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Written by Gena Showalter

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Gena Showalter

THE
DARKEST
WHISPER



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CHAPTER ONE

SABIN, KEEPER OF THE DEMON of Doubt, stood in the catacombs of an ancient pyramid, panting, sweating, his hands soaked in his enemy's blood, his body cut and bruised as he surveyed the carnage around him. Carnage he'd helped create.

Torches flickered orange and gold, twining with shadows along the stone walls. Walls that were now spattered with vivid red, dripping...pooling. The sandy floor was thick like paste, wet and colored black. Half an hour ago it had been honey brown, grains sparkling and scattering as they'd marched. Now bodies littered every square inch of the small corridor, the scent of fatality already rising from them.

Nine of his enemy had survived the attack. They'd already been stripped of their weapons, hustled into a corner and bound with rope. Most trembled in fear. A few had their shoulders squared, their noses in the air, hatred in their eyes, refusing to back down even in defeat. Damned admirable.

Too bad that bravery had to be quashed.

Brave men didn't spill their secrets, and Sabin wanted their secrets.

He was a warrior who did what needed to be done, when it needed to be done, no matter what was required of him. Killing, torturing, seducing. He didn't hesitate

to ask his men to do the same, either. With Hunters—mortals who'd decided he and his fellow Lords of the Underworld made good whipping boys for the world's evil—victory was the only thing that mattered. For only by winning the war could his friends finally know peace. Peace they deserved. Peace he craved for them.

Shallow, erratic rasps of breath filled Sabin's ears. His, his friends', his enemies'. They'd fought with every ounce of strength they possessed, each of them. It had been a battle of good versus evil, and evil had won. Or rather, what these Hunters considered evil. He and his brothers-by-circumstance thought otherwise.

Yeah, long ago they'd opened Pandora's box, unleashing the demons from inside. But they had been punished eternally, each warrior cursed by the gods to host one of those vile fiends inside himself. Yeah, they'd once been slaves to their new, demonic halves, destructive and violent, killers without a conscience. But they had control now, human in all the ways that mattered. For the most part.

Sometimes the demons *did* fight...*did* win...*did* destroy.

Still. *We deserve to live*, he thought. Like everyone else, they suffered if their friends were hurt, read books, watched movies, gave to charity. Fell in love. Hunters, though, would never see it that way. They were convinced the world would be a better place without the Lords. A utopia, serene and perfect. They believed every sin ever committed could be laid at a demon's feet. Maybe because they were dumb as shit. Maybe because they hated their lives and were simply looking for someone to blame. Either way, killing them had become the most important mission of Sabin's life. *His* utopia was a life without *them*.

Which was why he and the others had relinquished the comforts of their Budapest home to spend the past three weeks searching every godsforsaken pyramid in Egypt for ancient artifacts that would lead to the recovery of Pandora's box—the very thing Hunters planned to use to destroy them. Finally, he and his friends had hit the jackpot.

"Amun," he said, spotting the soldier in a far, dark corner. As usual, man blended perfectly with shadow. Sabin motioned toward the captives with a grim shake of his head. "You know what to do."

Amun, keeper of Secrets, nodded forbiddingly before striding forward. Silent, always silent, as if afraid the terrible secrets he'd gleaned over the centuries would spill from him if he dared utter a single word.

Seeing the hulking warrior who'd ripped through their brethren like a knife through silk, the remaining Hunters took a collective step backward. Even the brave ones. Wise of them.

Amun was tall, leanly muscled, with a stride that was somehow both purposeful and graceful. Purpose without grace would have made him seem normal, like any other soldier. The combination allowed him to exude the kind of quiet savagery usually found in predators used to bringing their prey home between their jaws.

He reached the Hunters and stopped. Scanned the thinned crowd. Then shoved forward and grabbed the one in the center by the throat, lifting him so that they were eye to eye. The human's legs flailed, his hands clutching Amun's wrists as his skin blanched.

"Let him go, you filthy demon," one of the Hunters shouted, jerking on his comrade's waist. "You've killed countless innocents, ruined so many lives already!"

Amun was unmoved. They all were.

“He’s a good man,” another cried. “He doesn’t deserve to die. Especially at the hands of such evil!”

