

FALSE COVENANT

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A Widdershins Adventure

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an imprint of **Prometheus Books**
Amherst, NY

Published 2012 by Pyr®, an imprint of Prometheus Books

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16 15 14 13 12 5 4 3 2 1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Marmell, Ari.

Printed in the United States of America

For Rachel,
who has endeavored to live the sort of world-changing life
that I've only ever had the guts to try writing about.

*Beneath the sun, the roads are man's,
His work, his home, his town, his plans.
But 'ware the ticking of the clock:
The night belongs to Iruoch.*

—from an old Galicien children's rhyme

"But I don't understand," said golden-haired Adeline. "You told me that you were not hungry this evening."

"I am not," said the Marquis Iruoch.

"And you said I had not offended you in any way," said Adeline.

"You have not."

"Then why do you seek to murder me?"

"Because I may later be hungry," said Iruoch.

"Because you may later offend me," said Iruoch.

"And because I can."

—from "The Princess on the Road of Beasts,"
a popular Galicien fairy tale

CHAPTER ONE

If she hadn't already known, she'd never have recognized the lie for what it was.

She'd been here once before, a guest in the sumptuous manor of the Marquis de Ducarte. Now, as last time, the air was heavy with the strands and strings of music, the floor vibrating with dancing couples. Vests and hose were deep, richly hued; magnificent gowns with hoop skirts resplendent in all the bright colors of spring. The servants—though clad largely in blacks, whites, and grays—were scarcely less fancy than the guests; the tables over which they stood were laden with fish and fowl, pork and pastry, and an array of wines that would have put most vintners and taverns to shame. The breath of a hundred conversations pursued the delectable aromas up toward the ceiling, where they swirled around hanging banners and streamers. On some snapped and flapped the sun-and-crown ensign of Vercoule, highest god of Davillon; on others, the rose petals of Ruvelle, patron goddess of the Ducarte line and its current scion, Clarence Rittier.

In nearly every way, it looked the same this time around as it had six months ago, when Madeleine Valois had attended Rittier's greatest fete ever, to celebrate the arrival of his honored guest, Archbishop William de Laurent. Nearly every way—but not all. The gleam in the eyes of the guests was perhaps just a bit wild, a bit worried; the tone of their friendly laughter and malevolent gossip high and desperate. Banners and streamers, tablecloths and gowns, were immaculately washed and well maintained, but they weren't *new*. Once, they'd have been new, every last one.

No more. Not since Rittier's disgrace—and certainly not since Davillon's. The ball, the joy, the carefree celebration . . . A façade,

every bit, a lie rigidly maintained by the city's aristocracy because none of them had the slightest clue of how to live any other way.

Well, almost none of them.

Dazzling in her gown of velvet green, the intricate locks of her blonde wig piled high like a hairy wedding cake in the latest fashion, Madeleine glided through the crowd, a beautiful wraith leaving nothing but a faint breeze and the occasional heartbreaking smile to mark her passage. Her knees grew tired of constant curtsying, her cheeks stiff from carrying her artificial smile, her voice hoarse from the false good cheer.

"Your Grace, so lovely to see you again! Are you well?"

"Yes, ghastly weather last week. This summer's likely to be just abominable, isn't it?"

"Indeed, it's been a while. I fear family matters have kept me from attending as often as I'd wish. But I'd be delighted to accept your invitation . . ."

And then, under her breath, so quietly that nobody could possibly have heard her, Madeleine said, "Could you please, please, *please* make everyone stop talking for a while? Or you could just strike me deaf. There's a lot to be said for being deaf, I think. At least it's quiet. . . ."

From everywhere and nowhere, a faint ripple of amusement—a voiceless laugh—sounded in Madeleine's mind.

"Well," she huffed, "I'm glad *one* of us is entertained."

Most of the time, her unseen companion's replies of pure emotion and intent could only be loosely translated into actual words. But in this case, the meaning of "Me, too" was unmistakable.

The corners of her lips twitching as she tried to simultaneously scowl and smile, Madeleine drifted past a table of various wines and punches, and just about collided with one of the men responsible for serving said beverages. A chorus of "Eep!" from Madeleine and "Ack!" from the servant—or syllables to that effect—accompanied a frantic dance of skittering feet. Half a cup of citrus punch sloshed

across the floor, and it was only the young woman's surprising speed (with perhaps the tiniest hint of divine intervention) that prevented her gown from absorbing the briefly airborne aperitif.

"Uh, terribly sorry, miss—uh, mademoiselle—uh, I mean, m'lady."

