

KARIS

The hallways of the Tallis Scriptorium are always so black at night. Statues and busts loom out of the dark and ribbed columns stretch down from the roof like pale fingers. I've taken my sandals off, twined their laces together, and hung them off my shoulder where they can't make any noise, and the cold of the floor leeches through the soles of my feet. I pull my himation tighter around me, the rustling of the cloak a bare whisper. If this were day, I would hear the quiet scratch of reed pens against parchment in the study rooms to the east, the droning buzz of a master's lecture from the hall. But in the night, it's so stifflingly quiet. Like a tomb.

Even after seven years I'm still not used to it. To the quiet. The dark. Back on Heretis, the island I grew up on, there was always noise, always light, even in the run-down streets my brother and I haunted, where not many could afford oil for their lamps. Here on Tallis, the black is deep and somber, every door locked and every shutter latched firmly shut, as if the masters fear thieves who might lurk out there in the wilderness and the night.

If only they knew the thieves were already inside.

I slink down the shadowy hall, my eyes straining to navigate the black, even though it isn't really the dark that's a risk. Being out of bed this late would earn me a lashing, but at least that's all I'd get. The true risk is in anyone discovering what I stole: the ledger currently clasped to my chest, its leather cover warm beneath my fingers. I can't even say what the punishment for this would be, because as far as I know no one's ever been impudent enough to try it.

At least not before me, and I prefer the term *reckless*.

I reach the west hall. Giving a quick glance up and down the silent corridor, I lift the latch on the closest window, wincing as it squeaks. I push the shutters open and night air brushes my skin.

The chilled marble of the windowsill stings against my legs as I swing over and drop into a crouch in the deep shadows by the edge of the building. From far off I can make out the sound of the waves crashing against the cliffs, the sharp tang of seawater hanging in the air. I take a deep breath, trying to trap the taste of it in my lungs.

I look across the dark courtyard to one of the smallest buildings. Despite its size, it's all marble with a full colonnade around its edges and elaborate moldings of masters and ledgers and automatons in the frieze running along the edge of its roof, darkened now with shadows.

The Hall of Records.

The second watch rings across the complex. I allow myself a smile. Perfect. There shouldn't be a patrol anywhere near here right now. I take off across the courtyard, bare feet pounding the packed dirt, not slowing until I slip past the colonnade. Bars of moonlight glow against the floor, stretching from the pillars that surround the open atrium I stand in. The back of the space is lost in the gloom, but it's impossible to miss the glimmer of gold, too vivid and bright to be anything but Scriptwork.

I pad silently over, avoiding the strips of moonlight and sticking to the shadows. As if the night sky will tell on me. Details swim from the dark: olivewood doors stretching high above my head, framed with brass and cut with flourishes and curls; the seal of bronze plastered to their center; and the rune carved deep into the metal, a tangle of thick golden strokes, bent around each other as if in a knot. A *lock* rune. The most complicated rune on this island.

I run my fingers over the ridges of the lines, warm and tingling beneath my skin despite the night air. The truth is, I'm not even supposed to know Scriptwork, at least no more than what's needed to climb automatons and make rubbings of the runes. The actual work of study is done by the masters and the aristoi scholars who come to study on Tallis. We orphans are only here for grunt labor. The Scriptmasters barely believe we can think for ourselves, never mind do something like this.

Lock runes are tricky. You have to understand which strokes engraved into the seal are part of the base rune and which have been added by that particular Scriptmaster. Then you have to replicate it perfectly in a ledger, all in the right order. Runes have rules, some of which haven't even been discovered yet, and we were certainly never allowed to study them.

But just because a crotchety old master wasn't going to teach me didn't mean I wasn't going to learn.

The light's just enough to let me see the ledger as I flip it open to the last page, the golden glow spilling over the rough stretch of parchment. I pull out the stub of charcoal from my belt pocket. Once I draw a line, there's no changing my mind. I'll have to sneak the ledger back eventually, and lines will only mean evidence, since trying to tear a page out will just be more obvious. If this doesn't work, I'll have taken all this risk for nothing.

