

PLAYING WITH FIRE

BRIDE OF FIRE BOOK 2

JANE BURRELLI



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Published by Eclipse Press,
a subsidiary of
ABCD Graphics and Design
977 Seminole Trail #233
Charlottesville, VA 22901
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Jane Burrelli
Playing with Fire
EBook ISBN: 978-1-948140-13-3
Cover Art by ABCD Graphics & Design

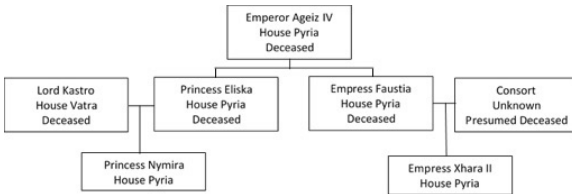
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*To walk through fire and feel the heat licking your skin.
Let it consume you and dance in flames.
To revel in a perfect moment is the gift of being human.*

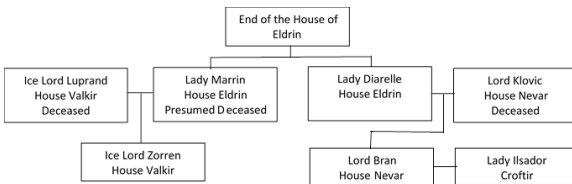
*A special thanks to my family, for always being there to share tears and
laughter and encouraging me to follow my dreams.*

CHARACTER LIST

House of Pyria



Houses of Valkir & Nevar



Other Notable characters

Thallenth, The Heir's Guardian

Astra, Iceari maid

Lord Gunnar, House of Ivrea

Lord Barek Trastmarra, No House, Chief advisor to the Ice Lord

Lady Druskia, Barek Trastmarra's daughter, married into House of Ishmael

Rhinga, Priestess

Tarf, Iceari Blacksmith

PROLOGUE

Zorren

Zorren pushed up onto his elbow and gazed down, a pale and flawless shoulder peeking out from the nest of furs, so soft and smooth. A mass of red hair tumbling across the pillow, it looked even better than he imagined. Contentment hummed through him, his mate was in Sevias. Safe and fast asleep in her bed, just as it should be. Mira was more than he had ever hoped for and made all others that had come before her fade to pale imitations and empty conquests. The beguiling contradiction of innocence and sensuality. She had taken him by surprise with her uninhibited enthusiasm, though unexpected it was most welcome. He shook his head. She not only accepted his intensity but matched it and reveled in it. The soft light of the fire played upon her brilliant hair and the sight stirred his ardor. He wrapped a glossy silken curl about his finger, mesmerized by the vibrant rich shade and texture. Making a sleepy little murmur Mira wiggled, subconsciously seeking his body as she snuggled closer, pressing her bottom against his groin. Zorren bit off a moan, fevered need shooting through him. He wanted her again but she

was still recovering from her journey despite what she claimed. A soft contented sigh followed by a cute little snort escaped her lips. His lips curled with pure male satisfaction. Adorable.

He didn't care she was a Firelander, he should, but it no longer mattered. His chest ached and he rubbed it absently. A rare emotion was stirring and it took a moment to realize what it was. Tenderness and the overwhelming urge for her to turn that all-encompassing smile up at him. To revel in the warmth of her personality, he would do *anything*. Cold slime and doubt slivered down his back as Zorren realized what he was thinking. Do anything? Possessiveness, he had expected but not this. It was the type of dangerous thinking that could lead a nation to the brink, to be consumed by a need for a woman which caused you to neglect everything else. Already he could feel that need taking hold, an all-consuming craving deep in his blood, a rope tightening round his neck. Too deep, too fast. Taking a steadying breath, he rationalized that time would allow the desire to wane, as would distance. The intensity was surely only temporary. It would be difficult, but he would will it to be so rather than become trapped like his father.

The first step would be to rebuild his defenses against the intense emotions and he would need space to do it. Slipping from the bed, Zorren groped for his scattered clothes and shrugged into his treads and tunic. With one last lingering look at his sleeping mate, he tugged the furs higher over her bare shoulders. Mira murmured in her sleep as if in protest, as he padded across the room, bare feet lightly gripping the floor. There was work to do, work he had been neglecting of late. Zorren found solace in the abandoned hall and the torch lit corridor. He wondered as to what his subjects would think to see him now, clothed in a crumpled tunic and treads, barefoot and his hair in tousled disarray from Mira running her hands through it. They probably would think him mad. Tracing the

familiar and well-worn path to his private study, Zorren slouched in his chair and eyed the heap of parchment, piled high on his desk. Sighing, he picked up the first one, broke the seal and began to read.



