

1

Iris



Midnight

Open invitation sent (via seance):

1st August 2021 – to cell on High Street, 4th December 1591

Elements: Null + Air

I was out in the Null. In perpetuity, it seemed, I was bodiless and formless until things began to appear. A row of oil-lit street-lamps. A cobbled road sloping down. The moon a thin smile. City trees bending their boughs so far back! The winds, wild! Tall tenement buildings line the road to Castlehill.

A witch will die here in the morning.

I descend a full three levels below the city of Edinburgh into a low-arched stone corridor. A guard is nestled in a nook. He peers into the gloom. I need him to go, so I can

come to you. Coalesce right next to his ear – whisper.

– Back out you go, into the Null, go on, your body is so heavy isn't it?

– Who is that?

I don't know how I know how to do this, but I do. I always have. I gently help his consciousness to separate from his body.

– It's only dreaming . . .

I say it into his ear, low and over and over, until his eyes close and his head lolls. To be able to do something like this you must learn not to have those around you drink your energy. I have learnt the hard way. As a child I used to give away light like it was nothing. Those without it would fill themselves up with all that good energy like I was an eternal font. The purest light attracts the most impenetrable darkness. Great giant moths-of-death come flying for it at night. All across the world. They will smother any source until all they have left is an empty husk. I will pay a price for this. That is how it goes.

With shaking hands that don't feel quite solid at all, I take off his boots, retch. (Can a spirit-dweller vomit? Yes, yes, yes, when a stench is this bad they can.) He has horned yellow toenails, thick and fungal. Throw his boots away down a tiny wee well. If he wakes he won't get anywhere quickly. You need time to prepare, Geillis Duncan. They will execute you in the morning.

Strike a match!
We have so little time.
I must hurry now.

2

Iris



12.37 a.m.

Open invitation pursued (via astral travel):

1st August 2021 – to cell on High Street, 4th December 1591

Elements: Null + Air

Your cell is several floors below the city. It is far below footfall, or taverns, or flats; below beds, or kitchens, or hugs, or hope, or church, or prayer, or freedom, or laughter, or air; below shuttered windows, or dogs asleep in front of fires. It is so far below the seasons they might as well not exist. There is only one kind of weather in here – freezing cold and cloaked in darkness. The air is stagnant. I must wait a minute. Make sure the guard does not wake. The last thing I could take is him coming to you. You are down here somewhere, Geillis Duncan. I'm willing to go

as far as I have to – so you are not alone on this, the last night of your life. I put a call out – to the ether – for you.

I have never channelled directly like this before, was far too afraid to do so.

Travelled time all my life.

Have had spirits come to me, go through me, had them drag me out of my body and throw me across rooms or ceilings all night long. I have seen one half-naked, just out the bath, holding a big knife. I heard them and hosted them before I knew how to form words, or smile. For you, though, I have been out in the Null. I was waiting. Unsure what this will mean for my health or my life. Will I get to go back? Five hundred years between us, Geillis Duncan – it's such a little leap really.

A conversation between two witches across time.

I am nervous.

I miss you.

Don't ask me why I feel like this because I don't know.

Some people might think it is not possible to so desperately miss someone you do not yet know, or a home you have never had, but I do. I have done so my whole life. I miss people I have never met. Mourn them. Even more than those who have already, one by one, been taken from me.

The hangman will be here by dawn.

I reach for the guard's keys.

He has put a padlock through them, and they are locked

into a metal hoop high up on the wall. There are no risks taken with witches. If only! The hangman might have found your cell door ajar. Dust spiralling through a wan sliver of light. On the floor, a single feather. His boots would pivot in the dirt. Pound back up the corridor. Onto the Close, up onto the High Street where people would already be walking by with their scrubbed morning faces, clean and ready – to watch Geillis Duncan die.

– She took flight!

– What?

– The prisoner, the witch, she is gone!

– Where?

– The Devil took her, or a familiar. The last guard is in a spellbound stupor, the man is barely there!

– Idiot . . .