Only then I think of Matthias. It's been seven years since they shipped my older brother away, all because he tried to defend me against them. Because they decided he would be too troublesome to keep. Behind these doors is the only record on the whole of this island that can tell me where he was sent.

And I am getting through tonight.

I dash off the first of the lines on the page. It comes off black and bold and perfect.

That's when I hear voices. Low. Serious.

A patrol.

There shouldn't be a patrol here, not at this time of night. Which means I'm either not as observant as I think or I'm real unlucky.

As soon as they enter the courtyard, I won't be able to get back to the window, not without them noticing. A hint of panic thrums beneath my skin, telling me to leave now, while I still can. But then I look down at the parchment, the rune already started. They can't catch me if I'm already inside the Hall.

As soon as I have the idea, I know it's a terrible one. I suppose that fits me perfectly.

I bend over the ledger and keep going. The lines unfurl across the parchment as the rune takes shape, each line in the proper order and form. Excitement curls around my heart, even as the voices come closer. I'm doing it.

The rune is finished. I look up at the seal on the door, waiting for the golden line to cut it in half, to let me through.

Nothing happens.

The seconds pound through my head. No. I look down at the page, at this rune that looks exactly like the one on the door. I'm sure I did it right. Why isn't it working?

One of the soldiers speaks again, their voice close. Too close.

I'm out of time.

I bite down my curse and dash away from the glow of the rune, toward the courtyard. Maybe I can still get across. I've just reached the colonnade when the soldiers step into view through the main gates. There are two of them, a man and a woman, their red chitons dark enough it's hard to make them out. Short gladius swords are strapped to their hips. They're coming closer.

There's one other way to my quarters, through a door I can possibly sneak to by circling the back of the buildings. A door that always stays unlocked because it's used by the patrols themselves to get inside.

I jam the ledger into a fold in my himation and run, sticking close to the wall that surrounds the Scriptorium complex. I can see the door I need ahead, nestled at the back of the acolytes' quarters.

I'm reaching out when it swings open toward me. I stumble back, off balance, and a hand from behind me clamps around my upper arm.

I jam my elbow back at whoever has me, but they're quick. An arm scoops me around the waist and jerks me behind the closest pillar, right as another two soldiers step out the door. I snap my head up at whoever has me, and catch a glimpse of a trainee's red sash. Of tousled dark hair and deep green eyes, currently narrowed to order me to shut up.

Dane.

I go still, both of us hidden in the narrow space between the pillar and the building. It throws me back, to years ago, when I wasn't the only one sneaking out at nights. When this picture of him and me was as natural as breathing.

The footsteps fade away.

I let out a breath. That was close. I know I shouldn't, but I look back the way I came. Maybe now that Dane's here, I could try again. Maybe he'd come with me.

But he doesn't even give me the chance to ask. Before I can open my mouth, he grabs my hand and pulls me through the door. Our footsteps hush over the floor, two sets this time, and even though I can practically feel the exasperation wicking off of him, see the tension in his neck, I feel strangely relieved. At least he's here.

He doesn't stop until we reach the small linen storeroom near my quarters, piled high with coarse chitons. There's a thin crack in the shutters, letting in just enough moonlight that I can see him. His hand is pressed over his eyes, obscuring most of his face, as if that's enough to hold back whatever he's thinking. Under different circumstances, that would have made me laugh.

"Karis." His voice is that dangerous sort of calm that, as far as I know, is only reserved for me and only when I've done something incredibly reckless. "What in all of every- thing were you thinking?"

I fold my arms over my chest. "You don't even know what I was doing."

He drops his hand and glowers at me. It's an expression I haven't seen in a while. Not because I haven't been doing reckless things. But because he hasn't been around to notice. "I got back after the rest of the patrol and I saw you near the Hall of Records. I know what you were doing."

I wince. I hadn't even considered that the patrol might have been spread out. It was careless.

"What were you even hoping to achieve without a ledger?" He's facing the moonlight. I'm not. I doubt he can make out my expression, but my silence must speak volumes.

He groans. "You didn't."

I reach into my himation, the cloth looped about my shoulders and waist, and pull out the ledger. "I'm going to return it."

Dane shoves his hands through his hair, growling at the ceiling. "Of all the ill-thought, hardheaded, impulsive..."

