

High Weir
by Samuel R. Delany

I

"What do you know!" Smith, from the top of the ladder.

"What is it?" Jones, at the bottom.

And Rimkin thought desperately: Boiled potatoes! My God, boiled potatoes! If I took toothpicks and stuck them in boiled potatoes, then stuck one on top of the other, made heads, arms, legs—like little snowmen—they would look just like these men in spacesuits on Mars.

"Concaved!" Smith called down. "You know those religious pictures they used to have back home, in the little store windows, where the eyes followed you down the street? The faces were carved in reverse relief like this."

"Those faces aren't carved in reverse relief!" Mak, right next to Rimkin, shouted up. "I can see that from here."

"Not the whole face," Smith said. "Just the eyes. That's why they had that funny effect when we were coming across the sand."

Mak, Rimkin thought. Mak. Mak. What distinguishes that man besides the *k* in his name?

"They are handsome up there." That from Hodges. "A whole year of speculation over whether those little bits of purple stone were carved or natural—and suddenly here it all is, right on High Weir. The answer. Look at it: It means intelligence. It means culture. It means an advanced culture at least on the level of the ancient Greeks, too. Do you realize the spaces between these temple columns lead to a whole new branch of anthropology?"

"We don't know that this thing's a temple," Mak grunted.

"A whole new complex of studies!" Hodges reiterated. "We're all of us Sir Arthur Evanses unearthing the great staircase at Knossos. We're Schliemanns digging up the treasures of Atreus."

I don't know where any of them are, Rimkin thought. Their voices come through the rubber-ringed grills inside my helmet. All these boiled-potato figures against the grainy rust; that one there, who I think is Hodges; the sun blinds out the faceplate. And for all I know, behind the plastic is a grotesquerie as deformed as those domed heads along the architrave above us....

"Hey, Rimkin, you're the linguist. Why aren't you poking around for something that looks like writing?"

"Huh ...?" And as he said it, without hearing their laughter, he knew that inside their onion helmets they were smiling and shaking their heads. Jones said:

"Here we are on Mars, and Rimky is *still* in another world. Is there any writing or hen-scratching up there where you are, Smith?"

"Nothing up here. But look at the surface of this eye, the way it's carved out!"

"What about it?"

And then Jimmi—Rimkin could always tell Jimmi because her suit was a head and a half shorter than any of the others—climbed up the rough stone foundation blocks and, with a beautiful "Martian lope" and a wake of russet dust, crossed the flooring, then turned back. "Look!" He could always tell her voice, no matter the static and distortion of the radios (long range; no fidelity). "Here's one that fell!"

"Here!" Rimkin said. "Let me see." They mustn't think he wasn't interested.

Her soft voice said in his ear: "I can't very well move it. You'll have to come up here, Rimky."

But he was already climbing. "Yes, yes. Of course. I'm coming." And there was the sound of somebody trying not to snicker, position concealed by lack of stereo.

The carving had fallen. And it had cracked on the stone flags.

He walked up to Jimmi. The top of her helmet came to the middle of his upper arm.

"It's so funny," she said with that oddness to her laughter the radio couldn't mask. "It looks just like a Martian."

"What?"

She looked up at him, small brown face behind the white frame. The movements of her laughter were displaced from the sound in his ear. "Just look." She turned back. "The great, high forehead, the big beady eyes, and hardly any chin. Wouldn't you have guessed? Martians would turn out to look just like a nineteen-fifties s-f film."

"Maybe ..." A third of the face had fallen away. The crack went through the left eye. What remained of the mouth leered with prune-puckered lips. "Maybe it's all a joke. Perhaps some of the military people from Bellona came here and set this whole thing up like an elaborate stage-set. Just to play a joke on us. They *would*, you know! This is absurd, just the five of us taking the skimmer on a routine scouting trip across High Weir plateau, not sixty-five miles from the base, and coming across—"

"—across a structure as big as the Parthenon! Hell, bigger than the Temple of Zeus!" Hodges exploded. "Come off it, Rimky! You can't just sneak off in the morning and erect an entire stone ruin. Not one like this."

"Yes, but it's so—"

"Hey! You people!" Again, the voice came from Smith. "Somebody come up here and take a look at the eyes. Are they the same stone as the rest of the building, just very highly polished? Or are they some different material set in? I can't tell from here."

Jimmi bent awkwardly and ran her glove over the broken surface. She who is dark and slender and the definition of all grace, Rimkin thought, muffled against the blazing ruin beneath deep turquoise skies.

"It's an inset, Dr. Smith." She made a blunted gesture, and Rimkin bent to see.

