

# LOST COVENANT

## ALSO BY ARI MARMELL

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# LOST COVENANT

*A Widdershins Adventure*

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To Jessie C.,  
for helping Shins grow up just a little;  
and to Jess H.,  
for her probably futile attempt to do the same for me.



## PROLOGUE: DAVILLON

“Name?”

“Business?”

“Thank you. Welcome to Davillon. *Next!*”

“Name?”

“Business?”

“Thank you. Welcome to . . .”

And on. And on. Irritating as a poorly tuned violin, played by a poorly tuned cat, just to listen to; she couldn't begin to imagine how utterly mind-numbing it must be to say , person after person, day after day.

Still, she found herself smirking ever so slightly to hear it. After so long, after such struggle to figure out who she was—*what* she was—what she *wanted*—she was coming home.

The line shuffled. She shuffled with it, hard-packed and harder-frozen dust scraping beneath her feet. It wasn't *much* of a line, this. Fewer than a dozen people ahead of her, and only a few of those even had carts or pack animals with trade goods. Not a hard winter , this one, at least not here, but still enough to postpone all but the most desperate travels or the most vital of imports.

It was one of the reasons she and her . . . ally . . . had chosen to return now.

Shuffle. Step.

“Name?”

Step. Shuffle.

“Business.”

Step. Shuffle. Step.

“Name?”

The guardsman’s eyes were glazed as a pastry , his expression so bored that even his mustache clearly wanted to be somewhere else. The silver profile of Demas—patron deity of Davillon’s City Guard, worn by every member as amulet or icon—was clearly more alert than he.

“Colette d’Arville.” Her name was, of course, nothing of the sort. None of the ones she’d used recently were. It was just the first that came to mind.

The sentry’s dull gaze focused just a bit at the sound of her voice. For the first time he looked at her, truly looked. The threadbare cloak and hood she wore against the voracious nibbling of the winter breeze only barely blocked the chill; it did nothing at all to block the roaming imagination of the man beside her.

“Business?”

*Did he actually just make his voice deeper? How precious.*

“Coming home,” she said, deliberately curt. (Not that “curt” was any real stretch for her.)

“Been away long?”

*You don’t need to attract the attention. You don’t need to attract the attention. You don’t need . . .*

Mantra repeating in her head—often and loud enough to drown out the nigh-overwhelming urge to hit him, if only just—she managed a good two minutes of inane small talk until the grumbling of the folks behind her in line grew audible enough to penetrate the soldier’s fascination.

“Umm, right. Thank you. Welcome to Davillon. *Next!*”

The hitch in her step, the limp she normally made such effort to conceal, was on full display as she pushed past the guard and beneath the arched stone of the barbican. Anything to appear less desirable; he was *probably* just your average lecher , visually groping whoever caught his fancy before utterly forgetting them, but she wasn’t about to take the risk.



She couldn't help but chuckle, however, at the thought of all her planning—all *their* planning—interrupted by a smitten guardsman so young he probably still thought his job actually *meant* anything to this cesspool disguised as a city.

It was a mirth that faded swiftly however, as her memory insisted once more on replaying the suffering her impediment had caused her, all the circumstances behind it. She drew herself up, prideful, scowling. The bustling crowds of Davillon's gateside square, through which she swam like a desperate salmon, already blocked her from the sight of anyone standing at the gate. No reason any longer to humiliate herself, or allow *too* many people to see her weakness.

Her potentially memorable, describable, identifying weakness.

A bit of muttering—so soft it would have proved inaudible in an empty privy, let alone the flesh-crammed, roughly cobbled roadways of the city—and she was off. All trace of a limp was absent, now; in fact, she seemed to almost glide through the throng, slipping through even the most densely packed logjams without slowing, without effort. Between that and her hood, which she'd pulled over her head once more to shield her distinctive face and hair from casual discovery, she might just as well have been a ghost.

Apropos, that—since she'd come not to honor or reacquaint herself with the city, but to haunt it.

Her mind wheeling with anticipation for all that was to come, Davillon's prodigal daughter—well, one of them—slipped through the milling sheep that were the city's oblivious citizens, and was gone.



## CHAPTER ONE

The young woman watched, irritated, as the world turned white beneath her.

She ought to have been happy with the drifts and flurries that danced in the air like butterflies in white fur stoles. Between the snow and the gray overcast of a sky clearly grieving for a sun it hadn't seen in weeks, if not months, nobody was likely to spot her as she went about her business.

