



Into the Dark: The Darkest FireThe Amazon's CurseThe Darkest Prison (Lords of the Underworld)

By Gena Showalter

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By Gena Showalter **Bibliography**

- Sales Rank: #432182 in Books
- Brand: Novels Harlequin Books
- Published on: 2010-04-27
- Released on: 2010-04-27
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 6.62" h x 1.01" w x 4.21" l, .40 pounds
- Binding: Mass Market Paperback
- 400 pages

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Editorial Review

About the Author

Gena Showalter is the New York Times and USA Today bestselling author of over 25 books, ranging from white-hot paranormal romances set all over the world (and even in some places that do not technically exist), sexy contemporary novels and other-worldly young adult novels.

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Every day for hundreds of years the goddess had visited Hell and every day Geryon had watched her from his station, desire heating his blood more than the flames of damnation beyond his post ever had. He should not have studied her that first time and should have kept his gaze downcast all the times since. He was a slave to the prince of darkness, spawned by evil; she was a goddess, created in light.

He could not have her, he thought, hands fisting. No matter how much he might wish otherwise. She would not want him anyway. This...obsession was pointless and brought him nothing but despair. He did not need more despair.

And yet, still he watched her this day as she floated through the barren cavern, coral-tipped fingers tracing the jagged stones that separated underground from underworld. Golden ringlets flowed down her elegant back and framed a face so perfect, so lovely, Aphrodite herself could not compare. Eyes of starlight narrowed, a rosy color blooming in those cheeks of smooth alabaster.

"The wall is cracked," she said, her voice like a song amid the hiss of nearby flames—and the unnatural screams that always accompanied them.

He shook his head, positive he had merely imagined the words. In all their centuries together, they had never spoken, never deviated from their routine. As the Guardian of Hell, he ensured the gate remained closed until a spirit needed to be cast inside. That way, no one and nothing escaped—and if they tried, he rendered punishment. As the goddess of Oppression, she fortified the physical barrier with only a touch. Silence was never breeched.

Uncertainty darkened her features. "Have you nothing to say?"

She stood in front of him a moment later, though he never saw her move. The scent of honeysuckle suddenly overshadowed the stink of sulfur and melting flesh, and he inhaled deeply, closing his eyes in ecstasy. Oh, that she would remain just as she was....

"Guardian," she prompted.

"Goddess." He forced his lids to open gradually, slowly revealing the glow of her beauty. Up close, she was not as perfect as he had thought. She was better. A smattering of freckles dotted her sweetly sloped nose, and dimples appeared with the curve of her half-smile. Exquisite.

What did she think of *him*? he wondered.

She probably thought him a monster, hideous and misshapen. Which he was. But if she thought so, she did

not show it. Only curiosity rested in those starlight eyes. For the wall, he suspected, not for him. Even when he'd been human, women had wanted nothing to do with him. They'd run from him the moment he'd turned his attention to them. He'd been too tall, too brawny, too bumbling. And that was *before* he'd resembled an ogre.

Sometimes he wondered if he'd been tainted at birth.

"Those cracks were not there yesterday," she said. "What has caused such damage? And so swiftly?"

"A horde of Demon Lords rise from the pit daily and fight to break out. They have grown tired of their confinement here and seek living humans to torment."

She accepted the news without reaction. "Have you their names?"

He nodded. He did not need to see beyond the gate to know who visited on the other side; he sensed it. Always. "Violence, Death, Lies, Doubt, Misery. Shall I go on?"

"No," she said softly. "I understand. The worst of the worst."

"Yes. They bang and they claw from the other side, desperate to reach the mortal realm."

"Well, stop them." A command, laced with husky entreaty.

If only. He would have given up the last vestiges of his humanity to do as she wished. Anything to repay the daily gift of her presence. Anything to keep her just where she was, prolonging the sweetness of her scent. "I am forbidden to leave my post, just as I am forbidden to open the gates for any reason but allowing one of the damned inside. I'm afraid I cannot grant your request."

Besides, the only way to stop a determined demon was to kill it, and killing a High Lord was another forbidden act.

A sigh slipped from her. "Do you always do as you're told?"

"Always." Once he had fought the invisible ties that bound him. Once, but no longer. To fight was to invite pain and suffering—not for him, but for others. Innocent humans who resembled his mother, his father and his brothers—because his true mother, father and brothers had already been slain—were brought here and tortured in front of him. The screams... oh, the screams. Far worse than the ones that seeped from Hell. And the sights... He shuddered.

