

Excerpt: The Darkest Fire

CHAPTER ONE

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. 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 flame -- 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 breached.

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 did think 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 *before* he'd resembled an ogre.

Sometimes he'd 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. 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. Or would have, if he'd required sleep. He remained awake, every hour of every day.

"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 changes 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 only be evil. And he had seen too much evil over the centuries. He would not be responsible more.

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