

Chapter 1

The masses received the Lord's blessing and confessed for transgressions against their fellow man. With strained voices, they praised the Lord with song, and begged forgiveness for the inborn sins of their self-righteous souls. And as the church bells pealed, dismissing the congregation from the stiff wooden pews that reeked of pine oil, Paine Robertson slipped out the door like the serpent out of Eden.

He walked across the dirt road, with the late June sun scorching his tawny locks, to the freshly-swept porch of Fillmore's Leathers. He plopped upon the wooden planks and waited for his parents to finish mingling with the rest of the Lord's flock. Off to the side the wind dusted their horse and cart with a light layer of dry earth. The few provisions they procured, as well as the goods they failed to sell, sat as a reminder of their misfortune. It was getting worse every week, fewer and fewer of the townsfolk willing to barter with them. Paine knew why.

How dare they judge him.

Even his parents' frustration was surfacing at the rumors, evident in their recent shortness of temper and talks of parting ways. A few weeks prior they spoke of Paine and his sister moving on – of starting their life elsewhere; preferably in another town. It made him feel like a dirty rag no one wanted to touch unless there was nothing left to use. He suppressed those feelings, refusing to even mention it to his sister.

He did that a lot of late, keeping things to himself. It started when the visions in the mirrors began, just two years past. The voices taunted him, tempted him with knowledge of things unknown, and tantalized his innermost wants. He had followed their instructions, sacrificing small birds and squirrels to the blood spells they had urged him cast, but their promises were false, and amounted to nothing. As a result, he scorned them, ignored their whisperings.

And then one evening he had made the singular mistake of revealing their presence to his parents. His mother immediately set about destroying all the mirrors in the house and then turned on her son and beat the evil out of him.

After that, and threats to send him off as a laborer, Paine censured what he revealed. He held his tongue and took his beatings with a quiet resolve because despite their firmness of discipline, he needed the elderly couple that had raised him.

At least for now.

Things had even been calm for awhile; pleasant, in fact. Yet over the last few weeks matters worsened. The change in his mother's attitude was noticeable. Slow was the indoctrination, but evident enough. The beatings were becoming more frequent. Something was changing her, and that something was connected to the arrival of the Reverend Chapman.

It sat like a bad apple within him.

Paine winced as he leaned against the post; the strap marks had not yet completely healed.

He watched his parents as they waited, like bleating lambs lining up in front of the slaughterhouse. Many of the parishioners waited to speak with the good Reverend, thanking him for his eloquent sermon about the evils of witchcraft. It was a message Paine thought typical of the new Church of the Ascension and the man who came all the way from the Confederation to lead it. Schooled at Ascension College he was; a son of aristocrats; learned.

Arrogant was more like it.

The Church was in service four weeks now, replacing the battered chapel that had been used for centuries. The relic sat like a forgotten silhouette to the white, stone splendor that rose above the willows with a single, shining pinnacle. Although he never enjoyed Sunday sermons, Paine possessed a fondness for the old chapel, with its ancient smell and creaking floors. Its stone foundation was from the old world, from the time before the Shift ripped the Earth apart. That made it over five hundred years old.

Paine's parents passed through the line at a lagging pace as they spoke to all and sundry before finally reaching the good Reverend. The three spoke at length. Gwen would raise her aged hands to the air as she spoke, her words slow and precise. Due to her stutter Paine's mother spoke little, but when she did her arguments were deliberate and sure. Charles, with his gray wisps of hair combed over the bald spot on his head, paused to look at Paine. He gave a slight nod and a smirk before Gwen pulled his face towards her and thrust the open pages of their tattered bible in the Reverend's face. The Reverend nodded to her line of reasoning, yet his gaunt face remained puckered.

Paine pricked his ears to catch what words might flit across the road but two young men stepped in front of him; Billy Chapman, son of the good Reverend – seventeen and built like the blacksmith's outhouse, and Jake Billerman, same age, same size, but more eager for trouble.

Billy sucked on a stick of Confederation tobacco and exhaled through the corner of his lips – something Paine once thought sexy.

Now it was just plain ridiculous.

"Good sermon, huh Robertson?" commented Jake.

"I can't say I was impressed."

Paine looked Billy in the eyes and the boy averted his gaze.

Jake scowled. "Why do ya think that is?"

Paine said nothing. *The fool could think what he wanted.*

Jake leaned over. The smell of his breath was like ash. "I saw your sister light a fire with her bare hands. I know she's a witch."