AT FIRST, Zorren thought it was the sunlight splashing across his face that had disturbed his sleep. The creak of a floor board to his right informed him otherwise. Snapping his head up, ice shot from his hand only for Zorren to twist his wrist and divert it at the last moment.

“Barek,” he breathed, relaxing at the familiar well-worn face. Stretching, he rubbed a knot at the base of his neck, served him right for falling to sleep in a chair “You know better than to approach me in my sleep.”

His oldest advisor’s lips curled, “Apologies, my lord.” Zorren grunted knowing full well he wasn’t.

“Were there any pressing problems in my absence?”

Barek, walked further into the room, “None that I was not able to handle with the aid of Lord Ivrea.”

“Thank you,”

Dark, intelligent eyes studied the parchment beneath Zorren’s hand. “Have you been working into the night again?”

Zorren’s eyes flickered down to the map, he had been trying to devise more defenses to stop the further raids to the eastern coast-line. How had they evaded the outposts and come so far inland? And, more importantly, how to prevent them from doing so. Thankfully, the winter storms are almost upon them and the raiding season was at an end.

“Attempting to find a strategic location to strengthen our defenses to the east?” Barek stooped over the map, and Zorren began pointing out the locations he had identified so far. “I was

thinking of forming a chain of signal fires starting at Lark's Point, but..."

"But the garrison is still too far out for those in the South," Barek finished, his mind as sharp as ever. Barek's fingers drummed lightly upon the table. "How many men are housed in the northernmost garrison on the coast?"

"Forty, give or take." The wheels of his brain beginning to turn and fight the sleep. "They should be able to manage with at least half that number." He scanned the map again. "There." Zorren stabbed his finger at the small coastal town of Lituk in the middle of the troubled area. "We will form a new garrison at Lituk which will increase the speed of the response."

Barek nodded, "It should work,"

"Can you engage the relevant people to start making plans for the undertaking, to present at one of the coming petitions?"

"Of course, my lord."

While Zorren rolled the map away, Barek lingered. "I hear that congratulations are in order, you have found your fated mate."

"Yes," Zorren said slowly, wary to go down this particular route of conversation. It was no secret that Barek had been throwing his own daughter at him with the hopes of making her his Consort. Having married into a noble house though now widowed and possessing the rare ability to manipulate ice she was eligible.

"A Firelander, I hear. It'll naturally take some time I imagine before she is sufficiently prepared to be introduced to Court."

Zorren frowned. "Indeed." In truth, he hadn't thought that far in advance. He hadn't planned further than getting Mira safely ensconced in Sevias and claiming her in the most elemental way possible. Proof that already her presence was having a negative impact on his ability to reason.

"I will, of course, aid her in whichever way I can." Zorren offered Barek a grim, tight-lipped smile. Putting aside his lack of forethought, the point still remained, how would Mira fit into

Court? An exotic and radiant flower uprooted and placed among the ordinary, Havron's teeth, they would eat her alive. She didn't know the customs or the politics, it would be like walking a tight rope. They would wear her down and the light in her eyes would wither and die. It had happened before, a new bride outmaneuvered and corrupted by the influence of Court.

"It has been quite some time since we had a woman within the royal household, not since Marrin." Zorren's jaw hardened at the mention of his mother, though Barek continued seemingly oblivious to the cooling temperature of the room. "I hope she brings you happiness and that history doesn't repeat itself."

Zorren absorbed the coldness in the air and walls, the soothing rush centering him. History would not repeat itself. He would not let it.

Mira

Stretching like a luxurious cat, I basked in the tenderness of my muscles. The secret smile of a well-pleased woman curling my lips. So, that is what all the ladies of the Court had tittered about behind their hands. Unwilling to open my eyes, my hand reached blindly for the happy cause of my tenderness. It clutched a cold and empty space. *Again.* My happy bubble dimmed, and I remembered the evening before. After wringing every drop of pleasure from me, half asleep I had tried to curl into Zorren's lean body, unwilling to ruin the intimacy between us. I had just been on the verge of dropping off when I felt him leave the bed and the sound of the door closing a few moments later. Sighing heavily, I rose. So much for talking and actually getting to know each other. Gingerly picking at my discarded clothes I grimaced as I lowered them back over my head, I hadn't even had a chance to ask him about a spare change of clothes. Maybe I could ask Astra to find more clothes somewhere. Or I could spend the day trying to discover the palace's secret places. If it was

anything like my old home there was always one secret passage or two and I would benefit from learning them.

