

Monster Sale

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Artemis Nettle stood amongst the wisps and willows of the night, turning a small piece of bone-white cardstock over in his fingers. “ARTEMIS NETTLE’S TRAVELING STORE, OPEN YEAR-ROUND, BY CHANCE OR APPOINTMENT ONLY,” the business card read in painstakingly crafted script. He looked up and examined the approaching couple: they looked young, no older than thirty-five, and they probably had a seven-year-old at home. He glanced over his shoulder and mentally checked his inventory. He fixed his hat and popped a mint into his mouth. The sugary disc lasted less than three seconds before he crushed it between his teeth.

The couple drew closer to him and the enormous canvas tent rising behind him, and Nettle noted a single drop of sweat trace its way down his back. He shifted his weight, and the sound of his dusty boots crunching gravel highlighted just how silent the night had become. The couple exchanged spurts of conversation, while the woman gripped the man in the crook of his elbow. Nettle charted the best course through his merchandise, knowing that some goods would only generate the desired effect when viewed in proper sequence.

Nettle bounced lightly on his toes and then stopped. He didn’t want them to think him too eager. He held his right wrist in his left hand behind his back and tried to relax his knees.

“Good evening,” Nettle said as they came into the full view of the light emanating through the tent flap. “Welcome to Artemis Nettle’s Traveling Store! I’m the owner, proprietor, and sole clerk, Artemis Nettle.”

“We weren’t sure if anyone would even be here.”

Nettle attempted to make eye contact with the woman, but her attention was elsewhere. She stared behind him, and he soon realized what she was looking at: a wooden sign hammered into the ground with red, spray-painted letters. The wording had dripped some, but the words remained legible.

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“Is this for real?” she said.

Nettle smiled and nodded.

Her face was impenetrable, but Nettle could sense what little faith she held in his store beginning to dwindle as the grip on her husband’s arm tightened.

“So, you saw my ad?” Nettle said, hoping to change the subject.

“What? Oh, yes,” the man said. “We thought it was a joke.” He wiped sweat from his forehead. “My name is David Yearling. And this is my wife, Ellen.”

“I assure you, Mr. and Mrs. Yearling, this is no joke.” Nettle felt his tongue and jaw loosen. “Tell me, how old are your children at home?”

His heart leapt at the sight of Ellen’s mouth dropping open. “How did you-” she began.

“Ma’am, I’ve been in this business for a long time.” He touched his index finger and thumb to the edge of his bowler hat. “Please, right this way.”

Nettle led the couple to the front of his tent. It had taken him an entire day to set up. Last week had been easier. He’d had help, but the dreadlocked girl hadn’t lasted long. None of them ever did.

The couple followed Nettle past the sign and up to his wooden podium. He went behind it and began rifling through papers. David moved his hand to his pocket.

“How much is it?” he said.

Nettle looked up at him. His hat had fallen askew. “How much is what?”

“The show?” He motioned toward the tent flap.

Nettle put the papers down and looked at the two of them. “Please understand something, Mr. and Mrs. Yearling.” Despite his annoyance, he kept his expression neutral—neither malicious nor kind. “This is not a side show. This is not the back lot of a carnival where I take you into a shadowy mirrored tent to unveil a dog-faced turtle boy floating in a vat of formaldehyde just so that you gasp and cringe. Don’t let the façade fool you: this is a business, and I am a businessman. Though I will be guiding you through my inventory, I would no more charge you to peruse my wares than a car salesman would charge you to look at last year’s models. So, for my sake and for yours, have no lingering doubts about the nature or the legitimacy of my store and its contents.”

Nettle returned to his paperwork. The sounds of papers shuffling floated oddly in the night air. David just stared at him, his mouth cracked open. Even Ellen had quit pondering the dirt.

Finally, Nettle lifted his head and held out two yellowed sheets of paper along with two ballpoint pens.

“What are these?” David said as he plucked the papers from Nettle’s grasp.

“Damage waivers.”

The Yearlings waited for Nettle’s face to crack, to produce a smile that would let them in on the joke.

It never came.

David looked from the paper, to Nettle, back to the paper. He glanced over at his wife, who barely registered the fact that she had been given anything at all.

“You can’t be serious,” he said.

