

## **THE BARTER**

by

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“How many monsters did you see?” Frank whispered, striking a match and holding it up high. He strained his eyes trying to pierce the darkness, but the light only lit a small area of the cave and he couldn’t see more than a few feet down the large gaping hole in front of him. He swore under his breath as he thought about Jenny dropping the flashlight and her talking him into this cave exploring in the first place. Now, she was seeing imaginary monsters. Frank put the match out. “Well, how many?” he asked again.

“I saw a lot of them,” Jenny said, her voice trembling. She grabbed Frank’s hand. “Come on honey, we’ve got to get out of here.”

“What do you mean by a lot?” Frank demanded.

“I mean one heck of a lot of them,” she cried out and gripped Frank’s hand harder. Jenny tried to pull him away from the hole, but he resisted.

“Try to keep calm,” he whispered. “We need to keep our voices down, we don’t want them hearing us. How many monsters is a lot?” he asked again and almost chuckled.

Fear washed through Jenny and she wanted to scream, but Frank kept asking the same questions, so she tried to calm herself down and remember how many she’d seen.

“There were at least ten.”

“Ten,” Frank said. He was beginning to think that maybe she’d really seen something. “That is a lot. Are you sure there were that many?”

“The place was alive with them,” she said, her voice rising. “Now, can we go?” she pleaded.

Frank lit another match and tried again to look down into the hole. “I wish it wasn’t so dark down there,” he said. “I can’t see anything.”

“I wish I hadn’t,” she cried.

Frank put the match out, took Jenny’s hand, and pulled her a few feet away from the hole. Then, he lit another match and said, “Tell me again what they looked like.”

Jenny couldn’t understand why Frank kept repeating the same questions. He was acting as though he didn’t believe her. She hesitated for a moment and then she mustered up all the strength she could from her one hundred and six-pound, four-foot, eleven-inch body and reluctantly described what she’d seen. “They were big and ugly,” she said again.

“That’s all, just big and ugly? That’s what you said before.”

“The flashlight wasn’t very bright and it was a long way down to where they were, but I could definitely see that they were big and ugly.” She tried to remember more details, but she couldn’t concentrate. “I...I... believe they might have had hair all over their bodies,” she stammered, “but I’m...I’m not sure.”

“What color were they?”

“Black I think, but I’m not sure about that either. For all I know, they could have been brown. Why do you keep asking these damn questions over and over,” Jenny blurted out.

“I just want to make sure that you really saw something and not just shadows,” he said and continued with his questioning. “Could you tell how big they were?”

Jenny bit her lip and felt like screaming at Frank, but she controlled herself and answered his question. “No, just big,” she whimpered.

Frank put out the match he was holding, grabbed Jenny's hand, and started pulling her back up the rock-strewn tunnel. "I think we'd better get out of here," he said.

"That's what I've been trying to tell you, but you kept asking questions."

"I'm sorry," he said, "but I wanted to make sure you really saw something."

"I really saw them," Jenny said, fear rising in her voice. "You didn't believe me, did you?" she said and started crying.

He pulled Jenny to him and gave her a big hug. "Honey, I believed you saw something. It's just that I was having a hard time believing that you really saw some monsters. But, if they're anything like you described, I hope we can get out of here before they find us."

"You're not the only one," Jenny said. "I'm scared."

"I'm scared also, honey."

Frank took Jenny's hand and they stumbled back out through the dark, narrow tunnel. At the entrance, they stopped and listened for the sound of anything behind them, but only an empty stillness engulfed them. They sprinted to Jenny's four-wheel drive Jeep that waited for them about fifty feet away. Any moment they expected to be pounced upon by one of the hideous looking creatures that Jenny had seen in the cave. They jumped in and Jenny turned the key, but nothing happened. She desperately turned it again.

"Come on, baby, start," Jenny pleaded. She turned the key several more times, but only silence greeted her efforts.

Frank jumped out and raised the hood. "The wiring has been ripped out," he yelled and slammed the hood down.

"Oh god, what do we do now?" Jenny asked, crying.

"I don't know." Frank glanced nervously back towards the cave entrance. "It's starting to get dark."

