

IMAGINATION

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EARTHSMITH

By Milton Lesser

Nobody at the Interstellar Space School had ever heard of Earth so naturally they treated Smith with contempt—or was it an innate fear? . . .

SOMEONE in the crowd tittered when the big ungainly creature reached the head of the line.

"Name?"

The creature swayed back and forth foolishly, supporting the bulk of his weight first on one extremity and then on the other. His face which had a slight rosy tint anyway got redder.

"Come, come. Planet? Name?"
The registrar was only a machine,



but the registrar could assume an air of feminine petulance. "We want to keep the line moving, so if you will please—"

The creature drew a deep breath and let the two words come out in a rush. "Earth, Smith," he said. Being nervous, he could not modulate his voice. Unable to modulate his voice, he heard the words come out too deep, too loud.

"Did you hear that voice?" demanded the man who had tittered. "On a cold wet night they say the karami of Caulo boom like that. And look at Earthsmith. Just look at him. I ask you, what can they accept at the school and still call it a school? Hey you, Earthsmith, what courses will you take?"

"I don't know," the creature confessed. "That's what I'm here for. I don't even know what they teach at the school."

"He doesn't know." More tittering.

The registrar took all this in impassively, said: "What planet, Earthsmith?"

The creature was still uncomfortable. "Earth. Only my name is not Earthsmith. Smith—"

The titterer broke into a loud guffaw. "Earthsmith doesn't even know what planet he's from. Good old Earthsmith." He was a small thin man, this titterer, with too-bright eyes, vaguely purple skin, and a well-greased shock of stiff green hair.

Smith squared his wide shoulders

and looked into the colored lights of the registrar. "It's a mistake. My name is Smith."

"What planet, Smith?"

"Earth. The planet Earth." Smith had a rosy, glistening bald head and a hairless face. A little bead of sweat rolled into his left eye and made him blink. He rubbed his eye.

"Age?" The machine had a way of asking questions suddenly, and Smith just stared.

"Tell me your age. Age. How old are you?"

Smith wanted to sit down, only there were no chairs. Just the room with its long line of people behind him, and the machine up front. The registrar.

"I'm twenty-seven."

"Twenty-seven what?"

"You asked me my age. I'm twenty-seven years old, and three months."

Except for the clicking of the machine, there was a silence. The voice of the machine, feminine again, seemed confused when it spoke. "I cannot correlate years, Smith of Earth. How old are you?"

It wasn't an ordeal, really, but Smith felt more uncomfortable every moment. Was the machine making fun of him? If it were, then it had an ally in the crowd, because the man who had tittered was laughing again, the green shock of hair on his head bobbing up and down.

"Earthsmith doesn't even know how old he is. Imagine."

THE machine, which was more feminine than not, asked Smith how far the planet Earth was from its primary, and what the orbital speed of the planet was. Smith told her, but again the terminology was not capable of correlation.

"Unclassified as to age, Smith. It's not important. I wonder, are you dominant or receptive?"

"I'm a man. Male. Dom—"

"That doesn't matter. Smith, tell me, how long has it been since anyone from the planet Earth has attended the school?"

Smith said he didn't know, but, to his knowledge, no one from Earth had ever been here. "We don't get around much any more. It's not that we can't. We just go and then we don't like it, so we come back to Earth."

"Well, from the looks of you I would say you are a receptive. Very definitely receptive, Smith." Given sufficient data, the registrar could not be wrong. Given sufficient data the registrar could tell you anything you wanted to know, provided the answer could be arrived at from the data itself. "The male and female distinction no longer holds, of course. On some planets the female is dominant, on some she's not. It's generally according to the time of colonization, Smith. When was Earth colonized?"

"It wasn't."

"What do you mean, it wasn't?"

"We were always there. We colonized the rest of the galaxy. Long

ago."

The registrar clicked furiously, expressed itself still more femininely this time. "Oh, *that* planet! You certainly are the first, Smith. The very first here at the school. Room 4027, dominant companion." Neuter voice again. "That's all, Smith of Earth. Next."

The vaguely purple-skinned man stood before the registrar, winked at the flashing lights. "You know, now I can see what they mean when we're told of a missing link in the chain between man and animal. Old Earthsmith "

"Name?" said the machine.

The man pointed at Smith, shook with silent laughter. The back of Smith's head, which could not properly be called bald because he had never had any hair on it, was very red.

"Name's Jorak."

"Planet?" demanded the fully neuter machine.

THERE was the red star, a monstrous blotch of crimson swollen and brooding on the horizon and filling a quarter of the sky. There was the fleck of white high up near the top of the red giant, its white-dwarf companion in transit. These were the high jagged crags, falling off suddenly to the sundered, frothy sea with its blood-red sun-track fading to pink and finally to gray far away on either side.

Smith watched the waves break far below him, and he almost stum-

bled when someone tapped his shoulder.

"That was mean of the man named Jorak." She might have been a woman of Earth, except that she was too thin, cast in a too-delicate mould. Yet beautiful.

Smith shrugged, felt the heat rise to his face and knew that he must have looked like a mirror for the red sun.

"Is that really a blush, Smith? Are you blushing?"

He nodded. "I can't help it. I—"

"Don't be foolish. I don't want you to stop. I think it looks nice."

Smith rubbed his pate, watched the hot wind blow the girl's yellow hair about her face. "They tell me my great great grandfather had a little fringe of hair around his head. I've seen pictures."

"How nice—"

"If you're trying to make fun of me, please go away. It wasn't nice, it was ugly. Either you have hair or you don't. The men of Earth used to have it, long ago. The women still do."

She changed the subject. "I'll bet you think this place is ugly, Smith."

Smith shook his head. "No, it's stark. If you like things that way, it isn't really ugly. But Earth is a planet of green rolling hills and soft rains and—you're making fun of me."

"You say that again and I'll take it as an insult." She smiled. "We

have our green rolling hills on Bortinot, only it's cold. I like it here because it's warm. And, of course, I have a lot to learn at school."

"Would you think I'm stupid if I ask you what?"

"No. And you were really serious in there when you said you didn't know what they teach."

"How could I know. I'm the first student here from Earth. Every five years—say, twenty times during the course of one lifetime—we get the application. This time the government finally decided someone should go. Me."

"Well, they teach just about everything that could be of value in a transtellar culture."

"What?"

"Things like astrogation and ethics—"

"I caught the school express at a Denebian planet. Someone told me there that the school is decadent."

She smiled up at him. "Deneb is a slothful place, then. It is true that the school never stands still, changing its courses to meet the demands of a changing society. If Deneb cannot keep pace with the changes, that could explain the feeling. Right now they'll be concentrating in dreams and dream-empathy, in some of the newer Garlonian dances, Sarchian cooking for the receptives and Wortan fighting for the dominants. Quite a virile program, Smith, provided one is up to it."

"What happened to your astrogation and ethics?"

"That? Oh, that's just a catch-all phrase. Your courses will depend on such things as your D or R classifications—"

"It makes me laugh a little," Smith admitted. "But they've classified me as a receptive. I guess they know what they're doing. Still—"

"You think you're strong, eh?"

"Well, I didn't see anyone in the registrar's room who would worry me very much in a fight."

"Society is sophisticated, Smith. There's more to strength than mere brawn. What sort of psi powers have they cultivated on the planet Earth?"

IN a general sense, but in a general sense only, Smith knew what she meant. "Well, there's hypnotism, and some people play at telepathy and clairvoyance. Nothing much, really."

"That isn't much, my friend."

"Why? What else is there?" Smith smiled for the first time. "I didn't know—" He shook his head, suddenly, to clear it. He felt tilted. He looked and he saw that everything was straight, but still he felt tilted. He tried to right himself, and down he went. On his stomach he lay, his legs twisted under him a little. Foolishly, he tried to get up. He couldn't.

"There's that." The girl laughed. "Suggestion without the need for hypnotism."

Smith stood up, said, "I see what

you mean."

"Think so?"

