

Taming the Flame

Annika sighed and laid the half-made quilt back on the table. Life as a seamstress wasn't nearly as pleasant as her mother had made it out to be. In fact, it was awful. Needle in, needle out. Except when she made a mistake, sewing was a painfully monotonous pastime.

She heard a shout from the other room, most likely from one of her two brothers; Matthias, who was five, and Thomas, who was seven but acted like a five-year-old.

When she walked into the next room, even she found it hard to restrain her laughter. Evidently, they teased Agnes, the goat, again, and she finally returned the favor. Both the boys were sitting in the corner, wailing as Agnes stood over them triumphantly, clearly proud of her actions. Annika hurried over.

"What did you do to her this time?" she asked as she attempted to drag Agnes away from them. "I told you if you kept taunting her she was going to strike back!"

"I didn't do anything," Matthias whined. "It's all Thomas' fault. He poked her with a big stick, and Agnes got mad at him."

"He told me to," Thomas retorted. "And it is *not* my fault."

"If Matthias told you to jump into a well, would you do it?" Annika asked.

"Um, no," Thomas admitted. "But it's not my fault, I promise!"

Annika sighed. "Oh Thomas! Just don't do it again." She walked back into the other room and sat down. Something near the fire caught her eye. She stared at it for a while, then decided it was a trick of the light. She dropped her sewing and picked up her pencil. Maybe writing would calm her down.

Suddenly, she saw it again. She gazed steadily at the flames. For some reason, the fire looked different, but Annika couldn't figure out why. She stepped closer. She had the sudden, irrational urge to touch it. To reach out and feel the flame. In fact, she didn't know why she shouldn't. Nothing so beautiful could possibly be harmful. She slowly stretched out her fingertips into the flames. She could feel the fire. It shot through her hand and coursed through her veins, but it didn't hurt—far from it. She withdrew her hand from the flames. Fire danced on her fingertips. She laughed, and brushed her hair away from her face. Then she realized the bottom of her hair was flaming as well. She yelped and patted them out. She looked at her fingers. They had stopped flaming too.

She stood up shakily, fingering the blackened tips of her brown hair. Why hadn't they burned off? Her hair caught fire, she was sure of that, but it hadn't

burned off, it simply became black. She pinned her hair into a tight bun and returned to patching up her brothers' clothes. Should she tell anyone? She thought of her scorched hair, and the flames rising from her palm. They'd think she was a witch. She could clearly recall the public execution of a 'witch' a few years ago. She only watched for a few minutes before her father sent her home, but those moments had been enough to scare her. If the town found out, she would end up the same way.

No, she couldn't tell. She'd have to hide it.

As soon as she woke up the next day, Annika couldn't wait to begin her chores, which was certainly unusual, but she wanted to experiment with the fire. Really she wanted to make sure she hadn't been hallucinating or even dreamt the whole thing.

She rushed through breakfast—porridge, no surprise there—and practically skipped her way down to the creek to get water, receiving bewildered looks from her parents on her way out. Once at the creek, she clumsily hastened to fill the buckets, and, as a result, drenched herself.

Annika groaned and placed both buckets on the ground, sloshing water over the brim as she did. Then she realized that it was the perfect time to try out the fire thing. She hesitated. Did she need to be nearby fire, or could she just summon it? She focused on a flame in her mind. Not a large one, just a soft, yellow flame. The tips of her fingers began tingling, as if they had fallen asleep. Slowly but surely, the feeling intensified and spread throughout her hand, and eventually throughout her entire body, warming her in the chilly morning air. It felt wonderful.

Then, suddenly, her hand grew numb, and little yellow flames burst onto her fingertips. They traveled down her fingers and into her palm, giving her goose bumps. Annika watched first in fascination, then horror, as one of her sleeves caught fire. She attempted to blow it out, but it did no good. Frantically, she shoved both her hands into one of the water buckets. The fire on her sleeve immediately went out, but little yellow lights still blossomed on her palm through the clear water.

