

Burn

a tale of Anarill

Marie Brown

Smashwords Edition

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The Vindrian compound came stealthily into view, like a giant squirrel's nest on the forest floor. Arden halted in front of the concealing brush heap and sent a questioning Word through the fence, the Vindrian equivalent of a city dweller's polite knock with a doorknocker.

The Word returned to him faster than expected, flashing with delight and followed closely by the somewhat disturbing sight of Phylo charging straight through the illusion. Branches and thorns emerged from Phylo's body as he passed through the gateway.

"You came, you came!"

"Even though I know it's not real," Arden replied, "seeing you in the middle of that thornbrake still turns my stomach. Yes, I came. What's the emergency?"

Phylo, completely free of the illusion, smiled at him. "You would be the one to feel concern over an illusory thorn. Thanks for coming. If you'll come with me, I'll tell you as we go."

Arden nodded consent, wistfully hoping Phylo would take down the illusion. Phylo didn't, of course, since time was apparently of the essence. Arden set his teeth and walked steadily through the thornbrake, fully aware that none of the brambleberry, nor the itchwood, nor even the moldering leaves and spiky branches he passed through were real, and yet feeling an illusory itch and prickle anyway. He kept precisely behind Phylo, because to either side of the illusion, the thornbrake became solid, and prickly, and itchy.

On the other side, the Vindrian compound waited, a collection of small domed huts built of bent whiptree saplings, leaves, and mud. Phylo set off toward one of the few permanent buildings, the springhouse.

"It began probably a lunation ago," Phylo said, puffing a little as he trudged rapidly up the slight incline. "We felt a huge disturbance in the ether, did you?"

"Laced with wildfire, yes," Arden nodded.

"We wondered what it was, but did nothing about it. Turns out we should have. Because Gemmel felt it too, and he captured the source of the disturbance, and was using the poor kid to power his own magic. Rotten thief. Anyway, he tripled his power overnight and started raising some unsavory types from Beyond and using them to terrorize the countryside. We think he was going to set himself up like one of the Darklords of old. So we went in and kicked his rump off his little power base, all of us together."

They reached the springhouse, a small, square stone building on thick pilings to keep it off the ground. The spring itself, more a cheerful brook, bubbled and sang past them on its way *down*. It didn't care about anything, just that it traveled *down*.

Arden briefly envied the simplicity of life as a spring.

"We found him there," Phylo said, pausing outside the door. "Poor kid, he'd been brutalized. Gemmel had such darkness within. . . We brought him here, because we could not leave the poor boy out on his own. You know how that goes, someone else as unscrupulous as Gemmel would snap him up and then we'd all be right back where we started from. But we don't know what to do. He's got a strong elemental affinity, fire, as you said, and he's also got strong empathy. But he can't control any of it, and he doesn't want to. He just sits there and burns. He won't even try. He hasn't eaten, he can't or won't speak, and we just don't know what to do. So we sent for you."

Arden closed his eyes for a brief moment, reminding himself to have patience with his uncomprehending friend and brother in magic. A person with a strong fire affinity, kept with water. . . !

"Thank you," he said, focusing on Phylo. "You did the right thing, sending for me. Now, let me see what I can do."

He entered the springhouse by the simple method of asking the spell closing the door to let him pass. A faint orange glow filled the small stone structure. Then he saw the young man, not a boy but a strong young man, huddled in the corner as far as he could get from the spring mouth, burning.

Oh, not really burning, of course. His flesh remained whole and healthy, his hair unsinged. But the huddled form sat sheathed in flickering, dancing sheets of orange flame.

Arden took a deep breath, releasing it in a long sigh. Poor fellow. Then he opened his shielding a crack, knowing what to expect, yet still rocking back under the onslaught of the other's intensely

negative emotions. Arden braced himself, then used that tiny thread of contact to impose a sense of calm on the young man.

The immediate, outward sign of his success came when the fires flickered one last time and died. The young man moved then, confused eyes opening in a haggard face and locking onto Arden.

"Hello," Arden said. "I'm Arden. I'm going to help you live. Will you come with me and eat something?"

