

THIEF'S COVENANT

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A Widdershins Adventure

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1. In a direction contrary to the apparent course of the sun
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PROLOGUE

TWO YEARS AGO:

The girl watched, helpless, as the world turned red beneath her.

She clung—first to the walls above, where few could even have *attempted* to climb, and then to the rafters—terrified to move, to breathe, to *think*, lest she accidentally attract a murderous eye. No matter how she tried, no matter how hard she bit her own hand in a desperate attempt at silence, she couldn't entirely suppress her sobs. Her body shook with them; her face glistened. But any sounds she made were lost in the carnage below; any tears that fell vanished in the sheen of blood that covered the floor.

Blood that, minutes before, had pumped from the hearts of men and women she knew. Men and women she loved.

Long after the slaughter had ended, long after silence had fallen, Adrienne Satti could only clutch the rafters with both arms and legs, her eyes squeezed tight, and pray.



Thin strands of mold clung to broken mortar along a wall of bricks. The watery tendrils of twisting underground estuaries and man-made sewers flowed beyond those walls, sweeping away the city's filth, twisting and wearing away at the brickwork, keeping it consistently damp. As easily find a museum without dust, or a tax collector without scars, as a cellar beneath the city of Davillon without mold.

Yet it was neither mold nor condensation weighing down the

chamber's stagnant air, obscuring the abstract designs on the bur-nished flagstones. Rather, it was blood—almost inconceivable quan-tities of it, mixing with the mold into a foul sludge, seeping through cracks in the floor, seeking a return to the primal earth. Scattered across those ornate tiles lay an obscene carpet of limbs and other, less recognizable bits that had so recently stood upright, talked and laughed and borne names.

With a gut-churning squelch, a booted foot stepped into the chamber of horrors. And there it remained, in mid-stride, until its wearer cautiously examined the floor to ensure he was not about to set foot on a corpse, or part of one.

A second glance followed, to ensure that his gauntlet had not picked up any of the stray filth that caked the walls. Only then did Sergeant Cristophe Chapelle of the Davillon City Guard carefully smooth his salt-and-pepper mustache (poking, in the process, at the camphor extract that he and the others had applied to their nostrils). A brief prayer to Demas moving silently across his lips, he grimly shook his head.

“This is a mess,” he muttered irritably. “We’re going to have to count heads.”

“Sir? Sir, I—that is, I think . . .” The voice petered out as the younger Guardsman gagged, forcing something back down where it belonged.

Chapelle turned toward the speaker, a young recruit named Julien Bouniard. Soft, unassuming features and slightly drooping eyelids belied both wit and reflexes at least as keen as the service rapier that hung loosely at his hip. Like the sergeant, he wore the black tabard of the Guard, emblazoned with the silver fleur-de-lis, and a medallion of Demas, patron deity of the Guard, around his neck—a medallion he rubbed gingerly between thumb and finger, seeking comfort and strength. Only his ribbons of rank differenti-ated his uniform from that of his sergeant.

Well, those and the abstract patterns of blood on his boots.

“What is it, Constable?” Chapelle demanded, his face a gruff mask behind which his own revulsion cowered.

“I’ve identified one of the dead, sir.”

Not a good sign. “And who might that be?”

“Sir, I believe . . . I really think you’d better see this for yourself. If I’m wrong . . .”

“Understood, Constable. Show me.”

Accompanied by a chorus of nauseating sounds, they crossed the chamber, stopping beside one particularly hideous corpse. The other Guardsmen, scattered throughout the room, paused in their own investigations to see what their sergeant was about.

Chapelle crouched perfunctorily beside the body Julien indicated—no. No, this wasn’t even a proper body. It was a shell, a suit of meat. Everything that gave life, everything that was supposed to be found within, was scattered around instead, ripped out through a gaping chasm in the abdomen.

It was the work of no weapon with which the sergeant was familiar. A bear, maybe, or a panther, if such a beast had somehow developed a sadistic taste for suffering.

Unable to put it off any longer, Chapelle turned his attention to the victim’s face, blinked back a surge of pity at the horrified expression forever etched into the man’s features. Clearly, the fellow saw exactly what was coming, and couldn’t do a damn thing about—

“Demas!” he cursed as recognition finally set in. “It’s Robert Vereaux!”

He lacked the wherewithal, as he rose to his feet, to reprimand his men for the shocked murmurs that swirled about the chamber.