She took a deep breath. *Don't panic.* She willed the flames to go out. A strange feeling coursed through her body, as if she had just had frigid water dumped on top of her. She looked down at her hands. One by one, the flames disappeared, leaving wispy tendrils of smoke in the otherwise clear liquid. She sighed in relief, letting out a breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding. She wiped her wet hands on her skirt, and folded both sleeves up to her elbows to hide

the scorch marks. As she headed back up to the house, she promised herself she'd be more careful, but she was still curious. What else could this fire do?

For the next few weeks, Annika used her abilities in little things; starting the fireplace, drying wet laundry, or heating her porridge. As time went on, she sharpened her abilities, and tested her skills. Only two weeks later, she was able to coax the flames into shapes: flowers, mockingbirds, and even dragons. She spent most her free time practicing. She longed to tell someone. The lies she told in order to hide her secret welled up inside of her, growing more intense as the days passed. Unfortunately, they weren't the only things growing stronger. The fire she controlled was also strengthening, she could tell. The energy it took to put the flames out was increasing, but they sparked at even the thought of heat or fire. The fire was becoming more and more independent. Or maybe she was just weakening.

Soon it began to frighten her. She stopped using it for a while, but she felt the fury of the fire building up inside her. It didn't appreciate being contained. She needed to let it out. She decided to go into the woods, near the creek, and use it there, where nobody would see her. She left at midnight.

The dry leaves crunched beneath her feet. The sounds she made seemed so much louder when she was alone. Finally, she sighted the creek. The full moon glinted off the clear water as it rushed over the smooth pebbles. It was almost as mesmerizing as fire. She focused on flames. She felt the heat trickling through her fingers and up her arms, the calming warmth was so different from the roaring fire she knew it was. Immediately, flames shot from her fingertips—red, yellow, blue—and raced down her arms. She had purposely ripped off the sleeves of her oldest shirt so they wouldn't catch fire. She coaxed the wild flame into her palm again, focusing on a flower. Slowly but surely, the fire transformed into a blazing rose, repeatedly blooming and wilting in an enthralling cycle. Annika gazed at it, transfixed by the shifting flames.

Something snapped in the woods behind her. She whipped around, her blazing hair casting wicked-looking shadows on the forest floor. A girl stood in the trees just along the edge of the clearing. She had dirty-blonde hair, and her pale skin shone in the dim light- Isabella.

Annika tried desperately to extinguish the flaming flower in her hand. The fire dimmed, but the writhing rose was still visible in the darkness of the night. Isabella shrieked.

"What are you doing?" She backed away slowly. "Witch!" Her terrified features contorted as she screamed again. The flames in Annika's hair had gone

out, but the reddish glow of the rose still leaked from her clenched fist. Isabella did what any normal person would have done. She ran.

Annika watched in dismay. What had she done? The horrific images of the executions filled her head, overwhelming her with dread and terror. She would have to leave. She rushed through the woods, taking no time to avoid thorns or roots. Her secret was out. She still felt as if the fire was awake, but her hands showed no flames. Soon she stood in front of her house. Her family was most likely sleeping. She must leave right then. She may not have another chance.

Creeping through the doorway, the soft soles of her shoes made almost no sound on the dirt floor. She quietly made her way into the next room. She snatched her brown bag; hastily filling it with a few extra things. She had been prepared to leave for weeks, but there wasn't any reason before. She turned back to the other room.

She sneaked by her family as quickly as she dared, being careful not to accidentally step on anyone's fingers. She jumped as Matthias sat up straight, shrieked, "It wasn't me!" and fell back onto his blankets. Annika relaxed momentarily, but then her father rolled over in his bed. She waited to make sure he was still asleep, and then determinedly made the final leap over her brother and to the door.