“I take my job very seriously, Mr. Yearling,” Nettle intercepted. He could feel the hairline fracture of resentment enter his voice, and he did his best to smother it. He had gotten them this far after all. “I am more than happy to allow you to peruse my wares at your discretion, but only after the proper paperwork has been filled out. They are as much for tax purposes as anything. I can understand your skepticism, but I assure you that this is all according to procedure.”

Ellen’s pen hovered over the paper. Nettle did his best to keep his features light, while still maintaining the seriousness of the waivers. His hands, out of sight underneath the booth, unclenched as she lowered her head to read the form.

David and Ellen finished filling out the forms and returned them to Nettle, who placed them in a manila envelope. He stepped over to the flap in the tent and motioned for them to follow.

Gripping one part of the opening, he smiled at them. “Mr. and Mrs. Yearling, again, I welcome you to Artemis Nettle’s Traveling Store!”

Out of the corner of his eye, Nettle caught them clasp hands as they took a step forward. He checked over his shoulder before following them in. The night shrouded the surrounding trees in a murky cloak, and, despite the breeze, the atmosphere was taut and unflinching. Nettle knew there would be no more visitors tonight.

He let the tent flap drape closed as he caught up with the Yearlings. Shadows danced along the interior plywood walls of the tent. Oil lamps hung sporadically from the rib-like beams of the ceiling, flooding some areas with light while neglecting others entirely.

“Well,” Nettle said as he approached the couple. “Shall we begin?”

“It smells in here,” she said.

Nettle pressed on, indicating to his left, “If you’ll just follow me this way.”

“Maybe we could come back tomorrow,” David said. “Will you be here tomorrow?”

Nettle’s back stiffened: he wouldn’t be here tomorrow. He had reserved a spot of land in Ravensport. Unlike the trickling traffic in this town, Ravensport had always been an ideal market whose sales would hopefully turn his year around.

“Mr. Yearling, and Mrs. Yearling, please,” he said. “All I ask of you is twenty or thirty minutes of your time. As I said earlier, you’ve already driven out

here, and I would hate to make you waste a trip. I know that, if given the chance, I can meet all of your needs and expectations!” He adjusted his hat and swept forward, willing them away from the entrance.

Before he reached the first cage, he turned back to them. His mood dipped when he saw that they hadn’t moved, though he made sure his smile remained.

“How old are your children? I don’t think I caught it earlier.”

“Ruby is nine, and Caleb is seven, but he’ll be eight this October.”

Nettle’s smile broadened. “Perfect! Come right up to the first stall.”

The couple advanced slowly to where Nettle stood, mindful of the bars nearby, inside of which hung heavy, faded curtains.

Nettle’s hand went up to a rope that dangled near the cage. “Again, I promise you both that you are completely safe, but I would advise that you steel yourselves so as not to excite her.”

“*Her?*” Ellen said as Nettle pulled down the rope.

The drapes inside the cage swooped away, and the couple gave a premature jump just from the curtains being drawn. Their faces turned to puzzlement at the sight inside.

A door.

It stretched across the width of the cage, the frame touching either end. A simple brass knob stuck out amidst the flakey white paint. Nettle motioned for them to keep looking at the door, his smile never wavering from his face. David made a soft squeak as the doorknob started to turn.

Two sets of purple fingers tipped with black, pointed nails wrapped around the crack that had appeared as the door swung out slightly. The knuckles resembled warped wood, and a soft hiss escaped from the opening, followed by two glowing eyes peering out from the blackness.

The Yearlings stood frozen.

Nettle cut through their stupor. “This is the standard Boogeyman that I have on offer. Well, Boogeywoman, but the difference is completely negligible. I think that she’d be *perfect* for your children. She’s low maintenance, requires no food or care, and the only thing that she needs is a nice closet to live in. Just wait for the right moment, and out she comes. Nothing too scary, just enough to set them on edge!”

Another hiss slipped from behind the door. The Boogeywoman drummed her fingernails along the wood but never showed more than those twisted fingers and gleaming eyes.

Without taking her eyes from the door, Ellen said, as if speaking to herself, “Our children don’t have closets in their rooms.”

The corners of Nettle’s smile sagged slightly. “Oh, well then.” He dropped the rope, and the curtains fell back into place. The Yearlings came out of their spell, blinking rapidly.

“Come along then, I’ve much more stock that might interest you.” He started to turn away, but then stopped. “Do they have attics in their rooms? Because she works just as well in attics. Not only that, but she comes with a thirty-day warranty that I could throw in at no charge.”