It began to rain. A brisk wind came up abruptly, and off in the distance Smith heard the roar of thunder. It came closer. Still closer. Like in a straight line. Smith watched the lightnings prance.

"We'd better get back to the school!" he cried. He didn't think she could hear his voice above the thunder. He started to shout again, but lightning crackled before his eyes. Between him and the girl. Something rumbled, and Smith started to fall. They had been blasted off the crag, and now they hurtled down through the sheets of hot rain.

"Feel yourself," the girl told him. The huge crimson sun still sat on the horizon. The air was hot and warm and Smith was dry.

"Suggestion," she smiled again. "Most of us have it to some degree, but we of Bortinot have it still more. Still think you should be a dominant?"

"Well—" The girl's face swam before his eyes. Lovely. Smith took a step forward, reached out and placed his big hands on her shoulders.

"Well what?" She was smiling.

"What's your name?"

"Geria."

His lips were big and hers were little, if full. He quivered as he kissed her. "I love you, Geria."

"I know it." she said.

"THE reason I went outside to watch the sea," Smith said, "was because I didn't know how to get to room 4027. I didn't want to ask anyone, not after—"

"That makes sense. I'll take you, Smith. I'm just down the hall from you, anyway."

"Thank you, Geria." Smith wondered how he knew her name was Geria. Nice name. "What happened after I thought there was a storm, Geria?" Smith suppressed a smile.

"Oh, nothing much. I just planted another suggestion in your mind. For now you've forgotten, but you will remember. Shall we go?"

They walked back down the path from the top of the crag, and soon Smith saw other students in groups of two and three. Ahead was the long low school, a dull rectangle of metal perhaps two miles long and half as wide. With Geria, Smith entered through one of the hundreds of doorways and followed her wordlessly up a mechanical staircase.

They flashed past many landings, and after a time Smith followed the girl across one of them and into a long hall.

"Simple," she said. "You have the twenty-seventh room here on the fortieth floor. Mine is room eighteen. Will we be seeing more of each other, Smith?"

"As much as you'd like," he said, but it made him feel foolish. He had merely spoken to the girl for a

few minutes, and yet he could not quite fathom his emotions. To some extent she had made him feel the same as had the man Jorak, and yet she liked him. She wanted to see more of him. She said so.

"Smith, you're blushing again. I tell you what: if you can do that every day, then I will see you every day. It's so nice and—unaffected."

Was that the word she really had in mind? Smith remembered once when he was little, a farmer had come to the city and everyone had called him an ancient word which they said came from a still more ancient name. Rube they had called him. Rube. He didn't like it. He had had a fight, Smith recalled, and a big plateglass window was broken. He went to jail for a few weeks on the moon, and after that he didn't come to the city any more. Smith was little at the time, but he had never forgotten the look on the farmer's face when the security officers took him off to the moon rocket.

Had he known it, Jorak would have used the word rube, but what about Geria?

The green number on the white door was painted sharply—4027. "Here's my room," Smith said. He tried an indifferent wave, but it hardly worked, and he began to blush again.

Geria skipped lightly down the hall, and he couldn't see her face to tell if she were smiling. He shrugged, opened the door.

“EARTHSMITH! Oh, no . . . I come half way across the galaxy to get here, so what are the odds against any particular room mate? Huge, that’s what. But I got me—hello, Earthsmith.”

It was the purple man, Jorak. He had just recently greased his shock of bright green hair, and he had turned away from the mirror when Smith opened the door. Now he turned back to the tinted glass and held his head at various angles.

“Well, can you change rooms if you want to?” Smith asked pleasantly.

“You’re not going to chase me out of my own room, Earthsmith. You can change if you’d like. Not me.”

“All right if you want me to I’ll change.”

“If I want you to! Don’t pass the blame to me, Earthsmith. I didn’t say a thing about changing, not me. Don’t you think I’m good enough for you?”

“I don’t care one way or the other,” Smith said. “I suggested you change because I thought you’d be happier that way. Look, I’ll mind my own business and pretend you are not even here. How’s that?”

“Pretend I’m not here? Like cepheid you will. If you want to be ornery, Smith, or Earthsmith, or whatever your name is, I’ll give you plenty to be ornery about. I’m a dominant, you know, so just watch out.”

“I’ll change if that will make you happy.” Smith didn’t want any

trouble. He still felt more than a little strange and out of place here, and a fight with Jorak wouldn’t help matters. Briefly, he wondered what sort of psi powers Jorak possessed.

The purple man stood up. “What kind of a slap in the face is that? We haven’t even started courses or anything. You think I’d need you to help me with my work or something?”

“No, I’m quite sure you wouldn’t. But I’ll change my room, anyway. I’ll probably get in your way—”

“Well, I wouldn’t get into *your* hair, satellite-head! If you think you’re going to leave here and say I started a fight or something . . . My father made quite a record for himself here at the school, and I’ll have to beat it, of course.”

“Of course,” Smith agreed, but he did not really know why.

“Are you implying anyone, just anyone, could top my father’s record, Earthsmith? Not a man from Gyra ever did it, and intellectually Gyra is top planet in its own sector. Not a woman from Bortinot came close, but then, you probably don’t even know where Bortinot is.”

Smith said no, he didn’t, but he had just met a woman from Bortinot. Perhaps if he changed the subject

Jorak ran his fingers up along each side of his shock of hair. They came away greasy green. “Exquisite, those women of Bortinot. But then, you probably wouldn’t appreci-

ate them, eh, Earthsmith?"

Smith said that he could appreciate them very well indeed, especially since, except for a few minor structural differences, they looked like women of Earth. It was a mistake, and the muscles in Jorak's cheeks began to twitch.

"I say they look exquisite, you say they look like women of Earth. Which is it, Earthsmith? Not both, surely—a contradiction in terms. I believe you're trying to provoke me."

Smith sighed. He wanted no trouble—they had spent a year with him on Earth, indoctrinating that. He was to be a paragon at the school, as Earth's first student there, he had to be a paragon—even if he turned out to be more awkward in this situation than the farmer on Earth everyone had called Rube.

"I think I will go to sleep," Smith said.

"Why, don't you men of Earth ever eat, Smith?"

Smith said yes, they ate, but he wasn't very hungry now. As a matter of fact, he was ravenously hungry, but he did not relish the idea of going to some public eating place either with Jorak or alone. His heart began to beat a little faster when he thought that he might meet Geria if he did, but then he felt the heat rise up his neck and into his cheeks. He'd hardly know what to say to her, and besides, he knew there was something he should remember but couldn't quite. No, he'd skip din-

ner this first day at the school.

Now he watched Jorak open the door and step into the hallway, and for a moment he heard gay voices and the shuffling of many feet, and Jorak's voice louder than the rest: "Kard of Shilon! How long has it been? I can remember that day near Raginsdild"

Smith turned to the window, and for a long time he sat watching the fat red sun.

HE got up early and he showered, and then he heard a clicking sound. Two cards had been deposited in a tray from a slot in the wall. At the top of one were the words "Jorak of Gyra," and Smith's name and planet were printed on the other. He picked it up and began to read, and then Jorak sat up and took the other card.

"Programs," said Jorak. "Everyone takes transtellar history, of course, and a section or two in the humanities. My electives are Wortan fighting and dream-empathy."

Smith smiled. "Me too—same program. I suppose we'll be in class together, Jorak."

"Rather stupid," the purple man observed. "They've given you a dominant's program. But then, I remember you questioned your receptive classification, and the registrar's known to do this on occasion, just to put you in your place. You'll be in Garlonian dancing in a few days, Earthsmith."

"Well, I sure hope not. I didn't

come here to learn how to dance —”

“Hah! So what? If you’re an R you’ll learn how to dance and like it. Cook, too. There’s no such thing as a misfit at the school, not permanently. They’ll find you out soon enough, Earthsmith. Hmmm, wait till Kard of Shilon finds out what they’ve put in Wortan. Kard’s top man in his sector, and it’s just possible they’ll pair you off with him.