Dane's my best friend. My only friend really. But that doesn't mean I'm going to stand around while he verbally berates me to the roof. "You couldn't have expected me not to try."

"Try to do what? What exactly were your plans for this?"

He catches my wrist and holds it up, forcing me to look at the bronze bracelet suckered there like a malignant growth. A copy of the one he wears. That every orphan brought to this island wears.

And he's right. I hate it, but he is. Even if I'd figured out the rune and written it perfectly, even if I'd gotten in and found exactly where Matthias had been sent, I would still be trapped here. Because of this hunk of metal around my wrist, this perfect circle with no clasp. As long as it's attached to me, going anywhere near the beach will burn my bracelet's identifying rune into their scrolls. They'd know exactly where I was and what I was doing. And there'd be no running from them then. There's only one ledger that can unlock the bracelets, and it's always with the head Scriptmaster. Not even I can steal that.

I meet Dane's eyes over my hand, and for a moment I'm so achingly tired. I almost want to apologize, to tell him he's right. Because maybe he is. Maybe I don't want to spend my entire life fighting a battle I can't win, when I couldn't even open a door. Maybe the masters were right about me and I am exactly what they judge me to be.

Only then I think of Matthias. Of the way he looked the last time I saw him, the day he was dragged away. Me screaming. Him calling out my name as his hand was ripped from mine.

The truth is, it isn't in me to quit. Not now, not ever. There are things I will not—cannot—concede, and my brother is at the top of that list.

So I don't say anything, just stare Dane down, and in the end he's the one who looks away, dropping my hand. A part of me is naive enough to believe it might be because he understands.

"You're lucky I was on patrol," he finally says.

"I know," I whisper. It's the most I can give him. It must be enough because he lets out a breath, rubbing the back of his neck.

"Did it work?" he asks. "The rune?"

I don't want to say it and make it more real. But I lie to so many people in my life, and I won't lie to him. "No." I swallow, staring down at the floor. "It didn't."

I can feel his eyes on me and when he speaks, his voice is gentler. "I'm sorry."

I raise my head to look back at him and force a smile. As impish and real as I can make it. "I know that, too."

He rolls his eyes, but that crooked grin, which doesn't belong to the soldier but to the street brat, to my friend, is already stealing over his face. I've missed that smile. "Yes, well, now that I've saved your sorry hide, I need to get back. And you should go to bed."

He must have forgotten the ledger, hidden in the dark. I rub my fingers over it and for a moment I'm tempted not to say anything. To let him leave and to give it another try. Maybe I would have, if I had any idea where I went wrong with the rune. Maybe I would have if Dane wasn't standing right there.

But he is. I don't know how he managed to get away from his patrol for this long, but I do know that if anything happens tonight, he'll be implicated in it. And I wouldn't do that to him. The risks I take, I take on my own.

I hold the ledger up. "I need to get this back." When I left, Master Kaius was snoring into his wine, but even he'll notice a missing ledger when he wakes up. The masters would tear this Scriptorium apart to get it back.

Dane looks at the book between us, and then he takes it. "I'll slip it into his study. At least if I get caught in the halls, I'll have an excuse."

I wasn't expecting that, not even from him. "Dane..."

He's already taken a step away, but he looks over his shoulder, and maybe more of the street boy still exists than I thought because trouble darts across his deep eyes. He comes back to me and pecks a kiss on my forehead. "Go to bed, Karis, before someone notices."

Then he's gone, disappearing back into the shadows of the hall, and the only evidence he ever stood here is the soft tread of his fading footsteps.

I failed. The knowledge sits like a thorn in my chest, prickling at the tender flesh of my heart. I was right there, I had the ledger in my hands, and I failed.

I drag my feet as I walk through the hallways, silently following the other acolytes in my group. Master Vasilis strides down the hall at our head, his robe billowing around his legs as he leads us to whatever work site he's chosen today to re-catalog for the umpteenth time. All in the hopes that something will have changed that will unlock the secrets of the automatons.

The Scriptorium, which rules Eratia, flaunts itself as a leader among the nations in knowledge, but for the past two hundred years all the Scriptmasters have been obsessed with is recovering what they lost—reanimating and controlling the automatons littered over the islands.