I exited the room. “My lady.” My heart lurched, but I prevented bringing my hands up for a strike. Shoving my flame back in its cage—see, I was getting better. I flattened my palm over my chest and turned to glare at the man who had given me a scare. “Apologies for startling you, my lady, I am Lord Ivrea and I have been assigned by the Ice Lord to provide anything you might require.” Squinting, I tried to memorize the name and face. The task was proving harder than usual, all the new faces with blond hair, blue eyes and towering height were beginning to blur into one. “You may call me Gunnar.”

“It is a pleasure, Gunnar.” I studied him closer, searching for a distinguishing feature. His hair was fairer, almost white though slightly shorter than Zorren’s. His features were less harsh and as a result more welcoming than my mate’s. That openness would invite people to confide in him and I bet he put it to good use. Though I’m sure many women found him attractive, I didn’t get that frisson of tension or anticipation that happened when I was close to Zorren. With Zorren I sense someone that wouldn’t give way to me and our verbal sparring excited me. So, Zorren hadn’t forgotten about me, instead, he’d pawned me off to another man. Hmm, I think I preferred it when I didn’t have a nursemaid.

I gathered my courage and asked the question that had been on my tongue ever since I’d awoken. “Could you tell me where the Ice Lord can be found or if there are any tasks he has left me?”

His friendly, open demeanor closed off and he looked shifty, but why?

“The Ice Lord has not left any tasks and is currently dealing with affairs of state, any questions you have are to be directed to me.”

I thought this highly irregular, upon finding their true mates the men were usually protective and possessive until the relation-

ship was cemented between the couple. My brow furrowed, I could only just imagine women like the Lady Ishmael throwing themselves at him. I'd scratch any woman's eyes out that stared at him a second longer than necessary. Point proven, ours was still partially formed and was like a frayed end of rope, you were always aware of it in the background. I pasted on a bright smile to hide my disappointment. There was a restlessness building inside of me and it was time to release some pressure. There was only one option—be assertive.

"In that case, I need a change of clothes and directions to a training area. In that order, if possible." I couldn't break this discipline and begin my descent down a slippery slope. His hand rubbed the base of his neck and I noted the uneasy gesture for future reference. "I'm not sure Zorren would like you to be practicing your element."

"My mate never said I couldn't and I need to acclimatize to the cold." I shrugged. "Or I let it bottle up until it bursts out under extreme stress." In a rare flash of humor, I grinned impishly. "Don't worry, I won't melt anyone."

Gunnar's brows rose to dizzying heights but there was a gleam of admiration in eyes. "You are going to be trouble." He chuckled under his breath.

"Is that going to be a problem?"

"No, it's going to be a refreshing change, especially if you are able to fluster someone's icy calm," he said offering me a grin I was sure had broken many a heart. "I can't wait to watch."

"So happy to be of service." My sarcastic reply did nothing to dim his good humor.



"YOU SURE you want to do this?" Gunnar asked for what felt like the hundredth time.

I rolled my eyes. “I’m not going to twiddle my thumbs all day and besides, I need the practice. I used to do this daily and it is far overdue.” For the hundredth time my hand wandered to my hip only to clench thin air. I felt naked and incomplete without the sacred sword but the fewer people that knew about it the better. Fortuitously a creaking floor board with a little further persuasion of the hooked end of the fire poker and I had the perfect hiding place, the sword was safely ensconced under the floor of my room.

The training ground held a handful of people; it was similar to the one at home. A large square with equipment at the sides and a good layer of sand to cushion the frozen ground. I stepped in and could practically feel the temperature drop, metaphorically as well as literally. Yes, this would suit my needs very well. Curious and hostile eyes prickled into my back and I trapped my tongue between my teeth to keep from making a smart comment. Hadn’t anyone ever seen a Firelander before? Did I have horns popping out of my head? Three eyes? What?

“Gunnar, what is she doing here?”

I closed my eyes at the voice; I braced myself for the disgust. Jorsen was proving to be a further thorn in my side. Living up to the typical macho half-wit I’d originally pegged him for. The only chance I had of getting him to let up was to show I was not an easy mark.

“*I’m* doing this pesky little thing called training, why? What does everyone else do here?” I fired back casually, flipping my braid over my shoulder. The question wasn’t directed at me but by Khatri’s sacred flame I was going to answer as I removed my coat and stripped down to the treads and sleeveless tunic Gunnar had managed to supply. “But if you ever want to spar please feel free to call upon me. I promise I’ll be gentle.”