Annika cast one last glance back at her family. A twinge of doubt arose in her mind. Was it really worth it? She turned away, steeling herself against the guilt that threatened to overwhelm her. She had no choice. She ran out before her resolve could waver. If she delayed any longer, she would never leave.

She hurried down the street, keeping to the shadows as much as possible. Her main problem was going to be the guard outposts, although she doubted the guards would be worried about a small girl. She didn't know what Isabella had done, or whom she had told. Fear made people do strange things.

Annika arrived at an alleyway between two shops. She cringed. Moss clung to the walls—if they could even be called that. There seemed to have been a cave-in on one side; a heap of mud, wood, and bricks took up most of the space in the cramped alley. She hardly had room to breath. Attempting to avoid the more suspicious parts of the alley, Annika meandered through the mixture of trash, old moldy food, and rats—dead *and* alive.

After what seemed like miles, fresh air wafted to her nose. It was her light at the end of the tunnel. The fact that she was near the end gave hope, and with a much-needed burst of energy, she made it out.

She raced down the empty street, heading toward the woods. In the village they spoke of healers and hermits in the woods. Hermits wouldn't get news about town witches. Some even said *they were* witches. Maybe they would help her.

As she passed the guardhouse, Isabella's shrieking about demons and forest fires rang in her ears. At least it was a distraction. Annika slipped into the woods. She crept down the worn forest path, the pale light of the full moon guiding her. All of the sudden, she heard shouts from the guardhouse. For a moment, she hesitated. What if they caught her?

Those horrific images crowded her mind once again, stripping her of reason. She ran.

Annika raced through the woods. Were they following her? No time to check. She spotted a tangle of thorns and branches up ahead. Perfect.

She dove into the web of thorns, ignoring sharp pains as the brambles snagged her hair and clothes, grasping onto her. Once she got through the initial wall of thorns, there was a small patch of smooth soil. The thorny shelter surrounding her was layered with dead leaves and pine needles, which provided shelter from both the elements and, hopefully, unfriendly eyes.

She barely had time to catch her breath before a pair of feet passed beside her hiding place. They found her. They were going to hang her too. She was going to die. She held her breath. Suddenly, a golden yellow light flickered to life. Annika looked up. A young woman was peering through the thorns, holding a small lantern. She beckoned. Annika scampered out of the thorn bush and brushed off her skirt. The girl hurried down a dirt path, indicating for Annika to join her. After a moment's hesitation, Annika followed her. If the girl wanted her dead, she could've just left her to the guards.

The girl led her through the woods, warning her of sinkholes and branches along the way. The wavering light of the lantern did little to illuminate the way, but it comforted Annika. Fire was her friend. She felt her hands tingling at the thought. She shut off the sensation before it could turn dangerous, but smoke still curled from her fingertips. She folded her fingers into a fist, effectively trapping the heat in the palm of her hand. She sighed in relief, and hurried to catch up with the girl.

Soon, a small cottage came into view. If she hadn't been on the lookout, she would never have seen it; dark green ivy clung to the walls, and thorns hid any path there may have been in that direction. Annika glanced at the girl, who was smiling mischievously. Suddenly, she turned and headed away from the cabin. Annika hesitated for a moment, but followed her.

"Isn't the house that way?" Annika asked, nodding toward the cottage. The girl ignored her, but Annika thought she saw a glimmer of a smile playing on her lips. Annika sighed. What if this was a trick after all?

The problem was, she had no alternative.

The girl carefully lifted up a particularly thick net of vines and hung it on a branch above them. Then she walked through. Annika hurried in behind her. Inside sat a small house, with two windows and an engraved wooden door. Different types of wild flowers also decorated the ground in front of the house, dancing delicately in the soft breeze.

"Is this your home?" Annika asked tentatively. The little hollow in which the cottage rested was not unlike the place where she chose to hide from the soldiers. The soldiers! "We must get inside. The soldiers! They're after me," Annika said. She was frantic. "They think I'm a witch!"