Of course, nobody was likely to spot her anyway, given the skills and abilities at her disposal. But even less likely was better.

It's just, she was *so* tired of snow!

"You came from a land like this, yes?" She cocked her head, listening even though the answer she awaited had nothing whatsoever to do with voice or sound.

"Colder?!"

A surge of emotion, within her and yet from something outside her. It conveyed confirmation, for the most part—but she couldn't help but detect a slight trace of patronizing smugness, too.

"This is *too* cold! Just because *you* don't feel it, all nice and snug in your coat of—of—*me*, that doesn't mean that the rest of us aren't *gleep!*"

Widdershins—former thief, former tavern keep, former citizen of Davillon—dropped to her belly atop the wall of heavy gray bricks. Her unseen companion's warning had come only a split second before it was too late. Two armed soldiers, clad in the ludicrous baggy pantaloons and gleaming cuirasses of the Church guards, but carrying their brutal halberds with military efficiency, strode by along the footpaths

beneath her vantage. Their pace was casual enough, their expressions easy, but Shins had no doubt that they were more than capable.

They *had* to be, if they were going to dress like a colorblind monkey had selected the bulk of their wardrobe.

It had been years, now, since Widdershins had learned to sub-vocalize, to pitch her words to her divine partner in such a way that *nobody* could overhear; still, she lay against the stone, thinking flat thoughts, until the pair was well and truly gone.

“Cut that a little close, didn’t we, Olgun?”

The tiny god from the far northlands, whom none now revered but the young woman herself, willed an indignant protest.

“Oh. You did suggest something like that was possible, yes.” Widdershins chewed a lock of auburn hair that had fallen loose from her hood. “So, what? The other gods don’t like you because you’re a foreigner?”

For all their time together, some concepts were still difficult, still too complicated, for Olgun to easily convey. Shins got something about the sheer prevalence of faith and divinity interfering with other, unrelated faith and divinity, and at that point she stopped trying to figure it out before her brain packed its bags and quit her skull in a magnificent huff.

“Shall we do this already?” she asked, uncertain and frankly uncaring as to whether Olgun had finished or she was interrupting. “Or have we come to our senses and decided that this is all really, really stupid?”

A stubborn, insistent prod.

“I *know* it was my idea! That’s why I get to decide if it’s stupid! Trust me, I know a stupid idea when I have one! Just, maybe not right away . . .” And then, “If you say *one thing* about me having a lot of practice, I’m leaving you here and you can walk home. And stop looking at me like that.”

A quick flex of arms and knees and she was on her feet. A second

flex and she was off the wall and sailing earthward. Wind and snow scratched with kitten claws at her exposed cheeks; her dirty-gray cloak spread behind her like wings, briefly exposing the worn black leathers that would, by themselves, have cast her as a conspicuous shadow against the ambient white; and the not-quite-sound of Olgun's startled not-quite-gasp forced a delighted grin across her face.

She landed, snow crunching beneath her, and tumbled into a momentum-eating roll. When she was done, on her feet once more, she stood with such careful balance that her feet scarcely left imprints in the powder, and the trail left by her landing, while obvious, didn't resemble a person at all.

"What? Hey, it's not *my* fault you weren't ready! You're the one letting the diviniteness of the place slow you down. Why should I have to wait for—It is *so* a word! I just said it, yes?"

It was only then that she realized she'd already bolted from her landing spot, taking shelter behind a nearby mausoleum in case her arrival had attracted any attention. Using the tiny etchings—ivy and holy icons, mostly—she was up atop the structure faster than most people could have managed a ladder. Once more on her belly, she waited, watching. . . .

Watching over a cemetery to shame even the richest that her home city of Davillon could boast. No simple tombstones here, not a one. No, the meanest, tiniest grave was still a crypt of stone rising like a handmade mountain from the earth and snow. The largest could have housed multiple families, and they *averaged* larger than most of the hovels or apartments Shins had lived in for most of her life.

*All* her life, save for those few blessed years under the roof of Alexandre Delacroix. . . .

It was a small city unto itself, really—a true and literal necropolis. The crypts were organized into blocks and neighborhoods, connected by winding paths superior to the roads in many villages through which she'd recently traveled. A few of those structures were

plain, but most had at least the sorts of iconography she'd just used as a stepstool, and many were so ornate, they were themselves works of art. Sweeping eaves, graven columns, angels and gargoyles of granite or even marble. . . .