“Well, you going to eat this morning? I’d hate to see you in Wortan without a good meal in you. But I suppose it really wouldn’t help, anyway. Coming, Earthsmith?”

There weren’t any people out in the hall this early, and Smith breathed more easily when they moved in a direction opposite that of Geria’s room. Soon they had descended a score of levels, and the moving ramp became more crowded. Smith tried to ignore the eager hum of conversation, but it was all around him. He realized he should be feeling that way too. But you couldn’t drum up a student’s eager appetite within yourself, not when you didn’t feel that way, not when your entire planet waited to see how you made out here and you felt unsure of yourself, even in such simple things as eating.

That part of it at least turned out better than Smith had hoped. There were eggs, and while he was sure he would not recognize the fowl if he saw it, he could at least order his

over-light and get something familiar. And there were long strips of fatty meat which almost could have been bacon, except Smith was sure the pig wouldn’t be a pig at all.

And Smith was lost in the hordes of white men, green men, purple, orange and brown, and no one paid him too much attention. Jorak busied himself remembering old times with a gruff burly orange man named Kard, whose planet was Shilon, and Smith ate in silence. Once he thought he saw Geria far off at another table, but it could have been his imagination, and when he looked again she was gone.

Home, Smith always had been a quick eater, but now he found himself pawing at his food. Soon the great dining room began to clear. Jorak and Kard leaned back in their chairs, watching Smith.

Jorak yawned. “How long does it take you to breakfast?”

“Different rate of digestion on Earth,” Kard suggested.

“Don’t be foolish. Earthsmith’s in no hurry to attend his first class, so he’s loafing. Right, Earthsmith?”

Smith mumbled something about unfamiliar food under his breath, and Jorak said, “Well, no matter. We’ll give you another moment or two, Earthsmith. Then we’ll have to be going. We all three have transtellar history, you know.”

Smith knew it all too well. Gyra and Bortinot and Shilon were so many names to him and he silently cursed Earth’s provincial histories.

For those here at the school, the three names and a hundred others might be magical stepping stones to the culture, the lore, the history of a galaxy—but all Smith knew now was that Jorak came from Gyra, and so some of Gyra's people at least must be purple, that Geria came from Bortinot where the women were D and the men were R and where the women looked like those of Earth, that Kard, finally, came from a place that bore the name Shilon, where some of the men at least were orange. But Shilon could have been anyplace from the hub to the fringe, Gyra might swim dizzily out near Ophiuchus or it might be the new culture name for one of Earth's near neighbors. And Bortinot—he wished he knew more about Bortinot.

THE instructor of transtellar history was a little fat man with a round gold face and green eyes that blinked too much. He wore the tight black uniform of the instructor and his green armband proclaimed his subject to be history. He smiled too much, too vacantly, as if he had been practicing it a long time and now forgot what it really meant.

"Greetings!" he cried jovially, after everyone had been seated on the long low benches around the room. "I bring you history. No one is to talk unless I tell him to. Everyone is to listen unless I tell him not to. Clear?" He smiled.

No one said anything.

"Excellent. History encompasses thousands of years and countless cubic parsecs. Only the big things count. We will forget the little things. Little things belong to little people and we of the school are the elite of a transtellar culture. Questions?"

There were none.

"Good, because I have some. What would you say was the first event of importance? Luog of Panden, talk."

Said green-skinned Luog, a very young Pandenian: "You mean ever?"

"I would have specified had I meant otherwise. Yes, ever. Talk, Luog of Panden."

"Well—"

"Halt a moment, please. Who thinks the question is a relative one which cannot properly be answered? I claim it is Brandog of Hulpin."

An albino woman three seats down from Smith flushed. "I am sorry," she said.

"Who told you to talk now? This is not Hulpin, Brandog. The course is intensive. You must concentrate. Concentrate, concentrate, concentrate. No extraneous thoughts." The instructor smiled. "Luog of Panden, talk."

Smith felt the little beads of sweat forming on his forehead. The instructor could read minds—and how many of these others could? They just sat there as if it were the most natural thing in the world . . .

Only Brandog of Hulpin seemed ruffled, and it would be many moments before her albino skin looked again like soft alabaster. But no one seemed to notice. Luog was saying, "—exodus from the prehistoric Sirian worlds to the first culture in the Denebian system, the Var one. More than ten thousand Vars ago."

"Satisfactory for a Receptive, Luog of Panden," the instructor smiled. "The Dominants would go back a bit further and talk of the Sirian wars, but that much is a matter of opinion, since the wars are largely mythical, anyway. And so we have set the stage for history. We have—"

SMITH wanted to get up indignantly and tell the instructor, tell them all, what the most glorious epochs of history really were. You would find it in the museums of earth, on the plaques and in the statues and on the old old records of Earth. There was a lot Smith wanted to tell them because there was so much only he could tell them, so much they had forgotten.

But he merely sat and stared politely at the black-uniformed instructor. You don't show yourself as a provincial—what was the word?—rube, not when your culture, while temporarily the oldest, is in a lot of ways the most neophite of them all.

You just sat and stared, looking interested.

The instructor's voice cut into his thoughts, "Earth of Smith—"

"Smith of Earth," he said, automatically.

"I did not tell you to talk, Smith of Earth. And if your card says Earth of Smith, how am I to know? A mistake, yes—but an understandable one. I'm a historian, and I have heard of neither planet. Where is this Earth? Talk, Smith!"

He stood up, although it wasn't really necessary, and he could feel his knees trembling slightly. "Earth is a few parsecs from Sirius, and Sirius I think you know."

"I know Sirius. Now talk!"

"What is it you want me to say? I don't feel much like talking—"

"Yet you speak so loud that the room fairly rocks with it. I wanted you to tell us why you did not agree with the answer just now rendered. It is, I feel, a good one. Talk."

"Then I agree, it is a good one." Smith did not want to get involved. He wanted to be a good, quietly efficient student. Nothing more. But he forgot that the instructor could read minds.

"You lie, Smith of Earth. I won't go into it any further, because it is your privilege if you want to lie. But you are not to listen for the remainder of this lecture. Do not listen."

Smith nodded, cursed himself mentally because he had made such a mess of things here at his very first lecture, and headed for the

door.

"Smith of Earth! Just where under the red sun do you think you are going?"

"You told me not to listen, so—"

"I didn't say talk. Talk now."

"—so I'm leaving the room."

"No one leaves until the lecture has been concluded. Sit if you will, or stand, but stay here. And do not listen."

Smith nodded, turned back to the row of benches dumbly. He found a place next to Brandog of Hulpin, sat near the albino woman. Down the bench, he saw Jorak grinning broadly. Smith did not know how he was going to sit there without listening, but he decided he'd better not ask that question now.

"THIS is your course in Wortan fighting," boomed the giant of an instructor. "Dominants only, or such Receptives as question their classification." The instructor's massive face was beefy, the color of new-spilled blood, and the muscles rippled and bulged and seethed under his black uniform.

"Me for this!" confided Kard of Shilon, slapping Smith's back. "Perhaps Jorak has told you that I am not without ability on the Wortan mats."

Smith hardly heard him. Two dozen paces across the room, on the other side of the circle that surrounded the instructor, stood Geria, hands on hips, lips soft-smiling when she saw Smith, silver tunic to her

knees, yellow hair hanging free to shoulders.

"Join me, Smith of Earth?" she called, and knees watery again, Smith made his way around the circle.

While Jorak gaped, Geria took Smith's hand when they met half way around the circle, and she smiled up at him. "I wouldn't have believed it, but you're blushing again. Earth trait, Smith?"

"No, not really," he stammered.

The slim girl was about to say something, but the instructor cleared his throat ominously, and the room became silent again. "Now, then," declared the giant, "there's no trick to fighting with psi-powers. Anyone can do that, and the women of Bortinot, as you know, are particularly adept. But the people of Wortan have no such powers; and they must depend on tooth and nail, on sinew and bone and animal cunning. Such is the way the Wortanians do battle—and, purely for sport, such is the way of Wortan fighting. Any questions?"