I'd love to hear the roar. Who would dare stop a good hanging? All the women I know would. Any one of us! We'd each come back and do this gladly. The murder of Geillis Duncan is to be performed for the State and the King and the bailiff who accused her; it is for the God-fearing, it is for ordinary people who like a good hanging. For those who need to hate. To elevate themselves on hatred. If you were not hanged in the morning, Geillis, how many people would go home feeling cheated? Disappointed not to see you die in front of them? They want to be able to say they were there when Geillis Duncan died. To dine out on the story for years. There was

a witch we saw killed! I turn down the last tiny winding corridor – you have to be at the end somewhere along here. Your murder is a message for the masses. King James’s enemies will shudder. Will his wife? Anne: fourteen and wed to a man who likes men and is paranoid he’ll be caught out for it. Over three hundred tailors worked on Anne’s wedding dress. It is all spectacle. Weddings, births, hangings. There is a bloodlust in humans. Let’s watch a girl hang to death! The King is showing all his might! Who would fight a man who has taken down the Devil himself? King James didn’t start this particular witch-hunt, but he will certainly finish it. How does he fight the Devil?

Well, now you ask!

Via teenage girls!

Doesn’t everyone?

We go after the Devil via womb-bearers – they are weak for him!

Widows!

Did she inherit?

A woman?

On her own?

Is she tall?

Is she ugly?

Does she twitch?

Is she too smart?

Did she look a man right in the eye?

Did she heal a pig?

Did she birth a child who died?

Did she speak – harshly?

No!

They won't tolerate that.

A woman's voice is a hex. She must learn to exalt men always. If she doesn't do that, then she is a threat. A demon whore, a witch – so says everyone and the law. So say the King and his guards. So say the witch-pricker and his sadistic friends. So say the husbands, the haters, the wives, the daughters, the God-fearing – demons are always trying to kill them, so they know. So says the hangman who sleeps with Bible in hand.

There is your cell, Geillis Duncan! Finally. It has taken so long to get here that I must not cry. I throw my arms up. A billow of dust falls – I have finally coalesced, into a slightly more solid form. Your cell is tiny and dark. You are still a child, really.

– Who's that there?

– Can you see me, Geillis?

– Sssh. If he hears you, it'll be me that gets it. I can't see you properly – it's too dim. What are you? Are you a demon?

– My name is Iris.

– Are you mad? Iris, do you know what they'll do if they find you here? How did you get in?

– I travelled through time.

– Liar.

– I did, to get to you.

– Why?

– So you wouldn't be on your own on this of all nights.

You shuffle forward a touch, less scared than a minute ago.

– Are you my familiar?

– No.

Almost up at the cell bars, you look right at me.

– Are you sure?

Rats scrape in the corner.

You hold my gaze.

Head turned away, eyes towards me – the outline of your nose and forehead and chin is marked in moonlight; you look like a silver face on a ten-pence coin.

– No, I don't think that's possible, Geillis. I mean, I didn't think . . .

– Of that?

– No.

– I see. How will you get back exactly, Iris from the ether?

– I don't know.

You smile then, a small giggle. You have an indent in your chin, soft hairs at your temple; your skin is so thin it seems precarious that it holds your blood and bones and organs and heart and soul.

– You are thinking of my insides, my dear strange visitor?

– No.

– Liar.

– So!

– You know any minute now all my innards may spill onto the floor – at your feet. You’ll sit in my sticky blood, my heart will still beat next to my liver and kidneys, and my eyes will rotate in a crimson pool, staring at you, my mouth too – open and laughing!

– Geillis . . .

– What? You thought I’d play nice? Tell me what tonight’s guard looks like? I need to know if he is the one who visits my cell before morning. I don’t think I can take it if it is him, not even one last time.

Your fist is balled tight.

Jaw set like marble.

Eyes hooded in darkness, and you are full of a fear so pure it smells like rotting pears.

– The guard won’t get back up again tonight, I promise.

– You did that for me?

– I tried, Geillis. You know what you said about a familiar? I was the one – I called out to you, but did you . . . ?

– I don’t know, Iris, did I?

Our thoughts march like mechanical clocks.

– The hangman will be here early.

– I know.

You open your hands like a prayer book. Ankles so thin. Skirt bunched up and dirty. Your right leg sticks out from

your skirt at an angle like they broke it and didn't let it set right afterwards. You are all bone. More than pallid! You are a girl made of moon. Dark eyes that might have been some other colour once, but they took the pigment out of them and you are already – gone.