

# Shoveling Doubt

An Anno Amagium Short by Hank Whitson

—Watch—

The call came at fifteen past three, and Watch was waiting.

Kingston and Claremont had both dozed in their seats, and woke with grunts at the crackle of the dispatch radio:

“Venture Kingston, do you copy?”

“This is Officer Herd. Go ahead dispatch,” Watch answered.

“We have another potential M51-20 in progress. Teenage girl called it in. She was hysteric so I don’t have much to go on, but she said her little brother was speaking tongues.”

“We’re on our way,” Kingston said through a yawn, then grouched: “Why is it always three in the morning?”

Kingston was being rhetorical, but for a moment, Watch couldn’t remember the answer. He could have explained exactly why at some point, and the knowledge was still somewhere in his head, but it had become murky. *It’s an inverted trinity-thing, right? No. It’s about sleep. More people are asleep at three than any other hour of the day. Fae and malefactors favor midnight, but three in the morning is when demons do their best work.*

Kingston turned on the siren and started speeding to the address dispatch sent. Watch looked out the window, taking stock of Arroyo. *How many bridges does one city need?* Admittedly, Arroyo resembled a suburban archipelago. The city was cracked with verdant gullies that spiderwebbed out from the larger, eponymous gulch to the west. Ornate bridges connected the ‘islands’ housing businesses, shopping districts, and apartment complexes, while wealthier homes were nestled in the shady embankments. But they were headed north, to the flatter, poorer neighborhoods nestled against the foothills.

“Check yourselves,” Kingston said, raising his voice against the sirens.

Watch snorted inwardly, but checked his equipment anyway. He had silver slugs chambered in his revolver and his blessed Keeper’s blade lay across his lap. His left license was loaded with fire, water, and air anima, while his right held one spirit for barriers and two for bindings. He ran his fingers over the vials of holy water in his belt, then studied the coil of rosary beads and saint charms on his right wrist until they arrived at the address; a low, dilapidated-looking tenement complex.

There was a crowd in front, people dressed in bathrobes and pajamas, talking amongst themselves with the same nervous energy of a fire drill that may or may not be warranted. But instead of an alarm, a voice bellowed from inside the building. It ranged from screeching to inhumanly deep, and was accompanied by a powerful, nauseating emanation. Watch recognized the language as Latin spoken in reverse, but could only make out the most oft-repeated phrase:

“Retam tse atacinrof subiuq!!”

*Charming. Would it kill them to come up with something original?*

The crowd parted when they saw the Keepers. Some practically fled. But an elderly man pointed up at the building and addressed Kingston:

"It's in apartment J. Second story."

Kingston nodded and led the venture inside. The air smelled like a busted sewer main. Rotting meat stewed in shit. And in between the inverse-Latinate bellows, they could hear the incessant buzz of swarming insects. The air grew thick and greasy against their wyrds as they ascended the staircase; telltale sensations of demonic magic.

Four people stood in the hallway. A Hispanic teenage girl, her parents, and a balding catholic priest. The parents seemed to be arguing with the other two, but they switched targets as soon as they saw the Keepers, erupting in rapid fire Spanish.

"No! Absolutamente no! No condenarás a nuestro hijo!" the father said, lunging.

Kingston caught him, emanated calm, and started speaking to him in slow Spanish. Meanwhile, Claremont and the daughter ran interference on the mother. The priest extricated himself and regarded Watch with the grimness of a man hopelessly trapped. He stepped forward, and Watch noticed he was clutching his arm as if it was injured.

"How long?" Watch asked.

"Insects started two nights ago. They called me when the tongues started, yesterday morning. We kept him restrained. I performed the rites, but..." he shook his head, gripped his arm. *But you were outmatched. Because you aren't equipped to deal with this. Instead of calling for help when you had the chance, you let this infection fester.*

"We need your blessing," Watch said. "Now."

The priest pursed his lips tight enough to sever a finger and shook his head firmly.

"Your consent then," Watch insisted.

The priest opened his mouth to debate, but another roar drowned him out and left Watch's ears ringing. When the corrupted voice went silent, Watch started to plead his case, but Kingston spoke over him, silencing everyone with an emanation nearly as powerful as the demon's, and spoke:

"You can let us in of your own God-given will, or we can bind you where you stand. But I will not let a child die on the altar of papal semantics."

The priest looked to the parents and nodded in defeat. The mother continued to protest, but the father held her back and she dissolved into wailing in his arms. The daughter blubbered thanks through her tears as the venture gathered around the door.