Behind me, Gunnar made a somewhat strangled sound, but I carried on regardless. I was used to the looks, stares and comments; it came with the territory of being a direct line of royal

blood. I blocked it out like I always did. Closing my eyes, I flexed my fingers and searched for the sacred fire buried deep inside me. I tugged it forth with the barest of thoughts, allowing it to flow slowly throughout my body. Spreading and filling me up, the same comforting sensation as when you step into a bath at the perfect temperature. My lips curled, perfect.

My teachers and aunt had been baffled as to why my power was only mediocre and not able to hold a candle to my cousin's. They had been working with me tirelessly until they had concluded my form was the issue. I flowed, my limbs appearing too weak and flimsy to put the power into the punches and kicks. Saying that, I was now, to my knowledge, one of the best manipulators and having more skills in my arsenal had won me many a sparring bout.

I snapped my eyes open, positive I would have gold dancing within and altered my stance to one of battle. Easing out of the starting gate, small balls of fire popping into existence in my palms. Swirling and twisting them around my body until a sweat broke across my brow. It looked easy, but the level of control required was high to keep them steady and bounce them off my hips, elbows and shoulders. Dancing in a complex clover and figure eight patterns, I dropped back into what my tutors would call an appalling style. I could hear Thallenth's familiar reprimand ringing in the ears, 'How will you ever hope to hold a royal position if you cannot master the formal style!' My limbs softened, speeding up the movements and pouring more power, the balls growing to ribbons of molten flame and surrounding me in a protective wall. Ready to scorch anyone that got too close. I pushed them out in a strict circumference. Stepping it up more, I fired punches and slashed a kick in the more approved stiffer style. Tempered, searing waves pulsed from me again and again. Determined to never get my feet frozen in place ever again.

When at last the firestorm within me calmed to a manageable

level I sucked it back, rotating my neck and sighing with pleasure at the click. I set up some targets, I wanted to finish the session by practicing my accuracy. Power is all very well and good but if you can't hit anything then what is the point? With long tails of flame trailing from my hands I would flick my wrist, each time the fire kissed the metal target, it would pop as the heat caused it to momentarily expand then shrink back. Each twist and flick was met with a gratifying pop; turns out my aim hadn't suffered from the recent lack of practice. I fastened my hands on my hips and satisfaction thrummed through me. I still had it and better yet, it had taken the edge off my unease. Maybe I was just being a little overly sensitive after all?

"Are you done, my lady?"

"Yes, thank you, Gunnar," I responded automatically shrugging back into the thick overcoat that swamped me. I was beginning to feel the cold and ignored the multiple people shooting daggers into my back. Jorsen strode determinedly forward and Gunnar moved to intercept him.

"Gunnar, don't bring her back." His lips drew away from his teeth like a feral animal.

"Be careful who you insult, Jorsen, the lady is the Ice Lord's mate," Gunnar warned coolly, his presence expanding to fill the whole area.

"*It is an insult that she is even here!*" Jorsen snarled. "How many of ours have been lost in the war with the Firelanders? How many of our kinsmen have died by fire?"

The tension was rising, a simmering pot that at the moment was threatening to boil over.

"The same number of my kind that perished from the cold and with a spike of ice through the neck," I declared, trying to step past Gunnar to face my accuser. I was brought to an abrupt stop by his out flung arm. I gnashed my teeth, but he didn't let me pass. It didn't dissuade me.

“No nation wins at war; the price was too high on both sides and it was for naught.”

“I’ve killed many of your kind, girl, and I have no problem adding one more to the tally.”

“Try it!” I dared him, heat gathering in my palms.

“Jorsen, that’s enough!” Gunnar snapped. “You swore fealty to our Lord and you would break it by threatening his mate. The girl is under my protection and everyone knows you can’t take me.” Jorsen’s bright white eyes remained fixed on me over Gunnar’s shoulder. “Come, my lady let us return you to the Ice Lord.”

My nostrils flared, and I chewed my tongue to stop myself from giving him a mouthful. It was time for tactical retreat, otherwise, there would be a fight. We walked in strained silence until Gunnar cleared his throat. “Do not let it upset you, my lady.” I walked faster, my lips pressed together in a firm line, with his long legs it made no difference to his easy-going stride. “It will take time for the people to become accustomed to you.”

“I am not upset,” I gritted out and further increased my pace.

“Really?” he drawled. “Because you are doing a remarkable imitation of it.” The sarcasm was not lost on me.