They shook their heads. “No, they just use dressers for their clothes.”

Nettle’s eyes lit up. “Oh, excellent! Please, follow me.”

He led them past several more cages—one smelled like rotten eggs while another emitted a green haze—before stopping at a compact cage with bars no bigger than drinking straws. Once they finally caught up with him, he leaned back and stepped aside, allowing them to peer into the cage.

“This next sample is a crowd favorite.”

Inside the cage sat a miniature dresser the size of a large dictionary. In most places, the wood was worn and dusty, but around the center of the drawers, there were long streaks of darkened wood. A withered length of string was attached to one of the knobs, and Nettle promptly reached over and gave it a pull.

A low sigh escaped from inside as the drawer slipped open.

“Mr. and Mrs. Yearling, I would like to introduce you to Kilroy.”

Nettle watched as the two parents edged closer to the cage and peered into the space. They jumped backward as a brief, wet sneeze chirped from the drawer. They continued staring as a shock of black and white hair popped up from inside, followed by two jawbreaker-sized eyes. Nettle’s smile grew even more as Kilroy rolled his pupils around to stare back at the two figures gazing in at him. Finally, with another soggy sneeze, the creature rose far enough so that its nose rested on the lip of the drawer. Nettle suppressed a cheer as he heard Ellen allow the smallest of laughs escape her lips as Kilroy emitted another sneeze. Kilroy’s eyes rolled and stared while its cucumber nose flexed and wiggled. Her laugh became a soft groan as a stream of snot melted out of Kilroy’s nose like candle wax, following the trail of darkened wood perfectly.

“Yes, well, as I said before, Kilroy is a favorite,” Nettle said as he hurried to draw the Yearlings’ attention away from the creature’s nasal discharge. “I’ve heard back from several satisfied customers saying that he’s just the thing their kids needed to keep them in bed. Some folks with younger children have let me know that their kids would rather try to adopt little Kilroy than show any signs of fear. But those are rare occurrences, and your children are well within the effective age range.”

He caught the eyes of both parents. Ellen's mood had lifted somewhat at the sight of the pocket-sized figure in the drawer.

"Though he doesn't come with a warranty, I will provide you with a reasonable price." Nettle fought to keep his arms from crossing across his chest.

"Well, he is cute," Ellen said contemplatively.

David suddenly found familiar footing in this strange place and began speaking with the tone of a man who was used to haggling over price. "Mr. Nettle," he began.

"Please, call me Artemis."

"Alright. Artemis. As you said, this little fellow might be just a little *too* cute to do much good, and without a warranty..."

"I agree with you; it is unfortunate that I cannot offer the thirty-day warranty on little Kilroy here." Nettle was no stranger to negotiating himself and knew that this line of conversation meant that the couple had made the gradual shift, as most eventually did, to accepting his store as a legitimate business.

At the sound of his name, the snuffling figure let loose another sneeze, adding more mucus to the front of the dresser. A noise that sounded like a strangled cat's purr came from within his flaring nostrils.

"David, are you sure?" Ellen said from behind her husband, her eyes still transfixed on the bulbous-nosed creature.

"Nobody knows your children better than you do," Nettle said to them. "If you don't think that Kilroy is up to snuff, then he's not." The purring continued, interrupted briefly with an indignant snort.

Nettle's mind raced. *Something less cute than Kilroy, not as off-putting as the Boogeywoman, but wait, their children have no closets.*

"Please, Mr. Nettle. Artemis. Is there anything else?" David said. "We're just looking for a little peace in the evenings."

At that, the salesman tugged on the string again, and the drawer snapped shut. Kilroy hadn't quite got his nose clear, and he let out a sharp squeak as his nose caught in the dresser.

Once the drawer was shut, Nettle raised his arms to indicate the tent. "Mr. and Mrs. Yearling, my entire stock is for you to peruse. I will make it my mission to ensure you leave here with precisely what you need."

Nettle led the couple through row after row of cages. He demonstrated his standard Monster Under the Bed, as well as providing instruction on how to banish it for the night with a few simple phrases and a pattern of flickering light. He gave them the hard sell on his deeply discounted Shadow in the Corner.

Nettle told the Yearlings that this last one simply had to go, and he was willing to sell it to them at, or possibly even below, cost.

As they rounded a final corner of the tent, the mood lightened but determined, they passed a large cage covered with heavy black satin curtains with a large letter B stitched in gold thread on each drape.

