

**A preview from Chapter One of “A Book of Hours: Gods and Tyrants” by Robert John Burke.  
Coming soon for Kindle and in paperback!**

(Author's Note: The excerpt is italicized and written in present tense in the customary manner of historical flashbacks from the series; the majority of the books are written with a more conventional style. If you enjoy this excerpt, please check out my [Amazon Author Page](#) or return to [my homepage](#) to check out my other works...)

*October, 1781. Two men on horseback push through a slender path between rows of scrub pines, shivering in wind that has turned unseasonably chill. The lead rider appears as a tall, slender man of fifty, white-headed and severe, struggling to keep his horse under him as the dappled gelding whinnies and starts at every broken twig. The second rider is younger, stockier, and much surer on his ride. His long brown hair streams unkempt around his shoulders: He's been awakened in the middle of the night, and it's all he can do to remain upright in the saddle.*

*Three hundred miles to the south, the American Revolution draws to an end at Yorktown, Virginia. Tonight, in the Pine Barrens of New Jersey, these men fight a different kind of war. The older man pulls back on the reins, allowing the second rider to come up beside him.*

*“Stay alert, boy,” he says in clipped tones. “This isn't hunting rabbits with your friends.”*

*“Yes, Father,” the boy murmurs, his eyelids drooping as he says it. The father cuffs him across the side of his head, and he pulls himself together. “Yes, sir. I'm sorry, sir!”*

*“It's for your own good, Johnny. Remember what happened to Thomas Quincy, last winter.”*

*The boy groans. “Mr. Quincy was an old drunkard who wandered off the path and froze to death in a snowdrift, and good riddance if you ask me.”*

*The father half-smiles. Not yet twenty years old, John Baldwin shares his father Amos' cynical pragmatism, even if he combines it with a softer side inherited from his mother. He's smart enough to have acquiesced to his father's machinations to keep him out of the militia and gentle enough to coax his chestnut stallion to obey his slightest command, even bedraggled and half-asleep. A boy with that combination of talents will go far, if only he can be freed from the burden of his family's mistakes.*

*“You may very well think that of Mr. Quincy,” Amos admits, “but our chickens are not so expendable. Nor are your mother and sisters, should it come to that.”*

*Johnny frowns. “Come to... what, father? The hen house must have been broken by some starving Piney. They won't come back, surely.”*

*Amos scowls. “Piney” is the local word for the ragged outcasts and Tories who inhabit the remote reaches of the pine barrens; a low lot of scoundrels and traitors, despised by decent folk. Having one of them invade his world is just about the worst possibility young John Baldwin can imagine. He doesn't know what his father knows: The darker things lurking in the Barrens make the worst pine robbers in New Jersey look like members of the House of Lords.*

*He's known for years the time would come to confide the truth to his son, and tonight it has*

*become a necessity. It's far from easy, even so.*

*"You saw the hen house," he murmurs. "No man could reduce it to kindling so quickly. You heard the scream."*

*"I didn't," Johnny says ruefully. "I was asleep."*

*"Then you are fortunate, lad. I'll not soon forget the sound."*

*"What then?" asks the boy. "A bear? I haven't seen one in..."*

*"It's not a bear," Amos says. "It's the Devil."*

*"Old Scratch? Have we got on his list? I knew Sunday School would be nothing but a mistake."*

*The boy laughs; his father is not in the mood. A bone-chilling wind cuts through the pines, bending their branches, casting nightmare shapes upon the path in the pale light of a harvest moon. The whispering sound is all around the hunters, and the dance of the branches makes it almost impossible to detect unnatural movement. Under these conditions, their quarry could creep within six inches of them without the slightest warning...*

*Spurred by the thought, Amos snaps his reins. The gelding leaps forward, nearly throwing him, and Johnny hurries his mount forward to lend a steady hand. When the gelding has been restrained, Amos jabs a finger at his son.*

*"Not a word."*

*Johnny obeys as far as actual words, although his stifled snort leaves his opinion of his father's riding skills in little doubt. Amos doffs his cap, sarcastically acknowledging the help. It is a quiet moment between father and son, congenial and familiar despite the danger.*

*Something crashes in the trees, and the moment is gone. Amos whirls, his musket held ready, but sees nothing. He doesn't even know where the sound originated.*

*Beside him, Johnny clutches his musket in two shaking hands, wide awake now. He turns to his father, wide-eyed. "Pineys..."*

*"No," Amos insists, "it's him. The Jersey Devil."*

*Johnny stares at his father, wide-eyed, as well he might. He's never heard so much as a whimsical anecdote from his patriarch, much less a flight of fancy. The look in Amos' eye persuades him not to laugh, but he backs the stallion off, shaking his head.*