Madeleine blinked at the flustered fellow, who didn't sound much like any professional servant *she'd* ever dealt with. "No harm," she murmured. And then, forcing her voice to squeeze itself into a more haughty outfit for which it was ill-suited, "But do take more care in the future, yes? Not everyone here is as quick-footed as I am—nor as forgiving."

"Of course, miss—uh, m'lady."

"What the happy hopping horses was *that* about?" Madeleine demanded of her silent partner. Then, when the response was something about the overall clumsiness of human beings in general, she could only wait until she was sure nobody was watching and then blow her unseen friend a quiet raspberry.

"Disgraceful, isn't it?"

Madeleine about jumped out of her skin, and then twisted to face the speaker. It was another young woman, perhaps half a decade older than Madeleine herself, glad in golden gown and a wig so pale it was less "blonde" and more "translucent." Madeleine had seen her before, at several of the aristocracy's fetes and balls, but not in some time; if she'd ever known the woman's name, it had long since slipped her mind.

"Um . . . yes?"

"I mean," the woman continued, "I think we all understand the marquis' . . . predicament." It was the closest anyone in the blue-blooded crowd would come to overtly acknowledging Rittier's recent troubles, let alone their own. "So a certain degree of belt-tightening is to be expected, I suppose even commended. But really, I think perhaps he could have afforded to stint a *little* on the refreshments, if it meant acquiring a higher class of server, wouldn't you

think? I mean, one expects a certain minimum degree of civilization in one's affairs."

Madeleine—who wanted nothing more than to sigh and walk away, or perhaps smack the woman on the back of the head so hard that her eyes would sprout hair—instead pontificated at length about how right she was, and how it was utterly disgraceful for a man of Rittier's (former) influence to be so lax in his standards, and how it simply wouldn't do at all, and perhaps they ought to consider writing the Duchess Beatrice and ask her to have a word with the marquis before the affair become scandal-worthy?

(By the end of it, Madeleine was having serious difficulty keeping a straight face, mostly because her invisible companion was quietly having hysterics.)

Eventually, the other noblewoman wandered off to go find someone else to grouse with (or at, or about), and Madeleine returned her attentions to the task at hand.

Or, most of her attentions, anyway.

"Tell me again, Olgun, why I ever wanted to be one of them?"

Olgun, the invisible presence to whom she'd been speaking throughout the evening, shook a nonexistent head. And then, perhaps troubled by the tone of Madeleine's thoughts, willed a gentle question across her psyche.

"Hmm? No, I'm fine. I just . . ." She stopped, realizing that she was chewing on a loose lock of hair from her wig—a very *un*aristocratic mannerism. She swiftly spit it out, patted it back into place, and sighed softly. "Olgun, that was twice in two minutes something caught me by surprise. The drink, and then that—that *woman* . . . I'm supposed to be more alert than that, yes?"

A moment more to interpret Olgun's unspoken response, and then, "I am *not* out of practice!" she practically hissed, drawing herself up and glaring around arrogantly in response to a few peculiar looks cast her way by those who *almost* overheard her. "I am not out of practice," she repeated, far more softly. "I just—haven't done this in a while."

And again, after a brief pause, “There is *so* a difference! It’s a subtle distinction, but an important one! Vital, even! No, I’m not going to explain it to you. You’re the god; *you* figure it out!”

Nose held high (making her look rather like half the other folk in attendance), Madeleine lifted her skirts and swept gracefully toward the exit. She passed through pockets of conversation about the general ungainliness and lack of competence among the serving staff—apparently, her own near-miss was far from the evening’s only unfortunate incident—and muttered a number of polite farewells on her way out.

Only a few even noticed her passing. Not that they were deliberately slighting her at all, no; rather because their attentions were focused elsewhere. In the room’s far corner, occupying a bubble all to himself as though his mere presence repelled the spinning dancers or even efforts at conversation, was a middle-aged fellow in the simple brown cassock of a monk. Perhaps as a peace offering to an angry Church, the Marquis de Ducarte had invited Ancel Sicard, Davillon’s newly appointed bishop, to his gathering. The fact that Sicard had chosen not to attend, but had sent his assistant instead, was cause for even more gossip throughout the party than the lackadaisical efforts of the servants. The monk, Brother Ferrand, stood, and smiled, and engaged in what conversation came his way, and if he noted the puzzled or hostile glowers, or the angry mutters directed toward him, he certainly gave no sign. Madeleine threw him a final, curious glance—recalling another monk of the same order, whom she’d known only briefly but liked to think of as a friend—and then slipped out into the moonlight.

