

## The Devil on Her Shoulder

### Chapter 2

Isaac's heart was pounding. He looked around the room, bewildered. Mia, without telling him, had decided to choose the early adoption option on the Elective Termination contract and have the procedure done at the Bureau. He couldn't recall how he had found out. Second hand, through a friend. He had rushed to the Bureau, broken in, and made his way to the processing room. He had fought guards along the way. He had been diverted down a multitude of rabbit trails in his desperate search. Finally, he stumbled into an observation room like an old timey surgical arena. The floor, ceiling, and walls were all white subway tile. Isaac was on the upper floor, looking down into the arena. Mia was lying on a gurney in a white hospital gown. She turned to Isaac, smiling. A faceless doctor gave her an injection. Her smile faded. She screamed in pain, contorting, writhing. The doctor stepped backward. He had stepped backwards before she began to squirm, anticipating it. He had known what it would do to her all along. Her contortions knocked the gurney onto its side, throwing her onto the cold, tile floor. Vomiting blood, she pleaded for it to stop. Isaac rolled on to his side, gripping the sheets. He was in bed. It couldn't have happened because he was in bed. It didn't matter how real it felt. If it had been real, there was no way he could be in his apartment in his bed immediately after seeing her vomit her innards onto a hospital floor. His heart slowed. Just a nightmare. He rolled onto his other side and looked through the bedroom door into the kitchen. He saw the blurry shape of Mia at the kitchen island, preparing breakfast. He felt relief, for a brief moment. Until grim reality set in. The nightmare had only been deferred.

He sat up slowly and just as slowly slipped his legs over the side of the bed. His body ached as though he really had been running through the Bureau and fighting agents. All he wanted to do was lay back down. He didn't want to sleep. He just didn't want to move. He didn't want to face the world. He didn't want to live, but he didn't want to die. He wanted to be someone else. He wanted a wife that loved him enough to stick with him. In plenty and in want. In sickness and in health. In malaise and economic uncertainty. He stood and walked into the living room.

Mia was whistling. She seemed happy. Her happiness was a slap in the face. She asked him if he wanted the leftover pancakes or a bowl of instant oatmeal. Standard pancake mix bothered his stomach less than Standard oatmeal packets. He opted for the pancakes.

They ate at the kitchen island. She poured his coffee. She finished before him and headed to the bathroom to finish getting ready for work. Isaac took Pip the last few bites of his pancakes, not knowing whether cats liked pancakes. Pip sniffed them for a while before finally lapping up the residual syrup. Isaac left the remains in the laundry room in case Pip changed his mind.

Mia passed him on his way to the bedroom. She kissed his cheek and told him to have a good day at work. To which he numbly replied, "you too." He brushed his teeth, took a quick shower, and got dressed. He desperately wanted to stay home, but he had missed the last two days of work. He had to go in. He had to tell his boss what was going on.

Work was either a thirty-minute walk or a five-minute walk plus a twelve-minute bus drive. Saving thirteen minutes wasn't worth using public transportation in any form. On mornings such as

these, when he was running late, he often bit the bullet and rode the bus with the rest of the depressed populace. He decided he'd rather just be late. Tina would understand.

Isaac walked past the bus stop as his next-door neighbor was boarding. They made eye contact. She started to raise her hand in a wave but faltered and left it dangling by her side. Isaac waved in response. She smiled and climbed aboard. Isaac continued walking. Behind him he heard the bus switch into gear. It slowly rumbled past him. He glanced up as it passed and saw his neighbor looking down at him. There was sadness in her eyes. He saw that sadness everywhere. In every face. Behind every eye. Tainting every smile. It was more than just sadness. It was exhaustion. Everyone was tired. Isaac was tired. Mia had been tired. Not anymore. She had renewed energy. There was a spring in her step. Ever since she had told him it seemed like a burden had been lifted. She walked with her shoulders back. Her head held up. Not like Isaac and their neighbor, slumped over, eyes dragging across the ground.

Isaac passed a bum he recognized from outside the neighborhood grocery. He was expanding his territory. Isaac swiped a few credits in his direction. The bum nodded in acknowledgement. Giving money to the homeless was a quick and easy way to boost your community involvement score. Isaac didn't attend the appropriate community lectures or spend enough time on state endorsed websites, which was the fastest way to build up your score. He needed all the help he could get. He spent a lot of money on bums. Mia had programmed a bot to click on links on multiple dot gov sites to boost her score. Isaac was too paranoid. He assumed he would do something wrong with his bots, even if he copied her code, and that "they" would know and punish him for fraud, or some other nebulous crime.