"Yes," Geria told him, "I have one. Are we not permitted to use any psi powers?"

"None. They disqualify you."

"Well, then I suppose I must withdraw from the course. I can't be expected to stand up to a man physically. I'm not built that way—and very few women are, Dominant or Receptive."

Smith had not expected this, but now he felt a warm glow in his

breast. He almost wanted to put his arm about the woman's shoulders, protectively. How could such a delicate beautiful thing be expected to fight?

The instructor said, "I won't argue with you. I can't remember a woman ever lasting in Wortan fighting, but if they're Dominants they're automatically entered. The rest of you can do like—"

The words came out before Smith could stop them. "In that case, can anyone tell me the difference between a Dominant and a Receptive?"

There was a lot of laughter in the room, and Smith thought it would have been the same had he, as a child, asked the difference between boy and girl. "Ah, old Earthsmith!" he heard Jorak's voice. "Everytime he opens his mouth new wisdom spews forth."

Pale eyes looked out of the instructor's blood-red face. "Obviously, you're joking. I'm here to answer questions, among other things, but you couldn't be serious."

And Smith heard his own dull voice reply:

"No, certainly not. I was only joking."

Said Geria, "Silly, a Dominant has more psi powers, that's all. But you really didn't know, did you?"

"There are no psi powers on Earth to speak of," Smith reminded her.

"Hmm, very true. In that case, maybe you're all Receptives—male and female. But don't feel too bad-

ly, Smith; Wortan's the same way, and Wortan has a first-rate culture. Look: they even have an instructor here at the school."

THE instructor of Wortan fighting was a Wortanian, of course. And here, in Wortan fighting, Smith might feel at home. But he hardly expected to excel at the school by breaking someone's back, or pinning him helplessly to the Wortan mat. Suddenly he found himself thinking of Earth, thinking of the trust that had been put in him as Earth's first student at the school. But his thoughts did not remain there long—his eyes took in the soft yellow of Geria's hair, and Earth faded far away.

"—volunteers," the instructor was saying. "Does anyone want to step on the mat with me for a fall or two?"

"I recommend Earthsmith," came Jorak's voice. "Positively—Earthsmith's your man."

Smith felt his face becoming very red again, but Geria nudged him with an elbow. "Go ahead, Smith—why not? You told me once you didn't fear anyone in the room of the registrar, not in physical combat. Go ahead."

"I know, but—"

"Go ahead, Smith. Show me."

He could do that. Yes, he could show her. But what if he were wrong—they might know a trick or two that would make him look foolish. And he wouldn't want that,

not in front of Geria. "I am tired," he said. "I didn't sleep well last night."

The instructor rescued him. "I didn't ask you to recommend. I asked for volunteers. But you who spoke, what's your name?"

"I am Jorak of Gyra," said Jorak, purple face paling.

"You'll do. On the mat, man of Gyra."

Jorak stepped forward, slowly, in no hurry to meet the giant. Smith heard Kard's mocking laugh. "Ho, Jorak—he'll tear you in half. Now if he had asked for a man of Shilon a real man "

And still laughing, the Shilonian heaved mightily with both his hands and sent Jorak stumbling out onto the mat. The man of Gyra fell and skidded on his stomach, turned over once and finally came up into a sitting position at the instructor's feet. Kard was grinning, but Jorak saw nothing funny in what had happened. He stood up slowly, wheezing, and his gaze raked the circle. It flicked past Kard rapidly, kept going, poised a moment on Geria, then reached Smith. Jorak shook his fist. "All right, Earthsmith. I'll get you for this."

Geria smiled. "I would say that you have an enemy there."

The instructor bellowed a warning and came for Jorak.

FOR some reason Smith found he couldn't keep his eyes off the fray, and he found his own breath

coming in ragged gasps. Geria watched with a dispassionate interest. "Poor man of Gyra," she said. "It might be a different story if he could use some of his psi powers. The men of Gyra have a little of that, you know."

"Well, why can't he?"

"He'd be disqualified, shamed—and maybe worse. I never knew that psi powers were not permitted on the Wortan mat, but I did know that the rules must be adhered to rigidly."

The instructor's massive body stood between them and Jorak, and one of the great arms circled the man of Gyra's neck. Jorak's purple face glared straight at Smith, and his body thrashed and wriggled furiously, like a snake, head held fast by a forked stick. Abruptly, the instructor stepped back and let go. Jorak fell and lay writhing on the mat, legs and arms pounding.

"Brute strength is what we want in Wortan," said the instructor, smoothing his black uniform.

Said Kard of Shilon: "You outweigh Jorak, but I see your point. I wonder how you would do with a man of Shilon."

The instructor smiled. "Well, we will pair off now. You can select me, if you wish. Those who want to drop out of the course, step back from the circle. We need room—"

All the women moved away, slowly, reluctantly. They were Dominants, every one, and Smith sensed they longed to use their psi powers.

Some of them trembled nervously from the exhibition they had seen, some wiped sweat from white and pink and green brow. One tall albino woman seemed hesitant, stepped back toward the circle, but she backed away again when a gold man big as Kard of Shilon strode forward eagerly.

Against the wall stood the dozen women, rapt eyes intent on the men as they paired off. And this, Smith thought bitterly is culture. This is what Earth had missed by closing its star lanes. Well, Earth

"Don't sulk, Smith of Earth," Geria told him, and Smith realized, shamefully, that he had slunk off with the women. "I say there is something glorious about fighting tooth and nail. Not depraved, certainly, unless you insist on judging it by a hidebound ethic. Go back to the mats, Smith—for me."

He looked long at the woman, saw no guile in her eyes. Who was he to judge? Could he dare pass judgment on a society that had left Earth behind a score of thousand years ago? The men of Earth hadn't sent him here, half way across the galaxy to do that.

HE turned and walked stiffly to the mats. By now the men had paired off two and two, stood facing each other in pairs. Kard of Shilon and the thick-thewed instructor, great gold man and chunky red, reed-slender green man and giant orange, albinos two like alabaster

statues.

From the circle came Jorak, hands to bruised neck. He stopped, looked Smith up and down grimly, smiled. "You have no partner, Earthsmith?"

"I'm looking for one."

"Well, look no more. I am tired and hurt, but I'd like to join you on the mat." He shrugged. "Of course, if you're afraid—"

Smith still did not feel like fighting. It might as well be Jorak as any other—he certainly had more reason to fight Jorak. Vaguely, it seemed a needless expenditure of energy. But he had done it again: he had put the shoe on the wrong foot—he, Smith, stood up for judgment, not the school. "Good enough, Jorak," he said.

In a moment, the instructor signaled them all to begin, and Smith had one brief look at the dozen pairs of men, grappling, heard the instructor shout, "one fall, and one fall only!" And then Jorak was upon him.

Jorak seemed for all the world like a snake, writhing and twisting with a deceptive sinewy strength. But calmly Smith stepped out of his reach, cuffing his ears roundly when he came too close.

"You're afraid, afraid, afraid!" Jorak taunted. "Fight!"

Smith shrugged. If he did not want to fight, he did not want to. But the women hooted, and they were hooting him, all but Geria who remained glumly silent.

"This is getting me nowhere," Jorak hissed. "You're making me look like a fool, Earthsmith." Perspiration bathed the purple face, stained the sides of Jorak's tunic darkly.

And then he smiled. Smith felt giddy, hardly could keep his legs under him, yet hardly had Jorak touched him. Then the man of Gyra was using his psi powers, despite the sanction. Oddly, Smith felt detached from it all. Let him use his powers then—that would end it. Let him

"Fight back, Smith!" Geria cried.

Jorak's powers were not like the woman's. He could induce giddiness, yes, but not in any overpowering quantities. Smith swayed foolishly, tipped first to left, then to right, stood for a moment with arms at sides. Jorak rushed upon him and struck out with both fists, and Smith stumbled back half a dozen steps, crashed into a pair of struggling figures, was dimly aware that both fell.