A path of cobblestones wound through garden and orchard, an inebriated earthworm twisting through the grounds of the Ducarte estate as it made its way toward the gates and, from there, the main road. Thick grasses and rich flowers perfumed the night, enjoying the last moments of a fruitful spring before the oncoming summer began to pummel them with fists of heat and sun. Again, Madeleine

couldn't help but think of her last visit here . . . Of the breaking glass, the quick plummet, and a desperate escape across this same meandering pathway . . .

She couldn't remember what the gardens or the trees might have smelled like, then. She'd been too wrapped up in the scent of her own sweat and blood.

"Okay, Olgun," she announced with a headshake that threatened to send her carefully coifed wig toppling into the dirt. "Enough with the reminiscing." (As though it'd been *he* who'd been doing it.) "Time to get on with it."

Madeleine Valois had done her part; it was time for the noblewoman to take her leave, and the street-thief Widdershins to take the stage.



It was one of her standard techniques, a methodology that had served her well time and time again: Use one identity to scout and study the target; and the other to relieve said target of just a small portion of excess wealth. Charity was a civic duty and a religious obligation, after all; one could even argue that, as one of the poor who needed said charity, she was actually doing them a *favor*.

(In fact, not only could one argue it, but she had done so, in her time. Oddly, few of the city's wealthy—or the Guard—ever found her logic particularly convincing.)

Her name had once been Adrienne Satti, and though not born into high society, she'd found her way into the aristocracy thanks to the efforts and kindness of the noble Alexandre Delacroix. The apparent fairy tale had not, alas, brought about a fairy tale ending; Alexandre was dead, now, and Adrienne wanted by the city's elite for a series of horrific crimes that she'd never committed. Today she was mostly Widdershins—thief and, far more recently, tavern owner—but she still kept up her presence within the aristocracy under the name Madeleine

Valois. It all might have been confusing enough to make her head spin, if she hadn't had the misfortune to live all of it firsthand.

But at least she wasn't alone. No, Adrienne Satti hadn't been the only survivor of those crimes for which she herself had been blamed. There was one other.

Olgun. A foreigner. A god.

A god few had ever heard of, and only one now worshiped.

A god who now kept careful watch, alert for any interruptions as his disciple and partner disappeared into a shadowed alleyway, gown and wig and other signs of Madeleine Valois sliding into the maw of a black canvas sack. Dark leathers, precision tools, and a blackened rapier emerged from that same hiding place. The young lady—slender and fine-featured, brunette—who scrambled up the nearest wall to perch, staring carefully at the Rittier estate, really didn't much resemble the absent noblewoman at all.

"All righty, Olgun, now it's time for the fun part, yes? You know, the waiting. What? Well of *course* the waiting's fun! Why else would we do so bloody *much* of it? For a god, you're really not all that good at logic."

And then, "I can *tell* when you're making those kinds of faces at me, you know."

After that, Olgun lapsed again into an amused silence, and Widdershins really had nothing to do but wait (which was not, despite her efforts at convincing the god or herself, the "fun part" at all) and watch for the activity at Clarence Rittier's manor to slowly taper off.



Windows of stained glass, worth more than Davillon's average laborer would make in years, cast the sanctuary in a soft rainbow glow. The steady gleam of the moon and stars, augmented by the flickering of a dozen streetlights, threw reflected images of countless holy symbols and scenes across row upon row of pews and kneeling

cushions. The most oft-repeated symbol was, of course, Vercoule's crown-and-sun, but here was the golden pyramid of Geurron, the silver face of Demas, the white cross of Banin, the bleeding hand of Tevelaire, and more. Those gods most prevalent in Davillon boasted the largest and most frequent icons, but every single deity of the Hallowed Pact—all 147—were represented somewhere.

Here in the Basilica of the Sublime Tenet, the heart of worship in Davillon, it would have been improper to do any less.

Perfumed censers and waxy candles breathed a pungent, greasy smoke that left a sweet aroma in its wake as it swirled toward the domed ceiling. From the raised dais at the front of the sanctuary, a priest's melodious voice rose and fell through a litany as familiar as his own name.

It was a litany few heard. That the sanctuary should be sparsely populated was no surprise; the midnight mass was never a well-attended function, even at the best of times. But this night—and, for that matter, the past two seasons—could not, for either Davillon or the Church, qualify as the “best of times.” Tonight, the priest and his assistants outnumbered the parishioners.

Nor had it been that much better during the day.