The words hung in the air unanswered while the young man considered. Arden studied him while he waited for the reply. His face looked young, with only a faint shadow of scruff on the chin where someday a beard might grow. But his upper body bulged with muscle. Clearly, whatever his physical age, this person was no stranger to hard physical labor.

Finally, he nodded, and rose stiffly from his corner. Arden smiled.

"Good. I'm glad you've decided to live. You'll have to forgive my brothers. These Vindrians know little of people like you and me, with an affinity to an element. They didn't mean to hurt you by putting you in here with the water. I'm sure they just wanted to spare their little forest huts from burning up if you had a nightmare. Now, come with me, and we'll get you something to eat."

The silent young man followed Arden slowly. Arden took down the spell blocking the door and led the way to the kitchen area, a communal hut filled with the bounty of the forest.

"Hello, Riordan," he said, seeing someone he knew cooking on the outdoor hearth. "Is there anything available for a hungry young man and a weary traveller?"

"Arden! You were able to come, after all. How wonderful." Riordan glanced at Arden's silent follower, but wisely said nothing. "You can have some of this stew, if you like. It's been on all day, it should be ready to eat by now. I'm just checking the seasonings."

"Certainly, Riordan. Whatever you say. Just don't check the seasonings to the point where nothing is left for dinner."

"Really, Arden, you are too much. Take your bowl and get out of here." But Riordan smiled, and found bowls, then filled them with stew.

Arden accepted his bowl and dug his wooden spoon out of his belt pouch. He started to look for a place to sit, then noticed his companion wore no belt pouch and secured a cooking spoon for him instead. He smiled at the youngster and found them both a seat on a log.

The stew proved full of fungi and root vegetables, seasoned with shy forest herbs that made a potentially boring dish delectable. Arden ate quickly, one eye on his charge the entire time.

The young man stared at the bowl of stew as though he'd forgotten what to do with it, then slowly began eating. Once he'd started, he picked up momentum, until the entire bowl of stew was inside him, where it belonged.

Arden put aside his empty bowl and rose when he saw the other finish. "Come on, then, let's go for a walk, now that you've eaten. We need to get to know each other. Have you got a name?"

He paused, but the other remained silent, although he followed Arden away from the kitchen area. They walked through the compound, a large clearing in the forest.

"Well, you'll tell me sooner or later. For now, I'd like to tell you something about yourself that you may or may not know. You've got some exceptionally rare and wonderful talents. There aren't many empaths born in this world, and there are fewer still that enjoy such a strong relationship as you do with fire. These people here, that rescued you from Gemmel, are Vindrian sorcerors with next to no experience with elemental magic. That's why they sent for me, because I have the knowledge you need. Here, let's sit in this garden. It's made for meditation, for long quiet moments alone or with a friend. . . probably the most peaceful place you've been for a while."

Arden sat down on an artfully placed boulder. So did the young man, staring at Arden with an intensity that bordered on desperation.

"There, that's a bit better. So. About a lunation ago, something strange happened. There was an explosion, down in Trade City. A boat, a good sized fishing boat, burst into flame late at night. The Masterfisher was found aboard, but there was no sign of the Journeyman. I felt that, even from where I was in Scholastica. People said the Journeyman must have burned up completely, but I don't think so. I think the Journeyman experienced an explosive incident with his talent for fire

coming to him full strength and out of control, then before he could escape he was snatched by Gemmel. Am I right?"

Arden waited. The young man on the rock opposite his watched him with a gleam of horror showing through the enforced calm.

"I didn't mean it."

A hoarse whisper, so quiet Arden almost missed it.

"I didn't mean it," he repeated, louder. "Master, he kept pushing me and pushing me, and finally one night something in me pushed back, and he died. I didn't mean to hurt him."

"I know you didn't," Arden said quietly. "What happened?"

"You want to know what happened?" The turmoil just beneath the surface of Arden's control threatened to break free. He tightened his hold on the other's emotions and nodded. "For real? All of it?"

Arden nodded again. "Yes, I really want to know. . . may I know your name, as well?"