And then, because things clearly weren’t bad enough, one of the other Guardsmen shot to his feet. “I’ve another one, sir!” the Guardsman stammered. “I think it’s Marie Richelieu!”

Chapelle cursed vilely, something he *never* did in front of the men. The Lady Richelieu was the young matriarch of a household that was, if anything, wealthier even than House Vereaux. Unmind-

ful now of what he stepped on, the sergeant darted over. Sure enough, he recognized the pert features and ravishing blonde curls of Marie Richelieu, though a sizable portion of her left cheek was absent.

The old Guardsman, growing visibly older by the instant, could only shake his head, mumbling prayers beneath his breath. The House Richelieu was quite accustomed to scandal and slander, but *this* was not the sort of public affair with which the House was equipped to deal.

And if there were two, how many more? Sergeant Chapelle set his men to examining every face, and with each positive identification, his world tilted farther off its axis. Pierre Montrand. Josephine Poumer. Darien Lemarche. Gaston Carnot, the Marquis de Brielles. No, they couldn't put a name to every face, nor even a face to every victim. But every last soul they could identify hailed from the ranks of Davillon's rich and powerful; each name they recorded was another House about to become the stuff of rumor, another god bereft of a most eminent follower.

Swallowing his distaste, Sergeant Chapelle ordered a more thorough search of the room. If there *were* clues to be found, they could well be hidden beneath a carpeting of blood, and they weren't about to leap out and reveal themselves.

The Guardsmen applied an extra dose of the disease-shielding camphor to their noses, swallowed their rising gorges, and began to sift.



A pair of fearful eyes in an oceanic shade, hovering indecisively on the cusp between blue and green, blinked open to watch the Guardsmen anxiously from above. The rafters atop which the blood-smeared figure had scurried—which were utterly unnecessary in the arched stone chamber, possibly left over from the days of construction—were thin, dusty, precarious. Yet she crouched among them care-

lessly, a human spider clinging to her perch, breathing through her mouth in a futile attempt to avoid the grisly fetor.

Her whole body trembled as a thrill of panic danced spastically up her spine, sending a trickle of dust raining from the rafters. Her own fear momentarily overwhelmed by this external, alien emotion, she twisted her head to glance over her shoulder, though she knew no one was present.

Not physically, at least.

“Stop that!” she hissed in a raw whisper. “This is hard enough without you distracting me!”

Through the fear, she sensed a faint but unmistakable tingle of sheepishness.

“Right, then.” She glanced downward once more, fingers grasping reflexively at the wooden beam.

“I’m going down there,” she decided suddenly. She didn’t much care for the Guard; hated them, actually. But after what she’d witnessed, she was willing to break down and cry on any shoulder, even if it sported the silver fleur-de-lis, or the stern visage that was both the face and the symbol of Demas.

A spike of terror, one that came from the *other* rather than from her own soul, rooted her in place. An involuntary cry escaped her lips.



One of the Guardsmen craned his neck upward, seeking uselessly to penetrate the shadows that clung to the ceiling in the lantern-light. Pushing back the brim of his plumed hat, he shook his head irritably. These new oil lamps were better than torches, but you still couldn’t bloody well see a damn thing when you needed to.

When the sound failed to repeat itself, he shrugged and, with a muttered, “Rats, I suppose,” resumed his grisly work.



“Now see what you almost did!” the girl hissed at her unseen companion, slowly edging her way across the beam. “When we get out of this, we’re going to have a serious talk as to who’s in charge here. I—”

“Sergeant!” The voice reverberated from below. The rafter-borne figure tilted her head, gazing down at the young constable who’d identified the body of Robert Vereaux.

You think this is horrible now, she thought at them bitterly, blinking back tears. *Where were you while I watched it happen?!*

A swell of sympathy and understanding washed over her from the unseen presence.

“Oh, shut up,” she snapped quietly.

“What is it, Constable?” This, weary-voiced, came from the older Guardsman.

“Sir,” the young man replied, “I’ve found a loose stone in the wall here. There’s a lever of some sort hidden behind it.”

“Oh, figs,” the young woman breathed.



With an old, practiced eye, Chapelle studied the large brick that lifted easily, despite its apparent mass, from its housing; the lever, perhaps a foot long, concealed behind it; and finally, took a single all-encompassing glance around the room entire, as though trying to discern what the mechanism might do.