It's mind-numbingly pointless. If it hasn't happened yet, it isn't going to happen. The power of the automatons is dead. And right now, with the knowledge of my failure sitting heavy in my heart, I'm spitefully glad the Scriptorium is never going to get what they want either.

Outside, it's barely dawn, pale colors stretching across the sky. Despite the early hour, the yard is already busy with the organized chaos of morning drills, men and women scattered about the yard. I look for Dane, even though I know he's smart enough to take care of himself.

There are so many sparring pairs, it takes me a moment to spot him. Despite the chill in the air, his skin's flushed and sweaty, and his sword flashes in the sun as dust flies around his sandals. Fatigue sits like a stone behind my eyes, but Dane looks as awake as ever. He lunges out fast and his opponent, a boy named Erys, jerks back and trips over his own feet. He falls in a tangle of flailing limbs. Dane lets out a whoop and jogs a few paces of a victory lap before helping Erys to his feet and slapping the other boy on his back.

I can't help the grin that cracks across my face. Someone's having fun.

As if Dane can sense my attention on him—which I'm half convinced he can—he turns and sees me. He flashes me a smile that's all secrets and all mine, and for a moment I almost forget how much the last few years have changed us. I wave back, ignoring the odd looks some of the nearby soldiers throw my way. As if it's unnatural that someone like Dane would pay attention to someone like me. I wonder how many of them remember that Dane came here as an orphan, too. Before he picked up sword-fighting like he'd been doing it his whole life. Before he was allowed to join the militia ranks and became a favorite of his master and his squad. Before he grew from a gangly child into someone who fits in perfectly.

Dane is good-looking and the worst thing is, he knows it. Knows exactly the effect he has on other people, especially on girls. At least girls besides me.

I've never felt that way about him. Actually, I've never felt that way about anyone. It's not as if I think Dane is bad-looking. Objectively speaking, he's quite nice to look at. There are plenty of people on Tallis who are nice to look at. I just wouldn't ever want to kiss one of them over it. Whatever it is that makes my group mates sigh and go misty-eyed, I've never felt for myself.

I know all that about myself and most of the time I'm fine with it. But right now, under all these stares...there's a part of me that wonders if I'm the strange one.

The drill sergeant, Master Adalis, gives a sharp whistle, raising her eyebrows at Dane. Looking only mildly abashed, he readies himself for another spar. I jog after the tail end of my group, slipping out through the front gate.

The island spreads before me, all pale craggy rocks and waving grasses. Stiff stalks poke at my calves and dust settles into every itchy space in my sandals. Orchids, just now blooming, open their delicate, purple petals to the sky. I lift my face to the thin rays of sun, ignoring the chatter of the other students, none of it directed at me.

I wonder what Matthias would think of this island. Even though he has low vision, he was always an adventurer, certainly more than I was. Maybe that was just because he was older. Or maybe that was just him. Back when we were young, I'm sure he knew every corner of our parents' weaving shop and our tiny yard, where we used to pluck figs from the tree and eat them crouched in the shade on hot days, or separate lentils into bowls for dinner. When we were on Heretis, every run-down building we took shelter in was a chance for him to poke his fingers into the nooks and cracks. Our childhood was one of small spaces and I'm sure he'd have loved the wide-open possibilities of Tallis.

"Acolyte Karis."

I snap back to attention just in time to hear the snickers. My cheeks burn as I see Master Vasilis standing in front of me. Behind him I can make out the curving edge of the eastern side of the island, where it turns sharply into white cliffs. We arrived at our work site and I didn't notice.

Master Vasilis glowers down his aquiline nose at me. "Tell me, Acolyte Karis, what has so riveted your attention that you ignored my instructions?"

I almost want to tell him, just to see his face when he learns I stole a ledger. But if I said that, I might as well go walk off that cliff. So I bite down the impulse and mumble, "Nothing, Master."

"Nothing? Well then, your wandering thoughts must simply be in need of a task. Attach the pulley system to the automaton."

My group mates snicker again and I don't understand why until I turn to the behemoth of a creature standing not five feet from us.