He came to a crosswalk. It was red so he stopped, despite there being no traffic. A bus stuffed with people stopped at the light. He looked up and saw his neighbor looking down at him. Somehow, he had passed her. Traffic light roulette. He smiled. Out of the corner of his eye he saw the crosswalk light turn green. No time to waste. He hurried across. He was halfway through the intersection when the red-light countdown began blinking. Any amount of time spent on the crosswalk during a solid red light would subtract points. Isaac broke into a jog. He made it across before the red hand appeared. He should be okay. He slowed to his normal pace and continued on his way. Moments later his neighbor's bus lumbered past.

Isaac continued down the street. Up ahead he saw another red hand flashing a countdown at the next intersection. He sighed deeply. Maybe he should've taken the bus after all. A man jogged past him towards the intersection, trying to beat the countdown. Isaac wanted to tell him it was too far. That he should save his energy. Perhaps the man was jogging to warm himself up. Isaac smiled grimly to himself as his fellow pedestrian slowed to a stop opposite the foreboding red hand. Isaac approached the intersection and stopped a few paces behind the stranger. The man pulled up the collar of his coat, grumbling something. Given his body-language Isaac thought a sarcastic comment might be appreciated.

"Another beautiful day in Stockburg."

The stranger turned to Isaac, whereupon he saw the Accountability Initiative badge sewn on to the front of the man's coat. His heart fell. He knew better than to make small talk with a stranger.

"Positivity is a virtue, Mr..."

"Wells."

No use in lying. A member of the Accountability Initiative could look up the traffic camera footage and find the facial recognition report.

“Well, Mr. Wells. You probably didn’t mean anything by it, but I’m sure you realize that sarcasm is bad for morale.”

The man waited expectantly for an admission of guilt, like a disappointed and condescending schoolmaster. Isaac would have to respond. He wanted to say something to the effect of:

“I’ve always thought that humor was a salve for the soul, Mr...”

But this would be considered snarky. And he couldn’t very well ask the man’s name. He was in a defensive position, where the only option was to grovel. Hopefully, he’d get away with a minimal show of remorse.

“Yes, sir. You’re right. I know we all need to pull together and build each other up. I forgot myself for a moment there.”

The man was satisfied. He turned away. The light turned green and he trotted off. Isaac continued on his way, slowly, putting as much distance between himself and the man.

Isaac finally arrived at work. Late as anticipated. He made his way to his cubicle, nodding to his coworkers as he passed. He swiped his card and the cubicle door opened. He stepped inside and logged on to his computer. It chided him for being tardy, telling him exactly how late he was down to the second. He looked through the clear, plastic walls of his cube at the office. He heard the familiar beep of his computer as it finished booting up. He turned to it. A notification of overdue community member training popped up in the corner of his screen. He sighed and clicked on it. Might as well get it over with. Thankfully he could complete it at work. Businesses could not prohibit employees from completing state mandated training on company time.

He checked his boss’s calendar while he listened to an AI tell him about how important strong communities are and how everyone should come together to do their part. The AI informed him that there were several ways to get involved. There was the Community Improvement Program sponsored by the Environmental Impact Department. Or the Accountability Initiative sponsored by the Bureau of Social Responsibility, which oversaw the various credit and scoring systems. He could always participate in the Give Back Campaign or take classes to earn one of the many Certificates on Community Team Building or Civilian Infrastructure, to name a few. Incidentally, the certificate programs were also a good way to boost low social scores. A full list of certificate programs would be provided at the end of the training.

Apparently, Isaac lingered too long on his boss’s calendar. The training AI paused the recording and scolded him for not paying attention. It asked him to close the company calendar and the other browser he had open. It informed him that Community Membership Training was a critical part of civic life. It also reminded him of the importance of being in compliance with all applicable laws and regulations. Once it had finished its scripted lecture, it thanked him for closing the calendar and the browser then continued with the training. As obnoxious as it was to have the AI track his activities on the computer during training, Isaac was still grateful that his company had not purchased the training model

that tracked the user's eyes. He could at least look away from the screen for an appreciable length of time without being reprimanded.

Tina, his boss, had meetings until ten. He'd have to try and catch her then. Tina's sister had signed an Elective Termination Contract two years prior. She had been diagnosed with a debilitating, but treatable, illness and had decided life wasn't worth overcoming adversity. After the ETC had been fulfilled, Tina joined a support group for people with relatives who had opted in for a planned departure. The leader of the group spent most of the time telling everyone their loved ones had done a brave thing and that they should all be happy for their dead. In private, she had told Isaac she felt attacked. She never went back.

Isaac tried to focus on work. All he could think about was his upcoming conversation with Tina. He both dreaded and looked forward to it. Tina, more than Larson, would understand what he was going through. While he didn't want to discuss Mia's upcoming appointment, he knew that he would have a sympathetic ear in Tina.