The eyes were cylinders of translucent material, perhaps nine inches in diameter and a foot long. They were set flush into the face, and the front surfaces ground to shimmering concavities.

"Lots of them are different colors," Mak noted.

Rimkin himself had noticed that the great row of eyes gave off an almost day-glow quality from across the dunes; up close, they were mottled.

"What are they made of?" Hodges asked.

"The building's that marsite stuff," Jones said. The light, purplish rock "marsite" had been found as soon as the military base at Bellona had grown larger than a single bubble-hut. Rimkin, there with the Inter-Nal University group, had spent much time looking at the worn fragments, playing after-dinner games with the military men (who barely tolerated the contingent of scholars) speculating as to whether they were carved or natural. The purple shards could have been Martian third cousins to the Venus of Willendorf, or they could have simply been eroded fragments tossed for millennia by the waterless waves.

"What are the eyes made of?" Hodges demanded. "Semiprecious stone? Is it something smelted, or synthetic? That opens up a whole world of possibilities about the culture."

"I can chip some off this broken one to take back—"

"Rimkin! No!" Hodges shouted, and in a moment the bumpy air suit had scrambled over the foundation. Hodges swayed on bloated feet. "Rimkin ... look, wake up! We've just had the first incontrovertible proof that there is—or at any rate, at one time there was—intelligent life beside us in the universe. In the solar system! And you want to start chipping. Sometimes you come on like one of those brass-decked thick skulls back at the base!"

"Oh, Hodges, cut it out!" Jimmi snapped. "Leave him alone. It's bad enough trying to put up with those thick-skulls you're talking about. If we start this sort of bickering—"

"Stop trying to protect him, Jimmi," Hodges countered. "All right, perhaps he's a brilliant linguist in a library cubicle. But he's absolute dead weight on this expedition. He spends all his time either completely uninterested in what's going on, or worse, making absurd suggestions like breaking up the most important archaeological discovery in human history with a sledgehammer!"

"I wasn't going to break up—"

Then: "Oh my—God.... No! This is—"

And Rimkin thought: Which one is it? Jesus, with all this distortion, I can't tell what direction the voices are coming from. I can place any accent on Earth, but I can't even recognize their individual voices any more! Which one?

Hodges turned around. "What is it?"

Jones, still down on the sand, called up, "What is it, Dr. Smith? What's happening up there?"

"This is just ... no ... this is amazing!"

They were all going to the base of the column against which the ladder was leaning. So Rimkin went too.

The white-suited figure on the top rung was peering into one of the eyes with a flashlight.

"Dr. Smith, are you all right?"

"Yes, yes. I'm fine. Please, just wait! But this ..."

"That's a low-power laser beam he's looking in there with," someone began.

"He said be quiet," from someone else.

I can hear five people breathing in my ears, Rimkin thought. What could he be looking at? "Dr. Smith," Rimkin called.

"Shhhh!"

Rimkin went on doggedly. "Can you describe what you're looking at."

"Yes, I ... think so. It's—it's Mars. Only, the way it must have been. A city, the city around this building. Roads. Machines that move, and a horizon full of man-made—buildings? Perhaps they're buildings. The picture moves—and the streets are full of creatures, like the statues. No, they're different. Some hurry ... some go slowly ... This whole plateau, all of High Weir, must have been some incredible acropolis for a mammoth cosmopolitan community. Wait! They're unveiling some sort of statue. Now they're presenting one of them to the people. Maybe a priest. Or a sacrifice—"

After moments of silence, Mak said, "What pictures are you talking about?"

"It's like looking through a window onto what must have been here ... on this plateau perhaps hundreds of thousands of years ago. As soon as I shine my laser light into the concaved surface, I'm suddenly looking out on three-dimensional moving scenes, just as real ... just as strange ..."

Mak turned to Hodges. "Is it some sort of animated diorama?"

"It's got to be some kind of hologram. A moving hologram!" At the top of the ladder, Dr. Smith finally looked down. "You've got to come up here and see this! I just wanted to look at the inside of the eye on this carving closely. I thought with the laser light I might detect crystalline structures, perhaps get a clue to what the eyes were made from. But I saw pictures!" He started down the ladder. "You've all just got to go up there and take a look!" Smith's indrawn breath roared in Rimkin's ear. "It's the most amazing thing I've ever seen."

"Still think somebody came by and built this today just to get us off on a wild-goose chase, eh, Rimkin?" Hodges chided. "Let me go up and look. I've got my own beam, Dr. Smith." Hodges started up the rungs as Smith reached the bottom.

Frowning behind his faceplate, Rimkin took out his own flash. For a moment, he fondled the tube; then he went back over the rusty sand tongues and purple stone to where the head had fallen. He looked at the whole eye. He looked at the broken one. He did not know what perversity made him crouch before the latter. He flicked on his laser beam.