"Prove it," Paine replied. He let his gaze slide over to Billy once more. The boy stared at his dust-covered shoes.

Paine couldn't help but wonder how much Billy had revealed of their encounter. There were too many rumors lately, ones that would not have cropped up unless Billy had been squawking like an old hen.

Jake's lips curved into an unctuous grin. "I won't have to. The Confederation is planning to annex Fairfax and the surrounding farms. The Witch Hunters are coming with them. And they're ridding the land of filth like you."

"I don't know what you're talking ab—"

"Hello, boys."

The two boys jumped and turned to the voice. Paine did not. He knew she was there, lurking. Like some hidden shadow upon his heart, he could sense her presence. She was always there, and when she wasn't, he could barely stand her absence.

From the corner of his eye he watched his twin, Lya, saunter towards them in her black gown. She always wore that outfit on Sundays, despite protests from Gwen to wear something less suited for a funeral.

She adjusted the folds of her dress, like one of the high class ladies at tea time, and nestled her head on Paine's shoulder. He wanted to shift over but was cornered against the post. Besides, it wouldn't look good if he seemed repulsed by his own sister.

Lya coiled her black locks around her finger and then plucked one of the strands. She examined it and then licked her teeth.

Billy backed up and lowered his head further.

Any lower and he'll be licking his own boots.

Jake refused to look at Lya. He focused on Paine. "Watch yourself, Robertson. Your time is short." The two then departed, giving a wide berth around his sister.

"They give you trouble?" Lya asked. She backed away from Paine, as if just as revolted.

"Not much." He glanced over to his parents. They were gathered with the other members of the Village Council. "Looks like we're going to be here awhile. Let's go wander."

The two rose and strode past a few shops and houses. Those on the porches did not offer the customary greeting or even a nod of the head. One woman hissed at them and some clutched the silver crosses that hung about their necks. They continued on and strode past the Apothecary where Old Lady Burns sat in front of her shop. She knitted a wool blanket for her newly-born grandson. The child was born a month prior, with knotted stumps for legs. It was the second such birth for that family. There were tears in the old woman's eyes.

Paine stepped on to the wooden porch and the faint smell of mothballs tickled his nose.

"Good morning, Mrs. Burns." He liked the old woman. She had always been kindly to him.

She sucked in her breath at the sight of Lya, an occurrence not uncommon among the townsfolk. She covered it with a feigned yawn.

"Interesting sermon this morning," she said.

Lya grunted.

"I thought it was a pile of horse shit," Paine said as he looked over to the Church. The Reverend spoke with a broad-shouldered stranger. Whether he was with the Confederation, or if he was just another traveler heading south to the ruins of ancient Dallas, it was hard to tell. The pepper-haired stranger glanced in Paine's direction for a fraction of a moment.

Old Lady Burns continued knitting. "The Reverend is not here to make friends. He is here to convert others to his way of thinking."

"He spews garbage from that cesspit of a mouth," Paine muttered.

"Not everyone follows him gladly." She offered him a timid smile, but one with enough reassurance to ease his anger.

Old Lady Burns had been accused of witchcraft countless times, especially after the birth of her grandson. It was common knowledge she did not get along with her son's wife. Yet few believed she was capable of such an atrocity. Paine had seen true witchcraft, and its power was beyond anything an innocent mind like Old Lady Burns could conjure.

He nodded. "We better get moving. Have a pleasant afternoon, Mrs. Burns."

"Thank you, dear."

The two then wandered towards the cemetery, almost directly across from the Apothecary. It sat behind the old chapel.

They strolled through the maze of haphazard tombstones to the oldest part of the cemetery. Upon one of the newer monuments sat a mourning dove. It cooed and barely masked the croak of an unseen raven.

Lya always kept Paine silent company on the trips to the cemetery, although she had her own notions about this place. She had mentioned several times she wanted to come into town at night to call forth the souls that resided there. It was an intriguing notion, but some things were better left undisturbed.

At least for now.

Usually when Paine called upon the dead, more than one emerged. And commanding one to do your bidding was challenge enough; commanding an entire cemetery was begging for a permanent possession. Paine shuddered at the thought. Two towns over, a man invited a legion of souls unto himself. The man went insane and threw himself off a cliff, squealing like a pig.

Paine's feet led him, as if by rote, to stand before a statue of an angel whose wings had long crumbled to dust. He could barely make out the words etched into the base.