Kingston pulled out his well-worn copy of the Paxigratian Book of Prayer and parted the cover. Watch raised his rosary; prayer beads and silver charms, and kissed the symbol of St. Jeor. Claremont started casting a binding contract. When they felt the spell reach completion, Kingston raised three fingers, folding each in sequence. As the last finger folded, he kicked open the apartment door.

A wall of insects crashed into them, accompanied by a stench powerful enough to burn Watch's eyes. His empty stomach heaved, and a handful of flies poured into his throat, leaving him hacking and choking. Claremont unleashed his binding contract, and Watch felt it reverberate against his wyrd as the spell strike the knot of noxious energy at the center of the room; a skinny young boy. Like all the others.

The spell held the him rigid, but he hung in the air, suspended by infernal magic. He was naked save for a pair of filth-stained briefs, his skin jaundiced, and his veins a gangrenous black. But his eyes were the worst. The worst thing Watch had ever seen. They had compounded.

Impossibly dense clusters of tiny human eyes writhed in the boy's sockets. A forked tongue hissed from his mouth and whipped the air.

Kingston cut through the chaos with an emanation strong enough to floor a heavyweight prizefighter.

"Our father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name!"

Watch clutched the charm of St. Jeor, grit his teeth, and surrendered his soul to the will of God himself. His *wyrd* seemed to dissolve and deepen simultaneously, as the Grace seized him. Warmth. Purpose. Power. *Lord guide me. Make me your instrument. Help me save this child. Your child.*

The demon lashed out with the child's *wyrd*. Tendrils and pulses of unseen force shot toward Watch. He caught most of the barrage with a messy, sorcerous block, but took a numbing hit to his right shoulder, and a gash across the top of his left thigh.

Kingston continued to read the Lord's prayer, drew a vial of holy water from his belt, and smashed it against the floor, then directed the splash of blessed water into the child's face with sorcery. The child violently shivered as the demon struggled to break Claremont's binding, then it threw his head back and a plume of insects erupted from his throat. They streaked toward Kingston's face; a torrent of biting, stinging chitinous hail.

*Focus. You can do this.*

Watch held the symbol of St. Jeor, the dragon-slayer and patron of exorcists, and focused every ounce of his magical might through it, as if it were a lens. He felt his *wyrd* collide with the demon's will, and Hell itself waited within. An eternity's worth of anguish. Enough rage and pain to toss him like a tidal wave, rolling, and grinding him until he couldn't tell up from down. It was like he ran into a brick wall head first at full tilt. Every neuron in his body lit with pain. And then, while he was still dazed, an immense, full-body weight smashed into his back.

It took him several seconds to realize the demon had hit him with the dining table. Even trapped in boy's body, even bound by Claremont's spell and basted with holy water, the monster had enough strength to pull a dining room table across the room, into the air, and against Watch's back.

For several awful seconds, he thought his spine was broken, but he eventually managed to draw a desperate, shuddering breath. He heard his comrades fighting. He felt their *wyrds* and spells clashing with the will of the demon, and through the magical ripples recoiling throughout the room, he could feel that they were failing.

*I want to stay down. Give up. Just lie down and die.*

Watch despaired.

—Cruz—

"God dwells in you!" Cruz called to the congregation.

"And also in you!" the congregation answered.

He started the homily as he so often did: a conversational recap of the week's events, announcements about events Hallowed Trinity was hosting or promoting, and other general bulletins pertaining to the church. And then it was time for the hard part. *The fun part. But still the hard part.*

“So autumn has arrived. And with it, we Paxigratians celebrate our own humble holiday, the Accordation. Not a day for gifts or cards. Not even a day off work, since it always falls on the final Soliday of Libra. If we associate the Accordation with anything, it’s probably awkward conversations with our agnostic friends or other confused Christians, trying to explain why our denomination celebrates the founding of the Second Amagium.”

“After all, Esmeryl Chaucer committed unparalleled atrocities. Putting aside the Desolation of Jerusalem, thousands of people suffered and died under the yoke of her monstrous institution. In fact, it lives up to almost all of Christ’s most dire condemnations of the First Amagium.

“And that is something else that we must account for. Jesus peacefully, but *vociferously* opposed the First Amagium. He declared, repeatedly, that wyrds were not only a God-given right, but our primary means of connecting with the divine. ‘Any Institution that attempts to impede that sacred communication is an enemy of my Father, God Almighty in Heaven.’ Cruz paused, allowing the weight of the holy words to settle before asking: “How did we, as Christians, get from there to here?”