Gideon, the blue-haired, kohl-eyed keeper of Lies, was at Amun’s side in the next instant, batting the protestors away. “Touch him again, and I’ll kiss the hell out of you.” He withdrew a pair of serrated knives, still bloody from his most recent clashes.

Kiss equaled *beat* in Gideon’s upside-down world. Or was it *kill*? Sabin had lost track of Lies’s code.

A moment passed in confused silence, the Hunters trying to figure out what exactly Gideon meant. Before they could decide, Amun’s hostage stilled, wilting completely, and Amun dropped him to the ground in a motionless heap.

Amun remained in place for a long while. No one touched him. Not even the Hunters. They were too preoccupied with reviving their fallen cohort. They didn’t know that it was too late, that his brain had been wiped, Amun the new owner of all his deepest secrets. Perhaps even his memories. The warrior had never told Sabin how it worked, and Sabin had never asked.

Slowly Amun turned, his body stiff. His black gaze met Sabin’s for a bleak, tormented moment in which he couldn’t mask the pain of having a new voice inside his head. Then he blinked, hiding his pain as he had a thousand times before, and strode to the far wall while Sabin watched, resolute. *I will not feel guilty. This has to be done.*

The wall looked the same as any other, jagged stones piled on top of each other and rising at a slant, yet Amun placed one hand on the seventh stone down, fingers splayed, then his other hand on the fifth up, fingers closed. Moving in sync, he twisted one wrist to the left, one to the right.

The stones pivoted with him.

Sabin observed the proceedings with awe. Never ceased to amaze him, what Amun could learn in a few heartbeats of time.

Once the stones settled into their new positions, a crack formed in the center of each, branching up, down, aligning with a streak of space Sabin hadn't noticed before. A section of the wall pulled back...back, and finally began to inch to the side. There would be a gaping doorway when it finished, wide enough for an army of hulking beasts like himself.

As it continued to widen, cool air blustered through the catacombs, causing the torches to sputter and crackle. *Hurry*, he projected to the stones. Had anything ever moved with such agonizing slowness?

"Any Hunters waiting on the other side?" he asked, sliding his Sig Sauer from his waist and checking the clip. Three bullets left. He dug a few more from his pocket and reloaded. The custom silencer remained in place.

Amun nodded and held up seven fingers before standing guard at that ever-widening chasm.

Seven Hunters against ten Lords. He didn't count Amun because the man would soon be too distracted by the new voice in his head to fight. But gods knew Amun would still (silently) demand to be included in the action. Still. Poor Hunters. They didn't have a chance. "They know we're here?"

A shake of that dark head.

No cameras watching their every move, then. Excellent.

"Seven Hunters is child's play," Lucien, keeper of Death, confirmed as he slumped against the far wall. He was pale, his mismatched eyes bright with...fever? "Go

on without me. I'm fading. I'll soon have souls to escort, anyway. And then I'll have to flash our prisoners to the dungeon in Buda."

Thanks to the demon of Death, Lucien could move from one location to another with only a thought and was often forced to usher the dead into the hereafter. That didn't mean he himself was immune to destruction. Sabin frowned over at him. Studied him. The scars on his face were more pronounced, his nose out of joint. There was a bullet wound in his shoulder, one in his stomach, and from the looks of the crimson stain spreading from his lower back, his kidney.

"You okay, man?"

Lucien smiled wryly. "I'll live. Tomorrow, though, I'll probably wish I hadn't. A few organs are shredded."

Ouch. Been there, had to recover from that. "At least you don't have to regenerate a limb."

From the corner of his eye, he saw Amun flash hand signs.

"Not only are there no cameras installed, but they're in a chamber with soundproof walls," Sabin interpreted. "This was an ancient prison and the masters did not want anyone to hear their slaves screaming. The Hunters are completely oblivious to our presence, which should make it easy to ambush them."

"You don't need me for a simple ambush. I'll stay behind with Lucien," Reyes said, sliding to his ass and propping his back on a stone to hold himself up. Reyes had been paired with the demon of Pain. Physical agony brought him pleasure and being injured actually strengthened him. While fighting. When the fight ended, however, he weakened like anyone else. Right now, he was more battered than the rest of them, with a cheek so swollen his line of vision

had to be shit. “Besides, someone needs to guard the prisoners.”