"We've got to do something," Jenny said, her voice breaking with emotion.

“In another few minutes, we won’t be able to see anything, especially with this cloud covering.”

“I hope whoever or whatever did this isn’t connected with what I saw in there,” Jenny said, trembling.

“You’re not the only...” Frank froze in mid-sentence as a strange squealing sound came from the direction of the cave.

“Jesus! What was that?” Jenny cried hysterically.

Frank grabbed her hand. “Come on we’ve got to get out of here.” They desperately raced down the rocky road as fast as they could as darkness settled in around them. They had traveled only a few yards when Frank stumbled over a rock and he lost hold of Jenny’s hand.

“Are you okay?” Jenny asked nervously as he got back up and dusted himself off.

“I think so,” he said and grabbed her hand again.

“Which way should we go?” Jenny asked.

“I don’t know, but we’ve got to get out of here.” They started to run, but something moved in front of them. They couldn’t see anything, but they could hear it.

Jenny screamed. Frank pulled Jenny to him and held her tight. They strained their eyes trying to see something, but only terrifying, evil blackness greeted them. They trembled and held each other, not knowing what waited for them in the darkness.

Suddenly there was movement again. Whatever or whoever was out there was moving towards them. They stood petrified, unable to move. They never had a chance to get away. Jenny was snared first, then Frank.

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“Do we have enough now?” Anore asked.

“Yes,” Moem said. “That gives us fourteen.”

“Good,” Anore said and smiled.

“Can I give the command to leave?”

“Yes. We have been gone a long time and it is time to return home.”

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The Alphians secured the captured passengers and readied the ship for departure. Two hours after the command to leave, they left the strange land called earth. The ship picked up speed as it left the solar system and headed towards the wormhole that would zip them back to their home—A planet in a galaxy many light years away.

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Frank partially woke up and tried to look around, but his mind was fuzzy and he was having trouble focusing his eyes. He felt weird like he was floating in a liquid. He was having a hard time staying awake. At one time, he thought he saw three things that looked like what Jenny said she saw, in the cave, move towards a plastic, liquid-filled tube next to him.

The things reached the tube and one of them reached over with a claw-like arm and slowly rotated it. One ugly thing was partially blocking his view, but Frank thought he could see Jenny in the tube.

The things came over to his tube and pointed their claws at him. Up close, they were even uglier than Jenny had described. Frank trembled and he wanted to scream, but he couldn't open his mouth. His mind reeled and he nearly blacked out as he watched the things in front of him. Each of them looked identical, like clones. They were considerably

taller than Frank's six-foot height and none of them wore any type of clothing. Their skin was a brown color and was wrinkled and scaly. He couldn't see any hair. They had six claws in place of arms, three on each side of their body, and extremely large heads with four bulging eyes. The only parts of their bodies that looked somewhat human were their spiny legs. God, they were the most hideous looking things he'd ever seen.

The three things seemed to be talking and every so often one of them would point a claw at Frank and their tongues would dart in and out. The ugly things were so close that Frank could see what looked like small brown worms crawling on their skin. It was the most sickening thing he'd ever seen. God, he felt like vomiting. One of the things reached up and pushed a button on a console beside his tube and almost immediately, Frank's eyes closed and he fell into a deep merciful sleep.

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"Prepare for landing," Anore said, his tongue darting in and out. "Soon, we will be home. The specimens we captured should bring us a good price."

"These are by far the best ones we've ever gotten," Moem said.

"Yes," Brean chimed in and scratched his brow, "but they are so ugly. I hope the medical examiners will want them."

"If they don't want them, maybe we can sell them on the black-market," Crease said and chuckled. "After all, you'd think that someone would want them if for nothing more than a conversation piece."

Anore laughed. "You're probably right. Even ugliness has a price."

"In that case, these should bring more money than we've ever gotten," Moem said.

"Hopefully," Anore said, "I'll be able to retire with the money I get."

"Maybe we all will," Crease added.

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“Good Johnathun!” the chief medical examiner, Maely, exclaimed in a blatant admonition to the gods, “I’ve never seen anything so ugly. Where on Alpha did you find these things?”

