

The
Aab

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The cool Martian wind crept across the rust-red expanse of desert. Occasionally its soft touch stirred the thorny leaves of Devil's Eggs—the squat black plants which peppered the silent monotony. Here and there a wisp of sand spiraled upward into the bright, thin morning.

The wind felt clean and new on Monk O'Hara's coarse, blond-stubbed face. He chuckled as noisily as a man buried neck-deep in sand can chuckle.

"Nothing to worry about," he muttered.

"Not a goddam thing."

It was uncomfortable, of course. No man would relish being beaten by hysterical Martian tribesmen, spat on, and buried to roast in the 100-degree Martian noon or freeze in the 50-below-zero night.

Yet the Summer wind from the melting Polar icecap would insure an endurable temperature through the day. Monk's lungs—enlarged and sensitized after two years of prospecting for Devil's Egg seed—were accustomed to the planet's scant atmosphere. Destruction of his oxygen mask presented no menace.

"Idiots," he mumbled. "The fool Martians made off with the sandcar like kids with ice cream—and left enough Egg seed to buy a thousand cars!"

He was able to turn his head just enough to glimpse the heavy, fat sacks that the tribesmen had dumped out of the sandcar.

The sacks bulged with the fine black seed that, properly processed, made the deadliest, costliest, and most habit-forming narcotic in the System. The sacks were symbols of a shining future for Monk O'Hara—symbols of fine clothes, beautiful women, choice whiskey and, most important of all, a return to earth.

Of course, it was too bad about the old man.

The white-bearded, toothpick-slim Martian trader and his black-haired daughter had pitched their tent next to his camp last night. The girl had been amazingly full-bodied for a Martian. Her round, firm body and sensual lips made him suspect that she was a half-breed, a delightful combination of Martian grace and Earthly sultriness.

Monk smiled as he saw her again in his mind's vision.

She slid off her antelope-like *lozelle*, came to him slowly with her small, naked feet swishing through the sand.

"It is all right for us to camp by you?" she asked, her eyes wide. "We will not bother you?"

"Not at all," Monk answered, his heart pounding. After all, it'd been six months since he'd even seen a woman—any kind of woman.

"What is your name?" the girl asked.

"Monk, they call me. Monk O'Hara." He could feel the blood pulsing through his temples.

"I am Tooli." She curtsied. "You like me?"

"Yeah," Monk, breathed. "I like you a lot."

Later, through the ports of his sandcar, he watched her lithe movements as she and her father set up their tent. Throughout the night, his sleep was thin and restless, his mind on fire with the vision of the dark, lovely face.

So early this morning he'd gone to her again. "How about some coffee, kid? Got plenty in the sandcar."

She crinkled her nose teasingly. "Yes, I like Earth coffee. My bocle come too?"

"No, just you, kid. Your old man's busy taking down the tent."

She nodded eagerly, smiling. "Yes, I come. I like you."

What greater invitation did a man need?

But in the sandcar the little fool screamed. The old Martian darted into the car, yanked Monk away from Tooli, and descended on him like an enraged beast.

Monk hadn't meant to kill the old Martian. He'd meant only to silence his shrill screams and stop the frenzied flailing of his fists.

How could he have known that the thin neck would snap like a rotten stick under his first blow?

Monk's smile faded.

No, he thought, he hadn't acted too wisely. He'd expected the frightened girl to leap out of the sandcar and race away on her *lozelle*—and she had.

But he *hadn't* expected her to return an hour later with a dozen revenge-hungry tribesmen. His mistake had been in letting her escape. He cursed silently.

Then he spat. After all, it was over and done. The Martians had trussed him, buried him, and left him to die—but he'd at least been wise enough not to reveal his ace in the hole.

His partner, old Stardust Luke, had left yesterday in the auxiliary sandcar to get fresh supplies from Chandler Field. Old Stardust was as honest as a baby and methodical as a clock. He'd return today, late in the afternoon, just as he'd done a dozen times.

There was no doubt about the punctual arrival of Stardust. And Stardust would save him before the freezing descent of the Martian night.

Monk thought for a moment, then chuckled again. His glee more than overshadowed the inconvenience of his neck-deep burial.

For the rescue would be the last good deed of Stardust Luke's life. In fact, it would be his *last* deed. Period. The old space rat had out-lived his usefulness. If he persisted in wandering over unexplored Martian terrain he'd probably end up in a freezing or sweltering grave anyway.