He muddled through work until roughly 9:50. He saved his project and began thinking about how he would broach the subject of Mia's ETC. He managed to sustain an imaginary conversation for a good five minutes. He knew the actual conversation wouldn't be anything like what he envisioned, but it still made him feel better. At 9:57 he stood and made his way towards Tina's office.

One of the perks of management was that you were upgraded to a plastic cube that could be changed to frosted walls with a click of a button. Tina's walls were frosted when he approached. He saw her blurry shape pacing the cube. He hesitated for a moment. It looked like she was still busy. Maybe he should come back later. What was the worst thing that could happen? She'd tell him she was busy and to come back later. He knocked timidly on the cubicle door. She bade him come in. He opened the door and stepped inside.

Tina's cubicle had an open concept. Rather than a desk she had a shelf that lined the cubicle walls which held her computer and other work equipment. In the middle of the cube were four chairs for small meetings. Neal from Budget was sitting in one of them. Isaac hadn't seen him through the frosted pane. His blurry shape had blended in with that of the chair. Isaac froze when he saw him, murmuring an audible, involuntarily "oh!"

Tina stopped pacing and turned to Isaac, "Yes?"

Isaac turned to her, "It can wait."

"Understood. Neal and I are finishing up. Have a seat."

Isaac meekly walked to one of the empty chairs and sat down. She began pacing again.

"Okay. Long story short, thanks to the Gladstone debacle we've passed our building allowance. So we've got to convince the Environmental Impact Department to grant us an additional permit so we can list a contract and start gathering bids."

Neal nodded, "Yes."

"When's the deadline to submit the contract?"

“March.”

“Not much time... We’ve got to submit a request for a Bureau visit today. If they send Dickson we’ll be in better shape. Hope they don’t send that one lady they sent last time.”

“Lambert?” Neal prompted.

“I guess. She was a real piece of work. If they send her we might as well let everyone know there’s gonna be layoffs.”

Neal glanced at Isaac uncomfortably.

Tina dismissed Neal’s concerns with a wave, “It’s fine. Okay Neal, good work. Keep me posted.”

Neal nodded, stood, and left the cubicle. Tina sat down opposite Isaac.

“Everything you just heard is confidential.”

Isaac nodded, “Understood.”

“Anyway, what can I do for you Isaac?”

“I umm... I wanted to let you know that.”

Isaac paused. His mind had gone blank. He forgot everything he had rehearsed. His eyes drifted to the floor. Sighing, he continued:

“The real reason I was out for two days is because Mia signed an ETC and I...”

He fell silent. He didn’t know what else to say. He looked up. Tina sat cross-armed in front of him. One hand was raised to her mouth. There were tears in her eyes. She took a deep breath, lowered her hand, and cleared her throat.

“When is it due?”

“In about a month.”

Silence once again prevailed.

“Mia and I are planning a trip. I’d like a week off for that if it’s okay. We’re going back to the cabin we went to on our honeymoon.”

“Yes, that’s okay.”

Isaac nodded, “I do have a lot of sick leave and vacation accrued. When your sister...”

Isaac paused guiltily.

“Was it better to keep working?”

Tina stared into space, “It didn’t make a difference. I couldn’t distract myself from it. It was all I could think about until it was over. But I will say... I needed the time for afterward. More than before. But if you have the hours... you can do whatever you want.”

Isaac thought for a moment.

“I’ll just take that week off for now. I’ll submit an official request when I get back to my cube.”

“Sounds good. Let me know if there is anything I can do.”

Isaac thanked her and stood. He walked out of the cubicle and closed the door behind him. A few paces away he turned. The walls of Tina’s cubicle were still frosted. Her blurry figure stood close to the door. He could tell that her arms were folded, and her head was bowed. He couldn’t be sure, but it looked like her shoulders were rising and falling, as though she were crying. Remembering her sister perhaps. Isaac turned away and headed back to his cubicle.

The day dragged slowly on. There were a few moments where Isaac was able to lose himself in his work. These moments inevitably led to the realization that he hadn’t thought about Mia for several minutes. At which point all his confused emotions came rushing back. Every time they returned, they felt new. As though he were hearing the news for the first time. Any time his mind drifted, no matter how briefly, he had to relive that moment three days ago. Distraction was proving to be unhelpful.

Noon. It was time for lunch. One half of the office took their lunch break at 12:00. The other half took it at 1:00. Changing lunch times required official approval from Tina’s supervisor. Two bosses removed from Isaac. Not that he wanted to change his lunch hour. There was no real benefit of either time. However, coming back from lunch at 2:00 might be slightly better than coming back at 1:00. After all there were fewer hours between 2:00 and 5:00.