Again, Cruz allowed his question to percolate in the congregation before continuing:

“I use every Accordation Day as an opportunity to consider that question very carefully. As both an individual, and in terms of the church as a whole. What does it *mean* to be Paxigratian? How can a religion of ‘Given Peace,’ come from humanity’s darkest, most violent hour? How *dare* we call ourselves Christians, when the secular governance of magic is a core tenant of our faith, and Christ wholeheartedly opposed the Amagium?”

One more pause for emphasis. Then Cruz casually shrugged, and said:

“I think it comes down to candles.”

The line earned a few confused laughs, just as the young Reverend hoped.

“Really! Candles. Our first Paxigratian brothers and sisters supported Chaucer because, for all her sins, the Second Amagium gave the world licenses. A stable, secular means of governing magic, without severing our connection to God. Our acolytes were able to light candles with their wyrd once more this morning thanks to licenses. I can project my beautiful voice to you all with a contract right now, thanks to the licenses on my wrist. I can fuel my prayers with the very fire of my soul, without fearing the dangers of that fire.

“These days, we are ‘wyrd-positive.’ I know that phrase is probably already dated—I can never keep up with the latest memes—but it’s also true. Whether you wholeheartedly support the Third Amagium, or think corrections are in order, we can all agree that magic is a good thing. But that wasn’t always the case. The Old Testament states wyrds are ‘the Living Echoes’ of Eve’s sin, ‘Stains of the Fruit,’ and so forth. It was Jesus Christ of Nazareth who said that magic can bring peace and safety to mankind.

“The First Amagium had noble intentions. But we all know where those can lead. And Esmeryl Chaucer ended up taking a stroll down that same road. But her Amagium also made an important step in the right direction. Licenses, like the printing press, and separation of church and state, put us on the path of progress. They lit a candle in the dark ages. They gave us hope. And hope, beloved friends, is at the core of my Christianity. It is the beating heart of Paxigratianism. Practiced properly, faith is a well-kindled candle in the dark.”

The congregation applauded, said amen, and shared their jubilation. Cruz gave a humble nod in response, and smiled broadly to cover the sinking feeling in his gut.

*This used to fill me with such warmth, oh Lord. So why am I so tired? Why do I feel like a bag of hot air, instead of the beacon these people deserve?* The candles angle was new, but the Accordation message was the same from year to year. *How can I preach progress when I make none myself?*

The service ran its gentle course. Cruz shook every willing hand, said his hellos and goodbyes over coffee and cookies in the church forum. Then he retired to his office, shrugged off his vestments, sank into his chair with a groan, and woke two hours later.

He was ashamed of leaving the chore of taking down the coffee tables to his staff. Save for a few classes, the campus was largely deserted too, so he would have to apologize later. He was still kicking himself as he strode across the parking lot when he noticed the doors of the church were still open.

It was customary to keep the building unlocked on Soldays, but there were signs everywhere asking people to shut the fucking doors so they didn't air condition half the neighborhood. Cruz sighed and jogged over, seeing the narthex door was opened as well.

When he stepped into the church to shut the door, he saw a young man in the black robes of an Amagium Keeping Officer standing two thirds up the aisle, looking at the altar.

Cruz instantly recognized the young man by his white hair; a billowing mass of white gold. He had been attending services for a month now, always sneaking in just after the processional, and leaving just after the eucharist. As a result, they had yet to meet. Cruz never would have guessed he was a Keeper. He always wore asfalis clothing. *I actually thought he might be an anticordance activist, since I never saw him wear licenses, either. Now I know why.*

Silver vambraces made asfalis people uneasy, even when the amagia who wore them were out of uniform. And despite their faith's founding principles, Paxigratians were still people. Mere mortals in the presence of magical titans.

*Can't have had his appointment long. I thought he was still in his late teens.* He had a slender build, accentuated by the wild hair that gave his head childlike proportions, and his average height was stunted by a perennial slouch. Poor posture was a rarity among amagia, to say nothing of Keepers. Years of athenaeum training usually beat all traces of timidity out of its aspirants. *He must be tired. Or injured, perhaps.* As Cruz approached, he noticed a brown string of beads and silver charms, coiled around the man's right wrist, just beneath the cuff of his right license vambrace.

*Ah.*

Cruz froze in his tracks when the Faithsworn officer casually unholstered his service revolver. Even from fifteen paces away, the gun seemed comically large in the man's thin hands. He cradled it in his other hand, staring with intense concentration.

