

The Proctors

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“Millions of U.S. citizens live with at least one family member who is undocumented.”

—The American Immigration Council

“Mark.”

“Mmph.”

“Honey, wake up. I’m expecting someone, remember?”

Mark Tremblay woke and saw his wife’s beautiful green nebulas staring into his. He smiled and sat up, taking in a great whiff of her air. She gave him a pat on his stomach, which had bulged over the last decade or so. And he swung his feet out from under the covers. And he stretched and looked out at the new day, a great orange star rising and sending a nigh-ethereal glow through the trees. These solemn mornings made him glad he had settled in Minnesota all those years ago. He ran a hand through his black hair and stood up, his kneecaps reporting with small firecracker pops. He walked over to his dresser, grabbed his favorite flannel shirt, his jeans, his crucifix necklace, rubbing a thumb across the slaughtered Christ as he walked to the bathroom; God incarnate yet more human than any man.

He was in and out of the shower in five minutes. He walked out into the living room, brushing his beard and watching his wife on the couch, arms crossed and looking out the window. “So, Angie,” he started, startling her out of her shawl cocoon. She put her hand over her mouth and stared at him, eyes wide. Mark held his hands up to his shoulders as if in surrender. He gave a wan smile. “Sorry, hon.”

“It’s okay, Mark, just . . .” she waved a hand and discredited the idea. “Go on, I’m sorry.”

“Who’re you expecting so early? It’s only nine-forty,” he gestured a thumb at the clock, the minute hand ascending from the eight as he did so.

“You remember Stacy, my old college friend?”

Mark nodded, biting his tongue.

“Well, she came over from South Dakota for a wedding out in, ah, oh, Mille Lacs, and she wants to stop by and say hi. We’re probably going to go out and, y’know, get coffee, I guess.” Emphasized with a purse-lipped giggle. “Who knows?”

Mark nodded and sat down next to her. “Sounds good, hon’. Why’d you need me up, then?”

“Well, I would prefer to say goodbye to the *real* Mark rather than the hog that takes up my bed.” She gave a small smile and put her hand in his.

Mark chuckled and nodded. “Sure. Right.” He looked around and towards the hall. “Where’s Tim, then?”

Angie told him her child and their son was out by the pullbarn, shooting his .22 into some paper targets.

“I’ll go out there with him after she gets here,” he said to no one in particular. “Has he got hearing protection?”

"He brought out those headphones you got him last year. Listening to that band he likes, whatever they're called . . ."

"Ah, those Led Zeppelin types?" Mark said. "That's good enough. Good music, too."

Angie shook her head, flaring her nostrils. "How are you able to like *every* piece of music you find? I remember when I first dug in your vinyl collection and found Sinatra and Death sitting right next to each other."

"Music wasn't really a thing when I was growing up, at least not in my household."

She grunted that this was known but was appreciated regardless of redundancy and put her head on his shoulder. Mark looked out at the lot the family used as a driveway. Mark had his Ford and Angie had her Kia, a piece of imported shit if there ever was one. He thought about the truck he would give Tim on his sixteenth birthday, within the year: a blue 1995 F-150, the first vehicle he had ever fallen in love with.

Almost on the heels of these thoughts, the sound of gravel crunching under tires came from outside, and a door opened and closed. Angie clutched his arm, and when a second door did the same, she shivered.

"Ange, what's wrong?"

"Nothing," she uttered a shrill, nervous laugh. "I just forgot that Stacy had herself a husband, you know?" Another odd laugh. "Get that, will you? Please?"

Mark nodded, rising slowly and giving her a wary eye. She'd only acted this way a couple times before: once when they were stranded and clueless on the perimeter of Skid Row and again when they got lost on their hiking trip in the Badlands. Both instances had nearly resulted in her going feral. He walked past the couches, looked at the reflective black flatscreen over the fireplace and fixed his hair, then opened the door. "Hey-hey, St—"

He stopped when, instead of this Visigothic gossipmonger and her husband, there were two men in black three-pieces, taking their sunglasses off on his stoop. "Mr. Mark Tremblay?" one of them asked. This one had dapper chestnut-brown hair with a well-defined arching line of a part on the right side, while the other wore slicked-back black hair and a rough complexion on a stout body. They both bore deep, aquatic blue eyes.

Mark nodded. "Sure? May I ask who you are?"

"I'm Agent Herskowitz," the one with a lighter, more put-together look said, "and this here is Agent Abramov. We're here to investigate some concerns about your identity. Do you mind if we . . .?" He waved his hand, trying to indicate the interior of the home.

Mark looked back and forth between Herskowitz and Abramov. "Who do you people represent?"

Abramov said, "We're agents in a *UN-sponsored* program known as 'The Proctors'. You haven't heard?"

Mark looked at the man with the Russian accent for a few moments, searching his memories for mentions of these "Proctors." "No. I don't think I have. What do you people do, exactly? And if you're fuckin' IRS and are looking for tax money, I pay my fair share like everyb—"

Herskowitz chuckled. "Trust me, Mr. Tremblay—can I call you Mark?—we have our reason to be here today, and it unfortunately does not pertain to taxes, or money laundering, or anything so

trivial. We have reason to suspect *you* are,” he grinned slightly wider, “what we classify as an extra terrestrial. Do you know what that is?”

