

## BURNED - EXCERPT

Kalona lifted his hands. He didn't hesitate. There was no doubt whatsoever in his mind about what he had to do. He would not allow anything or anyone to get in his way, and this human boy was standing between him and what he desired. He didn't particularly want to kill the boy; he didn't particularly want the boy alive, either. It was a simple necessity. He didn't feel remorse or regret. As had been the norm during the centuries since he'd fallen, Kalona felt very little. So, indifferently, the winged immortal twisted the boy's neck and put an end to his life.

"No!"

The anguish of that one word froze Kalona's heart. He dropped the boy's lifeless body and whirled around in time to see Zoey racing toward him. Their eyes met. In hers were despair and hatred. In his was an impossible denial. He tried to formulate the words that might make her understand— might make her forgive him. But there was nothing he could say to change what she had seen, and even if he could work the impossible, there was no time.

Zoey threw the full power of the element spirit at him.

It hit the immortal, striking him with force that was beyond physical. Spirit was his essence— his core— the element that had sustained him for centuries and with which he had always been most comfortable, as well as most powerful. Zoey's attack seared him. It lifted him with such force that he was hurled over the huge stone wall that separated the vampires' island and the Gulf of Venice. The icy water engulfed him, smothering him. For an instant the pain within Kalona was so deadening that he didn't fight it. Perhaps he should let this terrible struggle for life and its trappings end. Perhaps, once again, he should allow himself to be vanquished by her. But less than a heartbeat after he had the thought, he felt it. Zoey's soul shattered and, as truly as his fall had carried him from one realm to another, her spirit departed this world.

The knowledge wounded him worse than had her blow against him.

Not Zoey! He'd never meant to cause her harm. Even through all of Neferet's machinations, through all of the Tsi Sgili's manipulations and plans, he'd held tight to the knowledge that, in spite of everything, he would use his vast immortal powers to keep Zoey safe because ultimately she was the closest he could come to Nyx in this realm— and this was the only realm left to him.

Fighting to recover from Zoey's attack, Kalona lifted his massive body from the clutching waves and realized the truth. Because of him, Zoey's spirit was gone, which meant she would die. With his first breath of air, he released a wrenching cry of despair, echoing her last word, "No!"

Had he really believed since his fall that he didn't truly have feelings? He'd been a fool and wrong, so very wrong. Emotions battered him as he flew raggedly just above the waterline, chipping away at his already wounded spirit, raging against him, weakening him, bleeding his soul. With blurred, blackened vision, he stared across the lagoon, squinting to see the lights that heralded land. He'd never make it there. It would have to be the palace. He had no choice. Using the last reserves of his strength, Kalona's wings beat against the frigid air, lifting him over the wall, where he crumpled to the frozen earth.

He didn't know how long he lay there in the cold darkness of the shattered night as emotions overwhelmed his shaken soul. Somewhere in the far reaches of his mind, he understood the familiarity of what had happened to him. He'd fallen again, only this time it was more in spirit than in body— though his body didn't seem his to command any longer either.

He felt her presence before she spoke. It had been like that between them from the first, whether he truly wished it or not— they simply sensed one another.

"You allowed Stark to bear witness to your killing of the boy!" Neferet's voice was more frigid than the winter sea.

Kalona turned his head so that he could see more than the toe of her stiletto shoe. He looked up at her, blinking to try to clear his vision.

"Accident." Finding his voice again he managed a rasping whisper. "Zoey should not have been there."

"Accidents are unacceptable, and I care not one bit that she was there. Actually, the result of what she saw is rather convenient."

"You know that her soul shattered?" Kalona hated the unnatural weakness in his voice and the strange lethargy in his body almost as much as he hated the effect Neferet's icy beauty had on him.

"I imagine most of the vampires on the island know it. Typically for her, Zoey's spirit wasn't exactly quiet in its leave-taking. I wonder, though, how many of the vampires also felt the blow the chit dealt you just before she departed." Neferet tapped her chin contemplatively with one long, sharp fingernail.

Kalona remained silent, struggling to center himself and draw together the ragged edges of his torn spirit, but the earth his body pressed against was too real, and he had not the strength to reach above and feed his soul from the wispy vestiges of the Otherworld that floated there.

"No, I don't imagine any of them felt it," Neferet continued, in her coldest, most calculating voice. "None of them are connected to Darkness, to you, as I am. Is that not so, my love?"

"We are uniquely connected," Kalona managed, though he suddenly wished the words were not true.

"Indeed . . ." she said, still distracted by her thoughts. Then Neferet's eyes widened as a new realization came to her. "I have long wondered how it was that A-ya managed to wound you, such a physically powerful immortal, badly enough that those ridiculous Cherokee hags could entrap you. I believe little Zoey has just provided the answer you've so carefully withheld from me. Your body can be damaged but only through your spirit. Isn't that fascinating?"