At the word 'witch,' the girl looked at her sharply, but she shook her head. Then she marched up to the intricately carved door, opened it, and gestured for Annika to go in. Annika walked inside.

A colorfully woven rug stretched from one side of the room to the other, and deep red curtains hung over both the front windows, held together with a cord. A set of wooden chairs sat in the far right corner, and an old bookshelf leaned against the wall to her left. A small fire pit was dug out beside the wooden chairs, with smooth grey rocks fencing in the dead, white ash. A clay pot was suspended over the pit.

The girl turned and slipped through a doorway on her right Annika hadn't noticed. It opened into a slightly smaller room with a splintered cot in the corner, and an old chest centered under a window on a wall facing them. The girl gestured toward the cot. Annika hesitated.

"But where will you sleep?" Annika had seen no other bed in the house. The girl gestured again toward the bed. Only then did she notice how utterly exhausted she was. And the blankets did look awfully cozy.

Without further argument, Annika lay down in the bed and slept.

The next morning, Annika grudgingly forced herself out of bed. It was the best—and judging by the sun, also the latest—she'd slept in weeks. When she finally made it into the other room, the girl was already cooking something in the clay pot Annika had seen earlier. Annika approached.

"That smells wonderful." She said. "What are you making?" The girl smiled at the compliment, and held up a finger. *You'll see.*

Annika sat down in one of the wooden chairs. It creaked under her weight, but it held.

"What is your name?" Annika asked her. The girl paused, then headed to the bookshelf. For a few seconds, she shuffled through the assortment of scrolls, letters, and loose sheets before she found a usable slip of parchment. She then returned to the fire pit, and buried her index finger in the cool black coals. Then she wrote something on the parchment. Satisfied, she turned and handed the sheet to Annika.

Written on the page, in distinct letters, was Violet.

"Violet? What a pretty name." Annika hesitated, then asked "Can't you speak?" Violet bit her lip, and shook her head.

"Oh. I—I'm sorry."

Violet nodded, then began spooning out the warm stew into smaller bowls. Annika's gaze fell to the little flames flickering weakly in the fire pit, and gasped as her fingers began to tremble. Turning away, she clenched her hands into fists. She was *not* going to lose control, especially not in front of Violet. Her fingers gradually uncurled as heat rushed through them. Annika watched in resignation as flames leapt out of her open palms, and slowly raised her eyes to meet Violet's gaze, expecting horror, disgust, or fear. Instead, Violet only seemed surprised—almost happy.

Violet abruptly stood up and rushed to the bookshelf. She tore through the old scrolls, throwing ripped and yellow sheets of parchment onto the dirt floor. Unsettled dust hung in the air, clogging Annika's throat. What was Violet looking for?

Finally, she turned around triumphantly, cradling a thick, fragile-looking scroll. She ran into the bedroom and set it on the chest, frantically scanning the tiny handwriting. Then she beckoned to Annika, who walked over. Violet pointed to a poem. It was titled 'Flame of Sacrifice'. Annika read it silently.

The fire inside cannot be tamed,
It cannot be controlled.
And those who hope to wield the flame
Must first control the heart.

Belief is the first to start the spark,
But passion lights the flame.
And once the fire is raging inside,
You cannot put it out.

Realizing this kindles fear:

A want to hide the flame.
But caging fire doesn't end well
For those who started the spark.

The fire inside will consume them
If it is not let out.
They will die along with the fire
If they try to hide the light.

The only cure for a fiery heart
Is regret for what it's done.
True remorse for lighting the flame
And hatred of all its gifts.

This powerful cure comes with a curse
Almost worse than the flame.
Changed forever are its holders
Living without the gift of fire.

There is but one way to use it.
One path to the soft warm light.
Guiding the heat; not conforming its flame
May delight the seeker of fire.