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It took half an hour for Mak, Hodges, Jimmi, and Jones to climb the ladder, watch for two or three minutes, then climb down. They were gathering to go back to the skimmer when Jimmi saw Rimkin. She loped over to him.

She laughed when she saw what he was doing. "Now, aren't we a bunch of dopes! Some of us could have looked at this one down here. Come on, we're going back now."

Rimkin switched off his beam but still crouched before the tilted visage.

"Oh, come on, Rimky. They're starting back already."

Rimkin drew breath, then stood slowly. "All right." They started across the dressed stone flooring. The sand, fine as dust, spewed about their white boots like powdered blood.

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II

The commons room of the skimmer was a traveling fragment of classical academia. The celitex walls looked depressingly like walnut paneling. Above the brass-fixtured folding desk surfaces, the microfilms were stacked behind naugahyde spines lettered in gold leaf. There was a mantelpiece above the heating nook. Glowing plates shot pale flickerings across the fur throws. The whole construct, with its balcony library cubicles (and a bust of Richard Nielson, president of Inter-Nal University, on his pedestal at the turn of the stairwell) was a half-serious joke of Dr. Edward Jones. But the university people, by and large, were terribly appreciative of the extravagant façade, after a couple of weeks in the unsympathetic straits of the military back at Bellona Base.

Mak sat on the hassock, rolling the sleeves of his wool shirt over his truckdriver forearms. He had headed the Yugoslavian expedition that had unearthed Gevgeli Man. Mak's boulderlike build (and what forehead he had was hidden by a falling thatch of Sahara-colored hair) had brought the jokes in the anthropology department to new nadirs: "This is Dr. Mak Hargus, the Gevgeli Man ... eh, man ..."

Mak raised the periscope of his briar from his shirt pocket. "Tell me about holograms. I've seen them, of course, the three-dimensional images and all. But how do they work? And how did the ancient Martians store all those pictures that just pop up under laser light?"

Ling Wong Smith dropped his fists into the baggy pockets of his corduroy jacket. He and Mak gazed over the ferns in the window-box. Outside the tri-plex pane, across the dusty bruise of High Weir, the dark columns—twelve whole, seven broken—sketched the incredible culture they had viewed in the polished eyes along the carved lintel.

Jimmi pushed her dark braid back from her shoulder and leaned on the banister to look.

Ling Wong Smith turned away. "It's basically a matter of information storage, Mak." He lowered himself to the arm of the easy chair, meshed his long fingers, and bent forward so that his straight black hair slipped forward.

"The Martians certainly stored one hell of a lot of information in those eyes," Hodges commented, coming jerkily down the stairs on her crutches. She was large, almost as large (and soft) as Mak was large (and hard). She had a spectacular record in cultural anthropology, and combined a sort of braying energy, enthusiastic idealism, and a quite real sensitivity (she had been a cripple since birth), with which she had managed to stagger through all sorts of bizarre cultures in East Africa, Anatolia, and Southern Cambodia to emerge with thorough and cohesive accounts of religions, mores, and manners. Her spacesuit was a prosthetic miracle that enabled her to move as easily as anyone while she wore it. But outside it, she still used aluminum crutches.

From his go game with Jones in the corner, Rimkin watched her lurch down the stairs. She must think they're a psychological advantage, he decided.

"Go on, Ling. Now tell us all about holograms." She picked up one crutch and waved it at the Chinese psychologist, only just avoiding the venerable Nielson.

"Information storage," Smith repeated. "Basically it's a photograph, taken without a lens, but with perfectly parallel beams of light—the sort you get in laser light. The only scattering is that which comes from the irregularities of the surface of the object being recorded. The final plate looks like a blotchy configuration of grays—or mud, if it's in color. But when you shine the parallel beams of a laser light on this plate, you get a three-dimensional full-color image hanging over the plate—"

"—that you can walk around," Mak finished.

"You can walk around up to a hundred and eighty degrees," Smith amended. "It's just a completely different way of storing information than the regular photographic method. And it is far more efficient."

Jones said softly, from across the gaming board, "It's your move, Rimky."

"Oh." Rimkin picked up another black oval from his pot between his first two fingers and hesitated above the grid, dotted with white and black. Bits of information. He tried to encompass the areas of territory mapped below him, but they kept breaking up into small corner battles. "There." He clicked his stone to the board.

Jones frowned. "Sure you don't want to take that move back?"

"No. No, I don't"

"You can, you know," Jones went on, affable. "This isn't chess. The rules are that you can take a move back if you—"

"I know that," Rimkin said loudly. "Don't you think I know that? I want to go"—he looked around and saw the others watching—"there!" The click of his stone had been very loud.