The room's ambient gravity seemed to congeal in a wave radiating out from the gun. Cruz couldn't see the officer's expression, but his meek body language had gone taught. His slouch straightened, but it held no confidence. Rather, he seemed to be carrying an immense weight on his shoulders, or standing against a powerful current. Yet his wyrd was completely still. Utterly silent.

*What do I do?* Sudden movements and firearms were horrible bedfellows, but if the man decided to shoot himself, Cruz would be completely powerless to stop him. *Get him talking. Words are your sword and ploughshare. Words are all you've ever had. Use them. Speak. Say something, damn you!*

“Can I help you?” Cruz managed, then added: “Please?”

The Keeper didn’t flinch, or whirl around as expected, which was good, but weird, which made Cruz even more nervous. *Did he know I was here all along? Does he not care? Please don’t do this, man. I can’t take it. Please. God, give*—The young officer turned slowly, still holding the gun, with a wry and rueful smile on his lips.

“This probably looks bad,” he acknowledged, almost sheepishly.

“It’s not a comfort,” Cruz agreed. “May I ask that you holster your weapon?”

The Keeper did so without hesitation, re-securing it with the snap. Cruz exhaled so heavily he nearly deflated. *Praise be to God.* When the gun was secured, the blonde man turned his gaze back to the altar, left hand resting on his sword hilt. Cruz took one cautious step forward, and forced himself to continue—*I’m not ready to deal with this today*—until he stood shoulder to shoulder with the officer. He was older than Cruz expected, but still extremely young to be Faithsworn. *Then again, I’m young to be a Reverend.* Cruz cleared his throat:

“I hoped we’d meet eventually, though I had different circumstances in mind.”

“I wouldn’t have guessed you noticed me in the crowd,” the Keeper said.

“I try hard to remember the regulars, even if we don’t have the pleasure of speaking. It’s also hard to miss somebody who sneaks in and out of services like a stray cat. But I bet I can guess your reason, officer...?”

The man’s mouth twitched with a small smile.

“Watchell Herd,” he said.

“Reverend Legaro Cruz, at your service.”

They stood in silence for a moment before Herd spoke:

“I don’t think I was serious about it. At least, if I was, I probably wouldn’t do it here. Just a call of the void thing.”

“Is that a magical term?” Cruz asked.

“Psychological, actually.” Herd’s tone was light, but he kept his eyes downcast. “Have you ever crossed a bridge and had the sudden impulse to jump, halfway across? Or vivid thoughts of stepping in front of a bus?” Cruz nodded, and Herd confirmed: “Call of the void.”

“How’d the void get your number?”

Cruz kicked himself immediately. He always defaulted to weak jokes when he didn’t know what else to say. *But that’s always a gambit and this isn’t the moment for risks.* People assumed he was making light of their problems as often as they found the humor in his quips.

Herd chuckled and said:

“Probably uses the same directory as those automated tax scam calls.”

Cruz laughed harder than intended, desperate for levity. *He still has a sense of humor. That’s something, even if he is a smartass. I can work with that. But how? What do I say next?*

“Not completely sure why I came here,” Herd admitted. “Looking for a sign, I guess. And I woke up halfway through your liturgy. Thought it best not to interrupt this time.”

“Sometimes an extra hour of sleep is worth a week of worship.”

The officer turned to look at him. His eyes were an intense, gray-blue.

“That’s what I like about your services. You’re realistic. Practical. Relatable.”

*I’m out of my fucking depth is what I am.* Cruz sank into the nearest pew, trying to appear casual rather than exhausted. When he spoke, he emanated a sense of ease that he absolutely did not feel, and again felt foolish.

*He's an amagia. Faithsworn at that. He can probably sense my true emotions through my wyrd or something.* Cruz forced himself to commit to the attempt anyway:

"I can give you a recap if you'd like. But I'll be honest. Today wasn't my best work."

"Why do you say that?" Herd leaned against the pew on the opposite side of the aisle.

"Certain traditions just doesn't age well. Sometimes I wish we just could reboot it."

"What?"

"Paxigratianism. Christianity as a whole, really. Start with the same premise: Christ is God, born in human flesh. Magic is meant for love and worship; not war. Keep the bread and the wine. Keep the love. Keep all the good stuff. And apply some of the other important lessons history has impressed on us since."

"I thought the Holy Spirit guides the pens of scripture."

*Great. He really is a smartass.* But now that the fear of mortal danger was receding, Cruz was starting to find his rhythm.

