

The Market in Aliens

[by Barry N. Malzberg](#)

The first thing I did when I brought the alien home from auction was to plop him right into the tub. No sense in taking chances, even though they had assured me as usual that he was strong enough to exist out of the aqueous environment for several days. These were the same boys who had learned only after a lot of trial and error that they needed an aqueous environment in the first place, of course. The one thing I couldn't take would be an alien dying on me right off, and thanks to the liars and cheats who run these farces, there's a lot of precedent.

The next thing I did, after I established that he was going to lie there quietly, breathing slowly, turning the water their characteristic black, was to make a strong drink and call Intercontinental. I didn't even want to *try* making conversation with him; I had gone through that with the earlier ones, and it always came down to the same frustration, backed by whistling. Some day they're going to establish communication with them, and when they do, I'll be happy to talk. But until then, it's absolutely pointless. Besides, there is absolutely nothing an alien could say that would interest me in the slightest, not at this stage of the game.

I was lucky. I got Black, my contact, on only the fourth or fifth try at the switchboard—Inter is in administrative collapse like almost everything these days—and after reminding him of all the favors I had done for him, I laid it right on the line.

"I've got one in the bathtub," I said. "A clean healthy male, in the pink of maturity, I'd say. All reflexes in order, highly responsive and probably as intelligent as hell; he's piping a blue streak. I just got him this afternoon."

Black shrugged, a common business technique, and then cut off his viewscreen. "Don't need it," he said. "We're already overstocked."

"You need this one. Prime of life and all that. Furthermore, I was able to get him reasonable, and I can pass that saving right on to you."

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"Sorry," Black said. "We just don't need it right now. These things haven't been moving as well as we had hoped in the last month. People are tired of them, and I think there's a lot of guilt building up too. What the hell, they may be intelligent with these space machines and all. Speaking personally, I think the bottom has fallen out of your craze."

"Never," I said. "You're talking about the whole appeal."

"You don't understand psychology. Not to get involved, though, and just because I'm curious, what would you want for it?"

"Five hundred."

"Five hundred what?"

"Dollars," I said. Black was my contact at Inter; I had sold him eight aliens at more or less fair prices. Nevertheless, all that sentiment aside, he could drop dead most of the time, as far as I'm concerned.

"Oh. I thought you meant five hundred cents. At that level, we might have something to talk about, for taxidermic purposes anyway. But I can't use it, Harry. We can't move the stock we got. I tell you, the word is out on these things, now with the research. We don't know what we've hooked into."

"Three hundred," I said, cutting out my own viewscreen, letting Black drift in uncertainty for a few moments, a legitimate business technique. "For you. Just for the turnover. Hell, I got him at 275 so you can see that I'm practically crying."

"No, Harry. Speaking seriously, I probably could take him off your hands at 150, maybe 175 if he shapes up. We could sneak it through. But I couldn't ask you to take a loss like that, could I? A friend is a friend. Try Franchise."

"I will if I have to. But I don't like Franchise. I consider you my closest friend in this business, Black. Just to keep that relationship alive, I'll let you have him at cost price. All right, say 250. Just to have the lines opened." I had bought the alien for 100, and the auctioneer had been practically begging for that figure; Black was right about the bottom having fallen out. Nevertheless, I hated to concede a point. It was the first step to losing money, and I hadn't lost a cent on the freaks yet. Not one. And not ever.

Black sighed and put his viewscreen on again, gave me a good view of some cigarette-work. "200," he said, "and you'll have to deliver, and the beast better pass."

"225 and you make the pickup. And he'll pass. He was trying to sing me a lecture in there before."

Black showed me some smoke. "210 and I'll make pickup."

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"Done," I said, and flipped on my own viewscreen, projected some sensitive profile-action. "How soon you be over?"

"We'll have a crew in about half an hour. You better get it sedated, Harry. Some of the crews are getting nervous about this whole business, now. I don't want any of that whistling."

"Leave it to me."

"Don't overdoes him now."

"Don't worry about a thing," I said. "I treat them right. He's in perfect shape and he'll stay that way, and he'll be quiet as the tomb on the way over. You'll have the usual certificate for me, won't you?"

"Of course. You know how we do business. Personally, Harry, to loosen up a bit, I tell you that I don't see much of a future in this business for either of us, not with these latest reports. But I agree that you always came across with fair merchandise, and if he's a nice specimen, we might be able to turn him over to a lab, skip the zoo-route completely. I'll do this for old time's sake, but the lab pays only about 300, I want you to know, so who's taking the loss here?"

"Maybe the alien, is that what you're trying to tell me?" I said, and switched off altogether. The hell with

them. Unctuous bastard. If anybody was going to get crucified first, though, it was going to be the Blacks, not me. I was only performing a service for a public demand, and I could prove it.

I went into the bathroom, feeling pretty disgusted with the whole conversation, and looked at the alien for a while. He was in a semi-doze, one of the usual comas, the eyes bright and fixated on me as he moved slowly on his back. His tentacles were twitching. No whistling, no gestures though.

"Only a few minutes for you here and you're gone, boy," I said. I always try to communicate with them; *I* never said they weren't intelligent. Deep inside me there is the belief that a bit of soul exists in everything. Hell, maybe they came to earth to cure us; how the hell do I know? When I see it, I'll believe it, that's all I know.

I locked the bathroom door and went into the den and watched television for a time, waiting for the crew to come. As usual, Black's boys were late. A bulletin came on saying that yet another of their ships had landed somewhere near Lake Michigan, the second in a week in that general area, and that the usual procedures were being followed. That relieved the depression a bit. It meant that if they were efficient there for a change, the auction would probably be ready to go by day after tomorrow. Detroit was a nice city; I hadn't seen it for a while. So I called United and booked a flight, taking coach; no sense overdoing pleasure with business.

Some time after that, just before the crew finally came, one of those damned scientists came on in an interview with the usual recent crap about mass guilt and stellar communication, and I switched that right off. The profit on the sale, less the airline deposit, left me with fifty clear and what I did was to call Ginny and take her out. We went to the zoo where I showed her the two specimens which were mine. On my own level, I'm very sentimental about the freaks.

The End