"All right." Jones' stone ticked the board. "Double attari." But Rimkin was looking past Jones' small, heart-shaped Nigerian face to the others in the room, thinking, How can I tell them apart? They all just blend with one another. The room is round, their faces are round, stuck on little round bodies. Suddenly he closed his eyes. If they started talking, I know I wouldn't be able to tell any of them apart. How is one supposed to know? How?

And if I opened my eyes?

"Your move, Rimkin," Jones said. "I've got two of your stones in attari."

Rimkin opened his eyes on the grid of black and white. "Oh," he said, and tried to strangle up a laugh. "Yes. That was a pretty silly move after all, wasn't it?"

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III

Such an absurd move; he lay in his bunk with his eyes closed and his lips open over his teeth in a leer, trying to think of a better one. He hadn't slept in two nights. An hour like this ... maybe it was only a few minutes, but it seemed like an hour ... and he sat up.

He swung the reading machine over his bed and rolled it to the closing of the *Tractatus*. He'd been rereading it the afternoon the skimmer had left Bellona: *Wovon man nicht sprechen kann....* He pushed the machine aside and ran his hand under his undershirt. The skimmer would not leave till the morning. They should return to Bellona that night and report their discovery to the Those Who Were in Charge of Such Things. But the university people (especially the anthropology department) treasured their brief freedom. One more examination of the site tomorrow, a few cursory readings and measurements....

Rimkin walked barefoot into the hall. It must have only been a few minutes, because strips of light from reading machines underlined three doors. Which room belonged to whom? He knew, and yet somehow there seemed no way to know....

Down in the locks, he put his air suit on over his underwear. The plastic form-rings felt odd against his thighs and arms without the usual padding. He stepped into the lock.

Outside, sharp stars dropped frostlights. The sand was filled with great, slopping puddles of ink. Cold, cold outside. The little motor humming in the vicinity of his chin kept the silicone circulating between the double thickness of his faceplate to avoid frosting. He stepped. And stepped. The desert sucked his boots.

The others? It was not even that he disliked them. He was infinitely confused by them. Dune and shadow received him. As he walked, he looked up. One bright star was ... moving. If he stood still, he could follow the movement distinctly. Phobos? Deimos? He knew it was one of the two tiny Martian moons. But for the life of him, Rimkin could not remember whether it was Fear or Terror that coursed the frozen jewelry of the Martian night.

He saw the ruin.

He tried to blank the struggling anxieties that squirmed into the edges of his consciousness. Seven hundred and fifty-odd vitally important enzyme reactions are occurring constantly in the human body. Were any one of them to break down for even two-three minutes, the body would die. So, just to fix the free fear that ranged his mind, he worried about one of these seven hundred and fifty-odd complex reactions suddenly coming to a halt: until he lost the subject of his worry in the coils of sand. And fear moved free above him, tangible as the slender columns, the sculpted architrave.

He looked up at the faces, obscured by darkness. The eyes caught and grayed the

starlight, and regarded him. Rimkin began to paw under the flap of his pack for his flash. He found it after much too much time—he had forgotten what he was looking for twice—and rotated the dispersal grid to break up the laser beam into ordinary light.

He played the beam over the stones. They were gray now. He wondered if the purple were actually only a reflection from the desert. No, it was just the weakness of his beam. He walked along the sand to the place where the foundation could be mounted. He started to climb, once more aware of the inside of his suit against bare skin. The heating was working adequately, but the plastic and metal textures were so odd. He wanted to take the suit off and place his hand on the stone, then grew terrified that he might, because the Martian night was almost a hundred degrees below freezing.

Rimkin stood on the edge of the foundation and fanned his light toward the fallen head. He approached across the sandy blocks. The smaller fragment of face lay like a saucer. Its half-eye had cracks all through. Rimkin squatted before the major portion of the face, leaned toward the fractured orb. He raised his flash, twisted back the dispersal-grid so that the bright, singular beam fell on the broken circle: flicker, and flicker, image and image. The fragmented orb began to weep the sights of ages.

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Dawn comes quickly on worlds with thin atmosphere. It climbed the dunes behind Rimkin and laid its blazing hands on his shoulders. And the mechanism of his suit began to hum and twitter about him to prepare for the two-hundred-degree rise that would occur in the next twenty minutes.

"Rimkin ...?"

Who was breathing in his ear?

"Rimkin, are you up there?"

The voices had been calling for some time. But with just a sound coming out of a machine by your ear, how was he supposed to know what they were?

"Rimky, there you are! What are you doing? Have you been here all morning?"