"I think it guides all of us. But the people holding the pens are still people. They focus on the goal—a more loving and peaceful world—and get very fuzzy on the details of how we get there. Other times, I think the spirit tells us what we need to hear in a given moment. Just enough to get us to tomorrow, because the whole truth is too hard to cope with today."

Herd nodded, lowering his gaze to the church's worn tile floor.

"What do you think?" Cruz asked after a minute.

"I agree with you," Herd said. "But you found me holding my gun and looking grim, so I'm worried that you're just telling me what I want to hear rather than what I need to hear."

Cruz snorted.

"Hey, I can do that too. Get lots of sun, twenty minutes of exercise, at least eight hours of sleep, and drink lots of water." Herd snickered and shook his head. Cruz continued: "Come on, officer. Level with me. I can't help if you don't tell me what's bothering you."

Herd nodded in concession.

"I'll share this in strict confidence: Arroyo has suffered three times the national average of possessions over the last two months. And the demons are stronger than normal. That's why regional command sent my venture here. We've done four exorcisms so far. All children. Always from catholic, episcopal, or Paxigratian families. With the Catholics, we have to argue our way in half the time, so we're fighting the families and the demons." Herd scoffed.

Cruz nodded sympathetically. The Catholic Church's official stance on amagia changed from pope to pope, but generally ranged from exasperated, withering tolerance, to open condescension and disapproval. Ordained priests were permitted to assist Faithsworn and other Keepers during exorcisms—a concession hard won by the Church—but many conservative Catholics still believed the Amagium was in league with the infernal. *People peddling cancers so they can sell the cures at a premium, supposedly.*

"Anyway, the last one was three days ago." Herd said, then added: "Six-year-old boy."

"I see," Cruz said. After a pause, he asked: "Did you lose him?"

It was another risky move. Certain people preferred to talk around the source of their pain. But Cruz had found it was best to be frank with Keepers. They were usually hard people, and most of them preferred a direct approach. *I guessed right too.* Herd shook his head nonchalantly.

"No. It was close, but I connected with the Grace and banished it with the symbol of Saint Jeor. Kingston used the rites of Santa Ilyana to extract the demon into a physical form and Claremont cut it down. We watched it's body burn to sulfur."

"Praise be to God," Cruz said emphatically.

Herd smiled and nodded politely but there was a lingering, silent strain on his face. *Back off the preaching. We'll get there. First, a digression may be in order.*

"What did it look like? The demon, I mean."

Herd seemed surprised and scoffed.

"Completely ridiculous. Like a tarantula had sex with a raven."

Cruz laughed.

"Sounds like something from the Garden of Earthly Delights."

"They usually do. Sometimes I think archdemons slap random things together to pass the time, hoping they end up with something terrible. 'Idle hands,' and all that."

Again, Cruz chuckled, though he was growing restless. Crises of faith were complex. Herd probably didn't know what was at the core of it himself. *It's my job to help him figure that out, but I need more to go on.* Cruz waited several seconds, hoping he might work it out, but the Keeper was retreating back into his own thoughts, getting lost there. His eyes strayed to the sword on his right hip, then back to the revolver on his left. *Nope. None of that.*

"How was the child?" Cruz prompted.

"Fine. He passed out from the strain. Didn't even see the demon. We talked to him the next morning and he thought the whole thing was a bad dream. Just a few feverish memories and a hoarse throat from the Latin. We asked him if he had imaginary friends, or used a spirit board. Nothing. No explanation."

"Is that what's bothering you?"

Herd folded his lip and shook his head.

"Not particularly. I mean, it would be great if there was some more rhyme or reason to it, so we could prevent possessions in the first place, but I think it's just the nature of demons." After a pause, Herd continued. "What bothers me, Reverend, is that I felt like I lost. Or rather, I feel like the victory doesn't make a difference."

Cruz took a deep breath to let Herd know he was still listening, but remained quiet because he sensed the young Keeper had more to say. Herd unbuckled his weapon belt, leaned his sword over his shoulder, slid to the floor, and sat cross-legged against the pew.

"That's terrible, right? We saved a little boy. But tomorrow, or Marday, or next week there will be another. And another after that. And so on until judgement day. We're going to lose some, too. There is no winning here. Not giving up is the best-case scenario and that... *sickens me.*"

Cruz felt the full weight of the word through Herd's emanations. *He isn't disillusioned, or doubtful. He's disgusted to the point of illness.* It was a sensation Cruz knew well. Righteousness neutered by an overwhelming sense of impotence, and the feverish tide of rage that followed. Herd continued:

"In the athenaeum, they teach us angels and demons are no different than bogeymen or aethirie. Egregores. Beings formed by the collective beliefs of humanity. And that line of thinking extends all the way up to God. To every deity. It's brilliant, really. Accounts for the rise and fall of pantheons throughout history. Also explains why divine intervention is becoming



rarer. As the population grows and faiths fragment, collective belief becomes diffused. One man's miracle is another's blasphemy. Their system even explains the Grace."