Jorak came on, cocky, confident, and Smith rocked for a moment on the balls of his feet. Once and once only he lashed out with his right arm, smeared Jorak's nose flat against his face. Jorak toppled backward and fell, writhing.

Smith looked around him, panting. The other contestants ceased their struggles, and the instructor said:

"Someone has used psi. I don't

know who, but someone—"

Jorak pointed weakly, said, "Earthsmith!"

"Snap judgment," the instructor admitted. "Your word only. Still, you alone were bested, Jorak of Gyra—and, hah, that makes twice. doesn't it?"

"Once with psi," said Jorak.

"You sure?"

"I ought to know what hit me! He held me rigid, I tell you, and then he struck me. What could I do? I ask you, what?"

Smith knew that the instructor could read minds—with limitations. He knew the psi power had been used, but he did not know who had used it.

JORAK wiped the blood from his face with the back of one hand. "Listen," he confided, "Earthsmith is a savage, really and truly, of the planet Earth. Terribly barbaric. Obviously, he'd have no compunctions against dirty fighting."

"Well—" said the instructor.

"There's only one thing wrong with all this," Smith told him. "Nobody on Earth uses psi-power."

Jorak slapped his hand against the mat. "Then you admit that there are psi powers on Earth?"

"Yes," Smith said. "There are psi-powers on Earth." Things were happening to Smith. He felt vague stirrings inside of him, and he dampened them.

"There. He admits it," Jorak said. "The men of Earth are not

without their psi powers, and Smith or Earthsmith—I still don't know the barbarian's name—used them on me.” He shook his fist. “You just can't trust these barbarians.”

The instructor still did not seem sure of himself, but there were angry mutterings in the crowd, and the albino woman who had almost but not quite joined the fighters said, “Let me try a fall with him. Probably I would lose, but we of Nugat can preceive the psi powers readily.”

Smith stormed away from her, felt hot anger rushing through him. “I wouldn't fight with a woman.”

Jorak taunted, “He's afraid she'll discover—”

“Nothing! I'm afraid of nothing, Jorak. I just won't fight a woman.” He was shouting now, and he couldn't help it. Again, there was the odd feeling that part of his mind at least stood away from all this, observing, shaking its head and telling him to curb his temper.

A hand lay heavily on his shoulder, big gnarled, orange. “Kard of Shilon would like a fall with you, Earthsmith of Earth. Perhaps I am not as subtle as the woman from Nugat, but still I think I could tell.”

The instructor nodded, and Kard spun Smith around, kept him spinning with a short chopping blow to his jaw. Smith hardly felt it. But something told him deep inside his whirling brain to fall, fall, fall—and the faintest shadow of a smile

flickered across Jorak's lips.

Win or lose—what was the difference? Those who could would feel the psi-powers, and Smith would be their man.

By crotch and collar he caught the huge man of Shilon, lifted him. Kard's arms and legs flailed air, helplessly. He bellowed as Smith began to whirl, slowly at first, but then faster. Up he raised the great orange hulk, held it aloft on outstretched arms for one moment—hurled it.

Arms and legs still flailing wildly, Kard struck the mat, seemed almost to bounce, landed in a heap atop Jorak.

Geria jumped up and down delightedly, but the woman of Nugat scowled. “Psi,” she said. “I felt it.”

“As did I,” admitted the instructor. “Faintly. Smith of Earth —”

“Don't tell me you didn't see me use my arms then, just my arms?”

“Kard appeared awful helpless—”

“I felt the psi,” said the woman of Nugat.

“And I,” a man agreed.

“As I said,” Jorak declared smugly, “when you bring a barbarian to the school you must expect barbarous behavior. Oh well,” he stifled a yawn, “I'll get my nose fixed, of course, but this sort of thing could continue. Unpleasant, is it not?”

The instructor nodded slowly, dismissed class.

"DID you or didn't you, Smith?"

"What do you think, Geria?"

"I'd say no, but I did feel the psi when you threw Kard."

"That was Jorak—and he used it on me."

"Not very strong then, because I remember how readily I—"

"Look, Geria. What's the difference? They've made up their minds, and I can't do a thing about it. I didn't use the psi, I can tell you that and you'll believe me. But it doesn't matter, really. They're convinced. What happens next?"

The woman of Bortinot frowned. "I don't know. They could expel you possibly. You forget I'm new at the school, too. Let's forget all about it. You will, anyway, in dream empathy."

It was easy for her to say that, but Smith couldn't forget. The more he had tried to convince them he had not employed the psi-power, could not employ it, the more they thought that he did. He was of Earth—primitive by their standards, a barbarian. They had said so. Culture had leaped past Earth in all directions, had leaped so far that he could not even recognize it as such, had encompassed the stars and broad new concepts as big as the parsecs of space between the stars. How could he understand—ever?

Or was there anything to understand? If he could take everything at its face value, if he could trust his own judgment, this was not

culture at all. But he had forgotten again: his judgment didn't matter. He was being judged, not the school.

"—be strictly a neophyte in dream empathy," Geria was saying. "But not me. I've had my share of it on Bortinot, and they'll be pairing us off, experienced and novice. I'll take you as a partner if you'd like, Smith."

"You bet I'd like it!" He felt genuinely cheerful again, quite suddenly. Geria was the one bright spot at the school, and at least he had that. And yet there was something he could not remember, something pushing against the fringes of consciousness, and it concerned Geria. What actually had happened yesterday on the crags? He could remember, remember—but he couldn't at all, not really, and somehow he knew that the most important item of all remained tantalizingly close, yet just beyond his immediate reach.

He said, "Just what is this dream empathy?"

"Now you *are* joking."

"No. I don't know a thing about it."

"What do you people of Earth do for entertainment?"

"Well, we talk, or we dance, or we play games, ride horses, take walks in the country, see a show—anything anyone else does, I guess."

"No one else does any of that, because d.e.'s a lot better. You know anything about dreams, Smith?"

"A little. Very little. They've always been something of a mystery on Earth."

"Well, do you read or watch the telios on Earth?"

"Of course. But it's strictly local stuff on Earth. That's why I'm here."

"Well, if it's fiction, why do you read?"

"Excitement I guess. Interest, suspense. I watch the hero, I struggle with him, succeed when he does if the book's a good one—"

"Exactly. You go into empathy with him. Smith—how would you like to do that—with me?"

"Hunh?"

"Take a dream. I dream it, not you. It's a good one, under control. A vivid dream, more real than life itself in a lot of ways, emotions highlighted, maintained, increased—and exactly what I want to dream because I know we'll both like it.

"I dream it, not you. But you feel it with me. You grow tired of your own thoughts, so you switch in on someone else's. Control there. Gorgeous dreams, fantastic dreams, even horrible ones, if both would like it. Complete empathy—in a dream world.

"Then later, when you're experienced, you dream and I emp. How does it sound, Smith?"

He smiled. "Not much privacy. But I'd be a liar if I said I wouldn't want to take a peek at your dreams, Geria. It sounds fine."

Geria laughed softly, a lilting feminine sound. "It's a little more private than that, provided I know what I'm doing. There's a control. I can dream what I want, and can restrict it. You'll see."

Smith very much wanted to see. Almost, he forgot about Jorak and the psi-power. But briefly in his mind he saw the black uniformed giant from Wortan, felt again the flailing Kard raised high overhead, saw accusation in the woman of Nugat's eyes . . .

THEY lay on two adjacent couches, Smith and the woman of Bortinot. A bare cubicle of a room with just the two couches in it. A door, now closed, led into a room in which they had received their instructions. But Smith hardly had listened. Geria knew the game well enough, and he'd let it go at that. The rasping voice of the female instructor had annoyed him, anyway, but he noticed that she was a woman of Bortinot, not beautiful like Geria, but of her planet nonetheless.

"Psi powers again," Geria told him. "Hypnotism and telepathy mostly. You'll see."

Something which looked like a candle-flame seen through a long dark tube flickered from the ceiling. It came closer, steadied, flickered no more. Smith couldn't draw his eyes away from it.

"You're asleep," Geria told him, matter-of-factly.