Annika paused, and reread the entire poem. "What does it mean?" Violet shrugged. *You're the fire-user, not me.* "How do I 'guide the heat?' What am I supposed to do?" Again, Violet shrugged. Annika groaned. She feared the flame; it was true, but she didn't regret having it to begin with, and she didn't hate it. In fact, she loved all the things she could do with fire...when it was under control. She touched the pitch-black ends of her otherwise brown hair. Was this what it meant when it said it would consume her? The burned part had almost reached her ears after she played with it last night. She decided she could figure out the poem later. Until then, she would restrain from using fire, and hope it didn't 'consume her.'

Over the next few days, Annika read the poem over and over almost one hundred times. Once or twice, she even tried to use it—that is, the fire. She was extremely careful; only letting out a spark or two, but she could feel it rising up inside her—a bonfire in her soul. Her playing with candles or lighting up forest

paths did not satisfy it. It wanted out. And Annika knew she wouldn't be strong enough to imprison it for much longer.

One night, Annika dreamed she was back home again. She ran into her house, expecting warm welcomes—after all, she had been gone for weeks. But the minute she walked in, Thomas and Matthias shrieked and hid behind her mother. What was going on?

"Mama? Papa?" She asked. Their accusing glares burned into her face; she could feel the heat of their anger, and it was more intense than any flame she had conjured.

"Leave us alone, witch." Her mother draped a comforting arm around her brothers, the same reassuring arm that had once consoled Annika. Annika fought back tears.

"I'm not a witch! I promise!" Tears blurred her vision—or was it smoke? Her father pointed at her hands. She dropped her gaze. Her trembling hands blazed with an angry fire. She tried to put it out. Nothing happened. The flames raced up her arms, burning the woolen sleeves of her tunic. Soon she was blazing from head to toe, her blackened hair slowly turning an ashy grey as it burned. She screamed and—

Annika sat up, breathing heavily, the ghost of the scream lingering on her lips, her mother's accusations ringing in her ears. Just a dream. Where was she? It still took her a moment to remember, even after the weeks she had spent in the cottage. She was with Violet. Annika lifted herself off the bed and walked to the window. She opened the curtains. Dim moonlight flooded the room, casting deformed and sinister shadows around simple household objects. It reminded her of fire. She shivered, hastily closed the curtains, and slipped back into the bed, pulling the quilt over her head. She closed her eyes and drifted back off to sleep.

The next morning, she immediately got up and walked outside for some fresh air. Spring had barely started, yet little daisies and wildflowers had already popped out of the ground. The sky was a vivid blue, and bright sunlight peaked out from the leafy canopy shading the cabin. It was a beautiful day. The only thing clouding it was Annika's own dark indecision and anxiety.

Suddenly, without warning, her fingers started blazing. There was no buildup, no tingling in her palm. Her hands simply lit up. She stood there; hypnotized by the growing flames. Panic rose up in her throat. She didn't even attempt to extinguish it.

The wild flames raced up her arms, singing the sleeves of her dress. Her hair slowly began to burn again. She staggered as a horrible flashback from her dream filled her mind. *Witch. Leave us alone.* She fought the voices. They were a

fire in their own way, slowly burning and eating away at her sanity. Finally she stopped, realizing her attempts at control were futile. The fire had never hurt her before; why did she feel like she was dying?

A line from the poem filled her head. *The fire inside will consume them if it is not let out.* She repeated it again and again in her mind. She needed to focus. *They will die along with the fire if they try to hide the light.* She nodded absentmindedly. She understood now. She pushed the flames from her fingers. She forced the heat out of her palm. She encouraged the fire; and it grew. A strange elation ran through her body. She felt carefree.

Slowly but surely, she realized the fire was dimming. Not in intensity—it was still as bright as ever—but in size, and ferocity. Now it danced along her fingers—just as it had those many months ago, when she first discovered it. She smiled. This time it was relief that filled her throat, bubbling out into a laugh. It was truly as if a huge weight had been lifted from her mind and heart. The fire was still there, but instead of as a prisoner, caged inside her, it was a companion. She had thought of it as a tool—a power, even—but now she knew it was not.