I stopped so suddenly, Gunnar almost barreled into the back of me. Sucking in a steadying breath I whipped around on my heels to face him. “You should not have interfered. You made me look weak. *That* is why I’m angry.”

“What?” His eyes widened totally confused at my stance. Patience, I reminded myself.

“If someone came at me like that in my land there would most likely be a fight and I would be expected to prove my worth.”

“No one would come to your aid?” he whispered horrified. “But you are a woman you are surely not expected to fight?”

“Yes, I am,” I snapped. “I have an element and I am expected to establish myself in the hierarchy.” I met his eyes candidly. “I don’t back down often.”

He puffed out his chest and drew himself up to his full height. “My lady, I have sworn an oath to protect you with my life if needs be in Zorren’s stead—”

“Don’t even finish that sentence.” I cut off dangerously, my eyes narrowing into thin slits. “Save the speech. If I am challenged or attacked I will help you defend *both of us*.”

Clearly unhappy with my statement, I fixed him with a glare. I bunched my lips to side making it clear I wasn’t budging, and I put my hands on my hips for good measure.

“As you wish, my lady,” he said stiffly.

“Oh, for Khatri’s sake, call me Mira,” I huffed. “I have a feeling we’ll be seeing a lot of each other.”



“THE TRAINING GROUNDS,” Zorren ground out very slowly, pacing like a caged beast. “You thought it would be a good idea for you go to the training grounds?”

“You never said I couldn’t, in fact, you haven’t said much of anything to me at all.” My confrontation quota was spent for the day and right now, I wanted to curl up. Would the man please stop pacing, he was making me anxious.

Gunnar chuckled softly. “She has you there.” My eyes popped wide open and my body tensed waiting for a sudden and explosive reaction. None came. Gunnar’s shrewd eyes caught the subtle movement and flashed me an easy grin before shrugging his shoulders, unconcerned with provoking the Ice Lord in his lair.

If Zorren had been a Firelander the glare he shot Gunnar would have fried him to a fine ash. I was struggling to keep my mouth from dropping to the floor. No one would have *dared* in the Fire Court, private or no.

“Thank you for your input,” He bit back not appreciating his subordinate’s mirth.

“I meant no offense but I needed the practice. I don’t know about ice manipulation but my element needs a regular outlet,” I mentioned softly. My fingers curled with the urge to soothe his troubles and ease the way where I could.

“This will cause problems,” he grumbled.

“How so?” Gunnar shrugged. “The people will grumble but they are not happy unless they are grumbling about something.”

Still, Zorren did not rein in his agitation. “The old wounds still run deep. If I do not have the support of the Nobles, they can seize the throne.”

That had my attention, fear clawed its way into my heart. Not again. “What do you mean?” I spat out. “Is another relative of the blood planning an uprising?”

Zorren’s brow furrowed. “Of course not,” he snapped impatiently. “My cousin does not covet the throne.”

“Then how can they take the throne if they don’t follow the bloodline?” I huffed giving way to my frustration. Either I was missing an important piece of the game or they were talking nonsense. One thing that was revered was the royal bloodline. I could trace my lineage back to the first Emperor of Fire. Each emperor or empress proved the strength held within their blood by being able to produce a brilliant white flame. The ultimate power. There were two things that Firelanders revered, the sacred flame that burned within every living thing and the bloodline.

“The title of Ice Lord does not have to follow a particular House, it has done, but doesn’t have to. The Nobles have it within their power to select a new Lord, to turn their back on the current Lord and pledge themselves to another.”

Gunnar’s brow rose. “That law has not been used for centuries. Neither Bran or I want it and we are the ones powerful enough to hold it.”

“There is always someone foolish enough to covet the elusive promise of power but not know how to wield it, you know that,”

Zorren muttered bitingly. Propping his foot on the low window sill, he hunched over and stared intently out.

“Having a Firelander as a mate puts me in a potentially tricky situation. If you upset enough people it could cause a shift in alliances.”

I closed my eyes, the enormity of the situation sinking in. He was right I had messed up, the situation much more precarious than I had realized. Rising from my seat, I moved to Zorren’s side and placed my hand tentatively on his forearm.

“What would you have me do?”

Zorren rubbed a hand over his face. “Keep a low profile while they become accustomed to you.”

I must have appeared as uncertain as I felt, and he explained, “Don’t make any obvious show of your element and it will make people more comfortable around you and allow the dust to settle. I will deal with the politics.”

I stared at him for a moment and then turned my back on him. For there were no words. He meant so people would forget what I am, who I am and the culture I come from. I rubbed my arms; the room had grown that much bleaker. “As you wish.”