"Matta Thal, that's me. Journeyman fisherman, despite the problems I've had these last few annums with water. Apprenticed with Old Man Jelness, but he passed on in the middle of my first Journeyman annum. So I was sent to serve out the rest of my contract with Master Veld. Now this Master, he weren't so kind and understanding as the Old Man. Old Man, he'd see the Sea try and get me, and help me work out some way around the Sea's anger. Weren't easy, of course, but we'd do it more often than not. Master Veld, now, he'd just beat me. Call me stupid, incompetent, claim I was sabotaging the fishing—all sorts of things I wasn't. Not no way did I try to anger the Sea on purpose. I'm no fool."

Matta paused. Arden waited.

"And then. . . then he got drunk. Almost two annums he'd been beating on me, kept getting worse and worse, made me want to die sometimes. Then a real bad day happened and he got drunk. Real drunk. Drunk enough that he came belowdecks to my berth and woke me up. 'You're a lousy seaman,' he said, and started undoing his pants. 'Might as well be good for something.'"

Arden heaved a deep, shuddering breath. "Now I'm no good with women. Always figured I must be flit, even though I never saw a man I had much hankering for, either. No big problem, happens all the time, although I reckon my papa might have something negative to say if it's really the case. Reckon he plans to have me repopulate the entire Thal dynasty all by myself. Along with some willing woman, of course. Old Man, now, he didn't care one way or the other. 'It's all the same, boy,' he'd say. 'The Sea, she don't care who you lay with on land, as long as she gets your undivided attention when you're out with your boat.'

"Anyway, that Master of mine, he comes at me undoing his pants, and I don't think 'Looks like I get to find out if I'm flit after all.' No, I think instead I don't want any part of it, and I start to get all panicky inside. And the Sea, she catches on to my panic and starts getting all riled, pitching the boat up and down, and I'm getting hotter and hotter. . . and the evil happened. It just burst out of me. Nothing I could do could stop it, it was evil and it was going to happen anyway. So the evil came and burned him. And it followed me, it stayed around me when I jumped into the water, and the Sea spit me and the evil both right out onto the dock."

Matta paused again, thinking. Arden waited patiently, not even breaking the silence to point out that the fire-calling wasn't evil. He could feel something encouraging coming from the young fisherman, a desperate hope that everything would turn out well, that he wasn't really evil at all.

"I don't rightly know what happened next," Matta went on eventually. "I know I ran. And I know that black wizard Gemmel found me and took me. He threw some kind of spell on me, wrapped me up in it and took me back where he came from, all wrapped up in the spell and floating like a tame cloud behind him and his horse all the way. Very strange, that. I remember getting to his stronghold. I thought things would get better. Was I wrong! He tied me to a pole in a stone room and I remember what he said. He looked at me up one side and down the other, and said 'I wonder what it takes to make a fine young man like you call fire?' I thought about the fire eating the Master. I probably shouldn't have, guess he could read my mind, but I couldn't help it. And he saw it. He laughed. 'Oh, is that all?' he said, and then there he was, undoing his robe, because he didn't wear no

pants. And there was the evil, too, only Gemmel didn't burn up with it, he took it for his own use. And he did *that* to me, over and over again, and he used the evil, and he made me watch while he did horrible things. And if that didn't raise up enough of the evil, he'd do horrible things to me, too. Even more horrible than *that*, if you can imagine.

"So there it is. Journeyman fisherman Matta Thal, filled with evil, and not flit, after all, because I sure didn't enjoy any of *that*. And now I expect you'll want to get rid of me somehow, so I won't spread the evil to these nice people who took me in, even if they did pen me up with that infernal *giggling* spring. And I reckon I'll just let you do whatever you want, since I don't much want to spend the rest of my days with evil riding in my heart and soul."

Arden tried to make his eyes, voice, and empathic ability convey his compassion, speaking to the desperately hopeful inner self as well as the resigned public face. "Matta. You've had a horrible time of it these last two annums. I know nothing I can say or do will make any of it go away. But I will tell you one thing for absolute certain: you, Matta Thal, are *not* evil. What you are filled with is a force indeed, but it is neither good nor evil, it just *is*. Let me give you an example."

Arden reached into his belt pouch and found his lightstick. "See this? A lightstick, common and ordinary. You've probably seen a hundred, a thousand of them, right? Now watch."

He uncapped the lightstick and the tip lit with a cheerful glow, easily visible in the afternoon shade.