“From a planet in a galaxy many light years away,” Anore said proudly. “They are from a part of the universe that is mainly unexplored.”

“Personally,” Maely said, “I think you should have left them there. I don’t see any value in them at all.”

Anore couldn’t believe what he was hearing. “Is anyone here interested in them?” he asked, looking around at the group of medical examiners. Each one of them shook their head no.

“We had some other specimens that looked similar to these a few years ago,” Moren said, “and they were not only ugly, but they were biologically inferior to any intelligent species we’ve obtained. We don’t want any more of them.”

“Very well then,” Anore said, “we will have to dispose of them elsewhere.”

“I want to warn you,” Moren said sternly, “Don’t dump them at the disposal station. They might possibly contaminate the rubbish.”

“I’ll make sure that they’re disposed of properly. After all, I also have to live here on Alpha.”

Anore and his crew led the fourteen specimens out of the room. Once outside, Anore turned to Moem and said, “I can’t believe that none of them was interested.”

“I can't either,” Moem said, “I can't either.”

“Let’s take them back to the ship and decide what we’re going to do with them,” Anore said. “I feel like dropping them off at the disposal station. Then, we’d be rid of them.”

“You promised you wouldn’t,” Crease said. “And, if we were caught, we would be banned forever from Alpha.” He looked up at the double moons hanging in the cloudless eastern sky and added, “I like it here. This is my home.”

“I didn’t say I was going to,” Anore said. “Just that I felt like it. Actually, I think there might be a better way we can get rid of them and pick up a little extra money in the deal.”

“I’m not sure how you mean,” Moem said, “but I’m all for extra money. I hope it’s legal.”

“It is,” Anore said and smiled.

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“Where are we going with these fourteen rejects?” Crease asked as they once more headed towards deep space.

“Back to the planet where we got them from,” Anore said.

“How are we going to make any money if we just take them back?” Moem asked.

“I’ve got a plan,” Anore said as his tongue darted in and out. “As soon as we get to their planet, we’ll bring the ugly things out of suspended animation. Then, we’ll contact their leaders and see if we can make a deal.”

“What kind of deal?” Crease asked and narrowed his four eyes. “Do we ask for money in exchange for them?”

“No. I believe we can do better than that. We’ll offer these specimens in exchange for twice the number of hopefully more desirable specimens.”

“How do you know we’ll get any?” Moem asked.

“Because,” Anore said, “there were many of the better type specimens that the medical examiners said they were looking for on that planet. And,” he continued with a smile, “I believe the so-called earthlings will be happy to get these back.”

“I hope you’re right,” Crease said.

“Me too,” Moem added.

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With the exchange happily made and the new specimens securely loaded, the ship lifted off and again headed back to Alpha.

“I can’t believe we were able to barter with them so easily,” Moem said as the ship was nearing the midway point of their return.

“I’m a little surprised also,” Anore said as he raised his crusty eyebrows.

“And can you believe they actually threw in an extra thirty-six without us even asking,” Crease added. “Your plan has worked even better than I expected. Hopefully, we’ll get a lot of money for them.”

“My feeling is we’ll do quite well,” Anore said.

“Did you notice how happy the fourteen creatures appeared to be when we gave them back to their leaders,” Moem said. “They hugged each other and cried. Personally, I thought it was rather sickening to watch.”

“I guess even ugly things have feelings,” Crease said, shaking his head.

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After they landed back on Alpha, the crew brought the fifty new specimens out of suspended animation and took them to the medical examiners.

“My Johnathun!” Maely exclaimed excitedly as he examined the specimens in front of him. “These are fantastic. They’re small but beautiful. Where did you get such splendid creatures?”

“From the same planet we got the last ugly ones,” Anore replied proudly.

“These are certainly better than those,” Maely said. “We’ll gladly pay you ten times the normal amount for these fifty adorable creatures.” He looked around at the others.

“Does everyone agree?”

The other medical examiners lashed out with their tongues and nodded their heads in agreement. Anore could see that they were extremely anxious to start their medical examinations.

“What did you say these beautiful specimens are called?” Maely asked.

“The humans we got them from, called them roaches,” Anore said.

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