Had the pain and suffering been heaped upon *him*, he would not have cared. Would have laughed and fought all the harder. What was a little more pain? But Lucifer, brother to Hades and prince of the demons, needed him healthy, whole, so had found other ways to gain his cooperation.

The memories would forever haunt him, but might have faded during the night, if he'd required sleep. He remained awake, however, every hour of every day, never able to forget.

"Obedience. I expected differently from you," she said. "You are a warrior, so strong and assured."

Yes, he was a warrior. But he was also a slave. One did not cancel out the other. "I am sorry, goddess. My strength and assurance change nothing."

"I will pay you to help me," she insisted. "Name your price. Whatever you desire shall be yours."

If only, Geryon thought again. He would ask for a single taste of her lips.

Why limit himself, though? he wondered next. *Whatever he desired.* He could ask for a night in her arms. Naked. Touching. Tasting. Yes. *Yes.* Every muscle in his body clenched. In arousal. In desperation.

In despair.

No. He could not risk the suffering of the innocent—*why do you bother with them?*—simply to sate his craving for the lovely goddess. So have a kiss? A night with her? No again.

Finally I know true torture. He ground his teeth. Why did he bother? Because without good, there would be only evil. And he had seen too much evil over the centuries. He would not be responsible for more.

"Guardian?" the goddess prompted. *"Anything."*

Do not speak. Do not do this. Geryon gulped. "I am sorry, goddess." *No. Say no more. Ask for that kiss, at the very least.* "As I told you, I cannot help you." *No, no, no.*

How he hated himself just then.

Her delicate shoulders sagged in disappointment, and his self-hatred grew. "But... why? You want to keep the demons in Hell just as much as I do. Right?"

"Right." Geryon didn't want to tell her his reasons for refusing her, was still ashamed after all this time. Tell her, however, he would. Perhaps then she would return to the old ways and pretend he did not exist. As it was, his craving for her was deepening, intensifying, his body hardening. Ready.

She's not for you.

How many times would he need the reminder before this conversation ended?

"I sold my soul," he admitted. He had been one of the first humans to walk the earth. Despite his massive build and bumbling ways, he'd been content with his lot and enraptured by his mate, even though she'd been chosen by his family and, like all the other females of his acquaintance, had not desired him in return.

A year into their marriage, she had grown sick, and he had despaired. Though she had found no joy with him, she had belonged to him, and ensuring her safety and well-being had been his duty. So he had cried out to the gods for assistance.

They had ignored him, and his despair became unbearable.

That was when Lucifer appeared before him. So cunning, that one was.

To save his mate—and perhaps finally win her heart— Geryon had willingly given himself to the dark prince. And found himself transformed from man to beast. Horns had sprouted atop his head, and his hands had become clubs, his nails claws. Dark, carmine fur had covered the skin on his legs, while hooves replaced his feet.

In seconds, he'd been more animal than human.

His wife had healed, as his contract with Lucifer stated, but she had not softened toward Geryon. No, his selfless act had meant nothing to her and she had left him for another man. A man she had apparently been

seeing all along.

What a fool he'd been. A cuckold. *All for nothing.*

"What thoughts fill your head, Guardian? Never have you appeared so...broken."

The goddess. His hands fisted, claws digging deep into his palms, as he refocused on her. There had been compassion in her tone. Compassion he must ignore. Unemotional, that's how he had to be. Always. Otherwise, he would not survive his time here.

"My actions are no longer mine to command. No matter how I wish otherwise, I cannot help you. Now please. Don't you have duties to attend to?"

"I am doing my duty now. Are you?"

He flushed.

She sighed. "Forgive my waspishness. I am frazzled." The goddess studied him, her head tilting to the side. He shifted uncomfortably, such scrutiny unnerving given his sickening appearance. To his surprise, revulsion did not darken her lovely gaze as she said, "Your soul belongs to the dark prince?"

"Yes."

"And if your soul was returned to you, you would aid me?"

"Yes," he repeated, the word a croak. Would she still offer him a boon for that aid?

"Very well. I will see what I can do."

His eyes widened in horror. Approach Lucifer? "No, you must—"

She disappeared before he could stop her.

Inner Corridors of Hell

"Lucifer, hear me well. I demand to speak with you. You *will* appear before me. This day, in this room. Alone. I will remain exactly as I am." Kadence, goddess of Oppression, knew to state her wants precisely or the demon prince would "interpret" them however he wished. "And you will be clothed."