He turned around—and fell over.

"Rimkin!"

He had been in one position for almost nine hours, and every muscle, once moved, was in agony. In the pain fogging his vision like heat, he watched the boiled potato jogging toward him in a cloud of fiery dust.

Through his gasps he kept on trying to get out: "Why ... who are ... which ... who are—?"

"It's me, Evelyn."

Evelyn, he thought. Who was Evelyn? "Who ...?"

She reached him. "Evelyn Hodges, who did you think it was? Are you hurt? Has something gone wrong with your suit? Oh, I *knew* I should have brought Mak out here with me. The outside temperature is about ten degrees Fahrenheit right now. But in fifteen minutes it'll be ninety or more. I can't get you back to the ship by myself."

"No. No." Rimkin shook his head. "All right. My suit. I'm just..."

"What is it then?"

The pain was incredible, but for a moment he was in control enough to get out: "I'm just stiff.... I was in one position for so long. I just ... just forgot."

"How long is a long time?" Hodges demanded.

"Almost all night, I guess." His arms weren't so bad. He pushed himself up and propped himself against the stone.

Hodges bent down, picked up the flash (a feat she could only do with her specially constructed suit) and turned it around. "You've been looking at the pretty pictures?"

Rimkin nodded. "Eh ... yes."

She made a sound that had something of confusion, something of frustration. "You just be glad I came looking for you!" She squatted beside him, and after much maneuvering, got herself seated. "I can never sleep past five-thirty in the morning anyway, and I got to thinking that perhaps I'd let myself get carried away a couple of times with you. You know, back at the base, with all those ribbons and brass flapping around, saying all those stupid things; we've all been under a bit of pressure. Early this morning I was in the hall, saw the light from your reading machine, and thought you might be up. I peeped in, because the door was open, but you weren't in bed. I figured you must be in the library; but the doors down to the port were open and your suit was gone—well, this is the only thing around worth going out to look at. You've been here since last night?"

"Yes. I have."

"Rimky," Hodges said after a few moments, "we're all oddballs in our way. You're really not all that strange when you start looking at the rest of us. Maybe you're just a little less used to fitting your angles into other people's spaces. But I have been doing some thinking. And I have a feeling I've put my finger on the reason you were so ... well, preoccupied all last evening. Give me a listen and tell me if I'm right."

She rocked a couple of times beside him to settle inside her blimp. "Yesterday I said something about the Martians having at least reached the level of the Greeks. But that was before we discovered the moving hologram records. That at least brings their technology—or one facet of it, at any rate—to a level comparable to the middle of the twentieth century. Or even well beyond. We still can't embed a moving holographic image into a crystal that just starts to play back automatically under laser light. Now, if they were all that advanced, then there should be scads of written evidence around here. If not things like books, then at least carved in the stone. But there isn't a scratch, not a dated cornerstone, no mayor's name carved over the doorway. Hell, there're at least mason's marks on the blocks in the Khufu Pyramid. Now, you're our semanticist, Rimky, and it must be pretty important to you that there be some evidence of a Martian language. But the fact that there isn't any

immediately visible about a structure this imposing, coupled with the fact that they obviously stored so much *visually ...*" Her voice hung on the word as a card player's fingers might linger on a daring discard. "Well, there's a good possibility, Rimky, that they just weren't a verbal race, and they somehow managed to achieve this level of technology without ever employing written communication, sort of the same way the Incas and Mayas reached their cultural level and still managed totally to bypass the invention of the wheel. If that *is* the case, Rimky, that makes you sort of useless on this expedition. I could see that getting to you, upsetting you."

He could tell she was waiting for some great reaction of relief now that a truth had outed. How did she expect to detect it? Perhaps the change in breathing would come through the suit phones. He tried to remember who she was. But there were all seven hundred and fifty-odd enzyme reactions to think about, to make sure that one of them didn't suddenly stop....

"You know," she was going on (Hodges? Yes, it *was* the Hodges woman). "I'm really the useless one on the expedition. You know what my talent is? I'm the one who can make friends with all sorts of Eskimos and jungle bunnies. And then there were the mountain cannibals in the Caucasus who wanted to make me their queen." She laughed metallically. "They certainly did. I don't care if I never see another piece of decayed yak butter again as long as I live. Rimky, I'm here just in case we run into a tribe of *live* Martians." She looked out across the barren copper. After a few more moments she said, "I think you'd pretty well agree there's a good deal more chance you'll find Martian writing than I'll find the models for those carvings up there, wandering around in nomadic tribes. And what's more, it *does* get under my skin. I guess, being on edge like that, I've occasionally said some things, some of them to you, I'd have best held in. If you've got a skill or a discipline, you want to use it. You don't want to drag it halfway across the solar system because there's a one-in-a-thousand chance somebody might just want a minute of your time." She patted his forearm. "Am I anywhere near it?"