One could not control a being so wild and untamed as fire. She could guide it, certainly, and encourage the flames, but never hide it. Annika brought back the last stanza of the poem. The poem that had haunted her every morning, evening, and every second in between for the past few weeks. Now it all made sense. *There is but one way to use it. One path to the soft warm light. Guiding its heat, not conforming its flame.* She recited the final line out loud.

"May delight the seeker of fire."

"So you figured it out." Annika turned. Violet was standing in the doorway of the cabin, smiling triumphantly.

Annika rushed over. "I thought you couldn't speak!"

"I couldn't!" Violet exclaimed. "I was cursed when I was born. According to the old hag who cursed me, I wasn't going to be able to speak until a 'fire wielder' came to me, and through me gained peace and freedom."

"That's awful!" Annika was shocked. She thought curses and bewitchments were fairytales. But then again, she thought the same of fire controlling.

"It was." Violet admitted. "My parents were frantic. They assumed no one would marry a girl who couldn't speak. So they sent me off to live with an herbalist, Julia. She took me in, and taught me to read. When I was old enough to understand, she told me about the curse—and showed me the poem. She said the time would come when a fire user would come to these woods, seeking help. I was to show him or her the poem, and say nothing of my curse."

"What happened to Julia?" Annika asked. An herbalist might be able to tell her about the fire: where it came from, and why only she had it.

Violet bit her lip. "She—she died a few days before I found you."

"I'm so very sorry." Annika was sorely aware of how insincere that sounded, but she didn't know what else to say.

"Thank you" Violet smiled a little. "I'm going to go cook breakfast. You should probably come in and eat, too; you look terrible."

Annika grinned. "Don't worry, I'll come in a minute." She looked around, taking it all in. The flowers, the budding tree leaves, even the soft grass sprouting from the otherwise barren ground. When she turned to go inside, her hair caught in a low branch hanging above the path. As she untangled her hair from its clutches, she realized it was no longer black! The tips of her hair, which had been harsh and black, were once again a soft, dull brown. She felt surprisingly normal. She ran inside.

"Violet! Violet, look at my hair!" Annika laughed, and Violet turned around. "Look at it! It's brown again!"

Violet smiled. "I'm happy for you, Annika!" She smiled, and turned back around. After a few minutes she asked, "When will you be going home?"

Annika opened her mouth to answer, and then closed it. When *was* she going home—if she was going home at all, of course? She looked around at the cabin. It was far nicer than anything she had known before she came here; that was for sure. She had lived some of her greatest memories here. But even as she thought this, her brothers' faces arose in her mind. First Matthias and Thomas, and then her mother and father. She had to go back to them. Didn't she?

She remembered the welcome she had received in her dream. She doubted it would be anything that severe, but she would still have to explain. She would still have to lie and conceal her fire. And that didn't turn out too well last time.

She knew what she had to do. She looked at Violet.

"If it's alright with you, I don't think I will go home. I would have to hide the fire all over again, and that wasn't very enjoyable the first time." She paused. "Do you mind?"

Violet grinned. "Not at all. I was hoping you'd say that, actually. I'd be so lonely if you left."

"Oh good." Annika looked at the bowls of oatmeal Violet was balancing in her hands, accepted one, and smiled. "Let's go eat now; I'm starving."

As the days passed, Annika and Violet created many memories together, from close calls with soldiers to raising baby bunnies. They grew closer than sisters, and lived happily ever after.

Annika sighed and laid her pencil on the table. The story was finally finished. Although the ending was a bit sappy, and the poem was definitely not the greatest, she had to admit, she was proud. It took her almost three months to write, and although she was immensely relieved to be finished, she was also a little sad. It was fun to pen the words. Somebody shouted in the other room, and the angry bleating of a goat followed immediately afterwards. Annika sighed. She didn't know what she would write next, but she was almost positive it would be about a goat.