In the seven years since I arrived on Tallis, I've gotten plenty used to automatons. Back home on Heretis, there were only two on the outskirts of the city, and since Matthias and I always stayed near the central agora, where thieving was the easiest, I never actually saw them. Only heard the tales from the other street kids.

Here on Tallis, there are close to a dozen, leftover from the days when this island was a guard post. The things are massive. Monstrous. Great hulking bodies made of Scriptstrengthened bronze, most of it tarnished a dull green because there aren't enough of us to keep them all polished, thick arms and legs made from interconnecting plates meant for bashing and breaking, tiny heads placed atop for no reason I can see except to provide a point of normality to creatures that don't look normal at all. When I came to this island, I screamed the first time I saw one. And though the years have taken that blinding edge of fear away, the things still give me the shivers. Even though they're the pride of Eratia, the proof for the Scriptorium that once we were more powerful than anyone.

This automaton looks like any of its frozen kind, except for one thing: it's at a tilt, its upper body leaning out over the cliff's edge as if stilled in the moment before it was to dive into the water below. The ocean glints from up here, deceptively bright and beautiful. But I know there are rocks just beneath those waves. One wrong misstep on the climb up and I'll be taking a quick trip to a long sleep.

One of my fellow acolytes, Demetrius, steps forward and shoves the pack with the pulley system into my hands. I meet his smug eyes. The others crowd behind him—Jocasta, Petros, Thetis—whispering as they sneak glances at me. There's not a scrap of kindness in any of their faces, even though once there was. In Jocasta's, especially. Of everyone, she was maybe the one I could have made friends within those early days. She was the one willing to reach out, who would smile when she passed me in the halls. Only I didn't want friends.

And I don't need their kindness.

I jut out my chin as I swing the pack onto my back. My gaze tracks up the automaton, trying to find the best route. Its tarnished and dented skin is littered with runes: *reach, lift, bend*. Hard lines carved into the hard metal. They aren't lit—they haven't been lit since Master Theodis, the greatest villain of the ages, triggered the Great Lapse that made all the things still. But they're as close to handholds as I'm going to get.

I grab the lowest rune and haul myself up. I stick to the back of the thing's thigh, where at least its body is between me and the fall, but the runes down here are far and few between.

Sweat prickles from my palms and slides down my spine. My arms ache from the sheer effort of pulling myself up the steep incline. I grit my teeth and push on. I refuse to give anyone the satisfaction of seeing me plummet to my death.

I'm almost to its back. I reach for another rune and my fingers slip. I scramble for a new hold, any hold, but it's too late. My balance tips and I fall, screeching. The world tumbles over itself, flashing water and sky and cliff side. My body slams into rock, a steep slope turning my free fall into a desperate tumble, until with a bone wrenching thud, I stop.

I choke on air, my chest heaving, as I stare up at the bright blue sky. A hazy din of panic screams in my ears, and agony burns under every bit of my skin, like hundreds of scratching insect legs. I'm...alive. A strangled laugh tears from my throat. I'm alive.

My shaking fingers probe the ledge I'm on, slick with salt spray and barely larger than I am. This little outcropping of rock that saved my life. If it didn't involve flipping over, I might have kissed it. Gritting my teeth, I heave myself up to my elbows.

There's a crack in the cliff side, a few feet farther down the ledge. Its edges are lit with a faint glimmer of golden light.

I blink slowly, my aching head still sluggish. Is that... Scriptwork?

"Master, she isn't dead."

My group mate, Archus, has stuck his head out over the edge of the cliff side. Master Vasilis appears next to him, and even though I can't hear his sigh, I see it in the way his shoulders heave. As if my nearly dying is some great inconvenience.

“Well, I suppose someone ought to grab a rope and throw it down,” he says.

There’s some shuffling up above and then the frayed end of a rope is thrown down. Every bit of me feels battered and bruised, and I have no idea how I’m going to climb all the way back up. But I do know that if I don’t do it, no else is going to come down here and get me. So, with a growl, I grab the rope and drag myself to my feet.

Excerpted from *This Golden Flame* by Emily Victoria, Copyright © 2021 by Emily Victoria. Published by Inkyard Press.