*"Is this a game, Father?"*

*"Far from it. Johnny, there are things I never told you..."*

*"If it's no game, we must go back! I've never heard of pine robbers coming this close to Haddonfield. The farm will be in danger. We must tell Constable McCloughry..."*

*"There's no time!" Amos growls. "How can I explain? You know the story of the Devil."*

*"Not from you. I never thought you believed such foolishness."*

*"You've heard it!" says the father, desperate now. "What have you heard?"*

*The boy looks around him in the dark, still seeking some joke. He speaks haltingly, embarrassed*

by the words, his deep-set eyes hooded in the dark. *"The Devil was... a demon born in human form... to a woman named Leeds, I think, fifty or sixty years ago. It's supposed to have had wings like a bat and a hump and terrible claws. A lot of nonsense, really. They say it killed a dozen people before it was exorcised, banished from the pines for a century."* Johnny tries an uneasy laugh. *"So you see, Father, it can't be the Devil. He's not due back yet."*

*The laughter trails away. Amos studies the ground, ears intent for any movement, and murmurs, "They didn't exorcise it. You can't exorcise what isn't from Hell."*

*Johnny looks confused, as well he might. "Where's it from, then?"*

*"From us," Amos says. "Our family. Our shame."*

*"But there's no one named Leeds in our family; not on Mother's side, and you always said all your people were dead! Father, I don't understand this at all."*

Of course he doesn't, *Amos thought*. The curse of a logical mind. How to make him listen in the short time remaining?

*Another crunch, barely feet away now, causes both men to brandish their muskets. Amos licks cracked lips, feels his heart pound in his chest. The words won't come. He opens his mouth three times before he can force any sound.*

*"My family is dead, Johnny. All of them... departed long ago. Including my previous wife, Deborah Leeds."*

*"But..."* the boy narrowed his eyes. *"But that's absurd! You couldn't be old enough!"*

*"As I told you," Amos sighs, "there is much to explain..."*

*"I won't hear it!" John Baldwin seizes his stallion's reins, wheeling it around on the path. "You can stay out here and tell bedtime stories if you like. I'm going home."*

*"Mind me, boy! You stay where you are!"*

*"No," says Johnny, and he snaps the reins. His stallion trots back the way they came...*

*"Johnny, come back! Don't!"*

*Another crash, and it's already too late. A dark shape barrels out of the pines, barring the path in front of the younger Baldwin. The stallion rears up on its hind legs, and Johnny barely hangs on. His musket fires harmlessly into the air. The weapon's kickback completes the job of knocking Johnny off his stallion; he falls with his boots tangled in the stirrups, arms flailing. His head connects solidly with the ground...*

*"Johnny!" Amos cries. He shoulders his musket and fires.*

*He doesn't know whether the shot strikes home. The creature in the road might be seven feet tall, with a wingspan twice as long. Its head is horribly distended, with pop eyes on either side like a fish. Its long, skinny arms end in three dagger-like claws; its stubby feet are nearly hooves. Strange wings fold under the arms, shimmering like scales, flexible like skin, and apparently unforgiving as bone; the creature might as well carry a pair of scythes around. It hunches over Johnny, strange eyes staring, and opens a wide, flexible mouth like a leech's maw. Further back, its throat is studded with jagged yellow teeth.*

*It makes the sound: the rending, pulsating, violins-out-of-tune-at-the-end-of-the-world sound that alerted Amos to its presence. The sound he can never forget. The sound that turned the world upside-down, more than forty years ago. Now it's Amos' turn to be thrown from his horse. At least his son's mount had to be startled; Amos Baldwin's gelding just up and decides it doesn't want any part of the thing in the road, and Amos doesn't blame it a damn bit. He lands hand on his left hip, his musket on the ground beside him, frozen mud draining the warmth from his body as the hoofbeats recede.*

*The Devil peers at Johnny quizzically, then swivels its pop-eyes toward Amos. It steps over the younger Baldwin's prone form, stalking the father. Another man would be frozen from terror, but Amos has been waiting for this moment. His hands move slowly, grabbing up his musket: Cartridge, ball, powder, ramrod. He can reload in less than thirty seconds, and he will not miss twice at short range. He only has to last that long.*

*"You remember me," he says to the creature, "don't you?"*

*The Devil cocks its head and snarls. Amos understands why they call it a demon. He wishes that was all. It advances on him one heavy step at a time, claws working, wings flashing intermittently in the moonlight.*