“Well,” he said eventually, his tone even, “adventure fiction aside, nobody actually builds traps this obvious, just in the hopes that someone may be curious.” *Nobody sane, anyway.* “All the same, I want everybody to leave the chamber and step back into the hallway. Just in case. Bouniard!”

The young constable snapped to attention. “Sir?”

“I want you waiting in the doorway. If something untoward *does* happen, I expect some modicum of effort to get me out of it.” The sergeant smiled tightly. “I’m not expecting miracles, of course, since someone gets a promotion if I die in here. But at least make it look good.”

Julien Bouniard smiled faintly. “I’ll certainly appear to do my damndest, sir.”

“That’s the spirit! All right, move!”

In moments, the room was emptied of all living inhabitants save the sergeant himself, and the unseen watcher above. A quick glance at young Bouniard—gravely returned with a nod—and Chapelle yanked on the lever.

A low grinding sounded from beneath the bloody tiles; deep, ponderous, as though they were witnessing the gestation and birth of the thunder itself. The room shuddered, sending faint showers of dust spilling from the rafters (and eliciting a second involuntary yelp that, thankfully, went unheard amidst the rumbling). Agitated from beneath, a few dead limbs flailed about in a profane dance.

The center of the floor opened up, revealing a hollow almost ten feet on a side. Several corpses dropped into the gap, landing with a symphony of wet thumps on whatever lay below. Chapelle, his face gone pale, realized that they had just lost the bodies of five or six of the city’s elite.

But the procedure, whatever it was, was not complete. Something emerged, in rapid fits and starts, from the newborn pit.

The statue rose to its full height of eighteen feet, its horns almost brushing the rafters. It was carved in a crouch, as though it might leap to attack at any moment, bringing to bear the wicked axe slung over its left shoulder. Bedecked in furs that were carved with exquisite detail, sporting a beard so finely sculpted that it seemed possible to go and pluck a hair, it stared down at Chapelle with narrowed stone eyes. It looked for all the world to be a warrior of the ancient northlands, save for the horns that jutted from its otherwise bald scalp.

There was nothing inherently religious about the sculpture, but Chapelle knew an idol when he saw one; *every* citizen of Galice knew an idol when they saw one.

“Sir?”

“I’m fine, Constable. Bring the men back in here.” Trusting that his orders would be obeyed, he continued his examination of the towering form.

It clearly wasn’t one of the 147 gods of the Pact—or at least, not in any iconography recognized by the High Church. Sure, worship of an unrecognized god wasn’t *technically* illegal, but every city, every government organization, every guild, and every noble house of any repute claimed as their patrons a member of the Hallowed Pact. For *all* of these victims—each one claiming a different house and thus, most probably, a different patron—to have participated in rites devoted to an unrecognized deity was another blemish to fuel an already scandalous situation.

Yet again, Chapelle heaved a sigh from the very depths of his soul. “Search the statue,” he ordered, indicating a trio of guards, including Constable Bouniard. “The rest of you . . . keep counting bodies.”



In the rafters above, some eight feet from the leftmost horn, the filthy young woman again glanced over her shoulder. Pushing her matted and reeking hair from her face, she asked quietly, “This doesn’t actually change *your* situation, does it? Them seeing your idol, I mean?”

A resounding sense of denial ran through her body. She grimaced.

“All right,” she said, shifting her attention back to the events below. “This is bad. Still, I think we can talk our way—”

“Sergeant! I’ve found something!”

“This keeps getting better,” she mumbled.



Chapelle appeared beside the young constable, who was pointing toward a carefully concealed catch at the rear of the idol. “You seem to have a knack for finding these things, Bouniard,” he said gruffly. He looked over the constable’s find: a simple switch, set flush with the stone, just beneath the lip of the platform. With a leather-gloved hand, the sergeant flipped the switch.

A drawer, so expertly crafted as to have been all but invisible, slid from the stone. Within lay several small candles, a long quill, a jar of ink, and a wood-bound and velvet-wrapped ledger. Without so much as a pause for breath, Chapelle snapped up the book and flipped it open, eagerly scanning the pages for answers.

Even the most casual examination suggested the book could be nothing less than a roster of membership for this strange little cult, each page devoted to one individual. There were no names—gods forbid they make this easy!—but it did include dates, titles of rank or seniority that were pretty much meaningless to the old Guardsman, and a monetary value listed in gold marks, perhaps indicating donations.