"I will heal." He put as much strength as possible in his voice.

"Return me to Capri and the castle there. Take me to the rooftop, as close to the sky as I can be, and I will regain my strength."

"I imagine you would— were I so inclined to do that. But I have other plans for you, my love." Neferet lifted her arms, extending them over him. As she continued to speak she began weaving her long fingers through the air, creating intricate patterns, like a spider spinning her web. "I will not allow Zoey to interfere with us ever again."

"A shattered soul is a death sentence. Zoey is no longer any threat to us," he said. With knowing eyes, Kalona watched Neferet. She drew to her a sticky blackness he recognized all too well. He'd spent lifetimes battling that Darkness before he embraced its cold power. It pulsed and fluttered familiarly, restlessly under her fingers. She shouldn't be able to command Darkness so tangibly. The thought drifted like the echo of a death knell through his weary mind. A High Priestess shouldn't have such power.

But Neferet was no longer merely a High Priestess. She had grown beyond the boundaries of that role some time ago, and she had no trouble controlling the writhing blackness she conjured.

She is becoming immortal, Kalona realized, and with the realization, fear joined regret and despair and anger where they already simmered within the fallen Warrior of Nyx.

"One would think it would be a death sentence," Neferet spoke calmly as she drew more and more of the inky threads to her, "but Zoey has a terribly inconvenient habit of surviving. This time I am going to ensure she dies."

"Zoey's soul also has a habit of reincarnating," he said, purposefully baiting Neferet to try to throw off her focus.

"Then I will destroy her over and over again!" Neferet's concentration only increased with the anger his words evoked. The blackness she spun intensified, writhing with swollen power in the air around her.

"Neferet." He tried to reach her by using her name. "Do you truly understand what it is you are attempting to command?"

Her gaze met his, and, for the first time, Kalona saw the scarlet stain that nested in the darkness of her eyes. "Of course I do. It's what lesser beings call evil."

"I am not a lesser being, and I, too, have called it evil."

"Ah, not for centuries you haven't." Her laughter was vicious. "But it seems lately you've been living too much with shadows from your past instead of reveling in the lovely dark power of the present. I know who is to blame for that."

With a tremendous effort, Kalona pushed himself to a sitting position.

"No. I don't want you to move." Neferet flicked one finger at him, and a thread of darkness snaked around his neck, tightened, and jerked him down, pinning him to the ground again.

"What is it you want of me?" he rasped.

"I want you to follow Zoey's spirit to the Otherworld and be sure none of her friends"—she sneered the word—"manage to find a way to coax her to rejoin her body."

Shock jolted through the immortal. "I have been banished by Nyx from the Otherworld. I cannot follow Zoey there."

"Oh, but you are wrong, my love. You see, you always think too literally. Nyx ousted you—you fell—you cannot return. So you have believed for centuries that is that. Well, you literally cannot." She sighed dramatically as he stared at her blankly. "Your gorgeous body was banished, that's all. Did Nyx say anything about your immortal soul?"

"She need not say it. If a soul is separated from a body for too long, the body will die."

"But your body isn't mortal, which means it can be separated indefinitely from its soul without dying," she said.

Kalona struggled to keep the terror her words filled him with from his expression. "It is true that I cannot die, but that does not mean I will remain undamaged if my spirit leaves my body for too long." I could age . . . go mad . . . become a never dying shell of myself . . . The possibilities swirled through his mind.

Neferet shrugged. "Then you will have to be sure you finish your task soon, so that you may return to your lovely immortal body before it is irreparably damaged." She smiled seductively at him. "I would very much dislike it if anything happened to your body, my love."

"Neferet, don't do this. You are putting into motion things that will require payment, the consequences of which even you will not want to face."

"Do not threaten me! I released you from your imprisonment. I loved you. And then I watched you fawn over that simpering teenager. I want her gone from my life! Consequences? I embrace them! I am not the weak, ineffective High Priestess of a rule-following goddess any longer. Don't you understand that? Had you not been so distracted by that child, you would know it without me telling you. I am an immortal, the same as you,

Kalona!" Her voice was eerie, amplified with power. "We are perfectly matched. You used to believe that as well, and that is something you will believe again, when Zoey Redbird is no more."

Kalona stared at her, understanding that Neferet was utterly, truly mad, and wondering why that madness only served to feed her power and intensify her beauty.

"So this is what I have decided to do," she continued, speaking methodically. "I am going to keep your sexy, immortal body safely tucked away underground somewhere while your soul travels to the Otherworld and makes sure Zoey does not return here."

"Nyx will never allow it!" The words burst from him before he could stop them.