*Amos rips his cartridge open and pours in the powder. Twenty more seconds.*

*"I'm sure you remember me," he tells the Devil. "I remember you... and the midwife, Matilda Twigg? She brought you into the world. She was the first one you killed, poor woman. And the others at the tavern, remember them?"*

*The Devil blinks. Comes closer. Amos pulls out his ramrod. Ten more seconds.*

*"You don't how long I've feared this day... yes, and longed for it, too. I thought I'd struggle with it. I thought I'd be sorry, but I'm not. I have a son now, you see. A normal son. God's forgiven me."*

*The Devil cocks its head, nightmare mouth working in strange patterns. Amos drops the ramrod, shoulders his musket, and takes aim. The creature's heavy forehead rests between his sights.*

*"Time to undo past mistakes."*

*In a second, the debt will be paid. But even as he pulls the trigger, the Devil turns; Amos' shot ricochets off its plated wing. Someone is shouting: It's Johnny. He's come to his senses, and now he charges the monster headlong, wielding the butt of his musket like a club.*

*"Get away from him! Begone!"*

*The Devil cocks its head as though confused. The brave boy defending his father merits barely a moment of its attention; it slices with the deadly-hard edge of its wing: up, then down again. It steps away, and John Baldwin collapses practically in his father's arms, a bloody red "X" carved in his torso. His mouth gapes open, unsuccessfully attempting to draw breath.*

*Amos cradles him, awash in the boy's blood, choking on a moan. "Johnny... no..."*

*"Feed the horses, Father," the boy murmurs. "I'm going back to sleep."*

*He becomes very still. Amos sobs into his shoulder as his favored son bleeds out into the mud. He hears a heavy footstep, and then the creature stands over him, the prodigal regarding the corpse of a fallen brother with open curiosity. Amos lifts his eyes; hatred burns on either side of the gaze.*

*"Well, do it. Send me after him. Kill me, damned creature, or I swear I'll kill you."*

*The Devil makes no answer-- he's never heard it make a sound besides the obscene howl-- but it seems to understand what is required. It draws back one gleaming set of claws.*

*The world between them burns. Amos draws back, startled; the Devil flinches in terror. Someone has interrupted their ritual with a flaming torch, which is waved in the creature's face until it howls again. The sound fills Amos with fury. He rises, bloody shirt clinging to his chest, and picks up his musket.*

*"No!" he cries. "The creature is mine!"*

*The torch's bearer is not listening. He's a big, muscular man in hand-patched clothing, barely a silhouette in the dark. He places himself between Amos and the Devil, brandishing the torch, dodging the creature's claws with speed belying his size. One lunge leaves the creature off-balance. The big man flips his torch in his hand and drives its sharpened base into the thing's shoulder like a stake. The Devil screeches loud enough to deafen both Amos and his rescuer. Lurching and flapping as the flames lick its skin, it backs into the pines. At first the fire illuminates its path, but the creature finally rids itself of the torch and takes flight, bursting through the tops of the pines with a sudden crunch. By the last smoldering sparks, Amos sees it recede into the distance, its wound rendering it unsteady in the air.*

*The fire goes out. The Devil is gone. So is the angel of Amos Baldwin's new life. He sinks to his knees in the mud.*

*Presently, he realizes his rescuer still stands over him, respectfully silent. He frowns up at the big man, still unable to perceive the details of his appearance: The man's weathered skin is too dark to reveal much in the moonlight.*

*"Japhet Leeds?" the black man says in a rich voice, unexpectedly cultured. Amos knows what that means.*

*"That was... my former name," he says, shock fading. The ache in his chest remains, but if a man in his position knows how to do anything, it's adapt to grief. "I've gone back to Baldwin now, Amos Baldwin. Your servant, sir."*

*The big man snorts. "I doubt it."*

*"I am in earnest. We are anti-slavery in my family. Even if we were not, I know the Guild policy. You are with the Guild, yes? I seem to remember your voice from... long ago."*

*"Not long enough. Oliver Freeman," says the big man, inclining his head. Then he lifts it to scan the sky. "We should get indoors."*

*"You wouldn't stop him that way." Amos shakes his head, squeezes his son's cold hand in both of his. "I shouldn't think he'll be back. He's accomplished what he came to do."*

*Freeman says nothing, only waits as Amos convulses from a second round of sobs. When they subside, the big man helps him to his feet. Amos barely notices the pain in his hip until he tries to take Johnny's body in his arms and stumbles. Freeman does it for him.*