So it wouldn't be murder—not exactly. It would only be giving a bit of impetus to what already seemed inevitable.

Monk strained his neck muscles to gaze at the sacks of seed. They would all be his soon. Not half, as now. But *all*.

He sucked the cool air deep into his lungs.

"Everything's going to be okay," he murmured "—no, not okay, but *perfect*."

He closed his eyes, at peace with the universe. He could forget the pressure of sand on his chest, forget the heat that was beginning to shower down on his thick, sweat-matted mop of hair. He could imagine himself in a cool, dark bar on Earth, surrounded by smiling women, sipping iced drinks.

"Ahhh," he breathed, opening his eyes.

Then he saw the Aab.

It squatted on a small, irregular-shaped dune some three feet from him in the jagged sharp-edged shadow of a Devil's Egg.

Its eyes, like shiny pin-heads of obsidian, were on a level with his.

It was a red-scaled creature, about three inches long, combining the most significant characteristics of an Earth crab and an Earth ant. Its claws were tiny razor-edged traps on the ends of wire-thin appendages. Even at this distance, Monk saw that its mouth was open—whether in awe or in anticipation of a meal, he did not know.

The Aab rose on its six rear legs as if trying to stretch its dark red body into a position of better vision. It rubbed its fore-claws together. Sharpening them, perhaps? Monk shivered.

For the first time since his arrival on Mars twelve years ago, Monk felt fear. Till now, he'd met no adversary that his strong, bull-necked body could not subdue. Ordinarily, he'd dispose of an Aab by a squishing stomp of his boot. And he'd flower the naked grave with a squirt of tobacco juice.

But now it was as if he were bodiless. His broad shoulders, sinewy arms and barrel-chest seemed buried a thousand miles deep in the very bowels of the planet. He was a helpless freak, a living, sliced-off head on an endless platter of red sand.

Fear was an icy bauble in his mind, rising, swelling, forcing out all other thought.

"Go 'way!" he yelled.

The Aab's claws fell to the sand. Monk saw the menacing glint of the needle-like tongue in the creature's black, open mouth.

Aabs were carnivorous, he knew. They especially relished the soft, tender places of the human body—the lips, eyes, tongue.

Ten minutes of attack by a hundred Aabs would transform a man into a white, clean skeleton. About the bones, the Aabs would lie prostrate, too stuffed to move, their bodies swollen to thrice their normal size.

"Get out of here!" he screamed.

The Aab retreated a few inches, backing into the shadow of the Devil's Egg.

"Go on! And keep going!"

The Aab turned and began to creep away. It responded readily to Monk's commands.

For Aabs were gifted with a rudimentary, if unpredictable, type of telepathy. No interplanetary circus was complete without its complement of the deadly creatures controlled by an expert human telepath.

The Aab continued to needle a path through the sand. It passed through the shadow of the Devil's Egg. It was now some six feet from Monk, a tiny red ball half buried in the desert.

Suddenly a thought echoed in Monk's mind, ever so faintly, like the barely distinguishable sound of trickling water, far away:

I will come back. Many of us will come.

Monk paled. Damn. He'd forgotten. The Aabs, according to biological reports, sent out scouts in search of food. The Aab before him was a scout.

The fear welled up within him, stronger than ever. His body was held motionless in his tight prison, yet inside him he was trembling.

"No! Don't go! Come back!"

He repeated the words over and over in his mind, knowing that the Aab would respond only to the mental impulse, not to the sound of words. Aabs were deaf to the human voice.

The Aab paused.

"Don't go! Don't! Don't!"

Slowly, like a revolving wheel, the Aab turned. Its black, pin-head eyes seemed to bore into Monk's.

I'm going. You cannot stop me. The thoughts, not words, filtered into Monk's consciousness.

"You are *not* going," Monk telepathed. He gritted his teeth, funneling all his strength into the mental command.

The Aab was struggling to break away from the hypnotic chain. Its body was grotesquely twisted, its claws digging into the sand, its head bobbing absurdly.

Let me go. Let me go.

"You can't go. I've got you."

LET ME GO. LET ME GO.

The Aab struggled furiously.

"Damn you, I won't let you go." Monk hurled the thought at the creature in a fire of desperate fury.

The Aab fell, exhausted.

Five, ten, fifteen minutes passed. The wind blew. The hot Martian sun transformed the desert into a sea of glittering scarlet. A mist of sand settled on the inert body of the Aab, camouflaging it.