Seven against eight, then. Poor Hunters. Actually, Sabin suspected Reyes wanted to stay behind to guard Lucien’s body from the enemy. Lucien could take it with him to the spirit world only when he was strong enough, which he probably wasn’t now.

“Your women are going to give me hell,” Sabin muttered. The two had recently fallen in love, and both Anya and Danika had asked only one thing of Sabin before the warriors left for Egypt: bring my man back safely.

When the boys arrived home in this damaged condition, Danika would shake her head at Sabin in disappointment as she rushed to soothe Reyes and Sabin would feel slimier than the mud on his boots. Anya would shoot him exactly as Lucien had been shot, *then* comfort Lucien, and Sabin would feel pain. Lots and lots of pain.

Sighing, Sabin eyed the rest of the warriors, trying to decide who was good to go and who needed to remain behind. Maddox—Violence—was the fiercest fighter he’d ever known. Right now the warrior was as blood-soaked as Sabin and panting for breath, but he’d already moved beside Amun, ready for action. His woman wasn’t going to be any happier with Sabin than the others.

Slight shift, and the lovely Cameo came into view. She was the keeper of Misery, as well as the only female soldier among them. What she lacked in size she made up for in ferocity. Besides, all she had to do was start talking, all the sorrows of the world in her voice, and humans were likely to kill *themselves* without her ever having to lay a finger on them. Someone had sliced at

her neck, leaving three deep grooves. It didn't seem to slow her down as she finished cleaning her machete and joined Amun and Maddox.

Another shift. Paris was the keeper of Promiscuity and once upon a time, he'd been the most jovial among them. Now he seemed harder, more restless with every day that passed, though Sabin couldn't fathom what had caused the change. Whatever the reason, he currently loomed in front of the Hunters, huffing and growling and so keyed for war he vibrated with brutal energy. And though there were two gushing holes in his right leg, Sabin didn't think the warrior would be asking to rest anytime soon.

Beside him was Aeron, Wrath. Only recently had the gods freed him from a curse of bloodlust where no one around him had been safe. He'd lived to hurt, to kill. At moments like these, he still did. Today he'd fought as though that lust still consumed him, hacking at and mauling anyone within his reach. That was good, except...

How much worse would that bloodlust be when the next fight ended? Sabin feared they would have to summon Legion, the tiny, blood-hungry demon who worshipped Aeron like a god and was the only one who could calm Aeron during his darker moods. Unfortunately, she was currently doing surveillance work for them in hell. Sabin liked to keep up-to-date on Underworld happenings. Knowledge was power and one never knew what one would be able to use.

Aeron suddenly slammed a fist into a Hunter's temple, sending the human to the floor in an unconscious heap.

Sabin blinked at him. "What was that for?"

"He was about to attack."

Doubtful, but just like that, Paris cut whatever in-

visible tether had been holding him in place and swooped through the rest of the huddle, methodically punching the Hunters until every single one of them was down.

“That should keep them calm as Amun for the time being,” he rasped darkly.

Sighing, Sabin switched his attention yet again. There was Strider, Defeat. The man couldn’t lose at anything without enduring debilitating pain, so he made sure to win. Always. Which was probably why he was digging a bullet out of his side in preparation for the battle to come. Good. Sabin could always count on him.

Kane, keeper of Disaster, walked in front of him, ducking as a shower of pebbles fell from the ceiling, plumes of dust spraying in every direction. Several warriors coughed.

“Uh, Kane,” Sabin said. “Why don’t you stay here, too? You can help Reyes watch the prisoners.” A flimsy excuse and they all knew it.

There was a pause, the only sound to be heard the scrape of stone against sand as the doorway continued that slow glide. Then Kane gave a clipped nod. He hated being left out, that much Sabin knew, but his presence sometimes caused more problems than it solved. And as always, Sabin placed victory above his friends’ feelings. It wasn’t something he enjoyed doing, wasn’t something he’d do in any other situation. But someone had to act with cold-blooded logic or else they’d always lose.