From a shaded balcony above the sanctuary proper, all but invisible to the smattering of parishioners below, an old man watched, his eyes red with unshed tears. Ancel Sicard had always loved his Church, and the many gods whom he had the honor and privilege to represent. But in his past six months as bishop of this conflicted city, he'd come to love Davillon as well. And to see the two of them at odds ate away at him, body and soul.

He was a large man, but far narrower of girth now than when he'd arrived. His thinning hair and thickening beard, previously an even salt-and-pepper mix, was now entirely gray save for a smattering of dark patches. It seemed to him that even his white cassock of office had grown dim and discolored, though he knew, in his less emotional moments, that this could only be a trick of the mind.

Bishop Sicard kissed the tips of his fingers and held them up toward the largest of the stained glass windows, then spun on his heel and moved toward the nearest stairway. His footsteps echoed back to him as he plunged downward, a rhythmic counterpoint to the rapid beating of his heart. Through a heavy doorway and along plush carpeted halls he strode, into the small suite of chambers that were his own home here in the basilica.

Here, he paused for only a few moments, long enough to swap out his cassock and miter for the simple tunic and trousers of a commoner—a sort of outfit he'd had little cause to wear in over a decade—and to gather a satchel of yellowed parchments and old, cracked, leather-bound books.

He did *not* pause to question what he was about to do. *Those* concerns he had made peace with long ago.

Then he was off once more, through the halls and out into the Davillon streets. A number of sentinels—both Church soldiers and City Guard—stood watch around the property, just another testament to the growing rift between the sacred and the secular. Yet these men and women, though skilled at their duties, were watching for vandals and other angry threats from *without*; not a one of them thought anything strange of an old man leaving midnight mass, assuming they even noticed him at all.

Once clear of the basilica, Sicard took a moment to orient himself. In the months that he'd been here, he'd done precious little traveling on his own. Always with an entourage, usually inside a coach, he'd had scant reason to learn the layout of the city's streets. He'd *certainly* never traversed the city in the dark, alone.

Unprotected.

A frisson of worry coiled around Sicard's spine like a hungry snake, but he swiftly shook it off. He'd been to the house once before, had memorized the route. He wouldn't get lost, not so long as he paid attention to his surroundings.

As for robbers or other hazards of the city? Well, either he'd

make it to the Dunbrick District or he wouldn't; either the gods approved of his actions, or they didn't.

And either the rather disreputable individuals with whom he was supposed to meet would keep their promise of safe treatment, or they wouldn't.

After the relative silence of the cathedral, the hustle and bustle of the city, even so late, was something of a shock. Scattered merchants carried goods across town, making ready for the next morning's custom; somewhat less legitimate vendors hawked stolen, illicit, or simply socially unacceptable wares from dim venues. Sicard grinned briefly in morbid amusement, wondering what some of the dealers, fences, and streetwalkers would think if they knew they were propositioning the city's new bishop.

His route took him only briefly by the Market District or other crowded quarters, so he was bothered only sporadically by Davillon's nocturnal population, troubled only momentarily by the stale sweat, dried horse manure, and other lingering odors of the past day.

Sicard thought, as he walked, of William de Laurent. The archbishop had been one of his teachers and mentors in the seminary, and—though they'd never been *that* close—a friend. He'd survived a lifetime of laboring on behalf of the Church; two wars; half a dozen attempts on his life; and decades of the political infighting that plagued the clergy despite their best efforts to squelch it.

He'd survived everything the world could throw at him, until Davillon.

William would never have approved of what had happened in Davillon since he died; of this, Sicard was absolutely certain. He could only hope that the venerable archbishop would have understood what Sicard had to do to make things right.

The house, when he reached it, was—well, a house. Old but sturdy, small but comfortable, with once-fine paint only slowly starting to peel from the façade. A mundane, commoner's home in a mundane, commoner's neighborhood, it was one of many properties

the Church owned throughout Davillon—one that had been left to them in the last will and testament of a devout parishioner, back when the city was on better terms with its shepherds.

A quick glance either way was enough to convince Sicard that he hadn't attracted any undue attention, and then he was across the street and through the door. The carpet and the sofas were thick with dust, save for those spots where the small group awaiting his arrival had seated themselves.

He didn't explain himself; if they were here, they already knew why. He didn't introduce himself; he'd never heard their names, and he had *zero* intention of telling them his. No, Bishop Sicard removed the old parchments from his satchel—parchments that were very clearly *not* liturgical or sacred in nature—and then, after a simple, “Does everyone know what's required of them?” began to read.