He was. Not really, because in

sleep there was a lack of awareness. But he could not move and everything was dark and he could only think.

He felt nothing. Absolutely nothing. A mind without a body, in complete darkness. The tingle of awareness which you hardly regard as such because it always is with you was gone. Nothing.

And then it returned. He felt his heart beating again. His ear itched and he scratched it. He shifted his left arm which had fallen asleep.

Oddly, the ceiling light had moved. It had been just to the right of center—now it was just to the left, flickering again, retreating. It was gone.

He turned over on his left side, sleepily, contentedly—on the brink of real sleep. Geria knew what she was doing. He'd rest. He looked—at his own sleeping figure!

Madness toyed with the edges of his mind, gained inroads, made him look again. The silent figure to his left—himself. He raised his hands, felt the hair, long, flowing, billowing about his head—looked down, could see the gentle rounded rise of breast.

A voice nibbled at consciousness, repeated itself, became clearer, laughing: "*We will go to sleep now, Smith. How does it feel to be here with me? Let's dream. Dream—*"

The voice reassured, and Smith-Geria relaxed, slept.

* * *

He, Geria of Bortinot—really she, then—stood on a hill. A weathered hill and aged, on a frigid world where winds of winter raged and howled and battered mountains into submissive mounds. Fearful place, grim and almost dead it was—and yet he liked it. Smiling, he stood atop the hill and bade the tempest strike. The winds hurled him headlong and he stumbled, but he felt elated, wild and free, part of the elements that did battle there in that country of the weathered hills. And there were others and they were men. They came up the hill and they tried to take him in their arms, strong men and fair, but he ran laughing with the wind. His identity faded in that wind, was torn to tatters by it—left only was Geria of Bortinot, her feelings, her thoughts, but his awareness.

She stumbled, fell, turned over and over, much too slowly. Winds still howled, but above her here at hill's bottom. Wraiths of fog swirled in eddying gusts, came closer and faded, appeared again and swept away.

She cried a name because the fog brought her an image and the name and the image were one. "Smith of Earth, of Earth, of Earth." And he came to her, this image, on a charger, an animal much too thick through the shoulders to be a horse, with three pairs of legs. Low out of saddle he leaned, graceful, handsome bald head pink with excitement. He

clutched at her, lifted her through the mists, above them. The six-legged horse soared high, above the hills, above the winds, carried her higher and higher. Smith stroked her yellow hair, kissed her. She tingled . . .

* * *

"Wake up Smith! Up, come on now, the class is over for today."

He stirred. The dream—Gods of Earth, what a dream!

"Well, how'd you like it? See what I mean about dream empathy, Smith? Beats everything, doesn't it?"

Smith hardly heard her. They say dreams fulfill wishes, they say—and what was it Geria had dreamed? Suddenly, it was very important to Smith, terribly important, more important than anything, because he remembered, without knowing how or why, what had happened yesterday on the crags.

"Geria," he said. He tried to make his voice soft, but it boomed loudly, almost startled her.

"What's the matter?"

"Nothing. Why nothing is the matter. You remember yesterday on the crag, Geria?"

She nodded.

"And your dream—Geria?"

Again, the casual nod.

"Geria, I—I love you. I think I want to marry you. I think—"

He stopped. She looked at him for what seemed a long time but really was only a few seconds, and then she grinned. There was noth-

ing malicious about it, Smith knew, just a grin. It spread, and the woman of Bortinot began to laugh. Softly at first, but soon she was laughing very hard and Smith felt foolish. He wanted very much to be out of there, anyplace but in that room, but he did not know for sure that he knew how to operate the door.

"Oh, Smith, Smith," she said, "if you could see yourself now. But I suppose I deserve it. I planted the suggestion, you fought it, now you're pretending. All right, I admit defeat. But stop now; you should see your face."

Serious. She was serious. She thought he was joking. Post-suggestively you tried to get someone to do something—anything, and it was very very funny if they did. Funnier yet if they didn't, because then they beat you at your own game, made fun of you, laughed at you, but eventually with you. Of course it was like that, let her think it was like that.

He smiled. "All right, I'll—stop."

And together, laughing, they walked out of the room. Smith was surprised to find he had no trouble at all with the door.

JORAK had a friendly smile for Smith when he entered their room. "There's a card for you in the box, Smith. Read it." Jorak, it seemed, had stopped playing with his name.

Smith took the card, read it.

"Smith of Earth, report to Registrar at once."

"You know why, don't you?" Jorak asked him. But the smile was no longer friendly.

"How should I know?"

"Trouble, that's what. But you asked for it. Psi and Wortan don't mix, barbarian."

Smith was glad when he hardly felt any impulse to strike the purple man. But he said, mocking Jorak's own tones, "Don't provoke me," and Jorak cowered in a corner.

SMITH looked into the banks of the Registrar's lights, spoke into the speaker. "Smith of Earth," he said. This time his voice didn't boom with loudness. And it didn't seem to matter much anymore.

And this time, the Registrar's voice wasn't so femininely petulant. It sounded masculine, authoritative.

"Smith of Earth. Item. Garnot of Jlob feels you are an inferior history student, recommends withdrawal from the school.

"Item: Sog-chafka of Wortan announces your wanton use of psi-powers in Wortan fighting, recommends clemency because you are a barbarian.

"Item: Kard of Shilon wants to meet you in Wortan again. Promises to kill you.

"Item: both Jorak of Gyra and Geria of Bortinot have questioned your mentality, want you tested."

Vaguely Smith listened. He felt removed, resigned. But then cer-

tain words struck hard . . .

" . . . Geria of Bortinot questions your mentality . . .

"Smith of Earth. Are you listening?"

"I'm listening," Smith said.

"I feel you have two choices," the Registrar said. "We can request your withdrawal from the school, or we can keep you here under observation and give you an exhaustive battery of tests. The decision is in your hands."

" . . . Geria of Bortinot questions your mentality . . . "

" . . . the decision is in your hands."

Jorak moved, slipped along the wall. His face was sneering and fearful too. The purple mask of his face seemed to swim before Smith's eyes like something seen through watered glass. Smith was pacing. He felt the emotions beginning to work yeastily and he longed to take that face and twist it off its snaky neck.

"You had better go back to Earth, Smith," Jorak said. "Wherever it is."

Abruptly, Smith felt the tendons writhing between his hands. He lifted. He held the squirming figure off the floor, held it there and looked into it curiously.

"You'd better use some of your psi-power, my little green friend," Smith said, "While you can."

The green face was turning purple. Words choked off somewhere down in the tubular length of the

neck. Smith could feel it now! He could feel it! And he knew. The desperate tendrils of psi-power flailing out. And Smith began to smile.

"I could tell you some things, Jorak. You have some psi-power, but that and anything else you've got, including some very bad features, you got them all from Earth. You got the germs for it all a long time back. And what you have left is just something that's a kind of left-over after a few thousand years. The Earth has forgotten more psi-power, friend, than you'll ever have."

Jorak's eyes popped. Veins were coloring thickly through them.

"You're here to learn something, Jorak. Listen. We developed psi-power on Earth so long ago we don't bother remembering when it was."

Smith felt the power all right. Latent psi-power, dormant and unused and unneeded and uninteresting for aeons.

He threw Jorak into the corner. Jorak curled up there, sucking in air and rubbing his bruised neck.

"We had it. We threw it away," Smith said. "We had a defense against it too. But we don't use psi, or the defense anymore. We outgrew it. It had its day and then we forgot about it, Jorak. Why? We lost interest. Individual sanctity was better. Privacy of the human mind was something a lot more to be desired than being able to pry into someone else's brain, or

vice versa. But you take a lot of pride, Jorak, in having a little residue floating around."

Smith grinned more widely. It was funny in a way, and sad too. And he didn't particularly care about pushing it any further.

"... the decision is in your hands."

HE wished his thoughts would organize, fuse somehow with the stirring, rebelling emotions. Integration right now was vital. You lose, or you're not equal to something. And a really top-notch defense-mechanism will turn the whole thing around and say IT is not equal to YOU. That's a danger. And of that he was afraid.