Isaac watched half of the cubicle doors on the floor open. He watched half of the staff walk slowly past, towards the elevators and stairwells. He always waited for the crowd to clear. Meanwhile, his computer kept telling him it was time for a break. It informed him that taking breaks from work was important for mental health, and therefore productivity. The state required that employees take an hour for lunch as well as two fifteen-minute breaks a day, one in the morning and one in the afternoon. If he didn’t log off in one minute his computer would automatically lock itself until 1:00. The computer began the countdown. Isaac locked his computer, stood, and walked to his cubicle door, which had opened automatically at 12:00.

The lunchtime stragglers were ambling by. Marisa smiled as she passed him. She was followed by Turk. Isaac took his place at the end of the line behind him. He glanced past Turk at Marisa. If he wasn’t married, she would be his office crush. She already was, really. He was going to be single again soon. He internally cursed himself for the thought. He was such a piece of shit. He turned his eyes to the floor, disgusted with himself.

Marisa, Turk, and most of their other co-workers took the elevator. Isaac took the stairs. He didn’t trust the elevators in their building. They were always breaking down. Beyond that, since half the employees in the building went to lunch at twelve it meant that the majority of seventy-five plus people were waiting to ride an elevator that was too slow to begin with. He walked past the line, not understanding how anyone could stand to wait that long. He, and a few others, hop-stepped their way down the stairway, out of the stairwell, and onto the first floor, making their way to the cafeteria. As he walked down the hall, he remembered it was Wednesday. Wednesday was synthetic hamburgers and French fries. He’d go through the salad bar.

The line for the hamburgers was out the cafeteria door. He squeezed past and walked towards the salad bar. He didn’t like salad. He just liked it better than synthetic hamburger. He picked up a bowl

and dumped a spoonful of spinach, mushrooms, red onions, and chickpeas into it. He poured basil infused olive oil over it and made his way to the water fountain. The water fountain was broken. He looked at the line for the soda machine. Not worth it. He'd get water when he got back to the office.

One wall of the cafeteria was lined with windows. Tables sat facing the windows looking out over an empty parking lot. No one drove to work. They all wanted to save their credits for vacation. Yet all the new buildings still had parking lots. It kept construction workers busy. The tables by the windows were usually vacant. It was colder by the glass. Isaac didn't mind the cold. He'd rather be cold than sit next to anyone.

He walked through the rows of tables, nodding to co-workers as he passed. Television screens hung on the walls playing ads for the Bureau of Public Health Services and other government agencies. Isaac tried not to watch them.

He picked a table in the corner and sat down. He took a bite of his salad and stared out the window. There was one car in the lot. Isaac wondered who's it was. Beyond the parking lot was a road, empty except for passing buses and the occasional state issued car.

He heard the nearest television screen mention something about Elective Termination. His ears pricked up despite himself. He looked up to his left and saw that it was an ad. A young man in the prime of his life was speaking to an agent. What possible reason could this fictitious character have for ending it all? Isaac turned away, trying to focus on the solitary car keeping vigil over the parking lot. He tried to ignore the ad, but try as he might he couldn't help but hear the concluding line: "Elective Termination is a deeply personal decision. Be sure to consult a health care professional if you have suicidal ideation or if you think you might be interested in a planned departure."

Isaac ate his salad as quickly as he could. He wanted to be done with eating. Eating in the cafeteria was never an enjoyable experience. Eating at home was only marginally enjoyable. Salad finished, he pushed his bowl aside. How much time had he killed? He felt in his pocket for his phone. It wasn't there. He must've left it in his cubicle. He turned in his chair and looked up at the digital clock on the wall. Eighteen minutes had passed.

Mia told him he ate too fast. He needed to savor his food. Generally speaking, he didn't find food worth savoring. However, if he ate slower then he wouldn't have as much time to do nothing over his lunch break. Against his better judgement he looked up at the nearest television screen. It was playing a program about the onset of the Long Winter. A celebrity voice-over explained that a large asteroid had struck the planet Jupiter, which was a gas giant. The impact caused an enormous cloud of gas to escape the planet thereby forming a reflection nebula. The asteroid had struck Jupiter at the point of its orbit when it was closest to earth. The resulting nebula drifted, in a manner of speaking, into earth's orbit. The nebula formed permanent "cloud coverage" around the earth, preventing much of the heat from the sun from reaching the blue planet. The nebula surrounding the earth was dissipating at roughly the same rate as a planetary nebula, which meant it would be several thousand years before the earth returned to its temperature before the Long Winter. The segment concluded with the normal rallying cry for unity and support for the hard-working men and women of the US government. Humanity had to carry on. The segment on the Long Winter seamlessly transitioned into one on the Inter-Governmental DNA bank within which was housed DNA for most of earth's species prior to the Long Winter. Plans were already

underway to repopulate the planet with earth's colorful menagerie of old. As soon as the sun was shining.