Mark felt his chest tighten and a heat flash behind his eyes. “Are you accusing me of being an *alien*? From goddamn *outer space*?”

“That’s the gist of it, sir.”

Mark grabbed the door and made to close it when Abramov pulled out a blue alloy cylinder surrounded by three glowing halos that resembled a child’s idea of a raygun. “Not a good idea, *Mark*,” he said, the sarcasm stinging.

“This is baseless! You can’t do this to me, I’m a citizen of the United States—born and raised!” He jammed a thumb into his fat chest, his brown nebulas blazing.

“How can you be a citizen of the U.S. when you’re not even a citizen of Earth, *Mr. Tremblay*?” Herskowitz asked, a hand in a pocket and the other holding his sunglasses to the corner of his shiteating smirk.

“This is baseless!” Mark repeated.

“Your wife would beg to differ,” Herskowitz said, motioning behind Mark as before.

Mark turned his head around and saw his wife standing there, hand over her mouth, tears pouring from her eyes. She removed the hand to reveal a trembling chin. “I’m sorry, Mark, I’m so, so sorry. I just . . .”

For the first time in a long while, maybe ever, he was angry at her. His fist clenched. “You *what*?”

“I saw it again. You . . . in the mirror . . .” she heaved a breath and let it out in a sob. “I saw you *change*. And then I saw your ship under the pullbarn . . . I didn’t want to believe it, but then I saw the pumps, the way the inside looked . . . Christ, it looked like a UFO from a *sci-fi movie*! God, like from *Close Encounters*!”

She put her face into her hands and crumbled to her knees, wailing over and over in a high, revolving siren pitch.

“Change,” Mark whispered, the word carrying tons of weight. “*Close Encounters*.”

He stepped towards her and Abramov barked something in Russian, then in English: “Don’t move! I’ll shoot if you take one more step! Turn around, slowly.”

Mark did as he was told. Tears spilled over and made warm streams that soaked into his beard. “You’re not going to kill me, are you?”

Herskowitz shook his head and said, “No, no. ’Course not. No, this is a piece of equipment we got from an alien from . . .” he trailed off and looked at Abramov.

The Russian didn’t finish for him; he just kept staring at Mark. His lips were pursed into a white scar and his eyebrows danced with anticipation.

“Ah, whatever. All the same, ain’t they?” Herskowitz continued. “Anyway, it’s a transport-ray, if that makes any sense. After tinkering with it for about, oh, say, thirty-five years or so, the boys in the lab found a way to send certain aliens back to where they came from with a simple *zap*. Since you don’t fit the criteria of a hostile alien, all we’re going to do is send you back to the planet you hail from and you can be connected with your family there, okay? Your new old life.”

The tears kept flowing down his fake human cheeks and into his fake human beard, unrelenting. The truth poured from his mouth. "Please, all this was was a purely scientific mission, you *have* to believe me! W-We are a *peaceful* race! We help underdeveloped planets such as yours grow stronger and smarter! It's the Great Mission! Please, *please*! I'm not hostile! *We* aren't hostile!"

Herskowitz nodded. "We believe you. But, ultimately, you're not human."

Mark looked back at Angie, leaned up against the counter, gripping the seat of a stool. "Angie? *Ange?*"

"I'm sorry," she said. "I didn't know . . . I was so scared . . . I didn't know . . ."

Mark looked back at the men in black and opened his mouth to beg for mercy when Abramov pulled the trigger of the "transport-ray."

The first thing Mark felt—the last thing he felt as Mark—was a searing sensation in his belly. It spread to the rest of his body an instant after, and he started to scream, watching his faux skin disintegrate into embers, revealing purple six-fingered hands under his pale five-fingered ones. He felt the blaze in his eyes, mouth, and ears, eating away at his brain with horrid intensity. He grasped for the china cabinet and pulled himself up and saw himself reflected in the TV. His giant red eyes, nowhere near the nebulas they had been, appeared on his upside-down-pear-shaped head. He looked to the doorway, where Herskowitz was handing a cigarette to Abramov while they watched with entertainment and a confused, perverted fascination like a child in the revival tent as the crippled clunk about the stage, riotous preacher commanding the word of the Lord. He looked at Angie, her face frozen in a look of pure, untethered dread; orifices wide, muscles taut under sallow skin. He looked to his legs, now melting into the floor. Finally, he looked back at the flatscreen, and uttered one of the most human phrases he had ever heard in his time on Earth: "*Oh, Jesus, help me!*" Then: "*IT HURTS! OH, JEE-EE-EE-EE-SUS!*"

He closed his eyes and within an instant the burning stopped. He was in total darkness; totally conscious. He breathed frantically for a moment, getting his nerves under control enough to consider his surroundings. He had been here before, decades ago, eons ago, in training. It had only been for a few seconds, but it had been more than enough for him. This was *outside*; not just outside of a planet, not outside of a star system, nor a galaxy or a cluster of them, but outside of space and time itself. The humans hadn't tested the gun enough. Minds that cannot comprehend the power they hold so they only understand they hold power.

But, like a marble in a sling, once you were pulled back *from* reality, you were bound to bounce forth *into* it. There were two problems then: you had no idea how long the sling would be held back, and you had no idea which direction it was aimed. You could only wait.

The humans hadn't figured out how to control it yet.

The Proctors hadn't figured out how to control it yet.

He held his head in the darkness and whispered, "Oh, Jesus."