Chapelle was quite sure that he’d just found the motive for the horrific crimes: The sheer quantity of gold in the sect’s coffers must be staggering. Why, the first eight or nine entries alone totaled up to more than *ten thousand* marks!

More importantly, though, his men had managed a tentative count of the dead while he’d searched the statue and perused the ledger. And if that count was correct, the room contained twenty-six corpses—to the ledger’s twenty-*eight* entries. At least two members were unaccounted for.

“Inside job,” he said to Bouniard. “I suppose it would almost have had to be. I . . .”

“Sir,” Julien pressed as Chapelle’s brow furrowed in thought. “What is it?”

“Didn’t I hear Darien Lemarche listed amongst the dead?”

“Uh, yes, I believe so.”

“How many of you,” the sergeant asked, surveying the room as a whole, “are up on the latest gossip?”

Several Guardsmen exchanged glances and guiltily raised their hands.

“Was Lemarche still involved with Adrienne Satti?”

“Last I heard, yes, sir,” one of them replied.

“Find her. Now.”

They failed; no matter how they tried, they found no trace of the woman among the dead. Chapelle nodded with each report, his expression growing ever more certain.

Damned aristocrats! He could have told them it would end badly, with her. *Although*, he admitted to himself, *I didn’t expect it would go this badly.*

“We’ll have these bodies picked up, gathered, and . . . reassembled as best as possible,” Chapelle told his men. “I’m fairly certain I know what’s happened, but we have to identify them, all of them, to be sure.

“I also need a volunteer,” the sergeant barked as his men fell eagerly in line to depart. “Someone to stay behind and ensure the room’s not disturbed until the clean-up workers arrive.”

Julien Bouniard moved forward, arm half-raised, only to fall back—eyes and mouth agape, obviously shocked to the core—as a blond-haired figure appeared before him.

“I’ll stay, sir,” volunteered Henri Roubet, a constable some few years older than Julien himself.

Chapelle quirked an eyebrow. “Resting Roubet,” the others in the unit called him. “When Roubet volunteers” was, so far as they were concerned, roughly analogous to “When pigs fly,” or “When hell freezes over.”

Well, perhaps the surrounding scene of depravity had kindled some residual spark of responsibility in the man. Be a shame to squelch it before it could spread.

“Very well, Roubet. You’re on watch. I don’t imagine you’ll be waiting too terribly long; shouldn’t be more than half an hour. Report to the main office when you’ve been relieved.”

“Yes, sir. Thank you, sir.”

Chapelle pivoted on his heel and marched from the room, grateful to be away. Julien Bouniard fell in line with his compatriots, but his expression remained thoughtful, his thoughts clearly on the man who stayed behind.



“Well, that’s just dandy!” the young woman spat under her breath as the guards sorted through the ledger below. “What kind of secret cult keeps written records, can you tell me that?”

Judging by the sudden sense of disapproval—the emotional equivalent of a saddened headshake—she was fairly certain he couldn’t.

“Don’t you have any say over the doings of your own worshippers? Because I’ve got to tell you, the way they were running this thing . . .”

Her throat closed and her eyes widened, first in surprise at hearing the name “Adrienne Satti” spoken by the gravel-voiced sergeant, and then in mounting horror as the implications sank home. A hole opened in the pit of her stomach, just wide and deep enough for her soul to drop slowly and painfully through it. She watched, barely comprehending, as the bulk of the Guardsmen departed, leaving a trail of bloody bootprints in the corridor beyond the chamber door.

“Oh, gods . . .” Not even a whisper, now, but the faintest susurrus of exhaled breath. “Oh, gods, they think *I* did this!” For the second time in an hour, she had to blink hard to keep the tears from falling. “How could they possibly think . . .” Adrienne felt, once again, a touch of sympathy in the back of her mind.

“This is your fault!” she exploded at him, her fear turned suddenly to anger. “If you hadn’t stopped me from going down to them, I could have explained it! I could have told them what really happened! Now it’s too late! I—”

“Had better come down from there right now, Mademoiselle Satti, before I am forced to shoot you down.”

Adrienne froze, cursing her own stupidity. She peered downward, past the dusty beams on which she lay, past the horned form of the god. The remaining Guardsman looked up at her, an odd expression plastered across his scruffy face. His rapier hung sheathed at his left hip, but in his right fist he clenched a gleaming flintlock pistol—a Guard-issued special with a frame molded of brass rather than wood, reinforced to function as a brutally efficient head-breaker. In her youth, before the aristocracy, Adrienne had more than once been on the butt-end of those so-called bash-bangs.