"How's that?" Cruz asked.

"To them, the Grace is our capacity to tap into that reservoir of collective belief. It explains how Jesus was able to circumvent the bindings of the First Amagium. Rather than using his wyrd, he just drew upon the mental energy of everybody who believed in God."

"And you believe that?"

"Hell no," Herd said, then quickly emanated a sheepish apology. "Sorry. The Amagium focuses its training on sharpening and developing your will. Establishing complete control over your mind, body, and wyrd. It's all about dominance. The Grace is the exact opposite. It's the ultimate expression of vulnerability. You surrender yourself to God and become an instrument of *His* will."

"Is it the same for Faithsworn from other religions?"

Watch shook his head.

"I knew a Shinto Faithsworn once. He thought of things very differently, but it isn't even the same for every Pax. The Grace is like prayer. Deeply personal."

Cruz understood. Faithsworn used the Grace to refer to a very specific state of mind that married their powerful beliefs with their martial and magical training, but he knew the sensation of the divine touching his wyrd. It reached him most frequently in services, when he was surrounded by his congregation, but it was always intensely personal. An incredibly focused sense of belonging, paired with oceanic depth.

Herd took a deep breath and shook his head before continuing:

"Honestly, it doesn't matter if they get the metaphysics behind it right. They misapprehend the nature of God. There's no question that our limited understanding shapes the forms of angels and demons, and to some extent, their behavior as well. They are the result of the divine and infernal meeting us halfway. But God will not starve without our faith. He was here before us. He loves us, provides for us, and has faith in us, whether we believe in Him or not. *I know* that Christ tapped into something higher and more primal than... psychic populism. The Amagium makes sound arguments. They made me wrestle with well-founded doubt. But *I won* that battle."

Cruz suppressed a laugh and smiled a sad smile. *Oh, brother. You are so wise for your years, yet still so very young. Dead on when it comes to Christ, but doubt isn't a battle you win. Not if you seek God in earnest. You can steel yourself with scripture. You can plumb the depths of dogma for answers, but doubt will always come back.*

"I think you may be doing doubt a disservice."

"How so?" Herd asked.

"I agree that the Grace is an expression of vulnerability. And vulnerability is what Christ was all about. But what do you think enables us to embrace that vulnerability?"

"I don't see how it could be doubt," Herd said, narrowing his eyes.

"I think doubt is fuel for faith. Not just in terms of religion, but for science, magic, and personal growth as well. We all have obstacles within ourselves, things that block our ability to understand and act. Faith is the fire that consumes those obstacles, as if they were charcoal. A fire that burns without fuel casts no light. It provides no warmth. Trying to banish all doubt

from your mind, or claiming that you've conquered the very notion of it... that's not vulnerability. It's hubris."

Herd wore a sulky expression, but nodded, chewing on Cruz's words. *I haven't helped him yet, and this line of conversation is growing contentious.* It was time for another tactic.

"Would you be willing to indulge an odd request?" Cruz asked.

Herd looked up, eyebrows knit and inscrutable.

"I'd like to share a confession with you."

"I can't provide absolution, Reverend," Herd said, snickering.

"That's alright. Lord knows I've done things that need forgiving, but I'm hoping for something else. You see, I suspect God may have sent you here to help *me.*"

Herd said nothing, but there was a flicker in his wyrd. Intrigue in his gray-blue eyes.

"I volunteer at a shelter. I teach the gospel and read the liturgy every Soliday, but I never know if I'm making the kind of difference I should be. Charity staunches the bleeding, but it rarely sutures the wounds of the needy. And when it comes to services... people hear what they want to hear. There are always those in my congregation who find a way to twist my words into meaning the exact, ass-opposite of whatever I intend."

"My point is, you and I have a common problem, stemming from a common mission. We want to help people and fight evil. With that mission comes doubt. In ourselves. In God. In every other master and system we must serve. Shoveling all that doubt into the furnace takes effort, even if your faith burns hot enough to melt diamonds."

Herd nodded, opened his mouth, and then nodded again. Cruz continued.