Could he, should he, pass judgment? On a culture that had left Earth wallowing in the cosmic backwaters? Twice, thrice, he had tried to pass that judgment, but he could not. He should be judged, theoretically, not the school.

So what if their concept of history was primitive, basking in its own importance, ignoring the philosophical precepts upon which the social sciences are based? Surely they had reason, and he shouldn't question

And if they valued Wortan fighting above all else. If it made their women look like eager animals waiting to see the blood spill. . . how could he question? Why should he dare assume that the whole culture was depraved, simply because

he regarded it that way by Earth standards?

And their dream empathy was enjoyable, he had to admit that—but it was too enjoyable. No wonder Earth had dropped that sort of thing long ago. It was a good gimmick to divert attention from important things. It was also regressive, a kind of sick introversion. It was decadence, an invasion of privacy, an offense against the dignity of human privacy of the mind—the individual's last precarious citadel.

He jumped a little when the Registrar barked: "Your decision, Smith of Earth."

He smiled at the bank of lights. He had broad duties. He had a duty to Earth. And an indirect duty to the Galaxy. He should report all this. And Earth should try to do something to bring many worlds out of sloth, decadence, regression and inverted self-importance.

But first of all, a man had a duty to himself, his own psychic health. Maybe the two weren't inseparable either. Maybe Earth would share the humiliation if he Smith, suffered its scars to remain on him.

He wanted to consider himself as more than a mere projection of Earth, more than a mere symbol. He was of Earth, sure. But first of all he was Smith. Just plain Smith. A guy with a human spirit, with dignity that could be affronted and had been here.

He thought of Geria, of what that dream empathy had suggested. He felt her lips again, the softly curving line of her hips under the silver tunic to her knees, the yellow hair falling free to shoulders . . .

"Your decision, Smith of Earth," the Registrar's voice was louder.

"I'm not going back to Earth," said Smith softly. "Yet."

He watched Jorak slipping up the side of the wall, then rushing out the exit.

Smith went to the exit too, then into the hall. He started walking down it, and the smile clung to his lips like an old memory.

FROM the monochromatic light harmonies playing softly from the walls, from the abstract gentleness of music that never stopped filtering through the gardens and over the mists of fountains, from the ever-couruscating and subdued twilight that surrounded the school — from these things, Smith extracted the tone of decadence, the static, hide-bound turning of a wheel upon itself.

The women from Bortinot stared oddly at him as his bulk, high and broad passed near. He heard their whispers . . . "barbarian . . . savage"

His smile broadened. The cycle closed. Strange, how the old became decadent, and the young revolted and itself became sophisticated and sick, and the old became young again and the old values

turned fresh and clear like a tree blooming out of winter's snow.

The sounds of voices died abruptly as Smith went in. Faces turned . . . Brandog of Hulpin with the albino skin like alabaster; Luog the young, green - skinned Pandenian . . . varieties of form and color the white, pink, orange and green brows. But there was the sameness of inversion and static culture.

Mouths gaped as Smith strode up to the front of the class room in transtellar history and looked curiously at the little man with the round gold face and green eyes that still blinked too much, and who, even now, smiled too much, too vacantly, as if he had been practicing a long time and had forgotten what it meant.

But Garnot of Jlob's smile was slightly strained now and his face had a pale look, under its sheath of gold.

"What a boorish intrusion," the instructor said. His voice got higher. "The entire school knows of course, Earth of Smith."

"Smith of Earth," Smith said softly.

"Whatever it is, the entire school knows that already you have disgraced yourself and your planet—which was to be expected. And that I have recommended your withdrawal from the school as an inferior student."

"And so," Smith said.

"Therefore, it should be obvious that you are not particularly wel-

come as a member of this class. Surely you have not chosen to remain, and even if you have, it should be obvious that you will not be part of any class of mine until you have successfully passed certain tests, and have been kept under observation. Need I add that after you have taken these tests, we will not be expecting you to remain . . ."

Several students tittered.

"I'm going to talk now, Garnot of Jlob," Smith said. "You asked me questions earlier. Now I'm going to answer them."

"But I did not

"They're questions that should be answered, even though I'm not at all sure that there's enough free-thought here to grasp the real meaning of what I'm going to say."

"I did not tell you to talk."

"I'm Smith of Earth, and this is supposedly a free institution. On Earth I wasn't accustomed to being told when I could talk, when I could listen, when I could think. You asked me once where Earth is. I'll tell you."

"But I do not care and .

"Earth, interstellarly speaking, is a few parsecs from Sirius. Spaceographically speaking, it isn't very important where it is, not really. Historically, it was at the apex of civilized culture before Jlob ever existed except as a steaming carboniferous swamp peopled largely by a species of amphibian. Socio-psychologically, Earth is a few aeons ahead of the worlds so badly repre-

sented here."

"You have not been told to talk!" screamed Garnot of Jlob.

"But you are supposed to listen," Smith insisted. A gasp sounded through the room. "You asked what was the first interstellar event of importance. I'm going to tell you." He turned so that he was looking at the class. "It wasn't the exodus from the prehistoric Sirian worlds to the first culture in the Denebian system. Nor was it the Sirian wars. Those things didn't set the stage for Interstellar history. Interstellar history had already begun and grown old on the planet Earth, half a million years before "

An intensity boiled up through the wick of Smith's body. "The question itself is shallow, meaningless in an academic sense. It was asked only to be answered in such a way as to reinforce egotistical concepts of culture. The most important event in Interstellar history was when men on the planet Earth developed speech perhaps, or some other event even long before that . . . and started the scientific process that led finally to the most glorious epoch in history. And what was that? I can remember with pride the engravings of the first proud Earth ships that blasted off for the Centaurian system aeons ago. And other pictures of the early days of the new Centaurian culture, and still others. Of discontent and overpopulation. And the migration to Sirius.

"Or even earlier, of the stern, thin-lipped face of Matthew Merkle whose tincan of a spaceship carved a loop in space around the Moon—a satellite of Earth—and returned.

"You think of history in terms of challenge and response, and the earlier challenges were the most significant ones. It was harder to get a spaceship across a mere quarter of a million miles to the Moon then, than it is to send it, translight, to the farthest star today."

Garnot of Jlob was quivering. His face had a deep purplish cast.

Smith turned completely around, his back to the instructor.

"If you want the truth about interstellar history, my friends, come to Earth. That was where it started. That's where anything decent about it has remained. And I'm not at all sure that Earth isn't where it will end if it ever really ends."

Half way to the exit, he turned to Garnot of Jlob. "You can stop trying to use psi-power to make me shut up, you pompous phony."

Laughing softly, Smith went out and down the hall. Behind him he heard a loud coughing as though someone was choking.

THE word had spread before him to the room where Sog-chafka of Wortan, and Kard of Shilon, and the crowd waited. The two giants were on the mats and around the rows of up-circling benches, were the eager, hungry faces of the women of Bortinot. The Dominants, their

lips moist and slightly open and their eyes shiny with anticipation.

Geria stared at him, her body shifting slightly, her lips apart and her teeth shining white, eyes glistening. He remembered how the kiss had been. He smiled at her. She seemed scornful now, a little sad, pitying, as he walked onto the mats.

"Ah, Earthsmith," boomed the instructor. His massive blood-colored face was shiny as he stood there, muscles rippling and seething under the black uniform. Kard of Shilon grinned. The spectators laughed as Smith tripped on the mat and almost sprawled.

Kard of Shilon said. "I'm going to kill you, Earthsmith."

Smith said. "That's an odd way to express your elite tastes, Kard, but I can understand how you feel. Earth knew a lot of killing in its day."

To Sog-chafka, Smith said. "You accused me of using psi-power in Wortan fighting. It was kind of you to recommend clemency. However, I deny the accusation."

"He has psi-power," screamed Jorak of Gyra from the top bench. He shook green fists.

"You said only a few Earthmen had psi-power," Sog-chafka said.