Isaac turned back to the clock on the wall. Hardly any time had passed. Frustrated, he turned back to the parking lot. At five minutes to 1:00 an alarm would sound letting them all know it was time to head back to the office. Someone higher up the food chain had decided five minutes was enough time to make it from the cafeteria back to the office. Five minutes was more than enough time. Assuming, of course, that there weren't a hundred and fifty plus employees from multiple floors all trying to use three elevators at the same time. The 1:00 lunch crowd would be going down at the same time as the 12:00 was going up. Furthermore, functionally speaking there were only two elevators. The third one had broken down so many times that everyone was afraid to use it, not just Isaac. It always stood empty on whatever floor the last person brave enough to use it had left it.

"May I sit down?"

Isaac turned. It was Kaylee. He didn't trust her. She was too friendly. Friendly people tended to be stool pigeons for management. Isaac was pretty sure Kaylee was the one who had informed on Herb. Herb had complained, a little too vociferously, about a company policy in the presence of several co-workers, including Kaylee. It had resulted in Herb's first strike and a loss of credits. Since then, Herb had stopped talking to anyone at work. Isaac was reasonably certain that Kaylee was fishing for her next victim. Being a work-place tattle tale was a good way to earn extra credits. The administration called it being an invaluable team member. In civic life it was called being a good citizen.

Isaac tried to hide his trepidation. He couldn't really say no. He nodded and pulled the seat next to him out for her. Maybe he'd get points for being a half-way gentleman. Kaylee beamed a saccharine smile and sat down next to him. Isaac glanced at her lunch. A synthetic hamburger on a poppyseed bun with a salad on the side. The hamburger was momentarily open-faced. She had drawn a smiley face with ketchup on the burger. Isaac internally rolled his eyes.

"How are you today, Isaac?"

"I'm good Kaylee, how are you?"

"I'm doing very well, thank you. In fact, I'm doing great. I'm in a particularly good mood today. Do you want to know why?"

With feigned interest: "Yes, I would."

"Well, I just found out that my supervisor chose me to have an extra day off this month!"

With feigned excitement: "Congratulations!"

"They've even given me some extra credits so I can go to the spa!"

"Oh wow! That's great!"

It really does pay to be stoolie. Every month each department gave one employee an extra day off. That was not unusual. Giving the employee extra credits, however, was. Isaac wondered which co-worker Kaylee had screwed over this time. He wasn't going to be the next. He listened attentively to her rambling for the remainder of the lunchbreak. The five to 1:00 alarm went off. He excused himself, stood,



and walked briskly towards the exit, dropping his reusable plastic bowl and silverware into the appropriate receptacles on the way.

Ordinarily he would have been standing by the door prior to the five-minute warning. Whereupon he would have been the first one through the door, down the hall, and up the stairs. Thanks to Kaylee he had to wait in line. A short line, thankfully, but a line, nonetheless.

As he walked into the hallway, he felt someone at his elbow. He turned and found Herb following close behind. He hadn't seen Herb in the cafeteria. He had to have made a point to catch up to Isaac. Isaac was struck by the weariness in Herb's eyes. He must've been working hard to build his credits back up.

"Watch out for her."

Isaac nodded in appreciation of the warning. He and Herb parted ways at the elevator. Herb joined the queue and Isaac continued to the stairwell.

The rest of the day passed uneventfully. Mia lingered in the periphery of his thoughts. Nonetheless, he was able to focus on work just enough to lose track of the time. He was even surprised when the five-to-five warning went off. He saved his project and began shutting everything down.

He stood and pulled his coat on. He began pacing his cubicle. A brief survey of the office revealed the entire floor was doing the same thing he was: biding time. He wiggled his mouse so his computer wouldn't go to sleep.

The five o'clock alarm went off and almost in unison the entire floor shut their computers off. The cubicle doors automatically opened, and everyone stepped out. Isaac again waited for the crowd to dwindle before heading towards the stairwell.

On the way down he found himself walking next to Herb.

"Been a cold couple weeks," Isaac commented.

Herb nodded, "Colder than normal."

"Looking forward to Summer."

"I'll settle for Spring."

There was a pause. Then Herb muttered wearily:

"You know, when I was a kid, everyone always told me to just be myself. We've all been told that, right? When you grow up you learn that being yourself is what gets you written up."

"Some of us anyway."