"This may be heretical, coming from a priest, but I think most people try to fight exhaustion by making promises to themselves on God's behalf. Warriors tell themselves Christ will return for a final battle to settle the score between good and evil. Those hungry for peace swear God will grant them eternal rest and happiness in Heaven."

"You don't believe in Heaven?"

"Oh, I definitely do. And I believe it will be wonderful. But I don't think God will let us get bored up there. He's not one to squander talent. Besides, waiting for a happy death is a tragic way to go about living."

Herd nodded in agreement but furrowed his brow.

"Not sure I caught your confession, Reverend."

"I confess to being tired, Officer Herd." Cruz said with a heavy sigh. "And I'm not sure what to do about it. Every day, it gets harder to burn my doubt. I suspect my problem is a lack of perspective. I give advice all the time, but fail to seek it as often as I should."

It was a faen lie. Cruz appealed to God for guidance hourly. He made a point of seeking the counsel from his fellows and superiors. And whenever a person came to him for advice, he would always share a personal gripe or dilemma and ask for their insights. *That said, there is no such thing as too much guidance, and no surer way of helping somebody toward recovery than empowering them to help another.*

Herd studied the weapons in his lap again.

"Have you thought of taking a sabbatical?"

"Quite a few. And I'm always eager to get back to work afterwards. Not because they're restful, but because I find vacations extremely stressful. It's the guilt."

Herd nodded knowingly.

“Paxigratian apples don’t fall far from the Catholic tree.”

“Exactly.”

They sat there for a long moment. Cruz waited for Herd to say something, but the silence continued, deepening and thickening until he felt smothered. *We’re making progress, but I think we need a change of scenery. Something to shake us loose.*

“Care to join me for a walk? I could use some fresh air.”

Herd shrugged and stood, refastening his weapons to his waist.

It was a day fit for picnics and kite-flying. Birdsong and warmth filled the air. Summer never really stopped in South California regardless of what the calendar read, but late Libra’s afternoons brought a brief reprieve from the truly oppressive heat.

They gravitated toward the shade of a large oak, where Herd spoke up:

“You married, Reverend?”

*Oof. Right above the gut, just beneath the ribs.* Cruz must have made a face because Herd smiled sheepishly and apologized. The reverend quickly smiled and answered anyway:

“No. Almost. The job had to come first.”

Herd nodded respectfully and waited a moment before asking:

“How about local family?”

“I have my church. And my congregation.”

“Okay,” Herd said witheringly. “Close friends?”

Cruz chuckled.

“Are you asking me if I’m lonely, officer?”

“Do you have anybody to tell you ‘you did a good job’?” Herd asked, seriously. Cruz smiled and started to repeat himself, but the young Keeper cut him off with a gesture and a surprisingly—effortlessly—forceful urdic emanation. “No. Your congregation doesn’t count. Not as a whole. Do you invite any of them home for dinner? Do you go out to celebrate with them for reasons completely unrelated to the church?”

“I’m a spiritual dentist to most of them,” Cruz admitted.

The Keeper backed off, but his argument continued in Cruz’s head.

*I do love my congregation like family. And many of them consider me a friend outside of the church. I’ve got extended family sending their love from out of town. I have coworkers and colleagues, fellow people of the cloth with whom I can commiserate.... And yet.* He pursed his lips. *He’s right. There’s a hole.*

“I think it’s more specific than loneliness. You need somebody who understands you. Or your situation, at least. So when they tell you, ‘you did a good job,’ it actually means something. And when you fuck up, err sorry, when you fall astray, they can tell you that too. Colleagues don’t count either. They’re right there with you, stuck in the same perspective.”

“I could use a friend like that. You up to the task?” Cruz asked. Herd stared at him like he had gone insane. “What? We have a common mission, like I said. We serve God and fight evil in our own way. I stand apart from my congregation as clergy. You stand apart from asfalis as an amagia. We understand each other’s situation.”

Herd snickered and said: “I didn’t mean to turn this into an after school special.”

“I’m serious.”

“What? Just like that?”

“Oh, I’m sorry. Is there some Amagium form I need to fill out first? Am I too old for you? Who do *you* have to tell you ‘you’ve done a good job,’ officer?”

Herd looked down, scoffed, and laughed again when he couldn’t produce a rebuttal. Cruz looked to the sky, raised his hands, and said:

“This kid walks into my fucking church, ready to blow his brains out. Thinks he doesn’t need a friend. How am I supposed to work with this?”

“Alright,” Herd said, and extended his hand. “My friends call me Watch.”

“Cruz,” Cruz said.