Honors paid the dead while the living suffered and starved. Widdershins felt her face abruptly warm, her heart pound, her fists clench. All she'd seen, all she'd endured, and these . . . these . . .

She fought him. Waves of peace swept through her—Olgun's efforts to calm her down, keep her head clear, a rising tide lapping at the edges of her anger. But she *wanted* that anger; clung to it as a rock, a shield.

Until she no longer could, and the flame went out.

Then she *had* no shield. Then she was in a graveyard—with nothing between her and the memories of *another* graveyard, half a year and hundreds of leagues behind her.

Broken tombstones and broken bodies. . . .

Agony as the *thing* called Iruoch, creature out of nightmare and fairy tale, stripped ribbons of skin from her flesh. . . .

Frustration at a foe that would. Not. *Die!*

And another pain, even worse, as she cradled the lifeless body of a man she might, just *might*, have loved.

It was neither Widdershins's skill nor Olgun's small magics, but sheer and unadulterated luck that her sob was lost in a sudden gust of wind before anyone loitering nearby could have heard.

"I know!" She snapped it through clenched lips, her gritted teeth a cage to prevent the words from escaping as a full-on scream. "I know you only *meant* to help! You still *didn't!*"

Until Iruoch, until she'd left Davillon—until Julien—she'd never once felt Olgun recoil like a frightened puppy. Recoil from *her*. Since then . . .

"Oh, figs . . ." How many times? Half a dozen? More? She'd lost count. "Olgun?"

Nothing.

“Olgun, I’m sorry.” *Don’t cry. Can’t cry. If I cry, the tears will freeze to my skin.*

*If I cry, I have to keep remembering why I’m crying.*

“I just . . .” Shins cleared her throat. “I need to be angry right now. It’s holding me up.”

Time hadn’t done it. Distance hadn’t done it. Her fury, only barely held at bay by a leash of iron will, was all that stood between her and Davillon; between her and the searing pain Davillon had become.

She all but gasped in relief at his response, the mere feel of his presence. Understanding, nurturing, protecting.

Relief enough that she was willing to pretend—as he seemed to want—not to notice the underlying hurt that even the mute godling could not entirely conceal.

“He wouldn’t have wanted this, you know,” she said a moment later, once more casting her gaze across the intricate monuments and looming statuary. “He’d have wanted something simple. Modest.

“What? *Of course* I think he’s *worth* it. But he’d rather they’d spent—”

Another surge of warning, another sudden silence, as another pair of sentries rounded a nearby crypt and wandered by, oblivious to those who watched from none too far overhead. Thin snow and frozen dirt crackled beneath their boots, sounding much like a very slow fire, until they were well out of sight once more.

“Ever seen a cemetery this heavily guarded, Olgun?” A response, a roll of the eyes. “*Of course* I know. But this is Lourveaux; how many tomb-robbers can there—? Oh, hush! I am *not* a tomb-robber!”

And then, more softly, “That was one time, and it wasn’t *really* a tomb, in the strictest sense. And it was an emergency. Shut up and help me figure out which way to go.

“You can *too* do both at once! What’s the point of being a god if you can’t even talk and be quiet at the same time?”

In point of fact, whether Olgun did indeed have the divine power of communicative shutting up, the unfortunate truth was that he currently had nothing of use to communicate. Judging by the faint sludge of emotion bubbling up through Widdershins's system like a bad breakfast, the graveyard's massive scale and *mélange* of faith had the god just as confused as she.

The result, then, was *hours* of wandering, almost aimlessly, as thief and deity struggled and failed to find one particular abode in a sea of final resting places. Racing across the tops of icy mausoleums, constantly sliding or dropping prone to avoid the roving eyes of equally roving sentries; clambering down to earth where the crypts grew too uneven or too far apart for easy travel, huddling behind corners until the way was clear for a quick dash across the roadway; all in the midst of flurries of a wind that Shins, despite Olgun's scoffing, was certain could inspire a polar bear to don a parka. By the start of hour three, her normally pale cheeks were flogged red by the cold, and she had become fully convinced that her cloak itself had actually frozen to death.

Until finally—after having avoided roughly a dozen guards or groundskeepers and having crossed over or past enough crypts to populate a thousand nightmares—purely by chance, they found it.

Neither the largest, nor the most ornate; that much, at least, the Church had done in accordance with the man he'd been.