“Mr. Nettle,” Ellen said, “what’s this?”

Nettle drew up short. His spine was an ice pick. Without needing to look, he realized his error. He turned and caught her eye. “Oh, nothing, merely a piece of inventory that I doubt you or your children would be much interested in,” he said, waving his hand dismissively.

“Why?” David said. “What does the B stand for?”

“It’s actually two Bs, Mr. Yearling,” Nettle said, his fingers rubbing the edges of his hat.

The Yearlings waited for him to continue.

Nettle took a deep breath, wishing he had taken a different route through his store rather than excitedly leading them through like a hurricane.

He said the words in an exhaled breath. “Bed Bug.”

His customers exchanged looks, and then turned back to him in unison.

“Show us.”

He tried to buy his way out. “I’m sorry, but I’m afraid that this specimen here is already spoken for.”

“But you could get others?” David asked. “Surely you could get another if this is what we want. There can’t be just one, right?”

He took a deep breath and met their eyes. He weighed what would be worse: the truth or a lie. He drew himself up slightly, bracing, but he would never deny a customer’s request.

Nettle returned to the cage with the black curtains and placed his hand on the fraying rope. The Yearlings waited in anticipation.

“You were quite fond of Kilroy, yes?” Nettle said, his hand motionless. “I did mention that he was thirty percent off, didn’t I? Quite a steal...”

“Yes, yes, he was cute. Now, if you don’t mind.” David gestured lifting with his upturned palms. “I have a feeling that this might be just right for our children.”

Ellen never took her eyes from the cage. She leaned in to examine the bars, and Nettle’s blood turned to battery acid as he saw her eyeing the serrated marks that ran up and down the length of the metal.

Why didn't you get those fixed? he screamed to himself.

In one frantic motion, he readjusted his grip and jerked the rope downward. The drapes drew back with a whoosh, and light tumbled outward from within the cage. It was the size of a child's room. Stains lay splattered across the moldy carpet, and a simple bed sat in the center of the cage.

A few moments went by. Ellen looked first to her husband and then to Nettle.

“Did you mean *actual* bedbugs?” she began. “Those tiny brown-”

Without drawing his eyes away from the interior of the cage, Nettle raised one finger, silencing her. He then used the same finger to point inside. Ellen returned her gaze to the small bed.

A low whirring noise escaped from beneath the bed. At first, it was a mix between the buzzing of a cicada and the chirping of a cricket, but then it was neither. Maybe a baritone version of a mosquito with the flapping of immense dragonfly wings.

From beneath the bed came three pairs of grotesque, segmented legs. The light reflected dully off the chitinous exoskeleton, and each monstrous appendage flexed and heaved, churning ever upward in a wild dance. Ellen's face blanched as the buzzing intensified. The barbed ends began to pluck and scour the bed, and Nettle could almost see for himself what must be going through the Yearlings' minds as they imagined their children on the receiving ends of those razored prongs. Finally, Nettle saw his deal slam shut as thick, coagulating ooze seeped from the tips of the legs. It dripped with an agonizing slowness, coating the bed and carpet in a clear, sticky gunk.

With a sunken head, Nettle pulled the rope again to let the curtains fall back into place. As they shut, the chatter from within ceased, and he could practically feel the silence rush to fill the space.

He cursed himself and his carelessness. He should have paid more attention to what he displayed when he was setting up. He should have done everything in his power to move them along and assure them that the Bed Bug was completely wrong for their children.

But he hadn't.

The Yearlings stood before him, slack-jawed and ashen-faced. Nettle almost preferred the clamoring of the Bed Bug over their shocked silence.

Almost.

“You show this to parents?” David sputtered. “You show this to parents in hopes that they'll pay you money so that they can take it home and use it on their children?”

“Mr. and Mrs. Yearling, not all my wares are intended for children. Some, like Kilroy, are merely there to give them a little fright.”

“Is that or is that not a child’s bed you have in that cage?”

“Well, when traveling from town to town, space does become an issue...”

“Let’s go, Ellen.” David grabbed his wife’s arm. She hardly seemed to register his pull. Her face was chalk white.

As he watched them hurry away, Artemis Nettle’s hands found his pockets. His fingers brushed against a thin edge of cardstock.

“Wait! Mr. and Mrs. Yearling! My business card!”