Were she simply to demand an audience, he might whisk her to his bed, her arms and legs tied, her clothing gone, a legion of fiends surrounding her.

Several minutes ticked by and there was no response to her summons. But then, she'd known there wouldn't be. He enjoyed making her wait. Made him feel powerful. *Keep busy. Act as if you do not care.*

Kadence eyed her surroundings, as if studying them was exactly what she'd come to do. Rather than stone and mortar, the walls of Lucifer's palace were comprised of flames. Crackling, orange-gold. Deadly.

His throne was comprised of bone, ash and more of those flames. Off to the side was a bloodstained altar. A lifeless body still lay across it—minus a head. The head would

reattach all too soon, however, so that the torturing could begin anew. That was the way of it here.

No soul would escape. Even in death.

She hated everything about this place. Plumes of black smoke wafted from the blazes, curling around her like fingers of the damned. So badly she wanted to wave her hand in front of her nose, but she did not. She wouldn't show weakness—even with so small an action.

Did she dare, she knew she would find herself *drowning* in the noxious fumes. Lucifer loved nothing more than exploiting vulnerabilities.

Kadence had learned that lesson well. The first time she had visited, she'd come to inform both Hades and Lucifer that she had been appointed their warden. As one who embodied the essence of subjugation and conquest, there was no one better to ensure that demons and dead alike remained here.

Or so the gods had thought, which was why they'd chosen her for this task.

She had not agreed, but refusing them would have invited punishment. Many times since accepting, however, she'd thought perhaps punishment would have been better. Having stones thrown at her, bloody carcasses left on her doorstep in warning...they hardly compared to spending her days sleeping in a nearby cave—not a true sleep but a watchful one, her mind's eye drifting over the different demon camps. Could hardly compare to spending her nights surveying a wall of rock.

As the Guardian watched.

That, however, was not such a hardship.

For many years, his attention had unnerved her, for he was unlike anyone she had ever met: half man, half beast, all... edge. But then she'd come to find comfort in his detached gaze. He protected her from demons and souls who slipped through the gate, attacking everyone in their path. No matter the harm to himself.

She could do no less for him.

I sold my soul, he'd said. For what? she wondered. What had he received in return? Did he consider the trade a good one? She'd wanted to ask him, but had recalled how uncomfortable he had been with her questions about the wall. He would not have welcomed a discussion about something so personal.

And that was probably for the best. Only her job mattered right now. How could she not have known demon High Lords were determined to escape *forever*?

Had Lucifer somehow blocked her visions of this realm? He was the only one strong enough to do so. If so, what did he hope to gain? Were she to ask, he would merely lie, that much she knew.

She'd never felt more helpless.

No, that wasn't true. During her first visit, Lucifer had sensed her trepidation—and he'd since used every opportunity to nurture it. A fire-coated touch here, a wicked taunt there. Every time she had come here to report an infraction, she had wilted under his attentions.

That had disappointed the gods. They would have called her home, she was sure, had they not already bound her to the wall, an act that had been meant to help with her duties, not hinder them. But not even the gods had known just how deeply the bond would go. Rather than simply sensing when the wall needed fortification, she'd realized it was her reason for living.

Her blood now sang with its essence.

The first time one of the demons had scratched it, she'd felt the sting and had gasped, shocked. Now, it no longer shocked her, though she still felt every contact. When a soul brushed it, her skin felt tickled. When the inferno licked at it, she felt burned. So why had she not sensed these latest ministrations?

Oh, she'd felt her body draining of strength, little by little, pains shooting through her seemingly for no reason, but her visions had been calm. Well, as calm as such visions could be, considering what she was forced to witness on a daily basis.

Now, at least, she knew why she'd hurt. Bound as she was to this dark underworld, that crack in the outer wall was literally killing her.

You are losing focus. Concentrate! Distraction could cost her. Dearly. And the outcome of this meeting was more important than any that had come before it.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Joanne Hall:

Do you have favorite book? For those who have, what is your favorite's book? Publication is very important thing for us to be aware of everything in the world. Each book has different aim or goal; it means that guide has different type. Some people really feel enjoy to spend their time to read a book. They can be reading whatever they take because their hobby is actually reading a book. Think about the person who don't like looking at a book? Sometime, man or woman feel need book when they found difficult problem or maybe exercise. Well, probably you'll have this Into the Dark: The Darkest FireThe Amazon's CurseThe Darkest Prison (Lords of the Underworld).

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