It had a peaked roof, this particular tomb, clearly designed to look like a cathedral in miniature. It even had a steeple, which could not possibly serve any purpose beyond the decorative. Stained glass gleamed in several of the walls, reflecting the white snows despite the lack of any substantial sun, but only a few allowed that light into the mausoleum itself. The others were constructed against backings of solid stone—priceless art, deprived of both function and, for the most, any living audience to appreciate it.

Shins could have remained on the roof. Even-sloped and snow-



slick, it was no perch she couldn't handle. Somehow, though, it seemed . . . wrong. She'd come all this way to see him, to talk to him, no matter how foolish she felt for it. No way could she bring herself to go through with it while squatting over his head.

Again she dropped to the snow, rolling back to her feet, then swiftly darted up beside the padlocked door—some sort of hardwood, inscribed and engraved, smelling faintly of old lacquer, and probably worth more than some whole tombs back home. Recessed a bit from the stone porch, overhung by scalloped eaves, it ought to provide sufficient shadow to conceal Widdershins from any passersby.

Well, it *might* provide sufficient shadow, anyway. That'd have to do.

Back pressed into a corner beside the door, the young thief slid downward until she sat, legs crossed, staring out at the other tombs, at the snow, at everything and nothing at all.

"Hello, William."

Unlike Widdershins's god, William de Laurent, archbishop of Chevareaux, declined to answer.

"You probably didn't expect to see me again, did you?" she asked the mausoleum at her back. Her voice was fuzzy almost but not quite echoing in the recessed doorway and then flattened by the snow-choked air. "Long ways between Davillon and Lourveaux, yes? Bit of a hike just for chat with . . . Oh, this is *stupid!*"

Olgun let loose a startled bleat—or the emotional equivalent of a bleat, which was rather like a sudden urge to think about sheep—as Widdershins shot to her feet, pressed her shoulder to the side of the alcove, and began to peer about for guards.

"Because it's stupid," she repeated, in answer to his unspoken but hardly unfeared question. "He's dead. He's been dead a year! I'm talking to a wall, Olgun. And a door. And possibly a stoop, although I'm not sure, because I've never been clear on the difference between a stoop and a porch. So maybe a porch.

“Who I am *not* talking to is the only clergyman I ever met who was worth more than a mangy goat!”

An image floated toward the surface of her mind, rippling into focus. An image she didn't care to see.

“An *old* mangy goat!”

Olgun wouldn't stop; for all her efforts, the vision insisted on crystallizing, and Shins had nowhere to turn.

“An *incontinent* old mangy goat! An . . . Oh, figs . . .”

Once more she slumped to the stoop—or porch—this time with her legs splayed out crookedly before her, the image of a curly haired blonde woman foremost in her thoughts.

“Yes, I spoke to Genevieve a lot after she was gone. That was stupid, too.”

It was petulant, and she knew it before Olgun could point it out, before the words were even out of her mouth. “I know I know . . .” A long sigh, then, steaming in the cold. “It wasn't, was it? And she'd be cross with me for saying so. All right, well, we're here anyway, yes?”

She scooted a bit, so that this time she might at least address the mausoleum directly.

“Sorry about that, William. Haven't . . . really been myself recently.” She chuckled, soft and blatantly forced. “Guess the fact that I'm here proves that, yes? I mean, I'd never been out of sight of Davillon's walls when we met. Now . . .”

“Gods, how the hopping hens did I even *get* here? I didn't set out for Lourveaux. I just . . . walked. Didn't plan to come visit you; I decided to when I realized how close we were.”

The back of her head rattled with what could only be called the clearing of a divine throat. Olgun's way, perhaps, of jogging her memory over the fact that it had been *his* suggestion, one that Shins had dismissed until she realized he wasn't about to give up.

She, of course, acknowledged no such thing and kept speaking, voice growing as brittle as the slender icicles hanging overhead.

“I had to get out. I *had* to, I . . . don’t think you’d have been very proud of me, William. I messed things up. I tried to take care of everybody, I swear I did!” Her shoulders, indeed her whole body, had begun to shake, through no influence whatsoever of the winter chill. “But I let them all down. Robin, Renard . . . Oh, gods . . . Julien . . .”

Whatever was about to break loose, whatever torrent of white-water emotion might have overspilled the dam in that moment, for good or for ill, never had its chance. Her reverie, her fragility, shattered as though they, too, were stained glass, at the crunch of a footstep on the frost-covered stone behind her.

A footstep belonging to someone that Olgun *hadn’t warned her about!*