Rimkin thought: Live Martians? If I were a live Martian, then I wouldn't have to worry about the seven hundred and fifty enzyme reactions that keep the human body alive. But then, there'd be others, different ones, even more complicated, even more dangerous, because they have to function over a much wider temperature range. Am I a Martian? Am I one of those strange creatures I watched in the beam of my flash walking the strange alleys with the garnet-colored walls, driving their beasts and greeting one another with incomprehensible gestures? But this woman, which one is she? "Where's Jimmi ...?" Rimkin asked.

He heard Hodges start to say something; then she decided not to and began the complicated maneuver of her prostheses to stand. "Can you walk, Rimkin? I think I'd better get you back to the skimmer."

"The skimmer ...? Oh, yes. Of course. It's time to go back to the skimmer, isn't it?"

He ached. All over his body, he ached. But he managed to stand, thinking, Why does it hurt so? Perhaps it's one of the seven hundred reactions starting to fail, and I'm going to ...

"Let's hurry up," Hodges urged. "If you've been out here all night, you're probably on the third time through your air. I bet it's stale as an old laundry bag in there."

Rimkin started slowly across the stones. But Hodges paused. Suddenly she bent

down before the cracked visage and shone Rimkin's laser on the broken iris. She looked for the whole minute it took Rimkin to reach the edge. She made puzzled "mmmmmmmm" sounds twice.

When she joined him to climb down to the sand, she was frowning behind the white frame of her helmet. And a couple of times she made stranger faces.

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IV

The process of getting Rimkin to bed pretty well finished getting everybody else up. When Dr. Jones wanted to give him a sedative, Rimkin went into a long and fairly coherent discussion about the drug's causing possible upset in his enzymal chemistry, which the others listened to seriously until suddenly he started to cry. At last he let Jimmi give him the injection. And while the pretty Micronesian qualitative analyst stroked his forehead, he fell asleep.

Mak, in his weight allowance for Equipment Vital to the Facilitation of Your Specialized Functions, had secreted a Westphalian ham and a gallon of the good Slivowitz, contending that breakfast was pointless without a hefty slice of the one and at least a pony of the other. But he was willing to share; the ritual of breakfast was left to his episcopacy. Anyway, he had the best luck among them beating dehydrated eggs back into shape. Now, in the small area under the steps where such things were done, he was clanking and fuming like a rum-and-maple dragon.

Smith came down the stairs.

A skillet cover rang on the pan rim. Mak grunted. "I didn't realize he was that bad, Ling."

Jones folded the gaming board; the pattern of white and black fell apart. He slid the pebbles into the pot and pushed the stud on the pot base. "I guess none of us did." The pot began to vibrate. The white stones were substantially less dense than the black ones, so, after a good shaking, ended up on top. "Do you think Mars is just too much for him?" Dr. Jones had already noticed that the separation process took longer on this lightweight planet than at home.

"Naw." Mak ducked from under the stairs with his platter of ham and eggs. The steam rose and mixed with the pipe smoke. "This must have been building for months, maybe all his life, if Freud's progeny are to be trusted."

He leaned over hefty Miss Hodges and set the platter down. Then he frowned at her. "You look oddly pensive, ma'am."

Hodges, using her aluminum stalks, pushed herself around from the table so she could see Smith, who was at the bottom of the stairs. "What happens if you cut—or break—a hologram plate in half, Ling?"

"I guess you get half the image," Jimmi said. She was sitting on an upper step. Richard Nielson was staring directly at the top of her head.

"If I sit down at the table before the rest of you," Mak said, ducking under the steps for the coffeepot, "you're only going to get half your breakfast."

Smith, Jones, and Jimmi took their chairs. Mak set the steaming enameled pot (it, too, was from Yugoslavia, and had come with Vital Equipment) on the coffee table, sat down, and took four pieces of toast.

"Actually, you don't." Ling passed the egg platter to Hodges. "If you think of it as a method of information storage, you'll understand. You take the ordinary hologram plate, cut it in half, and then shine a laser beam on it, and you get the complete, three-dimensional image hanging there, full size. Only it's slightly out of focus, blurry, a little less distinct." He folded a sliver of ham with blackened edges and skewered it to some toast. "And if you cut it again, the image just goes a bit more out of focus. Try and imagine a photograph and a hologram of the same object side by side. Every dot of light-sensitive emulsion on each is a bit of information about the object. But the information dots on the photographic plate only relate to one point of a two-dimensional reduction. The information dots on the hologram plate relate to the entire, solid, three-dimensional object. So you see, it's vastly more efficient and far more complete. Theoretically, even a square millimeter cut from a hologram will have something to tell you about the whole object."