"I didn't. I said it's never used on Earth. There's a difference."

"You said you "

"Didn't use it," Smith said. "What psi-power you have, came from Earth. We of Earth developed it. But it's been a long time since we

have bothered with it. But though I'm a little bit rusty now, I'll show you—"

None of them ever knew what a dreadful moment that was for Smith who knew his capacity for psi-power, but had never bothered to use it before.

He concentrated.

Twenty Dominant women of Bor-tinot fell writhing on the mats.

They writhed for a while, then got up and sat down again. Perspiration was heavy on their faces, and they panted heavily, and their eyes were slightly glazed with psychic shock.

Smith's head ached. But he would never show it. He was rusty all right.

Sog-chafka and Kard shifted once and seemed uneasy.

Smith said. "I did that to demonstrate a point, which is that if I want to use psi-power here, I'll not fool around with any puny amount of it such as I was accused of doing earlier. I prefer fighting the Wortan way. Psi-power fighting is pretty unhealthy stuff. Minds getting all wrapped up together in combat. It's finally like beating yourself . . ."

Smith laughed at the two giants. "Well," he said.

Kard rushed. Smith dropped to hands and knees, pinched Kard's legs, held them perpendicular from the knees down. Kard's rushing weight carried his body on over. His knees popped. He screamed and fell moaning on the mat.

Sog-chafka was already rushing and he tried to duck as Smith lunged upward. The sound in the room was cracking and sharp. Sog-chafka, the instructor in Wortan fighting, stumbled back and his thick arms dug at the air and a laxness showed under the skin-tight black uniform. Blood ran on the mats as Sog-chafka refused to go down any further than his knees. His head hung loosely and he slowly raised his blood-shot eyes.

His massive face twisted. Kard of Shilon lay groaning a little, nursing dislocated knees.

Sog-chafka remained bent, powerful thighs driving as his toes dug into the mat in a pounding, hurtling running dive, head down, hands reaching. It was a ferocious thing to see. Smith could hear the gasps of anticipation as he waited.

SMITH chopped down with cupped hands as he stepped aside. He brought his knee up into Sog-chafka's face and the instructor spun crazily across the mat, his body sinking lower and lower and finally sliding forward on his belly and lying there without moving at all. "Brute strength," Smith said, "is what you want on Wortan."

Smith glanced at Geria. "As you said earlier, Geria, there's something glorious about fighting tooth and nail. That's what you said."

Smith's foot was jerked from under him as Kard heaved. Smith's heavy body thudded on the mat. Before he could twist around,

Kard's powerful arm was around his throat. Smith's wind was cut off. He felt his eyes bulge, and he knew that Kard would kill him. "I think Earthsmith, it only right you should come down here with me!"

Smith put his right hand under Kard's right elbow. He clenched Kard's right wrist with the other hand. He pushed up with his right hand, heaved down with his left. Kard screamed a second time as his elbow popped.

He had to let go or his arm would break, so he let go. As Kard rolled free, Smith aimed for that vital point just to the left of the tip of Kard's chin. The back of Kard's head thudded on the mat, his eyes rolled up.

Smith got to his feet. He could hear Jorak of Gyra yelling. "He used psi! He used psi!"

Smith hated to acquire another headache, but he felt this had to be done. He concentrated on Jorak who started to sweat. Then Jorak came down to the mats and began to writhe and hop around in a weird and formless dance. Round and round the mats Jorak danced, his face working fitfully.

Sog-chafka was on one knee: His face was swelling and blood ran from his chin. He grinned and a broken tooth fell out. He looked up at the row of spectators. "He didn't use any psi on me. I guess you could say it wasn't necessary."

There was no applause from the spectators. There was a kind of

bitter ferment working, a wonderment and a suspicion and a dull kind of shock that blanks out facing unpleasant truths.

Smith started past the first row, then stopped and looked down at the woman. He'd miss her, she had seen to that, and she had only been jesting. He'd think of how it might have been, at another time, in another way—but he'd forget in time. You forgot and you grew. Especially, when you had a job to do.

"There's one thing this school has," he said, "that Earth doesn't have . . . and never did . . . and probably never will. And that is Geria of Bortinot."

When he went out, she was staring after him with an odd expression he couldn't identify. And behind her, Jorak of Gyra danced round and round the mats.

THE Registrar's lights blinked with what might almost have been nervousness.

"Smith of Earth. Item: Garnot of Job has withdrawn his recommendation that you leave the school. However, his transtellar history class will have a new instructor for a week. His name is Khrom of Khaldmar.

"Item: Sog-chafka of Wortan withdraws his accusation that you used psi-power in Wortan fighting. Wortan fighting classes have been dropped for two weeks.

"Item: Kard of Shilon does not wish to meet you again in Wortan.

"Item: Jorak of Gyra and Geria of

Bortinot do not question your mentality and formally request that you release Jorak from psi-power suggestion which is causing Jorak to dance himself to death."

Smith listened rather absently and then went to the window and looked out over the strange landscape.

"Smith of Earth . . . as yet you have not taken the battery of tests here, and the tests will determine your stay here. The choice is yours. We can request your withdrawal from the school, or we can keep you here. Your Dominant classification has been thoroughly validated. We are sure you would be happy here, and the tests will be presented in such a way that you will . . ."

Well, he hadn't let himself down. He'd defended his integrity as a human being. But he'd been told not to let Earth down.

Well, would he be letting Earth down by leaving? Would he be? If he returned and said that the galaxy had a school but we'd better not send students because the school is decadent—could Earth stand up in the face of its pricked bubble?

What is, and what is not, letting your planet down? Smith knew it for an almost meaningless phrase, standing here before the clicking Registrar. The important thing was to learn, for from learning are sowed the seeds of progress, and surely he had learned.

Yes, he had learned a great deal about the Galactic culture.

The Registrar's voice droned on, being very logical and again petulant in a feminine way. It was a compliant machine. It got along well, maintaining a nice balance, with everyone. With Dominants it became slightly recessive. With Réceptives, it was just a little bit Dominant.

He watched the monstrous blotch of the red star, swelling and crimson, old and fading, yet filling a quarter of the sky, like a fat old man, getting fatter while his brain rotted away in his skull.

He turned as the door opened. His breath shortened as she came toward him. Smith rubbed his bald pate, and felt the heat rise to his face.

"You made a fool of me, Smith," she whispered. "Now you're blushing . . . and that's just an act isn't it? You're still making a fool of me."

"No," he said. "The way I felt about you and the things I said, I meant them. I still do."

"But you let me use that psi-power on you . . . and if you'd wanted to . . . you could have . . ." He stared. She was sobbing a little.

He had felt it before, but the feeling was strong enough now to motivate action. He put his arms about her, protectively. He looked out the window at the cragged horizon and the dying red star behind.

"The psi-power," he said. "I didn't realize I had it then. When you used it . . . and later, the dream-

empathy, it stirred up a lot of old capacities. I wasn't trying to fool anyone. I love you, Geria of Bor-tinot. And I'm not fooling . . ."

"Your decision, Smith of Earth . . ."

Well, he had learned a great deal about Galactic culture, so what should he do? A duty to Earth, to civilization. He had learned:

. . . That the superior cultures out here among the stars were a myth.

. . . That something had gone hay-wire in the startrails, that everyone you met was either psychotic or highly neurotic by Earth standards.

. . . That the exceptions might be the hope of the Galaxy. But they were very few.

. . . That Earth had better seek out the reasons for all this, try to eliminate them at their sources if possible, but certainly keep them from contaminating the home planet.

. . . That Earth had a big job, but if he came back and reported and worked at it, he might convince Earth she was up to it.

That was one way.

"Your decision, Smith of Earth, the battery of tests or . . ."

She was looking up at him. "Well?"

"What do you think, Geria?"

She put her face against his chest. "Whatever you decide," she whispered. "You're the Dominant . . ."

He smiled at the banks of lights. "When's the next ship for Deneb?" he asked. "We're going back to Earth."