Isaac glanced over his shoulder and saw Kaylee watching them. Herb noticed too and walked to the corner of the next landing to "tie his shoe," allowing Isaac to continue past. Isaac was relieved and grateful. He also felt guilty. He would've had to somehow shun Herb if the poor man hadn't provided a way out of the conversation, as innocuous as it was. Isaac couldn't be seen being too friendly with Herb; at least not until he had worked his credits back up. Most likely Isaac's trip to the Bureau had been

reported to his supervisors. Kaylee had been recruited to spy on him. Probably. If it wasn't Kaylee, it'd be someone else. Workplace snitching was commonplace. Anywhere people gathered for an extended period of time was rife with informing. Isaac prided himself on having never ratted on anyone. He had even been docked credits for it. It was considered indicative of a lack of concern for community building.

Isaac, and a crowd of his co-workers, stepped out of the building into the gray shadows of early evening. The crowd dispersed, murmuring their goodbyes. Isaac lingered for a moment, looking up into the sky. It was snowing again. It never stopped snowing. He folded his arms, pulling his coat tighter around him. He started off towards home.

At the crosswalk he suddenly decided to take a different way back. He turned right and continued down the sidewalk instead of waiting for the walking sign to turn green. He plotted the route out in his head. Once, when he had taken his car out of storage for a road trip, he had decided to drive it to work. On his way back home, he'd been forced to take a detour. A street team was working on the sewer. He was fairly certain he remembered the way. It would be longer than his normal route, but not by much.

The buildings seemed taller on this route. The only sky he could see, without looking straight up, lay directly ahead: a patch of light gray looming behind a stone cathedral. As he approached the cathedral the road opened into a small square, at the center of which was the church. Graffiti covered the walls of the building, accusing it of bigotry and hate. The righteous outpouring of impassioned youth trying to make a difference. A chain-link fence had been erected on the perimeter. A guard stood watch by the gate. The fence and the guard were presumably there to keep vandals from further defacing the church. Isaac paused on the other side of the street and looked up at it.

When the bill allowing for Elective Termination at the Federal level had passed, the only real opposition had come from the Catholic Church and a handful of Protestant denominations. They had formed a coalition. It wasn't particularly successful. At the time Isaac regarded the opposition as a nuisance. Yet another shrill reaction from a pack of religious fundamentalists who refused to leave other people alone. Now he was curious as to their reasons. What made human life so valuable to them? He tried to remember the arguments raised by Church leaders in the various debates that took place. He recalled statements about man being made in the image of God. Someone had said that life was a gift to sinner and saved alike. The speaker went on to quote something from the *City of God*, assuming Isaac was remembering correctly, about all the blessings of life and how they were enjoyed by both believers and unbelievers. The blessings were merely a foretaste of the life to come. It was at that point that Isaac had changed the channel. He wasn't all that interested in a religious debate. There was never any question to him that the terminally ill had a right to end their life. Why continue suffering? But if they had the right, why didn't anyone else? Why didn't Mia?

Isaac looked up at the church spire. His eyes slowly drifted down the stone edifice to the large wooden door. Maybe he could go inside. There would be a priest, or a vicar, or someone inside that he could talk to. He turned away and started home.

The snow was deeper on this route. Evidently it was the road less traveled. Which made it more difficult. Isaac stared into the white spread out in front of him. What right did he have to stand in Mia's way? What right did he have to try and convince her not to go through with it? Maybe he *was* being selfish. He had no right to keep her. Being with her for as long as he had was privilege enough. Who was

he to ask for more? Then he thought of life without her. Then he wondered why she thought so little of him that she was so ready to leave. She told him that she loved him. Given her decision he no longer believed that was true.

His mind wandered back to the Church and the fundamentalists who had opposed the legislation. The coalition had been accused of supporting a religious separatist group which had left the cities and begun homesteading on land that had been “returned to nature” after the population had been consolidated. The coalition neither confirmed nor denied the accusation, they simply pointed out that the separatist group had nothing to do with legalizing assisted suicide.

It was generally accepted, though Isaac had no idea if it was true, that the Church across all denominations had ties with the separatists. The rumor was that they were living quite comfortably somewhere out there in the mythic wilderness. Beyond the reach of the Bureau of Public Health Services. The rumor went even further: should someone be interested in getting away, for any reason, all they had to do was go to church and start asking around. They might have to get baptized in the process but for many that was a small price to pay.

Isaac suddenly realized he had stopped in the middle of an intersection. He looked around. There were no cars, otherwise there would have been honking. He wasn't sure when he had wandered off the sidewalk and into the street, but the snow was so thick in this part of town that it all looked the same. He glanced at the street signs, gathered his bearings, and continued the trek back home, hoping he wouldn't be docked credits for straying into the road.

He wondered what Mia would think about going to church on Sunday. She'd probably say no. But that didn't mean he couldn't go. He could ask around. He'd have to be careful though. They might think he was a Fed. Of course, it wouldn't do any good if he couldn't convince her not to go through with it. They were going back to Rustic Retreat soon. Mia always felt sentimental when they went there. There was a chance she would change her mind. But that was still three weeks away. Not much time to make contacts at the local church, assuming the rumors were true.