*Twenty minutes later, they're in a barn on the Baldwin farm, surrounded by uneven boards and fragrant straw. Freeman places the former heir gently atop a bail of hay, then leans against a stack of bails himself.*

*Baldwin speaks by rote, mind racing in circles. He keeps expecting Johnny to blink fatigue from sleepy eyes and rise to join them.*

*"Have you had a long journey, Mr. Freeman?"*

*"All the way up from Virginia. I've been serving with the Rhode Island Regiment. We've besieged Cornwallis at Yorktown, and were just about to get the son of a bitch when the Old Man called me up here. I've been tracking your Devil for the last three days." Oliver Freeman shakes his head. "I hate missing the ends of wars. They're so much more agreeable than the beginnings."*

*"It's over, then?" Amos doesn't shift his gaze, only stares at his son's body. "Good news. I must tell Constable McCloughry."*

*"I wish you wouldn't. The news won't reach this far north for a couple of weeks. We wouldn't want the Commons learning of the Guild's special channels."*

*"No... of course not. Forgive me. I am not myself."*

*Freeman studies him with hooded eyes. "I'm sorry for your loss. I'll help you bury him."*

*"No." Amos shakes himself. "I will tend to him. Are you a father, Mr. Freeman?"*

*"I've been everything a man can be," Freeman shrugs, "except lucky."*

*"Then you can't know how I feel. In the space of an hour, I've gone from the most fortunate man in Creation to less than a beggar." Freeman accepts that in silence, and presently Amos rouses himself. "I must... tell my wife, I must determine what to tell my wife."*

*"I suggest animal attack. It has the benefit of being true."*

*"It's not an animal."*

*Freeman's expression borders on pity. "Men are also animals, Mr. Leeds. Sorry; Baldwin. It gets burdensome over the years, doesn't it? Keeping the names straight. Do you ever wish you could just be yourself?"*

*"I used to. Now I'd like to be anything else." Amos turns from his son's body, fighting tears he cannot shed in his time and place. Lorelei, his wife, will shed enough for them both. He sighs. "She will not forgive me."*

*"Should she?"*

*Amos lifts his gaze, surprised by the bluntness of the attack, though not its content. "You said the Old Man summoned you."*

*"Yes, on behalf of the Directors. Your absence has been noted of late, and has been of some concern to them, especially to... those of your acquaintance. The Old Man agreed to look into it."*

*"What did he tell you about my activities?"*

*"Not much." The big man rolls his shoulders. "I didn't ask. I'm a simple man, Mr. Baldwin. I've often made my way by killing... men or beasts, it's all the same. I care little for you or your secrets, but I know a hex gone wrong when I see one."*

*"It's no ordinary hex," Amos says. A chill pushes through the rickety walls; he's already trembling. "You remember the old days, Mr. Freeman; you well remember them, if I'm not mistaken. I wanted so badly to make things right..."*

*Freeman holds up both hands, discouraging him. "I don't care about your reasoning. I only*

want to know how to kill it.”

“Leave that to me.”

“The Guild's already tried that.” Freeman rolls his shoulders a second time, working a knot out of them. “It's our problem now, Mr. Baldwin. It's everyone's problem. I hope it was worth it.”

Amos shakes his head; it hasn't even come close to being worth it. It couldn't.

Freeman makes a clucking sound with his tongue. “I'd like to sleep in your barn tonight. I'll pick up its trail tomorrow. Tend to your family; I'll hide in the pines while you move the boy out. Just before first light, come to me with a list of its weaknesses. Then forget this, if you can. Live your new life in your new country. You won't see me again, unless you're suspected of further hexing, in which case you won't see me for long. Understood?”

Baldwin bristles; in or out of shock, he's a proud man. “Do you presume to play my master? On my land, and you a--”

Freeman laughs, a short deep bark of sound. “That anti-slavery sentiment didn't last long at all, did it? Of course, if you find my suggestions very objectionable, you are at liberty to take it up with the Old Man. It's generally assumed you'd rather deal with me.”

It's the second threat Freeman has made, and the more effective of the two. Baldwin cannot muster up the necessary fury to rebut it. He feels suddenly very small and old.

“I must tell Lorelei,” he repeats. “You may stay here, Mr. Freeman. Please keep out of sight. I'll see you in the morning.”

“Thank you,” the big man says, dripping sarcasm. To his credit, it's gone from his voice when he says, “I am genuinely sorry about the boy.”

“Yes,” says Amos, the most reply he can muster.

He looks back only once on his way out of the barn: He believes the nightmare image of Johnny laid across the bail of hay, his flesh quartered by the terrible red X, will remain with him as long as he lives.

That is to say, forever.