With Kane out, that made the coming battle seven against seven. Totally even. Poor Hunters. They still didn’t stand a chance. “Anyone else want to stay behind?”

A chorus of “No” circled the chamber, eagerness dripping from the different timbres. An eagerness Sabin shared.

Until Pandora's box was found, these skirmishes were a necessity. But it couldn't be found without those damn godly artifacts to show the way. And as one of the four relics was supposedly here in Egypt, this particular skirmish was more important than most. He would not allow Hunters to claim a single artifact, for that box could destroy Sabin and everyone he held dear, drawing the demons out of their bodies and leaving only lifeless shells.

Despite his confidence that he would win this day, he knew he would have to work for victory. Led as the Hunters were by Sabin's sworn enemy, Galen, a demon-possessed immortal in disguise, those "protectors of all that was good and right" were privy to information humans should not have been privy to. Such as the best way to distract the Lords...the best way to capture them...the best way to destroy them.

Finally the stone ceased sliding, and Amun peeked inside. He waved a hand to signal it was safe to enter. No one stepped forward. Sabin's men and Lucien's had only just resumed fighting together, having been separated for over a thousand years. They hadn't yet learned the best formation.

"We going to do this or just stand here and wait for them to find us?" Aeron grumbled. "I'm ready."

"Look at you, all unenthusiastic and shit," Gideon said with a smirk. "I'm not impressed."

Time to take charge, Sabin mused. He considered the best strategy. These last few centuries he'd gotten nowhere with the Hunters, rushing heedlessly into battle with only a single thought: kill. But the enemy's numbers were growing, not shrinking, and to be honest, their determination and hatred were growing, as well. It was time for a new way of battle, of cataloging his resources and weaknesses before charging ahead.

“I’ll go first since I’m the least injured.” He curled his finger under the trigger of his gun before reluctantly sheathing it. “I want you staggered, a less injured man paired with a more injured one. You’ll work together, most injured acting as backup while the healthier takes out the target. Leave as many as you can alive,” he commanded. “I know you don’t want to, that it goes against every instinct you possess. But don’t worry. They’ll die soon enough. Once we ferret out the leader—and learn his secrets—they’ll be useless to us and you can do what you want to them.”

The trio blocking his path broke apart, allowing him to sail inside the narrow hallway without pause, then everyone filed behind him, their footfalls offering only the slightest whisper. Battery-powered lamps illuminated the hieroglyph-covered walls. Sabin allowed his gaze to rest on those glyphs for only a second, but that was long enough to burn the images into his mind. They showed one prisoner after another being ushered to a cruel execution, hearts removed while they still beat inside their chests.

Human scents coated the stale, dusty air: cologne, sweat, an assortment of foods. How long had the Hunters been here? What were they doing here? Had they already found the artifact?

The questions skated through his mind, and his demon latched on to them. As Doubt, it couldn’t help itself. *Clearly they know something you do not. It might be enough to topple you. Your friends could very well take their last breaths this night.*

Doubt could not lie, not without causing Sabin to pass out cold. It could only use derision and supposition to topple its victims. He’d never understood why a fiend from hell couldn’t utilize deceit—best he could come up

with was that the demon carried a curse of its own—but he'd long since accepted it. Not that he'd allow *himself* to topple this night. *Keep it up and I'll spend the next week sequestered in my bedroom, reading so I can't think too much.*

But I need to feed, was the whined reply. The worry it caused was its greatest nourishment.

Soon.

Hurry.

Sabin held up his hand, stopped, and the warriors behind him stopped as well. There was a chamber up ahead, its doorway already open. The sound of voices and footsteps echoed, perhaps even the buzz of a drill.

The Hunters were indeed distracted and begging for an ambush. *I'm just the man to give it to them.*

Are you, really? the demon began, Sabin's threat unheeded. *Last time I checked—*

Forget about me. I've supplied you with food as promised.

There was a gleeful exclamation inside his head, and then Doubt was opening its mind to the Hunters inside the pyramid, whispering all manner of destructive thoughts. *All for nothing...what if you're wrong...not strong enough...could soon die...*

Conversation tapered away. Someone might even have whimpered.

Sabin held up a finger, then another. When he raised the third, he and the warriors jumped into motion, a war cry echoing.