He checked the time on his phone and quickened his pace, which was difficult given the depth of the snow. He kept stepping off the sidewalk into the road where the snow was deep enough to rise above the top of his boots and spill inside. His feet were even more numb than usual. The alternate route was longer than he remembered. He was starting to regret his decision. Except if he had gone the normal way he wouldn't have passed by the church. He had made the right decision.

He tried not to get his hopes up. This new plan hinged on too many variables for it to be remotely possible. He couldn't give in to despair though. Otherwise, he might as well make an appointment with the Bureau himself.

He rounded the last corner on to his street. His heart fell. A Bureau car was parked in front of his apartment building. They could've been there to see his neighbor. Most likely they were there to meet with Mia. Follow up appointments at the signatory's house seemed unusual though. Isaac slowed his pace and walked towards his building, eyeing the car warily. An agent sat in the car. A large, serious looking man in black. Isaac accidentally made eye contact with him. The agent nodded. Isaac nodded in response, but the man had already turned away.

Isaac stepped inside the building and slowly ascended the stairs. He murmured a brief prayer that the Bureau be there visiting his neighbor. He momentarily felt guilty for wishing that upon her. A visit from the Bureau was never a good thing unless perhaps it was regarding an injectable for Nexdebepridine. Maybe his neighbor was just depressed and was seeking treatment. She certainly looked unhappy. When he reached the landing outside his apartment he paused. He could hear voices coming from his living room. He knew this would be the case, but irrationality had planted a seed of hope regardless. He sighed deeply, mentally preparing himself for a horror show, and stepped inside.

Both Mia and the agent stopped talking when Isaac stepped into the room. Mia sat on the couch and the agent sat on the easy chair. They were both leaning forward in their seats, cradling a mug of something warm in their hands. Wispy tendrils of steam rose from their cups. Isaac, briefly hopeful, glanced at the coffee pot. It was empty. Disappointed, he turned back to Mia and the agent, who were both staring at him.

The agent was a petite, blonde woman. She, like every agent Isaac had ever seen, was wearing a black suit. She gave him a half-smile. Isaac nodded in reply. Isaac turned from the agent and found Mia scowling at him. His heartbeat grew thick and heavy. What had the agent told her? Isaac removed and hung up his coat. He stomped the snow off his feet as best he could, then kicked his boots off onto the towel they kept by the door. He walked around the couch. He paused for a moment, trying to read the room. The agent looked like she was about to lecture him on something. Mia was hostile. He sat down, realizing no one had said a word since he had stepped inside.

“How are you, Isaac?”

It was the agent. For some reason it annoyed him that she didn’t address him by his last name.

“Fine. And you are?”

“Agent Frankl. I’m a counselor at the Bureau. Trevor recommended someone come by and see you after you visited the Bureau the other day. It seemed like you were taking Mia’s decision pretty hard.”

“Agent Frankl told me why you visited the Bureau.”

Mia’s tone and eyes were accusatory.

“We find that during times such as these open communication with your spouse is best practice.”

It was the agent again, sanctimonious.

Isaac cleared his throat, “So you came by for a welfare check.”

“Of course, why else would I come by?”

Accusing the agent of trying to drive a wedge between him and his wife wouldn’t do any good, however obvious it was. Isaac could feel his neck burning. He was frothing inside. He took a deep breath and cleared his throat again.

“Thank you for your concern. I will not be requiring your services, however.”

The agent set her mug on the coffee table.

"It's not unusual, Isaac, for family members to seek counseling after, or even before, an ETC. We all know you want to support Mia, but we also know that, even though an ETC is a happy occasion, that it can be difficult for family and loved ones."

She pulled a card from her coat pocket. She leaned forward and laid it on the coffee table.

"That's my personal business card. Please call me if you do decide you want to talk to someone. We're here for you, Isaac."

Pip mewed from the laundry room. Isaac turned and saw his paw sticking out from under the door.

"I see that you have a cat. That's good. You'll have someone to keep you company after the ETC has been fulfilled."

Isaac managed not to scream at the agent. No pet could ever replace Mia.

"Actually, we're just fostering. Would you like a cat?"

Isaac would never give Pip to this bitch.

"Oh, I'm sorry to hear that. We find that pets are good for the transition period."

The agent stood, "And no, thank you. I'm more of a dog person. Do let me know if you change your mind, Isaac. Our offices are open 24/7."

Isaac didn't reply. Mia saw Agent Frankl to the door. Isaac watched Pip's paw searching the floor from underneath the door. Mia didn't return to the couch. Isaac heard her walk to the kitchen. He turned and found her glaring at the back of his head.

"I can't believe you would go behind my back like that."