But rarely had she stared so squarely down the barrel of one.

“I’m not going to ask a second time,” the Guardsman warned.

Adrienne slid off the beam. Limber as a double-jointed cat, she swung from the nearest horn and clambered down the statue without pausing for breath (or to acknowledge her incorporeal partner’s sudden squawk of indignation at having his likeness used as a stepladder). In seconds, Adrienne stood upon the blood-slick floor.

Frowning thoughtfully, the Guardsman took a moment to examine his catch, difficult as she was to see beneath the filth and caked blood. She looked to be maybe fifteen, give or take a year or two; still somewhere in that nether realm between childhood and womanhood. Her hair, to judge by the few unsoiled strands he could see, was an earthy brown, and her eyes shone with a blue-green hue so liquid that he almost expected to see waves. A small, ever-so-slightly upturned nose sat in the center of a slender face. Impossible to tell precisely what her outfit had looked like; what remained of it gave the rather hideous impression that she’d fashioned her wardrobe from the scraps left over on a slaughterhouse floor.

“Do you normally find blood so fascinating?” Adrienne finally barked irritably. “Or am I special?”

“Rather clever of you to hide out here until we’d departed,” Constable Roubet told her casually, flintlock aimed unerringly at her bloody cleavage. “A pity you didn’t notice me, or it might’ve worked.”

“I was distracted,” she muttered, shooting an aggravated glower toward the statue. “But look at me, Constable. You can’t honestly believe me capable of this, can you?” She pressed her right hand to her heart—more than a bit melodramatically—and blinked at him. “I only survived by hiding in the rafters. I can only thank the gods that the killers weren’t as observant as you were, or else—”

“Shut up before I shoot you.”

Adrienne’s jaws snapped shut with an audible click.

“Even if I believed a word of it,” the Guardsman told her, shaking his head, “it makes no difference. I’m not the man making the decisions here.”

The young woman nodded slowly. “I think I’d like to speak to an advocate just as soon as possible.”

Roubet smiled grimly. “I’m sure you would. If you hadn’t tried to kill me during your escape, you might have lived long enough to do just that.”

“What are you talking . . . ?” And then she understood, and her knees threatened to give way. “You’re not a Guardsman,” she whispered hoarsely.

“I am, actually. But I’m also a great deal more.”

Frantically, she judged the distance between them. Twelve feet, give or take. She could cover that swiftly enough, but not so fast that he couldn’t pull the trigger. And even if she reached him, she wasn’t armed.

“So what is it, then?” she asked, stalling desperately for time. “Dead women tell no tales? You blame all this on me and the real killers go free?”

“Something like that.”

Roubet's arm straightened, the bash-bang shifting until it came directly in line with her heart. The barrel gaped open before her, an endless tunnel to hell.

"I'm sorry, Olgun," she whispered, unable to look away from the pistol. "I tried."

She felt a brief surge of emotion from the near-dead god, followed by the faintest tingling in the air. She had just enough time to wonder if she'd imagined it before the flintlock's hammer crashed down with a deadly clank—

And detonated with a sharp crack and an ear-rending screech of metal. Shrapnel ripped through the soft flesh of Roubet's hand and arm, scored the stone floor in a staccato patter that punctuated the Guardsman's cry of pain. With a resounding thud, the remainder of the now useless weapon dropped to the floor, sending cracks shooting through a small blot of dried blood.

Roubet himself followed an instant later, clutching the bleeding wreckage of his hand to his chest and sobbing inconsolably.

"Well," Adrienne said finally. "*That* was convenient."

She felt a brief swell of satisfaction from her divine partner—but it was no match for her own sense of satisfaction as she darted forward and kicked the whimpering man in the head until he was well and truly unconscious.

"We've got to get out of here," she told the god seriously, limping on a vaguely sore foot as she moved toward the long passage and the stairs beyond. "They think I did this, and I sort of doubt that Lefty here is going to tell them otherwise. We've got to hide until I can figure out what to do, or how to get back to Alexandre."

Another questioning probe.

"I don't know," she admitted. "It doesn't matter, really. I grew up out there, remember? The Guardsman hasn't been born that can find Adrienne Satti when she doesn't want to be found!"

Olgun's doubt, when it came to her, was almost tangible. She concentrated on it, so she wouldn't have to confront her own.