



## The Darkest Pleasure (Lords of the Underworld)

By Gena Showalter

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Danika is on the run. For months she's eluded the Lords of the Underworld, immortal warriors who won't rest until she and her family have been destroyed. But her dreams are haunted by Reyes, the warrior whose searing touch she can't forget. Yet a future together could mean death to all they both hold dear....

**And be sure to check out the latest book in the irresistibly seductive Lords of the Underworld series, *The Darkest Torment*, featuring the fierce warrior Baden who will stop at nothing to claim the exquisite human with the power to soothe the beast inside him...**

Previously published.

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## **The Darkest Pleasure (Lords of the Underworld) By Gena Showalter Bibliography**

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## Editorial Review

### Review

Showalter at her finest. --New York Times bestselling author Karen Marie Moning on *The Darkest Night*

One of the premier authors of paranormal romance. --New York Times bestselling author Kresley Cole

### About the Author

Gena is the New York Times and USA Today bestselling author of over 25 books.

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Reyes stood on the roof of his Budapest fortress, five stories up, his feet balanced precariously on the highest ledge. Above him, moonlight seeped red and yellow from the sky, blood mixed with fickle gold, dark mixed with light, wounds freshly cut in the endless expanse of black velvet.

He gazed down at the gloomy, waiting void beneath him, the taunting ground opening its arms as if begging to embrace him. *Thousands of years, and I'm still reduced to this.*

Frigid wind blustered, ruffling his hair in every direction, tickling his bare chest, the hated butterfly etched up onto his neck and the remembered lifeblood splattered there. Not his blood, though. No, not his, but his friend's. Every stroke of hair against that phantom evidence of life and death was like kindling thrown into the fire of his blazing guilt.

So many times he'd come here, wishing for things that could never be. So many times he'd prayed for absolution, relief from his daily torment and the demon inside him responsible...relief from his utter dependence on self-mutilation.

His prayers had never been answered. *Would* never be answered. This was what he was, what he would always be. And his agony would only increase. Once an immortal warrior to the gods, he was now a Lord of the Underworld, possessed by one of the many spirits formerly locked inside *dimOuniak*. From favor to dishonor, beloved to despised. From happiness to constant misery.

He ground his teeth. Mortals knew *dimOuniak* as Pandora's box; he knew it as the source of his eternal downfall. He and his friends had defiantly opened it all those centuries ago; now he and his friends *were* the box, each holding a demon inside himself.

*Jump*, his demon beseeched.

His demon: Pain. His constant companion. The tempting whisper in the back of his mind, the dark entity that craved unspeakable evil. The supernatural force he battled every damned minute of every damned day.

*Jump.*

"Not yet." A few more seconds of anticipation, of knowing most of his bones would shatter on contact. He grinned at the thought. The razor-sharp bone shards would cut his injured, swollen organs and those organs would burst like water balloons; his skin would rip from the excess fluid and this time the lifeblood that drained would be his own. Agony, such blissful agony, would consume him.

For a little while, anyway.

Slowly his smile faded. Within days—hours, if he failed to hurt himself badly enough—his body would heal itself, totally and completely. He would wake up, whole again, Pain once more a commanding force inside his mind, too loud to be denied. But oh, for those few blessed ticks of the clock before his bones began to realign, before his organs began to weave back together and his skin to reconnect, before blood once more pumped through his veins, he would experience nirvana. The ultimate paradise. Rapture of the sweetest kind. He would writhe in the exquisite pleasure the pain brought with it—his *only* source of pleasure. The demon would purr with utter contentment, so drunk on the sensation it was unable to speak, and Reyes would experience such blissful peace.

For a little while. Always, only, a little while.

"I do not need another reminder about how fleeting my peace is," he muttered to drown the depressing thought. He knew how quickly time passed. A year sometimes felt like nothing more than a day. A day sometimes felt like nothing more than a minute.

And yet, both were sometimes infinite to him. Just one of the many contradictions of life as a Lord of the Underworld.

*Jump*, Pain said. Then, more insistently, *Jump! Jump!*

"I told you. Just a few seconds more." Once again Reyes glanced at the ground. Jagged rocks winked in that bleeding moonlight, the clear puddles surrounding them rippling in the wind. Mist rose like ghostly fingers, summoning him closer, wonderfully closer. "Plunging a blade into your enemy's throat kills him, yes," he told the demon, "but then it's over, done, and you have nothing left to anticipate."

*Jump!* A snarled command, impatient and needy, a child throwing a tantrum.

"Soon."

*Jumpjumpjump!*

Yes, sometimes demons really were like whiny human children. Reyes shoved a hand through his tangled hair, a few strands ripping from his scalp. He knew of only one way to shut his other half up. Obedience. Why he'd even tried to resist and savor the moment, he didn't know.

*Jump!*

"Maybe this time you'll be sent back to hell," he muttered. A man could wish, anyway. Finally, he splayed his arms. Closed his eyes. Leaned...