Isaac didn't respond. He stared down at the floor.

"So, I'm trying to get ready for my passing and you're trying to undermine my decision?"

Isaac, meekly, "I just wanted to know if there was a way out. In case you changed your mind..."

"I'm not going to change my mind, Isaac. The decision has been made."

There was a long pause.

"I love you, Isaac. But sometimes..."

"You don't love me."

Isaac immediately regretted saying this.

"What?"

Isaac recognized that tone. They were about to have a fight. It could be a screaming match. He replied as calmly as he could.

"It just slipped out. I was just... I'm just confused because... you love me, but you want to leave me. I love you and I don't ever want to leave you. If I got sick, like terminally, for me the worst thing about it would be that I wouldn't be with you anymore."

"...That's very sweet, Isaac."

Her tone was no longer angry. It was patronizing. She spoke slowly, as though talking to an unruly child.

"But, again, this isn't about you."

"But it is a rejection of me."

"That's not fair."

Mia was angry again.

"Don't put that on me, Isaac. I'm not rejecting you. Don't make this about you."

Isaac swung around on the couch.

"What is it about? You've never even told me! You just fed me vague bullshit about 'being ready.' What does that mean? Why? Why are you doing this?"

"Why!? Because life is exhausting! Day in and day out always the same bullshit with no hope for change! Nothing is ever going to get better! It's just mind-numbing, soul-crushing shit every minute of every day right up til we die. It's the entire world of people, never-ending people crawling up my ass every day! People ruin everything."

Mia threw the last comment in as an aside. Isaac couldn't argue with it. She continued, scoffing:

"Why?... There are a million more reasons why than... life is way too long to feel like this every single day."

"You said you weren't depressed."

"I'm not! There's just no point, Isaac. There is no reason to keep grinding like this. My life expectancy is 90. 90 plus. I'm thirty-two. That's an estimated fifty-eight more years of this. You know there were people once who thought that we could live to 120, 150 even? Why on earth would anybody want to do that?"

Mia paused, then continued, more introspectively:

"None of us choose life. We don't have a choice in being born. We're all just stuck here. It's not fair to make us keep doing something we don't want to."

There was a long pause. They were both lost in thought. Mia turned to the sink and began washing her coffee mug. She rinsed it and set it in the dish drainer. She turned back to him.

"Your turn, Isaac. You tell me why. Why do you want to keep going?"

"You."

Mia scoffed, "Don't do that. Don't make me your reason for living. You can't live your life for someone else. That's stupid."

Isaac didn't respond. Was it stupid? No, of course it wasn't. Mia studied him for a moment then changed the subject.

"What do you want for dinner?"

Isaac blinked, "I don't know know. What do we have?"

"Curry, I think. Not sure if it's Indian or Thai."

Isaac nodded and turned away. Mia began busying herself with meal prep.

"I think we should have a baby."

Mia scoffed, "Right.... After all these years of marriage we should have a baby. You don't want a baby."

"I don't want to be 80 years old regretting I never had kids."

"Well, you can always re-marry."

"I want one with you."

The sound of Mia rummaging through the cabinets for the right pans got louder.

"I'm not putting it off to have a kid, Isaac. And I'm not gonna desert a child in this world either. You know that of course which is why you brought it up. If you want a kid so bad you can clone me."

Isaac didn't know what he thought of raising a clone of Mia from infancy. It was too strange an idea. It was one thing to raise a child who bore a strong resemblance to the one you love. It's quite another to raise their exact, physical copy.

Isaac watched Mia measure out the rice and water for the rice cooker. He watched her pour the curry mix into a saucepan. When she was finished, she walked to the refrigerator and pulled out a beer. It was unusual for her to drink. Strangely enough, Isaac took this as a good sign. Maybe she was rethinking her decision.

"I thought about going to church."

"More power to you."

"....Do you need help with dinner?"

"No. I'm just heating up shit from a package."

Isaac nodded. He wasn't sure what to make of their conversation. It was an argument, but it hadn't been as bad as he had feared. Mia wasn't nearly as angry with him as he thought she would be. Maybe the Bureau had erred in sending an agent. Mia couldn't stand bureaucrats any more than he could. Maybe the Bureau's obvious attempt to alienate them had driven her closer to him. Unlikely. He was just grasping at straws. The baby. Church. Separatists. There was no way out. There never had been.

She had to want it. Pip mewed. He needed food. Isaac stood and made his way towards the laundry room.

“I booked the cabin today.”

Isaac turned and looked back at Mia. She was watching him. He didn't understand what her expression meant.

“Did you get time off today?”

Isaac nodded, “Yes, I did.”

“Good. You might want to go ahead and get the car out of storage then.”

“I will.”

Isaac turned and walked to the laundry room.