In remembrance of Catherine and her beloved Ben.

The dates were no longer legible. He then moved on to the others.

The mourning dove cooed again and they ambled towards the old chapel. Paine gazed through a crack in the boarded window. Three shafts of light pierced the battered cedar roof and lit the pews. Fresh prints disturbed the neat carpet of dust that covered the floor; prints that appeared as if someone had let a cow loose in the derelict structure.

"Odd," he commented, and walked to the front of the building to stand before the double wooden doors.

Lya was at his side. "What's going on?"

"There's footprints inside."

She shrugged. "So?"

"Hoof prints."

She shoved past him to peer through the cracks in the doorframe. "What are you talking about?"

Paine examined the doors and found no sign of forced entry. He pulled on the iron handles. They were locked.

He was about to go back to the boarded window, but noticed the stranger watching them from the Apothecary. Paine swallowed the lump in his throat, but stared the man down.

"What was that about?" Lya asked, poking him with a thin, iron finger. "Do you know him, or has someone else in this little spit of a village caught your eye?"

He shook his head and turned. "No, I do not know him."

As they walked back towards the Church, the dove cooed a third time.

Within his cell, Friar John hummed; there was little else to do. His imprisonment was now at four days — four days of praying and meditation. Oddly, he found little to complain of. The feather bed was comfortable, if a little musty, and not quite long enough for his lanky frame, and his captors were as good to him as their conscience allowed them to be.

His punishment for heresy was a little severe, but his musings were not well tolerated. He wondered when they might release him. The Iberian monastery was a prison, placed at the southern tip of God's half-acre, where few would hear his truth.

Not my truth, he corrected himself, the truth.

He continued to hum, a refrain from a hymn that always brought him comfort.

Crow's-feet lined his face, every one earned over the last forty-three years, as were the gray flecks in his mud-colored mane. He cinched the belt about his brown robes to suit his narrowing midsection. His appetite had waned of late.

The smile on his face was wry. He wondered when the cardinal would realize that shutting him away like a criminal would do little good. It was *him* the Pope wished to see. He laughed when they told him he was to remain in this dark pit of a cell, in the deepest reaches of the monastery. The ears of God's representative were not to be tainted by his words.

They were in for a surprise.

He sat in silence, watching as a cockroach scurried across the dirt floor, looking for the scraps of his morning gruel. He tossed some crumbs in its path, knowing even the lowliest of creatures needed to eat.

It was difficult to tell the passing of time in this place. A moist chill permeated the stone walls, unwavering — day or night. Yet the faded glint of torchlight seeping under the door gave him some indication that the noon hour had recently passed. His humming continued, but for only a few bars of *Ave Maria* before he was interrupted by a clamor outside the door — the sound of heavy panting and fingers fumbling with keys.

Miguel.

The breathing was unmistakable.

John waited with the patience of Job as the man made attempts with numerous keys, but exasperation sighed from someone else in the hall.

"Hurry, man. The Pope doesn't have all day."

The clanking of keys increased and after countless attempts, the door finally opened. Flickering torchlight danced its way into the cell and the cockroach scampered towards a crack in the stone wall.

"Good day to you, sirs," John said. "You're a little late for our morning walk. The noon hour must have passed by now."

Miguel, large as life, had a dejected look upon his round face. The morning walk had been cancelled, yet John knew fault did not lie at the feet of the good brother. Miguel had always been kindly to him and the only one to request that they not confine him to the dungeons.

Yet his frail voice of support was of little help. The cardinal always got his way.

Except this time, John thought, taking in the striped, billowing uniform and plumed helmet of the other man who stood in the entrance – a member of the Vatican Guard.

"Come with me, heretic. You are summoned to the Pope." The guard pointed his spear at him. "Mind your tongue."

John said nothing, knowing his words would be wasted on one such as this, and followed quietly, winking at Miguel as he stepped into the passageway.

Soft torchlight lit the moss-covered corridors, the sound of the guard's polished black shoes clacking on the stone floor. Bells chimed in the distance, but their music was muted by the stone depths in which they walked. Numerous cells lay open, all with decaying wooden doors and empty since long before the Shift. Only his was occupied.

They wound through the stone maze, John and the guard stooping often to avoid the sheer tapestries of spider web. Finally, after climbing an aged stairwell, they reached ground level, and John covered his eyes from the bright glare of daylight.

He stopped to let the sun's rays warm his soul.

Something sharp poked him from behind.