"Come down from there," he heard a voice say from behind him.

Reyes's eyelids popped open at the unwelcome intrusion, and he stiffened. He rebalanced but didn't turn. He knew why Lucien was here, and he was too ashamed to face his friend. While the warrior understood what he dealt with because of his demon, there would be no understanding what he'd done.

"That's the plan, coming down. Leave and I'll see that it gets done."

"You know what I meant." There was no hint of laughter in Lucien's voice. "I need to talk to you."

The dewy scent of roses suddenly saturated the air, thick and lush and so unexpected in the late-winter night that Reyes would have sworn he'd been transported to a spring meadow. A human would have found the aroma hypnotic, lulling, almost drugging, and would have done anything the warrior asked. Reyes merely found it annoying. After thousands of years together, Lucien should have known the fragrance held no power over him.

"We'll talk tomorrow," he said tightly.

*Jump!*

"We'll talk now. Afterward, you may do whatever you please."

After Reyes admitted his newest crime? No, thanks. Guilt, shame and grief might bring emotional pain, but none would soothe his demon in any way. Only physical suffering offered relief, which was why Reyes had always guarded his emotional well-being so diligently.

*Yes, and you've done such a great job at it.*

He ran his tongue over his teeth, unsure who had whispered that sarcastic little gem. Himself or Pain. "I'm in a bad place right now, Lucien."

"As are the others. As am I."

"You, at least, have a woman to comfort you."

"You have friends. You have me." Lucien, keeper of the demon of Death, was tasked with escorting human souls to the hereafter, whether the hereafter was heaven or the deepest fires of hell. He was stoic, ever calm—most of the time. He'd become their leader, the man every warrior residing in this Budapest fortress turned to for guidance and aid. "Talk to me."

Reyes didn't like to deny his friend, but he told himself it was better that Lucien did not learn the terrible thing he'd done.

Even as Reyes thought it, he recognized the lie for what it was: a shameful lack of courage on his part. "Lucien," he began, only to stop. Growl.

"The tracking dye has worn off and no one knows where Aeron is," Lucien said. "No one knows what he's doing, if he's the one who slaughtered those humans in the States. Maddox said he called you right after Aeron escaped the dungeon. Then Sabin told me you left Rome and the Temple of the Unspoken Ones in a hurry. Want to tell me where you went?"

"No." Truth. He didn't. "But you may rest assured Aeron is no longer able to slaughter humans."

There was a pause, the rose scent intensifying.

"How do you know for sure?" The question possessed a bite.

Reyes shrugged.

"Why don't I tell you what I think happened?" Where Lucien's tone had been sharp before, it was now threaded with expectation. And fear? "You went after Aeron, hoping to protect the girl."

The girl. Aeron had kidnapped *the girl*. Aeron had been ordered by the new gods, the Titans, to murder *the girl*. Reyes had taken one look at *the girl* and allowed her to invade his most private thoughts, color his every action and reduce him to a lovesick fool.

With only a glance she had changed his life, and not for the better. And yet, the fact that Lucien refused to say her name pissed Reyes off royally. Reyes desired that girl more than he desired a hammer to the skull. For Pain, that was saying something.

"Well?" Lucien prompted.

"You're right," Reyes said through tight lips. Why not admit it? he suddenly thought. His emotions were in turmoil and remaining quiet had only roused them further. More than that, his friends could not hate him any more than he hated himself. "I went after Aeron."

The admission hung in the air, as heavy as shackles, and he paused.

"You found him."

"I found him." Reyes squared his shoulders. "I also... destroyed him."

Rocks crumbled under Lucien's boots as he stalked forward. "You *killed* him?"

"Worse." Still, Reyes did not turn. He peered down longingly at the still-waiting ground. "I buried him."

The pounding of footsteps ceased abruptly. "You buried him but did not kill him?" Confusion drifted from Lucien's voice. "I do not understand."

"He was about to kill Danika. I could see the torment in his eyes and knew he did not want to do it. I cut him down to slow him and he *thanked* me, Lucien. Thanked me. He begged me to stop him permanently. He begged me to take his head. But I couldn't do it. I raised my sword, but I just couldn't do it. So I had Kane collect Maddox's chains and bring them to me. Since Maddox no longer needs them, I used them to lock Aeron underground."

Reyes had once been forced to shackle Maddox to a bed every night, cursed to stab his friend in the stomach six hated times, knowing the warrior would awaken in the morning and Reyes would have to kill him all over again. *Some friend I am.*

After hundreds of years, Maddox had come to accept the curse. Restraining him, however, had been a necessity. As the keeper of Violence, Maddox tended to attack without warning. Even his friends. And as strong as the warrior was, he would have rent man-made metal in seconds. So they'd commandeered links forged by the gods, links no one, not even an immortal, could open without the proper key.

Like Maddox, Aeron had been—was...

## **Users Review**

### **From reader reviews:**

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