How many minutes more till the arrival of Stardust Luke? It must be close to noon. There'd be perhaps five more hours. Sixty minutes in an hour, and five hours—

The Aab stirred. It began to rise.

Monk concentrated on the thought: "You can't move. I've got you. You can't rise."

The Aab stopped rising.

Monk licked the perspiration from his upper lip in a futile effort to quench his thirst. But there was nothing to worry about. Nothing at all—

His head jerked back.

The Aab was rising again. It was defying his last command.

Monk bit his lip. Of course. His mind was tiring just as muscles tire. He couldn't hope to hold the Aab here all afternoon. The Aab, somehow, must be disposed of. But *how*?

Out of the heat, out of his fear and desperation, came a plan. It was simple and direct. It gave Monk his only chance for survival. He quickly pressed it into the depths of his unconscious mind so that the Aab would not detect it.

"Come here," he said. "I won't hurt you."

You will hurt me. You will dispose of me.

Monk cursed. Aabs weren't intelligent, but they possessed some reasoning power.

"No, I won't hurt you," he telepathed. "Come here. Let me see what you look like."

I am afraid. You have a plan.

This time Monk relaxed. He tried to emanate only thoughts of love and friendliness.

"I won't hurt you. I promise."

The Aab hesitated.

"I command you to come here. You will not be hurt."

Slowly, the Aab crawled forward. One inch, two, three, six, a dozen. It was only five feet from him now, and in the shadow of the Devil's Egg again.

"That's it. Come on. Closer."

I am afraid of you. Let me go. Let me go get the others.

The Aab suddenly braked its advance by digging its fore-claws into the sand.

"But you don't want to go back to the others." Monk's lips quivered as he spoke. His words, to human ears, would have been unintelligible. "You want to stay here. You want to come closer to me."

His attempt at telepathic hypnotism brought a small, silent reply:

I must call the others. It is my duty to call the others. The others are hungry.

A shudder passed through Monk's hot, tight body. A few minutes ago he had delighted in the coolness of the desert. Now the heat seemed to be pressing down upon him like the fiery hand of Satan.

"You're a scout, aren't you?" he asked. "You find food for the others. You go back and tell the others what you've found?"

I tell the others. The others are hungry.

"But you're hungry, too. Why share what you've found? Why not take it all for yourself?"

No reply appeared in Monk's mind. He continued:

"Come closer. Look at me. You're hungry. You're too hungry to waste time calling the others."

The Aab came closer. It passed out of the shadow of the Devil's Egg. It came to within two feet of Monk. It crossed the small dune. Slowly, slowly, its legs labored through the thin sand. At last it stopped some six inches from Monk's face.

It appeared immense, like a lumbering, scaly giant from the planet's billion-year-ago past.

It rubbed its claws together, threateningly. Its black mouth opened, closed, opened, closed. Its needle tongue twisted like a silver snake.

I am hungry, came the thought. So very hungry. But I should call the others



Combined fear and hope hung over Monk like an omnipresent shower of fire and ice. Sweat dripped into his hot eyes, obscuring his vision.

He opened his mouth.

"Look," he said. "You are hungry." He wriggled his tongue as a fisherman would cast out bait.

Hungry, hungry, hungry, came the tiny voice.

An eternity passed. Monk's heart was a monstrous hammer pounding in the depths of his body and in the depths of the planet. The Aab was motionless save for the restless, uncertain moving and blinking of its eyes.

Then its forelegs lifted. It drew itself forward. One inch, two, three, four, five, six.

Monk beckoned the creature on with his wriggling, twisting tongue.

"That's it!" he telepathed. "Closer, closer!"

The Aab entered Monk's open mouth.

Crunch!

Monk chewed and spat and chewed and spat. He grimaced hideously. He coughed and choked. The Aab tasted like a combination of paprika and oil. He thought he was going to retch, but did not.

And it was over.

Monk breathed the cool air. His weary mind thought of the stupid white-bearded Martian and of his lovely daughter. He thought of what he was going to do to that idiot space rat, Stardust Luke.

His gaze traveled to the empty red desert where, in about four hours, Stardust's sandcar would appear. It shifted to the sacks of priceless Devil's Egg seed, and he began to chuckle.

And last, his gaze turned to the black, pin-point eyes and the moving fore-claws of the *two* Aabs which squatted some three feet away from him in the jagged, sharp-edged shadow of a Devil's Egg....