skin, but the voice cast a spell over me. It soothed me, stopping the panic climbing up my throat.

“Help me,” I said, but no words emerged. It was the whinnying sound of a trapped animal.

“They’ll be here soon,” the voice said and a woman came into view. Not just any woman, but the silver-haired woman who knew me to be a liar.

Laughter drifted on the breeze. It was familiar and tinged with a cruelty I had failed to recognise earlier. Through the trees, I saw Jeremy and his hunting party on the crest of a hill. They heckled a figure on the ground. It clambered to its feet and I saw it was me, seconds after the rifle had bucked into my shoulder. I’d shot a stag, but it hadn’t been a kill. As the memory returned, the bullet in my hind leg bit deeper.

“No, no.” The words came as frightened braying. I didn’t understand. I couldn’t. I was with Jeremy, brushing grass from my clothing, but I was here, trapped in a stag’s body. I

pulled at the tree, frantic, feeling the wrench between my antlers and the skull they were attached to.

“They only wounded you,” the woman said, laying calming hands on my bunched shoulders. “The hunter never leaves a wounded animal to suffer. Even your friends understand that.”

“I pulled the trigger. I shot the stag. I shot me.”

The woman’s gaze fell on the tree and its wood grew rotten, dusting the floor with splinters. “As a human, you formed your identity from the lies you told yourself.”

The tree’s branches crumbled, freeing my antlers. I shook my head, trying to steady my ungainly body.

“What happened?” I asked.

“You were never a witch,” the woman said, “but you were always a part of Mother Earth.”

I blinked, tasting the impossible truth at last. “I was a stag?”

“And your true self will be more terrible than you could ever imagine.”

The voices from the hill grew louder. Jeremy led the way, with me following in his shadow. They were making their way to the woods, loading their rifles as they went.

“They’re coming to kill me.” My panicked braying must have alerted the hunters. Jeremy moved faster. “I don’t know what to do. Help me.”

The woman smiled. Her once perfect teeth were stained brown and insects clambered through her silver hair. “You were lost, but you have the directions you need.”

At her words, that frightened energy told hold of my body again and I galloped, my powerful legs propelling me from the trees and along a limestone valley. They spotted my movement and rocks exploded as bullets narrowly missed their target. I heard my human self hollering with glee, swallowed by a bloodlust I had not thought myself capable of.

I scrambled up a slope, unaware of how exposed I was. There was a shot and my antlers shattered, showering me in cartilage. There was no pain, but my body quivered in fear.

I reached the slope's summit where I cast a silhouette against a dying sun. Gun shots rained around me and I moved swiftly, another burst of speed taking me into the shadow of a mountain. The temperature dropped and my breath came as billowing steam. I moved fast, driven by alarm, but as I flew passed saplings bending to my slipstream, an expected joy pierced my chest. Freedom came from the increasing distance between myself and the hunters. My new body was an engine I was only just beginning to understand.

Turning at the base of the mountain, I headed for a meadow, thinking to hide at the other side, but my hooves suddenly slowed. I found myself in a bog, hidden by bracken. I struggled, lifting my legs high to maintain momentum, but it was no use. It sapped my energy, my new weight pulling me down into a mud populated by flies.

“We’ve got it now,” Jeremy cried from a distance.

Desperation gripped my heart, but the more I moved, the more I sank.

“It’s my shot,” my human self shouted. “Get back.”

How could I be so callous? So inhumane? But then I remembered what had brought me to this place. So overwhelmed was I at my failed existence that I had claimed to be a

witch, searching for meaning through dubious witchcraft lessons found on You Tube. When that had failed, I'd turned to violence for an answer.

But now...now I had discovered something real, a home without mouldy walls and rent I struggled to pay. I could be myself with coarse red fur and broken antlers and the thought spurred me on. I floundered in the bog, but managed to turn towards my human self, raising her rifle in my direction. She paused as she caught my eye, but I knew it was not from empathy. She was afraid; afraid to take a life no matter how hard she craved it.

I used the distraction to free my hooves from the sucking mud, moving to sturdier ground.

"It's getting away," Blobbo screamed. "Shoot it, you dumb bitch."

"Shut up," my human self hissed.

Blobbo plugged his rifle into his shoulder. "Pull the trigger, Trollop, or I will."

"Stop calling me that."

The shot rang out. I expected more pain or the tell-tale splash of a bullet, but there was nothing. As I pulled my heavy body to the shoreline, Blobbo toppled to the ground, writhing like a worm pulled from the mud, blood pumping through fingers he pressed to his (CUT: round) stomach.

"You shot me," he said.

"I didn't mean to." My human self stared at the rifle in her trembling hands as if she had not noticed she had been carrying one.



This was my chance to escape. The hunters stared open-mouthed at Blobbo's cries. The shot to my stag's leg didn't hurt the way his wound did. I was stronger than him, stronger than all of them. I trotted forward a few steps, but like my human self had paused before shooting me, I paused too.

Because behind the hunters stood the white stag. They were distracted by Blobbo's theatrics and did not see its looming form. It pawed the ground, lowering its head, its antlers flashing like steel as it positioned itself to strike. The white stag, appearing as a ghost, was preparing to mow down the hunters.

I launched into another run, all thoughts of escaping gone and headed to the crest where my friends unwittingly awaited their deaths. Surprised by my approach, the white stag retreated. My pounding hooves startled Jeremy and he fumbled his rifle. I had no way of alerting him to the danger they were facing so I did all that an animal could do – trust that my instincts would guide me.

In seconds, I was upon them. I raised myself onto my hind legs, my forelegs beating the air. Jeremy was frozen, unable to react to my majestic new form and I drove a front hoof into his skull. He toppled, blood running between his eyes, his rifle idle by a twitching hand.

A bullet flew through the air, missing my already broken antlers by inches. Knobnose aimed again and I rushed him, an instinctual energy guiding my body. Though my antlers were in splinters, they were enough to spear him through the chest. I drove forward, lifting his feet from the ground before I shook him free. Blobbo gave a curdled scream, the last sound he would ever make. (CUT: Whether it was his heart giving out or his blood loss,) his movements ceased and I watched the life leave his (CUT: bloated) body.

“You should be running from us.”

I turned at the sound of my human voice. It was both familiar and strange to me, but stranger still was the sight of my own eyes, wide with terror, staring back at me. In that instant, I saw her for what she really was.

“What you do next is your decision,” said the white stag coming closer. As it did so, I saw it wasn’t white, but silver. Transforming as I had done, the woman at the train station and the witch in the woods was now the white stag.

She continued. “But know your soul is split between two bodies. You can not remain here while she lives.”

I was faced with a decision, the same decision I had faced countless times throughout my existence. I could leave, retreat into a half-life, feeding myself with fantasies of how my life ought to be. Or I could act. I could make a change and imprint my place onto this world with a determined kick of my heels.

When I’d seen the white stag approach the hunters, I had believed it meant them harm, but it was not its role to rid the world of these men. It was mine. I had been led by others my whole life. On instinct, I had known my human self needed to be put to the stake so that my new self could survive. Killing Jeremy and the others had been my first kill, but it was Trollop who needed to pay the price.

“I don’t deserve this,” she said from the ground.

I raised my giant form up high, ready to drive her bones deep into Mother Earth. I looked into her eyes and for a brief moment, our souls connected. The paper witch knew she had uttered her last lie.