"Keep moving."

They continued, and when they reached the abbey Miguel and the guard knelt to gesture the sign of the cross before they turned and left him. The iron doors closed with a heavy clank.

John made no such signs of piety and strode amidst the rows of wooden pews towards the pulpit, the floorboards creaking with every step. The Pope waited for him, alone.

"Your Holiness," John said, standing to face one of the most powerful leaders in the new world. He could imagine what she must have looked like in her youth. Even with white hair and the fine lines that adorned her face, she was stunning. She stood tall for a woman, almost rivaling him in stature. The Pope was garbed in a white robe, her hair spilling over it. She held out her hand to which he feigned a kiss, his lips not quite touching the emerald ring.

"I want to hear your heresy," she said as he faced her. Her voice echoed off the vaulted ceiling. It was painted with vivid images of the Archangel Gabriel.

John gazed upon the wings that adorned the angel's frame, pristine and white, and wondered how much more in this world he would discover was a lie.

"The cardinal seems to think it is not for your ears."

Her round eyes hinted annoyance. "Cardinal Aloysius is an overambitious fool who cares for nothing but his own advancement."

He reserved his opinion, yet his lips formed a smug curve.

"I am a politician, and have attained this position by learning how to read people and their motives. I am sure you have heard otherwise, but give me more credit than that. I am the second woman to sit in this position since the Shift ripped the world apart. It has not been an easy road. Now," she said, sizing him up. "I want your truth."

"Why have you come all this way? Cardinal Aloysius, in all his wisdom, saw fit to have me removed to this place where only some patient brethren would ignore my words. Then, when he knew you were coming to the very place he banished me, he had me placed in the furthest depths of the monastery."

She held her hand aloft and mouthed an incantation he did not hear. The doors and shutters swung closed. Scars were made visible as her sleeve slithered down her pale arm. They were old wounds.

Bloodcraft.

The Pope lowered her arm and adjusted her sleeve with a curt tug. For the briefest hint of a moment, he caught fear flitting across her eyes.

She leaned in to whisper. "He is coming."

John swallowed. "Who?"

"Do not play coy with me. I did not come this far to bandy words with an idiot. The Second Coming is upon us."

"I suppose you know who I am." He shifted where he stood, and the cherry floor groaned under his weight.

She smiled. There was no mirth there. "I know what lies within that darkened heart of yours. I also know what will happen to the person that orders your death. Your soul is cursed. That's why I've let you live."

He stared, offering her nothing, yet he smiled inwardly.

Cursed indeed.

Anyone who had anything to do with his death would suffer for all eternity.

"I knew of your blasphemy and did not contest the cardinal's decision to put you away. There is too much at risk to let you run around spouting your so-called truth. I come here now to ask what you know. And when you are finished, I have an errand for you."

He masked his intrigue. "An errand?"

"Hoofed and horned, we believe he is loose upon the world once more, maybe even in physical form." She paused. "You're going to find him."

"How?"

“Beings of great power are being summoned, but to where we do not yet know. My sources have been unable to penetrate this secret calling, at least not without going mad. We know that it is being called by someone high in the echelons of the Fallen.”

“And what am I supposed to do when I learn of this summoning?”

“You will attend.” She paused, and lowered her voice to a near whisper, “And you will kill him.”

He refrained from commenting on the futility of the request. John’s command of the dead was limited at best, although there were other powers in this world, and ways to negotiate with the unliving.

“You must know by now that my gifts are inadequate.”

She nodded. “But your blackened soul is the only one that may be able to get close enough without suspicion.”

“And how will this deed be done?”

From the pulpit she pulled out a shroud-wrapped object. It was about the length of his forearm. She peeled back the layers of delicate cloth to reveal a sharp metal object. John knew it the moment he saw it.

“The Spear of Destiny,” he muttered.

“It will be the only thing that can draw his soul from his body. Once it is done we can imprison his spirit and keep the world safe for a thousand years. You will have only one chance.” She studied him as he ran his fingers along the length of the spearhead.

He nodded as her logic revealed itself to him. “And if I cannot kill him, then my own death will be a blight on his soul.”

There was cunning in her eye. “Now, what will it be, assassin? I want to know what you know.”

John pondered his options. Go on a treacherous hunt that would likely result in his own death or remain under the cardinal's watchful eye. His decision was quick and concise, so he motioned her closer, opened his mouth, and spouted truth from the sacrilegious fountain of his soul.