"Does that 'theoretical' *mean* something," Mak asked between burblings of his briar, "or is it just rhetoric?"

"Well," Ling said, "there is a point of diminishing returns. From what I've said, it would seem that most information storage is essentially photographic: writing, tape, punchcards—"

"But those are all linear," Dr. Jones objected.

"Photographic in that there's a one-to-one relation between each datum and each un-integrated fact—"

"Think of a photograph as composed of the lines of a television picture," Jimmi said, hastily swallowing eggs and toast. "A photograph can be reduced to linear terms, too."

"That's right," Ling said.

"Diminishing returns ...," Hodges prompted.

"Oh, yes. It's simply this: If you only have a relatively small number of addresses—cybernetics term for the places your data are going to go"—he explained to Jimmi's puzzled look—"then you're often better off with photographic or linear storage. That's because you need so many bits of holographic information before the image starts to clear enough to be—"

"—anything but a menacing shadow, a ghost, a specter of itself, a vague outline filled with the unknown and too insubstantial to contain it."

Everyone looked at Hodges.

"What *are* you talking about, Evelyn?"

"Rimkin." She gestured with her brandy glass to keep Mak from filling it to the brim. "Poor, crazy Rimky."

"Oh, he isn't crazy," Jones insisted. "He may be having a nervous breakdown on us, which is too bad. But he's a brilliant, brilliant man. He *did* end up beating me at go

last night. Sometimes I'm just afraid these sorts of situations are merely occupational hazards."

"True, Jonesy." She smiled ruefully and sipped. "And that's all I meant by crazy."

"You brought this whole business up in the first place, about the broken holograms," Ling said. "Why, Evelyn?"

The inflamed light of the morning desert jeweled the glass in her puffy fingers. "Do you remember the head that had fallen from the frieze? It was cracked so that one of the eyes had broken in half. When I found him this morning, he'd been out all night with his laser beam looking at the images in the broken eye." She put her glass on the table.

After a while, Dr. Smith asked, "Did you take a look?"

Evelyn Hodges nodded.

"Well?" Mak asked.

"Just what you said, Ling. The images were whole. But they were slightly blurred, out of focus. I think there was something off with the timing, too. That's all."

Mak leaned forward, made disgusted sounds, and began to batter his ashes over the detritus of crusts and butter on his plate. "Let's go out and finish up those measurements." He poked the stem in his pocket. The periscope dropped. "If he was up all night, that shot should keep him asleep till this evening."

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It didn't.

Rimkin woke fighting the drug after they had been gone twenty minutes.

And he still didn't know where he was. Not where he should be, certainly. Because his head hurt; it felt as though the side had been broken away. His whole body was sore. He lurched from the bed and tried to focus on the objects—pillow, reading machine, boxes of microfilm on the table—but they all had haloes like the superimpositions from special-effect sequences in old color films.

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Jimmi was sitting on the bottom step, reading. She had chosen (a little unwillingly) to stay with the patient.

Crash!

She looked up.

Richard Nielson was trundling down the steps toward her. And at the top, stood naked Rimkin. Jimmi leapt away as the bust struck the reader she had dropped on the steps.

"Rimky, are you ...?"

He came down the steps, three of them slowly, seven of them fast, the last two slowly. Then, while she was debating whether to try and restrain him physically, he was gone through the double doors to the lockers. She ran toward them—the two brass handles swung up and clicked. She crashed against them. But behind the veneer that looked like walnut was ribbed steel.

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Inside the locker, Rimkin fumbled the catches of his air suit and thought. Hot. Hot outside. Twice he dropped the contraption on the grilled floor. Boiled ... boiled *something*. An Earthman would boil out there on the desert without a suit. But why was he worrying? He wasn't sure who or what he might be. But the streets with their shaggy pennants and their elegant citizens walking their shambling beasts with blood-colored eyes; they were waiting for him there in the hot city, the dusty city, with high, marsite facades from which the carven heads gazed down on dry gutters.

He didn't need a suit, of course. But the lock-release switch was inside the suit, and it wouldn't work unless the suit was sealed. He picked up the white, slippery material again. Sealing the suit was almost habit; and the habits must have been working, because the skimmer door was opening now. Through his faceplate he could almost see the great city of High Weir stretching away to the temple. But slightly out of focus, indistinct.... How was he supposed to know which were shapes of time-cast dust and which were the intelligent creations of the amazing culture of his people, his planet? He brushed his arm around his faceplate—but that didn't do any good.