They shook. When Watch started to let go, Cruz tightened his grip.

“You’re doing good work, Watch.”

The young officer’s eyes sharpened, blue momentarily overtaking gray.

“You’re doing good work, Cruz.”

### —Watch—

Watch continued to despair. He knew he needed to shake off the spell, clear his head, and get up. But he didn’t. *I can’t*. Clenching his fists was the best he could do, and even that was agony. Kingston was floored too, crumpled inward, clutching his gut. Possibly wounded. Only Claremont was still fighting the demon, struggling to dodge its telekinetic assault while completing a complicated, metaphysical contract.

The boy’s back arched and his head twisted perilously as the demon continued to struggle against the fading binding spell. It threw a chair at Claremont, who barely managed to dive out of the way. He landed hard, rolled to his feet, and fired his completed spell. An invisible, Grace-enriched sledgehammer of psychic force struck the boy’s small body, ejecting the demon onto the corporeal plane.

It emerged as a writhing knot of fur, scales, bone, and other, stranger types of tissue, taking shape with wet, squelching cracks. When it settled, the resulting creature was about the size of a male lion. Its head resembled the face of an angler fish, but its torso and legs belonged to a grasshopper—*no, a locust*. The thing supported its front with two ape-like arms that looked like they could easily rip the doors off a car.

*Oh good. Now we can start fighting in earnest.*

Claremont drew his revolver and unloaded five shots before the demon backhanded him across the chest. The two-hundred-pound Keeper flew like a ragdoll and struck the far wall with a gut-churning thwack. Then the demon whirled to face Watch, its red, lantern-like antenna swinging in the lurid dark.

Looking at the demon’s gaping maw, Watch heard Cruz’s laughing voice: *Looks like another reject from the Garden of Earthly Delights. A smile twitched across Watch’s lips. If I live through this and my partners don’t... if the boy doesn’t... how will I look you in the eye, friend? And if I don’t live through this... if I don’t die trying to save them, I sincerely doubt we’ll end up in the same afterlife.*

Watch reached for his sword and stood up.

It wasn’t easy. His back still felt broken, extremities disconcertingly numb. His vision seemed to lag slightly, snagging on random details. His wyrd was spent, gasping for ambient

energy and so overwhelmed it couldn't even enter exus. His muscles were bruised and torn. But he stood anyway.

"Come on, you son of a bitch," Watch wheezed. "Come on!"

Fishface—*ha, Cruz would like that*—twitched its antenna, roared, raised its fists and reared back on its powerful, reverse-jointed legs before launching itself forward.

Watch closed his eyes. Thinking back, he clearly remembered taking a deep breath and correcting his stance, even though there was no time. The thing was hurtling toward him with twitchy, insectile speed. He had a hundredth of a second at most.

But it was still enough time.

His aching body fell silent. His wyrd swelled with power, even though the room had none to offer. Something stronger than any single human—any collective of humans—took hold. He opened his eyes. His body snapped forward.

Silver light wreathed his sword, and the gleaming edge caught the abomination's right cheek. Its corrupted flesh ignited like magnesium struck by lightning. Watch drew the blade through the entire length of its body in a single fluid stroke. A confused croaking noise escaped the demon's throat. Then the white flames reduced it to a smoking pile of sulfur. The swarming insects dissolved. The fetid stench cleared.

Watch sank to one knee, dizzy and tired. *I'm always fucking tired.* But he was whole. And so was the boy. Watch saw that his eyes were whole again too. A handsome, warm shade of brown, now wet with tears. As Watch staggered over to check for residual injuries, the boy embraced him, wailing.

*Oh God. Please don't. My ribs.*

A heavy, comforting hand fell on his shoulder, and he looked up to find Kingston smiling at him. Claremont shakily pushed himself to his knees, groaning and swearing.

The Keepers held each other up as they exited the apartment. The boy's family rushed forward, embracing him with hugs, kisses, and apologies. The stiff-lipped priest crossed himself, and nodded at Watch with something that might have been meant to pass as thanks. Kingston said they would come back in the morning to check on the boy, and led his venture outside without another word.

When they reached the street, Claremont spoke up:

"Don't know about you guys, but I could use a hard drink about now."

"Bars are closed," Watch observed. "But I've got a friend with a fifteen-year-old single malt who said his door is always open."

"And he won't mind if you drag in two bloodied Keepers behind you?" Claremont asked.

Watch considered it for a moment, and shook his head.

"That's quite a friend," Kingston said.

Watch smiled and said:

"Amen."