"Nyx always allows free will. As her former High Priestess, I know without any doubt that she will allow you to choose to travel in spirit to the Otherworld," Neferet said slyly. "Remember, Kalona, my true love, if you ensure Zoey's death, you will be removing the last impediment to us reigning side by side. You and I will be powerful beyond imagining in this world of modern marvels. Think of it— we will subjugate humans and bring back the reign of vampyres with all the beauty and passion and limitless power that means. The earth will be ours. We will, indeed, give new life to the glorious past!"

Kalona knew she was playing on his weaknesses. Silently, he cursed himself for allowing her to have learned too much about his deepest desires. He'd trusted her, so Neferet knew that because he wasn't Erebus he could never truly rule beside Nyx in the Otherworld, and he was driven to re- create as much of what he'd lost here in this modern world.

"You see, my love, when you consider it logically, it is only right that you follow Zoey and sever the link between her soul and her body. Doing so simply serves your ultimate desires." Neferet spoke nonchalantly, as if the two of them were discussing the choice of material for her latest gown.

"How am I even to find Zoey's soul?" He tried to match her matter of fact tone. "The Otherworld is a realm so vast, only the gods and goddesses can traverse it."

Neferet's bland expression tightened, making her cruel beauty terrible to behold. "Do not pretend you don't have a connection to her soul!" The Tsi Sgili immortal drew a deep breath. In a more reasonable tone, she continued, "Admit it, my love; you could find Zoey even if no one else could. What is your choice, Kalona? To rule on earth at my side, or to remain a slave to the past?"

"I choose to rule. I will always choose to rule," he said without hesitation.

As soon as he spoke, Neferet's eyes changed. The green within them became totally engulfed in scarlet. She turned the glowing orbs on him— holding, entrapping, entrancing. "Then hear me, Kalona, Fallen Warrior of Nyx, by my oath I shall keep your body safe. When Zoey Redbird, fledging High Priestess of Nyx, is no more, I swear to you I will remove these dark chains and allow your spirit to return. Then I will take you to the rooftop of our castle on Capri and let the sky breathe life and strength into you so that you will rule this realm as my consort, my protector, my Erebus." As Kalona watched, helpless to stop her, Neferet drew one long, pointed fingernail across the palm of her right hand. Cupping the blood that pooled there, she held her hand up, offering. "By blood I claim this power; by blood I bind this oath." All around her, Darkness stirred and descended on her palm, writhing, shivering, drinking. Kalona could feel the draw of that Darkness. It spoke to his soul with seductive, powerful whispers.

"Yes!" The word was a moan torn deep from his throat as Kalona yielded himself to the greedy Darkness.

When Neferet continued, her voice was magnified, swollen with power. "It is your own choice that I have sealed this oath by blood with Darkness, but should you fail me and break it—"

"I will not fail."

Her smile was unworldly in its beauty; her eyes roiled with blood. "If you, Kalona, Fallen Warrior of Nyx, break this oath and fail in my sworn quest to destroy Zoey Redbird, fledgling High Priestess of Nyx, I shall hold dominion over your spirit for as long as you are an immortal."

The answering words came unbidden by him, evoked by the seductive Darkness, which for centuries he'd chosen over Light. "If I fail, you shall hold dominion over my spirit for as long as I am an immortal."

"Thus I have sworn." Again Neferet slashed her palm, creating a bloody X in her flesh. The copper scent wafted to Kalona like smoke rising from fire as she again raised her hand to Darkness. "Thus it shall be!" Neferet's face twisted in pain as Darkness drank from her again, but she didn't flinch— didn't move until the air around her pulsed, bloated with her blood and her oath.

Only then did she lower her hand. Her tongue snaked out, licking the scarlet line and ending the bleeding. Neferet walked to him, bent, and gently placed her hands on either side of his face, much as he had held the human boy before delivering his deathblow. He could feel Darkness thrumming around and within her, a raging bull waiting eagerly for his mistress's command.

Her blood-reddened lips paused just short of touching his. "With the power that rushes through my blood, and by the strength of the lives I have taken, I command you, my delicious threads of Darkness, to pull this Oath Bound immortal's soul from his body and speed him to the Otherworld. Go and do as I order, and I swear I will sacrifice to you the life of an innocent you have been unable to taint. So thee for me, I mote it be!"

Neferet drew in a deep breath, and Kalona saw the dark threads she'd summoned slither between her full, red lips. She inhaled Darkness until she was swollen with it, and then she covered his mouth with hers and, with that blackened, blood- tainted kiss, blew Darkness within him with such force that it ripped his already wounded soul from his body. As his soul shrieked in soundless agony, Kalona was forced up, up, and into the realm from which his Goddess had banished him, leaving his body lifeless, chained, Oath Bound by evil, and at the mercy of Neferet.