He walked down the blazing, alien street.

And the street sucked his boots.

He was going to take off his air suit soon. Yes. Because there was no need for it in such a brilliant city. But wait just a few minutes, because things were still too unfocused, too amorphous. And sand, from when he'd brushed his arm across his faceplate, kept trickling down the plastic. Nor were the figures in front of him Martians. He didn't think they were Martians. They were white and bulbous and were busy about the shards of purple stone, doing things to the slim columns that rose to prick the Martian noon.

"Who are you?" he said.

Two of them turned around.

"Rimkin ...!"

"I don't know who you are," he told them.

"Hey, what's he doing out here?"

"I'm a Martian," Rimkin told them. "You're nothing but ... that's right, potatoes!" He tried to laugh, but it came out crying because his head hurt very badly, and he was dopey from whatever they had given him that morning.

"We've got to get him back to the skimmer! Come on, Rimky."

"I'm going to take off my air suit," he said. "Because I'm a Martian and you—"

But then they were all around him. And they kept holding his hands down, which was easy because he was weak from the drug. And the carved heads, the gleaming eyes, melted behind his tears.

"Rimkin! Rimkin! Are you out there? Evelyn, Mak, Rimkin's out there some place!"

"We've got him, Jimmi! It's all right. We're bringing him back to the skimmer."

"Who are you? I can't tell who you are!"

"Oh, Rimky, are you all right?"

"I'm a Martian. I can take off my spacesuit—"

"No, you don't, fellow. Keep your hands down."

"I think you're all crazy, you know? I'm a Martian, but you're all talking to somebody who isn't even here!"

"Rimkin, go on back with them and don't give them any trouble. For me, for Jimmi. They just want to help."

"I don't even know you. Why do I have to come back? This is my city. These are my buildings, my house. It's just not clear any more. And it hurts."

"Keep your hands down. Come on—"

"Jimmi, are you all right? How did he get out? He didn't hurt you, did he?"

"I guess the sedative wasn't strong enough. He surprised me and managed to lock me in the study. I just found Evelyn's emergency keys in her room a minute ago so I could get down to the controls and radio you. What are we going to do with him?"

"I'm going to go to Mars. I can take off my spacesuit. I'm a Martian. I'm a Martian—"

"He doesn't seem to be dangerous. They'll get him back to Earth, fill him full of calming drugs, and in six months he'll probably be good as new. I wouldn't be surprised to find out he goes into this sort of thing periodically. I spent a couple of weeks in a hospital drying out once."

"Why can't I take off my suit? I'm a Martian—"

"Rimky, remember all those enzyme reactions you were going on at us about this morning when you didn't want to take your shot? You open your suit, and the temperature out here will work so much havoc with them you won't have time to blink. You'll also fry."

"But which ones? How can I tell which ones will ..."

"Evelyn, I can't hit him over the head. I'll crack his helmet."

"I know, I know, Mak. We'll get him back. Oh, this is so terrible! What causes something like this to happen to a perfectly fine—more than fine—mind, Ling?"

"Don't hit me over the head. Don't ... I'm a Martian. And it hurts."

"We won't hurt you, Rimky."

"Evelyn, we're out here exploring the ruins of new civilizations on other planets, and we still don't know. We know much of it's chemical, and we can do something about a lot of it, but we still don't ... Holograms, Evelyn ..."

"What, Ling?"

"Nobody's ever been able to figure out how the brain stores information. We know the mind remembers everything it sees, hears, feels, smells, as well as all sorts of cross-referencing. People have just always assumed that it must be basically a photographic process, all the separate bits of data stored on the juncture of each individual synapse. But suppose, Evelyn, the brain stores hologramically. Then madness would be some emotional or chemical situation that blocked off access to large parts of the cerebral hologram."

"Then large parts of the world would just lose their sharpness, their focus ..."

"Like Rimkin here?"

"Now *keep* your hands *away* from your suit catch!"

"Come on, Rimkin. Once we get you home, you'll be all right."

"It won't hurt any more?"

"That's right. Try to relax."

As they reached the lock, Rimkin turned to one of the white, inflated figures and his voice grew tearful. "Aren't I ... aren't I really a Martian?"

Two white hands patted the shoulders of his air suit. "You're George Arthur Rimkin, Associate Professor of Semantics at Inter-Nal University, a very brilliant man who has been under a lot of pressure recently."

Rimkin looked out over beautiful rifts and dells, shapes that could have been sand dunes, that could have been the amazing structures of the great Martian city of High Weir, that could have been ... He was crying again. "It hurts so much," he said quietly, "how am I supposed to tell?"

The End

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