"This is light. It is neither good nor evil. Would you agree with that?"

Puzzled, Matta nodded.

"The lightstick is made of a stick," Arden tapped the thin wooden rod, "and the light of collected elements of fire."

Matta's eyes widened. "Didn't you use the words 'fire elemental' earlier? Talking about me."

"Yes," Arden nodded. "I'm going to assume nobody's told you about elementals yet. Each element of nature—earth, air, fire, water, and spirit—is made up of countless tiny little bits. Each little bit is mindless, and it is utterly pure. There is nothing but fire in the bits that comprise the element fire. This little glowing thing here," Arden touched the lighted end of the stick, "is made of a substance with an affinity for fire and a spell to restrict a certain amount of those little bits to the substance, providing a steady light source. Are you following this so far?"

"Yes. Are you saying, then, that I'm like the substance there? I have an affinity for the element fire?"

"Yes, I am, and I'm about to prove it to you. I'm going to relax this empathic hold I have on you, and you'll be able to sense the fire elementals in the lightstick. Ready?"

Matta nodded, then his eyes grew wide. "I can feel it! Like they're singing a happy little song, perfectly willing to sit there and shine forever."

"That's precisely right. That's how all the magical gizmos and gadgets we use work, with bits of each element all set to work for us. Does that seem evil to you?"

"No," Matta shook his head, then his expression darkened. "But killing people does. I can't see how this ability, this affinity, I have can be anything but evil. What good's it do anyone if I kill anyone that upsets me?"

"Matta," Arden called on annums of experience dealing with younglings and kept his patience. "You will *not* kill anyone who upsets you. What you need is control. Once you get your power to obey you consciously, then you'll no longer be a danger to anyone."

"Sure. Give me one example of how this evil of mine might be useful instead of harmful."

"Glass blowing," Arden replied promptly, the first trade to come to mind. "Glass blowers need mastery over fire to achieve their goals. Elemental magic is a tremendous boon to them. Creating magical devices, like this lightstick. Also metalworking, both regular smithcraft and weaponscraft, although I rather doubt that would appeal to you. Healing. I know it hardly seems likely, but a good many healers have elemental talents as well."

"Healing?" Matta's stubbornness dissolved into skepticism. "What good's it do a healer to be able to burn a patient up? They want to cure, not kill."

"They do. Cure, I mean. I asked a healer about that, one with a minor affinity for fire. She uses

her skill to help burn out fevers, infections, and also to purify medical instruments. Imagine you're in a hall full of people stricken with winter fever. You'd be able to cure each and every one of them with your fire, which is something only another elemental healer can do."

"Healing," Matta said again, this time in a voice tinged with wonder. Arden felt his attention shifting onto the new thought and away from the old pain, and released more of his control, until Matta sat free of external control for the first time in an entire lunation.

"You could come back to Scholastica with me," Arden offered. "I'm an instructor there. I teach people what to do with their elemental affinities. You could stay here, of course, but I know from experience that the Vindrians have no idea how to train an elemental. I studied with them myself until we all realized I've got more to me than just the ability to channel magic through my Voice."

"Scholastica? Someone teaches healing?"

"And metalworking, and glassblowing, and even the building and maintenance of hypocaust systems, another area in which knowledge of fire and its behavior is essential. What do you say?"

"Let me think on it," Matta said, rubbing his chin. "I'd like to talk to these Vindrians of yours, that saved me from—" he broke off, swallowed hard, and clamped down on his emotions before they could get the better of him. "Anyway, they're good people, and I'd like to talk to them before I go making any life-altering decisions. Seeing as I'm not really all that evil, that is."

Arden smiled. "Fine. And whatever you decide to do, don't neglect training up that empathy of yours, also. It's remarkably strong."

"Right, then. That I shall. Will you be near?" Matta asked, suddenly anxious. "You broke through the nightmare. I'm not sure I can do that on my own, if I slip back in."

"I'm not going anywhere, Matta. Even if you decide to stay with the Vindrians, I'm going to stay for a bit and help you get yourself together."

"Right, then," Matta repeated. "Looks like this might all come right in the end, just like the Old Man used to tell me all the time. Thanks."

"You're welcome," Arden replied. "You're very welcome."

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